

# Section I, "Hello, is There Anybody in There?"

In the near future....

Low slung, agile, and extremely fast; the exotic, yellow two door pulled to a quick halt at the curb. The growl from its 388 cubic inch fuel injected Chevrolet engine reverberated off the surrounding buildings, then slowly faded away. Nicholas 'Mad Dog' Pantera, Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force, retired, stepped out, looked around, then ran a quick finger through his close cropped, salt-and-pepper hair. He reached inside and removed his 'daytimer', then carefully closed and locked the exotic's door. He had purchased the car on a whim, a joke to go with his name. A Pantera for a Pantera. The car was complete, but had no engine and a stripped transmission when he purchased it at auction, and it had taken him years of loving work and plenty of his pension money to get it to the condition it was in now. The paint had been faded and the interior mostly complete but musty smelling from years of neglect. The paint now gleamed like a 10,000 watt spotlight and the new Recaros were covered in immaculate leather with contrasting yellow pipe

stitching. Bright yellow five point racing harnesses contrasted with the rich black leather seats. Nick thought it was funny to tweak the gomers who demanded purity, the people that thought that all the chalk marks and undercoat overspray should be photographed and replaced after a restoration was completed. He took the car to the All Ford Nationals at Carlisle Pennsylvania one year and caused about 5 coronary embolisms and a cerebral venous sinus thrombosis thrown in for good measure. He had decided to replace the missing Ford 351 with an all-aluminum Chevrolet high deck NASCAR racing block. In its current state of tune, the Pantera put out about 650 romping horses and would vault to 180 in nothing flat. Nick had hand timed it once unofficially through the quarter in about eleven seconds, so he figured it was fast enough already. He had once thought about having a supercharger added, then decided his middle-aged reflexes weren't quite ready for a JATO assisted suicide just yet. Nick did love the cosseting tan and black leather-lined interior and Recaro seats, but found himself driving his Pontiac Grand Prix GTP more and more every year.

**\*Guess the age thing is finally catching up to me,\*** he mused as his knees cracked. He unlocked and opened his apartment door, then placed his keys, wallet and 'daytimer' on the side-stand table near the door. He picked up Angellina's picture,

which stood propped on the table, and ran his finger over the cold, glossy surface. **\*I can't believe she's been gone six months now\***, he thought as a familiar, somewhat dimmed current of grief swirled through his heart. She was so beautiful, and so innocent. **\*Why do things like that happen to people like this?\*** he wondered silently. Pushing down conflicting emotions that were probably better left unexamined at this time, he prepared for another night alone, watching whatever mindless waste his satellite antenna collected from the limitless ether and passed to his digital TV, all for his viewing enjoyment (yea, right). After cooking a microwave dinner, he idly channel surfed, hoping something would catch his interest. About the time, he thought he had found something faintly interesting, his doorbell rang. **\*Ahhh, what now?\*** he wondered. Heaving himself out of his favorite chair, he pulled open the drawer in the side-stand, and removed a 4" stainless barreled Ruger .38 pistol.

"Yea, who is it?" he asked roughly.

"Mr. Pantera? Nicholas Pantera?" A feminine voice asked from the other side of the door.

"Maybe. Depends on who's asking."

"I believe I am someone that you may want to talk to. I'm Angellina's mother."

In his amazement, Nick nearly dropped the .38. He rotated the deadlock bolt, and the door opened with a smooth 'snicking' sound. Outside stood an attractive, middle aged woman about 5'-3". From the reddish blond hair and blue eyes, Nick could definitely see the wellspring of Angellina's beauty.

"Please, pardon my manners. I don't often get visitors at my home. Come in", he added, stepping back and opening the door wide so she could pass. She stepped in, and removed her coat. Beneath, she wore a knee length silk dress of an attractive but modest design. Her hair was braided up in an intricate design, and he found himself wondering how long it actually was. Nick took her coat, and quickly set it on a bed in his spare, back bedroom. When he returned, he found her looking at his picture of Gina. Ill disguised tears glistened unshed in her eyes.

"I'm sorry to show up on your doorstep unannounced, but I needed to talk to you. I needed to talk to someone, and you are the only one who knows all about what happened. To my dear niece Holly, and to my little girl. The police won't talk to me, because they have some sort of 'gag order' against them. The government, as usual, trots out the old 'national security' angle whenever I request information. I hope you aren't angry that I came here without calling, but I wasn't sure if you

would talk to me if I did call you first. My name is Natasha Kerinsky, and Angellina Lynn was my only child. She only talked to me twice after my divorce, and once was to tell me about you. She loved you more than I can possibly tell you, and I believe that that feeling was returned. We weren't close for many years, but she poured out her heart to me that day, beyond anything I had ever again expected. You were going to be married, weren't you?"

Swallowing heavily around the huge lump in his throat, for several seconds Nick could do nothing but nod.

"Yes, we were. The night she was killed, I was going to officially propose. She was on her way here when her car ..... was pushed off the road. The official police report says that she was drunk at the time. She wasn't. She was back in med school and doing incredibly well. Gina had cleaned up her life, and I wanted her to spend the rest of it with me, and I completely believe that that was what she wanted, as well. She was, beyond a doubt, the smartest, most caring and most beautiful woman I have ever known, and that was taken from me. From us, both. I was a cop for many years, and I flew combat in Desert Storm before that. She defrosted a heart that should never have seen spring again, my heart. She was everything to

me. What do you need from me, that the police won't give you?"

"Mr. Pantera, I need help. Help with something that will rock this country if word ever gets out, and I don't know how to handle it. I am not ashamed to admit this, but what I have is a problem so big that I don't have the intelligence or the courage to know how to handle it."

"What would that be?" Nick asked, almost beyond curiosity, and yet somehow dreading the answer, as well.

"Holly's son. I have Holly's son, and I don't have any idea what to do next."

Nick stiffened for a second, as if he had been poleaxed in the forehead. A small trickle of sweat rolled down one side of his face, and his breath seemed to be a little labored.

"You have who?" he finally managed to squeak out.

"Holly's son, Benjamin. He's four years old, calendar years, that is. This is going to be hard....." she tailed off.

Nick finally managed to heave himself into a seat and motioned her to sit as well. Making a 'go-on' motion with his hand, he wondered if he should be recording any of this, or perhaps taking notes.

"Ben is four. Chronologically. You won't believe this. In what they were doing, I believe they

may have cured progeria, or at least figured out why it happens. Ben is six foot four and has a fine mustache. Not only was he genetically enhanced, somehow they managed to speed up and then slow down his aging. He grew to adulthood in three years, but he should live out a normal life span, aging as we do, or so I think."

"Is this possible?" Nick asked, half rhetorically. "Age control? Then, it would be possible to cheat death? How long could you live, if you slowed everything down?"

"I don't believe it works that way. When they were training him, Ben ate eight times a day, as much as he possibly could. His metabolic rate was phenomenal. He has a PHD in physics and biochemistry, and he did that in a year. I don't believe any standard IQ test could match him. He is scary. But there are some issues. He never had a real childhood, so he has no social adjustment history to draw from. Only what they put in, which isn't really the same, or nearly complete enough. I was hoping that you could help me, because you saw what was in that lab, before the NSA and other even more shadowy agencies came in and collected everything. I believe the CIA and FDA are also involved, because the foods and chemicals they used there were highly unusual. Our government has an unhealthy interest in what went on out there. Maybe an unholy interest. I fear for

what Minisoft may want to do to me, and to Benjamin, but I also fear our own government. Is anyone wise enough to handle this knowledge properly? This is the power of God, to give life, to extend life, to alter life. Dare we say we are smart enough to use it properly?"

This whole time, Nick had just been nodding slowly, knowing full well that Natasha's thoughts were eerily mirroring his own almost to a 'T'. She paused and looked expectantly at him, obviously feeling that she had rambled on long enough, and expecting him to add something intelligent to the conversation. Which he desperately hoped he would be able to do.

"Okay. First things first. Where is Benjamin, and has any one else seen or talked to him? Ummm, okay, wait a second, how did you get a hold of him in the first place?"

"Yes, well.... He has been out in public a few times. He seems to handle it well, and I don't think anyone else realizes anything, beyond the fact that he is an extremely perceptive person who is not easily fooled. I need to move him somewhere safer, though, because I'm sure that if any records indicate he still exists, the government or someone will be looking for him. And, actually, he came and found me. Like I said, his intelligence is scary. He knows it bothers people, so he doesn't often do things to display it, because some people feel

uncomfortable or offended by feeling intellectually inferior. Personally, I feel safer having a genius in the house than I do wondering who is after me or us. He managed to track me down, with only incomplete scraps of information gleaned from various sources, most of them quasi-legal. He would be a formidable opponent if he or someone like him were used for military or intelligence purposes. Imagine our government with power such as that. A worrisome thought, is it not?"

"Yes, yes it is," he answered, to try to buy a few seconds of time, to finish the train of thought that this was leading him to.

"Where is he now?"

"He's in Colorado. I will take you there, if you think it is wise. Should we leave the country, do you think?"

"Mmmhmmm, I don't know. Not yet, at least, anyhow. Does anyone else know you're here?"

"I don't believe so. I don't think I was followed, and I didn't tell anyone where I was going when I left. I used my real name to buy a plane ticket, though. Maybe that wasn't so bright, yes?"

"Probably so, but its done. No help with that now. Anyhow, what do you perceive the threat level to be? Do you think anyone is actively hunting him now, or do you think that they will

wait for him to do something noticeable and catch him that way?"

"I just don't know. I'm not good at these sorts of things. Before this, the most difficult thing I ever planned was Holly's wedding. I can be honest with myself, Mr. Pantera, I'm not a rocket scientist. I believe that's the phrase?"

Nick smiled faintly, the first time he had in days.

"Yes, I guess that would do."

They shared a short laugh.

Nick pulled back on the control stick of his F16C as he thumbed the intercom button.

"Morning, gentlemen. The air temperature is 102 degrees F, and the sky is clear and sunny."

"Wow, big surprise there. We ever get anything else but sandstorms and sunrises?" his wingman chided.

Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas 'Mad Dog' Pantera pulled a 3G positive climb, then leveled off slightly behind and above the other two C's.

Configured for ground attack, they were carrying triple stick 500-pound dumb iron gravity bombs, CBU-528 cluster bombs and napalm canisters, along with two wing mounted AIM 120 Amraam missiles for self defense.

Nick checked his port wing rail and examined the similar Amraam nestled there. He was flying lead