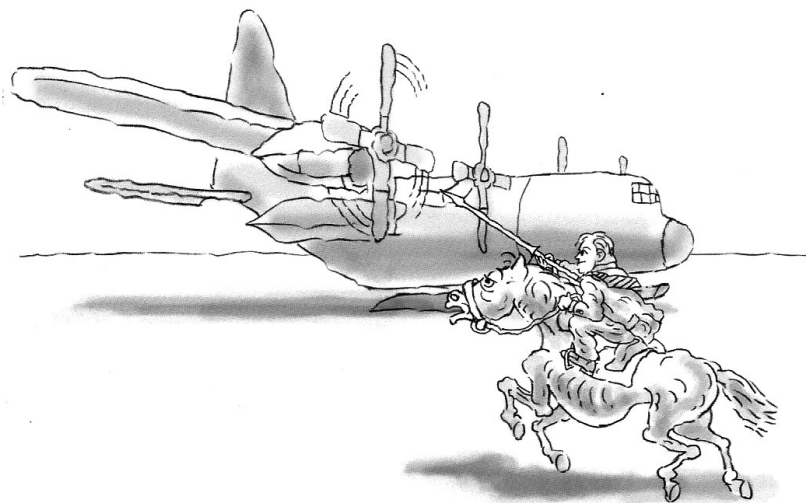


**IT'S TOO LATE
TO LEAVE
EARLY**

AN AEROSPACE FABLE



WILLIAM WALLING

It's Too Late to Leave Early, an Aerospace Fable

William Walling

For every disillusioned, downtrodden aerospace
engineer who ever fought the good fight

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

Prologue

On a blistering afternoon in the month destined to commemorate a despot still more despotically than he himself, Great King Khufu called a halt to the procession of spearmen, archers, priests, chamberlains and court hangers-on making up his retinue. Desolated to think the mighty looked upon his works without despair — a sore point — he motioned for the bearers to set down his lapis lazuli-encrusted palanquin. Shielding his eyes from the westering sun, a swollen, yellow-orange blaze near the horizon, his steadfast gaze roved across the Nile, where a dancing thermal mirage mirrored the Great Sand Sea.

Minutes passed. A *khamisin* blew steadily from the southwest, kicking up dust devils among the idling soldiers and porters. At last the king clapped his hands and summoned his master builder, T'Ankh Salot.

The architect dropped to his knees, fell forward and prostrated himself, his nose pressed to the scorching sand. "Your wish, O confidant of celestial Osiris, O consort of divine Isis, O ruler of all he surveys, O mightiest of —?"

"Yes, yes, yes," rattled Great King Khufu. He gestured impatiently with his golden flail. "There, on the far shore of the Father of Waters you shall erect My pyramid, My triumph of triumphs, My glory. See to the matter at once."

T'Ankh Salot stiffened slightly. "A pyramid, O favored of Geb and Sekmet, O bountiful Lord of the Upper and Lower lands, O beneficent —?"

"Yes, pyramid — P-Y-R-A-M-I-D."

"A . . . real pyramid?"

"Of course, you dullard."

The architect licked his lips, getting sand on his tongue. "L-like the t-tomb," he faltered, "of your illustrious sire, Great King Snefru?"

"Only in a manner of speaking. You shall erect a gigantic edifice many times larger and more grandiose than anything dreamt of by Snefru. While you're at it, specify flat sides all the way up to the peak, not bent in the middle at some obscene angle."

"Flat," murmured the architect.

"Indeed!" affirmed Great King Khufu. "My pyramid will soar to the skies in My everlasting tribute, a home away from home in My afterlife, the abode of My eternal *Ka*."

“Oh wisest of . . . the w-wise,” stammered T’Ankh Salot, “in this modern day and age don’t you think . . . ? What I mean is, uh, . . . All things considered, wouldn’t a towering, old-fashioned mound of stones be, well . . . perhaps a tad passé? Reconsider, I beg you! P-please don’t . . . That is, I’m not . . . quibbling, but certainly would be remiss in failing to explain that a huge, clumsy pyramid could never —”

“Stop nattering! Spit it out!”

T’Ankh Salot dared an upward glance, gauged the demeanor of Egypt’s lord and master, and did not like what he saw. His throat constricted. “O Exalted One, I’m l-loathe to . . . Please take no offense, but it behooves me tell you the b-building fraternity believes ostentatious, grandiose pyramidal tombs went out with Djoser. I fear a huge, clumsy mound of squared stones might be more than, well . . . a bit gauche.”

Overtaken by a paroxysm of teeth-gnashing indignation, Great King Khufu bellowed, “T’Ankh Salot!”

For his failure to keep pace with Fourth Dynasty state-of-the-art requirements, the architect was scourged, pummeled with sharp rocks, and had boiling oil poured over his tender insteps. He was impaled on stakes wrought of cheap bronze. He was sawn and mangled. The residue was tossed to a pack of fat crocodiles bilious at the very thought of dining on any more disfavored Egyptians.

Renamed Cheops much, much later by imprecise Greek vagabonds, Great King Khufu eventually came to realize that vast projects could never be accomplished with half-vast plans. He commissioned Neferhotep, a far more compliant master builder, who was abjectly terrified by the assignment, yet mindful of his predecessor’s fate. Nevertheless Neferhotep labored for decades to oversee the extremely labor-intensive erection of a colossal monument to human folly containing roughly two and one-third million unwieldy stone blocks no one counted closely.

Construction of the Great Pyramid, a monumental government project without equal, ensured full employment for tens of thousands of stonecutters, sculptors, slaves, overseers, money lenders, camel drovers, brewers, barge men, courtesans, concubines and gross quantities of shady ladies. Great King Khufu’s selfish endeavor not only revived a questionable fad, it provided further centuries of profitable activity for priests, tomb builders, tomb robbers, embalmers, middlemen, con men, tax collectors, guides, archaeologists, mystics, and film producers.

Centuries passed. Egypt waxed prosperous as millennial dynasties rose and fell, then waned in disrepair. Egyptian dreams of ancient grandeur faded as Greeks and Romans, Celts, Saxons, Goths, Norsemen and Mongols sacked and pillaged, settled, invented, and built their own ephemeral places on history’s center stage. Hordes of newbies came to view Khufu’s geometric mountain looming above the Nile alongside a pair of tawdry imitations, and walked away shaking their heads, mumbling to themselves, thinking how absurd the Egyptians had been to imagine they could ever amount to anything while occupying their minds and hands with such foolishness.

On an unseasonably warm spring afternoon of the sort Southern California chambers of commerce take for granted — temperature wobbling in the high eighties, with a persistent inversion layer trapping the polluted air onshore breezes wafted against encircling mountain ramparts — an exceptional motorcar exuded noble majesté. Cresting the freeway's grade, dipping its classic grille dipped into warm smog shrouding the San Fernando Valley, the motorcar began a regal descent of the Hollywood Hills. Fiercely driven Isuzus, Priuses and skittering Volkswagens thrashed past on either flank, drivers and passengers alike craning to ogle the motorcar's immaculate coachwork, its genteel lack of trim. A nouveaux riche Mercedes or sleek stretch limousine often cruised alongside, only to suffer invidious comparison and slink away to lose itself in the moiling traffic flow.

The motorcar, a Bentley town coupé of post-World War II vintage, champion of many a concours d'elegance, had been restored to pristine splendor by its proud owner-driver, Benjamin Claridge Mason III, the president and chief executive officer of Aerospace General Corporation. His features every whit as patrician as the Bentley's nine coats of hand-rubbed silver lacquer, Mr. Mason was a cum laude graduate of the Harvard Business School, a devout Episcopalian, a Republican of the first water, and an enthusiastic Freemason, no pun intended, who owed his ruddy complexion to golf and tennis, his exquisitely cut, tropical-weave linen suit to the salesmanship of a private tailor in Rodeo Drive, his platinum locks to sixty-three years of gracious living, and his petulance to the fact that a ranking corporate officer was not at the moment everything Mr. Mason might have wished him to be.

Slouched in the passenger seat, AGC Vice President Franklin Burton contemplated the unreeling freeway with watery blue eyes. Having accompanied Mr. Mason to a luncheon at the Beverly Hills Women's Club, a function arranged by a member of distinction, socially prominent, painfully thin Mrs. Millicent Maddox Mason, Burton was only distantly aware of his leader's pique. At the luncheon, he had scarcely touched his lobster salad supreme, electing to seek sustenance among skewered olives nestled at the bottom of several very dry vodka martinis. When his leader had been introduced, rising to vigorous applause and speak with forthright eloquence on his favorite topic, America's Amazing Adventures in Space, Burton had done his damndest to stay on cordial terms with the overdressed matrons on his left and right whose interrogations demanded polite responses. Deciding his function at these extracurricular affairs should not include being subjected to inquisitions by aging dragons who drew him into their clutches, he had taken an obdurate stand. After all, coveys of grandes dames draped in bandoliers of glittering gemstones were not creatures with whom a mere VP should be expected to cope.

His eyes firmly focused on the road ahead, Mr. Mason pointedly cleared his throat. "Frank," he said with just the proper degree of executive resonance, "Millicent told me you downed seven martinis at the luncheon."

Burton's head rocked as if in recoil from a sneak punch. The Bentley town coupé lacked air conditioning; Mr. Mason's directive to the restorers had specified that the machine be rebuilt *precisely* the way underpaid Rolls Royce mechanics had handcrafted it decades earlier. "Y'said . . . what?" he muttered.

"I said," declared Mr. Mason with curdling emphasis, "you apparently downed seven martinis during the luncheon."

“S-seven . . . ?”

“Seven,” affirmed his superior.

“Lucky number, heh, heh!”

Mr. Mason’s bulging jaw muscles suggested the onset of tetanus. “Millicent,” he added, “also described your purposeful rudeness to Mrs. Lythgoe.”

“Not . . . purposeful,” temporized Burton, bewildered by the reference.

“May I remind you,” reminded Mr. Mason, “that Craig Lythgoe is an AGC director?”

Overburdened by the effort of holding up his end of a meaningless conversation, Burton did not respond. He wilted in the passenger seat, succumbing to torpor.

A barely visible tic began jumping beneath Mr. Mason’s left eye. He wheeled the Bentley around an off-ramp’s descending loop and drove six blocks westward through moderate traffic. The heat sitting motionless at stoplights caused Burton to intermittently lose consciousness.

The nebulous outlines of large gray buildings congealed in the smog, and Mr. Mason turned the Bentley into a wide, divided drive cleaving through acres of empty parking spaces. Approaching the fenced-off AGC complex, where scattered vehicles broiled in the strong, grayish sunlight, the motorcar rocked forward on its front suspension, came to a halt beside the green-tinted windows of a security cubicle.

A gangling, loose limbed older man whose tan uniform badly needed pressing eased his weight down from the cubicle’s step. Known affectionately to AGC personnel as “The Sheriff,” the veteran plant protection officer touched two fingers to the brim of his battered Stetson. “Afte’noon, sir. Kinda nice day out.”

“I’ve seen better, Sheriff.” Mr. Mason clipped to his suit’s breast pocket a in scarlet-bordered badge replete with a less than flattering photograph of himself. Tapping an impatient forefinger on the steering wheel, he waited for Burton to stir from his semiconscious slump. “Your badge, Frank!”

“Badge . . . ?”

“Yes, badge. Would you prefer to remain outside?”

“Badge, uh . . . sure thing.”

Mr. Mason abused the Bentley’s gearbox pulling away.

A speculative glint in his rheumy blue eyes, The Sheriff watched the silver Bentley town coupé roll through the gateway in a high chain-link fence enclosing the inner security corridor that spanned the AGC facility. The motorcar disappeared behind the gray bulk of “C” Building, and The Sheriff muttered, “Slim pickin’s in store for that fella Burton.” Sauntering back to the cubicle, he mounted the steps, sat down inside and clamped a cigar stub in his dentures.

* * *

Instead of turning toward the reserved slot bearing his stenciled name and title in “A” Building’s executive parking area, Mr. Mason drove on past the guarded entrance gate. The Bentley purred along the plant’s inner security corridor, its invisible bow wave causing delivery trucks, vans and a heavily laden forklift to frantically veer aside. Braking to a curbside halt before a windowless, two-story building, he switched off the ignition, worked the latch on the forward-opening door, emerged stiffly and stretched.

Burton studied the unforeseen move with critical apathy. Floundering from the vehicle, he slammed the passenger door with a cah-chun-n-nk! that drew a wince from Mr. Mason. “Why stop here?” he inquired drowsily.

In lieu of a response, Mr. Mason let his jaundiced gaze take in dual patches of scraggly, wilted ivy overspilling the sidewalk, a pair of discouraged olive trees, withered shrubs and a drought-stricken boxwood hedge. AGC landscape gardeners, none of whom spoke English, had set out all “sun” specimens in shaded areas, while “shade” plants battled for survival under the solar blows of what strangers might consider an exceptionally warm spring day.

Tightlipped, Mr. Mason heaved a long-drawn, reproachful sigh. “Frank, you paid scant heed to what I had to say during the drive.”

A hunted expression crept across Burton’s clean-cut features. He could recalled no recent dialogue except the critique of his liquid lunch, but his leader’s habit of gauging executive ability in direct ratio to executive attention span was common knowledge. “Heard . . . ever’ word, Ben.”

“I’d hate to think *you*, of all the men and women on our First Team, were *daydreaming*.”

“Notta chance,” assured Burton.

“It’s gratifying to hear you say that, but may I refresh your memory? At last Monday’s executive staff meeting, Bill Ladd spoke to us about . . . Burton, are you with me?”

“Oh, you bet! At Monday’s Sunrise Service, Ladd talked about the . . . Oops, I meant at the, uh, you know . . . reg’lar mornin’ get together.”

“Frank, Frank . . .” Mr. Mason’s fruity baritone suddenly evidenced more benign harmonic resonances. “It’s perfectly acceptable to be colloquial about our morning powwows. I’d never object to hearing them called them ‘Sunrise Services.’ Tell me honestly, have I ever acted stuffy with you members of our First Team?”

“Uh-uh, ‘course not, B.M.”

Mr. Mason’s parody of a smile conveyed all the warmth of a summer day in Antarctica. “Simply isn’t your day, is it? I’ve spoken to you before about addressing me in *that* manner. ‘B.M.’ has scatological connotations I simply cannot abide.”

Burton paled.

Mr. Mason hawked and spat into the wilted ivy. He made a production of extracting a monogrammed kerchief and dabbing his lips with executive finesse. “Dr. Ladd had just returned from Washington, you may recall. He’s convinced NASA and DoD both lean toward accepting our second generation Space Shuttle proposal, er . . . Aerospaceplane, its generic title.”

Burton tolled the statement syllable by syllable. He took a random stab at comprehension, and came up empty.

“We drove through the main parking lot a moment ago,” added Mr. Mason. “It tells a dismal tale: three-quarters empty, and getting worse by the month. Before the merger and the massive attrition we’ve suffered, a parking slot was difficult to find out there. With the industry still flat on its backside, and the national economy devastated, you should be the first to appreciate how critical it will be to bring in a major program of significant scope and duration. Late last year, the directors agreed to fund an in-house study that will hopefully lead to a major contract award. Dr. Ladd’s Advanced Projects team has worked with vim, vigor and unstinting devotion to make our Aerospaceplane System R&D Proposal come in a winner.

Burton concentrated his faculties, striving to elicit a shred of meaning from the CEO's solemn disclosure. "Understand," he lied, biting back a hiccup.

Mr. Mason studied the featureless gray façade of "G" Building as if probing for weakness in the event of siege. "Not long ago," he said, "attrition in the wake of the XF-39 cancellation forced us to vacate 'G.' Recently seeding the ground floor with Ladd's Advanced Projects Group was merely a stopgap measure. If and when this Aerospaceplane plum falls in our lap, I plan to install the entire Research & Development Division currently under your guidance here in "G," and keep Ladd's diverse engineering functions conveniently together under one roof."

Suffering acute equilibrium dysfunction, Burton shuffled his feet, narrowly avoiding a plunge into the wilted ivy. "Ben," he pleaded, "bring me up t'speed."

"Pardon me?"

"Why're we foolin' with the Space Shuttle? Ancient . . . history. NASA flew a fleet of those big birds for years, then junked 'em in museums 'n places like that when the —"

Mr. Mason's head lifted smartly. "You've no idea at all what I've been talking about."

Teetering mutely on the sidewalk, the VP made spastic circles with his hands.

Mr. Mason spun on his heel, marched stiff-legged to the silver Bentley, wrenched open the door and plopped inside. Just before driving away, he leaned from the open window and hurled back an ominous, "*Humm-m-mph!*"

With the ominous grunt ringing in his ears, Burton shivered despite the heat and staggered to the wall of "G" Building, leaning against it for a spell to recuperate. Finally he somehow found the strength to lurch across trackless expanses of asphalt and concrete to his deluxe, fruitwood-paneled office in "A" Building's posh executive wing.

* * *

For his failure to keep pace with corporate state-of-the-art requirements, nothing happened to Vice President Burton for one whole week.

Seven days to the day after the tragic luncheon, he trundled his near-new BMW up to the secure entrance of "A" Building's executive parking area, commanded the window to roll down, and confidently pushed his encoded plastic key card into the admittance slot. The red-and-white-striped barrier refused to lift. He tried again, then again and again, and yet again. He worked the card in and out until it bent.

Uttering a ripe obscenity, his frightened gaze darted along the unattainable row of parked autos — Executive Vice President & General Manager Charles Allison's crimson Porsche, Dr. Herbert Mauch's sleek black Mercedes, Mr. Mason's elegant silver Bentley and the rest. He slowly backed the BMW away from the obstinate admittance gate, and stared wistfully at a forbidding caveat posted alongside the exit:

DO NOT ENTER

SEVERE TIRE DAMAGE MAY RESULT

A row of cruel, spring-loaded spikes poking above the asphalt permitted only departing cars to exit with impunity.

Gaining the sanctuary of his fruitwood-paneled "A" Building office, Burton learned the key to his private washroom had vanished from his massive desk. He ransacked every drawer, ordered his executive assistant to search her desk, hustled out and scoured the BMW's glove box, trotted back inside and emptied his pockets, looked into vases and flower pots, peered under

papers, searched the floor beneath his desk. By this time duly apprehensive and disconsolate, he stared out the office window, feeling doom settle around him like a poisonous vapor.

Burton drank too much that weekend. His wife threatened to leave him unless his vile disposition improved. His eldest son, a Phi Beta Kappa candidate at an expensively prestigious local university, was arrested Saturday evening and charged with Possession of a Controlled Substance. Late Sunday night his sunburned younger son returned from a waterskiing junket with news that he'd contracted a common social ailment from a lovely girl he'd met in the middle of Lake Arrowhead.

Feeling traduced by life on Monday morning, Burton entered "A" Building's executive row in low spirits and turned deathly pale. On the textured wall outside his office, the lettering on a walnut placard bearing his name and title had shrunk to a graffito resembling two lines of Serbian italics. Panicky, he breezed past his startled executive assistant in the anteroom and gingerly edged into his office. The cut-pile carpeting of a conservative russet hue no longer covered his floor. A nondescript sheet metal desk crouched in grim mockery where his large "L"-shaped model had reposed. The photos of zooming, fire-spouting missiles, spacecraft and airplanes no longer graced his fruitwood-paneled walls.

An hour later at Mr. Mason's Sunrise Service, he learned that he might as well have been fashioned of clear, polished crystal.

The next day his drapes vanished.

Overcome by dismay and remorse interspersed with sieges of red, foam-at-the-mouth rage, the beleaguered executive hunched behind his nondescript desk. Fearing for his sanity, he conjured fanciful images of himself vengefully barring Mr. Mason from the urinal until his bladder burst, pictured himself heroically defending the rape of his office by AGC maintenance men in grungy coveralls who bobbed and weaved and clawed to get past and strip the fruitwood paneling from his walls.

The following morning his executive assistant had disappeared along with her desk, computer terminal, and wastebasket.

Excommunicated from AGC's inner world, he no longer received corporate directives or memos; his name had been expunged from the executive distribution list. No one appeared to word process and dispatch outgoing missives, nor did the encrypted e-mail server any longer recognize his address and password. Burton slunk to and from a distant washroom, jaunts most of the neighboring executive assistants kindly pretended not to notice.

Unceremoniously moved to Siberia — "C" Building — he remained on AGC's overhead payroll for months, hanging on grimly teeth and toenails for the very best of excellent reasons: he continued drawing a weekly portion of his munificent per annum salary, plus stock options and management incentive bonuses, for doing absolutely nothing.

Well, almost nothing. While languishing in perpetual purgatory, he spent more than three hundred dollars on postage, and thousands more on airline tickets, mailing professionally doctored résumés to, or visiting in person, every aerospace firm from Miami to Seattle, from San Diego to Bangor. He tried to contact executive placement agencies, and found out that those few headhunters who hadn't as yet closed their doors and walked away would be far too busy filing bankruptcy petitions to grant him an interview.

The lack of a demand for his services astounded Burton. He managed to garner several perfunctory interviews, during the course of which two harsh facts of life became apparent: he was either overqualified or underqualified for an executive position, depending on the interviewer's whim and the current efficiency of his or her digestive tract; and secondarily that his position with a "defense-oriented" prime government contractor utterly doomed whatever faint chance existed of achieving a similar executive niche in the private sector. The aerospace community was not simply on its backside as Mr. Mason had suggested, it was a moribund candidate for the crypt. The national deficit was astronomical, defense funding sequestered, while the nation's economy had barely bottomed out, and was now dragging its heels. Former senior and middle-management aerospace executives now mingled with masses of unwashed blue-collar unemployed, not to mention washed masses of white-collar unemployables.

Feeling outed, downsized and desperately sorry for himself, Burton sensed his artfully nurtured management skills eroding daily. *If only*, he thought, staring in anguish at the acoustic ceiling tiles of his dingy office, *the damned CIA loafers had done their job and supported the USSR's Communist régime!* With even a minimum of foresight on the part of America's lollygagging spooks and self-serving cloak-and-dagger bureaucrats, the lucrative Cold War would *never* have evaporated, leaving him and thousands like him high and dry, with zero prospects. No, *less* than zero prospects!

A stiffly worded letter from AGC's bevy of corporate attorneys was eventually slipped under the door of Burton's déclassé office. The letter advised him that Mr. Benjamin Mason had "regretfully" accepted his resignation." The fact that he had not tendered a resignation sent Burton into a killing rage. His strident, table-pounding protests and furious denunciations did not even ruffle the feathers of AGC's legal eagles comfortably ensconced in their "A" Building aerie.

Rumors circulated after Burton's departure. Some said he'd suffered horribly after going against his attorney's advice and contesting his wife's divorce action. Some said he had fled California, a deadbeat fugitive from alimony payments, and was somewhere off the beaten path in the wilds of New Mexico, changing tires and pumping gas in an off-brand filling station. Others had it that he'd developed an affinity for New Mexico sunrises, as well as Tequila Sunrises, and spent hours sitting in the shade, shaking his fist and swearing uncontrollably each time an AGC commercial jetliner painted condensation trails in the brilliant Southwest skies overhead.

Some said T'ankh Salot had suffered a much kindlier fate.

2 - Ham

Jolted awake in the throes of a vivid, triple-X-rated dream, Henry Alan Moffett became all too aware of the noble reflex distending his pajama bottoms. Assailed by a residue of sensuous visions conjured during his subconscious plunge into virtual unreality, he resented the dream's obliteration almost as much as he resented the long siege of unemployment he'd experienced. No remedy for the latter came to mind, but he wondered if there might be a cure for the former.

Moffett opened his eyes, and sensory impressions flooded into his revived consciousness. Dawn light seeping through lined damask draperies glazed the mirror above a mahogany chest of drawers his dormant career had given him the leisure to refinish. Silver-framed photos of his son

and daughter reflected the crepuscular glow, and limned his wife's favorite Regency chair in ghostly outline. Light rain pattered on the cedar-shake roof. From the corner of the house, a gurgling obbligato made soft music in counterpoint to the diminuendo thump of raindrops overhead — a nagging reminder that the drainpipe he had promised to repair still required attention. A miniature Niagara would be cascading down the stuccoed wall, adding a brownish smudge to the raddled cracks and sun checks already there.

Thoughts of neglected drainpipes were thrust aside. He punched the pillow, preparing to slide back into sleep. After a time, he decided lingering randiness had eliminated that option, and rolled over in bed.

Audrey Lee's petite, indistinct figure was skewed in her usual curlicue, one arm flung back over her head, stretching aside, the strap of her nightgown, and exposing one hemisphere of dainty breast. The aureole peeked at him in the dimness. Struck by the symmetry of the breast's silvered outline, he welcomed the resurgence of warmth in his loins. His wife's breathing continued slow, rhythmic and shallow. Encouraged, he snuggled next to her.

Audrey Lee stirred. "You lecherous lecher," was her whispered indictment.

"Is there another kind?" When no further comment was forthcoming, he pressed his tumescence against her thigh.

"Honestly," she murmured, not withdrawing from the caress, "when a girl isn't safe in her own bed . . ."

"Safe . . . ? Take your little pills, don't you?"

"You know I do."

"Then what're husbands for?" he wanted to know.

"They're for winning bread and fixing broken drainpipes. Why aren't you up and out, looking for work?"

"How sweet of you to remind me. S'pose you're right, though. Guess it's that, or food stamps." He stroked her tummy with his fingernails until she squirmed. "Got that screwy interview at nine-thirty, remember?"

"What time is it now?"

"Happily ever after time." Tugging her gently to him, he nuzzled her throat.

He had to wait for her so that, together, they could enjoy the brief, transcendental explosion of pleasure. Afterward she lay in his arms, warm and drowsy.

He chuckled. "Hypocrite."

"Meaning . . . ?"

He smoothed her auburn hair. "You like sex even more than I do."

"What a shameless thing to say!"

"Don't try 'n deny it, Audrey Lee. If not for your straitlaced Southern Belle upbringing you'd admit it."

"Shameless! What led you to such a scholarly conclusion?"

"Nearly a decade of astute research."

"Shameless!" Her head lifted from his chest. "Uh-oh!" She pointed to the bedside clock's illuminated digits. "Best get a hustle on, Ham. It's five to eight."

"Ouch! Soft boil some eggs, will you?" He slid from the bed and sought his robe.

* * *

At breakfast five-year-old Teddy Moffett sopped up oatmeal. Audrey Lee and Ham took turns fending off the melting brown eyes of Ralph, the family dachshund. Intent on winning his favorite mealtime game, Ralph wanted to see whose resolution would weaken first when it came to doling out table scraps. The dachsie eventually threw in the towel and waddled away, head down, looking indecently aggrieved.

“Why isn’t Missy up?” asked Ham.

“She slept over at Gracie’s.” informed his wife.

“On a school night?”

“They’re plotting Gracie’s giant birthday extravaganza.” Between mouthfuls, Audrey Lee inquired if he’d learned who had set up the mystery job interview.

“Nary a clue. With the employment abyss still bottomless, who could afford to pass up that out-of-the-blue voicemail invitation to apply. A slim chance, so says conventional wisdom, beats none at all every time.”

“When your unemployment insurance ran out, you talked about going back to school.

Ham finished chewing a mouthful of eggy toast. “True, but sticking with the main chance takes hardly any smarts. I thought there might be a shot at getting back into Sargent until Clint Dangerfield told me the company nosedived not long after Sarge went to his reward. He said Sarge’s nephew looks and acts important sitting in his uncle’s old office, but his summed technical knowledge could be tucked in Ralph’s ear.”

Teddy looked up from his oatmeal. “Better not!”

Ham patted his son’s hand. “Easy, Ted. It’s called a figure of speech.”

“Sure better not.”

Sounding distantly troubled, Audrey Lee worried aloud about “that Aerospace General outfit” being such a huge company.

“Was,” he corrected, “before all the downsizing.”

His wife wrinkled her nose. “Well, it certainly isn’t small now. Let’s say you happen to land a position at AGC. Wouldn’t you feel lost, a teensy minnow in a great big pond?”

“Beggars do little choosing. I’ve been on the street so long I’m ready to flip burgers and mow lawns, except these days odd jobs like those are taken. Engineering for a major aerospace company doesn’t scare me. The economy’s still on the rocks, showing only teensy improvement, and hundreds of engineers were caught in the cutback gears. With a labor pool that size to draw from, the odds of landing a slot at AGC are about the same as winning the Lottery.” He paused to spread orange marmalade on a slice of wheat toast. “The prospect isn’t exactly dazzling, but today’s only talk, and talk’s cheap.”

“Hook up with this fly-by-night missile outfit,” she suggested, “and they could transfer you to God knows where.”

“I wouldn’t allow it.”

His wife’s irritation blossomed. “You’re always so blamed cocksure. Moving would mean selling the house, changing Missy’s school, losing our —”

“Whoa! You’re at it again, buying trouble, Audrey Lee. Don’t be so paranoid.”

“Only the paranoid survive,” she said. “Now if you were to land something near Atlanta, Charleston, or Memphis — even Nashville — that’d be a different story.”

“Uh-uh, forget it. You married a Californian, and that’s where he means to stay.”

Her chin lifted. "Uncle Nat spent time in San Diego during the Iraq War. He thinks the country's tipped a bit to the West, and everything loose rolled to California."

Ham grinned. "Uncle Nat's astute, and the world needs stutes."

His wife ignored the awful pun. "I'll ask again just to see if you're listening. If by chance you should land a spot with this missile outfit, where did you say they had another plant?"

"I didn't say," he told her with a twinkle. "Okay, if you must know there's an AGC facility between Denver and Colorado Springs."

"Colorado! Why, Colorado's the absolute back of beyond."

"What makes you the household's leading authority on Colorado?"

"I certainly ought to be. I flew over those parts two winters past on that visit to my sister. Mountains and snow, snow and mountains far as the eye could see."

Ham's brow creased. "Enlighten me about something, Audrey Lee. Exactly what is the topic of this conversation? Why in hell do we always end up talking in riddles?"

"Shush! Tame your foul mouth in front of T-E-D-D-Y."

The boy had finished his oatmeal. "Hell," he said brightly,

"There! See what you've done?"

Ham lifted his palms in self-defensive. "The accused ate a hearty breakfast, and must now depart." He survived his wife's accusative stare by pecking her cheek, brushed his teeth in the half-bath next to the entry, plucked his raincoat from the hall closet and called back a pacifying, "Ted, want to help me fix a drainpipe when I get home?"

From the dinette, Teddy said proudly, "Hell!"

"There! I hope you're satisfied," was Audrey Lee's parting shot.

He escaped, easing the front door shut behind him.

* * *

The late season shower was blowing away. Breeze-blown droplets from the bougainvillea espaliered beside the entry made Ham duck his head. The leather soles of his black oxfords skidded on wet, tissue-thin cerise petals littering the walkway. Mounded clouds formed battlements above Mount Gleason's camelback to the east, but overhead the sky had the scoured look of a cerulean bowl.

Beaded with water droplets, the eight-year-old Ford minivan started easily, mostly because he'd spent Saturday morning tuning the engine. He backed into the street, the nebulous prospect of employment once again dangling before him like a mirage that invariably receded at a high mach number whenever he approached. During the past year, he'd taken dozens of interviews, mailed numberless résumés, filled out countless applications. Minimal faith remained in the chances of AGC or any other firm offering a worthwhile position. He and his family had gotten by with the aid of unemployment insurance, reasonably prudent savings now all but exhausted, and Audrey Lee's penny-pinching genius for running the household.

Midmorning traffic was moderate; the freeway steamed as bright spring sunshine evaporated the moderate rainfall. Whistling tunelessly in time with the windshield wipers' metronome, he bobbed his head to see through smeared spray thrown back by the preceding cars, then swung the Ford around an off-ramp's descending curlicue and drove westward, chafing at the red lights. The unreliable dashboard clock reminded him it was nine twenty.

The main entrance to the San Fernando Valley landmark was guarded by a large sign:

AEROSPACE GENERAL CORPORATION

An Equal Opportunity Employer

Two-thirds deserted, the parking lot surrounded the frontage beyond an intersecting maze of walkways connecting monolithic gray buildings. Ham followed signs, guiding the minivan to the AGC Human Resources Center, a one-story structure divorced from the main complex.

In the small Human Resources parking lot, an elderly man struggled to levitate himself from the curb and lofted a hand-lettered cardboard sign tacked to a broomstick that colorfully described AGC's unfairness to "LABER." "Howdy," greeted the picket. "Aimin' t'work for these crumb-bums, are ya?"

"Uh, thinking about it, yes."

"Be one helluva big mistake, Mister."

Ham said, "I didn't know a strike was in progress."

"Ain't no strike. Us culinary workers're protestin' the conditions 'n stinkin' pay in the comp'ny cafeteria, is all."

"That bad?"

"Shitty."

"Sorry to hear it." Ham edged away.

"Do yourself a favor," the old-timer called after him. "No matter how desperate y'get, don't sell yourself to these sumbitches 'less they offer ya the Moon."

"The Moon," replied Ham over his shoulder. "Thanks. I'll keep it in mind."

A half-dozen discouraged looking applicants showed minimal interest when Ham entered a long, narrow room furnished with rows of molded plastic chairs. A Formica counter labeled EMPLOYMENT took up a portion of the left wall; on a second counter opposite, the engraved placard read,

PROFESSIONAL CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

A severely thin Asian-American woman behind the counter lifted her eyes, listened gravely to Ham give his name, nodded and tapped a computer keyboard. "Yes, Mr. Moffett. Straight back, second door on your left. Mr. Arnold is expecting you."

A portly, gray-haired gentleman, his eyes bright behind rimless bifocals, opened the door. His welcoming smile coming and going with disconcerting suddenness, Mr. Arnold scampered to his command post behind a desk littered with dossiers and stacked papers. Inviting Moffett to be seated, he inquired who had referred him to AGC.

No one," said Ham.

"Umm-m-m, no . . . one?" Mr. Arnold drummed close-clipped fingernails on his desk blotter. "Then may I ask what prompted you to send in a résumé? Was to dissatisfaction with your assignments at . . . ?" He broke off to consult Ham's paperwork. "Ah, yes; Sargent Electronics, an excellent concern . . . Wait, this tells me you left Sargent nearly a year ago."

"An anonymous voicemail said AGC was interested in learning my background and career goals. What with the current business climate, it didn't seem wise to pass up any opportunity."

"Quite so, quite so." The other's brow creased. Sounding harried, he said, "It distresses me to inform you no professional openings exist at the moment. We are, however, interested in learning who reads our advertisements, and feedback from applicants is vital." A second

instantaneous smile revealed Mr. Arnold's pride at being conversant with technical patois. Behind the bifocals, his eyes opaqued suspiciously. "Yet an anonymous referral is, well, most unusual. Pardon me one second." So abruptly a clinician might have thought it a spastic reflex, Mr. Arnold snatched up the telephone and punched buttons with the eraser end of a yellow pencil. "Lucille, please see what the database has on applicant Henry A. M-O-F-F-E-T-T."

Twiddling the pencil, Mr. Arnold's apologetic microsecond smile flashed again in Ham's direction. "Oh, not Dr. Ladd again! This time we may be forced to lodge a strenuous complaint. Yes, Lucille. Yes, yes; I'll take care of it. Thank you."

His manner pettish, Mr. Arnold clapped down the handset and massaged his forehead. "Things often happen in strange way around here. Our Human Resources group is dreadfully understaffed in the wake of all the, er . . . The engineering director of our Advanced Projects team apparently has an interest in learning your qualifications in depth. I realize it's an imposition, but can you possibly find time to drop by his office for an interview?"

His interest piqued, Ham said quickly, "This morning?" The notion of an actual interview with an authentic engineering director raised a distant glimmer of hope. A year's worth of turndowns made him squelch the glimmer.

Mr. Arnold's eyes glistened warily. "Not that Dr. Ladd owns proprietary rights to your services, Mr. Moffett. If only he's spend the time and energy running his organization he devotes to helping us do *our* job . . ." He trailed off, his lips pursed peevishly. "This interview request is a surprise. I'm aware of no requisitions for mechanical engineers in any of our three divisions, and whether you . . . What is essential, and in fact absolutely *vital*, Mr. Moffett, is fit."

"Fit . . . ?"

"Fit. We dare not try to stuff a hexagonal peg in a round hole, dare we?" The Human Resources official's phantom smile came and went like sheet lightning.

"Doesn't sound practical, no."

"Not at all. Now then, I believe you're all set to . . . Oh, one thing more. You really should fill out an employment application before your interview with . . . On second thought, perhaps it will be best to learn how you and Dr. Ladd get along together before bothering to complete the, uh . . ." Mr. Arnold paused to cogitate.

"I'll take the paperwork home," suggested Ham, eager to talk with someone who spoke his language, "fill it out and mail it back."

"A splendid suggestion!" Mr. Arnold went into overdrive. Whipping a number of preprinted forms from a segmented file drawer, he stacked the papers neatly, with geometric precision, added Ham's résumé to the top of the pile, and slipped the sheaf of paperwork into a white folder bearing the blue AGC logo. In passing the folder to Ham with his usual spastic haste, bad aim caused him to bark a knuckle on the edge of his desk. "Damn it!" complained Mr. Arnold. He sucked the bleeding knuckle.

"Best get a Band-Aid on that," advised Ham.

"Yes, yes. Lucille has a first-aid kit. I've included brochures describing AGC's profit sharing plan, Mr. Moffett, as well as our augmented retirement income plan and other benefits you'll definitely want to learn about. You'll be going to 'G' Building, which is . . . here." Mr. Arnold spun vertiginously in his castered executive chair. Sucking the damaged knuckle, using a fingernail, he traced Moffett's prospective route on a wall map of the facility.

Ham rose. "Right away?"

"At once, if it's convenient. Before you go, however, there's one extremely important point I want to make perfectly clear. Feel free to discuss anything at all with Dr. Ladd, except salary. I hate to tell you how complex our engineering and scientific salary structure is during these troubled times. When AGC does makes a rare professional offer, direct engineering labor averages must be factored into the equation, plus to overhead expenses, points for previous technical experience, points for work-related college courses taken, points for obtaining an advanced university degree, so on and so forth. It's a statistician's nightmare, believe me. The math involved is probably more complex than what you engineers use daily."

"No salary discussion."

"Wonderful!" Mr. Arnold pushed back his chair and came around the desk favoring the damaged knuckle, offering his left hand to shaken. "I do hope there's a fit, Mr. Moffett. A fit is the single, all important, absolutely essential ingredient applicable to every hopeful new-hire."

"Fit," said Ham. "I certainly will keep it in mind. Thank you, Mr Arnold."

Leaving the Human Resources building in a bemused frame of mind, Ham wondered if Mr. Arnold might be prone to throwing a fit himself.

The elderly picket levitated himself and wearily lofted his sign. "Did ya, young fella?"

"No. At least, not yet."

"Atta boy! Figured you was too smart t'work for these double-dealin' jerkjollies."

"If I ever do," said Ham, "I promise to never eat in the company cafeteria."

The picket wheezed laughter. "That's the ticket!" He resumed his seat on the curb. "Keep your word on that, and y'may live t'be my age. Maybe even longer."

3 - Alex

Clutching the telephone, Alexander Kurilekutzatzov — legally shortened to Kurile, a matter of acute distress to numberless relatives in his extended family — sat straighter in the high-backed executive chair. "You *found* the sumbitch, Gumshoe? Bolshoi!" cried Alex, hurting the detective's ear and also exhausting his Russian vocabulary. "So where's he holed up?"

The private detective informed his client one time AGC Vice President Burton was working in an off-brand New Mexico filling station. "We had to dig deep to locate him, Mr. Kurile. I'm calling from Tucumcari. Want me to sound him out, see if he's willing to —?"

"No, stay away. Keep him right where he's at. Be on my way there pronto."

"Well, Tucumcari is . . . Flying commercial, you'll have to change planes in —"

"Don't fool with that small stuff," assured Alex. "My Gulfstream takes me wherever I need to go. Have a limo meet my plane at the airport. Be there in two, three hours."

Alex did not believe in salutations or farewells. He caged the handset, muttering, "Floors me t'hear that loser could find his own butt using both hands." Bypassing his personal secretary, who was probably goofing off somewhere anyhow, he punched the autodialer to ring an unlisted number in the nation's capital. After three buzzes, a hoarse baritone voice said, "Gridley."

"It's me, Grid. Give a ear to some late-broken news, like the TV gonifs love to say."

"Great to hear from you, Mr. Kurile." Gridley's voice took on a sudden note of genuine interest. "How're things out there in God's country?"

“Gave him the day off. Knock off the loose chatter, and listen. The private dickhead I’m paying through the nose finally turned up this Burton character I told you about somewhere in the wilds of New Mexico. I’m heading there now. Meantime, I need you to invent some juicy stuff for a sit-down once the guy’s back on his feet, ready to shake, rattle ‘n roll. Got it?”

“Got it, Mr. Kurile. Fact is, I’m a step or two ahead of that game. I’ve been talking to . . .” The lobbyist broke off. “Mr. Kurile . . .?”

Not one to mince words, waste them on small talk, hellos or goodbyes, Alex had rung off. He autodialed his pilots’ answering service at McCarran International, adopted the clipped, authoritarian tone reserved for people in stations less fortunate than his own, and ordered the Gulfstream fueled and ready for the sky in exactly one hour. He hung up without waiting for acknowledgment.

Tall and rawboned, thin to the verge of emaciation, he resembled his paternal Great-grandfather, Andrei Kurilekutzatzov, in only one respect: he was a touch walleyed, a minor defect that made everyone with whom he came in contact wonder if he was looking directly at them. His mismatched, asymmetrical features, arrayed on either side of a long, sharply bridged ski-jump nose, would have driven to tears any police artist trying to sketch a suspect’s likeness from a verbal description by some witness.

The Spa Alexander Resort Hotel, a less than an average jewel in the fabled Las Vegas Strip’s tiara, was nevertheless his pride and joy, the dual penthouse suites his workaday office and castle. Under duress, his aghast interior decorator had agreed to paper his office suite with the identical crimson-flocked wallpaper peppered with golden Romanov crests gracing the expansive ground floor casino. Behind his oddly shaped freeform, ebon glass desk hung an enormous, gold-framed oil portrait of Tsar Nicholas II and his family posed regally in the splendiferous surroundings of St. Petersburg’s Winter Palace. He had commissioned the painting on the cheap, first browbeating and then blackmailing a local artist who barely survived by doing knockoffs of famous and semi-famous artworks.

Seated at his peculiar desk spewing dire subvocal imprecations salted with lethal threats, he vaingloriously tried to picture what locating ex-VP Burton would mean to his coming crusade aimed at toppling the walls of the aerospace company he detested more heartily than anything else alive or dead. Still passionately mumbling obscenities, he unlocked and slid open the tambour doors of a recherché, ergonomically designed avant-garde cabinet the decorator had touted as certain to become the very last word in utilitarian chic. The shelves sagged under volumes and portfolios and binders containing the results of decades devoted to intensive private detective agency sleuthings and in-depth researches. Bulging three-ring binders stuffed with collated data cross-indexed with hand-scribbled notes rested cheek-by-jowl alongside AGC stockholder reports, financial statements, records of evolutionary changes within AGC’s management hierarchy. Voluminous lists of facts and figures pertained to private sector contracts, cost and performance data relating to military and nonmilitary government contracts, career-oriented biographical cameos characterizing past and present key AGC technical and high-echelon management personnel, public relations handouts, press releases, a detailed history of AGC’s legal machinations, the doings of active and inactive lobbyists, a précis of technical accomplishments and failures, and an encyclopedic account of evolving AGC security provisions

and practices. Separate files held confidential insider information he had paid major sums to acquire; these ultra-sensitive documents were securely locked in the casino's vault.

Alex ignored the shelves overflowing with esoteric data, and reverently lifted from its place of honor a dog-eared, nostalgic pamphlet of yesteryear published by AGC a generation earlier. Printed in sepia tone to enhance its antique flavor, the pamphlet presented a thumbnail history of Aerospace General Corporation, née Kurile Aircraft Company, née Standish Aviation, and lastly but far from leastly the semi-founding firm, Kurilekutzatzov Aeroplane & Airship Company.

Taking care not to wrinkle the faded cover, Alex folded open the pamphlet to a well-thumbed pair of pages depicting a cloth-covered biplane labeled the *Samovar*, and a mammoth silver dirigible bearing the unlikely name *Tsar Nicholas*. For perhaps the ten thousandth time he studied the arresting photo of two leather-helmeted aviators of a bygone era, one inordinately tall and lean, the other short and gross. Posed beside the open cockpit of a decrepit Fokker monoplane, the fliers stared from the photo with fierce Slavic pride.

"Kickoff's coming up, Great-Grandpa Andrei," breathed Alex, his eyes glistening like black olives. "Soon now it's payback time! We'll grab the lowlife bastards who stole your company by the berries, squeeze and twist till they scream. I know you're up there watching over me, so I'll say it straight out, not pulling no punches: we're getting set to make damn sure you and your twin bro get all the recognition you pioneer air guys deserve. Guaranteed!"

* * *

He gently closed the prized brochure, replaced it in its niche exercising the prudent care reserved for sacred relics, and locked the outré cabinet. Checking the time on a platinum Rolex strapped inside his bony left wrist, he hustled out of the office suite, pausing in the antechamber to pat his willowy personal secretary's well-rounded bottom. "Shitcan the rest of my day, Kay."

Immune to any and all surprises and linguistic offenses, the lissome young woman asked what he wanted her to tell prospective callers.

"Tell 'em to go hump themselves."

Kay forced a laugh on cue.

Emerging from the private elevator compartment, Alex's tasseled, hand-lasted Italian loafers carried him through the noisy casino. Looking neither left nor right, he paid no heed to the constellations of tiny Romanov crests sullyng the red-flocked walls, nor the whirr-click-click of a nearby roulette wheel, nor the cheers when a point was made at craps, nor the bell-jangle announcing a win somewhere in the slot-machine jungle. Nodding to the ladder man at a baccarat table, he looked up and grimaced evilly for the benefit of invisible chickens roosting above one-way-mirrored ceiling panels. Most modern gaming palaces employed closed-circuit video surveillance. Not Spa Alexander, whose owner and proprietor thought it dumber than dumb to pop for an expensive video network. He had solved the dilemma posed by potentially dishonest croupiers and dealers potentially in cahoots with definitely dishonest gambling patrons by routinely firing random employees. At Spa Alexander, conventional wisdom had it that *nothing* escaped Alexander Kurile's folded hands and searching mind.

Before venturing through the tinted-glass revolving door, he plucked a pair of prescription shades in designer frames from the breast pocket of his hand-stitched silk shirt,

embroidered of course with a double-eagle Romanov crest, and cringed when struck by blinding desert sunlight that threatened to melt the parking lot's asphalt acreage.

His fire-engine-red Testarossa was parked beneath a green canopy reserved for it, and it alone. A tow truck stood by twenty-four-seven, poised to whisk away the vehicle of any driver who even *thought about* parking in his inviolate slot. Stooping to unlock the Ferrari, he took no notice of a pert cocktail waitress ankling past on her way to the employee entrance.

"Hi, Alex," called the young woman, smiling and wriggling the décolletage emphasized by her gauzy Arabian Nights harem costume.

Inclined to ignore the familiarity until he recognized the young woman, mirror shades, fluffy hairdo and all, as a carnal acquaintance who could suck the fuzz off used tennis balls, Alex returned the greeting with a flicker of smile, a multi-finger waggle.

* * *

Two hours and twenty-eight minutes later he roused from a fitful doze in climate-controlled comfort when the white stretch-limousine stopped to pick up the parboiled private detective who had been standing in the sun more than an hour.

"Shamus," mumbled Alex with sour inflection, "what you've got out here in the boonies is one great big giant slice of absolutely nothing."

"Welcome to the Land of Enchantment, Mr. Kurile. A local saying tells us there's nothing for miles and miles but miles and miles."

"Couldn't say it better myself."

Ten minutes later, the PI said, "There it is, ahead on the right, Mr. Kurile."

The limo swerved to the curb in front of a run-down service station. One gas pump featured a hand-lettered OUT OF ORDER sign. At the next pump, a man in baggy twill trousers and a flaming, grease-stained Aloha shirt was bent over as if in pain, his torso under the open hood of a dented tan GMC pickup.

"Stay put," ordered Alex, and dug a bent, much abused photograph from his jacket's inside pocket. Comparing the captured image to the bent-over worker, he flung open the limo's door and called, "Hey, your name by any chance Burton?"

The accosted one lifted red-rimmed eyes. He scowled at the limousine through a three-day growth of beard. "Who wants to know?"

"Me, I want to know." Uncurling his lanky frame on the sidewalk, Alex approached his quarry aggressively. "Name's Kurile. Means nothing to you now, but real soon it will." Exuding every iota of salesmanship he possessed, he said, "My great-grandpa and his twin brother were the entry-prooners who founded the company you used to work for."

"They were the *which* . . . ?"

"You spent years in Mason's hellhole, right?"

Franklin Burton stiffened, screwed his stubbled features into an improbably angry mask. "*He* sent you! Listen, you go tell Mr. Benjamin C. Mason Number Three to take a flying —"

"Nah," soothed Alex. "No sense getting hot. Mason didn't send me. I sent me."

Burton relaxed only a trifle. "What for?"

"To see you," drawled Alex, his manner deliberately mysterious. "I need your help to lay down a king-size bet. We'll buck hairy odds together, but if you're willing to be my primo odds-changer you could be one of the main reasons why I'll win wire-to-wire."

Burton eyed his visitor askance. "What the hell is this ditzy song and dance all about?"

Enjoying the moment, Alex said, "It's about persuading you to come work for me."

An indignant snort. "Oh, yeah! Own a gas station, do you?"

"Oh, yeah!" mocked Alex. "Four as a matter of fact, plus a spiffy Vegas hotel-casino, a New York investment bank, two newspapers, a television station, a sky yacht, a dinkier airplane with old-fashioned propellers, and a raft of other piddling items."

Burton reviewed the list with a thoughtful expression. "Work for you doing what?"

"Doing exactly what I want done exactly when I say do it. It's no surprise to hear you haven't figured out where I'm coming from, so listen and listen good. I need a hand to nail Mason's fat, scheming ass to the barn door. If you're willing to pitch in, spend every minute you're awake working your buns off, say so now. If not, it's Sayonara and no hard feelings except with girls. Thing is, and I warn you up front: take me up on my job offer it'll mean long, sweaty hours at pay so good you wouldn't believe it if I told you."

"Hey, slow down. Why me?" Burton wanted to know.

"Easy answer," said Alex. "My mind's one thousand percent made up about getting my hooks into the miserable AGC outfit. That's why it *has* to be you, Burton, nobody else. You're an insider, or were in the sweet bye 'n bye. I've made up my mind to go all in with my bet, and nobody but you can help me do what needs doing. Got it?"

Interested in spite of a gross overload of misgivings, Burton muttered weakly, "You don't say," sounding perplexed.

"Wrong!" asserted Alex. "I *do* say. We're about take the AGC turkeys by the throat, shake 'em till the feathers fly, then snap their necks. One way or another, I'm going to take back what's rightfully valuable property that once belonged to my family. I don't give a rat's ass how much it costs, or who and how many I have to steamroller and trample to get it. Got it?"

His bloodshot blue eyes alight with volcanic fires, Burton grinned and held out his oil-grimed right hand. "Good to meet you, Boss."

"Likewise," said Alex, his barracuda smile a monument to lantern-jawed rapacity. "Hop in the limo. We'll hit your digs, pick up your stuff and scoot for Vegas."

His crooked smile no less predatory than that of his newfound employer, Burton's negative head shake said it all. "Don't own a thing worth keeping. Let's roll."

* * *

Shaved and showered, Burton eyed the garish chartreuse polo shirt neatly folded in a bureau drawer, shrugged and pulled it over his head. Choosing a pair of dark blue gabardine slacks with hand-stitched pockets three inches too long for him, he rolled up the cuffs. Slipping his feet into fancy, ill-fitting sandals a full size too large for him, he shuffled across the hall into what Alex called his "super-moderne" office.

Dusk had settled over the desert. A huge picture window framed the rouged sunset silhouetting distant, craggy brown hills, a pastoral complement to the colorful, neon-flashing inferno born along South Las Vegas Boulevard fifteen stories below. Puzzled, he surveyed the office's bizarre furnishings, the tiny golden Romanov crests dotting the flaming walls in such profusion that they jittered when he shifted his gaze, wondering what he'd gotten himself into.

Slouched in front of the picture window, Alex was gazing down with paternal fondness at his demesne. He sensed Burton's presence. "Hey, looking good, my man!"

Burton eyed his newfound patron with analytical curiosity. “Alex, I’ve been thinking. I appreciate how badly you want this takeover, and believe me I want it every bit as much as you. Maybe more. But what I’ve yet to figure out is —”

“— why I want it so damn bad,” supplied Kurile. “Listen, I’m ready to sewer everything I’ve got to get it. There’s a world-class argument waiting if you think you want it half as much as me. No way, Frank! I want it ‘cause I damn sure *have* to get it, see? I want it bad enough to kill for, and won’t settle for anything less. A cold, sober fact is what that is.”

Taken aback by the vehemence of his benefactor’s response, Burton twirled the swizzle stick, sending tinkling ice cubes swimming around in his drink.

His hard black eyes alight with battle fever, Alex set down his drink on a plastic coaster imitating a Spa Alexander Casino thousand-dollar chip. Four giant strides took him to the millennial cabinet he unlocked and delicately withdrew the AGC historical brochure, plopped it on a slate coffee table upside down for Burton’s benefit. “See this pair, they’re the bottom line that makes me so desperate to yank the AGC rug out from under Mason and *his* big bosses at Vonex. Figuring out why you’ve got a permanent hard-on for that glorified pimp, Mason, is a finger snap. He did you dirty, right? Well, my gripe goes a lot deeper, and kicks off one helluva lot earlier, but I have t’play my hand close to the vest. I don’t dare let Mason or his kissy-ass AGC crotch cannibals find out too early what’s coming down on their heads. The old-timer on the left, he’s my Great-Grandpa Andrei; the stoutish gent’s his twin brother, Nikolai.”

Burton bit his tongue to suppress a grin. The airmen, clad in old-fashioned flying togs replete with earflapped leather headgear and goggles, could have passed for Slavic versions of Laurel and Hardy. “I think you mentioned an ancestor who —”

“Betchur sweet ass, Frank! These two were the real goods, topnotch pioneer air guys bar none who lost their whole family to the stinking Reds. The ten days that shook the world shook ‘em up like they were in a blender. They had to wade through rivers of blood two squaws deep to get out from under the gawdawful Pinkos and their stinking revolution. Half-starved with bunches of other escaped White Russians, they somehow made it to France, and later crossed the briny to the good ol’ U.S. of A. As God is my witness, I don’t know how they did it, but they did what damn few others could do, and did it with style, gumption and just plain guts. After we get this thing of ours rolling, I promise to sit you down and tell you their whole story front to back. It’s some far-out tale, Frank, but for right now just read this paragraph right here.”

Feeling it unwise to decline the invitation, Burton obliged.

. . . though penniless foreign airmen arriving in la belle France during wartime, the Kurilekutzatzov twins were greeted with open arms. In the spring of 1918, Imperial German forces had all but reached the gates of Paris, and the French authorities desperately searching the streets for qualified pilots to bolster the air war over the sagging Western Front found the twins. But, alas! Instead of flying for the Allied cause, Andrei and Nikolai helped the authorities run to ground a notorious espionage ring working for Imperial Germany . . .

Burton looked up in surprised to see tears in his employer’s close-set dark eyes.

“How it came down for me was like this,” said Alex with a depth of feeling Burton would never have suspected. A catch in his voice, he said, “A ten-year-old punk kid, I stood on the grass at Forest Lawn and watched two coffins go into the ground side by side. It tore me to pieces, Frank. I bawled like a babe there at the graveside services for Great-Grandpa Andrei and his twin

bro. Ever been to a Russian Orthodox planting? No . . ? Well, the dumb thing goes on forever and a day n' a half. What's worse, it's sung all the way through, not talked.

"Anyhow, I swore then and there, on my knees beside the graves, that the Vonex turds who stole AGC from under the noses of my heroes — ripped off my whole family, really — would live to regret the black goddamn day they dared to do what they dared t'do, and by the sweet soul of everloving Jesus those regrets are about to sprout wings and fly."

The impassioned speech left Burton in something of a daze. At a loss for words, he stared out the picture window, where deep night had fallen over the desert, finally feeling it safe to say, "I sympathize, Alex."

Naked rage reignited the embers in Kurile's dark eyes. "Sympathy, huh? Sorry, got no use for it. Save your sorries for the Vonex big shots who tell Mason what to do. We're about to rip the hearts out of every thieving bastard in their batting order. We're about to tear their balls off, feed 'em to the dogs. No matter how high the odds stack up against us, or how rotten the consequences get t'be if we should screw up, we'll soon be primed to lay down a solid win bet, never mind place or show. Know why we'll win big in the end, Frank?"

Thoroughly flustered, now doubly dazed, all Burton managed was a perfunctory nod.

"We'll win 'cause I'm the seventh son of a seventh son, who believe it or don't was himself the seventh son of a seventh son, and so it went only God knows how far back. As a kid, my pals figured I was the luckiest clam-digger who ever drew breath. Everything you see here" — Alex's grand, long-armed sweep took in his entire grossly overdecorated office suite — "goes to show they were dead right, right?"

"Right," echoed Burton, his mind now on autopilot.

"After we get cracking," vowed Alex, the long, spindly fingers of his right hand clutching his chest above where he thought his heart had to be, "I figure to sit you down and spiel their whole story. You'll hear how Great-Grandpa Andrei and his twin bro won out against odds so steep no gambler in his right mind would've touched the bet. Someday you'll hear it all, Frank.

"Someday . . !"

4 - Dr. Ladd

A gray, two-story structure, "G" Building's lobby tried to be both sumptuous and utilitarian, managing neither. A cracked, aggregate-surfaced walkway led from the main parking lot to high glass doors opening on a disjointed hodgepodge of furniture salvaged from other facilities. Drooping subtropicals struggled for life in ceramic jardinières. Scuffed benches and chairs were backed up against naked, floor-to-ceiling walls of glass.

Blonde hair bouffant, her manner affected, breathless, the receptionist behind a cantilevered counter wore mauve lipstick. Accepting Ham's paperwork gingerly, as if it might be unclean, she performed a myopic inspection of his appointment slip. "Please have a seat, Mr. Moffett. Your escort will be out directly."

Ham joined a quintet of magazine page-flippers and watched the receptionist lift a phone, watched her grayish-pink lips form the syllables of his name.

Minutes later the receptionist's twin sister arrived in a clatter of spiked heels. Applicant H. A. Moffett became an object of scrutiny by four eyes mascaraed á la Queen of the Nile. He

trailed the twin sister's clicking footfalls to an alcove just off the lobby, where a tan-uniformed plant protection officer who bore a startling resemblance to former President Truman had him clip a visitor's badge to his jacket pocket.

"You'll be in a maximum security area, sir," warned the guard, "so stay with your escort."

"I was told the position I'm applying for is on a civilian program."

"Wouldn't know about that, sir." The Trumanesque guard evaluated Moffett's potential for industrial espionage. "Lots of comp'ny confidential stuff's out in the open inside. Like I said, stay with your escort going in, then drop the visitor's badge here on your way out."

The receptionist's twin sister led Ham down a long hallway walled on either side by modular, unoccupied six-foot-high cubicles. Beyond the hall, larger offices lined the far wall. The twin sister stopped and spoke to a middle-aged woman who smiled and nodded pleasantly to Ham. "Go right in, Mr. Moffett. Dr. Ladd should be back any minute now."

The windowless inner office was deep, but relatively narrow; a long conference table crowded the room, with a desk pushed against it to form a tee. Too many freestanding bookcases and file cabinets crowded the border areas. A sibilant whisper from the air-conditioning louvers was all that broke the stillness.

Idly inspecting volumes in a bookcase, Ham found an impressive spectrum of engineering and scientific titles. Three framed items hung on the wall behind the engineering director's messy desk. On the left, a text in flowery calligraphy proclaimed:

*Yea, though I walk through
the Valley of the Shadow of Death,
I shall fear no Evil, for I am the
meanest Son of a Bitch in the Valley*

On the right, a three-color lithograph depicted two starving vultures perched in the skeletal branches of a dead tree. The worst looking vulture said to the other:

Patience, hell! Let's kill something!

An enlarged black-and-white photograph on the near wall depicted a group of men in heavy overcoats clustered at the base of a launch-ready German V-2 ballistic missile. The handwritten inscription read:

*For Austin Ladd, enemy in arms,
comrade in peace, benefactor always.
God willing, someday we shall
go up there together!
Wernher von Braun
White Sands, New Mexico
January, 1952*

"Morning." Delivered in a gravel-laced baritone, the greeting cut short Ham's reverie. A shambling, florid-faced man with bushy eyebrows and a monastic fringe of graying brown hair swung shut the door to the inner office. William Austin Ladd, Ph.D, wore a loosely knotted green-and-tan tie; his rolled-up shirtsleeves exposed excessively hairy forearms. "Glad you found find time to drop by, Mr. Moffett."

Ham had his right hand clamped in a stub-fingered vise. The other's heavy-lidded brown eyes swept over him in a swift appraisal. As if temporarily satisfied, pending further examination of the evidence, Ladd shuffled behind his desk and began aimlessly opening and closing drawers like a foraging honey bear. "Drat! I've run out of cancer sticks. S'pose I could cadge one from you, Mr. Moffett, or has the Surgeon General scared you into scrubbing the habit?"

"Guess I'm not smart enough to quit, Dr. Ladd." After holding out a half-filled pack, Ham thoughtfully laid it on the engineering director's desk.

"Thanks. Filters, huh? What comes through isn't bad, but then not much comes through." Ladd snapped a gold-flashed Dunhill that had seen better days.

"I was admiring your picture gallery, especially the group at the V-2 launch site. Would Austin Ladd be a close relative?"

"Yeah, my dad was one of the original rocket weenies working with von Braun at Sauerkraut Hill down Huntsville way. Guess I've been careless enough to follow in his footsteps." Settling behind his desk, Ladd exhaled twin threads of smoke. "Let's have a quick peek at your paperwork, then we'll get down to brass tacks." Pushing aside the voluminous forms doled out painfully by Mr. Arnold, he scanned Moffett's résumé, closing one eye, tilting his head away from the curl of smoke. "UCLA, I see. Was Chessy still heading up the Engineering School when you passed through?"

"Why, yes. You're acquainted with Dean Chesterton?"

"Was," said Ladd. "The lucky stiff's retired now, fly fishing somewhere up north in Oregon. What sort of grade point, did you finish with?"

"Three-point-four. I ran on the track team, and it kept me away from the books."

Ladd peered at Moffett circumspectly, his beetling brows lending him a vaguely sardonic air. "You sort of look like a track man. Which event?"

"The quarter-mile."

"Ouch! You picked a man-killer of an event." Regarding his visitor soberly, Ladd said, "Most engineering students don't have time to be jocks."

"I suppose . . . That is, I liked competition too much to give it up."

The older man's lip curled respectfully. "Three-four's not that shabby." After skimming the rest of Moffett's résumé, he performed yet another searching appraisal of the applicant. "May I hang on to this for a while? It tells me you spent seven-plus years at Sargent Electronics. I assume you got caught in the cutback gears over there."

"Along with quite a number of other engineers and technicians who —"

Ladd held up his hand. "Say no more, Mr. Moffett. It's an all too familiar story. This also tells me you left Sargent roughly a year ago. Any notion what's stirring over there these days?"

Reluctant to tell tales out of school, Ham shifted his weight uneasily. "I cross paths with a former Sargent acquaintance now and then, but hardly ever get much in the way of feedback."

"Uh-huh. What's your personal opinion, if you don't mind me asking? Has Sargent hit the skids? I promise to keep whatever you have to tell me inside these walls."

Ham's gaze locked with that of his inquisitor. "On the skids may be putting it a touch too strongly, Dr. Ladd. Sliding seems to be the consensus opinion."

The other's sudden cherubic grin was a surprise. "Enough said, Ham. I think I've netted what I was fishing for."

Startled to hear his nickname, Moffett tried to reconcile the other's abrupt turnabout from all-business to jocular friendliness.

What remained of the cigarette loosed a long ash that fell to the desk. Ladd wiped it away casually. "I owe you an apology. One of my spies at Sargent gave you an unusually high recommendation, so I had our department administrator call your home and invite a résumé. All things being equal, which they hardly ever are, the timeworn supply and demand scheme no longer works too well for someone in my position. I've learned to get sneaky in the clinches. Collaring a star performer these days is tricky. I have to sidestep Arnie and his Inhuman Resources henchmen and do the more serious headhunting on my own. God, do they ever hate me for it!"

"Dangerfield," said Ham with a flash of omniscience.

"Nifty guess," applauded Ladd. "Some months ago Clint and I sat down over a few beers and cut up old touches. He happened to mention your case when I quizzed him about the usual suspects, but back then the catch was that we had zip in the oven worth inviting you in for a chat. The old Guv told me point-blank, with zero equivocation, that the company Sarge built and nurtured has had it. Clint's getting set to pull the pin himself, head for retirement Down Under."

"Clint should know. He's wiser, closer to the Sargent front office than I ever was."

"Uh-huh." Without asking permission, Ladd stretched and captured another of Ham's cigarettes. "Judging from what Clint passed along," he said, snapping the Dunhill, "you worked your tail feathers off, earned a reputation, then got nipped in the second cutback wave although in Clint's estimation you were the premiere mechanical engineer in house. He called you a victim of the 'Last Hired, First Fired' syndrome, and wasn't a bit shy about criticizing young Sargent for hanging on to a flock of older hands, including a few no longer able to cut it, and dumping what he himself thought of as the least experienced. My respect for our mutual friend's judgment is stratospheric. Clint couldn't tell it other than like it is if his life depended on it. That's why I intend to make you an offer. It won't amount to instant wealth, but I think we may be able to sweeten the pot enough to grab your interest."

Unable to believe what he had heard, Ham's scalp tingled. "D-design work?" he faltered, a flush of excitement making him thick-tongued.

Ladd pondered. "Oh, for starters. Decide to come aboard, and you can wet your feet doing design concept studies on avionics and malfunction detector subsystems architecture — black boxes we'll have to fully invent later. But in my stable are some top-drawer designers, including a pair like you who ended up surviving one aerospace shipwreck or another."

The intercom's buzzed. Dr. Ladd lazily reached to punch a button. "Yeah, Minnie?"

"Mr. Mason, line four," announced his executive assistant.

"Okay." The engineering director excused himself, lifted the phone. "Morning, Ben. How was your game Sunday?" A slow grin. "Really? I hear they call it golf because all the other four-letter words were taken. Great, great! Keep killing snakes like that and a scratch handicap awaits you." He listened briefly, twisting the coiled phone cord around his index finger. "Sure, glad to. Let me pulse Tom, find out the details of what's bugging him. Right, I'll get back to you soonest. Later, Ben." He negligently caged the phone and muttered, "How to butter up the big boss."

* * *

Moffett had been figuratively pinching himself. *A bona fide job offer!* he thought. After experiencing an agonizing yearlong chain of neverending disappointments, the off-the-cuff word

of a job offer felt like a sunburst. Yet Dangerfield or no Dangerfield the screwy backdoor invitation to apply at AGC struck him as damned peculiar.

“Okay, back to our séance. Where were we?”

“You were discussing my prospective duties, Dr. Ladd.”

“Right. What I have in mind is pretty darned important. First you’ll have to learn the drill around this alleged engineering hall, get to know who’s who in the zoo personnel-wise, become acclimated to what goes on, and so forth. That should take more than a matter of weeks, *if* you decide to come aboard it goes without saying.”

Ham caught his breath. “Are you saying . . . you’re in the market for a helper?”

“Staff assistant, gofer, Hey, Boy! Pencil in whatever job title suits you. You’re grossly underage and short on experience for a staff assistant, but that isn’t an insurmountable handicap.” His expression neutral, difficult to read, Ladd shrugged. “I’ve been a one-man show all my working life, and hate like hell to mend my ways at this late date. If a certain program comes in, as I’m fairly sure it will, I’ll instantly be in desperate need of an alter ego. This Aerospaceplane R&D Program we’ve been bucking for is way too big for a single pair of hands, even for a superman like me.” Lifting his arms, he flexed his biceps with deadpan seriousness.

“Decide to accept AGC’s less-than-magnanimous offer,” he continued drily, “and you’ll spend hours at dishwater-dull meetings sitting in for me. You’ll get too many free airplane rides helping vendors and subcontractors iron out knotty problems that just about always require mutual concessions. You’ll spend your days putting out minor and hopefully major fires of one kind or another, reviewing systems architecture, military specs, engineering drawings, layouts, technical correspondence, qualification test procedures and suchlike until you see double.” Ladd raising tired brown eyes, and said, “Sound interesting?”

“Very,” replied Ham without hesitation. “Especially for someone who’s been on the street nearly a year. I do have to confess that I’m, uh . . . Well, more than slightly mystified, Dr. Ladd.”

“About what?”

“The position. Don’t mistake me, stepping into a staff job is a dream come true. Yet I can’t help but think an experienced AGC veteran would be of more use to you.”

“No argument. Don’t think I haven’t beaten the bushes for just such an individual. When series after series of massive layoffs hit us, most senior guys and gals — the prime candidates for the spot — elected to open a golden retirement parachute. Someone qualified could still be lurking in the underbrush, but if so they are awfully well hidden, or tied up in something equally important. My dilemma stems from not having the leisure to search any further inside the premises, so I’m counting on Clint’s perspicacity, plus my own worn-out instincts, to pick a winner, and think I have. Still sound interesting?”

Ham nodded eagerly. “And exciting.”

His tone mildly sarcastic, Ladd said, “Yeah, now and then it gets a mite too exciting. If you decide it’s the right move for you and your family, I want you come in with your eyes wide open. I’m tendering an ulcer-making job, Ham. One headache per hour’s the norm here in Ulcer Gulch, not to mention the regular wire-brushing my office gets from upper management. You’ll have to be technically and emotionally able to handle the traffic, not to mention being strong-willed and aggressive enough to bite the bullet when a tough decision comes down the pike, technical or otherwise. You’ll also need to be sufficiently thick-skinned not to let the dullards

liberally sprinkled throughout AGC's various internal organizations get under your skin. Soon now, I'm fairly certain we're going to have a hungry, mature Bengal tiger by the tail if and when the Aerospaceplane plum falls in our lap. The slot I'm offering will now and then take you away and keep you away from home and hearth on certain days. Any of that scare you?"

"Not even a little bit."

"Good! Exactly what I'd hoped to hear." Ladd flashed a genial grin. "Okay, you've heard my pitch, sum total. Don't fret if it takes half a century for the requisition to filter through Arnie's Inhuman Resources labyrinth. By and by you'll get a formal offer from Arnie's hiring mavens. If nothing shows up in a week, ten days, or you're dissatisfied with the dollars, want more details, anything along those lines, call me and we'll kick it around, thrash it out. Otherwise I'll look forward to seeing your smiling face in a fortnight or so. Hopefully sooner."

"I'm really grateful, Dr. Ladd!"

The engineering manager feigned a shudder. "I answer to Bill," he said. "The 'doctor' and 'mister' tags always make me feel like I'm being arrested." He rubbed his jaw. "S'pose I could bum one last cigarette?"

"Keep the pack; I have more in the car."

"Thanks, Ham." Ladd offered his hand. "See Minnie; she'll escort you out to the lobby."

Minutes later, Henry Alan Moffett walked out of "G" Building on air.

* * *

Bill Ladd sagged behind his desk and lit a fresh cigarette. He stared absently at the curl of smoke for seconds, letting the wheels revolve until reaching a decision. Lifting the phone, he punched buttons with seeming carelessness. "Hiya, Lucille. Ladd, here. Can you please wake up Arnie and put him on?"

The engineering director rocked back, creaking the swivel chair's springs, and planted his crossed ankles on a corner of the desk.

"Good morning, you lazy old flesh merchant? Say, I just finished talking to that nice Mr. Moffett you sent over to see me, and . . . What? Oh, does he ever! That young man slides into the template like it was custom-made to hold him. He's precisely what the doctor ordered, no training wheels or anesthetic required."

Listening patiently, Ladd's expression soured gradually. "Aw, come off it, Arnie! Don't hand me any horsepocky about 'fit.' We'll press-fit young Mr. Moffett into the cavity if need be. I want that youngster, and I *need* that youngster. He's as perfect a fit as anyone we could possibly rope in off the street."

Ladd listened some more. "Now," he said at last, "we're almost on the same wavelength. Certainly I know about the hundreds of applications on file; half the engineers west of the Mississippi are on their uppers. That aside, I want you to offer Moffett ten percent more than he earned when the dim bulbs at Sargent dumped him. Aw, Christ! I don't give a hoot how you fiddle the salary structure numbers. I need him, hear me? Now you're peddling unadulterated twaddle. Arnie, you couldn't tote a grocery list twice and come up with the same figure."

Ladd listened some more, a sly grin tickling the corners of his generous mouth. "Easy, easy; let's all stay calm. I already know how much Sargent was paying him; my spies are all reliable. Impossible, you say? Tell you what, Arnie. Let's get on the horn together and explain to

Ben Mason how hard you're working to obstruct the hire of an engineer I need, someone I *have* to have in my shop? Fair . . ? Hell no it's not fair! Who's got time to be fair?"

Ladd's grin broadened. "Fine business! Ten percent it is, you lazy old flesh peddler. Next time we cross paths, Arnie, remind me to return the favor."

Dr. Ladd caged the phone, leaned back and clasped his hands at the nape of his neck. Catching a glimpse of the office wall clock, his self-satisfied smirk sloughed away. He squashed the cigarette in an overflowing ashtray, seized a freshly sharpened red pencil and bent to attack the paperwork that in his estimation proliferated much faster than he could whittle it away.

5 - Lieutenant Colonel Sorenson

When Research & Development Division Vice President Franklin Burton managed to hang on the ropes much longer than anyone considered reasonable or proper, those occupying other sumptuous offices along "A" Building's executive row had evaluated the signs and knew — not guessed, but knew — Mr. Mason intended to replace him. Sparse minutes after the beleaguered executive's parking area pass refused to function, the high-echelon grapevine lit up like a supernova. Within hours the entire aerospace industry became aware that struggling, once thriving Aerospace General Corporation had a vice president on its shopping list.

Hush-hush, on the QT and under the rose, Mr. Arnold accelerated the labors of his understaffed Human Resources minions, bringing them to a state of perpetual agitation in order to launch a widespread talent search. Professional résumés were solicited with utmost discretion. Recruiters contacted executive placement headhunters in the dead of night, and lunched warily with legal counselors, the officers of other surviving prime contractors, leggy secretaries, PR flacks, contract bird dogs, and "Job Shop" flesh peddlers who dealt in temporary technical and office services.

Mr. Arnold's watchword was secrecy, secrecy, forever secrecy. Unfortunately, the message had rippled through the interlacing and intertwining aerospace grapevine at the speed of light. Gaggles of former senior and mid-level aerospace executives descended upon AGC in droves, all frighteningly sincere applicants who clamoring desperately for the high-level position, and believed themselves serious candidates simply because each possessed all of the stringent qualifications. These ladies and gentlemen were politely discouraged, including a presumptuous aircraft supply company executive who had the temerity to spend his own money flying to Los Angeles and stridently petitioning for a personal interview with Mr. Mason.

Weeks passed—a month, two months. The renovated, fruitwood-paneled office in "A" Building's executive wing remained silent, gathering dust, tenantless.

To the surprise of absolutely no one, it was Mr. Mason who personally struck gold at a Washington soirée honoring the seventy-second birthday of veteran legislator Wilton P. Dismyre, to whom becalming the aerospace industry in the Sargasso Sea of high-technology had long been a source of infinite satisfaction. The senior senator from Wisconsin, semi-permanently ensconced on Capitol Hill by his state's rabidly conservative milk, butter and cheese electorate, took enormous pride in crediting himself with being largely responsible for the industry's downhill tumble. He and the committee he chaired reveled in their penny-pinching role as a collective

eminence grise when it came to doling out defense appropriations in general, and aerospace appropriations in particular.

For Gridley, the obscure lobbyist who had fattened for years on Kurile's payroll, attending the affair was obligatory. In a Puckish mood after a few too many bourbon and sodas, he became fascinated by the ongoing festivities in the hoary Willard Hotel's main banquet room, avidly relishing the sight of rich and famous individuals reluctantly rubbing elbows with formerly rich and famous individuals and groups. The antics of one person in particular elicited a succession of infectious chuckles.

"Why the slap-happy giggle?" inquired a *Washington Post* columnist at Gridley's table.

The lobbyist giggled again. He described in lurid detail the sly gag he had invented.

"Why bother?" Half-seas-over, and of peckish temperament, the veteran observer of the aerospace milieu listened inattentively to Gridley embellish his explanation. At last the columnist shrugged and rose unsteadily. Weaving his unstable way between tables, he hung back, waiting for an opportune moment to introduce himself to Benjamin C. Mason III. After an ice-breaking smatter of industry-related shop talk, he introduced AGC's presiding chief executive to a previously cued Congressman's stooge, through whom Mr. Mason met an *Aviation Week* stringer who, though baffled by Gridley's recital of his brainstorm, went along with the gag, encouraging AGC's leader to shake hands with Lieutenant Colonel Blair G. Sorenson, USAF, Retired.

Mr. Mason took the measure of his new acquaintance with a practiced eye. He evaluated the tall former officer's burr-cut shock of iron-gray hair, his lofty mien, the look of eagles in his piercing, ice-blue eyes, and fell deeply in love in a purely industrial way with Sorenson.

But Mr. Mason had not attained his lofty position by acting precipitously. Shunning any and all spur-of-the-moment decisions, a firm, self-made rule of long standing, he realized this could not be an exception. Sounding out Sorenson, he listened respectfully to the colonel's profound silences, noted the former officer and gentleman's ramrod-straight posture, watched closely to see if Sorenson's attention wavered during his own lengthy, purposeful monologue citing AGC's past and present contributions to the defense posture of the United States.

The hour grew late. Speechmakers droned on at length. The toastmaster encouraged toasts, not to mention roasts laden with vitriolic zingers that paralyzed with hilarity the sophisticated, well-watered audience. The spoofing targets — self-important Washington bigwigs and potentates of one stripe or another — did *not* include the ultra-dignified guest of honor. Senator Wilton P. Dismyre had been known to froth at the mouth and threaten lethal countermeasures if anyone gave in to a suicidal urge and poked fun at *him*.

In a state of alcoholic euphoria, Gridley viewed from afar the antics of the pair he felt proudly responsible for bringing together. As far as he could tell from a distance, not once during their extended confab had Sorenson allowed his penetrating, unblinking stare to shift a single millimeter from the patrician countenance of AGC's polished president and CEO.

Here, thought Mr. Mason, immensely impressed, was attentiveness beyond belief. "Your Air Force career, Colonel?" he inquired.

The tall, ruggedly handsome model of a former military leader sipped his drink, rattled beached ice cubes reflectively. He pondered, deliberated, and finally said, "SAC."

“Ah, yes! Strategic Air Command!” Mr. Mason’s enthusiasm soared. “B-52s guarding us while we slept, eh? Every citizen of this great nation owes you an undying debt of gratitude for the selfless service you helped provide. A terrible shame SAC had to be disbanded.”

Unaware of disbandment, Sorenson responded with a frown, a solemn blink.

* * *

Across the noisy, crowded banquet room, Gridley snickered knowingly. Proud of having engineered what he and he alone regarded as the strangest of all strange encounters, he dug the Washington Post columnist in the ribs. “Be damned if it didn’t work, Bubby!”

“What so . . . worked?”

“My scam. Pipe the twosome you helped set up. They’re getting along famously.”

“Don’t break your arm patting yourself on the back. Call it the coup of the century!”

“Or maybe the coup of the millennium. Our good works could end up banner line stuff.”

Gridley sloshed his drink. “I can see it now: AGC CHIEF WOOS, WINS EX FLY BOY.”

The columnist wagged his head. “Grid, you’re a good ol’ boy in an off-center, sad sack sort of way, but about banner lines you don’t know straight up from sideways.”

“S’pose you’re an expert, Bubby.”

“I sure ought to be. My misspent youth was spent doing captions and headlines for *The American Inquisitor* rag. My all time favorite was DWARF RAPES NUN, ESCAPES IN UFO.”

No longer listening, Gridley said, “What’s going on over there is otherworldly. I thought the courtship would crash and burn of its own accord. Now I’m beginning to wonder.”

Intrigued by the other’s peculiar brand of logic, the columnist ogled the scene across the banquet room. “Have to admit that lanky, burr-headed giraffe does look formidable,” he ventured. “Sucker could model as Majority Whip, Cabinet member, some other variety of VIP.”

The lobbyist guffawed. “A candidate for Mr. Rushmore. A down-home pal went to high school in Connecticut with you candidate for Mt. Rushmore. That klutz is a one-of-the-kind guy tales’re told about. His service nickname was ‘Downwind Sorenson’ ‘cause he took off the wrong way on his solo flight, scattered a string of trainers coming in to land, then flew off and got lost way out in the Texas midlands, but I also heard he had a decent record in Nam.”

“Vietnam . . . ?” The other’s flagging interest revived. “Can’t be old enough for that one.”

“Little do you know, Bubby. Man’s a modern Methuselah, and a lifelong sufferer from . . . What’s it called, I forget . . . ? Oh, yeah: caninophobia extremis.”

“Gesundheit!”

“On the emmis, Bubby. Guy’s a textbook case, a pathologic . . . He’s scared shitless of dogs large or small, foreign or domestic. Claims mutts will leap through fire to get him.”

“Knock it off, Grid! If he’s really the head case you make him out to be, what’s he doing at Dismyre’s birthday bash?”

“Who can say? Maybe he was looking for a Ping-Pong game, got lost and came in here.”

“Sweet Jesus! Grid, if that line kicks-off another cornball routine, skip the snapper.”

“No help for it, Bubby. He’s also a dyed-in-the-wool, incurable Ping-Pong freak. Plays every chance he gets, and goes to every tournament that . . . Hey, look! Judging from the expression on Mason’s frozen kisser, he and Sorenson’re getting along super-famously.”

“So what’s the bottom line in all this? Why’d you egg me into going through all that hassle just to stage a handshake ‘twixt him and AGC’s top banana? What’s in it for you?”

“Not a thing,” lied the lobbyist. “Thinking to have a spot of fun, is all.”

“Bullshit, Grid! Save your snake oil and moonbeams for the lucky folks who don’t know you. There’s not an ounce of for-fun in your twisty, underbred mind. You’re up to something, I can smell it.” The columnist’s eyes narrowed. “Hey, hold on! You still collect baksheesh from that Nevada scumbag, right? Eight-to-five says a rip-off’s somewhere up your sleeve.”

Gridley set down his glass and and got up unsteadily. “Catch you later, Bubby.”

* * *

For the lobbyist, the Willard was much more than just a hotel, it was a semi-religious shrine, the lobby hallowed ground, a Sacred Grove where the modern art form of lobbying had been born. He made his erratic way across the Sacred Grove’s lush carpeting to an alcove near the restrooms, lifted a pay phone, thought better of it and consulted his Patek Phillipe wristwatch. He used his calling card to reach an unlisted number well past midnight in Las Vegas..

Alexander Kurile woke with a star, snuffled, rolled over in the tumbled acreage of his monster waterbed and stretched toward the antique, gold-and-ivory French telephone on a macabre, three-legged end table. He fumbled the ungainly instrument to his ear. “Yah?”

Gridley slurred his opening line. “Evenin’ Mr. Kurile. How are you?”

The petite, comely Keno runner lying nakedly beside Alex assumed his stirring a signal for action stations, and sleepily addressed herself to a perpetually shaded portion of his anatomy.

“Not now, f’Chrissake!” Alex brushed the girl away. “Grid, what the hell time is it?”

Getting up and leaving the banquet room had caused Gridley to succumb to the violent aftereffects of ethanol. Babbling a half-dozen words that difficult for Kurile to understand, he outlined the “chance meeting” he had craftily arranged, calling it the purest form of serendipity.

“Sarah who . . . ?” demanded Alex.

Undaunted, Gridley retrenched and began anew. Categorizing the odd meeting as the opportunity of a lifetime, he termed it a potential way of gaining access to AGC internal affairs.

“So Mason meets some ex-airplane driver. So what!” Alex used his free hand to fend off the Keno runner. “C’mon, what’s the punch line?”

Fueled by alcoholic zest, Gridley reset the conversation to zero once again and managed to utter only a few more fuzzy words before Kurile stopped his clock.

“What you been smoking, Grid? Why do I give a shit about every ding-a-ling Mason ups and meets? The private dickheads who’re costing me a bundle birddog Mason around the clock, but do I need a tally on every joker he meets?”

“Er, no. ‘Course not, Mr. Kurile.” Despite the air-conditioned lobby, Gridley was perspiring. “What I’m trying to say is . . . Getting those two together is . . . special, see? I know you’ve got Mason’s tracked day ‘n night, but meeting Sorenson made me think —”

“So start thinking straight! Wake me up every goddamn time Mason shakes hands with some sucker and I’ll cut your water off. Got it?”

Despite the less than lukewarm reception his news flash had garnered, the lobbyist knew he was in too deep not to persist. “Honestly, Mr. Kurile, not even the threat of waterboarding would make me disturb your rest for no good reason. I did my best to bring those two together because I thought it’d be an important stroke for Mason to —”

“Get away!” barked Alex.

“Sir . . . ?”

“Not you!” cried Alex loudly, hurting the lobbyist’s ear. The Keno runner had again begun semiconsciously molesting him.

“But Mr. Kurile, meeting this goofy ex-military guy could be —”

“But me no buts, Gridley! One thing I can’t stand is being butted. The next time you lose your mind and wake me up in the middle of the night you’d sure better have some pretty goddamn amazing good news. None of this ‘could be, or might be’ crap. Got it?”

“Got it, Mr. Kurile, but what you should know is if Mason decides to bring a ringer like Sorenson into AGC, we could be light-years ahead of —”

“No more buts!”

A faint click told the lobbyist Alex had rung off. Muttering, “Stupid SOB!” he let the phone drop and dangle at the end of the spiral-wound armored cable, and walked away.

* * *

In the wake of his fruitful if one-sided conversation with the stoic, distinguished looking ex-Air Force officer, Mr. Mason flew home to California in a state of corporate euphoria. The next day, former LtCol Blair Sorenson received an overnight FedEx letter from AGC; enclosed were a brief note inviting him to visit AGC, and a first class, round-trip airline ticket to L.A.

His lips moving, Sorenson doggedly read and reread the note, between times suspiciously inspecting the ticket. After racking his brain, he dimly recalled the pleasant, gray-haired gent who had spoken to him so long and earnestly at some kind of party he had inadvertently crashed as a last resort after being chased four blocks over rain-slick sidewalks by a slavering Irish setter.

During a fifth or sixth perusal of the invitation and ticket, vacuous furrows bracketed Sorenson’s classic masculine features. Stepping to a freestanding plywood wardrobe filled with useless sky-blue dress uniforms and spit-shined black shoes, he slipped the whole mysterious mess of paperwork into the pocket of a mothballed uniform blouse, and forgot about it.

Mr. Mason and Executive Vice President & General Manager Charles Allison, the gentleman to whom Burton had once reported, were driven to LAX to meet Sorenson’s plane.

The former lieutenant colonel proved not to be aboard.

Riding back to the plant in a state of grave disappointment, Mr. Mason slapped Allison’s knobby knee in frustration. “Cagy,” he said, tapping his cranium knowingly. “That clever devil’s playing hard to get, Charles. I *know* he is! With *his* background, he probably has scads of offers. Well, two can play at that game. Never fear, Charles. We’re going to land him in the end.”

Secretly overjoyed by the “clever devil’s” failure to put in an appearance, Allison had been scheming ever since Mr. Mason had mentioned his find, trying to devise some method of replacing Burton by promoting a certain loyal, wholly controllable gentleman who remained within the decimated ranks of eligible executives on his division’s overhead payroll.

Late the following afternoon, a telegram and yet another FedEx overnight letter arrived simultaneously at Sorenson’s canine-proof Washington apartment. The unexpected deliveries caught the recipient in the act of leaving to attend a Ping-Pong tournament. After examining the telegram, letter and airline ticket with a mixture of bewilderment, thoroughness and aplomb, he pocketed the missives, dodged a lurking mongrel in the street below, and caught a bus to the tournament.

Later in the evening he showed the unsolicited documents to the tournament’s fourth runner-up, an individual he greatly admired.

“Hey, Bo!” exclaimed the fourth runner-up. “Plain horseshoes is what y’got here. This guy, he wants you.”

“Me . . . ?”

“Uh-huh, that’s what it says,” explained the fourth runner-up. “He wants t’give you some kind of terrific job.”

“A job . . . ?”

“Right. This fella Mason comes across as a big wheel. He’s offerin’ what sounds like a super-juicy spot. Better heist your tail feathers aboard United chop-chop, y’hear?”

“Oh.”

In the morning, Sorenson opened a chipped bureau drawer and extracted three uncashed pension checks from a cache that was driving government accountants crazy. He purchased two suits: a sky-blue worsted, and for variety a powder blue gabardine, plus an expensive pair of black Wellington boots.

Airborne for the first time since being separated from the service of his country, the fact that some stranger was piloting the aircraft gave Sorenson a case of the willies. A pert flight attendant also made him edgy by hovering near his first-class window seat, making eyes at him, offering him pillows, chewing gum, magazines, and sundry other whatnots.

Fidgeting with anticipation near the arrival gate at L.A. International, Mr. Mason’s scowl darkened as the plane emptied. He turned away, teeth gritted, and grumped, “A damn shame, Charles! Hate to say it, but it looks like we may have lost him.”

A forced frown mask VP&GM Allison’s soaring inner delight. He found Sorenson’s second absence a source of infinite satisfaction until . . . Suddenly his eyes widened. He caught his breath, and tugged Mr. Mason’s elbow. “Ben, could this be him . . . ?”

A towering, aristocratic gentleman clad in a sky-blue suit tailored with a distinctly military cut stalked from the tunnel’s mouth at a stately pace.

“Thank God!” Mr. Mason lurched forward, trailed by the despondent VP&GM.

Jet-lagged after grueling hours in the air spent fending off the flight attendant, and between times wondering if the pilot would deliver him and the other passengers to the correct destination, the deluge of greetings and amenities showered on him was lost on former Lt Col Blair G. Sorenson, USAF, Retired. He leaned back against the cushions, he loosed a heartfelt sigh of relief and slipped into a relaxed doze as the limousine sped toward the fruitwood-paneled office formerly occupied by Vice President Burton in the posh executive wing of “A” Building.

Sorenson’s stoic indifference to who and what they were, or what they might have to say to him, *really* impressed the senior executives.

6 - Dangerfield

Two mornings after his AGC interview, Ham was singing lustily in the shower when Audrey Lee burst into the bathroom. Yanking open the glass door, she cried breathlessly, “A telegram!”

Not sure what he’d heard over the running water, except that it wasn’t his wife’s usual command to, “Shut up your howling in there!” he twisted off the faucets, groped for a towel.

“A job!” Bubbling excitement, Audrey Lee jiggled up and down. “That Aerospace General outfit’s offering you a *job*, and a whopping pay raise goes with it. Isn’t it wonderful?”

Ham had known better than to tempt the vagaries of fortune by prematurely telling his family of an impending offer. Wet hair plastered to his forehead, he reacted with a mixture of relief and elation by embracing Audrey Lee, soaking her blouse and slacks. "Magnolia Belle," he drawled, "finally you're beginnin' to 'preciate your debonair husband's true worth."

"Hush up! Don't you dare and act blasé about it. Need I ask if you're going to accept?"

Dripping water, Ham toweled himself, doing his best to sustain a pose of nonchalance. "Be tough to turn down, Honey Chile. That 'whopping' pay raise'll go a lot farther in Colorado." "Colorado!"

He grinned. "I was only funnin', Magnolia Belle. Stay cool, calm 'n collected, okay?"

An interlude of stony silence ensued. "Henry Moffett, there are times when I don't pretend to understand you."

"Your question was sort of academic. We'll get back on our feet, pick up a new car."

"Cars!" His wife pursed her lips. "Is that all you men ever think about?"

"What's so awful about wanting a new set of wheels? Our rattletrap's odometer rolled over to a hundred and ninety-some thousand miles. We'll grab a sporty model for you to drive. I can grind back and forth to work in the old minivan."

"You'd let me drive the new car?"

"Why, most certainly, Honey Chile. Now that the grits 'n chitlin' crops done been harvested, and the levee's repaired, soon you'll soon be roamin' the ol' plantation in style. Let me get dressed and phone Clint, fill him in on the glad tidings."

* * *

Ham met former associate and friend in a coffee shop not many blocks from the Sargent Electronics facility. All ears, the aging, slightly built Australian electrical engineer sported a wispy mustache. After listening to Ham describe AGC's offer, his only comment was, "You could've done ever so much worse."

"Clint, I've been doing much worse nearly a year," reminded Ham. "You're the one to thank for opening the door at AGC."

Dangerfield sipped his café au lait. "Best not thank me quite yet. Beyond doubt, Bill Ladd is the wisest old pelican roosting hereabouts. No one could work under his tutelage without some of his immense capability rubbing off. Still, you mustn't dance to AGC's tune strictly on my say-so. You mentioned a grace period during which to return a yea or nay. Poke around a bit, stir the pot. Make use of the interim to learn a few details about what you're letting yourself in for. It's the only sensible way of doing business with defense industry cobblers."

"Poke . . . around? You aren't serious."

"Never more so." Dangerfield appraised his friend candidly. "Put out some feelers, a few subterranean inquiries. Learn what others of your ilk think of engineering for a government prime contractor. You must be acquainted with a tot of AGC engineers; you've lived here in the Valley all your life, and it's fairly bursting with them. Or once was," he amended.

"So happens I run into an AGCer now and then, but . . . Clint, you slay me! First you recommend me sight unseen to Dr. Ladd, then do an about face and advise me to second-guess the only offer I've had, or can expect in the near future. You once told me all aerospace companies were pretty much the same."

“Ah, no; you misrepresent me,” denied Dangerfield. “Think back and you may recall me saying all *large* aerospace firms were comparable.”

“Okay, large. Even after our American money machine blew a gasket and the roof caved in contract-wise, AGC’s not exactly small. According to Aviation Week, only Lockheed-Martin and one or two other companies match or exceed AGC in gross sales.”

“Precisely,” declared Dangerfield, “yet you’ve missed my point. Sargent Electronics is not, has never been, nor will it ever be a ‘large’ aerospace firm — not aerospace at all, strictly speaking. You cut your teeth nicely at Sargent, built seniority and earned an excellent reputation. Unfortunately, those kudos evaporated once you were dismissed.

“What I’m struggling to put across,” continued Dangerfield, “is that you’ve yet to engineer for a major government supplier. If AGC fails to land the Aerospaceplane program you made mention of, further cutbacks could be inevitable. You might find yourself on the street again, most likely searching for yours truly with a firearm.” The electrical engineer grinned wryly. “By then, of course, you’d have to chase me to New South Wales to exact revenge.”

Ham’s forehead creased. “Excuse me, but isn’t that warning slightly askew? I’m on the street now, have been longer than I care to think about. I wouldn’t jump blindly at an ordinary position, but the prospect of working directly for an engineering director on what could become a new major program is damned exciting. Even if your doomsday scenario were to come true, I’d like to think I could hang on at AGC.”

“There’s a decent chance you could,” said Dangerfield, “though you must also remember the rule-of-thumb young Sargent invoked: ‘Last hired, first fired.’ I don’t say it’s a hard-and-fast industry maxim, or exaggerate the extent of its usage, but as a dictum it has apparently lodged in the forebrain of upper management here, there, everywhere.”

Ham sublimated his exasperation, “My turn to remind you of something, Clint: the way you used to rant about Sargent’s management fiasco, the lousy morale in engineering and out in the shop, the cash-flow crunch after leadership changed hands. Now you’re telling me —”

“Peace!” urged the other. “Didn’t really mean to start a row. What I’m suggesting is . . . Let me put it this way. I think perhaps I’ve a broader perspective than your tender years permit. All I advocate is making sure you know your own mind after becoming knowledgeable about the milieu in which you’re preparing to immerse yourself. You mention the low morale in Sargent’s manufacturing facility, which I fear is considerably worse today than when you made your exit. You were accustomed to dealing with Sargent’s free and easy, non-organized labor pool, and like most of our mechanical engineers not given to second-thoughts about energizing a milling machine and carving out the part you needed for a breadboard, prototype, whatever. True?”

“Guilty as charged,” said Ham. “Why not?”

“‘Why not’ sez ee.” Dangerfield rolled his eyes. “Because AGC is a closed shop, that’s ‘why not’ — unionized, hourly paid machinists and technicians every ruddy one. Within the toils of AGC if you were so much as lift a piece part and carry it across the room a union grievance would be filed before you could set the bloody thing down. And were you, a salaried professional engineer, to fabricate a part. I shudder at the consequences. Shudder!”

“*Why*, for God’s sake?”

“Because, my bright, naive young friend, in the Brotherhood’s eyes you’d be shattering some poor working chap’s rice bowl. Naturally you’re eager to work under Bill Ladd’s tutelage.

Who could resist jumping at the chance? What I'm striving to clarify is that there are things you will certainly dislike at AGC, just as there were things you didn't care for at Sargent, except in far greater plenitude. You were one short year out of the university when you came to us, and Sargent is basically a commercial design, build and sell establishment, although one or two residual, defense-oriented subcontracts still linger in-house.

"AGC belongs to a radically different species," he added. "You'll find frustrations multiplying geometrically each time you turn a corner. You'll hear decisions made for reasons of political expediency rather than logic, technical decisions bordering on criminal behavior, inexplicable committee decisions rendered by teams of 'experts' whose collective IQ measures not far above room temperature."

Dangerfield bore down. "The crucial point I want to stress," he said, "will be learn ahead of time whether you're willing to play the game and keep your salty mouth shut. I know you too well to believe you'll blissfully accept certain inanities and insanities without a monumental degree of bitching, not after years in the calm, peaceful, straightforward commercial world."

Ham regarded his friend soberly. "Clint, I realize you mean well, but for someone who recommended me to AGC you paint a less than appealing picture."

"Lost my rose-colored spectacles ages ago," confessed Dangerfield.

"Okay, I hear you. I'll give it a good, hard think, maybe talk to some AGCers if I can run any down, but let me ask a pointblank question, and I'd appreciate a pointblank answer."

"Pointblank it is. Fire when ready."

"What would you do if you were in my shoes?"

An indulgent smile leavened Dangerfield's weathered features. "Were I your age, married to a genuine knockout like Audrey Lee, with two adorable children, and possessed of your sterling abilities and outlook, I wouldn't pass up the opportunity to work under Bill Ladd's wise and beneficent guidance for anything in this world or the hereafter."

Ham sighed. "Thanks, Clint."

"Any time."

* * *

Leery of jumping the gun and imposing a rash celebration on his children, maybe to eat crow later, Ham tried to keep dinner that evening a sedate affair. Aware of the coming upturn in family fortunes, Audrey Lee had kept her counsel while preparing Ham's favorite meal — barbecued ribs, with the special glaze that took hours to simmer. Broccoli graced the table, and hominy steamed in a large serving bowl, not that anyone other than she herself ever touched it, and became a favorite tease topic with Ham. He asked ingenuously, "How's the hominy?"

"Delicious!" His wife urged him to try some.

Adopting the stentorian tone and cadence of a TV pitchman, Ham said extensive texting had conclusively proven that hominy had no flavor of its own. "Sure that's real hominy? It looks like white plastic packing material."

Audrey Lee had trouble preserving a straight face. In an exaggerated down-home drawl she said, "You po' starvin' Yankees don't appreciate the finer things."

Missy puffed her cheeks, made spiral motions around her ear with a forefinger.

Teddy giggled. "Mommy 'n Daddy're actin' nutty."

Having overheard guarded hints, Melissa Lee had sensed something afoot, but until now she'd purposely avoided questioning her father's prospective employment. Unable to hold back, she asked if it was true.

"My," said Ham, "news sure travels fast in our happy household. In a way, it was more like the new job found me, Missy." He searched his daughter's delicate features. As if Mother Nature's mirror had reflected a composite image, Melissa Lee was a scaled-down facsimile of her mother except a lack her flaming red hair, or inheriting his sandy hair and hazel eyes. "Tell you what. How about we put the celebration on hold until my AGC job's a done deal?"

His daughter nodded happily. "Gwen's dad works for them."

"Oh? Tell Gwen I'd like to have a talk with him. What's he say about working there?"

Missy elevated one eyebrow. "Heck, I don't know. Gwen told me they make big rockets."

"Among other things." Ham met his wife's bemused glance, then winked at his son.

"Think it'd be fun making big rockets, Ted?"

"Sure," the boy said. "Will you make 'em?"

"Uh, no. It isn't what I'm good at."

Teddy's expression let it be known that anyone who turned down a chance to make big rockets was beyond help.

Melissa Lee asked to be excused and vanished to do homework.

* * *

Audrey Lee meted out powdered detergent, twirled the dishwasher dial, and punched the starting button. She joined Ham in the family room, where Teddy had corked-off in front of the chattering TV. A cuddly doll, the boy lay with one arm draped over the complaisant dachshund.

His wife stooped to lift Teddy, but Ham touched her arm and put a finger to his lips. "Let the son and heir snooze. I'd like to hear your opinion of the new job."

"I'd never question your career decisions." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "With so many people out of work, employment is employment. The ups and down, profits and losses of working in . . . that place I'll gladly leave to you. You mentioned the long hours in that place, the chance of numerous trips out of town. I won't pretend to enjoy either prospect, but what bothers me most is, well . . . that place."

"AGC's facility?"

"It's . . . yes. I've driven past. From the street, it looks like a huge, gray prison."

"No wonderland," conceded Ham. "Utility goes with the territory. Worried about me being imprisoned, Audrey Lee?"

"No-o-o, nothing that dramatic. It's just . . . For some reason, the idea of you vanishing each morning in a gloomy dungeon gives me the heebie-jeebies."

The wall phone beside the breakfast bar chose that moment to jangle. Ham stretched to reach it, but Melissa Lee's yell from the hall preempted him. "I've got it."

"When she gets to be a teenager," said Ham, "we may have to buy a carrier pigeon to communicate with the outside world."

"She has lots of friends."

Missy called again. "For you, Dad."

Ham got up and slid his rump on a bar stool. "Hello?"

“Evening, Ham.” The rough, well-modulated baritone sounded vaguely familiar “Bill Ladd, here. Hope I’m not disturbing you.”

Moffett’s pulse rate jumped. “Not at all, Dr. Ladd.” Thick-tongued, all he could think to say was, “How are you?”

“Couldn’t be better, thank you. It’s been an exceptionally exciting day, and right not I’m riding a rainbow. Listen, I spoke to our HR maven, Arnold, just before the close of business. He told me an informal offer’s gone out to you.”

“A telegram. It tells me to sit tight until I hear from AGC again.”

Ladd chuckled. “Sounds like one of Arnie’s lightning moves. Next will come a formal letter of confirmation signed by me and Charlie Allison, the executive VP who heads up our whole division, including R&D. I know you haven’t had a decent chance to think matters through, but being selfish I wanted to let you in on the roaring good news out our way. I sincerely hope it’ll influence your decision.

“AGC,” pursued the engineering director, his voice laden with a note of genuine enthusiasm, “just won the Aerospaceplane R&D competition. Unofficial notification came late in the afternoon. Tomorrow or the next day, formal announcements are slated to issue jointly from Houston and the Pentagon.”

“Hey!” Spinning around on the bar stool, Moffett held out a thumb-and-forefinger donut for his wife’s benefit. “Roaring good news doesn’t begin to say, Dr. Ladd. Easy to see why you’re riding that rainbow.”

“It sure is, and I sure am.” Ladd sounded indecently pleased. “Everybody in our shop’s worked his noggin off to land this award. The celebrants are lined up four-deep down the street in Giorgio’s bar, or so I’m told. I may drop by, hoist a glass myself.”

Ham said, “Can’t thank you enough for letting me in on the excitement.”

“Oh, my motives will never be that noble,” confessed Ladd. “My reason for calling is a shade ulterior. Programs the size and complexity of this monster come down the pike only once or twice in a generation, and then only if you’re lucky. I expect employment to pick up sharply, and about time. While realizing it’s an imposition to badger you for an off-the-cuff answer, since the telegram states our offer will remain open for a while, but could you possibly —?”

“I’ve already decided,” blurted Ham.

“Then I sincerely hope to hear a yea. Real soon now my whole activity is going to start getting crowded into a thousand tight corners. I guess what I’m fumbling and stumbling to say is can you possibly give me a tentative answer tonight?”

“Definitely.” Ham paused and bit his underlip. “Can you hang on a second, Dr. Ladd?”

“Sure, glad to.”

Moffett palmed the phone’s mouthpiece. “AGC landed the biggie, Audrey Lee. They’re asking for a hurry-up decision.”

His wife’s smile was enigmatic. “You made up your mind long before that telegram arrived.”

Ham blinked. “Got me all figured out, have you?”

“I think so.”

“You’re wrong on one count. I didn’t fully decide until talking it over with Dangerfield. Speak now, Mrs. Moffett, or forever hold your peace.”

“Go on, tell him.”

“Dr. Ladd?”

“Hanging here on pins and needles.”

“Tomorrow’s Friday. I’ll drop off a confirmation of acceptance at the Human Resources office, and report in Monday morning if that’s agreeable.”

“Agreeable it sure as hell is! Glory be! Two pieces of blinding good news in one day are about all an old duffer like me can tolerate. I’m pleased as all get out, really! I suspect we can do great things together, God willing and the creeks don’t rise.”

“I’ll second that, Dr. Ladd.”

“Fine business, Ham! When next you see the old codger, tell Clint I owe him an extra, extra-large favor.”

“I will, and . . . Thank you.”

“That you’ve got backwards,” said Ladd. “I’m the one who should be doing the thanking. Look forward to seeing you in a few days. Have a good evening, and please give my best regards to your wife and family.”

Grinning, Ham hung up and did a little war dance across the shag carpet. “The die is cast, God’s in His Heaven, all’s right with the world, and I have a *job!*”

Smiling secretly, Audrey Lee came into his arms.

7 - The Veep

A monument to simplicity, and the epitome of good taste, an embossed bronze plaque graced the pastel, grasscloth-covered wall of “A” Building’s executive row:

BLAIR G. SORENSON

Vice President, Research & Development

The spacious, fruitwood-paneled sanctum floored in inch-thick pile carpeting of a delicate russet hue had been gloriously reborn. The huge “L”-shaped desk had reappeared, along with a high-backed executive chair upholstered in pliant, coffee-colored leather. Metal-framed guest chairs of racy contemporary design were interspersed with wax leaf philodendrons in one-of-a-kind ceramic jardinières. Color photos and lithographs of zooming, fire-spouting missiles, spacecraft and airplanes had reassumed their customary places to complete the décor.

On this particular morning Vice President Sorenson was craftily dividing his time between a map, a seeding chart, and the office window, impartially devoting equal time to each. A neglected map of AGC’s sprawling facility lay folded open on the virginal, polished expanse of his desk. The VP’s lips moved as he attempted to memorize the names listed on a seeding chart of the AGC Employees Recreation Club’s upcoming first annual Ping-Pong Tournament, an affair he had selflessly volunteered to sponsor.

Yet the large office window was like a magnet. Lifted his eyes frequently, he gazed out at the miniature, flagpole-dominated plaza in front of “A” Building, where yellowed shrubbery and a copse of wilted tulip trees shaded patches of desiccated lawn and a stone bench upon which no wholly sane employee ever dared sit.

If the view proved too awesome a distraction, he could have stepped to the window and cranked shut a set of vertical aluminum louvers, or buzzed for his executive assistant, Myra,

Moirra or Myrna, the helpmate he had inherited from the previous tenant, who would be thrilled to dash in and close the louvres for him. Doting on the ever-changing vista framed by his window, he never tired of watching the anonymous individuals who congregated out there and spoke to one another. He tried to imagine who they might be, what functions they performed, what they could possibly have to say to one another that demanded the often violent gesticulations and threatening gestures at times accompanying their silent discourses. The window was balm for Sorenson, a safety valve that helped him relax when the pressure of his post became too oppressive. Reluctant to close the louvers even when a latticed swath of afternoon sunlight poured in and severely taxed "A" Building's climate-control system. On those occasions he toughed it out, defeating the glare by donning one of nine pairs of polarized USAF-issue sunglasses he had secreted in his flight bag upon leaving the service of his country.

* * *

Gridley drove toward his K" Street office through traffic so noisy it forced him to shout into his satellite phone. "Got some terrific news, Mr. Kurile. AGC hired the dingbat."

Alex swore softly, pulled the phone away and rubbed his overstressed ear. "Quit your yelling, Grid! Which dingbat we talking about?"

Steering with one hand, the lobbyist shouted, "Sorenson, Mr. Kurile. Mason actually did it. He roped in Sorenson, brought him aboard."

"Slow down f'Chrissake, and talk normal! Mason brought in . . . who? Say again."

"Sorenson."

"Who the hell is Sor . . . whoever?"

"The retired military guy I phoned you about. Mason sent a magnitude seven shock wave through AGC by bringing the guy in as a veep in his R&D Division."

"Rrr-unn-deee . . ? Now what're we into?"

"Don't you get it, Mr. Kurile? Mason's yanked in a new vice president off the street. The Advanced Projects Group automatically reports to this newbie VP, and that bunch at AGC are the movers 'n shakers who're all set to kick off the Aerospaceplane R&D program that just landed in-house. What Mason's gone and done is a super-crucial gaffe."

"Now you listen, Grid, and listen good." Speaking slowly and distinctly, as if giving instruction to a child, Alex told the lobbyist his snow job was getting deeper and smellier by the second. "What's so special about this guy Mason's collared? What'll he do for us?"

"Nothing, Mr. Kurile."

"Now you're not making any goddamn sense at all," accused Alex. "I know of sixty-two thousand dipshit execs who could real easy fill those same 'nothing' shoes."

"Mr. Kurile, please try to understand something. This VP is a perfect —"

"Knock off the perfect crap, too!" bellowed Alex, trying to get even by hurting the lobbyist's ear. "You keep humming the same dumb tune. Get to the fucking lyrics, okay?"

Gridley savagely wrenched the steering wheel, barely avoided sideswiping a bus. "This guy Sorenson," he said earnestly, "a bomb set to go off one whiz-bang at a time. He's not wired right, but on the outside he's Moses in a blue business suit. Shake hands with him, and you just know you've met a world-class, hell-on-wheels executive of the first water."

"Water. . ?" Alex pulled a face, and pulled the phone away from his ear.

“Hang an albatross like this Sorenson around Mason’s neck,” Gridley hurried to say before Alex could question the liquid reference, “and it’s like chucking slow-fused dynamite sticks into AGC’s R&D Division.”

“You don’t say.” Kurile fell back on a favorite response to the incomprehensible.

“I’ll spell it out,” said the lobbyist, his patience dimming, and gasped; narrowly missing a hurtling taxi, he narrowly missed swallowing his tongue. “Sources inside . . . Beltway,” he said, breathing hard, “think AGC won . . . Aerospaceplane competition mostly ‘cause of Mason’s technical guru, a super-smart engineering manager named Ladd who’s team worked day ‘n night, and scrambled like a wild men to collar the contract, and getting it means R&D is where all the upfront action’ll be. With me so far, Mr. Kurile?”

Whipsawed between exasperation and perplexity over the rapid-fire mention of Moses, an albatross, water, aerial-spacey planes, dynamite, and an arcane something called “rr-un-dee,” Alex was fresh out of comebacks.

“Like I said,” insisted Gridley, “it’s sensational good news for us. Talk to Burton about Sorenson; he’ll fill in the blanks. Right this minute the guy is squatting in Burton’s old office. Frank will have a handle on how much damage goose egg leading his old division can do.”

“Yah, yah. I’ll get on the horn, see if Frank thinks we’ve rolled seven-eleven for a change. You on top of the game plan otherwise?”

“Oh, am I ever! We’re locked in solid with UTB. Sean Quick, the union hatchet man you shook hands with in Vegas doubts if we’ll have to salt their war chest more than a smidge. The first time Quick opened his mouth, he told me the union’s head office was already scheming to organize Mason’t professional engineers and scientists.”

“Now you’re talking my kind of talk, Grid.”

“Also,” added the lobbyist, “I touched base yesterday with two-star General Dennis’ stooge at the Pentagon. The captain’s ambitious. Calls his brass hat CO Superhawk, and imitates him by loving the sauce and dollies in equal measure. I think we can . . . Wait, almost forgot. Last Tuesday, I lunched with one of Senator Dismyre’s legmen, a college boy type with brains and expensive tastes. We may have to spend extra shekels to get a leash around his neck.”

“Shell out,” ordered Alex. “Never lose sleep over necessary expenses. First lesson I learned in the gaming racket is to never, *ever* scrimp on wining ‘n dining high rollers who can do you some good. Whichever wiseguy first said you have to spend money to make money really knew the score. Got that, Grid?”

“Got it, Mr. Kurile. The senator’s helpmate gets first-cabin treatment.”

“Whipped cream, with a Marinara cherry on top. You’ve got a green light to throw plastic around like waste paper, and ship the bills to my bookkeeper here at the Spa. I’ll tell the number-happy clown you’re faded all the way down the line.”

“Great, Mr. Kurile! One thing more. What I’d like to do with . . . Mr. Kurile . . . ?”

Mouthing an obscenity, the lobbyist concentrated on driving.

* * *

Having as usual disdained saying farewell, Alex instructed his personal secretary to put through a call to his premiere button man in Los Angeles.

Rejuvenated in spirit, buoyant with revitalized enthusiasm, and fairly bursting with a payback urge, Burton had returned to Los Angeles and immediately immersed himself in the task

at hand, beginning a pair of clandestine investigations. Working in a leased Encino apartment, he'd been chivvying information from a former underling who had reluctantly furnished an updated AGC internal telephone book. When phone on his makeshift desk in his makeshift bedroom-office rang, he was jotting on a legal pad, engrossed in surfing lists of names, mating individuals and company functions, and sorting those he knew personally, or knew of, and checking-off potential candidates for cultivation and eventual subornation.

Answering Kurile's greeting, he pretended the advent of R&D Vice President Sorenson was indeed what his employer had called "late-broken news." Two contacts had already advised him of Mason's unforeseen move, but he had not as yet sounded out any former associates, and therefore had no opinion one way or the other regarding the company's most recent leadership acquisition. After listening to his employer's secondhand account of the new veep's ineptitude, he kept his reply low-key. "If he's the total zero your man in Washington claims, it could be a major stroke in our favor. You asked if he could do serious, lasting damage. Of course, but I've decided to go a step higher, and attack the next rung up the ladder."

"What ladder . . . ?"

Burton realized he'd mistakenly credited Kurile for appreciating the virtue of metaphor, elliptical phraseology, puns, aphorisms and words of more than two syllables. He retrenched hastily. "Sorry, Alex; a figure of speech. This morning I thought of an easy way to throw the skids to my former boss, Charles Allison."

"He's . . . ? Come again, who's this guy? What's his gig?"

"Allison's this new veep's boss, the corporate VP & GM charged with overall guidance of Mason's Aircraft and Space Systems Division, including Research & Development. Sorenson reports to Chucky, just as I once did. You have to know the man to appreciate how far off center he really is. For a top-echelon executive, and he does fit that bill, Chucky's the most paranoid human being you or I or anyone else could ever imagine."

Alex did not try to ingest paranoid, letting it slide. "What kind of ladder bashing we talking about here, Frank?"

"It should go down like this," said Burton. "Mason's shoved a shiny new, unproven veep under Chucky's nose, but a 'someone' not, repeat *not*, a member of AGC's senior old boy's club. It's an absolute certainty that by now Chucky's running in circles, muttering gibberish and flapping his arms. Bringing in a exec off the street instead of allowing Chucky to elevate one of his pet monkeys in R&D is a no-no. Promotion from within has always been one of Mason's staunchest credos; he used to harp on it constantly. Now he's gone and broken his own chiseled-in-stone ground rule."

Alex had long since strayed off the listener's trail. Clueless about what Burton was telling him, he nevertheless tittered dutifully. "Bolshoi, Frank! How you figure to snooker this guy?"

"I have a . . . well, a dear friend," explained Burton. "She's an executive assistant, divorced now and hungry, who works for another VIP on executive row. She'll have no trouble slipping in and out of Chucky's office when he and his gal Friday are away from their desks."

"Some broad you used t'bang?" guessed Alex ungallantly.

The uncouth query irked Burton. Squelching his irritation, he chose his words carefully, explained the mission he'd penciled in for his dear friend. "I know Chucky inside and out. He's overripe for the kind of ploy I have in mind. Better still, it'll be a cinch to set up and execute."

“Sorry,” his employer said, “got another call here, Frank. Fill me in later, okay? Listen, I really cotton to your style. You’re using your bean to scheme, and I dearly love schemers. Grease the hungry bimbo’s palm. Getting her to do dirt for us is a goddamn master stroke.”

“As well as a pleasure,” added Burton, “in more ways than one.”

Kurile snickered dutifully.

* * *

Examination of the facility map, broken by long spells intensively studying the upcoming first annual AGC Ping-Pong Tournament seeding chart, and of course staring at the vista of ever-changing wonders outside his personal, private window, had devoured all but forty minutes of the gulf separating the start of Sorenson’s business day from lunch in the executive dining room.

Astounded to learn how many former military leaders and government executives AGC employed, he had scanned their ranks, and found that retired colonels, lieutenant commanders, and lesser lights abounded, all of them constantly vying with one another in bloodless competition, jostling and using their elbows, jockeying for position with their peers as well as former CIA and NSA officials. These worthy double- and triple-dippers in the Treasury Department’s treasure trove formed an empyrean clique that gathered daily in gustatory conclave in the tastefully decorated executive dining room.

A status less neophyte VP, Sorenson knew himself an outsider, and was reconciled to lunch apart from the elite former military, government and intelligence officials who tolerated his proximity solely because of his lofty corporate position, of which each was hysterically envious. Even so, thoughts of condescending to a mere former lieutenant colonel — a Johnny-come-lately fly boy, at that! — was anathema to these dedicated ladies and gentlemen. The newly minted veep would have to earn his spurs.

Lunch was therefore the cherished pinnacle to which Sorenson ascended every business day in order to eavesdrop unobtrusively, with no small degree of admiration and occasional trepidation, on tales of wartime valor and initiative, stories of peacetime fornication and peccadillo, never dreaming that he himself was the noontime object of countless nervous glances from the gentleman to whom he reported, R&D Executive VP & GM Charles Allison.

Traumatic shock had severely ratcheted Allison at the airport upon catching his first glimpse of Sorenson, then doubled and redoubled logarithmically when Mr. Mason had introduced him to the debonair, too-tall-to-be-true former officer and gentleman. Stumbling home that evening in a midnight blue funk, dismally certain his days at AGC were numbered, Allison had surrounded a quantity of Beefeaters before supper, and dolefully told his wife of more than forty years that Ben Mason had torpedoed him by bringing aboard a steely eyed, aristocratic ex-Air Force officer who was *certain* to replace him ere long.

Familiar with her husband’s fearful outlook on life in general, and his hold on a lofty corporate post in particular, Virginia Allison had laughingly pooh-poohed her husband’s fatalistic scenario. But Charles had convinced himself he knew whereof he spoke. Then out of the blue a cryptic, hand-lettered note had mysteriously appeared on his desk:

SORENSEN’S OUT TO GET YOU!

Aghast, his mind spinning like a runaway calliope, Allison had burned the insidious note in an ash tray, then hurriedly flushed the torn-up residue in the toilet of his private executive

washroom. The stark message had left in its wake a siege of acute anxiety that engulfed him for the remainder of the business day, and far into the night.

Then a second note had appeared:

SORENSEN'S A KILLER!

The harried senior executive spent the rest of the morning and early hours of afternoon lurking in an alcove down executive row from his office. Peeping furtively around the corner from time to time, he was determined to ambush the purveyor of despicable notes, and catch the bastard red-handed. His nervous vigil attracted the attention of passersby, and earned stifled giggles from executive assistants stationed along the wide, richly carpeted corridor. Despite exercising due vigilance, he failed to apprehend the phantom messenger who brought bad news.

Charles Allison finally screwed up his courage, confided the ongoing appearance of indecent doomsday notes to his wife, and was stunned to hear Virginia laughingly dismiss the incidents as practical jokes. Acutely conscious of her husband's susceptibilities, foibles and quirks, she suggested that someone at AGC was taking advantage of his inborn mistrust of the world and every animal, vegetable and mineral in it. Comforting Charles as best she could, Virginia affirmed and reaffirmed her own strong conviction that he was the victim of a prankster. Counseling him to forget the whole nonsensical business, she told him to buckle down and set an example of executive leadership no other captain of industry could *hope* to emulate.

Marginally reassured, although certain in his heart of hearts the cause was hopeless, Allison had indeed buckled down, throwing himself unsparingly into his division's operations maelstrom. As a consequence, he was rapidly burning himself out, working in a frenzy, spending long hours at his desk and on into most evenings, laboring far into the night over the ceaseless avalanche of paperwork, most if not all of which should have been handled by underlings.

As a result, his division soon ran like a rigorously maintained, nuclear-powered machine.

At the breakup of Mr. Mason's sunrise service, the CEO remarked on the wondrous turnabout to Dr. Ladd. "The transformation's no less than miraculous, Bill. It's like *magic* I tell you! R&D's strength has risen tenfold since we brought in Sorenson. I find it extremely difficult to believe a single high-level executive could make such a profound difference."

A sardonic glint his calm brown eyes, Dr. Ladd nodded and managed an appropriate response. Upon being introduced to his new boss, he had formed his own impression of the towering, burr-headed former officer and gentleman.

Upon receiving a final ghastly note, R&D VP & GM Charles Allison fainted:

YOU'RE FINISHED, CHUCKY!

* * *

Aware that his labors were being neglected, Sorenson tore his gaze from the engrossing panorama framed by his personal private window. Pulling the AGC facility map toward him, he dwelt momentarily on the identity and location of each large building, and tried to analyze the fine print listing intra-plant shuttle schedules and phone numbers. After a thorough perusal, he thrust the map aside and again concentrated on the seeding chart for the first annual AGC Ping-Pong Tournament Mr. Mason had praised him for sponsoring. Top-seeded was a tool and die inspector in what Sorenson considered no man's land, "F" Building's Quality Assurance Department. He admitted the fellow was adroit, and could volley and smash with the best of

them, but in his opinion the fellow's backhand needed polish, making the two- and three-seeds serious contenders in light of . . .

He paused, brow wrinkled, his ice-blue eyes flashing pale fire. Jerking the map back over the seeding chart, he studied it assiduously. His animation segued from uncertainty to irritation, then to outright indignation. He surged to his feet, unwittingly scooting the castered executive chair into an unoffending bookcase, and bent to rearrange the toppled volumes, heedless of where the tomes might have come from, or what any of the variegated titles signified.

Rolling the chair back into position with proprietary care, he clutched the folded map to his chest and vigorously exited his inner sanctum, breezing past his startled executive assistant, Myra, Moira or Myrna, who deftly slipped her nail file into a desk drawer. Looking neither right nor left, he stalked the length of executive row's wide corridor, his pre-possessive, metronomic footfalls dulled by the carpeting. Marching through "A" Building's small rear lobby, he loped down the steps, squared his turn in the fenced security corridor, and increased his velocity.

Nattily attired in a sky-blue business suit, dominant in bearing, eyes ahead, map in hand, his arms swinging with pendulous precision, Sorenson cut a devastating figure. His superbly masculine features and brush-cut helmet of iron-gray hair triggered numerous open-mouths among the employees who crossed his path. A man on a mission, he sailed past lesser individuals like a brigantine under full canvas, earning cringes and apprehensive changes of route.

Sorenson's excursion carried him past the rear steps of "C" Building, where a doughty manufacturing planner nudged a union shop steward. "Jeez! Pipe that mean looking bastich."

Noting the marcher's scarlet-rimmed badge, the union steward hawked and spat knowingly into a patch of wilted ivy. "Argg-g-gh, management!" he growled.

Sorenson swept past "D" Building, past "E." Across the way, "F" Building loomed next to . . . He halted, withdrew a mechanical pencil of gold-washed chrome from an inner jacket pocket and made a notation of some kind on the map, then all but paralyzed two employees on a coffee break by directing his laser glare at the large, stenciled "G" directly over their heads.

"H" Building hove in view, a single-story sheet metal structure from which issued the ratcheting sound of band saws and the tap-tap of carpentry.

Next in the row came . . . "*J" Building!*"

Sorenson halted, frowned darkly and snapped his heels together with a Teutonic click. He tapped the map, his features warped in an expression of volcanic indignation, then whirled and retraced his steps at subsonic velocity.

He bore down on the wide main gateway, where The Sheriff said something to a moving and storage van's driver. The veteran plant protection officer waved the trucker on, and found himself confronted by a tall, immaculately clad apparition.

"Where," demanded the glowering vice president, "is 'I'?"

The Sheriff rocked back on his heels, examining Sorenson in the manner of a lepidopterist studying an exotic insect prior to pinning it to his specimen board, "Offhand, sir," he drawled, "I'd say you were standing in the main gateway to the security corridor."

Sorenson blanched. "I" he said much more snappishly, "is *where?*"

The Sheriff squinted unhappily, his rheumy blue eyes roving downward, coming to rest on Sorenson's scarlet-rimmed badge. He blinked. "Begging pardon, sir. I've pinpointed your location near-zactly as I can get it. This here's the main traffic gate. On t'other side is . . ."

A low, feral growl issued from Sorenson's throat. The Sheriff drew back in alarm.

Decades as a commissioned officer had firmly cemented Sorenson's fine-tuned ability to spot enlisted personnel, in or out of uniform. The ragamuffin slouched insolently before him bore all the characteristic earmarks of a smartass *enlisted* man, exactly the sort of lowlife vermin he'd dealt with numerous times in the past. "Where," he insisted, raising his voice, "is 'I' Building?"

"Oh, 'I' *Building*." Immensely relieved, the Sheriff said, "Uh, reckon as how we don't have one of those, sir."

"Why not?"

The Sheriff raised a liver-spotted hand, eased back the Stetson's brim and scratched his freckled forehead. "Don't rightly know, now that you mention it, sir."

Sorenson considered himself well-versed in the intricacies of the English alphabet. He slapped the map a lusty whack. "'A' through 'M,' but no 'I' Building?"

"Er, no, sir. Nary a one far as I can tell."

Feeling crushed and humiliated by unanticipated exposure to the devious enlisted man mentality, Sorenson scowled darkly, about-faced like the whirling dervish, and set sail for "A" Building at flank speed.

A bilious expression clouding his weathered countenance, The Sheriff folded his long, thin arms defensively. He watched the apparition depart with long, measured strides, and breathed, "Where in hell did they dig up that weird fucker?"

* * *

Sorenson missed the daily, never-to-be-missed luncheon in the executive dining room, devoting his heart, mind, energy and spirit to a mandatory task.

Myra, Moira or Myrna returned from the cafeteria and was dumbfounded to find on her desk a single sheet of AGC letterhead bond filled with lines of hen-scratchings. Shocked to see the appropriate names for executive distribution listed in an infantile scrawl, she tried to decipher the erratically worded context and broke out in a cold sweat.

Ever since inherited the fruitwood-paneled executive office, Sorenson had received a steady fusillade of e-mail, executive and interoffice memos, arcane voicemail recordings, and reams of miscellaneous correspondence. At first he vainly tried to interpret the material, then threw in the towel. In order to resolve the current crisis, he'd unearthed a days-old memo from the wastebasket and, with agonized concentration, copied the format and list of names and titles.

Myra, Moira or Myrna puffed her cheeks, closed her eyes, took a firm grip on her faculties, silently vocalized a string of Hail Marys, and booted up her heretofore idle computer terminal. Laboriously rewording the memo after picked it to pieces syllable by syllable, she had unearthed the kernels of meaning nestled within its convoluted, elliptical phrased. Clicking her mouse and with fatalistic resolve, she dispatched the document to the laser printer, dropped the hardcopy in Sorenson's virginal OUT basket for signature, closed her eyes again and prayed.

Abandoning the seeding chart, map and window for the remainder of the afternoon Vice President Sorenson had ingrained the fruits of his labor in his mind, handed the memo back to Myra, Moira or Myrna signed with his illegible squiggle, and departed his fruitwood-paneled sanctum filled with a sense of fantastic accomplishment.

The memo crossed Mr. Mason's desk the following morning. He rushed to congratulate his protégé. "Thoroughness!" he told everyone along executive row. "Nothing's too minuscule to escape this man's attention. It's an attitude each and every one of us must cultivate, and nurture."

At the start of the ensuing day shift, a maintenance crew began painting out and re-stenciling the designations of four buildings ranging in size from large to huge. Maps and bus schedules, telephone books, catalogs and vendor information brochures were sent out to jobbers for reprinting. Delivery trucks dumped hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of piece parts, electronic components, castings, forgings and raw materials on the wrong loading docks. Expeditors, buyers and receiving inspection supervisors soon became nervous wrecks.

All told, Sorenson's acute powers of observation cost AGC in excess of sixty thousand dollars, plus untold wasted man-hours, before it was pointed out that "I" had been omitted from the building designations for an excellent reason.

In the aerospace world, common practice universally forbade use of the letter "I" in order to avoid confusing it with an Arabic "1," or Roman numeral "I."

8 - The White Elephant

With a pang of doubt crowing in his mind like the raven cry "Nevermore," Henry Alan Moffett reported to Aerospace General Corporation at eight o'clock on a windy Monday morning. He attributed the twinge of foreboding to a persistent behind-the-eyes headache that had refused to succumb to Sunday's ingestion of analgesic and fresh air.

The celebration responsible for the hangover, a dinner honoring Sargent Electronics retiree Clinton Dangerfield, had taken place the previous Saturday evening in the banquet room of Giorgio's bistro. Flattered upon receiving an invitation to attend the tribute, Ham had escorted Audrey Lee, resplendent in a greenish, tourmaline cocktail dress that vividly set off her auburn hair, and enjoyed mingling with some of the Sargent engineers with whom he'd spent years of his professional life. He had danced with the wives of former colleagues, laughed uproariously at his own jokes, and lied glibly about wishing Sargent had recalled him so that, together, he and his former colleagues could work added technological miracles.

Trying to match Dangerfield drink for drink had been Ham's undoing. Despite his advanced years and diminutive physique, the transplanted Aussie's tolerance for alcohol had been uncanny. One tacky vignette had lodged itself in the dim recesses of Ham's memory. Leaving Giorgio's long after midnight, an infirm voice in the parking lot had quipped, "You're too drunk t'sing, Moffett. You drive."

The hilarity had faded into oblivion, followed by a rude awakening early Sunday morning with Teddy bouncing on his chest and Ralph barking in his ear at thirty thousand decibels. Drenched in misery, he was perversely glad all other remembrance of the revelry had fled.

He spent the first half-hour at AGC watching a stilted indoctrination film, and was then photographed, messily fingerprinted, issued a clip-on plastic badge bearing his full name and a mug shot that made his driver's license picture look good. He also filled out a bevy of forms authorizing the payroll computer to make numerous deductions from his weekly paycheck, and in the end confronted by a solicitation from an unknown entity calling itself "Big Brother."

Hope he's not watching, came the inane thought. "What . . . or rather who," he asked a clerk, "is Big Brother?"

The woman sniffed, regarded him sternly. "A moderate weekly contribution helps ensure the minimum necessities for those less fortunate than we."

"A . . . charity?"

"Some may choose to call it that, sir."

His resolve weakened by ethanol rehabilitation, Ham said, "I, uh . . . give at home."

"The contribution's entirely voluntary, sir."

"Deduct much more," he said, "and I may join those less fortunate than we."

The woman eyed him with haughty distaste.

When he thought the dizzy parade of forms-to-be-filled-out was over, a pair of behemoths appeared: a computer-coded pamphlet requesting detailed biographical and career data, and a Department of Defense Personnel Security Questionnaire insisting that he account for every breath drawn since coming into existence, plus the names, titles, addresses, and phone numbers of five non-related personal references certain to be contacted and asked embarrassing questions about his professional, social, and spiritual lives.

New Hire Processing turned him loose at ten-forty with instructions to report to his "G" Building work station at one o'clock. Glad he'd had the foresight to drop by the previous Friday afternoon and undergo the perfunctory physical exam, he thought he might've flunked it in his present state of morning-after the morning after. His appetite nil, he dozed fitfully in the minivan for an hour, then roamed the semi-deserted parking lot breathing deeply, and massaging his throbbing temples. Entering "G" Building, he found the door to Dr. Ladd's office closed, His executive assistant was processing words at a fabulous rate at her desk.

"Well, hello." Introducing herself as Minnie, the woman said, "Dr. Ladd's out of town today, but knowing you were expected he asked me to turn you over to our Mr. Daisey, the department administrator. He'll help you get settled."

"Our" Mr. Daisey took his time answering Minnie's telephone hail. A laconic, sad-faced gentleman of middle years, he assayed Moffett's potential for burdensomeness and accepted delivery of the package. After a disinterested quiz about Moffett's background, Mr. Daisey led the way from one tenanted area and cubicle to another, presenting Ham to assorted drafters, designers, engineers, scientists and consultants, then conducted him to a cubicle near Ladd's office, in it a dusty sheet-metal desk, an empty, sagging bookcase, and a dented four-drawer file cabinet. Daisey's woebegone expression reinforced his woeful explanation about how the furniture had had been sitting there roughly forever, but were soon due to be replaced.

Abandoned to his own devices, Ham spent the afternoon drinking vile vending-machine coffee, bringing in personal reference books from the minivan, dusting the bookcase and putting things in order. After what seemed a full week, five o'clock rolled around. He had difficulty locating the Ford in the parking lot amid a roaring confusion of departing cars. Threading his way homeward through snarled traffic, he explained his irascible mood as an aftereffect of the hangover.

* * *

In the morning, determined to have a good first full day, he hustled through “G” Building’s tawdry, resplendent lobby seven minutes late due to the unfamiliar traffic crunch, and learned his desk, bookcase and file cabinet were no longer in the assigned cubicle.

Or were they?

Chagrined to think he had entered the wrong section of what might even be the wrong building, he retraced his steps mentally. Reassured, he checked the nearby cubicles. Yesterday’s tenants and furnishings had also gone missing.

Drifting uncertainly toward Ladd’s office, it gave him added pause to discover the area where Minnie’s desk, computer terminal and file cabinets had been was now an expanse of dusty floor tile. He cracked the door, peeked into the inner office. Bare walls and furniture-dented carpeting met his gaze.

Bewildered, feeling foolish turning round and round in the deserted corridor, he resolutely planted his feet. Where did AGC get off pulling this harebrained stunt? Fuming, he resisted an impulse to put a fist through the nearest cubicle’s partition.

“Mr. Moffett . . . ?”

Ham spun around. “Right! Who’re you?”

“Farnsworth,” said the other in a wary falsetto. The young man holding a rolled copy of the Wall Street Journal defensively against his chest warily backed away a half-step due to Moffett’s unexpected show of belligerence. “We, er . . . shook hands yesterday.”

“We did? Sorry, I met quite a few people yesterday.”

“May I inquire if you’re in the Market?” said Farnsworth.

“In the market for . . . ?”

“No, no. What I meant was . . .” Lowering his voice to a conspiratorial register, the other said, “I spoke to my broker just now, and wanted to warn you trading has fallen off rather sharply. If you’re in pharmaceuticals, autos, any high-tech issues, it might be wise to —”

“I’m in the market for my desk,” said Ham. “Yesterday it was in a cubicle over there.”

Looking uncomfortable, Farnsworth rolled and unrolled the Wall Street Journal. What little remained of his thinning blond hair contrasted picturesquely with the dark gray, three-piece pinstripes he wore. A small diamond stickpin blazed below the precise four-in-hand knot of a crimson power tie. “They . . . didn’t tell you?” he asked plaintively.

Ham said peevishly, “Whoever ‘they’ may be, ‘they’ didn’t tell me anything.”

“All Advanced Projects personnel,” enlightened Farnsworth, “have been moved behind the Green Door.”

“What did you say?”

Flustered, the other faltered, “I, uh . . . That is, Dr. Ladd assembled a tiger team to generate data for the preliminary Aerospaceplane concept review. The space cadets came and scoured every nook and cranny of the building for a suitable area to relocate —”

“Whoa!” Ham shook his head. “Say again.”

“Say . . . what again?”

“Whatever you’re talking about: tiger teams, green doors, space cadets!”

Farnsworth’s chubby features relaxed a trifle. “Just jargon around here, Mr. Moffett.” Punctuating the statement with a shy grin, he added, “Behind the Green Door is a catch phrase for any restricted area. Tiger teams are made up of personnel selected for an engineering task

force. ‘Space cadets’ are facilities coordinators who allocate floor space, move furniture, install telephone hookups, and so forth.

“Seriously,” added Farnsworth, his manner reverting to conspiratorial, “if you’re interested in revising your portfolio I’ll be happy to give you my broker’s number. I’m only a drafter, but I already own quite an impressive portfolio my broker helped put together. He doesn’t shilly-shally, know what I mean? Why, when I call in a buy or sell order he sits up, takes notice and gets right to it, know what I mean?”

“Great! Now if you aim me in the direction of this Green Door, I’d better check in.”

The other gestured with his rolled Wall Street Journal. “All the way to the end of the corridor, left at the far wall, then backtrack up the first aisle on your right.”

“Thanks, Farnsworth.” Ham strode away briskly.

“You can’t get in,” the youthful investor called after him.

Moffett halted in mid-stride. “Why not?”

“There’s a cipher lock on the Green Door, Mr. Moffett. You need the combination.”

Mouth dry, clenching and unclenching his fists spasmodically, Ham retraced his steps. “I take it you know the combination.”

“Oh, yes,” assured the other.

“How much do you want to tell me the combination?”

The drafter tugged nervously at his button-down collar. “I hope you won’t be offended, but it’s against security regulations to, uh tell someone the combo.”

Ham’s temper flared. “I swear on a stack of Machinery’s Handbooks to never, ever tell a living soul. Jot down the combination in Roman numerals. I promise to chew and swallow it.”

The fledgling capitalist blushed faintly. “Press the button at the Green Door, Mr. Moffett. Minnie will let you in, have you sign for the combination.”

“Bless you, Farnsworth! I hope the Dow Jones Industrials soar!” Charging up the corridor, Ham almost collided with a startled secretary toting an empty coffee urn.

When he confronted it, the Green Door proved a disappointment; it was painted a neutral beige. Ignoring the buzzer button, he pounded unmercifully on the beige Green Door, and kept on pounding until it swung inward to reveal Dr. Ladd’s quizzical features. “Tally ho! I was about to round up a posse and chase you down.”

Out of sorts, not feeling a need to apologize, Ham explained his tardiness.

“Daisey didn’t tell you about the move?”

“Must’ve slipped his mind.”

Ladd grimaced. “Okay, it’s time to start kicking butt around here, and Lazy Daisey will be a great first target. Have Minnie sign you up for the door combo, then round up some coffee and meet me in my new office there across the way. We’ll go have a peek at the mockup.

“Right away?”

“Give me two minutes to flog Daisey first.”

* * *

Carrying black coffee in a foam cup, Dr. Ladd punched a cipher combination with his free hand, pushed wide the inward-opening door and ushered Moffett into a windowless, claustrophobic room. “The basic design,” he said, “for some unknown reason is still company confidential. To date, only a few have seen the mockup of our gestating white elephant!”

Mesmerized, Ham stared at the model. Groping for an appropriate remark, unsure about saying anything, he elected candor as the only tack Ladd would accept. “A huge hydroplane?”

A bemused expression tickled the engineering director’s normally stolid countenance. “Great minds think alike after all,” he drawled. “When he first reviewed the concept studies I hauled back to Houston, Roelf Cornelius paraphrased your comment to nine decimals. Outrageous looking contraption, granted; but don’t let first impressions carry you away. Form follows function in many disciplines other than architecture.” Ladd sipped coffee, waiting.

Fascinated by the sleek model, Ham slowly made his way around the long plywood table. A sheet of clouded blue acrylic supported the model at the water line, as if the high-wing hydroplane were afloat. Four huge turbojet nacelles were cantilevered atop symmetrical pylons rising from the wing. Above outboard flotation hulls, at the junctions where the high-speed delta wing began its sharpest leading edge taper, a pair of longer nacelles spanned the wing’s entire truss chord, enclosing what Moffett judged to be ramjet engines. Soaring upward from these longer nacelles, twin vertical stabilizers bore a stylized, blue-striped NASA acronym. The orbiter’s dart-shaped aerodynamic lift body rode the hydroplane piggyback.

“What’s . . . the scale?” asked Ham.

“One to forty.”

After a second appraisal, Moffett said, “What’s the wingspan of this monster?”

“A red hair under seventy-seven meters.”

Ham loosed a sibilant whistle, opened his mouth, closed it again, unable to think of a suitable rejoinder. He finally said, “Two hundred feet?”

“Uh-huh.” Dr. Ladd hiked up one trouser leg, perched his butt on the table edge, ignored the NO SMOKING sign, pulled out a cigarette and snapped his lighter, and shot a glance at his wristwatch. “Give an ear to my spiel, then I’m going to sic you on a few reams of data and let you plow through the maze, learn what you can on your own. I’ll be a short spiel; I’m due to chair a meeting in less’n twenty minutes.

“For starters,” he began, “acquaint yourself with the acrid acronyms flourishing around here. The original RFQ — Request for Proposal — tabbed NASA’s next generation space transportation system ‘Aerospaceplane.’ We took it for granted the clumsy generic moniker would fall by the wayside, and split it in two. The orbiter stage rides the hydroplane piggyback, and answers to the acronym ORDART — Orbiting Reusable Deployment and Reentry Transport. The hulled air-carrier is labeled ALLP, Airborne Launch and Landing Platform.”

Ladd stabbed a button on the table. A tiny electric motor whined, opening clamshell doors on ORDART’s dorsal surface, exposing a silvery canister nestled in the cargo bay.

“Kitted ORDART military payloads,” informed Ladd, “will be carted into LOE — low Earth orbit — on mostly classified missions. USAF mass and volume estimates are only a shade under civilian modules and packages likewise kitted for on-orbit assembly. A typical ALLP/ORDART mission scenario is slated to go like this.”

Speaking much more hurriedly than during the employment interview, Ladd described how ALLP/ORDART would take off from, then descend and land in any appropriate body of fresh water, even the ocean in an emergency, though salt water contamination would pose what he termed “a pistol of a problem.” With ORDART piggybacked, ALLP would take off and climb out under normal turbojet thrust to around twenty thousand feet, where the ramjets would light

up and add more efficient thrust. Under combined turbojet-ramjet boost, ALLP would pitch up into steeper ascent mode, climb out and launch ORDART while cruising at between mach point-eight and -nine near the mesosphere boundary.

“We didn’t simulate one feature on this first-cut mockup,” he declared. “A hydraulic boom will elevate ORDART from ALLP in pre-separation mode, and the orbiter will bang away into LOE powered by its internal reaction motors and proceed on its mission profile, while ALLP cruises back and descends to a conventional water landing.”

“Like the Great Lakes?” suggested Moffett.

“The NASA/DoD site survey team took a hard look at the lakes. Unfortunately, the weather’s negative up that way a good portion of the year. Lake Mead in the Nevada-Arizona desert is the current leading candidate. Although suffering from a low water problem, it has plenty of acre-feet for our purposes. Final site selection will take place downstream, a decision in which we have no say. NASA and the Pentagon bureaucrats will have fun fussing and arguing with stingy pork-barrel-minded legislators over the operations site.”

Ladd glanced again at his wristwatch. “The faster I go,” he grouched, “the behinder I get. Let’s move on, Ham; we’ve much ground to cover in not many minutes. Mission completed,” he explained, “ORDART retrofires, reenters the atmosphere and rendezvous with ALLP at very high altitude — a maneuver akin to aerial refueling, but touchier to do. Once reacquired and remated via the hydraulic boom, ALLP/ORDART descends to a water landing piggybacked exactly as taking off. If a second ORDART’s been pre-flighted, crews could be exchanged and another mission, or rescue mission, flown within a ten or twelve hour turnaround period.

Concentration creased Moffett’s high forehead. He had given the fast-paced lecture his full attention, and taken mental notes. “I’m light-years over my head,” he confessed. “This may be a truly innovative space transportation system, but I have a gut feeling . . . I mean, to be up front, the configuration looks like an ungainly system to design, build and test. I can’t help feeling surprised AGC won the award. Please don’t pretend to understand it well enough to knock the concept, it just, uh . . . At first sight, it strikes me as . . . well, cumbersome.”

Ladd dropped his cigarette butt in the coffee dregs, and grinned. “Mr. Moffett, you’ve bolstered my first impression of you. Roelf Cornelius paraphrased your comment almost word for word. If I didn’t know better, I’d suspect you of reading my mail.”

Ham ignored the byplay. “You keep mentioning this . . . Cornelius. Who is he?”

“NASA’s resident genius. In my opinion, Roelf owns the most incisive technical mind in the civilized world. You’ll meet him before long, and revere him I’m sure. Yet in rendering your critique,” admonished Ladd, “you and Roelf were both shooting from the hip. To answer your objection the same way I answered his, upon first reviewing our proposal, the NASA/DoD evaluation team was incredulous. Their incredulity turned into open-minded interest, then to outright enthusiasm. Initially we were judged first technically, second with respect to facility resources and manned spaceflight experience, and fifth of five competitors on cost.

“Fifth, that is,” he clarified, “until the entire, prospective hundred-mission scenario was factored into the all-inclusive cost versus performance equation. Our closest rival, who has to remain anonymous, proposed an outdated ‘triamese’ concept — a triplet of conventional, solid-fueled launch boosters strapped to a lift-drag aerodynamic body much like ORDART. In essence, their proposal consisted of quasi-throwaway booster tankage, in essence a proven loser since it

would consist of three large strap-on boosters configured essentially like a glorified version of Rockwell's defunct STS system, except more costly to build and maintain, and a whole lot less cost-effective to operate. Ever since the *Challenger* and *Colombia* STS disasters, NASA and the Pentagon have been antsy about sticking with tricky solid-fueled booster stages on any variety of advanced STS system. In the final analysis, dumping the obsolescent strap-ons in favor of an air-carried system was a critically important criterion.

"Yet as one-shot delivered to the launch pad," pursued Ladd before Moffett could interject a question, "you and Roelf were absolutely correct. As proposed, the runner-up system would've cost less than ALLP/ORDART until logistics expenses and ancillary costs were factored into the entire multi-mission equation, and changed the story dramatically. ALLP/ORDART will be one hundred percent reusable, whereas our stiffest competitor's proposed configuration incorporated essentially obsolete vertical launch from a super-costly ground complex, not to mention the need to throw away, or hopefully recover at sea and retrofit, so-called 'reusable' booster shells.

"Viewed on a pro rata basis over a span of just twenty missions, the cost-effectiveness of ALLP/ORDART soars in spectacular fashion, and that was the clincher. Based on a one hundred-mission calculation of dollars-per-payload-kilogram-delivered-on-orbit over the program's time span, we literally beat the competition's brains out on cost, not to mention matching or bettering their conservative performance estimates."

Ladd checked his timepiece again. "Sorry, only a minute or two left to chat, Ham. Let me run through the secondary advantages that won it for us, then I have to scat.

"First, foremost, and above all else comes efficiency. Airborne by an admittedly oversized if conventional hydroplane, ORDART will air-launch from a high kinetic energy position at trans-sonic velocity on the fringe of the mesosphere, where the orbiter's reaction motors generate comparatively enormous thrust. This is a huge advantage compared to the negative kinetic energy position of vertically launched strap-ons sitting inert on the surface."

"Yes," put in Moffett, "but the —"

"Secondarily," continued Ladd, not to be interrupted, "once ALLP/ORDART is airborne its ascent-to-orbit azimuth is universal, whereas our competition would've been stuck with Kennedy's easterly equatorial launch corridor, or Vandenberg's southerly polar launch corridor. This buys all sorts of versatility; NASA, the military, telecommunication, remote sensing vendors, everybody, has been aching to escape the confines imposed by standard launch vectors.

"Thirdly, our system's rapid turnaround capability offers on-orbit rescue capability. Until now, if things were to turn dicey for guys and gals working in space, the chance of getting them home safely would still fall between iffy and can't be done. Another major point in ORDART's favor is that its reaction motors will light up in pre-separation checkout, significantly adding their thrust to ALLP/ORDART's total momentum prior to separation, whereas inert triammonium strap-ons would have continued to wastefully consume fuel and oxidizer during booster thrust checkout prior to unlocking and liftoff. In short, the competition's scheme was old hat; it depended on brute force. Ours employs at least a modicum of finesse, which has to be the way of the future."

Knowing it sounded lame, Ham felt that he had to say something. "It's . . . visionary."

"No, not really," denied Ladd. "Forward looking, but not at all 'visionary.' The proposed technology exceeds state-of-the-art in only one or two modest areas. One new goodie will be the

automated rendezvous system Dr. Mauch's electronikers will have to develop. His double-ees quoted a dual-imaging radar plus charge-coupled-device cameras to provide accurate stereo-perspective properties necessary for remate guidance at rendezvous. If the system pans out the way Mauch believes it will, remating ORDART and ALLP should be a snap."

"How about the —?"

"Sorry, we're out of time." Ladd slid his rump off the table. "I want you to start plowing through all the material in the proposal database. Check with the layout drafters, too; they're putting together a raft of preliminary outline drawings that'll give you the latest, up-to-datest configuration. See Yam Yaminishi or Max Anthony." He turned away, heading for the door.

"Dr. Ladd . . ."

"Yeah? Has to be a quickie, Ham."

"This configuration originated with you, didn't it?"

"Umm-m-m, a team effort all things considered. What struck me as odd was that NASA had the basic concept in front of its nose all along, and let the trees obscure the forest."

"What do you mean?"

"During a typical STS mission," enlightened Ladd, "if the weather soured in Florida the old orbiter people took to calling a Shuttle had to land at Edwards out in the California desert, then be expensively ferried back to the Cape piggybacked aboard a refitted Boeing 747. That alone should have provided their brain trust with a clue about the virtues of an air-carrier system. What made you suspect our white elephant was born due to my seminal inspiration?"

"I suppose it was . . . Call it a hunch."

"A hunch, huh . . .?" Ladd flashed a wolfish grin. "Keep playing your hunches, Ham. S'pose I have to plead mea culpa, not try to con you into believing otherwise. Before you bow to my brilliance, remember that I'm also the one who'll be shouldering the blame if our white elephant goes into labor and brings forth a teentsy mouse. It'll be up to you and me, as midwife and obstetrician, to make sure our she elephant delivers a strong, healthy newborn. And *that* will be a very tall order indeed. Look me up later in the day. We'll talk some more."

The door to the mockup room swung shut.

Having partially digested far too much information far too fast, Ham stayed inside for the better part of an hour, staring at the model, thinking, and digesting.

And wondering . . .

9 - Game Plan

Alex made his greeting extra effusive. "Hey, terrific t'see you guys! Just great! Come on in. Reason I called this sit-down is to lay our cards face up on the table. We'll firm up the game plan front to back, get a handle on the morning line, chalk up our crusade's early point-spread."

Once his co-conspirators had been made comfortable, Kurile let his mildly walleyed stare settled on Enrique Salazar, then drifted to Burton, on to Gridley, and back to Salazar.

The dapper attorney who managed Kurile's New York investment bank shifted his weight uneasily, trying to determine if Alex was looking at him, and his pencil mustache twitched, accentuating his perpetually wary expression.

“Rico,” declared Alex earnestly, “in the endgame we’ll be counting on you for the dollars and cents snapper that wraps things up, but that chain can’t get pulled for a while. First we’ve got to undermine AGC, goose Masons morons to the point where they’re easy to take as a bare-assed tootsie. Then comes your big bucks move. Then we’ll see how high they bounce.”

Salazar managed to perform a herky-jerky nod and shrug at the same time.

Miffed by the other’s outward lack of enthusiasm, Alex’s misfocused stare raked the banker. “Aw, can’t expect a whole lot of cheerleader rah-rah! from a lawyer.” He shifted his walleyed attention to Burton, then on to Gridley. “Hey, don’t just sit there, come to the party, guys! I can’t do all the think work for this wrecking crew. You’re my ace players. We came to play, and when you play you play for all the marbles. He waited expectantly. “Well, f’Chrissake don’t everybody talk at once!”

“Mr. Kurile,” ventured Enrique Salazar, “in my opinion you seriously underestimate the difficulty of effecting the hostile takeover of a major government supplier. AGC is more than merely a subsidiary of Vonex Corporation, a major conglomerate with enormous assets, but also the longest pole in the Vonex tent. I cannot imagine how we —”

“Tent, schment! Hold it there, Rico!” His lantern jaw outthrust pugnaciously, Alex rounded on the banker. “Think like that, and we’re screwed at the get-go. You clammed up tight, didn’t say boo when we slapped together *your* part of the game plan. Why start waffling now?”

The attorney said calmly, “No heat if you please, Mr. Kurile. I am being honest and forthright per your express wishes. We are aiming high — stratospherically, one might say — by hoping to achieve a leveraged buyout of AGC, while possessing very little leverage.”

“We is it? Forget ‘we,’ Rico, it’s *me*. I have so got leverage, bags, bundles of leverage.”

Salazar did not offer a rebuttal. His expression pensive, he turned and stared fixedly at the wind-battered picture window of Kurile’s garish, overdecorated penthouse office.

Taken aback, Alex followed the banker’s gaze, and listened to the sublimated moan of the wind, the barely audible susurrations of airborne grit blasting the glass. A sandstorm had roared in from the desert at dusk, obscuring the Strip’s neon jungle in brownish murk. “Putrid wasteland!” he muttered. “If this tin-plated, dried-up burg wasn’t where all the action is, or was until the Wall Street wiseguys zotzed the country’s money machine, I’d never come near the damn place.”

* * *

Alex took a deep breath, cleared his throat and shifted gears, slipped into his hard-sell mode. “Okay, now listen up! In his own shysterly way Rico made his point. It’ll be tougher than a two-dollar steak — crucial, to cadge a favorite adverb of Gridley’s — for us to try’n compete with Vonex on the heavy money thing. Rico,” he said angrily, “I promise never to get sore when you tell it like it is. We have to crank the handle, get our brains in gear and figure out how to use all the angles.” In a vein of infinite sincerity, he added, “Just look at the top-drawer team I’ve pulled together right here in my office. Burton was one of AGC’s top bananas, and now he’s our inside guy. Frank still buddy-buddies with the gonifs in Mason’s front office. He knows where the body’s buried, knows how to dig it up, bring it back to life so we can use it.

“Then there’s our heavyweight Washington arm-twister, Gridley, who parties with a dozen blowhards in Congress, hobnobs with military big shots, and is owed favors from right to left, north to south, from the White House to the Pentagon.

“Then there’s you, Rico. I didn’t pick you out of no grab bag to run my bank. You’re wired into the big picture on the Street. You pal around with fat cats on the Big Board, get the straight skinny through your pipeline into the scam on the Street *and* in the boardrooms.

“Finally there’s me.” Alex rose to totemesque proportions behind his freeform desk and proudly thumbed the lapels of the Savile Row, summer-weight suit that hung on his lanky frame like an off-the-rack drapery panel. “I get what I want, see,” he declared. “Always have, and always will. Why do I always get what I go after? Because I use my brains and balls to get the best mileage from my dough, that’s why. Except when I want something really, *really* bad, I hustle out and get my hands dirty. I go after it like it’s a life or death thing, nothing less.

“With the help of you three,” he predicted, “I figure to grab AGC by the berries in maybe a year, eighteen months tops, and start squeezing hard enough to put Mason go down on his knees. Burton’s our wood horse,” he said, oozing confidence. “He’s handling the Sneaky Pete insider goings-on, greasing the skids, getting AGC ripe for a fall by putting the kibosh on Mason’s key guys. Frank’ll be undercutting what few small potatoes contracts that’re still in the oven, and dynamite any new government handouts Mason happens to collar by accident.”

Alex paused. “Frank, you mentioned the big brain running their new space bus job.”

Burton nodded. “Dr. Ladd. For years he managed the Advanced Projects Group in my division. When the new contract landed, Mason promoted him to R&D chief engineer.”

“Rr-un-dee . . ? Want to spell it out?”

“Research and Development,” said Burton. “Bill Ladd now has technical cognizance over the entire R&D effort. As I said, in essence he’s been acting chief engineer for years, and when his team landed the Aerospaceplane contract, Mason made it official.”

“Bolshoi! Now there’s a bull’s eye target if I ever heard of one. How much banana oil will it take to put this guy’s heart in a jar, and lock it in my safe??”

“Forget it, Alex. Can’t be done.”

“Why not? Everybody’s got a price, and I mean *everybody*.”

Burton’s negative headshake was adamant. “Not this everybody. Advanced Projects reported to my office, and I learned early on to respect Ladd front to back, top to bottom and side to side. He’s among the most knowledgeable human beings alive, and not only in a technical sense. If he has a price, I can’t begin to imagine what it might be.”

Alex frowned. “So shitcan your imagination and go find out. If this rare bird’s too uppity-minded to bite on the long green, find some other worthwhile bait. If that don’t turn the trick, shovel dirt on his ace helper, handyman, gofer, whoever works closest to him.”

Burton said, “Now there’s a thought. The word is that Ladd just brought aboard a young staff engineer, so young in fact that it caused comment. There could be a shot at doing something like that. I’ll have Jake Pozderak, the P.I. who working with me, check on staffer’s pedigree.”

“That’s the ticket! Now you’re hitting on all cylinders,” enthused Kurile. “Smartass pup, new to the job, prob’ly with a missus and little house apes at home. Hungry young guys are pushovers. Dead meat! You can play ‘em like game fish, then reel ‘em in whenever it suits you. But those’re details you have to work out your ownself, Frank.”

Resuming his cheerleader role, Alex said, “Okay, us four, we’re getting set to swat AGC in the technical belly, belt Mason’s guys in the management gut, and kick ‘em hard in the financial balls. We’ll turn that stinking outfit inside out, upside down and sideways. We’ll get

into Mason's knickers every which way, screw him over till it won't matter if he ups and runs, or sits still, wets his pants and dirties his drawers.

"All the angles, guys! Keep thinking of that," insisted Alex. "Later on, we'll make use of the big bucks Rico's putting aside, and maybe even find a way to dynamite AGC's half-assed credit union operation. Rico, get with Frank on feeding feed you the inside poop on how their not-for-profit banking scam works, okay? Frank also told me about a hot flash of his that had to do with throwing Mason's stupid management club under the bus, even their flibberty gibbet recreation club, or whatever it's called. Better believe me, guys, I know how fast minor shit like we're talking about stacks up. In the casino racket, I learned the hard way that if you handle it right, minor crap fills the cesspool to the tippy top sooner than you'd think.

"Gridley's hot to trot already," he concluded. "He's getting set to call in some big favors from some of the union crooks and government freeloaders he runs with in D.C. He's also been cozying up to a soldier boy who works at the Pentagon for General Whatsizface, right, Grid?"

"Right, Mr. Kurile." The lobbyist grinned, exposing buck teeth. "General Dennis is some touchy, dyed-in-the-wool hardhead. What frosts the cake for us is that he's had a chip on his shoulder for AGC. I don't say it'll be a snap to set fire to the oil on the troubled waters in his command, but he sure does present a —"

"Oil, fire water . . ! Where the hell are you coming from now, Grid?"

"A figure of speech," the lobbyist said hastily. "Sorry, Mr. Kurile."

Alex fumed. "Forget all that 'troubled oil and cake' horsepocky, and stick to business. While you're at it, talk American, f'Chrissake. A scheme to unionize AGC's salaried pros is at the A-number-one top of Grid's sock-it-to-'em list. Work that angle for everything that can be milked out of it, and we could get a long, head-knocker of a strike by Mason's primo engineers and science guys that'll cut the legs out from under what few moneymaking programs AGC still has in the oven. Remind me, who's the union slob who's wetting his beak in my wallet?"

"Quick," replied Gridley. "Sean Quick, a feisty Boston Irishman. He's the strongarm hatchet man in the United Telecommunications Brotherhood hierarchy."

"Higher which . . ?"

"In the, uh, union's front office."

"Uh-huh, I met the shifty-eyed clown when you brought him to Vegas to wine and dine him. I tell you, guys, Grid's also working hard to line up other nifty surprises for Mason. He told me the waste in government spending is a pet peeve of some government windbag."

"Senator Dismyre," supplied the lobbyist.

"Yeah, that's the name I remember. According to Grid, he's got a permanent hard-on over the way big time bets go down on ding-a-ling aerial-spacey contracts that never run in the money, and hands out his silver whatzis award to shady airplane and missile builders who don't toe the line. We sure do want him on our side when it comes to hitting AGC with both barrels. Another nag out of the starting gate is the audit scam Burton cooked up." Alex snapped his fingers. "What did you call it, Frank?"

"A COR Audit."

"Core . . ? Like in apple core? Doesn't sound right."

"C-O-R," spelled Burton, "Corporate Operations Review. Coping with a full-blown COR Audit is a major headache for even the most honest and aboveboard prime contractors."

Alex snickered. "Which AGC isn't one of, right? Hey, are you guys beginning to catch a glimmer of the combination of lefts and rights, head-butts and ear bites we'll be bashing AGC with? Then later, after things begin turning our way, and Mason's slobbs are punchy, hanging on the ropes, about to go down for the count, along comes Rico who'll goose AGC into floating recovery bonds we'll snap up like hot, fried grasshoppers. Not long after that, it's a gotcha! The shoe's on the other foot, the tables're flipped, the rug's yanked out from under the Vonex turds who stole the company my great-grandpa and his twin bro sweated blood to set up in business."

"At which point, Mr. Kurile," interjected Enrique Salazar, "you-know-what will definitely hit the fan, and we shall all be exposed to an extremely bad smell. A hostile takeover simply cannot be the straightforward, linear proposition you picture."

"Why the hell not?"

The investment banker sighed. "What if Vonex dips into its sinking fund and props up AGC? It not only could do so, but in all probability *will* do so. As I mentioned, AGC is a major subsidiary of the international Vonex conglomerate enterprise. Should the directors decide to go head to head with you, trying to play a game of 'top this' will be like sitting in on a no-limit poker game with fifty dollars in your pocket."

Radiating acute indignation from every pore, Alex cried, "Rico, I've got one helluva lot more than fifty bucks in my deep pockets."

Turning away again, Salazar stared out the window at the moaning sandstorm.

Alex thought things over, relented only a trifle and said snappishly, "Aw, so we roll the cubes and seven-out. You can't win if you don't play, right?"

"A simile," said Salazar, returning his attention to the discussion, "much more valid than you may realize, Mr. Kurile. The proposed undertaking resembles an ordinary gamble in no way whatever. I would say its an off-brand variety of some exceptionally long longshot you would never touch or so much as go near in your own casino."

Alex had heard enough. He glared at the attorney with walleyed ire, gritted his teeth in an obscene rictus and said, "Life's one big crap shoot, Rico. We're sitting here in my penthouse comfortable as sin, betting the government jerkjollies over in Mercury won't set off an underground nuke and trigger a Bolshoi quake that'll dump my office on the ground floor."

"Nevada weapons testing ceased over in Mercury a long time ago," said Burton.

Alex pretended not to hear the remark. "A gamble's a gamble, Rico, and I'm a pro gambler, see? I made a lifetime project of engraving the percentages in my thick noggin so . . ." Kurile broke off. "What's eating you now, Rico? You've been checking your watch every two minutes. Got to take a leak, what?"

"The Market closes in an hour," announced Salazar. "I should call my office."

"So take off and make the damn call."

"Me too." Gridley eyeing Kurile tentatively, as if requesting permission to leave.

Alex waved him away. "Later, guys. We'll have another sit-down after dinner, slap a new set of Band-Aids on the game plan, maybe put a touch of extra polish on it."

* * *

His expression sour, Alex watched two of his co-consiprators file out of the office. "Frank, just betweenus," he confided, "that pair, they're crucial to the overall game plan, but I'll

let you in on a little secret. It's you who's my one and only ace in the hole. You're the guy who'll make it happen, see the deed gets done."

"What I'm into should improve our chances, but speaking plainly the downside is that what I'm doing is called industrial espionage. The powers that be take a dim view of —"

"Bet your sweet patootie their views're dim!" said Kurile. "You're into first-class cloak 'n dagger shit. We're not playing for peanuts here, we're shooting the Moon."

"Moon shooters, sometimes end up looking at the Moon through bars."

"Aw, Jay-sus! Knock off that negative crap! You're worse than Rico. Where you coming from with that downbeat horsepocky?"

"It happens, Alex."

"Sure, dimwits now and then take the fall, but smart Moon shooters end up crowing on top of the woodpile." Switching back to his soft-sell mode, Alex lowered his voice. "Why do you think I went to all the hassle of paying a P.I. outfit to look you up, then yanked you out of that two-bit desert rat hole where you were dying dead as yesterday's news? Why'd I put you on the payroll big time, Frank? Why did I set you up in L.A.? Did I do all that just for kicks?"

"Naturally I appreciate the way you've —"

"Naturally, hell! Listen, at age twenty-one" Alex said with passion, "I inherited a bundle that'd choke a horse, mostly leftovers from my old man's feast, topped off by spillover from the fortune of Great-Grandpa Andrei, bless his restless soul. In eight short years I turned that trunkful of loot into a mountain of greenbacks. I'm fixed, Frank, rolling in it. I don't need AGC for the big bucks, I need it for *me*, and the satisfaction of goofy relatives I haven't seen or talked to in years. By declaring war on Mason's scumbag outfit, I'm going to take it away from Vonex not by nibbling around the edges, but taking big bites in a winner-take-all, no holds barred, take no prisoners war. What's more, my war chest is big enough to take on France, let alone AGC and the Vonex high rollers who tell Mason when to jump, and how high."

Less than reassured, Burton returned a slow nod of agreement.

The other's uncertainty to swallow his tale made Alex bear down in earnest. "Like I said, I'm a pro gambler. I calculate today's odds at two-and-a-half or three-to-one against the scam swinging our way, but also know only the shoe clerks put down bets this early. Odds change fast when it gets closer to post time and the important dough goes down. You're my numero uno odds changer, Frank. With the wild-ass mix 'n match capers we're about to pull, I figure in less 'n a year the odds'll tote close to even money, and after that . . ." He let optimism hang in the air like the sweet smell of success.

Halfway convinced despite a river of qualms and reservations, Burton said, "I more than anyone hope you're right. I'll never be able to thank you enough for bailing me out, but —"

"But me no buts, Frank! I can't stand being butted. All you have to do from here on in is think bigger than big. It's the only way we'll have a prayer of coming in a winner. Once we're in the AGC driver's seat, who you think I've got pegged to run AGC?"

Burton's scalp tingled. "Me . . .?"

"Who else, f'Chrissake? You know the business up one side and down the other. You dig the insider deals, know what the government big hats are willing to pay for, and it makes you the primo sauce in my winning ticket recipe. You know the ins and outs n ups 'n downs of the whole oddball aerial-spacey racket. I ask you frankly, Frank, who else would I pick?"

An expression of sheer delight transformed Burton's clean cut masculine features. He fantasized wildly, pictured himself barring Benjamin C. Mason III from parking his show-off Bentley town coupé in the executive lot, saw the carpeting, draperies and fruitwood paneling vanish from the CEO's plush corner office suite, watched Mr. Mason hunt frantically for the key to his private john, envisioned him sitting behind a cheap sheet-metal desk in a two-by-four pigsty way out in the wilds of Siberia, maybe as far out as "M" Building.

"I'm with you all the way, Alex. We go for broke!"

"Now you're by God humming my tune!" Alex clapped his ace in the hole's shoulder a lusty whack. "Come on, we'll go get ourselves some dinner."

10 - Allison Agonistes

After four decades of married life tainted by the Aerospace Syndrome, Virginia Allison considered herself omniscient when it came to predicting her husband's foibles, faults and follies. On this particular evening she learned the meaning of fallibility.

Harried Executive Vice President & General Manager Charles Allison drove home erratically, arriving even later than usual from his long, enervating day at AGC. He announced his arrival by punching the garage door opener's remote control, and plunging his crimson Porsche into the rising door as it opened, smashing in the beautifully kept auto's forward deck.

Undismayed, Allison backed into the house's bedroom wing, demolishing a brick planter and splintering a hole in the board and batten siding. He emerged from the stalled Porsche like a sleepwalker, holding himself erect by sheer willpower.

Virginia Allison burst from the service porch. "Charles!" she cried, clapping her palms to her cheeks. "What have you done? Have you been drinking?"

"Good morning, Madeleine." Allison smoothed the lapels of his suit jacket, a gesture suggesting untapped reservoirs of executive competence.

"Madel . . . ?" Virginia gaped at her husband. "Madelaine's your secretary, Charles. It's ten o'clock at night, and this is me, Virginia!"

"Please bring me Mr. Sorenson's personnel file, Madeleine."

"Oh, Charles!"

"Come, come; don't dawdle. At last I have the goods on that scheming upstart. I also want you to call in a handwriting expert. Those scurrilous notes of his will hang him if nothing else turns the trick. He's a simp, I tell you, an evil, obnoxious simp. I mean to see that he ends up in a place where sunlight is piped in every third Tuesday."

Virginia shrieked and dashed back into the house. Seizing the telephone in an early stage of hysteria, her hand trembled so badly that clutching the receiver became iffy, and she punched the first sequence of numbers that flashed into her head. After three rings, an unctuous, recorded soprano thanked her for calling the Lukens Pet Center. "Neither Dr. Lukens or a staff member is available at the moment. Please leave a name and number, and your call will be —"

Virginia shrieked again and tried to slam down the handset, missing the cradle on her first two attempts. Punching buttons with haphazard haste, she reached in succession the Woodland Hills Lutheran Church, the local library, and a supermarket on Ventura Boulevard. By this time the poor woman was wailing in acute distress.

The out-of-touch senior vice president and general manager had trailed his wife into the study. Standing before her, an accusative frown hovering on his overworked brow, he said, "Stop this fooling around, Madeleine. Get me Sorenson's file."

The restated directive elicited a louder shriek from Virginia Allison. Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply and recouped a sliver of composure, an act of sheer desperation fueled by terror. Punching 911, she cried, "Ambulance, and for God's sake hurry!"

"Easy, Lady," advised a bored male voice. "Illness'r injury? What's the address?"

"Ug-hhgh-h-h . . .!"

"What kind of emergency, Lady? Give me the address."

Speechless, Virginia stared into her husband's glazed, vacant eyes. She couldn't seem to remember her street address. She could not in fact recall her own name.

"Y'with me, Lady?" inquired the masculine voice.

"Really, Madeleine!" Thoroughly vexed, Allison stamped his foot impatiently. "This is intolerable. Bring me Sorenson's file at once!"

"Oh, Ch-Charles! What's happened to you?" Sobbing, Virginia caged the telephone and frantically fumbled through a tickler file on the desk. Slowly, with single-minded determination born of panic, she punched Mr. Mason's unlisted Beverly Hills number.

AGC's president and chief executive officer had nodded off in the midst of writing the next speech he was due to deliver before the Beverly Hills Women's Club. He was dozing in front of the fireplace when the phone rang in his study.

"Virginia," he advised, only half-awake, struggling to reorient himself in space and time, "take a firm grip on yourself. What was it you said?" he asked sharply. "You mean he . . . Good heavens! He did, did he? Stay with him, my dear. Keep him as quiet as possible until I get there. Yes, yes; I understand. Are you in any physical danger . . . ? Good. Worry never cured any situation. Keep a stiff upper lip, Virginia. I'm on my way."

* * *

"Hiya, Frank." Returning from an extended weekend in Hawaii, Alex took advantage of a refueling stopover in L.A. to pay his industrial espionage maven a visit.

Blinking at the glare coming past his employer through the doorway, Burton said, "Hey, look who's here." He had spent the morning chivvying information from former associates and talking to one or two soldier in the regiment of private detectives assigned to help tumble the walls of AGC. The door chime had interrupted a lengthy phone conversation.

"How goes the battle?" asked Kurile.

"Great, great! Say, you look tanned and fit. Come on in."

"Yah, tanned, fit, and short on minutes. The Gulfstream's gassing up at Van Nuys Airport. I've got a massage appointment, then it's back to the eleven-to-two grind in Vegas." Alex trailed his number one co-conspirator into the bedroom Frank had converted into a makeshift office. He cast a suspicious glance at the paper mess on the desk. "Been doing your homework?"

"And how. Hang on a sec." Lifting the phone, Burton said curtly, "I'll call you back."

"So fill me in," ordered his visitor.

"Forging ahead on all fronts, Alex."

"Uh-huh, how fast, in which direction?"

“Full speed ahead straight down the pike. With the Aerospaceplane R&D Contract in-house, my old division automatically becomes our primary target. You once said lopping off the head was the quickest, easiest way to kill a snake.”

“Right on!” Not about to become the victim of an evasion, large or small, Alex demanded to know what sort of hatchet Burton was swinging at which target.

“Don’t know if you realize there’s a catch,” said Burton. “As a target, each of AGC’s three major divisions are two-headed, with a business head as well as a technical head.”

Mentioning a ‘catch’ garnered a suspicious narrowing of Alex’s too-close-together, misaligned eyes. He decided not to quibble. “I sniff a stinger in the wind, Frank.”

“Could be a major stinger. Remember what I told you about Charles Allison?”

“Uh, name doesn’t ring a bell.”

“He was once my boss, and I knew Chucky was was overripe for a fall. The executive assistant I told you about has been sneaking scary notes into his office?”

Alex blinked. “Sort of recollect something along those lines,” he lied.

“The word’s out on Chucky. He’s been crumbling, coming apart at the seams. I told you I once reported to him, and I know ultra-paranoid he really and truly is.”

“Ulter, uh . . . Yeah, sounds good.”

“According to a few R&D insiders, he’s been shying at shadows, burning the midnight oil every evening, practically living in his office, and getting very little sleep. He’s a competent workaholic executive, but beneath all that polish is a foursquare Nervous Nellie who’s been walking a knife edge. If he keeps up the dizzy pace he’s on, he’ll soon crack wide open.”

“Bolshoi!” Alex had no idea what Burton was talking about, but he ran his tongue over chapped lips and tasted a distant hint of success. “Sounds like you’re on top of that ploy, Frank. So if this scarey cat folds, who’ll Mason stick in his slot?”

“That,” said Burton with a self-satisfied leer, “is the teaser. No way to be sure, yet logic says it has to be the acting R&D guiding light, this Sorenson. Trouble is, logic doesn’t always end up taking the brass ring. I only hope we aren’t digging ourselves in deeper.”

“Deeper . . . ?” Alex didn’t like the sound of that.

“Dumping the devil you know,” explained Burton, “risks inheriting one you know nothing about. I can predict Chucky from here to breakfast, but not this shiny new exec. If Chucky cracks, his stand-in will hopefully be the newbie camped in my old office. Judging from what the grapevine has to say about him, he could literally *be* the nothing burger Gridley claims. He’s somehow wormed his way into a warm spot in Mason’s flinty heart. Even as a newbie exec he’s officially R&D’s second tier VP, so . . .”

“So what comes down if this goose-egg wins wire-to-wire?”

“No way to know until if and when it happens.” Burton pondered. “Sorenson has all the earmarks of a genuine enigma. If he does happen to match Gridley’s description, and gets himself installed in R&D’s top slot, I believe we may be home free.”

“Sounds t’me like one more crap-shoot. Okay, we’ll sweat that out, see what comes down. How about the hotshot engineer? Hang a bull’s eye on his backside yet.”

“Dr. Ladd . . . ? Umm-m-m, tougher, Alex, infinitely tougher. I had lunch with Bill last week. We were always on good terms. He’s someone I honestly admire.”

“You’ve stayed kissy-ass with Mason’s techie guru? Good, good! Learn anything?”

“From Bill, next to nothing,” admitted Burton, irked by his benefactor’s pedestrian manner. “He’s by far the brightest light in Mason’s technical stable, and friendly as a pup, yet also totally self-contained. It’s a waste of time trying to pump someone who’s able to talk intelligently on any subject you care to mention, yet reveal zip about what he’s really thinking. Oh, he acted glad to see me back on my feet, and all that, even mentioned in passing the screwing I got from Mason. A professional’s professional in every sense of the term, he’s also a deceptively slick article once you get to know him. It makes him a diamond-hard nut to crack.”

“He said nothing at all about Mason’s new space bus job?”

“Oh, generalities, common knowledge stuff. He told me Aerospaceplane was too big a job for any pair of hands. That’s why he brought in the young staff assistant I told you about.”

Alex frowned. “Frank, somehow we’ve got to clobber AGC’s new space bus job. Think there’s a shot at getting into the engineer guru’s knickers through his helper?”

Burton tapped a pencil against his teeth. “I’ve thought about it, plus some other side issues. Jake Pozderak, your star P.I. is doing a deep background check on Moffett.”

“On who . . . ?”

“Ladd’s young staff engineer. Getting next to Ladd through him depends on how close Moffett gets to Ladd, how much influence he can exert on his boss. They say no man is an island, but with Ladd that may not be entirely —”

“What frigging island . . . ? Now where’re we headed, f’Chrissake?”

“Skip it.” Burton squelched a brighter flare of irritation. “I honestly think the only door to Ladd may be through his special interest.”

“Which is what? Broads, sniffy powder, booze? I can fix him up easy with —”

“No, forget all that.” Burton diddled with a sharpened pencil, wondering how it would look sticking out of a misaligned Kurile left eyeball. “Ladd’s a dedicated futurist.”

“A which . . . ?”

“Fu-tu-rist,” declared Burton, employing Shakespearean enunciation. “Bill thinks he was born a century too early. He publishes technical articles about where we’re headed in space, and why. Under a half-dozen pseudonyms, and he’s authored some outstanding speculative fiction.”

“Speck . . . ? You mean sinus fiction? Rocket ships, screwy monsters from the stars, far out nutty crap like that? Guy has to be partly whacko to daydream about that stuff.”

His patron’s characterization brought Burton’s thought processes to a full stop. “Yeah,” he said wearily, “sinus fiction. I read two of his novels, but storytelling for him is just fun stuff. His real love is a deep, abiding focus on orbital manufacturing.”

“Orb . . . Making stuff up in the sky? Not using fancy footwork just to tap dance on ol’ Alex’s head, are you, Frank?”

“Perish the thought.”

“Yeah, uh-huh, perish, speck whatever, perry-noya and twenty-one adds up to Blackjack or the latest NFL score, whichever comes first. Enough of this malarky! How’ll this big brain engineer’s hard-on for future spacey stuff help our scam?”

“Maybe it will,” said Burton candidly, “and maybe it won’t. My thought is that if we can tease him into concentrating on his pet interest rather than riding herd on the Aerospaceplane program it might distract him from ALLP/ORDART long enough to —”

“Distract him from *wha-a-a-at* . . . ?”

Summoning backup from his rapidly dwindling, all but depleted stockpile of patience, Burton explained the acronyms.

“Kee-rist on a crutch! You keep on spouting techie double-talk straight from the gray part of the Twilight Zone.” Alex shot his cuffs, checked the time on his Rolex, and lurched to his feet. “I leave all that mind blowing crap to you, Frank. Talking serious for a change, you know the score on this aerial-spacey crap, and to put it straight up instead of sideways I don’t pretend to. Damned glad you’re heading up our wrecking crew. Gotta run. Keep me posted, okay?”

“Sure thing.” Burton walked his employer to the door. “Before you rush off,” he said, arresting Alex in mid-flight, “there’s something you ought to keep in mind, Alex. We’re not doing the country a favor by undercutting AGC. If Aerospaceplane gets shot down in flames, it will bollix a slew of downstream civil and military space projects.”

Reacting with mild alarm, Kurile said anxiously, “How so? Bollix ‘em in what way?”

“On the civilian side, Augmented International Space Station Beta will catch hell. Russia, Japan and other European countries play major roles in the program.”

Alex paled beneath his Hawaiian tan. “*Russia’s* in cahoots with the U.S. on space stuff?”

“Oh, yes; as one element of a multinational consortium. If ALLP/ORDART . . . Sorry, if Aerospaceplane gets scrubbed, any number of downstream weather and telecomm satellites, a physics lab, a microgravity manufacturing research facility, and a lot more, might go into the toilet, plus a raft of lesser items slated for downstream implementation. Nor does that list include an extended series of classified military missions.”

The wheels turned ponderously in Alex’s bullet head, squeaked, groaned, and ground to a stop. “Listen, there isn’t any bigger red, white ‘n blue flag waver around than me. I dearly love the U.S. of A. This great country did plenty to help boot the filthy Red bastards out of the Sovietsky driver seat. I’d never think of throwing a wrench in America’s slice of the spacey pie, or Russia’s either. Here’s what we’ll do, Frank. Once we’re in charge, I swear on Great-Grandpa Andrei’s grave to drop everything else and make you the button man on the fanciest, glitziest aerial-spacey items money can buy. That’s a flat-out promise! Last thing I’d ever do,” he insisted, “is help trash the techie stuff this great country’s got going for it. America handed my great-grandpa and his twin bro a home away from home when they needed one the worst way. Gawdalmighty! If only you knew what they went through . . .”

Alex forgot his massage appointment and put a hand on Burton’s shoulder. He said with almost painful sincerity, “Someday, when the time’s right, I’m going to sit you down and tell you their whole story front to back. You won’t believe the tale, Frank. You’ll be sure I’m telling a tall tale when I fill you in on what they did do, and didn’t do. It’s no ordinary story, either. A goddamn saga’s what it is . . .”

Burton mentally kicked himself for inadvertently priming his employer’s pump.

* * *

In record time, the silver Bentley town coupé negotiated Benedict Canyon’s switchbacks to the San Fernando Valley. Accepting Virginia Allison’s account of her husband’s condition at face value, the alarmed Mr. Mason had phoned Dr. Boggio, a psychiatrist acquaintance not in practice at the moment, having taken a sabbatical in order to write a few treatises, give a lecture here and there, play a few rounds of golf.

Mr. Mason picked up Dr. Boggio at his Tarzana home and whisked him to Woodland Hills. Expressing grave concern over Allison's purported breakdown, he urged Boggio to do his utmost for Allison, a senior executive who not only was one of AGC's staunchest management pillars, but practically a member of the Mason Family. Nothing, insisted Mr. Mason, was to be spared in treating whatever was troubling Charles Allison, and getting him back on his feet.

Unfortunately, Dr. Boggio was feeling grave if undeclared concern for his own condition. His wife, Wanda, had served baked lasagna for dinner, but she was of Polish extraction and her baked lasagna lay on the psychiatrist's stomach like so much baked cement. Had anyone but Mr. Mason dared call and interrupt his gastric misery, Boggio knew he would have simply hung up.

Waiting anxiously at the front door, Virginia was red-eyed, but doing her best to maintain a stiff upper lip. "Thank God you're here, Ben! He's in the study, and still, still . . ."

"There, there." Exhibiting gruff sympathy, Mr. Mason bent over backward to be helpful to the distraught woman, not patronizing. "Let's let Dr. Boggio deal with Charles, shall we?"

Due to long force of habit when dealing with maniacs, the psychiatrist used extreme caution approaching Charles Allison. He studied the executive's recumbent figure for most of a minute before saying, "I fear the prognosis is unfavorable."

Virginia gasped for air like a drowning woman.

"How can you tell so soon, Doctor?" inquired Mr. Mason

"Spot prognoses," said Boggio, stifling a belch, "are almost always unfavorable." He winced, massaging his midsection. "My dear lady, have you any Bromo-Seltzer?"

Virginia clutched her breast. "Will it help Charles?"

"It will help me, er . . . help him." Boggio hunched over, kneaded his burning midriff.

"I'll get it, Doctor."

"Clever," approved Mr. Mason. "A ruse to get her out of the room, eh, Boggio?"

"What? Oh, yes. Yes, of course. Talk to the patient, Ben. See if he recognizes you."

Mr. Mason gingerly squatted down in order to intercept the troubled executive's unfocused gaze. "Good evening, Charles. It's me, Ben. How are you feeling?"

Allison's pupils contracted slightly. He heaved a ponderous sigh and declared with damning insight, "Sorenson's an amoral, dangerous simp. He's been threatening me."

"Now, now," comforted Mr. Mason. "Everything will be fine, Charles. I'm certain Dr. Boggio will get to the root of your problem. Soon now everything will be fine."

Virginia careened into the study, a fizzing glass in her hand, and thrust it upon the psychiatrist, almost drenching him. "How is he, Doctor?"

Dr. Boggio drained the glass in one long, gulping draught. He belched loudly.

"Fix me a tall one, Madeleine," requested Charles Allison. "Easy on the soda."

"Oh, God! He doesn't even *know* us." Wailing in distress, Mrs. Allison threw herself to the carpet, clutched her husband's knees.

Mr. Mason rose and thrust himself forward. "Surely you recognize me, Charles."

"Sorenson," reiterated Charles Allison, "is a dangerous, amoral simp."

Boggio tugged Mr. Mason's sleeve. "Who's this Sorenson he keeps blathering about?"

Exhibiting hushed respect, Mr. Mason outlined a series of crisp facts concerning Vice President Blair Sorenson.

"Then he's not what one might call an 'amoral simp'?"

“Oh, anything but that,” declared Mr. Mason passionately. He recited Sorenson’s impeccable pedigree. “I fear Charles has taken a turn around the bend.”

“Apparently.” Dr. Boggio kneaded his fiery gut. “He seems to have slipped into form type of delusional behavior. This Sorenson routine could be a prominent delusion.”

“I fear so, Doctor. And your recommendation?”

The psychiatrist pondered. “I’m professionally acquainted with the director of a private sanatorium in Verdugo Hills.”

Hovering nearby, Virginia had listened to the exchange with trancelike concentration. “Please don’t blame Charles, Ben. He’s been working day and night, working himself into a . . . Well, into a state.”

“Blame . . . ?” When the occasion demanded, Mr. Mason could be righteously liberal for a lifelong conservative. “My dear, it amazes me to hear you express such a light regard for my integrity. When has AGC ever failed to take care of its own? Why, we’ll have Charles back at his desk in no time, won’t we, Boggio?”

The psychiatrist’s resounding belch punctuated his noncommittal shrug. “Let me make some calls,” he said, hunching to the telephone doubled over with cramps.

* * *

Early the following morning, AGC’s troubled, severely shaken president and CEO called R&D Vice President Sorenson into his office and grimly advised him he would have to square his shoulders, hitch up his trousers, tighten his belt and fill Charles Allison’s shoes during what looked like it might become the VP&GM’s prolonged absence.

Sorenson had only the vaguest notion who this Charles Allison might be, and was therefore nonplused. Nevertheless, upon being assigned to replace the mysterious gentleman said to have been in charge of something or other, he adopted Mr. Mason’s suggestion as a matter of course and went so far as to make a cursory inspection of this Allison person’s executive suite. He found it larger and more grandly appointed than his own, but alas! the window overlooked a featureless lawn bisected by an anonymous walkway, a view comparable in no way whatever to the constantly shifting panorama outside his personal, private window. He therefore modestly declined the move to more sumptuous working quarters.

When Mr. Mason learned of his protégé’s decision, his respect for the veep soared. “A big man,” he confided to everyone along executive row. “Blair’s a big man in more ways than one can count.”

Dr. Ladd read the e-mail announcing Sorenson’s temporary ascension to the upper strata of corporate management one giant stride above his previous level. He rose quickly, rushed to close the door to the inner office, and fell back into his chair. He chortled once, then abandoned himself to gales of lusty laughter.

So mightily amused was the chief engineer that he came close to putting the burning end of a cigarette between lips. Squashing it out he howled with glee until the tears coursed down his cheeks.

The Sheriff stepped down from his cubicle to admit an idling eighteen wheel tractor-trailer spouting sooty diesel smoke. He checked the paperwork, collected the bearded driver's signature, and waved him onward. In the act of remounting the steps to his cubicle, a loud nearby explosion drove him into a gunfighter's crouch.

An orange Mustang of uncertain vintage hurtled along the parking lot's center drive, its left front wheel wobbling precariously, slowed in brake-squeaking fits and starts, shuddered and slid to a stop slaunchwise across two parking slots reserved for AGC visitors. A wobbly front wheel bumped the concrete divider, and the Mustang rebounded, loosed a second reverberating backfire. The tailpipe belched exhaust, emitted a death rattle, drooped to the asphalt with a clunk.

Hands on hips, a cigar stub clamped in his dentures, the Sheriff leered at the diminutive cowboy who cursed in a fluid monotone after bolting from the vehicle. He scrunched down and made a futile attempt to rewind loops of rusted piano wire no longer securing the tailpipe, burnt his fingers on hot metal and hopped about, swearing with petulant virtuosity.

Acquainted with the driver nicknamed Little Joe, The Sheriff was was aware of the his far from secret ambition to emulate a long departed, hard-riding Western TV celebrity he revered above all other celebrities, past and present. Small-boned, his wizened features ravaged by ancient acne scars, Little Joe's perpetual squint came not from gazing into purple mountain distances; it was due to abysmal, ego-wrenching nearsightedness, an ocular condition that forced him to don detested horn-rimmed spectacles working at his drafting board. In only one respect, thought The Sheriff, keeping one eye on his unhappy acquaintance, did Little Joe resemble his idol, the six-gun-toting actor of yore. His half-a-size too small Stetson, buttressed in the manner of an afterthought by dirigible ears, perched atop a crowning mass of curly black ringlets. For more than a decade, the wannabe rangeland rover had haunted the offices of every theatrical agent in the Los Angeles basin, seeking to fulfill his unflagging ambition to land nonexistent work as a day-extra, bit player, stunt man, or anything in between. His persistence had come to naught. He had once admitted to The Sheriff that he'd never been within fifty yards of a horse, a fact that encouraged the plant protection officer to constantly needle his acquaintance.

His embroidered Western shirt complemented by a string tie he had never learned to knot properly, Little Joe abandoned his attempt to resurrect the defunct tailpipe. His needle-nosed snakeskin Western boots pinched his toes, lending him a swaggering, hip-rolling limp as he made his way painfully toward the main gate.. "I'm a-sayin' howdy, Sheriff," he drawled, clipping a bent, partially delaminated AGC plastic badge to a scalloped pocket of his Western shirt.

"Morning, Mr. Feinblatt," greeted The Sheriff. "Late for work as usual. I bet the folks inside took the bit in their teeth and started without you."

Little Joe grimaced. "C'mon, Sheriff. I asked you a thousand times t'stop calling me that. Nowadays I go by a different handle."

"Sure is peculiar. Your badge says Isaac Feinblatt. Trying to put one over on AGC?"

Little Joe tittered dutifully, his amusement sounding forced. "Keep my true moniker sort of, you know . . . quiet. You often have to do that for showbiz reasons, a 'image' thing. Soon now I'll be changing my name all legal and proper."

The Sheriff had not exhausted his needling topics. "What ails your hoss? Junior execs like you don't belong in a old mount. I'd say your Mustang was terminal, and shoot it."

“Aw, the old bus needs some work, is all,” lied Little Joe. “Who can come up with the freight on a new set of wheels? Besides, it’s not a hundred percent mine. The credit union owns more of it than me.”

“That a fact.” The Sheriff cast a jaundiced eye the orange Mustang. “How many times you refinanced that machine?”

“No matter,” Little Joe said sheepishly. “I won’t live long enough t’pay it off.”

“How many times?” insisted The Sheriff.

“Oh, six . . . seven. I disremember.”

“You refinanced that rolling junk pile six or seven times?”

A sorrowful nod. “They see me coming, the credit union honchos lock the door.”

“Take heart, Isaac,” comforted the Sheriff. “You can fall back on your movie show and TV pay. Loose change like that’ll make the freight on a new hunk of Detroit iron.”

“Showbiz,” admitted Little Joe, “is kind of slow right now.”

“Uh-huh.” The Sheriff scratched his stubbled chin. Best hustle inside now, ‘fore y’get handed a pink slip.”

Little Joe sighed. “No two ways about it.” His swaggering, hip-rolling limp carried him through the security gate, from where he sent back a parting quip. “Tell me, is screwin’ sheep agin’ the law up in Montana?”

“Naw,” denied the Sheriff. “Only in Texas.”

* * *

During the weeks following his hasty introduction to Ladd’s “white elephant,” Moffett stayed close to his new desk in an assigned cubicle directly across the wide corridor from the chief engineer’s office. Heeding instructions, he dug into data furnished by fellow engineers he queried, who steered him to the voluminous documentation and preliminary computer-aided-design drawings in the company-classified Aerospaceplane proposal database.

As conceived, Aerospaceplane, re-labeled ALLP/ORDART in AGC nomenclature, had been a spin off from an earlier DoD Request for Proposal soliciting bids on a military TAV, or Transatmospheric Vehicle. The unsuccessful bid to win a TAV study contract, coupled with the unforeseen curtailment of an advanced tactical “stealth” fighter under development in AGC’s Aeronautical Division, not to mention a merger with another aerospace firm that should never have taken place, had caused AGC’s semi-panicked corporate brain trust to sit up and take notice of the advice and counsel rendered by the gentleman Mr. Mason and his confreres considered the fountainhead of all technical knowledge, Dr. William Austin Ladd, Ph.D.

The days went by in swift succession. Ham did his homework diligently, finding it difficult if not impossible to corner his boss for more than minutes at a time. R&D’s newly crowned chief engineer was apparently involved in each of the merry-go-round meetings that seemed a fetish within the toils of all technical and nontechnical AGC organizations. Ham did manage to buttonhole Ladd in the act of hustling off to a midmorning conference, but his request for information on an esoteric subject was sloughed off by Ladd, who slyly dragged him to the meeting. “Time you got baptized and anointed. Follow close behind, and guard my back.”

That first meeting, and many succeeding gatherings he was told to attend proved dull and uninformative. He listened to freely booted acronyms, familiar and unfamiliar usages of what he’d once considered “commonly used terms,” and an incessant barrage of name-droppings

referring to individuals with whom everyone but he himself was cognizant. Wide-eyed and curious, he observed the overt animosity and occasional feral exchanges taking place between R&D's technical cadre and employees from the Manufacturing, Reliability, Product Assurance, Quality Control, Procurement, Status & Control, and Technical Analysis organizations. Foundering in a morass of meaningless "insider" references, he decided the only upshot of most meetings was an eventual consensus agreement about when to hold the next meeting.

In mid-morning, finishing a review of all readily available materials, and anxious to learn something more concrete and definitive, he decided to seek an overview of the preliminary ALLP/ORDART outline drawings Ladd had mentioned being under preparation by the drafters. With that in mind, he wandered into the Tiger Team's manual documentation area.

Only three of the eight-foot-long layout drafting boards were occupied. In the forefront, grumbling as though in pain, a huge, red-bearded woodsman wore a lumberjack shirt, suspenders and belted canvas trousers. Standing on a footstool, bent over at an acute angle, the woodsman drew with fierce, slashing strokes. At the board behind him, a thin, sallow-faced youth whistled Mozart with intense concentration. Across from the musically inclined drafter, a diminutive, curly haired cowboy looked up from his drawing and scowled. "Shut up your damn whistling, Maxie!"

Ham seized the opening. "Excuse me, is Yam, uh . . . ?"

"Yaminishi," supplied the cowboy, eyeing Moffett with casual indifference. "Sorry t'say ol' Buddha-head's not in today."

"How about the big fellow in front? Think he could help me?"

"Bundy . . . ? Doubt it. Crazy coot used to wrassle trees up in the north woods. Still thinks he's there, and talks to the trees. A punk named Farnsworth should be at the other board. He's most likely on the horn to his stinking broker. I'm Little Joe."

"Moffett." Ham had his hand wrung limply.

Little Joe's close-set dark eyes clouded. "Moffett, Moffett . . . Say, aren't you the new hand Doc Ladd brought in a while back?"

"Guilty. Call me Ham."

"Uh-huh."

Conversation lagged. Thinking to edge away and ask the whistler if he might get a look at the preliminary outline drawings, he hesitated when Little Joe said, "I'm a actor myself; this here's only my day job." When a response was slow in coming, he asked, "You married?"

His thought processes skewed by the bouncing ball variety of Little Joe's conversation, Ham said, "Yes, two children, five and eight. Say, would it be possible to have a look at —?"

"No fooling? You don't look near old enough to have a eight-year-old kiddie." Lifting his horn-rimmed spectacles, Little Joe squinted nearsightedly at Ham.

Ham repeated his overture. "About the outline drawings, think I could —?"

"Figure t'get hitched myself someday," said Little Joe, sounding wistful. "Except she's got to be just right, know what I mean? A gal with class, looks, the whole enchilada."

"The outline drawings," prodded Ham.

"I'll see what I can do. Hey, wake up, Maxie! This here's Mr. Moffett. Knock off your damn whistling and show him what you're working on, if any."

Max Anthony broke off a rendition of Glinka's *Jota Aragonesa*, a difficult melody that demanded every grace note and trill he could muster. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Moffett."

When Ham explained what he was after, Anthony's countenance fell. "Oh, sorry. Yam sent the finished drawings out for blueprint; should be back in the morning."

"Fine; I'll try then. I hadn't realized manual drafting was still used."

"We're shorthanded now," informed Anthony, "and only a few of us are still with the company. We four got pushed into the slot because Dr. Ladd prefers old-fashioned, reproducible mylar layouts to computer-aided printouts. You might try Farnsworth. Here he comes."

The debonair investor sauntered to his drafting board. Before Ham could question him about the outline drawings, he announced to the room at large that Intel was up one and one-eighth, adding that his broker was optimistic about the day's rally.

Deciding a further quest useless, Ham thanked the drafters and took his leave.

* * *

Dragging home in early evening more tired than usual, he thought Audrey Lee sounded a little cross when she said, "Exciting day at the office?"

"Excitement aplenty, but not at the office. Dr. Ladd took me to lunch."

"My, they certainly treat the new help good in that place."

Trying to imagine what had honed his wife's unnaturally sharp tongue, he told her lunch was the only free time his boss had to talk shop. "He quizzed me about what I'd learned to date."

"Earn a passing grade?"

The salty question brought Ham up short. "I think so. The excitement came driving back to the plant. We were stopped at a red light. Three cars ahead, a pair of goons dragged a woman and a teenage girl out of a big SUV and took off burning rubber."

"A carjacking in broad daylight?"

"Bold as if was on a deserted side street after midnight."

"Lordy! Did you get out, help the lady and girl?"

"People in the cars ahead of us did. No one was hurt, but the victims were screaming."

"Who could blame them? What in the world is civilization coming to? Rascals like that do whatever they please, never mind harm to women and children."

"I can think of a better term than 'rascals'."

"So did I," his wife said indignantly, "but it wouldn't sound ladylike. If something like that happened in the South, those carjackers would've been shot like rabid dogs."

"Most likely to the shooter's everlasting regret."

"That's cynical," accused Audrey Lee, "and you're a cynic."

"While you, Mrs. Moffett, are a tad naive."

"What if Melissa Lee, Teddy and yours truly had been in that SUV?"

"You would've had the doors locked, the windows rolled up."

"Pshaw! What'll that stop?"

"No one who's really determined," admitted Ham, "but it'll slow them down, make things tougher. Not to worry; no one would bother carjacking the old minivan. We'll keep any new car garaged, and I'll install an alarm system. Other than that, the only thing anyone can do is take precautions and hope for the best. Meanwhile, I'm bushed and hungry. What's for dinner?"

"In the microwave," his wife replied tersely.

* * *

In the morning, Ham parked his briefcase in the cubicle and lost no time carrying a wake-up mug of coffee to the layout drafting area. As if he had not stirred from his footstool since the previous afternoon, clad in what looked like the same woolen lumberjack shirt, Bundy grumbled and drew bent over double. Max Anthony drew slowly, methodically while whistling the “Forest Murmurs” sequence from Wagner’s *Siegfried*, sounding rhapsodically flutelike much to Little Joe’s consternation. Farnsworth was elsewhere.

On the fifth drafting board, a nameplate identified Hideo Yaminishi, a distinguished looking, abnormally tall Asian-American man. Beneath a razor-cut shock of snowy white hair, the lead drafter’s deeply wrinkled countenance broke into a welcoming smile. He introduced himself, extending his left hand to be shaken; his right shirtsleeve terminated in the pincers of a far from new but well cared for stainless steel and leather prosthetic appliance.

“Max said you came by yesterday, Mr. Moffett. Sorry I wasn’t in. I put aside some rolled prints of the preliminary outline drawings.”

Yaminishi’s concise, definitive rundown of work-in-progress pleased Ham to the point of requesting a peek at the drawings still under preparation. The soul of cooperation, Yam led him from one extra-long layout board to the next. He spoke of the preliminary wind tunnel testing underway at NASA’s Ames Research Center in the San Francisco Bay Area, and explained that Aeronautical Division’s team had retrieved sufficient data for a second cut at the latest ALLP/ORDART systems configuration. Aerodynamic analysis had also triggered a revision of the ALLP hydroplane’s high-speed delta wing, and trimmed roughly a half-meter in overall length from ORDART, plus a significant number of predicated kilograms of weight reduction.

Inspired by what he’d been shown, Ham immersed himself in the material, catching Ladd at odd moments to clarify certain aspects of the preliminary design. Delving into R&D’s multiple, encyclopedic computer databases, he skimmed the pertinent data generated before and after the contract award. As a secondary interest, he also dipped into corporate policies and procedures, specific documents governing employee activities, and printed out a hardcopy roster of engineering, scientific, financial, and program control personnel currently assigned to the program, including the tiered document facetiously referred to by Ladd as the “Who’s Who in the Zoo Chart.” Similar to a genealogy “family tree,” it broke down AGC’s three major divisions — R&D, Spacecraft, and Aircraft — into branch, department and group, delineating managers, et al, and the higher-ups to whom they reported.

Although more than once confessing to Audrey Lee that his first impression of AGC had not been entirely positive, bit by bit, section by section and item by item, he began to gain insight into AGC’s manifold functions, and eventually began carrying home esoteric portions of unclassified data for study, abandoning his wife and children to the wonders of television. Fending off occasional caustic remarks by his wife, he became absorbed in assimilating the program’s basics, and also familiarized himself with AGC’s organizational structure.

After yet another comprehensive update by Yaminishi of ALLP and ORDART layout documentation, Ham was leaving the layout drafting area late one afternoon when Little Joe happened to glance up at the wall clock.

“Jeez!” the drafter exclaimed in disgust. “Lookee there, four-thirty-five, already too damn late in the day to leave early.”

12 - Interlude

Time flew past with what seemed accelerating swiftness. No longer a neophyte who asked too many questions, Moffett began to think of himself as an integral cog in the R&D technical pathfinder Tiger Team. Late one Friday afternoon he was keeping watch on Ladd's office door, hoping to catch the chief engineer before he left for the day. His busy boss had asked to be reminded of the Saturday evening farewell bash, a sendoff dinner honoring their retiring mutual friend, Clint Dangerfield. The expatriate electrical engineer had concluded his stateside affairs, and was prepared to board a Qantas flight for Australia.

When next he peeked over the cubicle's partition, the metronomic footfalls of what obviously had to be a VIP caught his attention. Tall and broad-shouldered, Blair G. Sorenson rounded the corner and approached Ladd's office. Clad impeccably in a sky-blue business suit tailored with military severity, his manner firm, resolute, the long-striding gentleman's bearing matched his air of no-nonsense integrity, accentuated by the burr-cut helmet of iron-gray hair crowning the planes and angles of his ruggedly masculine countenance. The way he carried himself suggested vast reservoirs of executive competence immured within a diamond-hard personality; a scarlet-rimmed badge proclaimed his lofty corporate status.

Unquestionably on a mission of gravity, he paused in the antechamber of Ladd's office, squared his turn and came to attention before the executive assistant's desk.

Startled by the unheralded appearance, Minnie said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Sorenson."

"Jefferies," declared Sorenson, his sonorous voice carrying to Moffett's cubicle.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Jefferies," repeated acting R&D VP & GM Sorenson.

"I, uh . . ." Mildly flustered, Minnie explained that Dr. Ladd was on the phone. "Would you care to wait, sir?" she asked politely.

"Jefferies," announced Sorenson more forcefully.

Hands jammed in his trouser pockets, Ladd ambled to the doorway of his inner office. "Hi, Blair. Looking for me?"

Sorenson redirected the piercing gaze of his pale blue eyes. "Jef-feries," he said, enunciating the name with exaggerated clarity for the chief engineer's benefit, and wondering if Ladd might have once been a typically sloppy enlisted man.

Pursing his lips, Dr. Ladd said, "Hmm-m-m, Jefferies, Jefferies . . . Not sure we have one of those. Any other clue, like a first name?"

Ham watched the tall gentleman withdraw a folded scrap of paper from an inner pocket of his jacket. He tapped it meaningfully. "Jefferies," he announced, "is fifth-seeded."

"Fifth . . . seeded. Ah, of course. Now all becomes clear."

"Fifth seeded in the first annual AGC Employees' Ping-Pong Tournament. R. L. Jefferies. I have to tell him something."

"Ah, first initial is an 'R.' That may jump-start the search." Ladd plucked an AGC phone book from Minnie's desk and flipped pages to the 'J' section. "Here we are: Jefferies, Richard L, Department 34-06. Your man's work station's in 'C' Building, Blair, not here in 'G'."

Outwardly nonplused, Sorenson returned Ladd's quizzical stare with a stare one full order of magnitude more quizzical. His baleful, ice-blue eyes alight with challenge salted with deep, abiding suspicion. Half-convinced the insolent man named Ladd had once been an enlisted man, the acting R&D VP&GM turned on his heel and stalked away.

Ladd evaluated the abrupt departure in heavy-lidded silence, crossed glances with Minnie and performed a barely perceptible shrug.

Intrigued, Ham left his cubicle and stepped across the corridor.

"Still hanging around, helpmate?" asked Ladd. "You must like it here."

"Mind if I ask who that gentleman was?"

"No one of any consequence," drawled Ladd, "jus my boss."

Minnie giggled.

"He looks like quite a guy."

"Minnie giggled again."

The chief engineer's lips twitched, but his expression remained neutral. His intonation cryptic, he said, "That's one way to put it. What's on your mind, Ham? I'm about to get shut of this place before it gets shut of me."

"You asked to be reminded about tomorrow evening's get together. We're saying goodbye to Clint, remember? I plan to lift a glass, help celebrate his departure for kangaroo land."

"Wouldn't miss it for anything, not even the Second Coming. Giorgio's gin mill, sevenish, right? Now then, let's both get shut of this awful place. You too, Minnie."

* * *

The balmy, late-summer evening enhanced conviviality. The festivities were enjoyed by all. Dangerfield had already booked his flight, and was about to undertake what he called, "A long overdue homecoming."

One after another, Moffett's former Sargent Electronics colleagues rose and rendered toasts or jocular roasts designed to libelously defame the departing electrical engineer regarded affectionately by one and all, including a roaster who concluded by asking, "How about it, Clint? Do folks Down Under ever call North America Up Over?"

The retiree struggled to maintain a straight face. "Only on special occasions."

Once dessert had been served and the dishes cleared away, young Mr. Sargent rose and tapped his water glass. After a short, laudatory speech that libelously compared Dangerfield's accomplishments to those of Nikola Tesla on steroids, he ceremoniously presented the retiree with, "A fully certified, authenticated Crocodile Dundee hat replete with a special band and a service warranty."

His wispy mustache twitching, Clint solemnly thanked young Sargent, then earned roars of laughter by donning the hat and promising to, "Wear the bloody thing, even if the cobbers back home won't know what the hell it is."

After midnight, in pairs, triplets and quartets, guests began drifting by to say farewell, shake Dangerfield's hand and file out of the banquet room. The restaurant was getting ready to close when the Moffetts, accompanied by Clint and Bill Ladd, gathered outside in the mellow glow of a candlelit table. The restaurant's hillside terrace featured a view of the northern San Fernando Valley's galaxy of lights.

"A last one for the road seems in order." Clint crooked a finger, summoning the waitress.

“Skip me,” said Ham. “I’ve given up hangovers for life.”

Audrey Lee also declined the waitress’ enquiring look. “I’ll pass, too. I was tipsy when we came out here, but the night air cleared my head.”

“Ruddy Yanks!” Feigning disgust, Dangerfield said, “A whiff of the cork, and you’re all ready to slide under the table.”

Ladd never wasted an opportunity to josh his friend. “Once back in Sydney, you’ll have to mind your manners, Clint.”

“Why, may I ask,” said Clint with pretended ingenuousness, “need I do that?”

“I heard Down Under’s full of foreigners called . . . Australians, I think. Spotting an American old-timer like you, they’re liable to take advantage.”

“Naught to fear on that score,” scoffed the retiree. “God has a warm place in his heart for ancient specimens like myself, and the notion of leaving you American teetotalers behind is a great comfort. Most of my drinking chums have moved on or passed on, though I imagine a few are still around. How about a nightcap yourself, Bill?”

Ladd was no longer listening. Leaning far back, he gazed up into the night sky.

“I say, Bill,” prodded Dangerfield, “join me in a nightcap?”

Lost in contemplation of the heavens, Ladd made a sweeping gesture toward the valley floor. “Remarkably clear night here in Smogville. I spotted a few flickering remnants of the kappa-Cygnids. We’d see more if not for all the pesky lights down there.”

“Meteorites . . . ?” inquired Audrey Lee.

“Meteors,” Ladd corrected gently. “Meteorites are leftovers, Audrey Lee — stony or metallic fragments that survive a fiery plunge through the atmosphere. The kappa-Cygnids are usually finished by late August. We’re seeing a few laggards.”

“How can anyone predict when meteors will fall?” Audrey Lee wanted to know. “You make it sound like they run on a timetable.”

“It’s exactly what they do.”

“Really? I don’t see how.”

“Circling the Sun once each year,” explained Ladd, “our planet runs into clusters of debris — tiny dust and ice particles mostly, the residue of comets and other sky junk — that burn into the atmosphere at ten or twelve miles-per-second.”

“Goodness! Back home we called them shooting stars. I had no idea they came at specific times of year.”

“The major showers flash in with clockwork regularity.”

“Where do we look?” asked Ham.

“The northern cross is almost directly overhead,” Ladd pointed. “The brightest star is Deneb. Keep watch right around there.”

“I don’t see the W-shaped Lady in the Chair,” said Audrey Lee. “Where is she?”

“Cassiopeia’s low in the sky this time of year, behind the building.”

“Hey, there went a flamer,” said Ham.

“My, it didn’t last long,” remarked his wife. “I had no time to make a wish.”

“The streaks rarely last a full second,” Ladd told her.

Dangerfield sipped his nightcap. “Bill, your never-say-die space fixation will endure throughout eternity, and perhaps beyond.” He winked at Audrey Lee. “You’ve moaned about missing the boat into space for years. Give it up! There isn’t a blessed thing out there.”

Ladd favored his old friend with a knowing leer, and gamely swallowed the bait. “Sure about that, are you? Before Mr. Kennedy pushed the button and launched us toward the Moon, I sat in on a press conference up north at Berkeley’s Lawrence Radiation Lab. Edward Teller was the guest of honor, and he . . . Wait, that isn’t exactly a household name to you youngsters. Teller was the so-called, ‘Father of the H-bomb,’ but there was a lot more to that canny Hungarian physicist than nuclear weapons development. During a Q&A session after his speech, some smartass reporter asked him what could possibly be achieved by sewerling billions in super-costly space exploration, an investigation of ‘nothing’? ‘Ah, yes,’ said Teller, his bushy eyebrows elevated, ‘but precisely *what kind* of nothing?’”

The anecdote intrigued Ham. “I had no idea you were hyped on space, Bill.”

His boss nodded sagely. “Guilty as charged. It’s the future. If I’d been born in 2045 instead of 1945 I’d have found some way to get out there.”

“No doubt,” quipped Dangerfield, “in order to explore the boundless cosmos.”

The barb elicited indulgent grins all around.

“No, you sodden relic,” denied Ladd. “I would’ve left exploration to the heroes. Lowell Wood, the physicist who once headed up the highly classified ‘O’ Division at Livermore Labs liked to say that if your life wasn’t in danger you weren’t exploring, just touring. No, I would’ve happily left the derring-do stuff to hardier specimens and been content to design and produce goodies we can’t make here on the ground. When it comes to microgravity materials and processes engineering, the surface hasn’t been scratched. What hacks me is knowing an untapped Comstock Lode is just sitting out there in low-earth-orbit patiently waiting to be mined, and I’m too long in the tooth and worn out to go prospecting.”

“Poor boy!” consoled Dangerfield.

His inborn good nature augmented by alcohol, Ladd was in a mood to pontificate. “Hark ye unbelievers to an authentic reading from scripture! When ALLP/ORDART goes operational, NASA means to sell payload space, come one, come all. Several of the Rockwell STS missions dabbled in zero-gee manufacturing techniques — simple silly experiments, most of them, yet meaningful. A decade or two further into our proud new millennium, barring a reprise of Mr. Reagan’s ‘Evil Empire,’ or Senator Dismyre’s pinch-penny annihilation of honest efforts to do good work, Augmented International Space Station Beta will open for business. Although it’ll be a truncated version of the original concept, Beta will give knowledgeable people a first shot at doing some genuine microgravity research and development.”

“TV loves to show astronauts floating around in space,” said Audrey Lee, “but I can’t imagine what the absence of gravity has to do with making things.”

“Not absence,” corrected Ham. “Orbital velocity nulls the effect of gravity, but gravity — the ‘weak force’ — prevails everywhere, throughout the universe.”

Ladd nodded. “Seems to be a universal, pervasive function of mass, Audrey Lee. Given appropriate on-orbit velocity, an object will fall around the planet, not back toward it. The farther objects are from one another, the less their mutual attraction.”

“Something which also affects married couples,” said Clint, a lifelong bachelor.

The comment earned a round of chuckles.

Still puzzled, Audrey Lee asked what gravity had to do with making things?"

"Down here," explained Ladd, "fall off a ladder and you're instantly introduced to gravity's effect. We live under a perpetual load exerted by the enormous ball under our feet, and the same force also warps crystals growing in solution, makes certain substances like oil and water immiscible — unmixable, that is, refusing to blend uniformly since oil is lighter and rises to the top. Conversely, every object in freefall around the planet is subjected only to microgravity, a smidgen of gravitational residue resulting from almost but not quite totally unloading all solids, liquids and gases from the healthy tug every one of us feel twenty-four-seven, but are conditioned from birth to ignore."

"Unless you're a mountaineer," put in Dangerfield, "or clumsy on that ladder."

Ladd grinned. "Audrey Lee, I'm confident that someone alive today will earn a gilt-edged fortune from microgravity manufacturing — the growth of perfect crystalline lattices, the uniform mixture of plain and exotic immiscible substances, producing lightweight foamed metals, metallic and nonmetallic composites, super-strength nanotube strings, wonder pharmaceuticals and whatever else. The list is endless."

"Enough preachment, Bill! Aside from boring our friends with your gee-whiz lecture," accused Dangerfield, "you're not being entirely truthful. You've written a good portion of that space fabrication propaganda yourself."

Ladd conceded the point with a shrug. "I've also tried to impress young Mr. Moffett with the details of what can be expected if and when he decides to . . ."

The restaurant manager interrupted. "Pardon me, folks; we're preparing to close. Hope you enjoyed yourselves as much as we enjoyed having you. Please come back soon."

"Not bloody likely," muttered Dangerfield, a lopsided grin in evidence. He tossed back the dregs in his glass. "Shall we . . .?"

* * *

It was one-twenty in the morning when Ham walked the babysitter to her home down the block. He switched off the porch light, locked the front door and found Audrey Lee drowsily preparing for bed. "I sure will miss Clint. Did you hear what he told me in the parking lot?"

"Don't believe so." Audrey Lee went into the bathroom "I was too busy trying to stay awake," she called back. "Your boss' spacey talk numbed my poor tired brain."

"Clint told me . . . He said he'd come to think of me as the son he never had."

"Oh, Ham!" Toothbrush in hand, Audrey Lee peered from the doorway. "He certainly is a wonderful man, and friend. I hope he enjoys a long, happy retirement"

"He made me promise to visit him in Sydney if we ever get down that way. I hope he lives forever, and enjoys every second of it."

"Amen!" Audrey Lee finished brushing her teeth. "Best hustle to bed. Tomorrow's Sunday; the kids will be up early for church."

13 - Go for the Throat!

Ham was on the phone, arguing with an anonymous voice from Manufacturing Preplanning. Minnie came into his cubicle, dropped a memo over his shoulder and bustled away before he could cover the mouthpiece and question her.

“I said your PACER’s overdue,” repeated the voice on the phone.

“My, uh . . . ?”

“Your PACER input.”

Ham stubbed out a half-consumed cigarette. “Does our office owe you a . . . whatever?”

“Hey,” expostulated the voice, “if you ever want some SPAR units built.”

“SPAR . . . ?”

“Yeah, right: SPAR! OART and DARPA been sending us hate mail ‘cause a PACER wasn’t filed on a PSPP for SPAR, and a PET’s scheduled only ninety M-days from now.”

“M-days . . . ?”

“Manufacturing days — work days. We got a bad connection, what?”

Ham reined his temper. “Then I suppose we should file a PACER.”

“Yeah, you sure as hell should. ASAP! Check back with you later, Moffett.”

Warm under the collar after the deluge of acrid acronyms, he read Minnie’s memo. His blood pressure went up several more points. He stepped across the corridor. “Tell me, Minnie. Exactly who is this Glenda?”

“Why, Glenda is Glenda, Mr. Moffett.” Minnie accompanied the disclosure with a smirking sidelong glance.

“She can’t afford a surname?”

Dr. Ladd’s executive assistant giggled. “Any number of them, depending on which ex-husband happens to be the bestower. She may have once had a maiden name, although most of the ladies I work with refuse to believe she ever belonged in that category.”

“Minn-n-n-nie, your kitty claws are razor-sharp today. Okay, so Bill wants me to touch base with this . . . Glenda.”

“That’s what he told me to tell you. Touch base, and nothing else if you’re smart.”

Declining to bite on the innuendo, Ham said, “Touch base regarding . . . ?”

“Sorry, I wasn’t briefed on the details.”

“Okay, I concede defeat, Min. Where in the ever-expanding AGC universe is one likely to find Glenda, no middle initial, no surname?”

Minnie laughed aloud, something Moffett found definitely out of character. “The R&D Master Scheduling Committee meets in ‘C’ Building. If Glenda’s isn’t in her office adjacent to the conference room, see if you can locate a rocking camper in the parking lot.”

Ham grinned. “Mee-o-o-w! Sheath you claws, Min. I take it Glenda, no middle initial, no surname, has a reputation for speed.”

“Supersonic, Mr. Moffett.”

“What does she do?”

“Why, really!”

“Cut it out, Min. And knock off the ‘Mr. Moffett.’ What does she do here at work?”

“That question is still open to interpretation.”

“Minnie!”

“Glenda chairs the R&D Master Scheduling Committee.”

“She’s a manager?”

“Or manageress, if you prefer.”

Ham’s nose wrinkled. “Thanks for nothing! I’ll return the favor when I’m more rested.”

Minnie smiled sweetly.

Within the “C” Building labyrinth, large and small offices were interspersed with checkerboard cubicles. Ham passed doorway after doorway, noting the name and title on the nameplates posted outside. Managerial offices featured floor-to-ceiling privacy walls, whereas supervisors and lesser lights had to make do with six-foot-high acoustic partition cubicles. He searched in vain for his quarry’s nameplate, gave up and approached a young woman busily staring at the blank face of her computer display.

“Excuse me. I’m looking for Glenda’s office.”

Mildly startled, the brunette looked up. “Who?”

“Er, Glenda . . .”

“Gee,” said the young woman apologetically, “I’m new here. Let me see if I can find out for you. Leslie,” she called, “do we have a Glenda in our department?”

“Not that I know of.”

“I was told,” said Ham to be helpful, “she chairs the Master Scheduling Committee.”

“Leslie,” called the young woman, “is, uh, Master Scheduling here in ‘C’?”

Leslie raised up and peered over her computer display. “Not sure. Hey, Alice,” she called, “where’s Master Scheduling? Somewhere here in ‘C,’ isn’t it?”

“Beats me,” said Alice. “Ask Carol; she’s worked in this snake pit two whole months.”

“Sounding put out, Alice called, “Where’s Master Scheduling, Carol?”

A two-month veteran who knew the ropes, Carol aimed her coffee cup north by northwest. “Far end of the building, next door to Glamorous Glenda’s office.”

“That’s her,” said Ham, “That’s who I’m looking for.”

Carol’s expression soured. “You’re at the end of a long queue, Mister. Glenda Prout ought to get a number machine like in a deli or bakery. You guys could pull a tab, wait your turn.”

“Oh, her,” said Alice. “One thing, her name’s not Prout anymore, Carol. I heard she ran off and got married again in April.”

“A true statement,” acknowledged Carol. “The dissolution was in June. Fred said her name was once Carstairs, then Blake or . . . Burcham, forget which. And Dunsmuir, too.”

“Gee!” said Leslie.

The young women were tolling the many names of Glenda when Ham nodded his thanks and strolled toward his objective.

* * *

The wall placard, a beveled, hand-carved walnut masterpiece, was strewn with large, gold-plated letters that fairly reeked of feminine mystique:

GLEND A

Ham surmised that the much-married woman had given up revising her surname. In the anteroom, he bypassed a striking blonde executive assistant talking on the phone, paused in the doorway of the inner office, and was caught up in the nearsighted gaze of magnetic violet eyes.

“Well, hello, Dreamboat!” Glenda’s throaty, low-pitched contralto verged on the baritone register. “Can I do something for you I sincerely hope?”

“If it’s a convenient time, Dr. Ladd asked me to stop by and have a word with you.”

“Bless Doctor Bill! I’m so glad!” Glenda looked Moffett over hungrily, the rose behind her desk, swaying like a willow wand, struggling to confine the burden of magnificent, unfettered breasts hidden by the silky material of a navy blue dress worn décolleté. “Don’t just stand there, Dreamboat. Come have a seat. Wherever did Doctor Bill find *you*? If I’m very patient, I just know you’re eventually going to tell me your name.”

He obliged, and added, “Better known as Ham.”

“Marvelous, a delicacy I simply adore!” Glenda’s vivid violet eyes devoured him, making Ham feel like USDA Choice, Grade A Honey-cured Premium was stamped across his forehead. “You vaguely resemble a gentleman I was once married to, but . . . No, on second thought he was much more of a . . . Wait, all forget that. On third thought, were we to revisit yesteryear, you’re definitely more of a Peck.”

“Not a bushel?”

“Oh, clever, clever! Yes, that’s it: a young Gregory Peck in the flesh, although there’s also a wild-eyed look about you that makes you resemble . . . No, now it becomes clear. A young Ben Affleck! You’re nowhere near as tall as that dreamboat, but he —”

“I’ll try to be taller,” promised Ham. “Listen, Dr. Ladd asked me to enquire —”

“No, no! Forget celebrities.” Glenda pulled open a desk drawer, foraged inside and tugged out a dog-eared issue of long-defunct *Playgirl* magazine. Opening it to the centerfold, she held the pages vertically for Ham’s benefit. “There! It’s you to a tee!”

The centerfold pictured a semi-prominent television player stretched out on a chaise lounge beside the crystalline waters of a swimming pool. Tanned and muscular, the actor wore a pair of hand-tooled Western boots, trendy sunglasses, a professional leer, and nothing else.

“Not too sure,” said Ham, “about the, uh . . . tee.”

“Oh, clever, clever, clever! What do you think? Was I right?”

“Looks pretty silly with his wick hanging out.”

Glenda performed a stage pout. She slipped the magazine back in a drawer, and demanded to know what sign he’d been born under.

Tiring of the repartee, Ham said curtly, “Delivery Room.”

“Oh, God, clever, clever and now *cleverer*! We met moments ago, and I’ve already fallen in love with you. Seriously, what’s your birth month?”

Ham said, “November.”

“A Scorpio . . . ? No, couldn’t be. What day?”

“Thirtieth.”

“A Sadge!” Glenda sounded ecstatic. “I should’ve guessed. Marvelous sense of humor, carefree spirit, and strikingly handsome to boot. I’m a Capricorn. Caps and Sadies always get along famously.”

“Wonderful! Let’s start off getting along famously by figuring out how to coordinate the master scheduling on R&D engineering commitments.”

Glenda batted her false lashes derisively. “You, dear Ham, are living proof that Doctor Bill is a matchmaker. A Dolly Levi of the masculine gender, one might say.”

“Master scheduling,” said Ham. “R&D engineering commitments.”

Glenda touched her teased blonde tresses with manicured fingers, struck a pose and settled in her chair with feline grace. Opening a folder, she spent a few seconds’ reflection on the contents, and said, “R&D is late with POIR, PACER and PSPP inputs.” The disturbing violet eyes lifted, and her gaze locked with Ham’s. “Enough stuffy shop talk. Let’s find a topic of mutual interest. Are you married, I’m afraid to ask?”

“Will you be offended,” asked Ham, “if I ask what those mystery terms mean?”

Glenda rolled her violet eyes. “My luck! A Dreamboat who won’t talk about himself.”

“POIR, for instance,” prodded Ham.

“Project Office Interim Report.” Glenda allowed a note of displeasure to creep into her quasi-baritone enunciation.

“Ah, I know about that one. A report’s in the works. Let’s deal with PACER.”

“Planning Automation and Control for Evaluating Requirements.”

“A mouthful,” said Ham. “I’ll puzzle it out later. There was also a P-S-whatever.”

“PSPP.” The corners of Glenda’s carmined lips drooped unhappily. “The most important of the bunch, dear Ham: Proposed System Package Plan. Dr. Mauch’s electronic whiz kids in Spacecraft are developing packaging concepts for all umpteen varieties of black boxes slated to install aboard ALLP and ORDART. A PSPP should’ve been submitted six M-days ago, but that’s only dull business tomfoolery. I have it! Let’s meet for a drink after hours and discuss —”

“We’re hitting on all acronymic cylinders,” said Ham, “so tell me about SPAR.”

Glenda said snappishly, “Stereoscopic Precision Approach Radar.”

“Ah, on that we’re also up to speed. Dr. Mauch’s electronikers completed a preliminary draft. We can get it to you early next week.”

“No, dear Ham. Not here to Master Scheduling, to OART and DARPA.”

“Oh, sure.” Ham pondered. “Unless I’ve been misinformed, DARPA stands for Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. Never heard of OART.”

Glenda’s seductive smile bared her vividly white, expensively capped teeth. “New to aerospace, aren’t you, Dreamboat?”

“A recently sentenced prisoner,” he confessed.

“Get used to the gobbledygook flying about in this outlandish industry. You’ll be inundated by acronyms, neologisms, homonyms, aphorisms and peculiar coined expressions. So far, however, you’ve strenuously avoided the single truly important issue under discussion. Are you, or are you not married?”

“What does OART stand for?” persisted Ham.

“Oh, good God! Office of Advanced Research and Technology, a scientific think tank, a sort of lame offshoot of NASA. Dear Ham, I will not be quizzed further unless you answer my straightforward question regarding your marital status.”

“Dearest Glenda, I am fully and officially married.”

“Damn! Well, maybe there’s still a faint glimmer of hope. How long?”

“A little over nine years.”

“Nine years! Impossible! Why, you’re still a baby. You have to be sick and tired of her by now. Just think of it, *nine* whole years. I was once married nine weeks.”

“You tired of him that soon?”

“Not really. He fell madly in love with the next door neighbor. One dark and stormy night they ran off together. I never saw him again.”

Ham whistled. “She must’ve been some five-star knockout to ace you out.”

“He, dear Ham, not she. The next door neighbor had tattoos in strange places, drank vintage Budweiser and rode a motorcycle, but as the cliché has it, that’s life. There were things I hadn’t learned about Ronnie.”

“Easy to understand how upset you must have been.”

“Oh, I worried about AIDS for a month, but . . .” Glenda’s shoulder sway was wholly feminine. Her philosophical rationale rendered Moffett speechless. “Swing left, swing right. It’s all a matter of friction, Dear Ham. Fun, frolic, and simple friction . . .”

* * *

“Not a damn thing’s happening!” railed Alex, his bullet head lowered aggressively as he stalked his office’s lush crimson carpeting liberally speckled with tiny golden Romanov crests.

Gridley’s response issued weakly from the Ampli-Vox speakers. “It’s coming along.”

“Coming my rosy-red ass! It’s not even breathing hard.”

No one spoke for seconds. The four-way conference call between Kurile, Salazar in his high-rise Manhattan lair, Gridley in his “K” Street office, and Burton in the Encino apartment, had barely begun when Alex fell into a classic snit. Ignoring Burton’s self-adulatory opening remark about successfully replacing VP & GM Allison, Spa Alexander’s owner and proprietor ranted bitterly about the way AGC was humming along like a well-oiled nuclear machine.

“Where, I ask you guys, is all the do-re-mi I shoved out with both hands? What happened to it? What’s it gotten me to date? I need an answer after dishing out big bucks that vanish, but zip happens. All the long green stack’s bought me is listening to what might happen someday. Way things’re headed, ‘someday’ won’t roll around ‘till the sweet bye ‘n bye shows up.”

Gridley’s nervous voice crackled again in Alex’s office. “I’m loathe to argue with you, Mr. Kurile, but I have to tell you things are moving swimmingly here inside the beltway.”

“Swimmingly . . . ! Jay-sus, Grid! Now you’re in cahoots with the water fairy?”

“Twice this week,” the lobbyist hastened to say, “I sat down with that union pusher, Sean Quick. Even as we speak, bundles of handbills and sign-up petitions are getting airfreighted to LAX in California. UTB’s set to make its big move.”

“Hah! About time! Grid, you tell that Quick character a strike sure as hell better come off chop-chop. I want Mason’s engineers and science guys tied up in knots, want ‘em froze solid so they can’t turn a finger. Up to now, those union scumbags I’ve been juicing have limped along like a herd of sick working girls.”

“Mr. Kurile, don’t you think —?”

“Knock off your damn thinking,” cried Alex, “and start listening. Warn this guy Quick up front that I’m not getting my money’s worth. Tell the sumbitch to get off his duff, make things happen. Say I’ll cut off his water if a strike doesn’t come down by early fall. Got it?”

“A . . . strike!” Gridley sounded crushed. “Mr. Kurile, you have to be realistic about what UTB can do, and can’t do. First time I visited Quick, he said the Brotherhood had already targeted AGC’s professionals for organization, but those pros have to be signed-up guild members in good standing before UTB can think about calling for a strike vote.”

“Don’t hand me any more can and can’t crap,” declared Alex. “You just keep stirring the pot hard with the union’s wrecking crew, hear? Tell ‘em to get off their fat asses, or else.”

“I’ll do what I can to, uh, speed things up, Mr. Kurile.”

“Yah, you do that!” Alex swore softly. “Okay, Rico. What’s the latest in the Big Apple?”

“Liquidity continues to rise,” responded Salazar in the lugubrious tone of voice that was particularly his own. “Except for selling short on certain selected issues, and building gigantic cash reserves, I am able to accomplish very little at his juncture.”

“Okay, s’pose that makes sense.”

“About one thing, however,” added Salazar, “I have been extremely concerned. Piling up cash in anticipation of making major downstream buys of prospective AGC recovery bonds leaves the bank in an awkward, vulnerable position. Unless matters come to a head fairly soon, proceeding as we are could easily do serious, lasting damage. I discussed the matter in total confidence with an intimate acquaintance, one of the wiser arbitrageurs on the Street, who —”

“A wiser which . . . ?”

Salazar could be heard coughing. “Arbitrageur,” he repeated.

“What the hell is an arbywhatever?”

“Arbitrage,” informed Salazar, “consists of simultaneously buying and selling securities, currency or commodities in order to take advantage of fluctuating prices that —”

“Aw, shit! Here we go again, snowing dumbbell Alex with six-bit words. Kee-rist! You’re worse’n Gridley. Don’t you shysters ever use plain talk? Every school kid knows buying’s one thing, and selling’s another. Oh, what the hell! Your big push in this war comes later, Rico. One helluva lot later the way things’re headed.”

Alex stewed in silence for a few heartbeats. “Okay, your turn in the barrel, Frank. Your ploy to send this Allison guy to the rubber room is the only caper that’s worked, so you’re the team’s star performer. If your arm’s not in a sling from patting yourself on the back, tell us what’s in the oven. For instance, the nothing-burger sitting in for the lunatic, how’s he doing?”

“By all reports Sorenson’s doing splendidly,” announced Burton. “My contacts tell me he stays in his office all day, twiddles his thumbs and plays with himself.”

“Delegates everything that it?”

Burton snickered. “Not so you’d notice. If the distinguished gentleman owes a brain, it has to be disconnected. A daily tidal wave of business once flowed across my desk, and I’m certain that hasn’t changed, and possibly doubled. Mason’s brought in an effective cork in a major R&D pipeline, but seems not to have noticed. Not yet, anyhow.”

Exhibiting tentative enthusiasm, Alex said, “You mean he honest to God does nothing?”

“Less than nothing, so my sources tell me.”

“Be damned! Owe that caper to Gridley, and it starts to smell like it might run in the money, Frank. How about your scheme to dynamite space bus job’s big cheese engineer?”

“I’m working on a plan to distract Dr. Ladd,” said Burton. “I honestly believe it’s the only approach with even a slim chance of success.”

“Okay, if you say so, Frank. How about the young gofer who works for him?”

“The ace P.I. on your payroll, Jake Pozderak, dug into his background and turned up zero dirty linen. Ladd’s young helper comes across as Mister Clean.”

Alex cracked his knuckles. “Guess there might be a longshot tucked in there someplace. Stay on top of all your scams, Frank, but f’Chrissake make ‘em march under whip and spur. We have to light the fuse under Mason, and have yet t’scratch a match. If you three movers ‘n shakers sit around with your thumbs up the kazoo, Mason’s and his bootlickers’ll ride merrily along. We have to panic the bastards, goose ‘em real hard, make ‘em dance to our tune.”

The speaker phone was silent for seconds. “At the risk of making you sore,” ventured Burton, “I have to tell you there’s no quick and easy way to do as you suggest. With decades of momentum in its favor despite the ongoing business slump, the Aerospaceplane shot in the arm will keep AGC rolling like Old Man River.”

“River? Shithouse mouse, here we go! No more word games, okay, Frank.”

“What I’m trying to say,” insisted Burton, “is that AGC is exactly like all other prime contractors that have been in business for years, decades. Forget the Great Recession, severe economic downturns, DoD appropriations cutbacks and curtailments, aerospace companies have forever flowed along like the mighty Mississippi. It will take a whole lot more than gentle nudges to overcome the sheer inertia built up during a lengthy history of regular-as-rain profit.”

“Inner-sha . . . ? *Another* fucking buzzword!”

“Hear me out,” pleaded Burton, a twang of acute exasperation invading his diction. “Try and appreciate a fact of life that should be self-apparent, Alex. Attacking a large, established aerospace prime contractor is like tickling a full-grown bull elephant. It will take the monster months to realize it’s being tickled, let alone react.”

“Now you’re spouting the stinkiest kind of negative horse shit that I’ve ever —”

“No, I’m *not*,” insisted Burton vehemently. Determined to make his point whatever the cost, he went on to say, “Look at it like this. If your aim was the hostile takeover of a commercial make-and-sell establishment, all you’d have to do is salt the foreign competition’s larders with enough yen, euros, pesos, yuan, whatever to hand the competitors a slight edge. Pouring incentives in the form of cold cash into the coffers of a competitor permits him to undercut domestic prices, which in turn automatically undercut the target company’s profit margin.

“Unfortunately, that simplistic tactic,” warned Burton, “and others like it, are impossible when dealing with a government prime contractor. There *is* no foreign competition; it doesn’t exist. Moreover, defense contractors have consistently circled the wagons and merged right and left in order to stay profitable. Beside teaming up to stay in the big leagues, the major players have scrambled, jostled and used their elbows in a fight for every crumb Uncle dishes out, with the prize guaranteed profit, steady profit,” enlightened Burton. “Profit is the one and only hook in existence. Six or seven percent may sound like a trivial, piddling profit margin compared to what insurance cartels and subsidized petroleum corporations pull in annually, but the low percentage take on a billion-dollar-plus contract totes up to a tidy sum. Simply stated, the bottom line is that no government prime contractor has ever lost money on defense work. Never!”

Restlessly pacing his garishly decorated office, Alex halted and scratched his jaw in frustration. “Okay, see your point,” he lied. “Anyhow, getting back to the message I’m busting a gut to put across, we can’t pitter-patter around the edges of this demolition derby or let Mason dodge our silver bullets. In the gaming racket, the wiseguys who once owned Vegas had a motto they stuck, namely that the biggest risk a casino could take was to not take any risks. Savvy?”

Rippling murmurs of assent issued in unison from the Ampli-Vox speakers.

“Hey, don’t think I’m not hip to the Bolshoi job you guys’re doing. Nobody said it’d be easy, but keep one thing in mind: we aren’t in a friendly fight. We’ve declared war, and we’ll win it, hear me? The only way to come out on top in a real nasty alley brawl is to go for the other guy’s gonads unless you can’t see the way clear to go for his throat. Take a deep breath, all three of you, and concentrate on going for AGC’s throat. Got it?”

An amber light began to wink on Kurile’s desk unit. “Hey, got another call on my private line. Back to work, guys. We’ll heat up the horn again real soon, hash things out some more.”

In Manhattan, Kurile’s pep talk caused Enrique Salazar’s sanguine expression to segue into a mask of redoubled wariness. He speculatively fingered his Adam’s apple, and had little difficulty realizing what the Securities & Exchange Commission would think of Kurile’s frenetic, febrile endeavor, or his personal role in it, and thoughtfully continued rubbing his throat.

In his “K” Street Washington office, the lobbyist stumped away from his desk muttering, “Go for the throat. I’d love to — *his* scrawny throat!”

In the San Fernando Valley apartment paid for by his employer, Burton wrenched open a kitchen cabinet, broke the seal on a bottle of tequila, uncapped it and stared at the label. “Go for the throat!” he ordered, upended the bottle, took three swallows, and burped.

14 - Caninophobia Extremis

Ham stood on his toes, peeking over the partition of his cubicle. Minnie was away from her desk. The door to Ladd’s inner office stood open invitingly; he could see the chief engineer rummaging in a file drawer. Crossing the corridor, he waited to be noticed.

Ladd glanced up, appraised Moffett candidly. “Who kicked sand in your face?”

“I just came back from Glenda’s office.”

Crow’s feet crinkled the corners of Ladd’s eyes. “Get away with your pants zipped?”

“Barely. Is she for real?”

“Not in any way, shape or definitely form. Don’t let her upset you; under all that fem fanaticism she’s a heady, accomplished gal. Oversexed by few orders of magnitude, but smart and capable. Let’s keep her on our side if we can. What amazing facts came to light?”

“I learned all about POIRs, PACERs, SPARs, and one stranger. What’s a PET?”

“Performance Evaluation Test, a downstream nightmare just lying in wait to savage us.” Ladd slumped behind his desk and lit a cigarette. “Let me guess. Glenda complained that we were behind the times in outputting reams of paperwork.”

She advised getting a POIR on the road ASAP, or sooner, and forwarding Dr. Mauch’s SPAR report to OART and DARPA.”

“My, my!” said the chief engineer drily. “You’ve begun to sound like a veteran AGCer. Not to worry, it’s still early days. Programs of this size and scope pull together at a snail’s pace, except that eventually we’ll have to search out and round up some racing snails.” Ladd stretched tiredly, and rotated his neck. “The weekly dog & pony status show kicks off in a few minutes. Tag along to the PIC Room and absorb some genuine wisdom.”

“PIC . . . ?” inquired Ham.

An indulgent nod. “Program Information Center.” Seizing a thick manila folder, the chief engineer swatted his staff assistant’s shoulder, herding him out of the office. “Status meetings are

almost as informative as supermarket ads, but still richer in pay dirt than Ben's sunrise services. You haven't been attending because in my addled condition I forgot to tell you to go."

* * *

The medium-sized auditorium filled slowly as individuals groups and clusters of high, medium and low-on-the-totem-pole AGCers filed inside. The subdued chatter increased steadily in volume. "There's a pair to draw to," remarked Ham, indicating the pair of radically dissimilar individuals making their way down the aisle. "They could double for the Odd Couple."

"Uh-huh. The stocky, mean-looking gent with the silvery mane and Heidelberg scar," informed Ladd, "is none other than Terrible Tempered Erik Klonn. His sidekick, the skinny Asian kid tagging Klonn's heels, is lower-case rupert lin."

"Lower-case . . . ?"

"Absolutely without exception. Rupe's fluent in Cantonese and partial differential equations. At anything else he isn't so much. His ingrown fetish is an aversion to capital letters, sentence structure and all items of punctuation. It makes his written reports fascinating reading, with an obfuscation factor that's astronomical-plus. Rupe's thrilling syntax ranges from cryptic to incomprehensible."

"You make them sound like a powerful team. What's their function?"

"Technical analysis. Erik manages R&D's Basic Loads Section — aircraft and spacecraft structural analysis, thermal transfer dynamics, all that esoteric stuff. Under Erik's diabolical guidance, Rupe supervises dynamic and thermodynamic analysts who specialize in constructing ingenious mathematical models of items that rarely deserve modeling. Rupe's personal gig is supervising a small group of experts who overanalyze the dynamics, mechanics and heat-transfer mechanisms of electronic black boxes."

An urbane young man debonairly attired in a dark blue, three-piece suit tapped the microphone to assure himself the sound system was functional. He brought the meeting to order by delivering a mellifluous, "Good morning." The PIC auditorium quieted on cue. Lifting a pushbutton at the termination of a snaking cable, he clicked on the first rear-projection view foil — a bar chart depicting past and present, currently budgeted ALLP/ORDART preliminary development and design expenditures.

"Who's he," whispered Ham.

"One of the bean counters. Most of the dollar pitches we safely ignore, but not all."

"CBB," announced the urbane young man, "is tracking fairly close to the original CCBD." Using a collapsible metal pointer, he indicated pertinent bars on the chart.

"More bafflegab," whispered Ham.

"For CCB, read Control Budget Baseline," said Ladd in a stage whisper. "The other is Configuration Control Board Directive."

After hitting the high spots on three more financial vufoils, the young man turned the podium over to a graying, sad-faced gentleman whose manner was hopelessly apologetic. He gloomily informed the audience that AGC had received OART's reply concerning the RCIN for CATES. "We urged going OCONUS for CATES," he added sorrowfully. "NASA suggested querying France's Thales Alenia, but problems with DoD invariably crop up when we try to deal with foreign companies. What's worse, after the usual tail-chasing we're often directed to find a domestic source even if none happens to exist . . ."

“Help!” whispered Ham.

In rapid succession, Ladd whispered, “Request for Change Incorporation Notice, Common Automatic Test Equipment, and Outside the Continental United States.”

“Imagine that.”

“... also,” declared a third presenter minutes later, “electrical engineering is having difficulties with MADAR. Worse, Safety Engineering warns us that MOOSE will fall in a crack if NASA rescinds the NAR on MOOSE and doesn’t bother to tell us.”

“Moose Madar,” whispered Ham. “An NFL linebacker, wasn’t he?”

“Shush-h-h,” admonished his boss. “Malfunction Analysis, Detection and Recording. The others are No Applicable Requirement, and Manned Orbital Operations Safety.”

“Where does an alien go to register?”

“Put a lid on it,” whispered Ladd. “Look ‘em up. A glossary’s in the database.”

Twenty minutes later, the gentleman characterized by Ladd as Terrible Tempered Erik Klonn was announced as the final presenter. Massive in girth and stature, the silver-haired analytical group manager climbed to the stage, his manner that of Moses ascending Mount Sinai. Turning at the lectern, he glared at the audience, daring anyone to utter a sound, har-r-umphed! twice in rapid succession. “Analytical progress,” he proclaimed in an amplified, ear-bending basso profundo growl, “has been severely hampered by the wishy-washy, totally unnecessary ground rules currently invoked. Tasked to generate specific preliminary data deriving from extremely sketchy sources, forces us to make a futile, nonproductive attempt to perform worthwhile analyses despite the idiotic ground rules, thus wasting time, energy and funding.

“Since he has opted to join us this morning,” added terrible-tempered Erik Klonn, “I should like to inquire how our chief engineer wishes us to circumvent such an outrageous obstacle. Dr. Ladd, sir, how can my organization possibly produce useful, significant data? How can we hope to forward meaningful analyses under totally adverse obstacles and conditions?”

All heads swung toward Ladd. “Same as always, Erik,” he stated calmly. “Establish preliminary baselines, and extrapolate from them as the inputs become more definitive.”

Klonn’s beetling brows converged in an ominous “vee.” His florid features distended, his eyes ominous narrowed slits, he said much too loudly, “Will we never be permitted to conduct analyses in a proper, professional manner on at least *one* project? I may be forced to lodge a strenuous protest with upper management over this issue, Dr. Ladd. I warn you: slapdash analyses can lead only to slapdash hardware.”

“Erik, in every program that’s come down the pike,” said Ladd, “preliminary design demands preliminary analysis. If you’re able to invent another way to handle it, be my guest.”

Puffy-faced, Terrible Tempered Erik Klonn gathered himself to his full stature. Standing ramrod straight, looking as if steam might vent from his ears, he whirled ponderously and stumped from the stage in the manner of Moses descending from Mt. Sinai without his tablets.

Muttered comments traveled about the small auditorium.

“Think he’ll blow the whistle?” asked Ham.

“You mean the ‘strenuous protest’ bit?” Ladd chuckled. “Not a chance. Erik won’t admit it, but he knows the score. We’ve had an identical confrontation on every program that’s come along since Wilbur and Orville abandoned their bicycle shop. Erik’s extremely even-tempered; he’s forever pissed-off at something, or someone. Often both.”

The smooth-talking, stylishly dressed budgeteer who had convened the proceedings retook the podium. "Before we adjourn, Mr. Sorenson would like to say a few words."

Leaning toward his staff engineer, Ladd whispered, "This could get interesting."

R&D Division's acting VP & GM reared to totemesque proportions at the rear of the PIC room. Marching down the center aisle at a stately pace, he mounted the steps, squared his turn and faced front at the lectern. Afforded a first clear view of the VP's classic masculine features, roached iron-gray crew cut, and regal mien, the audience became aware of an imposing presence. An expectant hush fell over the auditorium.

Sorenson surveyed the gathering, his penetrating laser gaze shifting from one group of semi-mesmerized individuals to another. "Good going," he told the audience, immediately faced right and strode resolutely across the small stage. Bounding lithely down the steps, he exited the Program Information Center through a side door.

"The budgeteer," said Ham, "told us Mr. Sorenson wanted to say a few words, and few they were."

"My boss," responded Ladd with a twinkle, "is a gentleman of far fewer words than you or I or anyone else could possibly imagine."

* * *

Sorenson had purposely kept his pep talk short, then beat a hasty retreat, to keep an appointment of momentous significance. "F" Building's wiry tool and die inspector, currently top-seeded in the first annual AGC Employees Recreation Club Ping-Pong Tournament, had invited the sponsoring executive to meet him and view the club's most recent acquisitions.

Eagerly anticipating his first glimpse of the new paddles, a googol of Ping-Pong balls and many nets procured expressly for the upcoming affair, Sorenson's long strides carried him toward the designated trysting area in the parking lot. His pace vigorous, he charged down the plant's inner security corridor, exited the main gate like a cork popping out of a bottle.

Seated in his tinted-glass cubicle, a dead cigar stub clamped in his dentures, The Sheriff followed the executive's brisk passage with rheumy, calculating blue eyes.

Forced to slow his steps, Sorenson threaded his way through phalanxes of parked autos, roving up one aisle and down the next, randomly searching for what the wiry tool and die inspector's blue Honda sedan. Ducking between cars, he rounded a huge, archaic SUV and came face-to-face, eyeball to eyeball, psyche to psyche with his worst nightmare.

A dog!

The tall, distinguished acting VP&GM and scruffy, unkempt canine eyed one another in mutual enmity heavily laden with suspicion. Frozen in panic for a heart-stopping eternity lasting seconds, Sorenson stood paralyzed, appalled by a chance encounter of the very worst kind.

The dog, a dun-colored mongrel with frizzy, flea-bitten fur, bared yellowed fangs and barked once to test the waters. Lifting one paw, the dog leaned forward at point. A low, feral growl issuing from its arched throat slowly swelled into a drawn-out snarl.

Sorenson bolted, streaking down the narrow aisle between parked cars, the ravenous beast yapping at his heels. He cut slaunchwise between another pair of vehicles, bruising his shoulder on a camper's extended side-view mirror, spun around and cut back against the grain, then broke into a desperate all-out sprint toward the main gate.

The dog closed the gap and nipped a fast-moving heel.

Sprinting like a terror-stricken Olympic champion, Sorenson realized the main gate sanctuary was like Heaven, in sight but out of reach. In desperation, he frantically scrambled atop the hood, then on up to the rust-speckled roof of a nondescript sedan, its rear half chopped out to convert it into a wooden-bedded pickup truck.

The mongrel dashed back and forth, alternately yapping and growling. Now and again it leaped up, lunging at Sorenson in his ascendancy; its claws made a horrible scraping sound on the ersatz pickup's rusted fender as it slid and fell back in defeat.

Balanced precariously atop the ersatz pickup's rusted cab, Sorenson peered anxiously toward the main gate. Summoning his courage, he timidly shouted, "Help!"

A gleam of sheer delight in his rheumy blue eyes, the Sheriff had watched every move of the impromptu ballet unfold. Amusement tugged at the corners of his mouth, descended the steps, spat out the cigar stump and yelled, "Sorry, can't rightly leave my post at the gate."

"Shoot it!" cried Sorenson, energized at sight of a potential savior. Gesturing wildly at the slavering mongrel, he almost lost his balance.

"Agin' the law," cried The Sheriff, "to discharge firearms inside the city limits."

"Call 911!" screamed Sorenson.

Unable to hide the grin tickling his unshaven jowls, The Sheriff nodded agreeably. ducked inside the cubicle, picked up the phone and pretended to talk while holding down the button with a tobacco-stained index finger. "F'r all I care," he muttered into the dead phone, "that tall dipshit can stay up where he is all day long."

The dog sat down and licked its chops. Tilting its head at a thoughtful angle. it studied the teetering executive hungrily.

Feeling like a broken-winged bird cornered by a snake, Sorenson took note of the dog's every twitch. His anxiety peaked. He found the courage to cry, "Shoo!"

Outraged by the impertinence, the dog barked raucously and made several more futile attempts to leap up and savage the treed executive.

His calves were beginning to cramp from balancing so long on the pickup's scabby roof. A loud explosion nearby almost caused him to topple into the mongrel's jaws.

Belching sooty exhaust, Little Joe's orange Mustang roared up the parking lot's center aisle, backfired again and careened to a brake-squealing halt across two VISITOR slots. Little Joe emerged and perched the undersized Stetson atop his dark, curly locks.

Sorenson drew a deep, lung-filling breath and bellowed, "*Hel-l-l-p!*"

Little Joe reined in his needle-nosed snakeskin cowboy boots. His nearsighted, suspicious gaze swept the parking lot all directions, searching for the cry's source.

"Over here!" yelled Sorenson so loudly it made his throat hurt.

The drafter turned round and round, squinting until his eyes watered.

"Help me!" screamed Sorenson, outdoing his best previous volume.

Utterly confused by the vocal cries from nowhere, Little Joe stepped back to his battered Mustang's passenger's door, reached in through the open window that refused to roll up, and brought forth from the glove box his detested horn-rimmed spectacles with impossibly thick lenses. Armed with optical aid, he spotted Sorenson and shouted, "What're you doing up there?"

"Dog!" shrieked Sorenson.

"Fog . . ? There ain't no fog? It's clear as a —"

“Dog!” screamed the vice president, risking a hemorrhage. He hopped up and down in frustration, arms windmilling to keep from toppling off the ersatz pickup’s cab.

“Oh, dog!” Little Joe tossed the horn-rimmed spectacles on his car’s ripped upholstery. His swaggering, hip-rolling limp took him between parked cars. Slowing his approach to the hybrid vehicle and its marooned supplicant, he girded himself to face the mastiff holding the tall gent in a business suit at bay. With his luck, Little Joe figured he might have to drive off a ferocious, hundred-pound Pit Bull.

The medium-sized, dun-colored mongrel came in view. “Heck,” Little Joe told the man atop the vehicle, “this little mutt won’t bother nobody.”

“Get rid of it,” urged Sorenson. “Hit it with a stick.”

“Scat!” Little Joe drew back and launched a kick that would have impaled the dog on his needle-nosed cowboy boot. He missed, landing rump-first on the asphalt. Accustomed to harsh mistreatment, the dog had dodged adroitly and scampered away.

Swearing luridly, the wannabe Western star recovered his fallen Stetson and helped Sorenson climb down from his rusty sanctuary. Belatedly catching sight of the other’s scarlet-rimmed badge, the pupils of his close-set dark eyes expanded like quoits.

Quivering in all three axes, by no means recovered from this latest canine waking nightmare, R&D’s weak-kneed pro tempore VP & GM allowed the diminutive, curly haired cowboy to proudly escort him through the main gate. Little Joe winked at The Sheriff as the unlikely twosome passed his cubicle.

“You did good,” asserted Sorenson.

“Dee-lighted t’be of service, sir.” said Little Joe with an ingratiating display of modesty. “Think nothing of it, sir.”

“You play Ping-Pong?” inquired Sorenson.

“Begging your pardon, how’s that, sir?”

“Ping-Pong. Do you play . . . ?”

The Sheriff watched the pair diminish in perspective until the tall and short figures disappeared behind the bulwark of “C” Building. His head wagged knowingly. Seizing a fresh cigar stub, he muttered, “The awesome wonders round here won’t *ever* begin t’cease.”

* * *

“Here’s your TEA, Mr. Moffett.” Minnie deposited a slim packet on Moffett’s desk and turned to leave his cubicle.

“Terrific!” said Ham, arresting her departure. “It can’t be Earl Grey, Oolong or Darjeeling. Want the truth, I like coffee a lot more.”

Minnie sighed. “Your Travel Expenditure Authorization. I booked you into the King’s Inn on NASA Road One, a block from JSC’s main entrance. An Avis compact’s reserved at the airport. When you get back, make sure to file the TEA right away in Cost Accounting.”

“I’ll do my darndest to comply, Min.”

Arriving home that evening, he bussed Audrey Lee’s cheek. “Got my TEA this afternoon. Heading to JSC Monday morning. Can you drop me early at LAX?”

“Will I ever be told,” his wife asked, “when and where you learned a new language?”

“JSC, uh . . . Johnson Space Center, in Houston,” he told her. “I’ll be coordinating some preliminary design changes with NASA, and meet some people we’ll be dealing with later on.”

"I translated LAX on my own. You actually expect me to drive you across town to Inglewood? Why not leave from . . . what's it called, the Burbank airport?"

"Bob Hope, last I heard. On second thought, forget it. I'll catch a cab to Panorama City, and take the airport shuttle." Setting his briefcase in the hall closet, he loosened his tie. "What's wrong, Audrey Lee? There a burr under your collar?"

"It's that darn Mrs. Flickinger. She's upped her rates again, and tends to pick on Melissa Lee. She came home close to tears, and I came close to calling the hussy, telling her off."

Even mild disparagement struck Ham as unnatural coming from Audrey Lee, earning his full attention. "Best, maybe, if we find Missy a new piano teacher."

"Oh, I'd hate doing that. She says she's learning fine." Audrey Lee sniffed unhappily. "Will you be flying away often on these fool trips?"

"Now and then. We knew about it when I signed on at AGC."

His wife turned away. "So while you gallivant in Houston, I get to stay home and chase kids, run errands, wash clothes, and cook. The division of labor isn't exactly fair."

Ham touched her shoulder; she irritably shrugged him off. "Doubt if I'll have a chance to gallivant. Free airplane rides don't thrill me, either, or gloomy motel rooms, coffee shop meals, rental cars. It's a necessary chore, part of my job."

"Why can't I come along?"

"To do what, spend the day alone in a motel room? I'm slated to catch an early morning flight, spend Tuesday at JSC, then fly home Wednesday."

"Traveling alone?"

"Solo."

"Who knows?" Audrey Lee sounded wistful. "If I came along, I might meet some nice Southern gentleman in Houston, and be taken out on the town."

Miffed by the remark, Ham said, "A good bet. Why the heat all of a sudden? This's my first trip out of town. There'll be others. I appreciate how you feel, but —"

"Do you? Go wash up. Your dinner's getting cold."

Early Monday morning, a dense mist the airline clerk called "a light ground fog" enveloped LAX in a damp miasma, delaying Ham's flight. When finally allowed to board, he encountered a musty odor peculiar to commercial aircraft, a compendium of off-gassing plastic, damp fabric, and too many bodies recently crowded too close together.

The constant takeoff acceleration surge found him stewing about his wife's coolness. Audrey Lee had acted as if he were deserting her forever, even averting his goodbye kiss. Their bedroom had also been chilly on the weekend nights. It wasn't like her, not at all like her.

The jetliner climbed out through the overcast, broached into brilliant sunlight. He watched the blinding white floor of cloud hillocks and valleys drop away, loosened his seat belt and stared moodily out the window until an unsmiling flight attendant pushing a little card down the center aisle served oily coffee in a Styrofoam cup. Wondering what had turned his wife peevish, he regarded the empty sky beyond the sun glare coming off the wing, and wished smoking had not been banned on all domestic flights.

Dozing aboard the connecting flight hours later, his ears popped as the plane began a shallow descent between tufts of cottony, fair weather cumulus floating above a patchwork of

grasslands and geometric, checkerboard cultivated fields. Yawning repeatedly to clear his Eustachian tubes, he heard rude barks from the landing gear tires signal touch down.

Retrieving his overnighter from the luggage compartment above the seat, he disembarked, located the Avis counter in the lightly populated terminal. The time differential made it a warm, muggy late afternoon in Houston. He opened the compact Toyota sedan's trunk and stowed his overnighter and briefcase. The deck lid refused to click shut. If Audrey Lee knew what she was missing he thought wryly. He slammed the lid unsuccessfully a more few times, then gave up and hailed an attendant.

"What's the hangup?" asked a slim black youth.

"Won't close" Ham demonstrated the malfunction.

"Uh-huh, shit happens. Here, let me show you." The attendant stepped back, took two steps and landed rump-first atop the recalcitrant deck lid. It clicked shut solidly.

"Much obliged."

"Uh-huh."

Ham started the engine and let the sedan idle. Opening all windows, he switched on the air-conditioner and stood outside until the interior cooled down. After consulting the Avis map, he drove around the traffic-laden ring road, turned off south into a countryside peppered with dusty greenery, small businesses and homes, and then turned left into NASA Road One, a thoroughfare lined with shops, restaurants, motels and a bowling alley. The King's Inn appeared on the left, a rambling two-story structure with a pair of wings on either side of a triangular grassy area around the swimming pool.

He tugged and pried and hammered for minutes, sweating to open the Toyota's recalcitrant deck lid. He was struggling vainly when a dented brown GMC pickup rattled into the adjacent slot. A deer rifle was mounted on a rack in the rear window.

The tee-shirted, auburn-haired Texan who stepped down from the pickup sported drooping handlebar mustachios. Clutching a can of Lone Star beer, he hesitated to deliberate Ham's efforts. "Sometimes that there foreign iron," observed, the Texan, "don't work so good."

Moffett was hard-pressed to disagree.

"Here, let me give you a hand." The redhead rummaged through mounds of tools, a greasy chainsaw and other assorted debris cluttering the bed of his pickup. Holding aloft the granddaddy of all screwdrivers, he took a fortifying double-gulp of Lone Star, inserted the giant screwdriver in the crack between the Toyota's deck lid and the rear body panel, and wrenched fiercely downward. The deck lid flew open with a screech of tortured metal.

Ham fingered the chipped paint. "Thanks much. Appreciate it."

"Think nothing of it." Tossing the monster screwdriver into the pickup with a clatter, the other finished his Lone Star, collapsed the can in his overly large hands and ambled off in the direction of the motel coffee shop.

Ham checked in, unpacked and hung up a change of clothes. He watched the local TV news, then went to the coffee shop and ordered a BLT on whole wheat, half a cantaloupe, and a stein of his recent acquaintance's favorite brew.

* * *

In the morning, shaved and showered, he headed for the coffee shop and was served toast, hash-browns, and eggs sunny-side-up. The waitress also plopped down a bowl of steaming

grits gratis. Subliminally concerned by Audrey Lee's uncharacteristic pique, he ate slowly, and decided to phone home in the evening and take a stab at mending fences.

"Straight ahead, sir," directed the attendant at the entrance to Johnson Space Center. "Go left at the first intersection. Your building's on the right, just beyond the outdoor display."

The display proved too arresting to drive past. With a quarter-hour to spare until his appointment, he parked and walked across the Bermuda grass lawn arrayed with a scattered collection of monuments to NASA space programs. The main attraction, separate stages of an entire Apollo Saturn V were strung out lengthwise behind the detached, cone-shaped Command Module. He marveled at the sheer size of each successive stage, and was studying the five giant F-1 reaction motors at the base of the first stage booster when a remark of Ladd's popped into his mind: "We reached the point of diminishing returns with the Apollo Moon shots, a last gasp of brute force. From here on it has to be finesse, finesse, and yet more finesse."

Perspiring in the Gulf Coast humidity rife with a pungent petroleum odor, his sense of wonder was titillated as he walked all around the beached behemoth. He tried to imagine how such a gargantuan aggregation of hardware had ever been made to leave the ground.

The receptionist ran a crimson fingernail down the list. "Mr. Halloran asked me to bring you right in, sir."

Ham followed the receptionist down a tiled, antiseptic corridor. She knocked lightly, then ushered him into a medium-sized conference room, where he was introduced to four veterans of the Rockwell Space Transportation System, the former managers of Crew Compartment Integration, Aft Flight Deck and Annex Integration. Heading the pack was Lawrence Halloran, the upper level manager charged with Flight Hardware Integration for what little remained of NASA's manned space programs.

"Stan DeRoux is tied up this morning," said Halloran after Ham had shaken hands all around, "but he's only interested in GLOTRAC. Bob here wants to pick your brain about GOSS, and one of my major concerns is learning how AGC plans to handle ALLP ILAS and mission C&D equipment."

Moffett groaned inwardly upon hearing the parade of acronyms again on march.

"For lunch," added Halloran, "we'll trot down to Kemah. Once a red light district, it now features an eaterie on the shore of Galveston Bay that serves Gulf shrimp burnt black Cajun style, a stomach pleaser you won't want to miss. In the afternoon we'll meet with Mel Prentiss about the IMP variances listed in your preliminary spec for ICAD."

Ham loosed a second silent internal groan.

* * *

"The hammer comes down first thing tomorrow morning, Mr. Kurile."

"What hammer?"

"The United Telecommunication Brotherhood's hammer," enthused the lobbyist.

"Ah, Gotcha! Sure it'll happen, Grid, or only hoping?" demanded Alex.

"Action at last!" His enthusiasm had segued from doubt to elation, and Gridly said, "Sean Quick has squads of union reps lined up, prepped to descend on AGC's salaried professionals and catch 'em coming to work. They'll pass out handbills inviting the targets to next Saturday's 'Get t'know us' UTB rally."

“About goddamn time,” said Alex, “after all I’ve shelled out to those union loafers. Does Quick think Mason’s pros will swallow the bait and, you know, stand in line to sign up?”

“Uh, maybe nothing that dramatic,” temporized Gridley. Thinking fast, he added, “The brotherhood’s advance team scouted the territory thoroughly, and Burton filled in the team leader on the half-baked professional guild AGC scientists and engineers tried to form six, seven years ago, and told me it was strictly amateur night, with no qualified union organizers on scene for coaching and backup. A liberal translation of that, Mr. Kurile, is no union war chest stuffed with greenbacks to spread around, and no experienced union stirrer-uppers knowing how to spread it in the right places. Frank lived through that fiasco, and said the salaried pros agitated for a guild on their own behalf, without a clue about how to whip their peers in shape.”

“Piers? What goddamn piers? Mason’s pros aren’t dockworkers, f’Chrissake.”

“Their . . . professional colleagues, Mr. Kurile.”

“Piers, yet! Grid, you spout stinkier horsepocky every time we yak.”

“UTB,” insisted Gridley, “is loaded to the gills with organizing savvy; it’s what gives them a razor-sharp edge. Quick himself has organized professional guilds in aerospace and commercial companies from sea to shining sea.”

“Way I heard it,” quibbled Alex, “UTB mostly fronts a union aimed at blue-collar grunts, not aerial-spacey heavyweight brains.”

“Both,” assured the lobbyist, who had no idea if it was true. “The union itself is made up of hourly paid factory workers, but scads of engineers, scientists and so forth also belong to UTB’s Professional Guild; it’s kept separate for prestige purposes. This’s the beginning of the end for AGC’s heavy-handed treatment of high-tech professionals. Count on it!”

Alex’s skeptical grunt underscored his tangible lack of faith in Gridley’s declaration. “Go tell this Quick character to make damn sure it’s not the end of the beginning.” Without further adieu, he hit the speaker phone off switch a lusty whack.

15 - Union Now

Barely fifteen minutes late for work, an all-time promptness record, Little Joe nursed his ailing orange Mustang through sluggish early morning traffic. For some reason the streets around the AGC’s facility became unnaturally congested. Barely avoiding a rear end collision, he wrestled the Mustang to a shuddery, brake-squealing halt, and poked his curly head out of the permanently open driver’s window. A man wearing an *Dodgers* baseball cap with the bill reversed was dodging in and out of the street, handing out leaflets of some kind. Ahead in the queues in both westbound lanes, other strangers interrupted the traffic flow by doling out fliers.

The seven-times-refinanced orange Mustang, running poorly to begin with, gasped, skipped a beat and threatened to stall, doubling Little Joe vexation. He solved the stoppage dilemma by leaning on the feeble horn. The driver ahead of him whipped his head around and awarded Little Joe a clear, unobstructed view of his stiffened middle finger.

“Prick with ears thinks he’s number one,” grumbled the wannabe rangeland rover. The uneasily vibrating Mustang edged up one car at a time toward the man in the wrong-way baseball cap, coughed asthmatically, backfired once, producing a shattering report, and died.

“Haveaniceday!” A leaflet was thrust in Little Joe’s face.

“What the hell’s this?”

“United Telecommunications Brotherhood wants t’welcome you to membership, Pal.”

“Oh, yeah? See what your goddamn hang-up did to my car?”

“UTB needs your support.”

“Do I look like a friggin’ supporter?”

The leaflet man scowled. “Right next to it, Pal.”

“Why, you miserable . . . !”

“UTB,” informed the union hireling, “is hostin’ a giant mass meeting ‘n rally Saturday afternoon. You’ll be welcome t’come.”

“Screw UTB!” Little Joe ground the starter without mercy. The Mustang sputtered, spewed a cloud of sooty exhaust from its ruptured tailpipe. He got out of the wounded vehicle, and slammed the door. “While we’re at it,” he told the leaflet man, “screw you, too!”

The UTB minion searched the cadaverous, aggressive features lurking beneath Little Joe’s undersized Stetson. “Hey, we’re here t’help you poor benighted buggers.”

“Who you callin’ names, you slimy bastard?”

The leaflet man doubled his fist, thought better of stomping Little Joe into the asphalt, and hustled to the next car in line.

Outrage lent added fluency to the drafter’s fulminant vocabulary as he tried to push his orange Mustang up the shallow driveway’s slope into the parking lot. The auto’s wheel bearings were indecently worn, the bald left front tire semi-inflated. He was straining ineffectually, perspiration coursing in rivulets from beneath the undersized Stetson, when Farnsworth pulled alongside in his near-new Buick.

“Farnsie . . . gimme . . . shove,” panted Little Joe.

Nattily attired in a dark brown business suit, Farnsworth alighted and inspected the Mustang’s pitted rear bumper, then studied his near-new Buick “Sorry, Joe. My bumper would ride up over yours and cause damage. You should call triple-A. The, uh . . . Auto Club.”

“Auto Club . . . Schmotto . . . Club!” panted Little Joe. “Farnsie, you satisfied . . . t’stand there, do zip . . . ‘bout my invitation . . . t’lend a hand?”

Farnsworth nervously tugged his soft linen collar. “You aren’t with triple-A?”

“Get your money-grubbin’ butt . . . over here! You push, I’ll . . . steer.”

The unequal division of labor resulted in the orange Mustang sitting diagonally across three slots a quarter-mile from any other cars. Red-faced from exertion and rage, Little Joe didn’t bother to thank Farnsworth. His swaggering, hip-rolling limp carried him in erratic, energy-depleted zigzags toward the main security gate. Without a word of friendly badinage as prelude, he accosted The Sheriff. “Hey, don’t you see the goings-on out yonder? Look here, see this pinko trash those jerkjollies’re handing out?” He waved the UTB leaflet in front of The Sheriff’s bulbous nose. “Why don’t you guys go chase ‘em away, make ‘em skeedaddle?”

“Read the leaflet yet?” asked The Sheriff.

“Course I ain’t read it. Wipe my bum with it is what I’m going t-do.”

“Uh-huh. Well, ‘fore y’get to wiping,” advised The Sheriff, “give her a few minutes’ study. Might maybe learn something useful.”

Taken aback by the suggestion, Little Joe grimaced, readied a sharp retort sharply, and hesitated. Holding the plum-colored leaflet inches from his nose, he squinted at the text. It

defined the manifold ways AGC had been taking unscrupulous advantage of salaried professional employees, cited the wisdom of wiser, more mature-minded scientific and technical employees who had clutched UTB to their respective bosoms, thereby reaping phenomenal benefits by presenting a united front to management, thus avoiding the woeful pitfalls during vain, futile attempts to individually negotiate grievances. Professionalism, insisted the handbill, was achievable only in a thoroughly professional atmosphere, where the meritorious accomplishments of professionals were duly recognized, conscientiously rewarded.

Little Joe tilted back the brim of his undersized Stetson. "Truth be told," he said, "us drafters don't count as perfesh-nals."

"Salaried, aren't you, not hourly paid?"

"Well, yeah. But we're —"

"Beginning to figure out what the union ramrods're driving at, Mr. Feinblatt?"

"Really think this rinky-dink union scam's on the level, Sheriff?"

"Who's t-say? Sure does bear thinking on, though. Way I calculate, the tale they're telling warrants a hour're two of real serious thinking."

Little Joe cogitated. "You plant protection buzzards're all unionized, right?"

"Shee-it no!" To punctuate his emphatic denial, the oldster sent a stream of spittle through the chain-link fence. "Most of us are ex-military jackasses. We get the short end of the stick coming, going, and standing still. But by Lucifer, it don't mean you have t'put up with it!"

His mind working overtime, Little Joe folded and pocketed the leaflet. "I surely mean to think on this for serious, Sheriff. I truly for certain definitely promise to do it real soon."

"See that y'do," advised The Sheriff.

* * *

Mr. Mason surveyed the high-echelon underlings gathered in the executive conference room. "Now then, what shall we do about these UTB interlopers?"

AGC Chief Counsel Stanley Lomax spoke up. "We might request an injunction, Ben, but I doubt that it would be granted. The outlying streets and sidewalks are public property. I can think of no way to stop our professional people from being harassed unless union organizers venture into the facility proper."

"Including the parking lots?" someone asked.

"Definitely," assured the lawyer. "Touch one toe inside our privately owned acreage, and it would be an actionable occurrence."

Prepared to effectively circle the wagons against assault by the barbarian UTB horde at the gates of AGC, assorted vice presidents, directors, division and department managers anxiously awaited Mr. Mason's comment.

"Union agitators!" exclaimed the president and CEO with atypical petulance. "What next, for the love of God? We compensate our salaried professionals extremely well. Why, our professional remuneration scale matches or betters the industry's median, and our fringe benefits are absolutely outstanding. Isn't that so, Ron?"

The Salaried Employee Relations Director was noncommittal. "We're, uh . . . I'd say generally speaking we're in the ballpark, Ben."

The limp response earned a glance of reproof from AGC's silver-maned leader, who cleared his throat in a way that encouraged sharp executive focus. "Now attend me. We've been

blindsided by this totally unexpected union incursion, and I called you together in order to discuss specific ways and means of thwarting it. I want common sense advice about how to put a stop to it, and I want it stopped cold. All of us are aware of how swiftly a virulent infectious disease like a professional guild can decimate a smoothly functioning organization like AGC.

"It begins," he lectured, ticking off the point on a forefinger, "as a 'harmless' scientists and engineers guild. Shortly thereafter, petitions circulate requesting permission to 'contribute' input when determining salaries and benefits. Eventually the polite 'requests' become demands for representation on the board of directors, and finally comes the crack of doom, when the 'harmless' guild begins dictating corporate policy. I will never — mark me, ladies and gentlemen, never! — turn a sacred trust like Aerospace General Corporation over to hooligans who have only their socialist union's best interests at heart.

"This UTB threat," pursued Mr. Mason earnestly, "strikes me as nothing less than a serious, first-water menace. We simply must concoct a scheme, or schemes, to forestall, subdue or otherwise counter this very serious threat." He gestured curtly to the attorney. "Stan, if you believe seeking an injunction would be impractical, what do you see as our first move?"

"An odds-on bet," declared Lomax, "would be to immediately launch an internal, high-velocity counter-propaganda campaign."

"Excellent! An obvious first step," endorsed Mr. Mason, "yet I see it as only an interim counterpunch. For the main event we shall need something much more substantial, something more concrete. What else . . . ? Stan, anyone . . . ?"

AGC's chief financial officer spoke up. "A small blanket pay increase might be an effective deterrent, Ben. You know, toss the salaried pros a small bone to chew on."

Mr. Mason cocked his head. "That has merit, possibly a great deal of merit." He pondered. "At this juncture, however, mightn't that move seem a shade less than subtle? We can't let it be known that this unionization scare has coerced us to . . . No, I fear that would furnish UTB with added ammunition by inferring, if not in effect admitting, that our people are under-compensated. Let's hip pocket that notion for now, save it for later if and when we get backed into a tight corner. Does my objection seem reasonable?"

Murmured exclamations of assent rippled through the conference room.

"One moment, please!" Mr. Mason sounded annoyed. "I cannot stomach having a cadre of yes-men and -women on our First Team. If there's one thing I abhor it's executives afflicted with the 'yes-man' syndrome. Should anyone here disagree with my thinking on any issue under discussion, I insist that he or she speak up promptly. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

Murmured exclamations of assent rippled through the conference room.

"Fine! Now that we see eye to eye on it, let's put our minds to work and invent some appropriate method of counteracting this guild threat. You, there . . . Dr. Klonn, is it?"

Terrible Tempered Erik Klonn gained his feet ponderously. His normally ruddy features distended, a colossus towering above his confreres like some medieval warlord, he said in a rumbling basso profundo, "Mr. Mason, everything I have heard has thus far has been of a timid, passive nature. We must abandon passivity, and attack! We must rout the union scum before they can become entrenched, gain a solid beachhead from which to begin wreaking havoc."

A Spacecraft Division manager snickered, covered his mouth and whispered to the executive seated next to him, "Erik was in the army."

“Ours, or theirs?”

A second snicker. “He reminds me of someone, but I can’t put my finger on who.”

“Likewise,” whispered the other. “For me, it’s Dr. Frankenstein’s do-it-yourself guy, minus the head bolts.”

Mr. Mason detected the whispered exchange and glared at the offenders. “Gentlemen, let’s have just one meeting here, shall we? Proceed, Dr. Klonn. We’re all ears.”

“Our initial counteroffensive tactic,” declaimed Erik Klonn with all the command authority used by Bonaparte to rally the Old Guard, “must be surveillance.”

“Surveillance . . . ?”

“Surveillance, Mr. Mason, sir. It will be necessary to gather every available shred of intelligence related to enemy functions and actions. Doing so will be vital if we are to anticipate the moves these union scoundrels may make, and instantly evolve counter-moves as part and parcel of our overall strategy. Only in such a dedicated, decisive manner will we be able to defeat the nefarious union kingpins.”

“Dr. Klonn, I must confess that I’m, uh . . . well, not sure how we can, er . . . That is, I don’t entirely follow your chain of reasoning. Could you please elucidate?”

“Gladly, Mr. Mason, sir. Our learned legal counsel has pointed out the fact that UTB vermin may not conduct odious activities that verge on criminal behavior inside the boundaries of our facility. We must therefore secure the plant’s entire perimeter, and in my opinion ‘keep out’ demarcation deadlines would be appropriate. Should a single union agitator then dare to cross the established perimeter, he or she could be arrested for trespassing, a matter in which I’m certain the Los Angeles Police Department would cooperate to the full extent of its powers.”

Mr. Mason cogitated. “Stan, what’s your take on Dr. Klonn’s suggestion?”

“Sensational notion!” endorsed the attorney wholeheartedly. “There’s also a secondary reason for surveillance, Ben. More than one area of the plant is technically government property, where trespass would be considered a federal infraction, not merely civil.”

“Capital!” Mr. Mason beamed at the hulking figure of Erik Klonn. “Monitoring trespass around our entire circumference will not be simple. How can it be done effectively?”

“Through the use of towers!” boomed Terrible Tempered Erik Klonn.

“Er, towers . . . ?”

“Watchtowers, Mr. Mason, sir.” A series of violent affirmative head shakes caused dual oscillations in Dr. Klonn’s multiple dewlaps. “Temporary wooden structures erected at salient points along the surrounding streets from where plant protection personnel can scan the boundaries in both directions and videotape any disruptive activity or trespass as irrefutable evidence of a criminal act.”

“Capital!” The attorney echoed the muttered sentiment rippling through AGC’s assembled leadership. “Ben, I go along with that one thousand percent.”

Positively glowing, Mr. Mason said, “Outstanding, Dr. Klonn! That’s precisely the type of active countermeasure I’d hoped to hear. Audacity, above all else audacity! Attack! Thank you, sir. Your inventive brilliance may win the day for us. Since you conceived it, we shall leave the implementation in your able hands. Brief facilities management at once, if you will. Use my authority to execute your proposal.”

“At your orders, sir.” Dr. Klonn clicked his heels in Teutonic fashion.

Proudly scanning the assembled leadership, Mr. Mason's paternal gaze fell on the ramrod-straight figure of his protégé. "What do you think of the scheme, Blair?"

Hearing his name, Sorenson's lethargy sloughed away. He blinked uncertainly.

"Would you," asked Mr. Mason, "care to lend additional insight to Dr. Klonn's sterling proposal? It occurred to me in passing that we might augment the video surveillance by leasing a number of trained guard dogs and have them accompany our plant protection personnel."

Sorenson sat bolt upright, his expression one of undiluted horror. "Dogs!"

The vehement reaction caused Mr. Mason to swiftly retrench. "As usual, I suppose you're correct, Blair. That might be overkill, mightn't it? Well, thanks to Dr. Klonn I'm sure we now have the matter firmly in hand. Let's all hustle back to our desks, shall we?"

Led by the ebullient CEO, the executives chattered among themselves as they filed out of the conference room, leaving behind a badly shaken senior executive.

Pale and suffering from shortness of breath, his hands quivering like aspic, Sorenson stared blindly at the executive conference room's unlit rear-projection video display.

Murmuring "Dogs!" he came within a hair of retching.

* * *

"What're they hammering together out along the street?" asked Ham.

"Erik Klonn's machine-gun towers," replied Dr. Ladd. "Our first bastion of defense in Erik's master battle plan."

"We're renewing the war on poverty?"

A mischievous grin. "No, that was Lyndon Johnson's war. Poverty won hands-down, took no prisoners. This fracas is aimed at repulsing the current enemy."

"Oh, the union gambit."

Ladd motioned for his staff assistant to close the door to the outer office. "On these premises, speak not the word 'union' where it can be overheard. The term has blue-collar, dirt-under-the-fingernails connotations, and the UTB Brotherhood is promoting a professional engineering and scientific guild destined to have an elite membership like that of ASME, AIA, or I-triple-E. Except that it won't."

"I skimmed their handbill," said Ham. "The propaganda line's childish."

"You'll get no argument from this quarter," said Ladd. "Unfortunately, an adolescent attitude can also be attributed to numerous high-tension thinkers hereabouts." He added, "I've seen this movie before, and may live long enough for another déjà vu. Neither UTB or any other 'benevolent' union can organize a guild for us and our helpmates. Never in a billion years."

"Why so certain?"

"The root of my certainty, as I said, is that it's a reprise, not a first showing. Professional engineers and scientists are all cut from near-identical bolts of cloth. They spend their formative years hacking away at tough at some university, get themselves graduated and apply their acquired knowledge in order to earn a way above average living. However, when asked to join something — anything! — they dither, quake and are victimized by acute anxiety.

"I don't see why," said Ham.

"Then I'll clarify," said Ladd. "The professionals in question believe themselves eleven times smarter than average Joe Six-pack, and sure enough they are. Catch is, their smarts are

channeled into their respective disciplines, not into hassling with wheeler-dealer executives about mundane items like self-promotion, other forms of advancement, or a hike in salary.”

Ham capsulized Ladd’s account with one word: “Individualists.”

“Amen! Dyed-in-the wool, foursquare individualists every single one. They grouse and bitch about being left behind the door at raise time, moan piteously if someone viewed as a dunderhead is promoted to a position over them. Yet *do* something about it? Uh-uh, not a chance. They knuckle under and take their lumps, partly because of inborn temperament, partly due to the fact that they love what they’re doing in a technical sense, but mostly because they haven’t a clue about how to go about correcting whatever is affecting them.”

“That really how you see it, Bill?”

“Exactly how I see it.” Ladd eyed Ham, his air speculative. “Tell me, what’s your hobby, your relaxation activity? Sailing, skiing, tennis, golf, what?”

“Well, there’s . . . my family, and . . .” Ham tried not to sound defensive. “Even a normal AGC workweek doesn’t leave much time for —”

“You’re hedging ungracefully,” accused his boss.

“I, uh . . . read a lot.”

“Ah, I see.” Ladd’s bushy brows lifted. “Dipped into any good whodunits lately? A historical potboiler, courtroom melodrama, whatever? How about science fiction? Some ‘hard’ scientific and social extrapolations are thought provoking as well as entertaining.”

Ham righteously denied ever touching the stuff.

His smile beatific, Ladd said, “Who could blame you? Why ruin a finely honed technical mind reading that malarky? But I wager you keep current with *Aviation Week*, *Design News*, *Aerospace Digest*, juicy, informative ephemera like that. True?”

Moffett admitted guilt.

“Gotcha! You’re stuck in the same rusty rut as the others — all work and no play. It’s not a major surprise. I’ve made a study of how the technical mind works.”

“Your point, Bill?”

“I’m certain Ben and his front office people are goosing ghosts, grossly overreacting to UTB’s stab at organizing a professional guild.”

“In what way?”

“In simplistic terms, by their panicky opposition to UTB’s efforts. It’s a waste of time, energy and money. All the hammers of hell couldn’t make the flock of stubborn, individualistic Planet AGC geniuses join a professional guild. Never, maybe even longer! If you’re a betting man, I’ll be happy to back that opinion with an Andrew Jackson.”

“You really think UTB is spinning its wheels?”

“Yep, at a high rpm where AGC’s concerned. They could be going for it in a vain hope that a union scare now may lend a smidgen of nuisance value to a try later on.”

Ham thought it over. “Sounds like a reasonable bet. Let me think about it. If I decide you’re wrong, I’ll cover your Andy Jackson.”

“Deal!” Ladd held out his hand to be shaken, reversed course and turned his attention back to the paperwork littering his desk. “Now then, how’s your review coming on those black boxes Spacecraft is concepting for us down yonder in Huntsville . . . ?”

* * *

“You guys’re stupes,” accused Little Joe. “You’re getting laid, relayed, parlayed and delayed, and don’t even know it, don’t feel it in your gut like I do.”

Max Anthony broke off his version of the slow movement from Sibelius’ Second Symphony, clenched his left fist high overhead and launched into a whistled rendition of “The Internationale” that would have made Lenin proud.

The musical shift earned an appreciative grin from Yaminishi.

Forever bent over at an acute angle, Bundy grumbled and slashed vengefully at the layout drawing taped to his board. Farnsworth, on the phone, was excitedly calling in a panic “sell” order to his broker, divesting himself of craftily accumulated, nosediving high-tech shares.

“Knock off your damn whistling, Maxie!” A feverishly energized convert to the glories of organized labor in the form of UTB’s banner, Little Joe had attended the previous Saturday’s giant come one, come all mass meeting and rally. “All kidding aside,” he told the drafters, “those union honchos know what’s what, believe me. Hunderts of salaried pros have come aboard. I signed up thirty guys my ownself. The great day’s coming, I tell you.”

“Say it softly,” cautioned Yaminishi. “If management hears about it, you could be shown the door. The rule against union agitation’s posted everywhere.”

“Well, I could be a whole lot better off on the outside looking in.”

“I’m willing to bet,” said the lead drafter, “that if and when your great day ever does come guild dues will amount to more than any salary increase.”

“Aw, your head’s stuck in quicksand just like these other clucks,” objected Little Joe. “Think about it, Yam. You’re only a couple of years shy of retirement. A hefty boost in take home pay would mean lots more to you than us younger hands.”

“True,” said Yam, “but no extra bucks will come my way due to a guild affiliation.”

“How could it,” demanded Little Joe, “when stubborn jokers like you keep your heads jammed in the sand? Get with it! You’re twice as smart as most AGC klutzes. Surprises me no end t’hear how you feel about the way UTB’s trying to help you.”

Acutely distressed over the miserable way Wall Street was treating him, Farnsworth hung up the phone, and said, “I switched to Del Monte foods. It’s up one eighth.”

“How about Farnsie?” Yaminishi hooked his remaining thumb toward the impeccably clad investor. “He sign your petition? Once he pockets enough bucks, he’ll buy Wall Street intact, sidewalks, statues, everything.”

“His head’s not stuck in the sand,” denied Little Joe, “it’s jammed up his own bum. He thinks everything’s rosy-red in this screwed-up sweatshop.”

Farnsworth’s pained expression preceded an uneasy rebuttal. “American business deals fairly and decently with labor, Little Joe. Trying to form a professional guild here at AGC is self-defeating. Try and imagine the inhibiting effect a guild would have on creative effort. Why, in some organized firms advancement is impossible without guild sanction. Worse, every salaried professional is automatically pigeonholed in a specific category or discipline, and stays frozen there without recourse except through a plea to the guild officials.”

“Farnsie,” Little Joe said tartly, “you’re as full of shit as a Christmas goose. Look at what the Screen Actor’s Guild did right here in Hollywood. Over the years, SAG’s upped the earnings of every featured player who ever worked in this burg.”

“No question,” conceded Farnsworth, “except something on the order of eighty percent unemployment exists among featured players. Do you belong to SAG, Little Joe?”

The wannabe Western star pulled in his horns. “Never you mind, Farnsie. UTB’s setting up a brand spanking new kind of pro guild, a whole new proposition. Won’t be any of that pigeonholing crap, either. It’ll be a up-to-date, modern guild a hundred percent guaranteed to help yank this chicken shit outfit right out of the dark ages.”

“Mind explaining how UTB plans to do that?” inquired Yam.

“By forming a sound, democrat-type guild committee a hundred-percent eager to nee-go-shee-ate on our behalf with the management crumb-bums who run this stinkhole, that’s how.”

“You cribbed those ‘sound, democratic’ buzzwords from a UTB propaganda leaflet,” accused the lead drafter.

“So what? It’s the straight skinny, Yam. Here’s the clincher to chew on: AFL/CIO’s behind UTB every step of the way, backing ‘em right to the hilt.”

Yam grinned. “Surprise, surprise! Who ever heard of one union backing another?”

“Backing ‘em all the way down the line,” insisted Little Joe, oblivious to the sarcasm. “There could even be a sympathy strike by AGC’s unionized grunts if the numb-nuts ramrods on this spread don’t knuckle under and let us vote in a pro guild.”

“Nonsense,” said Yaminishi.

“Oh, no! It ain’t nonsense, Yam. I heard lots of insider stuff at the . . .” Seeing Moffett stroll into the area, Little Joe broke off and displayed instant deference, “Hiya, Ham.”

“Morning, troops.” Moffett inquired about the status of the preliminary ALLP avionics system schematic diagram, a drawing had been in the works for some time.

Swinging his prosthetic appliance clockwise, Yaminishi aimed it at Little Joe.

“Finished?” asked Ham.

“Well, I, uh . . . Y’see, I had to come up with some . . . Listen, I been real extra-busy on a bunch of other super-important stuff. Say, you’re a pro engineer, Ham. Got some really fascinating liter-chure here you ought to read. Thought about signin’ UTB’s guild petition?”

Ignoring the query, Moffett said, “You’ve been burning overtime hours like kerosene, and the first-cut system schematic hasn’t landed on my desk. I’m slated to pack a review copy down to Huntsville day after tomorrow.”

“Doing my damndest to wind it up. But about the UTB guild, have you —?”

“No excuses! When will a blueprint land on my desk?”

“Right now it’s, uh, darn near almost practically ready to begin starting t’finish up,” said the drafter. “But to talk serious for a change, have you considered joining the guild? The dim-bulbs I work with don’t appreciate the way UTB’s trying every which way to help —”

“Lately,” said Ham, his displeasure unveiled, “My major consideration has been the ALLP avionics system schematic. Is it ready to reproduce, or isn’t it?”

“Real close,” said Little Joe.

“Not good enough, Joe.” A sharp edge crept into Ham’s tone of voice. “At the very latest, I need two sets of prints by the close of business tomorrow.”

“Elektroniker schematics aren’t really my bag, Ham. I sort of got pushed into handling it, and I’m, uh . . . Been doin’ my damndest t’finish it up. Honest!”

“Also not good enough. May I offer a nugget of honest advice?”

“Guess so.”

“Pay more attention to your work assignments,” suggested Ham. “Do what you’re being paid to do. If not, you may never have a chance to join a guild, assuming there’s ever a guild for you to join. On my desk tomorrow, close of business, no excuses!” With that Ham nodded pleasantly to the other drafters and walked out of the area.

Fuming over Ham’s parting shot, Little Joe said, “Know what, guys? Soon’s I get to be a guild steward I’ll figure out a way to fix that smartass gofer’s clock.”

Yaminishi wagged his head. “Wayward colleague, you’ll become a guild steward not long after my wife and I move into the White House. Seriously, if I were you I’d stay over this evening and hump like a demon to finish that schematic. If you don’t, Moffett’s liable to reach down and snap *your* mainspring.”

* * *

Striding determinedly along a tiled corridor leading from the elevator to the hotel meeting room on neutral ground, Mr. Mason halted. Setting down his hand-tooled leather attaché case, his visage stern, he faced his companions, acting VP & GM Blair Sorenson and AGC Chief Counsel Stanley Lomax. Speaking hurriedly if extra-softly, he announced their one and only tactic would be to stonewall the union thugs. “I want no loose chatter in there, gentlemen — not a syllable of unnecessary conversation. None! Calmly go through the motions, respond to their introductions curtly, with a cool nod, and shake hands only if one of them insists. That will be the total extent of our cordiality. Understood?”

Lomax nodded his approval. “Sound logic, Ben. It worked at the previous sessions.”

“And,” assured Mr. Mason, “it had damn well best work during this penultimate meeting. Stonewall is the watchword, gentlemen; it sums up our attitude in a nutshell. I want their hatchet man, Sean Quick, his higher-ups and confederates to run headlong into a high, thick wall of solid stone. You with me on that, Blair? The entire corporation is counting on you to carry the ball in this confrontation. We have unlimited faith in you, haven’t we, Stan?”

Eyeing the acting VP&GM with tenuous certainty, Lomax whispered, “Unlimited!”

The CEO’s dictum aroused serious trepidations within Sorenson. Picturing the stone wall surrounding a neighbor’s home in Norwalk, Connecticut, he quailed inwardly. On the other side of that stone wall had lurked the shaggiest, most foul smelling canine monster he had ever seen, awake or in all too frequent nightmares. He recalled with suffocating dread the jaws of the rabid beast slavering in anticipation of ripping his flesh, crunching his bones. The ugly mastiff had waited in ambush every single day, hoping to catch him unawares on his way to and from school. He closed his eyes tightly, a film of perspiration beading his high forehead.

“Get a grip on yourself, Blair,” soothed Mr. Mason. “I appreciate the fearsome burden we’ve laid on your broad shoulders, but you mustn’t let it cause such an extreme degree of anxiety. Now then, let’s each take a deep breath and march in there like the three musketeers, calm, cool and collected, confident and thoroughly prepared to face the music.”

Sorenson frowned. He had not been told there was to be music.

Mr. Mason hefted his hand-tooled leather attaché case. His expression neutral, he led the way with purposeful energy.

The long, conference table was stocked with carafes of mineral water, crystal goblets overturned on linen napkins, silver ash trays, scratch tablets and enough freshly sharpened pencils to deforest a quarter-acre of Oregon.

Stanley Lomax nodded absently to the UTB legal eagle. Mr. Mason gingerly wrung the damp, tobacco-stained fingers of UTB's aged president. Sorenson reluctantly exchanged glances with a corpulent, ruddy-faced elder whose name and position were of no particular interest.

The antagonists settled in their chairs, gazing vacuously at one another across the polished expanse of no man's land.

UTB's wheezing president took it upon himself to open the session. Speaking hoarsely, his statements punctuated by a nicotine cough, his monologue described the Labor Movement's viability in modern America. Organized Labor, he informed the aerospace mogul now leading Aerospace General and his associates had taken enormous strides since its vital inception in an era when immigrant children — yes innocent, defenseless little children! — were forced to squander their budding lives in sweat shops, dangerous coal mines, back-breaking carding mills, and hundreds of dirty, smoke-filled factories.

Today, the UTB kingpin declared, his manner uncompromising, modern business thrived in an enlightened era of computerized, automated manufacturing facilities, air-conditioned factories and offices where high technology reigned supreme. Organized Labor's beneficent goal was to establish the highest possible standard of equality among professionals, just as it had among hundreds of thousands of skilled workers. Rather than be reduced to petty haggling over mundane topics like compensation and promotion, the energies and intellects of professional scientists, engineers, consultants and their peers would be far better employed in concentrating on the ingenious circuitry, mechanisms, systems and subsystems so essential to a high-tech corporation's prosperity and growth. Much more than merely obvious was the fact that creating an aligned technocratic elite was inevitable, factual not virtual certainty, a cornerstone of the greater America to come. When it matured, he stated, a praiseworthy Scientists & Engineers Guild could do nothing less than help AGC reap tremendous corporate rewards and dividends.

Outwardly unmoved by the recitation, Mr. Mason countered with a brief, poignant speech citing AGC's manifold contributions to the defense posture of the United States of America. He lauded the founding fathers — hardy, entrepreneurial twin brothers who been sadly victimized by the sanguine revolution sundering their homeland, Tsarist Russia — whose energy, dedication and vision had inspired the creation of America's leading aerospace firm. He briefly tolled the agony and struggles of his predecessors, related the manner in which the corporation had subsequently flourished and into an innovative, profit-oriented enterprise, reaching the present pinnacle of success largely due the selfless diligence and perseverance of executives entrusted with the awesome burden of leadership. He stressed the fact that AGC forever looked ahead, where the horizons were unlimited, ready to expend every effort, explore every technological avenue, that would continue ensuring its preeminence as a functional bastion of technological progress manned enthusiastically by citizens of the world's most freedom-loving society.

UTB's president uttered a caustic grunt. "We through with all the claptrap and hogwash, Mason? If so, let's deal out the cards face up. Mr. Sean B. Quick is our designated negotiator. Who's your boy?" Not waiting for an answer, he rolled between his palsied fingers a long,

greenish panatela, struck a wooden kitchen match on the table and ceremoniously kindled the cigar, an incendiary process Sorenson studied with no small measure of interest.

Mr. Mason refused to let the other's insufferable arrogance deplete his reservoir of executive composure. "Negotiations on AGC's behalf," he intoned, "will be conducted by Research & Development Vice President and General Manager Blair Sorenson."

The brotherhood's aged mastermind leveled his long, greenish panatela at the designated executive. "That's you, right?"

The UTB chieftain was subjected to the inexorable scrutiny of glacial blue eyes that refused to blink no matter how long he waited. Mildly shaken by the unanticipated visual barrage, UTB's headman said, "Uh, get . . . on with it. Sean, the floor's . . . yours."

His every aspect akin to that of a tenacious bulldog, the union's portly, abundantly freckled UTB hatchet man aggressively planted his elbows on the table and leaned forward aggressively, eager for battle. The gaze of his guileless, robin's-egg-blue eyes locked with Sorenson's laser stare, Sean Quick informed the gathering in a soft-voiced Boston brogue that the Brotherhood had at its disposal an arsenal stocked with high caliber ammunition. "As you may not be aware, sir, that UTB has obtained a court order which makes it mandatory for AGC to hold a company-wide vote among all professional employees within sixty calendar days. You must realize, and in fact cannot help but realize, how inevitable it will be for the referendum to favor by a healthy margin the formation of a UTB guild open to all AGC salaried employees."

Lifting a two-foot-high stack of forms bound with rubber bands, Quick let the bundle drop to the conference table with a dramatic thud. "Here, Mr. Vice President, are thousands of signed petitions, all formally requesting UTB to organize and administer a professional guild in your exceptionally fine aerospace establishment. Argument on your part would be less than pointless, not only totally meaningless, but futile. A solemn, inarguable truism is that your salaried employees are squarely behind the formation of an AGC professional guild, and are not only willing but eager to take advantage of this wonderful opportunity."

The negotiator paused expectantly, awaiting a counter-riposte. Seconds wore by, and when it became evident that Sorenson did not intend to return a salvo, Quick bared his teeth in a forced smile. Mildly rattled, he shot his cuffs self-importantly, and shot an inquiring glance at the Brotherhood's elderly leader. Disturbed by the absence of adverse commentary, he enumerated at length the demands and concessions advocated by UTB, all the while studying the opposition intently, in the manner of a poker shark evaluating an opponent's reaction to his bluff.

Sorenson's chiseled masculine features and fixed, intimidating stare eventually caused Quick to clear his throat and say, "Would you care to comment on our proposal, sir?"

Evidently Sorenson did not wish to comment on UTB's proposal. What Quick would never learn was that AGC's negotiator was suffering from severe inner qualms. The beefy, thick-necked redhead sitting across the table showed definite signs of having once been a smartass enlisted man. Utterly motionless, as if sculpted from flesh-colored marble, Sorenson wondered why the other had insisted on barking steadily and incomprehensibly in his direction. He thought with deep revulsion of the times his boyhood nemesis, the wretched mastiff, had likewise pushed its ugly snout above the stone wall, drooling hideously, snarling and barking, snapping its jaws.

Acute irritation blossomed in Sean Quick's apple-cheeked countenance. He tried again, confidently rattled on for a sentence or two, and then trailed off into thick silent, lost in the uncompromising, semi-hypnotic vise grip of deathly pale blue eyes.

"Thank you, gentlemen." With a practiced flourish, Mr. Mason collected his unopened, hand-tooled leather attaché case. "We'll be in touch," he lied, rose precipitously and stalked from the meeting room, trailed closely by the attorney and happy-to-depart acting VP&GM Sorenson.

In the privacy of the elevator, the lawyer's first words were, "Gawdalmighty! When it comes to stonewalling, you wrote the fucking *bible*, Sorenson."

Bursting with fraternal camaraderie, Mr. Mason patted his acting VP&GM's shoulder. "A superb, utterly fantastic performance! Blair, you were simply marvelous, even better than I had dared hope. I ask you, Stan, wasn't he something?"

"'Something' doesn't say it by half, Ben," enthused Lomax. "It was out of this world!"

Deeply puzzled, Sorenson said, "Thanks."

"Any chance of ducking the vote?" Mr. Mason wanted to know.

"Not a prayer," denied the attorney. "A court order's a court order, here, there, everywhere. We're hooked through the scrotum that."

Mr. Mason sighed. "I suppose I can become reconciled to putting a brave face on that. Our only recourse will be the small blanket pay raise someone suggested. Will it help, Stan?"

"Can't hurt," said the lawyer. "A moderate pay hike, and a fervent prayer to St. Jude, are the only fallback position we have, plus stalling the vote a full sixty days."

"St. Jude . . . ?" questioned Mr. Mason.

"The patron saint," explained the attorney, "of lost causes."

"Ah, I see, I see. All right, I'll set the wheels in motion straightaway."

One month later, AGC's salaried employees became the unsurprised recipients of a modest, unheralded across-the-board pay increase. Exactly thirty days after that rows of portable voting booths were set up in both cafeterias as well as the executive dining room. UTB representatives monitored the balloting and shared tallying duties with impartial outside observers, plus AGC hourly employees belonging to the local chapter of a different union.

The proposed Engineers & Scientists Guild was voted down by a eight-to-five margin.

In his office the next morning, Dr. Ladd accepted without a change of expression the twenty-dollar bill his staff engineer handed him.

16 - Barbara

"That her?" Burton wanted to know.

"In the flesh," replied Jake Poszderak. "Nicely arranged flesh, too."

"Blue leotards," said Frank, "tied-back blonde hair, and sunglasses. Maybe you can tell me why people wear shades at night. Never did figure that one out."

"To hide their sins."

In the passenger seat, Burton made as if to open the door, and the private detective laid a restraining hand on his arm. "Her beat-up Nissan's parked two slots over. Why not wait, let her come to us?"

The object of their scrutiny had stopped on the sidewalk to chat with a pair of similarly clad young women. Feminine laughter tinkled across the parking lot. Good nights were said. The woman in blue leotards walked to her car, unlocked the rear hatch, and was stowing a plastic flight bag stenciled with the United Airlines logo when the men approached. Not wishing to alarm her, they hung back.

“Hello, Fawn,” greeted Burton.

With a surprised intake of breath, the young woman slid the sunglasses up over her headband. She appraised the pair candidly, and her attractive features hardened. An aerosol can appeared in her hand. “Pepper spray, potent! On your way, guys.”

“Easy, Fawn. All we want is a minute of your time.”

“Who are you?”

“This is Jake Poszderak, a private investigator. My name’s Frank Burton. Jake’s been searching for you for weeks, Fawn.”

She bristled. “I don’t use that name.”

“Sorry, I should’ve said Barbara. Barbara Mott, isn’t it?”

“Okay, Frank and Jake, you’ve seen my flicks and dredged up my real name. What’s your pitch?” The pepper spray canister stayed pointed in their direction.

“We . . . that is, the gentleman we represent, would like to do something for you.”

“Care to guess,” asked Barbara, “how many times I’ve been hit on with that line?”

“This is legitimate,” assured Burton. “We’d like to —”

“I already know what you’d like. Go tell the ‘gentleman you represent’ to knock on another door. She exchanged the pepper spray can for a cell phone. “Off you go, or I yell cop.”

“Don’t blame you for being suspicious,” soothed Burton, “but least hear us out.” He opened a small notebook and read from it. “Barbara Louise Mott, née Cartwright. University High School here in L.A. Theater Arts major at UCLA; earned a B.A. exactly a decade ago. Married to Raphael Sebastian Mott, a certified public accountant. Separated, divorce pending. One child, Victoria, age —”

“Okay,” said Barbara, “so Sherlock’s done his homework. This scene’s going nowhere fast, and starting to bore me. Either spill it, or cut out.”

Burton pocketed the notebook. “Short and sweet, the gentleman we represent wishes to offer you a contract.”

“Whoopee! Sure beats a one-night stand.”

Burton persisted. “Jake found out you go to this aerobics session three times a week. I assume you still dance professionally?”

“Dance, hah!” Her hoot laden with bitterness. “The market for dancers my age is practically unlimited. I teach the aerobics class. For peanuts.”

“How about . . . acting?”

The young woman’s eyes glistened frostily. “You’re polite enough to call it that, so I guess you deserve an answer. I still do TV commercials from time to time, quickie bits, stuff like that. Not the . . . other. That ended years ago.”

“This is silly,” said Burton. “Do we have to stand here in the parking lot? Can we go somewhere and talk?”

“That one I’ve also heard a few thousand times.”

Burton tugged folded papers from his topcoat's inner pocket. "Maybe this will change your mind." He handed her the packet.

"What is it?"

"The contract I mentioned. Let's sit down someplace where you can read it. You pick the spot, we'll meet you there."

Twenty minutes later in an all-night Santa Monica Boulevard coffee shop, Barbara Mott looked up from the contract, her soft brown eyes round. "This is . . . I don't know what to say. How'd you find me?" she asked the private detective.

Poszderak shrugged. "Ran down the the producer of your last epic, got him to open up."

"Sol . . . ? That fathead has a big mouth. I'll get even with —"

"Don't," advised Jake. "Solly has friends nobody'd want as enemies."

Barbara subsided thoughtfully, and sipped hot chocolate. "It smells too much like plain vanilla blackmail. I wouldn't look chic peeking out of a cell."

Burton cringed upon hearing the dreaded "B" word. Shifting in the banquette, he glanced all around the sparsely populated coffee shop. No one among the handful of patrons seemed to be paying them any attention. "Please, Barbara; not so loud. Extorting money is . . . well, what you called it. All our client wants is Moffett's cooperation, period. It's legitimate. No money will change hands except what you earn for doing your part."

"I don't . . . I've known lots of guys, but . . . Well, with Ham it was . . . different. I had a really serious crush on him, and hate the idea of selling him out. It wouldn't look so hot, either, to chase him down and make myself available."

"If you won't accuse me of digging up bad data," said the private eye, "you and Moffett were college classmates. Your tenth reunion bash is coming up shortly."

"Jake, you *are* up to snuff. Yeah, ten deadly dull years have slipped away, and where they went I can't say. A letter weeks ago announced the reunion."

"There's a better than fair chance Moffett will attend," said Burton. "Run into him at the affair — that's what reunions are for — and take it from there."

Barbara cogitated. She went back and reread the most interesting part of the contract, the paragraph specifying a substantial quantity of dollars due to bulge her account if and when she did thus and so. "No names are in the blanks, just party of the first part agrees to this, party of the second part agrees to that. Who's this mystery client of yours, anyhow?"

Burton deflected the question. "Contracts are all worded in lawyerese."

"Can I show it to my lazy agent? Not sure he can read, but maybe he's learned."

"Our client doesn't think that would be a good idea."

"Uh-oh," she said abruptly. "What time is it?"

Burton consulted his wristwatch. "Eleven ten."

"Ouch! My babysitter will be having kittens. I promised her to be home before eleven." She folded the contract. "Can I hang onto this?"

"Please do." Burton glanced at the detective, received an affirmative nod. "One last pot sweetener before we say good night. Still living in that Venice fire trap?"

"Where else?"

"Our client owns a high-rise Westwood condominium complex. How'd you and little Victoria like to move in? It's plush, spacious, with a view of Century City's lights."

Barbara eyes widened. "You mean he pays the rent?"

"No, he won't have to, but won't collect it, either. It's a free ride until money rolls in from the film you agree to make." Burton reached out, tapped the contract meaningfully.

"I . . . this is all so sudden, you two popping up . . . Guess I'm sort of in shock. Let me think about it. Can I call you?"

"Please do," repeated Burton. After paying the tab at the cash register, he and Jake walked Barbara to her car. "You can reach me at this number." He handed her a slip of paper. "Nice meeting you, Barbara."

"Uh, same here. Thanks, guys. Thanks a lot."

They left her sitting in the Nissan staring numbly at the contract.

* * *

"Well, roving spouse, what exotic locale are you off to next?"

Ham set his coffee cup in the saucer. "It's Friday, Audrey Lee. The UCLA class reunion's this evening, remember?"

His wife cleared the breakfast dishes with bird-quick movements. "Thanks be to all the Saints for minor blessings! Won't sleeping at home feel strange? I swear days go by when I'm not sure I'm still a married woman."

Ham bottled his irritation. Sulking in silence, he lit a cigarette and finished his coffee, reflecting on the recent spate of whirlwind trips — another three-day junket to JSC in Houston, a jaunt to Huntsville, Alabama, capped by a skull session at the Rome, New York, Air Force facility. The round-robin of travel had left him emotionally drained. Ladd had not exaggerated in warning him of frequent free airplane rides. "What'll you wear tonight?" he asked, hoping to introduce a more positive topic.

Audrey Lee's back was turned at the kitchen counter. "I do wish you wouldn't stink up the house with your filthy cigarettes. You're too important to worry about your health, or admit how bad second-hand smoke is for Teddy and Melissa Lee. I don't count, of course."

"Hey, bend a little, Audrey Lee." Ham doused the cigarette in his coffee cup.

"Lately you've set aside almost no time for your family."

In the process of inventing a placatory come back, Ham kept quiet when his daughter bustled in from the hall carrying school books and a loose-leaf binder. "Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad," she kissed Ham on the cheek, and stretched to kiss her mother.

"Want me to drop you at school, Missy?"

"Thanks, Dad, but no thanks. I'm stopping at Sandra's. We have to dope out who's who, and who did what, for a doozy of a history test."

"Did you study for it?" asked her mother.

"Oh, sure. It's an American Revolution toughie. The Continental Congress, Valley Forge, General Washington, that kind've stuff. For instance, who was Aaron Burr?"

"Ask your father," said Audrey Lee. "He's a college man."

Further irked by his wife's taunt, Ham said snappishly, "Jefferson's vice president. He killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel."

"Thanks, Dad. I'll cool the test, no sweat. Bye." Missy swept out of the kitchen.

“Enjoy putting me down?” asked Ham. When his wife’s silence persevered, he went into the half-bath and brushed his teeth, combed his hair and collected his briefcase. “I’ll swing by, pick you up between five-thirty and six-thirty.”

“Don’t bother,” she said, not turning her head. “I’m not going.”

“What? Why not?”

“It’s your reunion. I don’t know any of those people.”

“Come on, don’t be like that.”

“You go,” she said testily, “and enjoy yourself. I don’t feel like going out this evening.”

“But we’ve already paid for the dinner. There’ll be music, dancing, good conversation. Don’t be a spoilsport. It’s a chance to get away by ourselves. You hired a babysitter.”

“I’ll call and cancel,” she told him. “I really wouldn’t feel like it. Besides, Nancy isn’t the most trustworthy girl who ever stayed with the kids. I’m not in the mood for that sort of fling. Better scat, or AGC may send you to Colorado, some other awful place.”

“I ask you, is that a reasonable attitude?”

“What does ‘reasonable’ have to do with it? I have work to do, and Teddy will be up any minute now.”

Warm under the collar, Ham was met by Ralph waddling toward him from Teddy’s room. Resisting an urge to boot the dachsie on general principles, he wrenched open the front door.

* * *

On the phone, Burton said, “It’s a go, Alex. Jake spun his usual fairy tale at the hotel, and got a peek at the reservation. It’s for both Mr. and Mrs Moffett.”

Still in a vile snit over the guild fiasco at AGC, Kurile hadn’t been paying attention. “Sucker Alex pumps big bucks into that scuzzy UTB, and ends up with goose egg on his face.”

“Know exactly how you feel,” lied Burton.

Alex belched loudly into the phone. “Got a touch of tummy upset, Frank. I was getting set to belt down some Milk of Amnesia.”

Burton stifled a groan. “That should solve the problem.”

“Yeah, so tell me again. Is that bimbo the P.I. rounded up primed to do her stunt?”

“Loaded, primed, and cocked, if you pardon the expression. Said she had a fierce crush on Moffett during their college days.”

“C’mon, Fra-a-a-ank!” Kurile milked the utterance for all it was worth. “Sure we are’t whistling Dixie with this off-the-wall caper? I mean, is meat-axing this twerp worth the hassle and expense? What payback can I expect downstream for what it’s costing me? Strictly on your say-so, I’ve gone and guaranteed this blonde bimbo a shot at doing another pussy pic, not to mention letting her and her kiddie roost in my condo, which by the way leases for nearly four large per month. Think there’s an honest shot at getting my money’s worth?”

“If not,” assured Burton, glad of an opportunity to lie, “I’d never have had Jake run her to ground and set it up. Distracting Moffett’s boss is impossible. I’ve sent him reams of literature on orbital manufacturing, but probably nothing he hasn’t already seen, or written himself. Hitting him below the belt by throwing his helper under the bus has a fair to middling chance of success. As the chief engineer’s staff assistant, logic says Moffett has to be close to the action in R&D. If Ladd loses his services, it’ll set back ALLP/ORDART a significant number of —”

“Alps and oars! Here we go again, more crazy talk!” Venting his disgust, Alex booted a wastebasket across the crimson carpet speckled with tiny golden Romanov crests. “Hope t’hell you know what you’re doing, Frank.”

* * *

Ham’s morning was taken up by two lengthy meetings, neither of which seemed to do much toward resolving the respective pertinent issues. He downed a cup of split pea soup and a chef’s salad in the “C” Building cafeteria, arguing at lunch with a pair of aeronautical engineers from Aircraft Division dissatisfied with data deriving from recent ALLP wind-tunnel testing.

Returning to his cubicle at one o’clock, he took part in a conference call — a follow-up to a trip to New York’s Rome Air Force Base — and was wire-brushed twice by Ladd, once for failing to attend one of the interminable meetings chaired by Electrical Engineering Manager Dr. Mauch, and again for not complying with a request to send the latest ORDART inboard profile drawings to JSC. He finished critiquing a revision to the ORDART crew safety specification at five that afternoon, and called his wife. “On my way soon, Audrey Lee. Pick you up in an hour.”

“Don’t bother,” she said curtly. “I told the babysitter we wouldn’t be needing her.”

“Seriously? Please come along. We hardly ever see each other any more.”

“Whose fault might that be?”

“Listen, it makes no sense at all to —”

“I’m busy fixing dinner,” she interrupted. “Have a grand and glorious reunion.” There was a faint click as she rang off.

Stewing about his wife’s attitude, trying to understand her level of animosity, he doused his face with cold water in the washroom, toweled off and fingered his stubbled chin. He had meant to shave and change into a dark blue gabardine suit, but all thought of stopping by the house, and possibly getting into a row with his wife, nixed that idea. The single-breasted gray worsted he’d worn all day would have to do.

On the other hand, there were hours to kill before the reunion. He ruminated, wondering what had prompted him to attend the affair. Aside from former UCLA track and field teammates, he’d stayed in contact with neither friends nor acquaintances from the university years. Lifting his jacket from the coat rack, he waved a casual farewell to Minnie across the corridor.

In the parking lot, he came across Little Joe swearing luridly, banging his fists on the orange Mustang’s dented hood. Tiring of that form of abuse, the would-be wrangler doffed his undersized Stetson and used it to punish the car’s pitted windshield, all the while fluidly cursing Henry Ford, his antecedents, descendants, family members, and prospective progeny.

“What’s the trouble?” asked Ham.

“Aw, the fucking battery folded up on me!”

“Lose not your cool, Joe. Everyone has days like this.”

“Not *every* damn day they don’t!” denied the other.

Suppressing a grin, Ham offered to get his minivan and jump-start the Mustang.

“Kay,” acknowledged the other sullenly.

The hard luck vehicle’s engine labored to turn over, emitted a cloud of blue-black smoke from the drooping tailpipe, and finally caught. Ham listened with misgivings to the valve-rattling roar, fearful that a piston might fly out of the engine block. Quickly collecting his jumper cables, he wiped the clips with a rag and stowed them away.

“Preciate it!” Little Joe revved the engine. “Junk yard gets this rattletrap real soon now.”

Ham drove away, inched through commuter traffic, entered the freeway on-ramp in a bemused frame of mind and blended into a slow-moving wave of autos and trucks southbound over the Hollywood Hills. At least I’m moving, he thought. In the opposite direction, a bumper-to-bumper jam clogged every lane coming downhill.

Approaching Sunset Boulevard with hours to spare, he was overcome by an impulse to revisit the UCLA campus. Flipping the turn signal, he took his life in his hands edging across three lanes of traffic, and swung into the Sunset Boulevard off-ramp. Winding the minivan around Sunset’s curves, he turned right on Hilgard Avenue.

Amazed to find a parking spot on a residential side street, he locked the Ford, jogged across Hilgard dodging cars, and followed a walkway leading toward the campus quadrangle. Few people were in sight at dusk. Across the quad, the asymmetrical twin towers of Royce Hall caught the sunset glow, making the building look as if it had been lifted intact from the Old World Milanese Renaissance era and set down in the modern, computerized New World. He wandered through the quad, crossing glances with passers-by in the shadow of Powell Library’s small, faceted dome, then paused at the balustrade to gaze fondly at the spires of Kerckhoff Hall peeking over the treetops, and descended the endless brick risers of Janss Steps.

Across the way, Drake Stadium cut a flat, oval shelf in the gently westward-sloping terrain. Bleachers ascended the far hillside; rearing at the crest were the lighted windows of Dykstra Hall and the other dormitories. Viewing the stadium, he recaptured the nostalgic moment when butterflies and near-nausea had wracked him before the fifteen-hundred-meter relay.

Deciding which team won had come down to the final events, the relay races. Earlier, their bitter cross-town rivals had whipped the Bruins soundly in the four-man sprint relay. In the metric mile event, he’d taken the baton cleanly, three strides behind the opposing runner in the third leg of the race. Heart pumping, straining to burst through his rib cage, calves tying up and beginning to cramp, he had somehow made up all but a scant yard and a smidgen of the gap before passing the baton, and then collapsed on the compacted clay track.

The anchor lap had ended in a neck-and-neck stretch duel. His Bruin teammate had broken the tape by the slimmest of whiskers, winning in a near dead-heat.

* * *

“That you, Barbara?”

“Jake . . . ?”

“Yeah, Poszderak here. I’m on the cell phone, circling the block on Wilshire. Grab a coat and hustle down now, now, now. I’ll pick you up in front.”

“Right away? I haven’t begun to get ready or —”

“Figured as much,” said the P. I. “Listen, our friend pulled a fast one. I tailed him from his work place, assuming he’d go home to collect the frau. He didn’t. Right now he’s wandering around the UCLA campus all by his lonesome — alone, hear me? Run into him by accident, and you can maybe do things the easy way, smoother, too. Pop down pronto. I’ll drop you as near to him as we can get in a car.”

“On my way, Jake.”

“Hold it, don’t hang up! Is Harry there?”

“Not now. He came by earlier, set up his stuff, and went to get something to eat.”

“He’d sure as hell better get back. Harry doesn’t know about the switcheroo. Don’t screw around primping, Barb. We have to catch the target before he leaves.”

“Be in the elevator in two shakes.”

“Make it one,” urged Poszderak.

17 - Reunion Now

“Ham, is it really you?” The indistinct figure of a woman, hands deep in the pockets of a navy blue, thigh-length leather coat, emerged from the shadows outside UCLA’s metered-parking garage. “I must be hallucinating!”

“Barbara . . ? I don’t believe this!” Ham reached for her hand, but she was suddenly in his arms, hugging him fiercely. “Barb Cartwright, where’d you pop from?”

“Your shady past.” Uttering a nervous little laugh, she said, “It’s Barbara Mott now,” and stepped back, regarding him fondly in the dim light. “God, it’s been ten incredible years!”

Flustered by the encounter, Moffett said, “Your married name is Mott?”

“Was . . . is. Ralph and I are separated. I have a baby girl. And you?”

“Uh, married, yes. Even split, a boy and a girl.”

“Someone told me,” she said ruefully. “It nearly broke my heart.”

Typical of former lovers, they self-consciously searched one another’s eyes. To Ham, it was as if he and the aspiring actress and dancer had moved to different worlds, which in a sense they had. Meeting Audrey Lee shortly after accepting a position as associate engineer in a modestly staffed consulting firm, he had fallen deeply in love, and never looked back, although visions of Barbara had admittedly danced more than once in libidinous daydreams.

“Going to the reunion?” Her tone suggested she already knew the answer.

“Planning to. And you?”

“I meant to go, but . . . I don’t know. Going by yourself is so dismal.”

“Why don’t we . . ? I mean, we could go together.”

“You’re not taking the better half?”

“She wasn’t interested.”

Barbara took his arm. “Then, why not? She tugged him toward Westwood Village.

Ham held back. “I’m parked across the campus, off Hilgard. Where’s your car?”

“I walked over. My condo’s on Wilshire. I was sitting there reminiscing, thinking about the reunion, and a sudden urge to roam the old school came over me.”

“Nostalgia isn’t addictive if taken in small doses. Same urge must’ve hit me, Barb.”

Her laugh sounded forced. She said a bit self-consciously, “We’ll rescue your car, trot over to my place. I have to change for the reunion, and my babysitter lives in the same building. She came early, so I had an hour or two to myself.”

“So you live in a high-rent district,” he said lightly. “Dancers must earn a big paycheck.”

“Dancing’s a fading memory, Ham. Now and then my agent finds a TV spot for me — commercials, off and on busy-work like that. Want the truth, all showbiz ever did for me was help to wreck my marriage. Ralph’s been decent about the split. He’s a CPA, has his own business. Little Vickie and I are . . . We’re comfortable.”

“Ralph . . ? That’s our dog’s name.”

Barbara smiled. "This particular Ralph is, well . . . Raphael. He hates his name."

"Thought maybe you meant Ralph Burgess."

"Your track team buddy? No way!"

"From where I stood, Burgess was my competition, not my buddy."

"I went out with that slug once. He was a track star like you, but I did all the running."

It was Ham's turn to force a laugh.

Trudging uphill past a corner of the library, Barbara no longer casually held his arm. She clutched him possessively.

* * *

The deluxe condominium, an opulent eleventh-floor suite, featured two bedrooms and a den. An arched picture window in the high-ceilinged living room offered a sweeping view of Century City's sparkling constellations. Ham intuited the subject of a pointillist oil portrait next to the fireplace had been nude Barbara's winsome anatomy.

He was introduced to Joey, a freckled teenager who sized up his relationship to Barbara at a glance, then went into the nursery bedroom to coax baby Victoria to sleep.

Barbara mixed herself a vodka martini; Ham elected Chivas Regal neat. They plopped down side by side on a curved leather sectional and rehashed the UCLA years. A freshman Chi Phi pledge, Ham had met Barbara through her sponsoring sorority sister. They chatted happily about former acquaintances, with him trying to conjure faces that matched the names she kept dropping. For some reason, unlike the school classmates he'd grown up with who were indelibly engraved in his mind, college chums did not become permanently fixed in remembrance.

Finishing his drink, Ham asked if Barbara had a razor he could use. "Didn't get to pop home and clean off the stubble."

"Sure, I have an-bitsy safety razor. Afraid there's no shaving cream."

"I can make do with soap."

She ran a speculative finger along his jaw line. "Still own a healthy crop of whiskers. Did that blue face grow just since this morning?"

"Blackbeard's curse," he said.

Barbara said, "Either an extra-generous glandular output, or a case of really good genes."

Ham glanced down at his suit trousers. "I'm not wearing jeans."

Barbara's laughed.

Self-consciously lathering as best he could with a bar of perfumed bath soap, he scraped away the day's growth. A dollop of whiskey on an empty stomach had dulled his inhibitions, though he still felt vaguely uneasy about being in the home of someone once dear, and now a virtual stranger. Wielding the tiny razor, he noted movement reflected in the mirror, Barbara slipping into a robe, and caught a flash of long, shapely dancer's leg. His stomach tightened.

Then she was standing behind him. Their eyes locked in the mirror; a tingling current charged the bathroom.

"You haven't changed," she said. "The years haven't touched you, Ham."

He feebly deflected the compliment. "What a disappointment! By now I'd hoped for at least *some* improvement."

Her smile was enigmatic.

“Look smashing, yourself,” he said, not wishing to be outdone. The rarest of rare birds, a natural honey-blonde with sultry brown eyes, she had kept herself in excellent trim. The same insouciant, turned-up nose and high cheekbones highlighted near-perfect features, and she fairly radiated femininity, still moved with the airy grace of someone who took her dancing seriously.

When she touched his shoulder, Ham bent quickly to wash away the soapy residue leftover from shaving, and and toweled off with excessive energy. “There! Feels better.”

Barbara silently watched him comb his hair, and led him back into the living room. “Can you amuse yourself while I shower and dress?”

He nodded. “Might even lift another glass. Where’s your babysitter?”

“Vickie’s asleep. I told Joey we wouldn’t be leaving for another hour, so she went back to her apartment. Some new magazines are there on the coffee table. Snap on the TV or stereo if you’re bored. I won’t be long.”

His hand not terribly steady, Ham poured two fingers of Chivas. He lit a cigarette, pretended to leaf through a recent issue of *The New Yorker*, but the faint sound of a running shower stirred his pulse. He became preoccupied with a mental image of Barbara in the shower. Unable to sit still, put down the magazine, rose and restively prowled the spacious living room, torn between a subliminal urge to leave, and an overt urge to stay.

A glass-shelved étagère held a dozen or more folio-sized art and travel books. From the middle shelf, he took down a thick photo album bound in calfskin. The first pages featured snapshots spanning Barbara’s on-again, off-again life from bouncy high school cheerleader through matriculation at UCLA. He leafed through page after page of glossy photos, assembled cast shots of her drama classes’ plays and rehearsals, Barbara in the company of a delicately handsome young man with a receding hairline he assumed was her estranged husband, snapshots of tiny Victoria laughing in her crib, being spoon-fed cereal, or reluctantly bathed.

He turned a leaf and came upon a series of black-and-white stills, obviously the work of a professional photographer. He puffed his cheeks, felt the heat rise in his loins. Barbara, topless and stunning in a monokini, sensuously posed on a swimming pool springboard. Barbara, totally starkers, the centerpiece of a supremely erotic ménage à trois, sharing a king-sized bed with a naked, hawk faced man and a striking Asian girl.

“Don’t tell me you’re blushing.” Barbara was slouched in the hall doorway, exceptionally provocative in a filmy robe that revealed as much as it concealed.

“My wife has an outfit just like this,” he said, pointing to one of her nude photos.

Barbara threw back her head and laughed aloud.

“I see you’ve . . . made some skin flicks,” he said lamely, and snapped the album shut.

“Hasn’t everyone?” She studied him. “See any of my epidermal epics?”

“Guess I must’ve, uh . . . missed ‘em,” he stumbled, his throat inhumanly dry.

“Don’t tell me my short, unhappy career bothers you. It’s hard to believe you’d be up tight about a silly thing like commercial porn.”

“Sexy,” he remarked, not knowing what else to say.

“Oh, God! If only you knew how wrong you are about that! Doing those films is almost but not quite as sexy as housework.” This time a brittle edge was apparent in her laugh. “The least sexy occupation on Earth is roasting under broiling studio lights and wrestling with perfect strangers, then shivering in a drafty sound stage between takes. Sorry you disapprove, Ham.”

“Who am I to disapprove?”

“Please don’t say anything else. You know how I felt about you, how I’ve always felt. Do you ever think of our wedding night?”

His sense of acute embarrassment waging battle with the aftereffect of Scotch on an empty stomach, it was all Ham could do to tear his eyes away from the living centerfold in a skimpy. He sank back on the sectional weak-kneed, the warmth in his loins crowding the residue of embarrassment out of the picture.

The inane remembrance of what she had called their “wedding night” assailed him. A mutual acquaintance had been married in Newport Beach. They had driven to Orange County in the ancient, racing green MG roadster that broke down with British regularity, and enjoyed the nuptials, as well as the lavish reception to follow, where champagne had flowed like . . . well, champagne. More than slightly sozzled, they had ended up sharing a sleeping bag on the foggy beach. It was the sort of magic night no one would ever forget, or wish to forget.

Barbara eased down beside him on the sectional, the hint of a seductive smile playing on her glossed lips, and placed an overly warm hand over his. “Poor Ham.”

“S’pose we ought t’hike over to the hotel.” Realizing his speech was slightly slurred, he added, “Must be sevenish, thereabouts. Better call Joey.”

“She’s not coming back. I paid her, gave her the night off. The hotel’s so glitzy, and stiff-necked place. Let’s stay here. We’ll have our own private reunion.”

He unsuccessfully tried to rise, and fell back. “Barb, you . . . You’re attractive as ever, or maybe more so. But I, uh —”

“You take those nine-year-old vows seriously.”

“Uh, guilty . . .”

“Forget guilt; it’s unhealthy.” She leaned sideways, letting the filmy robe fall open, and made no move to cover herself. Slipping her bare arms around his neck, she looked into his eyes, her expression languorous, sensuous.

“Listen, Barb, I think—”

Her kiss was soft, incredibly warm. Her fluttering tongue sought his.

Moffett’s thought processes ground to a full stop. Drowning in a flood of rippling sensation, his hand slid to her bare breast of its own volition. He caressed her lightly.

“It’s been too long,” she whispered, and tugged him to his feet. The master bedroom was dimly illuminated by spillover from the adjoining bathroom. Barbara slipped out of her robe, let it fall. Turning to him, she began undoing his tie, unbuttoning his shirt.

Loosing himself in a rising tide of emotion, Ham kicked off his loafers.

She came to him in a rush, their kiss was longer, more deeply felt. When they broke apart, she murmured, “You always did like to neck standing up,” and drew him to the bed.

After writhing in the heat of the moment for a time, Barbara said, “What is it, Ham? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t . . . It’s, uh, never happened before.”

“Stage fright,” she said. “I know the cure.”

“Jesus, Barb . . . !” He gasped when she bent and enveloped him in warmth.

After coaxing and teasing him with limited success, she gave up and lay back.

“Sorry,” he said, wincing at how idiotic the apologetic word sounded. Now much more than just embarrassed, he felt paralyzed, wanting in the worst way to gather his clothes and flee.

“Don’t fret about it,” she said in a wooden voice. “We were in too much of a hurry. Either that, or you’ve contracted a terminal case of marriage. Come hold me.”

They lay quietly, shrouded in a strained silence. “Oh, Christ!” she said. “My life turned into such an ugly fucking mess.”

Feeling dampness on his shoulder, Ham realized she was quietly weeping. Hurriedly sliding from beneath the coverlet, he stumbled erect, dressed with frantic, haphazard haste.

* * *

Posted expectantly in his SUV, Jake Poszderak used a Nikon megapixel, low-light camera to click off four snaps of Moffett rushing out of the condo, and two more as he wheeled the Ford minivan up the the basement garage ramp, tires squealing.

He punched his cell phone. Barbara took her own sweet time answering after it rang six times. When she finally did come on the line, Jake thought she sounded distant, out of it.

“Put Harry on,” he requested.

“Yeah?” the photographer said seconds later.

“Get it in the can?”

“Got it on the fucking sofa,” said Harry. “Got it in the fucking bedroom, and got it in the fucking bed. But no fucking.”

“What do you mean?”

The photog barked a laugh. “Overage Joe college flunked his final exam.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Jake, would I kid you? He couldn’t get it up.”

“I’ll be go-to-hell!”

“A strong possibility,” said Harry. “After Casanova streaked out of here, I offered to relieve the tootsie’s misery, but she turned all sad and weepy-eyed.”

Poszderak grimaced. “Guess it’s a wrap. Make two dupes of everything. You can swing by tomorrow, pick up your gear.”

“Check.”

* * *

Shaken and fuzzy-headed from alcohol and his recent ordeal, Ham glanced at the erratic dashboard clock just as it rolled over to 8:06. He abused the minivan’s gear box climbing the ramp to street level, and turned right on busy Wilshire Boulevard directly in the path of an oncoming sedan. The other driver leaned on his horn, swerved and made a radical lane change.

Red and blue flashing lights blossomed in the minivan’s rear view mirror. Cursing in an undertone, Ham slapped the steering wheel. He had to drive another block before finding curb space to pull over. The LAPD black-and-white slid in behind him, blocking a driveway.

An officer approached cautiously. “See your driver’s license, sir?”

Fearing a defensive remark might change the expected citation from “Failure to Yield Right of Way” to “Reckless Driving,” Ham slid the license out of his wallet’s plasticine holder, wondering if two short drinks before the luckless encounter would make him flunk a DUI test.

The officer walked back to the police car to check the minivan against a current hot sheet. He returned. “See your registration and proof of insurance, sir?”

“Certainly.” Ham stretched toward the glove compartment. The officer kept his flashlight trained on the outstretched hand to make sure nothing harmful came out in it. Ham recalled comforting Little Joe with a remark about everyone having “days like this.” At the time, he had not considered how the sentiment might apply to he himself. After his failure to perform in Bountiful Barbara’s boudoir, a moving violation made it less than a five-star day to remember.

“You nearly caused an accident back there, sir.”

“A misjudgment, Officer.” Ham tried to keep his voice level, matter-of-fact. “The other car was coming a lot faster than I thought.”

The officer mulled the statement. “Borderline speeding maybe. Even so, you have to be more careful. Where do you live?”

“Northridge, in the Valley.”

“Heading home now?”

“Yes. I was visiting a friend, haven’t had dinner yet. My wife will be worried.”

A sage nod. “She’ll worry a lot more if you wind up in the emergency ward, or worse. I know because I help paramedics scrape people off the pavement around here, especially on the night watch. You’ve had no recent moving violations, so I’m letting you off with a warning. Keep your eyes open, and take it easy going home, okay?”

“Will do. Much obliged, Officer. I appreciate it.”

* * *

More clear-headed and revitalized, though doubly angry at himself for not one but two consecutive demonstrations of dull-witted stupidity, he stopped for a cheeseburger and beer in an Encino coffee shop, and was reaching for the minivan’s door handle when the name on a sign at the corner of the adjacent street caught his eye. He, Audrey Lee and the kids had twice accepted Dr. Ladd’s invitation to visit him at his home three or four blocks up the hill. Would it be appropriate to drop in on the boss unannounced at this time of the evening? For some reason, he felt a pressing need to pour his troubles into a sympathetic ear.

Ladd answered the door on the second chime. “Well, lookee who’s come calling,” he said jovially, then sobered quickly. “No catastrophe at AGC, I hope.”

“No, no; nothing like that, Bill. Had my own catastrophe, and I need some advice.”

“Good advice, or bad advice? Nevermind. Come on in, and I’ll turn my collar around.”

In the book-lined study, Ham said, “Hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“No, I was sitting here feeling sorry for myself. Got to rise early for a round of golf with Ben and his rich neighbors. Tough work, but somebody has to do it.”

Ham related the evening’s uneventful events in succinct, straightforward fashion. He finished on a somber note.

Ladd pursed his lips. “Way you paint the young lady, she could be accused of inviting assault with a friendly weapon.”

“I’ve been . . . I’m worried about how to, uh . . . That is, what to tell my wife.”

“Tell her about the femme fatale who drew you into her clutches?” Ladd’s surprise seemed genuine. “Why, for God’s sake? You mad at sweet little Audrey Lee?”

“Of course not, it’s just . . . We’ve never kept secrets from one another.”

His expression solemn, Ladd said, “Pardon me, but I thought you knocked on my door and asked for advice. Filling in your wife on how you stumbled into the strange snafu you

described could be the apex of muddled thinking. Was there ever a man who at one time or another didn't feel an urge to sample a bit of strange? I seriously doubt it. With some of us it's wishful thinking, and with others, well . . . Ordinarily I'd tell you I'm not smart enough to give advice, but since you did ask, I'll make an exception. Keep your yap shut."

"Would that be fair to Audrey Lee?"

"Fair! How fair would it be to grievously injure your relationship with Audrey Lee by trying to explain away your damfool evening? Judging from what you told me, nothing happened aside from a few kisses, pats and tickles. Lesson learned, Ham. Let it go at that."

"I don't know . . ."

"Listen, Helpmate, learn to make up your mind before soliciting advice. Deciding to maybe not take my advice makes me feel useless." Ladd performed a mock shudder. "Audrey Lee is a redhead. Never, for any reason tempt the furies of a Portugee or a redhead; the results can be lethal. Chalk it up to folly, to an itch you didn't really want to scratch in the first place."

"Couldn't would be more like it."

Ladd shrugged. "Have it your way."

Feeling edgy and foolish for having unburdened himself, Ham wilted under the other's analytical gaze. He got up and began pacing the study, searching the ranks of titles in Ladd's floor to ceiling bookshelves. "You must read a lot," he said, unable to think of anything more appropriate.

Ladd watched him circumspectly from beneath beetling brows.

"Your collection is . . . Are all these science fiction titles?"

Ladd said noncommittally, "I keep most technical books at the office."

"Geoffrey Lane . . ." Standing on tiptoe, Ham pulled down a volume from the highest shelf. "The whole upper shelf's full of Lane books, several with the same title."

"Hang on to the one you just grabbed," suggested Ladd, "a gift from me to you. On second thought, leave it here. I'll have Geoff autograph it, give it to you at the office."

"You're acquainted with the author?"

Ladd scratched behind his ear. "I've known that deranged scribbler for some time."

Ham opened the volume titled THE LAMBDA FACTOR at random. He skimmed a paragraph or two, turned to the middle, read a quarter of a page and closed the book. Looking at his boss with new eyes, he said, "You're Geoffrey Lane, aren't you, Bill?"

A pleased expression leavened the other's weathered features. "Your unholy intuitive gift is working overtime. You added two and two awfully fast, deduced my ghastly secret."

"Hey, I think it's great! But, why a secret? Is Lane the pseudonym you always use?"

"Nope. I'm also Robert Wilder, Vance Croft and other wholesome Anglo-Saxon authors invented by my agent. He counseled me to use phony names for storytelling, and my own tag for technical papers and books. One smart cookie is my agent. Hope he gets to be a multimillionaire on fifteen percent of my earnings."

Ham grinned. "I knew about your other books, but . . . How'd the fiction come about?"

"Oh, I don't know. Fell into a vacuum when my wife passed on. Our boys were grown, had lives of their own. Guess I got bored with the boob tube, figured I could do better than some of the lame stuff I'd been reading. I was wrong. Telling stories is tough duty, hard work."

"It's so different," remarked Ham, "from your real-world topics."

Ladd picked up a ballpoint pen, wrote a florid salutation in the flyleaf, and handed the book to Moffett. “Read my potboiler when you’ve nothing better to do, and tell me what you think. There’s what’s liberally called ‘science fiction,’ you see, and then there’s speculative fiction — extrapolations from the here and now. In my tales you’ll find no sword wavers, or sorcerers, demons, werewolves, dungeons, dragons, fairies or magic spells, nor fighter plane-sized spacecraft that leap interstellar distances on one tank of gas, make banked turns and emit sound in vacuum, dream up starry aliens who interbreed with humans, DNA notwithstanding.”

Ham grinned. “Sounds like you don’t care for fantasy.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. Much of it’s beautifully written, but when literally anything can happen, and usually does, often for a not very good reason, to me it has zero appeal.”

“I suppose your tales go hand in hand with an interest in orbital manufacturing.”

“To some extent . . .” Ladd clicked his tongue and turned serious. “Glad you mentioned that. My curiosity bone’s been tickled, Ham. Someone — I have no idea who — has been sending me reams of data on microgravity materials and processes, orbital manufacturing techniques, so on and so forth. Snail mail delivers packages two or three times a week.”

“From where?” inquired Ham.

“Scatter gun postmarks from hither, yon, all over the place. Come see for yourself.” Ladd opened the doors of a tall armoire. Stacks of folders, periodicals and brochures were piled helter-skelter on every shelf. He peeled a handful of literature from the stack. “See here, MIT, Caltech, Marshall Spaceflight Center, University of Leipzig . . . Hey, I just had a hot flash about how to unload some of this waste paper. Go on, help yourself to a few hundred pounds.”

“Who’d bother,” scoffed Ham, “to plow through all this material.”

“In that respect great minds certainly do think alike. I riffled through some of it, found little of interest. I’ve attended symposia, listened to experts lecture, read everything definitive I could lay my hands on. See the file cabinets there against the far wall? They’re chock-a-block with cross-indexed papers and articles that blanket my obsession from stem to gudgeon. Here, helpmate. It’d please me no end if you’d help yourself to a double-armful of this junk mail.”

Ham lifted a twenty-pound stack of literature. “Thanks. Not sure I’ll ever dip into it.”

His expression sardonic, Ladd said, “Oh, you’re most welcome.”

“I’d better scat, Bill. Thanks again, and not only for the book or this stuff.”

“Have a pleasant weekend. You and Audrey Lee be sure and stop by again real soon. And bring the kiddies, hear?”

* * *

It was five minutes to eleven when Ham swung the minivan into his driveway. Leaving the pile of brochures and periodicals in the back of the vehicle, he fumbled for his latch key, quietly unlocked the front door and switched on a table lamp. The living room sectional was made up with a sheet, blanket and pillow. Propped against the pillow was a postcard depicting the picturesque harbor, “coat hanger” bridge and beautiful, multi-swoop-roofed opera house in Sydney, Australia. He turned the card over. The inscription was handwritten:

Dear Moffetts: hope all’s well with you & children, and that sunshine’s shining brightly on AGC. Getting somewhat accustomed to being home again, though Sydney has changed — a metropolis now, filled with Diggers who certainly do speak with a most peculiar accent. Joke! More later. Much love to you all, Clint.

Postcard in hand, he was staring coldly at the makeshift sofa-bed when he sensed Audrey Lee peeking in from the hallway.

"You're home early," she said sleepily.

He asked why the sectional was made up, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice.

"Thought you'd get in late, and not want to wake me." His wife yawned. "Read Clint's note?" When Ham nodded, she said, "Write him. I think he misses California, and his friends."

"I will."

"Have a good time at the reunion? See lots of old acquaintances, school chums?"

"I didn't go, Audrey Lee. I wandered around the UCLA campus after work, then gobbled a burger and spent the rest of the evening with Ladd at his place."

Surprise in her voice, Audrey Lee said, "You skipped the reunion? Whatever for?"

"Can't say. Didn't like the idea of going alone, I guess. Here, look at the inscription in this book. Turns out Bill writes novels as well as technical literature."

"Really?" Audrey Lee inspected the dust jacket and opened the volume. "Geoffrey Lane, he uses a pen name . . . Why, I think it's wonderful! You had no idea until tonight?"

"Not a glimmer. It's worse than pulling teeth to get Bill talking about himself."

"Well, forget the sofa." Audrey Lee stifled another yawn. "Best get to bed; the kids will be up pretty early."

Ham brushed his teeth quickly and tugged on pajama bottoms, hoping for a chance to reassert his manhood. By the time he clambered into the queen-sized bed Audrey Lee was sprawled in her usual curlicue, breathing shallowly.

Before drifting off, Ham reviewed the peculiar evening item by item, event by event. Later he dreamed that a gorgeous naked Amazon had relentlessly pursued him through the stacks of books in UCLA's Powell library, and had then chased him round and about the hills and dales of Westwood until he dropped the baton and a black-clad LAPD officer kindly picked it up and handed it back, sternly warning him to be more careful in the future.

18 - General Dennis

Forever agitated, upset and demanding, Alex phoned his ace co-conspirator early, and woke him from a sound sleep. "Frank, your voicemail said the head engineer's stooge couldn't get it up? How'd that pan out? There enough ficky-fick on film to heist him by the gonads?"

"Plenty," mumbled Burton, still two-thirds asleep."

Harboring a doubt, Alex said, "Ship me a set of dupes. Got to see this for myself."

"I'll FedEx the pix first thing."

"Figure to slap him with the bad news now, or have you already done the filthy deed?"

"Not yet. But I plan to hit her with the pix, not him."

"Her . . . ? The bimbo? That don't make any goddamn sense."

"His wife," said Burton loudly, now fully awake, and convinced that God had awarded his employer money instead of a functioning brain. "We're playing a character assassination game, not blackmail. I'm waiting for just the proper nexus to get the pix in front of his —"

"The proper *wha-a-a-at?*" wailed Alex. "Why do all of you college freaky-deakys keep spieling six-bit words nobody ever heard of?"

“Meant what I said,” assured Burton, sticking to monosyllabic sentences used for child guidance. “It has to happen at exactly the right time, under exactly the right circumstances.”

“So exactly when’ll *that* come around?”

“When losing Moffett’s services will do Ladd’s R&D effort the most damage.”

“Well, the exactly glorious damn day sure better roll around before your overeducated lingo puts me to a rubber room along with that guy you snookered with scary notes.”

“Allison,” said Burton, wishing his employer would hang up, and let him go back to bed.

“Yeah, him. Now here’s something else I called about. Gridley’s been eating crow turds ever since he flubbed the dub and let those union jerk-offs dump their guild ploy in the toilet. I told him a contract would be out on him if he ever again screwed the pooch like that. To make a short story long, one of Grid’s hotsy-totsy scams just got put on the front burner. He’s been real chummy on my expense account with a Pentagon gofer in the outfit run by a mad dog name of General Dennis. Soon now there’ll be a . . . Wait, what’d Grid call it? I jotted it down here. Yeah, got it. Mason’s morons are about to get clobbered by a pree-lim-in-airy de-sign review on their big, new space bus project. Mean anything to you?”

“Means a lot and then some to me,” confirmed Burton. “Shoving up the PDR date nearly months has my former division as atwitter as a trampled anthill. With the development phase barely started, Aerospaceplane’s already slipped a tad behind schedule, and is slightly over budget. Calling a formal PDR this early in the game guarantees a raft of downstream problems.”

“Pee-dee-rrr, you say? Uh-huh, I think that’s what Grid called it. One detail you maybe don’t know about is how Grid’s been greasing the palm of the greedy Pentagon flyboy, and goosing him into whispering all sorts of lickerish bad jazz in his boss general’s ear. Grid’s morning line says General Dennis and some other brass hats’re steamed to the gills, itching to screw AGC six ways from Sunday for bollixing their pet space bus job. How’s that grab you?”

Burton chortled to show his appreciation for stale information. “If ALLP/ORDART gets bounced hard at the PDR, it will do more than just damage the R&D effort. It could amount to a horrendous, head-on train wreck for the whole company.”

“Bolshoi!” enthused Alex, once again exhausting his vocabulary of Russian terms. “Wait, Frank. Straighten me out on something else. How’s this flyboy general get to pack enough juice to stick a shiv in AGC? I thought the space bus was strictly a civvy job.”

“That is affirmative, Alex, but also negative.”

“Double down on your goddamn double-talk again and you’ll regret it, Frank!”

“Funding funnels through NASA,” explained Burton patiently. “Technical cognizance, too. Yet due to the volume and frequency of prospective military missions, USAF will wield a hefty club during the development and test phases. From our standpoint, invoking a PDR so early is a real bonus. Opposition to funding Aerospaceplane was inspired by the devil’s advocate himself, Senator Dismyre. The upside for us is that a PDR down-check could easily shove AGC toward the precipice.”

“Devil’s avocado yet!” Alex gnashed his teeth. “Precipice, schmesipice! Frank, the crap you’re shoveling makes me want to puke. Got another call here. Do me a big favor, okay? Take your damn hundred-pound dictionary and shitcan it!”

* * *

The commuter flight from San Jose touched down at Burbank's Bob Hope Airport in the midst of the afternoon rush hour. Moffett yawned, swallowed repeatedly to clear the snap, crackle and pop in his ears, a result of the plane's rapid descent. His boss would be working late; Ladd rarely left his desk before nightfall these hectic days. Ham decided to swing by the plant on his way home, and brief the chief engineer on the results of his trip.

He reclaimed the minivan in the multi-level parking garage, fretted impatiently in a file of autos creeping along Hollywood Way toward the Golden State Freeway, and eventually joined a crawling river of vehicles grinding north in fits and starts, reflecting on what had been an interesting and informative day.

In company with an R&D procurement specialist, he had taken part in agreements with Swansdown Industries, the high-priced bidder subcontracted to supply seventeen varieties of dip-brazed aluminum alloy enclosures designed to ultimately house ALLP/ORDART electrical, electronic and avionics units. Witnessing the dip-brazement process of a prototype enclosure had upped his appreciation of the complicated procedures used to turn a collection of sheet metal piece parts into an integral, seamless mechanical assembly.

Urged to stand well back, he and the AGC buyer had watched a clamped-together prototype box removed from the warming oven and lowered into a kiln filled with closely temperature-controlled, eleven-hundred-degree liquid salt. Technicians wearing hard hats, goggles and thermal protection gear had cautiously moved around the sunken kiln. A foreman had warned the visitors that a single drop of perspiration falling into the dip-braze tank would simply explode.

Entering "G" Building, he learned that Ladd was not alone in his office. Engaged in earnest conversation, the chief engineer and Mr. Mason did not immediately notice his presence, but it was too late for him to escape gracefully. Ladd spotted him and called, "Ho, wandering helpmate, come on in. Ben, I don't think you've met Henry Moffett, better known as Ham. He's my strong right arm these days."

"A pleasure, Mr. Mason."

"And mine as well, Mr. Moffett." AGC's chief executive made a cursory appraisal of the strong right arm. "Bill tells me you're doing splendidly."

"Still learning the ropes, Mr. Mason. I got back from San Jose, and . . . I didn't mean to interrupt you. I'll fill you in tomorrow, Bill."

"Stay a minute," said Ladd, "and give an ear to the pep talk I've been getting. It's okay, Ben; Ham's privy to most everything that comes down around here."

"Certainly, certainly. To recapitulate, Mr. Moffett, you're aware that the Aerospaceplane preliminary design review has been moved up, and will take place in barely two weeks. What I've been emphasizing to Bill is a crying need for us to shine brightly at the PDR.

"Late yesterday," continued Mr. Mason, "we learned of a critical change in the agenda. Instead of having to satisfy only NASA, the USAF will also be here to critique our efforts and requirements pertaining to downstream military missions. We *must*, and I stress the imperative, assure ourselves every presentation loophole and gaffe has been eradicated or tightly plugged. A shoddy performance could jeopardize not merely Aerospaceplane, but other in-house USAF contracts as collateral damage."

“As I’ve told you, Ben,” drawled Ladd, “despite the cascade of change requests from either customer, we’re pretty much on top of things except for one significant glitch that’s sure to beget a world-class migraine. Dual customer requirements don’t mesh on all criteria. NASA wants it purple, whereas the Pentagon insists on green, then both change their minds to —”

“Pretty much on top of things simply won’t cut it,” declared the CEO. Patting his fingertips together, he tilted back and searched the acoustical ceiling tiles Ladd’s office as if soliciting revelation from above. “I’m aware of the roadblocks and pitfalls, but invoking the change-factor excuse might be an egregious error. Old Blood and Guts Dennis loves to rant and rave and make things difficult for everyone concerned; it’s his way of fishing for the third star he knows he’ll get by finagling a turnaround in cognizance, and pushing Aerospaceplane through as primarily a USAF system, leaving NASA to pick up whatever crumbs remain.”

Mr. Mason went on to warn how, when displeased — unfortunately, most of the time — General Dennis turns into a pluperfectly hard-nosed martinet. Sounding chagrined, he confessed to having goaded Dennis to retire, and had gone so far as to bait him by offering a desk in AGC’s executive row, adding that he had tendered the invitation for the sole purpose of keeping the crusty gentleman out of AGC’s hair as a customer. Nothing if not stubborn, and of course being who and what he was, Dennis had refused to drop the reins of command.

“Whew!” Ladd figuratively wiped perspiration from his brow. “Glad you didn’t net him, Ben. Denny’d be one tough horse to saddle here in our barn.”

“Oh, I was perfectly aware of that.” Mr. Mason shot a speculative glance Ham’s way. “To put it crudely, I’d much rather have Denny inside the tent pissing out, than outside pissing in.”

Ladd grinned. “Impeccable logic, but I still think you’d have been sorry.”

“Possibly . . .” Mr. Mason looked up, consulted the wall clock. “Drat! Where does the time go? Bill, I have no lack of faith in your ability to bring off this PDR smoothly. All I’m asking is for you and Mr. Moffett to exercise the smidgen of extra extra-effort it takes to push the boulder over the crest. I’ve asked Sorenson to look over your shoulder and assist your preparation efforts. Blair doesn’t say much, but he takes it all in, believe me. Being ex-Air Force himself, I plan to let him personally handle General Dennis.”

Ladd blinked and said, “A sterling move, Ben.”

“Yes, I’m sure Blair can handle him, although with Denny one never knows. Well, I’ve appointments to keep, and miles to go before I sleep. Have a good evening, gentlemen.” Flashing a plastic smile more appropriate to a vote-seeking politician than a whip-wielding captain of industry, Mr. Mason strode briskly from the office.

When he was gone, Ladd banged his desk with both fists. “Sorenson, God help us! From that burr-headed squirrel ‘Assistance’ is . . . Never mind, Ham. I’m afraid my tactic for coping with our acting VP and GM will be to sic him on you.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. I’ll be bouncing all over the place, too busy to scratch. Don’t fret about dealing with our peerless leader. He’ll be a cinch to cope with for anyone with two young kids at home. Show him a rasher of vufoils, and then snow him with mouthful after mouthful of technical jargon, the whole nine yards. I guarantee he’ll get out of your hair smartly.”

“Tell me something.” Ham had been pondering Mr. Mason’s caveat. “How did ALLP/ORDART manage to get in trouble this early in the game?”

“Oh, slipping a tad behind schedule on top of modest budget over-expenditures bodes anything but happy days on downstream. Successfully playing catch up is improbable at best, and impossible at worst. Using the deluge of change orders Ben called an ‘egregious error’ is however the major culprit responsible for cost-and-schedule slippage. Excuse or not, it amounts to a killer that makes any program run in fits and starts.

“Ham, you as much as anyone,” continued Ladd, “should appreciate how we’ve been forced to concept and re-concept one segment of aeronautical and electronic systems and subsystems architecture after another. It’s a damned costly process, and burns beaucoup man-hours. Worse, our Contract Administration dodos, and Stan Lomax’s squadron of legal turkeys, have months of fact-finding and renegotiation ahead of them before the schedule and budget mess begins to get sorted out. Ben’s losing sleep for a good reason. To cope with a premature PDR, a way to justify solid, meaningful dollar, man-hour, and calendar slippages doesn’t exist.”

Ham thought that over. “Can’t say I blame Mr. Mason.”

“Nor I, Ham. An elephant, per the adage, is a mouse designed to federal specifications. Our white elephant is no exception.” Ladd abruptly changed tack. “How’d the trip go?”

“Twice as interesting as I expected, I learned more than I ever wanted to know about dip-brazing techniques.” Ham related his elucidating experience at the vendor’s facility.

“Uh-huh, sounds like a worthwhile visit. Better scat now; your supper’s probably getting cold. We’ll fret about PDR *Sturm und Drang* in the morning.”

* * *

The succeeding days hatched a whirlwind of preparatory meetings, few of which struck Ham as fruitful. He attended several sessions with Ladd, and others on his own, where he listened with waxing apprehension to myriad rationales for tardy design review inputs, and numerous shadowy, intangible reasons for minor budget overruns. He conscientiously replayed to Ladd the general lack of awareness of subtleties involved in complying with change order requests which made it mandatory to rehash and rewrite material due for presentation to both customers. He spent the intervening hours and days helping collate inputs, marking up data sheets for revision, and liaising with “E” Building Technical Publications, where hardcopy documentation and presentation viewfoils were under preparation, usually arriving home between eight and nine in the evening, much to Audrey Lee’s disgust.

“Mean to say you’re not getting paid for all the extra hours you put in?”

“Stifle thy indignation,” he urged. “Us high-salaried junior execs get it done any way we can, mostly by working as long as it takes to get it done.”

“Junior dumb-bells, you mean. Dear husband, your devotion to duty astounds me.”

“Goes with the territory, dear fish wife of mine. What’s for supper?”

“In the microwave.”

* * *

Ham’s pristine encounter with R&D acting VP&GM Sorenson interrupted his review of computerized ALLP slides from Aeronautical Engineering. Ladd presented him to the imposing executive who stared through him as if oblivious to his presence. “Mr. Sorenson needs a peek at our latest updates, Ham. Fill him in on where we are. I leave you in good hands, Blair.”

“The material’s collecting next door in the conference room, Mr. Sorenson.”

Trailing Ham like a tall, elegantly garbed baby duck, Sorenson ignored the stacks of data piled across the conference table's length and breadth. Not a single facial muscle twitched as he watched the computer terminal light up, then waited with the air of a Supreme Court Justice preparing to hear evidence on a case crucial to the fate of mankind.

"Three problem areas still exist," Moffett began. "Program integration, minor budget and schedule slippages, and a lag in subcontracted hardware development." He described Aircraft Division as being in relatively good shape on ALLP, while Spacecraft, despite receiving a steady fusillade of change requests, had ORDART fairly well in hand. He explained how numerous employees were spending overtime hours condensing and collating electronic systems and subsystems inputs, their efforts hindered by having to incorporate last minute change requests, most if not all of which impacted data previously prepared. In rapid succession, he presented aeronautical graphs, commented on slide after slide of text intermixed with analytical equations defining airflow characteristics for ALLP paired with the orbiter stage, and without, as well as ramjet thrust estimates and similar esoterica. Moving on to ORDART's atmospheric reentry calculations, he cited predicated skin temperatures, wind tunnel-derived aerodynamic test results, and ORDART's many-times-revised launch and retrieval airborne scenarios, related facts and figures pertaining to crew safety, numerous, varied logistic requirements, plus spares, and a list of on-board commissary equipment, plus ORDART's compact microgravity toilet.

He stressed the difficulties involved in program integration — the enormous task of pulling the system's manifold bits and pieces into a first semblance of order — and related the problems of hardware and software subcontractors, their efforts hindered by change requests that rippled down through systems, subsystems and units, reflecting revisions to work once considered accomplished, as well as specific work-in-progress. Alluding to projected schedule slippages and minor cost overruns, he flashed viewfoil after viewfoil, briefly explaining each.

"That much covers most everything as of this minute, Mr. Sorenson. A number of adds are still in work, yet barring additional changes R&D's pitch should go together on time."

The magnificently attired, imposing executive's pale blue eyes had followed Ham's every move with unwavering concentration. He cleared his throat as if preparing to render a verdict on Moffett's presentation, and asked, "You play Ping-Pong?"

"Sir . . . ?"

"Ping-Pong. Do you play?"

"I, uh . . . Table Tennis . . . ?"

"That's it, Table Tennis. You play?"

"Er, occasionally, Mr. Sorenson. We have a collapsible table at home. Now and then I set it up, have a game with my wife or daughter."

"You," declared the corporate executive, the endorsement sounding very much like a Nobel Prize Committee nomination, "look like a good Ping-Pong player."

"Thank you, sir."

"But Ping-Pong is no kiddie game. You should sign-up to play in our tournament."

"Sign up . . . Ah, now I see."

Sorenson rose with fluid grace, stepped neatly around Ham and departed the conference room at a stately pace.

When Ham told his boss of the executive's reaction to the pitch, Ladd slumped behind his desk. "Sounds equitable to me. If I have to let Ben wax me on the golf course every weekend, is it too much to ask for you to play in Sorenson's Ping-Pong tournament?"

* * *

Early in the morning of the day prior to the dreaded, accelerated Aerospaceplane Preliminary Design Review, tension gripped "A" Building's executive row in a steel-jawed vise. Trotting over to "G" Building, Mr. Mason perched anxiously on the edge of his chair during the presentation's penultimate dry run, constantly dictating instructions to his executive assistant he wanted passed on to the R&D Chief Engineer and all other managers to key instant action.

Due to attend a welcoming luncheon arranged for visiting participants in the executive dining room, the review teams arrived in late morning. General Dennis led the blue-uniformed USAF entourage, with only a lonely trio of gentlemen in business suits representing NASA.

Mr. Mason fell into a perpetual dither, phoning Ladd at nine o'clock, again at ten, then yet again at eleven-fifteen to reassure himself the presentation hardcopies were complete and bound in the special glossy folders embossed with AGC's missile-shaped logo.

"Nearly ready for the kickoff," informed Ladd wearily. "Everything's whipped into shape except some stray analytical data from Erik Klonn's shop. Even that's here in rough form. My staff guy, Moffett, is reviewing the material."

"What?" cried Mr. Mason in alarm. "It's not spiral-bound, ready to hand out?"

"Relax, Ben. We'll slip the analytical write-up into each copy as an appendix. The material's more of a 'how to' guide, not definitive number-crunching. Call it a précis of the mathematical modeling approaches the analysts will use later in constructing real-world thermal and dynamic proofs. Don't fret; all documentation will be included by the time we convene."

Mr. Mason's relieved gasp evoked a knowing grin from Ladd. "Good, good! I'm afraid Blair's tied up; I can't hand the general over to him until this afternoon. In the meantime, are you prepared to cope with Denny at the luncheon?"

"As prepared," said Ladd, "as any sacrificial lamb ever is."

Hands jammed in his trouser pockets, the chief engineer strolled across the corridor to Moffett's cubicle and peered over his staff engineer's shoulder. "Uh-oh! Hate to say I see the spidery calligraphy of lower-case rupert lin in that tract?"

Elbow-deep in sheaves of paper, Ham lifted his hands helplessly. "Can't make sense of it, Bill. The symbolic logic goes so far, then takes off on a peculiar tangent. But I'm no math whiz."

Ladd massaged the back of his neck as if in pain. "Rupe's gibberish begs an interpreter *and* an Einstein. He still uses stationery headed by ideographs and a damned, sickly looking dragon. Oh, what the hell! Haul a few fistfuls over to my office. No time's left to call in an interpreter, we'll have to try and penetrate rupe's finely honed Asian mind ourselves."

After they put their heads together for twenty minutes, with minimal results. Ladd balled a fist and popped it into his open palm with a loud smack. "That conniving little fart! His conclusions are sound, but the way he circumnavigates the solar system to get there is totally asinine. I promised to have words with Erik about rupe's wayward ways, and never got around to it. Red China has to be funding him; his obfuscation quotient is stratospheric."

"Why not call him in," suggested Ham, "wring an explanation out of him?"

“Now there,” said Ladd, sounding adamant, “is a really atrocious notion. The only thing tougher to decipher than written rupe is oral rupe. He’ll drive you crazy, making you wait while he translates everything you say into Cantonese, then retranslates his reply into what he thinks might be a version of the English language. Something invariably gets lost in the translations.”

“Why does Klonn put up with him?”

“Put up with him, hah! Erik dotes on rupe, thinks he’s a clear-quill genius of the first water. He may be, but how the hell do you go about finding out?”

“Hello, Bill.” The greeting came from a short, nattily dressed gentleman who, attaché case in hand, nodded pleasantly to Minnie as he came striding through the anteroom.

The chief engineer grinned, pushed back his chair and rose. “Roelf, you old soak! Knew we’d see your sunny smile this morning. Come on in and meet Henry Moffett. Ham, shake hands with Roelf Cornelius. He’s NASA’s chief watchdog and bottle washer who’s arrive in order to take a stab at keeping us honest on the morrow.”

“A magnum order.” In stature only scant inches taller than five feet in stature, the merry-eyed newcomer shook Moffett’s hand with gentlemanly firmness.

“Dr. Ladd told me a lot about you, Mr. Cornelius.”

“Lies,” declared Roelf Cornelius, “all lies. Working with Bill, you must learn to sift the grain from the chaff, the fool’s gold from the genuine article. If not, you’re certain to fall into the Ladd Trap and succumb to his extravagant line of bullshit.”

“When that topic raises its unlovely head,” the chief engineer said, his inflection droll, “I refuse to argue with an expert in his own field.”

The riposte earned a warm, friendly smile from Cornelius. “Aerospaceplane aside, I suppose we’ll be forced to once again listen to your fully documented, orchestrated three-hour lecture on orbital manufacturing, eh, Bill?”

“Ouch! You always knew how to best hurt a guy. Uh-uh, not this trip, Roelf. Dare to exhibit anything resembling a depth of knowledge about that or any other arcane subject and it’s bound to confuse a certain general officer, but I do have Mr. Moffett halfway converted to the proper way of thinking. Strange, peculiar doings lately. Someone’s been doing a massive data dump on me, and being a devious fellow I shoved bales and bundles of stale literature off on Ham, who’s been asking the right questions. You and I show too much wear and tear to cash in on the big gold mine up in the sky, but if he works it right, Ham could tap the mother lode.”

Cornelius cocked his head, regarding Ham soberly. “Levity aside, Mr. Moffett, at the moment your boss is telling it like it is. Microgravity manufacturing can’t help but become the next technology frontier. I believe it inevitable, and it’s not far over the horizon, either. If you’ll bend and heed a stranger’s advice, listen to what Bill tells you, and bone up on the subject.”

“I mean to. In fact, I already am.”

Drawing out a chair, Cornelius set his briefcase aside, donned wire-rimmed bifocals and began scanning the analytical calculations spilling across the conference table. “What have we here? Thermal parameter estimates, I should think . . .” With that, the man from NASA fell into a studious trance.

Ladd caught Moffett’s eye, and winked. “Think back to your trip west before the last, Roelf. Remember the skinny Asian kid you had a long discussion with in my old office?”

“Assuredly . . .” Preoccupied with the data, Cornelius said, “Lim, if memory serves.”

“Lin,” corrected Ladd, “Rupert Lin. We’ve been trying to puzzle out his input.”

“Umm-m-m . . . yes.” Cornelius leafed through the unstapled documents, selected pages and reshuffled them in some sort of order. “This is interesting,” he mused, “and in fact verges on brilliance. See here, excluding power distribution units these statements can be reduced to algorithms appropriate to every electronic unit aboard either vehicle. And he’s made excellent use of ORDART’s on-board thermal environment to enhance heat dissipation factors — vectored, recirculated crew cabin air. And . . . oh, this is a rather ingenious approach . . .”

Dazzled, Ham glanced at his boss and received a second sly wink.

Slipping in and out of a state of acute concentration, Cornelius took from his briefcase a quadrille engineering tablet and began to scribble. Less than half an hour after his first glimpse of the raw, unintegrated data, he’d reconstructed lower-case rupert lin’s input, transposing cascades of abstruse equations and rendered them into clear, concise chains of symbolic logic.

Ladd clapped his staff engineer’s shoulder. “We’re saved, Ham! The Wizard has arrived in the nick of time and saved the day. Thank you ever so ver-r-r-y much, Roelf! Your aid in time of severe need is greatly appreciated. Entertain yourself for a minute while I get Ham started on formalizing this stuff so we can append it to the presentation handouts.”

Cornelius sent them away with an airy wave.

“He isn’t real!” exclaimed Ham once alone with Ladd. “Never seen anything like it.”

“Nor are you likely to see anything like it again. Roelf has brains he hasn’t gotten around to using yet. All business, Ladd said, Okay, boil down the write-ups into usable form, say a list of bulleted statements applicable to each type of input. When you’re finished, have Minnie run the data over to the documentation pool. Tell her to use my authority and give everyone unlimited overtime tonight. I have to attend Ben’s welcoming luncheon and soft-soap the general. Later we’ll sit down and run through the material before its spiral-bound.”

Ham said, “Good luck with the general. Everyone seems scared to death of him.”

“Yeah, with good reason. Denny’s sure he has brass balls that clang with every step he takes. He loves to terrify anyone who’s willing to be terrified, but I try to give him a moving target. You stay on top of this material, Ham.”

* * *

During the latter stages of his military career, USAF Major General Patrick Lemoine Dennis came to regard himself as a hybrid of Andrew Jackson, General Curtis LeMay, and the American war god who modeled for all war gods, General George S. Patton, Jr. His superiors as well as the senior and junior officers and enlisted men and women under his command, were aware that in heated moments he became anything but the model of a modern major general. An expectant hush fell over “A” Building’s executive dining room when the beribboned martinet entered trailed by a lone aide.

Mr. Mason greeted him warmly “Good afternoon, General. It’s a pleasure to have you with us again. I believe you’re acquainted with NASA’s Mr. Cornelius.”

An oblique nod was the general’s response to Cornelius’ cherubic smile.

“Hi, Denny,” said Ladd. “How’re they treating you?”

“Tolerably, unless you ask for details.” General Dennis’ rugged features cracked in a shadow smile. “All set to run your usual fancy tricks past us tomorrow, Ladd?”

“No choice, General. I’m too old to learn new ones.”

General Dennis sniffed the wind for the least hint of anxiety. “In this war,” he said confidently, “word games won’t win any battles. We need to get solid answers from AGC.”

“Solid answers are a specialty here, Denny.”

The major general’s grunt evidenced a degree of skepticism.

Introductions continued around the row of tables until the salad was served. “My apologies, General,” said Mr. Mason. “The gentleman due to chair tomorrow’s presentation has been working day, night and morning to prepare for the review. A retired Air Force officer himself, Vice President Sorenson couldn’t break free for the luncheon. You two should have plenty to talk about.”

The general’s forkful of salad had halted halfway to his lips. “Say again?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“That name. Your veep’s name?”

“Sorenson, Blair Sorenson, a truly dedicated executive. He’s the cornerstone of our Research and Development Division. Dr. Ladd reports to his office.”

“Sorenson, Sorenson . . .” Dennis performed a solemn head shake. “Now there,” he said, his belligerent stare focused on Mr. Mason, “is a name that sticks in my craw.”

“I, uh . . . sorry . . . ?” Anxiety was written large in the furrows of Mr. Mason’s brow.

“Never mind,” General Dennis said dismissively. “Couldn’t be the pea-brained B-52 driver I crossed condensation trails with about a thousand years ago. Let me tell you, he was *really* something: the grandest, most glorious dilbert who ever went through military aviation training. As God is my witness, I haven’t thought about that screw-up in a mort of years. On one of my crew training missions, he spilt a cup of coffee on the control pedestal. As training commander, I made him sit on his hands for three hours while I drove the cranky beast home.”

A jittery giggle issued from Mr. Mason. “The name is far from uncommon, General. Our Mr. Sorenson is reserved, but brilliant.”

“Brilliant, hah!” The acerbic bark was intended to be a laugh. “Dilbert I’m thinking of was maybe brilliant enough to pour piss out of a boot. Maybe. Aw, let it slide, Mason. By no stretch of the imagination could your veep be the same dull, useless tool.”

His imagination elastically stretched near the rupture point, a film of clammy perspiration beaded Dr. Ladd’s brow.

The luncheon progressed without incident, punctuated by business and military small talk. Mr. Mason politely queried the general about his estimate of faltering Department of the Air Force appropriations for the coming fiscal year, learning to his dismay that the newly confirmed Secretary of Defense had wasted no time making known his heartfelt desire to, “Do great works on the cheap.” Funding for a radical next-generation “stealth” fighter and a sophisticated drone been slashed. Wearing command pilot’s wings himself, Dennis roundly cursed SecDef’s policy.

At one-thirty, the general, Mr. Mason, Ladd and Roelf Cornelius adjourned to the CEO’s corner office suite. Dennis patted his rotund midriff, used Mr. Mason’s private executive washroom without asking permission, came out and belched. “Okay, Doc-tor Ladd-d-d,” he said with snide intonation, “time to hear your opening song and dance about the outsized flying cloud you folks’re allegedly trying to design.”

“We’ve made a decent start, Denny. Roelf’s people have followed our progress more closely than has your command. He’s convinced that NASA missions will —”

“Now hold it right there!” interrupted the general. “Best if maybe I put a lid on what you were about to say at the start. To be up front, my command doesn’t give a rat’s ass about NASA missions. This time around, Air Force priorities’ll preempt some ninety percent of civilian launches. Our nation’s major need will be to boost gross cargo tonnage into LOE for the highly classified offshoot of your, uh . . .”

Dennis paused to cast a guilty glance around the office. “Safe to talk here, Mason?”

“Absolutely,” assured the CEO. “My office is swept electronically every other day, General. No bugs allowed. Sonic guards defeat external windowpane pickoff surveillance.”

“Okay. What I’ve got to put across is that USAF missions will be prioritized to handle the orbital insertion of scads of ‘black’ hardware slated to be carted on-orbit by the Aerospaceplane STS System. Throw in extra crew-rotation flights, plus hauling life support materiel for the anticipated downstream missions, and NASA will have to squeeze its sphincters shut and take a back seat this time around.”

Roelf Cornelius smiled benignly. “Then I take it the Air Force Department plans to fund ALLP/ORDART development and production entirely, General.”

“Don’t even try to out-shout me with any static about funding, Cornelius.” The general’s ruddy features took on a grim set. “Funding’s a topic that sticks in my craw.”

“Your craw,” observed Cornelius, “must be rather full.”

“Money is money is money,” declared Dennis. “It all comes out of the same taxpayer pot. Later on, you civilians will get a crack at flying the NRO surveillance packages, your far-out astronomy gadgets, half-assed physics experiments and suchlike. I’m laying it on the line, telling you straight out, with zero qualification, the emphasis on Aerospaceplane is undergoing a radical change. Our nation’s military requirements outweigh anything NASA dreamt of by a full order of magnitude and then some. I’m not just blowing smoke. There’s solid backing for the redirection. Ordinarily I’m real shy of name dropping, but certain top-level authorities are . . .”

A soft knock on the door to the inner office caused the general to break off.

Mr. Mason admitted his executive assistant, who wheeled in a cart supporting a large coffee urn, Styrofoam cups and napkins. “Thank you, Ruth. Please keep holding all my calls.”

“Ah, great! A cuppa’s exactly what I need.” General Dennis stepped to the coffee urn. “Don’t suppose you’ve got any white lightning to spice up the java, eh, Mason?”

Mr. Mason uttered a semi-hysterical giggle. “Afraid not, General. We contractors are forced to adhere to government regulations about alcohol on the premises.”

“Yeah, know how it is. But there are rules, ‘n then there are ru . . .”

General Dennis bent forward at the waist and peered fixedly at a large wall-chart next to the coffee urn that depicted tiered echelons of executives responsible for the operation of all three AGC’s major divisions, including lesser lights down to the level of department manager. A photograph of each executive was prominently displayed alongside his or her title and position.

Noting the object of Dennis’ scrutiny, Dr. Ladd cringed, closed his eyes tightly.

“*It’s him!*” bellowed Major General Patrick Lemoine Dennis.

Ladd felt his heart skip at least one beat, maybe two.

The general’s cup crashed to the carpet, drenching the leg of his blue uniform trousers with hot coffee. Hopping about on one foot, his eyes popping in sheer amazement, he rubbed his scalded shin, and cried, “Jesus all Friday, Mason! I plain don’t believe this. It’s him, *him!*”

Mr. Mason rushed to the coffee cart, snatched a handful of paper napkins and dropped to one knee. He began sopping up the coffee darkening the general's trouser leg. "Could happen to anyone," he soothed. "Never fear, General. We'll take care of it."

"Sorenson!" roared General Dennis, chortled and all but kicked away Mr. Mason. He pointed a rigid digit at the wall-chart. "It's him, Downwind Sorenson." He guffawed loudly. "Christ on a crutch, Mason! You actually went out and *hired* that Dilbert? Are you daft?"

At a loss for words, Mr. Mason slowly gained his feet and stood ransfixed, staring numbly at the general, the paper napkins in his hand dripping on the carpet.

General Dennis delivered a belly laugh that would have rung up a six on the Richter Scale. He staggered to a chair and leaned on it as long, lusty gales of hilarity erupted. He laughed until tears ran down his cheeks, laughed until his sides ached and he gasped for breath.

His features ashen, Mr. Mason viewed the performance in open-mouthed horror.

In mid-laughter, General Patrick Lemoine Dennis jerked bolt upright and let go of the chair, his expression of deep concern incongruously juxtaposed with the tears of laughter still streamed down his cheeks. He clutched his chest, did a quarter-turn to the left and toppled face-down on the coffee-stained carpet of Mr. Mason's corner office suite.

Ladd surged to catch him, but he was a hair late. Shoving the chair aside, he rolled the general over and loosened his collar. "Call 911, Ben."

Dennis' normally ruddy features had turned a disturbing shade of bluish gray.

"Elevate his feet," suggested Roelf Cornelius. "You know CPR, don't you, Bill?"

"Yeah, but I doubt if it's necessary. His breathing is regular. Grab Ben's topcoat from the rack, Roelf. Let's throw it over him, keep him warm."

Wringing his hands, Mr. Mason said, "Is he . . . ?"

"Too soon to tell, Ben. Besides, I'm no medic."

Mr. Mason accompanied the stricken general, riding with him in the ambulance. He phoned Ladd two hours later with news that the general was resting comfortably in intensive care, and said the preliminary prognosis had been favorable. For a man of his age and girth, General Dennis had apparently weathered the heart seizure as well or perhaps better than could be expected.

The Aerospaceplane STS Preliminary Design Review went off without a hitch.

19 - Water Over the Bridge

Hands planted on his narrow hips, his bullet head thrust forward assertively, his mismatched lizard eyes tracking the oddly assorted trio filing into his garishly decorated office suite, Spa Alexander's owner and proprietor sucked his teeth, rotated his neck like a boxer loosening up for a bout, and growled, "Welcome to Vegas, one and all!"

Displaying properly contrite expressions, his three unindicted co-conspirators chose seats for themselves. Alex forced them to endure a four-beat pause for effect before he said, "I know you guys prob'ly think I called you here to chew your lazy asses into raw hamburger. Well, you're wrong. Think again! Since we last talked, I've stewed about the way nothing in our crusade's come up aces up till now, and done some serious, heavy-duty think work my ownself. It'd be a cinch to decide the fix is in, fold our cards and admit we're suckers betting into a cold

deck. But, no way can there be any give up on this thing we're into, so let's put our heads together, kick things around, and see if we can pencil in which button man can do what soonest, to up the odds on doubling down on our king-size bet by making all the right moves. Got it?"

Not hear an immediate response, Alex's wall-eyed glower swung from Gridley to Burton to Salazar, and back to Gridley. "Okay, Mr. Ace Lobbyist, you're first out of the starting gate. Care to fill us in on how and why your latest and greatest scam, that design review thingamajig, fell on its kiester and died dead 'n yesterday's news?"

Gridley hemmed and hawed, waffled and squirmed. "General Dennis," he finally summoned the courage to say, "is recuperating nicely. He's on disability leave, but —"

"Whoa!" declared Alex. "Who gives a shit if the mad dog general makes it or goes tits-up. He sure picked a lousy time to keel over, but now the design review thing-a-ma-bob is water over the bridge, so it plain doesn't matter any more. As I've told you guys before, life's a stretched out crap shoot, one roll of the cubes after another. The secret is to hang in there, and hang tough. Sooner or later, seven-eleven *has* to come up.

"Until now," pursued Kurile, his tone one of overbearing sincerity, "I've ponied up carloads of loot, spent hours 'n hours of skull-sweat, and we haven't lifted our butts off square one. That, I tell you straight out, has to change. At this creepy, crawly rate all of us'll die of old age still teasing Mason's morons with a feather they can't even feel. From now on we have to hit 'em hard, lay a ton of bricks to 'em, jab 'em with a red hot cattle prod. Hear me?"

Concerted affirmative mumbles attested to Kurile's audibility.

Muttering something vile and incoherent under his breath, Alex began pacing the crimson carpet richly dappled with tiny golden Romanov crests. After a half-circuit of his office, he halted at the tinted picture window and scanned the sun-bleached skyline with a bilious expression. A commercial jetliner taking off from McCarran International trailed brownish threads climbing out steeply above the distant brown hills.

He turned back, his subdued glare challenging his co-conspirators. "Okay, now we hit the checklist, chalk up where we're at, where we want to be, and dream up a way to get there. This time we'll do it arsey-versy, tackle tail-end-Charlie first. So how's the game plan coming along in the Big Apple, Rico?"

Salazar's expression of perpetual wariness segued into an advertisement for tranquilizer medication. "Still building liquidity," he said, measuring his words. "When the the occasion demands, if and when recovery bonds are forthcoming, sufficient cash should be on hand to cover purchases of the initial issue. For the present, however, we are passing up investment opportunities right and left, missing out on a number of prospects which —"

"Rico, get off your 'if, when, should be' kick, and tell it like it is."

The banker's pencil mustache twitched. "In plain language, Mr. Kurile, one fact is absolutely beyond dispute: AGC must be in extremely dire straits for the Vonex board of directors to authorize marketing high-volume, low-par recovery issues the trade calls 'junk bonds.' Years ago, a major petroleum supplier flooded the market with recovery bonds, then immediately turned about and filed a bankruptcy petition to get out from under the extravagant ensuing judgment. Junk bonds are considered a drug on the —"

"Chrissake, stop jerking me off, Rico! Come to the point."

Outwardly cowed, inwardly antagonized Enrique Salazar said calmly, “A truly disturbing facet at present derives from the bank’s static assets. Converting the holdings of customers into cash is much more than simply risky, especially in light of the TARP monies formerly doled out to us in order to stabilize —”

“You mean the government bailout dough?” demanded Kurile.

A slow nod from Salazar. “We received our share of the ‘bailout’ funds and —”

“And got shafted,” interjected Kurile, “when you didn’t fudge enough on dumping mortgage loans to the herd of bottom-feeders in line up to snap ‘em up, then choke on ‘em.”

Salazar grimaced uncomfortably. “What I am attempting to make clear enough for you to understand is that money must be thought of as organic.”

“Or-gan-ic . . . ? What the hell does that mean in English?”

“Money,” declared Salazar, “while neither animal nor vegetable, remains forever organic in nature. Capital lodged stone-cold in the bank’s computer is effectively useless, static, not merely equal to zero, but assumes a real-world negative proportion. Money must churn, remain continually in motion, yet with a reasonable amount available to cover daily investment opportunities. Making money work for you is synergistic, and we’re missing the boat on —”

“God help us, sinnergoosey! Vocabularyitis will do in every one of you overeducated bastards, and take me down with you. Okay, skip the rest of your spiel. I already know how you and your double-breasted-suit whiz kids make money the old-fashioned way, by glomming on to insider trading info before you lay down a single bet.”

Enrique Salazar’s permanently wary expression turned petulant. “What I insist upon trying to explain is that quietly converting into cash the diversified holdings in the portfolio of one unsuspecting client after another, and thus retaining rather than investing or lending government ‘bailout’ capital, is far from the wisest course for the firm, for me personally, or for you, Mr. Kurile. Should our clients or the SEC learn of —”

“Knock it off!” What little remained of Alex’s patience had evaporated. “You keep talking and acting like a small-timer, Rico. I won’t listen to any more stinking lectures about money, which by the way I’ve got plenty of, and got it by thinking big, not small. We’ll keep on doing things my way, see? Ah, what’s the use of wasting breath!”

Salazar’s expression let it be known how wasteful that could be.

* * *

Alex snorted something foulmouthed. He hauled off and booted a monogrammed leather wastebasket into suborbital trajectory. The unguided missile narrowly missed Gridley, who fielded it on the first bounce, set it upright and rescued a few scattered papers.

All but panting, Alex drew one calming breath after another. “Okay, Grid, you’re up. How’s you part in the game plan coming? Is your violin in tune?”

In a small voice, Gridley said, “I’ve been working on a pair of gems, Mr. Kurile.”

“Diamonds in the rough, right? Okay, spiel away. We’ll be hanging on every word.”

“Two white-hot notions show promise,” informed Gridley. “Enrique touched on one in mentioning the big bucks frozen uselessly in the bank’s computer. All government suppliers use a computerized cost accounting system, and I’m sure Frank will confirm the fancy footwork some use to juggle cost allocations by playing the mischarging game.”

“Miss which game?”

“Uh, mischarging: shifting cost overruns on programs that’re sliding,” explained Gridley, “over to healthy contracts that’re running at or under the incremental, allocated cost.”

“Screwing Uncle?” Alex’s interest rose a large notch. “That the straight skinny, Frank? I need to hear what comes down, how it works. Can you spell it out?”

Burton nodded. “Score one for Gridley. Let’s say a major program like Aerospaceplane gets off to a shaky start and begins spending more than the budgeted dollars doled out by Uncle, while at the same time an established, ongoing program like AGC’s bread-and-butter Skywatch orbital surveillance program is grooving along on all cylinders, staying comfortably within budgeted cost parameters, and thereby accruing a slight budgetary surplus, unspent monies Uncle wants repaid. Returning one centime is anathema to government prime contractors, so they —”

“Anna who?”

Burton contemplated strangulation as a cure-all for his employer’s malady, and said crisply, “To all con-trac-tors, giving back unspent monies is a no-no. On the QT, the bean counters now and then dare to shift an overrun amount to an underrun contract in-house. Uncle pays the extra tab instead of receiving a rightful return of the portion allocate.”

“Ah, dirty pool!” hooted Alex, his sinister chuckle grating on the ears of all three unindicted co-conspirators. “I love it, *love it!* Telling it like it is, are you, Frank?”

His principal conspirator shrugged. “To the letter. Uncle’s MRP gears never did meshed well with normal accounting practices, which makes it a simple matter to —”

“Hold it! What for God sake is this, uh . . . emm-rr-pp?”

“Ma-ter-ial Re-quire-ments Plan-ning,” declared Burton, enunciating each syllable with crystalline clarity. “A program GAO designed to level the budgeteer playing field by —”

“More fucking alphabet soup!”

“Gov-ern-ment Ac-coun-ting Of-fice,” syllabled Burton with agonizing precision. “The GAO whiz kids produced MRP to ease computerized budget leveling, theoretically smooth out the bumps and potholes that invariably crop up in a contractor’s path. MRP is supposed to allow the government contracting agency to get the most bang for the buck on specific programs, but has never worked properly due to incompatibility with standard cost-accounting practices. It practically invites contractors to hide their sins by sweeping them under the rugs of separate, healthy programs. I don’t say mischarging is an every day practice, but it happens, and when it does unlucky contractors eventually get dinged pretty hard.”

“Bolshoi!” cried Alex. “So what comes down on cheaters who take the fall?”

“The roof falls on ‘em,” put in the lobbyist. “It’s like the IRS catching someone with his tax pants down around his ankles. The contractor screams ‘persecution,’ but eight of ten times shuts up and pays the piper, plus a hefty penalty. What with today’s horrendous economic crunch fading slowly, people forget how the tab for two extra-long, expensive wars and shady Wall Street shenanigans ended up getting put on the government’s credit card. I don’t have to explain how it feels to be sitting on the mischarging hot seat these days.”

Alex smirked. “You’ve got that right, Grid. The Nevada Gaming Control finks gig me every other Thursday for skimming the cream off the casino’s take.”

Salazar dared to inject a note of levity. “Utterly false charges, of course.”

Holding a bony forefinger alongside his thin, ski-jump nose, Alex said, “Natch! Good work, Grid. Your scam sounds dee-licious. So how do we shine a light on Mason’s cheaters?”

Gridley said, "By advocating a pair of tough government audits. The Pentagon's Defense Contract Audit Agency monitors firms for costing errors and fraud, but it usually takes deep digging by experts to pinpoint how and where the body gets buried. The Air Force captain I've been cultivating has slyly urged the powers that be to call for an in-depth audit at AGC. If Mason's budgeteers are caught out of school, the company would face a civil suit to recover the fraudulent sums, and if truly heinous mischarging is unearthed, they'd have to make restitution, pay a whopping penalty, maybe even be barred for a time from government work.

"That," added the lobbyist, "is where Frank's insider contacts get into the act. If he can tap some finger man who's willing to yell 'foul,' we'll be in business. The PDR defined cost and schedule overruns incurred to date, and both're definite gotchas."

Alex frowned. "I don't get the gotchas. How can insiders stack the deck our way?"

"Under the False Claims Act," declared Gridley, "workers are goosed into blowing the whistle on employers, and whistle-blowers're protected from retribution. When it first became law, some small, medium and large defense firms were barred from further contract awards."

"Bolshoi!" Alex clapped his hands. "I'm falling head over heels in love with your kick, Grid. How about it, Frank? How do we find the sick chickens roosting on AGC's woodpile?"

"Shouldn't be difficult, if any are there. Gridley really has something here, Alex."

"Congrats, Grid!" said Alex. "And the other way to dynamite AGC's money machine?"

"A different sort of audit, entirely." Happily on a roll, Gridley bubbled enthusiasm. "I told you about it earlier — a COR audit. A Cor-po-rate Op-er-ations Re-view," he hastened to add. "It's a more direct frontal assault, and a snap to set up, but won't do half the damage of the other. It'll just create genuine agony and confusion inside AGC, especially among the leadership."

"Throw sand in Mason's gears?"

"Rocks, Mr. Kurile. Maybe ball bearings and razor blades, too."

"How about it, Frank? You go along with Grid's number two brainstorm?"

"And how!" Burton grinned. "Facing a COR audit, every AGC exec will be humping to to oversee the update of all policies and procedures, employee directives and similar pertinent documentation, making sure every scrap of paper is up to snuff. A COR dips into every phase of company operations, including the way it directs and controls employee activities."

"Be damned," Alex said happily, "if I don't begin sniffing more pay dirt! Yeah, we're getting on the right track. Keep plugging hard on both scams, Grid. Stay in touch with Frank about how things're moving. Stay on the hot line to me, too. Lastly, Frank, is your iffy nickel 'n dime caper to undermine the chief engineer's helper. Shown the feelthy pix to his frau yet?"

"No," said Burton. "Something almost as good came along, and maybe better. Moffett's ex-girlfriend has gone bonkers about him all over again. She calls me twice, three times a week asking when the flick we promised her will be ready to roll. I've strung her along, but in between the only other thing she ever mentions is Moffett."

Alex had the usual difficulty following Burton's recital. "Uh-huh," he said noncommittally, "true love is what makes the world go round. You figure the tootsie'll drive the married guy up the wall, make him start cheating and raise hell, maybe bust up his marriage?"

"It's a possibility, or even a likelihood. We can always use the pix later, but your ace P.I., Poszderak, dug up something even more titillating."

"Not you're talking my kind of lating," quipped Alex.

Burton chuckled just to be polite. "With the PDR behind him, Mason knows he has an advantage when it comes to landing the multibillion dollar follow-on test and production contract. With that huge, juicy plum in mind, Spacecraft Division is out looking for a buy on automation equipment for its electronic assembly line. Play our cards right, and we can maybe steer AGC into buying not merely a dog in the manger, but the whole damned kennel. There's one thing I should warn you about, though: it will cost us an extra bundle."

"Us . . . ?" Alex looked pained. "In this case, 'us' is Mrs. Kurile's favorite baby boy."

"Also," added Burton before Kurile could follow a tangent, "there's the beauty contest I suggested to the dazzling damsel of a lady manager I took out on the town last weekend."

"A . . . beauty con . . . Putting ol' Alex on, aren't you, Frank?"

"Not at all. It has to do with the embarrassment factor." Burton took his time describing the scheme, using extreme care to keep the explanation simple enough for Alex to understand.

Kurile jiggled merrily up and down, his sour expression sloughing away, then uttered a peal of ribald laughter. "Okay, I dig. That should embarrass the shit out of Moneybags Mason. Make double-sure that goofy prank comes off the way you said, Frank. I like it, like it a lot."

Looking pleased, Spa Alexander's owner and proprietor gazed fondly at his unindicted co-conspirators. "Bolshoi says it all, guys! Neither Frank's dumb beauty contest caper, or the blonde bimbo prank he's cooked up for the head engineer's helper, are biggies, but the wise guys who once owned the casino racket taught me a bunch of small cuts can kill faster than one big slash, 'specially while waiting for Grid's blockbuster audit what zits to kick off. Sounds like the deck's finally stacking our way. The next thing we'll got to put our minds to work on is . . ."

The intercom's buzz interrupted Alex. He popped a button. "What's up, Kay?"

"Your masseuse is here, Mr. Kurile."

"Tell her to read the funny paper till I can get there." Alex made it a point to shake hands all around. "Have a ball here at the Spa, guys. Full comp, everything on the house, so ask for whatever turns you on. Over dinner, we'll have a sitdown, kick the game plan around further."

* * *

Later in the evening, Alex and Burton were sipping after-dinner Chartreuse in the privacy of Kurile's penthouse living quarters. Salazar and Gridley were in the casino, the lobbyist saying Blackjack was his game. The Wall Streeter had spoken of "investing" a complimentary tray of chips at the roulette table.

Burton stubbed out his cigarette. "Things are beginning to pull together, but one aspect of our enterprise has baffled me ever since you plucked me out of that New Mexico gas station."

"Like for instance?" Alex wanted to know.

"Why," inquired the other bluntly, "are you so thousand-percent devoted to risking your considerable assets just to gain control of AGC? What made you decide to single-mindedly go all out to foot the necessary expense and undertake the effort? I've tried to imagine someone who already has it all could want more, and I'm burning to know why?"

"In a nutshell, my reason's dirt simple, Frank. I'm ordinary as the next guy, see? Except in this case, when it comes to getting what I want . . . Hang on a sec!" Alex plunked down his glass and disappeared across the hall. He came back gingerly carrying the possession he prized the most, opened it reverently, laid it in front of Burton upside down on a slate coffee table.

“AGC’s the one and only thing in the world I’ve really and truly got to have, Frank. I’d sell my soul cut-rate to bring AGC back into the fold what my dingbat relatives call the Kurilekutzatzov Family, and honest to God won’t die happy till I get it. Look here,” he said, tapping the antique brochure. “I showed you this pic before. Study it for a while, okay?”

Belatedly realizing he had asked the wrong question, Burton made a pretense of examining the grainy, obviously retouched photograph of an airborne silver dirigible, propellers whirling blurs; below, the distant stick figures of ground crewmen clung to trailing ropes.

Gauging Burton’s interest, Alex said, “My great-grandpa Andrei and his twin bro Nikolai were pioneer Russian aviators. After the revolution, they ended up here in the U.S. and opened their own company. One of their biggest scores was this here giant airship. I peek at these pics every other day to remind myself that if they could do it, I can sure as hell do it. Those two are my inspiration, my heroes. The beat gawdawful on-sided odds wading through blood to get away from the Red bastards who offed the rest of their family. First time we yakked together, I swore to tell you their whole story, front to back. Now’s as good a time as any. Settle back and pour yourself another splash, and bring the bottle. While you’re at it, grab a jug of brandy from the wet bar. Spinning this yarn will take a while, but like I once told you, a saga’s what it is.”

Burton nodded glumly.

His dark eyes glistening, Alex said, “Think back to the black ‘n white newsreels we all saw. Picture yourself in old St. Petersburg toward the back half of the Great War, with the Russians sure of nothing, and guns banging right and left in the streets. It was a bad news time topping all others. Banners waved and crazy Cossacks on horseback put the chop to anybody who looked at ‘em cross-eyed. The revolution was off ‘n running, led by slobs who sold the goods that grunts who worked in factories were a perfect fit to take over and run the Tsar’s country. Pretend you’re standing on a bridge in old St. Petersburg, watching everything you loved crumble. Go on, try ‘n think and feel what that bloody mess must’ve been like . . .”

20 - The Brothers Kurilekutzatzov

Fraternal twins born seven minutes apart, Andrei and Nikolai Kurilekutzatzov, the seventh sons of a seventh son, himself the seventh son of a seventh son, were reckoned fabulously lucky by their peers, the other cadets in training at Petrograd’s Imperial Flying Academy. Their doting father, Aleksandr Vissarionovitch Kurilekutzatzov, had chivvied appointments to the academy from his Cossack friend and boon companion, General Kornilov, in order to save his twin sons from being macerated by Imperial German forces during the Great War to End War.

The twins were as alike as anchovies and asparagus. Andrei, tall and thin to the point of emaciation, considered himself an aristocratic paragon of Russian manhood endowed with savoir faire. At nineteen turning into a mound of suet, Nikolai was a continual embarrassment to his parents, brothers, sisters, cousins and other relatives, as well as casual strangers.

The brilliant wands of searchlights swept the overcast October sky, sending blobs of light chasing each other across the low clouds. Caught up in a raucous crowd surging and milling about on a bridge spanning River Neva, the twins surrounded by a revolutionary hubbub now and then punctuated by the penetrant crack of naval rifles with which the cruiser Aurora was bombarding the Winter Palace.

Nikolai studied the cannonade with analytical concern. “Andrei Alexandrovitch, why are the sailors shooting the Winter Palace? It’s such a splendid building.”

“Because,” informed his twin, “the seagoing idiots from Kronsthadt Naval Base have sided with the revolutionaries.”

“Which revolutionaries? Papa’s party, the Social Democrats?”

“No, my dumbshit brother. They’ve struck up a common cause with the benighted Mensheviks, followers of that lowborn bastard, Trotsky.”

“Ah, now I see. Yet why do the Kronsthadt sailors want to shoot the Winter Palace? The Tsar isn’t there. Boris told us he and his family were spirited away to safety in Tobolsk.”

Andrei’s biting obscenity was muffled by his scarf. “Kerensky and his provisional government are headquartered in the Winter Palace, are they not?”

“Well, yes. This news I have heard.” Nikolai waited for the thunder of a cannonade to subside. “But why are the Kronsthadt sailors shooting the Winter Palace.”

Andrei’s voice grew strident. “Because the rotten Trotskyites are fomenting a bloody rebellion. Can you not see them here on the bridge, hear them?”

Contrite, Nikolai feigned comprehension. “What of the Bolsheviks we heard so much about? Have they no part in this, uh . . . bloody rebellion?”

Andrei was unequivocal. “None whatever. Their leader, a renegade calling himself Lenin, was proved a German agent and fled to Finland, tail between his legs. We can forget about the Bolsheviks, but not these putrefying Trotskyites.”

A lumpish man in a threadbare overcoat menaced Andrei with reproachful dark eyes. “All power to the Soviets! Did I overhear a disparaging remark about Comrade Trotsky?”

“You have ears — rather dirty ears, by the way — so one presumes you overheard.”

The lumpish man glared redly at Andrei. “Say,” he demanded, “what sort of fancy uniforms are those you two are wearing?”

“Clean uniforms,” informed Andrei.

The other’s outthrust jaw clenched. He came a step closer, thinking to intimidate Andrei. “My soiled clothing is the result of honest labor. Know this, my clean-uniformed dandy, we workers have united to rise and set things right. History is being made tonight.”

“Ruination is being made tonight,” contradicted Andrei, refusing to back down. The exchange began to attract restless mutterings.

“A White!” shouted the lumpish man, and spat at Andrei’s feet, then basked in the crowd’s mutterings of approval. “It is fitting,” he said, “for aristocrats like you and your fat friend to witness the proletariat come alive and smite your class. How will you and he like being pitched into a filthy dungeon, fancy uniforms notwithstanding?”

“How will you like being pitched into the freezing river, dirty ears notwithstanding?”

Grossly outnumbered, the ensuing scuffle went badly for the twins. Nikolai was flattened by a badly aimed roundhouse punch while his brother was trying to subdue an emaciated wretch wielding a revolutionary placard in the manner of a broadsword. Administering a bloody nose to his lumpish oppressor, Andrei took advantage of the resulting turmoil to drag his twin out of harm’s way. Chased by a shrieking mob, the twins scrambled across the bridge. Managing to evade pursuit, they sought devious routes making their back toward the academy barracks.

“Socialist pigs!” Andrei massaged his aching jaw.

“Andrei Alexandrovitch, why were the socialist pigs angry with us?”

“Oh, shut up!”

* * *

Keeping to the shadows, the twins crept through byways, alleys and side streets. A half-block from the sentries posted at the gates of the Imperial Flying Academy their stealthy passage was arrested when a dim figure in a doorway hissed, “Pss-s-s-st!”

Andrei halted so abruptly his brother bumped into him. “Who is there?”

“Boris,” whispered the dim figure. “Come here quickly!”

Huge simian arms reached out, enfolding the twins in a bear hug. “Dear, dear friends,” whispered Boris, “I bear tragic news. Your father has been arrested, and it’s said he’s to be shot. Documents prescribing your arrest are in the commandant’s hands.”

“Papa . . . shot!” Nikolai began sobbing. “P-papa has a g-great heart,” he faltered. “We m-must fly home to Kiev, rescue poor Papa.”

“Be still!” hissed Andrei. “Often Papa foolishly speaks his mind, and may receive a steel-jacketed bullet in his great heart because of it. With what crime is he charged, Boris?”

“I was not told. Obvious, is it not? Your family is allied with that mad Cossack, General Kornilov. You are Rightists, Social Democrats. The revolutionaries have driven out the forces of Kornilov, though he may have moved beyond the Urals to form an army of liberation. Yet that is only one rumor of many. You must flee for your lives at once.”

“We must fly home to Kiev,” blubbered Nikolai. “Mama, the children!”

“A suicidal endeavor, I suspect. You must think of yourselves, and flee,” advised Boris paternally. “I have a few hundred kopeks, surely enough to make a difference for you.”

“Flee . . . where?” Nikolai was on the verge of hysteria.

“Finland,” suggested Boris, “is by far your best chance.”

“We are acquainted with no one in Finland,” cried Nikolai.

“Be still, I say!” Andrei choked his twin until Nikolai gagged. “Bless you, Boris! Someday we shall repay you for this magnificent gesture.”

Boris dismissed the benediction with a lip smack. “Listen, I have a plan. Go down to the docks and ask for Gorodishche; everyone down there knows him. Tell him Boris sent you. His fishing boat will take you around the shore of Lake Ladoga to Khiitola, from whence you will have to make your way overland into Finnish territory, and onward to Lapeenranta.”

Nikolai rubbed his throat. “A long . . . voyage,” was his wheezing complaint.

Forever the pragmatist, Boris said, “Do you prefer to live, or prefer to die?”

“L-live,” admitted Nikolai.

The twins embraced Boris in turn, calling down multiple blessings on his head. Slinking furtively through teeming revolutionary streets to the waterfront, they soon learned Boris’s prophecy had been accurate. Everyone dockside did indeed know Gorodishche; he was Petrograd’s premiere smuggler. Keeping to back streets and alleyways, the twins circulated through sleazy taverns, less-than-clean cafés, and rundown coffeehouses filled with boisterous working class ruffians. Doggedly following Gorodishche’s scent, they eventually found him drinking vodka in a third-rate brothel.

“Boris sent us,” confided Andrei.

Wrinkled and stooped, Gorodishche was insanely wise in the ways of the world. He listened to their woeful tale with phlegmatic head shakes and blinks, and cackled gleefully at Andrei's second mention of Boris. The twins were ushered aboard a fishing scow that looked incapable of crossing the Neva, let alone navigating Lake Ladoga to Finland. They drank lukewarm chicory-coffee and slept in their greatcoats until two drunken crewmen staggered aboard near dawn and reviled them with cuffs and curses for usurping their smelly bunks.

Shortly after sunrise, the dingy craft slipped its moorings, chugged out into the lake and began puttering along close to the forested western shore. Gorodishche smoked his pipe while regarding the twins with circumspect intensity. "You are fortunate," he remarked in a dreadful peasant dialect, "that I voyage to Khiitola this day."

"Will you be staying in Khiitola long?" inquired Nikolai.

Gorodishche's grin was pixyish. "Minutes, only minutes."

The twins shivered through the next night on deck, sleeping fitfully beneath flinty autumn stars. They breakfasted on dried fish and moldy black bread, wolfing down the rude fare with gusto. In late morning, Gorodishche and his crewmen approached them on the afterdeck. "The time for payment is at hand," announced the smuggler.

"How much will you charge?" inquired Andrei.

"How much do you have?" inquired Gorodishche, his smile even more pixyish as he helped his sailors strip the brothers of their money and uniforms, and fling them naked into the frigid late waters. "Now you've learned my price," called Gorodishche as the small craft chugged away. "Any friends of Boris," he shouted, "are friends of mine."

Splashing and cursing, Andrei aided his half-drowned twin in reaching the shore. Teeth chattering, half frozen, they crouched on the sunny bank to warm themselves, then hiked for footsore hours through dense woodlands. Stealing a few nondescript items of clothing from a washline behind a farmhouse near Priozersk, they bound their feet with rags and trekked northward toward Svetogorsk, begging mouthfuls of food along the way. Nearing the border in the last stages of exhaustion, Andrei accosted a southbound rider in an attempt to ascertain what deceptions and treacheries might be needed to successfully sneak into Finland.

"Border's open," informed the horseman.

The twins learned to their chagrin that immense travail and hardship would have been averted had they simply bought rail tickets in Petrograd's Finland Station and ridden to Helsinki in a comfortable wagon-lit.

"May Almighty God damn Boris to eternal perdition for perpetrating this outrage," shrieked Andrei, "and that filthy smuggler Gorodishche, too!"

"Andrei Alexandrovitch, why was the filthy smuggler so upset with us?"

"Oh, shut up!"

* * *

Nikolai and Andrei reached Paris on their last legs. Having once visited beloved Aunt Lena as striplings during the city's Belle Epoch heyday, they found the City of Light vastly transformed. Spring, 1918, had ushered in a massive offensive by the forces of Imperial Germany, and Paris was an armed camp.

Their aunt's home in the Tenth Arrondissement was situated just off Boulevard de Magenta, near the canal. Stumbling toward the address, a tall, ragged scarecrow and a short,

pudgy refugee, the twins definitely looked out of place even in wartime Paris. Both limped like cripples, having walked all the way from Rouen.

“Won’t it be grand to see aunt Lena again?” remarked Nikolai.

“Pray that the old bitch remembers us,” muttered his brother, just as an eerie, whistling ululation drenched the sky.

“Down!” cried Andrei, and shoved his twin into the gutter, landing on top of him.

A deafening roar shattered the world from scant blocks away. The concussion wave made Nikolai clap both hands over his ears. “Where is it?” he asked, scanning the clouded heavens. “No zeppelin is in sight. Where did the bomb originate?”

“Zeppelin, hah!” Andrei helped Nikolai to his feet. “You and your lighter-than-air fixation. I read about the shelling yesterday in that newspaper we used to line what remains of our shoes. That was Big Bertha, my dumbshit brother.”

“Who is Big Bertha?”

“Big Bertha is no ‘who,’ Big Bertha is an ‘it’ — a monstrous cannon the Boche are using to shell the city from Coucy.”

“The Boche are at the gates of Paris?”

“Certainly not,” denied Andrei. “The forest of Coucy is perhaps a hundred kilometers distant. Didn’t you read the newspaper article? I showed it to you.”

“I am not . . . I do not read French very well,” admitted Nikolai.

“Confess, Brother! You do not read Russian equally well.”

“Russian?” The third voice was uttered by a dapper Frenchman leaning on an ebony walking stick. He had paused to regard the twins with frank curiosity. “If one may be so bold, are you indeed Russians? I had thought you beggars, or perhaps Gypsies.”

Andrei puffed his scrawny chest. “Never, m’sieur,” he said in very poor French. “We are refugees from the vile revolution sundering our homeland.”

“Ah, naturellment. Please take no offense. I meant no disparagement, but merely took note of your fright when the shell exploded. It made me most curious.”

“You do not seem frightened,” said Nikolai.

“Oh, one becomes accustomed to it.” The other’s shrug was wholly Gallic. “Periodically whoosh-baroom! It’s like clockwork, I regret to say. A fortnight ago on Good Friday, a villainous Boche shell landed squarely upon the Church of St. Gervais, killing many parishioners. In this war even peaceful prayer is fraught with danger.”

“Horrible!” said Nikolai.

“Quite.” The Frenchman made as if to move on, and then hesitated. “Will you gentlemen do me the honor of accepting a few francs in the spirit of hospitality? I myself have been a stranger in a strange land. More than most do I realize how frightfully difficult that can be.”

“We cherish your magnanimity,” said Andrei, “and will repay you when it is possible.”

“Tut, repay another instead.” The Frenchman handed Andrei a sheaf of francs. “Bonne chance, mes amis !”

“You have our most sincere gratitude, m’sieur. Adieu!”

Aunt Lena’s home at number 27 loomed less impressively than the twins remembered from their previous visit. The concierge, a brittle-eyed Frenchwoman, answered the bell. She looked the twins over. “Beggars go round to the back, if you will.”

"We are not beggars." Andrei drew himself up in his rags. "We are here to visit Madame Lena de Groix, our aunt."

"Madame is *your* aunt?" The concierge sniffed disdainfully, her nose in the air, and said disdainfully, "Has it been explained to you, m'sieur, that your accent is très execrable? Precisely what business have you with Madame de Groix?"

"Precisely that. Our business."

The Frenchwoman's eyes widened until mostly the whites showed. "Take that tone with me again, and the gendarmes shall be summoned."

"As I told you," asserted Andrei, "Madame de Groix is our aunt."

"Hmm-m-m, questionable, very questionable. Madame is a woman of quality, whereas you are . . . Stay where you are, do not move from the spot. I shall inquire how Madame wishes to entertain . . . To, uh, dispose of you." The door closed with an emphatic clump.

The twins were ushered into hatchet-faced Aunt Lena's rococo parlor. She impatiently ignored their protestations of delight at once again being in her presence, then her countenance sagged as their tale of woe matured. "So you ran," she accused, "like frightened rabbits."

"Please, Aunt Lena." Andrei spread his palms helplessly. "To be fair, what else could we do? What would've been gained by a stay in some Russian prison, or worse?"

"'Fair' has naught to do with it," Aunt Lena said archly. "Where, may I ask, are your father and my dear sister? Where are my beloved sister's other children?"

"Papa was to be . . . shot," ventured Nikola.

"*Shot!*" Aunt Lena sprang from the Louis Quinze settee as if shot from Big Bertha. "Aleksandr Vissarionavitch Kurilekutzatzov shot? I will not *hear* of it!"

"The evil deed may have already transpired." Andrei bowed his head, grief-stricken. "Papa was a friend of General Kornilov, who —"

"You miserable poltroons," cried Aunt Lena, "*abandoned* my sister and her children."

"It was unavoidable, Aunt Lena."

"It was despicable."

"We had no choice, Aunt Lena."

"You had a clear choice, a *man's* choice. I will thank you to never again refer to me as 'Aunt Lena.' I am deeply ashamed to admit you are of my flesh and blood, and doubly ashamed to admit it even here in the sanctity of my chambers. Now get out of here! Go!"

"Aunt Lena, we only wished to —"

"Go, I say! Begone, or I will have you horsewhipped!"

The despairing twins aimlessly shuffled three blocks straight into the arms of a French brevet lieutenant who was leading a squad of walking wounded to scour the streets and conscript civilian "volunteers" for the tottering Western Front.

"Ho, what have we here?" hailed the officer. "Sergeant, mightn't we stretch a point and consider this pair able-bodied?"

The noncom performed a sanguine appraisal of the twins and their remarkable states of disrepair. "Possibly, my lieutenant. One might think them beggars, or perhaps Gypsies."

"Who are you?" demanded the officer. "Reveal yourselves."

"Rus . . . Russians." Severely traumatized by Aunt Lena's frigid reception, Andrei haltingly explained the circumstances leading to their presence in Paris.

“Russians, you say? Viola, I believe you, since whatever it is you are speaking cannot be justifiably termed the French language. Your papers.” The lieutenant extended a gloved hand.

“We have none,” said Andrei. “We fled Russia with only the clothes on our backs.”

“Lacking even those,” amended Nikolai.

“No papers? But this is totally absurd! Everyone must have papers. It is more than a requirement, it is obligatory.”

Despite being the seventh sons, of a seventh son, himself the son of a seventh son, the twins spent days in a clean, whitewashed jail cell. It was a welcome respite, had the French authorities only known, from battling the world and losing. They were eventually conducted into the presence of a detective who informed them that uninvited foreigners were decidedly not welcome in wartime France, adding that they would be brought before a magistrate in the morning, and would then face questioning by a military tribunal. Should the answers to some exceedingly serious questions not be properly supplied, they would of course be shot.

“Shot!” wailed Nikolai. “Everywhere it is the same. We could have stayed at home in Petrograd and waited comfortably to be shot.”

“We are innocent,” protested Andrei. “Absolutely innocent!”

“What nonsense!” scoffed the detective. “How can one boast of innocence when one has yet to be accused of any crime.” He informed the twins that, should their answers prove satisfactory, they would be placed in the hands of a functionary in charge of immigration who would see to it that a set of proper documents were created. Had either of them specific occupations, he inquired, which might lead to gainful employment in France?

“We are aviators,” announced Nikolai proudly. “My brother and I were flying cadets at the Russian Imperial Aviation Academy.”

The detective clicked his tongue. “An occupation in light demand, I fear. Well, gentlemen, back to your —”

“Nikolai, look!” Andrei pointed to a bent photograph clipped to a thick dossier on the detective’s desk. “Doesn’t this resemble the kind gentleman who gave us money in the street?”

Nikolai squinted. “It does indeed, Andrei Aleksandrovitch. Wait, now that I can view the picture more clearly, I am sure. Yes, it is him. He is the very one.”

Flushed with excitement, the detective knocked over a chair surging to his feet. “My friends, are you seriously suggesting that you personally witnessed this individual’s presence in Paris?” He thrust the dossier closer to afford the twins a better look.

“No doubt of it,” said Andrei. “None! It is the very gentleman.”

“Do you recall if he called himself Charnal?” demanded the detective. “No, never mind. If it was the man in question, he has used any number of names.”

“We had taken refuge from a shelling, and were about to —”

“Yes, yes, later,” cried the detective, greatly flustered. “Repose, my friends. Make yourselves comfortable here. I shall return in but an instant.” He dashed out of the room.

The detective returned accompanied by an inspector who eyed the twins with grave suspicion. Moments later, a third detective appeared. After ten minutes of intense questioning, a chief inspector arrived exhibiting enormous deference toward a lean, saturnine individual whose trench coat collar was turned up despite the brilliant spring sunshine outdoors. During the course

of an intensive if repetitive grilling, Nikolai happened to mention their unhappy reception during a visit to Aunt Lena.

The saturnine man in a trench coat insisted upon learning her full name and address.

“Of course, sir. Madame Lena de Groix, of 27 Rue de —”

“*Mon Dieu!*” The man in a trench-coat turned deathly pale.

The Kurilekutzatzov twins were returned to their cell, where they languished day after day despite the detective’s prior assurance of a prompt resolution to their plight. All their questions went unanswered. Well fed and cared for, they were issued prison garments they viewed as haute couture compared to the rags in which they’d been jailed.

Late one morning the detective who had first interrogated them smiled through the bars of their cell. Jobs, such as they were, had been found for them in a small Left Bank café owned by a retired policeman. Given used-but-clean street clothing and a few francs as an advance against wages, they were assured that appearing before a magistrate and a military tribunal would no longer be necessary. Their official documents would be handed to them very soon.

However, a solemn promise was to be extracted before they were released. They were never, under pain of dismemberment or death, for any reason whatsoever to go near the Tenth Arrondissement’s Boulevard de Magenta, or attempt to contact Madame Lena de Groix in any manner, shape, or form, so help them God!

Since Aunt Lena’s farewell had included the threat of a horsewhipping, the twins joyfully accepted this stern condition.

They went to work in the retired gendarme’s café, Andrei as busboy, Nikolai as dishwasher. They rented half the squalid atelier occupied by a starving Lithuanian sculptor whose ponderous magnum opus threatened to momentarily collapse the floor and destroy the all the building’s tenants living below.

Spring wore on into summer, and the threat of German conquest abated. The City of Light continued to receive a deluge of Russian expatriates — parvenu nobility for the most part, accompanied by court hangers-on plus miscellaneous aristocrats and their servants, all of whom had wintered along the Riviera as was their habit, only to discover that their homeland had melted away like the proverbial dew. Most solved this dilemma by adopting ranks two or three tiers above their actual stations. Countless princes, counts, dukes and their ladies provided Parisian society with unanticipated diversions of one kind or another.

Nikolai and Andrei visited Le Bourget Aerodrome and talked aviation with the French airmen, few of whom seemed willing to accept the twins’ authenticity. Their overtures about volunteering to fly for France were met with bumptious hilarity.

On Thursday, August fifteenth, 1918, Madame Lena de Groix and her accomplice, currently known by the ominous nom de plume Charnal, were convicted of numerous acts of espionage on behalf of the Imperial German cause. They smoked their last cigarettes at sunrise, disdained blindfolds and gazed stoically into the muzzles of rifles in the hands of an enthusiastic firing squad.

True to form as the seventh sons of a seventh son, himself the seventh son of a seventh son, the Kurilekutzatzov twins were eventually identified as the reviled traitoress’ only surviving relatives. They jointly inherited the embarrassingly magnanimous fortune Aunt Lena had acquired by helping to sell out the French Republic to the accursed Huns invaders.

Sharing a lavish first-class stateroom suite aboard the *Mauretania*, Andrei and Nikolai sailed for New York two months after the armistice, not to seek their fortunes but enhance them.

* * *

Unfortunately, the twins found New World business conditions not that rosy. Aviation as an industry was in its birth pangs, though public interest had been piqued by hardy airmen who barnstormed in the aftermath of the Great War, or flew hazardous airmail routes in good weather and bad, or strove to collect huge cash prizes by flying solo across the unflyable Atlantic. Not until Lindbergh's historic aerial adventure did their dream begin to materialize.

Making good use of their ill-gotten gains, they founded the Kurilekutzatzov Aeroplane & Airship Company and engaged in a roller-coaster ride of elation and despair. They worked on advanced aircraft designed to fly the Atlantic. They barnstormed and flew the airmail through foggy, snowy, rainswept skies. They hobnobbed with Alexander de Seversky, Igor Sikorsky and other expatriate Russian airmen. The onset of the Great Depression caught them pouring their dwindling resources into expanding their fledgling business.

"Airships," declared Nikolai, "are the way of the future. Witness the *Akron* and *Macon* dirigibles under construction by the U.S. of A.'s Navy. Witness the *Shenandoah*"

"Airships, bah!" Andrei snapped his fingers in his brother's face. "I give you that for airships. The *Shenandoah*, you may recall, broke apart over the city of Ohio in a teentsy rain squall. Airships can't compete with aeroplanes, which are the way of the future."

Nikolai brooded. "A horrendous thunderstorm caused the *Shenandoah* disaster."

"Teentsy rain squall," contradicted Andrei.

"Horrendous thunderstorm!" Nikolai sulked. "Ah, hah!" he exclaimed. "Witness the LZ-129, popularly the *Hindenburg*. Germany plans to use this truly marvelous airship to carry paying passengers back and forth across the Atlantic."

"It will crash," prophesied Andrei.

Thoroughly vexed, Nikolai laced his sausage-like fingers together. "If airships are such worthless nothings, why did Pyotr Vassilievitch Konstantinov force us to diligently study the great von Zeppelin's work?"

"Because in my opinion he was not altogether sane."

"Konstantinov," shrieked Nikolai, "was the Academy's most brilliant professor of aeronautical sciences."

"The Academy, bah! Forget Petrograd and the blasted Academy," counseled Andrei.

"This is America, the land of free braves. Our enterprise will soon begin prospering. In a few years we shall be on Easy Street, as the Americans say."

Nikolai's anger waned. He sounded vaguely worried in saying, "Andrei Alexandrovitch, I confess to a growing concern about the horrific economic problems everyone talks about, where Millions are lost each day. We, on the other hand, were on Easy Street before leaving France."

"Millions are being lost," objected Andrei, "by inept 'investors' and senseless fools who haphazardly buy shares in one faulty enterprise after another, then try and sell them at a profit. Our wholly owned company is all ours, is that not so?"

"True, Brother. Yet while I am allowed a mere pittance for work on my semi-rigid airship you pour tens of thousands into new hangars and tooling and sales brochures and technical handouts for your wretched *Samovar*."

“*Wretched . . . !*” The color crept upward in Andrei’s scrawny neck. “The *Samovar* is our company’s Great White Hope.”

“A *biplane*, Andrei Aleksandrovitch? Have you never questioned the wisdom used in designing and constructing a biplane in the 1930s? After all, the Air Age is upon us.”

“The *Samovar*,” predicted Andrei, “will be a great leap forward in biplanes.”

“For biplanes, a leap in any direction would seem a great leap sideways.”

“Nonsense! We shall be showered with mail contracts, airline contracts. I even discussed a floatplane version of the *Samovar* with that visionary, O’Neill, who’s thinking to establish South American airmail routes. During the coming decade, our business will thrive. Mark me!”

“Oh, I shall,” said Nikolai. “In fact I will write down your words of wisdom.”

Four months later, in mid-flight, Andrei’s prototype Great White Hope transformed itself into a monoplane. The test pilot parachuted to safety, swearing he would never again, “Park my butt in the cockpit of any Kroolywhatzis airplane even if I learn to pronounce the fucking name.”

Two notes fell due, the loan proceeds having already gone toward financing additional hangar space and *Samovar* production facilities. In a desperate search for refinancing capital, Andrei entered the seventh-floor office of a prominent Manhattan banker just in time to see the gentleman vanish from the window ledge of his office. He read the suicide note propped against an overflowing ashtray, commiserated with the banker’s distraught associates, and left the bank in a disconsolate mood.

In the wake of the *Samovar* disaster, Nikolai was in his glory. “Witness the *Graf Zeppelin*,” he declared. “Eckener has flown his wondrous airship all around the world. Now that the *Hindenburg* is preparing to transport paying passengers, Germany owns every air route across the Atlantic except for *my* airship. The *Tsar Nicholas* is a forerunner of bigger, better American dirigibles to come. Wait and see, one day my airship will make our company famous.”

Andrei waited, and eventually saw.

An idyllic spring morning was slated for the shakedown flight. Nikolai excitedly watched the ground crew launch his silvery Great White Hope. Engines droning melodiously, the *Tsar Nicholas* wallowed into the smiling sky and ponderously shouldered away in the direction of Floyd Bennett Field, where newsreel cameramen, reporters, photographers and a crowd of aviation buffs had congregated to cheer the flyby.

An hour and forty-two minutes later Nikolai accepted a collect call from the company’s crack salesman at Floyd Bennett Field. Couldn’t something be done, the salesman wanted to know, to expedite getting the *Tsar Nicholas* airborne? The press corps and crowd were growing restless and impatient over the delay.

“What is this you are telling me?” Nikolai hopped up and down on one foot. “My airship flew away almost two hours ago. Where is it?”

Repeated attempts to make radio contact with the strayed dirigible proved fruitless. Terrified, the brothers flew to Floyd Bennett Field in a decrepit Fokker monoplane left over from their barnstorming days. The police were alerted. Search planes and Coast Guard vessels combed the placid offshore waters.

Like its namesake, the giant silver airship was never again seen by human eyes. Its disappearance in balmy, cloudless, windless skies made Kurilekutzatzov Aeroplane & Airship

Company famous, bearing out Nikolai's prediction, for creating a paramount mystery of the newborn Air Age.

"My airship!" wailed Nikolai. "My beautiful *Tsar Nicholas* must be found. A huge zeppelin does not simply disappear in thin air."

"Yours did," consoled Andrei.

Four months and eleven days later, the Kurilekutzatzov Aeroplane & Airship Company went into receivership. For their monumental investment of time, money, blood, tears and sweat, the twins eventually recovered roughly eleven cents on the dollar.

* * *

"How much remains in our account?" A much thinner Nikolai Kurilekutzatzov swayed in consonance with the streetcar's gentle rocking motion.

"Including interest," confided Andrei in stage-whisper, "around forty thousand."

"So much?" Nikolai's eyes grew round. "Andrei Alexandrovitch, this is madness. Here we are, starving in the midst of plenty. Let us take several of those languishing dollars and get something decent to eat."

His brother was adamant. "No."

"Fifty dollars? Thirty? Nothing edible has come our way since the evil day our company collapsed."

Unmoved, Andrei said, "We can't afford to touch one dime of our nest egg, my dumbshit brother. Don't be selfish. Think of something beside your stomach."

"Twenty measly dollars, I beg you! It's such an insignificant sum. We shall make it a Christmas present to ourselves."

"Yuletide doesn't occur in June. Here, Fifth Street. This is where we get off."

In a dreary loft three floors above the intersection of Fifth and Main in Los Angeles, a down-at-the-heels attorney leaned back from the soot-grimed windowsill and adjusted his worn bow tie. "Up 'n at 'em, Freddie! A Pacific Electric red car just delivered our pigeons."

"Freddie," the loft's only other occupant, was not listening.

"Damn it, Fred! Get a grip on yourself," urged the lawyer. "If this weird deal falls through, you may end up in front of a grand jury. You promised to stay off the sauce, too."

Frederick M. Standish wearily levitated himself and weaved his erratic way to the window. He peered myopically at the busy street scene below. "Which pigeons," he asked hoarsely. "Surely you can't mean the Mutt and Jeff crossing Fifth."

"Our sugar babies in the flesh."

"You, my boy," accused Frederick M. Standish, "are full of shit. That pair, they look like they just got off the boat. I'll wager they don't have two nickels to rub together."

"I'll cover that bet, Mr. Aviation Tycoon. Checked 'em out personally. They should be good for between thirty-five and forty thou, give or take."

"A fairy tale!" muttered Standish. "It's *you* who should stay off the sauce."

"Drop the sarcasm and begin acting like the executive you keep pretending to be." The lawyer made circular motions with his hands, and somehow continued the exercise while he slipped into a threadbare suit jacket. "Let me handle this, okay? Keep your yap shut and follow my lead. If those rubes bite, we're in clover."

The polished, professional presentation lasted two hours. Andrei and Nikolai were shown ingeniously doctored financial statements, full-color charts depicting airline growth predictions, bar charts graphically illustrating predicated soaring increases in military and commercial aircraft procurement, and a phenomenal anticipated rise in airmail contracts. Another half-hour was spent haggling over price — wasted effort had Standish and the attorney only known. After carefully inspecting the company's San Fernando Valley acreage held by virtue of a ninety-nine year lease impossible to break, Andrei had decided to buy a controlling interest. The pair of moderately dilapidated wooden hangars and a machine shop were located directly across the single runway at Van Nuys Metropolitan Airport, adding a major plus in Andrei's estimation.

"What else can I tell you?" The lawyer rested his butt on the edge of a scarred roll top desk. "Kind of hard to pass up, isn't it?"

"Should one last condition be met," said Andrei, "I believe we can do business."

"And . . . that?" The attorney held his breath.

"My brother and I wish to change the company name."

"Really? Hey, who'll be able to stop you? Er, change it to . . . ?"

"We wish to call it the Kurilekutzatzov Aircraft Company."

"Why, sure, great! The Kroolie . . ." The lawyer nearly swallowed his tongue.

"Our former business," said Nikolai proudly, "was the Kurilekutzatzov Aeroplane & Airship Company."

"Say, how about that! Y'got history on you side. That's some, interesting, uh . . . Listen, you gentlemen're buying in real big. Once we deposit the certified check, you'll own about eighty-eight percent of shares outstanding, and you can write your own ticket, name the blessed company anything that suits you, but mightn't Kroolie . . . the, uh, name you mentioned be kind of . . . cumbersome? No offense; America's chock-full of foreign sounding names, but —"

"Kurilekutzatzov," said Nikolai. "See, it's quite easy to say."

"Oh, no doubt about it." The lawyer concentrated on flicking ash from his cigar.

"Perhaps I can offer a suggestion, gentlemen" Frederick M. Standish advocated simply shortening the surname to Kurile. "The Kurile Aircraft Company has a nice businesslike ring."

Indecently offended, Nikolai cried, "Kurile is *not* Kurilekutzatzov."

Standish and the attorney knew when to keep their tongues well back in their mouths.

After handshakes all around, the twins were shown from the loft amid showered congratulations. Emotionally drained, the lawyer slumped against the closed door.

Frederick M. Standish beamed triumphantly. He chuckled the lawyer's shoulder. "My boy, I hereby take back every nasty thing I ever said about you. You did an admirable job."

"They bit!" The lawyer clapped his hands and waltzed joyfully around the dreary loft. "Those hicks actually swallowed, Why, they damn near helped us reel 'em in." Sliding open the scarred roll top desk, he took out a half-full bottle of sour mash bourbon, pulled the cork with his teeth, and handed Standish a filmed glass. "Freddie, your lousy stock is so watered those rubes won't just go bust, they'll *drown*."

"Not our headache, is it, counselor?" Standish said. "We aren't the brothers' keepers."

The attorney lifted his glass. "Freddie, I give you the Kurile Aircraft Company!"

"Just about what it's worth," declared the former aviation magnate. "Cheers!"

* * *

Standish and the attorney were correct, yet ended up being very wrong. Andrei and Nikolai visited their newly acquired facility, finding the work force of six men, two teenage boys and a secretary playing cards and pitching pennies. A quadrate of unfinished airframes gathered dust in the shop's dim recesses. All told, it was a picture widely at variance from the scene of bustling activity they'd been shown several days earlier.

"What is this?" demanded Nikolai. "Is it lunchtime at nine in the morning? Is it coffee break? Why aren't you all working at your jobs?"

"Who the hell're you bums?" a disgruntled foreman wanted to know.

"We are the new owners," announced Andrei.

Unintimidated, the foreman said, "Owners, you creeps!"

"Of a certainty. You are now employed by the Kurile Aircraft Company. We plan to do great things together."

"That a fact." Unimpressed, the foreman said, "First great thing we can do together is get paid. Nobody's seen a red cent in over three months. What's more, even if they was to get paid there's no materials left to finish those airplanes with. And what's more, even if the planes were ready to fly away there's nobody around dumb enough to pay cash money for 'em."

Close to tears, Nikolai said, "If you are not being paid, why do you stay on?"

"Sorry you asked that. My pop said if I was willing to work free I'd always have a job."

The twins rushed downtown. Only a vacant, high-ceilinged loft remained in the large office where they had consummated the deal with Frederick M. Standish and the seedy lawyer. To no avail, they complained to the authorities, and receiving zero satisfaction. Despondently furnishing what passed for an office at the plant, they used their remaining funds to pay the workforce a pittance of what was owed, grudging a few dollars more to purchase cash & carry materials with which to complete the four sorry looking airplanes "in production."

Frozen-faced bankers reluctantly listened to the twins plead for refinancing capital, and reminded them it was 1939, and that times were still tough despite the war in Europe because Mr. Roosevelt's grandiose scheme to put the country back on its feet had thus far gotten about as far off the ground as a Kurile airplane.

On Friday, September first, the very day Chancellor Adolf Hitler invented a border incident and sent gross numbers of *Whermacht* divisions, tanks and aircraft crashing into western Poland, the Kurilekutzatzov twins sat in their tomblike office contemplating suicide. Having beaten the bushes for funds with which to carry on, they'd given up the search as hopeless. Wolf packs of creditors were howling at the door, and only a miracle could save Kurile Aircraft Company, as scarcely dried scarlet letters proclaimed atop the larger of two sagging hangars.

The miracle arrived in the form of an official letter co-signed by U.S. War Department and British Air Ministry officials. England was engaged in a frenzied hunt for aircraft production facilities capable of helping build an aerial fleet able to counter the diabolical Nazi air armada. The letter inquired if Standish Aviation, Inc., was interested in being added to the list of prospective American aeronautical facilities British experts were shortly due to inspect.

Interested? Oh, were they ever! Totally on their uppers, the twins scraped together pocket change and dispatched a telegram explained how Standish Aviation had reinvented itself as the Kurile Aircraft Company, and would be overjoyed to aid Britain's war effort in every way.

During calendar year 1940, Kurile produced eighty-two Lend-Lease medium bombers under license from another southern California aircraft company. Painted with British insignia, the planes were ferried to embattled England via Newfoundland and the North Atlantic. The Kurile plant doubled in size.

America entered the global conflict in December, 1941, when Imperial Japanese carrier aircraft launched a devastating sneak attack in Hawaii. Nazi Germany declared war on the United States the following day, and the Kurile Aircraft Company began a march toward quintupling in size. When World War II hostilities concluded, more than two thousand carrier-based fighters had been delivered to the U.S. Navy, plus sixteen hundred medium bombers to the U.S. Army Air Forces, and Kurile's engineering team was busy designing an experimental jet-propelled aircraft and a fifty-passenger commercial airliner. The work force had swelled to an astounding seventy-odd thousand employees.

Multimillionaires twice over, the twins had each married and fathered multiple children.

A major conglomerate, Vonex Corporation, invested heavily in Kurile during the Space Age Sixties after a pair of elderly financiers serving as Vonex directors were appointed to the Kurile board. Accompanied by widespread press and television publicity, Kurile's corporate image underwent a dynamic transformation. A new name was chosen to appropriately reflect the company's modern, diversified product line: Aerospace General Corporation.

Although revered as famous aviation pioneers, the Kurilekutzatzov twins were deemed incompatible with AGC's glossy new image, and were artfully swept aside shortly after the ultra-smooth Vonex takeover, when efficiency experts and second-echelon executives from the conglomerate flooded AGC's front offices with the "visionary talent" needed to look forward forever, where the horizons were absolutely unlimited.

"Elevated" to the status of co-directors emeritus, the twins steadily slipped farther from grace to eventually be retained as mere tokens. Control of the company they had fought and slaved to build was eclipsed by complex legal chicanery, the intricate manipulation of preferred stock, and the twins' indifference due to their advanced age and declining health.

As befitted the seventh sons of a seventh son, himself the seventh son of a seventh son, the brothers passed away at seven minutes after seven o'clock on the seventh day of the year's seventh month. Probate disputes over their last wills and testaments dragged on for another seven years and seven months. Andrei's estate alone proved to be in excess of seven hundred and seventy-seven millions, and an equally staggering fortune derived from Nikolai's estate. The scramble for inheritances ignited white hot warfare raging within the Kurilekutzatzov extended families, and dozens of legal actions occupied numerous judges, juries, accountants and attorneys for an additional seven years, seven months and seven days.

21 - Miss Management

Little Joe had polished to perfection a devious technique. After committing to a drawing completion date, he schemed and plotted and seldom failed to adroitly slough off a major portion of the assigned task on congenitally passive Max Anthony, financially preoccupied Farnsworth, or grumbling ex-lumberjack Bundy. No one could begin to imagine how he consistently engaged in the nefarious practice that eventually earned him a long overdue reckoning.

Summoned to Moffett's cubicle for chastisement, the wannabe Westerner was listening with half an ear to Ham's lecture about the niceties of meeting drawing schedules when a sultry feminine contralto from nowhere startled all his nerve endings into acute wakefulness.

"Good morning, Dreamboat."

Ham suspended his verbal assault on the drafter. "Hi, how are you?"

"Unspeakably marvelous." The much-married woman ran her tongue over glossed lips. "If you're too terribly busy," she said, sounding too terribly provocative, "I can stop by later."

"No problem. This is Joe, one our ace layout drafters."

Having stumbled to his feet, his hormonal balance radically unbalanced by the unheralded appearance of a goddess, Little Joe stood on one needle-nosed snakeskin boot, then the other, goggle-eyed at the unprecedented volume of cleavage displayed in an aquamarine knit dress out of which Glenda seemed in imminent danger of falling. Speechless for seconds, his rangeland persona finally surfaced. "Ah'm a-sayin' howdy, ma'am," he drawled.

"Well, howdy to you, Tex." She subjected the diminutive drafter to violet-eyed scrutiny, bringing a flush to his sunken cheeks. "I know Ham belongs to the AGC Management Society." Leaning her well-rounded bottom on the edge of the desk, she asked, "How about you, Tex?"

"Er, uh-uh. N-no, ma'am," faltered Little Joe, his hormones adither. "The plain, no varnish truth is I never got 'round to, er . . . signin' up."

"Pity. You should, you know. We need all the members we can get. 'Mem-bers,' she repeated, reverently drawing out the word laden with sensual intonation. "I simply adore the term. I chair our entertainment committee, and keep application blanks in my desk. Come up 'n see me sometime, Tex."

Glenda's throaty contralto was setting Little Joe aquiver in all three axes. "Uh, not for sure certain if I'm, uh . . . That is, don't know if I'm eligible, ma'am. I'm just a drafter."

Glenda's smile would have melted lead. "Oh, our social group is too terribly democratic for words. All salaried employees are eligible."

"Sure do have a strong urge t'join up right now this minute, ma'am."

Glenda reciprocated Little Joe's appraisal with sensual expertise. "My, you're not what could be called a hero-sized cowpoke, yet incredibly macho."

Little Joe came as close to blushing as he ever would.

Enjoying the drafter's glandular crisis, Ham asked Glenda what he could do for her.

"Oh, any number of delightful things, Dreamboat. A Management Society issue has come up, and I need a special front-office favor. I ran into an old flame . . . that is, a close acquaintance who was once a vice president here, and in fact your boss' boss. He left the company under a dark cloud shortly before you blessed us with your presence. Has Dr. Ladd ever mentioned Frank Burton?"

"Not that I recall."

"Anyhow, he once actively sponsored Management Society dances, barbecues, and a mixed bag of soirees and fetes. We had dinner together one evening, and he made an off-the-wall suggestion I first considered silly, then thought about it and changed my mind. Frank suggested holding a beauty contest as the annual fundraiser."

"You'll win," said Little Joe with unbridled enthusiasm.

Glenda preened herself. “Well, aren’t you the flatterer, Tex! Seriously, Ham, I’ve convinced myself a beauty contest featuring homegrown contestants would strike gold. Many attractive people work here at AGC.”

All but panting over the one standing in front of him, Little Joe said, “And how!”

“People . . . ?” Ham’s tone was jovial, if a bit uncertain. “You mean women, right?”

“Heavens no, Dreamboat! A classic beauty pageant featuring curvaceous cuties in string bikinis would be a crashing bore. I’d like to enroll every hairy hunk who can be talked into competing. You, for instance. I intend to be one of the judges.”

Unable to think of anything better to say, Ham mumbled, “Interesting notion.”

“To make it viable, I desperately need help,” said Glenda. “Everyone knows how close your stuffy boss is to Mr. Mason on and off campus.. Could you possibly wheedle and cajole Ladd into pleading our case? Ben might go for the beauty contest, then again he might not. He can be a tight-ass, but all things considered he’d also fair-minded. As a personal favor, would you try and coax him into selling my beauty pageant to Ben?”

“Do my best. Tough to guess if he’ll go along. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Do try,” she urged. “Please, Ham.” Glenda batted her false lashes at Little Joe. “Bye, Tex. Don’t forget to drop by my office and pick up that application.”

“I’ll for certain definitely be sure t’do that very thing real soon now, ma’am.”

“Thanks, Dreamboat.” Glenda favored Ham with a lascivious smile that elevated Little Joe’s blood pressure another two points. “I appreciate favors, and never forget to return them.” Swaying deliciously, she sashayed out of the cubicle.

Little Joe almost fell down peeking around the partition for a view of Glenda’s oscillating departure. “Been holdin’ out on me, right, Ham? Where you keep that prize filly corralled?”

Ham filled-in the drafter.

“A manager . . . ?” Little Joe moaned in ecstasy. “Jeez, I plain don’t believe this! She available?”

Ham grinned. “An understatement of massive proportions.”

“Hot damn! And her pet name for you is ‘Dreamboat.’ On the emmis, just between us dudes, have ya gone ‘n sampled that?”

“Mind your mouth, Joe! And forget about Glenda; she’s way too rich for your blood.”

“Don’t you believe it!”

“Sit down if you’re still able, my oversexed colleague. Let’s talk some more about missing drafting schedules by a few hundred thousand man-hours . . .”

* * *

“A what . . . ?” asked the chief engineer when Ham casually broached the topic. “Beauty contest . . . ? Now there’s a prime candidate for fatheaded notion of the month. The Society invites speakers to its fundraising dinners, shows films, throws picnics, other sorts of clambakes and soirées, but a *beauty contest*?”

“Glenda thinks it’d be a dilly of a fundraiser,” said Ham. “She knows you and Mr. Mason are golf buddies, and suckered me into asking if you’d pulse Mr. Mason for approval.”

“Golf buddy, hah! Golf victim, you mean.” Ladd spent a few seconds pondering the ramifications of Glenda’s brainstorm. “No harm posing the question, but warn her Ben will shoot

down anything that lures people away from work during business hours. If he comes back with a firm nay, it'll write finis to my brief campaign. Make sure she understands."

"No problem, Bill. She also tabbed the beauty contest as beneficial to employee morale. Isn't that what the Management Society's all about?"

The corners of Ladd's mouth crinkled mischievously. "Hard to say. The Management Society has nothing to do with management; it's more like a sewing circle, or social club, maybe an excuse to get out of the house one evening each month. There's a flip side, too," added the chief engineer. "Ever since the UTB scare, Ben's been antsy about our salaried people taking another whack at organizing a professional guild, and I know how his mind works. He'll either sprinkle holy water on Glenda's notion, or axe it on the spot. Tell her I'll give it one shot, but only one. Warn her about what I said a minute ago."

"Keeping people away from their duties."

"Check. He's death-on-wheels when it comes to sports pools, personal phone calls, soliciting donations on the premises, folderol like that. If billable man-hours go down the drain due to organizing and promoting Glenda's kooky beauty contest, she and it will be dead in the water. Tell her so. We need Master Scheduling's cooperation, so I'll do anything within reason to keep Glenda on our side, but with Ben there's a limit to what the traffic will bear."

"I'll pass the message along," said Ham.

* * *

At midmorning on Saturday, Ladd and Mr. Mason had just made the turn at the ninth hole. The other members of their regular foursome, a pair of Mr. Mason's affluent Beverly Hills neighbors, were visiting the snack stand.

"What's bothering you, Bill? You've been awfully quiet today."

"You hustlers're three strokes up on us," said Ladd. "If you were in my shoes, it'd make you sad 'n weepy, too. Keep playing with you potentates, and I'll end up on Welfare."

Mr. Mason chuckled with fraternal affection. "Golf's a humbling game, but I've known you too long to believe you take it seriously. Come on, what's biting you?"

"Oh, Glenda over in R&D Master Scheduling wants to —"

"Ah, hah!" hooted Mr. Mason. "That slip will prove costly. Fork it over."

Feigning self-disgust, Ladd tugged out his wallet and sheepishly handed Mr. Mason a twenty-dollar bill. AGC business, or employee affairs, were never to be discussed during a leisurely round of golf. A penalty for the critical lapse had been established years earlier.

"Damn it!" groused Ladd. "You monied galoots aren't content to fleece me on the course, now you tack on highway . . . No, excuse me, *fairway* robbery."

"My just reward!" gloated Mr. Mason. "To prove how easy it was to make money in the bad old days, I mean to frame this bill. It's not like you to forget yourself, but now that you've paid for your sin, what were you . . . ? Good Lord! Don't tell me Glenda's getting married again."

"Wouldn't bet against the possibility," Ladd said drily, "but that isn't it." Mentioning Glenda's chairmanship of the AGC Management Society's entertainment committee, he said she was contemplating an innovative fundraiser. Further greasing the skids, he complimented the CEO for supporting the Society's contributions to charity, especially during the annual holidays.

Mr. Mason accepted the tribute graciously. "I've always favored the Society's civic and social functions. An affiliate of the National Management Association, it forms a Town and

Gown buffer between AGC and the community. A number of guest speakers have appeared at my invitation. What sort of fundraiser has Glenda in mind?"

"A beauty contest."

"A beaut . . ? You're not serious."

"At first I thought she was putting me on, but you know Glenda."

"Um, yes. A . . . beauty contest . . ." Mr. Mason pondered the unique proposal while absently studying a brightly clad foursome playing the tenth fairway. "I fail to see how anything so frivolous could raise a significant amount of funding."

"According to what Glenda told me," improvised Ladd, "there'd be a modest entry fee for contestants competing in the, uh . . . pageant. Some local high school or college might allow the use of its auditorium, or maybe even a church."

"Hmm-m-m, invite a paying audience," mused Mr. Mason. "Mostly the families and friends of contestants, I suppose. Conducted with decorum, it might be an acceptable event for Masonic Hall. I could arrange that easily."

Mr. Mason stepped to the golf cart. Taking a cloth from the zipper pocket of his leather bag, he spread three balls between his fingers like a juggler, popped them one by one into the automatic washer. "A peculiar notion," he mused, "but who knows? It could have hidden potential. Tell Glenda I'll think about it, and let her know."

* * *

"Her-r -re she com-mes," warbled Little Joe in a nasal tenor, "Miss-s-s Amer-ica-a-a-a."

Dismayed by the wannabe actor's off-key accompaniment to the his limping, hip rolling entrance, Max Anthony cut short his rendition of the "Bell Song" from *Lakhme*. He asked shyly, "What did you do with the money they gave you for singing lessons?"

"Don't try 'n crack wise, Maxie. You're out of your league up to the eyebrows."

"Yam's been looking for you. He needs the ORDART inboard profile revision."

"Got no time to mess with minor crap like that," said Little Joe, his cavalier attitude with regard to work in full flower. "Shake the mitt of a brand new Management Society member."

Farnsworth looked up in surprise from the *Wall Street Journal* he'd craftily concealed in a folded blueprint. "*You* joined the Society? It's a great organization."

"Yeah, you don't know the half of it. As a official member, I may get t'be a judge."

Farnsworth blinked uncertainly. "A splendid career awaits you. Municipal Court, Superior Court, perhaps one day a seat on the Supreme Court bench."

"Farnsie, you putz! Have you been taking wisecrack lessons from the Whistler? Talking serious for a change, the Society honchos're throwing a giant beauty contest, and you'll never believe the broad who runs it — T & A out the kazoo, helluva classy dresser, and blonde hair most likely all over, and she's a department *manager*. One roll in the hay with that dolly and I'd head for the last roundup a most happy fella."

"As I recall," objected the young investor, "on more than occasion you used extremely vile language to berate the Society."

"Wise up, Farnsie!" said Little Joe. "As usual, you've tangled the whole ball of wax. It's the management of this here slave pen I cussed, not the Society. I'm always on the lookout for opportunity, and this beauty contest, wow! It's opportunity all but knocking down the door."

"How so?"

“Just think about it: wall-to-wall hotties in teeny-weeny bikinis. If that ain’t opportunity knocking I don’t know what is, and as for a contest judge, who-o-o-ie! You can play the casting couch bit to the hilt, know what I mean? An extra slug of sweetness can’t hurt anybody. Ever hear the definition of a fuck-off, Farnsie?”

Farnsworth blushed. “You . . . ?”

“Now you make me feel self-conscious. Nope, a fuck-off is the final elimination in the Miss Universe contest.” Little Joe yuk-yukked, racked by loud, self-adulatory hilarity.

Bundy crashed down from his footstool. Auburn beard swaying with menace, he plodded toward Little Joe like Paul Bunyan on a rampage. “You talk too much,” he said. “Shaddup!”

“Aw, stuff it!” said Little Joe, failing to note the maniacal gleam in the other’s frosty, too-close-together eyes.

His paralytic stare scathing, the ex-lumberjack said, “Some of us’re tryin’ to work.”

Little Joe misevaluated Bundy’s irate, distended features, and decided to play the scene for laughs. “Where? I don’t see nothing much going on.”

Bundy’s gorilla hands closed on the buttoned halves of Little Joe’s denim jacket. The fabric complained as the much smaller drafter’s feet left the floor. When Little Joe’s terrified, acne-scarred countenance reached eye level, Bundy glowered at him nose-to-nose. “I want you to shaddup your mouth. When I say shaddup your mouth, I mean shaddup your mouth.”

“Easy,” croaked Little Joe in an early stage of strangulation, “don’t bend the material.”

“Shaddup your mouth,” insisted Bundy.

“Urg-g-gh,” gargled Little Joe.

Bundy released Little Joe, whose knees buckled from the fourteen-inch fall. The ex-lumberjack stumped back and mounted his footstool. Bent over at his customary acute angle, he resumed grumbling to himself and slashing angrily at the drawing on his board.

Round-eyed, breathing in asthmatic gasps, Little Joe shuddered convulsively and lurched to his own drafting board. Seizing a worn mechanical pencil with palpitating fingers, he applied it to the roll of vellum on his board, looking up now and then to cast a wary glance at Bundy’s elevated, axe-handle-wide backside, and consoled himself by muttering, “Goddamn psycho!”

Max Anthony broke the ensuing stillness by launching into Brahms’s “Academic Festival Overture.” Minutes later Yaminishi hustled into the drafting area, a tightly rolled blueprint clutched in his prosthetic appliance.

Little Joe met the lead drafter’s inquiring gaze, and flinched. “Almost got it done, Yam,” he said defensively. “Real close to winding up this here inboard profile.”

Yaminishi’s head wagged sadly. “The wicked flee when no man pursueth.”

“How’s that?”

“You’ve been ‘real close’ to winding up that drawing for days,” accused the lead drafter. “Now that it’s real close to being wound up, you can unwind it and make a fresh start. These hairy revisions just came in from Aeronautical Engineering. Here, take a look.”

“Well, f’Chrissake!” complained Little Joe. “A steady raft of changes keeps on a-coming, and that stinks to high heaven!” Foundering in self-pity, he slumped on his drafting stool and said plaintively, “Why’s everybody all of a sudden picking on me?”

* * *

“Men . . . ?” Mr. Mason irritably fluttered a bulletin announcing the first annual AGC Management Society Beauty Pageant. He repeated the indictment harshly: “*Men!* The idea of men completing in a beauty contest goes light-years beyond merely ridiculous! We’ll have no men prancing about in any AGC affair. Never! Nauseous business like that goes on at Muscle Beach, in Hollyweird, other cesspools. No, men are out! Tell Glenda they’re out, O-U-T!”

The CEO and Ladd were in Sorenson’s fruitwood-paneled sanctum to discuss something entirely different reason. Mr. Mason’s first glimpse of the bulletin had distracted him.

Doubly confused by his master’s angry words, Sorenson had been vainly trying to interpret his displeasure over what someone had written on the sheet of paper he kept waving about. Denouncing individuals of the male gender was an obscure clue, but his bewilderment deepened when Mr. Mason exclaimed, “Men, for God’s sake! *Men!*”

Sitting across the virginal, polished expanse of the desk manned by his nominal boss, its surface unsullied by paper, writing materials, a blotter, anything, Dr. Ladd voiced total agreement. Glenda’s gone overboard with this dual gender contestants idea, yet I have to plead not guilty. She didn’t say a word to me about enlisting male contestants.”

“Yes, yes; I understand, Bill. We shall have to straighten her out.”

“Still and all,” added the chief engineer, “beneath all that horny nonsense she’s a real sensitive gal. My office works closely with Master Scheduling, so I’d as soon not lose her support over something silly. Suppose someone else should tell her to dump the men?”

Tightlipped, Mr. Mason cogitated, and nodded unhappily. “Blair, you should take care of quashing this issue. I realize Master Scheduling works at one full remove from your office, but I want you to personally explain to Glenda that men are out. OUT! Do it quietly, but firmly.”

Sorenson gaped at his father figure and savior.

Mr. Mason was adamant. “No, I won’t listen to any argument on this touchy topic. Trot over this minute and tell Glenda, er . . . What’s her surname these days, Bill?”

“Search me; I don’t keep score,” said Dr. Ladd. “It was Prout not long ago, and Carstairs after that . . . Hell, I have no idea! Her office is in ‘C’ Building, Blair. Ask for directions over there; she’s well known.”

Sorenson obediently pushed back his high-backed executive chair. “Now?”

“At once, if not sooner,” declared Mr. Mason. “I want this idiocy squelched before its sheer ridiculousness can circulate. Why, we’d be the laughing stock of the entire aerospace industry if news of it ever got out.”

“Glenda, ‘C’ Building?” questioned R&D Division’s pro tempore VP&GM.

“I appreciate it very much, Blair.”

“No men.”

“Exactly. As I said, be firm, but try not to unduly antagonize her.”

Sorenson chose a pair of polarized, U.S. Air Force-issue sunglasses from the cache in his desk drawer. Donning the shades, he squared his shoulders, then squared his turn and startled Myra, Moira or Myrna by resolutely striding past her desk bent upon a mission of gravity.

Sorenson caromed from one end of “C” Building to the other for twenty minutes, his stalking passage causing any number of employees to shrink from his scarlet-rimmed badge, and quail at his stern demeanor when voicing a stern, oft-repeated utterance: “Glenda.”

A terrified file clerk eventually led him down a long hallway and pointed mutely at the proper office. Lips moving, he silently recited the syllables on Glenda's nameplate, marched through the anteroom looking neither left nor right, and halted, filling the inner office doorway.

"Why, Mr. Sorenson," greeted Glenda, her low, vibrant contralto that verged on baritone laden with extra dollops of honey. "What a pleasant surprise."

Sorenson entered, seated himself in a guest chair, and without preamble said, "No men."

"Excuse me, sir. Wh-what was . . . ? What did you . . . say?"

"No men," repeated Sorenson. "Mr. Mason says so."

Glenda's manicured fingers flew to her throat. She stumbled in her eagerness to rise, and brushed past Sorenson to hastily close the office door. "Mr. Sorenson, I really don't know how to respond except to say it's grossly improper, not to mention being totally unfair, for Mr. Mason or anyone else to issue a directive of such purely personal nature. After all, my private life is my own. What I do outside of business hours is . . ." On the brink of tears, Glenda subsided.

Sorenson's pitiless arctic stare raked Glenda. "No men," he reiterated, wondering if the abrasive, cry-eyed female person might have once been an enlisted woman.

Quivering, torn between outrage, indignation, embarrassment and humiliation, Glenda said. "I've never subscribed to Women's Lib fanatic, but I feel upper management has gone too far. No one will ever govern my private affairs." She paused to bite her lip and reconsider. "That is to say," she amended, "govern my, er . . . lifestyle. What I'm being directed to do is unprincipled, thoroughly undemocratic, and in fact fascistic. It's unreasonable to command anyone's behavior in that arbitrary manner. I'm a single woman who values her private life immensely. You may tell Mr. Mason that if he insists on this Victorian attitude he can have my badge. I simply will *not* be treated this way."

Sorenson had not anticipated backtalk from anyone as insignificant as this female person. Now certain she'd once been an enlisted woman, his cold stare gradually intensified into a fly killing laser glare. In his view, when Mr. Mason issued a directive it was equivalent to, and perhaps a touch more vital to be followed, than the Ten Commandments. Mr. Mason's orders were to be obeyed instantly, with neither quibbling nor argument, nor backtalk.

"No men," asserted Sorenson, a ring of finality in his voice. Rising to totemesque stature, he swept out of the office under full canvas, leaving Glenda in a misty-eyed rage.

When she rushed to cry on his shoulder, it took Bill Ladd ten minutes to convince her men were to be eliminated from the upcoming beauty pageant, not from her life.

* * *

Mona, a newly hired clerk in the "D" Building blueprint crib, was svelte and lovely and barely eighteen years old, with the dew still on her. Like ninety-nine percent of pretty young women in the Los Angeles basin, she aspired to a show business career, though as yet unable to decide whether to proactively pursue singing and dancing, or acting. She could not sing a note, but her boyfriend, whose heavy-metal garage band annoyed the neighbors to the point of not just contemplating but perpetrating mayhem, had assured her that while screaming was mandatory for a budding Rock star, the ability to sing a note was entirely superfluous.

On the same day advance notices of the AGC Management Society's first annual Beauty Pageant were posted on company bulletin boards, Mona filled out a form, paid the small entrant's fee, and became an official contestant.

“It’s a humongous chance t’show what you can do,” insisted Little Joe, who had been hustling Mona ever since she first appeared at AGC. “What say we yak it over over dinner.”

Mona eyed Little Joe with such an overload of supercilious distaste that it dimmed the luster in her delft-blue eyes. “My boyfriend wouldn’t like it.”

“That’s dumb, Mona. How’ll he ever find out?”

Mona disregarded the question. “You told me you did lots of TV stuff. I don’t remember seeing you on the tube.”

“I handle mostly waiver wrangler bits, you know, in Westerns,” lied Little Joe, confident that Mona couldn’t find out he’d never been within fifty yards of a horse.

“A waver what?”

“It’s a tek-nickle term us insiders use. A waiver wrangler’s a rider who signs a waiver swearing he won’t sue the studio if he falls off his nag and gets stove-up.”

“Oh.” Thoroughly doubt-stricken, Mona said, “They make hardly any Westerns.”

“Oh, but they’re about to,” assured Little Joe. “It’s the coming thing on TV.”

“You say you’re a contest judge?”

“Sure am,” he said with what passed for a straight face.

Mona frowned prettily. “I think you’re putting me on. I bet you don’t even belong to the AGC Management Society.”

Little Joe defiantly whipped out his cracked calfskin billfold and showed Mona the glossy new identity card obtained from Glenda that proclaimed him a member in good standing.

Pretending to be impressed, Mona asked if he’d seen any of the other contestants.

“Oh, sure. All of ‘em.”

“Be up front with me, Joe. Do you think I really have a chance?”

“A chance! Heck, you’ll bag the swimsuit part just by standing there breathing. With your figure, wow!” He leaned over the blueprint crib counter for a better view down her blouse.

Mona edged backward. “Dinner where?”

“How about Giorgio’s? Ever been there?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Oh, you’ll love it. All the best folks get their vittles at Giorgio’s.”

The prospect of nailing Mona thrilled Little Joe from the crown of his undersized Stetson to the toes crushed together inside his needle-nosed snakeskin cowboy boots. He even went so far as to have the battered orange Mustang washed before going to pick up Mona, or at least tried to have it washed. The vehicle bucked, sputtered, coughed and quit cold in a cloud of sooty exhalation, blocking the path of four other cars lined up at the car wash. The minor crisis was resolved by attendants who backed two autos off to one side and shoved the Mustang out of line, a juggling exercise that precipitated fisticuffs between two drivers who argued about who had preceded who in line.

Fuming in a blind rage, Little Joe ground the starter without mercy, finally coaxed the engine into valve-rattling thunder, and drove to Mona’s home in Hidden Hills.

The young woman cast a jaundiced glance at the debris piled on the rear seat and gave serious thought to refusing to enter the Mustang. “Was anyone hurt?”

“Huh?”

“In the wreck,” clarified Mona.

“My other car’s a Mercy-dees,” said Little Joe.

“Yeah, I bet.”

Dinner went well. Little Joe snapped his fingers and kept the waiter hopping. Insisting on extra napkins, chilled salad forks and prompt coffee refills, he signed the credit card bill, leaving an all but invisible tip, and escorted Mona to the parking lot. “Like to dance?”

“S’pose so. Where we headed?”

“My place.” Little Joe cranked the starter so long the battery nearly exploded. “Got a rack of super CDs. We can kick back the rug, dance up a storm.”

“CDs, huh? Sure you don’t have something else in mind?”

“Hey, this’s our first date, Mona. What do you take me for?”

“Really want to know?”

Little Joe eased the backfiring Mustang beneath the carport of his apartment in an industrial section of Van Nuys. Leading Mona upstairs, he unlocked the door with a smirk. “This’s it, Doll.”

Having memorized a line from the late, late show, Mona said, “What a dumph-h-h!”

“Moved into this here spread only three short years ago,” he told her. “Ain’t had a chance to fix it up yet. Want a drink?”

“How about a champagne cocktail?”

“All I got’s vodka.”

“Okay, a vodka martini.”

“No vermouth.”

“Hey, you’re really fixed.” Mona slumped on the sofa. She fingered the cotton stuffing oozing from an armrest, and sighed. “Pour a little vodka in a dirty glass, if you have one.”

Little Joe slid closer to Mona. “Listen, you’re a cinch to walk away with the blue ribbon now that you got me behind you.” He lunged, clutched her wasp waist.

Mona elbowed him away. “Do you honestly think I’d hump a midget, Judge?”

Little Joe drew back. “Hey, no point getting salty,” he complained, “especially with a guy who’s backing you all the way. I can get it for you, Mona. Say the word, and it’s a wrap.”

“You can take your ‘word’ and hang it in your ear, Judge.”

“Aw, don’t be that way.”

“Now you listen real careful. I have a proposition for you. So you tell me you’re a beauty contest judge, and I want to win the dumb contest, and want it real bad. Here’s what you’ll do, Your Honor. Talk me up to the other judges, convince ‘em I’m the beauty queen, or else.”

Little Joe quailed. “Or else . . . what?”

“Or else,” explained Mona, “I rip my blouse and bra, muss myself up, run to my dad and yell rape. That’s what else.”

Little Joe was aghast. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

“Th-that’s . . . You’re plain rotten! You don’t mean it.”

“Guaranteed,” said Mona. “What’s worst of all, I’m under age. If you’re half as smart as I know you aren’t, a rape rap involving a minor means means bye-bye birdie for years.”

“Yeah, half as smart is right,” raged Little Joe. “It means you’re fulla lying crap! Who you think you’re dealing with? You’ve got to be eighteen or older to hire on at AGC.”

Mona batted her lashes. "So I fudged a few months, but I meant it about the rape rap." She got up to leave, turned back at the door. "Don't bother to take me home, I'll catch a cab. You'd be real smart to show me how smart you are. Get busy and rustle your butt with those other judges 'cause the beauty bash is only a week away. Lot of luck, Your Honor!"

"Hold it," cried Little Joe. "Got my own confession to make. I fudged some, too. I ain't really one of the judges."

"That so?" Mona said over her shoulder. "Then you'd sure better get to be one in a big hurry. Either I win or you lose, Your Honor." She slammed the door behind her.

* * *

Preoccupied with his empyrean duties, Mr. Mason paid scant heed to preparations for the beauty pageant. He had arranged for the spectacle to be held in Masonic Hall, then reluctantly let Glenda inveigle him into becoming one of the five judges.

Seven days before the big event slated for a Friday evening, newly printed posters appeared on bulletin boards throughout AGC's sprawling facility. An overnight business trip had taken Mr. Mason out of town on Thursday, the day the posters went up, and he was therefore ignorant of their nature until the following morning.

Arriving in "A" Building at the start of the business day, Mr. Mason bounded up the rear steps leading from the executive parking area with customary vigor. Washed in eager ripples and cascades of "Good morning, Mr. Mason," he strode the length of executive row and passed a large bulletin board. The beauty pageant poster caught his eye. He stopped and examined it.

Glenda had sweet-talked an artistic carnal acquaintance into drawing a cartoon depicting a voluptuous young woman clad in a teeny yellow polka-dot bikini leered seductively while dipping a big toe in the surf. The caption announced:

YOUR MANAGEMENT SOCIETY
INVITES YOU TO COME ONE,
COME ALL, AND APPLAUD
EIGHT LOVELIES, ONE OF
WHOM WILL BECOME
MISS MANAGEMENT!

Mr. Mason blanched, turned livid, reached out blindly and ripped the poster from the bulletin board, damaging a fingernail in the process. At something between a jog and a trot, he burst through the anteroom, rushing past his startled executive assistant, and spread the crumpled poster on his desk. Gnashing his teeth in naked, feral outrage, he loosed a string of profane utterances that were not quite words while viciously punching the intercom button.

"Yes, Mr. Mason?"

"Get Ladd in here on the double, Ruth, and tell him to bring Glenda. While you're at it, get me Sorenson."

"Yes, sir. I'll schedule a meeting? What time would be convene —?"

"No, meeting! I want all three of them here in my office now, now, now!"

Sorenson arrived first from his sanctum three doors down executive row.

"Blair, just look at this damn thing! Sorry to say it came out of your division."

Sorenson dutifully looked at the damn thing.

Dr. Ladd ushered Glenda into the executive suite minutes later. The new arrivals found Mr. Mason ranting semi-coherently, abusively castigating the crumpled poster in terms which vastly perplexed and dismayed acting R&D VP&GM Sorenson.

“Bill, Glenda,” raged the CEO, “I insist on an immediate explanation. Moreover, I also insist on an immediate retraction to this, this arrant folly you’ve perpetrated. Please, for the love of God tell me none of these asinine posters have been posted outside our facility! Yes, or no!”

“N-no, Mr. Mason,” faltered Glenda, mostly the whites of her violet eyes showing.

“Thank you, Dear Lord, for small favors! I want these asinine posters taken down within the hour. Within the hour, do you *hear*?”

“Of course, Mr. Mason. It’s just that I, well . . . I d-don’t understand why?”

“*Why*?” cried AGC’s apoplectic president and chief operating officer. “Dare you ask why, Glenda? Because AGC will become the laughing stock of the entire aerospace industry, if not the entire civilized world if word of this, this . . . fiasco leaks out. ‘Miss Management’ indeed! Glenda, for a supposedly intelligent woman, how did the atrocious play on words ever slip past *you*?”

“Oh, my God!” Glenda jammed manicured, be-ringed fingers against her carmined lips.

“How about you, Bill?” demanded Mr. Mason. “It distresses me no end to say it was you who talked me into sanctioning this outstanding example of feeble-minded idiocy!”

“Sorry, Ben; you have to blame someone else,” said Ladd calmly. “First time I’ve seen this poster is right now, this minute. I had no inkling what the winner was to be called.”

To a thunderous accompaniment of wrinkling paper, Mr. Mason savagely balled the malignant poster and flung it in the general direction of a wastebasket. The fibrous missile narrowly missed Sorenson, too frozen in a paralytic stance to cower away from his saintly leader’s unexpected assault.

“Within the hour!” bellowed AGC’s president and chief executive officer.

* * *

The promotional posters were stripped from AGC bulletin boards in less than the prescribed hour. Led by Glenda, cohorts of frantic Management Society members scurried to accomplish the deed, cheered on by the hoots, jeers and catcalls of unionized hourly workers.

On the subsequent Friday evening, a petite, dazzling Vietnamese-American twenty-year-old employed in the “E” Building Office Services Department was crowned Miss Aerospace General.

At two minutes after six the next morning, Isaac Feinblatt, AKA Little Joe, was roused from sleep by someone pounding with sufficient vigor on the door of his apartment to endanger the hinges. A pair of plainclothes detectives read him his rights, handcuffed him after allowing him to pull on Levis and a less-than-clean sweatshirt, then frog-marched him downstairs to an unmarked police car. Little Joe woke every tenant in the building screaming, “It’s a frame!” at the top of his lungs.

When AGC personnel reconvened on Monday morning, the scandalous news spread through the plant like molten glass from a shattered pot furnace.

Max Anthony was so deeply in shock that he forgot to whistle.

Farnsworth waxed thoroughly and righteously indignant.

Yaminishi was unable to contain his astonishment.

Uninformed, Bundy slashed at his drawing.

“Bah humbug!” scoffed The Sheriff. “Foolishness like that don’t reckon to be took serious. That narrow-assed little peckerhead couldn’t rape a grape.”

The case was later dismissed due to a lack of evidence. In order to pay his legal fees, Little Joe tried to refinance the battered orange Mustang one last time. Unfortunately, the credit union manager saw him coming and rushed to lock the door in his face.

22 - Luck of the Draw

Abandoned in the salesman’s cubicle, Audrey Lee asked, “Think they’ll go for it?”

“Who knows?” Fist to chin, her husband was doodling on a scratch pad. “Depends on how badly the dealership wants to rid itself of an expensive inventory item.”

“You’re always less than enchanted by whichever model we choose.”

“Had my last love affair with a car,” said Ham, “when I was about seventeen.”

“Lordy! I hope they accept. I’m sick and tired of all this tail-chasing. Why, we must’ve talked to half the auto agencies in the Valley, and you’re *never* satisfied with any deal.”

“Has to do with the green stuff called money it’s hard to come by. I still think we’d be better off with a van conversion.”

“You keep playing that dumb tune. Why invest in a camper when the cheapskates you work for only hand out a two-week vacation? Besides, when you took the job you promised me a sporty new car to drive.”

“Get an RV,” he said, “and we could take the kids camping on weekends.”

“Hooray! That means between campings I’d be privileged to haul Missy to her piano lessons and run my other errands in a big, clumsy camper? Sorry, not interested.”

“The cost of renting a motor home for our vacation might cause you to change your mind,” counseled Ham. “The rental outfits charge an arm, a leg, a foot and a hand, plus mileage, fuel, insurance and . . . Shh-h-h, he’s coming back.”

The bluff, overweight salesman bustled into the cubicle flashing a toothy smile. “How we doing, folks? Like another cup’ve our famous coffee?”

“No thanks. Have we a deal?”

The salesman’s smile widened, exposing a gold-crowned bicuspid. “That’s what I love t’hear, a customer shooting from the hip.” He sobered quickly. “We’re real close, folks. I did my darnedest to push the package through, but the sales manager, he . . . well, he can be hardnosed.”

“Fair enough.” Ham got to his feet. “Thank you.”

“Listen,” urged the salesman, “that buggy’s loaded, folks — moon roof, factory air, wire wheel covers, tilt steering wheel, top-of-the-line stereo and a built-in GPS system. Goes down the road like warm Vaseline, and that V-6 power plant will blow the doors right off cars with lots bigger engines. You won’t find a bargain like it from San Diego to Seattle.” He concluded by saying, “We could maybe go eighteen-nine.”

“Our offer was seventeen-six. The check’s written against that figure.”

“We could maybe squeeze it through at seventeen-eight or nine if . . . Hey, wait! I’ve got it! If you were to pop for our Extended Super Maintenance Warranty, and round up a trade-in —

running or not, anything you can push on the lot — I know I could get it at your price. This lovely lady will get stares driving around in that sweetheart machine.”

Audrey Lee harbored a fatalistic aversion to stares. Having agreed to let Ham handle the dicker, she walked out of the sales cubicle without a backward glance.

“Maybe another time.” Ham followed his wife, threading his way between glistening new showroom autos, and pushed through the high glass door.

Looking out of sorts in the minivan, his wife stared straight ahead. Sounding miffed, she asked Ham if he and the salesman had reached agreement on a deal.

“Not hardly. Don’t you get it, Audrey Lee?”

“Get what?”

“Their setup. Our fat friend’s sales cube was probably bugged. He and his hypothetical sales manager let us twiddle our thumbs while they listened in on our conversation.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Better believe it. These high-pressure jokers play *all* the angles. That mush-mouthed con man will deluge us with a dozen follow-up calls.”

“What gall! Round and round we go,” she complained, “but where we stop nobody knows? I doubt if we’ll ever buy a new car.”

“A prophet shouldn’t be too specific,” said Ham, “but in a matter of weeks I suspect you’ll be zipping around town in a set of jazzy new wheels.”

“What’s up your sleeve now, Henry Moffett? If you hope that loose-lipped huckster knuckles under and drops the price, you’re mistaken.”

“Forget him and his agency. We have better prospects.”

Audrey Lee pouted. “Oh, really? Sometimes I think gallivanting around the country has softened your brain. Where’d you say you’ll be heading next week?”

“Goddard Spaceflight Center, in Greenbelt, Maryland.”

“My O my!” Audrey Lee accentuated her down-home drawl. “Li’l ole Maryland. Aren’t you the travelin’ man.”

Two days after flying home, Ham closed a deal with a no-nonsense Glendale auto broker recommended by Dr. Ladd. The Moffetts took possession of a fully equipped Ford sedan, a duplicate of the model they had fancied at another dealership. The contract was for less than any prior low bid, with financing at modest interest furnished by the AGC Employees Credit Union.

His wife read the sales invoice, and regarded Ham levelly. “You devious devil! Never meant to do business with any of those agency shysters, did you?”

“No, just fishing for the right model equipped our way.”

Audrey Lee threw her arms around his neck. “There are times when I think I may’ve been mistaken. You could be some variety of genius after all.”

“Way past time when you should’ve figured that out.”

* * *

“That you, Frank? Poszderak here.”

“Where you been hiding, Jake? I tried twice to get you on the cell phone.”

“Forgot and left it in my Bronco,” said the P.I. “I’m on Sepulveda at the RV lot I tailed the target to last week. He’s rented a mid-size motor home. After he left, I crossed the sales

monkey's palm and got a peek at their itinerary. The Moffetts and their brood're heading for Arizona by way of Vegas. Figured the boss might want to know."

"Thanks, I'll tell him." Burton thought over the P.I.'s news flash. "My imagination doesn't stretch far enough to guess what he might decide to do about it, Jake."

When Burton did pass along the private detective's revelation, all Alex said was, "So the guy who couldn't get it up is coming to this gawdawful hellhole. Why bother with the guy, Frank? He seems like awful small potatoes."

"Depends on where and how far the potatoes roll, Alex."

Detesting similes, aphorisms, innuendo of all stripes and word games in general, Alex masked his displeasure by asking if "the guy" would be carting his whole family?"

"Lock, stock and pooch, according to Poszderak."

"Okay, maybe we'll zip the bimbo here to Vegas, throw her at him?"

"Can't right now. She's in Acapulco with the tightwad movie mogul who's setting up her porn flick. She won't be back for a week, ten days."

"Jay-sus, Frank! On top of all the other favors, now I'm paying for grab-ass in Acapulco! Okay, okay; don't say anything. Throwing whatshisname under the bus may be a fart in a firestorm, or . . . Who knows? Ring me when he leaves. Could be time to castrate the guy, spring the ficky-fick pix on his wife, then catch whatever kind of fallout falls out."

"Alex, I'll do it now if you insist, but I wish you'd let me play my hunch."

"Hunch!" scoffed the hotelier. "Pro gamblers don't screw around with hunches. We play percentages. Screw hunches!"

About to frame a response, Burton realized he was holding a dead phone and hung up.

* * *

Ham finished loading the rented motor home, toting a pair of suitcases out to the street, stowing them vertically in the small closet. He started the old Ford minivan, pulled it up in the driveway and parked with the front bumper inches from the closed overhead garage door.

Audrey Lee waited in the entry looking pensive. "The mail came. A letter from Sydney's on the breakfast bar."

He slit the envelope, removed a single sheet of stationery.

Dear Moffetts:

Caught the pip on a fishing expedition, hence flat on my back the best part of a week & no chance to write. Got your latest, read it several times. Glad to hear things are cheery back in the States. Tell Teddy the 'roo pictures are on the way, likewise the stuffed Koala I promised Missy.

The situation here isn't all I'd hoped it would be. Few eventful happenings to report. Did some skeet shooting with an acquaintance weeks ago, but he's not terribly well just now. Most chaps I knew in the long ago, and presently not far away, have either gone to their reward or moved off to other parts. It's been a go for me to get back in the swim. But shame on me! That sounds like a complaint after all my preachments about yearning to come home again. Didn't mean it that way. Sydney's really a fine town.

Should stop now, fix myself a bite. Do hope all of you are well and prospering. Thinking of you always, Clint.

Ham folded the letter, stuffed it back in the envelope.

The world's foremost authority on judging her husband's moods, Audrey Lee said, "What is it? Is he all right?"

"Umm-m-m, yes and no. Had the flu. Read between the lines, and he seems lonely. The tone of this letter bothers me; it's a lot shorter than his usual encyclopedic account of life Down Under. I'll dash off a note soon's we get back, fill him in on our vacation adventures. Collect the kids and Ralph, and shoo 'em aboard while I lock up."

First to scramble into the motor home was the dachshund. Whenever anyone wanted to go anywhere, Ralph was ready. Missy and Teddy were chattering when Ham trundled the large, unfamiliar vehicle up the freeway access ramp and headed east. After driving exactly sixteen minutes by the dashboard clock, Teddy piped, "Go potty."

Ham grinned. "You're in for a surprise, Ted. No service station rigamarole necessary. Show him where it is, Missy."

Melissa Lee left off practicing on her fingerboard. "Do I have to?"

"You have to."

"Come on, Runt Face." His sister led Teddy to the RV's curtained toilet."

"I'm beginning to like this arrangement," said Audrey Lee. "It's almost a little house on wheels. How long until we get to Las Vegas?"

"Oh, with no stops three hours plus."

The air-conditioner was running full blast as the RV bored across what Audrey Lee called "the endless desert." Near Barstow they ran into strong, gusty headwinds; even with power steering, Ham had to work at keeping the unwieldy vehicle in its proper lane. He quelled an urge to light a cigarette for eighty miles, then cracked the side window and gave in to his addiction over needling feminine taunts.

Pulling into the Circus Circus parking lot shortly after sundown, they were hailed by a man waving a flashlight. "Sorry, folks. RV area's full up tonight."

"That's funny." Ham pointed. "Only three campers are parked over there."

"A Roadrunners of America convention's due in later," explained the flashlight man, "and every slot's reserved. Your best bet is Spa Alexander; they can handle our overflow real easy. Turn in at the lighted sign three blocks down the Strip on the left."

Ham cranked the wheel, swung the ponderous vehicle around. "Wash up right after we check in, troops. No cooking in Glitter Gulch, Audrey Lee. The buffet these gaming slicksters set out is sensational."

"You weren't kidding about the glitter." His wife took in the rippling, garish neon kaleidoscope flowing past along Las Vegas Boulevard. "Will it stay this hot all night?"

"Cools off toward dawn, not that you'd notice."

The motor home wheeled into Spa Alexander's driveway, and again the Moffetts were accosted, this time by a pair of men wielding flashlights.

Audrey Lee groaned. "Not another convention?"

"Congratulations!" A flashlight wielder smiled a welcome. "You happen to be our lucky millionth visitors, and get the royal treatment. Can I come aboard, show you where to park?"

Spa Alexander's effervescent meeter-greeter, an attractive woman in her late forties, wouldn't hear of the hotel's honored millionth visitors languishing overnight in a cramped motor

home. They were shown to a lavish eleventh-floor suite, where a large bouquet of hothouse roses and a magnum of chilled Dom Perignon waited in a silver ice bucket.

“Oh-h-h, Mom!” bubbled Missy, giggling. “Come see the goofy bathroom whatchacallit.”

“What sort of whatchacallit?” questioned Ham.

“She means the bidet,” said Audrey Lee. “Say, this is some fancy layout. Aren’t we the lucky millionth pups!”

“I’m hungry,” observed Teddy, summing up his appraisal of Spa Alexander.

The Moffetts enjoyed a complimentary feast in the crimson flocked, Romanov-crest-speckled splendor of the Imperial Dining Room, where a balalaika ensemble entertained patrons. The staff photographer commemorated the visit by Spa Alexander’s honored millionth visitors with enough photos to half-fill an album. After dinner, Ham sweet-talked his wife into allowing him an hour or two in the casino. Given handfuls of change, Missy and Ted visited the supervised children’s arcade. His wife kibitzed Ham at a Blackjack table until boredom set in. “I’ll take the the kids up to our suite. “Don’t go crazy,” she warned, “and lose all our money.”

“Not to worry, said Ham. “I’m very conservative for an Independent.”

Audrey Lee was barely out of sight when a gangling, deeply suntanned individual clad in blindingly mismatched lavender golf slacks and a chartreuse polo shirt strolled up to the table. An aggressively outthrust lantern jaw complemented the new arrival’s air of self-importance. Shown instant deference by the dealer, he stood back and watched Mr. Moffett’s eighteen fail to hold up when the dealer drew a seven of clubs to her twelve-count. His crocodile smile meant to let the loser down easy, the newcomer was sympathetic. “Tough hit, Mr. Moffett.”

Ham swung around on the stool. The Romanov crest embroidered on the pocket of the stranger’s chartreuse silk shirt caught his eye. “Luck of the draw,” he said, nodding politely.

“Kurile’s the name; friends call me Alex.” Their handshake was made awkward by the hotelier’s ostentatious, square-cut-diamond pinkie ring. “You and your family’re celebrities here at the Spa, Mr. Moffett.”

“We apparently stumbled in at exactly the right time.”

A barracuda-like grin attested to the statement’s accuracy. “Luck of the draw says it all, Moffett. My desk man said you planned to shove off in the morning, so I came over to offer a personal welcome. Why not stick around? We’d enjoy having you as long as you care to stay.”

“That’s kind of you, Mr. Kurile. You’re on the hotel staff?”

“Yeah, in a manner of speaking. I happen to own the joint,” said Alex, with an eruption of volcanic modesty. “What line of business you in, Mr. Moffett?”

“Engineering.” Ham couldn’t decide if Kurile was looking directly at him, or . . .

“That so? Whereabouts?”

“Aerospace General, in the L.A. area.”

“Well, I’ll be dipped in . . . !” Alex clapped a hand to his forehead, a gesture of such resounding sincerity it would have drawn raves from the immortal Konstantin Stanislavski.

“Small world it right! My great-grandpa and his twin bro founded that outfit, except back then it had some mouthful of a name: the Kurilekutzatzov Aeroplane & Airship Company. Say, how about a drink, Moffett?”

“Why, thanks. A bourbon and soda.”

Alex snapped his fingers. A cocktail waitress in a harem costume featuring pneumatic, pushed-up bosoms appeared from nowhere. "Bourbon, soda for the gent. Bring me my usual, and snap it up. Got to be somewhere real soon now."

The drinks arrived in world-class time. Ham raised his glass. "Here's to AGC's founders, Mr. Kurile. Russian expatriates, weren't they?"

"Sure were," declared Alex, tripping over "expatriates." "Real by God Russians," he assured the hotel's lucky millionth guest, "not the stinking Reds who stole their country and turned it into a great big jailhouse. That pair, they were pioneer fliers who made gawdawful sacrifices, beat some hellishly long odds to escape from the commies. Showed lots of spine, too, showed what they were made of. Patterned my whole life after 'em. They're my heroes."

About to interject a comment, Ham was startled to see his host whip out his right arm and consult the gaudy platinum chronometer strapped around his bony wrist. "'Fraid I have t'scat, Moffett. Great talking to you. You and yours be sure and live it up here at the Spa, okay?"

Ham swung back to the table and counted his chips.

Despite his high velocity departure, Alex didn't go far. He caught the eye of the pit boss, tugged the collar of his chartreuse shirt with thumb and forefinger, and dipped his head toward Moffett's back. The pit boss strolled over and whispered to the dealer.

Alex picked up a house telephone and carelessly punched a number. He spoke, but never bothered to listen. "Okay, game's on. Track 'em, see where they go, what they do, but have your gumshoe stay back, not make the tail too obvious." Not waiting for a response, he hung up.

At ten-thirty-seven that evening the elevator deposited Ham in the corridor. He used his electronic key card, grinned at Audrey Lee and handed her a small golden bucket polka-dotted with tiny crimson Romanov crests; stuffed inside was a wad of bills. "Luck of the draw, Audrey Lee. After a welcoming handshake from the hotel's owner, I sat back and raked it in."

"Shh-h-h, the kids're asleep. Goodness! There's a potful of money in here."

"Around fourteen-fifty."

"You won *that* much? Add a free night in this gaudy place, and our vacation's paid for."

"Nothing's too good for Spa Alexander's millionth visitors."

His wife laughed and hugged him, kissed him soundly.

Coming in a winner resurrected Moffett's laurels. He and Audrey Lee enjoyed one another in the master suite's elevated waterbed. She interrupted their connubial bliss twice with a whispered complaint about the bedchamber's "decadent" mirrored ceiling.

* * *

Driving toward Flagstaff late in the afternoon, Ham lifted his foot from the motor home's accelerator. "Uh-oh! Look at the temp gauge, Audrey Lee." Pulling over on the shoulder, he switched off the ignition and set the hand brake. Steam frothed from the RV's short, canted hood.

His wife had been awakened from a doze. "Can it be fixed?" she inquired drowsily.

"Have to find out." Stretched beneath the front suspension, he saw right away that a ruptured lower radiator hose had spilled a trail of coolant along the roadway. He awkwardly slid backward, and gained his feet. "Antifreeze must've eaten through it. The map shows Flagstaff twenty or so miles farther on. I'll hitch a ride, bring back a radiator hose, maybe buy a spare, too. You never know how well these rental rigs are maintained."

"Another 'maybe' is we're maybe the millionth *unlucky* pups! What else can go wrong?"

“Nothing, hopefully. Luck of the draw again. Keep the kids inside. Be back shortly.”

“You’re going to abandon us here?”

“Any point in abandoning me here, too?”

The luck of the draw paradoxically reversed itself. The second vehicle to pass, a white Chevrolet sedan with silver Nevada plates, stopped on the shoulder and backed up. The driver, a taciturn man in his sixties guessed at the whereabouts of a Flagstaff auto parts store, and dropped off Ham a block from the main highway, saying, “You must be living right. I’m heading back the other way in about an hour. Wait there across the street if you want a lift.”

Ham bought two radiator hoses matching the one he had crawled under the camper to remove. The bag of purchases in hand, he waited patiently on the corner.

After his unsuspecting passenger left, the Good Samaritan had driven two blocks, parked and used his cell phone to report Moffett’s problem. Receiving instructions to “stick with him,” he had circled aimlessly for while, then collected Ham for the ride back to his stranded camper and family. Ominous thunderheads were looming above the distant San Francisco Peaks by the time Ham finished installing the hose. He filled the radiator with water from the RV’s holding tank, and had the vehicle back on the highway in minutes.

“Strange,” he said, studying the oversized rearview mirror a while later. “The Chevy two cars back is a dead ringer for the one that hauled me to Flagstaff and back.”

“You told me the fellow was headed the other way.”

“That’s what he said. I may be seeing things, but this white Chevvy has silver Nevada plates, too. There’s a roadside rest just ahead. What say we pull in, overnight there?”

Tired of sitting in the camper, Audrey Lee thought it a wonderful notion.

The stopover turned out to be not all that wonderful. Missy and her mother prepared supper under a minor handicap when the RV began rocking to and fro in a rising gale. By the time dusk fell, a violent thunderstorm was in full swing. Rain lashed the windows. Lightning cracked, briefly illuminating the surrounding scrub forest with flashbulb intensity. Ham did his best to allay Teddy’s fears by counting aloud the seconds between a flash and rumbling thunder as proof that distant lightning was no threat. The boy huddled in silence until a brilliant flash all but coincided with a deafening roar. Teddy screamed and began sobbing hysterically. No one got much sleep that night.

* * *

Driving east to the Four Corners area, they took snapshots in the Petrified Forest and picturesque Monument Valley, overnighted in a KOA Kampground, drove back and roved southward into the Verde Valley, exploring Toozigoot, a long deserted settlement of the Sinaqua people, where Audrey Lee worried about snakes. After a stop in Jerome, once a copper mining center, presently a hillside quasi-ghost town, they circled eastward to Montezuma Castle, an ancient pre-Columbian habitat carved by the Sinaqua in a recess beneath the beetling brow of an escarpment of overhanging limestone.

“Indians sure liked cliff houses,” remarked Melissa Lee.

“With good reason, Missy. The cliffs kept nasty neighbors off their necks.”

Cicadas were making a clicking racket in a clump of cottonwoods as Ham wheeled the RV out of the parking lot. “Be swoggled! It’s there again, the white Chev with Nevada plates.”

“Where?” His wife craned.

“It’s hidden behind that big truck.”

“Sure you’re not seeing things, Ham?”

“No, but if I am it’s a consistent hallucination.”

Branching off on Highway 179, they drove north through spectacular red rock country to Sedona, and on to Oak Creek Canyon, where only a few RV slots were available for campers in high summer. Ham paid the ranger at the entrance station, and located the designated slot. “Sure looks like a nice, restful place. What say we hang out here a while and explore?”

“It’s the best idea you’ve ever had,” applauded his wife. “I feel rootless, like I’d lived my whole life rattling around the endless desert in this little house on wheels.”

* * *

The white Chevrolet’s phlegmatic driver punched his cell phone. “They’re squatting in the Oak Creek Canyon campground. Not sure, but I think the target might’ve made my car.”

“I hear you,” responded a private detective in Sedona. “I’ll send someone else over there in an RV. What slot are they in?”

The driver told him.

“Hightail it back to Lost Wages. A hot job’s waiting for you on a front burner.”

* * *

The summer weather was clement, the evening mild. After supper, Ham and Audrey Lee spent an hour chatting with a retired couple from Pennsylvania whose thirty-foot Winnebago was parked in the adjacent slot. It was pleasant sitting around the open fire pit until a loud party erupted in a nearby campsite. Transistorized rock ‘n roll blared from a ghetto blaster, shattering the quiet, accompanied by raucous shouts liberally sprinkled with profanity.

“Lordy!” said Audrey Lee. “The rangers ought to have a talk with those noisy folks.”

“Damfools’re at it again,” informed the retired gentleman from Pennsylvania. “Last night party time lasted on into the wee hours.”

“Come, kids; time for bed.” Audrey Lee shooed the children into the RV.

Stiff muscled after days behind the wheel, Ham bade the Pennsylvania couple goodnight, brushed his teeth and slipped into pajama bottoms.

“I do so wish those inconsiderate people would put a lid on it,” said Audrey Lee. “They must know other folks are trying to sleep.”

“Oh, I’m sure they know. They just don’t care.” Ham listened to the booming music, the laughter and shouting. After a while he drifted off despite the clamor.

A loud, unmistakable report reverberating through the campground, waking him.

“Was it a backfire?” mumbled Audrey Lee.

“No, I don’t believe so.”

A second gunshot ruptured the sudden silence.

“That does it,” he said. “Stay on the floor with the kids, Audrey Lee.”

“You’re not going out there.”

“Oh, yes I am.” He fumbled into his trousers and shirt, slipped bare feet into unlaced shoes. Unlocking RV’s glove compartment, he took out the .38 caliber revolver he’d borrowed for the vacation. The elderly gentleman from Pennsylvania was standing outside, a deer rifle in his hands. “Hear ‘em?”

“Two shots. Could you tell where they came from?”

“Over thataway. Four couples traveling in a pair of beat-up campers, same bad news jonnie who’ve whooped it up these past nights.”

“Will the rangers handle it?”

“They’d better,” said the other, “or I aim to.”

The campground was ominously quiet, the silence broken only by the night breeze sighing in the pines. Flecking the sky between trees were more stars than Ham had ever seen.

Flashing red lights appeared on the access road. A four-wheel-drive van rolled to a stop beside Ham and the retired gentleman from Pennsylvania. A spotlight blinded them. “Either of you discharge your firearms?” called a ranger.

“No, straight ahead.” Ham swung his arm. “Shots came from over that way.”

“Go back and put away your weapons,” directed the ranger. The Forestry Service vehicle sped off raising dust.

“Like fun I’ll put away my peashooter,” said the Pennsylvanian.

Ham and his acquaintance walked on down the road. They joined a muttering group of ten or fifteen gawkers who were treated to the spectacle of two alcohol-brave youths trying to convince a trio of rangers the gunshots had come from somewhere beyond their campsite. When more than one bystander regaled the rangers with the truth, the offenders foolishly decided to take on three professional outdoorsmen, and were easily subdued.

Backup units from the Sedona Police Department arrived. The incident ended with both handcuffed youths taken into custody.

In the morning, the troublemakers’ camper vehicles were gone. Waxing scornful at breakfast, Audrey Lee said, “A nice, friendly place you picked to stay. Let’s pack up, and leave.”

“Suits me,” said Ham. “How about pulling out first thing in the morning? The hell-raisers are gone. I’d like to spend today loafing.”

“Humm-m-mph! Other neighbors could be just as bad, even worse. Shooting off guns with women and children about is disgusting! I hope we don’t run across any more ruffians.”

“Luck of the draw yet again, Audrey Lee. No way to choose who you park next to. I’m beginning to think camping isn’t all it’s supposed to be.”

They drove into Sedona, stocked the motor home with groceries and arrived back in the Oak Creek Canyon campground just after one o’clock.

“The ladies’ll put this stuff away, Ted. We’ll take the hike I promised, then it’s nap time.”

“No nap,” informed his son.

Strolling with the boy along a trail leading upward at a gentle grade, Ham kept an eye on Teddy chasing squirrels and watched for snakes. According to the rangers, altitude diminished the likelihood of reptiles, but caution seemed prudent. The boy began to droop after plodding a ways farther uphill. He finished the hike back to the campsite perched on his father’s shoulders.

“Hop inside,” said Ham. “Nap time.”

“Not sleepy.” Teddy petted the dachsie tethered on a chain staked outside the RV.

“No nap, and you’ll run out of gas later on,” warned Ham.

Teddy had acquired the aggravating habit of ignoring directives he had no intention of complying with — a genetic trait, according to Audrey Lee, inherited from his father.

“Me for the hammock,” said Ham. “Stick close to Ralph till you get sleepy.”

Ham peeked through the motor home's window. Audrey Lee and Missy were curled up, fast asleep. Heavy-lidded, he sought the webbed hammock he had slung between tree trunks and watched Ted frolic with the unchained dachshund.

He awoke later, and would have sworn he'd barely close his eyes, then opened them again. Neither Teddy nor Ralph was in sight. Rolling out of the hammock, he stretched, knuckled gluey eyelids, surprised to find how far the sun had dropped behind the pines. Easing open the motor home's door, he found his wife and daughter still asleep, checked the overhead bunk, tiptoed to the rear of the vehicle and pulled aside the toilet's accordion traverse privacy curtain.

No Teddy.

No much more than slightly concerned, he went back outside, looked left, looked right, and hustled to scour the area on either side of the access road. "Seen a little boy in a yellow sweatshirt?" he asked a couple relaxing outside their camper.

"No, haven't seen any kids since lunch," the man told him.

He went as far as he thought Teddy might have strayed, backtracked past his own campsite and searched in the opposite direction, stopping twice to make inquiries. The negative responses accumulated, became genuinely worry-making. Concerned, he jogged back to the motor home. Missy and Audrey Lee were sitting outside in folding chairs. "Seen Teddy?"

His wife bounced to her feet. "He isn't with you? Where is he? Where did he go?"

"Must've wandered off. Ralph's gone, too."

"Well, some prize babysitter you are!"

"Save the riot act for later, Audrey Lee. Let's go find him. You and Missy head off that way; I'll look over toward the trail. I've already gone back and forth along the road."

"Shouldn't we tell the rangers he's missing?"

"If he doesn't turn up right away, we will. Don't fret; we'll find him."

* * *

"He did *wha-a-at*?" cried Alexander Kurile. "You saying this third-rate shamus found the kiddie asleep in his RV and drove off with him? Jay-sus! Where do you find dickheads like him, under rocks? A dirt-simple tail job ends up looking like a snatch by some pros ransoming the kid of some millionaire. All the silly bastard had to do was shake the kid awake and haul him back to his own camper. Does it take rocket science smarts to figure that out?"

Fuming, Alex listened impatiently. "Aw, f'Chrissake! So the stupid sumbitch was scared of being tagged by the guy he was tailing. I don't need any scared klutzes on my payroll. What was that? Not no, but hell no! Here's what you tell the stupid bastard do." Using profanely explicit terms, Alex described the private eye's prospective course of action.

* * *

Ham pulled up the metal tent stake and tossed it aside. Coiling Ralph's chain around his forearm, he set off through the extensive campgrounds spreading through a valley hemmed by soaring red rock cliffs. Asking after Teddy in various campsites, and received identical negative responses. A young couple with two small children offered the first clue.

"A black-and-brown dachsie? Yeah, a pooch like that was sniffing around here not long ago, but didn't see a kid in a yellow sweatshirt."

Ham voiced his thanks and hurried on. In a small clearing near the campground's center a standpipe sprouting from a mortared rock pedestal provided multiple faucets where campers could fill water containers. Ralph was lapping at the spill puddle.

Ham whistled shrilly. "Here, Ralph!"

The dachsie's head lifted. He scampered toward Ham, ears flopping. Ham petted the dog, unwound the chain and clipped it to his collar. "Where's Teddy? Where'd you leave him?"

The dachshund reared up, put its forepaws on Ham's knee and looked up at him with soulful brown eyes. Other than that, Ralph was not able to help.

Ham worked his way back toward the campsite in roundabouts and zigzags, and met his wife and Missy coming the other way. Audrey Lee was frantic-plus.

While sympathetic, the mustachioed ranger at the campground gate failed to act very concerned. "Happens now and then, folks. It's summer, still daylight for hours, so no cause for concern yet. Your boy'll turn up, wait and see."

The retired couple from Pennsylvania pitched in and offered assistance by rounding up a half-dozen neighboring campers. Volunteer search parties spread out in all directions.

"You stay in the RV, Missy," directed Ham. "Someone has to be here if he shows up."

"Okay, Dad."

"If he does comes back, toot the horn. Keep hitting it in short beeps. We'll hear it."

"He's been kidnapped!" Audrey Lee was beside herself.

"Pretty likely, ma'am," said the mustachioed ranger. "Nothing like that's ever happened around here."

At eight o'clock, with darkness coming on, the rangers alerted the Sedona Police Department. A widespread search was being organized when a white motor home with blue trim all but identical to the Moffetts' rental unit rolled up to their campsite. A gray-haired older man slid back the side window. "Think maybe I've got something that belongs to you folks."

The side door opened, and Teddy said, "Hi, Mommy."

Audrey Lee collapsed in tears.

"Leave it to Runt Face," said Missy, "to screw things up."

"Pulled out of the next slot over about two o'clock," said the gray-haired gentleman self-consciously. "I was banging along the highway, listening to the radio, when this little fella wandered out of the back. I was a whole lot more surprised than he was."

Oblivious to the excitement he'd caused, Teddy was not contrite. Having mistaken the other camper for his own, he'd crawled inside, gone to sleep. All he said was, "I'm hungry."

The incident had transformed Audrey Lee into a bundle of raw nerve endings. Ham and Melissa Lee had to prepare supper that evening.

"Take us home!" was Audrey Lee's mantra. "Take us straight home!"

* * *

Relieved, but still incensed, Alex called Burton in a fit of pique. "That does it, Frank! No more dinking around with this Mickey Mouse Moffett character. Got any notion what size stink that stone-stupid shamus could've sent up? We've been goosing ghosts trying to sandbag the chief engineer's errand boy. He's a nothing-burger, a gofer not worth all the time, aggravation and expense we've wasted trying to poleax the sumbitch. A double-whammy jinx is what he is. Lady Luck rides his shoulder like one of those plastic saints people stick on car dashboards.

Forget about him. Tear up the kissy, feely pix, and tell the bimbo to pack her undies and get her wiggly butt out of my condo.”

“She . . . has a contract, Alex.”

“Yeah, isn’t that wonderful! Got you to thank for the whole Moffett brainstorm. Tack on an extra thanks for reminding me she’s got me sewed up all legal and proper. I can live with that, but f’Chrissake tell her to ease off on the damn spending. Talk to her, and talk turkey!”

“I will, Alex.”

* * *

In early morning not long after sunup, the RV swept down the switchbacks of Yarnell Hill and rolled out into Audrey Lee’s endless desert. Halfway to Blythe, with the temperature one hundred and eleven degrees in nonexistent shade, the vehicle blew a tire, swerved radically, rumbled along the shoulder a dozen yards more and desperately tried to leave the highway.

The shredded tire was on the inner rim of the vehicle’s double rear wheels. Ham spent forty-five minutes struggling with the unfamiliar hydraulic jack, and wrestling with the heavy, ungainly wheel and tire. Sagging in a state of near-exhaustion due to the furnace heat, he eventually got the spare installed, remount the ruined tire and wheel on the vehicle’s rear rack. He crawled back aboard the RV red-faced and dehydrated, drowning in rivulets of perspiration.

“Ah, the unspoken joys of camping!” Repeatedly dousing his face with tepid water, he toweled semi-dry. “We have to take it easy. If this inferno wipes out another tire, we’ve had it.”

“Take us straight home!” encouraged his wife.

Somewhere near the Joshua Tree National Forest, on the highway leading past Palm Springs, the RV’s other lower radiator hose let go. Fuming and fussing and cursing with feral intensity, Ham thanked God and all the Archangels for endowing him with the foresight to purchase not one radiator hose, but a spare as well.

It was after one o’clock in the morning when they rolled into the San Fernando Valley. Taking turns, Ham carried his sleeping children to their beds, brought in only valuables from the RV, mixed himself a stiff drink, fell into bed and did a fast fade.

In early afternoon the next day, Audrey Lee followed Ham in the new Ford as he returned the RV to the rental agency. Lodging a very stiffly worded complaint about the unit’s atrocious lack of maintenance, he twice made it a point to relate how much grief the shoddy maintenance had caused. The salesman callously laughed off his radiator and blown tire adventures, and when he tried to charge Ham for the blown tire they nearly came to blows.

23 - Fruitcake

A satellite phone clutched in his dripping right hand, Alex performed an ungainly hop-step he and he only would think of as a happy jig. “Outstanding, Grid! Way t’go! Soon now we’ll have Mason’s motherhumpers right where they want us.”

Gridley analyzed the statement. He decided not to argue.

Wet because a manservant had dared to interrupt his morning swim, Alex hung on every word the lobbyist spoke, and cried, “Bolshoi! So when’s this audit thing due to come off? Uh-huh, uh-huh. Great! Remind me again what C-O-R stands for. Cor-po-rate Op-er-a-tions Re-view. Got it! So why do the government audit yahoos want to hold off their attack for weeks?”

Gridley explained.

Using a terry cloth towel to one-handedly dry his face and brush back the dark hair plastered to his forehead, Alex grimaced angrily. “Sumbitch wants *how* much? Forget about it! When I need action from some two-bit Air Force captain I’ll sweeten the pot, but ol’ Alex won’t sit still for a heist without a gun jammed in his gut. You tell the Pentagon Pirate if he wants to keep on cashing in on my good nature he’ll have to stir his butt, speed things up. Dropping a tough one on Mason’s fat head sounds like it’ll come in a winner, but we need it *now*, not in weeks and weeks, whenever the audit clowns get around to it.”

Listening, Kurile’s wandered past his peculiar freeform swimming pool and across the rolled and manicured lawn to the centerpiece of his estate, a castle-like apparition he’d overheard someone he’d fired on the spot describe as a scaled-down Disneyland architectural reject. “Hold it, Grid. What brand of crap you shoveling now? So civil service loafers do the audit. So what? There has to be a way to make the audit march. Aw, come off it! Dough always talks loud and clear, and you’re talking like a man with a paper asshole. Use you head. Figure out a way to hurry things up, and fill me soonest on what Captain Greedy has to say.

“In the meantime,” added Alex, changing subjects, “talk to Burton about the other audit? He what . . . ? Frank thinks AGC’s squeaky clean on the mischarging scam, thinks this COR thing will make a bigger train wreck. I flat out don’t agree. There *has* to be a dirty rooster crowing on top of Mason’s woodpile. If the snoops dig deep enough, upend enough moneybags and tote the loose change, for damn sure chunks of rotten cheese will turn up. You tell that nogoodnik fly boy he’s getting paid to goose ‘em into digging deep enough. One thing, more: make damn sure he twigs on how super-important it’ll be to hassle AGC. Yeah, call me any time, day’re night.”

Angrier than normal, Alex let the expensive satellite phone drop from his hand. It bounced off the glass-topped poolside table, clunked to the flagstone terrace.

The bikini-clad brunette recumbent on an adjacent chaise lounge owned a tan so golden smooth it looked cosmetically engineered. Pulling her sunglasses up over her forehead, she eyed Kurile, her expression one of haughty disdain. “You really ought to wear a swimsuit, Alex. The cold water makes your ying-yang look all shrunk up and shriveled.”

“I’d rather skinny dip,” said Alex, still angry. “Give it a whirl yourself, Doll. Get wet and we’ll play submarine hide-the-salami. My ying-yang will look better real fast.”

“Oh, you’re so crude!”

“That’s me.” He tugged the string of her bikini bra, let it snap against her back. “Crude, lewd, rude and tattooed, that’s me. Now get your cute tush in the water.”

* * *

“Bill, it’s a concern. A serious concern, I tell you,” emphasized Mr. Mason.

Slouched at his desk, Ladd toyed with the stub of a red pencil. “No argument,” he said, sounding too nonchalant for the CEO’s uses, “if only one in a long queue of concerns.”

Concern written indelibly in the furrows of his brow, Mr. Mason said crossly, “What I simply can’t fathom is why, for what reason, we’re suddenly targeted for a COR audit. Lately, it’s almost as if someone in authority had issued a commandment to get AGC!”

“Same thought passed through my weary brain,” admitted Ladd, wishing the big boss would find something else to do so he could get back to work.

“It’s a near-crisis situation.”

“Aw, c’mon, Ben. Crises come,” philosophized Ladd, “and crises go. Pulling all the bits and pieces together, getting everything shipshape for the audit will take gallons of skull sweat and beaucoup ergs of extra effort, but we’ll live through it. As for being targeted, maybe the Defense Contract Audit Agency is short of work, needs something to keep its people busy.”

Disconcerted to hear the other’s cavalier dismissal of a concern which in his opinion reared head, shoulders and torso above ordinary concerns, Mr. Mason cast a vexatious glance at his lolling fountainhead of technical expertise. “I do wish you’d take this latest threat seriously, Bill. An unfavorable COR report could wreak monumental havoc throughout the organization. Think what it will mean: experts sifting through our proprietary directives, circulating through the facility, interrupting the work of employees in order to ask question after question.”

The chief engineer lit a fresh cigarette. “Not overreacting a tad, are you, Ben?”

“No, I don’t believe so,” denied Mr. Mason. “Of course Aerospaceplane’s premature budgetary overrun and minor schedule slippages waved a red flag at the Pentagon and Houston, but a low audit may spur our customers to solicit open bids for follow-on production and test.”

Ladd could not resist saying, “Get behind early, and we gain time to catch up.”

“I don’t find your jocular attitude at all stimulating, Bill.”

“Sorry, but I have to say we landed the R&D phase on the strength of past performance, manned spacecraft experience, and the pro rata cost of all anticipated missions, then committed to a tight schedule Roelf Cornelius also believes is unrealistic. Despite that, it wouldn’t make sense for either customer to go elsewhere for test and production contracts.”

“I’m forced to disagree,” said Mr. Mason. “A negative COR report could shake the entire corporation to its foundation. Recall the black eyes other firms received, the severe penalties incurred? It could happen to us, especially with Senator Dismyre on the warpath again. He recently dished out his asinine Silver Chimera Award to Imhof International.”

“Blame the media,” said Ladd.

Mr. Mason blinked in surprise. “I doubt if the media had anything to do with it.”

“For years . . . No, decades,” declared Ladd, “the honorable senior senator from Wisconsin and the media have engaged in an incestuous love affair. Dismyre’s crusades generate sensational copy every time he mounts his white charger to nag and bully the industry, then awards his Silver Chimera doorstop to every DoD contractor who gets hung out to dry over procurement red tape, falling off the specification carousel, or another woolly, irrelevant discrepancy. The smarter culprits swallow their pride and take their lumps in silence, but the dumber ones shuffle excess costs, or try and sweep them under the rug. Despite that, if a suspected cover-up does come to light, Dismyre’s suspicion flowers and immediate, front page media coverage ensues.”

“I can safely say,” insisted Mr. Mason, “nothing of that nature occurs at AGC.”

“Can you honestly and safely say that, Ben?”

“A virtual certainty,” declared Mr. Mason, warm under the collar over the inference to honesty. “We would never dare attempt to conceal such an indiscretion, and we never shall while I’m in the driver’s seat. The preliminary design review cost-allocation rigmarole didn’t bother me half so much as this upcoming COR audit.”

“Ben, you’re forcing me to ask once again,” said Ladd slowly, “how you can be so certain we’ve never engaged in costing sleight of hand, or anything like it?”

“You aren’t serious.”

“Oh, yes I am,” asserted Ladd. “The Material Requirements Procedure guidelines foisted off by a nest of fiscal bureaucrats are . . . Something you should know, Ben, but perhaps haven’t been told, is that MRP, our government’s own epic method, greatly simplifies computerized dollar and cents chicanery. Do you really believe some poor department manager desperately trying to cover his ass by juggling funding from one program to another will march into your office and *tell* you about it?”

Mr. Mason frowned severely. “Very well, you’ve made your point. But isolated instances of such chicanery would be —”

“— like having a mild case of cancer,” supplied Ladd.

Looking harried, Mr. Mason stroked his jaw, but made no response.

“Cost, schedule, and similar instances of juggling,” insisted Ladd, “are a fact of life in this ditzzy business. You are aware of that, but won’t admit it. There are classic examples.”

* * *

Belatedly realizing he’d punched the chief engineer’s soapbox button, Mr. Mason rose, clasped his hands behind his back and began pacing back and forth.

“What Wisconsin’s honorable senior senator and his media sycophants fail to mention,” began Ladd, “is that government bureaucrats serve only themselves.” He related the manner news releases trumpeting Dismyre’s success at ferreting out contractor crimes never got around to informing the public of the cause: stringent military specifications those selfsame defense contractors were forced to comply with, or the corollary fact that said specifications were tiered in such a way that each document pertinent to a particular material, process, part or device automatically invoked a cascading multitude of additional specifications, and what was worse each in turn invoked yet others.

“Do yourself a favor,” suggested Ladd. “Wade through a convoluted chain of MIL specs or Naval Weapons specs for yourself. You’ll soon realize why the poor devils stuck with adhering to the letter of contractual documentation requirements get nailed to Dismyre’s silvery cross.” Vexed by his own words, he yanked open a desk drawer. “Ever show you my favorite spec?”

“No, I don’t believe so,” denied AGC’s long-suffering president and CEO.

“Here, take a gander at MIL-F-1499.”

“What does it cover?”

“Fruitcake.”

“You’re joshing.”

“Like hell! Here, let me read a few choice tidbits from MIL-F-1499. It calls for, ‘Orange peel thoroughly deragged and processed with sugar and corn syrup to not less than seventy-two percent soluble solids.’ Oh, and here’s a real gem: ‘Flavoring shall be pure or artificial vanilla extract in such quantities that its presence shall be organoleptically detected’.”

“Organowhat . . . ?” asked Mr. Mason. “I assume it has some obscure meaning in English.”

“Yep.” Ladd’s contemptuous snort underscored his contempt for the topic. “It instructs whichever chef has been assigned to develop, design and fabricate, but not simply ‘bake,’ a fruitcake to dump in vanilla extract until it can either be either smelled or tasted. Here’s another beaut: ‘For the proof of the pudding taste test, a fruitcake shall be bisected horizontally or vertically with a sharp knife, shall not crumble, nor show any compression streaks, gummy

centers, soggy areas, be excessively dry or over-processed, and shall display an even grain structure’.”

“Who in the world put out that specification?”

“The Army’s RD&E Command,” Ladd told him. “Compounding the felony, this is a ‘G’ revision, meaning there were six previous “A” through “F” issuances, plus of course the ‘No Change’ original.”

“Incredible!” The CEO wagged his head.

“What I’m trying to put across is just this: if a ‘how to’ on baking a frigging fruitcake is defined in language and terms applicable to an organic chemistry lab, why is it so difficult for anyone not in the know to imagine how the specs read for Herb Mauch’s complex electronic SPAR units we’ll depend on to ensure ORDART’s smooth rendezvous and remate with ALLP?”

“Um, yes. I appreciate the . . . difficulties.” Mr. Mason searched for a graceful way to revert the topic back to the upcoming COR audit.

R&D’s chief engineer was on a roll, however. In the same acerbic vein, he described the need to to tear his staff engineer away from other vital efforts and send him to a NASA facility, or liaise with subcontractors scattered across the country crying for help in interpreting specifications, or resolving associated quandaries, conflicts and inconsistencies. As a concrete example, he cited Moffett’s multiple visits to a dip-brazing specialty firm subcontracted to furnish housings for all varieties of ALLP/ORDART electronic units made necessary because in the entire L.A. basin only one or two government certified dip-braze vendors remained who any longer bothered to return bids on G-jobs.

“G-jobs . . . ?” asked Mr. Mason.

“Government contracts,” clarified Ladd. “Certified suppliers are burdened with a backlog of commercial orders for thin-walled commercial waveguides and other specialty parts, and they have been burned too often by government regulations, procedures and specifications to bother.”

Assuming Ladd was ready to step down from his soapbox, the CEO edged toward the door, but Ladd had not finished his say. “Our government’s perpetually heist by its own petard, and self-serving, ultra-media-conscious ‘public servants’ like Senator Dismyre damn well know it. They refuse to acknowledge it because doing so would involve the world’s most difficult exercise: turning one’s forefinger around and aiming it at one’s own breastbone.”

“I was . . . uh, marginally aware of that,” faltered the CEO.

* * *

Weary of the lecture, Mr. Mason said, “Peace, Bill. I’m glad we had this chat, but it does nothing to alleviate my concern. Let’s return to the here and now, shall we?”

Ladd shrugged, settled back and withdrew a cigarette from the pack on his desk.

“Duly forewarned,” began Mr. Mason, “we cannot afford laxity when preparing for this COR Audit. We have to squarely face the challenge posed by an in-depth examination of how past and present contractual accounts were handled, plus corporate practices and procedures, and volumes of ancillary documentation. Should we be unprepared, or the audit be mishandled, it could weaken the entire corporate structure. That’s why I intend to lay the primary burden on Blair’s broad shoulders. I want you to assist him as much as possible. Will you do that for me?”

Ladd’s downcast eyes had glazed. He flicked his aged Ronson and exhaled smoke. “Sure, Ben. Pulling together and updating the material will be a huge job.”

“What is absolutely imperative,” declared Mr. Mason, “will be a swift, accurate and comprehensive review and update of all current internal documentation, with emphasis on the flowdown of information and technical direction to each departmental function in all three divisions. We simply must bring the material up to snuff expeditiously, and less than two weeks remain in which to do so.”

“I’ll sit down with Blair, hash it out.” Ladd’s intercom buzzed. “Yes, Min . . . ? Oh, okay. Sounds like an important call for you, Ben.”

Having notified his executive assistant where he would be, Mr. Mason got on the phone and listened impatiently. “Yes, Ruth. Tell him I’ll be there very shortly. Thank you.” AGC’s leader waved a hasty farewell and exited the office on the fly.

The chief engineer propped his elbows on the desk, put his head in his hands and groaned. “Sorenson! God help us!”

R&D Division’s acting VP and GM arrived at work bright and early — well, early — the next morning. Clueless about the gist of what his saintly corporate father was instructing him to do, he accepted the crucial assignment with total equanimity.

24 - COR Crisis

Peripheral vision always on guard let Farnsworth detect Moffett as he approached the layout drafting area, and he deftly slid a blueprint over the *Wall Street Journal*’s current edition. Max broke off his whistled rendition of the allegro vivace march from Kabalevsky’s “The Comedians,” and nodded a polite greeting. Perched on his footstool, bent over at an acute angle, Bundy grumbled and slashed at the drawing on his board with feral intensity.

Ham accosts his victim without preamble. “Little Joe, how do you receive your task assignments? What guidelines do you follow in completing such task assignments?”

Tongue between his teeth, his nose millimeters from the drawing, the wannabe rangehand jerked bolt upright. Doffing his odious, detested horn-rimmed spectacles, he peered myopically at Ham. “Those’re trick questions, right?”

“No, as straightforward as questions can become. If I’m not mistaken, the drawing on your board is a sheet of the ALLP flight deck inboard profile.”

“Kee-rect. Sheet nine t’nail it down tight, except also the umpty-eleventh revision.”

“Fine! That’s settled. Now pay attention, and think before you answer. How do you know you’re supposed to be working on sheet nine, and not something else?”

“A cinch. When I run out of stuff to annoy myself with, I turn to my fearless leader and yell, ‘What’s next in the pickle barrel, Yam?’”

Yaminishi’s stainless-steel-and-leather salute corroborated Little Joe’s response.

“A marginally acceptable answer,” conceded Ham. “I won’t pick nits. Now, then, how do you know you’re revising sheet nine in accordance with AGC drafting practices?”

“You’ve got t’be kidding! Been busting my buns over this roll of vellum forever and a day. Damn near every line’s engraved in my poor burnt-out brain. The ornery shepherders over in Aero Division whip out a new set of loft releases every twenty minutes. Keeping up with those buzzards’ is a merry-go-round that makes me —”

“Whoa! Back up a hair,” urged Ham. “What I should have asked is what company procedures do you follow in preparing an outline drawing? What sections of the R&D Drafting Manual do you refer to for guidelines?”

“Huh?”

“What I should’ve asked,” said Ham wearily, “instead of what I said I should’ve asked, is what will you tell an auditor if he or she asks the same ‘trick’ questions I just asked?”

“Dizzy shit like this makes my head hurt,” complained Little Joe.

“Serious questions,” said Moffett, “will require serious answers, Joe. You’ve seen the bulletin announcing the upcoming audit everyone’s sweating about.”

“Who hasn’t? If the snoops hit on me, I’ll tap-dance a bit, then sic ‘em on Yam.”

“Sorry, that won’t work,” informed Ham. “Every employee an auditor pulses will have to quote chapter and verse of any document applicable to his or her job. That’s why people are working around the clock to review and update every scrap of AGC’s ‘how to’ paperwork.”

The longer Little Joe pondered the declaration, the more contorted his pinched features became. Deciding to shift tactics, he said, “Hey, I wasn’t just blowing smoke, Ham. Ever since the goings-on began over in ‘C’ Building I’ve been humping like there’s no tomorrow. If you think that’s a snow job, ask Yam.”

To Moffett’s surprise, Yaminishi concurred with the drafter’s amazing disclosure. “It’s true. He’s been Wonder Boy this past week.”

“Congrats!” Ham eyed Little Joe, his air speculative. “What ‘C’ Building goings-on brought about the miraculous transformation?”

“Not up on that, huh? Okay, I’ll spell it out. Here in Doc Ladd’s spread we’re working like the hammers of hell on layouts and outline drawings, kee-rect?”

“Kee-rect,” mimicked Ham.

“So to sort of speed things up, a herd of subcontract temporaries were brought in to work overtime hours in every R&D and Spacecraft engineering spread, kee-rect?”

“I’ll take your word for it. Fade to the punch line, Joe.”

“Better sit down to hear it,” advised the drafter. “It’s a doozy. Whilst us wranglers in R&D and the temps over in Spacecraft are hopping around like six-legged dogies, in Aircraft Division guys’re getting axed right ‘n left. Talk about company policies and procedures! The daily dozen we all put in at AGC is done under the same slimy policies and procedures as always. Front office honchos yank in temporary dingbats through the front door whilst shoving reg’lars out the back door. More things change, more they stay the same.”

Ham turned to the lead drafter. “Is that true?”

Yaminishi confirmed Little Joe’s woeful tale. “Last Friday a week, some production workers, several administrators and shop supervisors in Aero received layoff notices. Losing the advanced “stealth” fighter contract a while back hurt Aircraft Division badly, halfway driving a stake through the heart of any new aero business. Backorders for both commercial jetliners have also practically dried up.”

Having survived a full year of unemployment as well as collateral insecurity, the specter of recurring joblessness chilled Ham. “I’ll scratch around,” he said, “see what I can find out. Meanwhile, be a good idea to stir yourself, Joe. At least familiarize yourself with pertinent sections of the drafting manual. Is that too much to ask?”

“No sweat, Ham! I’ll definitely for sure think to bone up for serious on that very thing.”

“That goes for the rest of you, too,” Ham told the drafters at large. “Oh, one thing more, Joe. Can I have a peek at your timecard?”

The drafter snatched up his prominently displayed weekly timecard and passed it over. Ham compared the scribbled, hyphenated fifteen-digit alphanumeric sequence to a computer printout of valid charge numbers. He sighed. “Hate to say you’re out of bed, Joe. This charges your hours to ORDART account, but you’re working on an ALLP inboard profile.”

“Can’t be. Here, give me that thing.” Retrieving the horn-rimmed spectacles, Little Joe had difficulty deciphering his own hastily scratched numbers and letters. “How’d that happen? Keeping track of strings of goofy charge numbers is a pistol of a problem.”

“This pistol is loaded, too,” said Ham, “and also cocked, with a round in the chamber. All I can tell you is that if a COR auditor catches you mischarging you could soon be talking about timecard problems in the past tense.”

* * *

“Charles, oh, Charles! It’s gratifying to see you up and about, looking *so* well.” Mr. Mason levitated himself, came around his desk displaying excessive bonhomie and extended his hand to be shaken. “Feeling much better, are we?”

“Better than what?” inquired Charles Allison. Considerably thinner than at the time of his breakdown, his countenance seemed paradoxically bloated. Dark-circles under his eyes enhanced his woebegone expression.

The retort earned a wary blink. Mr. Mason retracted his unshaken hand.

Furloughed during his extended recovery, Charles Allison looked as if he had opened death’s door, looked inside, and not liked what he’d seen. “They keep me pumped full of tranquilizers, and reassure me daily, saying I’m on the road back. It’s like getting out of jail to escape from that . . . that *place*. You’re looking chipper, Ben.”

“At the moment, as well as can be expected. Charles. Sit down, sit down,” he invited, “and tell me all about it. Isn’t it grand to be back at AGC once again?”

“Uh, grand . . . Virginia’s been a brick, can’t do enough for me.”

“Splendid, splendid!” Mr. Mason toyed nervously with a sterling silver letter opener. Touching its sharp point, he shot an anxious glance at the recuperating executive, and casually if noisily dropped it in a drawer. “Charles, you’ve been sorely missed, let me tell you. When can we expect to have your invaluable services again? ”

“I’m not . . .” The stricken executive averted his gaze. “No way to find out, Ben. I ask, and ask, but they tell me hardly anything. What’s been happening in my absence?”

“Oh, the usual multiplying controversies, quandaries and conundrums, recently compounded by . . . Charles, have you been informed of the upcoming COR Audit?”

Allison’s eyes defocussed. He didn’t respond.

Mr. Mason described in less than glowing terms the plant-wide trauma soon to be inflicted upon the company. He mentioned the long hours employees were putting in to prepare for squads of government snoops certain to create all varieties of havoc by delving into the workings of major and minor programs alike, up to and including every facet of corporate operations. He announced Aerospaceplane’s lagging R&D phase was certain to become a primary target of intensive questioning.

“By extraordinary effort, Blair has stayed on top of everything in R&D,” asserted Mr. Mason. “Grasping the nettle firmly in your absence, he has things well in hand. The team under his direction has updated practically every policy and procedure document in existence, and promised me the documentation will be in bed when the audit team arrives.”

“Blair?” Allison’s vacuous stare disconcerted his erstwhile and prospective leader.

“Blair Sorenson,” clarified Mr. Mason. “He’s done an exemplary job sitting in for you, Charles. I don’t know what we’d have done without him. Why, the way he’s dropped his normal workload, pitched in and buckled down is . . .” The CEO trailed off, aghast at the bug-eyed grimace that transformed the other’s rotund, hag-ridden features into those of a rapacious, antediluvian predator.

“That simp!” cried Allison explosively.

“Now, Charles . . .” Mr. Mason swallowed his reprimand, opting for conciliation. “I realize your . . . indisposition may have affected your judgment regarding certain matters, but you simply must appreciate —”

“Sorenson’s an amoral, burr-headed simp! If he had a brain,” railed Charles Allison much too stridently for Mr. Mason’s comfort, “he’d be dangerous.”

Mr. Mason’s attempt to administer soothing balm fell short. “Let me help you, Charles. Tell me how I can make you aware of how very wrong you are? Lord knows I’m no psychologist! Nevertheless, I feel it my duty to advise you that you *must* plant both feet firmly on the ground and try to perceive reality, to see things as they are, not as you imagine them to be. When I told Blair you might drop by this morning, he seemed eager to see you, fill you in on the happenings during your absence. He’s coming to —”

“Coming!” shrieked Allison. “That amoral simp is coming *here*?”

Mr. Mason was speechless.

Red-rimmed eyes bulging out of their sockets, the once and future VP’s breath came in gasps. Lips drawn back in a tooth-baring rictus, he uttered a feral snarl.

The intercom’s buzz doubled Mr. Mason’s mounting alarm. He punched a button. “Ruth, it might be best for Mr. Sorenson to stay in the . . .” Realizing he had spoken too late, he broke off when the door swung wide, and Sorenson’s totemesque figure occluded the doorway. “Charles,” he said, look who’s stopped by to —”

“Uhhnn-grrr-uh-h-h!” Fighting to overcome gravity, Allison surged up out of the chair, his jaws snapping like those of a famished wolf, and loosed a gargling shriek, launching himself horizontally at Sorenson in the manner of a berserk NFL linebacker.

It took the combined strength of Mr. Mason, his executive assistant, a hastily summoned vice president and a security guard and to pry loose Allison’s death grip on Sorenson’s throat.

* * *

“How’s it coming?”

“Could be worse,” Ham told his boss, “could be better. Two whopping problem areas are Product Assurance and Materials & Processes Engineering, where the specifications are an ungodly ball of snakes. PA’s inspection records are, to be polite, less than complete.”

“It figures,” said Ladd, chucking aside his red pencil. “Awake or sleeping, I knew sooner or later we’d be done in by the practice of translating government specs into AGC specs.”

“The M&P manager,” said Ham, “insisted that the average techs and assemblers on the manufacturing floor isn’t qualified to interpret full-blown government specifications.”

“That is one of the truest of all true statements,” said Ladd, “yet who *is* qualified? The bureaucratic geniuses who write those documents couldn’t work per their own directives, let alone keep pace with a daisy-chain of revisions.”

“What can we do about it?”

Ladd lifted both hands helplessly. “Our best, as usual. The team working under Mr. Sorenson’s inspired guidance supposedly has most of the corporate documents squared away, but that’s relatively meaningless. The responses verbally quizzed people are what scares me. With layoffs in Aero Division, animosity toward the management ogres running this place has rocketed above the ordinary level of antagonism among hourly employees.”

Ham spoke of the grumbling he’d overheard, blaming the minor wave of layoffs for generating discontent, since most pink slips had gone to unionized hourly employees.

His mood somber, Ladd nodded. “Yeah, we catch hell when blue-collar guys get caught in the cutback gears. At first glance, letting employees go makes bringing in temp administrative help seem unjust, but production assemblers and machinists either won’t or can’t double as drafters or designers, and they refuse to serve on an interim basis as clerks or other types of office helpers. It’s an ancient headache that lacks a modern solution.”

“Couldn’t certain hourly employees be retrained?”

“Sure, and it’s been done. But who pays the retraining freight? The union insists that the rationale for retaining people be slanted toward length of tenure, yet neither years on the payroll or experience are necessarily accurate gauges of an individual’s current and potential worth. That aside, Ham, I’ve concluded that something peculiar is and has been taking place. Can’t put my finger on what it is, but a sixth sense tells me it’s like AGC’s suddenly come under attack by some malignant, invisible force. I know that sounds strange, but it sure does seem like the case.”

After a thoughtful pause, he added, “Think of it this way. With zero warning we’re hit with an attempt to organize our professional people via a campaign that must’ve cost the UTB kingpins a pretty penny. Then for no obvious reason the Aerospaceplane preliminary design review gets shoved forward weeks. Now we’re facing potential repercussions from an upcoming COR audit that strikes me as not only uncalled for, but crafted to impact slackening business and downsizing in Aircraft Division. On top of all that, the budgeteers tell us there’s been a quiet, persistent, behind-the-scenes examination of AGC’s past and present cost accounting practices. The string of consecutive harassments don’t add up. It’s as if AGC’s been spitted on a four-pronged trident, but I can’t get a handle on who could be wielding it, or why.”

Reflecting on what he had just said, Ladd said, “Be that as it may, Ham, we should be grateful R&D Division employs relatively few people. Deciding who goes and who stays is a management function everybody detests; it’s why I’ve stuck with the technical side of the game. Hardware and software problems can be dealt with in hardhearted linear fashion, but no entirely sane individual relishes passing sentence on some hardworking individual’s bread-and-butter existence. Yeah, loathing cutbacks is one thing, but sad tidings could be in store. If this COR Audit turns rancid, we could see vigorous surplusings in Spacecraft, Aircraft, and here in R&D.”

“Surely not while struggling to bring ALLP/ORDART up to speed.”

Ladd's expression softened. "Oh, didn't say it was likely, but our wondrous white elephant is no sacred cow; it can be struck down same as any program. Still and all, speculation's futile; it's healthier to stay optimistic. Saddle up now, Ham. Leave me to wrestle with this paperwork mountain that never dwindles."

* * *

Early on the dreaded morning government auditors descended on AGC in flocks and coveys and squadrons. Circulating through the sprawling facility like swarms of hungry locusts, the auditors avidly and indiscriminately devoured clerks, electronic assemblers, inspectors, scientists, tool designers, fork-lift operators, scientists, machinists, engineers, truck drivers, software specialists, managers, and statisticians.

The corporate documents Sorenson's team had labored so long and hard to reconcile and update were virtually ignored, and only lip service given to a review of AGC compliance with contractual specifications and obligations. The auditors apparently had been directed to perform concentrated, all-out selective interrogations of haphazardly brainwashed, indifferently coached employees, with especial regard to what was expected of each. Fuzzily worded instructions had informed all employees that the auditors were to be shown "a cooperative and candid interface," and that those employees randomly selected for questioning were to be "responsive and positive," but were not to attempt answering queries outside their particular fields of expertise or experience. Primarily, the auditors sought the answers to three key questions:

Were AGC written procedures and instructions readily available?

Did employees understand these procedures and instructions?

If so, were written procedures and instructions being properly adhered to?

The audit therefore went wrong at the start, due in part to the uncooperative attitudes and defensive, antagonistic responses of employees being interrogated.

* * *

An elderly machinist wearing a shop apron stood beside his vertical milling machine, controlling the feed on the tool bit as a curl of aluminum alloy unraveled from the part in production. A bespectacled Department of the Air Force auditor in her late forties watched the machine turn before offering a tentative, "Good morning."

"Hiya," said the elderly machinist.

"May I ask what exact part you're working on?"

"Sure thing. 'Exact' Shop Order's right there on the work bench."

Using a clipboard, the auditor recorded the Shop Order listed bar-coded identity, part number, and date of issue. "May I ask how you obtain instructions to make the part?"

"Sorry, say again, Lady . . . ?"

"The part in your machine, what tells you how to make it?"

"Oh, the blueprint. See there, it's clipped to the Shop Order?"

The woman cast a doubtful eye at the blueprint. "But the, uh, blueprint's tightly folded. Don't you refer to it while making the part?"

"No need. I've run sixty-some castings like this. Know that print inside 'n out."

"I . . . understand. Who interprets the blueprint for you?"

"Does which?"

"Who explains the blueprint's, er, 'how to make' instructions?"

“I do.” The elderly machinist favored the auditor with a hard stare. “Me, I figure the damn thing out my ownself. Been running cockamamie machines like this forty-some years.”

“I see. Doesn’t a foreman, shop supervisor, someone in authority assist you when it comes to interpreting the blueprint?”

The elderly machinist, less than thirty-six days from honorable retirement, asserted himself boldly. “Nobody has t’tell me how to read a blueprint, Lady. Now scoot your nosy nose out of here and let me do my work.”

* * *

A pimple-prone young stock clerk picked up his lunch pail and jacket. Making ready to depart after a long night shift, an auditor accosted him. “May I have your full name and employee number?”

Yeah, but . . . Hey, I’m clocked out,” protested the clerk. “Got something heavy going this morning. Maybe you should hit on the day guy.”

“Where is he?”

“Be here any second now.”

“Hmm-m-m,” the auditor said suspiciously. “This will take only minutes.”

The clerk reluctantly set down his lunch pail and jacket.

After logging the youth’s personal data, the auditor wanted to know how the parts and equipment in stores were controlled and distributed.

“Everything’s inputted ‘n outputted by computer.”

“I see. What process is used to, uh, pull items out of storage?”

“Y’mean how do we kit parts, send ‘em to assembly? The Manufacturing Planning computer’s programmed to spit out a hardcopy kit list, and the S&R system puts together —”

“S and R . . . ?”

“Storage and retrieval.” The stock clerk shot an anxious glance at the wall clock. “Sorry, got to run.”

“We’re not finished.”

“Tough!” The youth shrugged. “I work the night shift. They quit paying me six’re seven minutes ago.” Grabbing his lunch pail and jacket, he bolted out the door.

* * *

In “D” Building’s Quality Assurance bay, a pair of technicians had attached to a large steel fixture an electronic “black box” about to undergo formal qualification acceptance testing before delivery to the customer. The auditor, a fidgety, middle-aged auditor surveyed the activity and made a timid request. “Can I trouble you briefly? I’d like to ascertain precisely what you do here, how you go about it, and what instructions you receive to accomplish the activities.”

“This’s shake, rattle ‘n roll country,” announced the bearded technician. “We do vibration acceptance testing on flight units.”

“Mus’ be jelly, ‘cause the jam don’t shake like that,” amplified his companion, a tall Afro-American man with droopy eyelids and an ivory-laden grin.

“Beg pardon . . . ?”

The bearded technician said, “Pay Josh no nevermind. Had his brains scrambled by an IED over in Iraq. Ask away, Mister.”

The auditor showed the technicians his credentials, logged their names, employee numbers, plus the part and serial number of the black box prepared for testing. He questioned the procedures involved in conducting a test.

“Not a whole lot to it, really. Between these two shake tables, we bounce the box one axis at a time in all three axes. The brush recorders there behind the glass log amplitude and acceleration levels. Stick around and watch a run if you want. We already shook the bare-bones shake fixture to peg its resonant frequency. Soon’s the analytical honcho shows up, we’ll send the box up to twenty-five gees, RMS, in the ‘Y’ axis.”

“I . . . uh, R-M-S. Yes, I see,” said the auditor, who saw next to nothing. “What specifications do you follow when establishing the, uh, criteria . . .”

“Don’t hardly ever see a spec,” put in Josh. “Only scribbled instructions.”

“Really?” The auditor seemed perplexed. “Without a test specification to follow, how do you determine . . . ? I mean, what formal document supplies the information?”

“Formal . . . ?” The bearded tech chuckled. “A different data dump lands on us with every shake, Mister. The dynamic analysis honcho, he should be here any minute now.”

“Gang of super heavy-duty thinkers in that bunch,” remarked Josh. “Specially their head guy, Rupe.”

Looking for all the world like an innocent Asian schoolboy, lower-case rupert lin chose that moment to enter the test bay. The auditor dutifully logged his name, function and other pertinent data, then repeated the queries previously addressed to the technicians.

Lower-case rupert lin studied the auditor through thick, outrageously configured lenses, and wordlessly handed him a sheet of stationery, its letterhead featuring a fire-breathing Chinese dragon, below it an array of cryptic ideographs intermixed with equations.

The auditor made no attempt to decipher the close-set lines of spidery calligraphy nestled between rows of symbolic logic. Handing back the sheet, he asked the technicians if it was the sort of mumbo-jumbo they usually received.

“Yeah, if that,” the bearded tech told him. “See the mess of scribbling at the bottom? It spells out the shake parameters we’re to use.”

Wriggling in an admixture of embarrassment and indignation, the aggrieved auditor said, “Mr. Lin, how did you arrive at these . . . directions? For instance, what level of safety margin accompanies your request for, uh . . . shaking the unit?”

Lower-case rupert lin subjected the auditor to further bottle-bottomed scrutiny. “Spectral density primary vibration factor,” he rattled in clipped, heavily accented English. “Go two and half times what bird see in flight, twenty-five gee RMS.”

The auditor frowned and nervously scratched his elbow. “Sorry, but I do not begin to understand. Isn’t there some way to provide these gentlemen with more formal input?”

“No,” said lower-case rupert lin.

“Well, I’m afraid that answer simply will not do.”

Lower-case rupert lin spent a few seconds translating the other’s indignant protest into Cantonese, and another few seconds composing a rebuttal in what he himself considered the English Language. “Satisfy self,” he invited. Opening his briefcase, he extracted a sheaf of dragon-captioned stationery and thrust it upon the auditor.

The civil servant scowled as he riffled through sheets of abstruse equations interspersed with cramped calligraphic scrawlings and Chinese ideographs. “I’m a certified public accountant, sir, neither a mathematician nor a linguist.”

“So . . .” Losing patience with the inquisition and auditor, lower-case rupert lin shifted his bottle-bottomed attention to the technicians. “Shake ‘Y’ axis now.”

“Ready when you are, Rupe.”

The trio continued to ignore his presence, and the auditor left the area in a huff.

Josh’s grin exposed a mouthful of ivory. “You were real cool with oddball, Rupe!”

“No time for waste on clazy people,” said lower-case rupert lin, purposely mispronouncing the object of his derision to the vast enjoyment both technicians.

* * *

As the eagerly awaited preliminary reports began filtering into his posh corner executive suite, Mr. Mason gradually became aware that his worst nightmare was no nightmare. Paralysis set in, and he looked as if he’d been struck by an expertly wielded Louisville Slugger.

His company — his life! — was not only being squeezed in the pincers of a viselike crisis, it was floundering in the toils of a truly monumental cataclysm.

25 - Last Hired, First Fired

When fully compiled, the COR Audit Report told a ghastly tale. Seven of eight categories under evaluation were deemed subpar by scores ranging from mediocre to awful, with each gradation’s bandwidth of acceptability rendered by color: Green, satisfactory; Yellow, marginal; Red, unsatisfactory.

His substantial ego bruised beyond recognition by the audit debacle, in its wake Mr. Mason had his psyche battered to the verge of extinction when called on the carpet in the splendiferous Manhattan high-rise boardroom of AGC’s parent conglomerate, where he was hammered and wire-brushed to near-insensibility before a gaggle of frosty-eyed Vonex directors, not to mention being subjected to a deluge of explicit, pointed questions he was unable to answer with more than marginal success. He flew back to California in a bitter, vindictive mood, his first act upon returning was having the scandalous audit score sheet reproduced in full color, blown up ten times life-size, and posted on every bulletin board, in each conference room, hall, laboratory, executive office, assembly room, washroom and cafeteria of all three major divisions.

The embodiment of a vengeful nemesis, Mr. Mason rounded on AGC’s management hierarchy with the ferocity and bloodlust of a reborn Tamerlane. He scythed the executive cadre with searing accusations, subjected his confreres to merciless browbeatings, forced them to read and re-reread the awful truth each time they lifted their eyes, turned a corner, attended a meeting, had lunch, or visited the lavatory. He demanded immediate if not sooner corrective measures instituted to bring about drastic overall improvements to “green” in each and every category.

Severely traumatized by the incomprehensible, violent wire-brushing he’d endured at the hands of a gentleman he respected second only to God Almighty, acting R&D VP&GM Sorenson had been suffering astigmatic headaches from prolonged, continuous study of the ten-times-size, full-color audit report prominently on display taped to his office sanctum’s fruitwood paneling.

Product Integration: YELLOW

Quality Assurance: RED
Manufacturing: YELLOW
Engineering: YELLOW
Subcontract Management: RED
Contract Administration: GREEN
Property Management: YELLOW
Safety: RED

“Mr. Mason likes green,” confided Sorenson, startling his executive assistant when she interrupted his eighty-seventh review of the score sheet to bring in the morning deluge of mail he had given up all hope of reading.

“Yessir,” replied Myra, Moira or Myrna, who had become accustomed to Sorenson’s indifference to the finer points of executive leadership in addition to his innumerable quaint vagaries and quirks. She summoned the courage to say, “Green is nice, Mr. Sorenson.”

“Mr. Mason hates red and yellow. He likes it all green.”

“Indeed, Mr. Sorenson, sir. Would you like me to change our copy?”

Sorenson pondered, cogitated, and stewed about the suggestion. Frowning, he eventually made a command decision at the summit level. “Change it.”

“At once, Mr. Sorenson, sir. All green?”

“Green, right.”

The next time he dropped by to wire-brush the executive he had come to value above all other executives, Mr. Mason could not help but shoot an irritable glance at the ten-times-life-size audit score sheet. Doing so forced him to look again more closely. Bright green ink had gloriously transformed all formerly discrepant categories.

“That’s it!” exulted Mr. Mason. “By thunder, Blair! Some sterling move on your part that is! Once everyone begins to think like you, it will be clear sailing for AGC. Only then will our great corporation begin to realize a future where the horizons are absolutely unlimited.”

“Green’s nice,” said Sorenson, echoing Myra, Moira or Myrna’s observation.

Not long after AGC had been roasted on the slow-turning COR Audit spit for its brazen noncompliance with numerous technical and management baselines, the indictment was exacerbated by a supplementary accusation stating that the flowdown of information and instruction to AGC employees limped even more sadly than at the time of the audit. At the rabid insistence of Senator Dismyre and his committee, NASA and the Pentagon received notification from on high that the Aerospaceplane R&D Contract was to undergo critical reevaluation. All aspects of the program were to be probed, dissected, analyzed in depth, and judged worthy or unworthy of permitting current effort, of a continuance of ongoing effort.

Nine days after this shocking reversal of fortune, with AGC employees working around the clock to negotiate and implement a frantic flurry of COR corrective action measures, NASA and the Air Force Department jointly ordered a “temporary” Aerospaceplane R&D Contract suspension. This unexpected arbitrary decision immediately cut off funding, thereby thrusting fifty-two hundred and seventeen AGC employees on overhead costing, a direct expense the company could tolerate for no more than weeks. A month at most.

“Stacking lists” were rushed into preparation, each prioritizing the need to retain or eliminate the services of all non-management employees whose timecards reflected a direct

charge to the Aerospaceplane R&D Contract. The key deciding factors for retaining or eliminating a particular employee were his or her past and current performance criteria, and future potential worth, and length of tenure, and last but far from least minority status. Managers, supervisors and department administrators worked as teams to determine which employees were most needed for retention, which were only so-so, and which were least needed.

Hard on the heels of this crushing blow came a third major reversal. Purportedly the result of funding cutbacks deriving from all-but-forgotten Gramm-Rudman-Hollings legislation, Spacecraft Division's ongoing, bread-and-butter program, the Skywatch Satellite series of orbital surveillance vehicles was severely curtailed during the coming fiscal year. This placed in jeopardy the jobs of an additional forty-six hundred and eleven employees who had special access to a highly classified program conducted entirely "in the black."

Mr. Mason, a pair of antsy vice presidents and Corporate Chief Counsel Stanley Lomax packed their bags hastily, boarded the first available redeye, and flew east to Dulles International.

Sleepless, though preternaturally wide awake, Mr. Mason staked out the offices of the junior and senior senators from California. Wringing his hands, he babbled excitedly, pleading for immediate assistance in persuading officialdom not only to reinstate Aerospaceplane's R&D phase, but to take a longer, much harder look at the National Reconnaissance Office's invaluable Skywatch Satellite Program.

Mr. Mason and his entourage haunted Capitol Hill to no avail. As a last resort, the CEO demonstrated a stratospheric degree of executive persistence by besieging the office of the representative from AGC's San Fernando Valley district. Cajoling the legislator, he invited her to dinner, caught up with her wherever she went on Capitol Hill and elsewhere, and buttonholed her during her every free moment.

The congresswoman, herself soon to become a victim of controversial term-limit legislation, finally shrugged and said, "Tough titty, Ben. This time AGC's shit out of luck."

Further heartrending pleas uttered by Mr. Mason fell on deaf ears. There was nothing — absolutely nothing he was assured, reassured, and quadruply reassured — that congressional pressure could bring to bear which might help alleviate the cataclysmic cascade of catastrophes, at least not for the time being. Everything humanly possible to do, he was assured, reassured, and quadruply reassured, was already being done. Aerospaceplane's future had to remain in limbo while lofty decisions underwent committee discussion, debate, further interminable discussion.

On the other hand, Skywatch Satellite's exclusive product, unfortunately deemed "semi-obsolete" by Senator Dismyre and the committee he chaired, was considered an item of debris left over in the wake of the Cold War's demise, and doomed to extinction. Even if the Central Intelligence Agency proved willing to commit a large slice of its ultra-secretive, enormous discretionary budget to fund its stepchild, the National Reconnaissance Office, and fully reinstated Skywatch, wasn't it reasonable to assume that far fewer orbital reconnaissance missions would be flown during the ensuing decades?

A self-important junior congressman from California drove the final stake through Mr. Mason's heart by informing him in so many words that the coming fiscal year's budget had been slashed to ribbons, chopped to bare-bones minimums on Farm Aid, Welfare, Medicare, Medicaid, Education and similar nonessentials. Reduced expenditures on supersensitive

entitlement programs, he explained gleefully, meant less taxpayer dollars could be allocated for what he had the temerity to call AGC's "Pie in the Skywatch" adventures.

Abysmally discouraged, Mr. Mason and his high-echelon confederates flew home and girded themselves to bite the bullet. The sudden, unanticipated reappearance of hard times brought with it a reprise of the doomsday atmosphere that had suffused the company during yesteryear's unsuccessful merger, and subsequent massive attrition in the work force. A pessimistic miasma descended over the facility, settling in offices and conference rooms, stifling the workers in machine shops, assembly areas, laboratories and lavatories. Grim-faced employees went through the motions like automatons, hoping for the best, yet knowing in their hearts the worst was yet to come.

* * *

Clutching his antique French telephone, Alex cried, "Grid, that audit scam you cooked up grabbed Mason's thieving sumbitches by the ying-yang and squeezed real hard. You did it, Grid! You helped nail the motherhumpers to Senator Dismyre's rusty silver cross. A triumph's what it is! I won't ever forget what a great fucking piece of work you did."

Spa Alexander's voluptuous, middle-aged entertainment director slipped out of his office shaking her head.

"What? Say again slower," requested Alex. "Hell no we don't ease up! What's the matter with you? When the guy you're up against goes down, you don't help him up, f'Chrissake. You give him a hard shot to the crotch, then stomp the dog shit out of him. Sure wish I had a newspaper or TV station closer to L.A. We could really burn Mason's ears off, know what I mean? We'd accuse AGC of moper, dopery, graft, payoffs, all that kind of heavy shit."

Grinning a thoroughly nasty grin, Alex said, "Yeah, and a wowser of a windup caper *that'll* be. Strictly on the QT, being a real brainy guy, Rico's been socking away other people's money like it's going out of style, except he'll be saving his big guns for later on, when AGC gets backed into a corner and Vonex issues what he called 'junk bonds' just t'keep Mason's chicken shit outfit afloat. Sure the price of AGC shares'll fall; hope it drops right through the floor. Now that the rug's yanked out from underneath his airplane works, and he's been aced out of other aerial-spacy contracts, Mason stands to lose his shirt, buttons and all. Happy days, Grid! Look for something extra-sweet in your wallet come payday. Call it a bonus for your super-good job of rigging that audit. Congrats! Damn fine piece of work!"

* * *

"Crunch time," announced Dr. Ladd, "is once again upon us. Won't be a joy ride, but we'll scrape by. Here's my scenario. Lazy Daisey and I will put our heads together and take care of the engineers, scientists, consultants and admin types — everyone except Yam's layout drafters and the computer-aided design jockeys. You to sit down with Yaminishi, help him get his motley crew stacked top to bottom; likewise, the CAD supervisor and his people. Pass the fallout along to Daisey so he and I can fudge both data sets into our overall team stack."

His nod gloom personified, Moffett said, "Yaminishi stays, I assume."

Ladd nodded affirmatively. "I'd lop off my left foot before letting Yam escape."

"I may be out of line for asking," said Ham, "but where do I stand? I've been aboard less than two years, and as company policy last hired, first fired seems carved in stone."

“That notion of ‘company policy’,” Ladd reproved drily, “falls somewhere between ancient myth and the oldest old wife’s tale. Tenure counts, sure; but during periodic slumps wiser heads often prevail. Smart management types know they got where they are riding up on support from below, not vice versa; they also realize how vital it is to keep key people, new hires, or old. Dumber management types, of which we have our share, often turn autocratic when push comes to shove and let personal bias, payback for some imagined slight, racist, religious, or whatever prejudice, or some other oddball dislike to cloud their better judgment. Don’t tell me you’re really concerned about getting dumped.”

“If it’s going to happen, I’d rather know now, and scout around for something else.”

“A reasonable attitude, I suppose,” admitted the chief engineer. “Okay, I’ll be blunt. Unless everything crumbles and the doors threaten to close, I can’t imagine letting you go. I’d lop off my right foot before parting with your services.”

Amused despite the current situation by Ladd’s colorful way of making his point, Ham chuckled. “If Yam and I both get boxed and shipped, you’ll end up in a wheelchair.”

“Worries me no end. Scat now, Ham. “Go pulse Yam and the CAD supervisor.”

* * *

His warm liking for Yam sharply odds with his degenerating opinion of AGC, its methods and practices, Ham phoned Yaminishi, summoning him beyond earshot of his underlings. The lead drafter came into Ham’s cubicle wearing a solemn expression.

“This should take only a minute, Yam. Dr. Ladd wants us to stack your four guys.”

“Won’t take any even a minute,” said the other. “Anthony, Farnsworth, Bundy and Little Joe, tippy-top to lower depths, in that order.”

“Expecting this, weren’t you?”

A sober nod. “I’ve lived through a number of yo-yo spins at AGC.”

Ham marked his list accordingly. “Does Joe accomplish less than Bundy?”

“He has a good fist, but accomplishes less than anyone except right now, when suffering from layoff fever. Max drives everyone up the wall with his whistling, but turns out consistently decent work. Farnsie spends too much time away from his board outguessing Wall Street, but cranks out decent work between Market fluctuations. Bundy is without doubt the oddest human being I’ve ever worked with, but he’s bent over his board eight hours out of eight, and never makes the same mistake twice.”

“Fine. It goes in exactly per your call.”

His eyes downcast, Yaminishi said, “There’s another minor add to our design team stacking list. I’ve decided to volunteer for layoff.”

Ham let the revelation sink in. “You *want* to leave us?”

Yaminishi shuffled his feet. “I’ve seen it all, done it all. Been around the course once too many times, I suppose, and it’s no longer . . . Time’s come to hang it up.”

“Retirement?”

“I’ll file on the day I’m formally notified,” said Yam. “A chance to get bounced clinched the decision. When my unemployment insurance runs out, I’ll be old enough to file for full Social Security. Add severance pay, six weeks accrued vacation, back pay, plus a fair-sized bundle in the 401K, and my wife and I will do just fine. I also draw military disability.” he added, wagged his steel-and-leather prosthetic appliance.

Ham revolved the development, imagining the chaos Yam's departure would sow among the surviving layout drafters. "You'll be sorely missed, Yam, and I don't say it just to be polite. Speaking of formality, you should write Ladd a request for layoff to prove it's what you want. Otherwise, as a twenty-year-plus employee it would take a VP's signature to justify the layoff, and I'm not sure our VP has learned to write."

Yaminishi grinned. "I will. Thanks, Ham."

With a sense of loss, Moffett shook the abnormally tall, silver-haired lead drafter's left hand. Stepping across the corridor, he poked his head into Ladd's inner office. "Be a good notion to round up surgical saw, Bill."

His expression quizzical, the chief engineer's brows knitted. "You sound like Edgar Allan Poe on a sobriety binge. What hidden depths of meaning lurks behind that bombastic remark?"

"Yam's volunteering for layoff. I doubt if you can talk him out of it."

Dr. Ladd threw down his red pencil, pulled a face and said, "Aw, shit!"

* * *

The cowed department administrator summoned his courage. "Pardon me, Dr. Klonn, are you convinced Harrison Grimes belongs this low on the list? I hate to quibble, but he's been with AGC twenty-four years, yet he's stacked second from the bottom among the analysts."

"Eminently correct." Terrible-tempered Erik Klonn looked down his bulbous nose at the man half his size. "You've precisely defined the primary reason: a tenure of twenty-four years. A baccalaureate in Physics taken at prestigious Stanford University weighs heavily in Grimes' favor, yet also emphasizes how long out of date his degree actually is."

"As you say, but isn't it true that he —?"

"Make no mistake," asserted Terrible-tempered Erik Klonn. "While tenure is extremely important, more pertinent to the issue at hand is continually upgrading one's expertise in order to effectively perform accurate, definitive thermodynamic and structural analyses via state-of-the-art processes. Dr. Lin and I were obliged to tradeoff all of the various factors pertaining to the retention or dismissal of each specific analytical expert. Taking the long view, we assumed the unwelcome burden of determining who is most needed to achieve near- and long-term departmental goals." Klonn swiveled his bull neck toward the third man in the office. "Rupert, be kind enough to restate your considered opinion regarding the placement of Mr. Grimes."

"He round-eye know nothing," accused lower-case rupert lin.

Terrible-tempered Erik Klonn conjured a frown that threatened to bring rain. "No, no; we shan't allow personal feelings of animosity, ethnic bias, anything of that nature to interfere with critical personnel decisions. We must at all times keep an open mind, and impartially trade-off the overt factors, professional skills, personal attributes and imponderables so vital in making a totally objective evaluation of each individual's present and potential future worth, as well as his or her current contributions to our ongoing efforts. Those are absolutely essential factors."

"Grimes," declared lower-case rupert lin, "all time he argue, but not know Laplace Transforms from third base."

"You are firmly convinced that is the case?"

"He once dare tell me I wrong," said lower-case rupert lin.

"Well, there you have it." Klonn eyed the administrator archly, his air that of the Lord of the Manor addressing a servant suspected of pilfering silverware. "I fear no choice obtains where

Mr. Grimes is concerned. He must remain where he is on the stacking list, mainly because he has expended only minimal effort to keep pace with the march of analytical progress. I shall hate to see Harry go, yet as the adage has it an omelet cannot be made without breaking eggs.”

“As you wish,” said the further cowed administrator. “Might we also take a moment to review the status of Farkas Economides . . . ?”

* * *

Attired in a chic, severely tailored if outrageously feminine aquamarine business suit, Glenda was closeted with her administratrix, a doting middle-aged woman long suspected of harboring latent lesbian tendencies. Buffing her nails, the Master Scheduling manager listened to Margaret run through the latest version of the stacking list. Abruptly interrupting the recital, she said, “Hold it, Mag. Let’s hike Lenny Gottfried up a notch. He’s foxy in sort of a slimy way.”

Margaret wrinkled her nose. “Do you really think so?”

“I certainly should know. I’ve gone out with him a few times.”

Margaret sounded injured in saying, “I thought it was your firm rule to never, ever socialize with any of the men in our department.”

“Oh, it’s a firm rule, dear Maggie. Yet ‘never’ is such a dreadfully long time. Besides, stuffy rules like that are made to be broken. Not that Len could stand in for Superman, anything like that. On a one-to-ten scale, I’d give him a shaky five, perhaps even a six in a pinch, but that would be stretching it.”

“Putting me on, aren’t you?” Margaret sounded crushed. “If you slept with every man you brag about you’d go up with the window shade.”

Her smile coquettish, Glenda said, “Don’t underestimate me, dear Maggie. Lenny will never make Fuck of the Month Club’s top ten, but he rates somewhere between a damp firecracker and a dynamite cap. ‘Slept with’ isn’t accurate, either. With Len, you only get to doze off.”

“Really, Glenda! Must you be so indelicate?”

“Don’t let it fret you, Mag.”

“Shouldn’t we discuss Gottfried’s work ethic?”

“What’s that have to do with anything? Let’s forge ahead; I’ve got a heavy lunch date. Who’s next on Master Scheduling Master Shit List . . . ?”

* * *

Radiating rangeland fury, Little Joe burst into Moffett’s cubicle. “Lookee, here! See the damn layoff notice those pricks hung on me? Why me? Why’m I getting trashed?”

“Steady, Joe.” Ham groped for a tack that would pacify the drafter, yet still make the point he knew had to be made. “My guess it’s what you don’t do that earned a pink slip.”

“Now you listen, Ham! I been busting my buns, ruinin’ my eyesight over one miserable drawing after another. This layoff notice is plain horseshit, and you know it well as me.” All but frothing at the mouth, Little Joe stamped a needle-nosed snakeskin boot in frustration. “Talk to Ladd about this kick in the teeth, okay? It’s not right. Ain’t *fair*. ”

“Sit down,” invited Ham. “I’ll spell it out, and not pull any punches.”

Fuming over the horriffic injustice of it all, the drafter sank into a chair. “Okay, no laughing gas, but you better come up with a damn good reason for this slap in the kisser.”

Moffett dispassionately played back Yaminishi's rationale for placing Little Joe at the bottom of the short stacking list. He cited the drafter's inattentiveness, his reluctance to take direction, the memory lapse leading to an infamous incident when he'd unwittingly drawn the same drawing twice. He brought up erratic absences explained away by one lame excuse or another. He accused Little Joe of using every available hour of sick leave doled out by AGC, not to mention grossly exceeding the allotted "personal business" hours.

"So I take a day off now 'n then," objected the drafter. "Everybody else does, too. Last Wednesday I stayed home to work on my car, and AGC had to get along without my services."

Picturing the orange Mustang, Ham bit his tongue in lieu of a response. "With or without wheels, you have to face up to the real-world situation. According to Yam, you have good drafting skills, but don't bear down, don't concentrate on day-to-day efforts, don't pay attention to detail. With you it's 'get it out, get rid of it,' and let the drawing checkers worry about whether it's right or wrong. It's an attitude problem, Joe."

"So I'm a worthless turd?"

"Your're trying to put words in my mouth," said Ham. "Smarten up! Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Do what you're capable of doing, and maybe things will work out."

"Kind of late in the horse race," Little Joe said morosely, "to take the pledge."

"Not necessarily. Still on the payroll, aren't you? Poke around, try and find a slot in another department. You might even be kept on here if ALLP/ORDART is reinstated."

"S'pose," said Little Joe even more morosely, "I've got that Buddha-loving bastich Yaminishi to thank for this cutthroat stab in the back."

A flare of acute irritation sharpened Ham's response. "Blaming someone else for your shortcomings is a loser's crutch. Yam's the best boss you'll ever have. Just between the two of us, he's decided to cash in his chips and retire."

Little Joe's pinched features underwent an abrupt transformation. "Jeez! No kidding? What'll the guys do if Yam's put out to pasture? Who'll take his place? Not Maxie! He isn't so bad in most ways, but whistles his ass off all day long, drives the rest of us stone crazy."

"Far as I know, who takes over hasn't been decided."

Little Joe folded his arms defiantly. "What hacks me is how unfair this layoff notice is. Look at the screwballs in our bunch. Bundy's crazy as a waltzing mouse. He should be locked in a rubber room and have the key tossed. Farnsie spends fifty-eight minutes of every hour on the horn to his stinking broker. Why he ain't out there earning a fortune selling stocks is a baffler."

"When any of us tries to objectively evaluate others," said Ham, "being 'fair' about who goes and who stays isn't always a major factor. All over the plant people are sweating blood to objectively stack the individuals under their cognizance."

"Objectively my rosy-red patootie!" Once again gloriously incensed, Little Joe cried, "How 'objective' you think the goldbricking management dipshits really are? Still believe in Santa and the Tooth Fairy, do you, Ham? This nutty outfit is right now shafting a herd of graybeards just to keep from paying pensions to guys and gals sneaking up on retirement, while hanging on to younger hands who earn peanuts to lower the overall salary kitty and up company profit. What's 'objective' about those apples?"

"No comment," said Ham, wondering if Little Joe knew what he was talking about.

"So rustle your butt out in the real world you're proud of and find out."

“I intend to,” said Ham, squelching an impulse to draw back his fist and rap Little Joe in his overworked mouth.

“Yah, great! I’ll let you in on another something else, too. I won’t roll over and take a screwing like this without getting kissed first, see? I’m going to scream my head off to the front office about this here injustice. I’m going to bitch loud and long, and keep on bitching.”

“Your privilege,” said Ham, tiring of the nonproductive dialogue.”

* * *

“Minnie, please hold my calls for five, ten minutes, okay?”

“Certainly, sir.”

The chief engineer closed the door to his inner office, a device that silently informed all and sundry he was not to be disturbed. His brow furrowed as he prowled back and forth deep in thought, stewing about something. He eventually made up his mind to do something he had long since decided he would never do unless dire circumstances prevailed. Stepping to the coat rack, he removed a slim black book from the inner pocket of his suit jacket, riffled pages to an unlisted number,. Lifting the handset, he hesitated briefly — an uncharacteristic display of indecision — and then punched series of digits.

In Hartford, Connecticut, a manservant answered on the third ring, and responded to Ladd’s casual greeting by saying, “Of course, sir. May I inquire who’s calling?”

26 - The Gods Frown

The chauffeur ignored a prominently posted NO TRESPASSING sign, and swung the sleek limousine off the main highway into an unmarked private lane. The limo purred up a gently winding quarter-mile incline and eased to a halt before a set of filigreed wrought-iron gates. The chauffeur commanded the window to roll down and spoke to an intercom panel set flush in the leftmost pillar of native fieldstone. Presently the gates swung inward.

The baronial estate sprawled across a rocky Connecticut knoll surrounded by rolling, manicured lawns and patches of dense woodland. At the crest of the knoll, the limo halted on a circular cobblestone drive, its centerpiece a large stone fountain now dry, but iced over. The chauffeur stepped around the vehicle to hold the door for his passenger, an older, conservatively dressed gentleman.

Patinaed by age, though scrupulously maintained, the ivied Tudor mansion looked down on the new arrival through mullioned windows. Wide stone steps led to the corbeled entry, where a butler unctuously greeted the newcomer. “Good morning, sir. Mr. Dufresne is expecting you.”

Vonex Board Chairman Paul Hazlett allowed the butler to help him off with his cashmere topcoat. He handed over his gloves and scarf, declined an invitation to be seated and went to warm his hands at the fireplace.

“Ah, there you are, Paul.” Clad in a forest green paisley smoking jacket, Roger Dufresne descended the broad, curving staircase at an easy lope. “No game this bright winter morning?”

The visitor flicked his fingers — an impatient gesture. “Apparently vandals broke into the course at my club and tore up the ninth and tenth greens.”

Dufresne grimaced. “Intolerable! It’s hard to believe senseless happenings like that still occur.” His guest made a show of accepting the intolerable with equanimity, and preceded him into the high-ceilinged library, settling in a leather armchair facing the fireplace.

“Oh, the groundskeeper promised repairs by the weekend,” said Hazlett, circumspectly waiting for the manservant who brought in a silver tray to pour coffee and depart, and pull the library’s parquetry double-doors closed behind him.

Lifting a demitasse, Hazlett added sugar, stirred and sipped. “Speaking of senseless happenings, Roger, I wonder if you’ve any inkling of the peculiar doings in Washington these days.”

Bemused, his host said, “I don’t imagine so. Does anyone?”

“I for one have certainly been left in the dark.”

Dufresne said, “Afraid I don’t follow, Paul. In the dark regarding . . . ?”

“Aerospace General, one of our major subsidiaries.”

“Ah, of course. What appears to be the problem?”

“Confound it! That *is* the problem: not knowing. I haven’t the faintest clue. Some unknown individual, agency or what have you has apparently been working diligently while staying well under the radar to inhibit the ongoing activities of our major aerospace affiliate.”

“Really?” Dufresne’s curt response displayed a certain lack of interest. “Difficulties invariably strew the paths of most government prime contractors. Except for being perpetually reminded that problems seem to go hand on hand within the aerospace territory, I must confess to rarely giving more than a passing thought to their machinations.”

“Months ago,” declared Hazlett, unwilling to let his host change the subject, “we had CEO Benjamin Mason up before the board in New York. A decent executive all things considered, he was asked to explain the sudden avalanche of problems that have suddenly appeared for no apparent reason and converged upon AGC. In all truth, not terribly long before that session with Mason my colleagues and I had congratulated him for snagging a plum, the next generation space shuttle, or whatever its formal designation. It made this latest confrontation especially painful when forced to quiz him about AGC’s recent debacles and odd dips in and out of favor.

“By the way,” said Hazlett, interrupting himself, “entirely behind our backs someone also ordered a suspension of that selfsame program’s research and development first phase. Mason claimed to be mystified about where the directive had originated, and advised us he had no notion who that someone might be. Soon afterward, yet another ‘someone’ — quite likely your favorite Senator — ordered a cutback in the company’s mature, relatively lucrative orbital surveillance program.”

Roger Dufresne said dismissively, “Economic times being what they are, Paul, defense procurement’s been in a steady decline. I recall no such problems being bruited about in D.C. lately, but these days D.C. is shorthand for Disfunctional Capitol. Has either ‘someone’ been identified?”

“No, not yet. Surmise and suspicion point this way and that. The specifics have yet to be unearthed.” Hazlett refreshed his coffee, used silver tongs to drop in one lump of sugar, and stirred. “Roger, for some time I’ve kept in place an extremely reliable private pipeline into the overall doings at AGC. The gentleman in question called me day before yesterday — something

he does with extreme rarity, if ever. He claimed to be mystified concerning a series of what he referred to as 'attacks, disappointments and downturns.' He warned me in so many words that in his judgment the cause of this recent spate of happenings was synthetic, unnatural."

"An executive?" questioned Dufresne.

"No, purely a technical chap, the company's highly prized engineering director. Normally I'd slough off a caveat of that nature as a frivolous attempt to seek favor by a would-be informant. Not this gentleman, however. Frankly, I judge him not only one of the most astute technical minds on the planet, but in all other respects integrity personified. I've learned to listen closely to his infrequent yet invaluable messages.

"You see," continued Hazlett, "the contract suspension, turnabouts, disappointments and government audits have indeed come about in a deucedly odd manner, each shrouded in one or more layers of mystery, and no forewarning whatever. I put our best people on it immediately. It's apparently too early for them to get a handle on anything other than minor surface items."

Dufresne ruminated. "Paul, before you say more, I must confess to a habit of giving short shrift to aerospace industry trials and tribulations. In the wake of all the mergers, consolidations, vanishings and amalgamations, not to mention the impact of our current economic downturn, the fortunes of what few prime contractors still managing to be players rises and falls with tidal regularity. I had no intention of denigrating your concern, yet it's difficult to become interested in the prince and pauper nature of aerospace fluctuations. Especially now, with the business flat as Kansas and half as interesting."

A rasp of irritation invaded Hazlett's diction in saying, "California is a pet peeve of mine; the 'golden' state is an unemployment plague locale, which is beside the point. California must solve its own problems. It's this rash of peculiar sniper fire from cover that has our directors more than a touch disturbed. I've come to think of it as rather like a dull toothache, never truly painful but forever there, nagging and persistent. I could call in any number of favors with a finger snap, but it seemed wisest to stop up and speak with you before running off and doing something we both may later regret."

"Um, of course. Glad you did, Paul."

"Suppose I could trouble you to do us a kindness?"

"Anything in my power, you know that."

"Would you consider stirring the pot a turn or two with the Air Force Secretary, and perhaps likewise with the rude fellow who pretends to run NASA? I'd be ever so grateful if you'd spend an odd moment or two doing so, and perhaps learn something concrete about what's behind these strange happenings. Would you mind terribly? It's no life-and-death matter, yet this string of inexplicable, out-of-step happenings has my colleagues a bit edgy, and me damned curious. I've a strong urge to flush out the rascal or rascals, and shine a bright light on whatever game they believe they're playing."

"Delighted to do what I can, Paul. I'll be in Washington first of next week."

"Sooner, if possible," said Hazlett, his manner thoughtful. "Should that meet with your plans, of course."

"Then despite what you say, you believe the matter is pressing?"

"Oh, you know how such things occasionally afflict us," said Hazlett in lieu of an answer. "Touched on the problem yourself a moment ago. Boom or bust is indeed a way of life for all

defense-oriented enterprises, yet run of the mill perturbations, postponements, delays, cutbacks, so forth and so on are bumps in the road we're accustomed to taking in stride. Not this continual sniping from cover, hoqwcwe. It definitely doesn't smack of ordinary business ups and downs, nor any any of the more or less normal inconveniences and frustrations that invariably crop up for one reason or another. The ferrets I've dispatched are exceptionally competent, yet they haven't been able to pin down a single lead to whomsoever is causing the rash of . . ."

Hazlett broke off. "Wait, let me take that back, Roger. They did manage to unearth a faint scent of dirty linen in the closet of some Pentagon ribbon clerk who apparently has been telling tales out of school."

"Commissioned officer, enlisted, civilian employee, what . . .?"

"Holds the rank of captain, if I recall correctly. Judging by outward indications, the fellow couldn't possibly create the degree of nuisance AGC has experienced. What is disturbing is that totally without precedent, or a word of warning from any quarter, AGC has found itself the target of union organizers, government audits, contract suspensions and reviews, not to mention what may be an unforeseen, unseasonable decline in employment. This sequence of inexplicable, niggling thwarts and threats and out-of-bed problems add up to a puzzling, distressful situation."

"You certainly make it sound peculiar." Dufresne pursed his lips, and why your curiosity's been whetted. You've managed to pique mine as well."

"I'm loathe to add a further burden on your broad shoulders, Roger. Especially now, with so much already on your plate. If looking into the matter doesn't inconvenience you terribly . . ."

"I'll attend to it soonest, Paul. Will you be in town, or . . .?"

"London till Thursday a week, then back to Hartford after stopovers in the Midwest. Call any time; my people will track me down. You do have the number?"

"Certainly. Here, Paul; your cup is empty . . ."

* * *

Days later Ham and his boss were going over a revised overall stacking list when Ham mentioned Little Joe's indictment of AGC's scurvy layoff practices.

The chief engineer stubbed out a cigarette. "Yeah, it happens. Like the rest of us, Managers and supervisors are fallible humans. Sexual, racial, religious bias, or sometimes just a prickly personality, or maybe plain vanilla retribution help decide who gets the brass ring, who gets the steel ax. There could also be a shred of substance in what you were told about the company ridding itself of older employees."

"If that's true, a ripe stench rises from it."

Ladd concurred. "Eau d'merde. In any event, try and hang on to your objectivity. Ben's living under the gun these days. On one side, the stockholders are up in arms anticipating a low quarterly dividend; on the other, the high mucky-mucks at Vonex recently chewed his derriere raw for letting ALLP/ORDART slip into quicksand at the same time Skywatch Satellite is edging toward the abyss, and commercial aircraft backorders have nosedived."

"Tough," objected Moffett, "to fall back the human nature excuse. If executives stoop to lower the weekly payroll by dumping more experienced, better-paid employees in favor of keeping those younger, and lower-paid, it's as rotten as any knock I've heard about AGC. Makes me feel queasy about what'll happen thirty years down the road, when I'm in that hot seat."

Ladd searched his staff engineer's troubled countenance. "Mr. Moffett, not until this very moment," he drawled, "have you struck me as being the least bit naive."

Ham met his boss' steady gaze squarely. "And now . . . ?"

"A tad ingenuous, yes. Why so sure things are all that different in the big, brave commercial world? After you were dumped at Sargent, you scratched around for a year to find a decent slot, then came in here and adapted yourself to our psychotic milieu faster than I thought possible. Tell me, what do you honestly conceive to be AGC's principal product?"

Thrown off base by the sharp right turn in topics, Ham considered the question. "Sort of obvious, isn't it? A large volume of hardware, lesser amounts of software, a smidgen of firmware, plus any number of technical studies, analyses and special reports."

"Wrong on all counts," denied his boss. "Those are nitty-gritty byproducts, but all the same byproducts. What item of greatest value does AGC sell to the customer? Come on, think."

"I don't . . . understand."

"I know it. That's why I'm trying to broaden your education."

"Okay, I give up. What's our principal product?"

"Man-hours," announced Dr. Ladd. "Now and forevermore, man-hours. The customer's billed for each and every direct labor hour charged against each and every in-house contract."

"Well certainly, but —"

"But nothing! The annual proposal to fund the upcoming fiscal year's Skywatch Satellite orbital surveillance program illustrates my thesis to a tee. Skywatch birds have been buzzing around the planet for decades doing optical, infra-red and God alone knows what other types of look-see. Even so, our people in Spacecraft Division and up north at Vandenberg are forced to perform an incredible, yearly mating dance with the government bean counters. A ritual!"

Ladd enumerated fact-finding sessions in California and Washington, endless negotiations aimed at pinpointing and pigeonholing anticipated fiscal year expenditures by regurgitating reams of prior fiscal-year backup data — engineering change notices, discrepancy reports, quality assurance inspection squawks, engineering drawing and specification revisions, et al, plus actual design maintenance charges, new-design charges, so forth and so on. In short, massive archival expense extracts, plus the documented cost of producing hardware, software and firmware — what Ladd termed "waste paper" — were used as evidence to support AGC's prospective coming fiscal-year expenditures.

"The snapper," pursued Ladd, "is a beaut." He explained how the data were repetitively written, reviewed, amended, rewritten, re-amended, re-rewritten and re-reviewed again and again until all the beans had been counted, recounted, re-recounted and placed in their respective jars. He related the manner in which AGCers and the customer's people took turns flitting back and forth across the continent not once, but several times, to enjoy free lodging in expensive hotels, plus free meals. Yet when the negotiations and fact-finding sessions were finally concluded, after thousands of man-hours had gone down the drain putting together the most comprehensive anticipatory documents since "Nostradamus used a quill pen," lo and behold, as if by magic — *magic!* — the amount awarded per-contract for the ensuing fiscal year coincided *precisely* with funding the customer knew all along had been allocated by the Congress. "Isn't that," he concluded, "an amazing coincidence?"

Ham grinned sheepishly. "So man-hours are AGC's principal product."

“Amen!” said Ladd. “For AGC, and every other prime contractor. We play the dumb, expensive, exhausting game we’re forced to play. It’s a game we can never hope to win; the best we can ever manage breaking even. At heart, Ben Mason’s a good sort, except that he has the soul of a bookkeeper. He and his herd of senior executives think in terms of dollars, period. They leave necessary, far less important frou-frou like hardware, software and firmware to dodos like you and me. Getting the picture?”

“Clearly, Bill. As usual, I suppose you blame the government.”

“Who else?” his boss said cheerfully. “Little Joe lit your fuse with his zinger about sending more experienced employees to the scrap heap, and keeping later arrivals on board to lower the payroll tote. Instead of letting it upset you, try slipping into the shoes of a manager stuck with a directive from on high to layoff a fixed percentage of personnel under his direction. His incentive bonuses depend on how efficiently he runs his department, division, or in Ben’s case entire organization, and does so by keeping the cross-sectional salary index partially under his control by judging each individual’s worth, judges what each is worth, and adjusting each’s salary accordingly. Ergo, from his standpoint as an executive, less is more, and more is less. Despite what you said about it, human nature inevitably strikes again, perhaps with a twist of wry, cupidity, prejudice or plain bad temper thrown in for seasoning.”

* * *

In the process of inventing a rebuttal having to do with the injustice of it all, Ham and his boss were startled when the door to the inner office opened without benefit of a knock. Beaming in thoroughly disarming fashion, Mr. Mason charged inside gushing excitedly. “Apologies for bursting in on you like this. Bill, have you had any recent dialogue with NASA?”

“Sure,” said Ladd,. “Cornelius and I talk two, three times a week. Why, what’s up?”

Ham had thoughtfully pulled out a chair for Mr. Mason, but he seemed too agitated to sit down. Nodding like a pecking rooster, he said, “I knew it, *knew* it! Your relationship with Roelf has apparently paid an enormous dividend. You’ve convinced him of several truisms, Bill.”

Thinking to award his superiors privacy, Ham edged toward the door.

Mr. Mason magnanimously waved him back. “Stay, stay, young man! You’re entitled to share in the good news. It may brighten your day nearly as much as it has mine.”

After a self-dramatizing pause, Mr. Mason announced that NASA’s director had called from Washington. “Not only has the Aerospaceplane R&D Contract been fully reinstated, but we’re being directed to accelerate the first phase by throwing together and proof-testing the stripped ALLP hangar queen under construction at the Lake Mead remote site ASAP, then evaluate the configuration’s performance on a crash-priority basis and swing directly into full-blown production.”

“Production!” yelled Ladd. “Whoa, Ben! When the roof fell in, ALLP was buried under a snowstorm of design problems, and ORDART is bristling with unincorporated change orders. No way can we ‘throw together’ the hangar queen and do a proof test in hurry-up mode.”

“We most assuredly can,” declared not-to-be-argued-with Mr. Mason, “There *has* to be a way to get it done, Bill.”

“Mother of God!” breathed Ladd. “Full-blown production can’t possibly begin that soon. Please tell NASA there’s no way it can consider that a serious proposal.”

“Oh, NASA is absolutely serious,” said AGC’s overjoyed leader. “There are attached conditions, however. First, we must clean up our act internally, and willingly negotiate the payment of incentive fees diminished by schedule slippage and a minor budgetary overrun.”

Ladd slapped his desk. “Ben, you’re *not* listening! Reinstatement is a five-star dish of good news, but how in the name of Almighty God can we be expected to dynamically accelerate a program already slightly behind schedule and over budget?”

“I was sure you’d go straight to the crux of the problem.” Mr. Mason lowered his voice. “I appreciate the enormity of the task ahead, but have we a choice, Bill? All NASA is asking us to do is leapfrog the prototype design-and-build phase, and catch up with where we left off when this hiatus began. The prize will be worth the pain: an all but iron-clad guarantee of landing the extremely lucrative production, flight test and downstream maintenance contracts.”

“Ben, get real!” exclaimed Ladd. “In plain and simple terms, it isn’t that *simple*. How do we close our eyes and dismiss the necessary development work on ALLP, or rush the hangar queen configuration straight to finalized design. Think about what’s being asked of us from my standpoint. The toughest development work hasn’t yet begun on ALLP, nor the hairy problems afflicting ORDART. Wringing out Herb Mauch’s electronic systems alone will take —”

“The instant a formal reinstatement document is received,” declared Mr. Mason, “and of course the amended contract, I mean to institute a blanket recall of all laid-off employees, and I’m rescinding every layoff notice.” He moved toward the door, picturing in his mind the vainglorious presentation he intended to prepare for the Vonex Board of directors.

“Ben,” barked Ladd, arresting the CEO in mid-stride, “you’re definitely *not* listening to me! We were twenty thousand leagues behind the eight ball when the COR fallout hit the fan. How in the name of all that’s holy can we accelerate an R&D schedule that was mushy from the start, then ignore what’s vital beforehand, and jump directly into production and flight test?”

“Ah, but I know you can see that it gets done,” said Mr. Mason, brimming with confidence. “You haven’t failed me yet, and surely won’t now. Spend an extra few hours on a recovery plan, and show it to me. I’ll sit down with Arnold in Human Resources and we’ll . . . I’ll also ring-in our Public Relations director. We three are going to invent a terrific nationwide recruitment campaign. If necessary we’ll raid other firms, and should that prove insufficient we shall go out on the street and pick up the cream of whatever is available . We’ll bring aboard as many good people as are needed in every sphere of expertise, every discipline imaginable. We’ll accelerate ALLP/ORDART, never fear. The program is certain to become a resounding success.”

With that, Mr. Mason wrung the chief engineer’s hand, smiled at Ham, then spun around and exited the office in a rush, leaving Ladd and his staff engineer staring at one another in slack-jawed wonderment.

* * *

The resurrection of AGC’s sagging fortunes came about in dazzling fashion. Plant wide morale rose from moribund to optimistic, then soared to empyrean heights. No one other than the participants knew of the lengthy, verbose exchange which had taken place during an impromptu meeting between power broker and government minister without portfolio Roger Dufresne, and certain VIPs. Afterward, the Central Intelligence Agency dithered reflexively within its toils and ended up raising a thunderous if subterranean furor over the proposed diminishment of orbital

surveillance flights due to result from cutbacks to AGC's long-term Skywatch Satellite Program. Full funding was quietly reinstated for the coming fiscal year.

Joyful delirium reigned in every office along AGC's executive row, in the homes and offices of stockholders, and in the boardroom of the parent Vonex conglomerate, not to mention the sheer amazement running rampant in the watering holes frequented by media and print cognoscenti who earned a living as professional observers of the aerospace milieu.

Every layoff notice was rescinded forthwith. Recall telegrams went out to departed blue-collar workers, technicians, engineers, scientists and all others. In an unheralded announcement, Canadian Airlines exercised an option to purchase a pair of AGC jumbo jets. Days later, Quantas and Lufthansa each followed suit, exercising similar options.

At the end of a year filled with breathtaking roller coaster ups and downs, Mr. Mason waxed ecstatic during the hours spent helping Mr. Arnold and the public relations director put together a recruitment campaign, its principal lure a simple logline, or catch phrase: BRING 'EM IN. Each employee submitting the name and particulars of a prospective candidate who was eventually hired would become the recipient of a tidy cash bonus.

"Bring 'em in!" buried Mr. Arnold's feverish hiring counselors under a blizzard of employment applications. Interviewers worked overtime during the week, all day most Saturdays, and an occasional Sunday, striving to handle the queues of applicants dispatched by excited relatives, acquaintances, and the neighbors of revitalized AGC employees.

* * *

At a quarter to nine in the evening, after an extra-long day of frantic activity, Moffett was piloting the Ford minivan homeward. A lighted billboard on Balboa Boulevard caught his eye:

BRING 'EM IN!
DOES THE CHALLENGE OF HIGH
TECHNOLOGY EXCITE YOU?
COME TALK TO AGC

Dazed by the company's practically instant reversal of hitherto irreversible fortune, Ham unlocked the front door, hung his topcoat in the entry closet and pecked Audrey Lee's cheek. "I try and I try," he said with theatrical intonation, "but I will *never* understand what allegedly sane human beings are trying to accomplish in the looney bin where I spend my days."

"Lordy! Now what?"

"A gigantic, nationwide AGC hiring campaign is in full swing, Audrey Lee."

"You told me people were being let go right and left."

"Oh, you are behind the times, my dear. That was long, long ago — the day before yesterday. AGC is hiring, H-I-R-I-N-G. But I have to admit the powerful executives in charge, be they sane or stark, raving mad, do show true forethought."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"If things were to suddenly snap back the other way," said Ham, "only a single letter of the billboards and bulletins and TV and newspaper ads will have to be changed. Instead of 'hiring,' the literature can easily be amended to read 'firing'."

Audrey Lee sniffed. "Hush your nonsense and go wash up. Your supper's in the microwave."

* * *

Little Joe reined in the orange Mustang, and parked slaunchwise across two ‘visitor’ slots. He confronted The Sheriff at the main gate. “Reckon you’ll ever figure out the goings-on around this crazy, mixed-up spread?”

“Not so you’d notice,” assured the veteran plant protection officer.

“Couple of days ago,” said Little Joe, “My walking papers got handed to me. Instead of showing any of us the door, now us drafters’re humping more overtime hours than before the crunch hit. Don’t that beat all?”

“Mighty peculiar goings-on.”

“Know what I ought to do, Sheriff?”

“What,” asked the other, “ought you to do?”

“I ought to up and quit this chicken shit outfit cold. It’d serve ‘em right.”

The Sheriff’s belly laugh rumbled across the parking lot, scaring a dozen seagulls busy scavenging crumbs. “Yeah, Mr. Feinblatt, you sure do have the right of it. What you sure enough ought to do is up and quit, leave the silly bastards flat on their ass.”

“Damn straight!” said Little Joe.

* * *

With raw fury oozing from every pore, Alex clutched his antique French telephone in a white-knuckle death grip. “Grid, you are some stupid sumbitch! Everything you touch turns to crap. We had Mason by the berries, had him right where he wanted us, and you let him off the hook. You did it, Gridley. You’re fired! F-I-R-E-D! Got it?”

Kurile’s rage mounted and went off the scale as he listened to the lobbyist’s feeble protestations. Jiggling up and down at a high rate oscillation like a victim of electrical shock, he screamed, “All isn’t lost, huh? Bet your sweet ass it’s not. Except you’re lost, you miserable scumbag! If you’ve got half the goddamn sense I know you don’t, you’ll never show your pasty puss in Vegas. If you ever do, so help me God I’ll have you hit! Hit! What’s more, tell that lame-brained Air Force leech he’s fired, too — F-I-R-E-D!”

Alex smashed his fancy French telephone into the two-pronged cradle. Breathing in short, ragged gasps, his thin, mottled features hideously contorted, Alex turned the air blue with epic curses, then bellowed for the ministrations of his personal masseuse.

27 - Beaucoup Heartburn

The wiry tool and die inspector was using a feeler-gauge to measuring the dimensions and parallelism of a webbed, machined casting. Sensing a nearby presence, he glanced up and was overcome by mild trauma. R&D Division’s acting Vice President & General Manager reared beside him like some ancient statue mistakenly clad in resplendent modern garb.

“Hiya, Mr. Sorenson, sir.”

“You did good,” said the executive, his ice-blue eyes bright with enthusiasm.

Puzzled and further unnerved by the compliment, the wiry tool and die inspector said, “Sorry, Mr. Sorenson, sir. How’s that . . .?”

“You won. You’re a winner.”

“Oh, the tournament.” Accepting the accolade with gracious modesty, the champion said, “Guess I was on my game, Mr. Sorenson, sir. Had lots of luck, too.”

“Great smashes!” applauded Sorenson. “Good top spin!”

“Aw, thanks ever so much, sir. Praise like that’ll sure go right t’my head.”

“You could be a pro,” declared Sorenson.

“A pro . . . ?”

“A pro Ping-Pong player.”

The wiry tool and die inspector chewed over the statement, blinked, chewed his tongue and admitted to not knowing Ping-Pong professionals even existed.

“They will,” clarified Sorenson. Fearful of being overheard by someone who might pilfer his inspired notion, he checked the activity around him. Perched on a footstool before a large black surface plate, an inspector wearing a green eye shade and a jeweler’s loupe used a calibrated gauge to do something Sorenson judged totally incomprehensible. Having previously visited his Ping-Pong ace, he’s succumbed on both occasions to a thrill of wonderment at the the whys and wherefores and mysterious ways and means of denizens in the Quality Assurance bay who forever seemed intent on conducting arcane processes.

“They have golf pros,” confided the executive in a stage-whisper, “and tennis pros. Why not Ping-Pong pros?”

“Yessir, why not is right? I’m with you a hundred percent on that, sir. I think maybe you’re really on to something big, Mr. Sorenson, sir.”

“Shh-h-h, not so loud. We could start one,” whispered the acting VP & GM.

“Start one . . . uh, what, Mr. Sorenson, sir?”

“A pro team. Even a league. I’ve thought about it.”

His blinks now coming in rapid succession, the wiry tool and die inspector said, “Say, that is some ring-dang-doo dynamite idea you’ve got there, Mr. Sorenson, sir.”

“Think so?”

“Oh, do I ever! A real, honest to God inspiration’s what it amounts to, sir.”

“Will you help me get one started?”

“Uh, h-help . . . you . . . ? How’s that, Mr. Sorenson, sir?”

“We’d be partners.”

“Partners.”

“Right, in a partnership.”

“Oh, now I see.” The wiry would-be-partner deliberated the eventuality, “That’d be some honor, Mr. Sorenson, sir,” he said with aplomb. “What’d be in it for . . . ? What do we do first?”

“Help me find out who sells the best tables, paddles and nets. We’ll need pro quality tables, paddles and nets.”

“Ping-Pong hardware?”

“Right.”

“No sweat, Mr. Sorenson, sir. Should be a cinch. I bet dozens of joints right here in L.A. sell topnotch Ping-Pong gear.”

“Only the very best,” emphasized Sorenson. “Pro quality.”

“Right, sir. Nothing second-rate. Absolute top-of-the-line best there is.”

“Find out,” urged the executive, “and let me know.”

“I’ll do it the first chance I get, Mr. Sorenson, sir.”

Sorenson nodded. He turned away, exited the Quality Assurance bay at a stately pace.

The inspector working next to the wiry tool and the inspector slipped off his jeweler's loupe. "Couldn't help but overhear some o' that runnin' off at the mouth. The extra-tall, duded up guy, he for real?"

"Not so you'd notice. He's nutty as a MIL-Spec fruitcake, but a real big wheel. What's more, he's loaded. I go along for the ride, know what I mean? Can't see what it'll hurt."

* * *

"Dammit, Frank!" raged Alex. "Every scam we switch the juice to blows up in our face. We have to pull out all the stops, get cracking on this thing of ours. Sure hope you've cooked up something that'll put the show on the right road, keep it there. What do we hit 'em with next?"

Put off as usual by his erstwhile employer's unannounced visit, and exasperated by his demeanor, Burton clicked a pencil against his teeth. "We don't," he said.

"Don't what? Don't you get uppity with me, or you'll be damnd sorry! And don't ever 'don't' me again. Told you a dozen times I can't stand being don'ted."

"Our next attack," said Burton, unfazed by the other's sensitivity to the negative, "will be to sit on our hands and let electronic manufacturing shoot itself in both feet."

"Riddles on top of being don'ted is too much to take! What's sent you off your rocker?"

"Not at all," said Burton with a degree of smugness. "It shook me as much or more than you to learn how fast AGC bounced back from the audit disaster. Now I think the way that shenanigan bombed might be an unexpected benefit."

"Pretty well-disguised fucking benefit!" Fists clenched, his asymmetrical features a ruddy hue, Alex leaned toward Burton. "Shoot itself in both feet, yet," he mocked, venting sarcasm. "Where the hell do you get off handing me a dumber than dumb line like that?"

A touch hot under the collar himself, Burton also leaned forward until he was nose to nose with Alex. Looking daggers at his patron, he gritted "Back off a hair, and listen. Recall the five hundred thou used to undercut the competition's price on electronic automation equipment?"

"I hardly ever forget half a mil," assured Alex, "and never when it disappears down the rathole." Eyeball-to-eyeball and psyche-to-psyche with Burton, his mind working overtime in its own ponderous way, he finally said, "You talking about Mason's buy on 'automatrons,' or whatever they're called?"

Burton's temper slowly cooled. He sat back down behind his makeshift desk. "That's it, robotic systems, machines that automatically install electronic components on circuit boards. You kept screaming for me to dream up a scam that works, now prepare to celebrate. This ploy has apparently worked."

His tongue hanging out at the mention of a hint of a sniff of potential success, Kurile's temper also cooled a tad. "Okay, quit jerking me off and cut to the punch line, Frank."

"Not long after coming back to L.A.," declared Burton, "I told you about AGC's promise to update and expand its automated electronic assembly facility to prepare for an eventual flood of electronic production hardware. Well, it was no casual promise. AGC's legal team had to state as much in writing, and include it when quoting against the RFP. It so happened that —"

"More alphabet soup!" interrupted Alex. "What the hell's an rr-ff-pp?"

"Re-request for Pro-po-sal," said Burton, his enunciation lucid. "In this case the RFP inviting AGC to bid on Aerospaceplane. As one of Mason's former whipping boys, I was aware

that upgrading the current state of AGC automation would involve big bucks funded necessarily from the parent Vonex Corporation's currently less-than-deep pockets."

"Why 'necessarily,' Frank?"

"Modernization is an overhead expense prime contractors have to bear if they hope to compete, and continue to win juicy government contracts. Then later on," added Burton, "during the production and follow-on cycles the prorated cost becomes a tax write-off, loot spent in the interest of acquiring future business. With me so far?"

Alex grunted noncommittally, his close-set, misaligned dark eyes alive with resurrected interest. "Uh-huh, get to the punch line."

"When one of my contacts mentioned that AGC had solicited open bids on a new multimillion-dollar automation line, I hinted to an acquaintance at BLI that it would be a real smart move to —"

"*More* fucking alphabet soup!"

"Bor-ges-Lar-ra-bee In-dus-tries," gritted Burton, "one of the four bidders. I told the exec we'd be willing to salt the kitty with four hundred thou if he'd lower BLI's bid. He went for it like a tabby having a catnip orgasm, and dropped the price of BLI's bid accordingly."

"Dropped their price? You telling me this guy lowered the bid four hundred thou?"

"Not quite that much, but close. I also knew," added Burton, "that as a Vonex subsidiary AGC would have to establish a rock-solid rationale for the expenditure, then run it past the parent conglomerate for approval. The trap opened, the turkeys in Spacecraft Division sniffed the bait, and more or less went for it. Then Vonex dictated procurement from the lowest qualified bidder — *the* lowest. BLI's five-and-dime price snookered the Vonex fat cats exactly as I'd hoped, and why not? It was like waving red long johns in front of a pissed-off bull, and AGC was suckered into a buying —"

"Hold it, Burton!" cried Alex. "What the hell have you gone and done?" He waved his hands in frustration. "Who're the suckers here, them or us? Sounds like ol' Alex got bugged again. Out of the goodness of my heart I serve up four hundred large so the company I hate like rat poison can get a bargain basement by on automatron stuff. The way you outsmarted me is first-rate, Mr. Aerial-spacey Wizard,! Hate to sake whose pocket got my other hundred thou?"

Burton grinned. "You do try and try, but still refuse to get it, don't you, Alex? You hit the jackpot. You won the lottery, and you don't know it. A bargain basement price is *exactly* what AGC got. Unfortunately for Mason, and fortunately for you, for us, the robotics hodgepodge Spacecraft Division scooped up on the cheap is a collection of semi-obsolescent robotics gear no one else wanted. When another company reneged on their purchase and paid the penalty, BLI's pick-and-place robots gathered dust in a warehouse for two-plus years. Your extra hundred thou went for more than just having the dust wiped off; it paid for cosmetic refurbishment — new sheet metal panels, a slick paint job, a retrofit or update of all controls and visible hardware."

Alex's dark eyes glistened moistly. "You saying these automatron gismos will crap out, dump AGC in the toilet?"

"They will leave your beloved company twisting slowly in the wind, but hopefully not until later. I'm going to talk you into doing a bit more subsidizing. How about footing the bill for BLI to station a pair of techs on standby at AGC to service breakdowns?"

"Help *fix* the automatron junk pile they bought? Why, f'Chrissake?"

“Because the assembly line has to perform halfway decently while AGC is proving its advertised production capability to both customers. Now do you see why it’s to our advantage for AGC to land the ALLP/ORDART production contract?”

His employer snorted indignantly. “Waiting for bonehead Alex to ask, are you, Frank? Damn your eyes! You’re holding aces in a marked deck. Play ‘em, and quit teasing me.”

“As with most major aerospace contracts,” informed Burton with forced patience, “fifty, sixty percent of dollars spent will go toward producing electronic hardware, software and firmware, in this case plus ground-based and airborne test and checkout equipment. When Spacecraft Division techs try to mass-produce electronic assemblies, not just auto-assemble a few prototypes and engineering models to prove capability, the effort will fall flat on its face. There is no faster way for AGC to bilge the contract than by dropping dead on electronics build, test and delivery.”

“Bolshoi!” Alex clapped his hands. “So that’s the sucker play. A dim bulb finally lit in my noggin. Always said you were the ace dynamiter on our team. Using your head to scheme is what you do, and I dearly love schemers. Don’t know what the hell I’d do without you.”

Imagined several things Alex could do without him, Burton kept them to himself.

* * *

Minnie was away from her desk. The door to Ladd’s inner office stood open. Ham waited expectantly in the doorway until the chief engineer noticed him, and growled, “Who goes there, friend or foe?”

“Brought you something to read, Bill.”

Ladd tossed aside his omnipresent red pencil. He stretched tiredly, rotated his head and rubbed the back of his neck. “Only thing I’ll accept is good news.”

“A letter from Dangerfield.”

“Ah, that should satisfy the requirement. How’s the old Guv getting along?”

Realizing too late he had interrupted the chief engineer’s labors when his boss did not wish to be disturbed, Ham said, “Sorry, I’ll stop by later.”

Ladd’s visage relaxed into a more congenial mold, but the change looked artificial, and lacked his usual spontaneity. “Door’s always open for you, Ham. I’m probably getting crusty in my dotage, mostly because our white elephant’s helping to make an old man of me. Look, the paperwork snowdrifts are piled five or six squaws deep.”

Ham drew out a chair. “I’m sort of worried about Clint. Read between the lines, and you get the impression things Down Under aren’t all that rosy. He’s an energetic old codger. I think he must be kind of dying on the vine back home in Sydney.”

A sagacious nod. “Sometimes happens that way. Fact is, many of us aren’t built to prosper with all our cares unloaded. Clint’s about seventy, but still a pint-sized dynamo. Losing his established daily routine and also invalidating his technical expertise may’ve undermined his psyche. A shame, yet knowing Clint I doubt if he’ll let himself wither away.”

“You don’t suppose . . . What I mean is, would there be any chance of helping him get back to work here in the States?”

Ladd lit a cigarette. “By ‘here’ I suspect you mean at AGC?”

“It crossed my mind.”

“As what, a consultant?”

Ham nodded. "He could come in two, three days a week, help sift the grain from the chaff on electronic systems. Spacecraft Division's circuit schematics leave a lot to be desired."

"Do they ever!" Ladd pondered. "In my lexicon, a consultant is anyone who borrows your watch so he can tell you what time it is, but that limping gag line wouldn't apply to Clint. Speaking of limping, you're right about the way electronic design is limping along. According to Herb Mauch, the young electronikers he brought aboard during Ben's 'Bring 'em in!' hiring frenzy categorically refuse to abide by tried-and-true design standards or guidelines. Herb complains that the young'uns are twice as individualistic and stubborn as any of his salted double-ees. You may have something there, Ham. Clint could help set 'em straight."

"Definitely." Pleased by his boss' candor, Ham said, "I'll leave the letter with you."

"I'll get around to it this evening." His air speculative, Ladd went to the coat rack and pocketed the envelope. "Don't rush off just yet. Mentioning Clint brought to mind a collateral migraine. You've been loosely tracking prototype circuit board design and fab, and appreciate how unhealthy it is at best. I sat in on a session with the automation manager, Mac Ravenswood. He complained bitterly that too many prototype circuit board assembly inputs call for component densities too stiff for the pick-and-place robots to handle. Seen much smoke about that?"

"Billows," said Ham. "According to Ravenswood, the electronikers insist on partitioning their circuits their way. He has to accept schematic diagrams or computer network lists as they are. Component density's the main reason a preponderance of prototype boards are rejected for automated assembly and sent to the manual "push" line for slow, labor-intensive, hand assembly. We'll overrun the prototype budget by a light-year if the inputs aren't screened more carefully."

"Uh, huh." Moffett's recital had worked to aggravate Ladd's careworn expression. "Herb Mauch's young electronikers are book-smart, but most were hired straight out of college. No wonder they're indifferent to design guidelines and ground rules. I'd like you to trot over there and have a heart-to-heart chat with Herb's design manager, Beaucoup Heartburn, to see if —"

"With who?"

A puckish grin leavened Ladd's serious demeanor. "My private nickname for Beauregard Blackburn. Spawned deep in Georgia's piney woods, they force-fitted a pair of size fifteen triple-ees on Beau's feet and he elbowed his way through Georgia Tech. He's not your average, run-of-the-mill ramblin' wreck, but more like a force of nature. Whenever I want my blood pressure elevated I drop by to see Beau, since dubbed Beaucoup Heartburn. My faith in you is unlimited, Ham. I know you've got the right stuff to make Beau see things our way."

"Thanks ever so much."

"Don't mention it. As a plan of attack, first try getting on his good side if you can find a good side. Butter him up, then jolt him with the facts of life, and use both barrels an unsweetened message that the roof will cave in on Herb's operation if he doesn't unlimber his cat o' nine tails and lash his circuiteers into complying with automation ground rules. Black box design and fab is and will be the long pole in ALLP/ORDART's tent, so remind Beau that if and when the follow-on production contract lands in-house, sixty or more percent of modularized electronics will have to go together via automation."

"I'll give it my best shot. Why do these thrilling assignments always come my way?"

"Just lucky, I guess," the chief engineer said amiably.

* * *

Looking up Blackburn's office in the company directory, Ham dropped by on the off chance his quarry might be available. Chary about giving out information up to and including the time of day, the design manager's grumpy executive assistant suspiciously fended off all inquiries. When Moffett persisted, she reluctantly admitted Blackburn was due back shortly.

He decided to wait on a bench across the corridor, his presence earning quizzical glances from passersby, and took advantage of the opportunity to formulate an approach that would hopefully convince Blackburn to see the light. The minutes wore by. He concluded that hanging around only wasted time, made ready to leave, and hesitated at sight of a grossly overweight, balding individual with incredibly bad posture peering in his direction. A monumental belly hung out over the bearlike figure's ornate silver belt buckle, the centerpiece of a thick leather belt that accentuated rather than supported his permanent swayback.

"You've got t'be Mr. Moffett, young fella."

"Guilty, Mr. Blackburn. Ham had his hand shaken loosely, damply. "If you have a minute to spare, Dr. Ladd asked me to drop by and see you."

"Why, surely, surely. Lucy says you been waitin' patient as a weevil in the dead o' winter. Afraid a minute's about all I can spare. Come set yourself down and fill me in on what I can do to ease poor ole Doctor Bill's guilty conscience."

Beginning with a left-handed compliment about electrical engineering inputs, Ham cited the heated controversy over circuits "mispartitioned" in a way that made it difficult or impossible for assembly via automation. He did his best to inject anesthetic along with the indictment.

His deep-set, yellowish eyes alight with antagonism, Blackburn drawled, "Mr. Moffett, you surely appreciate the solemn truth that the automation junk pile Mac Ravenswood went out and paid good money for is a giant crock of shit."

"I, uh . . . hadn't . . . realized that, no."

"Then it's past time you did, Boy!"

Ham fumed quietly at being addressed as "Boy." It put him on the defensive without a hearing. "In your view, what seems to be the problem with the equipment?"

"Damn near everything y'care to mention. I've knocked heads with Ravenswood for weeks on that dilly of a subject. He's got problems galore with those obsolete robotics gismos he sewered a fortune to procure. Last demo I was privileged to witness, the pick 'n place arm on a retarded robot swung 'round and whapped its very own plexiglass safety shield. What Mac went out and bought's not exactly a automation wonderland. Understand what I'm saying, Boy?"

Ham's indignation flared. "Proposed cost estimates," he said sharply, "to cover the assembly of Aerospaceplane electronic production hardware were predicated on the basis of an updated, expanded automated assembly line."

"Shee-it! Don't you know it was us here in Spacecraft who wrote the proposal, except the the front-office geniuses used Mac's automation fiasco to reduce our quoted figures. And a colossal, cryin' shame that was."

Ham struggled to keep his voice level. "Mr. Blackburn, you acknowledge AGC's need to prove automated assembly capability. I've been asked to impress you with the fact that neither digital nor analog circuitry is being partitioned per automation guidelines and ground rules."

Beauregard Blackburn surged to his feet and slammed the flat of his hand on his desk. "Now you kindly attend me, Boy! You high 'n mighty R&D hotshots over yonder in 'G' stay up

nights and invent different ways t'tell us poor working stiff in Spacecraft how to run our shop. Well here's a news flash for you. Betwixt and between the hailstorm of change requests we get from either customer, on top of the Jim Dandy misdirection we get from our own high 'n mighty leaders squatting on executive row, we've absolutely no way in hades of knowin' whether we're afoot or on horseback when it comes to taking care of our preliminary design chores."

"That may well be the case, Mr. Blackburn," said Ham as patiently as he could manage, "but a number of factors contribute to electronic design, and you —"

"But nothing! Root around out there in my bailiwick your ownself. Pipe the independent minded, know-it-all cockerels I've been saddled with. Most of those spoilt little farts got shut of college months ago. Can't nobody tell 'em nothing, hear me, Boy? Do you honest to God think I'd turn 'em loose without guidelines 'n ground rules? The answer is not hardly! Try 'n counsel one of 'em on his shortcomings, and he'll, 'Shit in your hat 'n wear it!' He'll waltz out the door, and prob'ly head up to Silicon Valley or someplace where the action's hotter 'n heavier."

In the act of voicing a rebuttal, Ham was to allowed the chance.

"You'll have to accept my sincere apologies now, Mr. Ham," said Blackburn snidely. "I've invited a bunch of those snot-nosed youngsters in here for a serious ass-chewing' session."

"Certainly." Moffett rose.

"No, don't even think about sayin' what I know you've a mind t'say, Boy!" Blackburn eyed Moffett archly. "Trot on back to poor ole Doctor Bill and give him my message. Tell him we're taking care of our assignments over her the very best way we know how, and we sure as hell don't appreciate havin' him stick his rum pot of a nose in our affairs. Now scat!"

Moffett scatted. Walking back to his cubicle, resentment burning brightly within him, he licked his wounds. Pausing on the threshold of Dr. Ladd's inner office, he said, "Better take me out, Coach. They're too big for me."

"A shame," sympathized Ladd with deadpan seriousness.

"You were right to tab that gomer 'Beaucoup Heartburn.' He should change it legally."

"Cool down, and let it ride for the nonce. Someday, somehow, we may straighten Beau out. It's a long shot, but a remote possibility's better than no hope. I wanted you to get your feet wet by dealing with him on a legitimate problem. He's a big, bad bull looking for a china closet to trash. I thought meeting him now might make it easier the next time you do battle."

"The next time," said Ham with feeling, "I'll rear back and yell, 'Screw you, Boy!'"

"Know exactly how you feel," said Ladd with exaggerated solemnity.

"Capping that cracker's other sterling qualities, he's a prime candidate for a heart attack."

"Uh-uh," denied the chief engineer. "Beau doesn't get 'em, he gives 'em."

28 - Redundancy All Over Again

Questing for information that came straight from the horse's mouth, Moffett phoned for an appointment with MacArthur Ravenswood, the lean, bespectacled industrial engineer who managed Spacecraft Division's electronic production facility.

Intense and troubled, totally drained of whatever sense of humor he once might have had, Ravenswood issued for Ham's use a white coverall with the AGC logo on the back, a snood-like cover for his hair, and plastic bootees to stretch over his shoes. Clad in an identical "bunny suit,"

Mac led the way through a functional airlock into a large, windowless climate-controlled, air-filtered area he described as a Federal Standard “one hundred thousand cleanroom,” where similarly clad technicians tended dual lines of impressive looking robotics equipment.

“Trimmed-to-size bare circuit boards,” informed Ravenswood, “feed in from the electrical continuity check station over there. Rejects are sent back for rework, or scrap.”

“The lines look identical,” said Ham. “Will eventual ALLP/ORDART production quantities warrant two assembly lines?”

The “A” Line pointed out Ravenswood, auto-loaded components manufactured with electrical leads, whereas Line “B” auto installed leadless, surface-mounted devices precisely emplaced via robotics at computer-designated ordinate and abscissa locations. Black boxes destined to fly aboard ALLP posed only minor problems, since unit size and weight were no more than secondary and tertiary considerations aboard the giant hydroplane, whereas for ORDART each added gram or cubic centimeter of on-board electronics equated to a minor decrease in payload capacity, hence the orbiter’s restrictive weight and volume parameters demanded hi-density, surface-mounted components, the source of most automation migraines.

“Auto-loading integrated circuits or discrete components with electrical leads,” clarified Ravenswood, “is fairly straightforward, a lot like popping evenly spaced pins into evenly spaced pegboard holes. On the other hand, surface-mounted, leadless devices demand installation in precise locations, where each is held in place throughout subsequent operations up to and including vapor-phase soldering, our secondary source of major headaches.

“Yet most of those problems were anticipated,” continued Ravenswood, and explained the really serious hang-up as the autoloader’s failure to cope with boards that called for installing devices in excess of a given percentage of board density. “No way can the machines stuff too many components that close together, leaving only a relatively small free-surface board area. Look closely, and it will become obvious why circuit boards designed to accept surface-mounted devices have to be diverted to the manual assembly ‘push’ line.”

Getting the picture, Ham said, “I was sent to try and convince the electronics how vital it is to adhere to circuit partitioning rules by talking to Blackburn, but he’s —”

“— a loudmouthed jackass!” supplied Ravenswood.

Favoring a diplomatic response to the unprofessional remark, Ham said, “His excuse was a flock of new-hires who refuse to appreciate, or conform to automation mandates.”

“Well, neither does he!” the other replied heatedly. “He badgers me, comes in here and breathes down the necks of my people, then yells, ‘Get your troops on the ball, Mac!’ If he’d lay down the law, get his engineers on the ball, it would solve many of our problems.”

“We’ll certainly keep working on him,” said Moffett, “but in the meantime —”

“I said ‘many,’ but by not necessarily all our problems,” interrupted Ravenswood. “A few glitches won’t disappear even if the designers straighten up and toe the automation mark. There was something fishy about the way we acquired the robotics gear. My staff and I spent months canvassing the industry, doing comprehensive tradeoffs, estimating lifetime-usage-cost versus performance, evaluating test criteria in depth, and other esoterica, and chose Universal as the outstanding bidder. The bigwigs at Vonex ignored our selection and directed procurement from Borges-Larrabee Industries, the low bidder among certified vendors who returned bids.

“Then something even less germane tweaked me,” continued Ravenswood. “BLI’s delivery schedule made absolutely no sense. The procurement lead-time for sophisticated robotics gear runs between eight and eighteen months.”

“That long?” questioned Ham.

Ravenswood nodded. “Certified vendors have to either tailor their off-the-shelf products to a customer’s specific requirements, or design custom units from scratch. The BLI machines began showing up on our receiving dock sixty days after receipt of the purchase order.”

“Surprising,” said Ham. “Are the machines operating per spec?”

“Nominally within parameters, except for swarms of niggling glitches that keep popping up. One thing I’ll say for BLI: they supply debugging and maintenance technicians at a very modest price. See the pair in orange BLI bunny suits at the head of Line One? What scares me no end is that when hot and heavy volume production begins, a sequence of minor stoppages could turn into world-class disasters. This operation has to run like an auto assembly line, with nothing, and I mean *nothing*, allowed to create a line stoppage. Except in our case the —”

“Someone name of Moffett in here?” called technician across the assembly area.

“Yo!” Ham raised his hand.

“Call for you, urgent.”

“Excuse me, Mac.” Ham went to the wall phone.

“Minnie here,” declared Ladd’s executive assistant. “Bill’s at a meeting in Dr. Mauch’s office. He needs you right now, Ham. It’s important. Get over there ASAP.”

“I’ll scoot right over, Min. Thanks.”

Ravenswood responded to Ham’s farewell wave with a discouraged nod. He turned away, watched the mechanical arms of a pick-and-place robot dart back and forth at a dizzy clip.

* * *

The door to the inner office was closed. Ham tried to persuade the refractory executive assistant of Spacecraft Division’s electrical systems engineering director he was there to attend the meeting. He was having little success when the door opened and Ladd emerged wearing an uncharacteristically long face.

He tugged Ham aside, warning in a soft voice, “We’ve been blindsided with a controversy over customer requirements, Ham. NASA and USAF no longer see eye to eye on the quoted level of electronic systems redundancy. Roelf Cornelius phoned with news that a firefight’s broken out between NASA higher-up and the Pentagon. I’ve stalled Herb Mauch, but he’s got a virulent case of red-ass because I insisted on waiting so you could fill us in the current goings-on at Swansdown. Beau’s also in topnotch fettle, running true to form, eager to get out from under the automation cloud by redesigning the whole electronics shebang. Once we get in there, do not let Beau get under your skin. Soft-pedal what you say until the redundancy issue settles out.”

“Exactly what would you like me to do, Bill?”

“Lose not your cool with Beaucoup Heartburn,” emphasized Ladd. “Herb Mauch can be a pompous turkey when his dander’s up, and he’s touchy as hell about finger pointing, sloughing off blame on others, unprofessional conduct, et cetera. Keep everything low key, businesslike.”

When Ham was ushered into the office, Dr. Mauch broke off a discussion with his design manager. He looked through the new arrival with studied indifference, listened to the chief engineer’s introduction without a change of expression.

“We’ve eagerly awaiting your appearance, Mr. Moffett,” intoned Mauch, an undercurrent of exasperation adding a faint burr to his diction. “Dr. Ladd has explained your oversight of the prototype electronic enclosure builds currently taking place up north. Now that you’re with us at last, perhaps you can provide enlightenment. I’m told you’ve already met Mr. Blackburn. Beau, please recapitulate the observation you made a moment ago?”

Ignoring Moffett’s presence, the rotund Georgian leaned toward Dr. Ladd. “What this clambake boils down to,” he said with pedantic solemnity, “is decidin’ whether t’gin up an electronics redesign quotation right quick, or sit on our bums and wait patiently for a formal contract change notice, thereby lose weeks or maybe months of valuable time.”

As if he had not heard it earlier, Ladd carefully weighed Blackburn’s statement, his manner thoughtful. “Before we reopen that can of worms, let me bring Ham up to speed. USAF has taken exception to the number of potential single-point failure modes proposed in specific electronic systems and subsystems. USAF’s insisting on added redundancy for what it considers ‘mission-critical’ circuitry, and has managed to crowd NASA into a corner. Roelf Cornelius advises us his superiors are reluctantly accepting the prospective redirection.”

“Adding circuit redundancy,” said Ham without hesitation, “will mean larger circuit boards of certain types, which in turn will mean larger, heavier enclosures.”

“Exactly.” Blackburn sent a porcine leer in Ham’s direction. “With standardized board sizes for almost every ALLP ‘n ORDART on-board unit, an off-the-cuff estimate is that specific boards a quarter-again that size’ll be needed if we’re to comply with the upped redundancy factor. Question is, dare we dive in quicklike, gain a whopping head start by trashing what’s been done to date and gin up a requote, or wait for formal, slow-as-molasses redirection from not one but two sets of gov’ment bureaucrats?”

Judging Beau’s question anything but rhetorical, Ham was reluctant to break the ensuing silence, but sensed it would be foolish to hold back. “I’m afraid that isn’t the only question,” he said, catching a stern, reproving look from Blackburn. “Larger circuit boards will not begin to install within the current prototype enclosures or engineering models.”

“Well now,” drawled Blackburn, “can’t let a triflin’ thing like mechanical interference hold up the wheels of progress, so it’d be —”

Dr. Mauch had lifted his hand, freezing Blackburn’s oversized mouth. “Mr. Moffett,” he said, “as of today where are we with the subcontracted Swansdown enclosures?”

Ham described design and documentation as complete for all seventeen enclosure types. With the vendor’s tooling awaiting formal certification, four prototype enclosures had currently been delivered for SPAR units, one more for an ALLP avionics unit, and another pair destined to accommodate power distribution units. A dozen more were in one stage of work or another, plus nine engineering models in stages of fabrication.

Dr. Mauch directed his owl-eyed stare at Ladd. “We’ll have to issue immediate Stop Orders. It would be senseless to throw good money after bad with official redirection in the mill.” He swung toward Blackburn. “Let’s make that an action item, Beau.”

“Yessir.”

“Not just yet.” Ladd steepled his fingers. “This purported redirection has far-reaching ramifications. We’ll have to sit down with upper management and thrash the matter out, not jump the gun by issuing Stop Orders. Let’s shelve that action.”

Blackburn said aggressively, “Beggin’ your pardon, Doc-tor Ladd, sir, but those enclosures were designed here in Spacecraft. The decision on whether to stop or not stop producin’ useless hardware rests in our barn. I expect we have no option other than shuttin’ down the dip-brazing folks up in San Jose till we can —”

“The prototypes and engineering models,” interrupted Ladd, “are subcontracted under the research and development contract, and therefore my office has cognizance, not Spacecraft. If and when a production award lands in-house, I’ll be delighted to leave such important matters in your capable hands, Beau. Until then, R&D will decide which option to exercise, as well as if and when to implement it.”

Blackburn’s visage darkened. Jowls aquiver, he stole a searching glance at Dr. Mauch. “Far-reachin’ ramifications, y’say?” he drawled, anger bringing his accent to the forefront. “Hope you’ll ‘scuse my backwardness, Dor-tor Ladd, sir, but ah’m unable t’ distinguish too many ramifications, far-reachin’ or otherwise. If we add redundant circuitry, and expand the black boxes accordingly, it’s a simple add to the cost and schedule. S’pose you elucidate a mite about those ‘far-reachin’ ramifications?”

“Gladly, Beau.” The chief engineer regarded Blackburn levelly. “Tunnel vision provides far too narrow a view of the unintended consequences that could stem from this predicated redirection. Adding redundancy is simple for you electron pushers; your systems and subsystems architecture doesn’t need to be amended, only expanded.”

Using the same droll delivery, Ladd explained that if both customers concurred on added redundancy, synergistic consequences would be inevitable. Larger, heavier printed circuit boards meant larger, heavier black boxes, ergo added systems weight and volume. With preliminary design estimates on ORDART running close to the wire on weight and volume, growth in either of those metrics would mean reducing AGC’s delivered-on-orbit payload capacity, and might even necessitate modifying ORDART’s configuration. Neither customer had apparently taken the time to contemplate diminished mission payload capacity, hence any changes to the orbiter could conceivably cascade downward and force modifications to ALLP.

“Also,” pursued Ladd before Blackburn could interject an acid-laced comment, “circuit board expansion will invalidate all pertinent dynamic and thermal analyses accomplished to date. The customers will pay, and pay dearly, for what they apparently consider a relatively ‘simple’ change. Mr. Cornelius at NASA is the only individual I’ve spoken with who is so much as distantly aware of how far-reaching the ramifications actually may be.”

Eager to voice a rebuttal, Blackburn was again silenced by Dr. Mauch’s lifted hand. “Dr. Ladd is eminently correct,” he announced, his manner frosty. “Strike that action item, Beau. Neither customer has apparently evaluated the consequences of redirection. Until receiving formal notification of the proposed change, we’ll have to proceed as if nothing had changed.”

Blackburn’s scowl summarized the situation’s gravity. “Risky,” he said, “mighty risky business. We’re taking an unwholesome chance by sittin’ on our hands till both wishy-washy customers make up their wishy-washy minds. Why keep ploddin’ down the same muddy road when we’re bein’ offered a brand spankin’ new turnpike, specially when the customers seem willing to ante up ‘n pay the piper?”

Dr. Mauch cleared his throat. “Gentlemen, haggling over indeterminate eventualities is nonproductive. We have little choice but to play out the hand as it’s been dealt, and await formal

redirection. It may be more costly in the long run, but at this juncture it seems the only safe, practical course. Our sincere thanks to you and Mr. Moffett for your help and counsel, Bill.”

“Not at all, Herb.” Ladd pushed back his chair. “Once the smoke clears, we’ll put our heads together again and work out something sensible.”

Dr. Mauch responded with a curt affirmative nod.

Walking back to “G” Building, Ladd was silent until Ham ventured to say, “Glad that’s settled.”

“Settled, hah!” was the tart rejoinder. “Herb Mauch’s a twenty-four-carat slippery article, believe me. He and his ornery sidekick won’t let the issue slide so easily.”

“What else can they do?”

“Hard to guess,” admitted Ladd. “I doubt if we’ll have a long wait to find out.”

* * *

“Good to hear from you,” said Roger Dufresne. “How’s your game these days, Paul?”

“Um, had a decent round with my regular foursome.” Vonex Board Chairman Hazlett covered the phone’s mouthpiece and coughed. “Pardon me. Listen, I realize what a dreadful nuisance I’ve become, but believe it or not another niggling problem has arisen. I’ve rung you up in hope of once again imposing on your good nature.”

“Always delighted to be of help.” Dufresne wondered if he meant it.

“I spoke with a pair of our other directors yesterday, Roger. We’d be ever so grateful if you could spare the time for a dollop of quiet mediation. An ongoing dispute has apparently erupted between the garrulous do-nothing who pretends to direct NASA’s efforts, and the office of the Air Force Secretary.” Hazlett went on to describe the rising furor at AGC over prohibitive and possibly unnecessary changes in the Aerospaceplane research and development contract. “Could you see your way clear to put a bug in the Secretary’s ear? I absolutely detest the necessity of having to ask yet another favor so soon, but it does seem necessary.”

Dufresne’s dry chuckle demonstrated how little he thought of such matters. “AGC seems to be the sharpest pebble in Vonex’s shoe these days. Frankly, it’s my practice to unlace a shoe thusly afflicted and divest it of the pebble.”

“Oh, Lord! If only it were that simple.”

“Be happy to see what I can do,” promised Dufresne. “Day after tomorrow might be convenient. I have to see a man in Washington about an unruly dog of another kind.”

“Splendid, splendid! Can’t tell you how deeply it pains me to keep pestering you. By the way, have you learned anything about the, uh . . . that other matter we discussed?”

“A tidbit here, a smidgen there,” replied Dufresne. “The deeper a probe penetrates, the farther the crack widens. Light was shed on a tenuous link between the Pentagon Air Force officer whose name you furnished and some obscure lobbyist. So far, the officer in question has remained untalkative. In any event, the matter is being chased down from both ends. I’ll furnish a few seamy details at our luncheon meet. You mentioned being in Manhattan on Thursday.”

“Yes, Thursday. Fine, Roger! Shall we say the University Club, one o’clockish if that doesn’t conflict with your schedule?”

“Not at all. If it did, you know I would always make time for you, Paul.”

“Bless you! I’ll thank you in advance for putting up with my peculiar requests.”

Again wondering if he meant it, Dufresne said, “Never hesitate to call on me.”

* * *

The ensuing days riffled past in a round robin of tail-chasing. Ham sat in on conference calls between Ladd, Mauch, Air Force Department officials, Roelf Cornelius, and other NASA technical and administrative officials. Deadlocked in a disagreement over the finer points and added expenditures involved in a formal redirection of Aerospaceplane electronic systems redundancy, the Pentagon and NASA remained at loggerheads, arguing their way through a series of stalemated talks that showed small promise of imminent resolution. Formal redirection was not forthcoming, affording AGC no choice but to continuing to play the waiting game.

Ham returned from lunch and found a paste-it note from Minnie on his computer display. The note urged him to call Mr. Longley, the factory manager at Swansdown Industries ASAP, or sooner if possible. The note was marked “Most Urgent!” The words were underlined twice.

He punched a long distance call to San Jose and announced himself to Longley’s secretary. When the factory manager came on the line, he sounded hysterically indignant. Swansdown had received a raft of official AGC Stop Orders, effectively halting production on all seventeen varieties of dip-brazed prototype enclosures and engineering models.

Mr. Longley wasted no time tolling the dire consequences of such an arbitrary hiatus in production. Coming as they had with no warning whatever, the Stop Orders had forced him to suspend a multitude of exacting activities. Worse, if the suspension were to last more than a day or two, he would have no alternative but to retrench and perhaps furlough more than one highly skilled employee. Did AGC appreciate the magnitude of what Swansdown was being asked to do? Did AGC think it could turn complex tasks on and off like nonchalantly twisting a spigot?

Ham spent five minutes trying to placate Longley. Doing his best, figuratively bending over backward, he described the vacillations of AGC’s dual customers, spelled out the on-again, off-again nature of a prospective change in requirements on the part of conflicted government customers. To further clarify the mutual dilemma suffered by AGC and Swansdown, he related how and why program redirection would also prove equally damaging to the efforts AGC.

“Who signed the Stop Orders?” he asked, having long since guessed the answer.

“Hang on,” said Longley. “Got the damn things right here. Let’s see, this scrawl far as I can tell is by someone, uh . . . maybe Black . . .”

“Blackburn . . . ?”

“Yeah, B. L. Blackburn I think.”

“Okay, let me run it to ground at this end, Mr. Longley. I promise to call back by the close of business. Can you please hold off on the Stop Orders till then?”

“Hold off hell! I don’t dare do that, Moffett. It’s my responsibility to act on formal client directives now, now, now! Stop means stop. What else can it mean?”

“I hear you, Mr. Longley, but as I said,” pleaded Ham, “please find a way to give me until close of business to straighten this out.”

Longley grumbled, waffled, backed and filled, grumbled some more and voiced indefinite threats against all parties concerned. In the end, he consented to sit on the Stop Orders until five o’clock that afternoon, but not a second longer.

Ham burst into his boss’ office. “Beaucoup Heartburn strikes again.”

The news jarred Ladd halfway out of his chair. Looking indecently perturbed, his aplomb returned quickly. “All right, let’s not panic,” he said gruffly. “We’ll give this a good, hard think,

not pillory Beau just yet. I smell the fine-boned, Machiavellian hand of Herb Mauch behind this sly move, not Beau's hairy paw. God's gift to electronic design makes lots of foul noises, but he follows orders same as the rest of us. Let me collar Ben, and plead our case."

Looking defeated a half-hour later, Ladd eased into Ham's cubicle and plopped down in the guest chair. He related how the coldly logical, devastatingly persuasive Dr. Mauch had gotten to Mr. Mason first, and successfully frightened the CEO out of his socks with a dire warning of the cataclysmic consequences certain to descend if the informal, though verbally reiterated and confirmed handwriting on the wall continued to be ignored, convincing Mr. Mason of the ultimate chaos sure to prevail if prototype and engineering model enclosure fabrication went forward when a virtual certainty existed that the expensive housings would have to be scrapped.

"What did Mr. Mason say," Ham asked, "when you told him R&D had cognizance, not Spacecraft?"

Ladd sighed. "The sticky topic didn't get aired, Ham."

"Why not?"

"Ben detests executive infighting. Putting him in the middle of a pissing contest 'twixt my office and Herb's would have made things ten times worse. Also, it's a battle I would've lost, and Herb damn well knew it. What scares me silly is an authentic fear I did manage to pass along. The end run by Spacecraft could throw wide the door to Swansdown defaulting. If the noses of Longley's superiors are bent far enough, they could cite the Stop Orders as a rationale for abrogating our contract, then scrap every item of hardware built to date, plus a raft of expensive, semi-certified tooling. They could also demand penalty compensation under the contract's preemptory termination clause, and AGC would get nothing for something. In this case, a fairly large amount of 'something'."

Ham groaned. "Could that really happen? It'd set enclosure build back to square one."

"Amen! Self-interest rules the roost in Herb Mauch's shop, and a comprehensive redesign will neatly avert him being spitted on the automation design meathook. Herb's eagerly chasing a chance to get out from under the thick, black cloud by re-concepting the works, every single item of ALLP/ORDART black box electronic systems and subsystems architecture."

The chief engineer's grim prophecy proved painfully accurate. He spoke with Roelf Cornelius almost daily, alerting him to the potentially disastrous consequences of suspending Swansdown's efforts. While wholly sympathetic, NASA's resident technical genius said that for the time being there was nothing he or anyone else could do to rectify the situation. No recourse was possible until the redundancy issue was resolved.

USAF eventually had its way, or believed it did. A formal Contract Change Notice was messengered to AGC authorizing the company to provide a hurry-up dollar and schedule requote aimed at satisfying the redundancy reconfiguration pertaining to certain selective electronic systems and subsystems.

Learning of the firm redirection spurred Swansdown Industries to follow Ladd's ghastly scenario to the letter. All hardware in production was immediately bundled up to be sold as scrap, not to mention the semi-certified, sophisticated tooling used to fulfill the overall contractual requirement. AGC was billed for all effort accomplished to date, plus all raw materials procured or on order, and per a subcontract clause exercised its legal right to an exorbitant penalty fee for abrupt, unheralded cancellation.

Engineering and scientific teams within R&D, Spacecraft and Aircraft began burning the midnight oil in an intensive effort to quickly reallocate weights and volumes budgeted aboard ALLP and ORDART, and this data was then factored into the requote. Electrical Systems Design Manager Beauregard Blackburn was said to be “in Hog Heaven.” Adding redundant, “fail-safe” circuitry constituted a minor task for his designers compared to the corresponding growth in volume and size of specific units, which of course led to the mandatory redesign of all enclosures in which the revised electronic hardware was destined to be housed.

The new proposal went together rapidly and smoothly until Aeronautical Engineering responsible for ALLP design reviewed it, reared up on its hind legs and bellowed a caveat of truly terrifying proportions: the postulated growth in specific black box weights and volumes applicable to ORDART might indeed cascade downward, and make mandatory certain design modifications pertaining to ALLP. Either that, or the payload capacity of the orbiter would have to shrink by an appreciable number of kilograms, net.

Since delivered-on-orbit payload mass and volume constituted Aerospaceplane’s *raison d’être*, NASA officialdom as well as senior DoD brass exploded in consternation when these unthinkable options were communicated. Heated controversy again raged within the toils of the civilian spaceflight agency and the Pentagon. What AGC was actually proposing amounted to a comprehensive redesign of the entire Aerospaceplane System. Dr. Ladd’s “far-reaching ramifications” had reached very far indeed, and come home to roost with a vengeance.

Two days later, a month and one-half after the first rumors of an impending redundancy change had circulated, the Air Force Secretary put his heavy thumb down on the scale and settled the matter. The redundancy Contract Change Notice was rescinded forthwith.

Despite vociferous screams from Dr. Mauch’s office, AGC received authorization to proceed with prototype electronic systems and subsystems concept and design as originally contracted.

Thoroughly terrified, Beaucoup Heartburn condescended to make an apologetic call to Moffett. His manner that of a small boy pleading to avoid a session in the woodhouse, he pleaded for Ham to, “Get in touch with those Swansdown crackers right away this second, or sooner, so as to spread a little oil on the troubled waters up thataway.”

At first professionalism prompted Ham to soften his reaction, then all vestiges of sympathy were thrust aside in favor of an inborn sense of justice. After all, hadn’t it been Blackburn and Mauch who set fire to the oil on those selfsame troubled waters? He invited the slovenly Georgian and his boss to see what they themselves could do about dousing the flames.

Unable to resist adopting the Southern drawl he used to tease his wife, Ham said, “Listen here, Boy! You-all paid no nevermind when R&D told you it was our call on those Stop Orders, and then went behind our back and did the filthy deed strictly on your own hook. T’was you who signed the paperwork your ownself, Boy! You sure as hell better get busy and start cleanin’ up the mess you done went and made, and you’d best get to it right now this minute, hear?”

Ham listened to Blackburn’s howl of fury for a second, then grinned and hung up.

AGC procurement specialists bowed and scraped and lavished praise and did everything but send bouquets of flowers to Swansdown Industries. All was forgiven, they explained to stone-faced Mr. Langley and his icy-eyed superiors. Figuratively kissing the feet of upper echelon Swansdown executives, they insisted that since the Stop Orders had been lifted

prototype and engineering model enclosure fabrication could resume immediately. Moreover, AGC felt obligated to pay a modest penalty fee incurred by the “confusion” resulting from the “temporary” shutdown.

Not mincing words, Swansdown Industries invited AGC to perform an impossibly redundant physical act, after which Mr. Longley privately advised Ham that Swansdown was no longer interested in doing business with AGC due to the company’s insanely fluctuating requirements. In fact, Swansdown’s hierarchy had reached a decision to desist from bidding on future defense-related contracts. AGC and its ilk were welcome to search elsewhere for a certified vendor of precision dip-brazed hardware.

When Swansdown’s obstinate attitude was called to the attention of both customers, intense, high-level pressure was brought to bear. Swansdown was urged in the strongest possible terms to complete the tremendously important effort vital to national security it had begun.

Not mincing words, privately owned Swansdown Industries invited the Department of the Air Force and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to each perform impossibly redundant physical acts, or perhaps with each other if that proved feasible.

Hung out to dry, with much less than nothing to show for monies spent, plus accrued penalties and unrecoverable lost calendar time, AGC now lacked a certified subcontractor capable of producing the required enclosures, thus placing in jeopardy the future award of the extremely lucrative Aerospaceplane production, qualification testing, flight testing and maintenance contracts.

Mr. Mason instantly became a nervous wreck. He lost sleep, seriously contemplated a physical assault on the person of Dr. Herbert Mauch, and ordered a nationwide search for government certified dip-brazing vendors. Delayed and compounded by extensive negotiations and renegotiations, the effort was eventually doled out to three widely scattered firms, each less competent, less efficient, and by virtue of bonuses paid for overtime premium work, one and one-half times more costly than Swansdown’s finished products would have been. Specific phases of re-subcontracted electronic prototype hardware buildup also required numerous coordination trips out of town by engineers and procurement specialists.

Dr. Mauch weathered the storm splendidly. His electrical engineers blithely made use of the delay to repartition a number of original multilayer circuit board configurations until they more or less, somewhat, almost conformed to previously overlooked or ignored automation guidelines and ground rules.

“Don’t let it throw you,” soothed Ladd, weary of listening to Ham’s indignant tirade.

“But, Bill, it’s such an unbelievable, unnecessary *waste*. ”

“You get no argument from this quarter, but it’s also part of the game we play. I tried to impress you with the fact that we play the game for the game’s sake, with no chance at all of ever winning. You must learn to take such boondoggles in stride.”

Refusing to take the “boondoggle” in stride, Moffett’s disillusionment with AGC, its minions, methods and practices soared by leaps and bounds.

* * *

“Hoo-boy!” cried Alex triumphantly. “Your automation monkey wrench sure as hell jammed AGC’s gears, Frank. Congrats! You really nabbed the brass ring with that surefire bustaroo. You rolled seven-eleven! I hear it went off in Mason’s office like a bolshoi nuke.”

Swearing softly, Burton pulled the phone away and rubbed his ear. “Love to take full credit, Alex. Sure, I had something to do with it, but what came down was really a case of plain, old-fashioned serendipity.”

“Sarah . . . Aw, shit! Here we go.”

“A lucky break because we’re living right,” clarified Burton. Searching for terms his employer might perhaps dimly comprehend, and added, “Lady Luck kissed the dice, Alex.”

“Hey, did She ever!” gloated Kurile, now on turf he recognized. “The cubes danced, bounced off the wall and came up seven-eleven for us, and boxcars for Mason’s morons. Will this autowhatzit screwup really hurt his lousy outfit all that much?”

“Depends,” said Burton cautiously. “The prototype unit manufacturing brouhaha that helped to create the mess will eventually get resolved and forgotten, but an automation screw-up later on during the production cycle is what’s in store, and we’ll stay focused on that. It’s bound to set the program back a few giant strides at a critical time, and with NASA’s current push to accelerate the R&D phase you know what that means.”

“Not sure I do,” admitted Alex. “Never mind; I’ll take your word for it. Stay on top of this razzle-dazzle move, okay? See if you can figure out bigger and better ways to bollix Mason’s morons.”

“Don’t fret about that. You’ll never have to worry about me letting you down.”

Alexander Kurile cackled gleefully.

29 - Barbara, a Reprise

Audrey Lee hesitated. “I’d like a closer peek at the pretty silk blouse I noticed in the window at Marie’s. Then we can go, Ham.”

“A dress shop?”

“Over there, past the escalator.”

“Shop till you drop,” encouraged Ham, “but include me out. I get violent pains after twenty minutes in any shopping mall, and unbearable agony ensues in an emporium featuring women’s wear. I’ll flake out here and watch the funny people mill around.”

“Stick in the mud! Here, hold this.”

Accepting a large plastic shopping bag containing purchases, he watched his wife sift crosscurrent through a stream of passersby and disappear inside the store.

Down in the dumps over AGC’s antic fits, starts, stops, surges and reversals, he had tossed and turned the previous night, slept only fitfully and awakened in a foul mood, wearier than at bedtime. Chalking up restlessness to obtrusive problems his subconscious refused to dismiss, he had shaved lethargically, dawdled for extra minutes in the shower, and dressed with lackadaisical indifference as though preparing to walk his last mile.

For the very first time in his career, he had dreaded the prospect of going to work. The electronic redundancy fiasco had given birth to a monumental rash of overtime hours. AGC, forced to abandon all attempts to reacquire the services of Swansdown Industries, had become embroiled in a maddening flurry of negotiations with dip-brazing specialty houses scattered from Minneapolis to Miami, from Schenectady to San Diego. The frenzied activity, added to and complicated by NASA’s accelerated schedule, had convinced him there would never be enough

hours in any one business day. Every time he had tried to accomplish something specific, the phone had rung off the hook. Callers from all over the facility had pleaded for engineering direction or assistance in solving one multifaceted, labyrinthine quandary or another. He thought back to the hiring interview, and decided Ladd hadn't exaggerated by referring to his R&D engineering organization as "Ulcer Gulch."

Knowing he would be late to arrive in "G" Building, he had thrown in the towel, just this once determined to turn his back on dilemmas, controversies and confusions, real or imaginary, and asked Audrey Lee to phone Minnie and say he was not feeling well. Amazed at having her absentee husband to herself for an entire weekday, Audrey Lee had worked on him for the better part of an hour, finally persuading him to accompany her on a shopping expedition.

To Ham, the mall seemed unusually crowded. Sitting on an unpadded bench, he idly trolled for interesting faces and figures in the procession of chic homemakers and more mature matrons, some pushing baby carriages, sifting past in bi-directional parade-fashion along with a few men and some skylarking teenagers who should have been in school.

A swath of blonde hair caught his eye in the window of a bookstore across the way. His breath caught in his throat. He quickly looked away.

Standing at the counter, waiting for the clerk to ring up a purchase, Barbara Mott had been staring directly at him.

Heart pounding, his sense of well being assailed by the prospect of introducing Barbara to his wife — something he knew could never be managed with a straight face — he hefted the shopping bag, stumbling in his haste to escape, headed toward the escalator and caught a peripheral glimpse of Barbara hurrying after him.

"Ham . . . !"

Quickening his pace, he forced himself not to look back and nearly collided with an overweight woman pushing a stroller. Threading his way through the passing throng, he was immensely relieved to see Audrey Lee exit the dress shop.

"You won't believe the price tag they hung on that simple silk blouse."

"Why not, uh . . . ? Want to go back, get it?"

His wife regarded him closely. "Something troubling you?"

"Uh, no. Not really."

"You look sort of pale and jittery. Feeling all right?"

"Tip-top. We finished here?"

"My goodness!" Audrey Lee feigned alarm. "It has to be an attack of those awful shopping mall heebie-jeebies. Come along. I'll drive you home, nurse you back to health."

* * *

Certain coworkers had noticed Moffett's absence the previous day. One of them, Little Joe, couldn't resist smarting off. "How'd the interview go, Ham? Did ya get the job? Think they might need two whiz kids like you 'n me?"

"Good guess, but that wasn't it," Ham told him. "I had eye trouble."

"Ouch! That's a toughie," sympathized the miniature cowpoke."

"I just couldn't see," explained Ham, "coming to work yesterday."

The drafter yuk-yukked until his laughter turned to spasms and the hilarity ended in a racking cigarette cough.

At midmorning Ham returned from R&D's weekly ALLP/ORDART Status Meeting in a mildly antagonistic mood. Discouraged by the mishmash of software headaches discussed at the meeting, he asked Ladd if he thought the software mess would ever get straightened out.

"Not during the wondrous third millennium we're into, no," said the chief engineer. "Listen, Ham, I'm sorry to tell you it's good news, bad news time. A while ago I passed a few words with Ben Mason regarding a suggestion you made." Ladd paused and lit a cigarette.

The statement brought Ham up short. "Let's air the bad news first."

"Your wise decision pertaining to Clint Dangerfield, uh . . . Sorry, no dice."

"He isn't needed?"

"Oh, Clint's definitely needed in the worst way, but Ben won't hear of bringing in a part time consultant who's pushing seventy. Consultants are way down on AGC's shopping list right now, no matter how competent or experienced. I tried, really I did."

"Guess I sort of halfway expected it."

Assessing his helpmate's disappointment, Ladd said he hoped Ham had refrained from mentioning a possible consultancy at AGC to Clint.

"No, I'd never presume to do that. I'll write, try to cheer him up. And the good news?"

"Yaminishi."

"You actually conned Yam out of retiring?"

"Only in a sense. He'll start collecting his pension as planned, but double back and sign on as a part-timer. He'll come in a few days each week to steer the layout turkeys."

"That's a relief. Without Yam's whip and spurs, they'd run amok."

Ladd grin was benign. "Don't I know it."

* * *

The Air Force captain was groggy. Parking in early evening around the corner from the entrance to his apartment building, he was bending to lock the leased compact sedan when a pair of goons converged on him from the shadows.

He barely glimpsed the approaching figures who manhandled him, stuffed bodily into the rear seat of a steel-gray Cadillac that pulled up at the curb. His protests were ignored. He was assured that atrocious indignities would be inflicted on his person if he failed to behave, and was roughly blindfolded. He refused to answer any of their questions, a decision that seemed sensible while he was still lucid, in command of his faculties. Erupting self-righteous profanity, he demanded to know what the strongarm roust was all about, and received no answer.

Arriving at an unseen destination, he was bodily dragged from the Cadillac's back seat and guided indoors, where the blindfold was torn from his head. His right arm was clamped in the ungentle grip of two abductors; a third who didn't bother to swab a patch of skin with alcohol before plunging a syringe through the upper sleeve of his military-pressed uniform blouse. Shortly after that, things began to get fuzzy around the edges.

Each time he tried to get up he was shoved back down on a wobbly-legged wooden chair in the center of a debris-strewn cement floor. A bare light bulb dangling from the mottled ceiling on a frayed cord cast surrealistic shadows across the faded, floral pattern of wallpaper scaling in strips from the ravaged walls of what had once been a bedroom.

A set of square-jawed, perspiring features swam in and out of focus. The square jaws moved and gruff male voice penetrated the captain's out of tune consciousness. "Kiddo, do

y’want it pleasant and quick, or slow and painful? All the same to us; we got no special reason to make it painful, so it’s fielder’s choice. If you smarten up and supply answers, give us no static, you’ll be home free. Which’s it gonna be?”

The captain did not respond. The brutish, square-jawed face went away. The captain dimly perceived someone unbuttoning his uniform blouse and unzipping the fly of his trousers. In a detached sort of way, as if it were happening to someone else, he felt spring-loaded electrodes clamp his nipples and the head of his penis. The sudden onslaught of crackling pain made him cry out. Someone took a handful of his hair, jerked back his head and stuffed a rag redolent with stale turpentine in his mouth.

The brutish, square-jawed man nodded once. An accomplice cranked the twin handles of an olive drab Army field telephone left over from yesteryear.

The captain muffled scream was so loud it made his throat hurt.

“Make up your mind, Kiddo. Speak up, or shut up?”

Again the captain did not respond. He spasmed up out of the chair with a second muffled scream, and was shoved back down. The rag was torn from his mouth. “How about it now? We’ve got all night, so either spiel or fall in love with direct current.”

When queried this time, the captain started talking so fast it was all his abductors could do to slow down his babbling to the point where it became semi-intelligible.

“Whoa, clamp on the binders, Pal!” The brutish, square-jawed face gargled wheezing laughter. “Give us a chance t’write down some of this shit, okay? You say his name’s Gridley. Okay, that checks out; we know about him. He pay you direct, or through some other guy? Uh-huh, uh-huh. From who does this Gridley collect the payoff? Who pays him t’pay you . . .?”

Sometime during the wee hours, the Air Force captain regained consciousness when a few electro-chemical signals pass through his synaptic cleft at a time. In the throes of a sudden, skull-splitting headache, he found himself jammed crookedly in the rear seat of a car. Minutes passed before he realized it was his own leased compact sedan.

Early afternoon came and went before he felt strong enough to report to the Pentagon. He was approaching the River Terrace Entrance from the parking lot when a pair of expressionless strangers in dark business suits tailored to accommodate underarm bulges fell in step with him. The strangers invited him to join them in a “G” Ring basement office, where an older, dignified looking stranger had been waiting. The stranger told the captain his anticipated promotion had been canceled. He was then offered three stark options: he could elect to resign his commission, effective immediately, be reduced in rank and sent to enjoy an extended assignment in the Negev Desert as an adviser to the Israeli Air Force, or choose neither magnanimous offer and languish in a Fort Myers holding cell until the appropriate paperwork had been cut, and then face a general courts martial, where the senior officers sitting in judgment were certain to view his deceitful, treasonous activities with a absolute lack of sympathy.

At six forty-two that evening, the former USAF commissioned officer was arrested shortly after his first shot missed Gridley when the lobbyist emerged from his Georgetown condominium, and his automatic pistol jammed when he tried get off a second round aimed at the extremely fleet-footed lobbyist.

* * *

Ham drained his coffee mug, rolled his tongue around his mouth with an expression of distaste, and vowed to cut down on the caffeine intake he suspected was lately making him extra jumpy of late. The mug, a Christmas present from Melissa Lee, was stenciled with a calligraphic inscription: WORLD'S GREATEST DAD! He inverted the mug on a paper napkin, glanced at the clock and rose, preparing to visit the washroom before his regular afternoon skull session with Dr. Ladd. He and his boss habitually sat down together each day an hour before quitting time, or later, to quickly run through the list of pressing trials and tribulations, reviewed newly arisen problems, and regurgitate and re-attacked previously unsolved dilemmas.

He was within earshot of the cubicle when his phone jangled. Stepping back resigned to yet another plea for assistance, he picked up the handset. "Moffett."

An unmistakable soft contralto said, "So that perky little redhead's your frau."

His scalp prickled. "Barbara? Who gave you my office number?"

"She did."

"She? You don't mean —"

"Relax," said Barbara Mott in a kittenish drawl. "I wouldn't dream of playing the role of homewrecker, Ham. I was some secretary, calling for her boss at some company."

"Not sure she'd buy that transparent song and dance."

"Oh, I am. I'm an actress, remember?"

"Why the call?" he asked after a short period of silence.

"Need there be a reason? I thought you owed me an explanation for cutting me dead the other day at the shopping mall. Why the Artful Dodger bit? I wanted so much to talk to you."

"Kind of obvious, isn't it?"

"You mean because the little woman was with you? My, what a provincial attitude! I'd love to meet your wife. Hasn't she been introduced any of your former . . . friends?"

"Not so you'd notice," said Ham, growing more discomfited with every word that passed between them. "Look, Barb, I . . . He quelled an urge to hang-up and dash out of the cubicle."

"What was once between us is ancient history. Honestly, I doubt whether —"

"You say that only because of what didn't happen that night."

"That's one way to put it."

"So you had a case of stage fright. So what?"

"Stage fright, fine; I'll settle for stage fright. Listen, I have to go to a —"

"You're so short with me, so . . . cold," she complained. "Why are you angry?"

"I'm not . . . angry."

"You certainly sound like it," she said pettishly. "Enjoy making me feel humiliated for calling you, that it?"

"What say we drop the whole thing?"

"Won't you even talk to me?"

"What's to be gained?" he asked.

"Ham," she said, a quaver in her voice, "you and I once had something special. Why can't we be friends now?"

"Friendship's one thing," he said, "but you're, well . . . You know what I mean."

"Still attracted to me, aren't you? I know damn well you are. I can tell."

"I'd sound like a damn fool to deny it. You're attractive as ever, maybe more so."

“Your attitude is . . . It’s because of those silly films I made, isn’t it?”

“Has nothing to do with it,” he objected, not wanting to believe he lied.

“That part of my life was over long ago. Can’t we at least have lunch together?”

“Wouldn’t be . . . smart.”

“You’re mean!” she accused. “I didn’t think you could ever be so mean.”

“Barbara,” he said, “it should take hardly any explanation for you to understand why I can’t see you, why I don’t want to see you.”

There was a faint click as she disconnected.

Sitting perfectly still, Ham reflected on the infinitely deep chasm now separating the lovely young coed with whom he’d been deeply involved in an intense, emotional seesaw of post-adolescent romantic attachment, and the equally lovely divorced woman she now was. An invisible hard shell had grown over Barbara. She had been subtly transformed in a way that no longer allowed her to fit the mold of naive sweetness that had once attracted him so strongly.

The telephone loosed a succession of bleating complaints about having been left out of its cradle. He caged the handset, uttered a relieved sigh, thinking, Best to have it cleanly over and done with. Dismissing the call and the caller, he picked up a notebook and hurried out of the cubicle, late for his review of the current problem maelstrom with Dr. Ladd.

* * *

“One last signature, Mr. Yaminishi, and you can begin a life of leisure.”

Yam left-handedly signed his name on the indicated line and entered the date with a flourish, believing it a day worth remembering.

“Are you a natural lefty,” the clerk asked hesitantly, “or is it because of the, uh . . . ?”

“I was once right-handed,” said Yam matter-of-factly. “Long ago, when visiting a distant place called Hue, I had to learn to write and draw all over again. Rehab therapy taught me a handicap is whatever you let it be.”

“What a marvelous attitude! There,” the woman told him, “now it’s official. You can pick up your final check in Payroll any time after two this afternoon. Your first pension payment will come from corporate headquarters electronically the first of next month. On behalf of AGC, let me congratulate you, and wish you a long, enjoyable retirement.”

“Thank you.” Yam smiled and got up.

The woman offered an encouraging smile in return. “Oh, you mustn’t rush off, Mr. Yaminishi. We have other business to take care of. As a new employee, I take pleasure in welcoming you to Aerospace General.”

“A new . . . ?” Startled, Yam said, “I came to work at AGC almost thirty years ago.”

The clerk blithely disregarded his disclaimer, handing him a thick packet. “You have a number of forms to fill out — a payroll deduction statement, income tax withholding forms, a number of others. The physical exam has been waived due to your prior employment.”

“Is redoing all this paperwork really necessary?”

“A chore, I realize. I’m afraid part-time employees have to be in-processed exactly like new hires. Were you told about the work-week limitation?”

“Twenty-four hours, if I recall correctly.”

“Exactly. A maximum of twenty-four hours per work-week will not jeopardize or effect the amount of your monthly pension. Now then, what else?” The woman shuffled papers. “Oh

yes. It will be mandatory for you to attend the AGC indoctrination film. After filling out the paperwork, stop by the ID Unit for fingerprinting, to be photographed, and get your temporary badge. The film is easy to take, a twenty-five-minute videotape that runs every hour on the hour each Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Have all that, Mr. Yaminishi?"

"I . . . yes. Think so."

"Complete the forms and drop them off here at your convenience. On behalf of AGC, let me welcome you to employment. I hope your stay with us will be both pleasurable and profitable."

"Thanks again." Leaving the office, a ghostly smile tickled the corners of the lead drafter's mouth. His 'long, enjoyable retirement' had lasted exactly eleven minutes.

* * *

"Good morning, Ham."

Moffett's bowels went cold. Swallowed the expletive on his tongue, he folded a cover sheet over the company-confidential document he'd been reviewing. "Hi there," he said, shifting the phone to his other ear, angrily stubbing out a cigarette.

"I called to apologize for hanging up on you," said Barbara in a choked, little girl voice. "I didn't mean to be rude, Ham. I don't know what came over me."

"Forget it," he said crisply.

"You're . . . still upset with me."

"Of course not," he lied.

The silence threatened to drag on indefinitely. Ham could hear accelerated breathing at the other end of the line. At last Barbara said, "You aren't much on conversation, Ham."

"Tough to know what to say, especially here at the office. I'd really appreciate it if you wouldn't call me during working hours."

"Well, you won't meet me," she said in an aggrieved tone, "and hash things out."

"There's nothing to hash out."

"Would you rather I called you at home?"

"Please don't do that."

"Oh, I get it. Don't call at all."

"What's the point of this, for either of us?"

"Bygones are bygones, right?"

Ham gritted his teeth. "Something like that."

Her breathing quickened until she was practically panting. "You are a son of a bitch!"

"Someday, if I try real hard, I may be able to imagine why I deserved that."

After a short interlude of heavier breathing, the line went dead with a click.

He hung up the phone slowly, reopened the confidential document and read two paragraphs, and was forced to turn back to read them again. The text had transformed itself into a discordant string of words with no shred of meaning attached to a single one.

30 - Ping-Pong Balls

Riding into the sunset, Little Joe nursed the ailing orange Mustang through stop-and-go traffic. He made a falsetto attempt to sing along with his favorite Country & Western ballad: "I've Got

Tears in my Ears from Layin' on My Back Cryin' Over You," but he faulty radio erratically demolished the song, rattling the music with an electronic squeak each time his mount bucked and reared over a minor bump, not to mention the machine gun succession of spark plug noises popping in direct counterpoint to the erratic snap and crackle of the electrical system.

Automotive imperfections notwithstanding, Little Joe was in a sunny, ultra-benign mood. The layout drafters' guru, Yaminishi, had ended his "retirement" and reappeared to lead the small cadre nominally under his charge to epochal achievements. During a backslapping reunion, Little Joe had jovially accused Yam of turning pensioner just to take advantage of the farewell dinner party held in his honor, a quip that earning concerted laughter from the drafters and a gaggle of AGC old-timers gathered to welcome Yam back into the fold. After a fortnight in leaderless limbo, Little Joe felt it hugely comforting to again have Yam available for guidance and counsel.

The Mustang's left front wheel struck one of many abyssal potholes disfiguring Van Nuys Boulevard, causing the vehicle buck like a rodeo bronc and try to throw its rider. Little Joe disdained seat belts, referring to them as safety devices for people who wore skirts, and the hearty jolt bounced him up high above the seat. The radio chirped once, crackled loudly and quit cold. A half-block farther on, the static-garbled music resumed of its own accord.

He reined in the orange Mustang, bringing it to a brake-squealing halt at a stoplight behind an older convertible with a crooked bumper sticker that invited him to:

HONK IF YOU LOVE JESUS

In the best of spirits, Little Joe tapped the Mustang's feeble horn. The convertible's driver, a teenager adorned with a spiky purple hairdo, jerked his oddly decorated head around and scowled darkly at Little Joe, then saluted him with a stiffened middle finger.

Little Joe consoled himself by grumbling, "Jerk-off thinks he's number one!" Irked by the punker's rotten manners after he himself had gone to all the trouble of complying with the bumper sticker's dictum, he subconsciously depressed the accelerator, weaving the Mustang in and out of traffic, stretching his luck to keep the convertible in sight. He gained the inside lane with a radical swerve that came within inches of clipping a delivery van, and floor-boarded the laboring auto, intending to pull alongside the convertible and retaliate for the insolent response to his friendly honk.

Head turned, he was readying an obscene verbal jab for the punker, and failed to notice a traffic light flicker from yellow to red. The convertible slowed to a casual stop just as the orange Mustang zoomed abreast of it.

Little Joe stood on the squishy brake pedal, which obediently sank all the way to the floor. He frantically pumped the pedal and the gradually slowing Mustang zipped into the intersection. A fleeting impression of looming headlights assailed Little Joe, orchestrated by the ear-ripping screech of skidding tires. The broadside impact slammed his head against the door post, a blow fortunately cushioned by his undersized Stetson. The orange Mustang rolled over like a performing seal, skittered across the intersection on its side, slammed into the curb, rebounded and settled back on all four wheels with a succession of violent bounces, the tinkle of shattered glass.

The world around Little Joe wavered in and out of focus. He gasped, tried to grope for the door handle, but his left arm didn't seem to work properly. Conscious of a strong gasoline odor, he panicked, twisted and clawed ineffectually at the door handle with his right hand.

As if in a dream, loud shouts drew closer. The driver's door was wrenched open. More than one pair of strong hands plucked him bodily from the seat. He was toted away, deposited gently on the sidewalk just as the orange Mustang exploded in a balloon of orange flame.

Semiconscious, Little Joe felt intense heat on his cheek and forehead. After an indefinite period he heard the faint tremolo of a siren's distant wail, and became aware of a hovering, incredibly lovely vision that kept floating in and out of his hazy field of view.

"So sorry," apologized the incredibly lovely vision.

Little Joe's jaw dropped. He examined the difficult-to-see high cheekbones, the flawless golden skin, the dark, liquid eyes, the incredible lovely vision's deliciously curved, carmined lips. "So sorry, sir. Everything be all right now."

"Must've died'n gone t'heaven," he mumbled, realizing his speech was badly slurred." Deliriously and simultaneously, Little Joe fell deeply in love and into a mild coma.

* * *

"It's in Westchester, Mr. Sorenson, sir."

"Where . . . ?"

"Uh, Westchester, not far from Inglewood, sir. Out that way roundabout LAX."

"Near the airport?"

"Yessir, now you've got it. In that neighborhood. I wrote down the address 'n phone number." The wiry tool and die inspector thought twice about sullyng the pristine elegance of Sorenson's polished desk, and finally summoned the courage to lay down a slip of paper.

Sorenson regarded the slip of paper with grave suspicion. "They sell the best?"

"Oh, yessir! Every dude I talked to said Archer sold the very finest, top o' the line paddles, nets and tables of any shop in the business. They import real high-quality Ping-Pong balls by the gazillions from Taipei and Singapore, and —"

"Thanks," said the senior executive by way of dismissal. "I'll go see them."

Sorenson handed the slip of paper to Myra, Moira or Myrna, who was purely elated by the prospect of calling for an appointment with Vice President Samuel P. Siegleman of Archer & Associates. Acting R&D VP&GM Sorenson ignored the ever-changing vista outside his private window, got out his L.A. Rapid Transit District maps and bus schedules, and spent the remainder of the afternoon planning the long, possibly arduous journey to Planet Westchester.

In the morning he overshot woefully on his first pass, disembarking from the bus in an anonymous community somewhere between Long Beach and San Pedro. Confidently climbing aboard another wrong bus at a crowded, graffiti-decorated stop, he caromed around the area for an hour and a half before being gratuitously deposited outside the Hollywood Park racetrack by a frightened woman driver who was sure anyone of Sorenson's distinguished appearance and bearing had to be an RTD inspector who's sole purpose in life was to endanger her livelihood.

The uneasy rider did not object to being evicted. He politely inquired directions to Westchester from a young pedestrian, and received a sarcastic response, "Y'can't get there from here, Mac," which added immeasurably to his sorrow and confusion.

A kindly Nigerian bus driver eventually took Sorenson under his wing and gave explicit, detailed verbal instructions on how to consummate the arduous journey to Planet Westchester, then went so far as to jot down appropriate bus numbers, street names, in a comprehensive travel itinerary.

At long last the senior executive stood before an opaque plate glass business frontage, its logo the classic figure of Diana drawing back a recurved longbow formed by the silvery crescent of the new moon in an azure sky. Stylized gold letters confirmed and certified his destination as:

ARCHER & ASSOCIATES

“Sorenson,” he announced, standing at attention before the desk of a frazzled brunette receptionist. “My appointment’s with Mr. Archer.”

“Be a tough one to keep, sir,” informed the receptionist. “Mr. Archer passed on six years ago.” The woman looked up his name in the computer terminal. “Have you down for nine o’clock. It’s now eleven-twenty.”

“I’m late,” explained R&D’s acting VP & GM.

Sorenson spent twenty minutes cooling his heels in the anteroom before being shown into the presence of Mr. Samuel P. Siegleman, who took one look at the messianic figure rearing opposite his desk, and hastily elevated himself. He offered gracious words of welcome, a toothy smile, a clammy handshake, and a cigar.

“I hear you sell great Ping-Pong gear.” Sorenson, tendered his business card, declined the cigar.

“Great, uh . . . ? A major understatement, Mr. Sor . . .” Samuel P. Siegleman’s eyes bulged when he perceived his visitor’s lofty corporate status. “Absolutely, sir. We vend a truly superior line of products, the very finest available anywhere. But I hope you’ll pardon me for saying it isn’t really proper to refer to the game as ‘Ping-Pong’.”

“No? You mean it’s wrong?”

“Table Tennis is the actual designation, Mr. Sorenson. It’s also known under several trademark names — Ping-Pong, Gossima, so on and so forth. Unfortunately, ITTF refuses to endorse any of those designations.”

“Who?”

“The International Table Tennis Federation; USTTA represents it in North America.”

“Say again?”

“U-ni-ted Sta-tes Ta-ble Ten-nis As-so-ci-ation,” said Mr. Siegleman with practiced elocutionary skill. Continuing to size up the tall, immaculately clad visitor, he asked politely what Archer could do for AGC. “Is your company thinking to furnish a recreation area?”

“No, I want to start a pro league.”

Samuel P. Siegleman’s eyes narrowed. “A pro . . . ? Yes, yes; I see.”

“A pro Ping-Pong lea . . . Oops, should’ve said pro Table Tennis league. I’ll need lots of nets, balls, paddles and tables. I like the paddles covered with foam rubber.”

Mr. Siegleman revolved his visitor’s fascinating proposal for a number of heartbeats, and again offered Sorenson a cigar, which was again refused. Choosing a Panatela from the humidor on his desk, he made a production of chopping off the tip in a miniature guillotine, slowly turned it in his fingers, and lit it with care, artfully distributing the flame around the blunt end.

Sorenson’s ice-blue eyes followed every step of the incendiary process.

“Mr. Sorenson,” declared Samuel P. Siegleman, “you are beyond doubt a gentleman who possesses truly amazing vision. Your concept of organizing a professional Table Tennis league has to be the most inspired entrepreneurial notion in the history of sports. Archer can guarantee

to supply the most excellent assortment of certified regulation products available, but I sincerely hope you won't be offended if I tell you ITTF ruled sponge-rubber-faced paddles illegal."

"Against the law?"

"Outlawed, Mr. Sorenson. The decision came about shortly after a Japanese team won the world championship with foam-rubber paddles in 1953, or thereabouts."

"Not allowed?"

"Banned, Mr. Sorenson!"

"That's terrible."

"Oh, I couldn't agree more wholeheartedly." The other's frown let it be known how little he thought of ITTF's asinine ruling. "However, if you're serious about founding a professional Table Tennis league there is something you'll need before lifting a finger to proceed further."

"What's that?"

"A franchise, Mr. Sorenson."

"Franchise?"

"A requirement I fear impossible to avoid. Hoping to organize a professional Table Tennis league without obtaining a franchise would be like trying to form a professional basketball league to compete with the NBA."

Sorenson slumped in despair. "I can't just start one?"

"No, no! To put it in the most basic terms, Mr. Sorenson, it cannot be done."

"Where do I get a . . . ? One of those things?"

"Why, here at Archer," announced Samuel P. Siegleman with no hint of guile.

"How much does one cost?"

The Table Tennis magnate grunted. He doodled on a scratch sheet, shooting quick glances at his visitor. After due deliberation, he said slowly, "Very difficult to come up with an off-the-cuff, spur of the moment estimate, Mr. Sorenson. Whatever the out-of-pocket cost, however, your franchise will eventually be worth multiple times the pristine investment. Down the road, once your league is established, huge crowds are drawn to the contests and the star contestants prime celebrities, television will clamor to purchase broadcast rights. Precisely like every professional baseball, football or basketball franchise, someday you will be able to sell your franchise for forty, fifty, one hundred or more times its start-up cost."

"I can't afford more than two or three hundred thousand," declared Sorenson.

Vice President Samuel P. Siegleman coughed explosively on a lungful of cigar smoke. "I imagine," he croaked, eyes watering, tears running down his cheeks, "we can. . . negotiate around . . . that figure. I'll be delighted to look into the matter on your behalf, Mr. Sorenson. I promise to get back to you by the end of the week with a firm dollar quotation."

"Okay."

The bargain was sealed with a second clammy handshake. Samuel P. Siegleman ushered the executive from his office showering compliments for his astuteness, his dedicated vision and entrepreneurial brilliance. He congratulated Sorenson repeatedly for being so farsighted as to come up with such a staggeringly unique and innovative concept.

When the door closed behind Sorenson, the frizzy-haired brunette receptionist squinted at Siegleman. "Sam, you putz! I heard most of that crapoola over the intercom. What's with that cluck? Sounds like he's got Ping-Pong balls for brains?"

“Ping-Pong balls!” Samuel P. Siegleman shook with helpless laughter. “Unless I’m mistaken, that’s an incurable Asian venereal disease?”

“Oh, har-de-har-har!” The frazzled brunette receptionist who provided Samuel P. Siegleman with occasional after-hours recreation was all too accustomed to his treacheries and deceptions. “We’ve no authority to issue a Table Tennis franchise, Sam. What’re you trying to pull?”

“Shh-h-h-h, not so loud, Dearie!” Samuel P. Siegleman held a pudgy forefinger alongside his generous nose. “Keep one solemn fact in mind at all times. *No one* has the authority to issue such a franchise. I fell back on a business principle dating to just before the Stone Age. When someone offers you something of value gratis, take it!”

“Sam, you are some slimy rat.”

Samuel P. Siegleman laughed. “A soon-to-be *rich* slimy rat,” he amended.

* * *

For all his bulk and towering stature, Bundy did his best to remain inconspicuous. Self-consciously holding against his lumberjack shirt the spray of wilted lilacs purchased in a cut-rate florist shop, in a low-pitched rumble he said, “Heard it was a Jap in a Jaguar.”

“The other driver?” Farnsworth’s negative head shake denied that likelihood. “Don’t believe so. Yam said it was an Asian girl in a Corvette. Isn’t that how you heard it, Max?”

Max Anthony consulted his memory banks. “Yam mentioned a young woman — Chinese, I believe — driving an expensive sports car.”

Huddled in Kaiser Hospital’s fourth-floor corridor, the drafters were waiting for the doctor to finish whatever he was doing inside Little Joe’s private room.

Bundy uneasily shifted the spray of lilacs to this other hand, then shifted his three hundred pounds from one enormous, tightly laced lumberjack boot to the other. “I hate hospitals,” he announced. “Folks up ‘n die in these places.”

“Some get well,” consoled Farnsworth.

“Hospitals,” Bundy insisted, “are fulla gawdawful smells ‘n germs galore.” He wrinkled his flattened nose. “Wish the doc would get a hustle on. Gotta bust outta here ‘fore I choke.”

As if cued by Bundy’s ambition, the extra-wide door built to admit a gurney swung inward. The physician, a thin, mahogany-hued native of Rajasthan, was trailed by a hulking male nurse almost but not quite the size of Bundy. The doctor hesitated, critically appraised the drafters. “If you please, it is my sincere judgment that you are present to visit Mr. Feinblatt, the patient lodged in this room. Would that perception be essentially correct?”

“T’see who?” Bundy wanted to know.

The doctor consulted his clipboard. “Yess-s-s, Mr. I. M. Feinblatt has made mention of the fact that he is in expectation of visitors who might wish to call upon him.”

“Naw,” denied Bundy. “We’re here t’see Little Joe.”

“T’see who?” asked the doctor.

Farnsworth gingerly placed a comforting hand on Bundy’s lamppost-sized forearm. “Yes, Doctor. We’re here to see Mr. Feinblatt. He’s allowed visitors, isn’t he?”

“Oh, yess-s-s,” said the physician, eyeing Bundy mistrustfully. “But do so for a time not to exceed the maximum of a few minutes only, if you please. Mr. Feinblatt has had the misfortune to suffer a concussion, a fracture of the collarbone and contusions in many places, the sources of much painfulness. He should be allowed to be at rest as much as will be permitted.”

“We’ll only stay a few minutes,” promised Max Anthony.

“That should be agreeable to all concerned. You young gentlemen may now go in with all suddenness, if you please.”

His pinched features contorted in an expression demanding wholehearted, unremitting sympathy, the patient reclined in a partially elevated hospital bed. Clad in a hospital gown three sizes too large for him, a sling supported Little Joe’s left arm; a prominent knob just below his hairline bulged in impressionistic shades of russet, avocado and magenta.

“Hiya,” piped the patient. He coughed weakly, obviously in danger of expiring at any instant. “How y’doing, guys?”

Bundy shoved the spray of wilted lilacs in Little Joe’s face. “We’re worried about you, what with that raghead doc, and all. I was you, I’d try real hard for a different doc.”

“No sweat.” Little Joe coughed again more weakly. “Sawbones isn’t much to look at, but he does fair to middling work. Says I’ll be okay soon, but the poor Mustang’s burnt to a bacon crisp. Don’t know where I’ll find another set of wheels like that ol’ hoss. It was cherry!”

The trio of visiting drafters snickered in unison.

“What’s so damn funny?” demanded the patient.

Ever the diplomat, Max soothed the patient, assuring him that insurance would take care of replacing the barbecued Mustang. “How long do they plan to keep you here?”

“Aw, they won’t tell me anything.” Growing weaker, Little Joe coughed again. “How come you guys’re away from your boards on Saturday morning? No overtime this week?”

“We sneaked out to come and visit you,” informed Farnsworth.

“We wanted you to know how badly you’re missed,” added Max Anthony. “The place isn’t the same without you.”

Touched, the patient said, “That’s sure sweet music t’my ears, guys. I really appreciate havin’ pals like you. Don’t think I’ll ever forget how you . . .”

Little Joe’s paean of appreciation stuck in his throat. Staring goggle-eyed at the doorway, he exclaimed, “It’s *you*! And all along I thought I was dreaming.”

She was voluptuous, yet petite — tiny, to be truthful — not much more than five feet in stature. She wore stonewashed, formfitting jeans and a delightfully upholstered white cashmere pullover. Holding herself erect like ballerina toe-dancing to stage front, she came daintily into the hospital room. “Hope I not disturb you,” she said with musical intonation.

Little Joe’s deathbed demeanor evaporated. “Come on in,” he invited. “Say hi to Maxie, Farnsworth and Bundy, some real close personal friends of mine.”

The exotic newcomer dipped her head in greeting, and said shyly, “Sally Chang. Accident part my fault, Mr. Feinblatt. Can you ever forgive?”

The patient winced upon hearing his bona fide surname. “Call me Little Joe,” he pleaded quickly, his close-set eyes all but popping out of their sockets as the vision of loveliness beyond belief came closer. “Nothing t’forgive, Sally. We can yak about it after these fellas leave. You guys don’t really have to up and rush off, do you? Say so-long to my friends, Sal.”

Accepting this subtle hint at face value, the drafters began filing toward the door.

“Bye, Little Joe,” said Max Anthony.

“Get well soon,” urged Farnsworth.

“So long.” Bundy’s giant lumberjack strides took him swiftly away from the odors and death-dealing infections rampant within hospital sick rooms.

When his friends were gone, the patient gaped unabashedly at his delicately molded visitor. “Sally, you are . . . wow! Plain out ‘n out gorgeous is what you are, Sal.”

“How kind you are to say this.”

Little Joe recklessly incriminated himself. “But, hey; the wreck was all my doing.”

“I know different,” objected Sally Chang. “Traffic light change, I not careful, no pay attention. Talk to my father in Hong Kong. He insist to buy you new car, make things right.”

“A, what . . . ? A new . . . He told you that, no fooling?”

“Oh, yes,” confirmed Sally Chang. “No fooling. He feel it only proper.”

For the first time in his life at a loss for words, at last Little Joe cleared his throat and said, “Sal, don’t fret your pretty little head about what happened. look at it this way: insurance’ll take care of replacing my old rolling junkpile. It was ready for the boneyard anyhow.”

“Is no matter. My father insist to do this.”

“Does, does he? Your daddy must be rich.”

Sally Chang’s smile sent waves of ecstasy rippling through Little Joe’s achey-breaky heart. “Enough,” she said, “to make right a wrong. My father Choy Chang.”

Little Joe’s jaw dropped halfway to his sternum. “Choy Chang, the *film* producer?”

“Oh, yes. He make movies in Hong Kong.”

Little Joe’s ecstasy mounted, doubled, redoubled, went ballistic and soared completely off the scale. “I don’t rightly believe this’s happening t’me,” he said in a voice so weak it could have been the result of a fatal accident. Laboriously raising his good arm, he pinched himself hard. “Not funning me, are you?”

“Oh, no. Not . . . funning.”

“Sal,” declared Little Joe, “this could be the start of a bee-ooti-ful friendship.”

* * *

Barbara Mott’s first call of the day came at nine in the morning, the second at one-twenty that afternoon, and yet again at four-fifteen. Between times, whenever his phone rang he had to suppress an urge to bolt from the cubicle and never go back.

During her third and final call of the day, conversation worked its way from starkly ridiculous well into the sublime, and eventually reached the shouting stage. Ham’s vehement responses began attracting attention from adjacent cubicles. Minnie stood up and peered anxiously in the direction of an assumed altercation. This time it was furious Henry Alan Moffett who hung up on petulant Barbara.

Her schoolgirlish crush, romantic fixation, or whatever had evolved from ardent to insistent, and then ventured into the surreal made her refuse to take no for an answer. She insisted that they meet “in some secluded rendezvous” and discuss their relationship. His repeated assurances that a relationship was nonexistent went unheard. Having apparently riveted the entire focus of her being upon achieving one sole objective, she was determined to waylay him and rekindle his passionate affection.

Sooner or later, if he managed to stay sane Ham told himself, she would have to abandon her fanatical stalking obsession. Yet conversely, he also knew how obsessed she had always been about getting her own way. She would eventually try to contact him at home, an altogether grim

prospect. He closed his eyes tightly, zeroed in on the horrific, unavoidable agony sure to ensue if he ever tried to explain Barbara to Audrey Lee. Not that his wife was the jealous type; she'd never seemed so when he'd mentioned his daily association with women at AGC.

In retrospect, resolving the problem would have been infinitely simpler if he had ignored Ladd's advice and straightforwardly related the coincidental encounter with an old college flame who was now a total stranger. Had he done so then, the potential domestic tempest would have been so much easier to withstand — a minor storm, not the killer tempest lying in wait if Audrey Lee should ever learn of his misadventure. The tell-all moment had passed, however. What to do? He stared with unseeing eyes at the framed desk photo of his family, deeply regretting his peculiar involvement with someone he had absolutely no inclination to see or hear from again.

Dr. Ladd interrupted his introspective by strolling into the cubicle. Short of breath, the chief engineer wheezed and he plopped down a guest chair. "How'd you like a nice, company-paid vacation, young fella?"

Moffett stirred. "Sorry, Bill. What was that?"

The chief engineer cocked a bushy eyebrow at his staff assistant. "Something bothering you? You look like your best friend just hauled off and whipped you."

Ham debated the wisdom of relating his renewed dilemma, and decided it would be inappropriate. "Thought you made mention of a vacation."

"That I did. Now that you're tuned in on my frequency, let's talk about the ALLP hangar queen a building out at Lake Mead." He referred to the full-scale, non-flyable hydroplane fuselage docked lakeside at the remote lakesite bordering Nevada and Arizona. "The full-blown mockup exercise underway has been nailing down equipment installations. One of Beaucoup Heartburn's elektronikers and a human factors engineer from Spacecraft are taking part in concert with NASA reps and Air Force aeronautical and structural engineers."

"Word's out. They've supposedly run into knotty problems."

"Right to left, top to bottom and side to side," confirmed Ladd. "I'd like you to fly over there, track progress and help determine what's coming. Seems despite its size and volume ALLP isn't entirely comfortable with space allocations for all the prospective on-board consoles and other units. With this accelerated NASA monkey Ben's agreed to let sit on our shoulders, we're allowed only one shot to get it right. There's a pressing need to finalize installations and define test schedules for the major equipments."

"Vegas . . ." Ham mulled the assignment. "How long would I be gone?"

"Oh, a week, ten days max. The site's out beyond Henderson on the lakeshore. Judging from the scattered reports crossing my desk I'm edgy about how our guys and the 'experts' might decide to shift installations around without paying due attention to the effect on ancillary systems and flight operations. How about it?"

Ham grinned. "I hear high summer's the ideal season for a desert vacation."

Ladd's sly grin preceded exactly the sort of response he expected. "Aw, you'll come back all tanned and eager to jump back into the fray."

About to voice an objection, Ham reconsidered. Getting away for a week or more began to sound inviting. He would have some leisure hours, a chance to think things through, maybe solve the ridiculous situation in which he'd become entangled. Nor would he have to field any more tearful, plaintive, often vituperative phone calls from Barbara Mott. An absence might even

allow her idiotic penchant for stalking him to cool to something he could handle with logic, not emotion. He said, "Okay, Bill. When do I leave?"

"Hate to ask it, but could you ruin your weekend by flying over Sunday afternoon? That way, you can leap into the fray first thing Monday morning. If the tradeoff's agreeable, I promise to hand you a compensatory day off later."

"Don't see why not." His enthusiasm revitalized, Ham said, "I'll have Minnie book me into the same hotel as the other, uh . . . 'vacationers,' and pick up a cash advance Friday."

"Done! Knew I could count on you. I'll have Minnie set it up. Much obliged. For selfless devotion to duty, you earn two attaboys, and a gold star on your shoe."

When informed of his prospective sojourn in Nevada, Audrey Lee was quick to point out a serious flaw in his "vacation" plans. She balked again at being "left home alone" while he went "gallivanting off" to do God knew what in that "sinful den of iniquity" Las Vegas. Seething quietly, she asked in which casino he would be staying?

"Have a heart, Audrey Lee! I'll be lodged miles and miles from the Strip. The motel's way out on the far fringes of Henderson."

"If I should decide to have the divorce papers served there, what, may I ask, is the name of this five-star motel?"

Exercising restraint, Ham said through gritted teeth, "The Sheltering Palms."

"Ooo-h-h, exotic!" Oozing sarcasm, she said, "I expect you'll have an enjoyable stay. It's certain to be a deluxe desert playpen like that gaudy Spa Alexander place, with a huge, heart-shaped pool and a sauna staffed with hot and cold running blondes, brunettes and redheads."

At which point Ham gave up. He went into the bedroom, closed the door gently and began throwing clothes helter-skelter into an open suitcase and an unfolded garment bag.

31 - No Bridge Over Troubled Waters

Dozing in the cranked-back airliner seat, Moffett roused when the turbojets throttled back to a less pronounced susurration. The FASTEN SEAT BELTS sign lighted. The aircraft began a gradual, shallow slide into the heat haze shrouding McCarran International Airport. Thermal currents lofting up from the sun-ravaged desert induced wing-flexing jars and bounces, eliciting oohs and aahs! from scattered passengers. Servomotors hummed as the flaps extended. At five-fourteen Sunday evening, the jetliner abandoned its natural element and settled to the concrete, its arrival punctuated by dual barks from the landing gear tires.

The boarding concourse was jammed with sunburned revelers awaiting homeward flights from the glitzy desert playground. Ham signed for a rental compact at the National counter, slipped on sunglasses, doffed his jacket and folded it over his arm, girding himself to enter the bake oven outdoors.

The instant he emerged, desiccated furnace air sucked the moisture from his lips and mucous membranes. Even at this late afternoon hour the low sun roasted the pavement, fried the steel and glass shells of row after row of rental autos. Unlocking the compact sedan's trunk, he stowed his luggage, opened the driver's door and made as if to slide inside, and found the plastic steering wheel in danger of melting. He leaned in, started the engine and rolled down every

window, turned the air-conditioner up full blast and opened all the doors a few inches. Standing in the sun perspiring freely, he waited impatiently for the trapped oven air to evacuate.

Scorning the Pyramid, faux New York, the MGM Grand lion's den, Spa Alexander and the other grandiose gaming palaces along the Strip, he consulted the Avis map and took Sunset Road east to the intersection of Highway 93, turned south several miles to Lakeshore Road and drove through endless suburbs, where numerous boarded-up homes featured foreclosure or BANK OWNED signs posted where lawns had once been watered and mowed.

Hideously misnamed, the Sheltering Palms turned out to be a characterless, two-story stucco eyesore on the inner outskirts of Henderson surrounded by incongruously paved streets and vacant lots strewn with sagebrush and sun-browned tumbleweeds. He halted compact sedan beneath a drive-thru portico that looked in imminent danger of collapse, set the handbrake and let the engine idle to keep the air-conditioner running.

It was only twenty degrees cooler in the lobby. A blowzy, dark haired woman with thickly mascaraed eyes and misapplied orange lipstick acknowledged his arrival by leaning her puffy forearms on the counter. "Looking for Flo, Mister?"

"Er, not at the moment, no. The name's Moffett. I have a reservation."

"Nother of them space fellas, huh? Us Henderson folks're put out something fierce with you guys and your rotten company."

"That so? If so, why so?"

"For stealing Lake Mead."

"I haven't stolen any lakes recently."

The woman appraised him candidly. "Nichols and Steed, the other pair from your thieving outfit are in 212 and 216. I'll put you in 107. Here, fill this out, and sign."

Puzzled by the chilly reception in hotter-than-hell Henderson, Ham pulled the compact sedan into a parking slot on the building's shady side, a second misnomer. Retrieving his luggage, he carried it through a breezeway into the central court, where windblown grit crunched underfoot. At the far end of a swimming pool brimming with murky water, where the diving board drooped at a skewed angle, sun-faded plastic furniture and umbrellas were strewn haphazardly around the cement deck.

He unlocked the door to 107, learned it harbored hundred-and-thirty-degree air, chucked his bags on the bed, and groped for the unraveled sash cord, drew back musty draperies and slid open a filmed window facing the swimming pool. The wall-mounted air conditioner shuddered convulsively when its compressor awoke from a long, deep sleep, reluctantly came to life and began spewing a torrent of air slightly hotter than that already in the room.

Calling down silent maledictions on the sleazy motel's owners and operators, he stepped outside, leaving the door ajar, and lit a cigarette, wondering how many pennies AGC had pinched by lodging him and a pair of working colleagues in The Sheltering Palms firetrap.

A door closed on the landing directly above him. Spiked heels clattering on the stair accompanied the descent of a chubby, luridly attractive brunette in her early twenties. Clad in very short short-shorts and a tight-fitting cerise tank top intended to reassure everyone of the male gender that nothing other than bulging girl was beneath it, she slowed her approach, looking Moffett over with a practiced eye. "Hi, Sport."

Ham nodded. "Good evening."

“Maybe looking for action, are ya?”

“Whew! Not just now; it’s much too hot. Maybe when it’s fifty degrees cooler.”

“That’s a hoot. We’ll both be too old by then. Never too hot for love, Luv. I could show you some real heat.”

Beginning to enjoy the repartee, Ham said, “What’s the usual tariff?”

“The what?”

“How much?” he asked, brutally clarifying the question.

“Depends on how fancy your fancy is, Sport. A straight go won’t set you back much, but there’re lots of funner things to do.”

“Come right to the point, you do.”

“Saves time, and they say time’s money.”

“There’s a catch,” said Ham. “No, two. First, I’d have to ask my wife’s permission. Secondly, I charge more than that myself.”

The girl deliberated, raked him with a salty grin. “Say, you’re some sport, Sport.” She ankled away, her bottom oscillating in time to the tap-tap of spiked heels. “Room 201,” she called back over her bare shoulder, “when it ain’t so hot.”

A minute later softer footfalls echoed on the stair. A fortyish man wearing tinted bifocals descended and made eye contact with Ham. “Let me guess,” he said. “You’re out of Ladd’s shop, right? We heard someone from R&D engineering was due in today. Welcome to the finest hellhole west of the Mississippi.”

Ham introduced himself. “You’re Steed?”

The other grinned. “You had a fifty-fifty shot — fabulous odds in this burg. I’m Marv Nichols, an electron chaser from Beau Blackburn’s stable. Herbie Steed, the human factors guy, is making his regular weekend contribution on the Strip. Poor Herb’s been working overtime to rid himself of overtime pay. I see you met Flo.”

“True, if she’s the youngster who propositioned me.”

Nichols chuckled. “A youngster Flo may be in calendar years, but by all accounts she’s centuries older in experience. Just get in?”

“Minutes ago. I’m waiting for the room to cool.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” advised Nichols. “The air conditioners in this dump date from the Coolidge administration. Had dinner?”

“Not unless you count stale peanuts on the plane.”

“Care to join me? A nearby Henderson hash house guarantees indigestion, or you have to arm-wrestle the chef.”

Ham grinned, deciding he liked Nichols. “Give me a minute to wash up.”

* * *

Burton was upset. “Alex,” he pleaded, “please don’t get sore if I repeat myself, but I honestly think you’re making a huge mistake.”

“Who the hell you think you’re talking to?” was Kurile’s tart rejoinder. “I swing a hefty club here in Vegas. Got my own newspaper and TV station, and they’re both yelling their lungs out about the chutzpah it took for the feds to yank part of Lake Mead out from under the folks who work and play there. I’ve been greasing some local muscle, too. AGC’s hard-hat guys are

getting hassled right and left. There's been some bar brawls, slashed tires, busted windshields and like that. Soon there may be some busted heads, too."

"That's exactly why I'm warning you to cool it down, Alex."

"Warning *me*?"

Thoroughly exasperated, Burton said, "Shut up just once, and listen! Every single thing we've done to date has been on the QT, no fuss, no muss, no obvious source of the rising stench. What you're up to now will make the Vonex wheeler-dealers sit up and take notice. They won't waste a second pinpointing where the flak and badmouthing originates. Think about it! You're sending up flares, painting red arrows that lead them straight to your damned newspaper and TV campaigns. And, for what?"

"What do you mean 'for what'?" cried Kurile indignantly.

"I asked what I asked," said Burton, his inflection sour. "Exactly what are you gaining by publicly roasting AGC? What will spreading anti-company propaganda do for you, for us? In the first place, your rinky-dink TV station shows late night porn films, and your newspaper has a circulation of about thirty-eight."

"That's a goddamn lie, Frank!"

"Okay, two hundred thousand, twenty million, a *billion*." Burton drew a ragged breath. "I didn't call get your back up, it's just that word of the harassment went to L.A. at the speed of light, and stirred things up. My contacts say Mason's asked the FBI to look into the goings-on. The smart play would be calling it off, pulling in your horns, staying under the radar until the uproar quiets down."

"Under *wha-a-t*?"

"*Nevermind!*" Burton's rancorous slow-burn swelled into full-fledged anger.

"Not sure which side you're on, Frank."

"That's a crock, and you know it! *Think* for a change. On the sly, Salazar's been quietly stockpiling . . . you know what clients believe is safely stowed in —"

"Hold it!" cried Alex. "We're talking on an open line, f'Chrissake!"

Too upset to be chastened, Burton said, "Now hear me! Keep on waving red flags in front of AGC's nose, and Salazar may never get a chance to do the downstream deed he's slated to do. Once the heavy-duty thinkers at Vonex learn what's been coming down you'll be holding a dead man's hand. Stop kidding yourself. We're up against major leaguers, and once they get wind of your game the shoe will be on the other foot in a finger snap."

"Don't try and snow me with your fucking finger snaps!. Those Vonex turds with big brains can't touch Kurile Enterprises."

"Alex, get real! An international conglomerate like Vonex could buy and sell Kurile Enterprises by digging into its petty cash fund."

"Oh, yeah? Burton, you're full of shit!"

"Am I? Alex we're walking a tightrope, time-wise, and the clock's ticking. When Vonex wakes up, you and your whole kit and caboodle could go into the toilet with one big splash."

"Never happen!" Alex sounded supremely confident. "No way! Not counting Rico's . . . exercise, we haven't bent one single law, let alone broke any. You're dreaming."

"Yeah," muttered Burton. "It's feverish delirium."

"What was that crack?"

“Skip it. Didn’t mean to get you hot, it’s just that . . . Keep one thing in mind, Alex: if things turn rancid, you and the rest of us could be standing in front of a grand jury. I wish to hell you’d reconsider, call off this idiotic media campaign. It’s later than you think, too much so to tease the tiger and skip away without getting mauled. That’s my message, sum total.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll give the whole ball of wax a real hard think.”

“Yeah, do that!” Burton hung up on the individual he had begun to think of as his erstwhile employer.

* * *

Mr. Mason pressed the intercom button. “Who’s on tap, Ruth?”

“At nine-fifteen, Mr. Bokus from Salaried Personnel Relations.”

“Bokus, Bokus . . . ? Can’t fit a face to the name. Why does he wish to see me?”

“It wasn’t made clear, Mr. Mason.”

“Very well, send him in.”

Entering the spacious office suite gingerly as a barefoot fakir testing a bed of red hot coals, Mr. Bokus tipped his head deferentially. “Good morning, Mr. Mason, sir.”

“Good day to you, Bokus. What can I do for you?”

“I realize it’s improper to bother you with details, sir, but thought it wise to touch base with you concerning Mr. Sorenson’s retirement.”

“His wha-a-at . . . ?”

Mr. Bokus recoiled in distress. “Mr. Sorenson is . . . He’s due to leave us shortly, upon reaching retirement age next month, and it seemed appropriate to ask if you —”

“Impossible!” Mr. Mason glowered imperiously at his visitor. “What have you been smoking, Bokus? Why, Blair couldn’t be more than fifty-five — sixty at the outside.”

Shattered by the prospect of contradicting the CEO, Mr. Bokus clasped his hands before him in supplicatory fashion. “Sir, our records indicate that Mr. Sorenson was born in —”

“Records? You’d best trot back and check again. Your records cannot be accurate.” Mr. Mason conjured a mental image of the superbly masculine former officer and gentleman whose roached, brush-cut gray locks, chiseled features and pale, magnetic eyes formed a faultless template all other AGC executives would have sold their souls to emulate.

Mr. Bokus hemmed and hawed contritely before saying, “A notarized photocopy of Mr. Sorenson’s Connecticut birth certificate is on file, sir. He enlisted in the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War, and will celebrate his seventieth birthday in three weeks and five days.”

Aghast, Mr. Mason regarded Bokus in open-mouthed wonderment, then frowned darkly. “I hope you’ll forgive me for doubting you, Bokus. Yet even if you happen to be correct, which I find extremely doubtful, AGC cannot afford to lose a senior executive of Mr. Sorenson’s sterling caliber due to some vaporous in-house rule of thumb. No, I won’t allow it! We’ll have to put our heads together and unearth some viable alternative.”

“Begging pardon, Mr. Mason, sir, but it was you yourself who formulated and instituted the firm rule stating that —”

“Yes, yes. Did you believe I could ever forget what I formulate and institute?” demanded Mr. Mason huffily, his outthrust chin aimed directly at Bokus. “I sincerely appreciate being reminded of my own hard and fast rule. Thank you ever so much for your thoughtfulness.”

His features jelled in an indelibly penitent expression, Mr. Bokus was close to tears. “I hope you’ll forgive me, Mr. Mason, sir. I had only the company’s best interest in mind, and did not intend to be the bearer of unhappy tidings. It’s just that I felt it necessary to, er . . .”

“No, Bokus,” said Mr. Mason, relenting a trifle, “it is I who should ask forgiveness. I understand your position. It was wrong of me to take out my personal feelings on you. After all, you’re doing your job as you should. Hmm-m-m, four weeks, you say?”

“Three weeks and five days, Mr. Mason, sir. Yet as you said, it’s an internal, unofficial rule of thumb, not a formal requirement in our Practices and Procedures Manual directs its implementation. I’m certain you are also aware that mandatory retirement is thought of in government circles as —”

“Bokus, I’m quite aware of how our government thinks.” Regarding the other with sublimated rancor, Mr. Mason said at last, “No, we shan’t play favorites despite the provocation, no matter what it will cost us, how it will rebound to the company’s detriment. A rule is a rule, and we shall abide by it. Thank you, Bokus. Let me apologize again for my rudeness . . .”

* * *

His emotions roiling in the wake of Bokus’ departure, AGC’s flustered president and CEO loomed unannounced in Sorenson’s antechamber, causing the veep’s executive assistant to gasp and deftly ditch her nail file in a desk drawer.

“Is he in?”

“Yessir,” said Myra, Moira or Myrna. “Shall I announce you, Mr. Mason?”

“No, that won’t be necessary.” Mr. Mason eased open the door to the inner office.

His patrician features serene, R&D’s acting VP&GM had succumbed to the magnetic attraction of the constantly shifting panorama outside “A” Building. Facing his his private window on the world gave Mr. Mason the opportunity to make an analytic examination of the man’s classic profile. He searched in vain for wrinkles, lines, a dewlap, any minimal indication, however slight, of impending septuagenarian status, and marveled at the fact that nothing, not a vestige of an earmark, suggested that Sorenson had reached the age of sixty, let alone seventy. *Late fifties, at most thought* Mr. Mason, gazing steadfastly at the immaculately groomed, incredibly youthful senior executive. At last he said tentatively, “Blair . . .”

Sorenson turned to face the CEO. “Oh, hi.”

Adopting his most sympathetic manner, Mr. Mason related the clandestine rule he had instituted and enforced to govern mandatory honorable retirement for all high, intermediate and lower level AGC personnel. He described how and why it had come about, emphasizing its necessity despite the fact that many if not most employees, managers and corporate officers retained vigor and competence well beyond the arbitrary, compulsory retirement age. Calendar years, he asserted, were insignificant milestones, frivolous dates not necessarily counted, but lightheartedly dismissed, since after all wasn’t today’s seventy yesteryear’s fifty?

Dispensed genuine sorrow at the prospect of losing a gentleman whose perspicacity and devotion to duty had been so unflagging, so greatly appreciated, Mr. Mason concluded on a sad note, expressing remorse over the fact that it was impossible to treat mandatory retirement in other than cavalier fashion, since besides being grossly unfair to all other employees, showing favoritism would in a larger sense be grossly improper. Sorenson’s position, while tremendously vital as befitted a gentleman of his accomplishments and integrity, meant he would indeed be

sorely missed. However, said Mr. Mason, no choice existed for him except signing the retirement paperwork with a heavy heart and trying to carry on without Sorenson's invaluable service.

The ageless one had long since abandoned all attempts to digest more than the bare crumbs falling from his leader's longwinded message. All he said was, "I can go now?"

His expression more wistful than doleful, Mr. Mason sighed and wrung his hands. "What must be must be, Blair. May I ask what plans you've made for yourself?"

"Plans?"

"Yes. How do you intend to spend your Golden Years?"

"Ping-Pong," announced Sorenson without hesitation.

"Of course." A paternal smile. "I realize how much you enjoy playing the game."

"I meant Table Tennis," said Sorenson, hastily corrected himself, "Not Ping-Pong. Calling it Ping-Pong's wrong. We shouldn't do that."

"Er, certainly not. By all means enjoy your well-earned leisure in any manner you choose, but I wasn't thinking of recreation. Have you looked ahead to the future, where the horizons are absolutely unlimited? There are opportunities galore out there, believe me. Why, a gentleman of your stature would be a welcome addition to the board of many corporations."

"Oh, not playing," explained Sorenson. "Setting up."

"Setting . . . up? Sorry, I must have missed something?"

"Setting up a pro Ping-Po . . . Oops! A pro Table Tennis league."

"A pro . . . league? Afraid you've lost me, Blair."

"I bought a franchise," explained Sorenson.

"A, franchise . . ." A hint of grave suspicion insinuated itself into Mr. Mason's finely tuned executive consciousness. "You're joking, of course."

"Uh-uh, no joke. Now I can leave and start my pro league."

"You assume, uh . . . You think a demand exists for a professional Ping-Pong league?"

"Oh, sure. But call it Table Tennis, not Ping-Pong."

"Ah, yes. Of course. And you believe . . . such an enterprise would be profitable?"

"You bet. We'll sell tickets."

A chill breeze laden with horrifying certainty caused the short hairs to lift at the nape of Mr. Mason's neck. The formerly vague suspicion localized, gradually blossomed into something much more substantial as well as infinitely more grotesque. The CEO backed away, groping for the doorknob, and his gut wrenching suspicion deepened into terrifying certitude. "I must . . . run along, Blair. We'll get together later, discuss your, uh . . . retirement."

"Okay," said Sorenson.

Shaken to the core of his being, Mr. Mason reeled from the inner office in a trance, mentally kicking himself, muttering, "What in name of God have I done!"

"Excuse me, sir?" said Myra, Moira or Myrna.

"Er, nothing, nothing . . ."

Mr. Mason charged into "G" Building, strode unannounced into Ladd's office and broke the news breathlessly, and stood there, eagerly awaiting the chief engineer's reaction.

His surprise unfeigned, Ladd said, "He's *how* old? That's absolutely incredible, Ben. He could easily pass for a man in his fifties."

"Don't I know it! Good Lord! The man's years older than I am."

Realizing his big boss had been struck by the proverbial lightning bolt, Ladd looked his leader straight in the eye. "Mustn't blame yourself, Ben. It's a waste of energy."

"But I've been so . . . so gullible," said the anguished Mr. Mason. Thoroughly distraught, he babbled the news of Sorenson's scheme to form a professional Ping-Pong league.

Ladd doubled over with laughter. "He's not . . . serious. Can't be."

"At first I thought that, too. But he wasn't joking, Bill. He was dead serious, or as serious as someone like him can ever be."

Still chortling, Ladd shrugged. "Who's to say? He could become America's Ping-Pong czar. Stranger things have happened."

"Very few, practically none," observed Mr. Mason. He grimaced in a fit of reflexive self-deprecation, and plucked an address book from an inner jacket pocket. "I'll call Allison right this minute. We'll have Charles back in harness, prepared to take over R&D the instant Blair departs. I may be backward about certain matters — slow witted, you must surely think — but now I appreciate how perceptive Charles was, and is. Hit the target squarely, didn't he? We all thought poor Charles was daft, when all along he was the sanest member of our First Team."

Nodding tactfully, Dr. Ladd withheld any comment he may have wished to utter.

* * *

"Hey, come in and take a load off." Subjecting his guest to a walleyed leer, Alex gestured toward an odd three-legged chair. "Been looking forward to meeting you, Fawn. Sorry, should've said Barbara. Hear your new flick's getting set to roll."

Barbara Mott eased herself down in the peculiar chair, thinking of the numerous times she'd been looked over like a prize stock animal, but never with Kurile's overtly sensual directness. "Horace says 'next week.' I suppose next week will eventually get here."

Kurile barked a salacious laugh. "Pulling together the bits and pieces on a film takes time." Running his eyes over her like an eighteen-wheeler mashing an armadillo that crawled on the roadway, he asked, "What brings you to Vegas? Fun 'n games, or . . . ?"

"Well, I . . ." Barbara batted her false lashes. "Nothing important, Mr. Kurile. Frank Burton told me the pictures taken on the night we . . . What I mean is, do you have plans to use the video and stills taken during our, uh . . . ?"

"Nah, hell no!" Alex said irritably. "That whole mishmashes setup was a bonehead blunder by Burton. He schemed to cut legs out from under the small-timer as a way to dynamite his engineer boss at AGC. Forget that caper; it's water over the bridge."

"Then you . . . Do you still have the pix?"

Kurile waved toward a short row of file cabinets against the far wall. "In some drawer over there. I told Frank to tear up the dupes, and had the photog destroy the negs. Why?"

Her manner kittenish, Barbara said, "I wouldn't mind keeping a set for myself."

"Oh, yeah?" His antennae fully extended, the gambler's wheel in Kurile's skull spun, slowed and clicked to a stop. "Why's that, Barb?"

"No particular reason. It's just that Ham and I were . . . He's a part of my life I don't want to forget, and I thought . . ."

Alex uttered a nasty snicker. "Figuring to use 'em yourself, huh, Doll?"

Her eyes downcast, Barbara did not reply.

“So you’ve still got the hots for this nobody,” accused Alex, “and figure to lasso him any which way you can. Like one of my pals always keeps saying, leverage is leverage. I’ll have my gal dig up the glossies and ship ‘em to you. Meanwhile, why don’t we have a drink, get better acquainted? Where you staying?”

“I don’t . . . hadn’t planned on being here that long. Ham is working out at Lake Mead, and I thought —”

“Ham . . . ? This Moffett character who couldn’t get it up is here in Vegas?”

“A motel over in Henderson. I called his office, sweet-talked someone into giving me the number so I could stop by and see him.”

“Barbie Doll, you don’t fold your cards easy, do you?” A gangling satyr, his misfocused eyes glistening moistly, Alex came around the desk to gain a better vantage from which to stare down unabashedly at Barbara’s cleavage. “No give-up in you, is there? Always did like that sort of chutzpah in a gal. You’re no average, off-the-shelf skin flick tootsie, either,” he added, licking his lips. “I don’t do business without checking-out the merchandise, see? Had a pair of your pics screened when Frank put you on the payroll. That kinky, three-way roll in the hay with the China doll and Guinea was a five-alarm bonfire, and you’re even more of a turn-on in the goose flesh.”

Barbara Mott rose gracefully, turned as if to leave the garish office. Alex slid an arm around her waist, ungently pulled her toward him and patted her bottom, letting his hand rest there. “We can slide over to my home away from home across the hall, and get comfortable.”

“Look, Mr. Kurile . . .”

“Call me Alex.”

“Okay, Alex, cut it out!” Barbara tugged free. “I know how easy it is for guys to mistake acting for the real thing. Sure, I’ve worked in films they can’t show in prime time, but that doesn’t mean you can say the word and have me roll over and —”

“Never kid a kidder, Barbie Doll.” He grabbed her again. “You’re a hot number, and it shows. Want it rough ‘n tumble, that’s okay. Sort of enjoy that way myself now ‘n then.”

Barbara tore herself loose and fled the office.

“Hold it there, pretty lady! Nobody cuts and runs on Alex without paying the tab.”

In mid-flight, Barbara turned back defiantly. “What do you mean?”

“I figure to hang on to those gamy pix of you and your limp-dick boyfriend, and if you run out on me get set to pay the rental on my fancy Wilshire condo due the exact same day the camera rolls. Tell you what, I’ll give you a break, not jack up the rent a single dime.”

“You can’t do that,” said Barbara. “We have a contract.”

“Bet your sweet tush we do, and a contract that’s legal as sin. I’ll stick to my end, don’t lose not sleep over it. But you better read it again. It only lets you ride free till your pussy pic rolls, and says nothing about handing you a forever duty-free place to crash.”

“I can’t afford almost four thousand a month,” cried Barbara.

“Tough!” sympathized Alex. “Hit up your limp-dick boyfriend; maybe he’ll pop for a chunk of hard-earned. Be something to look forward to when you see him, right?”

Barbara bit back the invective twisting her lips and stormed out of Kurile’s penthouse, breaking a fingernail when she viciously punched the button of his private elevator.

32 - The Hangar Queen and Movie Queen

The remote site jointly established by the U.S. Air Force and NASA was situated on north of Saddle Island on Lake Mead's convoluted shoreline. Driving to the facility early Monday morning, Marvin Nichols explained why the local denizens were up in arms over the creation of a reservation dedicating an extensive lakeside area to ALLP assembly and test, and someday the Aerospaceplane operations base.

Shortly after the government declaration of eminent domain, AGC and its dual customers had been besieged with cease and desist petitions from the region's houseboaters, water skiers, fishermen, swimming enthusiasts, boating operators, cafés, snack bars, and fishing tackle shops. Several miles of the Lake Mead National Recreation Area shoreline, as well as an expanse of the vast lake that once held over a million acre-feet of Colorado River water, had been declared off limits to recreation and commerce. According to Nichols, a minor Las Vegas newspaper and TV station had taken up the gauntlet, heaping fuel on the fires of local unhappiness and indignation with a deluge of crusading coverage bitterly decrying the "theft" of the site.

"Around these parts," put in Herbie Steed from the back seat, "AGC's almost as popular as AIDS." Mildly hungover from a night on the town, the effort of making conversation evoked a groan from the human factors engineer, who added, "Hark to a tidbit of wise counsel, Moffett. While in this desert paradise, say not who your employer is to any man, woman, child, or pet."

"Sound advice," said Nichols. "A two-bit yellow rag, *The Vegas Vigil*, issues nasty anti-AGC bulletins every twenty minutes, then a nickel-and-dime TV station jumped on the 'Screw AGC' bandwagon. Construction grunts have had scuffles in local dives, had their tires slashed, windshields busted, and so on. Many also had a tough time finding a decent place to stay."

"Sure sounds strange," said Ham. "You'd think the locals would be tickled to have a sideshow that'll bring in truckloads of new business when the flight test program begins staging takeoff and landing circuses."

"People elsewhere might agree. Around here, say that and you'd best duck and cover."

Blue-uniformed Air Police at the entrance gate wore holstered sidearms. The IDs of all three AGC visitors were checked, and they were admitted with a salute reserved for civilians: a stiff forearm and white-gloved hand whipped horizontally across the chest.

Nichols' rental sedan toiled up a set of switchbacks to the summit of a lunar landscape of tumbled crags rearing stark and barren in the harsh morning sunlight. Marv pulled off on the narrow shoulder. "Step out and take a gander, Ham. You can see the whole show from up here."

Herbie Steed elected to stay slouched in the back seat and nurse his hangover. Ham joined Nichols on the lip of the overlook. The broad lake's shoreline, dented by numerous inlets sheened by low morning sunlight, made Ham think of as an active shipyard. Five stubby quays extended from the shore, spanned by an overhead traveling crane. Nichols pointed out the recently completed hull of ALLP's hangar queen, its semifinished, flightless fuselage, one of a quartet in various stages of construction, devoid of wings, outrigger floats and engine nacelles. The silvery boat-shape, a behemoth even at a distance, gleamed with dazzle points of reflected brilliance. Men and equipment swarmed over the facility. Forklifts and trucks trundled about. A welding torch's diamond glint sparkled on one of the more distant quays.

"Some setup," remarked Ham, who had begun perspiring freely. "Whew! Barely eight o'clock, and the sun's hellish."

Nichols snorted. “This’s frigidsville. By early afternoon, the hangar queen turns into a Dutch oven. You’ll lose two or three pounds before you can say salt tablet. Most of the regulars swallow those miserable pills like candy. I can’t keep the damn things down.”

Ushered to the half-door of a tool crib, Ham checked out a yellow plastic hard-hat and a pair of gray-green coveralls bearing the AGC logo. “Wear the headgear at all times on site,” admonished the clerk.

Nichols ushered Ham on a perfunctory walkabout of the facility. Afterward, in the headquarters building, he was introduced to the NASA and Air Force team leaders assigned to officiate during the equipment installation review.

Turned loose after the brief meeting, Ham spent the rest of the morning wandering through the hangar queen’s labyrinthine multi-deck bays and compartments, trying to familiarize himself with the mockup consoles, control stations and foam-board panels designed to stand-in for the operational units destined for eventual installation. To orient himself in the maze, he consulted a photo-reduced ALLP inboard profile drawing with Little Joe’s illegible squiggle in the title block, making him wonder if the document was reliable in all respects.

The hydroplane’s huge hull was cavernous, but for some reason many equipment bays, compartments and passageways struck him as oddly cramped and confined. In a few sections of the hull expanded-metal catwalks were suspended between ranks of foam-board mockups, each labeled with a unit identity number and nomenclature defining its function, with the simulated console supported by dummy shock mounts attached to the rear bulkhead and deck. Twice he lost his bearings in the maze, and had to consult the inboard profile drawing to find his way out.

After lunch — pastrami-on-rye and a can of iced tea from the roving snack truck — he joined the reconvened review team in a blissfully air-conditioned office adjacent to the hanger queen’s quay. When the session concluded, Marv Nichols’ prediction was fully borne out. The air inside the hydroplane’s hull felt as if it approached broiler temperatures. After a few hurried dashes in and out of the ‘tweendecks area to check tape measurements, Ham volunteered to accompany Steed on yet another excursion into the interior. Immediately regretting it, he wished he’d kept his fool mouth shut. The enclosed compartments were literally hellish, though all hatches were open and electric fans circulated the greatest possible volume of hot air.

Perspiration trickled from under the plastic hard-hat, burning his eyes when he and Nichols returned to the quay, their coveralls stained with dark blotches.

During the late afternoon review session, the six-man, two-woman team seemed increasingly reluctant to accept the presence of an interloper. For his part, Ham was content to listen attentively and take mental or scribbled notes. He consulted the inboard profile drawings from time to time, and pictured the equipment locations under discussion and reconciliation. He eventually interjected a comment, pointing out that the fueling operator responsible for in-flight monitoring of ORDART’s oxidizer tanks had been furnished a temperature readout at his station, but no pressure gauge. It woke the other team members to the fact that he’d been following the discussion as a participant. A formal action item was recorded to provide the pressure readout in question. After that, his contributions were listened to, and respectfully evaluated.

That evening shortly before six o’clock, Nichols parked at motel, switched off the ignition and invited his companions to, “Join me in grabbing a bite?”

“Count me out,” said Ham. “This heat’s killed my appetite. After standing under a cold shower for two hours, I’m going to call my wife, then fold up. See you two in the morning.”

* * *

Passing in rapid succession, the days consisted of commutes, losing battles with the desert sun, coffee shop evening meals, and arguments about locating or relocating functional equipments that occasionally became almost as heated as the ambient air temperature inside the hangar queen, the daily cycle broken by fitful, frequently interrupted slumber caused by the motel’s ancient, recalcitrant air-conditioning units.

Regular as clockwork, buxom Flo accosted Ham each evening to ask if he’d cooled down enough for some heat. Amused by her persistence, he assured Flo what she had in mind would be impossible in grossly overheated Henderson. Late every afternoon, he used a AGC-furnished satellite phone to fill in his boss on the team’s progress. Once finished with business, Ladd had Minnie patch the call through to the Moffett’s Northridge home. Sounding more vexed and distant each time he told her his stay might be prolonged several more days, Audrey Lee did not complain, yet gave herself away by tone of voice and a reluctance to discuss topics other than the children’s school work, or exciting events like hauling Ralph to the vet for his shots.

On Friday it was Ham’s turn to drive. Dehydrated and exceptionally weary after a stifling week of ducking in and out of the hangar queen, between times taking part in the lengthy review sessions, he pulled into The Sheltering Palms parking lot feeling as if he’d been ridden hard and was about to be put away wet. He’d spent the entire afternoon drowning in perspiration, a victim of the hull interior’s thermal bath, where he’d help finish establishing equipment locations, and coordinating the marked-up blueprints and dummy installed units, while swallowing as much bottled water and as many salt tablets as he could stomach.

His tail dragging, he bade Steed and Nichols adieu and, having learned to let the erratic air-conditioner run continuously all day long, found it relatively cooler inside the room. Kicking off his loafers as he walked, he peeled away his damp shirt, trousers and briefs, letting the clothes fall and trudged directly to the shower.

After letting tepid water course over him for a quarter-hour, he unwrapped a small bar of perfumed soap furnished by the motel and tried unsuccessfully to lather himself, but the scented bar was rock hard. “Fossil soap!” he grouched, and reached out a dripping hand to capture the remaining sliver of the bar he’d brought with him.

He stepped out of the shower stall, wound a towel around his middle and dribbled water across the carpet, deciding to let evaporation dry him slowly. In the act of lighting a cigarette, a soft knock on the door alerted him to a caller. Assuming Marv or Herbie had forgotten to tell him something, or more likely it was pluperfectly persistent Flo hustling her wiggly bottom, he opened up without hesitation.

Barbara Mott smiled warmly. “Hello, darling.”

* * *

“Roger, what you suggest is utterly preposterous!” exclaimed Paul Hazlett. “The man’s a pipsqueak, a third-rate innkeeper, if that.”

“This Kurile person is known to you?” Dufresne sounded intrigued.

“Oh, we move in radically different circles, but I do know *of* him.”

"I'm afraid the evidence coincides on all counts, Paul. Each odd-shaped piece of the puzzle presses neatly into its proper place." He described Gridley's meddling in Pentagon affairs by suborning the good offices of the cashiered Air Force officer subsequently jailed for attempting to kill the now-vanished lobbyist.

"Idiocy compounded by enormous idiocy. Did something that ridiculous actually take place?" demanded Hazlett. "The shooting, I mean?"

"Oh, yes. It was like a grace note of Puccini's, adding a nuance of flavor to the symphonic crescendo of sordidness stemming from Las Vegas, and spreading to Washington and California." Dufresne related the covert boring-from-within tactic of one time AGC Vice President Franklin Burton, who at Kurile's behest was apparently directing the efforts of some private detective agency. Certain other shadow activities also under investigation included the abortive press and media campaign against the government's declaration of eminent domain for a portion of Lake Mead waters and a stretch of shore.

"Very little doubt remains, Paul," concluded Dufresne. "I believe it safe to say most if not all of your aerospace affiliate's setbacks and perturbations derive from behind-the-scenes activities inspired by the callow gentleman in question."

"But for God's sake *why*, Roger?" demanded Hazlett. "A conceivable rationale for his actions and escapades is, well . . . It doesn't exist. Is the man daft?"

A fragile smile. "Possibly, yet a simpler, more logical explanation seems apparent. Investigation revealed that decades ago, when your grandfather was managing Shell's North American affairs, the redoubtable gentleman's great grandfather and his twin brother were AGC co-chairmen emeritus. By all accounts émigrés from Tsarist Russia, they fell into a cesspit during the Soviet takeover and Great Depression, and came out scented with rosewater. Their advanced ages and, shall we say 'skewed' personalities, made them persona non grata where AGC's then-directors were concerned, and they were gently eased out of active boardroom participation."

"All well and good, but what can that possibly have to do with —?"

"Patience," said Dufresne. "If we're willing to accept the word of two key sources, Kurile's volatile disposition and absence of insight at quite a young age induced him to psychotically fixate on regaining control of the company he's convinced Vonex 'stole' from his family. He did inherit appreciable sums, mainly residue from his great-grandfather's estate. Despite the serendipitous nature of the 'found' fortune he's apparently clung fiercely to his obstinate view that the Vonex acquisition of Kurile Aircraft was an affront to what he conceived as 'pioneering' struggles of the company's founders. In his view, the supposed 'theft' of AGC was an insufferable affront to he himself and his extended family."

"Roger," said Hazlett, "you're not hinting at some nonsensical revenge motive on the part of this . . . this Kurile person."

"Does smack of that, don't you think?"

"That scenario is patently absurd," insisted Hazlett. "I was occupied elsewhere at the time, and still a youngster, of course. I was however made aware of the means and methods Vonex used to acquire AGC. The Vonex directors gambled on a wallowing corporation, which along with every other defense firm was fighting for crumbs, struggling to overcome the postwar malaise. Millions were pumped into restructuring the company, not to mention busloads of fresh executive talent that infused new life into what could easily have become a moribund World War

II leftover. Vonex bore the entire responsibility for building AGC into the modern, diversified corporation it was prior to the recent economic downturn.”

“You’re preaching to the saved, Paul.” Sounding overly casual, Dufresne added, “You’ll be dealing with an individual endowed with neither clear-headedness, nor an overabundance of common sense. An astute gentleman in my acquaintance who makes what he can of life out in Mr. Kurile’s sagebrush wilderness told me . . . Wait, saying it another way he happens to be close to those charged with guiding Nevada’s Gaming Control authority, and equally close to the Silver State’s attorney general. After some quiet sniffing around, he passed along a singular tidbit.”

“I’m all ears,” Hazlett said expectantly.

“Pipsqueak or potentate,” informed Dufresne, “Messr Kurile is the proprietor of a holding company, Kurile Enterprises, which sustains legal ownership of a garish Las Vegas hotel and casino, a modestly solvent Manhattan investment banking firm, a desert newspaper absolutely no one reads, a television station absolutely no one watches; and some off-brand service stations.”

“A true business magnate!” said Hazlett with measured sarcasm. “I’m sure you’ll eventually come to the point, Roger.”

“My point,” said Dufresne, his smile paper thin, “is that Alexander Kurile is a buffoon, a charlatan and a know-nothing who has convinced himself, as most charlatans do, that he and his family have been dreadfully wronged. By his own lights, he’s seeking to right what is to him the greatest of great wrongs.”

“His own lights indeed! More properly burnt-out bulbs, I should say.”

Dufresne’s faint smile persisted. “Quite so.”

“But what is so perplexing,” said Hazlett, his annoyance feeding on itself, “is why the devil he’s bothered to work so industriously and expensively to ensure AGC’s detriment. Why throw blunt-ended barbs at our aerospace affiliate? A quest for what he may think of as ‘vengeance’ can’t possibly account for this . . . foolishness. Is vanity driving him? What exactly does he hope to accomplish? Could he possibly be in the pay of a much larger someone?”

Roger Dufresne laughed aloud. “You may rest easy on that score. No one of any stature would waste tuppence on Mr. Kurile. No, the answer is so obvious its very illogic obscures it in a thick, black cloud. His goal amounts to turning AGC into his own personal gain. The gentleman apparently burns with a self-infected, virulent ambition to recover what he sincerely believes rightfully belongs to him and his clan.”

“Recover . . . ?” Hazlett’s eyes widened until mostly the white’s showed. “Roger, surely you can’t mean a hostile takeover of Aerospace General Corporation.”

A nod. “Does appear to be the case, Paul.”

“Good Lord!” It was the older man’s turn to laugh. “A hostile takeover? Roger, how can you even suggest such madness?”

Although his response was deceptively warm, a chill crept into Dufresne’s delivery when he said almost too softly to be heard, “I suggest nothing. You must draw your own conclusions. All I’ve done is interpret the findings per your request, and forward the message.”

Realizing too late the gravity of his gaffe, Hazlett fell all over himself apologizing. “Please forgive me! I was so carried away by the insane nature of this, er . . .” He subsided and said, “What do you believe best to do about this imbecile? Something massive seems in order.”

It was a question Dufresne had been waiting to hear. “One feature of his nefarious activities struck me as less than subtle. In all other instances, to the best of my knowledge he’s broken no laws, done nothing to warrant successful prosecution. Yet one item of arrant nonsense piqued my interest.”

Dufresne went on to explain what he had in mind, and inquired if Hazlett would need assistance to orchestrate the proposed scenario.

“No, not at all. We can manage nicely.” The other sounded doubtful. “It’s clever, but will it wash? You say the informant described the upstart as not actually responsible.”

“True, but mightn’t something slipped into the private detective’s pocket encourage him to provide a deposition stating otherwise? Don’t mistake me, what I’m advocating is by no means the ultimate solution, merely a stopgap measure, an interim means of dropping a stumbling block in Kurile’s path to see if he trips over it. The allegation alone should make him think twice about persisting in the ridiculous game he’s been playing.”

Hazlett lowered his head in thought. “The charge not only sounds farfetched, It could never be made to stick, although as you said whether or not it sticks is immaterial. What it does do is automatically create a major degree of embarrassment. Later on, we must of course show the gentleman his proper place.”

Dufresne’s smile was entirely feline. “It shouldn’t be difficult.

* * *

Dripping water on the carpet, transfixed by the apparition poised expectantly in the doorway, Moffett forgot to breathe.

“Do you ever look yummy wrapped in that towel! And so tanned. What is it, Ham? What’s wrong? Aren’t you glad to see me?”

“N-no,” he faltered.

Her smile curdled. “I don’t believe you mean that. At last we’ll have a chance to sit down and thrash things out.” Pushing past him uninvited, she sat coquettishly on the edge of the bed.

“I do mean it!” he said, leaving the door open, and went to snatch up fresh clothing.

“Don’t bother dressing on my account, Ham.”

“Who told you where I was staying”

“I made some calls, spoke to a few someones at your company. When I put my mind to it, I can be terribly convincing. I couldn’t let things slide the way they —”

“Hey, foul!” cried Flo. Hands planted aggressively on her substantial hips, the blowzy young woman filled the doorway. “Cooled off enough to bring in fresh talent, that it, Sport?”

Ham cried, “No!” and charged to intercept Flo.

He was too late; she had already flounced into the room. Leaning a chubby shoulder on the wall, she directed a glare of gladiatorial challenge at her supposed business rival.

“Who might this be?” asked Barbara in a tone that would have quick-frozen asparagus.

Sensing that any action on his part would only make matters worse, Ham decided to play along with the gag. “Barbara,” he said with exaggerated politeness, “I’d like to introduce you to Flo, a dear friend of mine. Flo, meet my very dearest of dear friends, Barbara.”

“Barbara!” hooted Flo. “Jeez, Dearie, that’s lame! Couldn’t you dream up something with more pizzaz. Working girls don’t hardly ever float half-assed monikers like ‘Barr-ba-raaa.’?”

“Working girl!” cried Barbara indignantly.

“Sure thing, Sweets. I made you straight off. Helped out at a stag party over to Caesar’s last month. They showed some hotsy-totsy films, and the Johns loved the one you were in. A real glamour-pussy you are. A real dynamite fuck ‘em, suck ‘em movie star.”

Barbara shot a guilty glance Ham’s way, then hurriedly yet demurely looked away.

“See there, Barb,” said Ham, relishing the turn of conversation. “You’re no ordinary, off the shelf celebrity, you’re a dynamite fuck ‘em, suck ‘em movie star, so as a genuine glamour-pussy bend a little. It’s not nice to talk down to one of your fans, especially a colleague.” He fled into the bathroom and began frantically pulling on chinos and a linen polo shirt. He was combing his hair with furious strokes when the ruckus erupted. Dropping the comb drop in the washbasin, he bounded out of the bathroom and found the women screaming at one another.

The telephone elected that opportune moment to jangle.

“Shut up! Knock it off, you two!” he yelled, not daring to answer the call.

“Hear what this filthy bitch called me?” demanded Flo.

“So, what’re you, Snow White in disguise?” screamed Barbara.

“Quiet! Let me get the phone.”

The women subsided, glaring redly at one another.

He gingerly lifted the receiver. “Hello?”

“Ham, is that you?”

“Hi, Audrey Lee. You beat me to the punch. I was just getting ready to call you and —”

“Lousy cunt!” Flo launched a high-heeled kick at Barbara’s kneecap.

A former professional dancer, Barbara fended off the vicious thrust with a fluid sideways move that would have earned a matador an ear, and swatted Flo a roundhouse cuff with her handbag. The women tussled on the bed, panting, grunting guttural insults and epithets.

“Horn in on my territory, will you!” screamed Flo.

“Guess I picked a bad time to call.” Audrey Lee’s voice had frozen into an arctic croak.

What little remained of Ham’s self-control evaporated. “Hang on,” he said through gritted teeth, dropped the phone, leaped up on the double bed, grabbed Flo from behind, jerked her upright, dragged her off the bed and shoved her bodily through the open doorway. When Barbara resisted his efforts to do likewise, he wrestled her outside and threw her into the silt-laden swimming pool.

Slamming and locking the door, chest heaving, red-faced and willing to do murder, he snatched up the telephone, expecting to learn that his wife had hung up. “Audrey Lee . . . ?”

“Still here. Sounds like you’re having loads of fun.”

“This will take some explaining, but —”

“Later,” she interrupted, speaking with the same frigid intonation. “I apologize for breaking up your revelry, but I called because Teddy fell off the swing at school and broke his wrist. The doctor’s worried about possible nerve damage.”

Ham’s fury died instantly as he thought processes ground to a crawl, came to a full stop. Panting slightly from the recent exertion, he said, “I’ll pack on the . . . double, check out and catch . . . first flight home. Where’s Ted?”

“He and I are both in Kaiser Hospital. They’re putting a protective splint on his arm. The doctor wants to keep him under observation for a while.”

“Okay, look for me in . . . a few hours.”

“That will be grand,” said Audrey Lee in the same dead tone of voice. “I apologize again for tearing you away from your lady friends.” She disconnected without another word.

Ham collapsed on the bed and ground his knuckles into his burning eyes. He rolled off the bed, jerked himself to his feet upon hearing feeble scratching sounds.

Reaching the door in two bounds, he unlocked it, wrenched it open. Half-drowned, water streaming from her ruined hairdo, Barbara looked tearfully contrite.

Teetering on the brink of mayhem, Ham had difficulty restraining himself. Before the former love of his life could utter a syllable, he said, “Knock again, and I’ll throw you back in the pool.” He banged the door shut in her face.

33 - Truth or Consequences

Leafing through a two-month-old copy of *Scientific American*, Dr. Ladd paused to skim an article, and realized he had already seen it. Authored by an academic acquaintance, the piece dealt with the Simon-pure quality of pharmaceuticals destined to be produced on-orbit. Long a topic nearest his heart, microgravity materials and processes engineering was a field of endeavor that demanded continual update and revision. Certain techniques suggested by the author had become semi-obsolescent even before the magazine reached a newsstand.

The receptionist offered a plastic smile. “Doctor Pick will see you now.”

Ladd rose stiffly and made his way into the office with labored steps. “Hullo, Ned. How’s the sawbones racket?”

“Tolerable.” Pick studied his patient soberly. “I don’t have to ask how you are, Bill. I already know. These latest test results tell a piteous tale. You’d better sit down.”

“That bad?”

“Want it straight, or with anesthetic?”

“Save your painkiller,” said Ladd, “for serious cases.”

“I’m see one now.” The prominent lung specialist aimed an accusative forefinger at his patient. “Item of interest: the brown smudges between the fingers of your right hand. Years ago I warned you what was in store if you didn’t use your residual brainpower o kick the habit. Now you’re puffing like a marathon runner after the grueling hike in here from the waiting room.”

“It’s easy to quit,” said Ladd. “I’ve done it dozens of times.”

“An addicted humorist to the bitter end, and bitter it will be.”

“Okay, I could bilge from using the damn things, but I’d likely as not do a much quicker fade if I did manage to quit. All of us have to die of something. Can’t just wither away.”

“Oh, am I ever one lucky medic! Right here in my very own office is the king of devil-may-care philosophers. ‘We have to die of something.’ Now there’s a statement of benighted defiance if ever I heard one. How does slow suffocation suit you?”

“I meet lots more old smokers,” bantered Ladd, “than old doctors.”

His expression surly, Dr. Pick was not at all amused. “No more lectures, Bill. I’ve run out of patience. You make light of something deadly serious, the operative word ‘deadly.’ Please take what I tell you literally, because I mean it. For whatever reason, you’ve dodged mouth cancer, lung tumors et cetera, but your once healthy lung tissue is verging on useless, nor will it repair

itself. Shortly you won't be able to pucker up and blow out a candle. The worsening condition can be partially arrested in roughly five years if you quit smoking. If you don't . . ."

"Uh-huh."

"This time," admonished Pick, "ignore my final warning and I'll schedule no more appointments for you. I do my best to help patients, but I learned the hard way that treating dedicated suicides is a waste of time and energy, and that goes for you as well as me."

Ladd grinned. "Pick, pick, pick!"

"It's *not* a joke! It's my job to keep you alive, and you refuse to help me do my job."

"Physician, heal thy temper." Ladd rose and held out his hand. "Friends?"

Dr. Pick shook his hand firmly. "Get out of here, you stubborn old pelican."

Unable to sustain his carefree manner upon leaving the waiting room, Ladd slowly made his way to the elevator after stopping once to catch his breath.

* * *

"Good morning, Ham."

Moffett winced upon hearing the soft-spoken greeting, and gave serious thought to smashing the telephone in his hand. "Barbara, I warned you not to bother me again."

"Listen, please listen," she begged. "You have no idea how badly I felt about . . . well, what happened in Nevada. I'll do anything to make amends. Anything!"

"I accept the offer wholeheartedly, only if 'anything' includes getting off my back."

"I cried all the way home on the plane."

"You have my unqualified sympathy, as well as that of the airline."

"Don't be so damn cruel! I mean it. I've been terribly upset."

"Me too. Now listen carefully: I excuse you, forgive you, and swear to wallow in sympathetic understanding of your ordeal, so our apology is noted and on record. Goodbye!"

Wait, I'm . . . Things have turned around for me. I'm starting a new film, and —"

"Congrats! Please don't bother filling me in on the theme and plot."

Barbara's demeanor instantly reversed itself. "Where the hell do you get off acting so horribly toward me?" she demanded. "I can't help how I feel about you."

"Me neither."

"You're going to be very sorry you said that," she warned.

"I already am."

"You are one cold-hearted son of a bitch!"

"Unless I'm mistaken, we've had this same conversation a number of times. What sense is there in carrying on just to re-characterize me? Goodbye, good luck, and God bless! I really and truly hope everything works out for you."

"You are a son of a bitch!"

Fuming, he banged down the handset, bounced to his feet, exited the cubicle with energetic strides, stormed out of "G" Building's rear utility entrance and aimlessly prowled the inner security corridor for twenty minutes until his blood pressure subsided a point or two.

* * *

The cumbersome splint on Teddy's wrist had been replaced with an annoying cast that made the boy fractious and antagonistic. The treating physician had reassured his parents, explaining that radiological examination had shown only a hairline fracture — not altogether

good news, since no quick method was available to determine the possible existence or extent of nerve damage. Speaking privately, the doctor had confided to the parents off the record that in his personal opinion nerve damage was very unlikely.

Audrey Lee's arctic frigidity had persisted far beyond anything Ham considered reasonable or appropriate. She had instantly cut short his every attempt to explain the concatenation of unwholesome events and unheard of circumstances contributing to what she had overheard on the phone. Her standard response to his few and far between supplications had been a simple statement: "Your carousing doesn't interest me."

What with Teddy's whining complaints about the discomfort of dragging around the cast, Audrey Lee's persistent, thin-lipped silences, and Melissa Lee's perpetually wary, puzzled expression, an atmosphere of impending cataclysm had pervaded the Moffett household for too many days. Even Ralph had taken to moping about, head hanging low.

Missy approached her father one evening while he was reading the newspaper and whispered, "What's with Mom? She acts . . . funny about everything."

"She has a lot on her mind."

"Come on, Dad! That's no answer. What is it? What's wrong?"

"I can't talk about it yet."

"Why not? I'm a big girl now."

"That you are, but there are some things your mother and I have to thrash out."

"So start thrashing. Why haven't you done it?"

"She isn't ready to listen."

"That's dumb!"

"I'd be the last to argue."

"Are you and Mom getting a divorce?"

Deeply perturbed by the question, he said, "What gave you that idea?"

"Oh, I don't know. The way she treats you, talks mean when she talks at all."

"You can forget about ever asking that question again," he said, folding Missy in his arms. "Don't worry, things will work out. Until then, don't let it bother you. Promise?"

She looked up at him with damp, uncertain eyes. "Okay, I'll try."

Capping Moffett's domestic woes, the bumpy ride at AGC turned bumpier. In the wake of the Swansdown fiasco, he was hard put to endure the flak Beaucoup Heartburn fired his way. Mindful of Ham's "uppityness" in calling him "Boy," the slovenly Georgian made an extra effort to live up to his nickname and reputation, demonically criticizing Ham for serious misdeeds like, "Desertin' the ALLP's installation review just 'cause your little house ape busted a wing."

The exchanges of sniper fire taking place between Dr. Mauch's electrical engineers, Mac Ravenswood's automation engineers and technicians, and Dr. Ladd's R&D engineers, scientists and consultants had matured into a running firefight. Squarely in the middle of a three-sided, no-win, spitting, clawing, scratching contest, Ham found himself constantly thrust foremost into the line of fire, where he constantly had to dodge a fusillade of zingers from all directions.

The automated assembly of engineering model and prototype electronic hardware was limping, hence the skirmishes invariably centered on problems in Ravenswood's bailiwick. At every encounter, Mac insisted the main hangup was Dr. Mauch's backsliding circuit designers, some of whom persisted in observing few if any automation guidelines or ground rule amenities.

Mac pleaded for Ham's assistance in convincing the AGC higher-ups to lay down the law to Mauch and his number one "boy," Beauregard Blackburn.

Ravenswood also pointed an accusatory finger at the customized software written in-house to "enhance" the performance of what he considered "fault-ridden" Borges-Larrabee robotics equipment. The vendor's technical representative, trapped at the confluence of a three-way controversy, delivered a scathing written rebuttal in which he disclaimed all responsibility for the "questionable" software AGC had written to "supplement" the functional software of both BLI robotics lines. The Borges-Larrabee attorneys delivered a tract defining its official position, stating that AGC's "homegrown" software invalidated the effectiveness of BLI's tried-and-true, proven product, which consequently degraded the smooth functioning of BLI automation systems, thereby voiding the official warranty. AGC's legal department immediately shot itself in both feet by threatening a lawsuit, thus eliminating any chance of obtaining substantial vendor aid in solving the many-sided dilemma.

Several knotty ALLP/ORDART preliminary design problems also remained unsolved, while those for which tentative solutions had been devised quickly became buried under a flock of newborn, equally thorny quandaries. The weeks wore by, and the Aerospaceplane R&D Program steadily grew more over-expended, and suffered additional schedule slippages despite the official urgings and supplementary NASA funding allocated to accelerate the completion of specific hardware, software and firmware phases of development.

Ham also grew concerned about the toll a host of overriding difficulties and perpetual squabbles was taking on his boss. Ladd's acerbic good humor eroded now and then, turning plain acerbic when dealing with those working under his direction, and others. A secondary worry was his health. Walking between buildings, he evidenced marked shortness of breath, and had to stop frequently to rest and recover. Ham finally bit the bullet and questioned him, but Ladd sloughed him off, saying, "Aw, the years are catching up with me. A wise old graybeard I used to know told me he put up with old age only because the alternative was rotten. Mark Twain said it better, calling old age a case of mind over matter. If you didn't mind being old, it didn't matter."

Ham contracted a case of the sniffles that turned into a full-blown congestive head cold which he blamed, for lack of a better reason, on the weeks-old abrupt transition from Nevada's furnace heat to the clement weather in L.A. Giving in to droopiness and lightheadedness, he blew his nose and drove home from AGC just before lunch, and learned having Barbara Mott madly in love with him was a far, far better thing than coping with her poisonous vindictiveness.

Red-eyed, Audrey Lee was pouting in the kitchen, all she said was, "You're home early."

Ham saw that she'd been crying, and it brought him up short. "What is it?"

"Go look at the new car's right headlight."

"An accident . . . ?"

His wife nodded bleakly. "A fender bender. My . . . fault."

"Don't sweat it. Insurance will help take care of the fix."

"That isn't . . . It's not why I'm . . . distressed."

"Oh?"

"Your girlfriend called a while ago."

"My . . . ?"

"That Barbara person. She told me the whole story."

“Ah, did she now?” A surge of anger made him thick-tongued. “You refused to hear my story,” he declared, “why bother listening to hers?”

“What she said was . . .” Audrey Lee choked back a sob. “She told me you threw her in the swimming pool when she wouldn’t let you . . . have your way with her.”

“Oh, of course she did! When she wouldn’t let me . . . whatever!” Ham laughed hoarsely, and was forced to blow his nose again. “How positively wonderful! First she drives me batty with phone calls, pesters me to meet her, chases me to Vegas after lying in her teeth to find out where I was staying, and then calls to tell you fairy tales. That, my dear wife, is priceless.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, no,” he said, waggling a forefinger. “No stray bits and pieces. Either dry your eyes and hear me out — the whole insane story — or forever forget about hearing it.”

After a long pause, she said in a very small voice “Go on, tell me.”

Ham couched, blew his nose with a vengeance, and began slowly, hesitantly. His wife’s accusative, red-rimmed eyes never left him as he related the collegiate romance, the decade of no contact whatever, their chance encounter on the night of his class reunion, the way he had found out that she’d starred in “adult” films. He held back nothing, told of the subsequent gropings in her condominium, his failure to perform in manly fashion, the persistent phone calls two, three, five times a day, how she had begged him to see her and “talk things over.” He concluded with a detailed account of the brouhaha in the desert.

Light-years from being convinced, his wife said, “This Barbara person didn’t mince words. She said she saw you first, and means to have you back. Is she . . . attractive?”

A shoulder sway was Ham’s way of confessing that she was indeed attractive.

“What really happened in that motel room?”

Ham described the incident, this time in lurid detail.

“A working girl . . . ? You don’t mean a lady of the night?”

“That’s a polite label people once used. Yes, my dear: a hooker, a prostitute.”

“You let someone like that into your room?”

“I didn’t ‘let’ anybody do anything, specifically including *that*. Barbara was recognized after seeing one of her films, and the other once called her a porn queen, something like that.”

“You could have invented a more plausible story. Go on, finish your tale.”

Ham folded his arms resolutely. “No, don’t believe I’ll bother. It isn’t worth the time and trouble. If your mind is made up, Audrey Lee, so be it. You go right ahead, believe any damn thing you please. Do you honestly imagine I’d *invent* a story that stupid?”

“I didn’t say it was stupid.”

“No, but it’s sure as hell what you implied.”

“Don’t tell me what I implied,” she said, a break in her voice.

Ham slumped in defeat. “I don’t feel so hot. I’m going to swallow a bottle of aspirin and crash. We can finish this quarrel later.”

“I think maybe we are . . .”

He looked at her sharply. “Finished . . . ? Do you mean that?”

“Take it any way you like,” she said. “You’ve changed, Ham, and I think I know the reason. It’s because of that . . . that *place*.”

“My superlative intuitive powers tell me you’re laying the blame for my downfall at the feet of Aerospace General Corporation.”

“Months ago, I read an article that talked about what’s called the Aerospace Syndrome, how and why it affects people’s lives, especially marriages. You were an entirely different person when you worked at Sargent. I don’t believe you’re happy at AGC.”

“Just now I am unhappy at home, at work, and driving between one to the other.”

“Is that sarcasm?” she demanded angrily. “If it is, why don’t you just chuck it at AGC and go back to Sargent where you belong?”

“The major, outstanding reason,” he said, “is that my old employer is becoming ancient history. Last month young Mr. Sargent in all his wisdom laid off twenty percent of people in the engineering department. Clint’s the smart one to duck out while the ducking was good.”

When his wife failed to respond, Ham said, “Guess that’s says it all, then. You don’t believe my incredible tale, so there’s no longer anything left to say.”

Audrey Lee shook her head angrily. “I have no idea what to believe. This whole thing is so outrageous.” She fled into the kitchen.

“Outrageous,” muttered Ham, “doesn’t say it . . . by half.”

* * *

He stayed home the following day to nurse his head cold, and arrived in “G” Building the next morning to find Dr. Ladd lying in wait. To his amazement, he had been promoted to Senior Staff Engineer, making him perhaps the youngest senior staffer in the entire aerospace industry. A modest salary increase accompanied the unexpected advancement.

“I’m speechless, Bill. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You’re doing the work of a senior staffer on our less than merry merry-go-round,” drawled the chief engineer, “so you deserved the appropriate classification. Ben approved the Change of Status personally. If you want to thank someone, go thank him.

Ham carried the good news home to Audrey Lee that evening, hoping it would improve their relationship, but no such luck. She stared at him, a querulous gleam in her eyes, and said, “Added a tasty slice of live bait to the hook, did they? And you snapped it up. Get shut of that horrid place,” she advised tartly, “before it ruins you forever.”

Ham pulled a face and clamped his jaw tightly shut, withholding all comment.

34 - The Gods Smile

Luxuriating in his private sauna, all his pores open to the steam, Alex Kurile was enjoying the intimate ministrations of a nubile masseuse. He turned pale beneath his perpetual suntan when Spa Alexander’s assistant manager burst in and informed him who had come calling.

Interrupting the young lady’s labors to her vast relief, he dried himself hurriedly, dressed with frantic haste and ran a comb through his damp, stringy hair. Dashing from the penthouse residence quarters across the hall to his office suite, he plopped down behind the freeform desk, snatched up a ballpoint pen and stirred the clutter of papers in a feeble attempt to look busy.

When the door swung inward, framing his visitor in the doorway, Alex put on a show of rapturous delight. “Uncle Sergei!” and uncoiled behind the desk, bumping his knee painfully on

an open drawer. “What a terrific surprise! Great to see you, really great! Come sit down and make yourself comfortable. What brings you out here to Vegas?”

“Ugly rumors bring me, Aleksandr Aleksandrovitch.” His white beard thrust forward pugnaciously, the elderly gentleman’s tremored, liver-spotted hand aimed the gyrating rubber tip of his bamboo cane at Alex’s fast-pumping heart. “Ugly, ugly rumors,” reiterated Uncle Sergei.

“What kind of ugly rumors?”

“Ugly rumors concerning your misdeeds float about like thistles in the wind.”

The picture of beady-eyed innocence, Alex said, “Ugly thistle rumors?”

The Kurilekutzatsov clan’s aged patriarch directed a distasteful glance at the insanely curved, three-legged chair proffered by his host, and remained standing. Among the coveys and squadrons of Alex’s aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, children and their endless offspring, only the singularly iconoclastic Sergei Ivanovitch Kurilekutzatsov had retained what he stubbornly referred to as the pure, unadulterated Russian surname name sacred to their ancestors. “Terrible ugly rumors abound,” said Uncle Sergei.

“Yeah, you on keep harping about that,” complained Alex, hoping he didn’t sound as nervous as he felt, and not making the grade. “What ugly thistle rumors?”

“Ugly rumors pertaining to your villainous pursuits and abysmal stupidity. For many years I have accepted with equanimity your outstanding reputation for dullness, but that is not why I undertook the long, unpleasant journey into this hideous wasteland. I came here in person to confront you face-to-face about . . . Well, about certain of those selfsame ugly rumors.”

“Confront, my ass!” His cheeks burning, Alex said, “Get off this damn ugly thistle rumor kick! It’s not fair t’bust in here and start bitching. Knock it off!”

“Fairness plays no part whatsoever in my visit,” declared Uncle Sergei, “only necessity.” Hunching forward, the patriarch leaned on his bamboo cane. “For the good of the Family I must inform you that three days past I was visited by representatives of a gentleman who is a legend in his own time. I do not suppose you have any idea who the legendary gentleman might be, do you, Aleksandr Aleksandrovitch?”

“Gave up guessing games years ago. Who?”

“Roger Dufresne. Does that name, as the Americans are wont to say, ring a bell?”

Alex shrugged. “Heard plenty of smoke about him, sure. He’s a big wheel.”

“Ah, so big!” said Uncle Sergei. “One might even say gigantic. Seldom indeed has such a reclusive individual made his presence felt in all quarters of American life. Never has there been a political kingmaker of his stature and repute. Mark me, the next U.S. of A. president will wear this man’s invisible collar.”

Alex swallowed the lump that inhibited his breathing. “So w-what about Dufresne?”

“This about him,” declared Uncle Sergei. “You have gone out of your way to not only antagonize the monumental gentleman’s friends and associates, who number among the world’s most important, influential, frightfully dangerous individuals. They have labeled you a nogoodnik, Aleksandr Aleksandrovitch. They refer to you as a conniver and rascalion. I did not believe what I was told until certain damning evidence was placed before me.”

“Now hang on one goddamn minute, Uncle Sergei! I can explain —”

“When you were still a boychik,” pursued Uncle Sergei, “I clearly recall how you prattled about one day reclaiming the business enterprise founded by your great-grandfather and his

brother. Your own father, my dear late brother, and I dismissed your vengeful ambition as juvenile prattle, a foolish yearning you would one day outgrow.”

“Don’t you want to hear my side?” demanded Alex hotly.

“No, because I do not believe you have a side worth hearing about.”

“Now hold on, damn you! I didn’t break any laws. Not one! I was extra-careful not to leave fingerprints on anything I did, see? Where’s the gawdawful crime in going after the scumbags who pulled AGC right out from under our Family’s noses? You should be eager to help me, but instead you bust in here and come down on me like a brick wall just ‘cause I —”

“*Help you . . . ?*” Uncle Sergei’s snowy beard wiggle-waggled sorrowfully. “Although the urge to do so is strong, in good conscience I could never bring myself to help you commit suicide, nor is any assistance needed. You have worked hard to dig your own grave by jabbing a blunt pin into the rump of a famished tiger. The toes you have stepped on are those of an enraged golem. I journeyed into this pitiless wilderness for only one reason: to inform you in person that your fall will be as silent and unnoticed as a tree toppling deep in the snowfields of Siberia. You see, the Family has no wish to go down with you aboard your sinking ship, and hereby disowns you. You have our sincerest regrets and condolences. I will now bid you adieu.”

“Stay right where you are, you old fart!” Flying into one of his patented froth-at-the-mouth rages, Alex cried, “Where do you and the stinking jerkjollies you call ‘family’ get the nerve to disown me? I haven’t had one goddamn thing to do with anyone in our tight-assed . . . Hey, hold it! You can’t walk out without telling me how to get in touch with this guy Dufresne.”

A slow-moving pillar righteousness, Uncle Sergei turned back at the door. “Waste no time trying to get in touch with him, Aleksandr Aleksandrovitch.” The patriarch cackled sardonic laughter and resumed his shuffling departure. “Don’t bother looking for Mr. Dufresne,” he threw back over his shoulder. “His people will find you soon enough, never fear.”

“Crazy old coot!” shrieked Alex, his thoughts tumbling over one another in a disordered torrent. Slumping behind his peculiar desk, wily, if a good deal less than intelligent, he tried to imagine the potential consequences and repercussions of being found out. Was he vulnerable? Hell yes, in more ways than one! Yet the notion of backing off, retrenching in the face of a prospective counterattack never entered his mind. If fuddy-duddy old Uncle Sergei had told it like it was, he might soon be up to his chin in deep yogurt, might even be visited by some genuine bad news guys with thick necks and short fuses. This super-important guy, Dufresne, had somehow wised up to what he was into, and was certain to do something about it. Most likely something drastic. Although limited and ingrown, his imagination ran rampant.

The question of questions was what could Dufresne and his wisenheimers really do to him? He could get bounced around some business-wise, of course, but what other attacks should he be on the lookout for coming from what quarter? He thought about it, thought about it, and thought about it some more, then closed his eyes and thought about it in greater depth. He suddenly snapped his fingers. It had to be a dollars-and-cents stroke, a stiff belt in the gut, maybe not a head shot, but swift kick in the berries.

Having convinced himself he had accurately judged how the crisis would come to a head, Alex began to perspire. They could clobber him below the belt, in a manner of speaking, by somehow whacking his money machine. With things as they were, only Salazar’s dollars-and-cents caper in the Big Apple could catch him with his pants at half-mast. In hindsight, ordering

Rico to go out on a really shaky limb and sell off other people's holdings, and just bank the loot, began to sniff like stale fish. He prayed the herd of hooligans in Dufresne's pay wouldn't saw off the limb before he could prop it up. Picking up the phone, he used the autodialer to ring Salazar's private office number in Manhattan; it rang once at the other end when his office was flung open.

"Better get downstairs, Alex." Spa Alexander's assistant casino manager was whey-faced.

Alex groped to cage the phone. "Now what, f'Chrissake?"

"All gaming's got shut down."

Alex rose, his knees fluttery. "What's the beef?"

The assistant manager shrugged. "Skimming, what else?"

"That same dumb hassle again? Didn't Ernie pay off like always?"

"Sorry, this smells like a whole different pan of worms, Alex. They could've gotten next to Ernie, or someone else close to the action. We've got a genuine ball-buster of a problem."

Alex tried to exhaust his profane vocabulary. His guess on retaliation had been correct, but that was no consolation. The opening shot had indeed been delivered: a gut-ripping, below-the-belt punch to stagger his cherished, high-revenue money machine, Spa Alexander.

* * *

"Mitt me, Yam." Little Joe held out his hand. "It's been a blast and a half, but then was then and now's now."

Yaminishi used his southpaw grip to shake hands, patting the drafter's shoulder with his prosthetic appliance. "Keep in touch, Joe. We're going to miss you."

"Yah, ain't this a kick in the head! Not so long ago we were saying bye-bye birdie to you, and now it's me who's riding off into the sunset. Only thing I'll miss is you guys."

"Before you go," reminded Yaminishi, "congratulate Max. Hell be a finalist in next week's annual Nevada International Whistle-off Contest up north in Carson City."

"I'll be sure to do that very thing," promised Little Joe. "Hey, Maxie, you schmuck! Whistle your ass off yonder in Nevada and make us real proud, okay?"

Max Anthony shyly emitted a scale-encompassing trill that sounded for all the world like a mockingbird's morning song.

"And Farnsie, you overdressed, money-mad putz," said Little Joe, "I hope the Dow and Jones whatchamacallit zooms right through the roof."

"Confidentially," confided the investor, leaning closer, "I'll soon be leaving, too."

"No shit?"

Farnsworth blushed. "A local broker has my application on file. So far I've taken three interviews, so it could be only a matter of days — a week or two, at most — until I give notice. My third interview was impressive, *most* impressive."

"Best news of all, Farnsie. Listen, got t'saddle up and ride for the high country. My one and only is likely a not waitin' out in the parking lot. Take care," he called. "Be thinking of you."

Rearing on his footstool, Bundy stopped grumbling long enough to grunt farewell.

"So-long, pard." Little Joe stretched high, thinking to clap Bundy's enormous shoulder. Failing to reach that altitude, he waved to the ex-lumberjack and let his new hand-stitched, needle-nosed snakeskin boots carried him out of the layout drafting area for the very last time. Minutes later, he staggered to the security corridor main gate, his hip-rolling limp more pronounced due to the burden of a large cardboard box. "Ah'm a-sayin' so long, Sheriff."

The grizzled oldster's rheumy blue eyes narrowed at sight of the diminutive drafter's get-up. Duded up in a cream-colored Western suit with scalloped pockets, with a new undersized Stetson perched atop his curly locks, Little Joe was bent half-over toting a large cardboard box. The Sheriff thought he looked like a refugee from Grand Ole Pry, and rumbled, "Well, lookee what's coming here. Figuring to steal whatever y'got in that box, Mr. Feinblatt?"

"Nope." Little Joe set down his burden. "All I'm rippin' off is cardboard boxes."

"And welcome to 'em," said the veteran plant protection officer. He rummaged in the cardboard box, turning up drafting templates, mechanical pencils, writing tablets, erasers and assorted personal odds and ends. "Heck, you've got a signed property pass 'n everything. Why're you running off with all your gear this time of day?"

"Time for the last roundup, Sheriff. I rode over just to say so-long."

A frown creased the other's freckled forehead. "Mean to say you're really and truly walking off the job for good?"

"Yep, uh-huh."

"A whopping big mistake! Where'll you find another meal ticket soft as this one?"

Little Joe chortled. "In Hong Kong."

"Come again?"

"Hong Kong," repeated the ex-drafter, relishing the other's perplexity. "I met up with a sweet little gal whose daddy signed me on as a foreman over in Hong Kong."

"The sure enough for real Hong Kong?"

"None other. Her pop's a hotshot movie producer over there. His latest flick waltzed off with the Gold Palm Tree award at the Can-ee-zee Film Festival. Heard tell of that, haven't you?"

The Sheriff scratched his stubbled jaw. "Can't say as I have. You mean he'll let you ride in a Western movie show?"

"Uh-uh, but not a Western. In Hong Kong, it's called a Eastern," quipped Little Joe, who slapped his thigh for getting off a rib-tickler. "Funning aside, I may get t'do a few cam-meows as Mr. Chang's tek-nickle advice guy on a big-budget, super epic blockbuster he'd got in the mill."

The Sheriff squinted at Little Joe. "Now you're scaring me something fierce. Sounds like what few marbles you ever had done pulled loose and rolled away."

"Think so? Take a gander out there and feast your tired eyeballs on the brand new wheels Sally's daddy bought for me. Better watch your step, though; here she comes."

A shiny new orange Mustang convertible careened up the aisle and skidded to a rubber-burning stop a yard and a half from the Sheriff's kneecaps.

Little Joe doffed his undersized Stetson and whacked the Sheriff a lusty, friendly blow. "That's my gal Sal. Couldn't live without her, but when it comes to piloting a car, whew! She's only been in the States five months, and she's already earned a PhD in driver education.

The Sheriff was speechless.

Little Joe struggled to lift cardboard box. "Guess it's ay-dios, Sheriff."

"Be sure 'n write if y'get work." said the plant protection officer.

* * *

"I assume the stage is set for this farce."

"All it lacks at the moment," replied Roger Dufresne, "is an audience. The private detective is of Italian descent; he's visiting relatives in sunny Napoli. By the time he returns, of course . . ." Dufresne turned both palms downward, a genteel gesture of finality.

"Will a deposition be sufficient?" asked Hazlett. "If the district attorney decides to press charges, the investigators may wish to question the private detective."

"A possibility, though I strongly doubt if it will go that far. This charade is designed to remind Mr. Kurile it would be wise to curb his misdeeds soonest. The casino, his principal source of income, is temporarily shuttered. After SEC's ferrets conclude their investigation of the Wall Street investment bank and this Salazar's machinations, Kurile's house of cards will collapse. By then the charges, or lack thereof, will be of absolutely no consequence."

Hazlett wore an indecently pleased expression. "Roger, I can't tell you how grateful my colleagues and I are for your invaluable assistance in this peculiar matter."

Dufresne's self-effacing response was, "One must do what can be done."

"Surely you'll allow me to return the favor."

"How absurd! Quid pro quo among friends is unthinkable."

"What I had in mind is . . . Call it a small token of friendship." Hazlett explained his firm, lifelong belief in the validity of sustaining a never to flag quid pro quo philosophy.

* * *

Elated after successfully rounding up dozens of players eager to compete in the world's first professional Table Tennis League, still in its formative stages, Blair Sorenson dressed for the evening with care. Smoothing the lapels of his new white dinner jacket, he adjusted his black bow tie in the mirror, and loped downstairs. His night of nights called for arriving with flair and panache at the farewell dinner Mr. Mason had arranged in his honor.

The taxi pulled up in front of the hotel, and the East Indian cabbie hustled around to hold the door for his distinguished passenger. Doling out the fare and a less than magnanimous gratuity, Sorenson marched into the hotel at a leisurely pace. Cutting a swath through the occupants of the lobby, his grand entrance generated a rippling undertone of comment. He stationed himself impassively at the entrance to the banquet room, staring at the column of air directly in front of him.

A fawning maître'd appeared. "Good evening, sir. How may one be of service?"

"Sorenson," announced Sorenson.

"Begging pardon, sir?"

"Party for Sorenson," said the impeccably attired retiree.

"Ah, most certainly. One moment, please." The maître'd consulted his appointment list. His sanguine, cobra-like smile, artfully designed to intimidate even the most self-important guest, washed over the immaculately garbed gentleman with zero effect. "Sir, it grieves me to tell you," said the maître'd, his manner the epitome of unctuousness, "the dinner party for Mr. Sorenson is scheduled for tomorrow evening."

"Tonight," contradicted Sorenson. "Friday night."

"It is desolating to be the one who informs you, sir," said the maître'd in the practiced, nice-nasty tone he reserved for superlatively aggressive self-important guests, "that today is Thursday. The banquet room was reserved for seven o'clock tomorrow evening."

Certain this was yet another close encounter of the worst kind with a former enlisted person, Sorenson turned the full force of his riveting laser glare on the twerp.

Semi-mesmerized by the visual assault, the maître'd quailed despite years of cultivated expertise in making guests quail.

The retiring senior executive turned on his heel and exited the hotel.

The following evening, once again immaculately groomed in his new dinner jacket and black tie, Sorenson undertook a second arduous journey to the hotel. This time a valet parking attendant won his race with the West Indian cabbie and whipped open the taxi's rear door. Looking neither left nor right, Sorenson paid driver, stalked into the hotel and made his way through the lobby directly to the banquet room.

The maître'd recognized him on sight. Determined to never quail again, ever, he said smoothly, "Good evening, sir. It is not yet quite six o'clock, and you are the first of your party to arrive. Might one suggest something from the bar while you wait?"

"Not," declared Sorenson, mindful of his health, "on an empty stomach."

"Oh, certainly not, sir." The maître'd took sadistic delight in suggesting a stroll through the hotel grounds. "A lovely evening, sir. It might sharpen one's appetite."

"Good idea," said Sorenson, grossly disappointing the maître'd.

Striding resolutely past underwater lights illuminating the swimmerless swimming pool, Sorenson followed a flower-lined pathway winding between picturesque outlying bungalows. Drifting slaunchwise to the street, he set sail along Sunset Boulevard at a leisurely pace and became annoyed by the thoroughfare's rush of passing traffic. Turning up a palm-lined side street he passed a succession of impressive residences crouched behind screening hedges, flowering bougainvilleas, and forests of subtropical shrubbery.

Sorenson marched onward block after block, turned a corner and froze, beset by total paralysis upon coming face to face, psyche to psyche, eyeball to eyeball with . . .

A dog!

It was not a large dog, as dogs go. Nevertheless, the loathsome beast uttered an ominous growl and bared miniature fangs. A distant streetlight precluded any chance for Sorenson to clearly distinguish the fangs, but in his imagination he was able to picture them vividly. Backing away a gingerly, halting step at a time, he stumbled over the curb, whirled and bolted headlong up the sidewalk.

The dog barked once, acknowledging its canine duty, and gave chase.

The sprinting retiree heard snufflings and low grows coming closer. Energized enough to stay ahead of his furry pursuer for a full block, he was terrified by a nip on the ankle and cut right, dexterously hop-stepped over a boxwood hedge, crossed an manicured lawn and leaped for the lowermost limb of a tree. Grunting and straining, he pulled himself up into the flimsy branches of a flowering acacia.

The dog sat down on the sidewalk, tongue lolling, head cocked, watching Sorenson fight for balance on a sagging limb.

A passing car came to a sudden stop, backed up and parked at the curb. A spotlight's glare blinded Sorenson. The treed, panic-stricken former executive was preoccupied with keeping an eye on the lurking mongrel, did not notice the arrival of a Beverly Hills Policeman.

"I'll say this for you," said the officer. "You're the fanciest dressed peeping Tom I ever did collar."

"Dog," panted Sorenson, still short of breath from his sprint.

"Uh-huh, some mutt," remarked the officer. "Don't you know there's a Beverly Hills ordinance against pedestrians on residential streets after dark?"

"No," said Sorenson.

"Well, now you do," declared the member of Beverly Hills' Finest. "Quit stalling! Climb down out of that tree."

"The dog," objected Sorenson.

"Yeah, he's some ferocious hound." The cop reached down and petted the pooch. "Listen, don't screw around. Come down before I decide to shoot you down."

"Shoot the dog," insisted Sorenson.

"Jump down. Do it now!"

As a reward for his steadfast refusal to abandon the leafy haven before his nemesis was shooed from the premises, Sorenson spent the night in a deluxe Beverly Hills jail cell. The temporary incarceration caused him to miss the extravagant going-away dinner party Mr. Mason had taken practically no trouble at all to arrange in his honor.

35 - The Money Tree

After scraping a tire along the curb, Audrey Lee Moffett turned the steering wheel with extra care, exercising a series of forward lurches and anxious back-ups until the Ford ended up erratically parked on a side street two blocks north of Wilshire Boulevard. Switching off the ignition, she dropped the key chain in her handbag, breathing deeply, closed her eyes and let a flood of reborn anger recede until it was something she felt able to handle.

She glanced at the digital dashboard clock as it rolled over to 1:58. Having agreed to meet the brazen hussy at two o'clock, she meant to be fashionably late. Aware that consorting with the enemy on her home turf would strike most people as a blatant tactical error, she proudly thought of it as a chance to convert the questionable tactic into a strategic coup.

Outraged by her husband's gall for having looked more than once at another woman, and then dared to hide his peculiar involvement for months, her Southern pride had been ignited, her seething indignation subsequently fueled by more than one infuriating phone call from "the other woman," in her opinion a world-class brazen hussy of the first water, and peaked in the wake of successive anger transferences from brazen hussy to a two-timing husband with a wandering eye, then caromed again and again from one object of disdain to the other.

Not that she disbelieved Ham's account of how his own foolishness had given birth to the intolerable current situation. More than a decade of happy marriage had instilled rock-solid faith in Ham's veracity and strength of character; even so, instances of a bitch-in-heat deliberately setting out to ensnare a married man had begun when people lived in caves.

The deep, unspoken root of her fury lay in Ham's reluctance to confide in her, to seek her aid and advice rather than scorning it. His willingness to keep her in the dark had allowed the entanglement to bear fruit so toxic that it threatened not only the foundations of their marriage, but seriously undermined the security and well being of their children.

If only, she thought for perhaps the hundredth time, Ham had made a clean breast of it.

During her brief interview with a lady attorney earlier that morning, her slow burn had flared into a conflagration, then into a genuine firestorm. Her objective in keeping the appointment had been to sound out any and all legal means of holding Brazen Hussy Barbara at bay. She herself believed alienation of affection a perfectly valid basis for forcing “the other woman” to cease and desist from her amorous pursuits, and perhaps even do penance.

The acid-tongued, chain-smoking lady attorney had listened to her prospective client’s tale of woe while jotting copious notes on a yellow legal tablet. Yet rather than offer professional counsel on the alienation of affection angle, she’d laid aside her ballpoint, lit another vile smelling cigarette and voiced saccharine sympathy for Mrs. Moffett’s plight, and as a sop of understanding for her crushed feelings. Tolling Ham’s diabolical history of straying from the fold, the lady lawyer had ticked off his deviltries one deviltry at a time on tobacco-stained fingers, and then forcefully suggested that it was Audrey Lee’s duty to herself and her children to once and for all rid herself of a spouse who “thought so little of her that he eagerly played around with a shady former girlfriend who starred in commercial porn films.”

“Divorce?” Audrey Lee had cried. “I didn’t seek you out to talk *divorce*. Ham is mine, the father of our children. I’ll never divorce him, now or later. Please answer my question.”

The lady lawyer’s sarcastic response had been infuriating. “You mean the silly alienation of affection bit? It won’t fly, Mrs. Moffett. The burden of proof would be on us. Do you honestly think it possible to convince a judge or jury that your husband’s clean as a hound’s tooth when it comes to chasing skirts? Very doubtful. Even if such a miracle could be wrought, the action would cost a fortune, and could easily be thrown out of court.”

“But as a goad to stop this woman from —”

“Forget it, Mrs. Moffett,” advised the lady lawyer. “Go home and do some serious pondering about a realistic solution. It’s my professional and private opinion that marriage is essentially an economic partnership. When that partnership turns rancid dissolution isn’t merely necessary, it’s compulsory.”

“Ham and I have much more than an economic partnership.”

“Please, heed me! We’re talking money here, not love, matrimonial or parental bliss. Happiness buys precious little money.”

At which point Audrey Lee had stormed out of the lawyer’s office.

The dashboard clock’s digits rolled over to 2:08. Audrey Lee got out of the car, locked it and started up the sidewalk, deliberately slowing her steps, giving herself time to do one last rehearsal of the alienation of affection bluff with which she intended to confront Brazen Hussy Barbara. Running through the list of prospective utterances in the elevator, more agitated now, on the eve of battle, then paused again in the eleventh floor’s carpeted hallway to review what she’d rehearsed, the center of her being focused on convincing “the other woman” of her egregious error in imagining she could steal Ham away from his lawful, loving spouse.

Her rival answered the door on the second chime. Clad in a purple leotard and ballet slippers, her long blonde tresses restrained with a chic scarlet headband, Barbara mouthed a wooden invitation to come in. “Apologies. I’ve been grinding through my daily dozen.”

Audrey Lee chalked up the skintight leotard as window dressing designed to show off off Brazen Hussy Barbara’s supple figure, her less than subtle method of telling “the little woman”

how awesome were the odds against hanging on to Moffett in light of the truly spectacular competition. Her spine rigid, Audrey Lee preceded her adversary with short, precise steps.

A workout tape playing on a huge flat-screen TV displayed a squad of nubile young women and lithe young men robotically going through aerobic gyrations. Barbara faced Audrey Lee squarely, looking her up and down in an appraisal much more than critical, and in fact insolent. "I'm glad you came," she said. "It's sensible for us to be amicable and civilized. As I said on the phone, I saw Ham first and we fell deeply in love. He may be upset with me now, but that doesn't mean . . ." Barbara trailed off, her candied lips twisting uncertainly.

Green eyes ablaze, feeling not merely uncivilized but prehistorically barbaric, Audrey Lee glared at Brazen Bitch Barbara through a ballooning crimson haze. All the phrases she had rehearsed dissolved into meaningless gibberish. She let the handbag slip from beneath her arm, drew back her right arm and caught "the other woman" full on the cheek with a frenzied, roundhouse sweep of her open palm, snapping Barbara's head around.

A loud *sma-a-ack!* reverberated in the professionally decorated living room of Alexander Kurile's deluxe high-rise condominium, drowning out the TV workout tape.

Her features convulsed, the actress and dancer straightened, thinking to retaliate. Before she could, Audrey Lee's left hand swept around in a ballistic arc and smacked "the other woman's" right cheek.

Right hand, left hand, then the right again.

Barbara Mott's well-rounded bottom bounced on the plush carpeting. Dual-cheeked rosy from the unexpected multiple assaults, her blue eyes round in disbelief, she stared upward, her bovine expression similar to that of a steer stunned with a slaughterhouse mallet.

The registered legal owner of Henry Alan Moffett's connubial affection bent to retrieve her purse. "Come near my Ham for any reason," she told Brazen Bitch Barbara, "or call my home one more time, and you get another dose of the same."

* * *

"Enrique, you've been chewing loco weed!" accused Esperanza Salazar in Spanish. Her hands gyrating aimlessly, she asked her husband why he insisted on keeping his head in a noose by going along with Kurile's puerile schemes.

"Per my latest estimate," her husband said, "three hundred and ninety-four excellent reasons exist for going along with Señor Kurile's puerile schemes."

"*¡Ay de mi!*" wailed Esperanza. "Three hundred and ninety-four excellent nothings! For a truly smart hombre, you begin to sound like the demented *cabrone* himself. No, I take that back. You're even worse, even more loco than is that half-wit."

"Calm yourself," said Enrique. Employing his favorite pun, a play on his wife's given name, he added in English, "Where there is hope, dear Esperanza, there is always hope. Let's take a relaxing drive in the country tomorrow, and talk things over."

"A drive?"

"Si, in the country. Doesn't that sound pleasant?" Salazar finished, set the demitasse in a saucer, touched a linen napkin to his lips and pushed back his chair. "Tell the girls we shall take them along. If they object, say we wish to make it a family outing, a chance to get away from the hot, dirty city for a few hours."

Esperanza did not think their daughters could be coerced into coming along.

Hefting his attaché case, Enrique bussed her cheek. “They will come. I’ll see to it.”

Long a fixture at the upscale Central Park West apartment-hotel, the doorman saw the star tenant emerge. Recalling the generous Christmas donative he’d received, he rushed to hold the waiting limousine’s door. “Morning, Mr. Salazar.”

A pleasant nod. “Good day to you, George.” Across the way, Central Park’s trees were limned in hazy morning sunlight. “Have we a nice weekend in store, or a scorcher?”

“Be one heck of a warm one, Mr. Salazar.”

Settling himself in the limo’s rear seat, Enrique thought, *A heat wave in more ways than one*. The limo threaded its way through midtown traffic. His eyes half-closed, he conscientiously checked and rechecked his moves, concluding that he had not missed a stroke.

Upon returning from lunch in company with a prominent arbitrageur and his stuffy partner, Enrique’s secretary informed him of the call he had been expecting. Having put out feelers months earlier, the news neither surprised nor disturbed him. He returned the call, expressed warm gratitude for the information and assured the caller a pleasant surprise would shortly be in the mail. It was a pleasant surprise he had no intention of tendering.

He told his secretary he would be out of the building for an hour, perhaps two, and was expecting a call from a Mr. Conrad at the Securities & Exchange Commission. “Should Conrad ring as expected, please tell him I’ll get back to him before Market close . . . Wait, on second thought it’s Friday. Vouch for my promise to call him back first thing Monday morning.”

Succumbed to a rare impulse, he stood in a short queue in front of the lobby’s automatic teller machine. No hazard pertained in an impersonal withdrawal to complement the bonds and cash bulging a pair of money belts snugged around his slim waist. Not bothering to count the sheaf of bills extended for retrieval, he strolled out to the street and hailed a cab.

Saturday dawned hazy and sunny, promising a muggy midsummer day in Manhattan. At five minutes to eight, a surly Puerto Rican youth delivered the compact sedan previously ordered from a rental agency. Enrique carried his attaché case, the single thing he took with him in the elevator, while his wife and both teenage daughters exited the apartment-hotel empty handed, with neither the coats or sweaters Enrique had been mysteriously adamant about leaving behind.

“Morning, folks,” greeted the doorman. “We’ll have a real steam bath today.” He escorted the star tenants to their rented sedan at the curb. “Have a nice outing.”

Salazar smiled. “Thank you, George. A jaunt upstate for a breath of air is all we have in mind. We’ll be back late this evening.”

* * *

“Dad,” complained his older daughter hours in mid-afternoon, “where the heck are we going? I’ll miss my tennis lesson if you don’t turn around soon.”

“Tennis,” remarked her father, “is an exceptionally enervating game.”

For hours Enrique ignored his family’s protestations over the extended nature of their “short jaunt” upstate, and finally swung off Interstate 15 at Saratoga Springs. On the outskirts, he found a lane running uphill forested slopes, and pulled to the shoulder on a straight stretch where cars could be seen approaching from either direction. Withdrawing a screwdriver and a pair of Delaware license plates from the attaché case, he spent five minutes affixing the bogus plates to the front and rear bumpers. The commercial New York plates went into a thicket.

Selecting a motel at random, Enrique registered as Mr. & Mrs. R. L. Bennington and family of Dover, Delaware. He listed the ID of the bogus license plates, and gave a fictitious address matching that on the Delaware driver's license he had paid a mean-eyed denizen of the South Bronx jungle one hundred dollars to acquire.

By the time the "Benningtons" were ensconced in adjoining motel rooms, Mrs. Salazar and her daughters were beside themselves, clamoring for an explanation.

"Won't it be a pleasant surprise when Tio Julio sees us?" said Enrique.

Esperanza gasped. Her dark eyes saucer-like, she shushed the girls, tugged her husband into the adjoining room, closed the connecting door, and crossed herself. "*¡Por Dios!* You are some clever devil. But what of the townhouse, our property and investments, our friends?"

"The adage has it that you can't take it with you," intoned Enrique with no hint of regret. "Personally, I have never subscribed to that line of reasoning. To be realistic, our holdings total up to not much more than chicken feed. We will never have occasion to look back, Esperanza. That I promise you. And enterprising people like we are can always make new friends, eh?"

In the morning, the "Bennington" credentials were discarded. The foursome crossed into Canada as Mr. & Mrs. Roberto Escalante and family after "Roberto" showed a second backup driver's license, calmly explaining that he and his family would only be spending the day in Montreal. Finding them hatless and coatless, with no luggage in the rented sedan's trunk, the explanation struck the guardians of Canada's portals as eminently plausible.

A light summer rain greeted the Salazars in Montreal. After a leisurely lunch, Enrique drove from one shopping mall to another on a buying spree. He paid a premium to have a set of "Escalante" baggage tags plasticized on the spot, then dropped off his wife and daughters, plus a mound of luggage containing their new apparel, at a taxi stand. Driving the rental car to the uppermost tier of a large, multilevel parking garage, he left it unlocked with the keys on the seat, made confetti of the time-stamped parking ticket, and like any good citizen dropped the debris in a waste receptacle before rejoining his family.

"The airport, if you please," he told the cabbie, a mustachioed, turbanned Sikh who sacrificed not a single iota of dignity loading their voluminous luggage.

Uncharacteristically stern when silencing the vociferous objections of his daughters, Enrique used cold cash to purchase four one-way tickets to Mexico City, bringing about his one moment of anxiety; he had not dared to risk making reservations. First-class seats were available, however. Two hours later, their forged passports in order, the "Escalantes" boarded the aircraft.

Somewhere over Pennsylvania, Esperanza clutched Enrique's arm and whispered, "Three hundred and ninety-four excellent reasons. Now I understand why that is our lucky number."

"You think you do, my dear, but you are wrong. Our actual lucky number is three hundred and ninety-four million. You and I are the only people, aside from certain Zurich banking officials known to say less than eight words in a given month, who recognizes the deep religious significance of that number. We shall keep our lucky number to ourselves, eh? Or least until the girls are mature enough to appreciate its deep religious significance?"

"*¡Yo te amo!*" Esperanza Salazar squeezed her husband's hand ecstatically. "I think Tio Julio will be glad to see us, no?"

"I sincerely hope so, Esperanza. After all, where there is hope, there is always hope."

Enrique shaved his pencil mustache. He abandoned forever the trials and tribulations of banking, and his perpetually wary expression gave way to one of perpetual contentment.

The Salazars enjoy a wondrously carefree existence in the lush, tropical paradise of their readopted homeland, where never is heard a discouraging word like “extradition.” Their idyllic life is guaranteed by Enrique, who impartially dispenses largesse to Mother Church, to certain American consulate officials, to the local CIA chief of station, to the militant left-wing junta, and to the equally militant right-wing junta.

He also doles out a pittance to the sadistic, aberrant generalissimo who believes himself in charge of the tottering revolution-prone government.

* * *

Audrey Lee drove home from Westwood bursting with a sense of accomplishment. The impromptu assault might not have entirely solved the Brazen Bitch Barbara situation, but as her down-home maternal grandmother always always used to say, “If your ox goes in the ditch, there’s more than one way to skin a skunk pussy.”

Humming a tune, she recalled needing a few items from the store upon spotting Grand opening days in progress at the new supermarket on Reseda Boulevard. Following another car into the driveway, she had to stop twice to let groups of people cross in front of the Ford. The atmosphere was festive. Children trailed red and yellow balloons; the new building, festooned with grand opening streamers and bunting, was crowded. Carrying a hand basket, she ranged up and down the wide, unfamiliar aisles selecting purchases, all the while reliving the triumphant scene in Brazen Bitch Barbara’s fancy Wilshire Boulevard condominium.

The express checkout counter was tended by a slim young redhead who rang up a twenty-eight dollar and eleven cent tab. He gave her change for two twenties, dropped the cash register receipt into the bag of groceries, and handed her a California Lottery ticket.

She tried to give it back. “I never buy these things.”

“It’s a freebie Quickpix, ma’am. Compliments of our grand opening.”

She thanked the clerk, gave the Lottery ticket a cursory glance, stuffed it in her purse and drove home, her mind at rest for the first time in months.

Dragging himself home at a quarter to eight that evening, Ham spotted the Lottery ticket on the breakfast bar. “Taken up gambling ways, have you?”

Audrey Lee explained the ticket’s provenance. “I’ve no idea what the funny row of numbers mean.”

“Today’s Wednesday.” Ham checked the kitchen clock. “You can soon find out. They announce the winning numbers just before eight. Who knows? Maybe you’re a millionaire.”

“Really? I’ll turn on the little kitchen TV.”

“You,” said Ham, “are in an unusually sunny mood. Have a good day?”

“The best,” she surprised him by saying. “Your dinner’s in the microwave.”

Ham washed his hands in the half-bath next to the entry. When he came out, a TV pitch man was advertising the lottery in progress. A careful of numbered, merrily gyrating Ping-Pong balls made him think of his division’s departed veep, and he grinned.

“How do they pick a winner?” asked his wife. “What do I have to know?”

“It’s a complex, fairly intricate process,” said Ham. “A high degree of expertise reading numbers is required.” The microwave oven pinged. He pulled out a plate of hamburger steak, steaming string beans and scalloped potatoes, and opened a bottle of beer.

“Lordy!” cried Audrey Lee a moment later.

Ham stopped chewing. “Hit one?”

“Two, I think. Maybe even three.”

“Great! Should be worth a few bucks.”

“Why, isn’t that wonderful!”

Ham chuckled through a mouthful of hamburger steak. “Audrey Lee, you are something else. Sliding off the bar stool, he gathered his wife in a bear hug. Her lottery ticket fluttered to the floor. “That bottle of bubbly still in the fridge?”

“I think so.”

“What say we pull the cork?”

Audrey Lee looked thoughtful. “There might be an even better reason to celebrate. Mixed in with today’s bills and junk mail is what could be our tax refund.”

“Oh?” Ham riffled the stack of letters on the breakfast bar. He slit open the brownish envelope in question. “Yep, the Infernal Revenuers kicked back three hundred and ninety-four dollars plus change. Added your lottery winnings, that comes to a tidy sum.”

Audrey Lee hugged and kissed him. “You taste like hamburger steak.”

“That’s strange. You sure?”

Moffett finished his late supper and bussed the dishes. Missy was doing homework in her room. Glassy-eyed on the floor in front of the TV, Teddy’s head rested on Ralph. Shortly Ham and Audrey Lee were working on their second flutes of champagne.

“Oh,” Audrey Lee said, “I almost forgot to tell you about the weird phone call this afternoon. Someone claiming to be from the FBI said he’d like to talk to us about the kidnapping.”

“What kidnapping?”

“My very words,” she said. “Remember when Teddy disappeared during our vacation in the endless desert?”

“He went to sleep in the wrong camper. That was no kidnapping,” scoffed Ham.

“That’s what I told the caller. But he insisted, saying he wanted to come by and talk to us. I told him we’d be home tomorrow evening. Was that all right?”

“Guess so. Could’ve been a crank call. Teenagers love to pull goofy stunts like that.”

Minutes later, the door chime interrupted their celebration.

“I’ll get it.” Audrey Lee set down her champagne flute. “Most likely Patti from across the street returning my mixing bowl.” She came back from the entry looking sober, holding out an envelope,. “A FedEx overnight letter from Sydney.”

Ham inspected the envelope. “So it is, but not from Clint. The return address lists Starke, Ellsworth & MacKenzie, Solicitors.” Unfolding the single sheet of watermarked stationery, he read a few lines and the paragraph blurred. Looking at his wife through misted eyes, he said, “Clint’s gone, Audrey Lee. Happened weeks ago.”

“Oh, no!” She pressed her cheek against his shoulder.

Ham blinked repeatedly, and gently dislodged his wife. “Had a hunch it would happen. With his former lifestyle shot down, any chance Clint had of being content to sit around and loaf was . . . This hits me awfully hard. There are some people you wish would live forever.”

“Ham!” Audrey Lee had picked up the letter. “You didn’t read it all. Listen to this: ‘Being childless, with no known living relatives, Mr. Dangerfield’s last will and testament designates Mr. and Mrs. H. A. Moffett of Northridge, California, U.S.A., as the inheritors of all his worldly goods and assets.’”

Stunned, Ham mumbled, “Sounds . . . like something Clint would do.”

“There’s more,” said Audrey Lee, her voice thick with shock. “After taxes, it says here the estate will approach, but not exceed, three hundred and ninety-four thousand Australian dollars.”

36 - It’s Never Too Late to Leave Early

In an exuberant mood, Frank Burton locked the door of his Encino apartment. Heading for the carport, and a dinner date with Glenda, visions of the fleshly feast certain to follow coffee and dessert danced in his head, put wings on his heels.

“Pss-s-s-st!” The sibilant hail issued from a deeply shadowed wall behind the twisty arms of a spindly Hollywood juniper.

Burton recoiled instinctively. “W-who’s . . . there?”

“Shut up, f’Chrissake!” The juniper’s twisty arms parted a few inches, exposing the tip of a nose, one eyeball.

“Alex . . . ?”

“Not so loud,” whispered the hidden mouth. “Go back, open your door.”

“Why are you —?”

“Don’t argue. Do it!”

Acquainted with his employer’s virulent temper, Burton did as he was told.

Uncurling like a giant spider Alex left the Hollywood juniper crouching low, and duck-walked all the way to Burton’s apartment, an approach twice as conspicuous as a casual saunter. He crawled up the steps, slipped inside like a gangling wraith. A clawlike hand reached out, collected the lapel of Burton’s jacket and yanked him inside. The door closed without a sound.

“No lights,” commanded Alex. “Draw the blinds.”

Burton obeyed instantly. “What the hell’s going on, Alex?”

“We’ve got Bolshoi troubles, Frank.” His words spilling out haphazardly, Alex described recent happenings.

“Dammit, I warned you what would happen,” was Burton’s anguished retort. In very few words, he told Alex their troubles were a good deal larger than Bolshoi.

“I know.” Alex got around to mentioning a magic name, Roger Dufresne.

“Jesus, Alex!” Burton gagged and sank like a stone into a chair. “You’d have been better off to shoot the Pope. Wh-what can you, uh . . . What can we do?”

“Got to beat it, live t’fight another day, Frank.”

Burton doffed his jacket and loosened his tie in slow-motion, then fumbled for a cigarette. “Fight,” he muttered semi-coherently, “another day . . .”

“Right on! I don’t give up easy, see? This shit storm’ll blow over soon. They don’t have any way t’nail me. Nothing firm. I was extra-careful not to break any stinking laws.”

“Then why duck and run for cover?”

“Got to stay out of sight till things cool down some. Can’t risk answering too many questions right now. Only solid rap they can pin on me, or even connect me with, is Salazar’s under-the-counter scam. But if I know Rico, and I sure should, he’s covered my ass ‘cause it’s his ass, too. Everything else is aboveboard, legal as church on Sunday.”

“Salazar . . .” murmured Burton, slowly coming out of a shocked semi-daze brought about by the stunning prospect of living to fight another day against the political and financial empire of Roger Dufresne. “You mean Enrique kept on selling off investors’ holdings, and stockpiling the cash?”

“Yeah, strictly on the QT. But his caper’s kosher, don’t fret. He’s one slick, cagy operator when it comes to sly moves, specially when it comes to handling other people’s money.”

Burton licked his lips. His hands were palpitating slightly as went to a kitchen cabinet, and sought comfort in a half-full bottle of tequila, neglecting to offer Alex a swig.

“Like I said, we’ll have to lay low for a spell. The Gulfstream’s close by at Van Nuys Airport. I figure to scoot, find a deep hole to crawl into for a month’re two or three. If they can’t find us, they can’t ask questions, right?”

“Us . . . ?” Burton perked up. “Sure, I’ll come come along. There are a few dealings with the private detective agency I’m not keen on being quizzed about.”

“Now you’re talking, Frank! Fact is, that’s why I flew straight here instead of just up and scooting. Help me dream up a hidey hole we can dive into, and pull in after us. Some out of the way hideout it’ll be easy to get to, no questions asked.”

“Tucumcari,” declared Burton. “The offbeat character who owns th gas station you pulled me out of will take care of us for a modest price.”

Alex gave the postulated destination some thought. “Not bad,” he said, his underlip curled respectfully. “Yeah, the middle of nowhere out there’s a terrific place to squat. The Gulfstream can jump there easy on one fill-up. How ‘modest’ a price we talking about?”

“As modest as it gets,” assured Burton. “It won’t be the fanciest place you’ve ever stayed in, but no one will have a prayer of finding us.”

“Bolshoi!” His enthusiasm renewed, Alex was beginning to feel expansive, a lot more sure of himself. “I’ll call Rico, have him wire us some dough. Go hustle and pack some duds, Frank. We’ll heist our tails in the air soon’s I get off the horn.”

“Phone’s on the front bedroom desk.” Burton carried the bottle of tequila into the rear bedroom. Snatching down two suitcases from the walk-in closet’s high shelf and opened them on the bed and, tipling now and then, began tossing in shirts, trousers, underwear and socks.

An ear-damaging masculine scream of pure, undiluted agony erupted from the makeshift office-bedroom. Burton heard a second gargling shriek, a thunderous crash, and a dull thud. He dashed down the hall and found Alex sprawled beside a toppled chair, out cold. Wetting a washcloth in the bathroom, he dabbed it on his stricken employer’s pallid cheeks, draped it over his low forehead, crooning, “Alex . . . ?”

Kurile came around slowly. “Double-dealing, motherhumping spic!”

“Salazar . . . ?”

“Whe else? Lousy greaser’s . . . skipped.”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“Couldn’t have,” denied Burton.

“Did!” cried Alex.

“No!”

“Yes, dammit! Sumbitch skipped with the loot.”

“All of it?”

“Yeah, far as they can tell.”

“Oh, Jesus!”

“Amen!”

“What happens now?”

“Rico’s a walking dead man, that’s what happens now.” Swearing fulminantly, partially resuscitated, Alex sat up and blinked. “I’ll have the thieving bastitch hit wherever he’s run to!”

“No time to fret about it now,” said Burton.

“Yeah, ain’t it the truth. Help me up. We’ve got to make tracks.”

Burton drove them to the Van Nuys Airport in his leased compact. Alex wanted to hide in the trunk, but Frank pictured the unlikelihood of folding those long arms and legs into the cramped utility compartment, and talked him out of it.

Parking at a red curb on Woodley Avenue, Burton lugged his heavy suitcases. He was hard pressed to keep pace with his long-striding employer as they flirted with the shadows next to the closest of two large hangars, and slipped through an open gate in the chain-link fence.

The gleaming white Gulfstream was bathed in floodlit brilliance on the hardstand in front of the nearest hangar. Two men in business suits standing beside the open forward hatch looked to be in earnest conversation with a third casually dressed man Burton assumed was the pilot.

Two more men in business suits emerged from the shadows behind the pair of co-conspirators and quickly caught up with them. “Mr. A. V. Kurile,” called one of the suits.

Alex swore softly and kept on walking.

“Stop, Mr. Kurile! You’ll have to come with us quietly” The suit who had first accosted Alex flashed his credentials.

Alex slumped in defeat, then straightened. Canting forward like tree in the act of being felled, he peered intently at the suit’s open wallet. “Feds!” he cried in amazement. “You can’t hang a FBI rap on me.”

“The charge is conspiracy to commit kidnapping,” informed the special agent.

Alex nearly passed out for the second time in less than an hour. “Kidnapping!” he yelped. “That’s plain crazy! I never kidnapped nobody in my whole damn life.”

“You’ll have ample opportunity to attest to your innocence, Mr. Kurile.”

The second FBI special agent handcuffed Alex with a lack of gentleness intended to demonstrate a deep, abiding disrespect for the alleged kidnapper. The suspect was read his rights with all the solemnity of a priest conducting high mass.

“Hold it, f’Chrissake!” cried Alex. “I’ve got a right to know where this ‘kidnapping’ is supposed to’ve gone down.”

“In an Arizona campground.”

"In *what*? That's really insane!" shrieked Alex, spraying saliva on the federal agent. "I've never been near any damn Arizona campground."

"The sworn deposition of a Flagstaff private detective," intoned the FBI special agent, "states that you paid him to kidnap a seven-year-old boy named Theodore Moffett, and convey him away from the scene of the crime, then hold him for hours in a recreation vehicle."

"Some scuzzy, half-wit private dickhead said *that*? Well, he's a two-faced, lying sumbitch," bellowed Alex. "Listen, I can square this bum beef real easy. My dear Uncle Sergei was once close to J. Edgar Hoover himself, and I mean *real* close."

"You mean he's buried near Mr. Hoover?" was the second FBI special agent's snide inquiry. "Say, that's some honor! You'll have to come with us now, Mr. Kurile."

Screaming invectives at the top of his lungs, Alex was frog-marched away.

Burton morosely witnessed the leveraged departure of his patron. Realizing it was only a matter of time until officialdom came looking for him, he despondently toted his suitcases back to the compact sedan and drove to the Encino apartment.

As yet an unindicted co-conspirator, former AGC Vice President Franklin Burton was blind, staggering drunk by the time a pair of LAPD plainclothes detectives came knocking on his door.

* * *

"That a bruise on your cheek, Fawn?" The paunchy, bearded director bent over to inspect Barbara's "good side." He said he'd noticed it during the last take, and thought it was a shadow.

Reminded of her violent encounter with Mrs. Moffett, Barbara winced.

"Hey, Makeup," called the director, "come dab some pancake on this cheek?"

The gay makeup man stroked Barbara's bare rump playfully. "Which cheek," he asked, grinning lewdly, "this one, or the other?"

"Comedian!" Reclining nakedly on her tummy, Barbara had been explaining the condominium crisis to her swarthy costar, who now and then exerted himself to the point of grunting unintelligible responses.

Bored with Barbara's body, equally bored with posing as a lustful superstud, and bored to the point of insensibility after ingesting a overload of Viagra, her bedmate of the hour was quintessentially a captive audience thoroughly bored after listening to Barbara's problem, or anyone else's for that matter. His sole virtue, aside from being moderately photogenic, was a medication-induced ability to summon and sustain an erection at any time, in any place, under adverse or favorable conditions. "Good notion t'chew on," he advised boredly, "would be t'get the Vegas dude to cool it by offering him a piece of toast."

"It doesn't seem . . . fair."

The superstud grunted, closed his eyes and gave in to overpowering ennui.

"Horace," called Barbara, "do I have time to make a call?"

"Yeah, take ten."

"Got any coins?"

The film guru plunged a chubby hand into the pocket of his tight jeans, and flipped two quarters on the bed.

"Thanks." Barbara sought her robe. Barefoot, she ducked past a portable partition papered in a floral bedroom pattern. Dropping coins in the slot of a pay phone on the far wall of

the deserted warehouse imitating a makeshift sound stage, she punched “0.” When an operator came on the line, she charged the call to her Westwood number.

The phone at Spa Alexander rang twice. A rough baritone said, “Yes?”

“Alex . . . ? Is Alex Kurile there, please?”

After a brief silence, whoever had replied asked who was calling.

“And if I tell you,” said Barbara, “I suppose you’ll have Alex call me right back. Listen, I’m a personal friend of Mr. Kurile. Who is this? Where’s his secretary?”

“Mr. Kurile is no longer at Spa Alexander,” informed the voice.

“Oh, but I . . . He’s not? Is he traveling?”

“No. The hotel’s under new management, and Mr. Kurile’s under arrest.”

“Arrested . . . ? Alex? For doing what?”

“I’m not at liberty to give out that information.”

Barbara hung up. She was trying without success to retrieve the coins when the director’s distant hail summoned her. She gave up and padded back to the set, where her bored, ever-ready costar waited to perspire with her in a wrestling match conducted under broiling studio lights.

* * *

Ham and Audrey Lee talked things over until long after midnight. Sometime during the wee hours they finished the bottle of sparkling wine, and she fell asleep on his shoulder. Not even the soporific effect of too much champagne was enough to let Ham drift off.

Preternaturally wide awake, his softly breathing spouse beside him, his mind alive with a plethora of reminiscences and recriminations, he relived past contacts with Clint Dangerfield, fondly recalling how Clint had taken him under his wing, and coached him during the early days at Sargent. The dapper, knowledgeable electrical engineer had dispensed the sort of worldly wisdom money could never buy, not to mention penetrating technical insight. Now he was gone.

Dawn blossomed behind the family room’s drawn draperies. When the first sunlight of a clear August morning touched the drapes, he stretched and switched off the table lamp. Minutes later Melissa Lee’s clock-radio loosed a wake-up blast of rock ‘n roll. Minutes later the hall toilet flushed, and Missy peeked around the breakfast bar. “Dad, you and Mom are dressed. Why?”

Ham put a finger to his lips. “Shh-h-h, don’t wake her.”

“Haven’t you been to bed?” whispered his daughter.

“Never quite made it,” he admitted, slowly slipping out from beneath Audrey Lee, and led his daughter into the living room. “Everything’s going to be fine Missy. Take my word for it. We talked things out last night. Better hop it now; your swim class starts fairly early. I’ll grab a shower and head off to work. Can you put some toast in for me if you make some for yourself?”

“Sure, Dad.” Melissa Lee hugged him.

* * *

Ham knew his workaholic boss arrived at the office between six and six-thirty every morning in order to get a jump start on the crises plaguing Aerospaceplane’s accelerated schedule. Seeing him park the minivan in AGC’s all but deserted lot much earlier than usual, the Sheriff nodded politely. “Morning, sir.”

For some reason AGC looked alien and unfamiliar bathed in the horizontal sunlight of early morning. Ham remembered the way Audrey Lee had once described the facility as looking

like a gray, dismal prison. *And it does*, he thought. Walking along the inner security corridor toward “G” Building, he had to dodge a hell-bent forklift hauling a machined ring segment.

He dropped his briefcase in the cubicle, switched on the desk lamp and stood on tiptoe, peering over the partition. The door to Ladd’s inner office was closed. When he crossed the corridor and approached her desk, Minnie offered a welcoming smile. “My, you’re up bright and early. Glenda’s in with him now, Ham. Did you wish to see him right away?”

“The minute he’s free, Min.”

Glenda slithered from Ladd’s inner office clutching a three-ring binder to her bountiful bosom and made a candid appraisal of Moffett. “Hello, Dreamboat! Say, are we ever the relaxed engineer on his sunny summer morn.”

“Hi, Glenda.” He nodded pleasantly and went into Ladd’s office uninvited, pulling the door closed behind him.

The chief engineer did not look up from the paperwork snowstorm on his desk. “Good of you to show up at the crack of dawn. Sorry to say ulcer Gulch is already in full swing.”

“Now what?”

“Oh, nothing too far out of the ordinary, just ordinary cataclysms and apocalyptic disasters. Late yesterday, the granddaddy of desert stormshit your favorite vacation spot. It thoroughly sandblasted the hangar queen, bashed in the hull a bit whapping into the quay, and then,” continued Ladd without pause, “that benefactor of all mankind, Beaucoup Heartburn, had it out with Mac Ravenswood in a dustup that nearly went to fist city. But the king-sized whangaroo came later when a pair of INS agents swooped down and plucked lower-case rupert lin right out from under Terrible Tempered Erik Klonn’s light bulb of a nose. Erik’s in seclusion, suffering from acute traumatic shock.”

“Why’re the feds picking on poor little rupe?”

Ladd chuckled. “Turns out ‘poor little rupe’ is an illegal alien: phony Macao credentials, falsified academic records, the whole nine yards, plus a few to spare. Always suspected PRC money was behind rupe, and now he’s . . .” The chief engineer signed a paper, pushed it aside and glanced up, taking in Ham’s linen slacks and open-necked polo shirt with a null expression.

“Sorry to have to tell you Clint’s bagged it.” Ham neglected to mention the inheritance.

Looking stricken, opened his mouth, but didn’t say anything. “When?”

“Ten, eleven days ago.”

“Can’t tell you how rotten that makes me feel,” said the other slowly. “Sometimes you get the impression justice has died dead in our off-center world. If ever there was a man who deserved a rich, rewarding retirement it was Clint. But I sense something else gnawing on your liver. Something major, from the look of you.”

“I’ve decided to quit you, Bill.”

“Uh-huh.” Ladd eased back in his chair, creaking the springs and made as if to clasp his hands behind his head, then leaned forward instead and groped for the pack of forbidden cigarettes on his desk. He took his time lighting up. “Judging from the unqualified nature of that statement, I assume your mind’s made up.”

Ham nodded. “I’ll write you a memo. Two weeks, Bill. You don’t seem surprised.”

“Only minor clairvoyance was needed to smell it coming,” confessed Ladd. “A while back, it was easy to sense how unhappy you were over AGC’s shoddy ways. I hit you with an interim promotion, hoping to forestall it, but . . . Going out on your own?”

His grin sheepish, Moffett said, “Talk about *my* intuition! As usual, you’re always a few dozen steps ahead of the rest of us. I intend to lay back for months, maybe a year, take some courses and bone up, then open a consulting office combined with temporary design and drafting services. I think I can make a go of it. Audrey Lee and I spent most of the night talking it over”

Ladd reflecting on the proposed endeavor. “Most times a well-run consulting outfit will earn its keep, especially if it farms-out design, drafting and clerical temps that bring in enough to pay the rent. While you’re laid back boning up, do yourself a king-sized favor and saturate your brain with everything I’ve passed along about microgravity manufacturing.”

“I’ve decided to do exactly that, Bill. I’ve already read my way through much if not most of the literature you jotted down for reference, plus more from the bundle you passed along.”

His countenance wreathed in smoke, said earnestly, “Don’t think I’m all done shoving material your way. Before you leave, I’m going to sic you on to a raft of technical books and timely, assorted literature that spells out damn near everything researchers have learned to date — alpha to omega, including a raft of extrapolated inferences that’re largely conjectural. Saturate yourself, and I mean immerse yourself in the ‘how to’ aspects of microgravity materials and processes, et cetera, et al. When you feel yourself ready, and your business has a letterhead that establishes bona fides, start writing to the experts. I’ll furnish more names, addresses and phone numbers than you can ever use. Show a deep, abiding interest as the head of a legitimate consulting firm, and those selfsame experts will fall all over themselves to furnish data.

“Attend every bleeding seminar, symposium, convention and lecture you get wind of, and take notes” pursued Ladd. When you’re satisfied about being extremely well versed in the basics, and earning enough to do so, hire a clutch of star specialists who impress you the most, but watch yourself there. In lockstep with the ‘experts’ march gaggles of oddballs and semi-lunatics who have tattoos in strange places and drink Budweiser for breakfast.”

Ham laughed. “I’ve run across a few from time to time.”

“Not surprising; more than ‘a few’ are out there, including some who see UFO’s sailing past above every tree. Now comes my final preachment, so pay close attention. The microgravity production of perfect crystalline lattices, biomedical materials and byproducts, ultra-lightweight foamed metals, composite metallics and non-metallics, wonder pharmaceuticals, nanotechnology medibots and other useful products too tiny to see, and also a rash of potentially exotic goodies no one has yet begun to imagine. Mark me, Ham! Freefall manufacturing will revolutionize a large number if not most of the everyday items we’ve taken for granted all our lives.”

“I’m convinced. I suspect keeping my head above water in a new business will keep me hopping without much spare time for —”

“Lose the excuses!” insisted the chief engineer. “You can forget ‘spare time,’ too. Take the time — *steal* it if necessary. Microgravity manufacturing will be one cornerstone of the new frontier futurists like me love to yap about, and the future is literally up for grabs — a shiny brass ring just sitting out there waiting for the right grabber to come along. You happen to be of the proper age, disposition, temperament, technical background, ability and whatever else to pounce

on a bonanza that'll make Virginia City's Comstock Lode look like a kid's busted piggy bank. Stick your foot in the door, and keep it there. With any luck at all, you'll cash in big time."

"How," asked Ham, "would you like to act as chief consultant to my newly gestating consultancy?"

Ladd subsided, his expression querulous. "What's up your sleeve now?"

"I'd like to call the new business, if and when there is a new business, Ladd & Moffett, Engineering Consultants. What do you say?"

"You're not serious."

"Never more so, Bill."

"Well, I —" The intercom's buzz cut off Ladd's response. "Yes, Min? Okay, sure. Tell Ben I'll be along ASAP." Ladd coughed, then he coughed again, pulled a face, stubbed out his cigarette and rose tiredly. "Our fearful leader summons me. He's been suffering classic migraines over the desert sandstorm and lower-case rupert lin fiasco. As for the consultancy, I'll happily kick in a few bucks and beaucoup advice if and when you yell for help, but only on the QT. Let's keep my moniker off the masthead and everything else while I'm here at AGC."

"Done." Ham turned toward the door, and hesitated. "Clear up one last item for me?"

"Glad to, but make it march. I don't need Ben any more upset than he already is."

"You've spent your whole professional life riding this cockeyed aerospace merry-go-round, making big ones out of little ones, or vice versa, for more years than I've been alive. I respect your depth of knowledge and ability more than I could ever say, but my unholy intuitive sense tells me you're better than . . . well, than this, Bill. Why have you stuck with hand-me-down government programs forever and a day?"

Ladd's expression turned wistful. "Not sure I even know the answer. Blame it on lethargy, inertia, a lack of ambition and imagination, something along those lines."

"Come on, Bill! That doesn't work with me; I know you too well to let you slough me off with self-effacing malarky. Come clean! Why did you stick here doing G-jobs?"

"A searching question," drawled Ladd. "Exactly what I would have expected from you. Not about to let me off the hook, are you?"

"No. I have a . . . Call it a desperate need to know."

Ladd ruminated. He shrugged. "I was dragged feet-first into the peculiar aerospace world at an early age, and never left it for a simple reason. When it comes to major technological endeavors — or did in my time — aerospace was the only major game in town. Ridiculous in the way it's organized and managed, yet somehow or other, sooner or later, damned inefficiently and expensively, major systems get designed, built, tested and delivered. There, that do it for you?"

"I'm not . . . Let me think about it."

Ladd's wolfish grin was a prelude to barking, "Don't think too hard! You're still my slave for two more weeks, and I need you with a functioning brain. Now get to work!"

Saddened at having given notice, but still washed in the roseate glow of impending freedom, Ham strolled into his cubicle just as the phone jangled. He picked up, said curtly, "Moffett."

"Mornin,' you overage juvenile delinquent."

A knowing grin turning up the corners of his mouth, he said, "Well, bless my chitlins and corn pone if it ain't that good ole boy, Beaucoup Heartburn!"

"Blackburn," rasped the slovenly Georgian. "Knock off that 'Heartburn' crap, and listen. I happened to pass a few words with your fuddy-duddy boss after hours yesterday. Poor ole Doctor Bill told me there was a refreshin' tidbit of wisdom you wished to impart t'me."

"Correct," said Ham. "There is."

"Well, don't sit there just breathin', impart away."

"Screw you, Boy!" said Henry Alan Moffett.

"What was that?"

"You asked what I had to tell you. That's it! Screw you, Beaucoup Heartburn!"

Filled with a sense of well-being, confident about himself, about life in the far West and points beyond, he caged the telephone with a deft wrist twist, and laughed aloud.

Epilogue

"There they are!" said his wife, straining to be heard over the jetcopter's muted thrash.

Moffett lifted his eyes from the *Wall Street Journal* satellite printout purchased in Alexandria. Leaning toward the 'copter's transpex bubble, he followed Audrey Lee's gaze.

The sun, a swollen yellow-orange balloon all but touching the Western Desert's curved horizon imbued the parched, ageless scene with burnt umber radiance. Lengthening shadows stretched like elongated arrowheads from the three pyramids. Spotty water traffic plied the Nile's satin and gold sheen; pellucid air made the Cairo megalopolis seem to sprawl to infinity. "Except for wear and tear," he said loudly, "nothing's changed down there since the world was a lot younger." He returned his attention to the facsimile newspaper.

"Well, Mr. Space Tycoon," said his wife in mock annoyance, "for someone desperate to see the pyramids you show faint interest. Can't you ignore dull business just this once?"

"Tough habit to break." Knowing when to change the subject, Ham folded the hardcopy printout. "How're the hands?"

"Oh, better. Arthritis runs in our family. My mother, God rest her, was stricken most of her adult life. Dr. Ainsley said the new stem-cell process is from one of your space labs."

"Coming in, sir," called Ahmed, the pilot, a doctoral candidate in microgravity industrial engineering under a Ladd-Moffett Corporation grant."

The 'copter touched down at a sightseeing heliport on the outskirts of *al Jizah*. Ahmed cracked the hatch. Jumping down to the hardstand, he unfolded the steps and helped the Moffetts alight, warning them to keep their heads lowered beneath the droop of freewheeling, softly whispering rotary wings. "You have only minutes if we're to catch the ship before it sails."

"A quarter-hour's all we need, Ahmed. It's getting dark; all the tourists have probably left for the day."

A *khamsin* blew steadily from the southwest, kicking up dust devils as Ham led the way across still-warm sands toward the looming Great Pyramid. Audrey Lee was making heavy going of it. "Cruise ships," she remarked, "are not recommended for the waistline." Shielding her eyes against a grit-laden swirl, she gazed upward in awe. "Lordy! I never realized how huge each block is. How many stones are in this monstrosity?"

"On the order of two and a third million. I don't think anyone counted them closely."

"The pyramid behind it looks even taller."

“Khafre's shorter, though not much. It rests higher on the plateau, and looks taller.”

“And that sky!” exclaimed Audrey Lee. “Not a speck of haze anywhere. The pyramid’s sawtooth edge looks silhouetted against an upside-down bowl of shaded blue porcelain. Glad we took a chance, made this side trip?”

“Am I ever!” Unable to take his eyes from the Great Pyramid, he let it seep into his consciousness. An object of eerie fascination, the towering, geometric mountain was more than spectacular; it exuded an aura of mystic antiquity, and an indelible sense of wonder to boot, not to mention posing a silent question. What possible motivation could inspire any culture, ancient or modern, to undertake such a gargantuan manual effort?

“Look!” said Audrey Lee. “The first star of evening.”

“Neither star nor planet,” denied Ham. “That’s LM-3. Ted and Louise are up there. Let’s wave; maybe they’ll see us.”

“Forever the comedian!” chided his wife.

“Ted and Louise say they enjoy living and working in space. Decide to stay on-orbit, exercise and keep fit, and their life expectancies are pegged at a hundred-and-twenty years.”

“Really?”

“Not long ago UCLA’s Gerontology Center published a new set of exoatmospheric actuarials. The insurance cartels are running in circles, flapping their gums and trying to figure how to renege on the extended-life issue for policy holders who elect to live and work in space.”

Deep shadows were gathering in the pyramid’s lee. Ham glanced at his wrist chronometer. “We should hustle back; Ahmed’s no doubt getting antsy.” Knowing the slightest pressure on his wife’s arthritic fingers would cause pain, he gingerly took her wrist. Crunching across the sand in the dusk, they left Great King Khufu’s Great Pyramid to the ages.

Reaching the helipad, Audrey Lee turned back for a last glimpse. “Isn’t it absurd, Ham?”

“Isn’t what absurd?”

“For the ancient Egyptians to think they could ever amount to anything while occupying their minds and hands with such foolishness.”

Ham chuckled. “Don’t be too sure. They’ve had lots of company.”