

Echo I

Namgyal Monastery, Dharamsala India

Sunlight cascaded through the eight open-aired windows in the expansive hall. The morning was exquisitely beautiful, the rolling countryside a peaceful setting. The Monks, adhering to routine without question, were diligent in their tasks. They greeted the day with brisk exercise for the allotted time, followed by a longer interval of meditation and reflection.

Workers quietly scurried throughout the elaborate complex performing the ritual dance of their daily activities. Soon the smell of cooking breakfast wafted lazily on the gently climbing currents, flowing from the lower kitchen to the summit peak.

As was customary the bell rang once and the monks calmly concluded their activities. The soft shuffling of leather bound feet against cold stone echoed as they climbed worn stone paths. Awaiting their arrival with tireless patience was the ever-cheerful Dalia Lama of Tibet. His holiness sat relaxed on a raised dais, smiling at his disciples as they all dutifully took their places. Respectfully sitting military style, row upon row of straight backs, each awaited his pleasure.

With a gentle inclination of his near-bald head, which resulted in the lightest shimmer of reflection from his black rimmed glasses, the meal commenced. Sounds of clattering cutlery and steaming bowls flowed like a wave down the length of the room. The serving staff, cradling large vats of hot porridge, distributed their concoction with smooth, rhythmic, efficient movements.

On his third mouthful the Master suddenly stopped, breeching all etiquette. His spoon slipped through his fingers and with a loud clink, it hit the edge of his porcelain bowl. The look upon his face was troubled, as if deep in thought. His entourage of advisors and retaining staff shared alarmed looks.

They knew that although fit, the seventy-year old man was no stranger to illness.

His eldest advisor and closest friend, Kaden Norbu, boldly touched the arm of his holiness as if to awaken him from the trance, but his efforts proved futile. The only discernable change was a faint tune escaping the elderly man's lips.

All consumption ceased as the monks returned to their previous straight-backed sitting position. The large hall became deathly quiet once more. Kaden stood wearily, cleared his throat and declared this day to be a holy day of reflection.

The monks spent the balance in prayer.

Echo II

Nuclear One (Weather Station Alpha), Mount Weather State of Virginia USA

Cradled deep within the magnificent mountain ranges of Virginia laid an enormous bunker. Officially known as Weather Station Alpha, it was a concrete and steel maze. A multi-purpose facility maintained by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (F.E.M.A.), over time it had evolved and was, by those in the know, commonly referred to as Nuclear One. In the instance of a confirmed Nuclear or other credible threat to the United States, Nuclear One became a safe haven for Government leaders and State officials.

Three hundred and twenty eight permanent staff maintained the secure facility ensuring there was sufficient power, food and clean water to sustain life for at least a decade. At full capacity, it could host nine hundred guests. Nuclear One was the second largest facility of its type in the modern world. Decreed by Congress over a century ago, the American way of life must continue at all costs.

Hidden away within the restricted access military wing was the Think Tank. A classroom styled medium-sized room; the Think Tank contained five sets of soft fluorescent lights that emitted a faint buzzing sound. Shiny laminate black and white tiled squares covered every inch of the floor. White plastered walls and a painted concrete ceiling completed the dreary decor.

Distributed evenly throughout the room were thirty-five occupied gurney-style hospital beds. Each participant lay face down shrouded in a silver blanket. At a glance, they appeared to be sleeping, however closer inspection revealed each wore biometric medical monitors. They interfaced with the system via a complex configuration of state of the art virtual reality eyepieces, complimented by high-fidelity headphones.

Bags of pale yellow saline-like solution, connected via intravenous drip, fed into the participants. At the rear of the room sat two bored military nurses, quietly conversing to pass the time; a plain-faced brunette and the other a taller and slightly prettier blonde. Every few moments one or the other glanced at the computer screen on their desk.

On that day, like any other, a constant stream of information flittered across the large array of LCD screens at the front of the room where you might normally find a classroom blackboard. The information flowed in what appeared to be an unordered sequence. However nothing could be further from the truth.

Each display contained a meticulously gathered stream of all known information on a particular subject. The most commonly presented content was the high threat potentials; *HTPs* to those in the know. Occasionally a screen brightened as the stream of information slowed slightly before continuing on its merry way.

Cameras from three different angles recorded all activity in the room. One remained fixed on the wall of screens, the second recorded the room from the rear right corner to the doorway front left. The third, in the middle of the ceiling, used a fisheye lens to encompass the entire room. Always rolling, the cameras offered secure real time feeds directly to the NSA and, on occasion, the FBI.

The subjects were patriotic Americans all of high intelligence and each uniquely talented. Much of the rumored goings-on of secret Government laboratories over the last fifty years were, in reality, a deliberate push for knowledge and its controlled dissemination. At the end of World War 2, as the British and United States joint forces crushed the Nazi war effort, Government staff found, collated and hid records of a wide variety of experiments.

These records, meticulous in detail, led both Governments in new directions for their research. A similar facility existed in the United Kingdom and both

Governments continued to share their findings out of mutual respect. Such are the spoils of war.

The talents that the participants possessed ranged from psychic; mathematical; astronomical and scientific; to extraordinary memory retention plus lateral and literal problem solving. Trained in analysis, they could process amazing quantities of information, extracting common sequences that associated events. Known as event profiling, each person utilised a grading system when evaluating his or her presented cases. Cross analysis confirmed highly graded cases.

At precisely the same time, all thirty-five screens locked as one. All the participants began to hum the same hauntingly familiar tune. On hearing the sound, the nurses stopped their incessant chatter and proceeded to check the bio-scans. All thirty-five contributors were in a REM sleep state. After a short time, the two exchanged worried looks. The brunette rushed over to the wall and activated the red alarm button. No nurse in over forty years of the Think Tank had ever pressed that button before.