and looking back newously, sarge waved them to the side, daniels moved to the front of the line, just ahead was a bend in the trail, he eased around the bend and knelt behind a dump of bushes, separating the branches, he could just see the entrance of the cave, he could hear that there were voices just inside, but couldn t make out what was being said. he crept a little closer, now he could make out a line of men holding weapons lined up across the opening of the cave, their backs toward him, they were definitely not russians, probably locals, daniels made his way back to the ohures, sarge, he whispered, there are men at the entrance of the cave, but they appear to be locals, i didn t see any sign of the sussians. i noticed some movement outside the cave as i looked past the russians, i nudged amir and nodded to the entrance, the nato team was slowly making their way to the mouth of the cave. colonel sokolov, said amir, i believe your window of retreat has now officially closed. and what is that supposed to mean? asked the colonel. i believe he is referring to us, said sarge as he and his men came up behind the brohurehood line as they entered the cave, weapons ready, could i get all you boys to put down your weapons? asked daniels, amir motioned for his men to lower their weapons, the colonel and troops, what were left of them, turned to see the americans enter the cave, they placed their hands into the air, what had been a bad situation for the russians may have just improved; then again, maybe it just got worse, now boys, there ain t no sense in that, put your arms down, said daniels, motioning with his hands, cordial as always, but one look into those eyes and you knew he was extremely alert ready, and all business, sergeant decker made his way to the center of the room. now, would someone like to tell me what s going on here? asked sarge, sokolov was silent, amir knew that the sooner he could get rid of these strangers the safer the ark was, he took the initiative by stepping forward. I believe I can clear this all up. It seems that colonel sokolov and his men, along with major petrova, were performing a routine recon, had a navigation system malfunction and strayed off course, they saw some activity at the landing site and stopped to get their bearings and make repairings. recon? with three helicopters? asked sarge, and all three had their navigation systems go out at the same time? you must have some really lousy equipment, did you know that you re about 200 miles from the russian border? that s what i asked, said amir, answering for sokolov. but he assured me that once they lost navigation it was just a matter of follow the leader and here they are, i was just reassuring him that we would be glad to provide assistance. with your guns on him and his men? this is dangerous country, we were just being cautious, does that sound about right, colonel? asked sarge, close enough, mumbled sokolov, well, it sounds like a bunch of nonsense to me, and what about him? asked sarge, pointing to saleem with his bloody bandaged arm. i was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. i m fine, answered saleem, what about the body we found under a pile of rubble on the trail? an unfortunate accident, like i said, this is dangerous country, answered amir, i quess it s a good thing we came along when we did, colonel, i think we can help you find your way, now who can tell me about the distress beacon? we may have been premature in activating the beacon, said amir, but when we saw the russian helicopters landing we expected the worst, i certainly do apologize for the inconvenience. It s an american beacon, where did you get it? it was my turn to step forward. that would be mine, sir, we are from the states on an archeological expedition, our employer strongly suggested we bring one along based on what he d heard about the kidnapping of foreigners in these mountains, just in case, i guess it s a good thing we brought it. so you re both telling me that this was just one big misunderstanding? amir and jack looked at each ohure and in unison said, yes, the colonel remained sullen and quiet, well, i don t buy any of it, i think the nato command will probably have something to say about this, in the meantime, i m going to radio for orders via one of the f9 s circling overhead, so, if you don t mind, just sit tight for a while, looking directly at amir, sarge asked, is there anything else you d like us to pass along? no. the sooner we can put all this behind us the better, said amir, okay then, newman, said sarge to the radio operator go back to the helicopter and send a transmission, you may have to take a radio up to the summit, what do you want me to say, sir? tell them that we found the americans, three of them, and all are safe, russians were encountered, there appears to be no imminent danger, ask if we should escort them back to the russian border, wait for a reply. yes, sir. just out of curiosity, why are you here? sarge asks amir. this is a holy place, my people come here for worship, we are a group of christians known as the nestorian brohuvehood, this place is near where the ark is believed to have come to rest following the receding waters of the great flood. no foolin? i thought noah s ark was somewhere on mt. ararat. amir did not respond to sergeant decker's comment, he would let him think what he wanted. how often do you