

PROJECT WAR GOD

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Project War God

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PROJECT WAR GOD

PROLOGUE

"Did you eat the squirrel?" The Lieutenant's words echoed from the naked walls of the debriefing room with the tenacity of a hungry mosquito.

"No, but I should have."

* * *

Sure, I should have eaten the squirrel -- we all should have cooked and eaten the critter. Unfortunately, the bickering over who deserved the largest share escalated into a brawl which ended in our defeat with the squirrel's victorious departure.

My last sight of our would-be meal was that of the squirrel's half-skinned tail as it disappeared into a dead blackberry thicket.

If squirrels could laugh, I'm certain we would have heard his tiny voice hysterically lauding our stupidity and his good fortune in escaping the stew pot. In the larger scheme of things, the rodent's escape was of little consequence. After all, divided among the five of us, a cooked squirrel was hardly enough to ease the hunger that racked our shrunken bellies. Hell, even if one of us had managed to keep the entire carcass it wouldn't have changed the inescapable truth -- death from starvation was inevitable.

Only two of us were standing when the fight ended, though standing is not an accurate description of our posture. George was bent over a stump dabbing at his bloody nose and moaning

about the newly formed lump on his head. Dandy had smacked him with the butt of Old Ben's rusted M16.

And me, I leaned into a dead oak tree and nursed a twisted ankle -- my reward for leaping into the middle of the fracas and playing at being peacemaker. I should have known better.

The close friendship the five of us shared had withered and died in the hot summer sun like the drought-stricken high mountain forest where we were stranded.

"And you call yourself a bodyguard," I said sarcastically. Dandy was sprawled flat on the ground his arms and legs spread-eagle. He looked like Bambi after a clandestine meeting with Godzilla.

"I quit," he moaned. Then choking he spat out two pearly white teeth with a stream of blood and saliva. "Snakes in the grass, *bitch!*" Dandy pulled himself to his knees and crawled into the woods. That was the last I saw of him.

Old Ben followed Dandy into the forest and when he returned he looked like he had lost a fight with a bear. I didn't ask what happened to him; it seemed obvious that he and Dandy had settled their disagreement in private.

* * *

We were too tired to walk any further so we each staked out a spot to spend the night. I favored the dead oak partly because it was a good back support but mostly because I was too sore to look for a better place. I fell asleep with the setting of the Sun behind the nearest mountain peak, and though I briefly awakened from time to time, I was grateful to have escaped the haunting of previous night's bad dreams. With the dawn, however, came the realization that our group had diminished, again, by one. Nikita was gone. That left only the three of us, Ben, George and me.

In the not too distant past, I trusted Ben and George with my life but that trust was fading quickly. Who would go missing next? Moreover, who was responsible? George or Ben? Or -- was someone stalking us?

Paranoia?

Perhaps, it was as Ben suggested, "Nikita must've got tired of

our bickering and struck out on her own."

It was a plausible explanation, still.... I kept my eye on Ben, while he kept his eye on George. And George? Well, he didn't seem to care about watching anyone. He walked on ahead and broke trail for us, through the woods and back to base camp.

* * *

Lyn and Don had stayed behind to guard the camp, and what we had salvaged from Project War God, while the rest of us went for help. But they were gone when we returned to base camp. For the most part, the camping gear and equipment was just as we had left it -- only Lyn and Don were missing. They didn't leave a note, the coals in the fire pit were cold and the few footprints we found in the dusty campsite looked to be days old. In retrospect, Lyn and Don's disappearance should have bothered me, but it didn't. I was too tired and disillusioned to care anymore. So many of our team had either died or disappeared that adding two more names to the list was pointless -- I needed sleep.

At least my tent was the same as I had left it. I spoke a word of appreciation to Mother Nature for small favors and crawled into a sleeping bag, pulled the frayed top edge over my head and waited for sleep or death with only one thought on my mind -- how was it that a simple experiment, human behavior in isolation, had managed to go *so* awry.

PART ONE

Chapter 1 The Rocky Mountains

The smoke from a campfire awoke me. I rolled over and pushed back the tent's door flap to see what was going on. Ben's back was to me. He was stirring the coals beneath a large pot. "Breakfast will be ready soon," he said without turning to look at me.

"Breakfast?" We had finished off our last ration of water and pine nuts the previous morning so I wasn't sure that I heard him right. "We have fo – food?" my dry tongue fought with my lips to get the words out. Ben didn't answer.

The heat from the fire was a bit intense but it felt good. The smoke that blew into my face, on the other hand, was not a pleasant awakening. I rubbed at my eyes and looked again at the fire.

Sitting on the well-tended coals of last night's watch fire was an iron pot containing something like thin stew, or so I told myself. The reality is -- it looked like muddy water.

"Where did this come from?" I leaned over the pot to get a whiff and breathed in the dampness of the steam. The stew's aroma, if it had one, escaped me but the wetness of the steam caressing my face and nostrils was like a gift from heaven.

Ben shoved a water bottle into my hand. "Drink it slowly, just a little at first," he warned.

"George was down at the dry riverbed all night. He dug a hole in a likely spot and managed to strain enough water from the sand to fill the canteens and that pot. The boy's got talent."

Ben grinned. "There's edible root in that stew too."

A moment later George walked into the clearing and joined us beside the fire. "More protein," he announced as he dumped a handful of bark grubs into the pot. "Let it boil a bit before you eat. I'll be right back."

"Now where's he off to?" I watched in the direction of George's retreat. "He's not expecting us to wait for him to return before we eat, is he?" My eyes returned to the pot and the food I so desperately needed, my mouth watered with anticipation.

"Yes. It is the polite thing to do."

"Polite, hell. I'm starved." I reached for the ladle but Ben blocked me with the stick he used to stir the coals.

"We'll wait for George. Now, go see if you can round up something to eat out of. It'll keep your mind off the food."

"Huh! Dandy never gave me orders."

"Then think of it as a request. Get to it, girl!" Ben grinned and playfully threatened me with the stick.

I knew there was no point in arguing with him. Since Dandy's disappearance, Ben had taken on the role of my bodyguard and dictator. Like everything else, there was nothing to be gained by fighting it.

Nikita's tent was on the far side of the clearing. It was the largest and the only tent that wasn't threadbare. Two weeks earlier, when we broke camp, we stowed everything we couldn't carry in Nikita's tent. I went there first to look for the cooking utensils.

I zipped open the tent flaps and ducked inside.

The shielded lock-box Nikita brought with her from Project War God's city dome was open and empty. I squinted; my eyes were slow at adjusting to the dim and dusty confines of the tent. Project War God's back-up data storage cubes were hacked to pieces and scattered on the floor. "Oh, shit!" My knees went limp and I sat hard on the floor, my legs crossed in half lotus. "Damn, damn, damn," I closed my eyes and attempted to focus. My mind raced in a dozen directions -- who, why? No readily acceptable explanation surfaced from the clutter of thought until, inescapably, the truth surfaced -- two years of work, invaluable research, and people sacrificed for nothing. Gone. *All* gone!

No time for this, I told myself and shook my head. *Get it together, Britney*. The words were in my head but they almost seemed to come from someone else. Long overdue clarity of thought resurfaced and with it the realization that, for weeks, I had been walking around in a stupor, allowing circumstances and other people to lead me when I needed to be doing the leading. As project manager, it was my job to lead. "Why? Why had I forgotten?" I shook my head again -- there wasn't time for introspection.

"Ben," I yelled. "Have you or George been in this tent?"

No answer.

One corner of Nikita's journal peeked out from under the upturned lock-box. I pushed the box aside. The journal cover was defaced, the letters NWB were scratched across the cover and Nikita's name was X'ed out in heavy strokes of red ink. The journal was empty. The pages had been ripped out.

I got up, journal cover in hand, and stepped from the tent.

Ben was slumped over, limp; his forehead nearly touched his knees. The steel shaft of an arrow was buried in his back.

The journal cover slipped from my hand as I quickly scanned the clearing, looking for the intruder, and saw no one.

There wasn't anything I could do for him. Ben was dead.

Luck, or some act of providence, had spared me.

Staying in the clearing was not an option. I needed cover.

Cautiously, I backed my way around the tent and into the shelter of the trees.

The forest was deadly quiet, silent, it seemed as though the world, time itself had stilled in respect for Ben's passing.

No tears.

At least Ben didn't suffer as some of the others had. His death was quick. So many of my friends had died during the preceding three weeks that I had grown numb to it.

Live with anything, even unspeakable horrors, long enough and a person will grow accustomed to it.

The death of people close to me had become commonplace. For some it was a welcomed release -- an escape from the hell we had been made to suffer. I would have gladly accepted it for myself but that choice was no longer mine to make. Someone

had to live long enough to tell what had happened, I owed that much to my friends and co-workers. Without the data in the storage cubes Project War God would be seen as a colossal failure, when, in fact, it was a monumental success.

My first steps into the forest were deliberate and cautious. Moving from the cover of one tree to another, I stopped to listen for evidence of movement in the woods around me.

Ben's murderer could be anywhere.

When I was confident that no one was close by, I picked up my pace and ran in short spurts from one patch of cover to another. The fear of what might be behind me threatened to overtake my good judgment -- panic can send you off a cliff or into a trap. Fortunately, my weakened physical condition forced me to take it slow.

I was quite some distance from camp and feeling reasonably secure with the coverage the forest provided me. Nevertheless, I couldn't stop to rest. Whoever killed Ben would know that he was not alone. They, or he, would be looking for me! The assassin might be only a few yards behind and taking his time in stocking me. Not a very optimistic thought. I tried to put it aside and concentrate on the moment at hand, but my mind cued on a more depressing thought.

What happened to George? Where was he? Was he dead or was he the one who killed Ben? Was George following me?

"No." I shook my head and shoved the thought aside. George could have killed either one of us at anytime during the last three days. Why wait until we got back to base camp? No, I assured myself, the killer had to be an outsider. George wasn't in the clearing. He could be hiding in the forest.

I rested in the cover of a tree for a moment and looked around while listening for a sign that someone else was nearby – or following me. Nothing there.

The forest was *too* quiet.

If someone was tracking me, he was good at it.

George could move through the woods like that, silent, as quiet as a cat on the hunt. His keen reasoning and his ability to survive under the most difficult conditions were some of the reasons for his inclusion in the project. My hope was that his

innate talent hadn't failed him. Since Ben's killer hadn't caught up with me, it was reasonable to assume he must be preoccupied with finding George.

Fatigued, I wanted to stay in the shadow of the tree and rest but I knew better. I had to keep moving away from camp. Later, when I was sure it was safe to do so, I would double-back to look for George and to retrieve the water I so desperately needed.

The sun was over my left shoulder, I was heading south and the dry riverbed, where George had divined the water, was somewhere to my right.

* * *

When I reached the riverbed, I could go no further. I had to rest. For nearly three hours, I had fought my way through the forest. Stopping to rest was a risk I had to take. On the east bank, I discovered a large spreading maple tree. Using what little strength I had left, I climbed up and perched on a branch to rest. The foliage of the tree furnished me with some cover while allowing me a good view of the surrounding area.

Having dosed off for a moment, I awoke with a start when I heard the sound of something moving through the brush.

There wasn't time to leave my perch, so I stayed put.

A tall lean man, dressed in the project's standard uniform, emerged from the thicket. A crossbow was slung over one shoulder. In his hands, he carried a rifle. I couldn't see his face -- his head was down. But there was no mistaking who that head of shaggy blond hair belonged to -- Jean-Pierre Lanpart, Project War God's associate environmental engineer.

My heart leapt for joy at seeing him, then suddenly stilled. Fear and suspicion, the two-headed dragon, raised its ugly heads and made me weary of the situation.

Jean-Pierre was supposed to be dead.

Emotionally, I was confused. I wanted Jean-Pierre to be alive, but he couldn't be. Still, this was not a ghost approaching the tree. It was Jean-Pierre and he appeared none the worse for the three weeks he would have spent alone in the mountains. In fact, he looked too good -- clean and well fed.

When Project War God's city dome collapsed, we counted Jean-Pierre among the dead. We didn't find his body. But then, we didn't need to see the bodies of our friends to know there were no survivors buried under the tons of steel, glass and plastic that fell on the sleeping quarters that fateful night. The reality that Jean-Pierre was alive and well when everyone else had perished told me that Jean-Pierre wasn't inside the interior's dome when it collapsed. Only those of us who were suited up and in the atmospheric buffer between the exterior dome and city dome survived. No one could live in the atmosphere of the buffer without a pressure suit, so Jean-Pierre must have been outside and in the forest. For two years, no one had been outside the dome. To leave the dome was a breach of protocol.

* * *

Jean-Pierre was asleep on my sitting room sofa when I left my quarters that last evening. The report I had been working on all day would not let me sleep, so, I went to the commissary to fix myself a small snack and stayed there awhile longer chatting with a fellow insomniac. Between the two of us, we finished off a pot of coffee.

When I reached my office, on the opposite side of the complex, Dandy was waiting for me.

"The security alarm malfunctioned again. It showed a breach on the cliff side wall. I checked it out on the monitor, there's nothing there."

"Get some rest, Dandy. The maintenance crew can deal with it in the morning."

"There's more to it than just that, Brit." The expression on his face was quite serious. "Come with me."

Dandy led me to the south wall of the interior dome. He switched on the external lighting and I saw what he was worried about. A thick fog was forming in the buffer between the interior and exterior domes. "That's not possible!"

"But there it is."

"Maybe it's another one of those damnable tests. It's just like RE-Mohtech to throw something completely improbable at us

while we're prepping to close out the project. Short-timer stress combined with.... Wait a minute, did you check for a simulated asteroid hit? That would really test our readiness." Dandy returned my straw-fisted supposition with a frown.

"Seriously though, did you check the environmental sensors to see if it's carbon dioxide? They threw that scenario at us the first month, but there's nothing to say they wouldn't program the computers to do it again."

"I don't think so, Brit." He shook his head. "This isn't like anything we've encountered before. Besides, it doesn't fit the project's constraint parameters. And it's not a wastewater leak. I checked."

"Didn't you just tell me that the security system registered a breach?"

"Yes, but there isn't one. Not in the exterior, nor the interior structure. Besides, if it was another test, the operation's file would verify that. I checked. Security's SOP file shows no scheduled tests. No...," Dandy switched off the lighting. "... Something's wrong out there -- for real this time!"

"All right. Wake up the on-call crew. I'll meet you at airlock three."

"Jean-Pierre will want to call a full alert."

"No. Don't wake him. He's been putting in some grueling hours. Wake Ben instead. Let him make this call. It'll do his ego a world of good."

The environmental sensors confirmed Dandy's concerns. Significant amounts of nitrogen, oxygen and at least two unidentifiable and potentially noxious aqueous compounds had been introduced into the atmosphere of the buffer. Dandy suggested calling a red alert and waking everyone in the complex, but he was outvoted when Ben insisted on conducting an on-site inspection before calling a full alert.

Seven of us suited up and went into the buffer to investigate. Minutes later an implosion destroyed the interior dome. Stripped of its protection, the domed city was engulfed in lethal gasses. Not one of those who breathed the gasses lived. Those who were crushed by the falling debris were the lucky ones. The less fortunate died a grisly death -- drowning in their own blood.

* * *

Now, as I sat perched in my tree, watching Jean-Pierre, it all came together in my mind. He was the missing piece in the puzzle. There was no evidence to substantiate the hypothesis that an outsider was responsible for the city dome's collapse. From the beginning it looked like an inside job; but everyone who survived the explosion had ironclad alibis and top security clearance. The idea that one of the presumed dead was the perpetrator never entered our minds.

In retrospect, and two years too late, I realized that Dandy's initial assessment of Jean-Pierre was correct. "There's something odd about this fellow, Brit. I feel it," Dandy warned me. "Besides, the dossier security provided me with for Jean-Pierre Lanpart doesn't mention anything about his superior physical skills. He's a plant. I'd stake my life on that."

"You're overreacting, Dandy," I told him. "Everything's just going too smoothly for you, that's all. So relax, will you."

Despite my casual attitude toward Dandy's concerns, I heeded his warning and kept a close watch on Jean-Pierre for the first few months of the project. But whatever misgivings I may have had in the beginning fell away with time. Jean-Pierre had a talent for making friends, it wasn't long before he and Dandy had a close working relationship and an even tighter friendship.

What fools we were. It wasn't an outsider who sabotaged the project. It was one of our own!

Even with all the evidence stacked against him, I was finding it difficult to believe that Jean-Pierre could be responsible for the deaths of our friends -- thirty-one people. But it was the only explanation that made sense. Only the saboteur would have been outside, I reminded myself, and only the saboteur would have known what was going to happen that night.

Jean-Pierre stopped beneath the tree, brought a canteen to his lips and sipped at it noisily.

It was torture.

I wanted that water!

After wiping his mouth on his shirtsleeve, he replaced the cap

and dropped the canteen back to its place at his side.

From a small plastic food pouch, Jean-Pierre took an ample sized slice of jerky and began munching on it while he casually surveyed the dry riverbed.

I was thirsty. I needed Jean-Pierre's water, but jumping him for it would be a fool's move. Watching him enjoy his food and water was agonizing but there nothing I could do about it. So I waited, licked at my parched lips and watched. My thoughts at that moment do not warrant repeating. Suffice it to say, an intense hatred had replaced the emotional bond I had felt for him. It galled me to think of how I grieved at his presumed demise. *You will pay, Jean-Pierre. I promise you that!*

Jean-Pierre made his way down the riverbank and stopped in the middle of the riverbed. He looked one way then the other before going south.

He was gone and moving away from base camp. For that small measure of luck, I was grateful, but I couldn't relax. It was obvious that Jean-Pierre had killed Ben. George may have met the same fate. I wouldn't find help in camp. Furthermore, it was unlike Jean-Pierre to be less than thorough. He would have disposed of anything in camp that could be of use to me. Still, I had to be sure, and without water, there was little hope for making it out of the mountains alive.

Chapter 2

The sun was close to the horizon when I neared camp. Cautiously, I climbed the river's bank.

A swatch of red cloth beneath a bush caught my attention. I bent down to investigate and discovered the heel of George's boot.

"Ah, shit," I mumbled, and shook my head. Hesitantly, I pushed back the brush and touched the exposed calf of his leg. It was cold -- stiff.

"Oh, George." I sank to the ground beside him. Tears blurred my vision but I quickly wiped them away.

George lay face down; his head was cocked awkwardly to one side. There was no sign of a struggle, and no blood. By the looks of it, George had been jumped from behind and his neck broken by experienced hands. He probably didn't know what hit him.

Silent and stunned I sat beside him while waves of anguish washed over me. Tears welled up and escaped from my eyes to run down my cheeks in tiny rivulets. It was the first *real* show of emotion I had expressed in weeks. "It's just not fair, George! I can't go on alone." I hid my face in my hands and cried. "I'm not trained for it." I raised my head and glanced around quickly. "Damn it, George!" I pounded my fist on the ground, allowing myself, if only for a moment, to feel grief and pain at losing another friend. But there was no time to mourn, or bury him; these were luxuries I could ill-afford. So I wiped away the tears

and went about the business of trying to keep myself alive.

Three feet to the right of George's right hand lay a canteen. Hastily, I snatched it up.

Water!

I shook the container. It was nearly full. "Thanks, George," I whispered, a salute to his resourcefulness.

I unscrewed the lid and brought the canteen to my lips. Before I could taste the tepid liquid, an arrow pierced the canteen's side forcing me to drop it. The water pooled on the ground momentarily then quickly vanished into the parched soil.

I glanced in the direction from which the arrow had come. Jean-Pierre was moving toward me.

Throwing myself to the ground, I yanked the knife from George's belt sheath and crawled into the brush. It was my only hope for escape. *You won't take me by surprise again*, I cursed.

The drought had killed off most of the underbrush and left only the dried remains of a heartier breed -- blackberry bushes. Fortunately, some small animal had tunneled his way through the thorns and left behind a path for me to follow. Unfortunately, the tunnel led to a dead end.

I emerged onto a rock overhang overlooking the dry riverbed.

If there had been water in the narrow channel, it would have been my salvation. The rock provided the perfect platform for a leap into the river's bygone raging torrent. As it was, I was trapped. A leap from the rock into the dry riverbed might result in broken bones. I considered the alternatives and decided to try the twenty-foot jump.

I stepped to the rock's edge but a hand grasped my left forearm and flung me into the brush, where I landed on my rump in a pile of decaying leaves and pinecones.

Jean-Pierre stared down at me.

I tried to back up, but I was pinned against a tree. He'd trapped me that easily.

Brandishing the knife, I glared at Jean-Pierre. He stepped closer.

"Why don't you get it over with? Or is cornered pray just a little *too* easy?"

"Put the knife down, Britney!"

"Like hell I will -- " Jean-Pierre's moccasin clad foot connected with my wrist and the knife flew from my hand.

Before I could move, Jean-Pierre fell to the ground, pinned my legs down and grasped my wrists. "*Let go!*" I struggled, but it was wasted movement.

"I will gladly let go once you've come to your senses."

"Yeah right. Like I'm really supposed to believe you?" I tested the grip he held on my wrists.

"I have no intention of harming you, Brit. Quite the opposite in fact, I hope to keep you *from* harm."

"Huh, that's a laugh. You've already killed off everyone involved with the project. Why should I believe that you would spare my life? That much of a fool I'm not!" I stared daggers at him.

"I had nothing to do with that, Brit. They were my friends, too. Or maybe you've forgotten?" Pain and confusion shone in his eyes -- eyes that stared into mine, searching and quiet for a tense moment.

I wanted to believe him.

Something was desperately wrong with this scenario, or my assessment of it. Perhaps I judged Jean-Pierre too quickly; after all, I didn't have any *real* evidence to substantiate my belief in his guilt.

I turned from his stare and pushed the thought of his probable innocence aside. Clearly, I was losing my objectivity. I wanted to believe him and he knew it.

Without warning Jean-Pierre loosened his grip on my wrists and sat back on his haunches. "I thought you trusted me. I thought there was something special between us?" His voice was soft with disappointment. "Now I see that I was wrong." Jean-Pierre continued to stare at me, and I at him. "You're free to go, Brit," he said after a moment. I thought I noticed moistness about his eyes, but he suddenly turned his gaze to the dry riverbed and turned his back to me.

"What kind of game are you playing?" He didn't answer. "Do you really think that by making yourself seem vulnerable that you will gain my trust?"

Jean-Pierre had provided me with a perfect target. Positioned

as he was, on the edge of the rock overhand, it wouldn't take a great deal of strength on my part to shove him over. Of course, there was a good chance that he would take me with him when he fell, but for once, at least, I'd have the advantage. His body might even break my fall. I was desperate, he was confusing me and I just wanted to be rid of him, to be rid of the pain, the confusion and the emotions he stirred within me. Tears began to flood my eyes. I had to get away from him. If I ran, he would only catch me. His gift of freedom could not be trusted. There was only one way out. Over the edge.

I was positioning myself for the lunge when Jean-Pierre foiled my plan. He turned and tossed his canteen back to me. "Take this."

I let it fall to the ground. "I don't need your rations! There's water in camp."

"Take the canteen, Brit. You'll need it. George's assassin may have tainted the water in camp. He, or they, would expect you to double-back for it, as I did."

"I don't believe you." My only choice was to make a run for it. Cautiously, I moved to where the knife fell. I looked back at Jean-Pierre and bent down to retrieve the blade and narrowly escaped impalement by the arrow that whizzed past my ear and slammed into the tree behind me.

Jean-Pierre spun around, grabbed up his rifle, pointed it at the opposite riverbank and squeezed off a round.

A man stood from the brush on the other side of the ravine; then, lurching forward, he toppled end-over-end down the bank and out of sight into a rock outcropping.

Jean-Pierre jumped to his feet, picked up the canteen and tossed it to me. "His friends will be close behind." Jean-Pierre grasped my free hand and dragged me with him through the brush north following the riverbank.

Chapter 3

The trail we took was not a good one, but certainly better than the alternative -- bashing our way through the dry underbrush. My stamina was short-lived; I was slowing Jean-Pierre's movements. I tripped and fell several times. Jean-Pierre cursed and roughly helped me to my feet each time, allowing me only a short respite before insisting that we keep moving.

I thought we would stop for a rest when Jean-Pierre turned from the river trail, but we didn't. Instead, we began a steep climb up a rocky tree covered slope.

"I can't go on like this!" I gasped. My chest felt like it was bound tight with rubber bands -- with each labored breath the elastic tightened.

"Yes you can, it's not much farther." He wasn't the least bit tired.

"No, I'm serious." I pulled back on his hand and he let go. "I can't!" I plopped down on the ground beside a small dead tree and refused to move. "I can't go on!" My head was spinning, my heart was pounding in my ears, I was nauseous and I felt close to fainting.

Jean-Pierre looked down at me and scowled.

He glanced down the trail, then up the slope. "A few minutes won't make that much difference." Jean-Pierre took up the canteen and drank deep from it before handing it to me. "I won't be gone long. Stay out of sight," he ordered.

Without looking at me again, he walked back down the path

and out of sight.

The thought of escaping occurred to me, but Jean-Pierre was too fast. If he really wanted to find me, he could; besides, I didn't have the strength to make a run for it.

Whether I liked it or not, I had no choice but to ally with Jean-Pierre. He had food and water, and from what I had seen, he knew a lot more about the area than I did. It would be a difficult alliance to maintain, but I was prepared to live with it until I was sure I could escape from him and find my own way out of the mountains.

* * *

With Jean-Pierre's help, I made it up the slope to a trail that led us into a small canyon. The sun had set and though a full moon was on the rise, there was little that I could see. Fortunately, Jean-Pierre seemed to know where he was going.

Hours passed before we stopped again. "Stay here. I won't be gone for long." With that, he disappeared into the shadows of the forest and left me to wait for him at the base of a steep canyon wall.

"Take all the time you need," I said, relieved and grateful for the brief respite.

I leaned against a large boulder and looked around. There wasn't much to see, just rocks, dying brush and dead trees. The moon was overhead, big and bright it hung suspended in the sky like a beacon to the stars. There was nothing odd about it. However, something about the moon being in full phase tugged at my mind like a fragmented memory. It was there one moment then gone before the thought had a chance to evolve into something comprehensible.

The last time I saw a full moon it was not Earth's moon. It was Phobos. It zipped across the sky at sunset eclipsing its smaller more distant cousin while Earth, the evening star, rose above a shadowy pink horizon. In retrospect, the images projected on the underside of Project War God's exterior dome seemed more real to me than the large oversized moon I was looking up at. But then, that was to be expected. After two years

in isolation, living in an environment whose sole purpose was to replicate life in a biosphere on Mars, we expected to experience the same degree of disorientation as someone who was returning to Earth after living on Mars. What we hadn't anticipated was how long the disorientation would last. I had been outside the city dome for more than two weeks, living under the most primitive of conditions, and still I felt like I was a stranger to the world I had known all my life. The sun was too bright, the sky looked odd, the air, dry and thick, was too hot and now the moon was too big.

"Are you all right?" I hadn't noticed Jean-Pierre's approach. He was standing right in front of me.

"Yes, of course I am."

"No, you're not. You're asleep on your feet." Jean-Pierre pushed aside a small grouping of scrub oak and dead brush at the cliff side of the boulder exposing the entrance to a cave. "In here," he said. "You can get some rest and we won't have to worry about someone walking past the guard."

It was a tight fit. I had to duck low to avoid hitting my head. But once inside, I found there was more than enough headroom. Even Jean-Pierre, with his six-foot plus stance, could stand erect.

With the barrier replaced, Jean-Pierre led me blindly through a narrow passageway. Ten paces into the mountain we turned right and moved down another corridor eight paces or so before stopping.

Jean-Pierre let go of my hand and I stiffened, afraid to move. The totality of darkness, the cool damp air, and the eerie silence of the cave was frightening. Only the sound of Jean-Pierre's breathing reassured me that he was nearby and that he hadn't deserted me.

Then with the strike of a match, the darkness parted and there was light. I watched, like a moth drawn to the flame, as Jean-Pierre lit the wick of an old kerosene lantern. Its flickering flame cast freakish strobe-lighted shadowy figures on the cave walls. As welcome as it was, the light did little to quell the irrational feelings of apprehension I was experiencing. The tightness of the place was just a little more than what I was prepared for. "I -- I can't say that I care much for your choice of hiding places." I

shivered.

"You'll get used to it." Jean-Pierre tossed a blanket at me. "Make yourself at home," he said. "There's food in that old ice chest." With that, he turned and walked back to the cave's entrance. "I have tripwires to set," he explained. "I won't be gone long."

"Yeah, right." I glanced at the ceiling. "I'll get used to it." I pulled the blanket tight around my shoulders, leaned my back into the wall and slowly let myself slide to the floor.

This part of the old mine consisted of a hollow about six feet in diameter and eight feet long. To my right was a smaller tunnel. I could feel a draft coming from that direction. It was too big to be an airshaft, though I guessed it might lead to one and possibly another chamber with an alternate escape route.

"As caves go, it's not such a bad place," I informed myself. Smiling warily, I readjusted my mindset and tried to see the cave from a more positive perspective. There were no bats, no bears, no rats and I hadn't seen any insects. Then again, their absence was not unexpected.

Global warming; the acid rains, forest fires and mega storms of the previous decade were only a taste of the verdict Mother Nature had pronounced against mankind. Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions in diverse locations became so commonplace that the news media scarcely gave word to them. But there were those who watched and kept score, hacking their wares, on late night radio talk shows -- doomsayers who lauded their prediction of emanate worldwide catastrophe. No one really listened to them; their predictions didn't reflect the slow and sure reality of planetary desolation that sneaks up on you like a thief in the night.

Too many years of intermittent drought, beetle infestation and strange weather changes, had left much of the Rocky Mountain wilderness and public lands to the west inhospitable to man and beast alike. As a precaution against further environmental damage, the government enacted stringent measures restricting access to federal, state and publicly owned lands. Of course, the public vehemently opposed the lockout; they wanted free unobstructed access to the wilderness no matter what it might

cost them in the future. They lost the battle. On the other hand, the environmentalists, whose lobbyists had fought long and hard for reforms, were elated with the closures. They hailed it as a milestone won in the war to preserve the wilderness. It was, nevertheless, too little too late, the damage had already been done.

* * *

The battered old ice chest, I was sitting next to, was without ice. Its contents, however, were far from being a disappointment. Rummaging through it, I discovered about twenty day's worth of ration packets and two cans each of vegetables, fruits and prepared meats. There were several vacuumed sealed plastic bags whose handwritten labels identified the contents as cooked brown rice and lintels, and a bag of individually wrapped jerky.

I used George's knife to open a bag of rice and dipped my trembling fingers into the pouch. It was moist and sticky to the touch. I placed a small bite of the lightly seasoned staples into my mouth and grinned. The feel of it was wonderful! Stifling the impulse to stuff myself, I centered my attention on the rice and chewed. Rolling my tongue gingerly around the food, I savored its texture and mild flavor.

There was no need to hurry and risk making myself ill, so following a few moments of ambrosial bliss; I turned my attention to the stockpile of goods. It was reassuring to know that this night I would not go hungry.

At the bottom of the chest, I found a bottle of nutriment tablets and took one of those with a mouthful of water. My stomach had shrunk so drastically that a few mouthfuls of food and the liquid was all I dared take at one sitting for fear of my stomach's rejection of what had become almost foreign to it.

For the first time in more days than I could count, I had a full stomach. The effect made me sleepy. My eyes closed. Before sleep could drag me into its sheltering grace, I forced my eyes to open. "No, you don't!" I warned myself, and yawned. "This is not a secure situation! You go to sleep now and you might never

wake up."

I wanted to trust Jean-Pierre, but there were too many unanswered questions. This cave. The food. He hadn't suffered in the least. While the rest of us starved, he had plenty to share.

Part of our training for Project War God was to see the whole of our population as one body. Everything had to be shared equally. No matter how bleak the projected outcome, no one was expendable. We were a tightly knit group that had spent two years locked inside an artificial world, from which, theoretically, there was no escape.

Jean-Pierre's actions, his hoarding of food and supplies in this cave, revealed his flagrant disregard for the welfare of the whole. He had put his own needs above those of the other survivors -- that alone leaned heavily in favor of his being the spy Dandy at first suggested Jean-Pierre might be. Under the circumstances, trusting Jean-Pierre would be foolish. That much I was sure of.

What I wasn't sure of, was -- why he was keeping me alive. Why hadn't he just killed me and got it over with? Why go to all the trouble to drag me up here and into this cave? Why? And -- who was the guy that shot at me on the riverbank? Did Jean-Pierre have cohorts out there that had turned on him? I wondered. On the other hand, perhaps it was planned for the arrow to miss its mark. Maybe the guy Jean-Pierre shot was only feigning his injury. Had that been an act to gain my trust? If so, why? Too many questions and no answers.

Jean-Pierre had left his rifle on the floor next to the lantern. I crawled over and picked it up. It was loaded. I moved back to where I had been sitting and put my back to the wall with the rifle on my lap. I would have my answers.

My eyes, reacting to my body's desperate need for rest, kept closing. It became more difficult with each passing moment to keep them open. *Falling asleep on guard-duty, Britney! Dandy would be disappointed.* I tried to talk myself into staying awake. Ultimately, though, I nodded off.

* * *

The touch of a hand on my knee startled me. My eyes flew

open and I grabbed the rifle. "Back off, Jean-Pierre." He'd already pulled his hand away. "Against the other wall!" I leveled the rifle on him.

"Careful with that, Brit. It's loaded." He looked surprised but unafraid.

"Move it, Jean-Pierre!"

He backed up a few more steps and sat down at the far wall. "You might consider putting the safety on. I don't relish the idea of being shot on accident."

"Forget it, Jean-Pierre! This close you could jump me and take it before I could hit the safety."

"If that was my intention, I would have taken the rifle from you when I entered. Put the rifle down, Brit. I'm no threat to you."

"I like things just the way they are." I kept the rifle pointed at him. "First you answer my questions, then I'll think about putting the rifle down."

"In that case, you'll be sitting there all night. I don't answer questions at gunpoint." Jean-Pierre picked up a blanket, rolled it up and placed it on the ground beside him. "Good night, Brit." He stretched out using the blanket roll for a pillow and closed his eyes.

Leave it to Jean-Pierre to throw me a curve and thwart my plan! But then -- I didn't have a plan beyond forcing him to answer my questions.

I don't know how long I managed to stay awake, though I do remember Jean-Pierre snoring. When I awoke, the rifle was beside me on the ground. The safety was on. I wondered about that for a moment but put the thought aside when I realized I was alone.

A noise coming from the far end of the chamber drew my attention there just in time to see Jean-Pierre emerge from the small tunnel. He was rubbing at his damp hair with a ragged old towel.

I looked at the rifle, then at Jean-Pierre. There was no point in trying to force him to answer my questions -- he'd just ignore me. It was unfortunate that he knew me so well.

I closed my eyes and pulled the blanket up close around my

shoulders.

"Since you're awake, you may as well get washed up."

"What?" I rose up on one elbow to get a better look at him.

"There's a small spring at the other end of that tunnel. You'll find everything you need in there."

"Water to bath in?" I sat up and stared at Jean-Pierre. I wasn't sure if I'd heard him right. The thought of a bath was almost too good to be true. I hadn't known that luxury since -- well it *had* been a long time.

"Yes. And *please* avail yourself of the soap! You're stinking up the place."

"Well, thank you, sir, for being so sensitive to my feelings! There's been little enough water to drink, and none to bath in. So *excuse* me if I have offended you!" I stood up, took the blanket with me, and walked to the small tunnel.

"You'll need this." Jean-Pierre handed over a solar rechargeable hand lamp. "There's about an hour's charge left in it."

The spring was a steady stream that ran from the roof of a small cavern at the end of the tunnel. The water gathered on the floor to a depth of two feet then ran out through a fissure in the wall. I panned the roof of the cavern with the lamp and discovered where the draft was coming from. In one corner, there was a small airshaft. It was scarcely wide enough for a person to crawl through. The tunnel was a dead end. No escape route.

The water felt near to freezing. I washed out my clothing first, and then quickly dunked myself. I shivered, trembling in the icy water, but the feel of being clean for the first time in weeks was an indescribable pleasure and well worth enduring the chill of it.

* * *

"Where can I hang these so they'll dry?" I stepped from the tunnel with my wet clothes in hand and the blanket wrapped around me for warmth.

"Give'em here. I'll find a place for them outside. It shouldn't

take long for them to dry once the sun comes up."

"No, thank you. I can take care of it myself. Just tell me where you've placed your trip wires."

"You'd never see'em." Jean-Pierre took the clothing from me and placed them on the crate beside the lamp. "Sit down, Brit. You and I have to straighten out a few misunderstandings."

I backed up, keeping my eye on him while I returned to stand next to the cooler. In glancing down, I noticed the rifle hadn't been moved.

Jean-Pierre noticed me looking at it. "It's still loaded if that's what you're wondering."

"The thought crossed my mind. But why?"

"You're not my prisoner, Brit. If it makes you feel more comfortable to have the rifle, then, by all means, consider it yours." Jean-Pierre slipped out of his jacket and handed it to me. "Here, put this on, you're shivering."

"If I'm not a prisoner, then why did you drag me here?"

"I think the lack of food and water has rattled your brain, Brit." Jean-Pierre shook his head. "Sit down; we'll talk while you eat."

I kept my eyes on him while I seated myself next to the cooler. Jean-Pierre sat facing me. The rifle was between us.

"What are you staring at?"

"You, Jean-Pierre. Why did you do it?" I was more interested in having my answers than filling my empty stomach.

"You still think I'm responsible for sabotaging the project?" Jean-Pierre frowned. "If that was the case, you'd be hanging from that tree you were perched in yesterday. Did you really think that I didn't know you were up there?" He shook his head again. "You left a trail that a child could follow. You're just damn lucky it was me who caught up with you first and not...." He stopped suddenly, and turned to look into the darkened tunnel toward the cave's entrance.

"What is...?" Jean-Pierre threw his hand across my mouth and pushed me down and into the cave wall.

"Quiet," he mouthed, then he rolled away from me to the crate the lamp sat on. The light dimmed and went out as I grabbed the rifle.

It was a lousy position to be in. I wasn't sure if I should be aiming the rifle at Jean-Pierre, or at the entrance. Not that it made a difference. I couldn't see a damn thing anyway!

I felt Jean-Pierre's body close to mine. His hand clasped tightly on my hand and the rifle. "Take this...," he whispered. Jean-Pierre pressed a gun into my hand as he pulled the rifle from me. "... And stay down!"

It was an order I was most willing to obey. It didn't take much thought on my part to surmise that someone had tripped one of Jean-Pierre's traps. Only a fool would stand up under the circumstances, and I don't see myself as a fool.

In the dark, I had to rely on my sense of hearing for information. But the only thing I could hear was a slight ruffling sound coming from the cave's entrance. I couldn't tell if it was Jean-Pierre or an intruder.

The sounds that caught my ear next were at first indefinable; however, there was no mistaking the muffled scream and groan that followed. I waited for more. There was only silence. After a few tense moments, I heard what sounded like something being dragged through the cave. The acoustics made it impossible to tell from which direction the noise came.

The suspense was unnerving. I decided to play it safe and retreat. Jean-Pierre might have lost the battle.

I crawled to the 'washroom' entrance, and picked up George's knife as I passed it.

In the dark, the tunnel seemed smaller and longer. I banged my head on the ceiling several times before I reached the spring. I felt my way in and positioned myself to one side of the entryway.

The silence, aside from the sound of running water, was disquieting.

I hate small tight places!

I'm not sure of how long I stood there shaking and poised with the gun ready to defend myself. But it was too long. The combination of the cold and the uncertainty of the situation took its toll on me. My ability to concentrate waned quickly -- the walls were closing in on me. With a good deal of effort, I fought the sensation aside. I knew all too well the consequences I

would suffer if I allowed my mind to wander.

Damn it, Jean-Pierre, where are you?

To occupy my thoughts, and to establish a point of reference from which to judge how much time passed, I counted off the seconds.

Twenty minutes went by before I heard someone advance slowly through the tunnel. I aimed the gun at the opening, or, where I thought the opening should be -- my sense of direction had been corrupted with the passage of time -- I was no longer sure of the entrance's location.

The sound stopped.

My heart pounded in my head and my hands shook. I heard someone breathing. The breaths were slow and controlled. Aside from that, there wasn't anything that indicated someone was nearby.

I was trying to focus on the source of the breathing when it stopped.

Tentatively, I reached out with one hand and blindly searched for the cave wall. Before I could get my bearings, a hand came from behind and fell heavily across my chest. In one fluid movement, he pulled me to him and wrenched the gun from my hand. I brought my left elbow back, up, and caught him beneath the rib cage. He gasped in surprise. Seizing the opportunity, I fell to the right and freed myself from his grip. In the ensuing struggle, I managed to trip my attacker and together we tumbled into the water.

After a few anxious moments of wrestling in the pool, I managed to gain a strangle hold around my assailant's neck from behind. The knife in my hand was poised at his back before I realized who it was I was struggling with.

"Very go -- good, Brit," Jean-Pierre choked, sputtered and spit out water. "You -- can let -- go now." I loosened my hold slightly, but I kept him firmly penned.

"People who like to play silly games ought to understand the inherent danger. Don't you think?" I increased the pressure on the knife I held at his back just below the ribs.

"You win, Brit. Just get that, ouch. Damn it! Brit, that thing's sharp!"

"Answers, Jean-Pierre. This time I'm serious. I won't back down. Unless you favor the idea of a punctured kidney, I suggest you tell the truth. My...."

I don't know how he managed it, but the advantage was quickly reversed in Jean-Pierre's favor. He was facing me. The knife was in his right hand while he held my wrists at the small of my back with his left hand.

Jean-Pierre pulled me close to him and spoke into my face. "You learned a lot in Dandy's self-defense classes, now didn't you? But you forgot the primary rule. *Never* show mercy to your adversary." Slowly, Jean-Pierre ran the flat side of the blade down my cheek. I stiffened. "You play a mean game for a Sheila, but in this case...," his voice was a whisper, but the sudden change in his accent could not be mistaken -- it was Australian! "... You lose, pumpkin face."

My heart stopped and my knees gave way beneath me.

Chapter 4

Washington D.C.

"What the hell do you mean; you can't ascertain the operational status of Project War God?" Raymond Lambtree slammed the report down and stared across the desk at his young assistant. "Well?"

"I'm sorry, sir. That last surveillance shot is all we have. We have, however, verified that your daughter and the project's security chief, Dandy Jahmann, were in the group that was photographed."

"That was five days ago! Where are they now? And why the hell are they outside the city?" Raymond Lambtree stopped himself; it wasn't like him to lose his temper so easily. He fingered his wedding ring and stole a quick glance at the framed picture of his wife standing in front of their home in Alaska. *The pressure is finally taking its toll on me, Milia*, he admitted, and sighed. "I'm sorry, Marilyn." He looked up at his assistant and tried to smile.

"I understand, sir." She smiled back at him. "This crisis with the satellites has got all our nerves on edge."

"Thank you." He did smile then. "Now, what was that other message you had for me?"

"The Vice President has called an emergency meeting of the Senate." Marilyn frowned. "It's scheduled for 14:00 hours. Your presence is required, sir."

Senator Lambtree raised his eyebrows. "Sounds like the shit's about to hit the fan, huh." Hastily he scribbled a note on a piece

of paper and handed it to Marilyn. "See to it that that's taken care of."

Marilyn glanced at the note. "But, sir!"

"No questions!" He pointed to his ear, and quickly scanned the room with his eyes. "Thank you, Miss Whimdom. That will be all." He smiled.

Lambtree thumbed through the report again and frowned. "Bad timing," he sighed. For a moment, he sat quietly gazing at the satellite photo at the front of the report. Then he reached across the desk and punched the intercom switch. "Anderson."

"Yes, sir." The voice was masculine and business like.

"Try to get through to the West Coast again for me, will you please."

"I'm sorry, sir. The land-net is down again. If it's an emer--"

"Never mind, just let me know when you can get through to my son." Lambtree switched off the intercom and spun around in his chair to look out over the city. "Damnable Japanese technology. The bitch of it is -- we gave it to them!"

Chapter 5

The Rocky Mountains

You lose, pumpkin face. It was the code phrase my father had given me that would identify the one person in the project I could trust with complete confidence -- the only individual who was solely responsible to my father. I'd assumed that Dandy was that person, so it was something of a shock to discover that it was Jean-Pierre.

"Don't fall out on me now." Jean-Pierre laughed, and pulled me up. My knees had buckled and I had slipped from his arms into the water.

"Damn you, Jean-Pierre! Why didn't you..." He let go of my hands, drew me to him and firmly planted his lips on mine.

"Trust me now?" he said at last.

"Yes." I pushed back and out of his reach. "But you could have saved me a lot anxiety by simply revealing your identity earlier. Much earlier!"

* * *

The two of us huddled together in the main chamber and wrapped ourselves in dry blankets.

"Is that better?" Jean-Pierre pulled me to him.

"Yes, but I feel like I'll never get warm! My bones ache."

"It's just what you deserve. We'd be dry and comfortable if you hadn't decided to dunk me in the pool." He laughed.

"Huh, you're the one who sneaked up on me!"

"I'll be more careful next time."

"You had better be. If I'd been sure of my aim, we wouldn't be having this conversation. But seriously, you should have told me *earlier* that you were working for my father." I set aside the bag of rice I was nibbling on, and snuggled up to Jean-Pierre. Being close to him again, trusting him, was, as feelings often are, impossible to describe.

"No." He shook his head. "There was no need until now. Besides, after we became involved, I was sure you'd misunderstand me motives."

"You're right, Jean-Pierre. I would have." I yawned and closed my eyes, feeling safe and secure for the first time in weeks.

"And me name isn't *Jean-Pierre* it's John Peterson."

"Yes, Jean...." I mumbled sleepily and nestled deeper into his shoulder.

"Brit, there's something else I should tell you about -- about me." Jean-Pierre's voice was soft but with a serious edge to it.

"Can't it wait?" I forced my eyes to open and looked into his. "I'm exhausted." I yawned again.

He smiled slightly. "Yeah. It can wait," he said. "Go to sleep, Brit. We can talk later." I felt his chest slacken with a heavy sigh. Jean-Pierre wrapped his arms around me and I fell asleep.

* * *

I slept for the most part of the day, a deep restful sleep.

My strength and endurance were slowly returning. I felt as though I was ready for anything, but Jean-Pierre insisted that I needed to regain more of the strength I had lost.

"I'll go nuts if I have to stay hidden away in here for another day!" I pouted.

Jean-Pierre threw back his head laughing and nearly choked on the food in his mouth.

"And just what's so funny about that?"

"We've spent the last two years locked up in an artificial environment and *now* you're getting claustrophobic?" He

laughed again. "That's a good one, Brit." The laughter quieted abruptly as Jean-Pierre eyed me closely. "How did you manage it in the test isolation simulators? Or did you?"

I shrugged my shoulders and began looking through the food in the cooler again. Rice and lentils were beginning to bore me.

"You didn't, did you? They let you skip, didn't they?"

"Something like that," I answered nonchalantly. "Tight places get to me after a while. But I can handle it if I have to." I held up a can of mixed fruit and examined the contents closely.

"If you *have* to? Britney, what were you thinking? You couldn't have gone on the mission if you're claustrophobic. You'd flip out before we were more than two days out from Earth!"

"I told you, I can handle it. I managed it in the city dome. I could deal with it on a ship -- for a while anyway. I can handle almost anything as long as I'm busy and I know it's not permanent. Really, it's no big deal."

"No big deal? Do you have any idea how much damage even one slightly out of control person can do on a spacecraft?"

"There are medications that help to ease the symptoms." I stared at him. "What are you getting so preachy about? It's not like it makes a difference now, anyway. The project is dead. There won't be any colonists on Mars from this generation."

The expression on Jean-Pierre's face was a puzzled one, as if this information was new to him. "What about back-up personnel? Sure, they won't have the benefit of isolation training, no dress rehearsal. But we still have the data from the project, and -- why are you shaking your head?"

"There never was a back-up team. We were all there was. The talk of the standby group in training was just that -- talk. They never existed. RE-Mohtech needed names on the payroll to justify some of the cost overruns. Those disbursements were funneled back into RE-Mohtech's books. Without a well trained team they'll have to scrub the venture."

"No back-up personnel?" His brow creased. "Cost overruns? Who authorized? No, don't answer that. Let me guess." Jean-Pierre shook his head. "I wouldn't want to be in the good Senator's shoes when that bit of information leaks."

"He can handle it. Besides, no one's likely to care about some minor payroll adjustments when they get a look at the *big* picture." I shook my head and sighed. "The project's a bust. And so are our chances for a ride to Mars."

The color drained from his face.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," he whispered. Jean-Pierre drank from the canteen in his hand, and then offered it to me.

"No, thank you. Are you sure you're all right? You looked a little pale there for a moment."

"I'm fine," he said evenly. "They can still go through with the mission. It'll just take a few more years, that's all." He drew in a long breath, sighed, and looked down at the ground between us.

"You haven't been listening, have you? The whole project will have to be scrubbed. Project War God's psychoanalysis and stress factor data cubes, the environmental impact studies -- everything was destroyed back at camp. The really sad part is that we lost some of the best-trained minds of this generation when that dome collapsed. Those people are not replaceable. Then there's the money. Who's going to finance another project from ground zero? RE-Mohtech has already tapped all the private and federal funding they could find. Moreover, when the public learns about this semi-secret project and the maze of creative financing deals that were arranged to support it, and where the approval for that came from, there will be hell to pay. Heads will roll, *very* prominent heads. It'll be decades before the tax payers forget this little fiasco, of that I have no doubt."

"Decades," he mumbled, and was suddenly distant, withdrawn. Jean-Pierre picked up a small stick and began scratching interconnecting circles in the dust of the cave floor.

I returned my attention to the cooler's contents. My need for food was not as urgent and I could afford to be picky about what I ate. It was a good sign. I took out a bag of jerky and examined it closely before cutting open the bag.

Without warning Jean-Pierre grabbed the jerky from my hand. "You don't want to eat that, Brit."

"I need some protein and I'm tired of the rice. Give it back!"

"N-no!" he stuttered. "We need to save it for the hike out of

here. Eat something else. The corned beef's good."

"Too much salt."

"Then eat some fruit!" Jean-Pierre tossed the bag of jerky onto his pack.

"Jean-Pierre Lanpart, has anyone ever told you that you're stingy?"

"It's *John*, not Jon or Jean-Pierre, but John with an *h*, Peterson."

"That's what I said, Jean."

"No," he frowned. "Put the h in it, I'm Australian, not French."

"Well aren't we touchy, *John*." I wrinkled up my nose at him, and laughed. "I'm sorry; I'll try harder to pronounce it correctly." I smiled and leaned against the wall. "So, who *was* Jean-Pierre Lanpart?"

"A second-rate environmental engineer who's profile I fit. Why?"

"Oh, no particular reason."

"Bullshit, Brit. You're getting at something. What is it?"

I stared back at him for a moment before answering. "It sounds a little silly, but I just realized that I don't know anything about you. That's unsettling when I think of how close you and I have become. You're a stranger to me now, John."

"Does that mean you're having second thoughts about trusting me?"

"No, yes -- no. I mean, it's obvious that my father trusts you implicitly, or you wouldn't have known the code sentence. So yes, in that respect I trust you. But, on the other hand, I don't know you. I thought I did, but that was another person."

"You know me, Brit. I wasn't pretending to be anything that I'm not. I'm no actor. The person you know of as Jean-Pierre Lanpart is all that I am, excluding the factual background of course."

"That's just it, John. I don't even know what kind of family life you grew up in, what your beliefs are. It's obvious that you've had some military training. Your actions yesterday and early this morning betray that fact. But, then again, you were capable of keeping up your end on the project, so you have a

background in environmental studies. The two don't seem to fit, though. You're a puzzle, Jean," I caught the accent creeping into my pronunciation. "Sorry, John. Old habits." I shrugged my shoulders.

"You're forgiven." He smiled. "At least I don't have to worry about you becoming bored with me." His smile broadened. "I think I like the idea of remaining a mystery, for now anyway."

"Not fair!" I playfully slapped at him.

"Life's a bitch, ain't it?" He grinned.

I pushed for more information but John was adamant about keeping his past a secret. His silence only served to peak my interest. After a while though, I let him convince me that it wasn't important, and I dropped the subject. Well, I let him think it was dropped. Some people are not comfortable with opening up all at once. With those types, it is easier to wangle the information out of them a word at a time.

"So, where did you get this food?" I was going through the food box again.

"From the old satellite tracking station," he said, and remained focused on his pocket computer and the obscure calculations he was working on.

"When were you up there?" I stared at him.

The seven of us who survived the dome's collapse had made our way to the tracking station three days after the disaster. We hadn't found anything of use save for an old pack animal and some camping equipment. The only food we found was barely enough to last, tightly rationed, for a week.

"A week ago. Why?" He looked at me then back at what he was working on.

"This food wasn't there when I was up there. We combed the entire complex."

"You just didn't know where to look." John shrugged his shoulders. "What difference does it make?"

"A lot. I don't like loose ends."

John's attention remained centered on the computer.

"There are too many gaps here, John. I need more information."

"Like what?" He glanced at me, then back at his numbers.

"Like how you managed to get out of the dome alive and why you didn't join up with the rest of us." I closed the lid to the food box and rested my elbow on it. "Well?"

John entered a new set of calculations into the computer before setting it aside. "It's a long story, Brit."

"I've got nothing better to do, and oodles of time."

John's stare made me uneasy, so I took a drink from the canteen -- using it to shield my expression.

"I wasn't inside, Brit," he said flatly.

"What!" I nearly choked, and swallowed hard. "What do you mean you *weren't* inside?" I put the canteen down. My brow furrowed and my eyes narrowed to slits as I stared back at him. "You were sleeping when I left."

"No." He shook his head. "I wasn't."

"You're making me nervous, Jean -- John. I think you'd better explain before I start jumping to conclusions again."

John settled back against the wall and watched me closely while he spoke. "Sorry, Brit. I was only pretending. After you left the sleeping quarters, I slipped out and left the city dome. It was not the first time. I've gone out before, and like the other times, I planned on returning before dawn."

"Why were you outside?" Though I tried to hide it, some of the old suspicions returned.

"*Why* isn't important, Brit. And before you get the wrong idea, it had nothing to do with what happened at the dome." He had seen my eyes shift to the rifle. "I didn't know anything about that until I returned later."

"But, John...."

"Do you want to know what happened or not?" he frowned.

I nodded and zipped my mouth shut.

"When I got to the station the helicopter was gone. I assumed that Katsuko and Daniels had left so I tried to raise them on the radio. All I got was static. I'd given up on them and was making a search of the station when I saw the helicopter approach...." John's voice tapered off. He hesitated, stared at me for a moment then down at his hands. He shook his head slowly, looked up and met my eyes. "To make a long story short," he cleared his throat. "I got caught off guard by whoever it is that's out there

trying to kill us, and it took me a week to get back. I followed your trail to the tracking station, stayed there a few days, then went to base camp and found it empty. I spent some time tromping around in the woods and up here in this cave. Then I found you hiding in that tree. End of story."

"End of story? I still don't know...."

"And you don't need to. It's all just depressing shit anyway." John grabbed up his pack and crossbow. "I'm going for a walk." He stood up. "Take that other pack there," he nodded toward the bundle next to the crate. "Fill it with whatever you think you can carry. We'll be leaving when I get back."

"Just like that?" I stood and started to follow him.

"Just like that, Brit." John turned and scowled. "Get to it!" he ordered, and left me standing there alone in the cave.

"Damn it, John, you're impossible!"