

Preface

I wrote the *Golden Cord of Arram* in my copious free time while doing freelance biomedical research in Taos, New Mexico: circa 1996 – 1998. The manuscript was shopped around by a literary agent, back then, who got feedback from a couple of potential publishers: “Great plot.” “Well done; good read.” “A real page turner; too bad I can’t publish it. It’s just far too ahead of its time.”

Well, this is twenty years later, and current events speak eloquently that time has finally caught up with it—*because we’re living it now*.

The story dawned on me late one night in my lab, while babysitting a hundred-gallon culture of *Staphylococcus aureus*: MRSA actually. (*Picture that as a hundred gallons of concentrated pus.*)

As I was saying, it dawned on me that a multitude of climatic, governmental, environmental, religious, social, and scientific issues plaguing the planet might all have a common cause. The idea grew out of a special knowledge I gained from a little-known scientific principle that just might explain it, and, despite how bat-shit-crazy it may sound, the hypothesis could not be scientifically disproved.

Then I mused that it might be great fun to tell people about my discovery. And what else did I have to do at 3:20 in the morning, in the middle of the Taos desert, with strange lights in the sky, and a sextet of howling coyotes for company?

Of course, I’m big on QA (quality assurance), so to see how it might fly, I related a brief version of the core storyline to my wife’s younger sister—a visiting dignitary—the next day over dinner. She wouldn’t let me finish because she was “too creeped-out by it” and would not be able to sleep that night if I didn’t “Stop talking, now!”

Since it expounds my deep-seated philosophy of life—and time and my sister-in-law wouldn’t listen to me—I’m telling it to you.

Prologue

In 2056 C.E., the Earth's human population surpasses ten billion. They are a hungry throng consuming natural resources like a swarm of angry locusts, straining earth's fragile ecosystem to the breaking point. Holes in the ozone layer, over both poles, allow ultraviolet light to cascade down, causing millions of cataract cases and skin cancer. Increased ultraviolet light, and acidification of rivers and lakes, induce bacteria, fungi, and viruses to mutate wildly. New diseases spring into being, while thousands of plant and animal species slide into extinction. Global warming intensifies planetary weather systems to spawn storms of unprecedented ferocity. Throughout many areas of the world, a vast number of people are unemployed and displaced. They are forced to move from place to place, to glean the fundamentals of life. Billions precariously cling to life in shantytown squalor. Malnutrition and disease are widespread. There is an increased number of UFO sightings and reports of abductions are on the rise. Incidents of animal mutilations are gaining momentum as well. And there is even talk of human mutilations. All of these survival pressures create stress to which every living creature on the planet must adapt or perish. Is there a common causality for this eruption of seemingly disparate events, or are they simply examples of happenstance?

Breaking Out

The King County Hall of Records showed that OmniPhase owned a few properties in the Seattle area, mostly convenience stores, plus a chain of Italian quick-food restaurants. None of it sounded very promising. By the time he finished, it was 3:48. Nothing would be open past five o'clock, so he decided to make it easy on himself and examine the Snohomish County records next since that was on his way back to Villa Morro. He figured if he didn't hit pay dirt there, he would only be an hour away from dinner.

The Snohomish County Clerk's Office had only one property listed to OmniPhase, a three-year-old private hospital located just outside of Smokey Point. All during Bill's stay, Morro had been teaching him how to find and use his Resources. He was uncomfortable with the concept of intuition, it was too airy-fairy but, when he noticed the listing for the hospital, he knew if he had any Resources at all, this was the place to look for Ward. He programmed the address into his handroid, then drove out to take a cursory look around.

The hospital was not very large, but it was definitely first cabin. Set on a grassy hillside, looking westward over Lake Goodwin, it was a stunning piece of architecture.

The sun was setting when Bill drove into the parking lot. He tucked his shiny roadster into a large open space at the back of the lot and walked toward the main reception area.

He was not there to attempt anything heroic. He was a good soldier and would never consider taking any action without Morro's knowledge and consent. He only stopped by to have a quick look, but today there was a bonus attraction. Spread out before him was the most colorful sunset he had seen since he was in Hawaii six years ago. He walked right past the door that led to reception and ambled around to the back of the building. There he found a spot under a sturdy alder tree and sat himself down for the next half-hour. He leaned back against its

trunk, mesmerized, while the partially clouded sky transmuted itself into one of nature's most resplendent light shows. Only after the colors faded, did he reluctantly get up and walk back to reception.

Bill stepped out of the twilight into the brightly lighted reception lounge and was immediately awestruck. He was standing in a large open space, completely surrounded by marble and glass. Turning a slow pirouette, he was gawking it all in when a nurse from behind the admittance desk called to him.

“Good evening, sir; you look lost. Are you here to visit someone?”

Bill had not given any thought to what he might do if confronted by a member of the staff. Not to worry, he had lots of experience thinking on his feet, so he just winged it.

“Oh hi,” he said haltingly, still looking up at the glass ceiling thirty feet overhead. “Is this one of the Seven Wonders of the World?”

The nurse giggled at his comment.

He sauntered over to her desk, “Am I here to visit someone? Oh, yes ... I mean—not actually. At least ... Ah, not yet, that is.” He laughed nervously and did his best to look embarrassed, which was not difficult since he was. “I’m so sorry; let me explain. My father asked me to stop by and have a look around. We’re new to the area, and he needs to have a cyst removed from his neck. I told him I would stop by and see if your facility would be acceptable. We have been asking in town, and folks around here don’t have enough superlatives to describe your hospital. Now, I see what they mean. It’s amazing—I’m impressed. If the rest of your facility is anywhere near as splendid as this, I know Dad wouldn’t want to be treated anywhere else.”

“I’m surprised the locals speak so highly of us. I don’t think we have ever treated anyone from around here,” she said, looking puzzled.

Bill’s mouth went dry, hoping he hadn’t made a lurch of it. He stammered on, “Well ... Your reputation precedes you, and, remember, word of mouth advertising is always best. You can’t expect something this magnificent to remain a secret. It’s an awfully small town, after all.”

“I never gave it any thought before, but I’m sure you’re right,” she beamed. “I’ll bet we are quite a legend to the locals.”

“Oh, you are. Indeed you are,” Bill smiled, relieved that she bought it.

The expression on her face suddenly changed to one of concern. “Who did you say was your doctor?”

“My doctor? Oh, you mean, Dad’s doctor? Ah ... Dad’s doctor? He told me this morning; I’m sure of it. It’s right on the tip of my tongue.”

Her face brightened again, and the smile returned. “That’s okay; it’s just that his doctor will have to have surgical privileges here, and not many do. But, I am sure we can sort all that out later.” She paused, as if considering something else, then added. “It’s rather quiet right now; would you like me to show you around?”

“Oh, thank you. Yes, please; that would be wonderful.” Bill wished he could tell her just how pleased he really was. He knew Morro would be pleased too.

The building appeared to be constructed of reinforced concrete and covered inside with a fascia of pink and gray Italian marble. The lobby was huge and, at the moment, quite surreal. Reflected beams of orange and red, from the waning sunset, flickered in through enormous skylights, which framed the partially illuminated pastel-colored clouds that hung high overhead. The lobby was adorned with a variety of tropical plants; there were even papaya and lime trees laden with ripening fruit.

Two large wings swept back, off the main reception area, forming a large letter “V.” The receptionist led him into the north corridor of the building, known as the Alpha Wing, and began pointing out various facilities. He wished he could linger and poke around the rooms but did not want to push it. He just let her lead him around without asking too many questions—kibitzing, joking, making small talk. He knew if Ward was being held there, the place where he was incarcerated would be off-limits to outsiders, and it would be dangerous for all concerned

to show any interest, whatsoever, in sensitive areas. His mission now was to act casual and drink in every detail that struck his senses.

Feigning idle curiosity, he nonchalantly asked about the other wing. She told him it was called the Omega Wing and was configured much like the Alpha Wing, only it is not used very often.

By the time Bill got back to Villa Morro, it was nearly nine o'clock, and, true to his word, Morro had dinner waiting. All Bill had eaten that day was an egg and a couple of slices of toast in the morning, so he was starved. The smell of garlic and roast beef that greeted his arrival was almost more than he could endure. At Morro's invitation, he sailed into the kitchen and gleefully bolted for his usual seat at the table.

Bill knew Morro must have been hot on the trail of OmniPhase, while he was away, so, in his own inimical way, he asked for a report. "Well, my good chef, what did you do all day, while I was out wearing holes in the soles of my shoes—weed your garden?"

Morro glared at him from across the table, "Another fatal attempt at humor?"

Morro could see, by the gleam in Bill's eyes, that he was bursting at the seams to tell about his own exploits. "Actually, I spent my day extending the range of my SilentSync to include the kitchen and entryway; can't be too careful these days, you know." He paused for a moment, allowing Bill time to speak.

Bill said nothing. At the moment, he was intensely focused on loading his plate. "That plate don't have sideboards on it, young man," he recalled his grandmother's well-worn admonishment and looked up.

Morro's limited patience had long since failed him, "So, let's have it; it is safe to talk in here now. What have you got?"

"Well," Bill said, washing down a mouthful of roast beef with a hearty swallow of ale, "they own a few eateries. Looks like they sell tons of pizzas."

"I'm not interested in pizzas," Morro scowled.

"They own some convenience stores too."

Morro's eyes narrowed, "And?" he growled through clenched teeth. He could tell by the "cat that just ate the canary" look on Bill's face that; one: Bill found something important; two: Bill was going to make Morro drag it out of him; and, three: he was going choke Bill to death if he did not blurt it out immediately.

Bill saw the storm clouds gathering over Morro's head. "Oh yeah, I almost forgot—" He purposefully left the sentence dangling in mid-air while he adjusted the boundaries of the peas on his plate, milking the moment for its maximum dramatic impact. Then, just as Morro was about to hurl something at him, he continued. "There is also an extremely posh private hospital on the shores of Lake Goodwin. The admittance nurse was very helpful; even asked if I might like to take a tour of the place." He paused, then flashing a smug victory smile, he added, "On the odd chance you might be interested, I had a look around. Nice a place, actually."

"Posh hospital, huh?" Morro echoed, his eyes twinkling. "Now that does sound rather promising. You might actually amount to something yet." Then he growled, "If you live long enough."

It was obvious Bill had sufficiently teased him up, so he excitedly poured out the details of his tour. He even sketched a drawing of the floor plan in his notebook while he did so. As Bill continued to fill in more and more texture, Morro was increasingly impressed by Bill's recall and attention to detail. He quietly congratulated himself for choosing his partner in this venture so well.

"It must be the place," Morro thought. All his Resources cried out that it was perfect. Now he needed a plan, and it better be good. You can bet, if Ward was being held there, getting him out would not be easy. He also knew, if anything went wrong, Ward's captors could be counted on to play rough.

"Well done, Bill, you may have even earned dessert."

Morro got up to let Bill finish his dinner in peace. Yes, he needed a plan; he needed a surefire lightning-bolt-from-heaven plan. He was long past prime to be running through the streets playing shoot-um-up.

He called to Bill over his shoulder as he lumbered toward his study. “I need to think awhile; you do the same—once you’ve finished stuffing your face, that is. We’ll talk in the morning. Oh yeah, if you’re interested, there is an apple pie warming in the oven. Do your best to gag it down.”

Interested? Enraptured was more like it. He savored every last morsel of his meal, then rushed to the stove, where he did considerable damage to the aforementioned pie.

Now that the needles of both his main and reserve tanks were resting on past full, Bill waddled into the study to talk with Morro.

To his surprise, the room was empty. The problem was, it couldn’t be empty, or, at least, it shouldn’t be. He watched Morro walk down the hall and go inside—he was sure of it—but, unless Morro had turned invisible, there was no way for him to get out again without being seen from where Bill was sitting at the table. There were no other doors.

He called aloud, “Morro, you in here?” He walked farther into the room and carefully looked around. Bill felt stupid doing it, but he even peeked under the desk. He just didn’t know where else to look. There he stood, quite alone—puzzling in the dimly lighted silence. He did not see how anything could be wrong, but all the same, it gave him an uneasy feeling.

Suddenly it occurred to Bill that maybe he climbed out the window? He walked over to the window and checked; it was closed and locked.

The whole thing was a mind tweak. He decided to go to bed.



The following morning Bill got up and glanced inside Morro’s bedroom; no one there. Straight away, he went to the study. Morro was sitting at his desk, fussing with his computer.

“Where did you run off to last night?” Bill demanded, using the tone of a mother addressing a recalcitrant child.

“I needed to think.”

“Do you always become invisible when you think?”

“I think best in my Inner Sanctum,” Morro answered mysteriously.

Bill was confused, “I looked in here, and it was empty.”

Morro paused for a moment, then spoke, “Will you promise me you will never reveal what I am about to show you?”

Bill nodded a cautious affirmative.

Morro got up and walked to the farthest corner of the study, then turned back to look at Bill. He reached behind a book and, behold, like out of a movie set—only smaller—the bottom section of the bookshelf swung open, just large enough to crawl through. Morro motioned for Bill to come closer. “You can look inside but don’t go in. You’ll disturb the energy.”

Bill stooped low to see inside, and, if he had not seen it with his own eyes, he would never have believed it. Behind the bookcase was a small room with Far Eastern tapestries covering the walls and ceiling. It was dimly lit from indirect lighting placed behind the tapestries, creating a warm restful glow that seemed to come from everywhere. The floor was covered with an oriental carpet and, except for a few brightly colored cushions, there was no furniture at all. An altar, built close to the floor, was set-up at one end. On it was placed a single object: a large candle, perhaps ten centimeters in diameter—burning. On the wall, behind it, hung a strange geometrical diagram comprising inter-laced triangles with a small spot in the middle.

“It’s a soundproof Faraday cage. Nothing, not even radio waves, can get in or out. I built it myself,” Morro proclaimed proudly. “It was not part of the plans I submitted to the Building Department; consequently, no one knows about it.” Morro slowly closed the bookcase door, sealing out Bill’s ever-widening gaze. “There are several things in this house that no one knows about, and I want it kept that way.”

“It’s weird,” Bill said in astonishment.

“Maybe!” Morro snapped, a little miffed by the comment. Then he abruptly changed the subject. “Do you want to hear my plan?”

“Plan? Oh yeah, right, your plan,” Bill mumbled, dragging himself out of his thoughts. His mind finally snapped back into action, “I can’t wait to hear your plan. Let’s see; how do we break into OmniPhase’s ultra-high-tech hospital and abscond with their prize professor without ending up on a lab table, the topic of this week’s anatomy class?”

He chose to ignore Bill’s question. “I think we have everything we need. Well, that is almost everything.”

Bill did not have a clue what they needed. “Thank God we’ve got it, though,” he thought. Despite this good news, something told him he should check into it further. “So what’s this item we’re missing? Pray tell,” he queried, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“A victim.”

“Oh sure, I should have known,” Bill thought. He knew, all too well, who the victim would be. “I’m not very good at playing dead, you know. Besides, I’m a terrible actor. I was cast out of a school play once because my acting was so poor. It was very embarrassing.”

“Not you.” Morro scowled at him, turning the computer viewscreen so Bill could see.

On it was a brief email message: “Yours by one. M”

“It’s from Mary Jamison. She’ll be here at 1:00 this afternoon.” Morro paused and added, “At least, I think that is what it means.” He reconsidered his translation. “What else could it be?”

Bill shrugged. Was she to be their victim; when did she agree to that?

“That gives us just enough time to go over the details.”

Bill listened, while the “Legend of InfoScam” laid out his latest caper. They would need Morro’s van, as well as Bill’s car, a bicycle, and enough explosives to level a small town. Everything sounded good until Morro got to the part about blowing up Bill’s car. That is where he came right out of his chair.

“What to hell! Are you totally insane? That car is less than a year old. Besides, it’s not just a car; it’s one of the finest sportsters ever built. I had to wait five months for it to be delivered. I’ve ... I’ve—I’ve still

got four years of payments left before it's paid off. Give me a break. I love that car."

"Well, Bill, we are all called upon, from time to time, to make a few sacrifices."

"A few sacrifices? Bull!" Bill screamed, gesticulating while he stomped back and forth across the study, face reddened, veins bulging. "Why don't we sacrifice that broken-down beast of yours? From the looks of it, that relic does not have far to go before it self-destructs anyway. You aren't turning my beautiful road machine into a bomb—and that's final!"

Morro looked up, amused to see Bill so ruffled. Continuing slowly and calmly, Morro explained. "We could never fit four people, plus a bicycle, and all of the equipment we need, into that roller skate of yours. But, if it makes you feel any better, I have already asked our Benefactors to compensate you for the loss." Then, after a moment's pause, he added insult to injury, "And you can borrow my *beast* whenever you like until your new car is delivered. So, there now, stop pouting."

Bill stormed out in a huff, and from the hallway shouted back at Morro, "I hate this plan—it sucks!"



Mary got lost, trying to find Villa Morro and arrived forty minutes late. She entered the house, a frenetic whirlwind of mixed emotions.

That morning, when she downloaded Morro's email, her endocrine system went into hyperdrive. Of course, the cryptic way his message was worded was not the most settling: "Pet warthog lost and may be found. Broken? Perhaps. Competent help appreciated. Map attached. Borrow car. Bring bike. Do confirm. Drive carefully:-) M." Morro was definitely not a paragon of sensitivity.

"I see you were able to borrow a car."

"Yeah, a guy I had some classes with," she said absentmindedly. Then her voice turned forceful. "So what is going on? Did you find Ward? Is he hurt? Where is he?" she barked the questions at him in

rapid succession, pacing across the entryway as she spoke. Her hair was disheveled, and her clothes were thrown on hurriedly. She missed a buttonhole on her blouse, so part of it hung with a list to the left.

Morro fought to suppress a smile. It tickled him to see her so discomposd after she had been so cool, and in charge, at their first meeting. “You look like a lady who could use a cold beer,” he said and started off to the kitchen before she could answer.

“I’m not a lady—thank you—I’m a woman,” she said sharply, trailing in his wake down the hallway. “But I’ll take the beer anyway. Have you got a keg? I’ll just sit under the tap for a while.”

When they entered the kitchen, Bill smiled and got up from the table to greet her. She passed him by without taking any notice. She was intent upon pursuing Morro to the refrigerator. Suddenly she swung around to meet Bill’s bewildered gaze and spouted angrily, “Why does shit like this always happen when I’m hormonal?”

Bill immediately blushed, smiled sheepishly, and dropped his eyes to the floor. He was shy around women, to begin with, and, while he had dated his share of girlfriends, he was never quite sure what to do with himself when strong emotions came up. He shifted his weight to the other foot, and nervously looked around for a place to hide.

Seeing how embarrassed Bill was, by the mere mention of “female stuff,” brought out Mary’s blood lust. “Hormonal,” she said, loudly, leaning forward, staring at him intensely: “I don’t suppose ladies get hormonal, but women do. Find a blackboard! Write it down a hundred times: H-O-R-M-O-N-A-L.” She spelled it out to him, for emphasis.

Bill quickly glanced over his shoulder toward the hall door. No, there was no one there to come to his aid, so he beat a hasty retreat into the study.

“And when you’re done with that,” she shouted after him, “I’ve got a list of body parts you can work on.”

When she turned back to face Morro, he was standing there, chuckling to himself, wearing his best Cheshire Cat grin, holding an open

bottle in each hand. “I warned him, nothing left but his shoelaces,” he said, still chuckling under his breath.

The comment caught her by surprise. “Shoelaces?” she repeated, looking puzzled.

“Oh nothing,” Morro said, “a private joke.” He extended his arms to offer her both bottles.

“Not two, please. One is more than enough. I never drink anything alcoholic. Well, almost never. It gets me in trouble.”

They sat down at the kitchen table.

Morro brought her up to speed on the latest news and started going over the plan with her. Bill made a timid reappearance, and Mary apologized profusely for embarrassing him, although she sported a wicked smile while she did.

They talked and planned and plotted and schemed well into the night, stopping only long enough to make forays to the refrigerator. When all were satisfied, they agreed to “give it a go” in the morning.

Morro showed Mary to his room to sleep and curled up on the sofa in his study, where he ended up spending most of his nights anyway.

No one needed an alarm. They were all up and about before the crack of dawn, wolfed down a bowl of hot oatmeal in total silence, loaded the equipment and supplies, and off they went.

They made good time on the way down. It was about 7:40 when Morro pulled the van off the road at Smokey Point, about four miles from the hospital. Bill, who was following a discreet distance behind, drove past and slid into the supermarket parking lot without so much as a sideward glance to betray he knew them.

“Well, this is it,” Mary thought. She was not nervous during the drive down, but nothing seemed completely real to her then. It was much like the first time she jumped out of an airplane. She was born with a fear of heights, so skydiving seemed like a logical way to conquer her phobia. The theory being, if she could get up the gumption to walk

out of a perfectly good airplane, she could climb a ladder. The trouble with that theory was, once she was airborne, the ground was so far away it was not “height” anymore; it was something else. She did not feel fear at all—just excitement. She stepped out of the plane like it was a ride at the amusement park. Fear reared its ugly head on her next jump, a week later.

Her first landing was rough. It was breezy that day, winds nine knots and variable. As she glided in under her canopy, she did not know the wind had shifted direction, and she had drifted off course. By the time she noticed, it was too late to make a course correction. As if that was not bad enough, she had misjudged the distance to the landing zone and was headed straight for a barbed wire fence. Mary knew she had to do something, or she would hit the fence and be tangled in the barbed wire. It would not be a pretty sight.

So far, she did everything wrong that she could possibly do wrong. But, fortunately, she guessed what to do next. She swung her legs up in the harness over her head, like she was on a trapeze, and narrowly missed the barbed-wire. She glided over so close to the fence that a barb snagged her jumpsuit and tore a large chunk out between her shoulder blades. The fence she avoided, but it was not over yet. Within a second of grazing the wire, she crash-landed square in the middle of an asphalt taxiway that was just on the other side of the fence. She flopped with a bone-jarring thud, right on her tailbone, and got the wind knocked out of her. Then, to add insult to injury, her open chute unceremoniously dragged her over a hundred meters of rough asphalt before she could collapse her canopy.

Jumping out of an airplane, the first time, was easy; getting out the second time—that was a bitch—but she did it anyway.

Sitting there now, in Morro’s van, wondering what might lie ahead, a wave of fear rattled down her spine like hailstones down a drainpipe. The terrified little girl that lived deep inside her wanted to run and hide under the seat, but it was not that subpersonality who would be in charge today. She could not be. Today a more powerful persona would have to rule her mind, or they might all end up dead.

“Well, showtime,” she said, smiling at Morro as she garnered her courage and pulled herself up taller in the seat.

Morro slowly turned and looked directly into her eyes. “You are a very brave young woman,” he said.

“So are you,” she replied solemnly.

“I’m not young ... and I’m not a woman,” he slowly commented, while grinning at her mischievously.

“You can say that again, Toots,” she quipped, doing her best he-man imitation.

They both laughed. The fearful little girl was gone now, tucked safely away in the warm dark recesses of her psyche—Merry Mischief would ride again.

Morro remained in the driver’s seat, while Mary ducked out through the back, dragging her trail bike behind her. When it was clear, she closed the rear door and called up to Morro, “You’re buying lunch when this is over, right?”

“Lunch? ... Yes, absolutely. Lunch is definitely on me,” he shouted after her, as she accelerated past.

Mary rode hard and fast. It was important that she look the part of a racing cyclist who had just covered a considerable distance. Her face had to be red, heart rate, and respiration up, breathing hard and deep. For this plan to work, appearance was everything. She also had to average eighteen miles per hour for the timing to work correctly. That way, she would cover the four miles to the hospital in thirteen minutes and arrive right on time.

Six minutes after Mary left, Morro pulled out, heading for the hospital.

A minute and a half later, Bill’s roadster streaked out of the parking lot and raced to catch up with Morro. It did not take long.

He passed the van without a glance and a short time later shot past Mary, looking her over, as any man might do, while passing a young woman's spandex derriere peddling atop a bicycle seat.

"Checking her out" was part of the plan; everything had to look normal. There was not much about this plan that Bill liked, but he decided he liked this part—all two seconds of it, anyway. The rest of the morning was likely to be pretty grim.

It was a typical fall day in the Pacific Northwest, cold and damp. It was drizzling on and off while they drove down from Villa Morro, and now it was on again. Mary liked a little rain when she was riding. She loved the feel of it pelting her face and the smell of the earth and green things moistened by the water.

She saw the turnoff to the hospital and laid out hard to the left as her bike screamed around the turn. The access road would lead her past the hospital, on her right, with its staff parking area immediately adjacent to it. As she passed the staff parking lot, she saw Bill, dressed in a pale green surgical smock, locking up his car. He parked it, as planned, in the restricted zone right next to the laundry room under the main floor of Alpha Wing. No one would suspect anything out of the ordinary by this. They would just assume it was parked there to avoid even the slightest chance that someone might scratch it.

She shot past the front of the hospital at blistering speed. She knew that she was moving at an unusually fast clip. "It's amazing what a little adrenaline can do," she thought. She rode up the hill as fast as she could pedal, braked a little, then shot through the parking lot turn-around, picked up speed again, and headed down the hill toward the hospital.

A smartly dressed woman stepped out to cross the road as Mary blew past. The woman yelled, "Hey, slow it down, you stupid—" In an instant, Mary was too far away to hear more. She glanced over her shoulder at the woman standing there, shaking a fist at her, then faced forward again.

There it was, Morro's van coming up the hill at her—right on time. Well, almost on time. She was still a short distance from the front of the hospital where the accident was supposed to happen. She poured on the coal.

Morro swerved the van as though he had just seen her. She did the same, straight in his direction.

Both slammed on their brakes, but neither had counted on the roads being wet and slippery.

Their closing rate was much too fast. All Morro could do was grip the steering wheel and brace for the impact.

He saw Mary's body fly straight at him; he closed his eyes tightly and looked away.

Mary smashed into the front of the oncoming van. The impact was so violent she was thrown over the handlebars and hit the driver's side windshield with so much force her right shoulder crashed all the way through the glass.

Tires locked, the van continued screeching forward, drifting to the right. Finally, it struck the curb and stopped dead, throwing Mary's body fifteen feet forward onto the sidewalk, her bicycle crumpled under the left front tire.

Morro heard the collision and felt his face stinging from shards of broken glass that slammed into him. "Oh my God," he cried as he leaped from the van and ran over to her side. "Oh, my God."

There was no longer any need to worry about appearances.

Morro knelt beside her.

She showed no sign of consciousness.

He felt her neck for a pulse. She was alive but badly hurt. She would have to be hospitalized and treated. Of course, that was the plan all along, but it was not supposed to be real. Now with her injured, as bad as she was, the mission would have to be aborted. She would prob-

ably be all right, in time, if she did not have a broken neck or back, but she was surely out of the action now.

The immediate danger, now, was she might say something when she began to regain consciousness that would betray her purpose in being here. That could be catastrophic for all concerned.

Morro began to gently remove her riding helmet.

The woman Mary rode past came running up, shouting at Morro, “It’s not your fault, mister; I saw the whole thing. That guy’s an idiot. He nearly ran me over, too. Serves him right. The little bastard got what he deserves.”

Morro carefully removed Mary’s helmet and looked at the woman, “It’s a young girl, and she’s badly hurt. Have you no compassion?”

“Oh, who cares,” harrumphed the woman. “Well then, SHE got exactly what SHE deserves. Big hairy deal!”

Bill came running up and pushed the woman aside, “Excuse me; I’m a doctor.”

She flipped Bill and Morro an “I think you are both flaming idiots” look and marched briskly off toward the hospital—never looking back.

Bill moved across from Morro and began to examine Mary, trying to determine the extent of her injuries. He had taken first-aid courses, and, for most intents and purposes, was a capable paramedic. “Her shoulder is probably dislocated, and I think her collarbone may be broken,” he said. “She has a concussion, too.” Then Bill looked up.

Morro’s face was bleeding from several holes bored into it by flying glass. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

“We’ll have to scrub the mission,” Bill said quietly, “and we should not have her treated here if we can help it.” He saw a woman in a nurse’s uniform hustling toward them from the hospital.

Mary began to stir. “Where...” she broke off, “I hit something ... Oh, darn—I did.” She started to cry, “I’ve ruined everything.”

Never in his life had Morro felt more ashamed of himself. “It’s not your fault; I didn’t brake in time. With the rain, I should have given you more space. We’re calling it off and getting you out of here.”

She looked over and saw the nurse hurrying toward her. She reached up and grabbed Morro by the shirt, pulling him as close to her as she could. She winced from the pain her movement caused. “We are not cancelling anything; do you hear me? We’ve got ... keep going. There is no other way. Don’t worry about me—I can do this.”

“No, it’s impossible,” he insisted, “you’re too badly hurt.”

The nurse was bending over Mary now. She could not say any more, so she just stared intently into Morro’s eyes.

He saw her obstinate look of determination. The message was loud and clear. He closed his eyes and gave her a tiny nod.

“Showtime,” he thought.

The nurse was checking Mary’s pulse when two orderlies came running down the sidewalk, pushing a gurney. They carefully lifted Mary aboard and started running back to the hospital.

They burst through the double doors in the reception area.

As soon as they cleared the doorway, they were met by a tall man with a crew cut, dressed in a black three-piece suit. He stepped in front of the procession, reached out his hand, and halted the gurney. “Where do you think you’re taking these people?” he said to the nurse with a voice as gruff as an aggravated bridge troll.

“There was an accident out front. This woman is badly hurt; she needs treatment.”

“Well, she can’t get it here,” he snapped. “Call an ambulance and have her shipped down to Marysville. Let them handle it.” Then he gave the gurney an abrupt push toward the door.

The gurney jolted backward, sending a surge of pain through Mary. She cried out and grabbed hold of the nurse’s arm. “Please help me,” she pleaded and then began to sob, “Please don’t turn me away.” Mary

had never thought of herself as an actress before, but then she did not know how much of this was acting. Her pain was real enough; her belief in their mission was extreme enough. The rest was easy.

The nurse took Mary's hand in hers and gave it a gentle squeeze, "Don't fret, child." She glared forcefully at the man in black, then turned her attention back to Mary, "This *is* a hospital, Dear. Don't worry; we will have you fixed up in no time."

Then she looked up at the man in black, "That is what hospitals are for, aren't they Edward?"

Edward's eyes narrowed to flaming slits. He wanted to strangle her on the spot. He imagined how ecstatic it would feel to casually reach out and grab this bitch by the throat and slowly throttle the life out of her, watching her arms flay wildly in a futile attempt to halt her inevitable demise. She had been a thorn in his side for over two years, and he would relish putting an end to it—especially in so violent and graphic a fashion.

Martha Summerfield was a registered nurse from the old school. She was in her fifties and the mother of two grown children. She should have gotten over this sappy motherhood thing by now, but she was always mothering someone. It drove Edward crazy. Worse yet, she was nosy and meddlesome. During the time she worked there, as head nurse, she had accumulated too much knowledge about "sensitive matters." She could be dangerous. For the good of the company, her employment must be terminated—permanently. He would have done it long ago if he could be sure she did not have files on him, squirreled away somewhere. She had threatened him with them on multiple occasions.

"We are not a trauma center, nurse; get these people out of here. And I mean now!" he commanded.

Martha left Mary's side and took Edward by the arm, pulling him out of earshot from the others. "Look, you callous ass; if you don't allow this girl to be treated, I'll make a noise so loud it'll be heard in Moscow."

"That would be unwise, and shall we say ... unlucky."

What Martha had said, she said instinctively. Mary could have been her own daughter. She looked up at Edward and saw hatred burning in his eyes, like the fires of Hell. She knew the precariousness of her situation. This confrontation had been brewing for a long time, and she could see by the vehemence in his glare that she had finally gone too far. She had just signed her own death warrant.

Apologizing would not do any good, and begging for mercy would be just the sort of pleasure Edward would revel in; it would make his work far more enjoyable.

She had long kept silent about things she had discovered while working here. She and her employers were gripped in a deadlock: she had her secret files; they had the Sword of Damocles hanging over their heads. She justified her situation because the job paid triple what she could make elsewhere. So she caved into fear, swallowed her pride, and stayed in her place; but Mary being here changed everything. It forced Martha to redefine her place.

Martha riveted her gaze into Edward's glacial gray eyes and stood her ground. "Don't think for one minute that, just because you dress like an undertaker, you can intimidate me. If they go, I go with them. And, with God as my witness, I'll do everything in my power to expose you for the monster you really are. I'll take you, this so-called hospital, and your entire goon squad down with you."

"You won't live to see that day," his voice trembled, dripping with malice, "This I promise you."

"You are probably right but, if I do meet with an untimely end, I have already taken steps to see that certain documents and a detailed explanation of my employment here will rise up from my grave and destroy you. You know that I understand the nature of the beast I'm dealing with here. I know you want to kill me, but I don't care anymore. I spent most of my adult life alleviating suffering, and I will no longer be part of anything that causes it."

He stood there, glaring at her, boring holes through her skull.

She stared back. Determination flamed from her eyes as she sternly demanded, “Now, you let us pass!”

Edward considered his options. He could not snatch her here in the lobby, there were too many people involved. He was smarter than that. A sinister smile crept across his face, “If you insist, my dear. Please let me escort you.”

He took out his handroid. “Neal, this is Edward, prepare the Omega O.R. for an immediate trauma incoming.”

Then, approaching Mary and the others, he said with a smile that never touched his eyes, “Sorry about all that: a misunderstanding. I didn’t think we could admit you because we are full, that is Alpha Wing is full. Omega Wing was closed this week for improvements, but Nurse Summerfield just informed me that its operating room was certified ‘Ready,’ just this morning. I wasn’t told. Again, I apologize. This way, please.” He started off, leading the way, talking to someone on his handroid.

As they made their way to the double doors that opened onto Omega Wing, Bill whispered to Morro, “I wasn’t shown this part of the building when I was here before.”

“Good, we might be exactly where we need to be.” Then looking over at Martha, he added, “Our nurse-protector looks rather nervous, don’t you think?”

“Like the only cat in a kennel full of hungry pit bulls,” Bill cautioned, “it’s heads-up from here on.”

Bill may have been awkward with women, and a little green around the edges to be in command—unseasoned might be a better way to define it—but he was a top-notch field agent. Well-trained and savvy, he was also an excellent marksman: expert with both rifle and pistol. And he was experienced in setting and using explosives. Bill kept himself in excellent physical condition and had studied multiple styles of martial arts. He had no interest in competition, so he never earned belts for the styles he practiced. His interest grew out of the most primal of all animal behaviors: self-survival.

They moved through the double doors that separated Omega Wing from the lobby. Once inside, the two orderlies quickly whisked the gurney down the hall. Bill made a mental note that it was almost the same size as the other wing, maybe thirty rooms. Halfway down, on the right, a door flung open. The procession scurried in, with Edward leading the way.

One of the orderlies took up a position behind Morro; the other moved around to flank Bill. No one seemed very interested in Mary.

Edward slid around the gurney toward Bill and demanded, "And just who are you supposed to be?"

"Oh, sorry," Bill said, extending his arm to shake hands, "I am Doctor Macalister. I'm a visiting physician."

"We don't get any visiting physicians here," Edward forced an icy grin, while motioning to the orderlies.

The instant Bill saw Edward's hand signal, he pivoted forward on his right leg and threw a sidekick into the throat of the orderly behind him, and followed it with a karate chop to the bridge of Edward's nose.

Morro reacted the same instant as Bill. He swung around and laid all of his might into a well-placed hammer-blow to the other orderly's temple. The force was so great that the orderly was knocked clear off his feet; he was out, like a light, before he hit the floor.

Bill spun around to give his orderly a follow-up kick but, just as he did, Edward grabbed him from behind. His foot missed its mark. The orderly cocked his arm to nail Bill, but Morro struck first with a kidney punch that bent the orderly over backward and rolled him to the floor. He tried to get up, but toxins from his wounded kidney flooded into his system, and he staggered into unconsciousness.

Mary had climbed off her gurney during the struggle, She pushed it into Edward as hard as she could, breaking his hold on Bill.

Bill brought his boot down on top of Edward's shoe, followed by an elbow to the solar plexus. Spinning around, he grabbed hold of Edward and jammed his index and middle finger into the hollow of

his neck, just above the sternum. Then he hooked his fingers behind the sternum and locked the grip with pressure from his thumb and remaining fingers, a bitterly painful paralysis hold.

Edward hung from the end of Bill's arm like a rag doll, futilely clutching at him and gasping for air.

Morro quickly moved up alongside Bill.

Martha was pressed into the far corner of the room, crouched low and shaking in terror. Morro held up his hand, motioning her to calm down. "It's okay," he said softly, "don't make any noise, and we won't harm you."

Moving close to Edward's ear, he calmly said, "In a moment, I will order my friend to release you. I'm sure you're anxious for him to do that. You will not make a sound, except to quietly and truthfully tell us what we want to know. If you do not cooperate, or, if you lie to us, I will let him finish the job he started. I can tell by your expression that he is very good at what he does. The penalty for noncooperation will make this little grip feel like a pinch on the behind. My friend can be very destructive when he is angry, and I'm pretty sure you have made him angry. So my first question is, are you ready to cooperate?"

Edward tried to answer, but speech was not possible.

"I know you can't talk, just nod your head."

Edward tried to jerk his head up and down.

Morro commanded Bill with exaggerated authority, "Release him!"

Edward dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes, clutching his throat and gasping for air. Bill and Morro reached down together, pulled Edward up by his armpits, and slammed him back against the wall in a seated position.

Morro crouched in front of Edward, their noses nearly touching. "Where is Professor Ward Baxter. We know you are holding him here."

Edward turned his head and stared past Morro, his face resolute, his jaw-line as hard as granite.

"I won't ask you again; my friend will ask next. You remember him."

Edward just stared into space; his face bright red, full of hatred.

“Okay,” said Morro, “it’s your call.” He gestured for Bill to resume.

Martha cried out, “No—stop!”

Everyone looked at her in surprise.

“As much as I would love to watch you torture the sadistic bastard, there isn’t time. If we want to get out of here alive, we have to act now.”

“What do you mean, ‘We?’” questioned Morro.

“What I mean is I will be happy to help you, but you have to take me with you. Deal?”

“Who am I to ignore a damsel in distress, but why would you help us?” Morro asked, with a healthy dose of skepticism in his voice.

“There isn’t just one hospital here; there are two. Alpha Wing is just a front for this chamber of horrors. I’ve seen many people admitted to Omega Wing. I have never seen one discharged.”

“Okay, you have a deal,” Morro said. “Welcome to the Team.” He did not trust her as far as he could throw the entire hospital but, if she was on the level, she could be a useful ally.

Nurse Summerfield moved closer to Morro. “We need Edward’s access code to get your professor out of here. Then we can use his palm-print to open any door.”

Edward struggled to get up, “I’ll rip out your—”

Bill slammed him down hard against the floor. He went silent.

“I don’t suppose it matters much whether Eddie here is conscious or not for his palm print to activate the door?” Morro inquired.

“Not one little bit,” said Martha, not concealing her pleasure at the suggestion.

Morro nodded to Bill, who immediately applied a grip to Edward’s neck that stopped the flow of blood in his carotid artery. His legs convulsed and flayed about for a short time; then, he went limp.

“What’s his access code?” demanded Morro.

“I don’t know, but everyone is in the computer. We can break in using the terminal in here. Accessing his personnel file shouldn’t be harder than getting into my own; I’ve done it before. Any of you good with computers?”

Mary and Morro simultaneously replied, “I am!”

Mary struggled to make her way over to the computer terminal.

Morro and Bill quickly moved in to give her a hand, carefully helping her into a chair next to the workstation. Morro promptly sat down in the driver’s seat. Mary started to protest, but Morro said gently, “Your help will be invaluable, but you only have one hand now. It’s better if I man the keyboard.”

Martha piped up, “And I’ll do the voice entries; the computer recognizes my voiceprint.”

Mary focused her mind, scanning her stock of hacking strategies. “I think it might be easier if we access Martha’s file, and upgrade her access privileges to Administrator. That should give us total access to all systems. If that works, we won’t need Edward’s file. His file will probably have greater security around it, anyway.”

Bill agreed enthusiastically. “That will also be a whole lot easier than dragging Eddie’s carcass around with us to use his palmprint.” Then he added, as an aside, his voice barely a mumble, “Especially since I’ll be the one doing the dragging.”

Martha went over to one of the cabinets, opened a drawer, and pulled something out.

“What are you doing?” Morro demanded gruffly.

Fear seized her. She immediately froze in her tracks and held out her trembling hands, palms up, to show Morro what she was holding. She held a hypo-syringe and a bottle of Thorazine. “I thought it might be best if our boys, here, went to sleep for a couple of days. Don’t you agree?”

Morro smiled at her, reassuringly, “You’re the nurse.”

She prepped the syringe and shot a hundred milligrams of Thorazine into Edward and each of the orderlies; then, she hurried back to the terminal. "Computer, recognize Head Nurse, Summerfield, Martha T."

The computer replied, "Present your palm, Nurse Summerfield, and enter your access code."

Martha pressed her palm against the platen. A beam of light scanned it. Then she quickly reached around Morro and typed in her password. The terminal screen echoed the word "RECOGNIZED," and by voice, the computer responded, "Hello, Nurse Summerfield. How can I help you?"

Mary jumped in, whispering, "Tell it to activate the access code file, but wait till I tell you." Then she turned toward Morro, "As soon as she gives the command, you type in control, alternate, question mark."

"Good," said Morro. It was exactly what he would have done.

Mary raised her hand and pointed at Martha, then signaled, "Now!"

Martha moved a little closer to the microphone, "Computer, show me the access level code file. Please execute!"

"You are access to level five. I can only show you records that are access level four or less."

Mary and Morro both nodded, "Yes."

"That is acceptable. Please execute," said Martha.

Morro keyed in the sequence that forced the operating system to display the filename and directory path of the access level code file. It appeared on the upper left corner of the screen at the same time the file was accessed.

"Got it," Morro declared excitedly while reaching into his bag to fetch the flashdisk he and Mary created the day before. There was much about Mary that Morro found impressive, but her knowledge of computer programming really made him sit up and take notice. He loaded the disk into the infobay and keyed in the execution key. After the

program activated and signed on, he keyed in the filename and path for the personnel file.

Instantly, encrypted data appeared on the screen.

He entered the next sequence, and Mary's decryption analyzer sprang to life.

Hobble-gobble instantly began to scroll past.

It was a very tough code to crack. Time ticked by, and the code still remained unbroken.

Morro looked nervously over at Mary.

"It'll work," she said. At least it had done so numerous times before when Merry Mischief, her alter ego, used it to hack into ultra-secure government computer networks.

She saw the sweat on Morro's brow. No words needed to be said; time was the one commodity they had in short supply. Very soon, an army of OmniPhase henchmen would come charging through the door with guns blazing. Sensing each other's concern, they both looked over at the door where Bill was standing guard.

He felt their gaze upon him, so he glanced in their direction and gave the nod. The coast was clear for now.

Morro felt a drop of sweat trickle down his spine under his shirt: it tickled. Only six minutes had elapsed, but it seemed more like six hours.

"Come on, come on!" Mary ordered the computer under her breath, desperation evident in her voice, "We don't exactly have all day."

Morro looked over at her, quite amused. She knew telling the computer to hurry would not do any good. She shrugged her shoulders and sheepishly smiled back at him.

Another minute dragged by. Bill looked over at the group huddled around the terminal and said reassuringly, "All clear."

Bingo! At last, records began appearing on the screen that were all neatly ordered in English. Morro heaved a sigh of relief and reached

over to give Mary's hand a squeeze. "Great program," he said. "You will have to give me lessons someday."

He scrolled through the list until he came to Edward Dunning.

"That's him," Martha said excitedly, moving closer to the terminal.

Morro scanned screen-right until he found the access code field. He jotted Edward's secret access authorization code on the inside of his wrist, then scanned down to Martha's personnel record, entered Edward's authorization as her own, and saved the file.

While Morro was working on the access code, Martha had begun wrapping Mary's arm to immobilize it. She gave her ten milligrams of Alphabenzodone. "This will take the edge off your pain, dear, but it won't impair your thinking processes," she whispered.

Morro looked up at Bill, "Sorry, my friend, but it's time to give your trusty steed the *coup de grâce*."

Bill dropped his head, shook it sadly from side to side, and then slowly removed the detonator from his pocket. He looked up at Morro with tears in his eyes, held out the detonator, and softly said, "I love that car." Then he pushed the button.

Instantaneously, fifty pounds of C21 exploded in the bonnet of Bill's car. It destroyed the car and blew a hole in the side of the Alpha Wing medical laundry large enough to drive an eighteen-wheeler through. The shockwave shattered most of the windows on the Omega side as well.

The hospital was plunged into instant pandemonium. The hallways were choked with smoke and dust. People were screaming and running everywhere.

The hospital's security force bolted for the armory and hurriedly grabbed the heavy duty ordinance, while orderlies, patients, and nurses scurried around, trying to escape through the windows and fire escapes. Everyone was afraid the building would collapse on them at any time.

Morro's group moved cautiously out into the hallway and began looking into the empty rooms, trying to find Ward. Since Omega Wing was almost totally empty, they were the only ones in its halls. They could hear lots of commotion coming from the reception area, beyond the double doors in front. Inside Omega, all was quiet. They moved as quickly as they could, from room to room, groping through the thick cloud of dust and smoke that filled the hallway leading to the reception lounge.

As they approached Room 6, the door swung open, and an orderly, armed with a machine pistol, rushed out and turned to aim his gun. He was too late. Bill had already pulled a bead on him and lowered the hammer twice. Both bullets struck him in the chest, and he fell back through the open door.

The door began to slowly close.

Morro made a dive for it, like he was stealing third base, but not fast enough. It clicked shut with a solid finality.

Martha would have to open the lock.

Bill, Martha, and Mary crowded together around the door. To protect the women, Bill positioned himself between them and the hallway.

Martha keyed in her new access code and placed her hand on the platen. "I sure hope this works," she said nervously. She did not have to say it; they were all thinking the same thing.

Morro stayed where he was on the floor and motioned for Mary and Martha to move out of the way.

The lock clicked, and the green access light came on.

Martha breathed a deep sigh of relief.

Morro grabbed the bottom of the door. Then he rolled over, dragging it open while using it as a shield. The gesture was not lost on Bill, who leaped across the hall and assumed a firing position, where he could cover the room.

The wounded guard on the floor stirred slowly; there was no other movement.

Bill cautiously approached the open door, then jumped quickly inside.

A second man popped out from behind the hospital bed.

Bill and Morro fired at the same time.

The second guard fell.

Ward was there. He was unconscious and strapped to the bed with wide nylon restraints, but he seemed all right.

Martha rushed inside and grabbed his chart, studied it quickly, and announced, "He's drugged into a near coma. We will need the antidote to bring him around." She began frenetically searching the drawers and cabinets, looking for the antidote. Finally, she slammed the last drawer shut in frustration and said to the others, "There is nothing here to help him. He won't wake up for a full day, maybe two, unless I can get some Dextroatropine to revive him."

"No time. Just unstrap him," ordered Morro. "We'll carry him out, he will just have to sleep it off."

"Out where?" asked Bill.

"We're going to blow the doors off the front of this wing and take him straight out through the lobby."

Bill immediately crouched down and started reloading his gun. "So much for the genteel approach," he muttered to himself. There was a strange coolness in his manner.

Morro pulled five CX-23 grenades from his bag.

Bill could not comprehend what he intended to do with that much explosive. The CX-23 was a directional grenade that was designed much like the Claymore mines Morro used in Vietnam, only far more powerful. They had an outer layer, which was a fast-acting explosive that faced away from the direction of the blast. It detonated first to create a wall of force that would "case" and direct the second explosion, which would follow a millisecond later. Between the first and second layers of plastic explosives was a specially formed Ultrakevlar layer to further

shape and direct the inner blast. A CX-23 grenade could blow a hole through six inches of solid steel plate large enough for a grown man to crawl through.

“What are you going to do with all that?” Bill asked, duly amazed.

“I told you, I am going to blast away the doors to the lobby,” was Morro’s toneless reply.

“You have got to be joking; one of those is more than enough to pulverize a dozen of those doors.”

“Agreed, but the building should be empty by now. Everybody must have escaped. This will not only blow the doors, but it will also completely clear the lobby of”—he cocked an eyebrow in Bill’s direction—“*unwanted obstructions*.” He needed his meaning to be clear to Bill, without alarming the others.

Bill knew exactly what Morro meant. He glanced over at Mary and Martha. It was better not to worry them by defining the nature of those obstructions.

Bill and Morro moved out into the hallway and began placing the charges: one in the middle, between the doors, and one near each of the hinges holding the doors.

Morro turned to Bill, “We’ll move out right behind the blast. The smoke and dust will make us invisible.”

“Yeah, if the roof doesn’t fall in on our heads,” Bill groaned, his words echoing off the bare walls.

“Oh, ye of little faith. This is a strong building, great architecture. It can surely handle a little bang like this.”

Bill eyed him anxiously, “Famous last words,” he grumbled. He did not share Morro’s confidence.

Morro set the grenades to the same detonation code so they would go off simultaneously. Then he programmed the code into a detonator.

“Everyone ready?” he asked.

They all nodded approval and hurried into Ward’s room to fetch their cargo. Bill and Morro picked up Ward, and they all raced for-

ward into the first patient room, closing the door behind them, and crouched down low, next to the wall.

“Here we go now,” announced Morro. “Take a deep breath. We should not breathe any more than necessary until we are free of the building and clear of the dust.”

Morro squeezed the button.

The detonator’s LED screen lit up with the word “ARMED” and began counting: five ... four ... three ... two ... one—.

The blast shook the ground under their feet. A wall of dust and debris rushed through Omega Wing like a freight train in a dead-heat race with a tornado.

Bill and Morro hoisted Ward up between them and started for the door. Martha helped Mary to her feet and moved in behind.

“Stay close,” Morro ordered Martha.

“Don’t worry,” she shouted. She had every intention of sticking to his backside like glue.

Bill threw open the door, and they all rushed out.

The corridor was so full of smoke and dust; they could barely see which way to go. The only indicator was a slightly brighter haze in the direction of the lobby.

They carefully stepped through the Omega Wing doors, or more appropriately stated, the gaping hole where the doors used to be.

Since the blast was directional, the hallway was relatively clear of debris, but, within a few feet of entering the lobby, there was rubble everywhere. It made the task of carrying Ward all the more difficult.

Bill tripped over something and went down on one knee. It was the body of a man dressed in a dusty black suit. An M96 machine gun lay next to him.

Bill scrambled up quickly, dragging the M96 with him. “I tripped over one of those obstructions you were worried about,” he gasped,

regaining his grip on Ward with his left hand, holding the machine gun with his right. “How could OmniPhase get M96s,” he wondered; they were tightly controlled military weapons.

As quickly as possible, the group made its way through the lobby until they cleared the front of the building. Everyone gasped for air once they were finally out in the open.

“Let’s get the van and roll out of here, *haiaku*,” shouted Morro. His voice boomed over the cacophony that surrounded them.

The dust cloud got thinner and thinner as they moved down the sidewalk. Suddenly, from their left, a man in a dark suit came running toward them. Bill let go of Ward and spun around to face him.

Through the smoke, he saw the faint outline of an M96 and, without a moment’s hesitation, opened fire with his own M96. The attacker’s body exploded when the wall of projectiles hit it, throwing him several feet backward to the ground.

Bill was shocked by the “repeat” of the M96. It fired so fast it did not sound like individual bullets firing, it sounded more like canvas ripping. Feeling and seeing the weapon’s destructive force sent a chill through him; he never wanted to be hit by one of those. Not time for such thoughts; he grabbed Ward, and they all ran to the van.

When they got to the street, another surprise awaited them. The right front tire of the van had plowed into the curb so hard it bent the rim, and the air had leaked out. The tire was almost flat.

“Oh, oh,” Morro said anxiously, “We’re in deep doo-doo now.”

Bill let go of Ward and ran out into the street. A car was pulling out of the parking lot, heading up the access road past the hospital. Bill jumped in front of it, screamed “Halt,” and leveled the M96 at the driver.

The driver slammed on his brakes and screeched to a halt.

Bill shot around to the driver’s side and ordered him to slide over.

He did as he was told.

Bill opened the door and jumped in behind the wheel.

Mary ran ahead and opened the rear door for them, then quickly ran around to the other rear door, opened it, and painfully squeezed herself inside.

Martha grabbed Ward's other arm and, she and Morro dragged him to the car.

When Martha and Morro got to the car, they began stuffing Ward into the back seat. Mary grabbed him with her good arm and pulled as hard as she could. Searing pain shot through her. She cried out as she strained against his dead weight. "Get in here, Ward Baxter, you inconsiderate bastard." She screamed in exasperation.

Ward rolled in, and Martha piled in behind. Morro came around and jumped into the front seat.

They were off.

Bill mashed the pedal to the metal, and they sped away, like a shot. They didn't head for Highway Five, which most would suspect. Bill decided, on the spot, to head toward Warm Beach, a small coastal community on Puget Sound.

A few miles down the road, Morro told Bill to turn off onto a wooded side-street. They pulled over a safe distance from the main road. Morro jumped out of the car and ordered the hostage next to him to get out.

The hostage was a middle-aged man who had never experienced any sort of adventure, except for vicariously watching action films. He cowered on the seat and started to cry, pleading for his life.

"Don't do that," Morro snapped, extremely embarrassed. Then he softened his voice and said, very politely, "We don't want hurt you, and, if it is any consolation, we are very sorry for the inconvenience we have caused you." He paused and took out a set of handcuffs and a roll of duct tape, "And we are sorry about this too."

He took the hostage a short distance off the road, wrapped his arms around a sturdy tree, cuffed him there, then taped his mouth shut so he could not cry out for help. "In an hour, we'll call the police and tell them where to find you. So make yourself as comfortable as

possible. Once again, I am very sorry you got caught up in this mess. I promise it won't happen again."

Morro ran back to the car, and they were underway. "It's about an hour's drive until we rendezvous with the Benefactors."

"Benefactors? Why didn't you tell me about that?" Bill's pride was hurt; he did not like being left out of the loop.

"They asked me to keep it quiet until now. You and Mary will meet them, but Martha will have to be blindfolded." Then turning to Martha, "I'm sorry; it's not that we are ungrateful."

"I quite understand," she said. "I am the one who's grateful. You saved me from more danger than you know. This would have been my last day on earth if you had not come to my rescue."

They worked their way up the coast, taking roads that were well off the beaten path, driving cautiously, making sure they were not being followed.



The meeting took place on Lummi Island at the beach-front home of a good friend of Nanette Lacy. It was agreed that Martha and Mary would "go underground" and remain in Nan's care since it was much too dangerous for them to return to their former lives. Bill and Morro would take Ward back to Villa Morro and debrief him. Ward would not be told about Mary and Martha's participation. Since he was asleep throughout the entire incident, it would be safer for all concerned to leave him in the dark.

Morro was given another van. The Benefactors would discreetly dispose of the car Bill had commandeered. Morro's old van would not be a problem since it was never registered in his name, and the address where it was registered was phony. Bill's car was a thornier problem since it was registered in his name. It would help the enemy track him down if he ever surfaced again. But that would not happen anytime soon, so there was ample time to establish a new identity for him.

It was dark when Morro and Bill started for Villa Morro, with Ward sleeping soundly in a sleeping bag in the back. It was the peaceful end of a long hard day.