

The Rift: Hell Opened

Chapter 1

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United Global Federation.” The announcer spoke boldly into the microphone and then stepped aside as the President walked up. The sound of applause could be heard in the background from the small crowd of reporters packed into the press room.

The President paused at the podium for a moment as he looked over the crowd in front of him and directly into the camera for effect. After a few seconds he waived his hand to quiet the crowd and began his address.

“Ladies and Gentlemen of the world, it is my distinct honor today to stand before you and deliver this ground breaking news. Once again our scientists, archeologists, fearless explorers, and technological achievements have pushed back the borders of our known universe and opened up a new world for us to explore.

“We have assembled a team of the best researchers, scientists, archeologists, and cave explorers from all over the world, these people are the best of the best, if I may be so bold as to use that cliché. The team is currently on location in a recently discovered cave in the Sahara Desert in Africa, in the country of Niger.

“What we know so far is that the team is currently ten miles underground and venturing further daily. They estimate that they have eighty percent of the known cave mapped out and current estimates are that the cave is only forty percent explored so far, and it only gets deeper.

“The team so far has discovered massive mineral deposits of gold, silver, iron, copper, and several large pockets of diamonds, jade, and other precious rocks in quantities that almost defy imagination. Huge deposits of salt veins have also been discovered. Due to the massive wealth of this new discovery, we are mobilizing Federation Army troops in cooperation with the local authorities and governments to secure this site from looters and criminals, as well as the rogue governments who would like to seize this discovery for their own. This cave is the property of the Niger government and we are only offering our aid and support to secure this site from any enemy invaders.

“In cooperation with the Niger government, we are offering sealed contracts to companies worldwide to begin exploiting the resources of this cave. The Federation is committed to providing security until such a time as the country of Niger has mined sufficient resources to build a military of their own capable of replacing our forces there.

“This find is a historical event Ladies and Gentlemen.” The President paused for a moment and then continued. “The conservative estimate of the financial value of this new discovery is somewhere around twenty trillion dollars and that is based strictly on what can be seen visually; no mining has begun yet and no mining will occur until the cave has been explored and mapped one hundred percent.”

The President took a sip of water and then continued, “All of us are amazed at the reports coming from Niger and the team on site there.”

A computer generated image of the cave and the mapping progress replaced the President as he continued speaking. “You can see from this image the amount of exploration that has been done so far. The yellow dots are branches of this cave that have not been explored yet, are completely unknown, and the present assumption is purely hypothetical. The white lines represent the areas already mapped and explored by the team.

“I am excited about this discovery and I look forward to seeing what other great finds will come out of this. Thank you for your time Ladies and Gentlemen, God bless and Good night.”

The President promptly turned and left the stage as the announcer stepped back up. “Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United Global Federation.” He said in reference to the man who had just left. “We will not be taking any questions at this time. Goodnight.”

Several reporters sighed in disappointment, a few others yelled questions anyway as the announcer left the stage and disappeared behind the heavily guarded doors that the President had just exited through. Across the globe, the news networks turned back to their regular news broadcasts. Several commentaries were offered by various talking heads about what this new discovery could mean and the possible consequences and what effect it might have on the global financial market, not to mention Niger.

Investors around the world, many already in the know, began lining up to buy into the companies that would be awarded the mining contracts, a few investors had some good ideas as to what companies would get the contracts. There were only a few companies capable of handling such a job; Hellion Industries was one of the few and at the top of the list.

++++

“Listen. You hear that?” Archeologist David Cecil asked quietly. The team had been underground for

almost three weeks straight now, currently almost fifteen miles below the earth's surface. They had explored what they had taken to calling the main shaft and bypassed literally hundreds of lateral branches in this massive labyrinth that went to only God knows where.

Using advanced portable radar and sonar equipment, they had mapped most of the cave that they had passed through so far, but the high tech machines could only "see" a few hundred feet in any given direction and they could only map hard rock formations and minerals and metals. So far, no sign of any previous human presence had been discovered.

"No. I didn't hear anything" replied Sammy Powers; she looked around at the other team members still catching up to their position. The LED helmet lights lit the area around them in an artificial white light, revealing the glittering diamonds and metals that literally covered almost every rock face in sight. "It's beautiful isn't it?" she asked in hushed whisper, almost inaudible.

David looked around as he prepared for the next climb. "Yeah. It is." He set up his spot light and began surveying the cliff before him. They were going down, always down, interrupted by short stretches of horizontal travel or even brief upward climbs in this elaborate maze of tunnels, but always they were going down, deeper and deeper into the earth. The void in front of him was a chasm of inky darkness that seemed to soak up the light from the five million candle power spot. He could not see the bottom and the cliff face appeared to be smooth as glass and unbroken as far as he could see. This was by far the biggest and deepest pit they had discovered so far in this expedition.

David reached into his pack and pulled out a white phosphorus flare and set it aside. The rest of the team was gathering around and setting up various pieces of equipment and gear. Jim Dawson pulled out the sonar and radar equipment and began setting them up near the edge of the pit. Karl Teller quickly took readings of the air quality and tested for the presence of any dangerous gases. There wasn't much talk between the team members, they worked like a well oiled team and after nearly four months of exploring this cave, they could practically read each others minds.

"You know," Karl muttered to himself but loud enough for everyone to hear, "I find it odd that this deep under the surface the air is still good and there is no radon, no nothing." His meter chirped once as he finished talking and the needle showed a brief spike of nitrogen in the air and then returned to normal. "Strange" he muttered, "very strange."

"Hey Karl, we should just count our blessings that we got this far without anyone getting hurt." Vincent Cooper said, his voice echoing in the cave.

"I know and I am" replied Karl, "It just seems strange to me is all. You all know as well as I do that we

should all be in respirators by now with oxygen being pumped in from topside.” Karl set his meter down and assisted Vincent and Jim as they began setting up the descent cable and winch. Once the tripod was erected, they used an air gun to shoot the anchor bolts into the rock. A wrench was used to tighten them down and secure the tripod winch mount to the cave floor. Once that was done, a series of safety cables were attached and anchored to a spot further back in the cave away from the edge.

Jim had finished setting up the radar and sonar and began actively surveying the pit, trying to establish a picture of the area and what was down below them. After an hour of surveying, he pulled the flashcards from the devices and plugged them into his laptop and waited for the computer to map out the readings. It automatically added the new readings to the existing map of the “known” cave and then rendered a 3-D image of the new space.

“Interesting David. We still can’t see the bottom and this thing took a reading down to 1000 feet. That’s about the limit of this small machine.”

David grunted his reply as he looked over Jim’s shoulder at the 3-D image. He turned and walked back to where he had placed the WP flare and popped the cap off. The flare ignited instantly in a brilliant white flame that almost blinded the rest of the cavers and lit the entire area in a bright white light. David leaned over the edge as much as he dared and threw it out into the void.

They all watched as the flare fell seemingly forever, flickering light on the walls of the pit occasionally, then it vanished from sight altogether. No one said a word as they contemplated what that meant. The cable winch only had 1000 feet of cable on it, if there was no bottom to this pit, then they could go no further in this direction; it was a dead end.

“I’m going to harness up; send me down the cable. I want to find out if we can see anything. Send down the Sonar when I call up for it, I’ll anchor off the cliff face and hang out while you send down the sonar, maybe then we can see what’s down there.” Jim said as he began strapping himself into his harness. Jim was a seasoned and experienced caver, practically a legend in the world of spelunking for some of his adventures and discoveries. He finished putting on his harness and Sammy began checking him over to make sure everything was satisfactory. Jim cracked two chem lights and slid them into the holders on his sleeves and helmet, picked up his rappelling gear and strapped it on to his waist, then clipped the five million CP spot light onto the belt.

“I think I’m ready. Radio check.” He spoke into the mike that was attached to his helmet.

“Check, read you loud and clear” replied David as he checked over the winch and cable and safety

lines one more time. He picked up the end of the cable and attached it to Jim's harness and spun the lock on the karabiner until it was seated, gave it a quick tug to make sure it was locked and then stepped back to man the winch controls. "Everything is good to go Jim."

Jim walked up to the edge, took one last look at his team, took up the slack in the cable and stepped off. The cable went tight as it took his weight and Jim stood against the cliff face and adjusted himself for the long descent.

"Start descent." David heard over the radio beside the laptop. He picked up the controller and pressed the button and the winch began a slow, automatic, controlled release of the cable. The team was looking over the edge watching Jim as he began to descend into the void, his LED headlamp and green chem. lights slowly disappearing from view.

"Cliff face is smooth and black. No fissures or cracks or anything. It's like glass almost" came the voice over the radio, "I'm going to turn on the spot, see what's down here."

Jim flipped the switch on the spotlight and began to shine it around him as the cable slowly spooled him lower and lower. He could see the far edge of the pit opposite him, maybe 300 feet distant. The utter darkness seemed to soak up the light from the high powered beam and as he continued his descent the darkness became palpable and closed in around him with a tangible force.

Jim licked his lips nervously and continued to shine the light around. The cliff face was entirely smooth as if it had been polished. There were no handholds, crevices, outcroppings, or breaks in the wall. It was black and shiny like obsidian, but it wasn't a rock that he recognized. On the opposite wall the cliff appeared the same, but his light seemed to be dimming even though the battery indicator was reading almost a three quarter charge remaining.

"Passing 250 feet. See anything yet?" Came David's voice over the radio.

Jim pointed his light downward and the beam disappeared into the blackness. "No, not a thing. The walls haven't changed either, still smooth as glass. I have no idea what kind of rock this is. It almost looks like obsidian but it isn't. It's something else I've never seen before."

"Passing 500 feet." The scenery hadn't changed a bit but now Jim was trying to suppress a feeling of anxiety and dread that was creeping over him like a fog. He wasn't one to rattle easily and during his twenty plus years of cave explorations he had had more close calls and near misses than most people live through, but something about this wasn't right. The feelings began to grow as he continued his descent.

“Passing 750 feet. Anything?” Jim shined his light around some more but now the light seemed to be even more subdued than before. He checked his battery; it was reading more than half full. He shined it back up above him but he could no longer see the edge of the cliff. The wall opposite him seemed to absorb the light and he was no longer sure if there was even a wall there anymore. He pointed the light downward and his beam seemed to be cut short as if trying to shine through a fog of black ink; there was a black void there that the light wouldn’t penetrate.

“No. Nothing yet. Everything is the same.” He felt the uneasy feeling inside begin to climb and had to force his voice to sound normal. He pulled up his instruments and checked them; the air was still reading safe which he couldn’t understand. This far below ground they should all be wearing their respirators and having oxygen pumped down from the surface.

He felt the cable slow and then he stopped moving. “You’re at the end of the cable Jim. 1000 feet. You see anything at all? We can’t see you from here.”

“No. Can’t see a thing. Apparently there is no bottom here and the light won’t shine very far which is really strange and it’s making me a little uneasy. Hold on, I’m going to drop a flare and see what happens.” Jim pulled a white phosphorus flare from his cargo pocket on his pants and popped the top. The brilliant flare lit instantly as he turned his eyes away from the searing white light. He held it out at arms length and then dropped it and watched it as it fell. It fell a very long ways before disappearing into the darkness as if it was suddenly swallowed. Jim watched as he hung there for any sign of light from below and wondered curiously just how deep the pit went. They would probably never know without getting some more really advanced equipment down here to check it out.

“I’m going to anchor on. Once I’m set, you can send down the equipment. Do me a favor though, use the backup nylon rope and send it down manually, I’m not sure I want to hang here and wait for a line.” He knew that if he said something wasn’t right, that the others would believe him, even he couldn’t say exactly what it was. Out of the rest of the team, he was by far the most experienced caver and the others often relied on his judgment.

“Roger that. Jim if you think something is wrong down there, we’ll get you up right now.”

“Just hang on. Let’s see what the sonar picks up, if anything. I’m anchoring off now.” He pulled a rock anchor bolt off his belt, placed a cartridge in the gun and fired it into the rock. Instead of anchoring the bolt though, the bolt merely chipped the rock and then ricocheted out into space, the recoil of the gun slamming back into his wrist and numbing his arm. He dropped the gun out of reflex and grabbed his sore wrist with the other hand, his gun dangling down below him on its lanyard.

“Dave, never mind about the sonar. I just tried shooting a bolt into this rock and almost broke my arm, this stuff is incredibly hard whatever it is. The bolt gun just ricocheted off the surface and didn’t do more than chip it. I’m gonna try to drill it and set a wedge anchor.”

“Roger that. Are you okay?”

“Yeah I’m fine, arm is just a little sore. Hold on.” He pulled the drill out of his belt tool bag that held all his rappelling gear and placed it against the rock. Bracing with his feet he squeezed the trigger and the high speed hammer bit chewed into the rock, shattering it like glass before binding the bit and ripping the drill out of Jim’s hand. He cursed violently as his already sore wrist took a nasty twist and he let go of the handle as it spun sideways and ripped out of his grasp. The drill hung there for a second and then fell out of the hole and dropped before he could recover and grab it.

He sighed with frustration as he reached down and grabbed the lanyards and began pulling the two tools back up to him. He dropped them back in the pouch before radioing back to the top.

“That didn’t work either. I don’t what this stuff is, but it’s harder stuff than I have ever come across. Even harder than blue granite which I can drill into, but this stuff won’t drill either. Nothing left to do down here, go ahead and bring me up.”

“Roger that. Cable is coming up.”

He looked down and sighed with resignation when he thought he saw a light below him. He quickly grabbed his spot light and aimed it downward, but the blackness closed on the beam like liquid ink and seemed to snuff it out. The feeling of dread washed over him with an almost desperate fury and he suddenly had the urge to get out of there right this instant. He fought for control of his emotions and mind before keying his mike and saying softly “Ascend. Ascend now. Get me up there. Now.” He kept his voice low but the urgency was plain.

He felt the cable tug and then he was ascending. “I heard you the first time Jim, the winch is winding as we speak. What’s up?” David’s voice had concern in it as he caught the urgency in Jim’s request.

“I don’t know. Something ain’t right down here, I’m seeing some sort of light below me and it’s moving. Can this thing go any faster?” He already knew the answer, the winch had a set speed for ascent and descent and it was at max speed right now; it felt painfully slow.

BOOM.

The sound, like a giant bass drum, reverberated from down below and up the pit to the team above. “What the hell was that Jim? Are you okay?”

Jim didn't answer. He was too busy looking down below him, shining his light in all directions, fighting the ever increasing feeling of panic in his chest. The blackness seemed to get thicker if that was possible. Finally he whispered into the radio, “It wasn't me. Just get me up there NOW.” He stated with urgency.

BOOM.

The drum sounded again, the deep bass crashing up from below and the shockwave bouncing off the walls of the pit around him. He looked down, desperately searching for any sign of what was there; the cable moving at an incredibly slow pace. He looked down again and his heart seemed to stop.

Far below him, incredibly far below him, he saw a red glow appear, swirling slowly in the blackness, almost ethereal in appearance, like a gas. He stared hard at the light as he fought the panic inside him and tried to judge the distance. This wasn't real. It was his imagination. He was going crazy.

He checked his instruments again and the air quality meter read acceptable; he wasn't hallucinating from gas or lack of oxygen.

The light grew deeper and darker; the red light swirling around faster like a gas vapor caught in a whirlwind, streaks of black and a dark hue of orange, like a flame, mixed together as the light grew brighter. The walls began to glow and as the light flickered off the smooth glassy surface, illuminating the pit in an unholy light

BOOM.

The shockwave crashed passed him with almost deafening force. This time the panic won and he screamed into the radio, “GET ME UP NOW! NOW DAMMIT NOW!”

“We're going as fast as we can Jim. Hold on. You're passing 500 feet right now; we can barely see your spot light now. What's that red light?”

“I don't know. Whatever it is, that sound is coming from down there. Whatever is down there, we just pissed it off. Get me up there now dammit!” Jim was almost ready to try climbing the cable hand over hand as he fought to regain control of himself; he was sure he could climb faster than this. He

looked up above him and saw several flashlights hovering out over the cliff as his team anxiously looked for him, but they seemed to be so far off and distant. Pointing the spotlight back down below him he watched in horror as the red and orange swirl of light grew and then something even blacker than the blackness of the cave moved within the light, growing larger and larger as it gained on him.

The smell of phosphorus and sulfur hit him like a baseball bat and he physically recoiled in his harness as his eyes began watering and his nostrils began burning. He wiped his eyes quickly with his sleeve as he tried to clear them. Suddenly he was hit with a blast of heat as the air in the cave was began rushing upward.

“Passing 250 feet. You’re almost here. What the hell is going on down there?”

Jim stared down at the light and darkness below him, the even blacker shape within the light moving in a vertical pattern as if it was growing taller, gaining speed as it approached Jim at an ever increasing pace. Then suddenly the thing looked up at Jim and he saw the eyes.

They burned deep red and yellow; a vapor seemed to rise from them and the eyes smoldered with a deep menacing hate that Jim could literally feel. The eyes locked on Jim like a vise and held him; he couldn’t look away, he couldn’t respond, he couldn’t speak. The creature continued to rise toward him, taking shape as it grew in size. He could see the head now, shaped somewhat like a goat, but not, and two massive horns came from the flat skull and wrapped around in a full curl until they almost touched in the front; giant fangs protruded from the bottom jaw and up over the nose. The body took shape slowly but seemed to change as the smoke and flame and light danced around the cave. The skin of the creature was inky black with giant scales that glowed from a searing yellow flame under the skin.

“Passing 100 feet. You’re almost here Jim. Hang on; we’re all set to grab you.” The voice in his earpiece snapped him back to consciousness and he struggled to think of something he could do. In a desperate move he pulled his last phosphorus flare from his pouch and popped the cap. The flame seared white light around him and he prepared to throw it at the creature.

He was bringing his arm back for the throw when he saw the hand reaching up from the depths to grab him. The oily black skin was covered with huge scales and the flame from within was searing through the cracks in its skin. There were no fingers, only huge giant black claws; each one bigger than Jims body. The inhuman scream that escaped Jim’s mouth was one of pure terror as he tossed the flare with all his strength straight into the creatures gaping, fiery mouth below him.

The flare went straight into the creatures upturned mouth and disappeared down its throat; the

hand recoiled away from Jim for just a moment as attack caught the creature off guard. Just then Jim felt hands grab him and jerk him back over the cliff edge. Someone snapped off the winch cable from Jim's harness and he felt several pairs of hands grab him and drag him backwards away from the pit. He wasn't aware of anything but the growing red light that was coming from the pit.

Suddenly someone slapped him across the face. "JIM! Let's go. Let's move!" Sammy was suddenly standing in front of him and screaming at him at the top of her lungs; on the verge of panic herself. He snapped out of his trance and was instantly on his feet, spinning around and racing to keep up with the others, pushing Sammy ahead of him. The entire team was on the run back up the main shaft they had come down, abandoning all their gear behind them.

David was leading the way, his LED helmet light bobbing around up front as he scrambled over boulders and outcroppings and ducked under ledges; the other team members right on his heels. There was a chimney up ahead that they had descended to get here and now they must ascend it, but they could only do so one at a time. David was the first one to go up.

Jim wheeled around as he reached the chimney and watched the cave behind him as he waited for Sammy, Karl, and Vince to climb up. The faint glow of red could be seen from down the shaft and the acrid smell of burning sulfur was filling the air and growing stronger.

BOOM.

The drum sounded again, the sound reverberating off the walls around them and rattling a few stones loose from somewhere above them. The light increased a little and then they heard something else.

The creature roared and the entire cave shook with the reverberations, almost knocking them down. David was almost 50 feet up the chimney when he was knocked loose by the roar and fell several feet before catching himself on a ledge and regaining his footing. He immediately began climbing again with earnest, followed quickly by Sammy and Karl. Vince stayed on the ground with Jim as they waited their turn; Vince was also a very experienced caver and rock climber. Some would say that there wasn't anything on earth that could scare Vince, but right at this moment he was experiencing a terror like he had never known.

The light grew brighter suddenly and the cave filled with the smell of sulfur; suddenly a blast of heat hit them as the ground shook under their feet. The creature screamed again and this time it was close; much closer.

“Son of a bitch. What is that thing!?” Vince said under his breath, too scared to raise his voice much higher.

“I don’t know man. A demon? Whatever it is, we’re f*cked.” Jim replied as he fought to take his eyes off the growing red light and look up the chimney. The others were more than halfway up now. “Vince! Go!” He slapped Vince on the shoulder to get his attention and immediately Vince spun around and raced for the chimney, climbing furiously to catch up with the others.

There was a crash of shattering rock from below them and the cave shook again as the creature advanced toward the retreating team. Jim was the last one on the ground and he was backing up slowly toward the chimney as the creature advanced on their position.

The light was illuminating the entire cave now, dwarfing the light from their LED helmet lights. Jim watched in morbid fascination as a giant claw reached around the cave wall into the small room they had retreated to and grabbed the edge of the rock and ripped it apart with shattering force. The arm reached into the cave, filling it, and Jim just barely avoided a swipe of the claw as it swept around the small cavern; the very tip of the claw catching him on the leg and slicing cleanly through his pants and deep into the muscle tissue.

Jim screamed in pain as he jumped backward and scrambled up toward the chimney, his leg suddenly burning as if it was on fire. He looked up the chimney and saw that his friends were almost at the top, yelling at him to climb up. He stood up to begin climbing but his leg suddenly failed him and the pain seared through his mind like a white hot flash. He gasped aloud and collapsed on the rocks below him, grabbing the wound and wincing from the pain.

Instinctively he grabbed his shirt and ripped it off, wrapping it around his leg and tying it tight to stop the blood flow. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he forced himself to stand and hobbled to the opening of the chimney. The creature was just outside the cavern mouth, breathing heavily and filling the air with sulfur and heat. It was getting hotter by the second and Jim was drenched in sweat, both from the heat and from the pain.

The chimney was clear; he could see flashlights above shining down at him and his team members yelling at him to climb up. He pushed into the chimney and braced with his good leg as he tried to begin the ascent. He pushed up one foot, then braced with his injured leg. A white hot pain seared through him as he tried to support himself, but the leg failed again and he fell hard on his back, staring up at his friends high above him for a moment before rolling down the steep slope to the cavern floor.

Jim knew it was over. He wasn't getting out of this one. The arm of the creature reached inside again and grabbed the wall of the cavern mouth, this time shattering the entire wall as it ripped the rock apart like it was nothing.

The dust hung in the air for a moment and then a blast of hot air slammed into Jim as the creature let out another demonic scream. Jim recoiled from the heat and recovered himself just in time to see the creature stick his head inside the opening; the eyes locking on Jim with a searing, burning hate.

“Oh my God...”

Chapter 2

Five days later.

The team emerged from the cave mouth into a hustle of activity. During the four weeks that the team had been underground several units of UGF Special Forces and regular Army had been moved in and several advanced teams from the different mining contractors had arrived and begun setting up a base of operations, laying out building sites and roads, and drilling for water. So far there had been no luck on the water and it was currently being brought in by tanker trucks and huge water storage silos were being built to hold the incredible amount of water that would be required at the site.

A fuel dump was being constructed by the Army's combat engineers a few hundred yards from the base and a temporary airstrip had been graded and compacted and marked out. There was a giant mess tent setup near the cave entrance complete with air conditioning.

Everywhere there were people scurrying around like a swarm of ants going about their tasks and performing some job or another as the growing city took shape. It was a city after all, or soon would be once the operation got into full swing.

The desert heat hit the team like a blast furnace as they emerged from the coolness of the underground labyrinth; the bright sun reflecting almost white light off the sand as they shielded their eyes against the glare. The team staggered out from the mouth of the cave unnoticed at first; haggard and weary and half starved. For the last five days they had pushed as hard as they could to get topside, stopping to rest only when they physically couldn't continue due to exhaustion.

Most of their supplies and equipment had been left behind when the creature had come; they had fled instantly, unable to carry their supplies with them. They had left small caches along the way at each relay station, but those supplies were mainly for emergency only and just enough for one

person, maybe two. Their plans had been to return topside when they still had supplies enough to make the return trip, but now that had changed and they had run themselves into exhaustion with almost no food and very little water and minimal sleep. They were down to their last sets of spare batteries for their LED headlamps; thankfully the LED didn't burn energy like a traditional incandescent light; they lasted almost 5 times longer.

Within minutes of them emerging from the cave, someone sounded an alarm signaling their return and immediately they were swarmed by reporters, scientists, and medical personal. The rest of the exploration team who remained topside to do research and analyze reports noticed the physical condition of the emerging team and immediately realized that something had gone terribly wrong.

Dr. James Toke immediately summoned the Executive Officer for the security detail of UGF soldiers assigned to guard the entrance to the cave.

“Major Gatlin, get these people away from my crew please! Don't let anyone near them except authorized personal. Do it now!”

“Yes Sir.” Major Gatlin immediately saluted the head scientist and turned to his men, “Sergeant Jacobs, make it happen.”

Sgt. Jacobs turned to his platoon and issued the orders, “First squad, take the reporters out. Second squad, remain at the cave. The rest of you come with me, we're escorting the teams to the medical tent for debriefing and inspection. Let's go.” The soldiers closed on the crowd and began circling around the team and medical personal, separating them from the reporters and curious workers.

“All of you disperse NOW!” Major Gatlin ordered through his bull horn, the tone of his voice was all business and no one questioned him as they immediately began retreating down the hill. The reporters however, remained at a respectful distance continuing to do what reporters do: take pictures and wait for any opportunity to exploit the situation.

The team was quickly escorted down the hill and into the air conditioned medical tent where Dr. Moseph immediately began checking them over.

“All of you, please sit down at a table so I can examine you.” His Indian accent was thick as he spoke rapidly, taking note of their physical condition and the utter exhaustion of each team member.

“Nurse! Get these people water, room temp, right now.”

Nurse Mollie Jenson immediately turned and left the room for water, returning a few minutes later

with four glasses of lukewarm water, handing one to each of the team members. They all gratefully accepted as they sat on the tables waiting for the doctor. Sammy started trembling and tears were running down her face as she finally relaxed enough to think about the events of the past five days. Vince just stared at the wall with a blank stare, lost in his own thoughts as he continued to replay over and over what he had seen and witnessed.

David sat on his table with his face in his hands, his body shaking from exhaustion and adrenalin overload; every one of them had pushed themselves past their physical limits and then some, the fear of what was below them stronger than their own physical limitations.

Dr. Moseph was examining Karl as he sat still on his table, not speaking, not responding to the doctor's questions.

"Karl, are you hearing me? I said what happened to you?" Karl just blinked but otherwise didn't respond.

"These people are in shock. Jenson, get them over to recovery and get them cleaned up and bedded down. I don't want them disturbed for at least 24 hours." He stepped outside the tent to see Sgt Jacobs standing just a few feet away talking with another soldier. "Sergeant Jacobs, if you please sir." He beckoned the sergeant to come over to him.

"Sergeant, these people are in shock, obviously something very traumatic has happened down there. Jim Dawson is missing from the group; perhaps you can arrange a search party and go inside a ways to see if he is there and needing help. As soon as I can get them to talk and give me some answers, I will update you on what I know."

"Aye Doc. I'll see what we can do. I'll talk to the Major and see if we can get authorization to enter the cave and search for Mr. Dawson. Is that all?"

"No. I am going to put them in recovery for 24 hours. I do not want them disturbed by anyone. I would like you to post a few guards to make sure that happens. No one is authorized to enter the ward without my express permission. So far that is just Nurse Jenson and I."

"Aye aye Doctor. I'll inform the Major of the situation. In the meantime I'll post two guards at the ward for you." Sgt Jacobs saluted the doctor and turned away and waved two other soldiers over. "Corporal Disanti and Private Keeler, I want you to post yourselves at the recovery ward. No one gets in without the good doctors express permission, meaning a signed note or you hear the words come out of his mouth. Currently only Nurse Jenson is authorized. Twenty-four hour post gents. I'll send

relief in twelve. You're dismissed."

"Aye aye Sergeant." They both replied in unison and smartly turned on their heels to go to their posts.

Inside the make shift hospital, Dr. Moseph had had two other nurses help Nurse Jenson in getting the patients stripped down, showered, and into fresh clothes. As soon as they were all in recovery, they promptly passed out from exhaustion and the nurses went about setting up IV drips on all of them rehydrate them and feed them some vitamins and medication to treat for shock and also to sedate them into a deep sleep.

In the research facility Dr. Toke was meeting with the other team members to discuss opinions on what had happened and what might have happened to Jim Dawson. "As soon as they are cleared by the doctor, we'll need to debrief them. We need to find out what happened down there and where Jim is. If we have to, we'll organize a search party to go retrieve him....." he paused, then continued quietly, "or his body."

The words hung in the air as everyone contemplated what that meant. Jim was well known to all of them and none of them could accept that he had possibly been killed. But they all knew the risks to a certain extent; while none of the topside team were cavers, they all had a basic understanding of how dangerous caving was and the inherent risks involved. If Jim had died down there, they reasoned, he had died doing what he loved to do most.

"Major?" Sgt Jacobs inquired at the door to the Command Post (CP) tent.

"Yes sergeant, what is it? Come in here."

Sgt Jacobs stepped through the door and walked in, the tent was stifling even as the over worked AC unit struggled to cool the intense heat; thankfully the soldier's nano suits had built in temperature control and worked to keep them all cool. The heat was still something to reckon with though; the Sahara was one of the harshest deserts in the world.

"Sir, Dr. Moseph has requested that I organize a search team to go see if Jim Dawson is inside the cave somewhere, at least within the first mile or two. He may need extraction and until the others wake up and start talking, we can at least make an attempt."

The Major mulled this over in his head. He would have to contact command to get authorization to enter the cave and the soldiers would need some caving gear, of which he had none. "Very well

sergeant. Let me contact command for authorization and I'll get back to you. In the meantime, organize your team and get your gear ready. Talk to the Explorer Team and find out what you need for caving equipment. I imagine you will need all your rappelling and entry/extraction equipment for starters."

"Yes sir." Sgt Jacobs saluted and turned on his heel and exited the tent. He signaled for his fire team to gather around him and issued the orders. "Okay boys, tonight we are most likely going into the cave to search for Jim Dawson who is missing from the team. We are going in as far as we can without an escort to search for him, or his body. We need equipment and gear. Johnston, get the night vision together, test it, and pack spare batteries. Gabe, get the ropes and rappelling gear in order, take a few men with you and make sure you inspect it thoroughly. Make sure you get rock guards for the ropes. Andrews, go meet with the Explorer Team and see about getting an equipment list for caving, find out exactly what we need. Hopkins, ammo and weapons detail, take another man to help you. Gibbs, food and water. Get on it boys, we rendezvous at the cave mouth at 1800 hours."

The men immediately dispersed to go to their assigned tasks. Three hours later, Major Gatlin summoned Sgt Jacobs into the CP. "We are go for the mission sergeant. You are cleared to search as deep as you need to, it seems Mr. Dawson is a rather important person and they want him found. Tonight, you go in no further than three clicks and return. When the team wakes up and Moseph clears them for debrief, then we will organized a more advanced search team if needed to go after Mr. Dawson. Any questions?"

"No sir. We are meeting at the cave at 1800 hours. I've got comm. online but I'm not sure how far into the cave it will still work topside."

"What about a medic? Who do you have going with you?"

"I have Advanced Specialist Fulton going with me. He's cleared for trauma and trained in extraction."

"Good. Fulton is good man, really knows his stuff."

"Yes sir."

"If you have no further questions for me sergeant, then you are dismissed."

"Sir." Sgt Jacobs saluted and then exited the tent. His team was assembling at the cave entrance with all the gear from their assigned tasks and had begun distributing it among each other. He walked up the group and watched for a moment before speaking.

“We need to check our comm. Everyone put on their helmets and do a radio check.” The team dropped what they were doing and donned their black helmets, the internal computers booted up and began automatically monitoring vital signs of each soldier. The front lens of the helmet displayed a hologram on the inside that showed each soldier's vital signs. By pressing a small button on the side of the helmet, they could scan through each of their teammates and read their vitals as well. Another setting gave a summary list of each team member with a status report next to it: Online, Offline, Okay, Injured, Medivac, or KIA.

“Radio check” Sgt Jacobs spoke softly, the throat mike picking up his voice; it would pick up a whisper easily so no one needed to speak loudly which might compromise them in certain situations.

“Check.” Cpl. Johnston replied.

“Check.” Said Cpl. Gabe

“Loud and clear.” Pvt. Andrews said sarcastically.

“Check.” Replied Lcpl. Hopkins

“Copy five by five.” Lcpl. Gibbs said.

“Check.” Replied Nelson, Woo, and Hastings.

“Loud and clear.” Replied “Doc” Fulton after everyone else had chimed in.

“Check status.” Ordered Sgt Jacobs. Each man began scanning through the list, checking their own reports and then each of their team members, finally stopping on the team summary. Everyone's name was listed by rank and next to each name was a green status word that read “OL/Okay” which meant Online and okay.

“Status is good” reported each man as they finished scanning.

“Good. Everyone gear up. We move out in two hours. Eat and drink something, smoke em if you got em.” Sgt Jacobs said as he turned and walked back down the medical tent.

“Disanti, Keeler, you two will be relieved at zero hundred hours by Cpl Chang and Pvt. Olson. I'm taking a search team into the cave; you two stand your post until relieved.”

“Aye Sergeant.” They replied in unison. Sgt Jacobs went inside the tent to see Moseph, “Doc, we’re going in after Dawson, but only about three miles. If we don’t find him by then, then we are coming back out and we’ll need to debrief the team about what happened and find out where Dawson is. Dawson is a VIP, that’s coming down from the top, and we have orders to find him.”

“I have them sedated sergeant, as soon as they wake up, then we’ll begin debriefing. I’ll wait until you return to begin. God Speed Sir.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back by morning.” Sgt Jacobs left the medical tent and went up the research facility where the Explorer Team had their headquarters. Pushing the tent flap aside, he went inside. The Team was gathered around a table looking at artifacts previously brought up from the cave, but it was obvious that their attention was more on their fellow team mates down in the medical center than on the objects on the table in front of them.

“Dr. Toke, I’m taking a team inside to look for Mr. Dawson. We’re limited to three miles tonight. If we are unsuccessful in recovering Mr. Dawson, then we must return for a debrief from the others. Anything you can tell me that I need to know about the cave?”

“First of all, I’m glad you’re going after Jim. I’m sure the others will be glad to hear it once they wake up. About the cave, there’s not much we can tell you. Mr. Bradson here is the closest thing we have to a caver; he’s been inside a couple of caves in the past. I’m afraid most of us are just lab rats who have more experience analyzing things under a microscope and we don’t have much to offer in the way of field experience.” Dr. Toke replied sadly.

“No problem sir. We’re good at making it up as we go; it can’t be that hard. We’ll be back by morning, hopefully with good news.” Sgt Jacobs waved at the others and left the tent, returning to the cave entrance where he proceeded to find a shady spot next to the small vertical cliff and stretch out for a quick nap. The cave entrance had been discovered when a sandstorm had blown away the sand covering this small up thrust of rock in the middle of the Sahara. A random satellite surveillance of the area picked up the new formation and noted the presence of a dark shadow on the side; a team was sent shortly after to investigate the find, initially thinking it was a hidden missile silo or smugglers hideout.

Once it was determined that it was an actual cave and went deeper than the amateur explorers in the area were capable of exploring, a more professional team was assembled and sent in. After the initial discovery of some of the wealth that the cave offered, a new was assembled of the “best of the best” cavers and archeologists in the world. Jim Dawson was an extremely experienced caver and

a legend among fellow spelunkers; he was also a geologist and a civil engineer. David Cecil was an archeologist with a fair amount of caving experience. Sammy Powers was a geologist, one of the top in her field and one of the most extreme explorers in the world; she was one of a very few who had hiked down inside a live volcano to get samples and study the lava flows, she also was an experienced caver and fairly familiar with the deep, dark places of the world. Vince Cooper was a scientist, but he was a hands on scientist who spent most of his time in the field collecting this or that for whatever research he was working on at the time. Well known within earth science circles, he had been recommended most by those interviewed. Karl Teller was an EMT whose hobby was caving and rock climbing, experienced in extraction techniques and field trauma care and trained in emergency surgery. His experience, for that it mattered, made him basically a doctor minus the official paperwork and certificates on the wall.

Sgt Jacobs opened his eyes and looked at his watch; it was five minutes till the hour. He stretched once to get the kinks out from his stiff muscles and stood up. His Nano suit responded to his movements and the suit itself began to respond. He walked over to his pack and checked it and his gear; then began putting on his battle rig. "Mount up boys! We move in five."

Everyone else began moving around at the order, making last minute adjustments to their gear, and suiting up with their packs and battle rigs. The Nano suits adjusted themselves for the increased load and boosted the strength of each soldier accordingly. By the time they moved out, each soldier was carrying less weight than his own naked body weight, the bionic Nano suits carrying most of the load and amplifying the soldiers own strength by 150 percent. In an emergency, the suits could boost to 200 percent of the soldiers strength, but only for a few minutes; that was generally enough time to get the soldier out of harms way for the moment.

"Helmets on." Sgt Jacobs ordered. Everyone donned their helmets and went through one last check; everyone checked in fine and the computer read "OL/Okay" across the board. After a few seconds, the display faded to a barely readable outline on the inside of the visor. If anything happened to any of the other members, the display would alert, then fade back out so as not to interfere with the soldiers vision.

"All set. We are good to go." Reported Doc Fulton as he noted that all team members were online and healthy.

"Let's move out. Employ night vision." Sgt Jacobs ordered as he stepped forward, "I'll take point, let's go."

He slid the night vision (NV) visor down over the helmet visor and the world changed into an ultra

violet colored universe, every image sharply defined according to its heat signature, or lack thereof. The rock formations jumped out in sharp contrast, every ridge and crack and detail shown in stark clarity. The image of the men was no different, although the color was a dull gray as the Nano suits and helmets worked to hide their wearers from prying enemy eyes by preventing thermal detection; each team member was identified however by a little bar that displayed the rank and name of each soldier within view of the wearers line of sight. Vision was slightly amplified as the light decreased, turning the darkness of the cave into an ethereal universe.

Sgt Jacobs led the way into the cave, followed by the others in single file line. As they ventured further in, the sunlight was slowly extinguished and the darkness closed in around them; darkness so deep that only a complete and utter absence of light can create it.

“Switch to infrared.” Came the command over the radio net....