EPILOGUE

The story begins in 1994, during the second year of the Hungarian Wars. A limited nuclear exchange occurred between the Eastern Bloc Nations and the Soviet Union in 1992, after several three years of starvation caused by crop failures and poor Soviet administration. Glasnost policies were violently overthrown by the old guard after Gorbachev died in a mysterious plane accident on April 25, 1992. The new Soviet Politburo imposed vicious sanctions against the Poles, Slavs, and Czechs; they massacred the entire populace of Gdansk after a three week siege. This was followed by United Nations sanctions, the abolition of the U.N. treaty, and the intervention of NATO into what became known as the Hungarian Wars.

The instantaneous violent weather effects halted the brief interchanged of nuclear weapons. The 25 thermonuclear weapons involved created a band of drought along central Europe, Asia, and the North American grain belt.
Combat is now fought between specialized units of the opposing armies, while the governments of the northern hemisphere deal with food riots and political foment inside their own countries. The Third-World countries have greater powers as their production of raw materials for war and food stuffs increase. The United States, like other Northern countries, uses secret police and spies to influence resource nations of the world, far beyond the wildest dreams of the previous organizations such as the FBI, CIA, and NSA. The president of the United States has assumed unlimited powers, and has been wrestling with the local authorities who demand an end to the War, the end of the federal government, and the formation of large city-states, especially in the West and along the Eastern Seaboard.

The District of Columbia has been protected by federal troops since 1991. All entrance and exits to the city are controlled. In order to further control the populace, only computerized money is officially sanctioned. The use of metal or paper for exchange is a capitol offense.
"That's the last of this bottle. You are a sponge, aren't you?" He reached into the cracked wicker basket that smelled of fish from the market place. "They'd only give me this last bottle of madeira at gunpoint. Look at this label. 1969! God, I'll bet the air in Portugal was clean when they bottled this. Too bad I can't read Portuguese. The Central never sent me to Brazil."

"C'mon. Just another glass." Jazz Bolt pushed the empty glass past the bottle and buckled at the waist as she careened over the arm of the love seat.

His hands pushed her face, throwing the kneeling woman back into the hard maple of the furniture. "You're not passing out on me. No way. Let's go!"
"I told you," she slurred," I'm not shacking up with the Sphinx unless I'm so goddamn drunk I can't see your shitty little face."

"You've had enough," he snapped.

He pulled her violently from the love seat. The room blurred as her stomach rioted. A moment in flight ended on the bed as he tossed her onto the sagging mattress; the finest in Azuga, according to the surviving locals.

The candles flickered in the tempest. Their recovery left billows of black smoke circling up around the barren apartment. Their shattered movements collided back and forth against the multifaceted panes in the French doors to the veranda. The tattered blue and white curtains failed to hide the glass from the glare.

The wiry agent ran his hands through the grease in his thinning hair as he pounced on her warm, wriggling body.

"Ceausescu would be proud of you, Jazz." Sphinx pulled the blonde hair away from the flawless, ivory skin of her neck and face.
"Shit! I'm not ready. Why the hell did I ever agree to this. Ungggh." Jasmine Bolt rolled over the soiled brocade bed cover and vomited violently on the faded mauve patterns of the oriental rug. She rolled back, expecting to be alone. The Sphinx was still waiting, emotionless as ever.

"Well, my little jewel, what was your favorite thing when you were growing up in Wyoming?"

"Montana, asshole. What's with you. You must be a fucking mushroom. Why don't you get the hell out?"

"Have it your way."

His hand felt nothing as it smashed against her right cheek.

She groaned and stilled. He feared he might have hit her too hard. She recovered by coughing up blood and spit.

By the time Jasmine's vision had cleared, and she was aware of the burning pain in her face, her hands and legs were tightly bound to the poster bed pillars.

"Should've read your file better. Son-of-bitch! Son-of-bitch!"

"You are what you were trained to be, Jazz. We're both the best at what we do. I steal art for the
agency, and you lift your pretty little ass across Eurasia, tantalizing every priest, prelate, and politician. But what's the use in me eulogizing your comforts. What a horrible waste."

Her eyes strained as she fought the alcohol. Adrenaline was counteracting the fogginess.

Sphinx stretched the duct tape over the confident, pouting lips he had come to respect, trust, and in an odd sense, love. She was so much like Anna, the only woman to bed him. But that was fifteen years before, in the Netherlands of the 80's. There were no memories strong enough to prevent his duty.

"Yes, old Nick they called him, Nicolae Ceausescu. He always said that the peasants should be glad to make the final sacrifice for the good of the nation. And you, my wild little Montana whore, are a peasant. And so am I."

Sphinx pushed up from the trembling victim. The cork of the madeira gave way and splashed out over his khaki pants. The gushing flow of red soothed him, as the smell of fresh vomit began to twist his stomach. He drained a pint from the dusty bottle in one mighty gulp. Some splattered up from his mouth, and oozed over his lips. He wiped it off on the tattered sleeve of his worn gray sweater.

"Let me talk to you, my little Jazz." He stepped slowly to the bedside, hesitating.
After resting the madeira on the night stand, Sphinx knelt shakily at the side of the bed.

"God, if you are there, forgive me. Strike me dead. Oh, Christ on earth!"

He stood abruptly, looking down at the filth in his own fingernails. The oval mirror over the nightstand reflected back a face of death and ice.

"You bastard" he swore, as he smashed the mirror with his fist. The blood ran down his fingers to his wrist and onto the rug. The slow thud of the drops filled the silence. Jasmine lay frozen.

"Play dead," John Bolt had said. "Listen to your big brother. If we're camping and a mad bear or crazy bull comes snooping around, just be still. No matter what. Crazy things go after moving targets." She could see John now. His confidence. His strength. She remained still.

Sphinx looked away from the distortions of the fractured mirror. He became fixated by the play of light on her blue velveteen dress. The dress of a princess. The dress of a queen. He reached for the top and ripped it open in one thrashing movement. "So these are the treasures that men sink for. But you are lovely, my angel."
A trembling hand traced over her tight breasts, stopping only momentarily to trace over the huge, plum colored nipples. He traced farther over the smooth torso and slightly jutting hip bones. A single bright tattoo of a poinsettia greeted him from her right thigh.

"Flowers. Lovely. Think of flowers then, sweet Jasmine. Think of some sweet childhood memory of flowers. It will end soon and you will be free. But I won't. I'll remember the blue princess with fire-straw hair, meadow eyes, and the nubile body of a child lost at play. Good-bye."

He kissed her gently on the forehead. Her eyes were still closed.

Playing well, he thought. He preferred her drugged, or even dead, but not this way. Not this alive. She'll know it all. Know the terror.

Splashes of reflections from the candles poured across the nude body and the green brocade of the bed as Sphinx opened the French doors. Street sounds and carriage driver calls would never again reach up to the second story of the battered hotel.

Only the distant roar of the Hungarian War ruffled the night breeze. Occasionally a low flash of pale pink light would preface the dull roars. The night breeze rushed over the rancid smells of the tight apartment. Darkness followed as the candles died under the breath of the Sphinx.

Better in darkness, he thought. Better to go with some dignity.
He turned from the night visions, being careful not to look towards the bed as he gathered his weapons. The tarnished, cracked, brass door knob shook beneath his hand as he pulled it shut. Inching against the pitch dark of the hallway, he could barely make out the shape of the stairway. Only one candle burned at the front desk during the new austerity.

There was no desk clerk to greet him, as he slid into the night air of Azuga. He paused under the balcony, waiting. It was late enough, and he had kept his part of the bargain.

Sphinx rubbed his hands over his forehead, pushing at the creases. Thirty-one, he thought, and what? Hunted, hated, and old before his time.

Warmth from the tin of his snuff can oozed into his left cheek as he rubbed the green enameled pattern back and forth. His mind circled back to Anna, and the walks through the cold night streets of Eindhoven. They would huddle together through the night gloom, avoiding the smudged bricks of the narrow passages. Textile and plastics factories fouled the air.

Anna would pull the snuff can from her cleavage and rub the warm surface of emerald flowers over his face. How wonderful, the relief of the opiate based snuff. Then the embracing.

A quick sniff and his head pulled back, as he leaned against the bricks beneath the veranda. Perhaps it was the cocaine, or his wandering thoughts that confused him. Peering harder, he could make out
a maroon, luminescent mist rolling around the building across the street. There was no lamp light to create such a light, and the full moon had long since passed over the city roofs, leaving its afterglow in the west. But the mist continued.

The swirling mass turned upon itself. It could not have been the trail of a police flare, he thought.

A whine arose, and then ringing filled his ears. A piercing cry pressed on his eardrums, and pushed him to his knees. It was upon him. He could not run.

It had him, possessed him, devoured his being. The Sphinx crumbled, his mind filled with a terror unknown in his past. Someone else was inside his body, with him, pushing him out. He struggled.

It was over. He pulled himself up from the wet cobblestones. The smell of dog urine and garbage wafted up from his jacket. Sphinx peered into the specter before him, a twirling veil of screaming maroon: a spinning vortex of anger and power. A hunger... but not for his flesh.

Pulsing, snapping, twirling, the red fury blazed and soared above him. His head pounded, as the roar of his own blood echoed in his ears: a castle door rammed open.

"WHERE? WHERE?" It demanded from him.
Sphinx crawled back to the gutter, until the bricks held him like mortar. There was no escape. It rushed on him again, pounding on him. Lifting him from the ground and smashing him into the hotel wall again, and again. A scorching agony tore through him as it entered his thigh, pulling life from him, and leaving a blood soaked wound that would never heal.

"WHERE?  WHERE?"

Sulphurous fumes burned his lungs, and his eyes were almost useless against the heat of the thing. There was no more resistance left in him.

Sphinx pointed up and then turned away. It tossed him aside.

Fire and fumes roared into a pillar of burning rage, a tornado of lust and hunger, plying the brick walls and climbing to the veranda. The hotel bricks were scorched beneath its glowing flight.

Sphinx pushed out his left arm to brace and found it useless. His legs, right arm, and ribs were broken. Pressed against the pavement, he could feel the ooze running from his right ear. It no longer rang with searing bells.

His voice would not work, as he lay choking on his own saliva. He could not cry out to God, or anyone else. He could not ask for forgiveness.
A cold, bloodied fist circled the green snuff can as the Sphinx whimpered into unconsciousness.

Jasmine Bolt swirled with her consciousness about the room, trying to free herself from the overdose of cheap wine.

"Pull, damn it, c'mon, pull!" She mumbled under the press of the tape, and continued her struggles against the bonds, but they were too well constructed. She decided to withstand the torment until the Romanian whoremonger, a squalid pig who probably paid for her with some exquisite art treasure, finished and untied her. How she hated these mountain people. They were unclean and violent. Twice she had agreed to work the magic of her body to get information from them, but that was enough. She made it clear to Central that no gypsy bastard was ever going to tie her again. But here she was, trapped into that same "bullshit scam", as she called it.

Even though the guns in the Transylvanian Alps had stopped for the night, the evening silence was broken. Jazz could hear a high wind and then a scuffle in the streets. Without candles, it was easy to see the red glow coming into the room. She thought it might be the Secret Police using the stun flares, but they only lasted for a moment. Unlike the flares, this light pulsed and jumped. These were not the typical rounds fired during a police action.
It roared over the metal railing, and smashed the windows of the veranda. She could smell it before its forms reached her. This was wrong, very wrong. This was evil. She was exposed and helpless to evil.

"Play dead," John Bolt had said. "Listen to your big brother. Play dead!"

Her heart crushed under the fierce heat hovering over her. She held her eyelids tight, afraid to look. Terrified to become part of the corruption. It touched her, and she buckled violently, unable to withstand the deep burning.

Huge and fierce, it entered her. But not like a man. It was not a man but a furnace, cremating her from within. The smell of her own burning flesh mixed with its vapors. Every hair on her head rose into the air, floating as if suspended by invisible threads.

Then it flared out, pulling with immense force, as each golden straw ripped from her skull.

There was no blood at first, first the rest of the hair on her body ripped away, leaving a sea of screaming pores. Jazz should have been unconscious from the pain, saved from the horror, but it prevented that peace. It held her mind open. It savored the abject terror, fear, and suffering.

Her body thrashed. Her wrists broke against the ties and vomit rolled into her throat. She choked. She quit breathing. But she did not die.
Thoughts of poinsettias raced into her. She centered on them. The lovely poinsettias on her mother's table. The poinsettias that lived all year. No one grew them like mamma. Everyone came to see them. How soft the leaves were. The red was so gentle. The green so welcome in a long Montana winter.

Every surface of Jasmine Bolt was aflame. Searing heat consumed every part of her skin, but did not burn. The bed broke under her desperate struggle.

The feeding began. It had readied her. Each capillary exploded under its tentacles. Thousands of sucking arms of mist pulling the life from her skin, as an abomination consumed her from inside.

In seconds Jasmine was a flaccid pile of jelly, writhing in the red and green brocade bed spread. The squirming mass was unrecognizable as anything once human. But still she felt. Still she lived and suffered, until it let go; let go of her soul, the only thing it could not consume. It could sense the soul still resisting, concentrating on some red flower unknown to the Romanian summers.

A torrent of white mist rose over the still remains. The redness in the cloud was gone; calmed, engorged, completed. Rising to the ceiling, surveying the remains, it hesitated before soaring out the door, over the streets, and into the sable of the Romanian night.