

Artwork by Franklin Givens II

## The Atlantis Caper

by Randy Gonzalez

Part I: Signal from Washington, Admiral Fleming.

Freedom Island was located just off the coast of Louisiana about sixty miles southeast of New Orleans. For the most part it went unobserved. The island was part of the U.S. Military's Eighth Sea Forces District, although most of the time it operated independent of the military. Its command structure answered to the highest levels of the Executive Branch in Washington, D.C.

Since the year 2000, U.S. armed forces had undergone a complete reorganization culminating in what was now called the U.S. Military Combined Service Force. Under its auspices, Freedom Island combined dual functions. First, it served as a highly secret specialized training base for a multitude of select military operations. Second, it was the North American Quadrant's headquarters for the newly formed United Nations International Security and Enforcement Commission known as "UNISEC."

In January of 2004, the United Nations, with support from the newly-elected U.S. President, created through special charter the UNISEC organization. The new commission had five directors appointed for a five-year term. Each director represented one quadrant of the globe, with one director serving at large and acting as chairman. Every five years the various countries would submit nominations to serve on the commission.

The five-year mission of the commission was to investigate acts of international terrorism and criminality and evaluate potential extraterrestrial threats.

It was 4:00 a.m., 1 July, 2005, and the night watch team of Freedom Island was preparing to leave their stations for the day. Long range radar and sonar scanners kept an hourly vigil, alerting technicians of any approach to the

island by water or by sky. Personnel in the base's three story living quarters, which housed both enlisted and officer ranks, were beginning to stir in preparation for a new day.

At the complex's reception desk around the corner from the main lobby, a young ensign sat watching his communications terminal prior to leaving his post for the night. He had just instructed one of the stewards to bring coffee from the adjoining cafeteria. The screen on his console flashed a red light indicating a message was coming in. He leaned forward, pressed a button and the screen lit up in bright yellow letters, "TOP SECRET — FOR ADMIRAL FLEMING ONLY — FROM THE WHITE HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS AGENCY."

The ensign almost stood at attention. He rotated his swivel chair to face the petty officer sitting behind.

"I don't believe it!" he blurted out. "This damn thing is from the President."

"Who's it for?" the petty officer answered, apparently unimpressed by the ensign's concern. He continued to read over his night log. All the petty officer wanted was to be left alone to do his job and get reassigned from the desolate island as soon as possible. He didn't have time for impressionable young ensigns fresh out of the academy.

The ensign rotated his chair back to the console and immediately pressed the retrieval button activating the secured frequency. Within a few seconds another message printed out, "STANDBY TO TRANSMIT IDENTITY CODE."

"The message is for Admiral Fleming," the ensign answered as he placed his right hand on a small finger-print reader next to the console. The finger-print reader would insure to the sender of the message that the person receiving the message had the appropriate clearance.

Seconds passed and a third message appeared, "CLEARANCE AND I.D. ACKNOWLEDGED — MESSAGE SENT."

The ensign pressed the button to receive the transmission, "ATTENTION — ADMIRAL J. ALEXANDER FLEMING — UNISEC COMMAND — DIRECTOR 3 — IMMEDIATE PRIORITY FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE

UNITED STATES — CONTACT IMMEDIATELY — URGENT."

"That's it?" the ensign looked at the screen. "All that, and they didn't say what they wanted?"

He looked around at the petty officer who stuck a half chewed cigar in his mouth and turned to the ensign with a sour expression. "Guess you better go fetch the Admiral, uh, sir." The petty officer chewed the end of his cigar.

The ensign jumped from his seat and ran to the bank of three elevators serving the upper levels. The third floor suites were reserved for the ranking officers. He exited the elevator and ran down the hall to Room 377. On the large, solid, metal door the sign read: "VICE ADMIRAL J. ALEXANDER FLEMING, RESERVES."

He pressed the door buzzer and waited for a response. None came, so he knocked loudly and pounded his fist several times. Nothing. Using his pass key-card, he inserted it into the locking device. The card-reader read off the appropriate code and the door was unlocked after several metallic clicks. It slid open quietly and receded into the frame. The ensign ran in and looked around.

"Admiral Fleming, sir?" he called several times. "Damn reserve officers, can't find 'em when you need 'em."

Then, in the bedroom on the dressing table, he found a handwritten note, "If you find this note, Ensign, you will know that I have slipped through your security once again. I'm with the Scuba Unit, Fleming."

The ensign thought for a second. "He's done it to me again," he said aloud and cursed.

Running down the hallway, he got back in the elevator and exited at the lobby. He ran through the electronic doors of the entrance, which opened automatically. The ensign jumped into one of the nearby vehicles. It was a three-wheeled type with two seats, powered by an electric drive system which allowed it to hover several feet off the ground once it got going.

He raced the craft down the main boulevard to the scuba training area located at one of

several docking areas. After parking the craft at the end of the dock, he jumped out and ran down the plastic planks to the end where a T-shaped platform jutted into the water. Standing on the platform in his black wetsuit was the Admiral.

"Admiral Fleming, sir," the ensign came to attention and saluted.

"I see you managed to find me," Fleming responded without turning around or saluting.

He was barking orders to several people in the water who had tanks and equipment on. Their heads bobbed just above the surface. A small barge floated about fifty yards from the docking area with several other people on board. They had just finished an exercise in which the people in the water attempted to seize the barge and all hands on board.

"Okay, ladies and gentlemen," Fleming said, "that last attempt was terrible. We're going to try this one more time. Stand by a moment."

Fleming turned his strong, medium sized frame to the ensign and was about to say something when he swung back to the group in the water. He yelled, "If this had been an actual combat situation, none of you would have made it!"

Fleming clinched his fists on his hips and smiled slyly while they treaded water. They were tough. All were well trained, had combat experience and were graduates of the renowned Fleming Martial Arts and Survival Academy. At present, each of them had an officer's rank in the U.S. Military Service. Fleming had them assigned as special agents working for him on the UNISEC operation. He had been impressed with these young individuals of which there were three men and three women.

"We're going to play a little game," Fleming smiled down at them. "If you people can take this dock," he paused and grinned, "and put me in the water, training's over for the day."

The group let out a cheer and started moving slowly toward the dock like sharks circling their prey. Fleming turned his head sideways to the ensign, who had trouble figuring all this out.

"Now, then," he said, with those steel, grey eyes locked on the ensign's face, "what do you have for me?"

The ensign cleared his throat, not quite able to speak, always nervous in the Admiral's presence. "Uh, Admiral, sir," his voice squeaked, "top priority from the President." He paused and cleared his throat again "Signal from Washington, Admiral Fleming."

Fleming's face brightened with enthusiasm. His nostrils flared, and he ran one hand through his light brown hair which was styled rather modestly over the ears. "Why the hell didn't you say so?" Fleming responded. His mind raced in all directions. He had the feeling just the other night that something was brewing. Perhaps, after nearly a year of organizing and planning for the operations of UNISEC, he might get a chance to really test his people.

"It was a restricted message for your eyes only. I've got the transparent copy right here," the ensign said as he fumbled in a pocket for the copy.

"Forget that now," Fleming ordered. "I don't have a decoder unit with me. Quick," Fleming pointed to the vehicle, "let's get back to the office."

The ensign ran down the dock to the vehicle to get it ready. He turned to see six black wetsuits climbing onto the dock. Fleming was in the middle, executing a series of kicks, ducks and spins, and threw five of the six into the water. It was a reminder of Fleming's exceptional martial arts ability; yet, in the final seconds, the last black wetsuit, a tall, slender female, slipped up behind Fleming and caught him with a scissor-lock around his knees.

Fleming toppled into the water. The chorus of six jubilant voices signaled the end of training.

## Part II: They call it Atlantis.

By 7:00 a.m., Washington time, Fleming's personal jet cruiser was carefully landing at Washington National Airport. The swollen Potomac River sometimes threatened air traffic due to recent flooding. Many things had happened to the continental United States in the past seven years. The first sign of things changing was when California began to sink. It took several years for many to recover from the shock. At first, people found it hard to believe, but then, a short time later, it happened to the entire city of New York.

After five years of major geographical calamities, another land mass, several square miles across, appeared in the Atlantic. Archaeologists began to have a field day and scientists speculated it had caused other changes. Only a few, like Fleming, were bold enough to believe the island was the lost continent of Atlantis.

Fleming's long time friend and business partner, William H. Watkins, greeted him at the airport. Billy Watkins was responsible for company business while Fleming served the government at Freedom Island. It had taken them years to build a world-wide private investigative consulting company which had one of the most distinguished reputations.

They had been partners in the early days, when both had worked for a state government as top criminal investigators. That was when they had earned their reputations as among the best in the business. They had become so respected, they now consulted with heads of state the world over on delicate matters. Often they suffered comparisons to their legendary counterparts, Holmes and Watson.

Watkins sat smoking a big cigar, waiting in one of the company vehicles. It was one of the new hydrogen-turbine powered two-seater kind with convertible top. Watkins puffed and blew silver rings in the air. The electric seat automatically adjusted as he reclined backwards and daydreamed. For him, the world had changed far too much. It was a world in rapid transition. The transition was one from the old fashioned world of conflict situations based on military and political competitions for power to one in which urban guerrilla warfare and crime was an everyday occurrence in most countries. The turmoil had overloaded judicial systems and threatened almost every seemingly stable government. Worldwide chaos seemed the order of the day. The frequency of political coups and public assassinations had grown to alarming proportions. Yet, even in the midst of such upheaval, some profited. China grew immensely in both population and economic output, causing some economists to call it the "New Japan". By contrast, Russia declined socially and economically. Watkins longed for the old days.

His dreaming was interrupted by a familiar sight. He spotted Fleming coming down the escalator to the reception area. Watkins pulled his bulky six four, two-fifty frame from the vehicle. His blue suit was slightly wrinkled. Despite the wealth he and Fleming had assembled, he still looked as if he slept in his clothes.

"Damn, Johnathan," Watkins greeted him, "what the hell is all this about? The President say anything?"

"Billy," Fleming shook hands firmly, "great to see you. No, the President didn't give specifics. How's business?"

"We're doing just great, as usual, as expected," Watkins warmly advised. He rubbed one hand through his thinning grey hair and smiled a mass of wrinkles.

They slid into the vehicle. The doors locked automatically and Watkins activated the engine lever. The softly purring turbine machine started.

"Well," Fleming said, "you're looking better these days." They were both about the same age, but Fleming always looked younger and more fit.

"I'm on the wagon again, at least for today," Watkins answered.

They headed for the Key Bridge and avoided the almost submerged Memorial Bridge. The swollen Potomac threatened Virginia Avenue, so they headed straight for Pennsylvania Avenue, the long way around. The Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials had to be moved to other locations due to extensive flooding.

The White House was like an armed camp, Fleming observed quietly. They entered the gates and were momentarily stopped by an alert member of the White House Protective Services. Fleming squinted in the early morning sunlight and continued to scan the landscape. He watched a formation of soldiers march across the White House lawn in near perfect cadence. Security was tight around the executive mansion these days. The special forces unit from Eighth and "I" Street, formerly U.S. Marines, kept the South Portico under constant surveillance.

"Identification, please, sir," the White House Police Officer said.

"I'm William H. Watkins and this is Vice-Admiral Fleming," Watkins advised the officer.

"Watkins," Fleming began, "what's all this Vice-Admiral stuff? This is only a temporary thing. It sounds like I'm making a career out of the service."

"Well, for as much time as you've been putting in on that island, one would think you were." Watkins chewed on his cigar and grinned.

The officer of the gate had taken two identification cards from Watkins and placed them in front of a photographic scanner. In a matter of seconds, a small viewing screen flashed a message. It read: "I.D. CONFIRMED — OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT."

"Uh, my apologies, sir," the office said. "I haven't seen you two around here for some time. I forgot your faces." He waved them through.

"No problem, officer," Fleming leaned over to the window and said, "I'm glad you checked us. Shows you're doing your job."

The President was alone in the Oval Office as they entered. The President, who already appeared quite worn by his first year in office, was pouring over stacks of paper which filled the top of his desk. He sat there for several seconds staring down at the huge, cluttered desk top, with a pipe sticking out of the side of his mouth. He glanced up and said softly, "Glad you've arrived, Dr. Fleming. Please excuse the mess." He pointed at the top of the desk and rose to his feet. "Damn, you guys are hard to find sometimes. It takes a special order from the President of the United States to get an appointment with two world famous private detectives."

The President pulled his pipe out of his mouth and laughed loud and friendly. He tapped the pipe in a circular metal ashtray emblazoned with the seal of his office and rolled down his sleeves. The white silk shirt appeared slightly wrinkled. So did the navy pinstriped trousers. A pale blue pindotted tie, pulled open at the collar, hung limp around his neck. The President moved around the huge wooden desk and approached his two favorite visitors. His tall, lanky frame seemed to add an overpowering presence to the room. Fleming noted streaks of grey filling the black hair. He shook hands warmly with the President.

"Thanks for coming, Dr. Fleming. It is indeed a pleasure to have you and your friend, Watkins, periodically visit this creepy, old place." The President turned and motioned them toward the more comfortable chairs near the fireplace. As Fleming suspected would happen, the President spent considerable time beating around the bush.

"Uh, Mr. President," Fleming interrupted. "How can we be of service to you?" Fleming was slightly cautious. He wanted to show the proper respect.

"Why, yes, Dr. Fleming." The President's mood suddenly changed a bit. "You're a man who comes to the point rather quickly. That's what I like. Cut the bullshit and be straight forward. That's why I recommended you to UNISEC."

The President refired his pipe. He watched carefully as Fleming did the same. A pipe often helps you think, Fleming thought.

"That mysterious land mass out there in the Atlantic has presented us with a peculiar new problem." The President sat back in his rocker. He rubbed his narrow pointed nose with the stem of his pipe and continued, "Our people, that is the scientist working for the U.S. as part of the U.N. World Geological and Archaeological Foundation, have discovered an interesting crystal. Simply put, the crystal's gone. Vanished without a trace. We suspect the Russians."

"That's a problem, Mr. President," Fleming leaned forward to face him squarely. "That represents a significant find. If it's what I think it is, the production of antimatter is only one step away. Legend has it the crystal was part of the final downfall of Atlantis. It has unlimited energy potential."

"Exactly," the President smiled behind his pipe. "And, that's why I need you and your team of experts. The potential, if what our people say is true, can either revolutionize space travel or create one of the most devastating weapons known to man. If used peacefully, this stuff could bring interstellar flight to the brink of the speed of light."

"No shit," Watkins added in his rustic style. "I mean, no kidding." He chomped on his noxious cigar.

The President began again; his tone was solemn. "Unfortunately, several key people have died in the process of storing and protecting the crystal. Two CIA agents and two of our top scientists were brutally murdered while the item was in route to the Houston Space Center for further analysis."

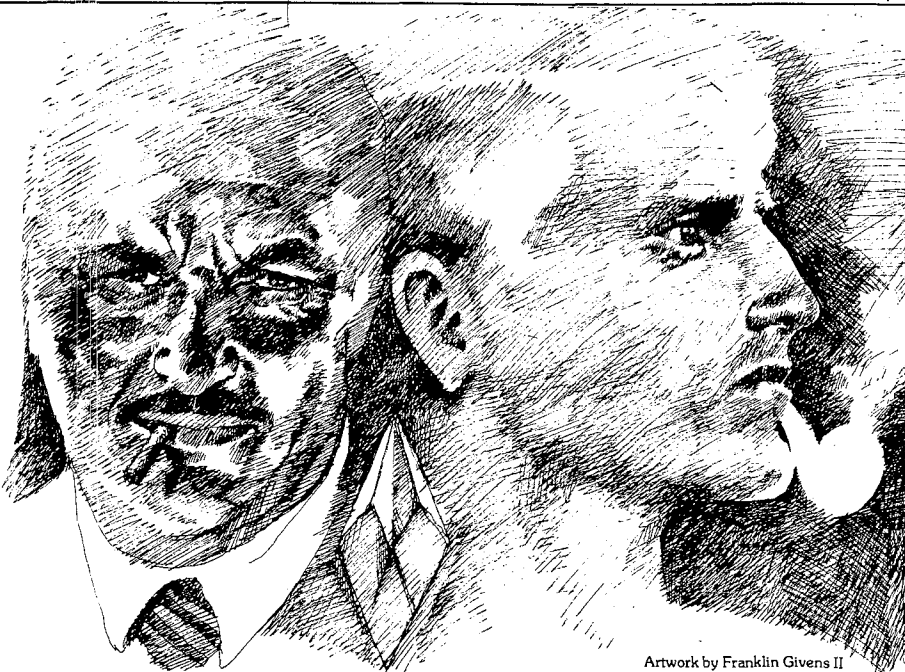
"Sorry to hear that," Fleming offered. "To date, the majority of our scientific community refutes the existence of such legendary pieces of history, including the Atlantis theory."

"That's one reason why you're in on this thing," the President responded. "There's been a complete news blackout and you are known as somewhat of an authority on items of the occult, parapsychology and that sort of thing. What do you make of it so far?"

"Well, Mr. President," Fleming got to his feet. "they call it Atlantis." Fleming let that sink in for a second. "We'll be in touch by the usual channels."

### Part III: There's nothing new under the sun. It's all been done before . . .

They didn't waste time getting out of the White House. Fleming was an impatient sort who liked to get started immediately on any new caper. The two of them entered their vehicle and headed for the airport for immediate takeoff. As they drove through the gates onto Pennsylvania Avenue, Fleming was already on the video-phone. Fleming always used his personal jet aircraft.



Artwork by Franklin Givens II

"Fleming to Skyhawk," he said over the telephone wavelink. "Standby for immediate takeoff."

"Roger, Admiral," an alert crewman answered.

They took a different route back to the airport, but still intended to use the same bridge. Watkins headed for the makeshift road hastily constructed along the Potomac in the path of rising waters.

"This whole damn city's going to sink one day," Watkins commented as they drove on.

"Probably be the best thing that ever happened to it," Fleming answered, only half listening.

"We got company," Watkins checked the rear view camera screen. "Been following since we turned off Pennsylvania. The words out on us." He pushed forward hard on the control stick and the vehicle shot forward, skidding on all three tires.

"They're gaining, old Friend," Fleming acknowledged, watching the passenger side viewing screen. "Don't like the looks of it, Billy. Lose 'em!"

The two vehicles were locked in a chase across the bridge and toward the airport. At one point, Watkins turned off a side road down the river. A high-powered shot rang out from the other car. A projectile lodged in the rear tire effectively disabling it. Watkins erratically steered the vehicle back and forth across the road, dodging one obstacle after another. Finally, they slowed at a dead end. The other car raced up behind them.

"Ready for evasive action!" Watkins yelled. Fleming nodded.

Watkins jerked the vehicle to a sudden halt and both men leaped from it as machinegun fire riddled the vehicle, causing the hydrogen filled tank to explode in one fierce burst of flames. Exploding projectiles were flying everywhere while the two raced up an embankment for cover. The other vehicle stopped short of the burning wreckage, and four armed men jumped out and ran for the wooded area.

Hiding in the bushes, Fleming opened his briefcase. "One for you," he said calmly, and handed Watkins a fat stubby automatic pistol. "And, one for me." Quickly Fleming assembled a metal stock to the butt of the weapon, stuck an extension clip of ammo on the bottom, and affixed a telescopic-laser tracking sight to the top.

"Who da you think they are?" Watkins

asked, crouching low in the bushes.

"Probably," Fleming bit down on his everpresent pipe, "professional terrorists, but definitely not the Russians. No matter what our commie-hunting President thinks, it's not their style."

Watkins heard a movement on high ground and to the rear. Instinctively he turned in a split second, identified the target, took aim and fired a burst of rounds from the small machine pistol. All five rounds found their target. The assailant was blown upward into the air and landed with a thud.

"One down," he said matter-of-factly, blowing on the barrel and smiling proudly. "Your turn, Doc."

Fleming was more meticulous, slightly more scientific than his counterpart. He saw movement about fifty yards on the right near the river. He positioned the weapon, sighted with the laser tracking system and when the red light inside the scope flashed, he squeezed the trigger. The weapon made no recoil movement when five tiny rocket projectiles left the barrel. On the receiving end, there were five powerful explosions in the bushes. A large human body flipped out of the underbrush and hit the water. It did not move.

"Not bad," Watkins spit some tobacco. "But all that scientific stuff is a pain. Just give me a good old pistol without the fancy stuff and I'm happy." He twirled the pistol around his finger a couple of times. "Let's see, that leaves two, right?"

Fleming just shook his head and smiled at his friend. About that time, a stun grenade landed in their midst and went off. Both were paralyzed. Fleming thought he heard a voice saying something as he was slipping into unconsciousness.

"Sorry, Dr. Fleming," the voice said from somewhere above. "A change of plans. We're taking you and your friend alive."

Fleming could barely open his eyes. He ached from head to toe. There was nothing that didn't hurt. He tried to move, but found it difficult. Through squinted slits, he gazed around the room. From what he could see, they were in a cell of some type with high granite-like walls, no windows and heavy iron bars for a door. Both he and Watkins were on the floor. Watkins was just barely moving.

"You okay, my friend?" Fleming choked.

"What's left of me feels terrible," Watkins

coughed. "Did you get the number of the monorail that hit us?"

"No," Fleming rolled to one side. "But, this is another fine mess you've gotten me into." He tried to smile at their predicament.

"Thanks, old buddy," Watkins tried to roll to one side. "Don't blame me for this. You're the one with all the great ideas. Big deal. I think my drinking hand has been injured!"

"Good evening, gentlemen," A voice echoed through the cell. "Welcome to our little clambake."

"Who the hell is that?" Watkins yelled, holding his ears.

"You'll find out soon enough," the voice answered. "Sentry, bring them to me immediately. If they try anything, use whatever means necessary to restrain them, but I want them alive."

Two guards moved into the cell as a mechanical arm drew the bars into the ceiling. Fleming was crawling around on the floor when the guard hoisted him into an electric wheelchair and strapped restraints into place. Watkins was less cooperative. He pushed himself and lunged at one of the guards. Slamming the guard against the wall of the cell, Watkins swung wildly. The other guard seemed undisturbed by the action. He calmly pulled out a large pistol, aimed at Watkins' back and fired a hypodermic dart. Watkins fell lifeless to the floor.

Both were finally secured in motorized wheelchairs. The two guards followed behind with remote control units in order to steer them down the hallway to another chamber. The effects of the stun grenade were finally wearing off for Fleming, but Watkins was still feeling the aftermath of his tranquilizer.

The tunnel passages were dimly lit and Fleming could barely make out where they were going. He could only deduce that the passages were long and narrow and must run for miles throughout the whole complex. After what seemed like fifteen to twenty minutes, they approached a double set of large steel doors which had at the top a series of lights. Two additional armed guards stood outside the door. Each was carrying some type of automatic weapon. The guard on the right pressed buttons on a control panel mounted on the wall. The lights above flashed from yellow to blue and then to green. The heavy doors withdrew into the rock surroundings.

They were rolled into what appeared to be a circular room about sixty feet in diameter. On one side, Fleming's right, was an expensive and sophisticated looking array of computer equipment and various consoles. On the other side, several desks and seats were littered with charts and graphs spread everywhere. Other than that, the place was immaculate, yet comfortable. It might have passed for a college lecture hall. Desks and seating on the left were tiered upward with a four-foot railing enclosing the area. Directly in front of Fleming, as he strained to get a better look, was something that appeared to be a large tank with viewing ports. The entire structure was built into the rock formation. Viewing holes lined the sides and the glass looked as though it were blackened or shaded somehow.

"Good evening, gentlemen." A small bald man appeared from the shadows around the tank. "I trust the accommodations were satisfactory." He was dressed neck to toe in black. Fleming instantly knew he didn't like the guy's tailor.

"Who, or what, is that?" Watkins groaned.

"He must be of some importance around this place," Fleming said dryly.

"I see the experience of the last twenty-four hours hasn't affected your wit, Dr. Fleming." The little man's mood changed suddenly. "But, you are in no position to make jokes."

Watkins immediately placed his appearance as something out of a bad dream. His head was

completely round and totally hairless. He had two bulging black eyes that almost popped out of his skull. His nose was flat and large. And, to add to the effect, a cruel jagged scar traveled from his left temple to the corner of his mouth. His head seemed out of proportion with the rest of his body. Black gloves added to the mystery of this little creature.

"If it's not too much trouble," Fleming began in a mocking tone, "would you mind telling us what's going on?" Fleming struggled against the restraints. "And just as a matter of interest, what have you done with the Atlantean crystal?"

"All these questions!" the little creature responded cheerily. "The great Alexander Fleming, a famous private detective, advisor to the President, one of the five directors of the international police organization, is now my prisoner. That's quite an accomplishment. You're one of the few people who really know the crystal's true origin and value."

The little man paused and turned toward the huge holding tank in the wall. Fleming could detect no specific accent in his voice. "Right here, Dr. Fleming," the man turned back to face him and continued, "you have the rare opportunity to come face to face with how I will create the master race. Yours truly, Dr. Alastor Buer."

"Alastor Buer?" Watkins breathed. "You're supposed to be dead. Didn't the Russians execute you as a traitor five years ago?" Watkins then realized the folly of his statement.

"How flattering for you to remember." He smiled monically. "They tried to have me executed, the fools!" He smashed his fists together. "I told them when the land mass first appeared, the crystal must be there along with other things. But, that's a long story."

"Very good, Watkins," Fleming added. "His name was known to the ancients to mean 'The Executioner' in demonic legend."

"The dead do come back, Mr. Watkins," Buer added with a sinister laugh.

"Okay, Buer, enough's enough. Where's the crystal?" Fleming pulled against the restraints again.

"It's in there, Dr. Fleming," Buer pointed to the tank. "We have synthesized the code, the one the Atlanteans had developed." He motioned to the guards. "Release them, but if either one makes any sudden moves, cut him down immediately."

A guard pressed a button on a hand-held device and the restraints in both chairs released.

"Come, I want you to see this," Buer waved a hand to the two and walked to one of the viewing ports. "Behold, Dr. Fleming, the essence of the entire Universe. Isn't it magnificent?"

"Yes," Fleming peered through the reinforced smoked glass, "it is incredible. So, now what?" Fleming tried to remain objective.

"Dr. Fleming," the little man said seriously. "You are one of the few who can appreciate and understand all of this. This is time itself, another dimension captured in living, breathing, pulsating energy." He peered through an adjacent port. "Do you realize," Buer looked to one side at Fleming, "that for every natural particle occurring in nature, there is an exact second particle, the anti-particle, with distinct electromagnetic properties. We can therefore produce anti-matter a thousand times more powerful and efficient than nuclear fission or fusion."

"I fully understand the principles," Fleming said, now looking Buer straight in the eyes.

"What do you want with it? It was supposed to be used for peaceful purposes, but even the Atlanteans were seduced by the power."

"What do I want?" Buer seemed shocked by Fleming's question. "I want to bring the earth and all its feuding governments to its knees!"

"That's an awful limited viewpoint, isn't it?"

Fleming countered, as the little guy appeared more agitated by the questions. "Certainly there are other reasons. Like space travel, communication and other advanced research in which the crystal could benefit mankind."

"That's very true, Dr. Fleming," Buer said in a less angry tone. "You do understand its potential. But, first, I want to bring about a world government. If necessary, a few things will have to be destroyed. A few leaders may have to be replaced, like that fool in Washington and that maniac in Moscow."

Watkins was completely fascinated by the display of seemingly controlled firewords with a multitude of brilliant color combinations reacting in the test chamber. It was astonishing, he thought. "Interesting, completely unbelievable," Watkins murmured. "You mean this thing has the ability to open a door to the next dimension?"

"In a sense," the little guy turned suddenly to Watkins, "with the correct calculations and instrumentation from the computer system, the power can be transmuted through time and space to create a kind of warp in the space-time continuum. So far, the computer has obtained some very significant data, heretofore unheard of in scientific circles."

"I was afraid of that," Fleming said half under his breath. "What have you found?"

Buer turned to face Fleming. "To what we have unlocked from its secrets, man's existence on this planet goes back at least ten million years. In addition, Atlantis, gentlemen, was man's first home on the planet earth." Buer grinned proudly.

"The scientific community will be thrown into a state of turmoil, you realize," Fleming offered.

"I will make them accept," Buer countered.

"Further analysis indicates that man's existence in the Atlantean plane was originally that of spirit form, not physical. The souls, or spirits, whatever you choose to call them, fused with physical properties. They abruptly interrupted the evolutionary pattern developing on the earth at that time." He stared into the tank. "They soon will see things my way. That's one reason why we're here at this location near Cuzco, Peru. This is one of the remaining undiscovered pyramids of the Incas. As on Atlantis, the crystal had to be placed at an exact point at the base of a pyramid. Only there, at direct point to the pinnacle, could the true power of the crystal be unleashed. It's like tapping the mind of God, gentlemen."

"Peru?" Watkins uttered quietly. "They'll never find us in time."

"That's right, Mr. Watkins," Buer said with a sarcastic grin. "They'll never know, because you two gentlemen are going to be the first of many more experiments. You'll have the singular distinction of entering the next dimension." Buer watched his crystal. But his concentration was soon broken when the computer alarm system began flashing a warning on a nearby console.

"INTRUDER ALERT, WARNING, INTRUDER ALERT!" the computer announced loud and clear. A startled technician tried to fix the exact location on his screen. "INTRUDER ALERT!" the computer announced again. "WARNING, INTRUDERS HAVE ENTERED THE MAIN TUNNEL!"

A guard stepped close behind Fleming and cocked his weapon. He was surprised by the sharp pain in his stomach from Fleming's elbow. Watkins reacted in a similar manner to the guard standing to his right. Fleming turned swiftly and crushed the man's windpipe with a quick blow from the edge of his hand. It took about two seconds to transfer the machine guns. Watkins opened fire on the two guards standing by the main door. Fleming executed a swift front kick to Buer's midsection and temporarily relieved him of consciousness with a chop to the back of the neck. Then he quickly

turned and opened fire on the computer banks and blew everything apart. A horrified crew ran in all directions.

Fleming knelt in front of Buer and stuck the gun barrel in his mouth. "Okay, Dr. Buer, how do we get the crystal out?"

"You can't," Buer said, still groggy from the blow. "There's a self-destruct order in the computer. This whole place is going to blow."

"Well, that's typical," Fleming said in disgust.

An increasing and pulsating glow of bright red and orange emanated from the tank through the window ports. Fleming saw a side panel, like a small hatch, to the interior of the tank. "Watkins," Fleming called out. "You're the computer expert, can we shut that thing down and go in the chamber?"

Watkins was already at the controls making the attempt. "Well, I wouldn't go in there, but you can," Watkins answered with sarcasm.

"In that case," Fleming grabbed Buer and placed him in front of the hatch, "then Dr. Buer will go in."

"No!" Buer screamed. "You can't! I'll disintegrate. It's cold blooded murder, Fleming!"

The hatch opened by itself and sucked Buer into the churning whirlwind. Fleming was pulled with him, but braced himself on the steel frame. The hatch closed; Fleming remained on the outside. They couldn't hear the screams, but they watched through the ports as Buer faded into the vortex of time as a whirling vacuum jerked him through the next dimension. Then, minute explosions began to erupt inside the chamber, rocking it from its foundation. There was the sound of thunder and lightning.

Suddenly, the main door burst open and a tall, statuesque female clad in jungle fatigues jumped through the door with an automatic weapon. "Dr. Fleming, Mr. Watkins!" she called out.

"Stella!" Fleming answered. "It's about time you got here. Where's the rest of the group?"

"They're right behind me. You two okay?"

"Everything's okay with us now," Fleming looked around for Watkins. "Watkins, meet Stella Sleek, one of my agents in training on the island."

"Well," Fleming said, putting his arm around the Amazon of a woman, "we've got to get the hell out of here. This whole place is going up. How much time we got, Billy?"

"About two minutes, Doc," Watkins checked his watch, then glanced back at Stella. Two other agents came through the door. They were dressed in a similar manner.

"Let's go, gang," Fleming led the way through the door and down the hall. Piles of rock and debris lined the hallways where the agents had dynamited various sections. Three other agents joined them halfway through the exit tunnel. They had been crouched in position guarding the exit.

"One minute!" Watkins yelled out the time.

At the end of the tunnel, they were confronted by a massive steel door leading to the outside. Fleming walked toward it and examined the surface. His fingers carefully ran across the surface without making contact.

"High voltage. Don't touch," He said to Stella as she approached, "Can you blow it?"

"No problem, Admiral," she said with a smile and quickly pulled out of one of her pockets a small, squarish device. "Everybody take cover!" She turned a dial on the small package, which was about the size of a pack of cigarettes. A small red light on one side started flashing off and on. Everyone had taken cover behind some rock formation. She stepped back a few yards from the door and tossed the device. The magnetic surface on the other side of the device stuck to the door. "Ten seconds!" she yelled.

The explosion rained fragments in every direction and chunks of rock and debris flew through the air. When everything settled, a nice big hole about five feet in diameter remained.

Shots rang out from the other end as a few remaining guards attempted to halt their exit. Two agents were immediately hit and blown apart by the impact of the exploding rounds. Stella and Watkins returned the fire, cutting down three advancing guards instantly. In the process, Fleming ordered the remaining agents through the hole. Fleming was the last one out and rejoined the group in a small clearing about fifty yards from the cave.

"Ten seconds," Watkins announced as he checked his watch again. "Nine, eight, seven, six, five . . ."

They dove for cover in a drainage ditch. A terrific explosion ripped through the underground tunnels and the ground around them vibrated. Fire and debris belched through the tunnel exit and the ancient Incan temple collapsed into a large crater. They sat up and dusted themselves off.

"Well," Watkins began, "I hope that's the last we will see of Dr. Buer."

"I doubt it," Fleming said flatly.

"Fleming," Watkins looked startled, "the crystal. We didn't get the damn crystal."

"It's better off where it is, Billy. I don't think we're ready for it yet," Fleming checked his watch. "I guess you won't be needing my signal beacon for the time being."

"Thank goodness you had it on, Admiral," Stella added.

"You mean," Watkins had that surprised look again, "you mean she tracked us here? They knew all the time?"

Fleming smiled broadly and reset the small button on his watch. "Of course, Billy. Who do you think trained these people? They're the best. By the way, Stella," Fleming turned to the agent, who was now towering over him, "that was a damn good operation you pulled off. Naturally, I expected nothing less than the best from your team."

"Thanks, Admiral," She smiled proudly.

"Now, if you gentlemen will follow me. The shuttle craft is anchored just down the river here."

"You knew all the time, Fleming, didn't you?" Watkins patted him on the back as they followed a nearby trail. "You old rascal. You're always getting me into these messes and then pulling something out of a hat at the last minute."

Aboard the shuttle craft, which was down river and under heavy camouflage, they nestled into their seats and buckled up for the take-off. The small craft hovered momentarily above the water and then rocketed upward.

"We're always running into some strange character out there," Watkins sipped his favorite bourbon and water, and glanced out the window, "with some devious plot. What's that Milton said about plots and schemes being necessary things? Will it ever end?"

"How philosophic of you, Watkins, old friend," Fleming leaned back and closed his eyes. "That was from 'Paradise Lost.' And, no, I don't think it will ever end. There's nothing new under the sun; it's all been done before and it always will be."