

CHAPTER ONE

New York, December, 1999

“Are you getting this?” Dan Jessup tried to keep the crowd from jostling his cameraman as the candidate brought his speech to a period.

The reporter braced against a thrust of eager admirers. Simon White stood on the steps of his headquarters building in Midtown Manhattan, the wet wind whipping his gray hair back from his bony forehead. He towered over the men around him; he was as tall and majestic as an ancient tribal leader, and his presence and words had a powerful effect on the audience.

“—And through the thinning ozone layer come the naked cancer-causing rays of the sun: is this not symbolic of the Lord revealing his Awful Countenance to a world of sinners? And the drought that has struck Europe and Africa, threatening famine to millions: is this not symbolic of his withholding from us the rain of his beneficence?”

Jimmy Nap, the Vietnamese videographer he’d recently been teamed with, indicated he wanted to move. Jessup blocked for him. The rain had finally begun to let up.

“We see reports on our daily newscasts of glaciers cracking and dropping into the sea, the raging sea whose rising level threatens to sweep the world in another Great Flood. I say to you, the Day is coming. The Signs are everywhere for those who will but see.”

“Tell us what to do, Simon!” called a voice from the audience.

Jessup craned to see who it was: a Simon staffer? Probably just a hired shill. Or it might even be genuine. Simon White’s support was impressive and growing. Jessup chastised himself. If he was to do a decent job on this assignment, he’d have to shed his habitual cynicism.

“We see a nation of pleasure-seekers, succumbing to the temptations of the flesh, seeking fulfillment in material possessions, abandoning all resistance to the scourge of drugs. What has become of the ideals, the values we once held so dear?”

“Simon for president!” The shout was almost lost in the rising enthusiasm of the crowd.

Simon smiled and nodded, seeming to bask in their fervor. He gestured then, and the noise subsided. He allowed the silence to grow as he transformed himself from crowd-exhorter to a simple man with a personal vision. In spite of himself, Jessup was impressed.

Into this silence, Simon began softly. “I’m frightened. When I see the hope in your faces, when I see the—well, I suppose there’s no other word for it—the love you offer me—”

Jessup tapped Jimmy on the back. “Here it comes.” They edged forward and Jimmy adjusted his lens.

“—I am overwhelmed. I know, and you must know, that no one man can reverse all the problems we face. Don’t ask me to bear that burden alone. I hope those of you willing to favor me with your votes are also willing to face up to the work that must be done, the sacrifices that must be made so future generations can—”

“Come on, he’s going into his wrap-up.”

Jessup led Jimmy, still aiming his camera at the candidate, up towards the rain-slicked entrance.

They managed to get inside the building before Simon and the crush of other reporters.

Waving and smiling, surrounded by his security people, Simon moved towards his inner office. The media workers were held back by several unyielding guards. Then Simon spotted Jessup and bent to whisper to one of his men. He beckoned, and the two of them followed the candidate inside. The other reporters were excluded and the door firmly shut behind them.

Simon sat behind his desk and indicated chairs for Jessup and Nap.

“Well, Dan, how’s my—what do you people call it? Oh yes, my ‘videography.’ How’s it going so far? Jimmy, why don’t you set that thing down? It looks uncomfortable.”

Jimmy Nap took his videocam down from his shoulder, set it in his lap and wiped the rain off with a soft cloth.

Dan Jessup began, “Frankly, Mr. White—”

“Call me Simon: all my friends do.”

“This hasn’t been an easy project.”

“Why is that?”

Jessup paused to collect his thoughts. When Chapman gave them the assignment, he’d made it clear he didn’t want a tired rehash of the narrative everyone knew. He expected them to uphold the WTEC reputation, and their own, for digging beneath the surface. But in their search for something new and news-worthy, they’d come up against one dead end after another. “It’s never easy to find a fresh angle on a story as well-known as yours. Some new angle, or perhaps some undiscovered territory in your background.”

Simon smiled gently.

“We’ve interviewed many people involved in your public life. But we’d hoped to reach someone from your youth and young manhood, before you became a famous preacher and, um, ‘moral soldier.’” He resisted the urge to smile at the quaint phrase devised by Simon’s publicists. “But so far, no luck.” Simon’s distant past was shrouded in obscurity. The interviews they’d already completed were interesting and even important, but Jessup felt a nagging sense of incompleteness.

Simon spoke. “Have you been to New Salem, Utah?”

“We tried phoning, but got nothing. The place seems to be deserted. According to our contacts in Utah, everybody from that town seems to have died.”

“Oh, I hope not. Many have moved on, I’m sure. There was a terrible outbreak of typhoid a few years back, but I’m sure there are still a few survivors. You haven’t gone there, then?”

“I hated to waste the trip.”

“Do go,” urged Simon. “I’m sure you’ll find a few people who remember me still.” His sad smile stirred feelings of sympathy in the reporter.

According to Simon’s legend, New Salem was the town where he’d spent the first dozen years of his young manhood, and experienced the tragic fire that transformed his life. “Do you think of it often? The fire? Your family?”

Simon shook his great head. “Not often, no. Only some nights when I can’t fall asleep. I often wonder at the harsh methods of the Lord. If it weren’t for those terrible events, I should never have come to serve Him.” He looked away as if unwilling to share the burden of his pain. At last he roused himself. “While you’re here, please feel free to roam my headquarters and talk to the people here. I have the most wonderful, dedicated staff imaginable. In fact—” he reached over and buzzed his secretary. “Ask Webster to step in, please.” He looked up. “Webster Tierney is my most trusted friend. His wise counsel has made all this possible.”

“You mean your candidacy?”

“And so much more.”

There was a knock, and the door opened. Jessup had to suppress his reaction as the grotesquely misshapen man entered, leaning on his cane. Simon stood and greeted his friend and mentor. The contrast between the two was almost shocking. Simon, large, robust, appealing; Webster, cruelly twisted, shrunken, repellent in form despite his handsome face.

“Ah, the Media.” Tierney lowered himself onto the sofa.

“Web, Dan tells me he’s had no luck in contacting New Salem.”

“No? Too bad. I was sure there would still be someone there, though it’s been many years since I’ve been back.”

“Oh, you’re from there, too?”

“Yes. It was a very small town. Insular, you might say. Few families, little contact with the outside world. A very religious community. Not uncommon in that part of Utah.”

Simon added, “If you have any questions, Webster is your go-to guy. He knows me better than any man alive.”

“I dare say,” agreed Tierney with an odd smile. “Have you seen our video on Project Morality? It’s a quick and painless way to fill you in on Simon’s former activities. Let me find you a copy.” The twisted man levered himself up with his cane and limped out.

Simon closed the door behind him. “Wonderful man. Brilliant mind. What a tragedy he was born with that terrible disease. Progressively worsens. He seldom mentions it, but the pain— Anyway, if you have any further questions—?”

“No. —Well, about Project Morality. Was it your idea?”

“Webster’s and mine, yes. After the debacles that afflicted televangelism in the late Eighties, we began in our quiet way to try to redeem the notion that religious leaders could be moral leaders as well.” Simon pursed his lips. “I can say with some pride that Project Morality has never had such problems. For ten years, it has taught values and fostered decent behavior. The materials we distribute to schools, plus our other activities—I believe we’ve made a real difference in the lives of young people.”

That was the wonder of Simon: that someone so evidently dedicated to good works would seek the presidency. It was almost enough to embarrass the cynicism right out of Jessup.

Simon ushered them out of his office. Jessup noted that the skin on Simon’s hands was a mottled pinkish hue, alternately smooth and gnarled.

He leaned close to Jimmy. “Did you see his hands?”

“Yeah. From the fire?”

“Must be.” Jessup glanced around the office at the busy workers scurrying about or sitting at computers or telephones. “Light up your camera. I’m going to grab a few statements.”

He intercepted an older woman carrying a sheaf of printout. “Excuse me, I’m Dan Jessup with WTEC, doing a special report on Simon White. Have you worked with him long?”

“I’ve been with the minister some ten years, I think.”

“So you started with Project Morality?”

“Yes, but I’m with his campaign now. He took some of us along when he left PM.”

“How did you feel about his leaving?”

“A little sad, but it’s all for the best. God’s plan is to give this good man a larger pulpit. This country needs saving, in case you haven’t noticed.”

Jessup thanked her. With Jimmy taping, he wandered around, observing, chatting briefly with other workers. Telephones rang, keyboards rattled, computers murmured, messengers shuttled back and forth.

Jimmy shut his camera. “Come on, man, this stuff is boring. Anyway, I gotta take a leak.”

Jessup took one last look around. A number of people were handling the telephones, accepting pledges. His eye snagged on one young woman: she looked like she’d been caught in the rain. Her hair was dark and as thickly tangled as a tropical jungle. Attractive, self-assured almost to the point of arrogance. She flicked him once with her hooded eyes and Jessup felt it almost like the sting of a slap.

“One more interview.”

Jimmy gave him a look. “Forget it.”

“Some friend you are.”

“I gotta pee. I’ll wait for you up front”” Jimmy Nap shut his camera and lugged it away.

Damn. Jessup glanced over at her. She had the phone in one hand and a pen in the other, writing as she spoke. He tried to be unobtrusive, timing his wanderings to be near her desk when her conversation wound down.

When she got off the phone, he turned to her and said, “I guess the money just keeps rolling in.”

“It’s been a good day,” she replied noncommittally.

“I’m Dan Jessup, with WTEC. I’m doing a story on Simon White. You mind answering a few questions for me?”

They shook hands. “Fire away.”

“Name? Rank? Serial number?”

That brought a brief smile. “Maggie Molinari. Schlepper. I doubt if anything I know would help you much. I think Simon is wonderful.”

Up close, she was an interesting mix of contradictions. Her cool handshake came with a surprisingly warm smile which faded all too quickly. Her pale blue eyes kept him at a distance but her lips were full and soft-looking. She wore an expression of amused distrust. She’s seen something of life, Jessup decided, and it hasn’t always been kind to her.

"I'm sure everyone here adores the man, but I'm looking for more interesting details. Does he ever lose his temper? Swear? Crack jokes? Get loose? How does he deal with criticism? You know: the unbuttoned Simon White."

She eyed him with suspicion. "You think he's some kind of actor or hypocrite?"

He backed off. "No, of course not. But all public figures relax when the cameras stop rolling, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't know about other people. But Simon is exactly the same, on or off camera." She was all business now. "If you followed him around while he works, you'd see for yourself." She picked up a stack of papers, clearly indicating she was done with his questions.

Ignoring the signal, Jessup perched on the edge of her desk. "Actually, I'm more interested in his personal background, the people who knew him when he was a kid."

"Oh?"

"He ever talk about that sort of thing?"

"Not to me. I'm sorry, Mr. uh—"

"Jessup. Call me Dan."

"Dan. I've got work to do. I'm sure Mr. Tierney can help you, though."

Great. A brushoff. "Yes, I spoke with Webster." He stood. "I've already taped several employee interviews today. Most were older people. I'd like another for contrast. For instance, you. You'd look good on television. You're, you know, young, attractive—I can't promise we'd use it, but we might."

She gave him a little smile then. "Not a bad approach, Jessup. I've fallen for worse."

Well. So she was human after all.

Webster appeared with the videotape. "I see you've found Miss Molinari. She's one of our best, most dedicated workers."

"She might make a good subject for an interview."

"What an excellent idea!" Then, seeing the dubious look on her face, Webster leaned closer. "Of course you needn't do anything you're uncomfortable with, my dear, but it could possibly help our cause."

"In that case, I suppose I might. But not today: I'm such a mess."

"That's fine," said Jessup. "I'll get in touch when we're ready and give you plenty of advance warning."

"Here's the video," said Webster. "Please don't hesitate to call if you need anything else."

Jessup thanked him. When he turned to say goodbye to Maggie, she was already busy with the telephone.

CHAPTER TWO

Planning Group Headquarters, Virginia

The two-mile length of unmarked road ended abruptly at a metal gate flanked by a stone guard house. Except for this gate, the grounds were completely surrounded by a triple barrier of heavy chain-link fencing topped by razor-sharp coils of concertina. The central fence was electrified. The grounds beyond contained no trees, no bushes, no flowers, not a single blade of grass. Just a paved Euclidean plane that turned into a parking lot in the distance. Beyond this brooded the building itself: an immense, windowless, featureless, nameless monolith of granite as leaden as the winter Virginia sky overhead.

Colonel Joe Pangborn stopped his red Dodge pickup truck at the guardhouse and handed in his pass. The guard checked the gaunt photograph on the card and compared it to the face before him. The same pale, almost lashless eyes, the same indrawn mouth, the same twisted nose, the same scar on the forehead. Pangborn waited with less than his usual patience as the guard went through his routine. Today was going to be a special day. His fingers tapped a nervous tattoo on the steering wheel as he waited.

The guard took his sweet time. He inserted the card into a reader and examined the monitor screen. He punched an entry on his keyboard. Finally returning the pass, he opened the steel gate.

Clipping the laminated card back in place on the pocket flap of his tunic, Pangborn drove on through to the parking spot that bore his name and his truck's license number. After nine years, he was used to all the security precautions.

The paneled lobby contained only two stiff black leather couches and a pair of tables, plus a counter, behind which there was space for visitors to check their belongings with the guard. Nobody carried anything into the inner halls.

To make things even more difficult for any would-be spy, the sole copy machine operated under the constant scrutiny of television monitors and computer scanners. Any documents committed to paper were strictly accounted for. Most memos and reports were sent via the internal computer network. And that network was isolated from the rest of the world, especially the internet.

This was Planning Group. The military think tank. Counterpart to The RAND Corporation, this was where all the what-ifs of a complex and dangerous world were posited, pulled apart and put back together again to make sure America came out the winner. At least, that had been its purpose when it was commissioned in the '70's. But in the darkness and secrecy that surrounded it, its mission had taken on a life of its own, as things military tended to do. Having long since outgrown its original quarters in Alexandria, the present building had been constructed a few miles southwest of Fairfax, Virginia in the mid-'80s, usurping one of the many golf courses owned by the military.

In the late '80s, during those heady days of Glasnost and Gorbachev and the Fall of the Wall, it seemed the need for places like this would soon evaporate. Especially when the Warsaw

Pact nations abandoned communism and their Soviet “protector”, with even former Soviet republics clamoring for independence. But there was always a segment of the US military that distrusted all things Russian, and viewed with great suspicion this sudden craving for Western economics and polity. To these Cold Warriors, the soul of the Russian people would never allow that nation to turn into a well-behaved neighbor. Particularly since they still owned and operated tens of thousands of thermonuclear warheads. And so for the next several years, while the fearsome empire disintegrated in abortive coup and counter-coup, while Yeltsin battled the bureaucracy and the bottle, while his physical health deteriorated along with his political health, the Cold Warriors watched and whispered and planned for all possible eventualities.

They watched and worried when Russia suffered the paroxysms of runaway inflation, corruption in government, the rise of the criminal class and the threat of bankruptcy: conditions all too similar to the collapse of Germany’s Weimar Republic that led to the rise of Hitlerism.

When the active young Neo-Stalinist from Belarus engineered a treaty with the nearly prostrate Russia, they watched with narrow-eyed interest.

When Yeltsin was removed from power by the votes of a people who never forgave him or Gorbachev for ending the communism that had all but destroyed the motherland, the Cold Warriors smiled knowingly and prepared for the inevitable.

When Yeltsin’s former military chief ran for the presidency on a promise of renewing Russia’s might, and lost to Myshkin, the Belarussian who had promised much the same thing, only more forcefully, they nodded in grim satisfaction and deployed their agents.

And when Myshkin justified their concerns within months of his ascension to power by reabsorbing the largest and most powerful republics, nationalizing all the companies the west had foolishly built on Russian territory, incarcerating the new oligarchs, and then boldly defaulting on the nearly fifty billion dollars in western loans, they shook their collective heads in horror and began planning in joyful earnest.

They were back in business.

Col. Pangborn was buzzed past the lobby guard.

The structure was built to be secure. But of course the weakest link in any security system was its people. Which was why those who worked in Planning Group had been subjected to very intense scrutiny before being accepted. Their attitudes, their politics, their deepest psychological characteristics had been analyzed with microscopic precision by means of the latest pharmacological and electronic techniques. Techniques which were to the ordinary polygraph as laser surgery was to the hacksaw. And of course references, family, friends, neighbors and acquaintances were also interviewed extensively. Even a lifetime of reading habits had been charted—by means of the computerized library systems in place throughout the US. Those accepted had to submit to telephone taps for a period of two years. Some believed the taps were still in place. A rumor the brass found it convenient not to convincingly deny.

It was a paranoid universe of ultra-secrecy and rigid rules, but Joe Pangborn felt reasonably comfortable in it. The psychological profile of Pangborn, Joseph Edward, Lt. Colonel, revealed that he was a rather old-fashioned kind of creature: a patriot. He was without politics, without

ideology—he simply loved his country and followed the orders of his superior officers. He took pride in his service, and believed in his mission, which, as he saw it, was to help insure the safety and survival of the greatest country on the planet. Also noted in his file was his deeply-rooted pessimism—a dark suspicion that any personal happiness he might experience was temporary and undeserved. The reasons for this had been exhaustively documented, tracing back to his childhood, his parents, his overbearing sister, his school experiences, his divorce, etc., etc., etc. Noted and deemed innocuous and perhaps useful.

He'd joined the Air Force after high school. After serving his term, he'd gone to college with the financial help available to vets. It was while he was in school that he'd come to the attention of military intelligence. His twin interests in chess and computers had led him to experiment with a new approach to the eternal problem of teaching computers to play the game. Until then, brute-force processing was seen as the certain path to ultimate victory. Indeed, just two years back, that was the technique used by Deep Blue in its defeat of Garry Kasparov. But Pangborn's approach had been quite novel, using a multi-level neural net to learn strategy. Instead of thousands of parallel processors, his method fit on a single desktop computer, and was spectacularly successful. Only a handful of the world's top players had ever defeated Pangborn's demonically powerful chess program. Kasparov refused to play against it. The military found Pangborn's deep-learning approach interesting and valuable.

Joe passed through the metal-detector and entered the featureless inner hallways. As he walked, his every step was monitored by the tiny television cameras mounted at close intervals along his path. He no longer noticed them.

His strategic skills had been honed for dealing on many levels with battle and war planning. But, after some early work related to his chess program, his assignments had never dealt with anything so broad: instead, he was just a small cog in a huge machine. But Joe was patient. And now at last, that patience was about to be rewarded.

At the door to his section, he punched in his security code and looked into the Eye-View detector. His code called up a digitized photograph of his retina from the computer's memory for comparison with his living retina. When the computer decided they were a match, the door was electrically unbolted and he was admitted into the Inner Sanctum.

His office walls bore no photos, no cartoons, no articles taped up. A sweater hung on a hook behind the door. His desk was empty of pencils, stapler, clips. Any notes he might want to leave for himself were filed electronically. Even his calendar was electronic.

He turned on his computer, entered his access code and logged in. Then he went out to the central area for coffee.

“Hey, Pangborn, wasn't it your turn to bring donuts?”

It was a standard gibe. Outside sweets were verboten. Someone might be concealing a short-wave radio inside a cruller. All food was prepared on premises and available at cost in the building's lunchroom. But you had to eat it there. You couldn't even bring an apple back to your office. And Joe was very fond of apples.

He sat and sipped his coffee. Maybe his new assignment would be challenging. He

missed the adrenaline of a good challenge.

Back at his computer, he worked halfheartedly at his current project: a study of the effects of various kinds of chaff on the enemy's newest types of detection radar, examples of which had been recently obtained by unspecified means.

He'd been at it for several hours when the summons flashed on his screen. He logged off and headed for the large conference room, which was actually a small auditorium.

He found a place next to Mitch Andresson, the tall, slender, bearded but balding full Colonel who was fifteen years his senior and as close a friend as could be expected in a place that discouraged socializing and forbade discussion of each other's assignments. They'd begun years ago as chess rivals, but their friendship had blossomed to the point that they seldom played any more. Instead they talked. About books, movies, politics, the meaning of life, and their favorite topic of all, global military strategy.

It was typical of their working conditions that despite this friendship they never saw each other outside.

Mitch greeted Joe. "Glad to see you made the cut."

General Harold Forster strode onto the stage and the men quieted. Forster was the Operations Manager: a technocrat who had never held a command or served in battle, but had advanced steadily through the ranks of military intelligence. Forster thanked the men for assembling promptly, made certain the heavy steel doors were shut and locked, then introduced General Elmo Hagenmeier.

Hagenmeier, or "Hagenstein," as he was popularly known, stalked onto the stage with the parody-inviting stiff-legged walk made familiar in his many television appearances. But that wasn't the only reason for his nickname. Many believed that Hagenmeier was the creation of The Old Man, John Reitske. His entire career, it was believed, had been puppet-mastered by the wizard who was behind so much of their work at Planning. Granted, Hagenmeier had served bravely in Vietnam—an exploding mine had given him the leg wounds responsible for his peculiar walk. He had emerged from that conflict with a Captain's bars. And rose to general very quickly afterwards. He stood at grim attention and waited until the murmuring subsided.

"Fifty eight years ago this week, in one of the most brilliant strokes in military history, the Japanese stuck the US Naval Base at Pearl Harbor."

Behind him, a movie screen lit up with ancient footage of the attack. Hagenmeier continued.

"This preemptive air strike destroyed virtually our entire Pacific Fleet. If it had been coordinated with a German attack on our eastern facilities and Washington, the course of history would have changed. But the Japanese strike, bold as it was, was not a decisive blow because it was not executed to completion."

He stepped in front of the screen to emphasize his point. The images flickered over his face. "This is a lesson we here at Planning Group have taken deeply to heart. Should this nation ever again be targeted for such an attack, we will know how to respond. And should America ever

need to employ this tactic, we will be prepared to execute it fully and flawlessly.”

The film ended. The General’s icy stare surveyed the room. “Men, I am here to ask you to participate in the most important project in the history of this institution.

“Each of you is a specialist. You have delved deeply into areas of defensive and offensive weaponry, systems and strategies. You are the most professional group of military technostrategists ever assembled. Indeed, you were selected for your overall strategic skills. And yet for years you’ve been asked to work with blinders on.”

Hagenmeier permitted himself a small smile. “As of now, all that has changed.”

Pangborn felt a stir of excitement.

Hagenmeier did his stiff-legged walk to the other side of the stage. “We are about to embark on a coordinated demonstration of our skills. We will be testing the systems, strategies, tactics and, most importantly, the basic assumptions that underlie our entire defensive posture. You will be exposed for the first time to a broad overview of our planning.”

His words stirred a buzz in the audience. Andresson waggled his eyebrows.

Hagenmeier held up a hand for quiet. “I need hardly tell you how carefully each of you has been screened before being selected for this assignment. Gentlemen, consider yourselves honored. Upon the outcome of this demonstration will depend the future of the American system of government. The details of this will unfold as we work.

“As you can imagine, the security on this project is so critical I don’t want you to say a word about it to anyone: not to your wife, not to your analyst, not to your dog.”

General Forster joined Hagenmeier on stage. “Some of you are no doubt aware that unusual activity has been going on in another part of the building. The construction is now complete. If you’ll assemble at the elevator, we will conduct you to this new facility. It’s a surprise I think you’ll like.”

The doors were unbolted and the men headed for the elevators, murmuring questions at one another.

Andresson shot Pangborn a look as they walked. “At last a little excitement, eh?”

They and half the others packed into the elevator. A guard punched in a code to select their floor. Joe had never been inside this elevator before. It moved smoothly down the shaft, long enough, he guessed, to take them deep into the bedrock. But he had no idea how deep the shaft ran: there were no indicator lights to give away their speed or their destination.

At last the doors opened onto a metal-walled hallway ending in a pair of sturdy blast doors. Forster entered his code, eyeballed the lock and the doors swung slowly open.

There was a collective intake of breath at what was inside: a perfect replica of the Pentagon War Room.

The men moved into the room like wide-eyed children entering a toy store. They examined electronic maps, ran their fingers over the computers, eyed the command and control facilities, the gleaming glass and steel instruments of Ultimate Power. Joe Pangborn’s flesh puckered with excitement. After all these years of waiting, the game was about to begin.

A technician on loan from the supplier took the men on a tour of the facilities, explaining

the functions and capabilities of each piece of equipment.

When the tour was completed, the men assembled in a small room. Forster waited until the excited chatter subsided. "I know you're eager to receive your assignments. Let me just go over some of the ground rules. Although security on this mission is tighter than any you've ever dealt with, we're relaxing some of our restrictions: we will permit, even encourage you to talk about your work within this select group. We believe this kind of cross-pollination can improve productivity. And," he smiled, "we're also removing some of the restrictions on food and drink at the work-stations. Coffee and snacks will be permitted." He nodded to the technician, who brought in a stack of manila envelopes. Forster called the men in alphabetical order and handed each of them the thick envelope containing his assignment.

When they resumed their seats, the technician stood to give them an overview of their task. He waited a moment until he had the attention of the group. "Okay. You've each been given problems generated by another section of Planning: problems that replicate the kinds of situations the US could face in the real world in times of tension. You'll be testing and modifying, if necessary, techniques for solving these problems." He waited for the buzzing to subside. "There will be a test-run of your coordinated strategies in a few months, followed by extensive analysis of the results." He looked around. "After that, the techniques you've perfected will be made available to those responsible for monitoring America's worldwide defensive network. You may unseal your envelopes now."

They did so.

Pangborn was elated. His assignment was a real plum: analysis of Russian spy satellite activity.

"Okay, let's take a lunch break, then we'll get to work," said Forster.

They filed into the lunchroom. For a change, the meal was noisy with chatter. Pangborn and Andresson compared notes, then circulated among the others. Twenty four eager technicians stood in clusters, gobbling bites from their sandwiches when they remembered to, poring excitedly over the contents of each other's envelopes. Pangborn was anxious to begin. As soon as his curiosity was satisfied, he moved to his work-station and logged in.

Hidden behind one of the glass display maps was a small observation room. General Hagenmeier slipped into the room and greeted the others. It was a triumphant moment for him: the culmination of more than a decade of planning, although the real work had yet to begin.

He was pleased that John could be here to see this; that he had lived long enough.

Dr. John Reitske, the Grand Old Man of American foreign policy. Hagenmeier contemplated the ancient warrior in his motorized wheelchair. Reitske had advised and decisively influenced every American president since Eisenhower. Had met and dealt with every leader of Russia since Khrushchev. This project had been his baby from the beginning. And Hagenmeier had been his point-man, bringing it to fruition.

Standing tall next to the old man was Simon White, the minister and moralizer who was running for the presidency. Next to him sat the crooked figure of Webster Tierney. Hagenmeier

didn't know him well. But in an uncomfortable moment of insight, he realized that Tierney's relation to Simon was rather similar to Reitske's relationship to himself.

Webster turned to Reitske. "I'm very impressed."

"You should be. As you can see, Elmo and I are doing our part. Now it's up to you to do yours, and get this good man into office."

Hagenmeier felt a stirring of distaste. "I still don't see why we need—"

Reitske interrupted. "Now Elmo, we've been all through that."

Hagenmeier hated it when the old man used that tone on him. He turned abruptly. Simon White, Reitske's "indispensable man," stood gazing through the one-way glass into the war room. He seemed to be talking to himself. Hagenmeier leaned closer to hear.

"Moloch, Moloch," murmured Simon, staring raptly.

Webster used his cane to force himself erect. "I suppose we should leave. It wouldn't do to be seen hanging about Planning Group." He sniggered as if he'd said something witty.

Hagenmeier gazed thoughtfully at the odd couple as they limped and strode out. Exactly *who* would find it disturbing that they were here? Surely it wouldn't matter to the twenty four technicians who were bound body and soul to the Cause. Then who?

Hagenmeier's mind was rigorously trained to tune out the stray reception of epiphanies. But it now dawned on him that if Simon White's pivotal role in a rogue military conspiracy were revealed, it just might trouble the folks who planned to vote for him.