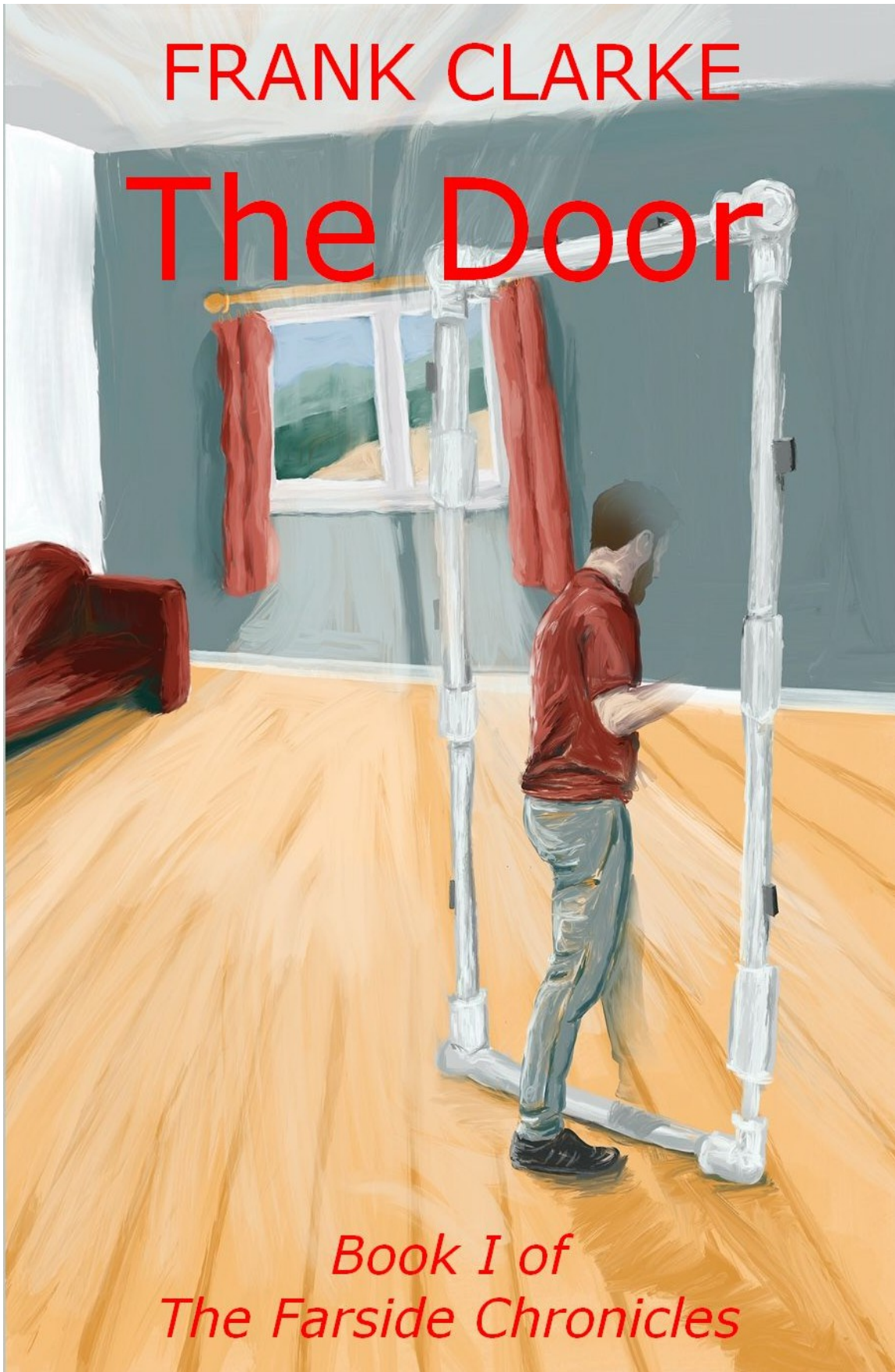


FRANK CLARKE

The Door



*Book I of
The Farside Chronicles*

The Farside Chronicles

Book I

The Door

by Frank Clarke

© 2017

"It's simple," he said. "You park the car in this spot, then you twist one of the dimensions that define the parking space — there are four that we can perceive but an infinite number that we can't perceive — and the car 'disappears' — as far as anyone in this universe is concerned. Then you roll another car in where the first one isn't any longer. You can keep doing that longer than forever."

"OK," the other began, a note of skepticism clearly evident in his tone, "and when Mrs. Jones wants her Mercedes back?"

"You just look up her coordinates in the log, reconfigure the space for her coordinates, and her car magically reappears. She gets in and drives away. Simple."

"Simple," the other repeated. His face did not reflect confidence.

"Yes," the first sighed, "I just have a bug or two to work out."

Acknowledgements

Cover art by Andrew Stearns

Table of Contents

1 – Prologue.....	1
2 – Discovery.....	10
3 – The Curtain Parts.....	18
4 – Across the Meadow.....	26
5 – Escape.....	38
6 – Parry.....	45
7 – Riposte.....	56
8 – Flight.....	65
9 – Spike.....	82
10 – Kidnap.....	95
11 – Ambush.....	109
12 – Duck For Cover.....	123
13 – Endgame.....	132
14 – Epilogue.....	159

1 — Prologue

"Any questions?" She eyed them all briefly. "Good," she announced. "No class Thursday. I'm in meetings all day with doctoral candidates. Mr. Marburton is available to help you individually and in groups as you wish. You are responsible for all material through the end of chapter 17. See you Monday. Class dismissed."

Barbara fitzGibbon, Associate Professor of Physics, U. Colorado, Boulder, breezed out of the classroom and was gone in a wink. In the faculty office area, Marge, the department secretary, notified her as she swept past: "There's another one."

Inside her office were two dozen long-stemmed American Beauties. The note said, simply: "I love you. Say 'yes'. Dennis."

A dark look crossed her face. "I don't need this, Dennis," she muttered to herself, half wishing he were present to hear it personally. It was the thirty-second or thirty-third consecutive workday that one or both had sent her roses or candy or both. It was now at the point where everyone in the office snickered at the arrival of the delivery-boy (*delivery-person?* she asked herself.)

This rivalry between Dennis and Vincent is really starting to get on my nerves, she thought, and her mood deepened. *Why is it so difficult, she wondered, for them to understand that she wasn't ready for a long-term 'thing'? And if she were, it could just as well be Ernie as one of them. To be honest, she thought, Ernie was probably more likely to make the better partner, even though he was as poor as a church mouse and both Dennis and Vincent could buy Ernie if they wanted... if they knew about him... if they cared. Still, the flowers were lovely. Ah, well.*

She stood in the doorway of her office and told Marge: "They're lovely. Would you like them?"

"Of course."

"Then they're yours, Marge. Do whatever you like with them. Give them away to the first twenty-four women who walk in that door if you like."

"But, Barbara..."

"No 'buts'. If I see another salvo in their 'War of the Roses', I'll be ill."

Dr. Barbara fitzGibbon, 28, 5'11", 148 pounds, brunette, jogger of mountains, long-distance cyclist, pilot, author of the obscure treatise "The 4-space Meaning of n-space" (obscure because only seven people in the entire world understood it, if 'understood' were the

proper word), had made up her mind. She was attractive enough, she knew, to pick her own suitor, and smart enough to make a good choice. So, why, she wondered, did she have the nagging thought that her head was not totally involved in this decision.

Ernie, after all, rarely sent her flowers. In fact, now that she thought deeply about it, Ernie had *never* sent her flowers, but he also never failed to provide a greeting card at just the right moment to brighten a dismal day.

Then again, maybe the judgment of “dismal” was made retroactively and in contrast to the warm feelings she got whenever Ernie showed he was thinking of her. *This is all getting too complicated*, she thought. *There ought to be a mathematical solution to such problems. She would check with Dr. Saarinen tomorrow.*

—==++++==—

Ernie Walsh pulled the door shut and twisted the key in the lock. He paused and looked at the lettering on the glass of the door: Better World Society. *If we can ever afford it*, the brown thought flitted through his brain before he could put a stop to it.

From the trunk of his car he drew a carpetbag that had once-upon-a-time been somebody’s suitcase. He wondered if it could really be as old as he suspected and still be serviceable.

One day, he fantasized as he strolled toward Pearl St., he would walk into an antique dealer’s shop with his carpetbag in tow, and there would be ooh-ing and aah-ing over the “find”. “An original Guacamole if I ever saw one,” they would say. “What will you take for it?” they would plead, and he would magnanimously allow them to buy it for a mere thousand dollars. Oh, what the heck! Dream big. Ten thousand dollars.

His juggler’s equipment, of course, would not be included. Else, how would he survive? Indeed, how would he survive without Pearl St.? The half-dozen blocks of Pearl that served as a pedestrian mall were anything but pedestrian. For as long as the stores stayed open, and in some cases longer than that, there would be activity of one kind or another. Jugglers, magicians, folk dancers, musicians in ones and twos and threes, even an occasional tightrope walker, their acts were single-minded essays to extract a few coins, or (happy day!) a few dollars from the strollers and the shoppers for whom no trip to Pearl St. was ever wasted.

Undoubtedly, some of these entertainers performed for the joy of performance. More typically, the donations pitched into their caps, lying there on the pavement, would be a significant and indispensable part of their income.

Ernie was, above all, a realist. *The minuscule salary provided by The Better World Society ought really to be called a stipend*, he thought. No one in his right mind could expect anyone to live on it, not even one who lived Ernie’s near-ascetic lifestyle. If it

weren't for Barbara fitzGibbon's cooking that she bestowed upon him rather more often than he thought he deserved (not that he was complaining, mind you), Ernie's spare frame might be considerably more spare.

His carpetbag open at his feet, Ernie toyed with a variety of objects, Indian clubs, golf balls, assorted fruits and — in some ways — the spectators. Talking with the other performers on the great stage that was Pearl St., he learned that he was not alone in his ability to spot the two or three onlookers who were most likely to part with a donation, and (of course) he always played heaviest to them. They were, after all, his livelihood, but beyond the crass necessities of supplementing his income, they were, themselves, as much fun to Ernie as he was to them. Perhaps more.

—==++++==—

"I'm home," Buck called, but no one answered. He plopped the grocery bags onto the counter top and began to unload them. The bottle of Wild Turkey he was about to put in its accustomed place beneath the counter, then stopped, unscrewed the top, took a tumbler from the cabinet overhead, and poured himself a stiff one. Then he resumed putting the groceries away.

Buck fitzGibbon savored the whiskey as it flowed over his tongue, burning it, numbing it. He took a slow, deep breath of the alcohol fumes and closed his eyes with the first rush. In the dark behind his eyelids he could see Alice's face as clearly as if she were in the room with him. That was the worst part about drinking. It made him remember. Then he would drink more to forget.

Marion E. fitzGibbon, "Buck" to friend and foe alike, pressed the glass to his forehead and tried to hold back the tears for lost Alice. Marines don't cry, especially not 30-and-out retired Sergeant Majors, and especially not over stupid, senseless errors like the one that took his wife, his childhood sweetheart, and his best friend all at once. Such things had no explanation, and the Board of Inquiry at Quantico had offered none. It was an accident, they said. A regrettable accident, they said. And they said they were sorry, but it didn't bring Alice back, and the next year when it came time for him to re-up, he decided, *No, it's time to leave all this behind*, and he left the Corps. But he didn't leave it all behind. Somehow, it always seemed to move to the same place he did. Funny, that.

Barbara will be home soon, he thought and muttered to himself *"Better get started."* He downed the remaining whiskey in one gulp and set to making dinner. *For two or three? Better make it three. Can't tell who she'll bring home. Maybe it will be Ernie and*

we'll get to finish that chess game.

—==++++==—

"Does anyone here juggle?"

"I do. I do." Barbara waved her hand like a first-grader.

"Ma'am, would you mind stepping over here behind me?"

Barbara smiled. Ernie had spent weeks rehearsing this with her, and tonight was opening night, her first public performance. He was juggling soft things, lemons, and Barbara sidled up next to him. "Put out your right hand, next to mine... right there..." And her right hand received the next lemon which she tossed... catch and toss and catch and toss and... Expertly, Ernie slipped out of the set and Barbara was left juggling three lemons by herself. The crowd went wild with applause and whistles. The tension was so high that she started giggling defensively and within seconds there were lemons flying this way and that. Recovery was impossible, but she truly expected that she wouldn't be able to keep it up for too long in any case, and the crowd loved it. Several of the onlookers even tossed money into the carpetbag, an indication of the success of the ploy.

As the crowd began to drift away at the end of the act, Barbara motioned to her mouth. "Dinner?"

"Sure, where?"

"I thought you'd take me out with all that extra cash I helped you get," she told him with a pout.

"Hey, you never paid me for all those juggling lessons," Ernie complained. And they both smiled and laughed over their mini-triumph with the lemons.

"Well, then, how about dinner at my place," Barbara suggested. "Dad's doing the cooking and he always makes too much."

"Sounds great," Ernie agreed. "As soon as the crowd thins out." Barbara looked disappointed. "Gotta make hay while the sun shines, doc."

"Alright, then," she capitulated. "Come by when you can. I'll warm something up." She blew him a kiss and departed without waiting to see whether it was returned.

He calls me 'doc', her inner voice told her. He never calls me 'hon' or 'dear', or 'sweetheart', or anything that might be considered 'mushy'. Could that be why I prefer him to Vincent or Dennis? They're always calling me 'darling' or 'my love' or 'cherie' or some other nonsense that probably rates right up there in importance with 'Hi, how are you?' And, you know, Ernie has never — well, I think it's never — said 'I love you', not even the first night we met at the Boulderado when he was obviously — wasn't everybody who was there

that night? — looking to 'connect'. Come to think of it, he behaved that night far better than I had a right to expect under the circumstances — a perfect gentleman. Maybe I should add 'darn it!' after that, she added to herself, because I was a little disappointed that he didn't even press for a good-night kiss. Which he might have gotten, given his otherwise exemplary behavior.

Ernie, you're something else. And they say women are hard to figure! If you only knew.

—==++++==—

"I'm home" Barbara called as she shut the front door behind her.

"Dinner's almost ready," her father announced. "Who did you bring with you?"

"Nobody this time, but Ernie might stop over later," Barbara suggested.

Buck didn't look up from his task at the counter. "Good. I like that young man — plays a good game."

Barbara turned away to hide a smirk of pleasure. *If Buck would admit to that, Ernie must be one OK guy.*

She tossed her purse through the doorway onto the bed. In the kitchen, she wrapped her arms around the old man's neck and planted a kiss on his cheek. He returned the kiss and Barbara caught the unmistakable whiff of bourbon fumes.

"Starting early, aren't we?" she asked accusingly.

"I wouldn't say so. I'm 53, remember?" Buck corrected her.

"I remember," Barbara replied. "I want you to stay healthy, Daddy, and that stuff's not helping. I need you to stick around. You're the most important man in my life. You know that, don't you?"

He could feel the tears welling up again. "God, you even sound like your mother," he gulped fighting back the rising emotion. "It's times like this I thank Christ you don't look like her as well. I don't think I could stand being reminded every day that she's gone. I'd have to move away." A single tear raced toward his chin.

Barbara herself was fighting back the tears, but it was a losing battle. "I know, Daddy. I miss her too." And they spent the next several minutes softly sobbing in each others' arms.

Alice Northrop fitzGibbon, dedicated Marine wife, had presented herself at the appointed time for what should have been run-of-the-mill abdominal surgery. Not out-patient surgery, no, but neither was it a complicated procedure like a heart transplant. A small misinterpretation of a seemingly insignificant aspect of the surgical plan not caught by the pharmacy, not caught by the prep team, not

caught by the nurse who hung the bag, and Alice Northrop fitzGibbon ceased to exist. It was everybody's fault, and therefore nobody's fault. And it was history.

They sat down to dinner.

—==++++==—

Fatah Abou-Saad, at 19, was possessed of that glorious flush of youth, firm of flesh, with that rich olive complexion that Middle Eastern men, with good reason, insist must be veiled. She, however, was a liberated woman, sure of her beauty, sure of her future, sure of herself. There would be no veil for her. She accepted as a compliment the admiring glances she received from men — and from women.

Her father had assured her before her birth of a bright future by founding Tripoli Global, now Libya's largest import/export concern, with good, solid ties to many western nations including this one. Palestinian by birth, her father had managed, by dint of several early strokes of good fortune, to become something of a 'mover-and-shaker' in the import-export game, shedding his Palestinian past at the same time. Now, his several branch operations at strategic places around the world enabled him to find and exploit lucrative loopholes in the rules of international trade. The money poured in.

Fatah never gave it a second thought that she was liberated by virtue of her father's money. The grandeur of the Front Range, backdrop for the university, was enough to drive such thoughts from anyone's mind.

This, and the very idea of a university, provided just the right environment for the birth and growth of a rainbow of political persuasions. Fatah, by virtue of her Palestinian lineage, took something of a hard line, politically, and took every opportunity to step up on a soapbox for what she thought of as 'her people'. There were rumors, as well, that she did more than lecture — that she was active among the less academic, more pragmatic elements of Middle Eastern culture in the area.

Now she stands before the open door of her freezer, trying to decide which frozen meal she will microwave for dinner. *It will be up to Al to choose his own — if he ever gets here.* She selects one, strips the packaging from it, and slides it into the microwave. *If he's going to be this late, he can damn well eat alone.*

CNN's lead story is of another Israeli atrocity: another over-reaction to a street demonstration. Fatah sits and fumes over CNN's typically pro-Israeli 'spin'.

In disgust, she switches to a movie channel. The man, who

bears a striking resemblance to young Alfred Beddowes if only in her own eyes, is running his fingers through her hair and kissing her, and Fatah can imagine herself in the scene, Al holding her in his arms, she trembling with anticipation. Involuntarily, her breathing deepens and her heart rate rises. When she feels her cheeks flushing, she catches herself and tears herself away from the set.

Her dinner is ready, anyway, and she stands at the kitchen counter eating it, cursing herself for being taken in by her hormones. Again.

Hypocrite, she shrieks at herself. You don't want your hormones to behave, you're just over-sexed. And what's so bad about that? Everybody needs a little intimacy, a little physical closeness, warmth... yes, even love, now and then.

She lets her thoughts drift back toward Al.

—==++++==—

Alfred Beddowes Jr. pounded his fist on the fender of his car. To him, the Ferrari engine was just another chunk of metal and miscellany. What did he know about engines? He was a physicist, and tightly specialized, too. So specialized, in fact, that there aren't many places he can do the kind of research he needs to do to satisfy his professional curiosity. UCB is one of those places, for no reason other than the presence on the faculty of Dr. Barbara fitzGibbon, a woman who can either validate his work or shoot huge holes in it, whose doctoral thesis, "The 4-space Meaning of n-space", formed the basis of Al's research, and whose day-to-day involvement in that research was as valuable to her (he was sure) as it was to him. Dr. fitzGibbon would be unlikely to trash work she was intimately involved with... or would she?

Al knew this about his engine, though: he knew that it wasn't doing what Ferrari engines are supposed to do, and because of it he was late for dinner with the svelte, the gorgeous, the luscious, the filthy-rich Fatah, the stingiest heiress he knew — well, the only heiress he knew, really — in fact, *10 bucks*, he bet himself, *she's prepared popcorn for dinner — in the microwave*. Even so, one day she would own or control the largest, most well-connected import/export company in the Middle East, and Al wanted a piece of the action, as big a piece as his father, maybe bigger. *If Fatah Abou-Saad is part of that package*, he thinks, *that would be the icing on the cake*. He has never met anyone more beautiful than Fatah.

Is that true, really, he wonders and begins to catalog the cream of New England femininity, the debs, the Wellesley and Bryn Mawr high-priestesses of beauty. Failing to find a winner, his thoughts

switch to the prettiest of the LSU co-eds... five or six ties for second-place, but no winners.

The tow truck from triple-A arrives and the driver/mechanic tinkers magically with the mystery under the hood. "Try it now," the mechanic orders. The engine sounds better but it still doesn't start. More tinkering. "Try it again." The engine roars to life and the mechanic drops the hood into place. "You need to have your dealer check it over," he tells Al as if Al couldn't figure this out for himself. A moment later, he's gone.

Alright. One fewer problem. Makes up for the two that developed in the lab today. In truth, he ought to be over at Dr. FitzGibbon's place, asking her for some of the insight that made her name synonymous with multi-dimensional rationalizations, because it was clear that some sort of intuitive leap would be needed to bridge between the two mutually exclusive conclusions he was able to draw from the mathematical world written across four lecture-sized marker boards in his lab. Indeed, one or both of those conclusions could be in direct contradiction to some of the logical consequences of her work in "The 4-space Meaning of n-space" for cases where 'n' is odd. And Al's specialty was 5-space.

Well, she would either point to the solution or to the error when they met tomorrow, of that he was sure.

He parked the Ferrari at curbside and mounted the few steps to Fatah's front door, twisted the key in the lock and entered. Fatah was waiting and he pulled her into his arms and kissed her long and hard.

"You're late," she told him accusingly.

Al looked at his watch with feigned surprise. "My gosh, you're right. Where does the time go?"

Fatah slapped him across the back of his shoulder as he moved toward the living room. "What do you want for dinner?"

"Mmmm... What's on the menu?"

"Whatever you can find in the freezer. You know how to work the microwave." Al made his selection and popped it into the oven then joined Fatah on the couch. Fatah slumped cross-wise on the couch with her head in Al's lap.

"Rub my forehead," she directed, and he began a slow, gentle massage of her forehead and temples. Fatah closed her eyes and let the motion of his fingers be her entire world. Gently, his fingertips brushed past her eyebrows and down the curve of her cheek, barely actually touching her skin. As they crossed her lips she kissed them and Al continued with the back of his fingers up the other side of her face to resume his massage of her forehead, then lightly across her glistening black hair. "That's nice," she told him. "You may

continue forever.”

But he did stop to eat his dinner. As he did, Fatah kneaded his shoulders from behind. “You’re very tense tonight. What’s the matter?”

“We’re on the edge of something startling, Fatah, I’m sure. I wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t that I really needed to get away — clear my head. The mathematics doesn’t seem to make sense anymore,” and he began to explain in great detail to this Political Science major what, precisely, was so bizarre about his studies, that (why, he couldn’t tell) it seemed as though Barbara fitzGibbon’s hypotheses about manifestations of simultaneous n -space might not apply to odd-dimensional space. And since Al’s work concentrated on 5-space, the most nearly congruent n -space to our own and since Dr. fitzGibbon was Al’s mentor and proctor, and since Al’s work might throw hers into doubt... “Do you see what a predicament I’m in, Fatah?”

“I see that you need to relax. Why don’t you try to relax?” *I know how to make you relax*, she thought. *I know how to make us both relax*. She was running her fingers through his hair and imagining herself the recipient of the attention.

Al sprang to his feet. “You’re right. I need to relax. And I need to get ready for tomorrow’s meeting with Dr. fitzGibbon. I need a good night’s sleep. That’ll do it.” He picked up his gear, gave Fatah a quick kiss, and left.

Fatah looked blankly at the door closing behind Al’s departing shape and wondered what it was that could so interfere with his libido. Could his search be so all-consuming that there is no second place for her to fit into? Bah! She wouldn’t want second place anyway.

2 — Discovery

"I'm not sure you can do this, Al," Barbara said. "You're making some rather daring assumptions regarding the transforms. Has Dr. Saarinen looked at this?"

"Yes," Al replied. "As a matter of fact, it was Dr. Saarinen who suggested that equation 139b looked very like a flattened, two-phase Salamanca model. And, in fact, it's fairly easy to re-derive equation 137 (barring only the fractional adjustment) from the resulting equation 140, so we know we're in the ballpark, at least.

"That fractional adjust is what really caught my attention, and what I'd like your opinion on especially." *What do you think, doc?* he thought. *Am I laying it on thick enough?* "The fractional adjust offsets the distortional separation, and that's a function of the moldau displacement. So, these constructs apply, really, only to odd-space. I think that your model applies more to even-space where the fractional adjust is zero. The ultimate implication is that even numbered moldau displacements have much more in common with our own universe than odd-numbered displacements. What do you think? Is that reasonable?"

"Reasonable?" Barbara mused. "Yes, it sounds as though it might be a plausible line. And you say Dr. Saarinen has looked this over and thinks so too?"

"Yes," Al confirmed, "although he did point out that treating 139b the way we did is — well, the word he used was 'aggressive'. To be fair, he thinks a similar aggressive treatment elsewhere in the chain might produce grotesques."

"Have you tried that?" she asked.

"Not yet," Al admitted, "but I plan to spend some time on it later this week."

"Call me if you need an assist," Barbara offered. "I'll wager that Dr. Saarinen would like to get a piece of the action as well."

"I'll call you both when I'm ready. Thank you, doctor." Al tossed a board marker in the air and caught it.

Barbara waved over her shoulder and was out the door with not another word, heading for her next appointment.

Al turned back to the board. *What a stroke of luck*, he chortled to himself. *If she hadn't narrowed her field of vision so early in her mathematics she would surely have crashed into the same wall that got me — and she wouldn't have had Dr. Saarinen to suggest a back-door. Oh, yes, she would have. Someone else would have been*

there. She had some real hotshot mathematicians working with her then. And then where would I be? All this would have been a 'done deal' already. Lucky, that's it. Just lucky.

Barbara's expression was part smirk, part frown as she walked toward her next appointment. *That little squid, she thought, he's better than I gave him credit for. He found the hole. Not only did he find the hole, he found the way out of the hole, which is more than I was able to do. I had to redo a third of my work just to avoid getting near questions I knew I couldn't answer. I wonder if he suspects me of hiding it by writing the moldau displacement out of my model early? Oh, well, at least it left a handhold for others to use as they start their climb. Good luck, Al. Nice shot.*

"Good morning, Mr. Murphy," she called expansively as she burst into the lab. "What have we this morning?"

"I had hoped to show you a clean kill, Dr. fitzGibbon, on the laser-shaping problem, but the microcode for directing the laser seems not to be quite ready. It needs to be a tad faster to analyze the advance of the ignition front and get the beam pointed. I apologize for taking your time this morning."

"Not at all. Let's look at the code." Barbara moved closer to see what he was working on.

Dan Murphy plopped a half-inch stack of paper on the table. Barbara flipped rapidly through it, pausing only briefly here and there. Finally, she stopped flipping and stared intently for several minutes.

"Why did you do this?" and she pointed.

Dan Murphy shrugged. "The alternative seemed too slow, using the library function. These general routines waste too much time."

"I'd bet big bucks that your code is slower than the 'generalized' library routine in this case," Barbara challenged, "maybe in lots more cases, too. It's broken anyway. Why don't you give it a try?"

"Sure, why not?" Dan agreed.

"Good. Tricia Mullins did her Masters work in that area, too, so you may want to ask her opinion." Barbara turned as if to leave, then turned back. "Maybe you should do it over dinner." She leaned in and whispered, conspiratorially: "I'm absolutely sure Tricia would enjoy helping you out, if you know what I mean." She turned away with a smile and was out the door on her way to her next appointment before Dan was fully aware of what she had suggested.

The entire day ran something like that and she (rightly) suspected that it was a portent for the week: in and out of labs and offices, checking on the progress of her charges, making suggestions,

offering encouragement. *Mother hen*, she thought, *that's what I am. I wonder if that's how they see me?*

By Thursday, on the n -th cycle back to Al Beddowes' lab, she found him hard at work near equation 42.

"Ah, Dr. fitzGibbon, you got my message," Al greeted her. "Dr. Saarinen should be along shortly, too."

"Actually, Al, I haven't seen my own office in nearly two days." She blew a wisp of hair away from her eyes. "What's going on? Are you hunting grotesques?"

"I started this morning. Dr. Saarinen was dead-on in his speculation. I've already found one area that's a candidate. Look at this." And he began the mathematical twisting and distorting of equation 42. After a few minutes of that, Barbara stepped to the board.

"That's turning into a Palestrina model," she mused bewilderedly. "Can we...?" Quickly she rewrote it to shape it into a formal Palestrina.

Al began to snicker. "Palestrinas describe the effects of third-order magnetic fields. What does *that* have to do with 5-space?" Slowly the smile faded from his lips. "I need more board space."

"You're right," Barbara agreed. "This deserves a closer look."

"I t'ink so too." They turned. Dr. Saarinen was standing behind them, admiring the mathematics. "You two have done very well with this in the few minutes I have been here. May I?" Dr. Saarinen extended his hand.

Al handed him a marker. The head of the Mathematics Department bracketed a section of the board and drew a squiggly line terminating in an arrowhead pointing to another equation. "This would make a fine doctoral project by itself. This board should be photographed before you proceed further," Saarinen cautioned.

They got a camera and shot several views of the boards, then turned back to their work.

Barbara scanned through the boards looking for familiar patterns. At equation 68 she stopped, then picked up her marker and began "doodling," as she called it. In two steps, 68 was reshaped into another Palestrina as Dr. Saarinen watched.

Suddenly, Saarinen's eyes lit up. Quickly he erased a section of board and recopied the modified 68 and the modified 42. In the space of a few minutes, he opened several odd new lines of mathematical thought. Al and Barbara stopped their work and wandered over to watch. Finally, Saarinen stopped, too.

"What is it?" Al asked.

"It looks like a frequency distribution function," Barbara

offered.

"I believe that's what it is," Dr. Saarinen spoke after contemplating it for some time. "Yes, it has to be."

"I wonder," Al asked, "what would happen if someone generated a field like that?"

Dr. Saarinen looked at his watch. "Oh, my goodness, I'm going to be late if I don't rush. Pardon me for dashing off like this, Al." He reached out for Al's hand and pumped it vigorously. "I enjoyed this very much," and he dashed out the door and was gone.

"That's a pretty unusual looking curve, Al," Barbara said distractedly. "Do you think such a pattern could be generated?"

"Well, yes," Al answered slowly, "I think it could be done. Think of it as a composite of n different patterns overlain one on the other. All we would have to do is decompose it, piece by piece, until all the sub-patterns, all the 'notes' of the 'chord', have been discovered. To regenerate the curve, one would simply 'play' all the notes together. If it could be phased properly, the resultant would be the right shape. I'm not sure what that would do, or why we might want to do that. This is all quite theoretical, anyway."

"I agree," she said with finality. "This has, however, provided some interesting new material for your dissertation. I'm looking forward to seeing how you address all of it."

"Doc, so am I," and he turned back to his work at the board as Barbara left the lab.

—==++++==—

Piece of cake, he thought. *This is really nothing more difficult than three 3rd-degree lines and four 2nd-degree lines.* Al's razor-sharp intuition had enabled him to pull the individual threads out of the mathematical tangle in only six days of hard work. The 'chord' had seven notes. Now all he had to do was to play it. For this, Al enlisted the aid of another grad student.

Gwen Nikkoliassen was in the middle of a rather more elaborate project and thought Al's request just the least bit bizarre: he needed help in generating a magnetic field, one that would pulse so as to produce a particular electromagnetic waveform. "That's no big deal," she told him distractedly. "We do it all the time."

She showed him how his computer could be programmed to drive the generator at almost any desired frequency and produce any desired waveform.

"Could this be built into, say, a special purpose (and very small) microprocessor?" Al wanted to know. Gwen gave him the short lecture on how to 'burn sand', working with PROMs and EPROMs, and

told him to come back when he had his algorithms completely debugged.

Two days later he was back with seven small programs, each of which would produce one of the waves. Gwen and Al spent the next two hours transferring one of the programs onto a chip and hardening it. All the time, Al scribbled notes frantically, trying to keep up with Gwen's impatient delivery.

At last, Gwen carefully slipped the newly-cooked chip into a prepared slot on a circuit board and applied power. The device was as silent as a tomb, but the oscilloscope receiving the chip's output clearly showed a wave-form of the proper shape.

Al thanked Gwen profusely, then headed straight for the lab. He placed one call to Mountain States Electronics, ordered the parts for six more field oscillators, charged it on his father's credit card, and settled down to the unsolved problem of the physical arrangement of the oscillators.

As he sketched on the one remaining clear area of the board, Barbara fitzGibbon was making her normal end-of-the-week rounds of her grad students. Entering the lab quietly, she watched Al inch forward with the design, then run into a snag, fall back, and start over. Finally, she could take it no more.

"What seems to be the problem?" she interrupted.

Al jumped at the sound of her voice, but regained his composure quickly.

"Wow, doc, you really caught me off guard. How long have you been there?"

"About ten minutes, perhaps," she admitted. "I've been watching you push and shove that drawing all over the place. You seem to be going around in circles."

"Maybe," he agreed. "It's better now than it was two hours ago. Then I was making no progress at all. At least now I'm getting somewhere."

"And where is it that you're getting?" she probed. "What is that thing you're sketching?"

"Do you remember, doc, last week when you and I and Dr. Saarinen were playing math games over there," — he waved in the direction of Equation 42, — "and we talked about decomposing the frequency distribution function? Well, I've done it, and I'm getting ready to 'play' the chord. The only problem left is the placement of the wave generators."

"That's terrific, Al," she enthused. "Show me what you've got. Maybe between the two of us we can push it along."

Al laid out the seven constituent equations that, when

'played' in sync, made up the chord and he explained to Barbara how he had built the seven driver chips for the generators. He had spent most of his time trying to figure out how to get the drivers clustered together so as to minimize interference.

After a while, Barbara stepped back and looked at the latest arrangement.

"Maybe this is a blessing in disguise," she wondered aloud. "Maybe we don't want to minimize interference. Maybe we want to use it."

"But, doc," Al protested, "if we don't minimize interference, the field will be limited in size, perhaps very limited..." — He began smiling. — "...and all the power will be concentrated in a central area. Yes!"

Al went to the closet and rummaged until he found enough parts to make a crude frame, laid them out on the lab bench and attached the seven generators roughly equidistant around the perimeter.

He looked at Barbara. "Ready?" She nodded. He switched on the power and they both watched for several seconds, then Barbara spoke.

"It didn't blow up," she observed. "That's a good sign," and they both laughed.

Al crumpled a piece of paper and tossed it at the device. It missed, but as it passed above it, the color of the paper changed to a fluorescent orange for just an instant. Al and Barbara looked at each other wonderingly, then Barbara reached over and switched the power off.

"It's time we get out the instruments and put some controls on this," she offered sternly. "I don't like seeing radiation effects where none were expected."

Al nodded. "Agreed."

—==++++==—

Barbara's fears about radiation leaks were unfounded, but some unusual findings were, in fact, made. The first experiment was simply to turn the apparatus on and measure the stray radiation. It was minimal. The second test involved putting a flask of dye at the center of the ring to see if there were any special light effects. When the power was turned on, the flask simply disappeared. The experiment was repeated with a penny, and then with a block of wood. Each of them disappeared in turn. Never was there any hint of a radiation increase.

Finally, Al volunteered to insert a probe into the ring to

measure the speed at which material was consumed. He chose a long thin wooden pole and, with the power running, inserted the tip into the center of the ring. As he inserted the wood into the exact center of the ring, it disappeared with just the faintest hint of a multi-colored fluorescent glow. When he withdrew the pole, it appeared to be unchanged even though he had just, for all intents and purposes, rammed it through a marble laboratory table top.

A cage with a lab mouse was produced and lowered into the ring. The cage appeared to 'sink' below the surface defined by the ring and disappear. When it was withdrawn, the mouse appeared somewhat agitated but otherwise none the worse for wear.

A video camera was brought in from the broadcast studio and slung from a gantry. Carefully the camera was lowered through the ring as Al and Barbara watched the attached monitor. As the camera passed below the apparent surface of the ring, the image on the monitor became distorted and broken with much of what seemed to be interference.

"Well, Al, old man, this is going to make one hell of a term paper," Barbara told him with a distinctly congratulatory tone. "I think we're looking at the fifth dimension, or at least an alternate universe that makes use of it. What shall we do now?"

"If this is going to be the discovery of the century, I want my ducks all lined up," Al responded. "Best, don't you think, that we document what we've found so far and see if we can't devise a more... umm... concrete approach to find out what (if anything) is on the backside of that ring."

"I like it," she said. "You're thinking like a scientist. Al, you'll be Doctor Beddowes before you know it, and people will still be talking about this when I am long forgotten. I hope you understand the magnitude of what we — you — have discovered here today."

Al simply smiled. He knew something special had happened, but he did not, in fact, appreciate its full potential.

Barbara, for her part, was intensely pleased at being even a small part of such a momentous discovery. Occasionally, she would mentally kick herself in the seat for giving up the original line she had been pursuing as she worked toward her doctorate. There must have been some element of luck involved there, too, because in the light of what Alfred Beddowes, Jr. was doing mathematically here, it was clear that her thesis included a deadly error among some very good mathematics.

Through luck of his own coupled with much hard work and brilliant insight, Al had found the twisting mountain path around the rocks that had almost stopped her. She had chosen to go over the obstacle and had thereby given herself a much more arduous path,

one for which her mathematical skills, as good as they were, were nonetheless inadequate.

AI had started where she left off and had backed up almost exactly to the point at which she had made her critical mistake. *It's a good thing that he has done*, she thought. *I could never have done it. Remember being thunder-struck at the simplicity that resulted from his merely dropping the one assumption that had led me astray? I would never — never! — have given that one up. Only completely new eyes could have seen it. And I get part-credit because AI studies with me.*

She smiled inwardly at herself and continued her rounds.

3 — The Curtain Parts

"Once the key elements are in place, Fatah, it simply exists," Al explained to Fatah Abou-Saad. "We know — we can demonstrate — that there is 'space' behind the ring. It appears to contain breathable air. The mouse survived a short exposure, so it's not poisonous. None of the samples were radioactive when they were brought back, so there is no significant radioactivity. And, of course, it's important to note that the samples could be brought back.

"Fatah, I'm dying to see what's there. If only the ring were larger."

"Can it not be made larger, Al?" she asked.

"I haven't figured out yet how to do that," Al admitted. "As soon as I try to expand the ring beyond about an eight-inch diameter, the effect disappears. We were able to push a video camera through the ring but all we got back was garbage. The signal was so badly scrambled it could have been anything."

"Perhaps there's not enough power," Fatah suggested. "What if you applied more power to the device. Would that let you expand the ring?"

Al was shaking his head already. "No. There's a limit to how much power the chips will take before they burn out. We're running totally maxed out right now, and all we can get is an eight-inch ring."

"Can you not get chips capable of handling more power?" she pressed. "Or perhaps you should use two sets or three."

Al rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I'm not a chip expert. There might be chips that will handle more power, but I don't know of them. More chips... *hmm...* that might be a possible solution. Suppose I had several sets? That's worth a try. C'mon. Let's go shopping."

—==++++==—

The sales clerk at Mountain States Electronics wanted to be helpful. He just couldn't. "Unfortunately, the chip you have is the highest-rated device of its kind we carry. I doubt you'll find a higher rating available over the counter anywhere. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yes, how many of these have you in stock?"

The sales clerk tapped briefly on the keyboard. "About sixty."

"I'll take them all."

—==+++==—

Back at his place with Fatah, Al spent several hours programming the new chips and attaching them to their individual oscillators. When he had his first set ready, he enlarged the framework to about twice its former size and clipped the new set of wave generators equally spaced around the ring. Then he applied power.

The ring sprang into existence immediately and Al slowly increased the size of the ring until, with a soft sigh, the portal closed. Step by step, Al added pieces to the framework to make the ring larger, added generators seven at a time, and hooked them into the power circuit. Each step produced a larger ring than the one before until, at last, he judged it large enough to handle his entire body.

"Well," he spoke to Fatah, "it's now big enough for me to go through. It's time to do some exploring."

"No," Fatah gasped, "this is too dangerous. What if you cannot return?"

"Fatah, someone must be the first," Al insisted. "If this is what I think it is, I will be more famous than Columbus. Even if I do not return, I may be famous. I will provide countless theoretical physicists with material for research papers unending." He smiled at her. "And, to tell you the truth, I don't believe it is the least bit dangerous. Just in case, though, I have this rope," — he hefted a coil of synthetic rope, — "and I want you to pay it out a little at a time. When I tug twice, give me another meter of rope, OK?"

Fatah's brow knitted. "I don't like this, but, yes, OK."

Al threw a bowline into the rope and, with Fatah taking up the slack, leaned deeply into the ring. His upper body seemed to melt and dissolve where the framework defined the ring. Shortly, he pulled himself back upright.

"It's a place," Al announced breathlessly. "There are things that look like trees and mountains and clouds and... But the colors are all wrong for the kinds of things they are. And I'm glad I didn't just jump in. It's a ten-foot drop if it's an inch."

Fatah's eyes were wide. "I want to see."

Carefully, she leaned her body into the disk. A few moments later she straightened up. "It's wonderful. The Rockies look so weird."

"What? Did you say, 'the Rockies'?" Al demanded.

"Yes. Didn't you see them?" Fatah asked. "Look to the west. Of course, the blue-green color isn't something we associate with them, but those *are* the Rockies."

Al went to the kitchen to get a soup bowl, then passed through the bedroom where he got his camera. He tied the rope around himself again and leaned through the disk. On the other side, in that strangely-colored world, he looked at the magnificent blue-green Rockies. Yes, it was as Fatah had said. Then he dropped the soup bowl to the ground some ten feet below. It shattered on impact. He photographed the site with the camera, then pulled back into his living room. The picture showed the same colors he had seen. They were real.

He shut the equipment off. "Let's give it time to cool. I want to know if it always seeks to the same coordinates, or whether that was just a fluke."

He took out a notebook and began to record his observations and the method he used to generate the ring. After about an hour of such writing, he turned the power back on. The ring sprang into existence again, and Al cautiously leaned through it. There, on the ground below him, was the shattered soup bowl.

"Preliminary tests," he wrote, "indicate that the equipment seeks to a constant location." He thought about that for a while. Suppose the equipment were in some other place? Would that be true?

He shut the power off and began disassembling the framework. He hauled the pieces down to the basement and reassembled them, as near as he could figure, directly below the original location on the first floor. When he powered the ring and looked through, he was only a foot or two above the shattered soup bowl. He took a piece and brought it back with him.

On an impulse, he dragged a long piece of scrap lumber through the disk and simply dropped it, half in, half out. The ground level on the other side of the disk appeared to be six inches higher than the floor of the basement. On the other side, the board lay flat on the grass (or whatever it was that passed for grass). In the basement, it appeared that a length of board was suspended in mid-air six inches above the surface.

Al reached over to the power supply and switched it off. Half of the board fell to the basement floor with a crash. He switched power back on again, reached through and pulled the other half of the board back into the basement. He examined the 'cut line'. The surface was smoother than any amount of sanding could have made it, as smooth as glass.

No more of this leaning through, half-in-half-out, he thought. This is the world's sharpest guillotine.

He spent another half-hour on his notes, then turned to

Fatah.

"I still have work to do on my notes, and I need some more stuff from Mountain States Electronic Supply. Can you run an errand for me?" Al asked Fatah.

"Sure, but write it down on paper," she cautioned.

Al jotted down a list of several items, components for a backup power supply, and Fatah left immediately.

As soon as she was gone, Al wrote a note explaining where he was going, warned Fatah not to follow him, grabbed the rope and a handful of plastic bags, and stepped through the disk. He did not actually expect that she would ever read the note, for it was a long trip to the store, and he intended to be back before she could return.

Once safely on the other side, Al carefully surveyed the entire scene. He was standing in a large grassy meadow. Not far to the West, the Flatirons rose like a wall. The sun was low in the Eastern sky and the grass was wet with dew. Patches of fog lingered here and there. It was morning here even though only a few feet away, beyond the portal, it was Saturday afternoon.

As near as he could tell, the mountains he saw were the same mountains he would see if he were standing on the site of his house and there were no houses. He wondered if he was seeing the Rockies as they were before the arrival of man, and he wondered (with some trepidation) what animals he should expect to see.

The meadow stretched out from there eastward several miles. At the fringes of the vast meadow, a wall of forest, probably pine, could vaguely be made out in the distance. The forest, like all the other foliage, was in shades of gray, so light in some places as to seem white.

Al pulled a weed-like plant from the soil, and stuffed it into a plastic bag. Looking around warily for signs of life that might eat him, Al moved off toward the next interesting sight.

—==++++==—

Fatah thought: *"Poor Al. He has been working himself to death on this. Sitting down to his notes will be just what the doctor ordered: a chance to relax and let his mind dance around this wonder that he has done."*

She decided that he needed some time alone much more than he needed parts for his project so, after picking up the parts on Al's list, she dropped in at the bistro where most of Boulder's Middle Eastern community congregated. She shared several cups of their thick, strong coffee, and chatted about the latest developments on the

political scene.

A fresh crop of kidnappings of civilians in the Middle East by radical Muslim groups had raised a cloud of obscuring "dust" around what some saw as real progress in the area. Others were cheering the insurgents on: "Take them all hostage! Chase the invaders from our streets!"

Fatah's youth made her lean toward the more radical position, yet her family interest in a flourishing economy drew her to the more conservative side. Fatah, herself, could not decide which of these was the stronger argument.

She downed her last cup of coffee. Time to get back to Al.

—==+++==—

Fatah entered the basement cheerily, but her composure soon left her as she read the note:

Fatah, I have gone through the gate to do some exploring. Do not attempt to follow me. I will be back in a few hours at most. Don't worry, and don't turn the power off.

— Al

Well, there's nothing to do but wait, I suppose. She settled herself into a chair and picked up Al's notes to pass the time waiting for him to return. It was only a matter of some twenty minutes when a shadowy form appeared within the ring and Al stepped forth into the basement. He was clearly excited, but was surprised to see Fatah waiting for him.

"You beat me back. Did you get it all? How long have you been waiting?" he fired questions at her.

"Yes, I got it all, and I only beat you by a few minutes," she admitted. "You've been doing some collecting, I see."

"And wait 'til you see some of things I found," he told her excitedly. He scanned through the bags. "Here," he said, and held up a bag containing four grayish-white pear-shaped objects.

"What are they?" Fatah asked.

"Taste one," Al challenged her. "They're delicious."

Fatah took a small bite from the one Al offered her. "It tastes like a pear... oh! It *is* a pear!"

Al was smiling and chortling. "Yes. And I'll tell you something else. Beyond that gate," he pointed at the ring, "is a world virtually identical to this one, if you'll disregard its weird color scheme. That's the flora. I haven't seen any fauna, not that I'm complaining."

"What else?" she asked.

Al displayed several bags containing various kinds of plant specimens. Some of them were vaguely recognizable despite their uniform lack of color. The clods of dirt that clung to some of the roots, though, were as brown as coffee grounds.

"I've got to see more of this," Al announced. "Help me disassemble this."

"What are you going to do?" she demanded.

"I'm going to rebuild it in the garage and take the car through," Al explained matter-of-factly.

"You're crazy," she told him.

"Yes, I probably am," Al admitted, "but I'm going to do it anyway."

By adding all the available sets of chips and carefully shaping the ring, they managed to get it to the approximate shape of a car. When Al leaned through to check the other side, he realized that the topology was not an exact match. Here, the ground level was below that of the garage floor by a good two feet. His Ferrari would, first, never survive the fall to the ground on the other side and, second, could never manage the leap up to the portal for the return trip.

From one of the neighbors he borrowed a tape measure, and, with scrap lumber left in the garage by the previous occupant, he began a rough survey of the terrain on the other side. When he was finished, he had a very good idea of the size ramp he would have to construct to handle the two-foot drop.

He quickly sketched a design for a wooden ramp and estimated the amounts and sizes of lumber needed to build it.

Al deeply regretted not taking more engineering courses as an under-grad. It would have made designing this thing so much easier. The yard supervisor at the lumber yard, however, quickly revised Al's design to eliminate the more dangerous errors, gave Al several valuable pieces of advice for the construction, and reworked his materials list. Why not? Between lumber and fasteners and power tools and miscellany, the bill came to over \$700. They even delivered it.

By Sunday evening, he was hard at work in the garage. Fatah provided, on a regular basis, the third hand that home handymen seem always to need, as well as encouragement, refreshments, and a distraction from a too-intense concentration on the work at hand.

—==++++==—

Monday, bright and early, Al trotted his specimens down to the Biology department. Edwin Schultz was very busy, he said, but when he got his first glimpse of Al's samples, he suddenly became unbusy.

"What is this stuff?" Edwin asked.

"That's what I want to know, Edwin," Al responded. "I need to know if these plants are actually what they appear to be: colorless variants of known specimens, and I need to be the only one who knows. I consider this very *hush-hush*. I don't want this appearing on the front page of the school newspaper... or any newspaper, for that matter. I need your word that this stays strictly between the two of us."

"Agreed," he assured Al, "nobody hears about this from me. When do you need the analysis?"

Al ruminated on this question for a few moments. "Obviously, I would like to have it pretty quickly," Al replied thoughtfully. "And please include toxicology." As he said the word, he recalled that both he and Fatah had sampled one of the fruits he brought back. Yes, toxicology could become very important. "As a matter of fact, Edwin, could you start with toxicology? I already took a bite from one of the other samples."

Edwin looked at him askance. "That may not have been the smartest thing you've ever done, Al," he informed his friend ruefully.

That afternoon, Edwin called Al's lab to inform him that, toxicologically speaking, the pear-like fruit was a pear. Edwin admitted to trying one himself, pronouncing it quite tasty. One of the weed-like plants appeared to be Poison Oak, he said.

"Did you use gloves when you pulled that specimen?" Edwin asked.

On the other end of the line, Al's face took on an astonished look. "No, I never gave it a second thought," he admitted to Edwin. "I just yanked it and stuffed it into the bag."

"Well, I don't know why you're not in the itch-ward right now. The PO sample has a full load of all the right stuff. Where did you get these?"

"I'd rather not say just now. I will tell you that it's related, peripherally, to other work I'm doing in the Physics department. Don't worry. I'll give you full credit for helping me out when I publish. Until then, I'd prefer not having to answer too many questions."

"Okay," Edwin agreed, "I'll hold my questions until the press conference."

Edwin knew a "find" when he saw one. All he wanted to do was become rich and famous, and these dusty-white-gray plants were going to do the trick, he was sure.

—==+++==—

By Thursday evening, Al felt confident enough to risk the Ferrari on the ramp. He had already tested the structure by jumping forcefully on it several times. It was quite sturdy. Now all that was left was to push the ramp through the portal.

That proved to be a formidable task, for the ramp now weighed several hundred pounds and, between them, Al and Fatah could not budge it. Al broke the one huge piece down into several components, (grateful the whole time that he had bolted the pieces rather than nailing them), moved them individually through the portal, and reassembled them there.

Preparing for all this, Al had gotten out two floodlights to enable him to work in the pre-dawn darkness beyond the portal. Al tightened all the fittings to make the ramp fit to hold his baby, his Ferrari. Then he stepped back into the garage.

"What took you so long?" Fatah asked as he reappeared.

"Long? I was only there twenty minutes or so."

"You've been working there nearly an hour."

"Well, Fatah, time flies when you're having fun." He picked his watch up off the workbench in the garage and looked at it. Sure enough, he had been at it nearly an hour. They shut the system down because it was getting too late to do much tonight.

Tomorrow's another day.

4 — Across the Meadow

School was beginning to get in the way of what Al now considered his “real work”. Especially troublesome was Barbara fitzGibbon and her constant poking and prodding for “progress”. He had made progress. What was she worrying about?

To say that Barbara was worrying was to overstate the case. Barbara rarely worried. She was, however, concerned that Al seemed to have given up the seemingly productive line he had written on the lab’s white boards. She would periodically wander into the lab to see how it was coming along and lately had noticed little or no movement. She could not, of course, see the work that Al was doing off-campus in his basement workshop. Had she been able to see what was happening there, perhaps she might have become worried.

And she was anxious, for she saw Al’s work as the completion of her own, perhaps even starting a new branch of Physics. Of which her research was the first. She smiled inside and felt very satisfied with herself. And frowned that Al seemed to be taking his time when he should be pushing, pushing, pushing.

She sat down at her computer and scheduled a meeting for the following Monday morning at 10AM, inviting Professors Larreau, Carson, Saarinen, D’Amico, Edwards, and — as an afterthought — the remainder of the Physics faculty.

—==+++==—

Just what I need, Al thought, more time wasted, this time in senseless meetings with people who have absolutely no idea what I’m working on beyond the fact that Barbara fitzGibbon is associated with it.

Fine. She wants a meeting. I’ll give her a meeting. When I return from a weekend spent in a parallel universe, I’ll have notes enough to knock their socks off. Maybe.

Or maybe I’ll just keep it to myself. Who knows?

—==+++==—

Al eased the Ferrari through the portal after making very sure that the wheels were lined up properly for the ramp now invisible beyond the ring. The front wheels slowly descended the ramp, followed by the rear wheels. Clear of the ramp, Al and Fatah headed

out across the meadow, but they only got fifty feet from the ramp before the wheels lost traction in the soft earth. The spinning wheels soon convinced Al that he would need assistance to get the car back to the safety of the garage. And he couldn't call the Automobile Association for this one, either.

He trudged back to the portal with Fatah.

"Do you know anyone who owns a 4-wheel drive, Fatah?"

"No. But perhaps we could rent one," she suggested hopefully.

Fatah read telephone numbers to him and Al dialed one rental agency after another. It was Friday evening. There was nothing available at any price.

"Doesn't Dr. fitzGibbon have a truck or a four-wheel-drive, Al?" Fatah asked.

"Yes, she does." And Al quickly dialed her number.

You have reached the fitzGibbon residence. We're sorry we cannot take your call right now. Please leave your name, number, and reason for the call at the tone, and we will return your call when appropriate. BEEP!.

He hung up. "Let's go over there. Maybe they're nearby."

They jumped into Fatah's BMW and drove to Barbara's. No one was at home, but the 4-wheel drive Jeep was still sitting in the driveway. Fatah drove up behind the Jeep and stopped. Al knocked on the front door several times, and was turning away in near-despair as the engine of the Jeep roared.

Fatah slipped from behind the wheel of the Jeep. "Let's go" she told him and carefully replaced her tools beneath the floor mats of her car.

"You didn't...?" Al said incredulously.

Fatah put the BMW into reverse and backed out of the driveway, turned and headed for Al's place. Recovering, Al jumped into the Jeep and followed.

He nosed the Jeep into the garage and shut the door. Careful measurements convinced him that the vehicle would fit, but only just barely, and he would have to be extraordinarily careful to avoid shaving the top or the sides. After all, he did want to return the Jeep to Barbara.

Gently, he maneuvered the Jeep between temporary guide posts he and Fatah had set up to mark the limits of the portal. As the radio antenna passed through the ring, the top four inches quietly

dropped, bounced once on the hood of the vehicle, then fell to the floor. *An excellent reminder, he thought, of what would happen if I were to make a mistake.* Then he was through.

He hooked the front of the Ferrari to the rear of the Jeep with chain and rope he found in the bed and dragged the sports car back to the portal. Fatah jumped out and walked through to guide him once he was on the other side.

By now it was quite dark on a Friday evening, so Fatah felt comfortable opening the garage door to allow the Jeep and Ferrari combination to come all the way out, but she kept the lights off and used only a flashlight for necessary illumination.

Al dragged the red car up the ramp and through the portal as slowly and as gently as he could, careful not to allow either vehicle to touch the sides of the gateway. Then he and Fatah swapped the cars around and put the Jeep inside the garage, away from prying eyes.

"Do you have a plan for your exploration, Al?" she asked.

"I don't really have a well-defined plan yet, Fatah," he admitted, "but I think I may spend the whole weekend exploring. Are you game for a camping excursion?"

"We can sleep in the Jeep, I suppose. What will we eat?" she probed.

"Yes, we'll have to do some quick shopping tomorrow. Will you stay the night?" Al asked.

She slipped her arms about his neck and looked up into his eyes. "Of course, I will. I thought you'd never ask."

—==+++==—

The movie had been one of those that Barbara classed as a "two-hankie". Her nose was still a little pink from all the dabbing and blowing. Buck slowed to a stop in front of Ernie Walsh's modest dwelling. "Good night, Buck. Thanks for including me in your plans. Good night, Barbara." He leaned in through the window and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"Are you coming over tomorrow?" Barbara asked.

"What's the occasion?" Ernie challenged.

"Nothing special, Ernie," Buck responded. "We just like your company."

"Oh, well, in that case, yes. Do I get fed, too?" he asked expectantly.

Barbara laughed. "Sure. What would you like?"

"Umm... Lunch or dinner?" Ernie responded expectantly.

"If we're to get any serious chess-playing done," Buck said, "you had better plan on both" and he winked at Barbara.

"Alright, then, see you for lunch." he agreed.

Moments later, Buck pulled into their driveway, and he and Barbara went inside. Buck turned on the TV, and Barbara bustled about her room. When the 11 o'clock news came on, Barbara came out to join Buck on the couch. The lead story was the recent alarming rise in car thefts in the Boulder area. As the story played out, Barbara turned to Buck.

"Where's the Jeep?" she asked her father.

"It's parked right in front of my car, why?" Buck responded.

"I was just thinking that I don't remember seeing it in the driveway when we came in." Barbara commented.

"Maybe it's in the garage." Buck suggested.

"I don't recall putting it in the garage, do you?" Barbara mused.

They both got up and peered out the side window at the driveway. Then Buck went to check the garage. When he returned, Barbara could tell by the look on his face that her Jeep was gone.

They called the police. The responding officer got all the facts and called them in, but he told Barbara there was little hope that she would ever see her Jeep again.

—==+++==—

At what seemed like the crack of dawn, Al was out of bed, dressed, and ready. He kissed Fatah gently on the forehead as she roused.

"I'm going shopping. Want to come?" he offered.

"Of course." Fatah responded excitedly.

They shopped for groceries first, since that store opened earliest. They stocked up on foods not needing refrigeration, but they also bought a picnic chest and stocked it with ice. At the hardware store, they bought rope (by the mile, Fatah thought), a camp stove and fuel, batteries, lanterns, an ax, and knives. Last, they shopped the local Army-Navy store for camping miscellany that no one else ever seems to carry: flares, 2-way radios, USGS topological maps. All of this they managed to fit into the trunk of Fatah's BMW. The last thing they got was 20 spare gallons of gasoline in four 5-gallon cans.

Once home, they transferred it all to the Jeep. By about one in the afternoon, they judged themselves as ready as they would ever be. Cautiously, Al eased the Jeep back down the ramp onto a meadow bathed in the sunlight of early afternoon.

Their first task was to set up a marker, something visible from a good distance, so that they would be able to find their way back. The base station they equipped with a strobe beacon so that it

could be found at night as well. Then they made their way into the foothills near where the University would be. They got out and reconnoitered on foot. Suddenly, Fatah gave a whoop and Al turned toward her. Above her head, she held a block of wood, certainly not naturally occurring, and the block was spattered with fluorescent dye.

"Look up-slope for the dye," Al instructed. And about 60 feet up-slope they came across the remains of a beaker and a splash of multi-colored fluorescent dye. Al erected another marker assembly on the spot. "This is the location of my lab," he told Fatah.

They made a long loop to the east and north, scouting several lakes. Fatah spent much of her time annotating the topological maps with anomalies, differences between the two landscapes.

They had brought enough water to sustain them through the weekend and did not have to rely on the lakes. Al took several samples and carefully marked them to indicate which of the lakes on Fatah's map had produced them. As darkness fell, they cleared supplies from the bed of the Jeep and turned it into sleeping quarters.

The night was as uneventful as the day, and Al began to suspect that there might not be any large animal life-forms in this replica-Earth. Fatah, of course, had no experience with North American wildlife, but Al had been a Boy Scout briefly, and had been camping several times. Always before, the night had been alive with sound: owls hooting, insects making all manner of sounds, other creatures rustling in the underbrush. There had been none of that here beyond the expected insect noises, and little of that.

The morning sun revealed the thickest fog Al could ever recall seeing. It was so thick that trying to drive was out of the question. Between them, Al and Fatah managed to cook something approximating breakfast. They sat and waited for the fog to burn off. And they talked.

"Al, I've been thinking," Fatah began.

Al turned toward her. "Yes?" he prompted.

"Could a gate be opened here to re-enter our world at a different place?" Fatah probed.

"Yes, I don't see why not," Al speculated. "The power requirements for the gate are actually quite small. It might even be possible to power it by battery, although if it failed — you've seen what happens when the gate closes."

"Yes, I know," Fatah acknowledged ruefully. "How much power is required?"

"Mmmm... I'm guessing," Al mused. "Perhaps less than an amp, the chips will take up to about 12 volts. I think it could be done with flashlight batteries."

They both considered this as they stared into the early-Sunday morning fog.

Beyond the portal, faculty trooped into conference room 8 for their Monday 10 a.m. Conference.

Gradually the morning sun began to burn the fog away and the two could begin to make out features of the terrain further and further away. They broke camp and headed North along the foothills. Every once in a while, they would try to find a pass through the mountains to their West, but they were unable to locate anything resembling a road, even for the Jeep. Each time they were turned back either by impenetrable forest or by talus-covered terrain too slippery to risk.

In fits and starts, they mapped to their topological charts most of the major features from Boulder north to about Greeley. There was a startling congruence between high-spots and low-spots, and an equally surprising lack of it in the size and location of things like lakes and forests.

—==++++==—

At the appointed hour, 10am Monday, Barbara fitzGibbon, Dr. Saarinen, and several members of the Physics faculty gathered in Faculty Conference room 8 for a high-level review of Alfred Beddowes' recent work. Barbara had given them an informal introduction to the topic and promised them an eye-opening presentation. She was not happy when Al failed to show.

She apologized to the staff for the inconvenience and canceled the rest of the meeting. Then she called Al's home. The answering machine picked up. Barbara didn't bother to leave a message.

Each grad student she recognized in the hallways she would stop. "Have you seen Al Beddowes today? Do you know who might know of his whereabouts?" she asked them. In this fashion, she button-holed Edwin Schultz.

"Doc, what do you know about Al's research?" Edwin probed.

She held up two fingers pressed close together. "Edwin, we're this tight. I'm very worried about Al. He's got hold of something that may be far bigger than he suspects. He may, at this very moment, be in the utmost danger." *He's in the utmost danger of getting his carcass thrown out of here*, she thought.

"Doc, come with me." In the Biology lab, Edwin unlocked his private cabinet to reveal the clear glass specimen jars. Barbara looked but did not, at first, understand. "Al brought these to me last week

and swore me to absolute secrecy."

"Al brought you these?" she repeated, not entirely sure of what Edwin was saying. "Where did he get them?"

"He wouldn't tell me anything about them" Edwin complained. "He just wanted them classified and toxicological studies done."

"And..." Barbara pushed.

"Well, except for the inexplicably weird color," Edwin started, "they're ordinary-ordinary."

"Except for the lack of chlorophyll," Barbara prompted him.

"No," Edwin corrected her. "they're chlorophyll-based. They're ordinary plants." Edwin insisted.

"But they're white!" Barbara was astounded.

"I know." Edwin shook his head. "Mass spectrometer says they're green. Chlorophyll up to here," and he held one finger across his eyes. "There's not a single discrepancy I can find between these and their green counterparts, beyond the normal variance you would expect due to soil differences."

"What else?" she goaded him.

"That's it," Edwin finished. "Oh, toxicology. This is Poison Oak. Al says he picked it bare-handed — didn't recognize it as PO, and he got no reaction from it. I suspected he was immune to PO (I'm not) so I tried it on myself. No reaction. Mass spectrometer says it's Poison Oak, but it doesn't start a rash. Toxicologically zip.

"I had this thing that looked like a pear and tasted like a pear. It was a pear, and it was gray."

"You tasted it?" Barbara asked, surprised that Edwin would be so foolhardy.

"Yes," he confirmed. "It was delicious."

"I wonder if you got any nutrition from it?" she mused.

"I wouldn't bet my life on it, Dr. fitzGibbon."

"Thanks, Edwin," she finished. "I need one more favor. Check all the grad students' labs for anyone who might have assisted Al in any way, however small. Don't offer any information. Keep it low-key. I'll check back with you later."

She picked up a phone and dialed Ernie at work. "Got some spare time you can give me?"

"Sure, doc," Ernie agreed at once. "Anytime."

"Good. I'll pick you up."

Ernie was waiting on the corner. Barbara stopped long enough to let him get in, then floored it for Al's house. Al's Ferrari was in the driveway, blocked in by a BMW. She knocked on the door. No answer.

Ernie, meanwhile, had checked all the car doors and

discovered that the passenger door of the Ferrari was unlocked. On the visor was the remote control for the garage door. He clicked it and the garage door slowly opened. Ernie stood there just looking. He did not know what it was he was looking at, but as Barbara came around the corner, she gasped, for she had seen one of these before.

And on the floor of the garage were the muddy tracks of a wide profile tire.

"Don't touch anything, Ernie," she warned him. Barbara leaned through the portal and came back shaking.

"He did it. The little squid pulled off the biggest scientific coup since Columbus, maybe the biggest scientific coup ever." She snatched several pieces of note paper from the workbench and began sketching the layout of the chips and circuitry on the gate.

"What is it?" Ernie asked.

"Poke your head through that ring," she told him, "and be prepared for the shock of your life."

Ernie leaned his head and shoulders through the ring, looked around, then pulled back into the garage.

"Bizarre," was his one-word judgment. "I still don't know what it is."

"Ernie, it's a parallel universe," she explained. "It's a world in every sense our own is. It may not have the same 'natural' laws, it may not have the same topology or geography, in fact it almost certainly doesn't — look at the colors — but all its natural laws will seem as internally consistent and seemingly free of error as do ours. See these tire tracks? How much would you like to wager these were made by my Jeep?"

"Yup, sure looks like it," Ernie confirmed.

"And now I know why my Jeep was taken — why Al took my Jeep," she speculated. "That's rough terrain. He wouldn't dare take his Ferrari."

"It looks as though he tried, doc," Ernie said, pointing at the ground. "Look at the mud on these tires."

"Sure enough," Barbara agreed. "Let's go. I have some calls to make."

On the way back to the University, Barbara stopped to make a phone call to Professor Joseph D'Amico. "Joe, I need this really big favor. I need to borrow Gwen for a few days. Maybe not even that long. Would it be OK with you? I'll make it worth your while."

"Of course, Barbara," D'Amico agreed. "You're already holding lots of my IOUs."

Barbara smirked. "Thanks, Joe. Can you stop her from leaving the campus? I really need to talk to her today."

"Sure. Stop by my office."

The white boards in Al's lab carried, next to Dr. Saarinen's work with equations 48 and 62, the seven constituent frequency functions that Al had developed. Barbara quickly copied them, then hurried over to Joe D'Amico's office.

Gwen Nikkoliassen was waiting there with Professor D'Amico. "I've asked Gwen to help you out all she can, Barbara, but (of course) I wasn't able to tell her on what. Would you care to share it?" Joe D'Amico pleaded.

"Joe, if I knew what it was I was sharing, quite possibly," Barbara fended him off. "Right now, I believe Al Beddowes' life may be in peril and I would really rather not spend the time a proper explanation might take. I do hope you understand."

"Of course." Joe nodded in agreement.

"Gwen, let's work in my lab, please," Barbara offered with her arm around Gwen's shoulder and gently guiding her out of Joe D'Amico's office.

"Sure, Doctor fitzGibbon."

"Barbara. Call me Barbara." she told Gwen. "We're not in class. Today we're colleagues."

"...Barbara. This must be related to what Al and I worked on the week before last."

Barbara's head snapped around. Until this moment, she had not realized that Gwen was the source of Al's microchip expertise. "Quite probably. You better tell me what ground I don't have to cover with you."

"Al came to me about two weeks ago," Gwen started to explain, "looking for help customizing microchips, and I showed him how to do PROMs. He had seven functions programmed, pretty simple ones as I recall, and each one was to go on its own chip. I think he was going to use them to drive some other device."

"That's my understanding, too," Barbara confirmed. "Can you replicate the work you two did?"

"No problem," Gwen said immediately. "The source code is still on my computer. You have the chips?"

"No," Barbara sounded disappointed. "Where do I get them?"

"I always use Mountain States," Gwen replied. "Let's give them a call."

The salesman at Mountain States Electronic Supply was very apologetic. That item had sold out earlier and a resupply was not expected for quite some time. They tried Chuck's Electronics, and Hacker's Heaven, finally locating a very expensive supply at Aurora

Computing. Ernie, meanwhile, was taking some unscheduled time off and hunting for electromagnets and assorted other hardware.

Barbara had counted 56 sets of chip-and-driver around the ring in Al's garage. Gwen had confirmed that there were seven varieties of chip. That worked out to eight sets of seven. Gwen cooked the first batch of chips and supervised as Barbara did the second batch, then they each worked independently until all 56 chips were ready, each marked with a splash of paint to indicate which formula it implemented, which wave-form it generated.

By this time, Ernie had returned with several boxes of material including the electromagnets. Gwen, Barbara, and Ernie mated them to chips and stored them carefully away.

Barbara thanked Gwen profusely and released her, Ernie helped pack the material for transport, and they drove back to Barbara's. There they constructed the framework for their portal very much along the lines of Al Beddowes' device. By about 8pm they were ready to try it. Barbara switched on the power.

"Ernie, would you care to have the honor of being first through the door you helped build?" she waved toward the gate.

"Not at all, Doctor," Ernie gallantly declined. "After you." And he made a sweeping gesture toward the ring.

Barbara bowed to him and made to step through the portal. It was as though she had walked into a wall. Suddenly, she was sitting, dazed, on the floor of the garage. Her nose was bleeding.

"Are you alright?" Ernie asked, bending down to help her to her feet. Barbara looked a little dazed.

"Yes, I think so," was all she said.

Ernie felt the portal. Although he could see through it as though nothing were there, he could not push anything through. He shut the power down, and was then able to step through the frame to the other side of the garage. He turned the power back on and carefully probed all the corners of the frame. A narrow vertical section on the right side allowed the probe through. Elsewhere it was blocked. After a while, he shut the power down again and began sliding the framework toward the door of the garage. He powered up and tried the probe. It was clear at all points in the portal. He leaned through and was back in a moment.

"Come look," Ernie commanded.

He and Barbara both leaned through. Four feet or less before them a rocky outcropping glowed in the mid-morning sun. Barbara had set the gate up inside a rock. When she went to step through there was no "space" on the other side of the gate. She had literally walked into a wall, one that she couldn't see.

"Al's out there somewhere, Barbara. Shall we try to find

him?" Ernie asked.

"He's got the Jeep," Barbara responded thoughtfully. "He's probably in better shape than we would be if we went in after him."

"Let me scout for you," Ernie offered. "We need someone on the entry-side who knows how the equipment is put together in case it fails." Barbara nodded in agreement. "What time do you have?" he asked her.

"I have 8:10," Barbara replied, looking at her watch.

"So do I," Ernie confirmed. "I'll do a 20-minute recon and come back here. If I'm not back in 20 minutes, start shouting." Barbara nodded her agreement.

Ernie stepped completely through and turned around. The gate was totally invisible from either side. He stepped back into the garage.

"Better give me something to mark the spot so that I can find my way back," he told her.

Barbara looked around the garage. She tossed a spray can of green paint to Ernie. Back he went through the gate, got two rocks and placed them by the entrance to the portal, sprayed them with dabs of paint. Turning to the huge rock face he began to paint a 6-foot "f" in script. As he put the finishing touches on it, Barbara's head poked through the gate.

"Ernie, don't take all day with that," she ordered. "It looks OK."

"Barbara, it didn't take that long," Ernie sounded a little annoyed. "And besides, I have to be able to see it a long way off."

"But, Ernie, you've spent your whole 20-minutes just painting the rock," she explained in exasperation.

He looked at his watch. "Have not. It's only been seven minutes."

Barbara stepped through. She showed him her watch. It said 8:30. Ernie held up his watch. It said 8:17.

"I've got to think about this, Ernie," she told him. "Let's go back."

In Barbara's living room, they talked about what they had just seen. Ernie had been beyond the gate for what seemed to him to be seven minutes. By Barbara's watch twenty minutes had passed. Everything moved slower beyond the gate, even time. Or perhaps it was only time that moved slowly. At any rate, the ratio seemed to be about three to one.

"That's what happened to Al!" she exclaimed. Barbara's eyes lit up with the revelation. "If he snagged my Jeep Friday evening and took it through, he may be planning to spend Saturday and Sunday exploring. It'll be Tuesday night or Wednesday before he gets back."

No wonder he missed the meeting!"

"OK, now that you have that figured out," Ernie said, "I want you to check something else out for me."

They returned to the garage. Standing before the gate, Ernie asked Barbara: "How familiar are you with the local ridge-line?"

"Very familiar," she asserted. "I've done some sketching of the mountains. They're beautiful, aren't they?"

"Yes," Ernie agreed. "Close your eyes and imagine the ridge-line northwest." Barbara nodded and closed her eyes.

Ernie took her elbow and led her through the gate.

"Open your eyes," he commanded. And Barbara gasped, for, apart from the unusual color, the ridge-line was as she remembered it.

"It's almost identical," she muttered almost to herself. "So, the topology is congruent. That's... odd."

"It's something else, too," Ernie said with a grin. Barbara looked at him in confusion as if to ask 'What?' "It's convenient. I'll bet that, just knowing the local topography, you could tell where in Boulder (or anywhere else) you were."

"I suppose," Barbara agreed, "but what good would it do unless there were a gate where you needed it?"

"Well," Ernie continued, "how much power does one of these take? If a portable pack could power a gate... How about this: two gates powered by batteries. Open the first one. Take the second gate through in a power-off state. Open the second gate. Go back via the second gate, shut the first gate down and bring it through. Now you have a gate that exists in Earth-II, and you can go anywhere and open your own gate where ever you want."

"That's a great idea, Ernie," Barbara agreed. "A little expensive, though. It cost us nearly three hundred dollars for the parts for this gate."

"Barbara, if you decided to use it to loot a bank," Ernie suggested, "a pair of three hundred dollar gates would be a small investment."

"Ernie!" Barbara was stunned he would even consider such a thing.

"I'm only kidding," he assured her. "Anyway, Al's probably in no real danger beyond losing a few days of his career. I want to be there when he finds out about the time discrepancy."

"Right. C'mon, I'll drive you home."

5 — Escape

Coming through a break in the trees, Fatah gasped at the immense size of the lake stretching before her. It was virtually an inland sea. Al slowed to a stop at the edge of a thirty-foot drop and they both got out and walked to the edge to admire the panorama before them.

"How far is the horizon from thirty feet high?" she asked.

"I don't know. Eight, maybe ten miles?" Al suggested.

"That's got to be one of the largest lakes I've ever seen," Fatah remarked. "I wonder if there's any fish in it?"

Al shrugged. "The next time we come back, we'll have to bring some tackle and find out."

Back in the Jeep, they worked their way back through the forest following their own tracks until at last they could again see the Front Range before them. The sun was now low enough that the East face was in shadow.

"Watch the gas," Fatah reminded him. "We don't want to run dry here."

"Right," Al agreed. "I'm keeping my eye on it. We probably ought to start back soon."

"Let's turn back," Fatah suggested. "We're not learning anything new here and it will be dark before we know it."

She was right. They had explored most of the area between the foothills and the three large lakes except for the heavily wooded and rocky sections. In two days, they had seen nothing out of the ordinary. The same monochromatic foliage, assorted insects, no animal larger than a raccoon and few of those at that, no bears, no wolves, no deer, no birds larger than a crow.

Al took one last look at the snowy pass to the west, then started the Jeep and turned south. Forty minutes later they could just make out the strobe in the distance in the lengthening shadows of the Rockies. Five minutes later they were at the portal. Fatah jumped out and slipped through into the garage. She was back in an instant.

"It's black as pitch in there," she told him. "Let me have a flashlight."

She lit the lights in the garage, then made to wave Al through.

"No," he told her. "I think I'll keep it for a little longer. We can buy gas and bring it back." He shut the beacon down and stepped through the gate. "You're right, it is dark in here. Why is it so dark at

six in the evening?"

Inside the house, they got a partial answer. The clocks all said 10pm. Al put his watch to his ear. It seemed to be working.

"Fatah, what does your watch say?"

"I didn't bring it with me. I left it in my purse in the BMW."

He turned on the television, switched to the Weather Channel and got the correct time, 10:03pm. He would have to get rid of this old watch and replace it with one that worked.

Without a proper change of clothes, Fatah was forced to go back to her own home. *Just as well*, she thought, since she was plenty grimy from two days of playing Girl Scout. *There will be other times.*

—==+++==—

It was Al's habit to pick up the morning paper from the driveway on his way to the university and read it at his leisure once there. This morning, however, there was more than just Sunday's and Monday's paper. Al found that Tuesday's paper and Wednesday's had been delivered as well. Somehow, he realized, he had lost two full days.

Returning to the house, he called Fatah and woke her up.

"It's Wednesday," he told her.

"What?" Fatah was still somewhat sleepy and couldn't quite imagine what Al was talking about.

"You heard me" Al repeated. "It's Wednesday. We lost two whole days."

"That can't be. We only spent one night." Fatah thought Al had gone crazy.

Al looked at his 'faulty' watch. The day-of-the-week indicator said "MO".

"I know we only spent one night, but it's Wednesday," he insisted. "My watch says Monday, but I have Wednesday's paper in my hand."

By this time, Fatah had retrieved her watch from her purse. Her watch had spent the entire time under the front seat of her BMW. It said "WE".

"How... how can this be?" she stammered.

"I don't know," Al admitted. "Just be aware when you meet people today that it's not Monday anymore. I'll talk to you later today."

Al made his first stop at Barbara's office. Marge, ever efficient, knew exactly where Barbara was. Al rushed into his laboratory, breathless.

"Dr. fitzGibbon! I don't know how to begin to apologize for

missing your meeting," Al apologized before Barbara could begin to say anything. "How can I make it up to you?"

Barbara turned from the board to face him. She wore the sternest expression she could muster. "Mr. Beddowes, I have already made our apologies to the faculty who were inconvenienced, but I, myself, would appreciate some explanation for your absence. Perhaps you do not realize how important your own research is?" *Come along, little fish, bite*, Barbara wished to herself knowing full-well why Al had missed the meeting. "Do you not understand that you are laying a theoretical foundation upon which an army of your colleagues may build? If you do not value the work we advance here, perhaps you ought to seek another mentor."

"I doubt, Dr. fitzGibbon, that that would do either of us good. I assure you that I am as aware of the importance of this research as are you, maybe even more so." *Yes, quite a bit more so*, Al thought. "Only personal business of the most serious nature could keep me away from here. And, in view of the seriousness of that business, let us make that explanation enough, and get on with the job at hand." *Bitch!* "Would you care to reschedule the meeting? I assure you I will be available for it."

"Very well," Barbara agreed. "Shall we make it for Friday?"

"I will be available whenever it is convenient for the rest," Al assured her.

"I'll let you know," and she left the laboratory.

Al turned to the board, picked up an eraser, and removed the seven field equations. *Too dangerous*, he thought, *to leave these lying around where people can see them. Too much of an invitation.*

—==++++==—

"Boulder Police Department," the operator announced.

"Lieutenant Cardozo, please," Barbara asked.

The phone rang twice before it was picked up. "Donovan," the voice on the other end told her.

"Lieutenant Cardozo, please," Barbara repeated her request.

"I can take a message," she was told.

"This is Barbara fitzGibbon," she introduced herself. "I think I have a lead on my stolen Jeep." The disembodied voice grunted in acknowledgement. "I have reason to believe it can be found at 1247 Silvermill."

"And what reason is that?" the voice asked.

"Just a hunch, that's all," Barbara admitted. "Woman's intuition."

That's not much in the way of 'probable cause', Mrs.

fitzGibbon," she was told. (*'Miss', she corrected him.*) "I'll leave word for Lt. Cardozo and have him check it out."

"Thank you." Barbara replied.

"Not at all." *Click.*

—==++++==—

Fatah twisted her key in the lock and entered. Al was not home yet, she knew, because the red Ferrari was not in the driveway. She got a bottle of sparkling water from the refrigerator and sat down to wait for Al.

She didn't wait long. The rumble of the Ferrari exhaust announced his arrival.

He dropped onto the couch next to her. "Did you think of an explanation?" he asked her.

"No," she admitted. "Did you?"

"Perhaps," Al began. "It was about noon on Saturday when we crossed through, right?" Closer to one, Fatah suggested. "Alright, then, one. We got back about 10pm Tuesday. That's eighty-one hours, or three days and nine hours. On the other side of the gate, when we went through early Saturday afternoon, it was really starting to get dark by then, remember? The first day it had gotten dark at about 4pm and I adjusted my watch forward two hours. Sunday, we returned just about dusk, 6pm local time, so we actually spent maybe 27 hours beyond the gate. Is that about right?"

"Yes, I think so," Fatah agreed.

"Know what I think? I think time runs about one-third as fast beyond the gate as it does on this side," Al suggested. "Do you remember when I was building the ramps? I swore I only spent fifteen or twenty minutes putting them together. You claimed I spent nearly an hour."

"Yes!" Fatah suddenly brightened. "I remember that! Al, that must be right. So, you could lose a lot of time living and working on the other side."

"You sure can. So, let's stay out of there until we have something worth burning down time for, OK?" Al suggested

"I *do* have something worth burning time for, Al," Fatah responded. "Can you think what it might be?"

"Of course, Fatah, but I can't see how this might be used to help the Palestinians. Is that what you were thinking of?" Al prompted.

"Yes, it was," Fatah confirmed. "I think that we at last have found the way to drive the Jews from our land. If we can pass through the gate into — what shall we call it?"

"Let's call it Earth-II," Al proposed.

"If we can pass through the gate into Earth-II and reappear anywhere, border crossing guards and patrols are useless. The border will cease to exist," she told him excitedly. "We can strike the Jews wherever and whenever we want and escape back into Earth-II where they cannot follow and so avoid taking any casualties ourselves. No one will be able to withstand very long that kind of punishment. They will be unable to hold onto our land any longer. We will be free of them at last. Will you help me in this, Al?"

"Fatah, I think it will work. Yes, I'll help you." Al agreed.

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. He kissed her back. She closed her eyes and let her imagination run wild. Soon, her breathing became deeper and she could sense that Al's response was matching hers. As if in obedience to the fantasy playing through her mind, he ran his hand up her back inside her blouse and began toying with the hook-and-eye fastening. After several minutes of ineffectual maneuvering, Fatah broke the seemingly interminable kiss long enough to advise him: "Use both hands."

The bra strap loosened, he brought his hands slowly around to the front and gently cupped her breasts in his hands. His thumbs swept across the nipples and Fatah made small throaty noises through the kiss as pleasant sensations flooded her body.

The doorbell rang.

Cardozo didn't pick up his messages until after 5:30, and didn't get around to Barbara's message until nearly seven. Then he and his partner made a quiet visit to 1247 Silvermill. There was no sign of any Jeep from the street. A peek through one of the garage windows likewise revealed nothing. Perhaps she just had the address off a little bit. They would check with the owner.

Cardozo rang the front door bell. Al answered.

"Yes?" he greeted the two policemen.

"Boulder Police. I'm Lieutenant Cardozo. This is my partner, Lieutenant Forbes. May we have a few moments of your time?"

"Sure. C'mon in," Al invited. They sat down. Al introduced himself and Fatah.

"Have you noticed any unusual activity lately?" Cardozo began.

"Unusual?" Al responded. "I don't know. Give me an example of what you might think is unusual."

"Oh, neighbors behaving out-of-the-ordinary," Cardozo suggested, "sudden displays of wealth, more than the usual number of cars, or a rapid turnover of vehicles."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't do much of that kind of observing," Al

informed him. "You see, I work at the college." Cardozo and Forbes exchanged a quick but knowing look. "I'm out of here before it's full daylight, and I don't generally get back until near dark. After that, I keep pretty much to myself. What, specifically, are you looking for?"

"Specifically, we're looking for a stolen Jeep," Cardozo informed him. "We'd appreciate it if you kept your eyes peeled."

"Will do," Al responded agreeably.

When they had gone, Al turned to Fatah.

"She knows," he told Fatah.

"Impossible," she snapped back.

"I take it you believe Barbara couldn't have a clue we were involved in it?" Al challenged her assurance.

"She couldn't possibly know," Fatah pressed on. "Why would she even suspect you?"

"For one thing, I was inexplicably missing for two days this week," Al explained. "I'm sure she must think that at least a little bit odd, no?"

"Yes, I see what you mean," Fatah mused. "What shall we do about it?"

"I think I ought to disassemble the gate and get it out of here," he told her. "What do you think about moving it to your place?"

"How are you going to get the Jeep there?" she asked.

"You're right, Fatah," Al agreed. "We're going to need a second gate, maybe a third as well. I guess it's time to go shopping."

"Let's do it."

—==++++==—

"To be perfectly honest, Mrs. fitzGibbon," (*'Miss', she corrected him.*) "there's absolutely nothing to support your intuition about Mr. Beddowes. We found no physical evidence at his residence. We spoke to him at some length and he impressed us as a thoroughly honest individual. The bottom line is that we think your suspicions are..."

"Paranoid?" she offered.

"Perhaps."

There was a long pause. She seemed to them to be looking inward. "OK," she finished. "Thanks for humoring me. I guess I over-reacted."

"That doesn't mean we'll stop looking," the detective assured her. "We're still going to try to recover your Jeep. We just want you to understand that this type of theft is often unsolved. The prudent course is to begin preparations for replacing the vehicle."

She showed them to the door and they left. When she

turned back from the door, Ernie was looking accusingly at her.

"What?" she asked him. Her defensive tone was plain.

"You're not going to let this drop, are you?" Ernie predicted.

"It's virtually certain that Al has your Jeep."

"I know that," Barbara agreed. "They have to work within the law: civil, criminal, and natural. Al is operating beyond the scope of the natural law these guys know. They couldn't even conceive of what he has pulled off. It's up to me to dispense justice in this case."

"Up to us," Ernie corrected her.

"OK. Up to us," Barbara agreed. "Thanks, Ernie. You're always there when I need you."

—==+++==—

The retail-electronics-parts businesses in the Boulder area must certainly have wondered what was going on. Over the space of a few days, parts that had gathered dust for months or years suddenly sold out with indications of continued demand.

Al was forced to call a manufacturer direct when all the normal local sources came up empty. Federal Express promised to have his parts to him by the weekend.

6 — Parry

Al Beddowes entered conference room 8 only steps behind Barbara and went directly to the speaker's rostrum.

"Allow me to apologize again for leaving you all in the lurch Monday," he apologized. "Only the most serious of personal business could take me away from such a meeting so precipitously. Again, my apologies.

"You have before you a very rough summary of my recent work that Dr. fitzGibbon wishes you to be briefed on and to review for possible suggestions as to plausible routes through what is turning out to be a most difficult area, experimentally. But first, some background for those of you who may not be fluent in the lines of research in Physics currently being pursued here at U Colorado Boulder:

"You are all aware, I am sure, of Dr. fitzGibbon's seminal work in multi-dimensional rationalizations. My work is a continuation of hers, concentrating most heavily on what is called '5-space'. 5-space is, of all the mathematically manipulable spaces, the one most nearly congruent, in an architectural sense, to our own, which we call '4-space'. During my research, thanks in no small part to Dr. fitzGibbon herself, it has become clear (or at least *less unclear*) that the good doctor's mathematics applies primarily to even-dimensioned spaces, that is, 4-space, 6-space, 8-space, et cetera. In my studies of 5-space, I think I may have found the key to making her mathematics deal with odd-space as well." Barbara nodded in agreement.

"The keystone to the direct linkage of her original work with mine is a mathematical oddity, little better understood today than it was at its discovery twelve years ago. That oddity is known as 'moldau displacement' and, without going into too great detail, in dimensional mathematics it tends to take values of either zero or one — never anything between. It is one (that is, Existence) for odd-space and it is zero (that is, Non-existence) for even-space. Its applicability is primarily to the mathematics of distortional separation. If you will turn to Appendix A."

There was a rustle of paper as the audience turned pages as directed.

"Appendix A begins with the three primary field equations from Dr. fitzGibbon's treatise and converges them without respect to the implicit moldau displacement. Notice how, near equation 11, the entire string leading to the expression of distortional separation is now declared as negatives. I have not developed a hypothesis regarding

'negative distortional separation' and welcome your thoughts on the topic.

"Appendix B" — more rustling of paper — "is fundamentally a line suggested by Dr. Iivo Saarinen. Again, there is not yet a hypothesis to explain the unusual presence of a clear and unmistakable series of true, formal Palestrinesque frequency functions here. On my own, however, I took that series and derived constituent fragments.

"If you would turn to Appendix C — the seven equations shown there are the true factors of equation 68f of Appendix B." They weren't, actually, for AI had made four individually unnoticeable changes to the results to thwart anyone who might try to replicate his field generator. "Since they appear to represent the irregular fluctuation of a field, I decided to replicate the field in 4-space as an experiment.

"I programmed seven programmable computer chips, PROMs, one with each of the seven constituents, and used them to drive small individual oscillators mated to electromagnets to produce the required fluctuating fields. Dr. fitzGibbon was with me the first time we provoked the field.

"Dr. fitzGibbon, would you care to describe the experiment we performed that day?"

"Mr. Beddowes, you're doing just fine," Barbara called out to him. "Pray, continue."

"Thank you, doctor. When the field was first switched on there was no apparent change. I recall tossing a crumpled ball of paper at the apparatus. As it passed above the field there was a distinct change in color, almost a fluorescing of the paper. We shut the equipment down for fear of radiation hazards and had radiation detection equipment brought in. That equipment showed no radiation effect whatsoever, so we are still somewhat puzzled as to what might have caused the original phenomenon.

"We then placed a flask of fluorescent dye in the center of the field and re-powered the device. The flask disappeared and we are not sure what happened to it. However, I suspect that the device we were using somehow made a connection to an alternate space, that that alternate space has a gravitational field, and that the flask was pulled through into that alternate space."

There was considerable murmuring of surprise among the audience. Barbara had not been briefed on what AI was going to say, but knew (unofficially, of course) that there was no 'suspecting' on AI's part. He absolutely knew of the existence of alternate space. Why was he teasing this out? Barbara decided to say nothing and let AI play this the way he had planned.

"We then tried the same test with several other objects with equivalent results," Al continued. "A wooden shaft was inserted into the field and withdrawn without apparent change. The same was tried with a lab animal without apparent effect. When we lowered a video camera into the field, there was no recognizable signal. That is, all we got was 'snow'.

"Dr. fitzGibbon, is there anything you would like to add?" Al finished.

"Nothing to add, Mr. Beddowes, but I do have a question or two," Barbara stood to ask her questions. "This experiment was conducted two weeks ago?"

"Yes, two weeks ago today," Al confirmed.

"And since then you have made no further progress? No further experiments?" Barbara prodded.

"I have attempted to expand the effective field, but have had only partial success thus far. The problem seems to be one of power: the chips we're using will only handle so much power. This limits the strength of the magnetic field generated by each electromagnet. Adding more units to the ring-arrangement you and I worked out increases the separation between the units, the center of the field attenuates, then collapses. Other physical arrangements are generally less satisfactory.

"I am currently trying to locate equipment capable of handling more power."

He's lying, Barbara said to herself, but why? Unless he's planning to keep the secret to himself for the time being. I wonder what he's found in the alternate space?

"This is quite the break-through," Dr. Edwards said as he stood. "Since we have the week-end coming up, why don't we all use that time to mull over these extraordinary findings and give Al our comments and suggestions early next week. Would that be satisfactory, Al?"

"Entirely, Dr. Edwards," Al agreed. "Thank you all for your time."

As they all filed out, Barbara moved next to Al. "Well, Al, you left them all speechless. Where do you plan to take it from here?"

"Until I can get more power applied to the problem, all we have is a very interesting toy," Al replied. "Suggestions?"

"How about arranging the power units hemispherically?" Barbara suggested. "That might let you focus more power on the central spot."

"Been there, done that," Al told her. "I think we ought to wait and see what our distinguished faculty can invent over the week-end. And speaking of 'week-end', I can hardly wait to start mine. You

have a good one, doctor." He turned and headed for the exit.

—==+++==—

When Fatah arrived at Al's after school Friday, there was a note from FedEx stuck to the door. The material had arrived and was being held at the central office of Federal Express. She called and was told that she could pick the packages up for the addressee if she could show proper identification.

She left her own note for Al and headed for the Federal Express office. She was back in less than an hour, and by that time Al was home as well. She rushed in, plunked the packages down and gave him a long sensuous kiss.

He returned her a mock-serious look: "Do you want to play or do you want to work?"

"I suppose we really ought to work," she admitted.

They broke open the cartons and laid out the contents. When they had assured themselves the order was complete and correct, they began to program the chips. As Al produced completed chips, Fatah mated them to the wave drivers and seated them on the frame.

The frame had been constructed of plastic pipe of the kind used for plumbing, with just enough elastic rope run through the pipes that it was sturdy when put together, but could be taken down easily. 'To take down', in this case, meant loosening the corner fittings and folding the loosened framework into a compact package. The power supply was a pair of 6-volt lantern batteries in parallel. The whole assembly weighed less than thirty pounds.

With the gates fully assembled, Al and Fatah tested both side-by-side. Satisfied of their operation, one gate was shut down, disassembled, and brought through to the other side. There, it was reassembled and powered up. Fatah's supposition about pulling gates through to the other side was thus proven correct. They broke the other gate down and pulled it through, also.

There were now two portable gates operating in Earth-II and one less-than-portable gate in Al's garage.

They loaded the portables into the Jeep. The sun was nearly setting in Earth-II. The gate-marker strobes were clearly visible and would become more so as the night wore on.

"OK, Fatah," Al started, "you're the one with the plan. Let's hear what you intend to do."

She took out her contour map on which she had been, over the past several days, marking the locations of selected buildings. She

pointed to a spot on the map. "Take me here" she ordered.

Al started the Jeep and they sped off in the indicated direction. The great meadow provided a quick trip, there being no other traffic but more for the ability to travel in straight lines. Within a few minutes, Fatah motioned for him to slow down, then to stop.

"I think this is close," she said.

"Close to what?" Al asked.

"The National Guard Armory," Fatah answered. "We'll need weapons."

They set up a gate and powered it on. Fatah poked her head through to find out where they were. In an instant, she was back. The gate was shut down and she directed it to be moved to a new location where the operation was repeated. And again. And again. On the fourth try the gate opened inside the building and in reasonable alignment with the floor. Each of the other attempts had either been outside or too far above the Earth-I ground for easy transit either way.

The new location was in an Earth-II gully that ran through the basement of the armory in Earth-I. As luck would have it, most of the small arms and explosives were stored close to the route the gully took. Working quickly and silently, Al and Fatah moved two crates of M-16s, and a crate each of rifle ammunition, hand grenades and anti-tank rockets. They could not find anything that looked to their unpracticed eyes to be a rocket launcher, but they took the rockets anyway, just in case.

At the guard station, an indicator light flickered yellow.

"What is it?" the sergeant asked.

"Motion sensor in the magazine," the corporal told him.

"Send two men down there to check it out," the sergeant ordered.

"Sarge," the corporal pleaded, "it's probably just rats. Nobody has been in the building all day but the five of us on duty. There haven't even been any cars on the access road. What could it be but rats?"

"Yeah, you're right," the sergeant agreed. "Still, send someone to scare away the rats."

He hefted the radio and spoke: "Jeff, Sarge wants you to go scare the rats in the magazine. Reset the motion sensor while you're there." The radio crackled then cleared long enough for Jeff's '10-4' to be heard.

They shut the gate down, loaded all the crates into the back of the Jeep and drove back to Al's. There they passed a portable gate back into Earth-I and loaded it into Fatah's BMW, along with a pair of

strobe beacons and took the lot to Fatah's house. They got the gate operating and placed two strobes in Earth-II to identify it.

Back at Al's, Al took the Jeep through Earth-II, heading straight for the blinking strobes. Fatah returned to her house via Earth-I, barely beating Al despite the time discrepancy. There the two of them unloaded their booty.

Exhausted from their exertions and suffering something akin to jet-lag, they collapsed on Fatah's living room couch. Soon, they were in each others' arms, kissing passionately.

"You need a shower," Fatah told him, "and I could probably use one myself."

"Then maybe we ought to shower while we're still able," Al suggested.

Fatah led him upstairs to the master bath where they undressed each other. In the shower, they barely went through the motions of getting clean. Toweling her body dry was almost impossible for him, for every time she turned he found a new place to kiss her. His kisses drove Fatah to a blinding ecstasy. She could no longer think. She only knew that she wanted. In the end, the bed proved to be too far away. Fatah lay on the carpet in the bath and Al fell on top of her. She held his neck with one hand and kissed his face and neck. With the other hand, she parted the flesh protecting her vagina. Al slipped into her silky wetness with what seemed to her a single motion. Her back arched and she cried out softly as a great wave of pleasure surged through her body. As her hips twitched uncontrollably, he caught up to her in a single flash of mind-numbing pleasure-pain.

They lay collapsed in a heap on the plush carpet, dreamily nibbling each other's lips. He scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bed where he deposited her with all the gentleness he could muster. As he lay down, this time beside her, she turned and whispered "Again" and pushed him onto his back. Astride him now, she guided his still-firm organ once more inside her, and rested lazily across his chest, enjoying the moment.

—==++++==—

Barbara, too, had placed an order for parts sufficient to build another gate, but they had not yet arrived. So, she and Ernie dismantled her gate and moved it to Ernie's.

By the time they had the gate operating at Ernie's, it was nearly two in the morning, Saturday. Beyond the gate, the sun had already set and the temperature was dropping fast. Ernie and Barbara

stepped through onto the great meadow and looked around. The half-moon cast a pearly glow across the landscape.

In the darkness, two things were plain-as-day: two sets of strobe beacons winked in the distance, one to their west, the other north-east and much closer. The moon only partially illuminated the land and Barbara and Ernie strained their vision to see. "Wait here," Ernie said, "I'll be right back." When he returned in what seemed to Barbara barely more than a minute he held a pair of binoculars. He raised the glasses to his eyes and focused on the nearer beacon.

"Take a look," he told her, and Barbara peered through the glasses.

"My Jeep!" she shouted. "I'm going to go get it!"

"Let's both go get it," Ernie suggested. "Got your keys?"

"Yes." Ernie took a kerosene lantern and lit it so that they would be able to find their way back and they set out cautiously across the meadow.

It turned out to be about three-quarters of a mile away. Aided by flashlights and the light of the moon, they made the trip in less than 10 minutes.

The doors of the vehicle were unlocked. Who in this world would steal it? The wires hanging free from the steering column told them how it was done: the Jeep had been "hot-wired" to get it going.

As Ernie tried to figure out how to start the vehicle, Barbara poked about in the air with a branch. Suddenly, the last six inches of the branch glowed frostily and seemed to dissolve. She pulled it back and the branch reappeared.

"Ernie, there's a gate here," she whispered.

"What's on the other side?" Ernie asked.

Barbara stuck her head and shoulders through. By the light of her flashlight she could make out several boxes. "Ernie, take a look."

Ernie peered through into Fatah's garage. "Military stuff. I wonder where they got it."

"A problem for another day," Barbara asserted. "Let's get out of here."

Ernie cranked the ignition. Barbara jumped in beside him. Moments later Ernie pulled to a stop before the kerosene lantern. He got out and carefully probed to define the limits of the gate. Barbara, behind the wheel now, slowly edged the machine forward.

"Lights out," Ernie warned. She doused the lights just as the front end of the Jeep shimmered silver and disappeared into Earth-I. It was just past three in the morning.

—==++++==—

"I knew something was wrong immediately, Lieutenant," the corporal explained. "These boxes never get moved. They're emergency supplies. They were stacked neatly here after the last inventory, July or so, and they've been untouched since. Every time I do a patrol of this room they're just sitting gathering dust. Suddenly, one of them is left catty-corner and there's no dust on top. Something's been taken from here, that's for sure."

"Thank you, Corporal."

The sergeant stepped up to him, computer printout in hand. "Near as I can figure it's two crates of rifles, one of ammunition, one of grenades, one of rockets, no launchers."

"No launchers?" the Lieutenant asked.

"Nope," the sergeant confirmed. "They're all accounted for."

"That means whoever took this stuff already has the means to launch the rockets," the lieutenant muttered. "Has NSA been alerted?"

"They're on their way."

—==+++==—

Fatah sat bolt upright in bed. She shook Al awake.

"Wha... " he mumbled groggily.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

"No. What?" Al still wasn't completely awake.

"I don't know. It sounded like a train rumbling through the house." Fatah explained.

"You're dreaming," he told her. "Go back to sleep."

Fatah decided that she was, in fact, dreaming and lay back down on her pillow.

—==+++==—

Ernie packed a duffel and pitched it into the back of the Jeep. Meanwhile, Barbara dialed the police.

"I feel like such a dunce" she told the officer. "I told my friend two weeks ago she could borrow my Jeep anytime. I even gave her a key. She left a note for me at my house, but the wind must have blown it away before I got home. Anyway, my Jeep is back. I really feel sorry about making you guys run around chasing this wild goose. Do I need to do something formal to make amends?"

"No, Mrs. fitzGibbon," (*'Miss', she corrected them again, but it again went unnoticed.*) "I'll let Lt. Cardozo know when he comes in. Thanks for the call."

Then she called Buck. "Let's head for the cabin early."

Buck agreed. "When?"

"Right now," Barbara told him. "I don't want to wait for sunrise. I got my Jeep back and I want to get started on my weekend."

"Where are you?" Buck asked his daughter.

"I'm at Ernie's. We're on our way over to pick you up. Get ready." she told him.

"Aye-aye, sir" and he hung up.

"Ready?" she asked Ernie.

"Ready," Ernie replied.

Buck was just brushing his teeth when they walked in.

"Hi, Buck" Ernie called. Buck mumbled some barely recognizable reply through the toothpaste.

Barbara took her duffel down and started loading it for the weekend. Buck, with thirty years' experience packing on a moment's notice, beat her to 'ready'. Barbara left dry food and water for the cat. The three of them piled into the Jeep and drove away, heading west into the Front Range toward the isolated mountain cabin that Buck maintained for just such occasions when they had had enough of civilization and needed a quiet weekend away from it all.

Buck had taken one look at the Jeep and knew most of its recent history.

"You didn't say, Barbara, how you got your Jeep back. I had assumed it was the result of good police work, but these dangling wires say something different."

"Right, as usual, Dad," Barbara responded. "Where shall I begin? It's now clear that Al Beddowes stole my Jeep. I don't know that 'stole' is the right word, either. Perhaps 'borrowed' would be more accurate, because I don't think anyone with as much money as Al Beddowes would ever think of stealing a beat-up old heap like this.

"I know why he took the Jeep, too. Al's research, like mine, concerns multi-dimensional rationalizations. The difference between his research and mine is that his has actually produced some visible results beyond paper. Al has managed to rationalize an entire parallel universe. It's as real as this Jeep, with some bizarre differences. The most bizarre difference of all — don't you agree, Ernie? — is the color scheme. Virtually every living thing in this parallel universe is monochromatic: black-and-white or shades of gray."

"You've *seen* this?" Buck was incredulous.

"Oh, yes," Barbara assured her father. "Ernie and I have both been there. As a matter of fact, that's where we — he — found the Jeep. I should back up. It looks like Al managed to build a gate..."

"A gate?" Buck queried her.

"That's what we call the device that allows us to cross over into the other copy of Earth," Barbara explained. "Oh, yes, for all the differences, there is a major similarity: topology. The land surface of this other Earth is almost identical with this one. I'm beginning to think that the only differences may be where man has trenched out or filled in or eroded away or blasted.

"Anyway, last night we, Ernie and I, discovered that the house on Pershing Street co-exists with a huge rock outcrop, so we moved the gate over to Ernie's to do some exploring. About two this morning, we passed through and discovered my Jeep about three-quarters of a mile north-east of Ernie's. We hiked over and took it back to Ernie's, rolled it through the gate, and here we are.

"When we found it, it was parked right next to a working gate. Just beyond the gate, in somebody's garage, there were a half-dozen crates of military stuff — military markings, anyway."

Ernie held up his wristwatch. "Don't forget time."

"Ah, yes," Barbara took a conversational side-trip. "Stranger than the monochromatic color scheme is time. I don't know how and I may never know why, but it seems that time there clicks along at about one-third the rate we're used to here. Slip through the gate, spend an hour, and when you get back three hours have gone away. Your watch says you've been gone an hour. It takes some getting used to. There are no clues. The sun rises and sets in time with your watch, and when you get back you discover it needs resetting big time."

"It sounds crazy alright," Buck agreed. "Ernie, tell me about the boxes you saw with the military markings."

"What's to tell? Ernie asked. "Some wood, some metal, painted green, lots of numbers and dashes and slashes I didn't understand, a few words I did."

"For instance?" Buck prodded him.

"Grenades. Rockets. M-16, maybe? 5.56mm, maybe?" Ernie didn't sound too confident about what he was saying.

"Yup, those are all things you might find in green boxes," Buck agreed. "Some heavy stuff. This was where?"

"It was in somebody's garage about three-quarters of a mile north-east of my place," Ernie stated.

"Not Al Beddowes' house?" Buck asked.

Barbara answered. "I'm trying to think where Al lives in relation to Ernie's. The lights off to the west may have been his house. I can't think of whose place the other set might be."

"I think that this is more a cause for alarm than you seem to view it, Barbara," Buck warned her. "Anyone who's dealing with grenades and rockets is not playing, unless it's for 'keeps'. The ability

to maneuver in this other universe is a rare tactical advantage, even if it does eat up time. I wouldn't be surprised to find that the knowledge Al Beddowes has is no longer merely a laboratory curiosity. And by taking back your Jeep, you have given them a wealth of information. Whoever 'they' are, they now know that you also have access to this other universe, and they may suspect that you can guess who they are. You are a positive danger to them."

"Daddy, I think you're over-reacting," Barbara brushed off his concerns. "Al is a serious scientist. He's after knowledge. He as much as told me last week that he's intent on getting as much basic research done on this phenomenon as he can before the lid blows off. That's why he took my Jeep, I'm sure. It enables him to get around the wilderness he's discovered, and it prevents me doing the same thing besides keeping me otherwise occupied. It's just an 'academic dirty trick' is all. But he *will* be upset when he finds I've taken it back."

She smiled at this, relishing the thought of Al suddenly realizing that credit for the discovery would have to be shared. Then she yawned loudly, and Ernie did the same.

By the dawn's early light, they unlocked the cabin and got the stove going. Buck had bacon and eggs ready just as the disc of the sun peeked over the horizon.

After breakfast, Buck got his toolbox and began to reattach the wires on the Jeep's ignition. Barbara and Ernie found comfortable spots on couches in the cabin's main room and were both asleep before they knew it.

The weekend had begun.

7 — Riposte

The sunlight streaming in the window woke Al rather more harshly than he wished. Turning away brought him face-to-face with Fatah's angelic countenance. Her eyes opened lazily and gazed into his.

"Good morning." She moved her still naked body next to his and kissed him passionately. In moments, they were again caressing each other, their ardor increasing, stroke by loving stroke. For the better part of an hour they made love, then showered together again before getting dressed for the activities of the day.

So it was that about nine-thirty, Al went into Fatah's basement to begin another round of exploration beyond the gate. As he stepped through into Earth-II, darkness surrounded him, and it was a few moments before his eyes adjusted to the change. By the light of the moon and the flashing strobes he could see that the Jeep was gone.

"Barbara!" he muttered, and stormed back into the garage.

"Fatah, she not only knows," Al sputtered, "she has her own gate. She's taken the Jeep back."

"Then she must be eliminated," Fatah concluded glumly.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Al agreed.

Fatah took out the map she had been working on and next to it laid a street map of Boulder.

"Where does she live?" she asked.

Al indicated a spot on the map. "2550 Pershing."

"We could walk to it from here, even in Earth-II," Fatah mused. On her topological map, she marked the location corresponding to Barbara's house.

In the basement, Fatah selected an M-16 and two magazines. She shouldered a portable gate while Al carefully stowed four rockets into his backpack. "The M-16 if they're at home, the rockets for a booby-trap if they're not," Fatah explained. Al could barely believe that he was deliberately setting out to kill someone.

Then they set off cross-country. The darkness made travel difficult, and recognition of landmarks doubly so, but Fatah was becoming very practiced in the art of 'dead reckoning'. The trip itself had taken a mere fifteen minutes, but they realized that in Earth-I forty-five minutes had ticked away.

They set up the gate to correspond with the mark on Fatah's map and peeked through. They were in an attic, judging by the

exposed beams and insulation, but whose? By carefully repositioning the gate, they determined that they had found 2554 Pershing. Downslope of them was a huge rock, right where Barbara's garage would be, but the main house would, they felt, be clear. When they next opened the gate, it was positioned partially in the living room, partially in the basement. The next attempt put them flush with the basement wall next to the staircase. This allowed them to step through the gate directly onto the stair.

Fatah tried the doorknob. It was unlocked. She flicked the safety catch on the M-16 and set it for rapid-fire and stepped into the kitchen.

The house was empty, the only noise made by the cat meowing as it brushed past Fatah's legs. Tip-toeing through the house, she made sure that no one was home, then returned to the basement.

"Booby-trap" she announced.

Taking a hand-grenade from her belt, she unscrewed the top and stored it safely away. Then she unplugged the refrigerator and took the light bulb from it. This she gently tapped with the body of the grenade until the glass shattered. The shards she swept into the trash. She inserted the base of the light bulb into the body of the grenade and taped it securely. The entire assembly was replaced in the refrigerator. The last step was to plug the refrigerator back in. The next person to open that door would never know what hit them. Instead of the helpful glow of a light, the filament would, instead, trigger the explosive inside the grenade.

Selecting some broad pieces of lumber from the workbench in the basement, she tried to gauge how they would fall if nudged by the cellar door, then she placed the four rockets so that the falling plank would slam into the detonators. Their work finished, they retired beyond the gate, powered it down, disassembled it, and carted it back to Fatah's.

It was noon by the time they returned to Earth-I. The waiting had begun.

—==++++==—

The more Buck thought about it, the less he liked the idea. Some civilian had a whole crate of M-16s. It was possible, but only just possible, that they were legal. Grenades and rockets were something else again. Given the coincidence of being connected to Al and Barbara, it was *not* possible that those were legal — at least, the odds were so small as to be the equivalent of 'not possible'. Therefore, they had been stolen, but from where? One of his many

contacts would know where or would know where to find out.

He was sitting at the kitchen table, making notes in what he called his 'tactical journal', when Ernie awoke. The two sat in the kitchen conversing in whispers so that Barbara could sleep.

"What's this?" Ernie asked.

"Oh, it's just a notebook," Buck explained. "I write those things I think are important today so that tomorrow I won't be able to kid myself about my first thoughts and burning questions. It's come in quite handy on several occasions. The matter of the moment is: whose garage was that where you saw the grenades, where did they come from, and why? Question two is: how are they connected with Barbara's wheels? Interesting questions, don't you think?"

"Yes, very," Ernie agreed. "I can give you some insight, perhaps.

"The Jeep was parked near an operating gate. That's how we got into the garage. That means the owner of the garage — it wasn't Al's house but that may not mean anything — knows about gates, and is, therefore, associated with Al in some way. I think.

"Barbara is quite convinced that Al is a serious researcher. What if she's right, and what we're seeing is a security breach being used by someone else for other than research?

"Suppose a friend or an associate knew of the research, duplicated it as we did, and is using it for less-than-honorable purposes. We couldn't blame Al for that."

"True," Buck agreed, "but it's still a fact that someone is playing with dangerous toys, can play with those toys because of what Al knows (or knew), and may realize that too many people knowing about it is dangerous in itself. And they know someone else has that knowledge, namely: Barbara. Do you know what that means? It means that Barbara, and us too perhaps, will be in mortal danger the instant 'they' decide to tie up all the loose ends. We're going to have to do something about that."

"Agreed," Ernie said. "Let's call the police."

"I think getting a cast of thousands involved is probably not the best course of action. We ought to keep this one in the family," Buck suggested.

"I'm not a fighter, Buck," Ernie told him.

"True, my boy, but we all have different gifts."

—==+++==—

"Gwen Nikkoliassen," Al said, apparently out of nowhere.

"What about her?" Fatah asked.

"She knows," Al told her. "She helped me do the chips for

the first gate. She must have helped Barbara, too. There's no telling how much Barbara blabbed to her about the project."

"You're right," Fatah nodded. "We have to get rid of her too. Where does she live?"

Al grabbed the phone book and tried to find her name. It wasn't listed.

"She works Saturdays sometimes," Al thought aloud. "Maybe she's at her lab."

"Worth a try," Fatah agreed.

The M-16 went on the back seat of the BMW wrapped in a blanket. Al and Fatah drove to the university and Al checked out the labs while Fatah waited in the car.

Gwen was in her lab finishing up, putting equipment away, tidying the area. Al observed but did not disturb her or let his presence be known. He told Fatah: "A little while and she'll be down."

Fatah came around the car to take the passenger seat and Al took the wheel. Twenty minutes later, Gwen slipped out of the building and into her car. As she rolled away, Al followed at a respectable distance down Regent onto Broadway and north, finally turning east on Iris, and south onto 14th. Fatah now had the M-16 between her knees. When Gwen turned right onto Hawthorne, Fatah rolled the window down and the chill November air puffed through the car.

Gwen's car pulled to the shoulder a few feet ahead.

"Slow down," Fatah ordered, and she brought the M-16 level.

Methodically, she emptied the entire 30-round magazine into the driver-side window as the BMW rolled past. Al sped away, right on 13th, right on Iris and they were instantly lost in the weekend traffic. A nice, clean kill.

—==++++==—

Mr. Jones, the cat, awoke from his afternoon nap, stretched, yawned, and looked around. *Just time left in daylight*, he thought, *for one quick patrol of the house*. Perhaps there's different, better food than the crunchy, dry bits in his bowl.

His normal patrol route took him from the kitchen to the living room, along the main hall, down into the cellar, and back to the kitchen. As Mr. Jones wedged his nose between the cellar door and the jamb, the plank so carefully placed there tottered and fell.

Four warheads exploded within milliseconds of each other driving the fuel chambers through the stair treads to the basement floor. The casings still intact after the explosion of the warheads split on impact with the concrete floor. One of the casings, still mostly

retaining its original shape, bounced upward slicing through the main beam supporting the house, and continued upward, trailing burning fuel, until it punched through the roof. It would come to rest four blocks away. A second casing ricocheted from wall to wall, finally passing through a support pillar. This, combined with the damaged beam, was the last straw. The crippled structure began to collapse barely more than a second after the first explosion.

As the first floor crumpled, the refrigerator fell over and rolled. In the last instant before the electricity was cut off, the door opened. The explosion of the hand grenade was hardly noticed.

There was little the fire department could do beyond preventing the spread of the flames. The fire marshal was accompanied on his investigation by representatives of the National Security Agency, already alerted by the Colorado National Guard, and the FBI.

—==++++==—

Their cabin had few of the amenities, and no television. News bulletins, therefore, did not intrude on their weekend. This was as they intended, but it had its drawbacks.

The nearest town was a forty-minute drive so they always planned their trips to maximize efficiency. The cabin itself was always kept stocked with enough long-shelf-life food for two or three days. This allowed them to run straight for the cabin at any hour of the day or night and survive there until the impulse to go food-shopping overtook them.

Barbara slept late and lounged later, so it was very late afternoon before they headed down the mountain.

They had determined that this was a good night for restaurant food, so they would restock their emergency supply, then let someone else serve them dinner.

Barbara shifted into second gear to accommodate the slope and, as the clutch bit, reached over and turned on the radio.

"...crowds in New Delhi. Closer to home, Boulder police are still without a suspect in the gangland-style slaying of Gwen Nikkoliassen outside her parents' Boulder home this afternoon." Barbara gasped in surprise. "Miss Nikkoliassen was machine-gunned to death as she sat in her car outside her parents' home at 1325 Hawthorne Street. Again, police have no motive and no suspects."

Barbara's voice caught on the word. "Gwen!"

"The explosion that rocked a quiet suburban street earlier this afternoon has now been confirmed by the fire marshal as arson. Boulder Fire Department and Federal investigators have spent the last

several hours combing through the remains of 2550 Pershing Street." Barbara slammed on the brakes, the Jeep skidded sideways several feet down the road and came to rest with its nose facing the rock wall.

"Asked why Federal authorities are involved, Boulder's Chief Fire Marshal replied: 'No comment'. In sports, today...". Buck switched the radio off. Barbara was now crying torrents.

"Our house!" she sobbed.

"Drive," Buck ordered. She put the vehicle in gear and continued toward town.

She drove slowly, picking her way down the mountain through the tears. "Why?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Buck and Ernie looked at each other. "It's started," Buck told him. Turning to Barbara he said: "That explosion was meant for us. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes. And Gwen is dead because she knows — knew — the key to the gates." Barbara started to regain her composure. "Daddy, if Gwen is dead and Al thinks we're dead, he probably feels pretty safe right about now."

Ernie put a hand on her shoulder. "Buck and I were talking about just that earlier. Barbara, you know there's no proof that Al's involved. This could be the work of someone else entirely."

She thought about this for a moment. "Al may not have pulled the trigger, but my intuition tells me he's in this up to his neck. At the very least, he knows who's responsible for this... this wanton destruction."

"Agreed," Ernie continued. "Two thoughts: one, you're safe only as long as Al (or whoever) thinks you're dead. If you're recognized walking along a street in Boulder, he'll know you escaped the bomb. Two, you don't know who you can confide in beyond the two of us. I'm probably safe just because not many people connect you with me. You and Buck are at risk, and you don't know, can't know who you're at risk from. You two can't go back to Boulder."

Barbara pulled into a parking space outside the Wind Drift Motel and Restaurant and shut the engine off. They took seats in the dining room and the waitress deposited menus before each of them. As Buck and Ernie examined the menu, Barbara went to the pay phone and dialed the Boulder Police Department.

"Boulder PD," the operator announced.

"Lieutenant Cardozo," Barbara requested.

The phone burred softly. "Cardozo."

"I need a favor," she started.

"That's quite an opening line," Detective Cardozo offered. "Who needs a favor?" He turned to his partner and made the hand signal for 'start a trace'.

"It's important you don't trace this call, so I'll speak quickly and drop off soon. Listen. This is Barbara fitzGibbon."

"The gal with the Jeep?"

"Yes. Listen. It would be very helpful to me and my father, to you too, perhaps, if those who bombed my house today could believe that we perished in the blast. I might be able to help you catch them, but not if I'm dead, and you can't protect me, you really cannot. I guarantee it. Help me or I'll really be dead, me and my father both." She hung up and returned to the table.

"Who did you call?" Buck asked.

"Cardozo," she answered, "the cop who was in charge of finding my stolen vehicle. I asked him to make it look like we died inside the house."

"Will he?" Ernie asked.

"I don't know," Barbara mused. "He already thinks I'm a flake. Maybe he won't. I thought it was worth a try."

"Right," Buck said, "I have a call to make, too."

Ed Smith had such a common name that Buck made it a point to always have his telephone number with him so that he wouldn't have to use Information.

"Hello?" the voice on the other end said.

"Hello, Ed, this is Buck fitzGibbon."

"Jeez, Buck, there was a big explosion up in your neighborhood today."

"Yeah, Ed, it was my house," Buck told him. "Do me a favor, will you? First, don't tell anybody you've talked to me. Make like I'm dead. Second, find out if any local high explosive is missing. Can you do that?"

"Sure," Ed Smith promised. "Piece of cake."

"Great. You can't call me. I'll call you, maybe tomorrow. Thanks." Buck hung up. Ed would come through for him, Buck knew. *Semper Fi.*

—==++++==—

Cardozo and his partner picked up the partner's brother-in-law, a Battalion Chief with the Boulder Fire Department. Together they called on the Chief Fire Marshal.

"I know it's your territory, Chief, but PD wants to help all they can," Cardozo started. "You, in turn, can help us help you on this one."

"How?" the Chief asked askance.

Cardozo lowered his voice conspiratorially. "I received a call

early this evening from someone who could be one of the residents of 2550 Pershing. She says..."

"That would be Barbara fitzGibbon?" the Chief advanced.

"Yes, you do your homework," Cardozo allowed. "She says that the blast was definitely deliberately set, and that she was the target."

"Did she say why?" the Chief asked.

"She didn't go into a lot of detail. She was off the phone so fast we didn't have time to even start a trace," Cardozo told him. "She suggested that she was in great danger and that being reported dead might lessen the danger for her and her father."

"Is she suggesting that we report finding her body?" the Chief asked Cardozo.

Cardozo nodded. "And her father's, yes, I believe that is what she was suggesting."

"And you support this?" the Chief pressed onward.

"I defer to your judgment, Chief, but, yes, I think it might be a good idea," Cardozo answered. "From what I've heard, there must have been quite a lot of explosive. Probably a pro job."

"Appearances are deceiving," the Chief told him. "We found what looks like part of a 3.75-inch rocket casing. It was military hardware that took her house down, probably half a dozen or so."

"I'll ask my NSA liaison about this. If they don't object, we'll probably do it."

"Thanks, Chief."

"Don't thank me," the Chief told him, "just keep me informed."

"...In a further grizzly development to the explosion in the Foothills area today, investigators report recovering several body parts. Chief Fire Marshal Gibson suggested to your reporter just minutes ago that two people may have died in the blast. Asked if the remains could be identified as Marion fitzGibbon and his daughter, Dr. Barbara fitzGibbon, the Chief shook his head and replied: 'Not enough data. Sorry.' We'll have an update for you at eleven."

Well, the Chief asked himself as he listened to the reporter draw all the wrong conclusions, *a tail is a body part, right?*

Ed Smith whistled. "Jeez, I always thought his name was 'Buck'." In the four hours since Buck had called him, Ed had determined that lots of portable high explosive was missing. And Ed was worried. The normal contempt Marines, especially Marine sergeants, felt for National Guard troops was noticeably absent in this case. Ed knew the local NG Commandant, had fought beside him in combat, and knew him for an upright and respectable soldier, and he

knew that those who reported to him would be likewise or they would be history.

So how could several crates of killing equipment escape from his grip? Ed had asked that question of several confidants in the upper echelons of the Colorado National Guard. They were mostly stumped. All of them knew the weak spots in security, and none of them could suggest a way for this much material to disappear so fast.

Ed wasn't the only one who was worried.

—==++++==—

Special Agent Marjorie Evans and Special Agent Tareeta Washington decided to start the planning for their investigation before they turned in for the night. They had been flown out from NSA headquarters earlier in the day because of a theft of military equipment from a National Guard Armory. Now the investigation had gotten much more serious because 3.75-inch rockets had been stolen and that kind of ordnance was implicated in the bombing of a Boulder residence shortly thereafter, and M-16s and ammunition had been stolen at the same time followed shortly by the murder of a Boulder woman by the right kind of weaponry. The murdered woman was a graduate student at the University, and the destroyed house was the home of a University professor.

Some crazy person or persons had managed to steal sophisticated weaponry right from under the noses of armed guards. How? That was question number one.

What was the connection between Gwen Nikkoliassen and Barbara fitzGibbon, if any? That was question number two.

The first question's answer was at the Colorado National Guard Armory, and the second's was at the University. They tossed a coin to see who would take what. Tareeta Washington won the toss and picked the Armory because the other was no challenge. She would discover that she had chosen the insurmountable challenge: the question for which there was no answer in her world.

8 — Flight

Every two hours on Sunday the three of them went out to the car at five minutes before the hour and turned on the news. In this way, they kept abreast of developments, and in this way, they learned that Barbara and Buck were presumed dead.

Sunday was spent planning. They talked and Buck made notes in his tactical journal. It was clear that they would need to go back to Boulder very soon, and it was equally clear that they could not afford to do that. To be discovered now was to risk death from a direction and at a time they could not anticipate.

If that problem could be solved, others might fall into place. The key was intelligence. They had to know what was going on (really) and what others were planning.

For Buck and Barbara, the resource situation was, to put it mildly, gruesome. They had the clothes on their back and whatever they had brought for the weekend. Everything else was a smoldering pile on Pershing Street. They had, between the three of them, about \$160 in cash, plus a bank card with which they might draw small amounts of cash from scattered automatic teller machines. They had the Jeep. Buck's car was in the driveway the last time any of them had seen it. They didn't even know if they *had* a driveway anymore. Buck shook his head. Probably not.

"Some glitzy electronics would be just the ticket" Buck said. "We could bug Al's house, the other one where the rockets were found, tag his car, find out where he goes and who he talks to."

"Sounds expensive," Ernie offered.

"You won't find it at Best Buy if that's what you mean," Buck told him. "Yep, it'll cost big bucks, but it might be a worthwhile investment."

"Daddy, maybe I could ask Vincent or Dennis for a loan," Barbara suggested.

"Maybe Dennis," Buck thought aloud. "I wouldn't want you to owe Vincent anything. That snake..."

"Daddy, he's nearly a perfect gentleman," Barbara protested. And when she realized what she had said, she couldn't help but snicker. Buck was right, she knew. Vincent almost slithered when he walked.

"You'll have to be very careful about how you approach Dennis," Buck mused. "He thinks you're dead. Ernie, maybe we should have you talk to Dennis first."

"Sure, I could do that," Ernie agreed.

Buck had already started making his shopping list. "And guns" he said to himself and made a few more entries. "And we could use some dynamite, too. Easier to handle for our purposes than most military stuff."

"How much of this stuff do you think I can pick up at Ace, Buck?" Ernie asked, already knowing the answer.

Buck looked at the list thoughtfully. "About none of it."

Ernie looked over his shoulder. "I sure hope you have some ideas about where to find these things. I sure don't."

"Don't worry, Ernie," Buck comforted him. "I have sources and contacts enough to choke a horse. Besides, if necessary we could always open a gate into somebody's armory and take what we need before they know what's happened."

Ernie chuckled. "Yeah, we could match them item-for-item," and suddenly he understood. "Maybe that's where the crates came from."

Buck wrote more on the paper, then tore it out and gave it to Ernie. "This is Ed Smith's number. Ed is trying to find out if anybody in our area lost any military high explosive. Call Ed. Mention to him the possibility we just discussed. Give him our shopping list. He may be able to locate some of it for us."

Barbara, too, presented him with a list. "Ernie, this is Dennis' telephone number. Good luck approaching him. If you raise any funds, I could use some more clothes."

"OK," Ernie asked. "What are you two going to do while I'm gone?"

A pained look came over Buck's face. "Right. You'll have our only transportation. I guess we'll just sit and wait."

"Buck, maybe you could come into town with me," Ernie suggested, "and I could get my own car."

"You know, Ernie, it would almost be better if Barbara went," Buck replied. "She could call Dennis. She'd be much more convincing than you ever would. Maybe we need to bite the bullet on this one — go for broke."

"Daddy, I think we have to do it, as dangerous as it is," Barbara agreed.

In the end, they decided they would all go. The Jeep was backed into Ernie's carport and covered with a tarpaulin to disguise it as much as possible. They took the gate apart and stowed it in the back storage deck.

Buck dialed Ed Smith's number. Ed answered on the first ring. "Come over when you can," he told Buck. "I have news."

Barbara dialed Dennis' number. The butler answered. "May I tell Mr. Cameron who is calling?"

"You may tell him 'The Queen of Hearts'," Barbara informed him.

Dennis was on the phone in an instant. "Who is this?"

"Dennis, you mustn't believe everything you hear on the radio. It's Barbara."

"Barbara! I'm so glad to hear your voice," and Dennis' tone confirmed his words. "The police said no one survived the blast."

"And they're probably right, as far as that goes," Barbara explained. "I'm sure Mr. Jones has had all of his nine lives used up by this one. As for my survival, I suspect it may be only temporary. Dennis, that explosion was no accident. If I'm to stay alive, I need help from everyone I call 'friend'. Does that include you?"

"You know that it does, Barbara," Dennis assured her. "How can you ask such a question? Tell me what you need me to do."

"Dennis, I hate to sound mercenary at a time like this, but the most crying need I have right now is for money, and lots of it," Barbara explained.

"How much?" Dennis asked.

"I don't know quite yet," Barbara admitted. "How much can I ask for and expect to get it?"

"I only keep about \$20,000 in cash at home," Dennis told her. "When the banks open..."

"Dennis, can I send someone to pick it up?" Barbara begged. Dennis agreed immediately. "Thanks. His name is Ernie... no, Dennis, I can't come myself. It's too dangerous for me and maybe for you, too. He'll be there in fifteen minutes... yes, Dennis, I love you too." *But like a brother*, she said to herself.

Barbara turned to the others with a smirk on her face. "He only keeps \$20,000 at home, Ernie."

"That's almost what I make in a year," Ernie observed ruefully.

"Yes, well, here's where to pick it up." Barbara handed him a slip of paper. Ernie left for Dennis'. Barbara and Buck went to see Ed Smith.

Ed Smith had done his homework. "The Air Force folks say they're tight as a drum, but they said they heard something about CNG having a problem. So, I called Megson's brother-in-law, the one who's a CNG Major. He was a little fussy — wanted to know how I found out — admitted that he had heard something — maybe. Not two hours later, I met this sergeant down at Duffy's. Says the CNG lost a half dozen crates of 3.75's. That would do it."

Buck gave him the shopping list and Ed scanned it quickly.

"No problem... no problem... no problem. This is too easy, Buck. I thought you were going to ask for hard stuff."

"You fill that order and we'll have all the 'stuff' we can handle," Buck told him. "These are amateurs, remember."

"Right," Ed confirmed. "Where can I reach you?"

They gave him Ernie's phone number with some reluctance. As Barbara turned to leave, Ed pulled Buck aside.

"You have a sidearm, amigo?" Ed asked Buck.

"No. Left it at home. It's buried," Buck told him. "There's a rifle in the cabin."

"Here, take this," and Ed slipped a 9mm Browning into Buck's hand.

On their way back from Ed Smith's, to satisfy a morbid curiosity, they drove to Pershing street, but the 2500-block was closed to everyone except residents and they weren't ready to admit they lived there. From the street corner, they could see the rubble that once was 2550. The tail of Buck's car peeked out from beneath a pile of debris.

When they got back to Ernie's, they found him counting money. Ernie had two hundred \$100 bills that looked as though they had been printed yesterday.

The phone rang. Ernie picked it up. "Hello?"

"Ed Smith said you needed some special equipment," the voice on the other end said matter-of-factly.

"Hold the phone." Ernie handed the receiver to Buck. "Your 'special equipment' consultant."

Buck chatted for several minutes using lots of technical jargon none of which Barbara or Ernie understood.

"OK, 8,000 dollars," Buck said at last. "Deliver it to Ed Smith's... no, tonight. I need it tonight... alright, then, tomorrow morning, but no later than 9 o'clock."

"We start in the morning," Buck told them, "but tonight we can still do some 'recon'. Can I see what's behind this 'gate' thing?"

"Sure," Barbara agreed. Ernie got the gate from the back of the Jeep and he and Barbara assembled it in his living room.

"What is all this stuff?" Buck asked.

"The framework is just there as a place to hang the wave drivers," Barbara explained. "Each of the electromagnets has a microcomputer attached to it as a driver. The computer, just a chip and power supply, really, controls the supply of current to the electromagnet, and that causes a particular wave-shape to form. There are seven different chips generating seven different waves. When they all mix in the area inside the ring, the phenomenon we call

'the gate' appears. To get the gate as large as it is, we have to have eight sets of chips driving eight sets of magnets."

"Why didn't you have each chip drive a separate power supply and have the magnets fed from the driven supply?" Buck asked. "You could run as many sets of wave drivers as you want from a single set of chips."

"I didn't do that because I was copying someone else's design, and this is the way they did it, but that's a great idea, Dad," Barbara congratulated him.

She looked at the arrangement briefly, then announced: "Piece of cake. Tomorrow we'll revamp the whole thing. If it works (and I'm sure it will) we'll have enough chips for eight gates. The rest of the stuff is comparatively cheap and easy. For tonight, let's show off the world next door."

She looked at her watch. It was just after seven pm. "Daddy, what time do you have?"

"Seven oh-eight," Buck told her.

"Leave your watch here. We'll use mine."

They stepped through into a bright mid-morning radically different in appearance from their last trip. In the near distance, three-quarters of a mile or so northeast a strobe winked, visible even in the sunlight. A few miles to the west another strobe was visible, but just barely. By the cold light of the winter sun, they could make out the fading imprint of tire tracks in the crushed grass. The tracks ended a few feet away, where Ernie's carport would be, and streamed away to the northeast.

"I don't like the looks of this," Ernie said. "This is an invitation if I ever saw one."

Buck blinked in the sunlight and looked all about him as if dumbfounded. He took it all in for several minutes before he regained his senses.

"Barbara, where did you find the crates?"

"At the strobe there, to the northeast," she told him.

"And where is Al's house?" Buck continued.

"I don't know for sure," Barbara admitted, "but I think the strobe west of us could be Al's."

"We ought to check it out." Buck hefted the automatic in his hand.

"If we're going to check it out, Buck, we ought to use the Jeep," Ernie suggested. "Otherwise the time difference will really be noticeable. It's bad enough as it is."

"You're right," Buck agreed. "Let's do it tomorrow when we have the electronics for making it a worthwhile trip."

Back beyond the gate, they compared watches. Buck's

watch said 7:19. Eleven minutes had passed. Barbara held up her watch.

"Four minutes," she said. Buck nodded.

—==++++==—

Bright and early Monday, Buck drove back to Ed Smith's house to await the arrival of the parts he had ordered. Barbara and Ernie stayed behind, Barbara to tear down and re-wire the existing gate, Ernie to run errands to this store and that so that Barbara would have enough parts to build more gates.

It was a good idea, Buck's, to use a driven power supply. Power in any desired volume could be applied at will as long as the flow pattern was well regulated, the job of the driver chips.

Less than an hour after she started tearing down the gate, Barbara had it working on a single set of seven drivers, a single set of seven power supplies, and all fifty-six electromagnets. And there appeared to be no limit to the number of, or strength of the electromagnets that could be run from this configuration.

That left her with seven spare sets of driver chips. They were hard to come by (hadn't she had to order more from the manufacturer? — and they were probably waiting for her at Federal Express), but the power supplies were relatively easy to find.

The framework was ordinary plastic pipe held together by bungee cords under tension. All the parts except for the driver chips were ordinary-ordinary. Just after lunch, Ernie returned with a car full of assorted goodies. The two of them set immediately to work constructing more gates. In the middle of this operation, Buck returned from his errands and pitched in to push the effort along. By noon, they had three more working gates. In another few hours, they would have eight gates in total.

Now, all they needed was a secluded place to roll the Jeep through. Ernie's carport was open to the elements and to prying eyes as well. The neighbors would certainly remark if they saw a vehicle disappearing into thin air.

Buck grabbed the Yellow Pages and quickly thumbed through it, picked up the phone and dialed. "Let's just rent a garage," he suggested. "Maybe we'll get a double."

A double was about what they needed. Between the two cars and spare equipment for the gates, the double-width work area was ideal. They paid cash in advance, of course. They didn't need anyone asking questions.

They set up two gates at the back-end of the garage and got them powered up. By late afternoon Monday, it was late afternoon

beyond the gate as well. There appeared to be no activity near either of the beacons. They carefully noted the location of their gates before they drove through and headed for the westernmost of the beacons.

As they approached, Buck stopped about a quarter of a mile from their target. "Don't want to leave tire tracks right up to their front door, do we?"

Ernie stayed with the Jeep in case it became necessary for him to charge in and rescue them both. Buck and Barbara hiked the short distance to the beacon with Barbara carrying a folded-down gate and Buck carrying an Uzi carbine, an early delivery from Ed Smith.

As it turned out, Al had left his gate powered-on, so they simply stepped into his garage.

"This is Al's, alright," Barbara told Buck. "I've been here before."

Buck took one transmitter and placed it on a shelf above Al's workbench where it would be out of sight. Entering the house, he hid another above a kitchen cabinet, and a third on a bookshelf in the living room. Buck planted the last in the upstairs bedroom. Then they returned through the gate to Ernie.

To Ernie's eyes, they had been beyond the gate for only a few minutes, perhaps five. To Barbara and Buck, the quarter-hour they spent prowling through Al's house were the worst fifteen minutes they could recall.

Back in the Jeep, they headed for the second beacon at top speed, again holding short by a quarter-mile to avoid laying tracks too close to their target.

Once again, Barbara carried a portable gate and Buck the Uzi. Fatah's gate, too, had been left powered on, an incredible failure on the part of Al and his accomplices but, considering that Barbara could have used her own, it really had no noticeable effect. They stepped cautiously into Fatah's basement.

There was really nothing to fear, because it was Monday, a school day, and Fatah's schedule often kept her at school late on Mondays. So it was today.

The crates Ernie had seen earlier were still there on Fatah's basement floor. The crate of 3.75" rockets had been opened, and four were missing.

"This is what blew up our house," Buck whispered to her.

"Let's take a few and blow this one up!" Barbara hissed.

"No, Barbara," Buck cautioned. "Information is far more valuable than revenge. When I blow this house up, I want it to be filled with deserving people. For that, we have to know the hour and the day."

He glued a transmitter to the back of the staircase with a

glob of putty-like material. Silently they ascended the stairs and listened for voices. There were none, so they continued into the living room where Buck hid another transmitter, and a third one in the kitchen. There, Barbara riffled through the bills stacked neatly on the counter.

They were all addressed:

*Ms. Fatah Abou-Saad
1211 Ardennes
Boulder CO*

Upstairs in the bedroom, Buck placed the fourth and last transmitter as he had done at Al Beddowes' house. This one he glued behind the headboard of the bed.

As they descended the stairs from the sleeping area, they heard an automobile engine in the driveway. In a panic, they flew down the stairs, down into the basement, pulling the door shut behind them, rushing toward the gate.

"Daddy, we should take some of these guns!" Barbara protested.

"Take nothing, Barbara," he snapped at her angrily. "They mustn't know that anyone alive has a gate, and they mustn't know that anyone else has been here."

Through the gate they ran, and made a dash for the Jeep. Ernie cranked it as they approached, and together they sped off toward their new hide-out.

"Her name is Fatah Abou-Saad and she lives at 1211 Ardennes," Barbara told Ernie.

"Good," Ernie congratulated her. "That's valuable information."

With the Jeep stowed safely in the garage, Ernie drove Buck and Barbara to a nearby car rental agency where they each rented the cheapest possible vehicles they could locate. At the garage, Buck equipped them both with receivers to match the transmitters, and tape recorders for recording any conversations that might be picked up.

It was agreed that Ernie and Buck would take the surveillance duty, and that Barbara would keep watch at the garage. Ernie was posted to Al's house, and Buck took Fatah's. Each of them had spare transmitters of the proper frequency equipped with magnets for attaching to vehicles.

—==++++==—

The knock on the door had not been unexpected, but the fact

that it came from one who identified herself as an agent of the National Security Agency was something of a surprise. The University Provost had assumed the FBI would be handling the case.

"Yes, sir," Agent Marjorie Evans explained to him. "They are involved, but because this series of incidents involves U.S. Government property of a sensitive nature, NSA has taken control of the investigation. FBI is assisting us. May I come in?"

"Oh, of course. What can I do to help?" he inquired as he led her to the sitting room.

"We believe the bombing of Professor Barbara fitzGibbon's house and the murder of Gwen Nikkoliassen are closely connected," Agent Evans explained. "Professor fitzGibbon was a member of the Physics faculty, was she not?"

"She was," the Provost confirmed.

"Can you suggest someone on the faculty who would be considered a 'close associate' of Professor fitzGibbon?" Evans asked.

"Barbara was very well liked throughout the Physics department," the Provost told her. "Just about everyone would be her 'close associate' unless that term has some special meaning."

"No, it implies nothing," Evans assured him. "Is there someone on the faculty who could speak with authority on Gwen Nikkoliassen?"

"Yes, certainly. Dr. Joseph D'Amico was Gwen's faculty advisor. Would you like me to try to reach him for you?" She nodded. The Provost lifted the handset and dialed Joe D'Amico's office number from memory.

"Good morning, Joe," he began when the phone was answered. "I'm sitting here with Special Agent Marjorie Evans of NSA. She's investigating our recent tragedies and wants to interview you... I'll ask." He held the phone off to one side. "Here or there? He says it's all the same to him."

"Would it be OK to do the interview here? Time is of the essence, and I may need your further assistance anyway."

"Not a problem," he agreed. Turning back to the phone: "Joe, come over right away, can you? Good, I'll see you then," and he hung up.

"Joe will be here in just a few minutes," the Provost informed her. "Would you like something to eat or drink? Coffee's ready, if you'd like." She indicated that coffee would do just fine.

The Provost poured three cups of coffee — he knew Joe would want one when he got there — and made small talk while they waited. They didn't wait long. True to his word, Joe D'Amico arrived a very short while later, and entered without knocking. He and the Provost had been friends too long for such formality. The three sat

right down and got straight to business.

"Dr. D'Amico, I'm trying to find any threads of commonality between Gwen Nikkoliassen and Dr. fitzGibbon," Evans began. "Can you tell me anything along those lines about Miss Nikkoliassen?"

"I can tell you that a week or so ago I got a phone call from Barbara asking me if she could 'borrow' Gwen's prodigious computer skills," Joe D'Amico told her. "Gwen had helped one of Barbara's grad students with a project and — I'm not sure exactly what she was after. I think she was worried about Al's procedure — she asked Gwen to help her replicate Al's work."

"Do you have a last name for Al?" Agent Evans asked.

"Yes, it's 'Beddowes'," Joe D'Amico informed her. Marjorie made a mark in her notebook and nodded to the Provost who turned to his computer terminal and called up the University's records on Al Beddowes.

"Al is doing his graduate work in an area pioneered by Barbara fitzGibbon," D'Amico continued. "I believe he has made something of a breakthrough, because Dr. fitzGibbon had him brief the entire Physics faculty on Friday. She seemed most pleased with his progress despite her agitation earlier in the week when Mr. Beddowes didn't show up for the originally scheduled briefing."

"What, exactly, is this breakthrough that Mr. Beddowes has made?" Marjorie Evans asked, still jotting notes in her pad.

"I've spent most of the weekend looking at the mathematics of it," D'Amico confessed, "and I have to admit that I'm not entirely sure. It has something to do with multi-dimensional rationalizations."

"Rationalizations?" Marjorie Evans cocked her head to one side in curiosity. "What does that mean?"

"It means 'to make real'," D'Amico explained.

"Uh-huh," and she wrote more notes in her book.

"What can you tell me about Al Beddowes, specifically?" she pressed.

"Other than what we've already told you and his formal records," D'Amico admitted, "nothing. Sorry. Some of the other grad students may be able to give you more information, perhaps."

"Can you be more specific?" Evans asked.

"Perhaps we can go over to the Science Building and see if any of them are available?" D'Amico offered.

"That's exactly what I was hoping for, doctor," Marjorie Evans brightened. "Let me check in with my partner and then we'll go."

She dialed her partner on the cellular. "I'm finished here for the time being," Marjorie told Tareeta. "I've interviewed the University's provost and Dr. Joseph D'Amico. I'm in transit to the

Science building with Dr. D'Amico to see what else I can turn up. Call me if you find anything."

They grabbed a quick lunch in the cafeteria on the way over, in the process meeting several of the graduate students she wanted to interview. Everyone she met was very broken-up over the deaths of Gwen Nikkoliassen and Barbara FitzGibbon and was anxious to help the investigation in any way possible. She made appointments with several of them, and asked them to pass the word along to as many others they might meet that she was interested in speaking with all of them. You could never tell which one might possess that special piece of trivia: the key to the whole problem.

During lunch, between bites, she pumped Joe D'Amico for as much background as he could supply on as many of the graduate students as he could recall. After lunch, she started interviewing all the people on her list, by the book, by the numbers.

Al Beddowes had been in earlier, they were told, but had left to run some errands (he said) and would return later.

Tricia Mullins recalled Gwen saying something about Al Beddowes' project but she couldn't recall now exactly what it was. "Keep trying to remember," Marjorie told her, "and contact me if you do. Thanks."

It was late in the afternoon when she finally caught up with Edwin Schultz. "Have you spoken with Al Beddowes yet?" he asked her.

"No, I've been hoping to run across him all afternoon," Marjorie Evans admitted somewhat dejectedly, "but he left the campus earlier to do some errands and hasn't been back since. Is there a problem?"

"No, no problem really," Schultz told her. "It's just that Al's research isn't published yet, and I want you to understand that anything I say to you is 'off the record'. I don't want to blow the lid off Al's research before..."

"Mr. Schultz," she spoke to him sternly, "are you aware that this is an official U.S. Government investigation involving the violent deaths of at least three people by a person or persons unknown, at least some of whom may have stolen substantial quantities of military weaponry and high explosives?"

"I..." Edwin Schultz stammered.

"If you even think of withholding evidence in this case, Mr. Schultz," she barked at him, "you could spend the remainder of your natural life in Kansas. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to be precise. Let me be one hundred percent up-front with you, Mr. Schultz. If you impede this investigation by delaying or withholding evidence, I will personally see that you are charged with being an accessory before

the fact to Sabotage and First Degree Murder. Those will be Federal charges, not State, and you will be tried in Federal court, and you will be lucky if you do not hang."

"I..." Edwin began, still completely flustered.

"Is there anything I've said, Mr. Schultz, that you think you may not have understood?" Marjorie Evans asked him, her face mere inches from his. "Anything you'd like explained in greater depth or detail?"

Without a further word, Edwin Schultz turned and unlocked his specimen vault and brought forth the plant samples he was holding for Al.

"What is it?" Evans asked.

"Well, this is a maple leaf, this is poison oak, this is dandelion, this..." Edwin started explaining.

"Why are they all black-and-white?" Agent Evans interrupted him.

"I don't know. Chemically they're identical with..." Edwin tried to explain, but she cut him off again.

"And what does this have to do with the case?" she asked.

"Al gave these to me to analyze," Edwin Schultz started. "I asked where they came from, but he wouldn't tell me. I'll tell you: he didn't get these samples from this planet."

"And did you analyze them as he asked?" she pressed him.

"I just told you," he told her impatiently. "They're chemically and physically indistinguishable, except for the color, from any matching plant you might pluck from any Colorado hillside."

She scanned her notes for Joe D'Amico's phone number, pulled her cellular phone from its holster and dialed his number. His secretary answered.

"No, he's not here," D'Amico's secretary told Marjorie Evans. "May I take a message?"

"Can you reach him?" Evans asked.

"He's teaching a seminar. If you leave your name, I'll have him call you as soon as he returns," the secretary offered.

"This is Agent Marjorie Evans of NSA. It's critical — in a national security sense — that I speak to him as soon as possible. Can you interrupt the seminar?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Evans," D'Amico's secretary gushed. "He left word that if you called..."

"I'm with Edwin Schultz in his lab," Evans explained. "Can you send Dr. D'Amico here right away?"

"I'll have him there in just a few minutes," the secretary assured her.

Just shy of ten minutes later, Dr. Joseph D'Amico, breathless

from running, pushed the door of Edwin Schultz' lab open and entered.

"What's up?" he asked expectantly.

"Look at this, doc," Evans offered, "as Edwin here explains where they came from."

Edwin gave him the abridged version of the origin of the plant specimens as Joe D'Amico looked on wide-eyed. Edwin finished his spiel: "They didn't come from this planet."

"Well, doc, what do you think?" Evans asked D'Amico.

"I think that AI has been able to open a physical connection between two alternate universes and that these specimens are from that other universe," D'Amico mused. "I've been mulling that possibility since hearing of his early experiments. But you don't think this has anything to do with..."

Marjorie tried very hard to contain her excitement. "Would you excuse me for a moment while I make a call?"

She walked to the far end of the lab where it was quiet and as private as it was ever going to get on campus. She dialed a number. "NSA," the voice on the other end told her.

"This is Agent Marjorie Evans, NS-47012. Connect me with the Hydraulics Lab."

NSA's 'hydraulics lab' is concerned not the least bit with hydraulics. It was a code name suggested because Archimedes' breakthrough was in hydraulics, and was the paradigm for all startling breakthroughs. The 'Hydraulics Lab' was concerned most with those flashes of genius that accompany leaps in technology, especially those bearing on national security or national defense. Marjorie Evans was sure she had just stumbled across something they would be interested in.

A short pause, then: "Hydraulics Lab."

"This is Agent Evans, NS-47012. I declare 'Eureka', class two."

A class two 'eureka' was a find warranting an investigative team on-site without delay. Only a class-one eureka was more urgent. In that case, the President would ask the Governor (and the Governors of all surrounding states) to declare martial law in the area, sealing it off — no one in, no one out — and would bolster the effort by flying in Airborne troops.

"Where are you, Agent Evans?" the voice on the other end asked.

"I am on assignment in Boulder, Colorado," she informed him, "presently on the campus of U. Colorado. I'm staying at the Broker on Baseline and can be reached there this evening."

"Check in periodically and plan to have dinner with the Eureka team this evening," she was told. "We'll buy." The line

dropped.

"Big spender," she said to the dead phone. "It's all NSA's budget, anyway." She walked back to where Schultz and D'Amico were examining the plants.

"You were saying: 'I don't think this has anything to do with...'. With this case?" Marjorie Evans started. "Yes, doctor, I think this is inextricably part of this case. I don't quite know how, yet, but I will."

She dialed her partner on the cellular. "I'm in transit to 1247 Silvermill to interview Alfred Beddowes. Call me if you turn up anything."

Turning to Edwin Schultz she instructed him: "Mr. Schultz, don't go anywhere that I can't locate you in ten minutes flat. Dr. D'Amico, unfortunately that applies to you, too. Also, both of you need to understand that this investigation is now classified. All of our conversation is a national security matter. Don't repeat any of this to anyone, not even your wife, doctor, or your sweetheart, Mr. Schultz. If you can avoid it, don't even mention my name. Thank you both for your cooperation." She holstered her cellular phone and walked out. Edwin Schultz and Joe D'Amico exchanged looks of half-wonder, half-worry.

—==++++==—

Ernie arrived at Al's just in time to see him pulling out of his driveway. Following Al led him directly to Fatah's house and Buck, who had just taken up his position.

Ernie's equipment was now largely useless, because it was tuned to listen to the transmitters in Al's house, whereas Buck's equipment was tuned to listen to Fatah's. Ernie joined Buck in the other car. The speaker reported the sound of kisses being exchanged, then:

"I spoke with Mahmoud," a woman's voice said. "He likes the idea and said he could put us in touch with his people in New York."

"You didn't tell him too much, did you?" Al's voice asked. "Remember, the existence of the device is to be our secret. It's the only way we can feel completely safe: by making ourselves indispensable."

"I didn't tell him anything beyond what we agreed to," Fatah assured him. "He knows we have a method or a plan for neutralizing their border security, but he doesn't suspect what it might be."

"Good," Al concluded. "What are his plans?"

"We fly to New York as soon as we can get free," Fatah

continued. "He will have someone meet us at the airport. He says to make sure your passport is handy."

Al chuckled. "I wonder how we'll get the gates through customs at — where are we likely to end up?"

"Amman," Fatah speculated.

"...at Amman International Airport," Al finished his thought.

"Al, you don't take gates," Fatah scoffed, "you take chips. The rest of it is available nearly anywhere in the world."

"Yes, of course," Al agreed. "I'm free immediately. My work can be done anytime. When are you free?"

"I can go now," Fatah asserted. "The Palestinian cause is too important to let the University stand in its way."

Outside, Buck handed Ernie a pair of magnetized transmitters. "Get a pair from your car and tag those two cars with one of each."

Ernie dashed to his car, took two transmitters, and sprinted back towards Fatah's BMW. In the rear wheel well, he plopped two devices, then did the same for Al's Ferrari. He was back in under two minutes.

Al telephoned his travel agent and ordered two tickets with open returns on the first flight to New York. "The very next leaves tonight at 7:32pm," the agent informed him. "Is that too early?"

"That's perfect," Al told her. "I'll take it." The agent confirmed the order and hung up. "Fatah, we won't have time to coordinate driving to the airport together," Al told her. "Pack and meet me at Delta departures in time for a 7:32 flight." She kissed him quickly and warned him as he left not to forget his passport.

Ernie missed this exchange while he placed the new bugs. Back at the car, Buck grimaced and informed him: "Ernie, I think our problem is about to leave town."

"Can't happen soon enough for me, Buck," Ernie smirked.

Buck popped the tape and replaced it with a fresh one.

"I'm going to leave this car here with tape running," Buck told Ernie. "I think we've found the brains of this outfit. Let's get back to Barbara."

—==++++==—

"Daddy, we can't let them take a gate to the Middle East," Barbara pleaded. "The area is permanently unstable, and they obviously intend to make it even less stable. They're going to start a war. We've got to put them out of business."

"I agree," Buck answered. "Ernie?"

"Yes," Ernie agreed. "They have to be stopped."

Buck took another Uzi, loaded and cocked it, and put the safety on. He handed it to Ernie.

"Buck, I don't..." Ernie stammered.

"Just flip this lever, point and click," Buck explained. "Just like using a computer mouse."

"I've never killed anyone before," Ernie protested.

"Can you do it if you have to?" Buck asked.

"I don't know," Ernie admitted.

"Well, let's go find out."

The two rode back to Fatah's only to find Fatah's BMW gone. They then went to Al's expecting to find them both there, but Al's Ferrari was likewise gone.

"Could they have left already?" Ernie speculated.

"It's possible. Let's head for New York. Maybe we can head them off there."

—==+++==—

There was no answer to the door chime at 1247 Silvermill, nor was there a car parked in the driveway or in the garage.

The neighbors were almost no help, either, with the one exception of the high-school-age boy next door who offered that Al's girlfriend drove a BMW, license EHR-347.

In her car, Agent Evans called for a search warrant for Al's house and DMV data on EHR-347. Then she got Fatah's telephone number from the phone company. There was no answer to her call.

An all-points bulletin was issued for Al's Ferrari and Fatah's BMW: Locate, do not detain.

The Federal magistrate standing by for this case issued search warrants immediately and one search team headed for Al's house, while the other made for 1211 Ardennes.

Evans met the search team at Al's. Their lock man had the front door open in under a minute and the team began their search hoping they wouldn't find a body or a booby-trap. They found neither, but a bug-sweep turned up several listening devices strategically placed throughout the house.

Evans' phone burred and she answered it. "Bingo!" the voice of her partner on the other end told her. "You better come over."

By the time she arrived at 1211 Ardennes, the Boulder Police were evacuating the neighborhood. The agent running the search team briefed her: in the basement of 1211 they had discovered two crates of M-16s with one rifle missing, a crate of ammunition with several magazines missing, a crate of grenades with one missing, and

a crate of 3.75-inch rockets with four rockets missing. A bug-sweep of the house had uncovered four devices.

Agent Evans informed the Boulder Police and Colorado State Police to upgrade their all-points bulletin. It was now: 'heavily armed and extremely dangerous. Apprehend with extreme caution'.

9 — Spike

Barbara used her cell phone to make reservations on a morning flight for New York. On his phone, Buck dialed the number of Arlo Rubinstein.

Arlo and Buck had not seen each other since their last combat tour together, but they had spoken off and on over the years, and they had always stayed relatively close. Combat does that to you. It makes brothers. It makes family. And when brothers ask for favors, there is no refusing.

"How are things going for you, buddy?" Arlo asked after Buck identified himself.

"To be honest, Arlo, things have gone to Hell in a hand basket," Buck admitted. "My house has been bombed flat to the ground, and Barbara and I feel that we are in substantial danger from those who did it."

"Anything I can do to help, amigo?" Arlo asked, a note of real concern now evident in his voice.

"In fact, Arlo, there is," Buck told him. "Two of the people we suspect are in transit to LaGuardia this instant. I'd very much like to know who meets them, if anyone, and where they go after they leave the airport."

"Just a stake-out?" Arlo asked.

"For now, that's all we need, Arlo. Can you get somebody to hang around the terminal and check out the arriving passengers?"

There was a brief pause while Arlo spoke with the others in the room with him. "We have four right here playing poker who can be at the airport in twenty minutes. How's that for service?"

"I knew I could count on you Arlo," Buck responded. "How many of my IOUs are you holding now?"

"Tell me what you can about the targets, Buck," Arlo prompted.

"They're flying Delta from Denver, and they'll be there soon," Buck informed him. "His name is Al Beddowes, and hers is Fatah Abou-Saad. They may travel under different names. I need to know where they go when they leave the airport. He's a Joe-college looking guy, well-dressed. She's Syrian or Libyan. That's all I have."

"When will you be here?" Arlo asked.

"We're going to be there as soon as we can," Buck told him hopefully. "We don't have tickets yet. I don't think I'll be able to take my sidearm on the plane, but it doesn't much matter. I'm going to

need something heavier when I get there.”

“OK, Buck,” Arlo finished. “Call me when you arrive.”

—==+++==—

“Oh, shit!” one agent gasped.

“What’s the matter?” his partner asked.

“Look at this,” the agent said to his partner leaning over his shoulder as he pointed to the computer screen. “We’re going to get killed for not running this match earlier.”

There, highlighted on the screen, were the two names: Beddowes, Alfred and Abou-Saad, Fatah, shown as having boarded a Delta flight to New York at 7:32pm. That flight had already landed in New York and its passengers had disembarked and scattered. Finding them in New York might be — would be — next to impossible.

—==+++==—

As soon as the local hardware stores opened, Mahmoud’s men started converting Al’s shopping list into piles of parts, PVC pipe, connectors, adhesive, bungee cords, transformers, enough for six small gates using four sets of chips each, enough, Al thought, to tide them over in case of an emergency. When the parts arrived, Al and Fatah put six gates together.

—==+++==—

The night was occupied with tearing down and packing for shipment their four working gates. They had parts for four more, never having gotten to the point of cutting the PVC pipe into frames and putting them together.

In the morning, Buck and Barbara visited their bank and, after a great deal of wheedling and cajoling, managed to convince the bank’s officers that the condition of their home on Pershing Street, on which this bank also held a small mortgage, made theirs a special case. The bank promised to have a replacement key for their safe deposit box available by eleven o’clock. Buck and Barbara, at least, would be able to cross the Atlantic as soon as they recovered their passports. Ernie had never had occasion to own a passport, so his situation was less settled, but it was said that the passport office in New York could issue a new passport — sometimes — on the same day.

The bank treated them very like they were criminals, fingerprinting and photographing them, making them sign more documents than Buck could recall inking at the closing of the house on

Pershing Street. In the end, barely satisfied that Buck and Barbara were entitled to it, they produced a key to replace the one lost in the explosion. Accompanied by several witnesses, they proceeded to the vault where they removed only their passports.

At the airport, they exchanged the tickets on the earlier flight that they had missed for a later flight. The odd shape of the packages containing the gates generated some curious looks, but since the flight was lightly booked they were allowed through.

From LaGuardia Airport, Buck called his contact and got directions to a quiet neighborhood in Queens where they would stay until they could continue the chase. MSgt Arlo Rubinstein, USMC (Ret), welcomed his old friend, Buck, and made them all feel at home.

Some food and some back-slapping 'Can You Top This' from the days since they had last parted company filled the evening until the doorbell announced the arrival of more company. One of the newcomers brought along some pictures, hot from the nearest While-U-Wait lab, and dropped them on the kitchen table. "Are these the ones?" he asked. The photographer had taken several fine pictures of Al and Fatah. Barbara nodded agreement. It was her first glimpse of Fatah.

"That's good," the photographer explained. "There were three couples we saw fitting the description you gave us. One couple immediately reboarded a commuter flight for Albany. We would have lost them there, anyway, so we ignored them. Luckily, we had two surveillance teams available, so both these couples have been followed. Here's the other couple." He dropped another picture. "They were met by Mr. and Mrs. All-American, so we figured them for a low probability. The first couple were met by..." He dropped another cluster of pictures. "Amahl and the Night Visitors. These we figured for high-probability. Want to know where you can find them now?"

"Damn right," Barbara told him.

"They're about six blocks from here." They all exchanged surprised looks.

Buck turned to Arlo. "Let's do what we came here for."

—==++++==—

"Fatah promised us a 'high-tech' solution to our problem," the older man addressed Al, "and tells us that you are the key to victory for us. How is that possible."

"Fatah is very beautiful and very intelligent, but this is no more a solution than a hand grenade is a solution," Al responded. "If you think this will eliminate risk or make it unnecessary for you to deal with the matter yourself, you are greatly mistaken. What I have is a

tool. It is a wonderfully powerful tool, to be sure, but a tool. You need to cut trees. You have an ax. I offer you a chain saw. You need to dig holes. You have a shovel. I have here a back-hoe. Will it do the job for you? It will not, but it will make it easier. It may actually make it possible. There are conditions for its use. Did Fatah tell you that?"

"She said only that we would need to come to an agreement with you before you help us," the old man said. "She did not say what it was we would have to agree to."

"So," Al continued. "This is what you must agree to:

"You must agree to keep the number of people who know of us or of our operation small. I mean some number on the order of twenty. Perhaps fewer.

"You and each of those who are with the project must swear to absolute secrecy. They must agree to die rather than reveal what they are about to learn.

"And you must all — all — agree that what I am about to show you is mine. When the operation is over (and it's over when I say it's over) the equipment — all of it — comes back to me for disposal as I see fit.

"Lastly, some day in the future I shall come to you and demand in payment a like favor, and you shall grant it.

"Will you agree to these terms?" Al finished.

"Those are strenuous terms," the older man said. "What if we cannot agree?"

"Then there is no agreement," Al told him. "Fatah and I will return to Colorado and all things will be as they were. All things."

"What is to stop us from killing you, taking your equipment for our own use, and not having to agree to anything?" the older man asked.

"As Fatah said, it's a high-tech solution. There is a world of facts about which you could not even begin to speculate before you could operate the equipment at all, much less safely," Al explained. "I assure you that long before you learned how to operate my device you would curse the moment at which you took such a decision. Ask Fatah."

Fatah just nodded as if to affirm what he had said.

"And what means this 'like favor'?" the older man asked.

"It means something comparable in importance and immediacy," Al told him. "I am not a fighter, I am a businessman. I look at this as 'buying insurance' against the day when it will be important (in a commercial sense) to have you fight, or not fight. On that day, you will be reminded of the magnitude of the deed I do for you today, and you will be asked to make a gesture of appropriate

size. That is all it means."

The two elderly men looked at each other, perhaps reading each other's minds. The older one turned to Al and spoke: "Agreed," he said.

"Then let us begin," Al said. "We will need to know who to contact and how to contact them when we arrive in Palestine."

The other elderly man held up one hand. "Is not a demonstration in order before we hand to you the keys to our entire operation?"

"A demonstration is not in order," Al warned them sternly. "You have just agreed that the number of those who know anything about this operation must be kept small."

"As of now, it is very small: just you and Fatah," the younger of the two old men noted. "One more will not risk too much, but for us not to proceed cautiously would be for us to risk all. That is unacceptable."

"Then choose who will be given the demonstration," Al agreed.

"For us to choose wisely, we must know what it is your 'tool' is supposed to do for us. Tell us something about it," the younger man insisted. Al looked at Fatah. *You really did keep them in the dark*, he thought. *You must have told them virtually nothing*.

"The 'tool'," Al began, "is a way of moving unseen in this world. To do this, we first cross over into a shadow world, travel through the shadow world, then cross back into this world at our desired destination. I provide all the equipment necessary to do this. You provide the people and equipment to be transported from point to point."

"And what are they to do when they arrive at their destination?" the older man asked.

"That is up to you," Al dismissed the suggestion.

"Are there limits on the destinations?" the older man pressed.

"There are," Al admitted. "The only destinations we can reach are at or near the surface of the planet. Travel in the shadow world is very slow and time-consuming: what is ordinarily a twenty-minute trip can take a full hour. The shadow world has no people, buildings, towns, or bridges. None of the things we associate with 'civilization' will be found there. If you would normally cross a river getting to your destination, you had better have a boat."

"Then we could not go from here to Palestine?" the younger man suggested.

"Not this year," Al agreed. "Perhaps some time in the future."

The two old men turned to each other. "Perhaps Anwar could suggest a destination." The other smiled, picked up the telephone and dialed. He spoke briefly in agitated Arabic, then hung up. "Bring what equipment you need. We have arranged for a practical demonstration. And bring your passports."

Al and Fatah, the two older men and two young men rode in a delivery van to another part of the city. On the way, one of the younger men turned to his passengers and announced: "We're being followed."

The older man, the leader, turned and observed for a few moments, then: "Can we lose them?"

"Not in this," he was told. "We'll have to stop them."

"Do it," he ordered.

From beneath the floorboards of the van the young man pulled an anti-tank rocket launcher. The driver took a course through an area of warehouses and factories that were, at this time of the day, completely deserted. It was now quite plain that the brown sedan was following them. As the van turned a corner, the young man with the rocket launcher jumped from the passenger door and hid among a cluster of barrels and boxes.

The brown sedan passed. He let it get about 50 meters away before he stepped into the open, the launcher on his shoulder, and fired. The rocket streaked the short distance to its target, punched through the light metal body of the car, and exploded.

The instant he heard the explosion, the driver of the van did a U-turn, turned the corner, swerved around the burning sedan, and slowed just enough to let his friend swing aboard before accelerating out of sight.

—==+++==—

The van containing Barbara, Ernie, Buck, and two Marines cruised slowly (but not too slowly) down the street.

"That's it, number 10379," the driver pointed. "The white Ford is the car they rented at the airport. They're probably still inside."

Ernie tried to concentrate on remembering the distances involved. "We need a quiet spot to set up."

At the foot of the street was an alley used for servicing the stores and businesses along the avenue. The van pulled in and parked. Buck motioned to his Marines to cover the two ends of the alley, and they left. Barbara unwrapped a gate and deftly connected all the sections of pipe. In only a minute, the gate was operating.

Buck handed Ernie an Uzi, grabbed a second gate, and he and Ernie crossed through. It was midnight in Earth-II.

"How far?" Buck asked as he switched on the spare lantern to mark the position of the gate.

"I'd make my first try just to the left of that tree," Ernie indicated it with a high-intensity spotlight. "It might be short, but it won't be long."

They moved off together. Next to the tree, they set the framework up for the first time. Buck screwed a suppressor to the muzzle of the pistol and gave Ernie a 'thumbs up'. Ernie flipped the power switch. A torrent of water poured from the gate before Ernie had the presence of mind to power-off.

He moved it two meters to the right before applying power again. When they stepped through, they were in what appeared to be a basement playroom. Steel posts supported the ceiling, paneling covered the walls, a ping-pong table occupied the corner. The floor was wet.

Ernie turned to Buck. "Not far enough. Let's try again."

They stepped back through the gate, powered it down, and moved it another few meters away from their starting point. When they stepped through again, they were in another basement, this one very smoky with a thick, aromatic tobacco smoke. As with the first basement, this one was empty of people, but the smoke still hanging in the air told them that the room had been recently occupied. An Arabic-language newspaper on the table confirmed for them that they were in the right place.

Buck signaled for silence and tip-toed up the stairs to the main part of the house. He listened at the door, then shrugged his shoulders and returned.

"Nobody," he told Ernie. "It's dead quiet up there."

They stepped back through the gate and marked the position against the time when they would need it again. Ernie powered the gate down, collapsed it, and carried it back to the other gate.

At the van, Buck whistled for the guards and called them back. "The spot is marked in case we need it later," Ernie told Barbara, "but the house was empty. Nobody."

They drove back to Arlo's to do an analysis of the situation. There they found that a surveillance team that had been watching the house had called in some time back to report that they were following a van containing the 'target', Al and Fatah. They had not made a second report, but Arlo was certain they would hear more as the situation developed. They waited.

The phone rang. Arlo picked it up. "Hello? Doris, calm down," he pleaded with a near-hysterical woman on the other end.

"Tell me slowly." He cupped the mouthpiece with his hand and whispered to one of the Marines: "Tell my wife to get over to Doris' right away.

"Yes, when? Did the police give you any other information? Esther is on her way over right now... Alright, Doris, we'll find out who did this. They won't get away." He hung the phone up and turned to the waiting faces.

"Bruce Miller's car was found behind a warehouse in Whitestone. It had exploded and burned. They don't know the cause yet, but there were three bodies inside. It would have to be Bruce, Art, and Little Artie."

"Sarge," one of the Marines spoke, "they must have been spotted while they were following the targets."

"Yep. Buck, these are bad dudes you picked to take on."

"Yes, Arlo, I'm sorry now that I didn't make that clearer. I'm not sure it was entirely clear to me," Buck agreed sadly. "We've got to shut their operation down in a hurry."

"Agreed," Arlo responded. "Let's get the op-teams formed and do it right."

—==++++==—

The Gulfstream rolled to a stop, the door popped and, with a long sigh, rotated to become a stair. Agents Evans and Washington, looking as if they had just completed a cross-country flight in a small plane with little in the way of amenities, descended and were met by agent Jeff Robbins of the NSA Hydraulics Lab who had arrived less than twenty minutes ahead of them.

He pointed to the opened trunk of a limousine and they tossed their bags in, then joined him in the spacious back seat.

"Looks like we've had another little incident according to the latest news off NSAnet." He swung his laptop around so they could read the summary: "Probable missile firing in Whitestone area destroys one vehicle. Three dead. Factor: likely Stinger or Katusha. Source: unknown."

"Well, it can't be any of the stuff from Colorado. It's all accounted for," Marjorie Evans opined. "Do we have any evidence this is connected to our case?"

"Not so far, but the coincidence makes it very attractive," Agent Robbins suggested.

"Agreed. Who's on it?" Marjorie asked.

"FBI has control for the moment," Robbins told her. "Do you want to take it over?"

"Hell, no," she exclaimed. "Unless and until it becomes

firmly connected, I think we'll have more than we can handle just tracking this Beddowes guy. Let the FBI control it, but let's keep our ears open. When did this happen?"

"About — oh — just shy of two hours ago," Robbins informed her.

"Check with the local FBI office. Find out if they're still on site," Evans ordered.

Agent Robbins called the local FBI office, spoke to the Area Supervisor and learned that the agents assigned and the Forensics crew were, in fact, still auditing the site. The limo exited LaGuardia Airport and headed for Whitestone.

—==++++==—

"Anwar Al-Ajib, Alfred Beddowes" he introduced them to each other. "Mr. Beddowes is going to be your guide, Anwar, on a little operation. He will handle strategic matters. You, tactical."

"What sort of operation, grandfather?" Anwar asked.

The old man looked out the window of the second-floor apartment onto the lights of 11th Avenue below. "The one we nicknamed 'Spike', Anwar. Mr. Beddowes is going to make it possible tonight. At least, he says he will. That is what we are here to determine: whether Mr. Beddowes actually can make such operations practical."

"Perhaps," Al suggested, "it would be good for me now to know what it is this operation is supposed to accomplish."

"Quite right," Anwar agreed and began to brief Al on the operation. "'Spike' is a fairly simple, straight-forward demonstration with little or no tactical value — psychological warfare, really — to show that we can strike where and when we wish. The value is in increased morale for our side and demoralization for them. The target is the local 'office', if you can call it that, of the Jewish Defense League. It is in the basement of an apartment building here in upper Manhattan. It is heavily fortified, and ringed with several layers of defensive perimeter. The security architecture — passwords, guards, even the location within the building — is changed frequently. Because of this, the plans for 'Spike' have never been finished to the point that we could carry out the operation with confidence. If what you say is true, tonight is different.

"Mr. Beddowes, grandfather here has told me to keep the team small," Anwar continued. "I take it you do not plan a frontal attack?"

Al faced him. "Depending on the terrain, Anwar, there may not be any attack at all. We shall have to make that decision on-site.

Where, by the way, is the site?"

Anwar pointed through the window to the apartment building across the avenue. "There."

—==++++==—

Eight people were gathered around the gate positioned near a window overlooking Broadway.

Al leaned through the gate and peered into the darkness. It was just after midnight in Earth-II. An LED spotlight allowed Al to scan the terrain. Men in the apartment held tight to ropes to keep him from falling, a serious concern here, for the ground was quite some distance below him: 14 feet, according to his rangefinder, not quite what he had measured from the window to the street below. Lifting his gaze, he readjusted the device for 110 feet, the distance across the avenue to the other building, and tried to determine from the image which of the physical features of Earth-II were about 110 feet away. A tree in the middle-distance he ranged at 112 feet. Close enough.

The ground in this area seemed to slope away from them in Earth-II, but was relatively flat in Earth-I. That was a lucky break for Anwar, for it meant the basement of the other building would be at or above the ground line of Earth-II. They could enter it directly.

Across the kitchen table they spread a blueprint of the building. Al marked on it the approximate positions of the physical features he had observed.

"Where is the target?" Al inquired.

"Here." Anwar indicated the spot on the blueprint.

"How much damage do you expect to do?" Al was clearly worried. "I'm no engineer, but I can read a blueprint. This line, here," Al pointed at the blueprint, "is a main support for the entire building, and it runs right along a wall of that room. If it's damaged, the whole structure could come down on our heads."

"We just want to kill everyone in the room," Anwar explained. "It is their headquarters. But if we could destroy the building as well, that might be worth it. Most of the people who work there live upstairs in the building with their families. The rest are just Zionists, anyway. It would be a good lesson for them. Is there no way to do that and escape as well?"

"Perhaps, but that building won't come down like others you may have seen on TV," Al began to explain to Anwar. "Those 'implosions' are done by professionals after weeks of study, and even then, there are mistakes of catastrophic proportions. No, this building is going to splash all over 11th Avenue and there will be severe damage done to all the surrounding buildings, including this one."

"So, what?" Anwar challenged. "They are only buildings."

"So, we need a safe place to return to, Anwar," Al explained trying to retain his composure. "If this building is rubble, I don't consider that a safe place. And if the building is reduced to rubble, what of my equipment? What happens to it? We need that equipment, intact and operating, to get back."

"You are right, Al Beddowes," Anwar agreed, finally seeing the light. "We will be satisfied with the original goal. When can we start?"

"Soon, Anwar," Al assured him. "Do we have access to a first-floor apartment in this building?"

Anwar shook his head. "This is the only secure place we have nearby."

"Then we will need a ladder of some sort," Al thought out loud, "preferably an extension ladder, at least fifteen or sixteen feet long. And rope." Anwar spoke a few Arabic words to one of the men in the room who departed immediately.

Al sat down and began to sketch on a pad. "The local ground level is about 14 feet below the floor of the apartment. When we go through the gate, we will have to go down, so I'm going to reposition the gate on the living room floor. Everyone must stay away from the gate even when it's turned off. Is that understood?" There was a murmur of assent from the onlookers.

"Let me show you why." Al took a broom handle from the kitchen, opened the gate, and waved the broom handle through it, being sure to contact the edge of the gate as he did so. The section of broom handle beyond the gate at the moment it contacted the edge never came back, but the other piece had the smoothest cut line any of them had ever seen.

"It will do that to your arm or leg or neck with equal ease," Al lectured the assembled group. "Die for your cause if you must, but don't be stupid." He switched the gate off. "This is why we must prevent the ladder or anything else touching the edge of the gate area, so we'll put a two-by-four from the couch to the TV and position the gate so that the men will be able to swing onto the ladder and descend without danger of brushing the edge. When they come up, they must be equally careful."

The ladder, a 20-foot extension ladder, was brought in and carefully slipped into the virtual hole created by the gate. Two men braced it with ropes to steady it, and Al Beddowes swung onto the ladder and disappeared into the pit, searchlight in hand.

One by one, the five men chosen for Operation Spike followed him down the ladder. By the time they had assembled at the bottom, Al had already located the tree he had noticed earlier. They

left one lantern as a marker beacon and set off toward their first checkpoint. From the tree, Al located an oddly-shaped cluster of rocks, and then a small cliff-like drop-off. Halfway between these he set up the gate for the first attempt. His first try was right on the money: inside a mostly-empty storage room next to the 'office' of the JDL. By Al's estimate, he hit the spot he wanted within two feet. One of Anwar's men pressed his ear to the wall and gave a 'thumbs-up' sign.

"What now?" Anwar asked. "Shall we just blast through the wall?"

"No," Al objected, "you'll just make a lot of noise, you won't know if your op has succeeded or failed, and we'll all be in danger of not making it out of here in one piece. I'm going to reposition the gate."

After very carefully marking its position, Al switched the gate off and moved it to the new spot that he calculated was just barely inside the room where sat the tactical high command of the JDL. Five men held pinless grenades, arms cocked for throwing. Al counted down: "Five, four." They released the triggers on the grenades. "Three, two, one." He switched the gate on. "Zero." Five hand grenades sailed through the gate and disappeared. Al dropped power to the gate. They moved it back to where it had originally been and applied power. Anwar poked his head through the gate for a quick look.

"All is in disarray" he told them. "The cement-block walls of the room are all blown through. The ceiling has fallen in. No one could have survived that. Operation Spike is a success."

They packed up their equipment and headed back toward the lantern shining in the distance. One by one, they climbed the ladder to the second-floor apartment where their friends waited. There, they peered out the window at the collection of Fire Department equipment gathered on the scene.

"How did they get here so fast?" Anwar asked, wide-eyed. "It is not but a few moments since we made the attack."

"So fast?" one of the elders responded. "We heard the explosion nearly fifteen minutes ago. We thought that you must all be dead when you did not return immediately, but Fatah insisted that we have faith and patience. Now I recall that Mr. Beddowes told us how tedious is movement in this shadow world."

While they talked, Al had quietly gathered his equipment and wrapped it in its canvas cases. He extended his hand to Anwar. "We'll meet again." To the elders: "It's time for us to return."

They left the apartment and headed back to the quiet Queens neighborhood from which they had started that afternoon. Halfway

there, 'grandfather' handed Fatah a slip of paper. "Insh'Allah," he spoke to her in Arabic.

The van wound its way through the streets of Manhattan until it arrived at the Jordanian Consulate. Al, Fatah, and the elder went inside while the van waited. A few moments later they left the building, their passports now validated for a trip to the Middle East.

"I took the liberty," he told them, "of booking you on a Thursday morning flight. In the meantime, you will stay at a 'safe house' not far from here. Fatah has the address along with the recognition signal for your contact in Amman. That is the paper I gave you earlier, Fatah."

"Yes, grandfather," she answered.

"When we get back to Queens, you will drive your car to the address on the paper," he instructed Al. "You will relax until Thursday, then you will fly to Jordan. You will be met there, and your work will begin."

Al nodded.

—==++++==—

Three cellular phones beeped at once. Agents Evans, Washington, and Robbins each answered and turned their backs to each other to make listening easier. Each got essentially the same message from their personal handlers at NSA's New York Center: an explosion of undetermined origin has partially destroyed an upper Manhattan apartment building known to be headquarters for a militant Jewish organization. Details on NSAnet.

—==++++==—

The radio crackled: "Q-base, Forward. Unit A is on station"

Buck turned to Arlo with a quizzical expression. Arlo explained: "'Unit A' is your friends from Colorado. They've arrived back at the house." Arlo squeezed the bar on the hand-held: "Stay on them."

Outside of 10379, Al popped the trunk of his rental car and slipped the two gates in among the luggage that had never quite gotten unpacked. Fatah started the car and let it warm while she and Al went inside to say goodbye to their new friends. It was no more than a coincidence that their forward observer's visibility was obstructed by a delivery truck when Al and Fatah stepped through the front door of the house and into their car. They were long gone when the observer, his view now clear with the departure of the truck, realized their car was missing.

"Q-base, Forward. Unit A is on the loose!"

10 — Kidnap

Four middle-aged (but still burly) men stepped from the side door of the van. Two of them began to unpack a gate while the other two stood guard. A second van pulled in behind them to provide additional cover and more men.

"Gate's open," Buck told them. "Everybody ready?" They nodded.

Buck, Ernie, and four Marines slipped through the gate from the darkness of late evening into the pre-dawn darkness of Earth-II. Their eyes adjusted instantly, for the light-colored foliage seemed to pick up any stray light, and the moon was nearly full.

They set the second gate up at the same spot Buck and Ernie had used once before. Ernie counted down on his fingers to the Marines crouched ready at the gate: "Three, two," he switched the power on. "One, zero." Four men leaped through the gate with their suppressed Uzi carbines.

Inside the basement room, three men sprang away from the table at which they were seated. One of them reached behind his back, but four silenced 9mm rounds, *pop, pop, pop, pop*, dropped him to the ground dead. An older woman off to the side opened her mouth to scream. *Pop, pop*. She slumped to the floor, blood leaking from her head and chest.

The two other men waited for their death, but one of the Marines patted himself on the head, indicating that they should place their own hands atop their heads. They did so and were pushed through the gate to where Buck and Ernie waited.

"Lay down, face down, hands and feet straight out," they were told, and they did so. "Don't move and don't talk."

The Marines carried the two dead bodies through the gate, then crept up the stairs to the main living quarters. There they found two older men and three younger men talking around a table. From the kitchen came the sound of women's voices. The four were inside the room in the twinkling of an eye, spread out, each covering the others. Those facing the men at the table had their weapons leveled at them and their fingers to their lips. "Quiet," the gestures said, "or you die."

"Your first sudden movement," the leader of the raiders whispered to them, "will be your last, and then we shall have to kill your women, too. Be quiet and do as you are told. Understand?" They nodded agreement and were led down into the basement and

through the gate where they received the same instructions as those who came first: "Lay down, face down, hands and feet straight out. Don't move and don't talk."

The raiders returned through the gate to the house to collect any others who might be left. In obedience to Buck's instructions, a radio transmitter disguised as a pen was deposited on a bookshelf in the basement, and a second, ordinary bug was glued underneath a chair. Another was hidden in the upstairs dining room, and a fourth in the living room.

The only remaining occupants were the women in the kitchen. These were likewise herded into the basement and through the gate. On the way, one of the Marines picked up a hand-held radio on the chance that it would help them intercept the radio traffic of those who had killed their comrades. This was delivered immediately to the crew guarding the entry gate.

Ernie switched off power to the gate and Buck addressed the prisoners: "Stay where you are and listen carefully. You may only hear this once. You are associated with what we consider to be most dangerous people, namely: Alfred Beddowes and Fatah Abou-Saad, both of Colorado. We have what we consider adequate proof that at least some of you are associated with them, so do not bother to deny it. These people have killed our friends and intend to kill more of them. We intend to find these people and you will help us.

"You are our prisoners, and you will remain our prisoners until the danger from these people is past or you die, whichever comes first. You will each be interrogated. You will be interrogated even if someone before you has given us the information we need. If we determine that none of you have information to give us, you will all be killed. If any of you have any questions, you may wave your right hand."

One hand waved. Buck spoke to him: "Stand up. Face away."

The young man did so.

"What is your question?" Buck asked him.

"You cannot hold us like this," he told Buck. "You have no auth..." From behind him, a single round from an Uzi, no longer silenced, smashed through his right knee-cap. He collapsed, screaming.

"Meaningless prattle is not a question. Are there any other questions?" Buck asked. But there were none.

The young man with the smashed knee, still howling in pain, was taken first to a place sufficiently far from the others that they could not hear whatever was said or not said, and while he was being questioned his wound was tended to the extent possible under field

conditions. In twos and threes, they were escorted to the spot and questioned privately as to their knowledge of Al and Fatah. One by one, they denied even knowing of the existence of the two and, in clusters, they were escorted to a woody ravine with deep sides, easy to descend, but difficult to climb. When they were all assembled, they were forced to clamber down the slope, slipping and sliding on the loose dirt and rock that formed its sides.

"You have chosen your own fate," Buck told them. "Now you must all die."

"We are not afraid to die," one of the young men told him. "Go ahead and shoot us."

"I don't need to waste the ammunition," Buck answered him. "We will simply leave you here in the wilderness. You will starve if you do not become food yourselves."

The Marines turned to go.

"Wait," the young man called to him. "Where is 'here'?"

"I don't really know," Buck answered, "not that it matters."

The Marines hoisted their equipment to their shoulders and set off toward the marker beacon in the distance. They were surprised to find the sky beginning to brighten even though their watches told them it was not yet 2 o'clock in the morning.

—==++++==—

"Well, we've been monitoring radio traffic all night," Barbara told them. "Let's recap. Harry?"

Harry Tumulty, Arlo's radio 'expert', stood before them and flipped his notebook open. "In the eight hours you've been gone, the hand-held has been relatively quiet: mostly checking to see that everything was still OK between the inside crew and the outside crew. The transmitters you placed in the house have been very active.

"About 11:45, the outside crew called inside on the radio for more coffee and got no answer. That's when they discovered that the house was empty. The outside crew split into two groups, one of which became the inside crew. They've been calling all over via telephone. I think they contacted this Al Beddowes guy, but I can't be sure. We heard one talking to what may have been a desk clerk.

"Then they called someone named Mahmoud, who may have gotten very angry at them, because it sounded as though they would have punched each other had they been in the same room. I missed a lot of the dialog because it was in Arabic or something.

"About 2am, reinforcements arrived. We think there are between fourteen and eighteen people on site currently.

"Just shy of 3am, there was a meeting that was carried live

on one of our channels. Someone contacted Al Beddowes to bring him up to date. From the discussion, I think they talked him into canceling some travel plans, so he'll be sticking around for a while. We're not sure why.

"They believe this was a conventional kidnapping, and they blame the JDL. The motive they ascribe was revenge for an attack on a JDL headquarters earlier today. Probably what they're referring to is an explosion in an apartment building in upper Manhattan this evening. The explosion destroyed most or all of the basement of an apartment building on 11th Avenue. Damage extended to the second floor, say 15, maybe 20 feet above the basement. Substantial structural damage to the entire building to the extent that the City Engineer has ordered it evacuated. These guys got plenty of muscle if they can pull that kind of stunt."

"Thanks, Harry," Barbara accepted his report. "Dad, what do you have?"

"We collected eight men and five women from the house," Buck began. "One man and one woman had to be silenced. Six rounds were fired and the brass has been retrieved. We questioned the eleven survivors separately, but no one would admit to having any knowledge regarding the whereabouts of Al Beddowes. It sounds as though that problem may be solved for us."

"Right," Harry acknowledged, "but we'll have to maintain the radio watch if we're to stay on top of it."

Arlo spoke up: "That's good work, Harry. Keep it up. Make sure your team coordinates with each other so they don't miss anything. Think about rotating them in their positions to relieve the boredom."

"Good idea, Sarge." Harry's team was composed mostly of the sons, daughters, nieces, and nephews, of the local Corps auxiliary. Radio watch was something the youngsters could do without being put into danger. As he said this, a pretty brown-haired girl stepped to his side and handed him a piece of paper to read.

"Conversation overheard:" Harry read from the paper aloud. "'That will give the damn Jews a good lesson. We'll blow them up and their synagogue, too,' and we got a phone number, too. Looks like somebody's going to turn up the heat."

Anwar picked up the phone on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Salaam," she greeted him, "let me speak to 'grandfather'."

"Who is this?" Anwar demanded.

"My name is Fatah," the woman answered. "Who are you?"

"My name is Anwar," he told her. "We met yesterday afternoon. 'Grandfather' is missing."

"What are your plans, Anwar?" Fatah asked trying to get herself current on the overnight events.

"I am so infuriated, Fatah, I can barely speak," Anwar fumed. "I want to wring somebody's neck for this. I think we will have to do something drastic, Fatah, but I don't yet know what."

"We hit them hard once before, Anwar," Fatah comforted him. "Perhaps they need a second lesson. Maybe we should do a synagogue this time."

"Fatah, you are a genius!" Anwar congratulated her. "That will give the damn Jews a good lesson. We'll blow them up and their synagogue, too. Can you meet us back at the apartment you were taken to yesterday?"

Fatah cupped the mouthpiece and spoke to Al, then turned back. "Yes," she told him.

Anwar looked at his watch. "It's just after seven. Can you be there by eight?" he asked her.

"I don't know, Anwar. The traffic..." Fatah sounded worried.

"Alright, then. Be there when you can," he told her. "Write this number down: 960-2991." She repeated the number to him to make sure she had it right.

"If you have any trouble, call."

"See if you can get somebody to convert that number into an address," Arlo ordered handing the paper to one of the kids. Turning to Buck: "What do you think?"

"I think it's time we moved to interdict them before they wind up killing a few hundred innocent people," Buck answered. "Arlo, if you were going to blow up a synagogue for political effect, which one would you pick?"

"Well, there's two that would make dandy targets," Arlo answered thoughtfully, "Temple Beth Shalom and Temple Eretz. They're both what you might call 'political hotbeds' and, come Friday night through late Saturday, they'll be filled with political heavies and their families. Yeah, if I wanted to make an impression, I'd try one of those places. Or both."

"You know what I'm thinking, Arlo?" Buck started. "I'm thinking that anyone who's going to use a gate to blow up one or both of those synagogues would have to trek overland through Earth-II to get there. I'm thinking that we could booby trap the land around these two and let our friends give themselves a surprise or two. Damn, now's the time I really wish we had an expert trap-man like Irv Morrison with us."

"Why can't we get Irv?" one of the Marines asked.

"Because he's dead," Buck told him.

"When?" the startled Marine asked. "I just talked to him last week."

"Are we talking about the same Irv Morrison?" Buck asked quizzically. "I mean the one who served with me and Arlo, the one who could lay traps even the regulars fell for."

"I think it's the same one," the young Marine answered. "Skinny guy, gray hair, little brush mustache?"

"Sounds like our Irv," Buck gave him. "Call him. See if you can get him over here quick." Turning back to Arlo: "With or without Irv, we're going to need some stuff. Let's go shopping."

Four of them in a van circled the Regimental Armory looking for a parking spot. When they found one close enough, they made careful estimates of the distances involved, then opened a gate.

The first hint of dawn was showing on the horizon of Earth-II. By the light of the moon they could make out the terrain. The ground pitched sharply up from where they were.

"Shit," one of them swore, "we'll have to enter on the second or third floor." As it was, they had to climb a little to get through the gate for it had opened partially underground.

"Don't forget," Ernie reminded them, "you'll have to stoop to get through this gate on the way back."

They marked the gateposts with lanterns and set off for the armory, Ernie, Buck, and one Marine who claimed to know the building cold, leaving one person behind to occupy the van.

Ernie's sense of distance was unerring. He put them, on his first try, into exactly the room the young Marine had requested. Cautiously, they worked their way down the back staircase to the munitions storeroom. The Marine pushed the buttons on the cipher-lock and opened the door. They took only a few seconds to survey the room and decide what they wanted. They had already spent some time talking about it.

Ernie and the Marine had their pockets and shirts stuffed with C4, plastic explosive. Buck took charge of the detonators.

They silently closed the door and made their way back upstairs to the second floor, slipped back into the room from which they had started, and were gone. They had spent not quite seven minutes inside the armory.

—==+++==—

Marjorie Evans' beeper chirped at her. She looked at the number briefly and dialed the New York Center on her cellular.

"Center," was the nondescript greeting.

"Evans, NS-47012," was her equally cryptic response. The phone went silent as a second connection was made.

"Marjorie, this is Hank in Boulder. We have some very interesting news for you which will probably equate to much more work. I'm sure you're thrilled." She growled at him over the phone and he continued. "I'm not sure how this slipped through the cracks, but it did. Sorry. We spoke some time back to one Lieutenant Cardozo of Boulder PD who told us of a conversation he had with someone claiming to be Barbara fitzGibbon of 2550 Pershing. This person also claimed that she and her father, one Marion E. fitzGibbon, same address, had both survived the blast that destroyed their residence. Well, we didn't give it too much credence until just now. Investigating, we find that Barbara fitzGibbon and Marion E. fitzGibbon booked passage via Delta to LaGuardia Monday evening. Both also appeared at their bank first thing Monday morning and gave credible performances, adequate to convince the bank to let them into their safe deposit boxes. Bank officials report they removed only their passports."

"Shit. I mean 'wonderful'," Marjorie fumed. "Have we alerted passport control?"

"Yes, we have," the Boulder agent assured her, "and we're checking all international outbound PNRs for any of the four names. We'll keep you informed if anything turns up. In the meantime, look on the bright side."

"There's a bright side to this?" Marjorie Evans wondered aloud.

"Sure. You probably won't have to travel far to find them and now the chances are twice as good that you'll be able to locate one of them."

"Hank, E-S-and-D." she told him with a grimace.

"I love you too, Marjorie." She dropped the line and her beeper chirped simultaneously. She glanced briefly at the number and re-dialed the New York Center.

"Center."

"Evans, NS-47012." The phone again went silent as a second connection was made.

"Agent Evans, I have a PNR match on Beddowes, Alfred, and Abou-Saad, Fatah, both booked on a Saudia Airlines flight from JFK to Amman, Jordan Thursday morning. Do you wish to make the intercept?"

"Yes. I'll want plenty of back-up, too. These people are considered heavily armed and extremely dangerous."

"Roger."

—==++++==—

"Well, Mahmoud, how did they get into the house in the first place?" Fatah demanded.

"I have to admit, I don't know," Mahmoud answered. "There were no signs of forced entry. From the blood spatters we found, we can guess which directions the shots came from. There are no windows or doors on that wall. There is no place the shots could have come from except inside the room, and that leaves your question still unanswered. Do you have any ideas?"

"I do," Fatah told him confidently. "I've talked with Al and we think that someone else has a gate. We don't know how this can be — the probability of Barbara fitzGibbon surviving the bombing of her house and then tracking us unerringly here is too small to consider — but *someone* has a gate — it must be. Perhaps she told someone else how to build a gate. No, I don't know. It's all too coincidental. Perhaps it is nothing more than coincidence. That, or we have overlooked something more fundamental. It doesn't matter. We will have to put that gate out of business if it exists."

"How?" Mahmoud demanded.

"You say you are missing a radio, Mahmoud?" Fatah asked.

"Yes," Mahmoud admitted.

"Perhaps those who took it are listening to it," Fatah suggested. "I want you to try to contact them. Ask to speak to their 'gatekeeper'. I have a feeling they will understand. Give them the phone number of the cellular phone. No sense providing them with traceable information."

"And then, what?" Mahmoud wondered.

"And then we shall offer them whatever they wish simply for them to stay out of our way," Fatah answered.

"And if they refuse?" Mahmoud probed.

"Then, Mahmoud, we shall have to track them down and kill them," Fatah told him smugly.

"And if they accept?"

"Ah, then," she smiled, "we shall not have to track them down."

Mahmoud squeezed the 'talk' button and spoke: "You who took our radio, we have a message for you. We wish to speak with your gatekeeper. Have your gatekeeper call us at 555-0428."

"Re-broadcast it every hour until they reply," Fatah instructed him. "Meanwhile, Al and I are going to come there, cross through and try to track the kidnappers. We'll see you in a few hours." She hung up.

—==++++==—

Harry looked at the words on the paper, but didn't understand them. There were fewer than ten people in the whole operational team who had heard anyone speak the word 'gate' in connection with it, and Harry wasn't one of them.

"See if Buck or his daughter know what this might mean," Harry instructed his daughter. She nodded and headed off to find the fitzGibbons.

Barbara was visibly shaken by the words she read. Silently, she handed it to Buck who read it in turn.

"Barbara, that's one smart bunch you tangled with," Buck grimaced.

"Well, Dad, we *did* leave them a clue or two," she grimaced back.

"Like what?" Buck asked. He thought they had been very careful about cleaning up.

"Like: no sign of breaking and entering," Barbara counted off on her fingers. "Your troops must have seemed to appear out of thin air. No smashed door locks or windows. You killed two before they could utter a sound. A team of really, really good cat burglars might have pulled that off given months of planning and mountains of good luck. They already know of a way to do it without cat burglars. And they know their technology is or was known to a limited few others. They probably already suspect we survived."

"Yeah, you're probably right — again," Buck admitted. "Where did I get such a smart daughter?"

"What I don't know, Dad, is what kind of response we ought to make, if any," Barbara wore a worried look. "Whatever they suspect is now only a suspicion. If we reply, we erase all doubt. Do we want to give them that?"

As Buck pondered the question, running the possibilities through his mind, a small group entered the house laughing and talking. Buck, lost in thought, did not even look up until he heard: "Hello, Buck."

His head came up and locked onto a pair of dusty gray eyes surrounded by dusty gray hair above and below. He leaped to his feet and clamped his arms around Irv Morrison's slight frame. "They told me you were dead, Irv."

"Not even a little," Irv protested. "You got work for me, amigo?"

Suddenly it all became clear in his mind. Irv was truly the missing piece, the keystone, the answer to his problem.

"You know, Irv," Buck began thoughtfully, "I didn't really

believe, I guess, that you were alive until just seconds ago, so I haven't been counting on your help too heavily. But now that you're here, I think I not only have work for you, but I have work of the most critical and demanding sort. Irv, you're back in business."

"That's good, Buck, but I didn't bring my tools," Irv told him.

"We have everything you need, I think," Buck assured him.

"Davy, over there, has a list of the stuff we harvested today. Check with him to see if there's anything we missed. And welcome back to the land of the living, Irv."

While Irv Morrison and Davy put their heads together in the corner of the room, Buck shifted mental gears and began revising and polishing 'the plan'. His pencil scurried across the paper, scratching out, rewriting, sharpening the details the way he once sharpened his bayonet, until the edge was flawlessly smooth and deadly dangerous.

Much of what he wrote, of course, was purely speculative, what-if scenarios for the several gambits he could anticipate from Al and Fatah. Barbara came up behind him and kneaded his shoulders. His left hand rested on hers as he continued writing, his stride and his concentration unbroken.

"You're tense," she told him. "Would you like me to get you something to drink?"

He stopped writing and turned to her. "I must be really tense for you to offer me that, but this is a time when tension is good. I have to — we all have to stay sharp. Thanks, but I can't afford it."

Barbara kissed his cheek and turned quickly away so that he wouldn't think she was smirking. "*Daddy, you're alive again,*" she thought.

Buck picked up his notes and wandered over to where Arlo was sitting. "What do you think about this: we call them and dumb it up good. We don't know what a gatekeeper is, but we called in case we are one. We admit to being a radical arm of the JDL and demand somebody's head on a platter for the 11th Avenue bombing. With luck, they may offer to throw us a bone as bait, and we will appear to take it. If we can convince them we don't have gate-access, they may be tempted to use that route for a surprise attack. We get Irv to prepare a surprise of our own."

"You're counting on an awful lot of venality, Buck," Arlo challenged.

"Yup, but they've already nearly convinced themselves that our raid is connected to the 11th Avenue bombing," Buck answered confidently. "We know that from their chatter. I think we can play on that."

Arlo pointed to the phone. Buck dialed the number. It was picked up on the first ring. "Hello?"

"What's a 'gatekeeper'," Buck asked.

"Who wants to know?" It was a female voice, without a doubt.

"We have your radio, and we're curious what you mean by it," Buck teased.

There was a long pause with faint rumblings, as though the mouthpiece had been covered for a private consultation. Buck could imagine the female voice saying, "They don't know what a gatekeeper is." Shortly, she was back on the phone.

"They say that if you were a gatekeeper, you would know," the voice told Buck.

"No matter," Buck told her. "Did you enjoy our little surprise?"

"We did not," she told him. "We are very upset over your little surprise. You are very naughty. I think we shall have to punish you."

"You will have to catch us first. We ninja may prove more than you can handle." Around the room, several people stifled snickers.

"Perhaps," the voice offered. "You are very effective, I will grant you that. Is there some other way we can get you to stop being naughty boys?"

"You can give us the severed heads of those who blew up headquarters," Buck dangled the bait before her. "That might get us to behave."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she objected.

"Of course, you do," Buck told her. "Even though we had little use for that bunch of pansies, we cannot allow you to just blow them up the way you did — it makes the whole organization look soft — so we will continue to bite you until you give us what we want. You will discover that *some* of us know how to fight fire."

"Let's talk about something else," the woman changed the subject. "Several of our friends are missing, some may be hurt or dead. We are very concerned about their safety."

"You should be," Buck told her.

"We are willing to pay for their safe return," the woman said. "They are still safe, yes?"

Buck now cupped his hand over the mouthpiece. "They're offering a ransom for the ones we grabbed."

"Most of them are safe," he continued. "They will cost you a million dollars." He could hear her gasp through the phone.

"We don't have that kind of money," the woman's voice protested. "Even a hundred thousand would bankrupt us. Give us back the women, at least. They are not fighters."

"Alright, then, the women only for a hundred thousand." Arlo scribbled a note and handed it to Buck. "Flushing Meadow Park, west of the rotunda, tonight at 10pm. Send only one person with the money. Have him open all the doors of the car so that we can be sure no one is hiding in it. When we're sure it's safe, we will deliver the women to him. Make sure there are no tricks or there will be more bloodshed."

"Agreed." She broke the connection.

Buck looked at the phone and snarled at it: "Gotcha, bitch."

At her end, Fatah smiled. *The fools. They did not know who they were dealing with. No longer would women and old men fall victim to these amateurs. Tonight, they would feel The Sword of Allah.*

"They say they do not know what a 'gate' is," Fatah told them, "and I half believe them. If they had a gate, would they pass up the chance to gloat over their victory? I think not." She turned to Anwar. "You know this place, Flushing Meadow Park?"

"Very well," Anwar assured her.

"Al, we need to get some gates out there so that we can welcome our friends in grand style," Fatah said as the kernel of a plan began to form in her head.

"Yes," Al agreed, "and a little planning wouldn't hurt. Anwar, do you have a map of the area?"

Anwar produced a map annotated with detail sufficient to satisfy Al. Together they picked out several spots providing, by Anwar's recollection, cover sufficient to allow successful infiltration via gates.

"At ten minutes before the hour, we will drop men here, and here, and here," Al pointed to spots on the map. "Each team will have a gate, and directions to the spots at which they are to re-enter. They will go immediately to their assigned posts; one member of each team will pass through and wait for the action to begin. If these bandits arrive overland, we will be ready for them. If not, we will still be ready for them."

—==++++==—

"He's a Marine, isn't he?" Tareeta Washington asked.

"Yes, what about 'family connections'?" the thought finally coalesced in Marjorie Evans' brain.

"Exactly. Let's see if any of his combat buddies are in the area. It's not much of a lead, but it's miles ahead of what we've got now, which is 'nothing'."

They passed the request back to the Analysis Section in

Virginia: combat associations for Marion E. fitzGibbon — only addresses in the New York Metropolitan area. Urgent.

—==+++==—

"You've got ninety minutes, maybe less, to set it all up. Before ninety minutes are up, you must all be back here, at this very spot, ready to leave the area permanently," Barbara told them, "and it would be very good if you left no trace of your presence behind when you do. Ernie will be your guide while you are beyond the gate. Listen to him. He knows more about this operation than we have had time to impart to you. Good luck."

The team of six men entered a men's room in Flushing Meadow Park. Ernie picked an end stall, taped the gateframe to the tile wall and turned on the power. The land surface of Earth-II at this spot was a mere four inches below the bottom of the gate. It appeared to be morning. The winter sun was just peeking above the horizon. He stepped through and was followed immediately by the five others. Together, they rigged a second gate flush with the first, Ernie went back and pulled the first gate through. Then the second gate was shut down until the operation was complete.

Consulting the map held by the patrol leader, Ernie started pointing out terrain features: "Point A on the map is very close to that dead tree there. Point B is just offshore in that lake. Point C is behind that cluster of rocks."

"OK," Irv Morrison instructed. "We'll string the trip wire in from the lake shore about 50 feet, on the assumption that they won't want to drop their men into water."

They laid a surface minefield consisting of pairs of shaped charges tripped by a wire, and set to blow in a spray pattern as they were tripped. The traps were set such that it was just barely possible to maneuver through them safely, but any straight-line path was certain death. The matte-finish, ultra-thin wire was nearly invisible even in broad daylight. They gathered their equipment and headed back to the pick-up point.

There they reversed the process of pulling a gate through into the now darkened men's room. The first man through checked the outside door and found it locked. When he reported this, there was great consternation as they all thought about possible other ways for them to get back to their rendezvous. Finally, Ernie's eyes brightened.

"Pull that gate back, then move this gate back about two feet. When we go through, we'll be on the outside of the building."

"What if someone sees us?" one of them asked.

"They're locking the facilities," Ernie explained. "If it's not because there's no one around, it's certainly a hint to everyone that the park is closed. Let's risk it."

The first man through looked around to see if he had been observed appearing out of thin air. He saw no one, so reached back through and motioned for the others to follow. In moments they were all through, the first gate had been pulled, and they waited for their pick-up.

The van in which they had arrived a bare hour-and-a-half ago slowly worked its way through the park toward where they waited, and whisked them to safety. It was 8:40pm in Earth-I, and just after 9:30am in Earth-II.

11 — Ambush

At precisely 9:30pm the first group of four slipped through a gate set up inside the Step Van, and jumped the short distance to the ground. Al Beddowes led this group, the first of three, so that he might observe the other groups' arrivals and be ready to provide technical advice to them.

As soon as the four were through, the gate was closed and the van moved to the next prearranged drop-off point. The senior officer put his hand on Al's arm.

"This is not a good spot for us — too open. We must find cover." He pointed to a small copse of trees. "There."

They immediately began to move in the direction of the trees, walking in a cluster, but they had not gone 30 feet when one of them blundered through one of Irv's traps. With a deafening crash, 300 grams of C4, 150 at either end of the cable, detonated, sending branches, dirt, pebbles, and a shock wave in a flat spray pattern that was every bit as effective as a shotgun blast at close range.

The amount of damage done to the four bodies was relatively insignificant, but the type of damage told a different story.

A jagged branch of dried wood pierced the skull of one soldier, inducing a paralyzing shutdown of his nervous system.

Al Beddowes was cut down by several dozen pebbles that, like shotgun pellets, tore flesh in their passage. Two of them passed through his neck severing the blood supply to his brain. Shock set in immediately, and death moments later.

Of the other two, it appears that a fragment of debris may have sheared the handle from a grenade hung on a bandoleer, and, still stunned by the blast and not fully understanding yet what had happened, they simply did not expect the close-range detonation of the grenade. The last two died four seconds after the trap was sprung.

Moments later, another gate opened about a quarter mile away and three riflemen leaped to the ground. They looked all about for signs of the first unit, but could not locate them. They took cover behind some bushes a few feet away near the shore of a fetid lake and waited for instructions that they had been told might be only minutes coming.

Each of them searched for any kind of movement, and finally one spotted, off in the distance, a group of four of their compatriots appearing out of thin air as they transited the gate. One waved to the

newcomers, and the newcomers waved back in acknowledgement. Then their team leader whistled and motioned for them to take cover. The four members of the third squad broke into a trot, and headed for a nearby outcropping of rock, but they never made it. Virtually the same scene played for the first squad now enveloped the third as 300 grams of plastique and assorted debris reduced them to lifelessness.

The three heads of the second squad snapped around at the sound of the blast, and they watched in horror as the dust slowly settled around their fallen comrades. Through binoculars, they could see the four bodies now covered with a thin layer of dirt. Training their glasses in the other direction, they could, now that they knew what to look for, make out the fallen bodies of the first squad.

"We must help them," one said, rising to his feet.

The squad leader gripped his arm and dragged him back down. "We must stay right where we are until we can figure out what's going on."

"But they may still be alive!" the first protested.

"And if we go rushing to their aid, we may not be alive," the squad leader snapped at him. "Did you not see that explosion? That was no stick-or-two of dynamite. And what set it off? Was it a tripwire, or remotely detonated? What do you think?"

"I don't know," the first answered sheepishly.

"That's right," the squad leader agreed, "and until you do, you stay right here. See if you can spot anything with your binoculars."

"What am I looking for?" the first asked.

"Look for booby traps, you boob. If it had been remotely detonated, we would already be under fire in an attempt to drive us out of shelter and into the minefield."

They searched so intently that they almost missed the signal.

A few seconds before the stroke of ten, a Chevrolet station wagon pulled off the road onto the shoulder. In obedience to his finely detailed instructions, the driver shut off the ignition, flipped the special switch on the dashboard, and tossed a small package into the cargo deck where it disappeared. Then the driver got out and opened all the doors of the vehicle, including the cargo gate. He leaned against the hood and waited. At two minutes after ten, a large rented truck pulled onto the shoulder behind the station wagon. Two men got out and approached him.

"Do you have the money?" one of the men from the truck asked.

"Yes," the driver of the station wagon told him. "Do you have the hostages?"

"In the truck," the truck driver assured him.

"Bring them here."

"The money first," the truck driver insisted. The driver pointed to a leather attaché case on the front seat. "No containers, just money," the truck driver snapped. "Take it out of the case and put it on the front seat."

"It's locked," the station wagon's driver protested. "I don't have the key."

The two men from the truck looked at each other and nodded. "No way am I taking a locked briefcase into that truck. Trojan horse, for sure. Go get something to pry it open."

Buck was halfway back to the truck, with Arlo engaging the driver in small talk, when the truck horn sounded twice and Ernie swung down from the truck cab with two suppressed Uzi's. One of these he pitched side-arm at Buck, then flipped the safety of his off. "Cover!" Ernie screamed. "There's a gate in the car!"

Buck plucked the Uzi out of the air, spun and crouched. There, as if dancing on the cargo deck of the station wagon, were several short pieces of branch or dowel. Someone was probing the gate to find its dimensions preparatory to coming through.

Ernie trained his weapon on the cargo floor from the back. Buck went forward to the rear passenger door to create a cross fire as Arlo kept the driver covered.

"Fire," Buck ordered, and they both emptied their magazines through the open gate.

"Look! There!" Lying on the ground about eighty feet away was a small box with a blinking light. Attached to it was a pair of headphones.

"I see it," the squad leader acknowledged, "but how are we to get to it?"

"Lieutenant, I think I have that figured out, too," one team member offered. "Look near the ground between those two bushes."

"I don't see anything," the squad leader admitted.

"Try the binoculars," he was told.

He lifted the glasses to his eyes and stared intently for a few seconds. "Is it a wire?"

"I believe it is," the first soldier said. "We may be able to cross safely if we make sure to lift our feet high and not drag them. Also, I'll probe ahead. That should give us enough warning."

"Let's go," the squad leader ordered.

One of them went out ahead waving a length of dowel near the ground before him. On two occasions, he halted his high-stepping gait, stooped to the ground and spray-painted a wire in fluorescent

orange. The others followed cautiously behind. They crossed the eighty feet surprisingly quickly and were soon at the blinking light. The lieutenant took the headphones and listened, but all he could hear was high pitched chattering. As he listened, the others probed the opening with lengths of dowel brought along for just this purpose. Occasionally, as the wood crossed the edge of the gate, a length of dowel would be severed and drop to the ground. The spot on the ground would then be marked with the severed piece to indicate a gate-edge.

Their plan was to stand up inside the gate boundary. This would project their upper bodies into Earth-I and enable them to fire upon their enemy. The driver of the station wagon serving as the carriage for this gate was instructed to fall to the ground the instant he noticed any activity at the gate. It was hoped that this would keep him from being accidentally shot.

They were almost finished their survey and were preparing to start the attack when, without a sound beyond the dull *thump* of bullets striking flesh, the three were cut down.

Ernie found the power leads for the gate and yanked them. With a sigh, the gate closed. He slid the entire array out the back of the wagon and snapped the components off the frame, pocketing them as he went.

"Keep your money," Buck told the driver, "and tell your boss that this double-cross means they'll never see their women again. You're free to go."

The combination of the hour and the season with its blustery cold nights made the park a very secluded place, a fact counted upon by both sides, and the entire incident, therefore, went unnoticed.

The two vehicles drove off, taking different directions as they left the park. The truck turned right and moved off at a leisurely pace, and another car fell in behind it at a discrete distance. The distance, however, was not discrete enough, and the team inside the truck soon realized they were being followed.

"I know the perfect spot," Arlo told them. "It's an alley just barely wide enough to accommodate this truck, but it goes through to the next street. Backing up in the alley will be impossible for us, and is almost out of the question for them. We can lead them in and bottle them up there for as long as we want. Pull over here. I need to make a phone call."

Buck stopped the truck at a corner telephone booth and Arlo got out to make the call.

"You know the apartment buildings along Abbington east of Pleasant?" Arlo spoke to his second unit. "Yes, well meet us there as

quickly as you can, stake-out style, one in front, one in back. I'm going to try to put a genie back in its bottle... OK, twenty minutes."

He jumped back up into the cab. "We're going to have to lose ten or fifteen minutes. Turn left here."

They drove for several minutes before Arlo again ordered him to stop at a convenience store. Arlo made some small purchase and came back to the truck. Then they filled the gas tank at a nearby service station.

"That's enough time," Arlo told them. "Turn right here... left at the next corner... left after the bowling alley. See that driveway? Turn right."

Arlo was correct. The alley was very narrow, so that Buck had to slow to a crawl to avoid scraping the walls.

"Are they following?" Arlo asked him.

"I don't see anything behind us... wait, something just turned into the alley behind us," Buck told Arlo. "I think that's them."

"Stop when the front of the truck clears the alley," Arlo instructed. "Set the brakes and shut off the engine."

As soon as the truck's brake lights went on, the men in the car knew that they had been set up. The driver turned around and leaned over the back of his seat to see if it were possible to back up, and saw that another car had pulled across the end of the alley. He couldn't go back, and he couldn't go forward. Now there were two men walking towards their car from the rear.

"Are we going to fight our way out, Zaf?" his passenger asked.

"It's that or get taken alive," Zaf answered him. "We've got no cover in this alley or in this car. Are you ready to go out shooting?"

"Zaf, I think I'd rather be taken alive."

Zaf thought about this for a few seconds. "Maybe you're right. We're surely dead if we start shooting, and we're of no use to anyone dead."

He shut off his engine and carefully, because he barely had room to open the door, stepped from the car. Turning to the two men approaching, he slowly drew back his coat to reveal a pistol in a shoulder holster, drew the pistol with three fingers, and laid it on the roof of the car. Then his passenger did the same.

Wordlessly, the two men approaching signaled them to move forward of the car, and picked up and pocketed their handguns as they passed. At the truck, Buck opened the barn doors to reveal an empty cargo bay. The two prisoners looked at each other with startled looks, then the driver turned to Buck and asked: "Where are the women?"

"You're going to find out very soon," Arlo told him, "when you join them. At this rate, we'll soon hold your whole organization

prisoner.”

The two were hoisted roughly into the truck’s cargo bay and the doors were shut and latched, then Buck, Arlo, and Ernie drove off. One of the ‘stalkers’ donned surgical gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints, and drove Zaf’s car to a place where it could be safely and quietly abandoned.

—==+++==—

“I don’t know what happened,” the station wagon’s driver shouted. “All I know is that they shot many rounds into my station wagon and there isn’t a mark on it. I have lots of shell casings as souvenirs, ‘though. They took out the framework that was laying on the back deck and tore parts off it and kept them. They left the rest of the framework. You can see what’s left of it.”

Ibrahim was Anwar’s second-in-command and was nominally in charge of the eleven men injected into Earth-II for this operation. He was now trying to find out why the operation went so badly, why no one got off a single shot from their assigned positions. He knew he would get no more information from the driver of the station wagon. He had been told nothing beyond what he absolutely had to know: where to go, what to do and in what order, what to say, and what not to say. Others were now going about the task of recovering the eleven. Perhaps they would be able to shed more light on the failure.

Those others now pulled their van to a stop at the approximate location of their first drop-off. Fatah, in charge of the recovery operation, opened a gate and peered through. It was bright sunlight on the other side, and she shouted a few times to attract attention. Getting no reply, she waited a few moments for her eyes to become accustomed to the bright light. She turned back and spoke to those waiting in the truck: “I’m going through to see if I can spot them. Wait here.”

A section of 1-by-10 was shoved through to form a ramp, for the local Earth-II ground here was a few feet low, and the ramp would serve as a precise marker for the location of the gate, as well as provide easy access to it.

Fatah reached the bottom and looked around, trying to locate the precise spot that the first squad was dropped. A nearby patch of disturbed ground caught her attention, and she made for it. As she drew closer, however, it became more clear that this disturbance had been an explosion of some size. As she bent to examine the small crater, sunlight glinted on a piece of metal, and she reached for it. It was a watchband, and it was splotted with blood.

She stood now with a purpose, and scanned the area, not for

footprints, but for bodies. In seconds, her eyes found what her brain feared they might. She reached Al and turned him over. His eyes stared blankly back at hers for the instants before tears clouded her vision.

"They're all dead," she told those in the van as she strode purposefully through the gate. "Let's get to the second squad."

At the site the second squad had been deposited, she repeated the exercise, this time following footprints, first to their shelter near the lake, thence to the spot where they had died. One glance told her all she needed to know. This was the only group that had survived long enough to take their assigned position, and they had died because her opponents knew the properties of gates. Further, she now knew, they must also have gates of their own, devices they had used to rig traps through this whole area, traps such as the two the second squad had identified with spray paint, including the trap that killed Al. This had all been a setup, right from the start. They would pay for that. They would pay for that. She picked up the tube containing their emergency gate and took it with her.

On the chance that someone from the third squad might have survived, they checked that site, too, but the story was the same.

—==++++==—

The Step Van carefully worked its way into a parking spot that was barely large enough.

Down the street, one of Arlo's spotters made note of the arrival and the fact that two older men left the truck and entered the house. He didn't know that he himself had been spotted earlier in the day and that this was a charade being played for his benefit alone.

Inside the truck, Fatah applied power to the gate taped to the wall of the truck and walked down the ramp into a bright sunlit winter morning in Earth-II. On the ground of Earth-II, she and a companion searched for clues to confirm that her opponents did have a gate. She knew now that such evidence must exist, and she needed it for the success of the rest of her plan. The evidence was not long coming.

Nearby, she found several bloodstains, two where the KIAs had been lain temporarily, and another where a bullet had shattered a knee. They found, as well, the marks where the gate had been set up for the raid on the basement. She set another gate up on the same spot, and was about to step through, then hesitated.

"Go back to the truck," she told her assistant, "get on the radio and tell them to be hold their fire." She waited while he ran back

to the ramp and disappeared into the truck, then waited a bit more until he appeared through the gate and his fingers made an 'OK' sign.

She stepped through into the basement. Four of Anwar's men were waiting, fully armed and ready for action.

"Come with me," she told them, and they all slipped back through the gate into Earth-II.

They had no trouble following the footprints, first backtracking to the entry point a mere forty yards away. They could see the impression in the dirt where a device of some sort, probably a lantern, had been placed. Yet, footsteps led to this point from two directions.

"I can't believe this is anything more than a temporary entrance," Ibrahim said. "In the direction we have traveled from the gate, this must be near the avenue. They probably parked a truck here and crossed through the same way you just did."

"Agreed," Fatah told him. "Let's find out where these other footprints take us."

They backtracked those prints until they came to the ravine. At the top of the ravine, they found two bodies, one man and one woman. In the ravine were three men and four women.

"We can't climb up," they explained, "the sides are too steep and the rock slips beneath our feet. We sent four men out to scout the two ends of the ravine to see if there is another way up, but they haven't come back."

Ibrahim sent one of his men in each direction. "Fire a flare if you run into trouble. Fire two if you find a way up." A third man he sent back for rope in case neither end provided an escape route. Before he could return, two flares rose from one of the scouts.

"Go to them," Ibrahim called down to those in the ravine. "We will wait here for the others to return. If the rope arrives before they do, we will bring them up and fire two more flares. Otherwise, we will send them on and we will all meet back here."

Before two hours had passed, all the 'prisoners' had been recovered and debriefed. According to them, all their captors were men. That ruled out involvement by Barbara. Perhaps she really was dead. Fatah knew that Barbara lived with her father, but did not know what he looked like, so there was no hard evidence linking Buck to the operation, either. Well, absence of evidence is not evidence.

None of the men had used anything to hide their identities, and one of the women was certain she had seen the faces of two of them in the neighborhood, perhaps while shopping. Local talent. And they have gates, plural. And they know how to pull a gate through.

"Blowing up Barbara fitzGibbon's house was a tactical

blunder," Fatah admitted to Anwar. "We should have eliminated them one-on-one. This way, we have no assurance that she and her father are dead, and I am now convinced they survived, at least one of them. There's no other explanation for the existence of other gates and the knowledge of how to use them. We now have a much larger task ahead of us: we must find all the people involved in this and kill them. We must take all the gates they have and either destroy them or put them where they can be controlled. And we are out of time. They know where we are, and we don't know where they are except that they are nearby. Suggestions?"

Ibrahim spoke: "I think we need to have a rotating guard in this shadow world. What do you call it? Earth-II? We need to be protected against further attacks from that direction."

"Agreed," Anwar told him.

"Let us put the old woman to the task of locating any of the men who took her prisoner," he continued. "That might give us valuable information about the whereabouts of the others and their gates."

"That has already been started," Anwar told him.

"And I think Fatah must teach some of us how the gates work so that we can stay here and work while she takes the technology to the homeland."

"There's nothing to teach," Fatah explained. "You turn the power on and the gate exists. What causes the gate to exist, I have no idea beyond the parts you see, chips and magnets and wires. Al knew, and he's dead, so when a gate breaks, it's broken forever, and when we lose one the way we did in the park, the enemy gains one as well. We must reverse that trend. I'm not a tactician, Anwar. You and Ibrahim need to figure out how."

"Al made enough chips for six gates, so he — I — still have three sets that can be made into gates. The shopping list he gave you when we arrived needs to be refilled. That will give us a total of five gates, and that's as many as we will ever have unless we can capture some back. Recapture has to become a top priority for us."

—==++++==—

Barbara read the report from Harry's radio monitoring team with utmost satisfaction, tempered only by an immense sadness that Al had lost his life so uselessly. "From here on, it's a war of attrition. We must make absolutely sure they never capture one of our gates, because the change in design would be obvious to almost anyone, would allow them to multiply their gates by a factor of four and make it nearly impossible for us to round up the remaining gates."

"Beyond that, we must stop Fatah or her friends from exporting their knowledge. Buck, Arlo, any ideas how we might halt them?"

Arlo spoke up first. "I've been considering that in the light of Buck's successful double-back. I said Buck was counting on an awful lot of venality, and it looks like he got it, but we can't expect them to fall for the same ruse twice. This radio intercept, 'though, has given me an idea. They're actively looking for us. Let's let them find us — somewhere where we can be waiting in force."

"I like that," Buck told him, "but we should also plan to cut off their retreat by a simultaneous attack on their entry point. To do that, we have to post enough lookouts in Earth-II so that we can maintain a more-or-less constant watch on the time and place they enter."

"That's going to be expensive in terms of manpower, Buck," Arlo responded, "not to mention dangerous. If we have a lookout stationed very close to an entry point, that lookout has to be presumed to be a casualty, because it will be six-to-one or better against our man."

"You're right, Arlo," Buck agreed. "Still, if we let them retreat with even a portion of their force, it's a portion we will eventually have to eliminate, probably with substantial losses. There has to be a way."

"How about television cameras?" Arlo asked.

"We've tried it," Barbara told him, "and all we get is snow. Something is interfering with the transmission of the signal across the interface."

Harry Tumulty had been listening to this conversation absently, but now his ears perked up. "Does the interface radiate?" he asked.

"No," Barbara answered. "We checked that out with a Geiger counter early in the process, and..."

"I didn't mean that way," Harry cut her off mid-sentence. "I meant 'in a radio-frequency sense'."

"I don't know, Harry," Barbara replied. "I suppose it would almost have to, if at no other time, when the field collapses."

"I'm hoping that it radiates when the field expands, too," Harry expanded. "If it does, you would have the equivalent of a doorbell."

"Is there some way we can check this?" Barbara asked him.

"We can take a gate down to my shop," Harry offered. "If it radiates in AM or FM, I think I can find it. If it radiates anything else, we'll probably never know."

"Ernie, take a gate and go with Harry," Barbara ordered.

"Give us a call if you find out anything."

On their way out the door, Ernie paused briefly, eyeing the row of duffels lined up against the wall, each stuffed with ammunition and an Uzi carbine, then picked one and hoisted the strap to his shoulder.

—==+++==—

Barry knew what to expect and how to act. As he rummaged in the 'frozen dinners' section of the supermarket, he looked up straight into the eyes of the dark-haired beauty and smiled. She smiled back. He continued his shopping, now with a new purpose. He picked up 30 assorted frozen dinners, several bags of snack foods, and two cases of soft drinks. He was sure she had recognized him. Without appearing too obvious, he scanned the store for accomplices, but saw none. Nevertheless, he was sure they were there.

He loaded the bags and boxes of groceries into the trunk of his car and drove slowly away. Before he had driven two blocks, he was certain he was being followed. He parked by the curb outside the Prestige Social Club, popped the trunk of his car and began to carry bags inside, all the while keeping a wary eye on his 'tail' *This is the right place and time, he thought, if they want to make a run on me, but they didn't.* Instead, the car drifted past, with the occupants apparently paying no attention to Barry and his errand.

Inside, he dialed Arlo's number. "I've been made," he told them.

"Good," Arlo replied.

—==+++==—

"Off," Harry called, and Ernie flipped the switch off for the umpteenth time. "On," and Ernie flipped it on.

"That's a roger," Harry told him. "Your gate radiates FM at precisely 68.714 megacycles, but it's not the only thing doing it. Look here." He pointed at the trace on the oscilloscope. "This is the signal coming from your gate. Turn it off." Ernie did so. "See, there's still this little bump of a signal. Maybe another gate, maybe far away. I don't know."

"Can you tell where it's coming from?" Ernie asked.

Harry rummaged in the back room for a few minutes and finally emerged with a parabolic dish antenna. This he connected to the tuner on the workbench, then began a scan in all directions. Each time he waved the antenna at a particular spot, the little bump would become more pronounced.

"I can definitely track this," Harry said confidently. "Add

another station for triangulation, and I can give you the address."

Ernie was on the phone already, talking with Barbara. His side of the conversation, after giving her the good news, was a series of "Uh-huh's" punctuated with assorted "yes" and "no" answers.

Turning toward Harry, Ernie briefed him: "Barbara wants to know how fast you can throw together two or three portable versions of this rig. Then she added that she doesn't care how long it takes, she just needs them desperately."

"The answer to her first question is that all of this stuff is very high current draw, so portability is a problem," Harry explained. "But I know just what she's after, and three or four sets spaced far enough apart ought to do the trick. It's going to be expensive, though. We're talking maybe a Grand apiece for each station."

In response, Ernie took a wad of bills from his pocket and counted off forty one-hundred dollar bills. He handed the stack to Harry. "Do it, and keep going until you're out of money. Are your kids going to be able to run this equipment?"

Harry nodded. "Oh, sure. Once it's set up, there'll be nothing to run. All they'll have to do is rotate the dish and say where the signal is strongest. Piece of cake."

—==+++==—

The gate opened in what appeared to be a kitchen, although not a very glamorous one. Two men plunged through and immediately took positions covering each other with their shotguns. They were, however, the only two in the room. One of them stuck his hand back into the gate and waved his companions through. Four more armed men joined them.

They advanced in carefully rehearsed stages, until they could burst in upon the occupants of the Prestige Social Club, but when they finally arrived at the main room it was empty.

From the kitchen, one of their number called, and they returned there.

"This is definitely the right place. Look!" and he lifted a handful of frozen dinners from the freezer.

"Alright," their leader told them, "let's mark the spot and come back later. Everybody out."

They exited through the gate, their leader last. He flipped the power switch off and bent to mark the spot where the gate stood, and so missed being hit by the first volley that killed three of his men outright and wounded the other two. He spun around to find the source of the gunfire, but before he could react, two men were upon him, one on either side, and he was disarmed and seated on the

ground, his hands upon his head. From this position, he could see three more men coming down the ramp leading to the other gate. *They have taken the truck, too*, he thought.

Above the Prestige Social Club, six teenagers sat around a cluster of small television sets. "Kitchen," one of them called, "intruders in the kitchen, count two... count six... moving toward the door."

"Main hall," another spoke, "four of them entering from the kitchen."

The coordinator keyed the microphone. "Six intruders, four in the main hall, two in the kitchen."

Behind the Prestige Social Club, an outbuilding had been cleared of its contents enough to squeeze six of Arlo's Marines inside. "Ready?" their leader asked.

"Ready," they replied. He applied power to the gate and the point man poked his head through for a quick look around. He was back in an instant.

"I don't see any extra headcount. The area's clear."

Five men passed through the gate. The one left behind shut it off, and folded it down. Theirs was a do-or-die mission, a one-way trip. Two of the men immediately fanned out to either side of the one visible gate. The other three raced toward a pair of wooden ramps angling up and disappearing into thin air. With their suppressed Uzi carbines, two of them hit the boards running, and bounded through the gate in one step. The other trailing a spool of wire was a half step behind.

Beyond the gate was the cargo compartment of a medium truck containing a single occupant, their gatekeeper. It was the work of a moment to handcuff him and gag him so that he could not warn the driver of the truck, as yet oblivious to the activity behind him.

The wire of the spool was snugged against the rim of the spool and the whole assembly was made taut waiting for the signal. Outside at the other gate, the two men in their winter white coveralls spread apart to give themselves a clear field of fire. One held the end of the wire attached to the spool now inside the truck beyond the first gate. They settled down to wait, carefully taking aim at the gate assembly.

They didn't wait long. In what seemed like only a minute or two, six figures emerged from the invisible rectangle, and five of them executed a quick turn to the right and made straight for the ramps leading to the truck. One bent down and worked with the equipment at the gate.

"*Now or never*," the young Marine thought, and yanked the

wire sharply. Inside the truck, the spool of wire rattled and bounced across the floor, and the three Marines waiting in the darkness of the truck emptied their magazines through the gate, then immediately popped fresh magazines into their guns before joining their two comrades on the other side.

On the ground of Earth-II lay three dead, two wounded, and one, the team leader, captured. Their gate, already powered down, was moved to a position corresponding to 'inside the truck', then powered up. Two Marines re-entered the truck, shut off and disassembled the other gate and passed it through to their team waiting on the other side. The gatekeeper, still bound and gagged, was passed hand-over-hand through the remaining gate before it, too, was shut down.

At precisely the location of their original gate, as evidenced by their footprints in the soft earth, they reassembled one of the captured gates. The patrol leader then stepped through into the outbuilding, now occupied solely by their gatekeeper and his rifle.

"A-OK," he told the gatekeeper. "Four prisoners. There's a truck parked outside by the curb. It needs to be secured."

Their gatekeeper spoke into his walkie-talkie. Moments later, outside the Prestige Social Club, a car pulled to a stop next to the truck driver's door, one passenger exited, saying his good-byes to those inside the car, turned and stepped up onto the truck's running board. In the wink of an eye, the driver of the truck felt the muzzle of a silencer in his gut. At the same moment, another man appeared in the curb-side door, but it was locked. "Move over," he was told, "and unlock that door." The startled driver did as he was bidden, and now flanked by menace, he watched as the truck was backed into a service drive next to the club.

"Out," and they escorted him to the backyard outbuilding and through a gate into Earth-II. There, he found his gatekeeper and the patrol leader bound and gagged, and two of the team having their wounds attended. They all sat and waited.

12 — Duck For Cover

Ibrahim paced back and forth in the living room. He had been doing it for so long now that he was surprised the rug was not showing signs of wear. From time to time he would take a drag from his cigarette and pungent smoke would swirl around his head as he walked. The air in the room was becoming thick.

Fatah rose and looked out the window. "What can have gone wrong this time?"

"I don't know. I don't know," Ibrahim repeated. "Perhaps nothing has gone wrong. We don't know that anything has gone wrong. Why don't you have a little faith?"

"Because, Ibrahim, every operation we have planned against these infidels has gone disastrously wrong," Fatah snapped back at him. "Why should this one be any different? If we've lost another gate...", she wagged her index finger at him like a scolding mother, then closed it to a fist, scowled and turned away.

Ibrahim stepped to the front door of the house and signaled to one of the guards on the street to come closer. "Get a squad together," he spoke to the man in nearly a whisper, "and go through this house with a fine-toothed comb. See if you can find any 'bugs'. I think we're being listened to. Do your search without speaking. If we find any bugs, we want to be the only ones who know they've been discovered."

That guard called three more of his men together on the street outside the house and briefed them on what they were going to do and how they would proceed. Then the four of them moved indoors and began examining every detail. In the dining room, one ducked to look under the table and was rewarded by the sight of a small transmitter stuck to its underside.

With signs and gestures, he called the others over to see what he had found. They nodded as if in agreement that this was, indeed, the thing they were looking for. One of them made to pull it from its position beneath the table but a hand on his wrist stopped him.

Instead of removing it, they made a hand-lettered sign saying

BUG

and placed it on top of the table so that everyone would know of its

existence.

Now that they knew what they were looking for, the other conventional bugs were quickly found and their positions marked.

Communication within the house was now done primarily with paper and pencil. Anything of importance could not be discussed within the house. All planning was now done outdoors.

On the back porch, Ibrahim and Fatah discussed the situation.

"This is a very well-prepared group we're dealing with," Ibrahim admitted ruefully. "They could provide surveillance equipment to plant here on very little notice. They have already made one raid here and the bugs they planted have enabled them to defeat us at every turn.

"I think it is a foregone conclusion that our raid on their headquarters is another failure, as you said, Fatah. Our men are long overdue from a mission we expected should have taken them only minutes, one way or another, and now we know that all our planning has gone right into their ears. Curse me for not being more careful.

"I think it is clear, also, that this house is not defensible. We must abandon it and move our operation elsewhere."

"I agree, Ibrahim," Fatah spoke glumly. "Can we use the Spike base? Would we be safe there?"

"Probably," Ibrahim nodded. "Nothing is certain, but it seems the best alternative. I will have Khalil make the arrangements. We will be out of here before sunrise."

"Before we go, do you think it would be possible to use these bugs to set a trap for our friends?" Fatah asked.

"What did you have in mind, Fatah?"

"We had once talked about bombing one of their temples," Fatah mulled a plan. "Let's go back inside and firm-up those plans for the benefit of whichever ears might be listening. Then let us set our own trap for any they send to stop us. With luck, we may recapture a gate or two."

"Ah. Excellent."

—==++++==—

They held a brief 'dress rehearsal' out on the back porch to give all the actors last minute instructions on how they were to play their parts. Some of the parts were merely 'observer' parts. Others involved in the play did not know — were not told — that they were playing a part.

"The important thing for you observers is not — I repeat — not to get involved in the planning session," Ibrahim instructed them.

"Your job is to listen and to decide how you would thwart the plan being put together inside. Clear?" They each nodded that they understood.

"Fatah, you and I are to be the plan facilitators. The target will be either Temple Eretz or Temple Beth Shalom. Let them get as detailed as they want. All the better for our observers. As in any brainstorming session, we should avoid negatives. Always accept every idea no matter how bizarre it might sound at first, because any idea might have a brilliant gem at its core."

"Understood," they all acknowledged.

"Good let's go inside and start." Ibrahim turned and led them inside.

They gathered, eight of them: Fatah and Ibrahim, two observers, and four of the more experienced fighters in the group, spaced evenly around the dining room table. The 'BUG' sign had been removed, and all involved had been assured that the room had been swept for listening devices. In fact, only the other rooms had had their devices removed, generally with appropriate noises to indicate that the bug had been found, after which it would be put out of service. This room still had a transmitter gooped to the underside of the table, and Fatah and Ibrahim were counting on someone still having their ear to its receiver.

"Let's start," Ibrahim ordered. "We are here to plan our next operation. The last few have ended disastrously because this house had been bugged by our enemies. We have handled that, and now it is time to strike back. We lost six of our best men in the last raid. I intend to take revenge one-hundredfold for their loss. The council has suggested that either Temple Eretz or Temple Beth Shalom should be our target."

"Why not both?" one of the fighters asked. Fatah was about to explain that they were so short of everything that they could not support simultaneous attacks when Ibrahim read her face and held up his hand.

"That is always possible," Ibrahim told him. "If you think it would be easier to plan two operations at once, we can do that."

"Ah, yes," the first replied, "complete the planning for one, then do the other. That makes more sense." Ibrahim nodded. "Do we have enough gates?"

Again, Fatah was about to say, "We're down to only three" when Ibrahim stopped her.

"The number of gates is not infinite," Ibrahim told him, "but do not worry. We are adequately equipped for any operation. Go on."

"Either of these operations," another began, "requires us to work beyond the gate for some time. We should know what the

terrain looks like before we do any serious planning. We can continue now and get much of the basic planning done, but maybe we should send someone to make some photographs of what we will be faced with while we are here doing the planning."

"An excellent idea," Ibrahim agreed.

Ibrahim stepped away from the table while the others continued to talk and spoke with one of his aides: "Put a small team together and take one gate with you. Get pairs of pictures of each target from about the same spot, always the first from this side of the gate and the second from the other side. Get pairs of shots from many different angles. On your way back, get them printed. Any questions? No? Go." Ibrahim returned to the table.

"I think we ought to just satchel-charge the perimeter and bring the whole structure down. It might not kill everyone inside, but it will get most of them, and the ones who are left alive will be able to tell how awful it was. That's what we want, isn't it?"

"Yes," one of the others agreed, "but that will require a great deal of time being spent in the open by several of us. What if someone sees us?"

"So, you kill one of them earlier than expected."

"You know what I mean," the first one objected. "They'll probably have guards posted what with all their leaders packed inside. We could get into a fire-fight and I don't think that's what we want."

"That's right. We don't want a fire-fight," another added. "Perhaps we can set the charges earlier in the day and blow them when the time is right."

She wore a most serious expression as she spoke into the phone. "Daddy, you better come over here right away and listen to this tape. These guys are really going to kill someone."

"I'll be right there," Harry told his daughter. Arlo turned to face Buck, Barbara, and Ernie. "It's getting real serious. The kids are getting spooked."

A few minutes later they entered the room above the Prestige Social Club where was housed their electronic surveillance operation. Arlo put a hand on his daughter's shoulder.

"Quiet?" he asked her.

"Uh-huh."

He took a fresh tape, popped the old one out of the player and replaced it with the new one. The old one went immediately to the spare player in the corner. The four huddled around it and listened to the playback.

"Sounds like they found some of the bugs," one said.

"Yeah, but not all of them" was the reply.

"I don't like the sound of this," another offered. "They're going to do a vengeance op having already lost — what — twenty headcount and a stack of gates? They're crazy."

"They're not crazy," Arlo explained, "they just don't have a whole tactician between them."

"Doesn't matter," Harry muttered. "We have to stop them from pulling this off regardless. That guy had a good idea — we ought to scout the other side before planning a counter-op."

"There's another site we ought to investigate as well — that apartment building on 11th Avenue," Ernie suggested. "I'd like to see how they got there and where they came from. They probably think of it as a pretty safe place. I'd like to hear what goes on at their entry point."

"Yeah, we could do that," Harry mused.

—==++++==—

Arlo answered the doorbell and was met by a boy in his late teens who said nothing but handed him a note. Arlo opened the note and read:

*Just spoke with two NSA agents looking for leads to
Barbara or Buck fitzGibbon. Phones may be tapped.
Just thought you might want to know.*

— Gillman

"Thanks," Arlo told him, and the boy took the note and turned away. "Buck," he shouted down the hall, "trouble brewing."

"What's up, Arlo," Buck asked.

"Just got a note from Major Gillman," Arlo told Buck. "He says NSA is looking for you and Barbara. Why would NSA be interested?"

"There's all that ordnance that was stolen," Buck mused. "Some of it certainly was used on our house in Boulder. Officially, we're dead, but it may not be officially enough. Arlo, I don't want to be interviewed by NSA. There's just too much an experienced interrogator might get out of me — any of us — given time. You probably don't want to be interviewed either, but that's up to you."

"For sure we need a good cover story," Arlo agreed. "How about: you're on vacation, just passing through?"

"That is, I didn't tell you the whole story, and you don't know anything at all about what went down in Boulder?" Buck continued Arlo's thought. "Too bizarre. If you know me well enough to put me up, you almost certainly know my Boulder address and what happened to it. Let's try something simpler: we're on the run, you provided us

with a safe house for a day or two and now we've moved on. You don't know where."

Barbara and Ernie had joined the conversation part way through and now Barbara added: "And please don't mention Ernie unless they bring it up first. The less he gets involved, the better. If they press for information about where we're headed, tell them 'Maine' or 'Canada'. Can you stonewall beyond that?"

"We'll do what we can, Barbara."

—==++++==—

Two men and two women were waiting at the door when Arlo answered the next ring. They each held their identification open for him to see that they were not salespeople.

"Mr. Rubinstein, we're from the National Security Agency, NSA," one of them, probably the senior agent, began. "We'd like to talk with you. May we come in?"

"All of you?" Arlo asked.

"Well," Marjorie Evans hesitated, "yes, may we all come in?"

"Am I under suspicion for a crime or am I about to be arrested?" Arlo asked her.

"No, sir, neither of those," Marjorie assured him. "We just want to ask you a few questions."

"You can come in, agent..." Arlo looked closer at her ID card, "agent Evans. The rest can wait outside."

"We can get a search warrant, if necessary, Mr. Rubinstein," Marjorie pressed him.

"I just asked you if I was under suspicion and you answered 'no'," Arlo challenged her. "What could you possibly take before a magistrate to obtain a warrant to search the home of someone who is not under suspicion of a crime? I didn't, by the way, refuse my cooperation. I just don't want an army trooping through my house."

"Mr. Rubinstein," one of the men interjected, "we can talk here or we can talk back at the office. It's your choice."

"Then you are going to arrest me," Arlo challenged. "What's the charge?"

"No, sir, we're not going to arrest you. We'll just take you in for questioning."

"Let me explain something, son," Arlo told the agent, "I've already offered my limited cooperation — here. If you want something else, you will — let me make that clearer — you will arrest me. Is there anything I said that you didn't understand?" They shook their heads. "Good. Now don't try anymore of that hard-nose bullshit with me. I'm a retired Marine Corps Master Sergeant. I was teaching

recruits how to be hard-noses when you were still wetting your pants. Agent Evans," and he stepped aside to let Marjorie Evans pass.

"Mr. Rubinstein," she asked as she crossed the threshold, "are you armed?"

Arlo paused briefly, then answered: "I don't believe I should answer that question, Agent Evans. However, I am retired Marine Corps. You should presume I have something deadly nearby. You're worried about your safety, being alone inside this house. I assure you that you have nothing to fear from me or anyone else in my household."

"What about Marion E. fitzGibbon?" she asked.

"Buck..." Arlo corrected her.

"Is that how he's known? Buck, then," she corrected herself. "What about Buck fitzGibbon and his daughter, Barbara?"

"If they were still here I would have no qualms about assuring you of their good will, either," Arlo told her.

"Then they were here?" she countered.

"Here and gone," Arlo answered. "What do you want with Buck?"

"Actually, it's Barbara fitzGibbon we want to speak with," Marjorie Evans informed Arlo. "She has information we need about some very dangerous people. It's imperative we speak with her. If you have any information as to their whereabouts, Mr. Rubinstein, please tell us. This is a matter of great urgency that could seriously threaten the security of our country."

"What I got from Buck and Barbara was that someone is trying to kill them," Arlo told Marjorie Evans, "even went so far as to blow up their house. They're on the run, Agent Evans. If you want to help, find the people who want them dead."

"Mr. Rubinstein, I think you're wrong on at least one count," Marjorie responded. "Buck and Barbara fitzGibbon are not 'on the run'. They're the hunters, not the hunted. We know the identities of the people who blew up their house in Boulder. Almost certainly the fitzGibbons know also. We think the fitzGibbons are trying to kill them, possibly before they, themselves, become victims. It's important, in a national security sense, that the information they all carry, probably in their heads, not be lost. It's critical that both the fitzGibbons and their intended victims be kept alive. I appeal to your unquestioned patriotism to help us find these people — all of them."

"They mentioned Maine," Arlo said softly. "They mentioned Canada."

"Not the Middle East?" Marjorie asked, sounding surprised.

Arlo tried very hard to maintain his poker face while his mind raced to reconstruct his strategy. This agent was very well informed.

NSA knew or suspected far more than any of them had presumed.

"Where in the Middle East?" It was a tactical blunder on Arlo's part.

Now it was Marjorie's turn to scramble for a fresh strategy.

"Mr. Rubinstein, your idea of 'limited cooperation' is very different than I originally contemplated," she rounded on him. "You're obviously holding back far more information than is congruent with the notion of 'cooperation'. We may, in fact, have to arrest you. The charges would be Espionage and Sabotage, Theft of Government property — there's more. Mr. Rubinstein, you need to tell me much more than you've obviously planned, or you need to adjust your plans to include incarceration."

"That would not get you what you say you want," Arlo answered her in like-fashion "unless what you want is something else, something unsaid."

"Where are the fitzGibbons?" Marjorie demanded.

"Tell me what will happen to them if you find them," Arlo insisted.

"They'll be questioned," Marjorie said. "Depending on their answers, they may be arrested. They may be taken into protective custody..."

"...and killed," Arlo finished.

"Do you think NSA would kill them, Mr. Rubinstein?" Marjorie challenged him.

"No," Arlo admitted, "but from what I've heard them say, not even NSA has enough muscle to protect them in confinement. You would take them into protective custody or arrest them for anything at all and they would both die for it, probably within the day. Go ahead and arrest me," Arlo pushed back, "but don't expect that I'll give Buck and Barbara to you. Their only chance is on the outside."

"And they've moved on?" Marjorie offered.

"Yes," Arlo lied.

"I could have a search warrant here in twenty minutes, Mr. Rubinstein," Marjorie suggested. "Do I need to do that?"

"If you think it would be productive to search my house, Agent Evans, you should start by obtaining a warrant," Arlo told her, the friendly tone he initially had now completely gone. "Now, I think our business is concluded. Let me show you to the door."

Marjorie Evans opened her cellular phone and began to key numbers. Arlo reached over and took it from her hand.

"You were invited in to ask me a few questions, Agent Evans," Arlo snapped angrily. "You've done that. If you want to do something else, make a telephone call, for instance, you can do it outside my house. Let me show you to the door."

As Arlo and Marjorie Evans moved toward the front door, Buck, Barbara, and Ernie gathered luggage and gates and prepared to slip into Earth-II with a small group of volunteer helpers. When the NSA returned with their warrant, no trace would be left of them in this house or in this world.

13 — Endgame

It was snowing in Earth-II but there was little wind, for which they were extremely thankful. Two mountain tents were quickly set up and camp stoves began to warm them. Each minute that ticked along in Earth-II was three minutes gone by in Arlo's house just beyond the now unpowered gate. Three of Arlo's Marines who claimed either engineering experience or outdoorsman's skills helped Buck, Barbara, and Ernie get acclimated to life in the wilderness. Buck, of course, having spent many months in many countries around the world always living a frontier existence, felt far less threatened than did his urbanite daughter and her equally tenderfoot companion. Even so, it was going to be a hard winter.

They took turns with the axes working on felling trees to be turned, eventually, into a more formal shelter and other useful structures. The hard work had the beneficial effect of keeping their bodies warm and their minds occupied. The worries that would normally have plagued them were crowded out by the necessities of the tasks they had laid out for themselves. First among these was to build a platform on which a gate could be laid horizontally, positioned so that it was near, and just below, the ceiling of Arlo's living room. Once this was done, a gate could be opened where there would be no danger of anyone accidentally blundering into it, a very hazardous thing to do given the ease with which the edge of the portal could slice material objects. A select few, a *trusted* select few would be told of the existence of the portal. Its primary purpose would be to allow someone in Earth-I to signal that it was safe to return from Earth-II. Barbara and Ernie were very anxious to have that task completed.

By their best reckoning, felling the trees, constructing the platform, and building a makeshift ladder (none of which were readily available in the twenty-or-so minutes they thought NSA might give them) took them most of a day. That meant that nearly three days had slipped by in Earth-I. They badly needed to re-establish contact with Arlo.

They had no idea how badly they needed to re-establish contact.

—==++++==—

Anwar and Fatah pored over finely-detailed street maps, marking them with the locations where their scouts had set up gates

and trying to decide, based on the photos they had from those positions, what terrain they would find on the other side. It was mind-wracking work to annotate the maps with details from the photographs because there was no reliable scale to help determine if this rock were 50 feet away or 150 feet away. They had to do a great deal of guessing, something that could cost them dearly in time, not to mention lives, if they were too far off. Two whole days of round-the-clock work, including many face-to-face interviews with the scouts, had given them as clear a picture of the congruences as they were likely to get. Before putting their final seal of approval on the blueprint, they called the scouts and team leaders together for a preliminary briefing.

"We've settled on Temple Eretz as the primary target," Anwar explained. There were several nods of approval. "The preliminary plan is to satchel-charge the walls of the building. We will carry the explosives through Earth-II, open gates near the walls — inside the walls, if there are hollow spaces, would be even better — set timers, and retreat to safety. It seems to us that a Friday-night attack leaves us too little time to pull all the details together, but that is up to you, the operation leaders, to decide. A Saturday-morning op will likely do as much damage and we will have that much more time to prepare.

"Fatah looks as tired as I am, so we are going to get some rest while you flesh-out the details of the plan. These maps—" He laid the maps he and Fatah had so meticulously marked out on the table. "—are marked to indicate features you will see in Earth-II and where, approximately, they correspond to features in Earth-I. You should take what you see here as 'a good guess'. We have tried to be as accurate as we could, but we could be off by quite a lot without being able to check. The photographs you provided enabled us to triangulate quite closely, but everything you see here is, nevertheless, just a guess.

"Lay out your plans as best you can. Fatah and I will meet with you in the morning and we will all, jointly, agree on the final details. And now, if there are no pressing questions, Fatah and I are both exhausted and need some sleep."

Planning for the op continued through into the early morning, at which time everyone seemed to be pretty much agreed on how the attack would proceed. It remained only to present it to Ibrahim, Fatah, and Anwar and get their approval. Every contingency had been covered in an hours-long discussion the totality of which, Anwar, Fatah and Ibrahim knew, was being carefully listened-to by their foes. It didn't matter. The real operation was preliminary to this one. When these operatives crossed into Earth-II with their munitions, there

would already be a strike team positioned to intercept the men sent against them. With luck, they would not simply capture hostages, but they would increase their supply of gates. They *had* to increase their supply of gates: they were down to their last three. They were at, or close to, the point of not being able to complete an operation.

—==+++==—

In the 'Research' area of NSA's New York office, Tom Nolan pored through hour after boring hour of surveillance reels hoping for a match. True, all he had to do was load the reels. He didn't have to watch them, although there was little else to do until one of the machines signaled a need for another reel or a printed sheet dropped into the output bin. The computer attached to the viewing system automatically scanned anything it decided was a 'face' and compared it to the seventy-three faces selected from the frames in the 'Arrivals' area of JFK International Airport the night Al Beddowes and Fatah Abou-Saad had landed in New York. A few of the faces were of especial interest, the three people who greeted the pair at Baggage Claim, but four others seemed to have more than a passing interest in the group, obviously watching them, and departing at almost exactly the same time. That brought the total to nine images that were tagged as 'high priority', and there were sixty-four more that were probably of no interest at all except that Marjorie Evans had told them to check everything. Surveillance tapes from many areas of the city with heavy Middle-Eastern populations were copied either with the source's permission or surreptitiously. NSA had years of experience with that.

When a viewing machine came across a face on its list, it would print the frame, captioning it with the date and time the frame was snapped and the location. It didn't happen very often, and many times the 'hit' would turn out to be a false alarm but every sheet that dropped into the bin was sure to get individual and very close attention. The machines weren't perfect, but they were pretty good. Each sheet that looked like a 'probable' resulted in a pin on a wall map of the city. Each pin had a little flag on which was written the date and time the image was snapped. The map now had over a hundred pins and a pattern was clearly beginning to form. Oddly, there was one area in Queens where the cameras had seen several different faces from the 'hot list' and it was remarkably close to where another line of investigation had said a very close friend of Marion fitzGibbon lived: Arlo Rubinstein. Stake-out teams would soon begin to infiltrate the areas of heaviest concentration.

In fact, stake-out teams were already being formed and the

images from the viewers' output were being circulated among those who would be expected to identify and track the people who matched the pictures. Unusual facial characteristics, moles and the like, were duly noted and the agents committed such details to memory. On the first day on stake-out, two 'probables' were identified, tracked, and their residences located.

When someone knocks on the door, the natural inclination is to open it to see who is doing the knocking. In other circumstances, a heavily armed team might break the door down and force entry, but in this quiet neighborhood the spectacle of a 'dynamic entry' was deemed not worth the likely bad publicity for a bad warrant. This could, after all, be a big nothing.

A burka-clad woman who answered the door in response to Tareeta Washington's knock was more than a little surprised at the sight of four well-dressed people. "Salaam," Tareeta Washington greeted her, holding her NSA credentials in one hand and a search warrant in the other. "I have a warrant to search these premises. Please stand aside." The woman was so flustered that she did as she was bidden. The four NSA agents entered the house, guns drawn, and fanned out to cover each other.

"Who else is in the house?" an agent demanded. The woman's eyes flickered toward the kitchen briefly and that was enough to alert the NSA team. When they burst into the kitchen, however, they found no one. The few seconds warning given by the act of answering the door allowed Fatah and Anwar to slip into another room and out the back door. They each shinnied over the fence at the back of the lot into a neighbor's yard and escaped down the driveway separating the houses.

Their route would have guaranteed a clean getaway had it not been for the presence on the planning team of an agent who had grown up in this area. The method used by Fatah and Anwar was not new. It had been used by teen-aged boys (and sometimes girls) for at least 50 years, and probably longer. The second team arrested them before they got to the corner.

The old woman was also detained, as well as one other man who was found in the basement asleep. Within the hour, all were being interrogated, but without much success.

Fatah was of particular interest, since she was known to be a 'close associate' of Alfred Beddowes Jr., who was a person of maximal interest. NSA badly wanted to know where Beddowes could be located and they were exerting extreme pressure on Fatah to give up that information. Fatah, in turn, knew that she could never tell them, nor even hint that she might know, without jeopardizing the entire

operation. She steadfastly refused to acknowledge having seen Al since they arrived in New York. NSA's interrogators began to consider other options.

—==+++==—

Periodically, someone would push a broom up to the ceiling of Arlo's living room to see if a gate had opened. As the second day wore into the third, the bristles of the broom fluoresced and disappeared briefly. "Arlo!" he called as he reached for the green dish towel, the pre-arranged signal to Barbara, Buck, and Ernie to 'come home'. The green towel was wrapped around the broom-head and shoved back through the portal. Moments later, Buck stepped through a second gate into Arlo's living room, followed immediately by Barbara and Ernie. On the other side of the gate in Earth-II, night was falling on a winter wilderness, and the temperatures were already well below freezing.

Arlo greeted them: "We're glad you're back. There's trouble brewing. The towelheads are in the final stages of planning an op against a synagogue on the upper west side. If they pull this off, very many people are going to die spectacularly. This might be our last chance to shut them down for good. Come on over here and we'll fill you in with the details."

They all sat around a large table and discussed what they knew and what they suspected about the plans being formed only a half-mile away that would result in mass murder if allowed to come to fruition. According to Harry Tumulty, they had decided to pass on Friday night because there was too little time for preparation, opting instead for an attack timed to coincide with Saturday services.

The radio came to life: "Q-base, Forward. Something strange is happening."

Arlo grabbed the hand-held. "Forward, what are you seeing?"

"Four 'suits' knocked on the door about five or ten minutes ago and went in. They just exited the house with an old man and an old woman. The other two we thought were in the house — no sign of them."

"'Colorado' is missing?" Arlo inquired, referring to Fatah.

"Affirmative."

"Shit. OK, pull back to HQ. We'll probably need you here." He hung up the phone and immediately dialed another number, a friend-of-a-friend who had an inside track in the NYPD. After exchanging pleasantries, Arlo got right to the point with him: "Detectives — we think they were detectives — picked up two people

at 10379 Herkimer, and there may be others they're still looking for. We need to know what's going down, where they're being held, and why. Yeah, I know it's a lot to ask, but you have Mark's assurance that we're on the up-and-up and I'll tell you that it's critical we have some very good intelligence very soon on these people. OK, thanks." Arlo hung up the phone.

They sat and waited, because that was all they could do.

At NSA's New York office, Fatah, Anwar, Ibrahim, and the old woman were separately questioned. Having discussed exactly this possibility just after Al's death, they all knew what they could say and what they couldn't say.

Fatah offered that, yes, she had traveled to New York with Al Beddowes, Jr., but that she hadn't seen him since the morning following their arrival when he was picked up by a limousine, and, oh-by-the-way she was very worried that he has been gone for several days now even though he had assured her he might be gone for as much as a whole week. No, she didn't know why they were here. She had decided to accompany him because she had many relatives and friends here that she hadn't seen in a very long time.

Anwar and Ibrahim admitted having met Al briefly, but hadn't seen him since, and had no knowledge of the purpose for his trip. They were happy, however, that their distant cousin, Fatah, had come along because it had been many years since they last had the pleasure of her company. The old woman spoke only in Arabic and, through a translator, denied paying much attention to the goings-on around her, except to say she was happy to see Fatah again.

Arlo's phone rang and he picked it up quickly. On the other end of the line, his contact at NYPD gave him the bad news. No NYPD detectives had been involved in the operation. But he also had some good news: rumors he had been told of said that a federal judge had issued a search warrant for the same address earlier that day at the request of NSA.

Would NSA use NYPD lock-ups for holding such prisoners? His contact admitted that he had never heard of NSA or any other federal agency using NYPD facilities for that and suspected they had their own detention areas. At a prod from Arlo, he gave up the only address he had for the local office of NSA but noted that it was only 'hear-say' since NSA doesn't broadcast such information. Everyone put their heads together to decide what they would (or could) do with this new information.

Harry Tumulty began: "There are two things I think we ought to consider: First, we have had several 'blips' at 68.714 megahertz and have pretty much pinpointed the origin. It's in upper Manhattan on 11th avenue, and I'm pretty sure it's very close to that apartment

building that blew up earlier in the week. With a little scouting-around, we might be able to zero in on whoever has the gate that's making all the noise.

"Second, we might be able to snatch those people away from NSA. If NSA has reservations about wiring them up for questioning, I don't, and I want what's between their ears, and I want them to be punished for what they did to Art and Little Artie."

"I doubt NSA has any such reservations, Harry," Barbara assured him, "but we ought to consider doing that if only for self-preservation. There's no telling how much Fatah and the others know about us, even if it's just in-general-terms. The less NSA knows about us, the better." A murmur of approval rumbled around the table. "I say," she continued, "we get them out of there before they blab."

A team was dispatched to the address they had for NSA to scope it out and to reconnoiter the terrain on the other side. When they returned in the early-morning hours of the next day, the plan was already well-formed: they would almost certainly have to build a tower, but the experience of building a very small structure in Earth-II had taught them the essential impossibility of doing much of the work there. It was just too costly in terms of time. Instead, the basic millwork would be done in Earth-I and the parts transported to the construction site. There it would be passed through and assembled on the other side. Since NSA's offices appeared to be on the third floor, the structure would not even have to be very tall. Twenty or thirty feet ought to do it. And cost was not a problem. Ernie still had half of what he had gotten from Dennis Cameron.

When the lumber yard opened in the morning, an empty truck waited to be filled with the contents of a quite long shopping list. By 9am it was on station in an alley a short half-block from NSA's local headquarters. With the truck and the van tail-to-tail the wooden beams and planks were dressed by power tools in the truck bed and passed into the van where they disappeared. If anyone noticed that many 16-foot pieces of lumber were being successfully loaded into a 12-foot van, they didn't say so. New Yorkers are better than most at minding their own business.

On the other side of the gate, the pieces of the tower were assembled almost as fast as they were received. Before lunch the tower stood 28 feet tall and provided a place where a gate could be opened *somewhere* inside NSA. The problem now was: *where* inside NSA would it open?

Careful calculation — as careful as possible under the circumstances — gave them confidence they would be near and behind the elevator shafts. What was to be found there was anybody's guess. When the first volunteer poked his face through the gate (after first

testing to make sure there was actually 'space' beyond it) he was back in an instant to report: "Completely dark — it must be a closet or storeroom". When he finally stepped through completely, a flashlight showed him that he had been correct: the room was full of filing cabinets, including an entire bank directly behind the gate. Had they positioned it less than a foot back from where it was, they would have been inside the filing cabinet itself.

More detailed calculations and a quick reconfiguration of the tower made their next try a success: the gate, now horizontal, opened in the space above the ceiling panels and above an area filled with desks in cubicles. Carefully, the ceiling panel was lifted and moved slightly aside to give them a better view of the area. There seemed to be few people about. Perhaps these were work areas for field agents to complete reports and such between assignments. At the extreme other end of the floor on a windowless wall were a series of rooms with obviously armed men standing guard. A laser rangefinder gave them the exact distance to the wall. As carefully as it came out, the ceiling panel was replaced.

The design of the tower had been done with the idea that it would have to be moved, and quickly, from place to place. In a stroke of good fortune, the ground in Earth-II was nearly level, enough that blocks would keep wheels from rolling. The tower, to take advantage of that, was based on oversize wheels that could be man-handled to make them roll and blocked to make them stop. It was the work of a few minutes to relocate the tower to the area just beyond the guards. Positioned once again in the space above the ceiling panels, a quick peek into the room revealed an old man and an old woman. These people were of no interest.

Repositioning the gate above the next room, they struck pay-dirt: Fatah Abou-Saad sat handcuffed by one arm to a chair. Three quick measurements with the rangefinder gave them a good idea where the gate must open next. A note saying "Don't move. We're coming to rescue you" fluttered from the ceiling toward Fatah. She caught the movement in her peripheral vision, and snatched the note out of the air with her free hand as it got within range. She opened it one-handed, read it, and smiled.

A moment later a gate opened next to the chair and a hand reached through. Fatah eagerly grabbed the hand and it pulled her through the gate into Earth-II. When power was cut to the gate, the chain of the handcuffs was sliced in half. Fatah's smile of satisfaction dissolved immediately into a frown as she realized she recognized none of the faces before her.

"Who are you?" she asked them. "Where is Anwar?"

"We haven't located him yet," Ernie informed her. "Are you

alright?"

"Yes, yes," she assured him. Then again: "Who are you?"

"We're friends of Barbara and Buck fitzGibbon," Ernie informed her casually. "Do you recognize those names?"

The frown across her face deepened. "No, should I?" Her only option at this point was proclaiming her innocence.

Ernie just shrugged his shoulders and led her to the ladder leading down to the ground. Once down, she was given a blanket to protect her from the wintry weather and offered a steaming cup of coffee. She felt she might just make it out of this in one piece if her 'rescuers' could be convinced she were an innocent bystander to Al's machinations. She had as yet no idea that would be impossible, but she knew it was a bad sign that Barbara fitzGibbon was interested in her.

Up on the tower, the gate was again moved to a spot above the next room, but it was empty. The next 'room' farther on was actually outside the building. It was quite startling to push through the gate only to find yourself looking straight down at the sidewalk two stories below. Checking the rooms (if any) at the other end required that they relocate the tower again. A few minutes of pushing and shoving got the tower where they thought they needed it and another attempt was made to locate the person Fatah had called "Anwar". This next 'room' appeared to be a control room of some sort. At one end was a large window through which could be seen an interrogation room so familiar in its layout that this room must surely be the other side of its one-way mirror. Through the window, they could see a man sitting at a table, his hands cuffed to the chair arms. Someone was speaking to him, but the words were muffled and indistinct. Periodically, Anwar's lips would move.

"They've got Anwar in the interrogation room," Ernie called down. "What now?"

The Marines at the foot huddled to discuss what their next move ought to be. One of them turned to Fatah and asked her: "When were you questioned last?"

"Yesterday afternoon, I think," she told them. "We can't see any windows, so we don't have any idea how much time is passing. I'm probably due for another session pretty soon."

That complicated matters. Anwar would soon be returned to his room and Fatah would be moved into the interrogation room, except that she was then going to be discovered to be 'missing'. All Hell was about to break loose. If they were going to snatch Anwar, it had to be the instant he was returned to his room, and they didn't even know with certainty which room that was, although it seemed highly likely the empty room was Anwar's.

"Get this tower back over there where the empty room was," their patrol leader ordered. Six men started heaving the tower around on its wheels to point it toward its new location. Time was flashing by here in Earth-II at three times the rate for Anwar and his interrogators. Every second that ticked by brought them nearer to being discovered or, worse, caught.

With the tower in place, the horizontal gate was opened and a ceiling tile carefully shifted to allow a peek into the room. Anwar was not yet 'back'. Guessing that he would be shackled in the same fashion as Fatah, a gate was positioned next to the arm of the chair where Anwar would be, they hoped, seated. Since Fatah had been handcuffed on her right, they positioned it for a similar 'grab'.

In a very short time, the door opened and Anwar was led in, seated in his chair, and handcuffed — on his left. Ernie pulled back into Earth-II and told the crew: "He's handcuffed on the left. Move that gate about three feet over and make the grab. Do it now."

In Earth-I, the two agents had already left Anwar's room, and they paused outside Fatah's room to exchange small talk with the guards there. In that moment, a gate opened next to Anwar's chair, a hand reached through and grabbed the front of his shirt. Before Anwar could protest — before he even noticed — he was standing in the frigid air of Earth-II 28 feet above the ground on a rickety wooden platform and the handcuffs once holding him to the chair now dangled uselessly from his wrist.

"Who...? What...?" he stammered.

"Never mind," Ernie told him. "All will be explained in due course. Fatah is already here, but before we let you talk to her, we have a few questions of our own."

The gates were quickly broken down and passed down to waiting hands below. Fatah went through to the waiting van in the company of four Marines. Anwar followed a few minutes later and was transported in the truck. Both arrived at the Prestige Social Club a few minutes apart, long enough that neither was sure the other went to the same location. Held in widely separated parts of the building, they would be questioned separately and their answers compared.

At NSA, Fatah had been discovered 'missing' just seconds after Anwar had disappeared into Earth-II, and Anwar's status had been confirmed mere moments later. To say that NSA was 'frantic' was to drastically understate the situation. The entire building had gone on immediate lock-down: no one in, no one out, but it was all for nothing. There was no sign of either Anwar or Fatah beyond the half-handcuffs uselessly clamped to the arms of their chairs with cut-lines so smooth you could use the ends for mirrors. The technology they so desperately wanted had been used, there was no doubt, to snatch the

most valuable assets NSA had ever yet had in their possession.

From headquarters in Washington the orders went out: arrest everybody. That, too, would be 'too little, too late' since Arlo, the only person NSA knew or suspected was associated with Barbara fitzGibbon, had gone on 'vacation' to Connecticut, bunking in with 'friends' who would die before allowing him to be taken into custody. Everyone else involved in the operation, save only the four whose faces had been identified at the airport, were so low-profile that they were virtually unknown. The other four knew so little they were not a security risk, but they all 'went fishing in Pennsylvania' just to be sure they weren't where they could be easily found.

Neither Fatah nor Anwar would admit anything beyond the basics: Fatah had flown to New York with Al, who had disappeared shortly afterward. Anwar had, of course, met young Mr. Beddowes but hadn't seen him since that day. The questioning was getting nowhere. Neither would budge from their prepared stories. Buck began to wonder if they might be telling the truth. Of course, there were those crates of rockets in Fatah's garage.

Regardless, Harry Tumulty had solid vectors from three locations, all pointing to a single spot in upper Manhattan. It was now their only lead. They set to planning another mission.

The vector information pointed to the vicinity of the George Washington Bridge, about 13 miles, over 20,000 meters away. At that distance, even the most accurate readings had to be taken with a grain of salt. More bearings from much closer and with much greater angular displacement were going to be needed. One unit was sent to Pelham and a second to an office building in midtown Manhattan. Wherever the gate was, it had been radiating on-and-off for four solid days. While it stayed open they would be able to take continuously better bearings until it was pinpointed.

—==++++==—

The apartment on 11th Avenue had been turned into a 'war room' of sorts. The operation against Temple Eretz was being prepared here and the only thing missing was permission from Anwar to carry it out. Anwar, however, had disappeared along with the girl from Colorado and Ibrahim and his wife. Not knowing whether their plan had been compromised, no one wanted to take the chance that they might lose another gate or, worse, more of their compatriots' lives.

They used the time until Anwar or Ibrahim should contact them again to continue refining the plan laid out for them. Periodic forays into Earth-II were made to exactly locate Earth-I landmarks so

that when the moment came to execute the attack, it could be carried out with extreme precision.

Within hours of setting up listening posts in the East Bronx and Manhattan, vectors from those points were established that zeroed-in on a point that all the maps said was very close to Broadway at 112th Street. At that spot 11th Avenue had become West End Avenue and then merged with Broadway as Broadway wiggled its way toward the Hudson on its journey toward Spuyten Duyvil. Anyone walking north on 11th Avenue would not have noticed the change.

An insertion team was formed and set out for the target area. They set up their observation post in Earth-II a few hundred meters northeast of the point they thought was the location of the gate. They spent nearly an entire day — only seven hours in Earth-II — observing the area for evidence of human activity before seeing a ladder extended downward from ‘thin air’ to the ground and men descending it. In fact, they hadn’t seen the ladder itself until three human figures began to make the descent to the ground from what had to be a gate. At that moment, they realized their ‘target’ had been in sight all along.

Those three figures marched off toward the north-northwest approximately at a right angle from the observation post. They carried measuring devices and cans of spray paint that they used now and again to indicate the location of some landmark. Periodically, they would set up a second gate and one of them would poke through to observe what was on the other side.

“We could really use a tower like we had for the NSA op,” one of the Marines opined. “We could pop into that room, grab their gate, and be gone before they knew what hit them.” Unfortunately, there was nothing any of them would describe as ‘cover’ anywhere near where the ladder descended to the ground. There was no place to assemble a tower, and no place to hide it until the time for any attack.

“Maybe,” one of them suggested, “we could use the ladder that’s there already. Didn’t Harry say they were leaving the gate powered on all the time?”

“That’s right,” another confirmed. “If the gate wasn’t open, the ladder couldn’t be there suspended in mid-air.”

“OK, so how do we snag their gate without powering it down?” a third noted. “And when we power it down, what happens to that ladder? It’s going to be sliced in two, this part falling to the ground, the other part winding up on the floor of someone’s apartment. After it’s cut in two, how do we get back here?” They all mulled this problem for a few moments.

"Why do we have to come back here?" one of them asked. "We could power the gate down, collapse it, and exit the building onto 11th Avenue, flag a cab, and go home."

"And what do you think the occupants of that apartment might be doing while you're executing this plan, Burt?" the patrol leader asked. "Are you thinking they'll be so stunned by your audacity that they'll be immobilized?"

"They have to sleep, don't they, Mark? Let's do it in the very-early-morning when everyone (I hope) will be snoring."

"This is New York, where people deadbolt their doors from the inside," Mark countered. "What if you need a key to get out of the apartment?"

"OK, we check that first," Burt suggested. "If the front door is dead-bolted we abandon the op, and exit back down the ladder."

"I've got a better idea," one of the younger men told them. "If the front door is secured, we'll have their gate. Power it on, wave it onto the locks, power it off. Poof! No more locks. Just a big hole where the locks used to be."

"That's a plan," Mark, the patrol leader, offered. "Let's do it!"

One of them was sent back through the gate to wait in Earth-I until his cell phone said it was 20 minutes after one in the morning. He set the phone's alarm to wake him at the proper time, then closed his eyes for a nap. At exactly 1:20am the phone's alarm feature played 'reveille' and years of Pavlovian training kicked in: he was awake and ready in an instant. Popping through into Earth-II he announced to them that it was time to start the operation.

Four volunteers scaled the ladder as slowly as they could to minimize bouncing or rattling or any other kind of noise that might give away their presence. The first of them emerged into a darkened living room and switched on a small flashlight. Scanning the room, he determined that no one else was there and signaled those following him to come up. In a few more minutes, all four were in the room and a perimeter had been formed. They each carried a 9mm pistol and were ready to use them if it became necessary.

One of them held the top of the ladder so it wouldn't fall while another switched off the power to the gate. They laid the remaining fragment of ladder gently on the rug. Leaning against the couch was the collapsed framework of another gate fastened with bungee cords. They took both gates and moved to the door. As they had suspected, the apartment door was dead-bolted from the inside. It was the work of a moment to switch power on to the gate and *swoosh* the gate against the door jamb. The entire lock mechanism and a two-foot section of the door jamb melted away before the power

was again cut to the gate. They pushed the now lockless door open and started downstairs toward the street. As they went, the uncollapsed gate frame was broken down and rolled into a more easily carried form. As they left the building, the van that had brought them here originally pulled to a stop in front of them, the four jumped in joining their comrades, and the van sped off toward Queens.

—==+++==—

Neighbors heading for work in the early morning noticed the ruined door as they passed, and reported it to the building superintendent, who dutifully called the police.

In view of the odd circumstances — no one had ever seen a door that looked like it had been chomped by a giant shark — the police responded with uncharacteristic speed. In fact, they had to wake the occupants of the apartment to get the details needed to fill out their reports. While interviewing the apartment's tenants the fragment of ladder lying on the rug so intrigued the detective who had been sent along to coordinate the investigation that he started to ask probing questions about it. When the answers failed to satisfy him — failed even to get anywhere near 'satisfying' — he called for transportation and had everyone brought 'downtown' for more in-depth questioning. They were, after all, obviously Middle Eastern, so he was disinclined to take any chances that he might accidentally let Islamic terrorists loose on the streets of New York.

And there was this odd contraption in the kitchen closet that looked like plastic plumbing pipe with elastic bands running through the several pieces, and the pipe sections had mechanisms — he didn't know how otherwise to describe the 'things' clipped and taped to the pipe sections. Yes, clearly this was worth some more investigation.

Of course, the morning TV news programs got wind of it — they had the most highly-paid informants in the entire police department — and crews showed up at the apartment building to get footage of the weird damage to the doorframe. Was this a new technique being tried out by New York City's ingenious underworld?

At first, the six men who were on the operation and who had made the raid on that apartment were just amused until the TV talking head mentioned the 'strange device, possibly a new type of bomb' the police had found in the apartment. Then their amusement became something else.

"Did they have another gate? Did we miss one?" Mark wondered aloud. "What if the police power it up? Can they power it up?"

Burt chimed in: "We promised Arlo and that 'Buck' guy we

would capture or destroy every gate the ragheads had. If we missed one, we have a duty to go get it."

Mark picked up the phone and dialed — from memory — Arlo's number in Connecticut. The phone was answered on the second ring.

—==+++==—

"What is NSA's involvement here?" Barbara asked Fatah. "Why are they interested in you?"

"I don't know," Fatah answered mustering all the innocence she could manage. "All their questions were about Al. I think they're more interested in him than me. I'm just an innocent bystander in whatever is happening. And, by the way, what *is* happening? Why are they even looking for Al? Do you know?" She had now put herself into the role of interrogator.

"Actually," Barbara told her, "I think I do know what's going on. Do you live in Boulder, too?" Barbara parried, taking back the interrogator's spot. Fatah nodded. "Where?"

"I live on Ardennes in the 1200-block," Fatah admitted. "Why do you ask?"

"Where did you get a supply of rockets and machine guns?" Barbara asked leaning in closer to Fatah's face. Fatah suddenly realized Barbara knew far more than she, Fatah, had ever suspected.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Fatah gasped.

Barbara signaled to the men standing behind Fatah whereupon one of them stepped in front so Fatah could appreciate the straight-razor he carried in his right hand. The man grabbed her silky black hair and tugged so her left cheek was positioned for the razor.

"No!" she screamed. "I'll tell you." The man released her hair.

"Hesitate again, even for an instant, and there will be no reprieve," Barbara warned her with a hiss. "I know far more than you imagine so don't play the innocent with me. I know, for instance, that you weren't surprised that you were rescued through a gate, and neither was Anwar. That means you know about gates, and you probably even have some, and likely have used them, so don't act like this is a surprise to you. It won't work, and you won't be nearly as pretty after Mark, here, finishes plastic surgery on you. That was your last chance to protect anything or anyone. The next time Mark opens that razor you're going to turn into Quasimodo." The anger evident on her face frightened Fatah more than she had ever known. This was war, and she didn't like it. "Where?" Barbara demanded.

"Al got them," Fatah lied. "I don't know where. Maybe the

National Guard Armory."

"Were you involved in bombing my house?" Barbara asked Fatah.

For the briefest instant, Fatah considered lying again, before realizing that it simply no longer mattered. "Yes."

"And the death of Gwen Nikkoliassen?" Barbara continued.

Fatah squirmed. "Yes."

"One last question, and I should warn you that we have already talked to Anwar and have gotten an answer from him, and he was told that you had already given us an answer, so your answer and his had better be the same. How many gates do you have?"

"Only three that I know of. You've captured or disabled all the rest."

"Congratulations," Barbara told her. "You get to keep your pretty face for a little longer."

—==+++==—

Arlo, too, had seen the morning news out of New York City and had already called his contact at police headquarters. The police had nothing concrete to charge the people in the apartment, so they were brought to the 24th Precinct Station rather than Spring Street for additional questioning. That's where the gate was, also. Arlo had also consulted with Buck and Barbara who had moved back to Earth-I and civilization and were staying at a different house in the same block as Arlo's. Barbara had advised Arlo that the gate had to be taken back, and it had to be done before someone became daring enough to power it up. More importantly, it had to be taken back before NSA discovered it. NSA was not populated by dummies. They would figure it out very quickly and the gate and its technology would pass out of Barbara's control. That could not be allowed to happen.

It was a lucky stroke, Buck thought, that Arlo and most of his friends were career soldiers. Many of them had spent twenty to thirty years as Marines and, having survived the experience, were now retired. The hours they were putting in helping him would have been impossible for anyone working a 9-to-5 job. How could he ever repay them?

Four of them and Buck and Ernie and Barbara tried to imagine the layout of the 24th Precinct house. Its location was easy enough to determine; it was listed in the telephone directory. None of them had ever been inside any police station, much less one 13 miles away. Some reconnaissance would be needed.

"I could walk in and apply for a conceal-and-carry permit," one of them suggested. "That would give me time to look around

some.”

“They’d laugh you right out of there in a second,” came the answer. “You have to be the mayor or his close personal friend to get a concealed-weapon permit in the city. You’re better off asking if they need help with holiday parties for underprivileged kids. That might actually get you upstairs.”

Tony Cusumano strolled through the front door of the 24th Precinct, went straight to the desk sergeant, counting each step, and asked whether the 24th did anything around the holidays for the kids. When the sergeant directed him upstairs to talk to the Major who handled that task he made a small notation in his notebook, turned and headed for the second floor. As he waited on the bench outside the Major’s office, he made small, cryptic notes about the things he was seeing. Through the frosted glass of an office door he could make out the vague outlines of a seated person and a standing person, but their conversation was so muffled by the walls that he couldn’t claim to understand what was happening inside the office. Still, it looked something like an interrogation.

The Major’s door opened and a uniformed officer exited. A head appeared in the doorway, graying hair but still quite full. “Are you waiting to see me?” he asked Tony.

“I just wondered if the 24th precinct was going to do anything for the kids at Christmastime,” Tony explained. “I wanted to help you guys out with a small donation.”

“That’s really nice of you, Mr...?” the Major thanked him.

“Just think of me as ‘Tom Anonymous’,” Tony responded. “I don’t need to take any credit for doing what any decent person would do.” He smiled at the Major and the Major smiled back. Tony handed him a twenty and turned to leave. He had seen as much as he was going to see without first putting on a uniform.

“Don’t you want a receipt?” the Major asked him as he walked away.

“Why?” Tony asked over his shoulder. “Are you going to steal it?” He laughed and kept walking. In a few seconds, he was out the front door and crossing 100th Street to a waiting step van.

Inside the van now rigged out as a mobile war room, Tony grabbed a large piece of scratch paper and began to draw out what he had seen and taken notes about inside the building. In minutes the men peering over his shoulder had a rough idea of where everything was. This did not, unfortunately, include the whereabouts of the missing gate.

While this crew was on stake-out, a second crew had gone to disassemble the tower used for the NSA raid and bring it to 100th

Street and Broadway. By the time they arrived several hours later, the first crew had sketched out the rough floor plan and gotten vectors and elevations to about the same precision — rough. Inside the truck used to transport the pieces of the tower, a gate was powered on and the pieces were fed one-by-one to the construction crew in Earth-II. As quickly as the pieces arrived they were moved into position and fastened together. Having done this once already, the crew were familiar enough with the task that the new tower went together in record time followed immediately by careful probing to find out exactly where they were.

The first 'excursion' that wasn't inside a wall found them in the second-floor men's room overlooking a stall — and it was 'occupied'. A 'uniform' was seated on the commode reading a newspaper. Eyeballing the height above the tile floor and the distance to the stall door, Ernie got a second gate positioned with its bottom edge a little below the floor and slanting away toward the sinks opposite. It was felt that this arrangement would provide the minimum warning that the victim was about to step through into empty space and it would also hide the edge of the gate, a known hazardous area.

As the policeman rose and began to rearrange his clothing, Ernie signaled 'get ready'. When he unlocked the stall door and pulled it open, Ernie gave the 'go' signal and power flowed to the second gate. Patrolman Dan O'Reilly stepped forward and toppled three-and-a-half feet to the platform of the wooden tower. Before he realized what had happened he had been disarmed of his service sidearm and his handcuffs had been applied to his wrists now behind his back.

"What the hell," he sputtered, but the muzzle of his .40 caliber Glock was pressed firmly into the front of his face.

"Shut up," he was told. "Don't speak unless spoken to, then resolve to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, or even God won't be able to help you. What do you know about the people arrested in an apartment at 112th and Broadway earlier today?"

"Where am I?" Dan O'Reilly demanded to know.

"Think of it as Hell," he was told, "and you could be here for all eternity unless you start talking about precisely and only the topics we're interested in: the people."

"They're in holding cells in the basement. They're probably terrorists. They had some kind of new-fangled bomb when we caught them."

"Oh, yeah? Where's this 'new-fangled bomb' now?" Ernie probed.

"It's in the Property Room," O'Reilly snapped. "Where else

would it be?"

"And where is the Property Room?" Ernie pressed. O'Reilly looked at them as if they were very dangerous people. He didn't know how much trouble he could get into for telling them what they wanted to know, and he didn't want to speculate on how much trouble he would get into if he didn't. The Glock was still pointed ominously at the bridge of his nose. "If you're thinking of lying, think again," Ernie continued. "Yes, we're going to send a crew to retrieve it. If they don't come back, you're not going home — ever. So, be a good boy and tell us what we want to know so that we'll have a reason to send you back in one piece."

There was just the faintest hesitation as Dan O'Reilly weighed his options. "It's the room next to the men's bathroom, just beyond the mirrors."

O'Reilly was helped down to the ground some fifteen feet below the deck he had fallen on. Strong hands and strong arms gently passed the shackled form from one to the other until he stood on the frozen ground. "Awfully cold for 'Hell'," he remarked.

Ernie took another bearing on the far wall of the men's room, calling it 'twelve feet', then added some more for the wall between rooms and lowering the aim point so it would be close to the floor. The gate O'Reilly had blundered into was moved to the designated spot and activated. Peeking through the portal, Ernie observed an older blue-clad policeman leaned back in a swivel-chair reading a men's magazine. Deep in the policeman's subconscious he knew that only inanimate objects were behind him, and he paid them no attention. Ernie had not yet gotten to the point that he could have killed another human being in cold-blood and so wouldn't risk the operation on his ability to do so. That task fell to another more used to the notion of 'inflicting casualties in an operation': one of the Marines. A figure burst through the gate, crossed the four feet to the sergeant in charge of the property room, and had a knife at his throat, all in the space of a single breath.

"Your first sound will be your last," the Marine whispered in the sergeant's ear. "Where's the device from this morning's incident at 112th and Broadway?" The sergeant pointed to a collection of plastic pipe and wire standing in the corner. The knife flipped in the Marine's hand and the butt came down hard on the sergeant's nearly-bald head. He dropped to the floor like a sack of sand. The Marine grabbed the piping and dashed back through the gate.

"Mission complete," he assured Ernie. Ernie looked at the assembly, nodded, and powered the gate off. If Fatah and Anwar could be believed, there were no more gates under their control and no more danger of them precipitating a religious war either here or

overseas. Ernie breathed a sigh of relief and leaned over the edge of the tower.

"Officer O'Reilly," he asked the shackled patrolman, "would you like to go home now?" O'Reilly nodded in the affirmative.

O'Reilly had two spare magazines for his Glock beside the one in the butt of the pistol. These were unloaded and the individual cartridges placed in the pockets of his uniform jacket so that he would have to go to some effort to put the weapon back in firing condition. The handcuffs were undone and wiped down to eliminate any fingerprints, then placed into their holster on his belt. A second gate was positioned to open just beyond the back of the truck used to transport the pieces of the tower to this site. The truck itself was invisible from Earth-II but everyone knew where the first gate was from all the lumber they had passed through it in the past hour. O'Reilly was led to the new gate.

"Jump through," he was instructed. "There's about an eighteen inch drop on the other side, so be prepared." Someone stuffed the Glock into O'Reilly's holster and gave him a push. In an instant, he was standing on the street across from the 24th Precinct. He reached back, feeling for the portal he had just jumped through but there was nothing unusual about the air there. He crossed the street headed back for the station.

—==++++==—

Fatah and Anwar stood before a formal-looking group at a banquet table in the Prestige Social Club. The arrangement looked very like a court-martial.

"Fatah Abou-Saad," Barbara began, "you have been charged with the murder of Gwen Nikkoliassen of Boulder, Colorado, and the attempted murder of Barbara fitzGibbon and Buck fitzGibbon, both of Boulder, Colorado. You are also charged with complicity in the deaths of several 'John Does' in an explosion in an apartment building at 112th Street and Broadway, New York City. How do you plead?"

"You have no authority to do this," Anwar interrupted. "This is not a real court and you are not real judges!"

"The fundamental axiom of the American system," Ernie addressed him, "is that all power flows from the people. The people, by constituting courts, merely lend their power to the government for convenience and uniformity. They do not surrender any power. They merely agree not to exercise it in the normal course of events. We're faced here with 'events' that are in no way, shape, or form 'normal'. The court system would be unable to deal with a case such as is before us here today. It is necessary that the people handle this matter,

because the courts cannot. You may call us 'vigilantes' if you wish. It is of no concern to us what you call us. All that should concern you is that you are going to be tried in as fair a manner as we can manage and that you will permit. The 'fairness' you permit is the fairness you will get, so it is clearly in your own best interests to do whatever is necessary to assure yourselves of maximum fairness. Is that clear?"

"Anwar Al-Ajib," Barbara continued, "you are charged with complicity in, and being an accessory-before-the-fact in the deaths of several 'John Does' in an explosion in an apartment building at 112th Street and Broadway, New York City. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty," Anwar answered. "Not guilty," Fatah echoed.

Barbara addressed Fatah directly: "Fatah, you've already admitted taking part in the bombing of my house in Boulder. Why should we not proceed immediately to a 'guilty' verdict in your case?"

"You will do what you want to do whatever I say," Fatah spat the words out. "Don't pretend the outcome is in doubt. We all know the verdicts have already been written."

"We were hoping you would give us reason to doubt what we know or think we know," Buck told them. "Absent that, what evidence we have indicates that you two are far too dangerous to be permitted to live among civilized people. Unless you give us reason to spare you, you are correct: the verdicts have already been written, and you are not going to be pleased with them. I suggest you start convincing us how wrong we are."

"I don't care," Fatah burst out. "Yes, I bombed your house. Al suspected you had a gate when the truck we had stolen turned up missing. Only someone with a gate could have done that. You had to be eliminated."

"And Al supplied Anwar and his men with gates to blow up the Jews in their hideout." Anwar looked at her with horror in his eyes. Any thought he had of getting out of this alive evaporated under Fatah's outburst. She continued: "And we would have freed our people from oppression if we had succeeded in killing you. We would now be causing the collapse of the Zionist conspiracy."

"Good enough for me," Arlo muttered, turning away.

"Me, too," Ernie said with a look of disgust on his face. "We'll do the world a favor if we get rid of them."

"Fatah Abou-Saad, Anwar Al-Ajib," Barbara addressed them, "this court finds you guilty as charged and sentences you to permanent exile beyond the gate. The details of your exile will be explained to you in due course." Turning to their Marine guard she ordered: "Take them away."

Fatah was driven to a place in Suffolk County out on Long Island, a place observed to have, in Earth-II, an abundance of

apparently edible plants and a smattering of small game. The brushy undergrowth would provide fuel for cooking and warmth during the winters for as long as Fatah survived. She did not know where Anwar had been sent.

Anwar Al-Ajib was relocated to a spot corresponding to 'Connecticut' in Earth-II, an area heavily wooded and hilly. Small game and local plants would be his diet for as long as he could survive on them. He was not told where Fatah had been placed.

Both were provided with 20,000 rounds of 9mm ammunition, two handguns and a survival rifle, all chambered in 9mm. With care, this would keep them fed for a very long time. They each had standard survivalist equipment: flint and steel, knives, axes, dried foodstuffs to last for several years, three complete campsites including tents and sleeping bags. No one had so far reported seeing any animal larger than a raccoon, so there was little in the way of dangerous beasts known to inhabit the land beyond the gates.

They each ought to live a long, if lonely and strenuous, life.

—==++++==—

Dennis Cameron's phone rang and the butler (of course) answered it. "Whom shall I say is calling?" the butler inquired.

"Please tell Mr. Cameron 'the Queen of Hearts' wishes to speak with him." Dennis was on the line in an instant.

"Barbara, it's good to hear your voice again," Dennis gushed. "How are you? Have you resolved your problems? Where are you? 'Caller-ID' says you're in New York."

"Not quite yet, Dennis," Barbara answered. "In fact, I'm planning my return trip as we speak."

"Barbara, I'd be pleased to have tickets waiting for you at any airport," Dennis offered.

"Unfortunately, I can't consider flying. There are still too many people looking for me whom I wish not to find me quite yet," Barbara explained. "I'm going to have to come home the slow route: overland. Dennis, I hate to do this. I *really* hate to do this. I need more money."

"How much?" Dennis asked. He could almost hear Barbara gritting her teeth on the other end of the line.

Barbara, for her part, was forcing herself to do this. Every fiber of her being told her it was dead wrong. "Dennis, there's no way in the world I could ever repay you — not on a teacher's salary — 112,000 dollars." There was a long pause.

"Where shall I send it?" Dennis asked.

"Mid-Island RV's in Wantagh, New York is holding a vehicle in

the name of 'Ernie Walsh'," she flinched saying the words. "The balance due is 112,000 dollars. I need them to release that vehicle."

"I'll tell my bank to put a 'rush' on it," Dennis told her. "Barbara, hurry home. I don't expect I'll ever be repaid for this and I really don't care as long as you're home, you're safe, and you're happy. I love you, and 'money' simply doesn't enter into the picture."

"Oh, Dennis, I don't want you to have any illusion," Barbara started. She felt tears welling up in her eyes.

"Barbara, I know about Ernie Walsh, and it doesn't matter," Dennis cut her off mid-sentence. "He's a good friend of yours. I understand. It still doesn't matter."

"He's more than just a good friend, Dennis," Barbara admitted.

"And it still doesn't matter," Dennis repeated. "My loving you is not dependent on you loving me. If you hated me, I would still love you. Love is an act of the will, Barbara. It isn't an accident that just happens in a careless moment, like stubbing your toe or getting a splinter. If you were to marry Ernie Walsh, I would still love you. I would hope that you would even then love me, but it still wouldn't matter."

"I *do* love you, Dennis," Barbara told him, and she realized that she did, in fact, love Dennis almost as much as she loved Ernie.

"Well, in that case, it matters," Dennis finished. "Go get your RV." and the line disconnected.

The next morning, Buck at the wheel, their new RV — stocked with enough supplies to make 'stopping' a luxury — pointed west and headed for Colorado.

By common consent they agreed that Ernie would rest as much as possible, Barbara and Buck would share driving, but in the event of anything untoward — being stopped for a traffic violation or some such — Ernie would be roused and take responsibility for everything so that neither Barbara nor Buck would be on record as 'existing'.

Packed in the overhead storage bins were thirteen assorted gates of various sizes and several that didn't work for one reason or another. In her spare time, Barbara reviewed Al's work for which she had notes, and tried to push it forward as she had not been able to do with her own work those many years ago. She still had her handwritten copy of the seven equation-fragments Al Beddowes had pulled out of the mathematical morass on his laboratory scribble boards, and she had the paper Al had presented to the faculty that day — she stopped herself in mid-thought — it was barely two weeks ago! And now Al was dead and Fatah would never be seen alive again. She shook her head in disbelief at all that had happened in such a short

time and turned back to her research. When she got to the seven fragments, she compared them to her own notes to make sure she had copied them correctly and discovered several discrepancies. She grabbed a pencil and paper and began to reconstruct the original master equation from its parts. The seven fragments she had copied into her notebook combined to exactly match the master equation in Al's presentation paper. The seven fragments in the appendix to the paper combined to form something different. Similar, but not quite exact. Comparing the individual fragments, she concluded that Al had deliberately 'fudged' the work in the presentation paper. No one could construct a working gate using those pieces. It would never work, and anyone who tried would conclude that Al had lied about his results. Not that it mattered anymore.

But there was something puzzling still left there: fragment 'B' and fragment 'E' would have, together, negligible impact on the final product as far as Barbara could see. She recombined fragments A, C, D, F, and G and got the master equation — exactly. Those two fragments were not true factors of the original master equation. They were extraneous, the product of Al's over-active imagination. Barbara looked at the notes she had taken while working with Gwen Nikkoliassen. The chip for fragment 'B' had a dot of red paint and that for fragment 'E' had a dot of dark blue. She popped the overhead compartment open and took down one of the gates with the chips she and Gwen had built. Then she went forward to where Buck was seated driving the RV.

"Stop when you get a chance, Dad," she requested. "I have an experiment to work on and I need the truck stationary." Buck gave her a "thumbs up".

A few miles later, west of Terre Haute on I-70, Buck swung the RV into a rest area and found a quiet spot away from the other RVs. Barbara, meanwhile had reconfigured the gate to not use either the B-chip or the E-chip. She powered the gate on and, rather than being able to see through a transparent opening, the gate now showed the wilderness of Earth-II, and the colors were 'normal': green trees and blue skies. She made to step through the gate when Ernie stopped her.

"Sorry, doc," he insisted, "you're too valuable to risk being on the other side alone. I'll go. What time is it?"

"I have 2:32pm," Barbara told him.

"I have 2:34pm," Ernie said looking at his watch. "Two minutes fast." He stepped through onto a grassy meadow, turned and looked back into the RV through the gate. "You're visible to me," Ernie said, but his words didn't cross the barrier. Barbara spoke back to him: "What?" but Ernie couldn't hear. He took a few moments to

survey the terrain, stepping aside so he could see beyond the gate. After a few minutes, he reappeared in the portal and stepped through into the RV.

"Well, the colors look OK to me from this side," Barbara allowed. "How does it look from the other side?"

"It looks real normal," Ernie confirmed. "I can see through the portal on the other side as well as we can see from this side. What did you change?"

"I noticed that two of the chips implemented waves that effectively cancel each other out," Barbara told him. "I just took them out of the pattern. It appears they were providing some form of interference that whacked the colors. By the way, what time do you have?"

Ernie looked at his watch. "2:38."

"I have 2:36," Barbara noted looking at her watch. "The time-compression seems to have disappeared, too."

"I don't think that's it," Buck offered. "I think this is a different alternate universe than the black-and-white. I'll bet that if you fire up one of the original gates it will take you to a different place than this gate takes you."

Ernie took a quarter from his pocket and tossed it through the gate onto the ground of Earth-II. Barbara deployed an original gate and powered it up next to the first. Ernie poked his head through to the other side and was back in an instant. "No quarter there. Wherever that coin went, it wasn't into the same universe. Looks like Buck nailed it."

"If we must lose a gate," Buck mumbled stroking his chin, "it would be better to lose one of the seven-chip gates. The time-element given back to us by the five-chip model is too substantial to surrender willingly. Just in case something horrible happens, you want to be sure the 'improved technology' doesn't get captured. Understand?"

"I do, Dad," Barbara agreed. "I'll put the other two chips back in the circuit just in case."

—==++++==—

The trip home to Boulder, passing thru Harrisburg, Columbus, Indianapolis, Terre Haute, St Louis, and Kansas City, was remarkably uneventful if long and tiring — four long days of driving. They were rolling into Boulder, Ernie at the wheel for the last few dozen miles, when the excitement started. From fully two blocks away, Ernie could make out police cars at the far end of his street, obviously positioned so that anyone who turned onto that street would meet a police blockade before they could get away. Ernie called back

to his passengers: "Buck! Barbara! This doesn't look good." As nonchalantly as possible, Ernie turned at the next corner, away from his home, doubled back to route 36 and continued at a leisurely pace northward.

Barbara, meanwhile, had pulled two small gates and power packs from the overheads, popped the sides in place on one of them, and began to disable the B- and E-chips. "They don't want you, Ernie," Buck comforted him, "they want us. And it's only a matter of time before they find us. Barbara and I have discussed this over the last few days while we were sharing the driving. This technology is too dangerous to let loose, even to our own government, so we're going to keep it. We're going to dump all the gates into Earth-II, keeping only one, and that one will be configured with seven chips. They'll never find the other gates, but if we need to, we can always build another with a spare set of chips Barbara's keeping in with her jewelry. Here's what we — you, me, and Barbara — have to do. A block or two from your house, we're going to open a 5-chip gate, transfer all the other gates to the other side, and pull the original gate through. We'll meet you at your house after all the dust clears. Ready?"

"OK," Ernie agreed. He turned the RV left off route 36 and began to pick his way southward again back toward his house while Buck and Barbara gathered the gates, warm clothing, camping gear and food. Two blocks away from his house, the RV pulled into a gas station and Ernie got out to refuel the vehicle. Inside, gates and gear went hand-over-hand into Earth-II until all incriminating evidence was gone from the truck except for one small scanned image of Barbara's notes showing the seven 'magical' equations on a keychain storage device attached to the RV's keys. By the time Ernie had filled the tank and paid for the gas, there was no sign of Buck or Barbara left in the truck. He rolled onto the street and headed for his house.

Ernie pulled the big rig to the curb in front of his modest home, and made to get out. Before his feet hit the pavement, he was surrounded by police with guns drawn. He raised his hands and put on his most bewildered expression.

"Who else is inside?" one of the police demanded.

"There's no one else inside," Ernie told them. "I'm alone." The police pulled him from the truck and made him lie on the cold pavement while they entered the vehicle and searched it.

"There's nobody in here, Sarge," one of them called out.

The sergeant pulled Ernie to his feet and pushed him hard against the truck. "Where is Barbara fitzGibbon?" he demanded.

"I haven't seen Barbara in about two weeks since she and her Dad and I went to New York", Ernie lied.

"And why did the three of you go to New York?"

"I went to pick up this RV for Mr. Dennis Cameron. I guess Barbara was going on vacation or something. She didn't say. We split up at the airport. They went their way and I went mine."

The sergeant looked very confused. He had been counting very strongly on a 'break' in the case and he didn't get one. NSA, for whom Boulder PD was doing this 'special favor', was not going to be pleased.

"Am I under arrest?" Ernie asked. The sergeant shook his head. *No*. "Then, am I free to go?"

The sergeant poked his head into the RV and called his men out. "Are you planning any more trips, Mr. Walsh?" the sergeant asked.

"I don't have any immediate plans," Ernie told him noncommittally.

"Well," the sergeant continued, "don't leave town without letting me know, and if you hear from Barbara fitzGibbon or her father, I want to know about it immediately," and he handed Ernie his business card. "Are we clear on that?" the policeman demanded. Ernie nodded.

Ernie moved his suitcase from the truck into the house, got the heat going to warm the place, which had gotten pretty cold in the time he had been gone. He had turned the heat to just high enough to keep pipes from freezing before leaving for New York because there was no sense heating the house if no one was going to be there to appreciate it. As he bustled about the house making it livable once more, the soft 'pop' the gates sometimes made when they opened or closed made him turn around just in time to see Barbara and Buck step through their gate into his living room. Barbara carried a second gate with her. Quickly setting it up, she powered it on, stepped through, and shut the first gate off, brought it through into the living room, powered the second gate down, reconnected the B- and E-chips and disconnected one of the others picked at random. She applied power to it, but nothing happened. If anyone found that gate, reconnected the odd chip, and used it, they would wind up in a time-compressed, black-and-white universe where no other gates existed and whose only inhabitants, Anwar and Fatah, were 1,800 miles away.

Ernie picked up the phone and ordered two large pizzas — delivered.

14 — Epilogue

By the dawn's early light, Marjorie Evans and Tareeta Washington knocked on Ernie Walsh's front door. Barbara was asleep in the back bedroom. Ernie had curled up on an inflatable mattress in what would have been a second-bedroom if the house were large enough to allow such a luxury. Buck had opted for the couch in the living room. Without thinking, Buck rolled off the couch, pulled on a pair of pants, and opened the front door.

Marjorie Evans' jaw dropped at the sight of Buck fitzGibbon in the doorway and there was a fraction of a second that she stood there frozen like a statue. Tareeta Washington had always prided herself on having a 'warrior mentality'. When the face in the doorway was something other than what she expected — Ernie Walsh's — she drew her sidearm and threw her weight, all 124 pounds of it, against the door and pointed the gun directly at Buck.

"Hit the deck!" she ordered him. "Face down, spread eagle, NOW!" Buck, caught completely off-guard, complied, because by then Marjorie Evans had also drawn her weapon and had him in an incontestable cross-fire. In moments he was handcuffed and immobilized. Marjorie Evans canvassed the house while Tareeta Washington held Buck prisoner and called for back-up. A minute later, Evans marched Ernie and Barbara into the living room where they joined Buck.

"Are you Barbara fitzGibbon?" Agent Evans asked Barbara.

"Who's asking?" Barbara demanded. In response, Evans and Washington displayed their ID.

"Yes," Barbara confirmed, "I am. Why do you care? And why are you pointing guns at us?"

"We consider all of you to be extremely dangerous," Tareeta Washington told them. "Others consider you all to be extraordinarily valuable, and we are charged with making sure you harm no one, and no one harms you. For the moment, that charge means you get guns pointed at you. I'm sorry about that, but that's the way things are. The more you cooperate with our investigation, the safer you'll be and the sooner you'll be free of people pointing guns at you. Do you understand?"

All of them, Ernie, Barbara, and Buck, turned their faces away and said nothing. Finally, Ernie looked back at them.

"Are we under arrest?" he asked.

"Yes," Agent Evans answered. "I think you should consider

yourselves all 'under arrest'.

"What charges?" Ernie demanded.

"Probably 'sabotage' or possibly just 'theft of government property'," Marjorie Evans explained. "We'll figure it out as we go along."

"You obviously have something you can use as 'proof' for these charges?" Buck probed.

"We'll figure that out, too, as we go along."

"That means you have nothing you can use to charge us with," Buck told her, letting Barbara and Ernie know at the same time that they should not give up any information, no matter how insignificant.

About that time, the Boulder PD arrived in force with transportation, and several officers began searching through the house. One of them brought out a 'device', plastic pipe with bungee cords running through them, and electronic components of some sort fastened around the perimeter. "What's this?", Agent Evans asked.

"Looks like pipe with bungee cords," Ernie replied. Turning to Buck and Barbara: "Do either of you recognize it?" They shook their heads. "Must have been left here by the previous owner," Ernie offered.

"What say we turn this thing on?" Agent Evans suggested. All three of them just shrugged their shoulders.

Evans untaped two wires from the framework and connected them to the battery. Nothing happened. She waved her hand at the space inside the framework, but there was nothing unusual there.

"What in the world are you doing?" Ernie demanded with an obvious tone of exasperation. "Would you please tell us what's going on here? Why are we being held prisoner, and what do you expect to find by searching my house?"

Presently the Boulder PD sergeant who had given Ernie his card the previous day showed up. He surveyed the three prisoners briefly before turning to Ernie.

"You knew we were looking for Barbara fitzGibbon and you hid her from us," he snarled at Ernie. "Do you know how much trouble you're in?"

"I didn't 'hide' them from anybody," Ernie spat back. "Buck and Barbara didn't get here until late last night. I figured it would be OK to call you in the morning."

The sergeant turned on Barbara: "And where have you been for the last two weeks?"

"Hitchhiking," Barbara answered. "Dad and I have always wanted to hitch-hike cross-country, and the fact that somebody wants to blow us up seemed like the perfect excuse for getting out of town."

We flew to New York and thumbed our way back. And what has Boulder PD been doing in the past two weeks to find out who wrecked our house?"

"That's not our problem," the sergeant told her. "NSA is handling that part of the investigation."

"You mean these two?" Buck indicated Evans and Washington.

Buck turned on them, his hands still cuffed behind his back. "So?" he prodded accusingly. "What have you found? And why am I, the 'victim' in this case, being treated like a criminal?"

"For all we know, you two blew up your own house," Evans lied.

"I can hardly wait to hear you explain to a judge why we need to be held," Buck smirked.

"Why don't you just tell me what this thing is and how it works so we can all go home?" Agent Washington suggested.

"Why don't you take these handcuffs off to see if you get more cooperation?" Ernie retorted. Agent Washington nodded and in seconds keys turned in the locks and the handcuffs fell away. Ernie rubbed his wrists to soothe the pain of having metal clamps tight against bone. "Start," he told the NSA agents, "by telling us what you think these things are."

Agent Evans turned to the sergeant and waved him out the front door. This was a matter they weren't cleared for. The sergeant called his other men out from the back rooms where they were poring through drawers looking for anything odd or suspicious. Together they exited the house leaving Evans and Washington alone with Ernie, Barbara, and Buck. Evans pointed a finger in Barbara's face. "You know, even if these others don't," she said, the faintest wisp of exasperation in her voice.

"Why would I know?" Barbara leaned in until her face touched the tip of Evans' accusing finger. "What does this have to do with me?"

"Are you trying to tell me this has nothing to do with Alfred Beddowes Jr.'s research?" Marjorie Evans asked, her tone clearly indicating she would accept nothing but a confession.

"Al is working on multi-dimensional rationalizations," Barbara answered. "What has this to do...?" She allowed a look of 'dawning realization' to creep across her face, hoping it would appear that she had just had an entirely new thought. She turned to look closely at the pipes and chips. "Are you saying he's done it? That's wonderful! When we fled Colorado, Al was working on something. We thought he might have opened a passage into a sort of 'somewhere else', but we weren't able to do anything with it. His apparatus did look something

like this. I didn't get any of the details before our house blew up and we went on the run. Why don't you just ask Al? Wouldn't he know all the *minutiae* of this device?"

"We would ask Al Beddowes if we knew where he was," Agent Washington admitted. "Al apparently flew to New York just hours ahead of you. That's an amazing coincidence, wouldn't you agree?"

"He went to New York just hours ahead of me, then," Ernie pointed out. "Isn't that a coincidence too? Or are you saying that it's something other than 'coincidence'? As far as I'm concerned, that's exactly what it is: coincidence — nothing more, nothing less."

"Even so," Barbara chimed in, "why not just track him down in New York — that's what you people do for a living, isn't it? — and ask him directly?"

"Alfred Beddowes Jr. has disappeared under mysterious circumstances. We have no idea where he is or even 'if' he is. You, Barbara fitzGibbon, are our only lead to discover what this is and how it works, and the fact that we found this here, in close physical proximity to someone who certainly must know its background, is proof-enough for us to suspect you know far more than you admit to. Wouldn't it be better for all concerned if you came clean with us? There's really no value in your denying it further."

"It could be that Al left this here for me to discover after my house was destroyed."

"A full day before you and Mr. Walsh left for New York? Why wouldn't he have simply knocked on the door and given it to Mr. Walsh here? And if Mr. Walsh were not here, how did Alfred Beddowes gain entrance? No. This device was not Al Beddowes'. It was yours, and now it's ours and we need to know how to work it and you're going to tell us or none of you will ever see daylight again."

Barbara looked at Buck who returned the glance. The look that passed between them told Barbara to go with her gut instinct. "It doesn't work," she told the agents. "Al had one that did work. It was in his lab. If you can find that one, you'll have what you need. I tried to replicate his work, but there's something missing, and I don't know what it is. Maybe with time I'll be able to get the passage to open." She walked to the bookshelves along the living room wall and pulled a ring binder from the shelf. "This is Al's presentation package that he gave to the faculty committee some two weeks ago. It lists the waveforms that must be generated to get the passage to open. I tried to replicate the work, building a set of wave-drivers as Al did, but it won't open. I've spent the last two weeks trying to figure out what might be the cause of the failure."

"In New York," Agent Washington interjected.

"Yes, New York and other places along the way," Barbara answered.

"Why New York?" Evans probed.

Barbara smiled. "The famous bank robber, Willie Sutton, was once asked why he robbed banks. He said: 'Because that's where the money is'. I went to New York because that's where Al was. Where would you have gone?" The NSA agents just shrugged.

"So," Agent Washington probed, "you went to New York to — what? — to kill Al Beddowes?"

"No," Barbara recoiled in mock-horror, "to talk to him. Dead he's no good to anyone. No, I went to talk to him because only he knows the 'secret', if that's what it is, that makes these rigs open a passage to an alternate universe." She sat down on the arm of the couch. "You now have everything there is to be had from these three people. You can throw us in jail forever if you want, but you'll never get anything more about this technology because there isn't anything more to be gotten. It's your call."

The agents exchanged glances, reading each others' expressions. "Don't get lost," Agent Evans warned them. "If we decide we need more help, we'll want to be able to find you. Understand?"

"Where would we go?" Ernie asked as the agents turned to leave with their precious cargo.

—==++++==—

At NSA's Hydraulics Lab, a team of technicians fussed over the strange contraption made of PVC pipe, bungee cords, computer power supplies, electromagnets, oscillators, and integrated circuits. One of them noticed a wire had come loose from one of the chips and reconnected it. With a soft 'pop!' the gate came alive.

The opening was the size of a doorframe, substantial, but far too small to get anything but people, and perhaps a motorcycle, through. They would spend years and millions of dollars trying without success to enlarge the opening until that fateful day one of the chips failed stranding four men on the other side. The replacement chips made from the specifications in Al's presentation document never worked. In the end, the entire project would be written off as a fluke, an accident that might never be replicated.

—==++++==—

Buck, Ernie, and Barbara looked out across an inland sea that stretched eastward from about where Platteville, CO would have been and seemed to go on forever.

"I can't see a shoreline on the other side," Ernie remarked. "What does that say for how wide this lake might be?"

"The rule of thumb I always used was to take the square root of your height in feet and multiply by one-and-one-third," Buck offered. "That gives you a rough approximation of the distance to the horizon in miles."

"So, we're — what? — thirty feet high?" Ernie started churning numbers in his head. "That's five-and-a-half... eleven halves times four thirds equals... forty-four sixths, or about seven miles, a little more. Seven miles and no shoreline. That's one damn big lake."

"No shoreline north or south, either," Buck observed. "I'd like to get a bird's-eye view of this water. This could be the Atlantic Ocean for all we know. I don't even see anything that might be called 'high ground' north or south either."

"Well, of course, most of the high ground in our own universe is west of here anyway," Barbara reminded them. "East of Boulder about all you find is The Great Plains, but look! There must be a dozen small islands that we can see from here in that lake. However wide it is, I'll bet it never gets very deep."

Earlier in the day they had seen small horse-like animals moving in a herd, probably numbering two hundred or so. They had also come across several varieties of fruit trees, with apple predominating, although it was unlike any apple variety any of them were familiar with. They had begun to wonder what they might do with all this land.

"This all would have been Al's had he not gone and gotten himself killed," Ernie allowed. "Now it's yours, Barbara. It's yours to do with as you see fit."

"I rather consider it 'ours', Ernie," she replied. "We three have earned this as much as Al did. He, after all, was pushing forward work I had done for my doctorate. Had he not chosen an evil path he would have had a stronger claim even than I, but that's not how things worked out."

Ernie shrugged. "But since neither Buck nor I have any idea how these gates work or why, we have to rely on your expertise for our passage between these worlds. That rather puts you in a controlling position," Ernie reminded her.

"So, I guess that makes me queen of the world or something, huh?" Barbara chuckled.

"Or something. So, what shall we do with it, your majesty?" Ernie asked her.

"The first thing we need to do with it," Buck said, "is to explore it. Right now, we don't even know if it's safe to be here."

—==+++==—

Ernie finished his act for the spectators on Pearl Street and basked in the applause they offered him. He looked around the group. "Who wants to get married?"

"I do," Barbara said, looking straight into his eyes and waving her hand like a second-grader. "I do."

He took her into his arms — was it for the first time, Barbara wondered — and kissed her. "What do you think, doc? Maybe we can make it a 'Better World' after all."

"We already have, Ernie," she told him. "You already have." And she kissed him, finally.

—==+++==—

As members of the faculty looked on, Buck escorted his daughter, now clad in a simple white dress, and carrying a simple bouquet, down the main aisle of the tiny wedding chapel just three blocks from their now-destroyed house at 2550 Pershing. Waiting at the altar, a freshly-starched Ernie Walsh beamed at the approach of his bride. On either side were friends and colleagues, because neither Barbara nor Ernie had much in the way of family locally. Barbara's secretary Marge, Dr. Joseph D'Amico, Dr. Iivo Saarinen, their Provost Dr. Kenneth Fleming, and a gaggle of her more devoted students including Dan Murphy and his new fiancée Tricia Mullins, gathered to see their friend, colleague, and mentor finally tie the knot.

Never one for ceremony, Barbara had urged her beau not to make a big thing of their nuptials and Ernie, still poor as a church mouse, had thought that an excellent idea. They wed, therefore, in a quiet, low-key location with a quiet, low-key wedding service, with a quiet, low-key price tag, after which they all repaired to the Boulderado Hotel for a quiet, low-key wedding reception: 'just a few close friends' as celebrities would say.

"Where would you like to go on your honeymoon, doc?" Ernie asked his bride after the umpteenth toast to their health from the assembled guests.

Barbara gave him a querulous look. "Do you think we need to get to know each other better?" she asked him with a laugh. "We've been dating off-and-on for four years."

"And you haven't had a real vacation in all that time," Ernie reminded her.

"I don't think I'm going to get one for some time to come," Barbara spoke glumly. "We have a lot of work to do, Ernie. You, me, and Dad." Ernie nodded in silent acknowledgment of what they all knew lay ahead of them. "And stop calling me 'doc'."