

TRIAGE



WILLIAM WALLING

Triage

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tri•age (ˈtrē,ăZH) noun [Fr. “separate out”]. Classification of war casualties, or civilian disaster, to determine priority of treatment:

Class I Those who will die regardless of treatment.

Class II Those who will live regardless of treatment.

Class III Those who can be saved only by prompt treatment.

Part One - Victoria

Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.

Genesis, i. 1. 28

Prologue

Most summer afternoons around three and four o'clock, twelve million denizens of the Greater Denver megalopolis have to deal with a minor inconvenience. Prevailing westerlies push warm, humid air from the Great Plains against the Continental Divide. The moist influx rises, collides with cooler, drier air high above the mountains, and moisture condenses. Pedestrians scurry for cover as thundershowers drench the region, though not for long.

Soon the air clears magically, the sun reappears. For a time, until endemic high altitude smog settles back in, the Rockies can be seen rearing majestically, silhouetted against a cerulean sky.

The exception that aided in proving the rule occurred late one summer evening, when the minor inconvenience turned into a major bother. A window-rattling electrical storm stalked the area, its noisy passage continuing on into the wee hours. Lightning strikes speckled Greater Denver and the outlying exurban sprawl with power outages.

To homeless scavenger Nate Senich the blackout was neither a bother nor any sort of inconvenience, but the godsent opportunity he had watched and waited for all summer long. A lightning strike had blasted a transformer, chopping off power in the general vicinity of the Denver City Park, specifically a high, electrified fence enclosing the zoo's deer compound.

His emotions whipsawing between dread of the consequences if things were to go wrong, and a foretaste of the soaring elation in store if everything went well — an ambivalence shared by three oddly assorted companions — fear burned in Nate's gut like ripe jalapeño peppers, garnishing his omnipresent hunger. Clenching and unclenching his fists to still the trembling, he psyched himself up for the coming effort, licked chapped lips and whispered nervous urgings to his companions, telling them to stop bellyaching and get ready, goading them to risk the bold sortie, reassuring them it could be done quickly, easily, just as rehearsed.

Heart thudding in his chest, his mouth dry, Nate tensed, steeling himself to surge erect, bolt across the patch of sun-browned lawn and scramble up and over the dead electric fence. But at that moment the full moon slid from behind scudding thunderheads and loosed a wash of moonlight that silvered the trees and walkways, the clump of withered shrubbery behind which crouched he himself and three other emaciated men.

Uttering a sibilant curse, Nate whispered, "Okay, soon's the moon dives back under me 'n Red go up and over, grab a fawn and heist it over the fence. Art, you and Slick man the rope. Then we all cut and run like the hammers of hell."

"More meat on a big one," pointed out the redhead.

"Terrific!" His stage whisper louder than if he'd spoken normally, Nate said indignantly, "How you figurin' to haul a full-grown buck or doe over a ten-foot fence topped with barb wire? Snatch a fawn and scarper is what I say. The zoo guys could get power back any minute, then where'd we be?"

"Up shit creek," admitted Red.

"Uh-huh, without no damn paddle, either."

The moonlight faded, gradually snuffed by a passing cloud. Nate refused to chance reconsidering, and maybe chicken. He drew a deep breath and reared to his feet. Bent over at the waist to aid in hoped-for concealment, he trotted clumsily toward the deer compound, the redhead at his heels.

Getting into the compound proved harder than Nate had anticipated. Haphazardly climbing ladder fashion, the pointed toes of his badly scuffed Western boots kept slipping on wet chain-links. Praying that power would not be restored and fry him like a bug, he used a pair of side-cutting electrician's dikes stolen from a nearby fire station to snip the coil of vicious concertina wire looped atop the formally electrified fence. Beside him, Red went over first, snagging his shirt, tearing it on a sharp, lopped off wire end. Nate threw a leg over in the darkness, nearly losing his balance, then slipped twice more climbing down, with Red wheezing and grunting alongside.

The meager herd of mule deer moved away skittishly, milling toward the far side of the compound. Fast on his feet for someone in poor health, Red darted toward the anxiously stirring deer, chased after a fawn, tripped and sprawled face down, managing to stretch out and capture the half-grown animal by a pipestem rear leg.

Hustling to lend a hand, Nate failed to notice the doe that came up, prancing to protect her fawn. A razor-sharp front hoof poleaxed the redhead, catching him above the left ear. Weak-lunged and diabetic, not to mention being malnourished since birth, Red went down like an emptied sack.

Nate swore softly and charged after the fawn as it scampered away. Catching hold of the animal's hindquarters, he rolled it to the ground, slit its throat with a rust-speckled hunting knife. He stooped over Red, fearful of touching him, and listened for breathing. No breath was left in the redhead. The moon emerged from scudding cloud anvils and dimly illuminated a dark pool forming beneath the other's head. Red's eyes were open, staring blindly in the moonlight.

Panic drained Nate's strength as he staggered to the fence, the blood-soaked fawn cradled in his arms. His fingers trembling badly, he had difficulty tying the dangling length of fraying hemp around the animal's forequarters and upper torso. Art and Slick yanked on the rope. The fawn bounced against the fence, moving upward in fits and jerks with Nate clambering in awkward haste beside it. He helped jiggering the carcass over the top with one hand, and then nearly fell again in his haste to descend the other side of the fence.

"What's with Red?" Slick busied himself helping Art stuff the fawn into doubled, king-sized plastic trash bags.

"Stove-up, deader 'n yesterday's news. Get a hustle on!"

"Can't just leave Red here. It ain't right," objected Art.

"What the hell else can we do? Move your butt, f'Chrissake!"

Street lights flickered, winked to life as three shadows hastened away from the deer compound. Nate labored under the doubled trash bags holding the carcass of one of the Denver Zoo's few remaining mule deer.

* * *

Hours later, slumped against the cement-block wall in the basement of a ramshackle abandoned house in an older, rundown section of Greater Denver's Wheat Ridge district, Nate laid both hands across his distended gut and groaned in ecstasy.

Picked clean, what was left of the fawn hung on a spit Slick and Art had jury-rigged from a length of half-inch pipe and two "Y"-shaped branches lopped from a dead parkway tree. Battered kitchen cabinetry and two hollow-core doors scrounged from upstairs bedrooms had been smashed into kindling and burned on the cellar's cracked cement floor, leaving a charred mess.

Slick's loud belch earned a snicker from one of his mates.

Sated, Art wheezed, "Gawdalmighty, roast venison! Didn't think I'd ever see the day."

"Want . . . more?" Despite a mouthful of badly decayed teeth, Slick still chewed noisily.

Art grinned. "Couldn't choke down another mouthful. Besides, not much left except bones 'n gristle."

Slick's chewing suddenly stopped.

Art gasped.

Startled by the other's sudden intake of breath, Nate's alarm peaked when the old fellow loosed a heartfelt exclamation of dismay. "Oh, Jesus-my-beads!"

Ruddy in the faint glow of smoldering embers, a pair of Greater Denver's Finest quietly tiptoed down the basement's rickety wooden stairs. Polycarbonate visor-shields pulled down over their eyes, body armor in evidence, the cop in the lead covered the threesome with a riot gun. Two more officers edged downward behind the first pair, one holding a laser rifle. The other rearmost officer switched on an electric torch, blinding the diners.

"Against the wall, spread 'em!" The not-to-be-argued-with command echoed hollowly in the basement's confines.

Rough hands frisked Nate. Beside him, leaning on his hands at an angle against the wall, Slick sobbed in a gurgling falsetto. A cop kicked Art's legs out from under him when he failed to comply fast enough with a curt order.

"Stupid assholes!" remarked one of the officers.

"How'd you, uh . . . finger us?" asked Nate, feeling dead inside despite the only decent meal he could recall. "What made you pick up on us?"

"You kidding, Dipshit?" His grin nastiness personified, the cop used two fingers to push the visor-shield up over his helmet. "The stink of roasting meat only attracted maybe three or four dozen sniffers. They're lined up three deep along the sidewalk."

"Sniffing," said Nate dully.

"Yeah, and drooling."

Art retched, vomiting all over a cop's bulletproof vest. The officer swore a fulminant curse and beat him senseless with a truncheon.

Slick cried, "Oh, Jesus-my-beads!"

* * *

Eight thousand kilometers eastward in Rome it was getting on toward noon of a humid summer morning. Although a prominent member of *Famiglia Pontificia*, the Pope's inner circle, few habitués of Vatican City would have recognized Louis Cardinal Freneau. Eyes downcast,

head heavy in thought, His Eminence was dressed for travel in a summer-weight, dark gray business suit, a perfect complement his somber expression. With no more than minutes to spare, he hurriedly descended the outside stairs leading up to the papal apartments and hastily made his way across the San Damaso courtyard.

In less than two hours, with or without him aboard, a hypersonic jet would depart Leonardo da Vinci International for New York. The limousine driver had been instructed to pick him up on *Via di Porta Angelica*, at the gate adjacent to the Swiss Guards' barracks, but despite the need to hurry he felt an overpowering urge to seek solace in the basilica before commencing the dreaded journey. With faltering resolve that amply reflected his depressed state of mind, Cardinal Freneaux bypassed Raphael's Loggia, and skirted the Sistine Chapel to avoid the inevitable gaggle of summer tourists.

The interview had not merely gone badly, it had in fact turned into a frightful ordeal, a far worse confrontation than he had anticipated. Renowned in private for a mercurial temper well salted with an acid wit, His Holiness had not been just angry, he had been in high dudgeon. His harsh words and strident directives, delivered in staccato Italian, beat and reverberated silently in the cardinal's mind like a cacophony of clangorous bells:

"This abomination has gone on far too long, Louis — nearly thirty years! It must be stopped, and we mean to see that it *is* stopped. No, I will not listen to another word from you! We shall brook no more of your sentimental arguments. Never again will you be allowed to try and exacerbate the infamy perpetrated by that *woman* and the other eight United Nations death merchants. Whatever personal opinion you may hold of you'd do well to keep to yourself.

"During the coming audience," the Pontiff had continued vehemently, "you are to convey absolutely nothing in the way of salutations and felicitations. You are not to stand on ceremony, Louis. You shall deliver our message verbatim, and you shall deliver it firmly, forcefully. There cannot be the slightest possibility of misunderstanding. It is our firm conviction to carry through with the ultimatum, and it is something you must make perfectly clear."

"Yes, Holy Father," had been his meek response. But what else could it have been?

Feeling the weight of the world resting on his gaunt shoulders, Cardinal Freneaux entered the basilica. There before him lay the shrine of shrines, gloriously lit beneath Michelangelo's soaring dome. The four curlicue, gilded bronze columns of Bernini's *baldacchino* supported the high, draped canopy above the papal altar in splendor. Beyond, at the far end of the apse, a bronze throne held the symbolic wooden chair of Peter. Long a Prince of the Church, Freneaux had enjoyed the spectacle innumerable times. Even so, it never failed to move him.

He bent as if to make obeisance, then an inner voice urged him to hesitate. With a catch in his throat, he wondered for perhaps the thousandth time what the saintly Fisher of Men would think of the modern world humanity had inherited.

With a single tear rolling down his sunken left cheek, he turned and left the basilica in a state verging on despair.

It promised to be anything but a joyous trip.

One

The tall man waited with outward patience, standing stiff-backed, knees together opposite the desk where Dr. Duiño's executive assistant feigned work under his own punishing scrutiny. An imposing presence not much under two meters in stature, the tall man was forceful in appearance, with a proud aquiline nose, sleek dirty-blond hair, and chill hazel eyes. The wraparound collar of his pearl gray tunic was fastened despite the fact that a scheduled rolling

power brownout had paralyzed portions of Greater New York during the night and early morning hours, leaving the anteroom overly warm and stuffy.

The youthful executive assistant barely lifted his head to dart occasional furtive glances at the tall man. When their glances happened to cross, he squirmed. “Terribly sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Rook. I can’t imagine what’s keeping her.”

“I’m sure Dr. Duiño is very busy, Harold.” The tall man folded long arms across his chest, a gesture hinting of a mild rebuke. “Don’t trouble yourself. Pretend I’m not here.”

Plunging back into the paperwork littering his desk, Harold divided his time between a checklist of names and the flat-panel computer display integral within his desk. When at last the intercom chimed, he was quick to say, “You can go right in, sir.”

Rook nodded, turned on his heel. When the blast-resistant door to the inner office slid into the wall and he entered, Harold looked immensely relieved.

The sanctum of Dr. Victoria Maria-Luisa Ortega de Duiño, Chair of the U.N. Department of Environment & Population’s nine-member Triage Committee, was as severe and desiccated as the woman herself. A blue-and-white United Nations ensign hung behind her ebony desk on the left; on the right, atop a travertine pedestal, the diorite bas-relief presented to her by Mexico’s preeminent sculptor depicted a stylized version of UNDEP’s logo, a set of balanced scales superimposed on the globe of Earth, and beneath it the motto:

TERRA STABILITA

A pair of utilitarian guest chairs crafted of clear Honduras mahogany were adrift on a sea of wall-to-wall shag the color of oatmeal. Save for an antique French pendulum clock, and a floor-to-ceiling bank of video panels — now dark — the austere yet spacious office was enclosed by oyster-white walls. Damask draperies of pastel yellow shrouded a glass wall overlooking the East River ninety floors below.

Rook did not presume to speak. Hands clasped behind his back, he chose a spot not far inside the door, and in a stance outwardly subservient regarded his superior with a vacuous, indolent expression.

If aware of his presence, Dr. Duiño gave no sign, continuing to occupy herself with a sheaf of papers neatly stacked beside the computer display. Her hair, short and brittle as her temper, was roached stiffly backward to form a platinum aura. Her features were wrinkled, sagging, although her eyes retained the dark and shining luster of youth. Around her frail neck, pendant against the handmaid lace *mantilla* thrown over her shoulders hung a polished silver crucifix. In two months and eleven days Victoria Duiño would celebrate her eighty-eighth birthday.

The most reviled and detested human being on the planet, she lifted her eyes at last. “My apologies, Bennett. I hadn’t meant to keep you away from your desk so long. Please have a seat.”

Rook made it a point to remain standing. “I take it the matter is pressing?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Dr. Duiño touched a button on the remote controller. Across the office, the larger of two holovision tanks lit, and a scene condensed. Rendered with startling realism via an encrypted, secure satellite transmission, it allowed viewers to eavesdrop on a courtroom scene. In its penultimate stage, the trial was taking place half a continent away.

“I wish to assure myself,” declared Dr. Duiño, staring unabashedly at her deputy chairperson as if gauging his demeanor, “we are obtaining full benefit from the Senich Trial. I assume you’ve been following the case.”

Rook turned with leisurely grace. He studied the scene in the holographic theater for a number of heartbeats, listened to a phrase or two of the summation rendered by a public

defender. Despite an abysmally weak contention, the self-conscious young attorney was vainly trying to make use of the only ammunition in his depleted arsenal. Much less than eloquent, he was attempting to convince a dozen stone-faced jurors that the defendant had suffered severe deprivation all his life, and therefore deserved nothing more than relatively lenient punishment. To condemn the defendant, Nathan Senich, for the vile offense he and a pair of luckless companions had committed, pleaded the lawyer, would amount to an act of gross injustice.

Rook said, "I hope you'll forgive me, Victoria. Alas, I've been too busy to keep up with the proceedings. I assume it's the gluttony action mentioned in your memo."

"It is," was Victoria's cool rejoinder. In her opinion, the unanimous guilty verdict soon to be rendered by twelve resentful, disgusted men and women was a foregone conclusion, the crime itself just one more ugly, despicable incident. A homeless transient, along with two miserable co-defendants, had capped their thievery of an animal belonging to an endangered species by reviving the ancient sin of gluttony. In her view, although totally indecent in itself, the deed was much more heinous than simply an affront to human society as a whole, exemplifying as it did one symptom of a global population slowly and steadily degenerating toward terminal illness. Her interest was purely political since, for the UNDEP Triage Committee, the trial carried important propaganda implications. Widespread howls of public indignation, fanned by print and electronic tabloid journalism, had created a volcanic avalanche of calls, letters, and e-mail, and if UNDEP press releases were to milk the sordid affair for all it was worth . . .

"The gall of those swine!" Victoria bit the indictment short in an uncommon display of vehemence. "In a starving world, they dared to slaughter and gorge themselves on the flesh of a fawn snatched from a protected compound in the Denver Zoo."

Bennett Rook's underlip curled. "Grotesque," he said in a resonant, unruffled tone of voice. "Despite what you say, Victoria, frankly I can't imagine what might be in it for us. In forty-eight hours or less, the remains of the mischievous gourmands will be fertilizing crops in Denver's greenbelts, or perhaps the grounds of the zoo itself — poetic justice, one might say."

"I'd much rather not hear you make light of it, Bennett." A throaty burr crept into Sra. Duiño's enunciation. "In my memo, you may recall, I asked you to have PR crack the whip on this court action. Thus far, you seem to have ignored my request. I believe we stand to reap a certain amount of public sympathy if trial coverage is handled properly."

"We . . . ?" Rook's brows elevated. "Triage Committee? Sure you aren't perhaps a touch overly optimistic about that? Nothing we do or say could possibly improve our image. Only the day before yesterday *L'Osservatore Romano* once again referred to you as the 'Matriarch of Death.' Decades ago PR abandoned any and all attempts to 'sell' our committee to the public."

"You know perfectly well what I meant," said the old woman tautly. "Bennett, must we always end up fencing? Can't you ever bring yourself to sit down with me and converse in a sociable manner?"

His arctic smile a travesty of humor, he rocked back on his heels and returned Victoria's steadfast gaze with an imperturbable coolness that never failed to infuriate adversaries and sympathizers alike. "I'm afraid there are matters we shall never see in the same light. Nothing personal, I assure you. If you want the truth, I admire you tremendously, always have. If that were not the case, I would tell you so. I'm not a hypocrite, Victoria."

"No," she conceded. "Blunt and outspoken, but never hypocritical."

Rook made a small gesture, turning over the flats of his hands. "Blunt then, if you will."

Sra. Duiño gazed at her adversarial colleague with unwinking concentration. "Bennett," she said calmly, I need your cooperation, not your enmity. In fact, I insist on having it."

Rook sighed. "How many times have we had this conversation? I'd rather not discuss it."
"Why not? What are you afraid of?"

Rook stiffened slightly. "I'm afraid of nothing," he declared, then after a pause, "Pardon me, of almost nothing."

"Your use of a qualifier leaves me curious."

"My single, one and only genuine fear," he said slowly, "is for the survival of our species."

"And mine as well. The future of the race is precisely what we've labored so long and earnestly to ensure."

"To little avail."

"Do you honestly consider that a fair and reasonable statement?"

"Eminently reasonable, and totally fair." His eyes alight with refractory intensity, Rook stood firm under the elderly woman's penetrating gaze. "You more than anyone," he added, "should be familiar with this week's global delta."

Victoria hesitated. "Certainly, and it's most encouraging. Worldwide growth during the past week totaled less than a quarter of one percent."

"Bravo!" Applauding the statement in his own sardonic fashion, Rook pantomimed the silent effect of one hand clapping. "Do forgive my impertinence, but now and then you should open your eyes wide, look beyond the walls of our ivory tower and view the real world as it really is. During the past week, despite sanctions, proscriptions, and lawful executions; despite floods and the lethal effects and aftereffects of climate change; despite earthquakes, plagues, volcanic eruptions and the further desertification of the planet's remaining arable soil bank, some twenty-five thousand *more* human beings came into existence, joining the twelve and one quarter billions, many of whom are refugees unable to adequately feed, clothe, or house themselves. In light of those figures, can you 'honestly' say all's right with the world?"

Taken aback, Victoria replied more sharply than she might have intended. "I made no such idealistic claim. The world is, and has always been precisely as you inferred: too painfully real. May I in turn ask how you can possibly deny that the weekly delta is encouraging? ZPG is certain to become a reality in several years."

"Ah, zero population growth — Nirvana!" said Rook. "Despite losing millions during the past decades, ZPG is at last on our doorstep. My dear Victoria, even if that particular chimera were to materialize this afternoon, and the global birthrate were to dip marginally below the death rate, it amounts to too damned little, too damned late. You cannot help but be aware that most of a half-century will have to grind past before currently mature generations live out their lives and depart the scene, *if* they are able to stay alive long enough to do so."

"That is . . . true," she admitted with some reluctance.

"My position," he insisted, "has no changed; it's no different than it was when first appointed to the committee. Had sterner measures been adopted then, we would now be on the downslope, not slouching minimally toward the crest."

"Oh, I am *quite* familiar with your views." For the first time during the confrontation Victoria sounded testy. "Stern measures, as you call them, would have inspired the committee to act in a less than humane manner. Fortunately, most of our fellow committeemen and women feel as I do, and refuse to subscribe to inhumane judgments as a cure-all for the world's ills."

"As triage philosophy," insisted Rook flatly, "that declaration amounts to the worst sort of emotion-based, head-in-the-sand optimism. The committee's refusal to squarely face the cold

equations of population control is precisely what has defeated our dream . . . Excuse me, *my* dream. An idealistic worldview is a luxury we can afford neither professionally nor privately.”

“Bennett, Bennett!” Dr. Duiño’s head wagged sadly. “You are without doubt one of the most intelligent people on the planet, and as well industrious and thoroughly dedicated to the grisly task we’ve committed ourselves to undertake. Those outstanding virtues are why I selected you from the crowd those long years ago. On the negative side of the ledger, however, you own not one iota of compassion, have not the slightest twinge of conscience for joining myself and the others to prescribe the awful judgments we vote to render year after year.”

Equivocation was not a facet of his nature Rook never allowed the world to see. “Ever worsening world conditions automatically excludes emotionalism from the population control equation we must persist in striving to balance. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I believe it was a famous despot calling himself Josef Stalin who best explained a fundamental sidelight of human nature. He observed that when a single individual perished it was naturally considered a tragedy, and generated an appropriate degree of remorse, yet when a disaster claimed the lives of many thousands their passing was treated as only a matter of faceless statistics.”

Victoria frowned. “Quoting one of the past century’s principal ogres hardly seems appropriate, however one defines the present condition of humanity.”

“Human condition aside,” countered Rook, “more than a grain of truth clings to that tidbit of Stalinesque wisdom. Mortal danger to an individual — the victim of a mine disaster, an unfortunate trapped in a burning building, a flood, whatever — never fails to raise a groundswell of public sympathy, while the fate of gross numbers stricken by megadrought, massive flooding, severe storms, widespread famine, an epidemic, et al, are shrugged off as inevitabilities. Up to a point, our committee does what it was organized to do, what it was *forced* to do by those selfsame statistics aptly reflecting the degenerating human condition. We’re actually given little choice if we are to effectively undertake the onerous task of judgment. We have no recourse but to act analytically, dispassionately, dutifully. Were it otherwise, there would be no sane committeemen or women to carry on the struggle.”

“And you,” she declared, “think of me as a senile, idealistic old fool for harboring the . . . sentimentality you disavow for condemning segments of the population. You’re convinced that I should step aside and let a young Turk like you to chair the committee. Isn’t that so, Bennett?”

Rook stood perfectly still, his manner relaxed, speculative. “Senile, idealistic . . . ? Hardly, my dear Victoria. Your mind is as clear and incisive as ever; you remain one of very few who are able to best me in debate. Idealism I will not speak to; I’m not qualified. And as for being a fool, not by any measure. Allow me to correct a false impression on your part. All things considered, you are less a fool than anyone in my acquaintance. I respect you enormously, envy your dedication, your strength of purpose. Perhaps I even love you in my own peculiar fashion. Nevertheless, given the opportunity I would replace you tomorrow.”

“Because I’m too soft?”

“Because,” he said, “you are too soft.”

“Thank you for stopping by, Bennett. May I remind you perhaps a bit more strongly to prod the Public Relations Director about releasing additional coverage of the Senich Trial.”

“I’ll take care of it at once.” There was no hint of sarcasm in Rook’s show of deference. “Until later, Victoria.” His eyes hooded, he left the office.

In silent reflection, Dr. Duiño gazed at the closed door for long seconds before resuming her labors.

* * *

In mid-afternoon the intercom chimed twice, sidetracking Victoria's train of thought. She stretched to press a button. "Yes, Harold?"

Her executive assistant announced that Cardinal Freneaux was in the anteroom. "And your granddaughter's calling, Dr. Duiño — channel six."

"Monique . . ? Did you explain that I was occupied?"

"I tried. She told me it was urgent, said it was extremely urgent."

"I see." Victoria glanced at the tick-tocking pendulum clock across the office. "If I'm not mistaken, His Eminence requested a three o'clock appointment. It's now two fifty-six. Surely he will allow me three or four minutes to indulge my only grandchild."

"Surely, ma'am. I'll let him know."

"Thank you, Harold." Keeping one eye and a portion of her attention on the cascade of statistics scrolling upward in the old-fashioned flat-panel computer display she preferred, Victoria switched off the descrambler circuitry invoked for confidential communications and opened vidicom channel sixteen. "Sorry, Monique; I can't talk very long at the moment. I trust you and Stewart are well?"

"Grandma . . ." The full-color image that jelled depicted a petite, attractive young woman, her raven hair in disarray, her dark eyes red-rimmed, desperate."

Victoria straightened in the high-backed executive chair. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I've got . . . troubles, Grandma. Big troubles."

"What kind of troubles? Can I be of help?"

"Oh, God! I hope so, but I, uh . . . don't see how. I just got back from seeing Dr. Everett, and I'm . . . I hate to even say it, but I'm in the family way, if you know what I mean."

Victoria's knuckles whitened on the arms of her chair. "How did it happen, Monique? Were you careless?"

"No, I don't think so. I don't know. I, uh . . . took my pills, never missed a date. I just don't know."

"Is Dr. Everett certain?"

"I . . . yes. When the test results first came back, Dr. Everett laughed it off, calling it a 'false positive.' But the second test, was, er . . . It's fate, I suppose, or the worst sort of bad luck."

Letting the first flush of emotion to wash through her, Victoria willed herself to relax and think. Red flags shot up at once. Intuition screamed a warning that once again had she become political fodder, except that this latest assault was apparently covert, not overt. She realized instinctively that somehow she had again become the victim of a sly, flanking attack by some unknown individual or group lost among the legions of dedicated antagonists who detested everything and anything she and her committee stood for, but of one thing she was instantly certain: the attack had nothing to do with her granddaughter. It was she herself, and the reviled Triage Committee she chaired, that were the true targets. Seizing a yellow legal tablet and stylus, she asked her granddaughter where she'd purchased the birth-control medication.

"Where . . ? What does that have to do with —?"

"Never mind. I assume you buy birth control meds regularly at some pharmacy."

"Why, yes. I almost always fill the prescription at Gilbert's here in the arcology complex, but I don't see what that has to do with —"

"Have you any left, Monique?"

"Meds . . ? A few, I think" The young woman sounded uncertain. "Yes, several I believe. I've been meaning to refill the prescription the next time I happen to be up on level —"

“Send them to me,” urged her grandmother. “Get them over here by special messenger, and insure the parcel. On second thought, address it to Harold Strabough, care of the U.N. Tower, Floor Ninety, and beneath the address write the initials V.M.L. to assure prompt delivery to me personally. I should receive the package before today’s close of business.”

“I . . . all right. I’ll do whatever you think best, Grandma. Oh, why did this have to happen now? Stew’s really broken up about it. Chances are the Genetics Board would have approved us for parenthood within months. What can we do?”

“Nothing at all, Monique. Leave everything to me.”

“Can you . . . ?” Monique hesitated. “I mean, do you honestly believe you’ll be able to do something about it?”

“I sincerely hope so,” her grandmother said. “Now listen carefully. I want you to remain as calm as possible about what’s happened. Follow Dr. Everett’s instructions to the letter, and have him prescribe a sedative if you feel it necessary. Also, let me know at once if any complications arise. Will you promise to do all that?”

“Yes, of course. Wh . . . what will they do to me, to my, uh . . . To our baby?”

“For the time being, not a thing,” said Victoria with all the assurance she could muster. “Unauthorized birth is a punishable offense, but unauthorized pregnancy is not. We have months — all the time in the world — to effect a solution. Above everything else, what you must not, *cannot* afford to do, is panic. Don’t let fear get the best of you, Monique, neither now, nor later.”

“Stew’s talking kind of crazy,” said her granddaughter. “He’s raving about running off to Brazil or some other remote place.”

“Hum-m-mph! And do what, live in what was once a vast rain forest with throngs of other outcasts and refugees? Is that what Stewart has in mind? Think about it, and think hard. Amazonia is still largely a tropical jungle, although not in the former sense. Ask yourself if much of the region’s denuded quagmire would be a fit place for you and Stewart to raise an infant? Doing as he suggests would be a form of suicide. Why, you wouldn’t last long enough surrounded by the two-legged wildlife down there to give birth, let alone make more than an animal existence for yourselves.”

“Do you . . . think? I mean, do you know that for a fact, Grandma?”

“Certainly I know,” said Victoria firmly. “I’m in a position to learn the existence of every crisis center and sore spot in either hemisphere. Promise me you’ll do exactly as I have advised. We’ll get together this evening when there’s time to thoroughly thrash things out.”

“God bless you, Grandma! And . . . thank you. I love you more than I can say.”

“I love you too, my dear. Until this evening . . .”

Seething inside, Victoria switched off and permitted herself the use of an expletive not in keeping with the dignity of her office. Reactivating the scrambler firmware, she hastily punched buttons.

The refined features of UNDEP Security Director Broward’s executive assistant condensed in the vidicom display. “Why, good afternoon, Dr. Duiño.”

“Leslie, it’s imperative that I speak to A.J. immediately.”

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry,” intoned the middle-aged woman. “He’s somewhere over in Queens. Food Transport is having the usual problem with —”

“Can you please page him, tell him I’d be obligated if he could . . . No, forget ‘could.’ Tell A.J. in the strongest terms possible to stop by my office the second he returns to Manhattan. It’s terribly important.”

“I’ll call, get word to him right away, Dr. Duiño.”

"Thank you, Leslie. I appreciate it." Her thoughts whirling, Victoria rang off, grasped her bamboo cane and used it to help her rise stiffly. Monique's call had come at a most inopportune moment. There was no time which to contemplate the ramifications of her granddaughter's predicament — actually her own and the committee's predicament — before receiving Cardinal Freneaux.

Hunched beside the desk diminutive and birdlike, she leaned on the cane, squinting down at the carpet with unseeing eyes. Her first impression had been correct, of that she was certain. It was definitely an attack. Could it be anything else? Possibly, but it seemed unlikely. Yet an attack from what quarter? During the arduous decades since her investiture, she had been the victim of countless physical and political attacks, not to mention being constantly and consistently showered with scurrilous innuendo, vitriolic commentary, and no small measures of scrofulous invective. She had survived four separate attempts on her life, assassination tries ranging from clumsy bunglings like the homemade bomb thrown by a demented Buenos Aires theology student that had caused permanent hearing impairment in her right ear, to the ingenious poisoned croissants, three years ago, which had resulted in the death of a respected friend and colleague.

She felt something wither and die inside her, heaved a deep sigh and muttered, "Damn them!" Unfortunately, at present she had to deal with the present. Closing her eyes tightly, she washed the residue of Monique's call from her mind and depressed the intercom button. "You may show Cardinal Freneaux in now, Harold."

"Yes, Dr. Duiño."

A Cardinal Deacon, Louis Freneaux numbered among the *legati a latere*, or papal envoys, serving the Papacy. There could be little question about the fact that he had been dispatched on a mission of major consequence, most likely something directly connected to His Holiness' current fit of acute, virulent displeasure with she herself, and of course the usual shopping list of nefarious Triage Committee's judgments, actions and activities.

Hobbling to mid-office, she leaned on her cane, waiting with outward patience to welcome the churchman.

Two

The blast-resistant door to Dr. Duiño's office slid into the wall. Louis Cardinal Freneaux's red-fringed black robe hung slackly about his wasted figure. He offered a wan smile of greeting, yet beneath the ruby-red biretta his eyes were lackluster, sad. "You're looking quite well, my dear Victoria."

"How kind of you, Louis. At my age, I can't imagine a nicer compliment." Holding the bamboo cane aside, she bent stiffly, intending to kiss the prelate's ring.

"That . . . will not be necessary." Freneaux withdrew, mildly embarrassed. "I'm afraid my visit is official."

Victoria straightened, asked in a different voice, "Your Eminence, must it be like this,?"

"Please take no offense. The Holy Father is . . . He wishes me to, er . . . I fear what we must discuss will be less than pleasant."

"I assume," she said, further testing the waters, "His Holiness is even more displeased with me and our committee than usual. I regret having caused him further pain. What is it this time, Louis?"

"Egypt, my dear Victoria."

Dr. Duiño's understanding nod was slow in coming. Throughout their long acquaintance, her high opinion of Freneaux had not wavered. Whether or not she agreed with him about all

matters, she deeply respected his humanitarian outlook, appreciated his firmly held convictions, and cherished the friendship that had grown between them. Nevertheless, she believed that in private, he sometimes carried formality to an unnecessary extreme. Aware that for years Freneaux had made it a point of honor to limit his caloric intake to something commensurate with that of the deprived members of the Holy See's vast flock, she considered him one of the more enlightened churchman in her acquaintance.

She turned away, stumped to her desk, set aside the bamboo cane and invited her guest to be seated. "Roughly three million inhabitants of the Nile Delta," she declared, "formerly Class III, were recently re-judged Class I. The vote was unanimous, eight ayes and a single abstention by myself. As you are aware, I am eligible to vote only in the event of a deadlock. Euthanasia is being provided for all of the unfortunates who elect to choose a less painful path."

"Deplorable!" said Cardinal Freneaux.

"No one," she said with feeling, "could deplore its necessity more than I myself. Mention any delta community — Damanhûr, El Mansûra, Tanta, Zagazig, El Faiyûm, El Minya, others staggering under the burden of refugees from some climate change disaster who fled there in hope of survival, and now share the fate of those in numerous towns and villages scattered around the mostly dry delta of a once mighty river."

"A Coptic Christian community still more or less survives in Egypt," declared Cardinal Freneaux, his intonation somber. "U. N. Peacekeeping Forces interdicted portions of the Delta preparatory to . . . That is to say, in order to prepare the populace, if that death knell term is appropriate, and it sent the Patriarch into a blind rage. He petitioned the Vatican for redress."

"Ah, *petitioned* . . ." Her dark eyes flashing pale fire, Victoria wanted to know why the Patriarch had failed to petition the governments in Moscow, Kiev, Tashkent and elsewhere in the Balkanized Commonwealth of Independent States whose leaders she accused of guilt by association for joining Russia in adamantly refusing to help the Egyptians to help themselves.

A grimace of frustration preceded Freneaux's response. "Help themselves indeed! Even were I to agree with that, my dear Victoria, what is your purpose in seeking to revive —?"

"Decades ago," she interrupted, "UNDEP geologists repeatedly warned Cairo of the dire consequences in store if the decrepit Aswan Dam continued to remain a threat to each and every downstream community. The structure was built and duly propagandized by the former Soviet Union's 'beneficent' régime, yet that does nothing to excuse present day CIS autocrats for backing down and looking the other way, especially since the problem was created by their collective predecessor states."

Cardinal Freneaux chose not to reply.

Victoria went on to determinedly explain how, swollen as a result of climate change megastorms in East Africa, the overflow of Lake Nasser on unstable terrain helped create a severe seismic disturbance, causing the upper Rift Valley to develop a subsidiary fracture, and allow the Nile to find a new channel to the Red Sea. "Today," she concluded, "Cairo is a dusty, decaying ruin as useless as the pyramids across the Nile. You may not believe me when I say the disaster was prophesied, but it was. Moreover, the catastrophe was duplicitously judged by the Kremlin not to have been the result of global climate change everyone knew, but rather due entirely to laxity and deceitfulness on the part of Russia's leaders, who should have held themselves at least partially responsible."

"Prophesied . . .?" Freneaux blinked, not entirely sure of her meaning.

"Prophesied," insisted Victoria. She pulled the leather-bound volume of the Holy Bible on her desk toward her, opened it to a red-ribbon bookmark. "Indulge me, Your Eminence, while

I read from Isaiah 19:4.5. ‘And the Egyptians will I give over into the hand of a cruel lord. And a fierce king shall rule over them, saith the Lord, the Lord of hosts. And the waters shall fail from the sea, and the river shall be wasted and dried up’.”

The papal envoy sniffed, shifted restively in his chair, and lowered his eyes. He did not comment on the passage from Scripture, although the set of his mouth evidenced what he thought of biblical prophecy, or for that matter any type of prophecy. “Rationalization is useless,” he said, doing his best not to sound defensive. “We have no choice. In crucial matters we must be practical.”

“*Practical*, is it! In the Nile Delta more than a thousand *fellahin* now compete viciously for every diminishing square kilometer of what’s left of the formerly arable land on either side of the riverbed, and do so while watching the wind carry away topsoil, making it vanish before their eyes. Something had to give, Louis.”

Freneaux coughed apologetically into his cupped hand. “More than three million . . . somethings,” he said in a monotone.

Victoria drew back as if she’d been slapped. “That was unkind of you. They’re helpless human beings. They work together, love together, cry together, have aspirations and perhaps occasionally laugh together, even like you and I. Unfortunately, also like you and I, each of them has an appetite for potable water and sustenance. Do you — does the Holy Father — imagine that I myself or any other Triage Committee members *enjoy* our work?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then why didn’t the Vatican exercise whatever influence it retained over Eastern Orthodox churchmen within the Commonwealth of Independent States? Why hasn’t His Holiness thrown his weight behind a worthy crusade of that nature? The Vatican’s good offices might have helped make the Russians, Ukrainians and other CIS leaders appreciate their obligation to aid in resolving the Aswan problem before it became too late, too enormous for even considering corrective action measures. With CIS help instead of hindrance to ensure an intact river, the very lifeblood of Egypt ever since the world was young, triage judgments in the Nile Valley would have dwindled significantly.”

A small sound of disgruntlement escaped from the cardinal’s throat. “Argument is meaningless, my dear Victoria. You know how little Holy Church is able to influence decisions in Eastern Europe, or for that matter much of Asia. The CIS, for example, is plagued with its own problems. Titanic problems one might say.”

Willing her temper to subside, Victoria tapped a stylus on the desktop and silently recited a novena, requesting a special award of grace to help her deal with the cardinal. “Titanic indeed, Louis, or perhaps an order of magnitude larger. Yet hasn’t God put us here to solve problems, titanic as well as commonplace? Can you deny that the impoverished portion of the Third World sprawling across Africa, the Mideast, much of the Indian subcontinent and other Asian regions was in some respects partly a creation of the former USSR? Despite the loud, self-serving boasts about several CIS states becoming authentic democracies, it’s common knowledge that certain leaderships where corruption is ever rampant have not entirely relinquished Soviet philosophy, and perhaps never will where aggrandizement or the exercise of power are concerned. “Call it what you will,” said Victoria, her blood pressure rising. “Call it the CIS, the USSR, or for that matter the Tsar’s holy Rodina. The congenitally paranoid, manipulative Russian Bear will forever remain the Great Russian Bear. The U.N. is powerless to inflict the will of the majority on certain regions of the Third World, except as the Great Russian Bear permits.

“Even today,” she went on to say, her voice choked with resentment, “The CIS graciously condescends, permitting triage judgments rendered and implemented wherever and whenever they are decreed, then either individually or collectively turns about and points a long propaganda finger, and labels our committee ‘genocidal murderers of millions.’ But let the U.N. wise heads suggest something *beneficial*, something designed to aid in the restoration of our human to something that will retard global climate change and improving living conditions — something in the nature of the Qattara Project — and the Great Bear exercises its veto without remorse, killing the measure without even questioning its value.”

Freneaux listened in silence, letting Victoria’s statements and accusations echo hollowly in his mind. His manner unbending, he shifted his weight disquietly and acknowledged nothing. “I’m not . . . I don’t believe I’m familiar with the . . . project you mentioned,” he dissimulated, hoping to divert the chairwoman’s waxing anger.

“Really?” Aware that her visitor was not being entirely truthful, Victoria refrained from saying so. “Ah, but you see there is even more to the prophecy. Think back to one of the lines from Isaiah I quoted a moment ago: ‘And the waters shall fail from the sea’?”

“I, uh . . . yes, of course recall what you said.”

Pushing the heavy Bible to aside, she consulted a computerized tickler file, then touched in succession the buttons of a remote controller. An accurately scaled, digitized topographic map of the Middle East formed in the larger holovision tank. She commanded the display to zoom in on an area south of the Mediterranean coast of Libya. “Several kilometers west of Alexandria,” she said, pinpointing the site with the cursor, “is El Alamein, a town of historical significance. Near there, British forces turned back those of Nazi Germany in one of the Second World War’s climactic land battles.”

Freneaux said impatiently. “Forgive me, but I can’t imagine what this has to do with —”

“In and of itself,” she said, as if unmindful of his interruption, “the battle is neither here nor there, except that the British high command made an excellent choice of a site in which to stage a winner-take-all stand. To the uninitiated, it would seem a minor inconvenience for Field Marshal Rommel’s armored forces to swing out into the open desert and avoid General Montgomery’s trap on his drive toward Alexandria and the Suez. Such was not the case, however. On a much larger scale, the terrain bordering the seacoast is a corridor similar to Thermopylae. British tactics emulated those of the Greeks who managed to stand off Persian hordes in classical times. You see, Rommel had neither the petrol nor supplies to skirt a vast natural obstacle.”

* * *

Victoria paused, asked the cardinal if he would like refreshment. When her offer was declined, she poured water from a carafe and sipped, studying Freneaux over the rim of the glass. “Let your eye drift southward from El Alamein,” she continued. See the long crescent labeled Qattara Depression? A vast sink similar to California’s Death Valley, it’s situated between the Libyan Plateau and the Western Desert. In most places, the floor of the depression dips one hundred or more meters below the level of the Mediterranean.

“UNDEP ecosystems analysts proposed a fifty-kilometer canal excavated by ‘clean’ mini-fusion devices from the seacoast adjacent to El Alamein to the brink of the depression, where a hydroelectric power station was slated to be built. Roughly seventy years would have been required for a broad, fan-shaped inland sea to form, stretching from Siwa Oasis near the Libyan border to the foundations of the pyramids at Giza, with a long neck extending southward along the Ghard Abu Muharik wadi almost to El Kharga, which is . . . here. The prospective Qattara

Sea would have helped alter the climate of the arid Western Desert, bringing added rainfall to the rich, parched soil; in antiquity, much of the region was a lush garden. Egypt could have reclaimed hundreds of thousand of fertile hectares, thereby helping alleviate perpetual famine, and perhaps avert the fate of many Ethiopians, Eritreans and Somalians.

"The Fathers and Teachers in Kiev, Moscow and points east vetoed UNDEP's proposal out of hand." Victoria switched off the holovision map. "Let me apologize, Your Eminence. I hadn't intended to lecture."

Having watched and listened to her recital in stoic silence, Cardinal Freneaux said, "My dear, you have an uncanny knack of making complex matters sound brave and simple. I'm afraid world conditions are a much more tangled than you picture. Visionary schemes like this . . . project are inevitably dismissed due to —"

"There was nothing 'visionary' about the Qattara Project," she denied. "Not one visionary aspect pertained to it in any sense of the term. I mentioned it only because it forms a primary example of many similar UNDEP proposals that have principally succumbed to collective CIS geopolitical nearsightedness and obfuscation, especially on the part of Russia."

The papal envoy pursed his lips, rose and began pacing the carpet, arms folded, head bowed. "Holy Church is not blind," he declared. "CIS geopolitical games are often less subtle than were those of the former USSR. Yet the 'Great Bear,' to borrow your term, is not to be provoked. His Holiness detests the concept of modern warfare. No one can begin to imagine a greater horror than the carnage thermonuclear weaponry would wreak upon the former densely populated regions of Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas."

Victoria sounded subdued, but by no means defeated in saying, "The holocaust you envision would either extinguish our species once and for all, or reduce our numbers to something the planet could once again tolerate. Triage on a grand scale."

Aghast, Freneaux halted in his tracks. "How can you dare even *voice* such a horror?"

"There are wars," she said calmly, "and there are wars. Even as we speak, a global conflict is raging, and the current major battleground is in northern Egypt. If His Holiness refuses to recognize that solemn fact of life, I'm hard-put to explain it."

"I have never heard you speak like this before, Victoria."

"I sincerely regret the necessity, Louis. Maybe it's because my optimism and diplomacy now seem as worn out as the rest of me." She searched the churchman's contorted countenance. "No, strike that; it simply isn't so. What frightens me beyond all other earthly terrors is that while we are gradually winning the triage battle, we are far from winning the neverending, ongoing environmental war. Not yet, anyhow. But we shall — must! After all, only two alternatives remain: global triage, distasteful as it is, yet much less so than Armageddon, or a sniveling decline certain to end in a whimper."

"Studies have shown," Freneaux said defensively, "that our planet will support between twenty and twenty-five billions."

"Oh, studies!" Sounding doubly perturbed, Dr. Duiño said slowly, distinctly, "Correct me if I'm mistaken, Your Eminence, but I suspect that amazing number was derived from the Vatican's most recent *Humanae Vitae* conference. If so, aren't you being a touch conservative? During the past century, published estimates of similar conferences decreed that our planet could support more than forty billions. Perhaps the decaying, pollution-ridden world we have no choice but to live in could indeed support such an outrageously extravagant number, but support them in what *condition*?"

Again Freneau failed to respond. After a moment, he said, "I fear our conversation has strayed far afield, Victoria. I sincerely hope you will understand my single-mindedness. The purpose of my visit is . . . well, to dutifully perform as the surrogate of His Holiness, who insists that a certain vital matter be resolved. The Holy Father has directed me to ask, in his name, a question of extremely personal nature. Will you be offended if I simply blurt it out?"

"What does the Holy Father wish to know?"

"Do you consider yourself a good daughter of the Church?"

"You know I do."

His Eminence pondered the invisible wall that had risen between himself and Dr. Duiño. "His Holiness was in an unusually stern, refractory frame of mind when he dispatched me on this mission. He instructed me to earnestly plead the immediate reclassification of all despairing Nile Delta inhabitants. He urged me in the strongest possible terms not to take 'no' for an answer."

Her expression neutral, her heart in her throat, Victoria said, "To my everlasting regret, the stern, unbending Holy Father must be told that he has an equally stern and unbending daughter. It grieves me terribly, Your Eminence, to say my answer cannot be other than negative. Wars are never fought without casualties. Relief shipments to northern Egypt have already ceased."

"Then I must warn you of a potentially dire consequence, my dear Victoria. Please do not take this warning lightly. Should you fail to change your mind and respond positively to his plea, His Holiness has spoken of excommunication."

Victoria grew deathly pale. Her fingers flew to her throat, touched the silver crucifix. "Does the Holy Father," she inquired with calmness she did not feel, "expect me to be intimidated by such an awful threat? Do you, Louis?"

"Not for an instant. I have known you too long, too well, to believe you would so much as give thought to discarding your strongly held principles. Not even in the face of . . . of such an abominable consequence."

At once enraged, in deep shock and very frightened, Victoria tossed her head. "I'm amazed to hear that His Holiness would stoop to attack me in such a dastardly, underhanded way. It's impossible to believe he would try to coerce a change in the manner which I must and shall continue to conduct my lifework. Why is His Holiness threatening eternal damnation, Louis? What does he hope to gain? How can he possibly imagine that exacting such a vengeful threat would cause me to bend in good conscience to his will. Has the Holy Father convinced himself that facing excommunicated from everything I hold sacred will destroy me professionally?"

"I believe . . . I think the, er . . . rationale explicitly sums his decision."

"Were such a horrible form of retribution to be carried out, doesn't he realize it would mean absolutely nothing to the workings of our committee, only to me personally? Why can't he appreciate that simple fact?"

"I'm not . . . sure."

Fingering the silver crucifix, she then clutched it tightly as if fearful it might be ripped from her throat. "What have we come to, my old friend? The Church — *our* Church — is now permissive regarding the question of homosexuality, therapeutic abortion is countenanced under certain circumstances, and euthanasia is semi-condoned when the burden of life becomes too great for the sons and daughters of Mother Church to bear. Yet the Holy Father insists upon obstinately pretending that an irrefutable, inescapable truth does *not* exist. A renewal, however slight, of population growth will mean nothing less than the eventual extinction of our species. In the absence of dynamic population control, the global curve again start to rise toward asymptotic

heights. Yet long before the hideous curve reaches climactic ascension, the world will cease to exist as a fit environment for human beings.”

Unable to meet the eyes of his hostess, Cardinal Freneaux studied the carpet beneath his feet. “This discussion is exceedingly painful for me, Victoria.”

“And for me, Louis, only much more so.”

The cardinal said, “I am obligated to ask again for your definitive answer.”

“You’ve already had it, Louis. Please tell His Holiness the Matriarch of Death considers eternal fire a pittance to pay for the work she has done, and must continue to do.”

His eyes misted, Cardinal Freneaux nodded in resignation. “Then I shall bid you good day, my dear Victoria. I sincerely hope our next meeting will be . . . more pleasant.”

“Let us hope so.”

* * *

Excommunication! The horrid term ricocheted in her mind, reverberating like a nuclear detonation. To her it was, had always been far the ugliest term in the lexicon. How unthinkable that she should face the ultimate punishment her faith could impose simply because she prided herself on being farsighted and pragmatic when most fellow beings insisted on blinding themselves to an implied human destiny so evident and ultimate as to be inescapable. Why couldn’t people put dogma aside, open their eyes and glimpse the horrid truth staring back at them? The apocalyptic destiny she feared was inextricably bound to the implacable march of demographic statistics — numbers, numbers, numbers, the relentless, cascading numbers.

Her thoughts racing in the wake of a desolating hour with Cardinal Freneaux, she closed her eyes and reviewed the nightmare judgments she not only had lived with, but had directed for more than a quarter-century. The Holy Father’s threat derived from his faulty assumption that she herself and the committeemen and women under her direction were inhuman monsters willfully ordering the death of millions, not farsighted volunteers responsible for selflessly seizing the opportunity afforded by a climate change lull in the pell-mell surge of humanity toward oblivion via overpopulation, and providing a humane method of averting the inevitable. The raw numbers had formerly shouted loudly on their own accord, speaking for themselves. Eight millennia before the Savior’s birth, the global population estimate had ranged in the vicinity of five millions. When Caesar fell to the daggers of envious assassins, unbeknownst to them the Roman Republic had fallen with him at a turning point when the worldwide population estimate hovered in the neighborhood of two hundred and fifty millions.

During the mid-seventeenth century roughly five hundred millions had occupied the planet, and by 1850 the number had climbed to about one thousand millions — a billion. Circa 1930, just under two billions had lived out their lives in the world’s continents and islands, and with the third millennium in its birth pangs almost seven billions had crowded the globe.

The frightening numbers had continued swelling at the alarming, exponential rate of three or four additional births per second, eleven or twelve thousand per hour. A grim corollary to that grim statistic was the equally grim fact that by calendar year 2001 between forty and fifty thousand children had starved to death each day, roughly fifteen millions per year; nor had that total included the victims of, or children orphaned by, AIDS, Ebola, and one or another of the multiplying diseases, their respective virulence difficulty to cure accelerated by mutating bacteria and viruses.

Most modern demographers conveniently chose the first year of the third millennium as a major knee in the population curve, a watershed year, principally because it brought with it an American administration much more concerned with economic profit margins, an unregulated

banking system and a pair of long, unbudgeted foreign wars than population statistics, or for that matter the living conditions of its citizens. A critical decision point had arrived just after the turn after the century, a crucial nexus where something that could have and should have been fought for had been artfully swept under not only America's political carpets, but those of many other nations as well — the normal change in global climate accelerated by pollution injected into the atmosphere since the beginning of the industrial revolution.

Most political leaderships then in authority had forced their eyes wide shut despite the fact that hard evidence portending what was on the horizon had been written legibly and indelibly for all to see, but few to appreciate and understand. Around the globe during that fateful era, twenty-eight individuals per thousand had been born for every ten who perished; translating that statistic into a “per hundred” ratio equaled a growth rate of one-point-eight percent, a rate of increase then considered not that a major problem, although certain criers-in-the-wilderness had proven with simple arithmetic that it meant the planetary population would double in the relatively short span of forty to fifty years. The upshot, of course, meant the world's then-current seven billions, give or take, would become twelve billions-plus by calendar year 2041, or 2050 at the latest.

It deeply galled Victoria to realize the criers-in-the-wilderness who'd warned of what was in store had been correct for accurately predicting that the twenty-first century would come to be known as the Age of Shortages. The world's politicians, bureaucrats, technocrats, dictators and warlords had naturally failed to accept scientific evidence that an increase in the degenerating human condition could be partially blamed on human-induced atmospheric pollution, increasing acidity in the oceans, vanishing topsoil, disappearing forests and wildlife impacted by global climate change — a trend possibly exacerbating, and probably compounding, the fact that Planet Earth was still experiencing mild warming in the aftermath of the last ice age.

Fossil fuel depletion in the face of ever-increasing demand had also taken a severe toll on the human condition, not to mention accruing the lion's share of blame for acid rain, the accelerating extinction of plant and animal species, worldwide deforestation, and every other scapegoat factor brought to the attention of the people supposedly in charge, yet who had either ignored the warnings or shuffled the problem off to be dealt with by succeeding generations. Politicos of all stripes had adamantly refused to admit to their constituents, or for that matter to themselves, that energy resources were being consumed at an ever-accelerating rate by a burgeoning population, a fact effectively transforming them in time to nonrenewable resources. World leadership in general had unanimously refused for much a long time to admit that the cited “symptoms” essentially constituted the disease, and that most if not all such “symptoms” were obviously spinoffs of a worsening environment coupled with overpopulation.

Perhaps the most damning factor of all, she realized, was that Holy Mother Church — *her* beloved Church — had obdurately maintained a stand which decried and forbade humane methods of slowing and potentially curbing a new exponential rise in population, specifically modern, readily obtainable means and methods of female and male birth-control, plus due to extreme necessity global triage judgments. But, no; the Vatican had retained its dogmatic medieval approach to the problem with impenetrable, unshakable firmness by continuing to preach adherence to “God's will” in keeping with the biblical commandment to be fruitful and multiply. The modern Catholic hierarchy had exhibited neither an appreciation for, nor offered anything in the way of realistic thought, to the solemn truth that God might indeed welcome a little help.

The intercom chimed twice, and Victoria's gloomy retrospective dissolved.

“Mr. Broward is here,” announced her executive assistant.
Victoria changed mental gears. “Thank you, Harold. Send him in, please.”

* * *

His hangdog expression and deep-set brown eyes reflecting equally deep-set weariness, Augustus Jason Broward trudged into Victoria’s office clad in a mussed tan tunic open at the throat, without the old-fashioned necktie he usually wore.

“Thank you for stopping by, A.J.”

UNDEP’s saturnine security director eased his large-boned, moderately overweight frame into a guest chair across from the desk. “Will this take long?” A passel of loose ends need tying up before —”

“And miles to go before you sleep,” interjected Dr. Duiño.

The other’s humorless chuckle rumbled softly. “Uh-huh, that too. But make it light-years, not paltry miles.”

Broward’s basso profundo speaking voice and fish-eyed stare never failed to disconcert Victoria, though certain those attributes had served him well in loosening the tongues of untold suspects and miscreants as a former Manhattan homicide detective. While holding her colleague in immensely high regard, she admitted to herself that he was not, had never been and never would be, a particularly likable individual. The corollary, however, she liked very much indeed. Without A.J.’s intelligent, dedicated leadership, she knew UNDEP Security could never have become the efficient, hard-as-nails organization it was.

“Problems in Queens?” she asked rhetorically.

A.J.’s phlegmatic shrug signaled his unflappability. “The mother of food riots, Victoria. New York’s Finest were undermanned, and overwhelmed *tout de suite* — no surprise. I pulled a few squads of U.N. Peacekeeper uniforms over to Queens, plus a few dozen off-duty blue suits scrounged from Brooklyn precincts. We did our bit, helped to bail out the Queenies.”

“You succeeded, naturally.”

A.J. uttered a snort of indignation. “Depends on what metric you use to chalk up success. All toted, there were in excess of two thousand arrests, so we sure as hell succeeded in collaring flocks of hellraising bad-deed-doers. Catch is, no way on God’s formerly green Earth can one one-hundredth of the happy rioters be held more than a few hours. Every slam, lockup and holding pen from here to California bulges with inmates. Aw, what the hell! Keeping the bad asses penned up is someone else’s headache. Speaking of collars, what type of ‘extremely urgent’ burr is under your collar on this miserable evening?”

Victoria’s expression underwent a radical change. Slowly and carefully choosing her words, she related the most recent development, picking up the pace bit by bit as the explanation of her granddaughter’s dilemma — her own dilemma, actually — matured. Somewhere in mid-sentence, she became semi-hypnotized by the other’s patented fixed stare, and broke off, wondering if A.J. ever blinked.

He finally did blink, but all he had to say was, “Terrific, just goddamn terrific, Victoria! One more load of bad tidings is exactly what I need.”

“It’s an attack on me personally; can’t be anything else. My granddaughter and her husband have absolutely nothing to do with it, other than acting as innocent foils.”

“Umm-m-m, granted. Could be a strong likelihood of that,” conceded Broward. “But let’s forgo conclusion-jumping yet and pigeonhole your conclusion as a probable, not a given.” A.J.’s unblinking stare persisted. “Hate to sound like a smart ass, but with PRE-VENT, PREG-NOT

and other available implants, methods and goodies, why in the name of Saint Swithins is your granddaughter playing horse-and-buggy conception games with old-fashioned tablets?"

"It bewilders me, too, A.J. I've asked Monique that identical question more than once. She said she and her husband don't trust modern implants, devices or medications."

"Great! Their mistrust could be one helluva costly mistake. But, to each his own. Did Monique," inquired Broward, his detective's instincts working overtime, "bother to keep any of the meds?"

"She did, yes. I asked her to send them to me. The package arrived an hour ago by special messenger. I told Monique to address it to me marked 'personal.' Harold has it locked in the office safe."

Broward actually blinked again. His thick, bushy brows knitted. "Mean to say you let your number one boy out there hold the parcel?"

"Why . . . yes, of course."

"Not a real smart move, Victoria. How do you know that nice looking youngster isn't in on the scam, if a scam there is?"

"I trust Harold implicitly."

"Well, hooray! No, make that hallelujah! Trust, trust, and yet more trust. Your granddaughter and her hubby don't trust implants or any other modern BC methods, but you trust Harold 'implicitly.' I guess it must be my day to drown in an ocean of trust. I'll say this for you, Victoria. It's refreshing to hear how 'implicitly' you trust the youngster paid to do your busy work."

Noting her reaction, A.J. grimaced. "Okay, okay; don't get your back up. I'm sure the young fellow's sterling character shines through. Assuming he's a knight among executive assistants, I'll pry the packet loose from him on my way out, bounce the tabs over to the lab for analysis."

"This affair," declared Victoria, making the point with added firmness, "must be kept strictly between ourselves, A.J. If the faintest hint of a rumor of Monique's illegal pregnancy were to leak it would mean —"

"Yeah, I hear you," interrupted the security director. "Listen, before I put any of my people to work cracking this ditzzy affair, let's get one thing straight between us. I have to be one thousand percent certain you know for sure your granddaughter wasn't just careless about keeping to the pill-popping slate her medic prescribed."

"It's impossible to believe Monique could possibly be careless about something so important."

"And upon exactly what do you base that conclusion?"

"Mostly," she admitted, "because of Monique's adamant assurance to the contrary. I know my granddaughter, A.J. She's an extremely trustworthy young woman."

"Ah, yes; once again trust rears its lizardly head." A.J. Broward, who had little faith in letting his right hand know the left even existed, wagged his head sadly, unable to believe what he'd been hearing.

"Monique," assured Victoria, "is too conscientious, far too thorough in her ways to slip up on a vital necessity like birth-control. Besides, I happen to know she and Stewart were scheduled for parenthood approval by the end of the current quarter. Through private sources, I also know for a fact that the Genetics Board was preparing to grant approval, but for obvious reasons I couldn't let Monique and her husband know."

"Obvious reasons, or ethical reasons?"

“Aren’t they one and the same, A.J.?”

Broward’s sigh was especially long-suffering. He said with sardonic inflection, “First trust, and now ethics; both should be deemed elective subjects for anyone studying Law or Medicine.”

“You’re paranoid, A.J.”

“Only the paranoid survive,” observed the other.

“Please, no cynicism.”

“Sorry, scratch cynicism. What I’ll need from your ethical, trustworthy granddaughter are the particulars. Tell her to quicklike furnish addresses, vidicom numbers, her and her husband’s SSA numbers, citizen’s IDs, the names and locations of relatives, close friends and incidental contacts. I’d also like a list of the names and office addresses of any and all physicians and other professionals she’s been seeing, plus whatever else you can think of that might make a first dent in the puzzle.”

“I’ll prepare a dossier, A.J., and see that it lands on your desk first thing in the morning.”

“Seal it Eyes Only; address it to me personally.”

“I will.”

Broward clicked his tongue and pulled himself to his feet. Nodding a weary farewell, he departed the office with long, measured strides, neglecting to offer Victoria so much as a by-your-leave or a backward glance.

Three

Where UNDEP Security Director Augustus Jason Broward was concerned, using an encrypted, scrambled vidicom circuit was as natural as breathing. He called Dr. Duiño’s closely guarded private number at seven fifteen that evening. Direct as always, he ignored salutations and wasted no words voicing his message.

“The BC meds your granddaughter sent along are phony as old-style greenbacks, Victoria. I dropped the packet off at the lab minutes after leaving your office. Not long ago, the analysis report landed in my computer’s encrypted file. The ‘meds’ she swallowed are placebos, plain and simple. They’re stamped with the infertility symbol, but lacking the chop of any pharmaceutical house.”

“I’m so glad to hear that, A.J.”

“Yeah, good news it may be, but don’t get too glad too soon. It dumps everything we do from here on into the straightforward investigation bin, except the ‘straightforward’ part could easily get pretty hairy. The U.N. High Court takes a dim view of any and all pharmaceutical goings-on of a shady nature. The High Justices dote on the prosecution and conviction of slimeballs who sell any and all varieties of bad merchandise, especially anything painted with a medical stripe. The provider and seller will get hit equally hard once we run them to ground.”

“You have no inkling,” asked Victoria, “where the meds came from, who at the arcology pharmacy might be responsible?”

“Uh-uh, way too early in the game for anything like that. As I said, let’s not jump to premature conclusions about the pharmacy or anything else. Finding out what actually took place is bound to take some deep and fancy digging.”

“I understand, A.J. I have every confidence in you and your people. I know you’ll get to the bottom of this sordid business.”

“Count on it,” assured Broward. “Okay, let’s get down to brass tacks. Does your eminently trustworthy, ethical granddaughter happen to know the name of the clerk who sold her the placebos?”

“Name . . ? I don’t believe so. Monique remembers the clerk as a young, slender Afro-American woman wearing greenish eye-shadow and too many beads and trinkets. She seemed fairly sure the clerk was a regular pharmacy employee, someone she’d seen before at a check-out counter. But she said the young lady wasn’t wearing one of those name badges. Monique doesn’t recall hearing her name spoken aloud.”

“No matter. Chances are, if the pharmacy does become our first target, the placebos could’ve been slipped to the clerk on the sly by someone higher up. A licensed pharmacist strikes me as a likelier candidate for the evil deed than some low-paid sales clerk. We’ll run a check soonest on all pharmacy personnel, and hopefully get a lead on who’s mixed up in this mess, who’s not. I promise to get back to you the minute we learn anything worthwhile.”

“Good hunting, A.J. God bless you!” Victoria used a voice command, and the vidicom display went dark.

* * *

Alone in the silence of her modest, three-room apartment high on the tower’s hundredth floor, feeling rudely battered by life, Victoria sat perfectly still, only her mind alive. Over the decades, she had been attacked from the left and the right, from the middle and sides, and from above and below. This latest oblique assault, if that proved to be what it was, meant that some individual or organization had struck at her covertly, from the shadows, and at the very same time His Holiness had launched a direct frontal assault by messaging an overtly threat of excommunication if she refused to abandon what the Vatican termed ‘the ongoing triage holocaust.’ Contemplating the simultaneous assaults evoked a faint shudder. By this time, she should have become numb, hardened to having one or more oppressive dark clouds constantly hanging over her weary head. But such, it seemed, was not the case.

After a while, she tried to indulge in a tasteless skimpy meal of thin vegetable soup and soya toast, and learned that she had no appetite. Pondering the latest pair of crises, she realized that while Broward’s investigation might effect a remedy for the quandary centered about her granddaughter’s pregnancy, hoping to evade the Holy Father’s indecent threat was something to be viewed in an entirely different light. Her thoughts changed direction more than once, spinning from one problem to the other, and then back again, eventually settling on the dilemma unwittingly posed by Monique’s reluctance to take advantage of modern, conventional infertility practices. One by one, she considered and discarded the suspects and options that came to mind; the former were practically without number, while the latter — aside from anxiously soliciting Broward’s aid — struck her as all but nonexistent.

In recent years, except for occasionally slipping out of the monolithic United Nations Tower to attend some off campus function in her official capacity, or reluctantly accepting a rare dinner invitation she felt it would be rude and improper to decline, she almost never ventured outside the building. There would be little purpose in going out, but in A.J. Broward’s view a major degree of risk. Almost everything worthwhile in her life was here — the meager creature comforts she enjoyed less with each passing day, the small chapel on the twelfth floor where UNDEP’s crotchety Jesuit chaplain, Monsignor Esterhazy, said Mass and heard confession — infrequently of late, she thought ruefully — and of course her work. She made a determined effort to thrust aside the immediate problems weighing heavily on her mind, neither of which it was possible to anything about at the moment.

A sudden onset of nostalgia spun her thoughts back to the early days in Argentina, when serious-minded, dedicated medical student Vicky Ortega, newly risen from the tumbled shacks and grinding poverty of a sprawling Buenos Aires barrio, had taken ill. Light-headed and feverish, she'd been forced to sit for hours in the local clinic's crowded waiting room, feeling not at all herself, and had been overwhelmed by her first glimpse of Dr. Enrique Duiño, the fledgling medical intern who walked into her life unannounced.

Love had blossomed in the blink of an eye, in the macrocosmic slice of eternity it had taken for the handsome young resident to order a nurse to check her vitals and have a swab taken from her infected throat. She had again languished in the waiting room until the lab results came back, and then nearly fainted when Enrique looked at her, smiled encouragement, bent to write a prescription and urged bed rest and a liquid diet.

Oh, she had pursued Enrique with diligence and zeal, no two ways about that. Weeks of premeditated, thoroughly orchestrated "chance" encounters had followed — an utterly frantic period during which her studies had gone neglected and she'd lived in perpetual terror of losing him.

She vividly pictured the miraculous afternoon when she'd led Enrique up a crooked, debris-strewn alley to the ramshackle lean-to her parents and brothers and sisters called home. Turning his hat brim nervously in his deft surgeon's fingers, Enrique had hemmed and hawed and done his best to utter polite small talk, working himself up, mustering his courage to the point of asking her father's permission to make her his bride. Later, honeymooning in Montevideo, she had mentioned the five children she'd prayed God would grant them.

And there, on their night of nights in a hotel room they could hardly afford, she had been shocked and dismayed by her bridegroom's response. Enrique had launched the heated lecture that was destined to change forever the direction their life together would take. It was then, on their wedding night, that she had learned what a truly dedicated futurist Dr. Enrique Duiño had become. A walking encyclopedia of futurist philosophy, he had apparently stuffed himself with demographic statistics, facts and figures pertaining to family planning, and additional reams of facts and figures concerning the fantastic rate at which unrestricted growth was working to double the world's population in an ever shortening span. Enrique had voiced a lengthy sermon about the looming extinction of vital species, the diminishment and eventual disappearance of fossil fuels, the fact that in his opinion global warming was not a theory, but a grim, menacing reality, only one of the numerous portents foretelling inevitable disaster. Enrique had concluded his lecture by insisting with uncharacteristic vehemence that they would have one child, and only one.

Vicky had at first been horrified, then resentful, and in the end fascinated.

Their first wedded decade had been an exciting hodgepodge. With a combined income netting next to nothing, they had struggled to make ends meet at the missionary hospital in back-country Bolivia, and then studied and practiced together in Madrid, in London, and later in the world's most populous beehive of humanity, Mexico City. The years in America had passed like a fast-forwarded video disc until, somewhat late in their married life, Hector Enrique Duiño had been born.

It had been then, she told herself, that they had entered the richest, most tranquil years. She and Enrique had practiced together in San Francisco, and later in New York. The boy had grown to manhood almost overnight, or so it seemed. And when Enrique's crusading articles in JAMA and similar publications won him selection as a delegate to the Third International

Population Convention in New Delhi, she had been so very proud, but at the same time regretful that her own practice would keep her at home in New York.

Curiously enough, although Enrique had been ultra-fastidious in caring for his patients, for whatever reason he'd been much less so when it came to his own health and wellbeing. The cholera epidemic had erupted with volcanic suddenness, raging across northern India with the speed of a wind-driven crown fire in a forest. Refusing to be flown home like the majority of other delegates, Enrique had elected to stay on in order to lend what help he could.

The first prognosis she had received from the jam-packed Delhi hospital had been cautiously favorable. Shortly thereafter, however, she had awakened in the night bathed in cold sweat, horrified by the pall cast by a ghastly premonition. All her prayers had gone unanswered. Her beloved had come home to her in a plain metal casket.

The ensuing decades of loneliness and endless labor melted into a blur — long-suffering, difficult years they had been, decades filled with struggle, major and minor triumphs, and bitter disappointments. Abandoning her career as a physician, she had done her utmost to carry on Enrique's work, had made a perpetual nuisance of herself by loudly and repetitiously pouring her late husband's vital message into deaf political ears.

But at last — not too late, perhaps, yet very late indeed, in the aftermath of the Mideast conflagration that all but consumed Iraq, Iran Pakistan and Israel — she and the other criers-in-the-wilderness had finally obtained a perfunctory hearing of sorts. In an atmosphere of overriding panic, frenetic finger pointing and intestine debate, with the threat of a universal martial uprising blowing through society with hurricane force winds, it seemed like only yesterday that UNDEP had been organized; its universally reviled Triage Committee had been formed shortly thereafter.

It seemed starkly incredible that almost thirty years had slipped from the calendar since her investiture? Nearly three decades! She had been, and was, the committee's first and only chairperson.

Dr. Duiño raised withered hands and inspected them closely. There were times when she imagined light could be seen streaming through the mottled parchment stretched over her brittle bones. Where was pretty little Vicky Ortega now? Submerged in the twist of exhausted flesh that was all that remained, she supposed.

She took up her bamboo cane and stumped to the dual-pane, bulletproof polycarbonate picture window of her suite. It was after midnight, and fairly clear. Looking up at the few stars visible through the haze illuminated by Greater New York's myriad lights, and stood at the window for some time, gazing out over the inky wash of the Atlantic into the depths of night.

* * *

Once he had finished giving Dr. Duiño the good news as well as the bad, A.J. Broward switched off the encrypted vidicom channel, opened the intercom and tried to tell his Gal Friday to hold all calls. A sheepish glance at the office wall clock informed him that his executive assistant, Leslie, had gone home an hour ago.

Aware that some individuals considered his cultivated fixed, thousand-meter stare capable of turning suspects to stone, he sat ramrod-straight at the desk in his silent, functional office and methodically tolled one set of circumstances after another, a first attempt to separate the fly specks from the pepper on various aspects of the case Victoria had unceremoniously dumped in his lap. He let his sharply analytical mind, rove freely, accepting this, discarding that, reserving an opinion on the other.

Deep within his innermost self, A.J. was severely torqued. As if too little were already on his agenda, the woman he admired above all others had tossed him a white hot potato in the form of an inferred conspiracy designed to undermine, and potentially decimate, the credibility and authority of the universally detested woman chairing UNDEP's Triage Committee. The motive behind such a conspiracy, if that was what it was, had to be political, not cultural. It rankled him to think that none too subtle chicanery on the part of someone, or an organization of someones, had been responsible for substituting placebos for the obsolescent birth-control tablets favored by Victoria's one and only grandchild. At least that much could be taken for granted, if at the moment very little else.

Or could it? What made investigating the critical, hypersensitive case especially difficult and touchy was the unquestioned need to keep a tight hermetic seal on its every aspect. No choice there; he himself would have to play super cop on this case. The ultra-sensitive circumstances surrounding what little was known would force him to head a personal investigation rather than assigning a team of premiere investigators. He would naturally need help, but if the slightest whisper of suspicion were to leak that Monique Delgado and her husband had dared to flaunt the law of the land . . . He refused to think about the potential consequences, not merely for Victoria, but for the Triage Committee and its works.

Over and over, redundantly, until his thoughts began to circularize, he asked himself the classic question. It was a question posed by every criminal investigator since time immemorial, a question that begged some form of tentative answer. It was a simple question, and simply stated; yet even the most nebulous, inconclusive answer sometimes amounted to the primary rationale for guiding an investigative procedure. Reflexively, the question and its tentative answer had more to do with solving criminal conundrums than volumes of testimony, not to mention figurative or actual bundles and bales of clues. If it did nothing else, the tentative answer more often than not aimed an investigator in the proper direction.

Who, he asked himself over and over again, stood to benefit most from the crime, if a crime had been committed? Who, to cite a classic example, stood first in line to inherit a large sum of money in the wake of a death under unusual, somewhat suspicious circumstances? Who, in another instance, had been overheard preaching vendetta before the sudden disappearance of a relative or close acquaintance? More to the point, who stood most to gain by foisting off phony birth-control medication on Dr. Duiño's granddaughter?

Unfortunately, each time the query formed in his mind a superficial answer rebounded of its own accord, making him restively shift his weight in the executive chair. Guilt could be tentatively be ascribed to any of literally scores of anti-triage organizations, cults, cliques, riot-minded protesters, or to one or more individuals among the billions who openly abhorred the "murderous old crone," and passionately detested anything and everything represented by global triage judgments. Reviled far and wide as the "Matriarch of Death," Dr. Duiño had long since become the vocal butt of public censure and condemnation. For decades she had willingly accepted the role of sacrificial lamb, taking upon her own narrow shoulders the blame for past and present triage "crimes against humanity."

Anyone, anywhere, he decided, uttering a muffled snort, could be a suspect. But, no; that was an exaggeration. He chided himself for muddy thinking. Victoria's overt public, political and ecclesiastical enemies numbered in the mere hundreds of thousands, not billions. All well and good, but didn't several hundred thousand potential perps suffice to make a staggeringly large list? He gave no thought to attempting to narrow the awesome, disordered data pool of discontents by the process of elimination. He decided to stick to knowns, and leave conjecture

for later, when at least a hint of where the case might lead should appear. Fact, not theory, was the keyword. He ran through the “knowns” one by one.

Fact: An indictable criminal offense had apparently been committed. Wait, strike “apparently.” It seemed safe to conclude that a criminal act had definitely been committed.

Fact: Someone, somewhere out among the hungry real-world multitudes had perpetrated the crime, possibly with zero animus toward the victims per se. Monique and her husband, a couple having proven themselves “mistrustful” of modern family planning techniques, had quite likely been used as a convenient fulcrum with which to leverage wreckage of the Triage Committee’s chairperson by casting extremely serious aspersions on the lawful and moral integrity of her immediate family members.

Before he pressed on, A.J. mulled this supposed “fact” at length, trying to satisfy himself that it was a valid though still tentative conclusion. His gut feeling was that designating Triage Committee as the ultimate target did seem valid, not merely an inference. Victoria had successfully evaded too many physical and political attacks of one kind or another for such a tangential assault to be anything other than what it did appear to be.

Fact: Monique Duiño Delgado had purchased the bogus meds at the same Brooklyn drugstore where she usually did business. He was distantly familiar with Gilbert’s Pharmacy, a pharmaceutical warehouse on one of the shopping mall levels of gargantuan Elysium arcology complex. The pharmacy therefore had to be a logical starting place, had to be where the first spadeful of information might be turned over.

Fact: According to Monique’s grandmother, the Delgados were within months of being officially sanctioned for parenthood by the Genetics Board. If that proved to be true — and his position allowed him to check and confirm the item of hearsay — no remotely logical explanation obtained for why the youthful parents-to-be would dare an illegal pregnancy.

In conclusion, what bothered him most was that the string of “facts” did nothing to rule out accidental conception, a “slip” categorically denied by Monique Delgado, and further corroborated by her grandmother. Nor could he think of any basis for disbelieving either grandmother or granddaughter. In light of the present crisis, deliberately telling an untruth struck him as inappropriate, not to mention being illogical. More than a decade of close professional association with Victoria made him aware that Monique had inherited a good many of the positive qualities endowed by her stern, unbending grandmother. From what he knew about the lives of both women, neither fit the dissimulation template in any way, shape, or form, especially in this instance. To be on the safe side, however, he intended to make a privileged vidicom call to a professional acquaintance on the Genetics Board who would be able to confirm or deny the Delgados’ current status regarding prospective legal parenthood.

A lanky, slightly stooped Afro-American gentleman of middle years, his acromegalic head proportionately too large for his rangy frame, Broward pushed back his chair and rose, frowning. Wandering to the glass wall, he stared down at the mist-layered waterway sixty floors below, letting his patented laser glare rove from one item of spotty river traffic to another.

The most perturbing fact he had unearthed was that he’d quickly run out of “facts” too early in the game for comfort. Only conjecture remained, and in that A.J. refused to indulge at the present time. Experience had taught him much too thoroughly how strewn with cul-de-sacs and pitfalls a conjectural path could be, and how dangerously far afield faulty guesswork could lead an investigation.

Pondering the problem, he restated the question of questions in his mind: Who stood most to gain? Who could eventually be the crime’s ultimate beneficiary?

The Church was the most obvious candidate, and perhaps a touch too obvious. Traditional arbiters of the world's ethical and moral behavior, the various religious sects in general, and the Roman Catholic Church in particular, never failed to express the most vocal, least tolerant opposition to triage judgments wherever and whenever they were rendered and implemented. By its very nature, global triage was anathema to all ecclesiastics, no matter to which faith they subscribed. Universally condemning Victoria and her committee, churchmen never failed to denounce the woman they had labeled — libeled, rather — as the “Matriarch of Death,” and often accused her and the committee of usurping the role of the Almighty.

Close on the heels of established religious orders and a multitude of orthodox, conservative and reform spinoffs, were dozens of odd, ritualistic, anti-orthodox cults scattered within and without the world's so-called clergy, not to mention the lunatic fringe, which he'd come to regard as more a solid border than a fringe. Next in order behind the cults and "hate-anything" cliques and gangs stood the “old time religion” fundamentalists and evangelicals, and beyond them flocks and herds and gaggles of out and out crazies. There were also roughly one hundred chiefs of state and their minions who collectively represented the world's elite “Haves,” as well as franchised and disenfranchised billions of “Have-nots.”

Magnificent deduction! he thought, awarding himself a dollop of self-reproach. Assigning potential blame in that haphazard manner narrowed the field of potential perps to damn near everyone on the planet. He grunted irritably, stroked his salt-and-pepper-speckled sideburns, rubbed his balding pate as if to stimulate thought.

Where O where to begin? An equally vital question, that. Gilbert's Pharmacy, the only target thus far on the horizon, was one of many, many shops, boutiques and emporia within Elysium's vast multi-level business/residential arcology complex. Since no other investigative options had appeared, the hunt would have to begin in the immense Brooklyn complex where the Delgados made their home. Victoria had assured him that Gilbert's was where Monique traded regularly, and definitely where she'd filled the prescription, purchased the placebos. Learning what the huge drug warehouse was all about, and from there hopefully picking up a trail on which to set up a viable backtrack procedure, seemed the likeliest bet. Truth be told, he thought unhappily, it seemed the only bet.

At which point A.J. gave up for the evening. He locked his office and took the executive express lift up to his suite. Late for dinner as usual, he washed up, lifted a lukewarm tray from the microwave oven and sat down at the dinette, where he listened stoically to his wife's complaint agenda while enjoying a lukewarm supper.

* * *

Arriving in his office early the following morning, A.J. left a message that he was not to be disturbed. He sat down, shoved aside the other work on his desk and isolated himself to think. After reviewing the previous evening's train of “facts,” he came to a decision, opened the intercom circuit. “Any calls, Leslie? Anything important I should know about?”

“Yes, Mr. Broward. The Secretary-General called from Geneva.”

“Sir James? When?”

“About a half-hour ago, sir. I told him you were occupied.”

“You do good work, Les; give yourself a raise. Sir James say what he wanted?”

“No, he said he'd call back sometime after lunch, our time. And, oh, yes; you asked me to remind you of the eleven o'clock budget meeting.”

“Got it nailed down, Leslie. If you’re not too busy to scratch right now, get on the horn and rustle up Auntie. Tell her to drop whatever she’s doing and come see me ASAP, or sooner if possible.”

“Yes, Mr. Broward. Right away.”

“And remember to shoo her inside the second she pops through the door, okay? Don’t let her cool her heels out there and start gabbing girl talk. Tell her she’s free to interrupt my siesta, thumb-twiddling session, whatever I happen to be doing at the time.”

His executive secretary chuckled. “I’ll track Millie down, Mr. Broward.”

“Thanks, Les.” A.J. stretched and yawned. A gentleman who detested computers with a passion that would have done credit to the Luddites, he disdained to even look at the blank face of the flat-panel display that was an integral part of his desk. Instead, he resumed an endless assault on the stacks of files, report hardcopies and documents prepared by investigators and staffers.

* * *

Frequently of late, insomnia had robbed Triage Deputy Chairperson Bennett Rook of his rest. Annoyed to see the lighted numerals on the bedside digital clock roll over to 03:27.41, he rolled over himself. Wide awake, he put his hands behind his head and lay perfectly still, staring up at the dark ceiling of his suite’s bedchamber.

After a time, he gave in to wakefulness. Reluctant to make waves that might awaken his paramour of the moment, he eased from the king-sized hydraulic mattress a few decimeters at a time, and glanced back at the lad’s dim figure. Despite being prone to goosey giggles, girlish pouts and an abysmal lack of intellectual depth, Arthur, the roguishly handsome youngster he’d plucked from servitude in UNDEP’s unskilled labor pool, had more often than not proven himself extraordinarily competent in bed.

In the dark parlor of his executive suite, Rook didn’t bother telling a table lamp to switch on. He decanted a dollop of brandy at the wet bar, sagged with it into an armchair, his mind churning through the previous day’s events.

Insufficient as it was in his opinion, he never ceased to wonder how the nine-member Triage Committee had managed to accomplish one-tenth as much as it did, not that the accomplishments were overly pleasing. Reveling in his reputation as a brilliant, self-satisfied ogre, he realized the cherished self-image he’d manufactured stemmed primarily from his dogged persistence in nay-saying the halfway measures and tentative judgments brought before the committee for discussion, particularly those subjected to an eventual vote. Nevertheless, he meant to continue obdurately butting his head against the armor-plated bastion of moralistic rectitude Dr. Duiño had erected, and forever crouched behind. With more than a decade as a committeeman under his belt, his more recent tenure as deputy chairperson had induced him to regard the commonplace, pedestrian atmosphere in which he was mired as a round-robin of frustration. His endless attempts to redirect triage judgments along more fruitful, more sanguine lines had been inevitably blunted, watered down, or a number of cases shelved due to Victoria’s insatiable addiction to archaic humane sensibility.

Yet the supreme miracle of miracles, he reflected, was that the committee had ever come into being in the first place. A lesser miracle, if by the slimmest of slim margins, was that it continued to function with even a semblance of fruitfulness. He had often tried to picture the agonized brouhahas, media confrontations, debates and screaming firefights that must have erupted in the beginning, when the controversial lady doctor and her supporters had managed to somehow, in some way, overcome truly monumental opposition pressure and win endorsement

from the U.N. hierarchy, although the final vote in the General Assembly had been touch and go. Fathered by necessity, though born by cesarean section after a lengthy, strife-ridden gestation, the U.N. Department of Environment and Population had itself come into being earlier, creating a maelstrom of controversy and opposition. To extend that analogy, its semi-legitimate offspring, Triage Committee, was still to this day considered afterbirth by churchmen, a host of government officials and private citizens, an opinion stridently echoed in the media and what remained of the print press bent upon presenting the “truth” to the world’s teeming billions.

The truth, Rook thought wryly, was that most of the world’s peoples considered the practice of global triage just plain offal.

The collective public outcry raised in every quarter of the globe had quickly changed into screams and accusations of genocide, but wholesale rather than retail, and compared to the infamous Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany during the previous century, and to a lesser degree to the “ethnic cleansing” conducted by other fascistic and tyrannical régimes. Church and State in concert had incited rioting among the masses of washed and unwashed alike until the figurative barbarian hordes had begun clamoring at the U.N. gates. Thunderous protest had been raised when the pristine triage judgment had been imposed upon woeful Somalia, and had then reverberated in truly deafening fashion when portions of Ethiopia and low-lying Bangladesh had become subsequent victims, although in the latter case flooding brought about by climate change had trumped the despicable human condition there. Headlines in the print press, in addition to damning diatribes uttered by one media pundit after another, had decried both actions as “perpetrating unconscionable genocide.”

Rook sipped brandy. With a clarity of insight common among insomniacs wakeful in the wee hours, his thoughts retrogressed. Discounting the historical lag between word and deed, his former position as merely one of eight committeemen and women had forced him to become intimately familiar with the seminal incidents leading up to UNDEP’s unnatural conception and birth. Sequential happenings during the previous century’s final decade, and the early third millennium, had been the primary catalysts driving the need to artificially inseminate and give life to UNDEP. When the tyrant of Iraq had elected to invade and “take back” what had once been a part of his nation — oil-rich Kuwait — America had stepped forward, supplying most armaments and military personnel in addition to small forces committed by loosely affiliated allies and the neighboring, war-threatened Saudi Arabian Kingdom, decimating the tyrant’s military arm, and temporarily subduing his aggressions. In the course of succeeding, drawn-out conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. had foisted itself off as a savior nation for “freeing” Iraq, and thus preserving one of the world’s largest remaining pools of fossil fuel, in addition to prosecuting the terrorists and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Earlier, NATO’s chancy air war against Bosnia, with U.N. peacekeeping troops sent into stricken Kosovo in order to purportedly aid Muslim refugees returning to their homeland, had been haltingly effective during roughly the same time frame when the little-remembered, unsuccessful U.S. military foray into Somalia occurred. Prior to those events, the rabid ethnic conflict in formerly socialist-unified Yugoslavia, not to mention assorted “brushfire wars” springing up in Latin America, Africa and other regions, had eventually inspired some very serious thinking on the part of certain very astute, powerful individuals in high places.

Working behind the scenes, those selfsame powerful individuals had held up to the world an infamous example of futility, the “do-gooder” relief mission in Somalia, where famine in the Horn of Africa conformed to a lame, tired scenario, underscoring the notion that any attempt to “rescue” the Somalians would yet again be a matter of treating the symptoms rather than

prescribing for the disease — overpopulation, coupled with a total breakdown of whatever government there had once been. Supplying relief to Somalia, as one of Rook's pragmatic, history-minded researchers had succinctly if crudely put it, amounted to a case of, "Shoveling shit against the tide."

Somalia, in company with ethnic cleansing taking place the Darfur region of Libya, had provided additional sparks that were duly propagandized as "proofs" of how utterly useless was the task of attempting to help those unable or unwilling to help themselves, especially the coastal Somalians bent upon perpetrating rampant piracy on the high seas as a livelihood. A prominent example of the fruitless helping-hand philosophy occurred after the armed, multinational "peace keeping" contingents withdrew from Mogadishu, and matters quickly settled back into a familiar rut, with anarchy the order of the day and no government other than factions led by various warlords guiding various martial clans, precisely the selfsame factions formerly guilty of raping, mutilating and murdering indiscriminately. The Somali populace had quickly reverted to a state of perpetual bloodshed and semi-starvation, its sole economy based upon piracy.

The massacre that had taken place between opposing tribes in Ruanda, not to mention similar slaughters in Timor, the Congo, Zimbabwe and other places, had also been held up as specific examples of how useless it was for the U.N., with only "resolutions" to use as enforcement weapons, to interfere in any way with the direction in which portions of the world's peoples were headed. Afterward, the scenario had grown rather murky, difficult to distinguish.

Rook was certain it had not been long after the terrorist attacks on the twin towers of the New York World Trade Center and the Pentagon, coming as they had in the wake of previous assaults upon U.S. embassies in Africa and an American warship, that serious thinking on the part of the astute, powerful individuals had jelled. During the succeeding decade, by means of deft, behind-the-scenes geopolitical maneuverings and manipulations, the least likely establishment imaginable — the United Nations Organization, renowned since its inception as a select sewing-circle of delegates devoted to international bickering, and little else — had mysteriously acquired vestiges of muscle and teeth. Most of a decade after that, in a turnabout shrouded in even deeper mystery, the manipulators guilty of equally obscure dealings had become the manipulated.

Slowly the succeeding generation of U.N. delegates to a newly resolute Security Council had cashed in on droves of ex-servicemen demobilized by the hundreds of thousands in the wake of the defunct, winding-down Mideast Conflict, other brushfire wars, battles over drug trafficking and minor insurrections, and the nucleus of an International Peacekeeping Force had been formed. Marshaled and loosely modeled on France's famed *Légion d'Étrangère*, this shadow force was comprised of nationals from every ethnic strain and religious creed, with only the officer corps legitimate members of the U.N. Reassembled and redeployed, newborn U.N. Peacekeeping Forces had self-replicated into division after division of IPF shock troops that were routinely rotated from station to station in strategic corners of the globe, with each brigade, assault group and air wing prepared to instantly put down by force of arms the inception of any nationalistic military aggression, incipient revolution, gross violation of the UN's stringent environmental standards, and later any and all anti-triage insurrections. In other words, IPF forces had been positioned in readiness to jump in and smother any and all varieties of minor conflict that might arise, and thus prevent them from ever growing into major conflagrations.

And as an adjunct to IPF deployment — more an afterthought, Rook knew, than a pre-planned bureaucratic decision — the U.N. Department of Environment and Population had been hastily organized as an additional plank of the U.N. infrastructure, with a mandate to await the

adjudication of non-conformance with lawfully established norms by the Security Council, and if necessary to quickly react by directing the IPF "quasi-world government" to enforce the drafting, passage, and amendment of environmental legislation, and sometime later to practice dynamic population control by means of its never-to-be-sufficiently-damned Triage Committee.

But in the end, thought Rook darkly, triage as it was amounted to only an interim solution. Although the U.N. had put its finger in the dike, mounting population pressure building behind it had weakened the structure. Triage judgments and implementations had been insufficient then, but to his way of thinking were insufficient now, under Dr. Duiño's benign direction, and would never be enough unless a majority of other committee members could be made to see the light. Caveats citing runaway overpopulation as the root of the world's ills had been bruited about, discussed, cussed, understood and misconstrued for the better part of a century and a half. But while correcting the overpopulation problem may have been accepted intellectually, the concept had never been actually digested in a practical sense, nor had the "interim solution" been acted upon to the lengths he himself believed mandatory. In many respects, America had been — still was in some ways — the principal culprit. It had been ridiculously easy for self-righteous Americans to condemn "underdeveloped" and "emerging" nations for harboring more people than could be housed, fed, clothed, afforded medical treatment, or educated. But certainly a stern indictment such as that could not possibly be applicable to denizens of the Land of the Free and the Brave.

The "American Dream" had been kept alive and well, thank you very much, by TTCB — the popular shorthand for "those twentieth century bastards" who had crusaded to carry out their collective intention to keep things exactly as they were. Europeans had evidenced slightly better attitudes and actions, though not by an appreciable degree. The most difficult exercise ever invented, Rook reminded himself, was turning one's accusatory forefinger around and aiming it at one's own breastbone.

He sleepily drained the brandy snifter, laid his head back against the cushions and yawned.

When Arthur woke not long after daybreak, he found his paramour and benefactor slumped crookedly in an armchair, sound asleep.

Four

One hundred and ninety kilometers west of Porto Velho, Senhor Queirós spotted the approaching boat in the distance. He ordered his driver to pull the electric limousine to the side of the road and wait, warning him to stay inside the limo, doors locked, and keep a sharp lookout for intruders. One never knew when a band of starving locals might wander out of what remained of the *selva*, catch a scent of loot and do great mischief. Incidents of kidnapping and cannibalism were not unknown among the surviving denizens.

Queirós felt it his official duty to meet the returning visitors from North America. Swearing under his breath at the sea of silt and muck bordering the river in all directions, he gingerly made his way toward the decrepit wooden jetty, where a number of planks had been chopped away by the locals for use as firewood, a desecration that made walking perilous on the rickety pier.

In the boat, a quartet of armed Brazilian soldiers were clad in yellow ponchos against the intermittent rain. They had been assigned to guide and guard the experts from a major Pennsylvania pharmaceutical conglomerate. The official watched eagerly as the boat turned toward the jetty.

The older of the two scientists looked up, noticed the Brazilian official standing on the jetty, and waved. Queirós forced a smile and returned the gesture. During the preliminary negotiations, he had made up his mind to deal only with the graybeard, not his aide, a snot-nosed young genetic engineer who had the look and manner of a juvenile *demônio*; worse, his attempt to speak Portuguese had been enough to encourage blasphemy in the saintliest of men.

A wide fan of ripples in the heavily silted brown water laved the pilings as the boat gently bumped alongside the jetty. “Good afternoon,” greeted Queirós, reduced to speaking heavily accented English because the occasion demanded it. “Ready to harvest, are we, gentlemen?”

The young genetic engineer stepped up on the planking, careful about where he put his feet. “Harvest what?” he said, accompanying the snide response with a leer.

Senhor Queirós held his temper, something not easy thing for a member of the Chamber of Deputies designated to speak for the Brazilian government here in the field. Feeling a mild reproof in order, he said with a hint of joviality, “Surely you exaggerate, sir. Conditions may not be far from ideal, but they cannot be that bad. Your marketing manager spoke of —”

“Couldn’t be a whole lot badder,” quipped the geneticist, making a dramatic, long-armed sweep of the all but denuded horizon. The surrounding mud desert, once among the richest sections of Amazonia’s rain forest, was now a sea of devastation, tree stumps and muck. “What’s left to harvest out there,” he added, oozing sarcasm, “is zilch.”

Further irked by the other’s use of an unfamiliar term, Queirós watched in impatient silence as a soldier bent to tie off the boat’s painter.

The senior scientist cut his colleague a stern, reproachful look, stiffly stepped out of the boat and climbed a ladder to the jetty. “Senhor Queirós,” he said in less than fluent Portuguese, “our marketing associates assumed . . .” Pausing, obviously uncomfortable with what he had to say, he switched to English. “Let me put it this way, sir. Most of our products involve manipulating existing genetic material, but as you must surely be aware the material itself is the end-product of natural selection — evolution and coevolution — over a period of thousands and thousands if not millions of years. Synthesizing genetic material is impossible; it cannot be done in the laboratory. The tragedy we see here is . . . I deeply regret having to have to tell you that Donald, our geneticist, may not be diplomatic but he said it all. There is next to nothing left in this region to . . . harvest.”

“But,” protested the official, “the thriving research and export business Brazil has enjoyed for decades cannot simply be dismissed due to a lack of certain . . . elements.”

“Foliage has been burned or clear-cut throughout the area,” said the graybeard. “To our mutual misfortune, the wildlife has disappeared along with the trees and other vegetation. In addition to subsidizing extensive logging, running livestock, farming, mining and similar commercial ventures, your government has persisted in encouraging landless people to settle here, a course I admit was perfectly understandable in one respect. But the settlers who stripped the land, planted crops and so forth — with marginal success, I’m afraid — have exhausted it. The Amazon Basin is deluged with eighty or ninety inches of annual rainfall, but once the area was deforested the thin topsoil — deficient to begin with, since most nutrients were in the vegetation — has washed away in the torrential rains. Biodiversity has all but disappeared.”

“Bio . . . ?” Queirós used a kerchief to mop the perspiration beading his brow. The sun had reappeared, turning the mud flats into a steaming inferno misted by rising vapor. “Your pardon, Senhor. The term in your language is unfamiliar.”

“Sorry, sir. It’s a difficult subject to explain in lay terms. Biodiversity is best described as, uh . . . Call it the practically infinite variety and multiplicity of species — plants, animals,

microscopic organisms, so on and so forth. At one time biodiversity existed here in superabundance, and many innovative pharmaceutical products were born here in the, uh, selva. Long ago, sophisticated drugs — penicillin is an excellent example — as well as varieties of other so-called wonder drugs originated here and came into widespread medical usage. The rain forest was once a natural laboratory, a treasure trove of genetic material.”

The senior scientist paused to wipe away rivulets of perspiration. “It gives me no pleasure to tell you that . . . What I mean to say is, in truth nothing remains that could be remotely considered harvestable.”

Aghast, Senhor Queirós licked his lips.

The senior scientist had meant to let the official down as easily as possible; he now realized there was simply no way to do so. “Your government,” he told the other, “was warned time and again of the dire consequences certain to result from deforesting major portions of Amazonia. Our company’s president and chief scientist visited the Palace of the Dawn eighteen months ago. They explained in detail, for at least the fourth or fifth time, how continuing to open the Amazon frontier to settlement, unfortunately a primary goal of the Brazilian government for some time, could end up doing nothing less than inviting a major, large-scale disaster as far as pharmaceuticals are concerned.”

Utterly appalled, the official felt queasy. It would be his duty to assume the role of the messenger who brought bad news. He would be forced to explain to his peers how the flow of badly needed new dollars from one of North America’s largest pharmaceutical enterprises would abruptly cease, tidings certain to ensure a grim reception in Brasilia. “But there must be some solution,” he pleaded. “Are you saying . . . ? What I mean is, are you gentlemen able to recommend a means of retrieving what has been lost?”

The geneticist snorted. “Sure,” he said, “leave it be for a few thousand years, and maybe it will begin to —”

“Don, that will do!” The senior scientist cut short his colleague’s sarcastic rejoinder. “I’m afraid nothing can be done, Senhor Queirós.”

“N-nothing . . . ?” faltered the other.

“No one could be more regretful than I am. You must understand that it is our loss as well as Brazil’s.”

Leading the visitors across the mud toward the waiting limo, Queirós felt rubber-legged and weak, as if he might faint.

* * *

Mildred Forchet, a middle-aged Afro-American lady whose sunny disposition never dimmed, owned a mouthful of perfect teeth that complemented to her winsome smile. Millie loved her nickname, “Auntie,” bestowed years earlier by a law enforcement colleague who appreciated her convivial, outgoing manner, not to mention her inborn knack for charming and disarming the most peckish stranger. Auntie went out of her way to display a strong liking for the world in general, and everyone in it, by offering all of those with whom she came in contact an ivory-laden smile that would have melted butter, had butter been an available commodity. Most times, she had been gratified to learn how much the world appreciated her good nature, and more often than not reciprocated in kind.

Responding to the hurry-up vidicom summons from Broward’s executive assistant, she swept into the antechamber beaming her patented, radiant smile. “Top of the mornin’ to you, Leslie. What’s got the bossman so riled up all of a sudden?”

Leslie held a warning finger to her lips, motioned for Auntie to go right in.

“Goodness gracious! Don’t tell me he’s reached the frothing-at-the-mouth stage this early in the day?”

Leslie nodded mutely.

A.J. Broward greeted his star investigator by thrusting aside the report was reading. Having long since learned to give his full attention to the star investigator on UNDEP’s payroll, he never ceased to marvel at Millie Forchet’s uncanny sleuthing ability. She was one of very few individuals he himself trusted “implicitly,” to borrow Dr. Duiño’s overused term. It had taken only a short time during the course of an earlier, difficult case, to recognize the fact that beneath her puppy-friendly, warm exterior lurked a shrewd, subterranean talent for ferreting information from suspects and non-suspects alike.

“Have a seat, Detective Forchet.” Without preamble, A.J. explained how and why, thus far, no one other than he himself and the principals directly involved knew of what might be a conspiracy aimed at undermining Dr. Duiño, and through her bring about the potential demise of Triage Committee and its works. He bluntly informed her that she would have to be the sole investigator to whom he dared divulge what little details were known. He instructed her to forthwith drop whatever else she was doing and concentrate on the extremely important case, and went on to describe what had transpired in a few words, and gave her explicit direction concerning what he wanted her to do first.

Auntie nodded. Tongue in cheek, she said, “So the chase kicks off in the wondrous garden spot called Brooklyn.”

“Could be worse,” remarked A.J. “Would you rather it was the Bronx?”

A mock shudder. “I’ll settle for Brooklyn. So I’m to dig dirt from under the fingernails of the pill-rollers over thataway. Okay, a start is a start. On my way, unless there’s something else.”

“Detective Forchet, make double certain you keep me up to speed on this one, .”

“Right you are. If you don’t hear from me in two or three days, send out a posse.”

His fixed stare in full force, Broward gestured impatiently toward the door.

* * *

Monique Delgado and her husband lived in a densely populated section of the borough someone with less than a vivid imagination, and a lack of up-to-date geographical knowledge, had dubbed “Little Calcutta.” Street-wise to the nth degree, a worn canvas shopping bag dangled from Auntie’s braceleted wrist. Oozing various flavors of bonhomie, she deftly fended off the scattered panhandlers, grifters and drifters trolling the cracked and pitted sidewalk in search of a victim.

Edging around a curbside mountain of trash waiting patiently to be collected, she wrinkled her generous nose. “Pee-e-e-yuu!” she said to an assortment of scavengers poking through the mess. “You kids root out any goodies in that stinky pile, let me know, hear?”

One of the urchins scrabbling through the refuse in search of anything edible, salable or trade-able paused long enough to award her a quizzical once over.

Auntie’s sunburst smile washed over a pair of hulking uniforms posted outside Elysium’s northern entrance to shoo away the worst undesirables. She was rewarded with a grudging, “Sistuh,” from the smaller of the two apes; the other guard glanced suspiciously at her empty shopping bag, blinked and looked away.

Auntie mounted the short flight of broad-risened stone steps, lifting her eyes to the building’s soaring facade, marveling at enormity of its sheer expanse.

Visionary Turinese architect Paolo Soleri, believed he’d been born a century or more ahead of his time. A pioneer environmentalist as well as an architect, he deserved both titles for

conceiving the notion that cities were meant to occupy the least possible land area, while at the same time affording the most comfortable volume of living space to the greatest number of residents. Soleri had melded the words architecture and ecology, fusing them into the term arcology, a label that described his grandiose concept — an immense, vertical “city” comprised of residential and industrial sections, emporia, theaters, workshops, studios, roof gardens, and what have you. The extravagant arcology complexes depicted in Soleri’s architectural renderings had been intended to free the surrounding countryside for recreational and agricultural development, but the concept had not been taken seriously by developers and builders until cancerous overpopulation had become a major driving force, causing many of them to change their minds.

Elysium’s monumental structure, erected with Soleri’s utopian objective in mind, had at first been modeled on his renderings, but as his conception evolved into a real-world concept, the complex had strayed from Soleri’s ideal visualization. Unfortunately, after adjacent sectors of the blighted borough had been razed in accordance with the developer’s farsighted open space concept, there had been a slip between the lip and the cup. Odious slums co-existed within as well as without Elysium. Boutiques, chic emporia and luxurious living quarters occupied cheek-by-jowl square footage with squalid apartments and government subsidized housing units featuring cubicles rather than rooms.

Noting the extent to which acid rain had etched the complex’s towering façade, Auntie pushed through a squeaky revolving door into the vast street-level north lobby, where a crude, hand-lettered sign informed her that the wide escalator was down for repairs. The faded sign looked older than the inert escalator.

Stumping down a flight of graffiti-desecrated stairs, she had to step around and over outstretched arms, legs and bundles clutched by a rag-tag collection of homeless people huddled there for shelter. Undaunted, she reached the lower mall level, where a second sign informed her that the central slideway was also out of commission. Resigned to a long hike, she joined the straggle of early shoppers, wanderers and idlers, negotiating on foot almost two kilometers of worn tile paving.

Strolling into Gilbert’s Pharmacy six minutes before ten, she hoped it would turn out to be a relatively slow hour of morning. Glad to find her hope fulfilled, she circulated through the expansive drug warehouse aimlessly, roving up one aisle and down the next, all the while covertly reconnoitering a quartet of clerks lolling behind four of a dozen or more check-out counters. Many shelves were bare, stocked with not much of anything except brand-name unguents, lotions, cure-alls with faded labels, and suchlike. Toothpaste, astringent mouthwash and personal hygiene products competed for the attention of customers with numerous over-the-counter birth-control devices and medications in plentiful supply for an excellent reason: infertility medications for women and men were heavily subsidized by the federal government, and all but free for the taking.

Auntie pondered, gnawing her lower lip. A.J. had described the probable target as a slender black saleswoman. Trouble was, all four idling clerks fit that general template. Arbitrarily settling on a thin, gum-chewing girl slouched behind the counter at the nearest check-out station, she sidled over.

“Honey Bun,” greeted Auntie in her warmest contralto, “how come there ain’t none of that there anti-bio . . . None of the cream you smear on cuts and scratches on any of the shelves?”

The sleepy-eyed girl came erect a few millimeters; her jaws stopped working. “Say what?”

“That cream they make for curing cuts ‘n scrapes, you know.”

“Antibiotic salve?”

“Uh-huh, sounds like what I need. Used t’buy it here regular. Now I can’t find none on any shelf. What’s a person to do if she’s needful of that kind of salve?”

“Even if there was some,” confided the clerk, “over-the-counter meds are, you know, nothing much to write home about. Best bet’d be for you to stop by the level six clinic here in Lee-shum, see if maybe you can talk a nurse practitioner into writing you a prescription. That way you won’t have to mess with ready-made ointment. If there’s any to be had, you’ll get, you know, the real thing.”

“Pshaw, the clinic!” Although her exclamation was laced with sarcasm, Auntie’s sunny smile continued to light the pharmacy. “Tried to see a ear, nose ‘n throat doc up there not long ago. Folks starve to death in that line, ‘cept the lucky ones who turn up their toes and get themselves carted away. The line stretches twice round the whole blamed tier.”

“Yeah, it’s a hassle.” A rueful nod. “My big sis she, you know, works there in the clinic.”

“That a fact? Doin’ what?”

“Eve’s a nurse-trainee.”

“Nursing, uh-huh. Now there’s a real thankless job.”

“And then some, but the pay’s good.”

“When do you s’pose I could come back here to Gilberts and glom on to some of that healin’ cream?”

The girl lifted her hands, palms upward, a gesture of helplessness. “Maybe next week, next month. Maybe never. Mr. Tackett told me lots of meds and other stuff come from the jungles down in South America. But he also said there ain’t much left in the way of jungles, so . . .” The clerk’s shrug was eloquent.

Auntie clucked in feigned dismay. “Now, don’t that beat all! You mean the salves and creams that help healin’ are made from bugs, plants and whatnot?”

“Yeah. According to Mr. Tackett, fungus, different kinds of molds, plants and like that, the stuff that once grew wild down there.”

When a timid voice behind her said, “Excuse, please,” Auntie stepped aside and waited for the clerk to ring up a bottle of mouthwash and make change. The elderly Asian purchaser hobbled away aided by her cane.

Auntie said plaintively, “Honey Bun, you mentioned some fella’s name. Can we maybe ask your mister . . . darn! Forgot it already.”

“Mr. Tackett . . . ?”

“Yeah, sounds like that was it. Who’s he, anyhow?”

“Assistant pharmacy manager.”

“Okay, he ought to be able t’come up with some answers. Can we maybe ask him if he knows somewhere a poor soul like me can buy anti-whatchamacallit cream?”

“Don’t you wish,” the clerk told her. “Tackett’s a lucky pup; been on vacation for weeks now. He and his, you know, squeeze, took the airboat down to some fancy resort in Mexico.”

“Well, lah-de-dah!” Auntie pretended disgust at the notion of someone well off enough to traipse down to the Mexican Riviera for fun time. “I hear tell the hoity-toity hotels down thataway charge an arm, a leg, a foot ‘n a hand for one night of campin’ out with roaches ‘n skeeters and like that.”

The young woman grinned around her chewing gum. “Yeah, takes big bucks. Mr. Tackett, he’s a pretty decent guy. Kinda show-offy now ‘n then, but . . .”

“Knows what he’s talkin’ about, does he?”

“Oh, that’s for sure,” said the clerk. “Year or two ago he went and got a college degree in pharmacology. He likes to, you know, lord it over some of us. Fancies himself a ladies’ man and hits hard on some of the girls who work here, but he’s always been fairly nice me.”

“Mexico. Think of that, would you! Puttin’ teentsy pills in small, expensive bottles must pay something terrific.”

Puzzlement clouded the salesgirl’s dark eyes. “Wouldn’t know about that. You want, you can ask Mr. Singh where some antibiotic salve can be got. Singh’s, you know, the pharmacy manager. He might be able to tell you of someplace where you’re liable to find something better than over-the-counter stuff. Want me to call him? He’s working in back.”

Auntie allowed a heartfelt sigh to escape her. Awarding the clerk a reprise of her sunburst smile, she wearily hefted the empty shopping bag. “Naw, don’t bother, Honey Bun. Got to be someplace else right quick now. Maybe I’ll sashay over next week, see what your Mr., uh, Whatzisname has to say if he’s back from Mexico by then?”

“Mr Tackett . . ? I expect so.”

“Thanks loads, Honey Bun.”

“Naveaniceday.” The clerk’s gum-chewing resumed.

* * *

U.N. Peacekeeping Forces Major Olaf Skaar was troubled, though whatever it was that bothered him was unsubstantiated. A general uneasiness had been gnawing at the limbic edges of his mind since early morning. From time to time, he seemed to feel a cool breeze on the nape of his neck and tried, but couldn’t seem to pin down a source of his disquiet, merely a vague suspicion that all was not right. More than once he had discovered that his right hand had subconsciously slipped down to rest on the butt of his holstered sidearm.

A veteran officer who had served during a pair of anti-triage insurrections, the major searched Alexandria’s humid, dusty Saad Zaghlul Square item by item, his gaze wandering past the central grassy area where the statesman’s statue reared, and beyond to the half-finished seawall, an aborted construction project designed to hold back the rising level of the Mediterranean, a result of global climate change. No matter where he looked, he failed to locate a specific cause for his subliminal anxiety, yet something in the peaceful scene continued to nibble at the edges of his consciousness. It was a growing, nagging sense of disquiet, an apprehensive feeling he especially resented because whatever was bothering him lacked form and substance. What he liked even less was that his jumpiness was beginning to infect the men under his command, serving to double his concern as well as his resentment.

Major Skaar forced himself to stop pacing back and forth in front of the command post. He planted his combat boots, faced the square in an outwardly nonchalant stance, hands on hips, a casual attempt to appear relaxed, confident. A native of Norway’s Kristiansund, he had successfully commanded troops during both prior triage interdictions, experiences endowing him with a sixth sense, an subliminal awareness of the lightning rapidity with which an aggregation of skeletal men, women and starving children could transform itself into a sea of people raging inwardly with a collective mob mentality who had absolutely nothing to lose.

At this stage of the previous interdictions, most about-to-become-victims of triage implementation had succumbed to the Wildebeest Syndrome, and were complacently awaiting release from their misery at one or another of the euthanasia stations. Yet even so, a single spark was all that would have been needed — the rallying cry of a lone fanatic, the sound of a single

Muslim woman's ululating wail — and mass hysteria would instantly ignite a formerly docile crowd, turning it into a ravening beast.

The major pivoted slowly left and right. He took his time scanning every visible aspect of the square, trying his best to discover what the hell it was that disturbed him. Something out of sight was definitely there, something out of place and dangerous, something that lurked behind the scene, something threatening . . .

Minutes later the question answered itself, and the answer struck Major Skaar like a physical blow. Far too few Alexandrians could be seen wandering about the square. Now, in late morning, thousands of condemned men, women and children should have been congregating, queuing up before the euthanasia stations, and either grieving quietly among themselves, or praying as they readied themselves to accept the inevitable.

The major was preparing to summon a sergeant-major, have a quiet, cautionary word with him, when the faint sound of distant singing reached him. Concerted voices raised in song drew nearer. Skaar wasted no time alerting his command.

They flooded into the square from three sides, singing a Coptic hymn in unison, with the robed Patriarch of Alexandria marching proudly in the van, leading the contingent.

"We lock and load, sir?" asked the sergeant-major.

"Not yet. Stand fast, wait for my command."

The singing ceased abruptly, giving way to the deafening ululation peculiar to Arabs and other Muslim peoples that rolled across the square in a concerted, high-pitched wail. From the opposite direction, Coptic Christians and Muslims alike surged into the square, having apparently joined forces in a united, an all-out anti-triage revolt.

The major whirled and sprinted toward the communications tent just as the first barrage of rocks pelted his troops. Sporadic automatic weapons fire erupted spontaneously.

A broken chunk of masonry from the second fusillade of bricks and rocks caught Skaar on the shoulder, half-paralyzing his arm. A larger missile struck him at the base of the skull, and a third hit him behind the ear. The world went dark as he went down, bleeding.

The mob did not let him rise again.

* * *

"Good morning, Doctor." Victoria came forward, smiling, and gave her hand to UNDEP Surgeon General Levi Melnick. "Thank you for coming on such short notice."

"A very good day to you, Doctor." Levi clasped her arthritic fingers gently; his answering smile made the little spade beard he affected dance merrily. Melnick allowed himself to be led to a guest chair, all the while making a candid appraisal of the aged woman. "Harold told me it was urgent, so urgently I came. But you had your quarterly checkup weeks ago, which makes me believe it isn't that type of urgency. Besides, you look remarkably fit. Hey! All of us should look so fit."

"Remarkably fit," she amended, "for someone closing out her ninth decade." Levi, she thought, would always be Levi.

Genial and salty, seldom out of character, Dr. Melnick treated small talk like a foreign tongue. He never failed to speak directly to the matter at hand, invariably with bluntness verging on rudeness. Not once, but on certain occasions he had gone out on a limb to prove himself a trustworthy confidant.

"Ninety, schminty!" he said, dismissing the concept of old age. "The alternative to enduring one's advancing years, my dear, is pluperfectly rotten. Keep that solemn truth in mind always. Listen, not to hurry you but at eleven I'm due to chair a dishwater-dull meeting with a

gaggle of visiting epidemiology know-it-alls. What can I do for you that can be done chop-chop, posthaste, maybe even sooner?”

Victoria fingered the silver crucifix pendant at her throat. She began by mentioning the threat of excommunication delivered personally by Cardinal Freneaux.

“Good, glad to hear it!” Melnick’s spade beard bobbed an emphatic positive. “If the pious Roman goniffs kick you out, you’re more than welcome to join my lodge. Rabbi Jacobowski will welcome you with open arms, but take my advice and stay clear of those open arms. I warn you, it won’t be easy; that wise old fart has an eye for the ladies, believe me.”

Victoria suppressed a chuckle. “Sorry to ignore your kind invitation, Levi. I’m too decrepit and set in my ways to change lodges.” Knowing Melnick would take it as an affront if she were to pledge him to secrecy, she delved into what she herself was certain amounted to a plot involving her granddaughter.

“Black-hearted bastards!” was the surgeon general’s scathing indictment. His agile mind at work, he rubbed his jawline, tugged his little beard. “A sour pickle this is if I ever tasted one,” he finally said. “Worse, it could get a damsight more sour pretty fast. If word were leaked to your dear friends in the Catholic media, not to mention the sensation mongering goyim, they’d have a field day spreading the bad tidings.”

“I know,” said Victoria. “That inspired notion apparently occurred to whoever’s behind it. What I hope you’ll agree to do for me . . .” She paused. “I realize what a terrible imposition it is, Levi, but can you bring yourself to arrange a quiet screening of Monique’s and Stewart’s genome charts? We should learn now, early in the first trimester, if it’s wise to let her bring the fetus to term.”

Dr. Melnick pondered. In order to obtain Genetics Board approval, prospective parents were obliged to prove a hoped-for child would be free of recessive, or occasionally dominant, characteristics liable to induce mongoloidism, epilepsy, autism or a number of other defects rooted in the genome pool. He agreed readily. “Surely, surely; I’ll do it first thing. Why not? It’s the proper step, very sensible, Victoria.” Wagging his head angrily, he added, “Now listen to me, and take what I say to heart. Whoever owns the brass balls to pull a tomato-in-the-face surprise like this has to be nailed, punished. Any notion who might be behind it?”

“No, not yet. A.J.’s hard at work on it. He has . . .” She broke off when the intercom chimed. “Pardon me, Levi.” Depressing a button, she said irritably, “Harold, I asked you to hold my calls.”

“Mr. Rook on channel twelve, Dr. Duiño. I told him you were occupied, but he insisted it was imperative to speak to you at once.”

“I see. Please excuse me a few seconds more, Levi.” She opened the vidicom channel. “What is it, Bennett?”

“Egypt,” said the deputy chairperson even before his stern image descrambled in the display. “A mob overran several companies of interdiction troops in Alexandria, then attacked and destroyed the euthanasia stations. Widespread anti-triage rioting is apparently brewing all over the Delta, and adjacent sectors of northern Egypt. Geneva’s sending in an additional airborne division to backup boots already on the ground. I thought you’d want to know ASAP.”

“Certainly. Thank you, Bennett. I’ll be free in a few minutes. Will you please convene an emergency committee session?”

“As you wish, at once.”

She switched off the intercom, turned to meet Melnick’s sharp-eyed gaze.

Having no desire to let Rook know of his presence, the surgeon general had stepped aside, out of range of the vidicom terminal's eye, listening to the caller's modulated baritone without seeing his image, or being seen. His countenance dour, Melnick dipped his head knowingly toward the vidicom terminal. "Problems, problems — big problems piled atop even bigger problems. Tell me something on the *emmis*, Victoria. What does that shitheel deputy of yours accomplish besides giving your ulcers ulcers?"

Victoria did not respond; professionalism did not permit her to discuss the failings of an associate. She took up her bamboo cane, stumped to mid-office. "I must go to work now, Levi, and you have your meeting. We'll finish our conversation later. You did agree to grant my favor?"

"Need you ask? I could never bring myself to do less, and you know it. Have your granddaughter and her randy spouse drop by the infirmary at their convenience. Not the medicenter, mind you, my office at the infirmary."

"It's a favor I won't forget, Levi."

"Favor, schmavor! What the hell are friends for . . . ?"

* * *

Admiral Sir James Schuyler-Browne, acutely conscious of his prestigious post as U.N. secretary-general, occasionally stooped to mingle with assorted relatives and a select coterie of close friends; in those instances, it was his habit to downplay his role as one of the most powerful individuals on the planet. A former Royal Navy strategist par excellence, Sir James publicly displayed a brand of standoffish reserve exceeded by only the royals themselves. Among very few exceptions to that empyrean attitude, first and foremost was the manner he adopted when dealing with a gentleman whose capabilities and dedication he held in the highest possible esteem, UNDEP Security Director A.J. Broward.

True to his word, Sir James called back via the secure satellite link at two o'clock, Greater New York time, late evening in Geneva. Descrambled and encrypted circuitry got their acts together electronically, and the aging admiral's image appeared. "Good afternoon, Augustus."

"Hullo, Sir Jim," were Broward's first words. "How're things across the pond?"

"Hectic," admitted the admiral. "Blizzardy at sunset; one could see perhaps a half-mile across the lake. Avalanche frights have villagers ducking for cover in every Alpine valley."

"Burr-r-r!" A.J. hugged himself, shivered theatrically. "Just hearing about it gives me the chills."

"In that event," said Sir James on a more serious note, "the reason I've rung you up should freeze you into a solid cube of ice. As you may have heard, we make it a habit over here to keep both ears to the ground at all times. In light of that brave statement, I urge you to treat the following caveat with utmost discretion. The committee's latest triage judgment, not to mention what it implies, has stirred the very devil of a hornet's nest. To our mutual misfortune, I'm afraid these confounded hornets are the size of condors."

"We heard about the turmoil in Egypt hours ago."

"Um, yes. The anti-triage uprising is widespread, nasty; it's gathering steam all across the region. Marshal Gareth's airborne troops are well-trained, however, and very experienced. I'm sure the fracas can be handled in straightforward fashion. It's goings-on in other regions of the globe that are of major concern at the moment."

Broward frowned. "Oh . . . ?"

“Aided and abetted by a continuous fusillade of Vatican bombast,” continued the admiral, “which of course is instantly parroted by what remains of the ecclesiastic press and tabloid media, what were once distant rumbles have swelled into deafening rolls of thunder. Pressure has mounted phenomenally, faster than one would have thought possible. Enormous amounts of sympathy, empathy, et cetera, et al, are being trumpeted loudly in all quarters, targeted on the woeful Coptic Christian minority in what remains of the, er . . . Land of the Pharaohs.”

“Can’t say it comes as a surprise,” remarked A.J.

“Nor I, nor I,” concurred Sir James. “Except in this instance the Vatican seems bent upon exercising drastically underhanded measures. Several hours ago, His Holiness quietly issued an encyclical to every bishop in the Holy See.”

Broward did not have to guess the content. “Urging that Victoria be replaced.”

“Quite, although the term ‘urging’ is somewhat pale.” Biting his words short, Admiral Schuyler-Browne said, “Demanding that Victoria immediately be dismissed and the committee disbanded would be much more accurate. It’s put our people into something of a dither.”

“We’ve seen all this before, Sir Jim.”

“A true statement, Augustus — not once or twice, but over and over and again. Yet never until now have such high-handed demands blossomed into a major volcanic eruption of this magnitude, or severity; nor have the ripples spread quite so far quite so quickly. The encyclical in question, you see, was issued covertly, screened from the eyes of the laity. It includes a blow delivered decidedly below the belt.”

A.J. didn’t like the sound of that. “How so?”

“A dash of out-and-out blackmail accompanies the usual anti-triage jeremiads we are accustomed to hearing. His Holiness has instituted formal procedures intended to culminate in Victoria’s excommunication.”

“Her wha-a-t . . . ?”

“Tut, Augustus,” the admiral said, “your reaction is totally understandable. I was extremely reluctant to believe the authenticity of this latest Vatican sword thrust, mainly because of former Vatican threats to do precisely what this one insists will be done. Our people in Rome and elsewhere had difficulty confirming it’s validity, but I’m sad to relate that it appears to be true.”

His blood pressure rising steadily, A.J. said, “Any fool who believes Victoria would even contemplate knuckling under to vile coercion doesn’t know her very well, and yet . . . Wait, now something I’ve speculated about begins to make a good deal more sense. Were you aware that someone she considers a dear friend paid her a visit several days ago?”

“Um, yes; Freneaux,” said the admiral without hesitation.

“Good guess, Sir Jim.”

The admiral blinked, looking displeased. “It wasn’t necessary to guess, Augustus. His Holiness dotes on Cardinal Freneaux. He acts as the designated bearer of ill tidings, and principal scapegoat.”

“You forgot to say whipping boy.”

“Indeed. The gentleman in question is immensely well-suited to each and every one of those roles. On most occasions, His Eminence not only willfully seeks to carry the cross, but provides his own nails and crown of thorns.”

The analogy distantly amused Broward, but he was in no mood for levity. “There’s something else I should have let you in on by now, but hadn’t around to making the call.”

“Really?” Accustomed to meeting Broward’s disconcerting, double-barreled stare head-on, Sir James nevertheless seemed taken aback. “Judging by the image I’m viewing, it makes me reluctant to ask what that ‘something else’ might be.”

Choosing his words, A.J. explained what had taken place in the household of Dr. Duiño’s granddaughter.

“Good Lord! Don’t tell me the young woman still uses antiquated birth-control capsules?”

“Fraid so, Sir Jim.”

“Have you made absolutely certain the medication is bogus?”

“Beyond the slightest degree of doubt.”

“Um-m-m, pressure, pressure, and yet more pressure,” muttered the admiral. He scowled. “How dear Victoria manages to hold herself together and function under a dozen or more atmospheres of stultifying pressure is quite beyond the realm. I trust you’re on top of the matter, Augustus. The least desirable event I can conceive of at this juncture would be to lose Victoria’s services. If she were to resign of her own accord, stepping down could realistically be ascribed to her advanced years and weariness. But to let them drive her out of office on a trumped up, circumstantial side issue would be a major disaster.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll stay on top of it,” assured Broward. “I jump-started the investigation right after the lab report on the meds landed on my desk.”

“I’m certain you’re doing all that can be done.” The admiral pursed his lips. “I needn’t mention the air-tight seal that must surround all aspects of your investigation without fail. I assume you’ve put your best man on it.”

“Woman,” said A.J.

“Woman, singular?”

“An exceptionally singular woman she is, Sir Jim, and that’s an understatement.”

The secretary-general’s careworn image returned Broward’s implacable stare boldly. “I appreciate your position, Augustus. You must run your shop the way you see fit, yet were I in your shoes I wouldn’t hesitate to throw every resource at my disposal into this particular chase.”

“Some dogs hunt,” explained Broward, “and some can’t, or won’t. My hunter’s a world-class champion, best of breed and show. Doesn’t matter she’s a setter, not a pointer.”

Sir James Schuyler-Browne blinked at the obscure reference. He had long since concurred with Winston Churchill’s oft-quoted observation that the United Kingdom and Britain’s former colony were indeed two nations separated by a common language. Employing a degree of diffidence, he suggested that Broward might also give serious thought to providing additional security measures round and about Victoria’s person. “Philip’s intel people,” he pursued, “have eavesdropped on a handful of death threats which have popped up on either an elint or humint or some European network or another. God only knows what could be brewing in down-at-the-mouth parts of the globe.”

“My gut feeling,” said A.J. “is that we could be seeing the start of a repeat of the recent bit of bad business in Ankara.”

“A scary notion, but definitely a possibility,” said the admiral. “Phillip’s field officer had a perfectly awful time running that group of self-styled ‘patriots’ to ground. The Nigerian ringleaders had acquired weapons-grade enriched uranium in quantities sufficient to produce more than one fission device. Thank God they’re now comfortably ensconced in the Madagascar lockup, although beyond a shadow of doubt others precisely like them are out there somewhere. Those twentieth century bastards, our predecessors, postulated that either a bang or a whimper

would signal civilization's demise. One cannot help but wonder if TTCB contemplated the terrifying fact that a bang might act as catalyst that would ultimately produce the whimper."

"Hear you loud and clear, Sir Jim."

"Please heed my advice, Augustus. Do cloak Victoria's well-being with every facility and operative at your disposal."

"Not to worry on that account," assured A.J. "She's covered like the proverbial blanket. No outsider can get near her, on that you have my firm guarantee."

Apparently satisfied, Sir James said, "Capital! By all means keep me posted on your investigation's progress."

"I'll get on the horn the instant anything surfaces. Promise!"

Admiral Sir James Schuyler-Browne terminated the transmission without a farewell.

Five

Millie Forchet swept into the antechamber flashing her sunburst smile. She complimented Broward's executive assistant, saying how much she admired her hairdo, and began chatting her up.

Leslie voiced a warning, advising her to go in at once.

"Don't tell me the Chief's out of sorts again."

"More than usual. He's been anxiously waiting for you."

"Oh, Lordy!"

A.J. cut short a videoconference when his star investigator appeared. He nodded wordlessly, motioned for her to take a seat and tell all.

Sagging into a chair opposite the desk, Auntie draped the ragged canvas shopping bag over her generous lap and reported tersely. "Soup's thin and watery over at Gilbert's Pharmacy. I siphoned off what little I could get a handle on; it may be hardly anything worthwhile."

Broward's gimlet stare prompted her to continue.

"Girlie who rings up sales," related Auntie, "doesn't know straight up from sideways about what comes down amongst Gilbert's pro pill pushers. Only substantive info I could pump out of her was a pair of names, an assistant manager named Tackett, and Mr. Singh, an older gent who runs the pharmacy."

A. J. reached for a legal tablet, picked up a stylus. "Tackett, one tee or two?"

"A deuce I think; couldn't tell from the way she pronounced it."

A.J. scratched the name quickly. "And Singh, as in rag-head, a Sikh?"

"Yeah, could be a Sikh, except with no rag wound around on his head. This particular Mr. Singh wears a headful of iron-gray hair. Got a peek at him as I waltzed past the big pill working room in back. A solid citizen by the look of him — fail elderly, kind of slow-moving, and sun-baked brown enough to pass for one of the brothers."

"No first or middle on either?"

"Negative. Not even bare-bones initials. I didn't want to seem extra-nosy on the first go-round. It'd be a good idea to run a check on both names, especially this guy Tackett. The lass I pulsed said he'd earned himself a degree in pharmacology. Gilbert's is a huge cavern of a drugstore, so Tackett and Mr. Singh can hardly be the only licensed pill-pushers working there. By the way, it's probably not important, but how much do pro druggies like that earn?"

"What?"

"Pill packagers, pharma guys and gals who cook up meds for sale. What level of baksheesh does someone in that business drag down by the week, or month?"

Broward shrugged. "No idea. We'll find out if you can come up with a reason to bother."

Auntie pursed her lips. "Could be a long shot, but the scam I got from the girlie says Mr. Assistant Pharmacy Manager Tackett and his significant other been living high on cloud nine during a fortnight on a super-deluxe holiday. Care to guess where?"

Broward's corrosive stare kept his favorite snoop pinned in her chair. "I give up."

"Mexico," she told him, beaming. "The island paradise of Cozumel, no less. Or so the girlie told me. Down yonder off the Yucatan peninsula, isn't it?"

"Whups!" A.J.'s flint-hard brown eyes defocused in thought. Isolated portions of the Mexican Riviera touted the few luxury spas still solvent and operating in the northern portion of the western hemisphere. Cozumel, an island featuring several idyllic resort-hotels, Mayan ruins and many sights to see, was interdicted from the endemic misery of eastern Mexico by an expanse of salt water isolating the few posh spas still doing business from the abysmal poverty of mainland corporate agribusiness conglomerates bent upon wrenching every last peso from the depleted soil, and every last drop of sweat from the itinerant *peones* who labored there. Protected by the Federales, to whom *mordita*, the payoff, was an ancient, established rite, not to mention a way of life for the padrones who ran the exclusive hotels and spas that catered exclusively to the sugared icing of the upper, upper crust of a wealthy if steadily diminishing clientele.

"Licensed pharmacist or nuclear brain surgeon," said Broward, thinking aloud, "Cozumel's too fat a cash cow for any salaried pharmacologist to even think about drinking the milk. Most of us would have to hock the horse and dog, maybe mortgage our immortal souls, to indulge in a slice of Cozumel's high-rent fun and frolic. And you say the young lady told you Tackett and his lady were staying down there two weeks?"

"That's what the girlie told me. Yeah, that's what she said."

"Umm-m-m, a fortnight in paradise is only a few thousand light-years above and beyond what ordinary citizens would call a vacation."

Auntie sniffed. Figured as much; glad she mentioned it. 'Course the guy could've inherited big bucks from some relative. It happens."

A.J. thought it over. "Now and then," he admitted. "Detective Forchet, we'll definitely run a check on this Tackett. He also could have inherited big bucks from someone bound and determined to throw Victoria and her committee under the bus. But we'll also have to play this case smarter than smart. First I'm going to sic Phil's intel ferrets on Tackett and Singh, learn what sort of fallout falls out. Good work! It may not sound like the healthiest lead we've ever been handed, but you never know. Stay on deck; I may need you again real soon."

"Will do, Chief."

"I don't have to tell you to keep anything and everything about this under your bonnet."

"No," she said, favoring her superior with a sunny smile, "you don't have to tell me."

* * *

When the pocket door to the inner office slid closed behind his star detective, A.J. opened the intercom and instructed his executive assistant to put through a priority call to U.N. Intelligence Agency Director Philip Clews. The call had to be routed through two buffers in Geneva before the vidicom chimed. The saturnine, ever suspicious countenance of Clews descrambled and congealed in Broward's vidicom display.

A.J. used his standard opening quip whenever he contacted the intel chieftain. "Clews, Clews . . . Anyone with that surname ought to be in my racket, not juggling daggers, sweeping the dirt under cloaks."

The intelligence official's features remained inscrutable. "Same laugh-a-minute gumshoe as ever, eh, Gus? What's new in the Great Big Sewer?"

"Not new, Phil, just rancid. Truth is, I'm running scared about a superheated potato that fell in my lap yesterday. Strictly on the QT, under the rose and all that other nonsense, can you have someone crank up your bottomless database, dive in and do a deep data dig? I need every last tidbit and detail on a pair of surnames?" Whether dealing with a trustworthy colleague like Clews, or a total stranger, A.J. was a staunch believer in a simple to state, difficult to follow down-to-earth dictum: the fewer people who knew about anything, the fewer there were who could kiss and tell. He held back almost all details, divulging just the names, and then gave a brief account of Auntie's foray into the Elysium pharmacy. Clews jotted down the data, as well as a scribbled a note to remind himself of the whys and wherefores related to the scribbles. "I'll have someone chase down the names right smartly."

"One thing, Phil," cautioned Broward.

"One's about all I have time for," replied Clews.

"This bit of business is fragile-and-then-some-plus, with a capital P. It has to stay hush-hush, in the deep black. The chase we just kicked into gear could turn into a gigantic brouhaha, depending on where and to whom it leads, and believe me it had sure as hell better to do exactly that. The word can't get out on anything having to do with this pair of names, Phil. Cannot! Zero leakage. Do you read?"

"I won't let my left hand," promised Clews, "so much as hint about what the right one has in mind,"

"Does it ever?"

The men laughed together.

"Obliged, Director Clews, sir. Get back to me ASAP, okay? To me personally; don't leave a message."

Clews nodded. His expression still inscrutable, his image faded in the display.

* * *

Dr. Victoria Maria-Luisa Ortega de Duiño had again fallen into a dispirited, introspective mood. Forever the numbers, she thought, the cold, cold numbers. Now and throughout eternity the immutable, irreconcilable numbers would continue to plague mankind. Other than committee sessions, ancillary meetings, working-group discussions and now and then an isolated lecture, her principal labor consisted of playing the numbers game in the cheerless solitude of her office. Worse than a no-win contest, it was like contesting the laws of thermodynamics, an utterly one-sided game where winning was a stark impossibility, breaking even extremely rare and unlikely, and simply staying in the game a matter of inhuman persistence and dedication.

She had taken exquisite pains in this latest effort to sift through and extrapolate from the raw data flowing into the U.N. Tower in a ceaseless, remorseless avalanche of gigabytes. The hopeful saving grace was that she had adopted the creative, self-serving habit of mentally translating cold, unfeeling statistics into the numerical analogs of living, breathing human beings, doing so even while appreciating the fact that it made the task that much more difficult. A secondary saving grace was that it also forced her to focus on the stark, real-world relationship between the faceless numbers and the gross quantity of living, breathing individuals they represented, an extremely important relationship she kept in the forefront of her consciousness.

The cascading numbers, remote and pitiless as the fixed stars, were totally meaningless in their own right; the esoteric discipline of statistics had no more content than any other branch of mathematics. The cruel numbers only became meaningful when viewed in the light of their

human context — a hideous, underlying truth she'd forced herself to remember, and was determined to keep rooted firmly in mind.

The present parade of marching numbers, a compendium of inputs from numerous UNDEP environmental and demographic data gathering centers scattered around the globe, signaled a sharp warning. Much of Kenya had begun to teeter, indicating a grave danger of toppling from Class III into the yawning charnel pit of Class I. Worsening famine in what remained of Sudan had been the catalyst that all but ensured Kenya's downhill slide toward ultimate demise. With much of Sudan already gone, Khartoum was now a sand-drifted ghost town inhabited by snakes, scorpions and lizards. What complicated Kenya's situation was that tens of thousands of Sudanese refugees, desperate to survive in the wake of an incipient Class I judgment, had flooded toward hoped-for sanctuary in Uganda and Kenya. Refugees by the hundreds of thousands had filtered through late-arriving cordons of U.N. Peacekeeping Forces hastily dispatched to interdict the Sudanese border. Compounding the bitter misfortune of Sudanese refugees was the fact that by venturing into Kenya and Uganda they had unwittingly placed themselves in double jeopardy.

As for Kenya itself, she privately feared the fall was no more than a matter of weeks away, a month at most. Not too long ago, she recalled, of the entire patchwork of Balkanized African nations Kenya, with its relatively stable government, an income from tourism and a smattering of industry, plus a moderately well-educated core population, had been considered a safe haven for its citizens in the immediate future. The seeds of change, sown in the latter part of the previous century, had sprouted into full flower when Kenya had begun experiencing one of the world's highest population growth rates, something in excess of four percent per annum. The nation's demographic statistics had zoomed, doubling its peoples in the remarkably short span of seventeen and one-half to eighteen years.

Under severe restrictions instituted by an enlightened government, the Kenyan ratio of births to deaths had perversely flip-flopped, falling to a ZPG rate of just under two percent. Trouble was, the turnabout had come about too late for anything smacking of mild optimism. The older generation, allowed to live out its collective lifespan, had consumed gross quantities of nonrenewable resources that otherwise might have saved portions of the younger, more vigorous and productive generation. The resulting lag had turned into a major threat to Kenya, all but eliminating the nation's slim recuperative chances, dreadfully handicapping its race against oblivion. The Kenyans had suffered overpopulation coupled with desertification, a result of the sadly depleted soil bank, and a breakdown of biodiversity in the wildlife community known to inevitably lead to ecosystem failures. Victoria realized intellectually that Kenya was all but lost, yet refused to admit it emotionally, not even to herself. The race would apparently not go to the swift after all, but rather to the cold, inescapable numbers.

Yesterday in committee, Rook had again voiced vehement opposition to what he dared term "her stalling tactic." Antagonistic forever, her deputy chairperson had actually had the effrontery to openly accuse her of postponing Kenya's inevitable fate by citing only the most obvious facts pertaining to the nation's distressed society, while ignoring the reality of the deeper meanings and inescapable inferences that accompanied them. Lecturing the committee with his customary show of intellectual arrogance, he had accused her point-blank, pulling no punches, of cherry-picking only those few-and-far-between indicators she herself felt might someday, somehow, allow the beleaguered nation to recover a semblance of equilibrium. Rook had then capped his diatribe by describing continuing grain shipments to the faltering nation as, "Trying to make water run uphill." Much as she hated to admit it, integrity had forced her to agree with the

technical probity of her adversarial deputy's views, although privately she still felt that morally and emotionally he was very much in the wrong. But then empathy had never been Rook's strong suit, nor would it ever be.

As chairperson she could not — would not — allow a debate to take place that might designate Kenya eligible for a vote; not yet, at any rate; not while sympathy for Kenya's degenerating human condition was admittedly a minuscule factor in the infinitely more complex triage equation. Hopeless or not, the Kenyans had fought a long, hard, uphill battle against overwhelming odds, and deserved a last chance to redeem their lives, to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps so to speak. She intended to make certain they were afforded that chance.

Africa, O Africa! Wasn't the ongoing horror in northern Egypt enough to satisfy Rook and the sanguine trio of committeemen and one woman who tended to support his draconian triage philosophy? The anti-triage insurrection raging through now-arid sections of the once fertile Nile Delta, and beyond, was being effectively stifled — a foregone conclusion, and certainly no surprise. Armed with sticks, stones and pitchforks, the despairing fellahin, their lives and those of their wives and sons and daughters judged to be forfeit, or one might say sacrificed on the altar of common good — were throwing themselves in waves against professional U.N. Peacekeeping troops keenly trained to combat expressly that type of uprising.

Having stayed current with the media newscasts, as well as a deluge of official U.N. dispatches from Alexandria, she was aware that the carnage, trumpeted far and wide in the print and electronic media as the committee's most recent murderous assault on the human species, was being labeled, "A desecration of the human spirit," or "The most recent theft of humanity's inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

A pursuit, she thought sadly, that through no fault of their own reasoning adults and children were being rewarded by the loss of not only liberty, but life itself.

Clamorous, vindictive protests in the ecclesiastic press and media echoed the international media to a tee, decrying the Egyptian battleground as yet another slap in the face of humanity, a totally unconscionable action on the part of the death dealing United Nations Organization, and an affront to the will of God Almighty. If Kenya were to be declared Class I now, with northern Egypt in flames, screams of racial cleansing and genocide would literally rise to the skies.

Victoria tried again to concentrate on the ranks and columns of numbers scrolling slowly upward in the flat-panel display. After a few minutes more, a distraction obtruded in the form of her granddaughter's features, contorted and tearful in the wake of her recent trouble, and rendered the data meaningless.

She halted the program, turned away from the hateful, insidious numbers in disgust.

* * *

A.J. returned to his office from one of the numberless meetings it was his duty to attend. He sublimated his displeasure upon finding his executive assistant waiting for him. His expression softened when Leslie told him of a personal message from Philip Clews in Geneva. Having insisted that Clews furnish the desired data to no one other than himself, he was glad Phil had appreciated the necessity of doing so.

Ten minutes later, Broward and his chief administrative aide, flanked by a customary pair of bodyguards, rode downstairs in the executive express elevator. The compartment doors separated, exposing the uppermost tier of the tower's multilevel basement garage. A.J. and those with him were treated to the sight of Bennett Rook stepping out of a black electric limousine.

The deputy triage chairperson was bent over, his attention on something the driver was saying; his own bodyguards, stationed alertly on either side of him, their backs to the limo, facing outward, continuously swept the length and breadth of the garage with calculating, suspicious eyes.

No love was lost between the UNDEP officials. Professionals in every sense of the term, for more than a decade each had made a polite show of respecting the other's position and authority. Privately, however, they detested one another.

Despite the conventional wisdom alluding to one's lifestyle as being one's own business, interacting with homosexuals never failed to make A.J. uncomfortable. In accordance with Sir James Schuyler-Browne's directive of long standing, he maintained a confidential file on Rook's comings and goings, contacts and amours, as well as a file on Dr. Duiño, the other eight Triage Committee members, and every other UNDEP official and bureaucrat who had reached or aspired to an upper-echelon management position. Despite harboring disdain for those who "liked their vice versa," a derogatory term invented by the homophobic Mrs. Broward, A.J. was too thorough a professional to let personal feelings regarding certain personalities interfere in any way, shape or form with the conduct of business. No one could question Rook's commitment and incisive capability, least of all Broward; nor had the committee's acerbic thorn in Victoria's side, renowned for blinding intelligence purportedly off the scale, ever given A.J. the least cause to doubt his integrity or trustworthiness.

A lanky, not altogether reassuring presence, A.J. motioned for his aide and the bodyguards to hang back. Ignoring the pointed stares of Rook's watchdogs, he approached the limousine. "Have you a minute, Bennett?"

Rook straightened. Glacial hazel eyes locked with those of deep, uncompromising brown. "A minute, Augustus, but little more. I'm running a tad late for a committee session."

"This won't take long. I have to be in Staten Island by three o'clock." A.J. casually took Rook's arm and drew him out of earshot, an action earning nervous stares from both sets of bodyguards.

Lowering his voice, A.J. hit only the high points, touching upon the most recent threat to Dr. Duiño and Triage Committee.

Rook's only indication of concern, brows contracted ever so slightly, preceded a searching question. "Do you mean to tell me Victoria's granddaughter uses old-fashioned family planning medication?"

"Apparently."

"How archaic. Frankly, I'm amazed."

"So was I." As always, the other's caustic, above-it-all manner grated on A.J.'s sensibilities like a hangnail scraping across a chalkboard. He would have held his breath all the way to unconsciousness, however, before letting his irritation show. "You paraphrased the reaction of Sir James to a tee," he told Rook. "When I reported on the doings, his surprise more than matched your own."

"Um, yes; quite surprising, isn't it, in light of modern implants. But, tell me, Augustus. What made you decide to air the dirty linen for my benefit?"

"You're Victoria's deputy, and any threat to the committee is bound to affect you personally. Also," added Broward, "a strong rumor has circulated, hinting that you have contacts in high, low, and medium places. We may not be friends by any definition of the term, and perhaps we will be. But I like to believe we're players loyal to the same team, and share the same objectives."

"Never doubt it," assured Rook. "What have you learned to date?"

"Almost nothing, really." A.J. recounted the slim information Auntie had obtained at Gilbert's Pharmacy. He explained how, following a verbal message, a sealed packet containing the confidential report forwarded by Philip Clews had landed on his desk a quarter-hour ago. It specified that one Alan R. Tackett, definitely a person of interest and potential suspect, was booked on an airboat inbound from Isla de Cozumel.

"Cozumel, my, my! Assistant pharmacy managers live rather Olympian lives these days." Arctic smile in evidence, Rook gestured toward A.J.'s bodyguards, who were careful to watch the officials under their guardianship by not looking directly at them. "I gather you and your praetorians have arranged a warm homecoming for the vacationer."

Rook's bantering tone further irritated Broward. His demeanor was galling, a perfect complement to his subterranean snottiness. A.J. said he intended to meet the airboat and ask Mr. Tackett a few relevant, highly pertinent questions. He concluded by saying, "Before I run off, may I ask a small favor?"

"Anything in my power."

"Nose around on the sly when you have a chance. Find out what you can. Victoria needs all the help she can get on this. It can also be said she that she needs it desperately."

Rook's classic features underwent a subtle transformation. "I shall," he said, sounding overly sincere. "I'll do precisely that. Quietly, of course."

"Very quietly," emphasized A.J. "Whatever you turn up will be greatly appreciated. I'll thank you in advance for taking the trouble."

"Don't mention it, Augustus. I'll be doing myself a favor."

A.J. turned toward his waiting limo. Rook brought him up short by saying, "There's something I should warn you about, Augustus. It might be wise to dismiss your limousine. Try crossing the bridge just now and you should arrive in Staten Island sometime later in the week. My driver just fought his way through a food riot and another protest demonstration. Every street leading to the bridge is clogged solid. Take my earnest advice and requisition a 'copter from the roof park."

Broward returned the other's steady gaze with an infinitely steadier gaze. "I'm obliged, Bennett. I certainly will."

* * *

The airboats serving Greater New York and much of the eastern seaboard bore a superficial resemblance to the previous century's turboprop-driven aircraft. The empennage of an airboat, while similar to that of an aircraft, was much smaller, after which the similarity diminished markedly. Low-flying airboats featured stubby lift surfaces that could hardly be called wings, and a fuselage bulking far wider and flatter on the underside than that of conventional aircraft. An airboat's multiple-bladed, duct-shrouded propellers drove downward huge volumes of low pressure air, stacking up googols of air molecules between the craft and the surface of the water. Before the air had time to escape, it formed a buoyant "cushion" beneath the craft $\frac{3}{4}$ a phenomenon known to aerodynamicists as "ground effect."

Airboats flew roughly two meters above the waves, low enough for the air cushion produced underside to remain effective and. Under proper oceanic conditions, clear weather and relatively calm seas, airboats were able to attain near-aircraft subsonic cruise velocities. An airboat's major virtue was that it failed to leave the high altitude condensation trails produced by water vapor, or the polluting the residue of unburned fuel emitted from the engines of hypersonic aircraft, thus producing no significant contribution to atmospheric contamination.

When the jetcopter deposited A.J., his aide and the omnipresent bodyguards at the Port Richmond helipad, A.J. was startled to see an inbound airboat already churning spray as it cleaved the water, arrowing toward them near the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. In his haste to locate the Immigration and Naturalization Service duty officer, he sent his aide and the bodyguards in different directions to search for the official.

Flashing his credentials when the INS man appeared, Broward hurriedly described how a suspect believed to be aboard the arriving airboat was wanted for questioning by U.N. Security, and went on to explain why it would be preferable for INS to pretend to collar Tackett with a bogus charge of being under suspicion of illegally entry. The INS inspector, happy to oblige, insisted that Broward use his own office at the Greater New York & New Jersey Port Authority.

Twenty-five minutes later a disheveled man in his late thirties was ushered into Broward's presence. The assistant pharmacy manager sported a crimson-and-blue aloha shirt, webbed leather huaraches, a deep suntan, and a defiant expression.

"Who're you?" were Alan R. Tackett's first angry words. "What's this hassle all about? My friend and I are tired and hungry, anxious to get home."

"Have a seat, Mr. Tackett." A.J. signaled his aide to leave them alone. One look was all it had taken Broward to decide he wanted to questioning the "person of interest" in private.

"This identity crap is plain bullshit," said Tackett hotly, "I was born and raised in Red Bank, New Jersey, and you don't need a passport to fly-boat down to Mexico. The clown in customs accused me of trying to pass myself off as an American citizen. I am a citizen, not some goddamn illegal. I don't need this, and I sure as hell don't need to be kept waiting to see if I . . ." The object of both barrels of Broward's paralyzing stare, the assistant pharmacy manager trailed off uncertainly.

"We know," announced A.J. in a monotone, "all about the phony birth-control tablets."

Tackett paled beneath his Mexican tan. His air of bravado sloughed away more quickly than A.J. would have thought possible. "Don't know . . . what," he stumbled, "you're talking about."

"Let me refresh your memory, Mr. Tackett. We have an eyewitness to the deception. One of the clerks at Gilbert's Pharmacy," lied Broward, "testified that it was you who passed her the placebos she later sold to Mrs. Delgado."

Alan Tackett seemed to have sudden difficulty breathing. "I don't, uh . . . Which clerk?"

"Does it really matter?" A.J.'s implacable stare persisted, a silent, refractory accusation intent upon boring twin holes in whatever fairy tale Tackett was about to concoct. Seconds wore past. Broward refrained from blinking — a tactic he had perfected years earlier, had used ever since to great advantage.

"Are you . . . ? Am I under arrest? You . . . haven't read me my rights," accused the pharmacist in a small voice. "I get one phone call, too. I want to talk to my attorney."

"Alan R. Tackett," intoned A.J., "you have the right to remain vocal, and while being vocal you have the right to know that anything you say can and will be used against you."

"What . . . ? That isn't the way it's supposed to . . ."

"In this instance, Mr. Tackett, it's perfectly appropriate." Reaching into an inner jacket pocket, A.J. withdrew his wallet, flipped it open and showed the other his U.N. buzzer. "You have the right to speak up and admit your guilt, Mr. Tackett. At the moment, it's the only right you do have."

"Y-you can't . . ." faltered the other, choking back whatever else he had intended to say. Bending forward, he looked more closely at the impossible-to-counterfeit United Nations

hologram gracing Broward's optically encoded ID. "Hey, what is this? You aren't INS, you're ___"

"Correct, Mr. Tackett. As for speaking to your lawyer, I'm afraid a local attorney wouldn't be of use to you in Switzerland."

"Switzerland!"

"Under the circumstances, obtaining an extradition order will be a simple matter of cataloging the facts. You'll be indicted and arraigned in Geneva, and then tried before the United Nations High Court." Broward made a project of spreading four digital holographs across the INS man's desk; he placed them carefully, as if they were delicate, upside down for the suspect's benefit. "What you see here, Mr. Tackett, is the United Nations penal colony in Madagascar. There are no walls you will notice, nor watchtowers, patrolling guards, electrified fences, anything of that restrictive nature. The problem for inmates is that it's an extremely long, terribly difficult and dangerous swim to the East African mainland, not has any prisoner who ever tried survived the abundant sharks. How do you think you'll enjoy planting, cultivating and harvesting vanilla beans under the broiling equatorial sun?"

A.J.'s preternatural, unblinking gaze shredded what little remained of the assistant pharmacy manager's reeling psyche. Wilting under Broward's paralytic stare, he wilted further and began coming apart at the seams. His mouth worked as he tried to say something, but the words stuck in his throat.

"Take your time, Mr. Tackett."

"I didn't think . . ." he muttered. "I wasn't told that it was, uh . . ." The pharmacist bit his underlip. "How was I know those BC meds would turn out to be a big deal?"

"Our records show that thirty-five thousand new dollars was deposited to your credit union account last month, Mr. Tackett. I suppose the meager size of the payoff did not clue you to the felony's importance. As a matter of added interest, another fifteen thou showed up the previous month in your account at the savings and loan establishment near the pharmacy in the Elysium arcology complex. Would now be a good time to explain by what means those monies were obtained?"

Alan Tackett was speechless.

"Who paid for your duplicitous act, Mr. Tackett?"

Perspiring freely, the suspect wiped his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Don't know, and that's God's honest truth. I had no way of knowing."

"Do you expect the U.N. High Justices to give credence to that patently absurd statement?"

"Th-they'll have to. It's the . . . That's exactly how it came down. Honest!"

"How did the money come into your possession?"

"Thirty-five gees were messengered to my apartment there in Elysium."

"Cash?" demanded A.J.

"Cash, yes — crisp hundred-dollar bills."

"Who made the arrangements for selling the tablets to Mrs. Delgado?"

"Hey, I just finished explaining how it worked. I really and truly don't have the slightest idea who could've been behind it."

"Well, I can see we're wasting time." Broward rose slowly, towering above the much smaller man. He leaned forward, hands flat-pressed on the INS inspector's desk, and stared at the suspect, his every aspect belligerence personified. "You'll be held in custody until extradition

can be arranged, and then flown directly to Geneva for indictment and arraignment. You'll stand trial before the U.N. High Justices, and upon conviction will be sent to Madagascar for —"

"Wait, hold it!" Alan Tackett swallowed noisily. "I meant, what I said. What I told you was God's honest truth, so help me. Can you do me any favors if I, uh . . .?"

"Should you choose to cooperate? Sorry, Mr. Tackett; I'm not in a position to make deals or promises I have no intention of keeping. I'll do what I can, of course, but only if you decide to come forward with every last detail concerning the whys and wherefores of the entire incident."

"It happened," said Tackett hastily, "exactly like I said. An offer came by surface mail, a handwritten note saying I was in line for a hefty payday, but the note had no return address. A follow-up letter came two days later, telling me what I had to do to earn . . . I mean, what I would have to agree to do if I accepted the, uh . . ."

"Pennies from Heaven, Mr. Tackett?" A.J. feigned skepticism. "Maybe pie in the sky would be the more proper term. How did you get hold of the phony birth control medication?"

"Same way, messengered to my apartment."

"Do you still have the note and messengered letter?"

"Uh, no; threw 'em away."

"A shame," said A.J. as if in disbelief. "Is any of the cash left, or did you spend it all in Mexico?"

Tackett yanked a plastic wallet from the back pocket of his chinos. "Sure, here's a hundred, two fifties, a couple of twenties and some singles. The rest went stayed in my credit union account."

"These bills were part of the payoff?"

"Yeah, sure. Like I said, I kept some out, deposited most of the rest."

"The hundred will do nicely. May we borrow it?"

"Hell yes, take it! Can I, uh, get a receipt?"

"Why, certainly." A.J. finally blinked. He said, "What do you take us for Mr. Tackett, thieves?" He accompanied the question with a derisive leer.

Six

Depressed in the wake of yet another session counseling her granddaughter, Dr. Duiño entered her own parlor with weary steps. Knowing it a waste of time, she laid aside the bamboo cane and made a desultory attempt to resume her evening labors. For a quarter-hour, she tried to concentrate on the computer display's marching numbers, but her emotional state obtruded, making the attempt to work less than worthwhile.

Monique's outlook had not improved; actually, it had worsened. She had been inconsolable, pacing her living room in Elysium like a caged tigress, turning a deaf ear to all expressions of sympathy, understanding and encouragement. Monique had talked wildly about abortion, and almost as wildly about fleeing the country to evade prosecution.

Using all her wiles, Victoria had done everything she could to alleviate her granddaughter's distress, repeatedly reassuring the young mother-to-be, iterating and reiterating her own pledge that everything it was possible to do was being done, firmly driving home the point that it was she herself, and Triage Committee, who were the targets of a possible conspiracy, not Monique and her husband. Stressing this salient point over and over again, she'd repeatedly cited her worldwide notoriety as chairperson, insisting that she and her work were to blame for what had transpired, not something Monique or Stewart had done.

Gathering her thoughts by main force of will, she made a second determined effort to dismiss the problem that kept defeating on her conscious efforts, and concentrated on the scrolling statistical data. But the image of her lovely young granddaughter in tears would not be dismissed. Certain that she herself, and the committee, were solely responsible for Monique's dilemma, guilt weighed heavily on her conscience like a bad dream from which there might be no awakening.

Forced to bring her work home because she had stolen time away from her office to visit Monique, she forced her iron will to take control and bore down, resolutely applying herself to the task at hand, analyzing and integrating the stark numerical data in the lucent display. Gradually the stark numbers began taking on at least a semblance of meaning.

Kenya's deteriorating situation immediately became apparent. If the beleaguered nation had been one of her former patients, a prognosis would have been unnecessary; she would have written off the case as hopeless. If only, came the nagging thought, the time lag in Kenya's death-to-birth ratio had been shorter, the downward curve less steep.

Then too, the problem might have partially solved itself if not for TTCB. Those greedy twentieth century bastards had collectively and consistently looked the other way when problems in Kenya began getting out of hand. No, even worse was the fact that TTCB had callously turned its collective back on the inevitable upshot of real-world conditions then moving in an all too obvious direction. Yet in the here and now, second-guessing their blindness, purposeful or otherwise, would be tantamount to twenty-twenty hindsight. What struck her as intensely regrettable was the stern fact that if a minimum of foresight had been available to the public back in an era of relative prosperity, humanity's mad dash toward cloying overpopulation might have reversed itself naturally, the way animal populations in the wild declined when the environment turned against them and showed signs of failing to support their burgeoning numbers. An idealistic scenario back then would have eliminated the need for dynamic population control by an agency so abysmally insidious, yet vitally necessary, as the Triage Committee.

But to once again invoke the well-deserved pejorative in common usage, TTCB symbolized most businessmen, politicians, and citizens of America's long gone, despised "Now Generation," and the most neglectful, devastating inaction of all had been in an area of human endeavor that had created the greatest, most lasting damage — the monied arena manned by the era's financial fat cats, the profit-driven movers and shakers who'd labeled themselves "Masters of the Universe" and had been allowed to ignore regulations and morality and grow exceptionally wealthy by manipulating the money of others. But TTCB's perception of future ills had not been null, and void, merely ignored, conveniently put out of mind. Little if any thought had been given to the stray notion that they might be fostering, nurturing and promulgating a self-destructive socioeconomic climate that demanded continual, neverending growth as the sinecure of economic prosperity. Infinite growth, in the mind of any sane, thoughtful individual, could not help but be regarded as an overt impossibility in a finite world, a stern truism that could not possibly have gone unnoticed, but was treated mutely for the most part until the Crash of 2008.

Whether reviled as TTCB, or spelled out syllable by syllable, letter by letter, and misdeed by misdeed, those twentieth century bastards had been bound and determined to nominate and elect themselves institutional kingpins who busied themselves churning and manipulating the vast holdings of "investors" in order to skim the cream while the skimming was good, and let someone else take care of the future economic problems. Likewise, large agribusiness complexes which produced much of the world's food supply had never looked beyond their own noses, or for that matter beyond those of their stockholders, while identical blinders had obscured the

vision of the petroleum industry as well as countless other business enterprises. Succinctly stated, TTCB's philosophy could be capsulized as "Me first, and screw posterity!" TTCB had stubbornly refused to face up to the dismal future portended by adhering to short-sighted, lucrative, ultimately self-defeating fiscal policies. Unwisely, to their own eventual detriment, TTCB had prayed hard at what to their skewed way of thinking was the throne of Capitalism, free trade, and had thereby forfeited not only the future of their own children and their children's children, but everyone else's children as well.

* * *

It was Victoria's firm conviction that America's so-called "Baby Boomers" — a favorite target of finger pointing — had been the principal culprits. To the Boomers, the term "posterity" had been not simply anathema, but a mystical Zen concept, a phantom notion exemplifying anything other than their "me first" lifestyle. Appearing on the American stage in droves in the wake of the Second World War, the Boomers had matured and immediately gone to bat for the widely espoused "now" philosophy. They had consumed, consumed, and consumed with a vengeance those resources considered nonrenewable, while indiscriminately bearing children, who bore children, who bore . . .

TTCB's "boomer" contingent had righteously and persistently denied an obvious, totally undeniable truth, namely that each new child or immigrant brought into then-affluent American society was destined to consume a proportionately gross and unfair share of the world's dwindling nonrenewable resources. To cap their greedy "me first" philosophy, the conscientious "consumers" had either consciously or unconsciously transferred many formerly renewable resources into the nonrenewable category, with fossil fuels the outstanding excellent example, although a number of others also came to mind. TTCB had been marvelously adept at bequeathing to denizens of the mid-twenty-first century a singularly apt label: The Age of Shortages.

The well-nourished, genetically advantaged Boomers had lived longer than their forebears, and in so doing had denuded social entitlement programs by claiming the benefits promised, paid-for and accrued during their working lifetimes, and a dark cloud predicting grief to come had formed on the horizon of America's Social Security Administration. Most taxpayers in that bygone era had assumed that the large, ever-larger growing bites deducted from their paychecks were being deposited in an overflowing money pot, the "lock box" politicians loved to remind the public from which senior citizens would be eligible to draw enough to lighten the burden of their "Golden Years." The Boomers had assured themselves that the monies would be there for them, guaranteeing supplemental retirement income when the time came for retirement.

Unfortunately, during the concluding decade of the second millennium ever-increasing loans from foreign nations, and politicians with sticky fingers who "borrowed" from SSA's lockless "lock box" faster than it could be replenished, and of course conveniently forgot to pay back the monies, added to the depredations of major financial houses and mortgage vendors who encouraged the public to buy homes they couldn't afford, and bulk-sold the mortgages to whoever believed a profit was to be had, created a dire economic fiasco akin to the infamous Ponzi confidence game, where Peter was invited to "invest" with a promise of a generous return on his money, and then Paul was approached with the same lure dangled before him, whereupon Paul's "investment" went to pay off Peter, and Mary was then approached. Those at the end of this daisy chain, fueled by conscienceless greed, were left holding an empty sack, especially in the case of the taxpaying public, who were asked to bail out the TTCB fat cats, who managed to turn a profit from acquiring the "bailout" monies. Home prices sank, a devastating consequence

for those whose homes were suddenly "under water," owing more on their mortgages than their homes were now worth and faced either foreclosure, or the pain of walking away from their investments. In short, middle-class American citizens already flatlining where jobs and income were concerned, had become the era's most grievously injured empty bag holders.

The Boomers, having enjoyed extended lifespans while consuming much, much more than their fair share of everything, not to mention leaving less to their descendants, who had lived even longer, began selfishly pointing indignant, accusative fingers at the world's Have-nots for daring to perpetuate and exacerbate the world's looming overpopulation crisis — an altogether wrong, utterly unjust accusation. Affluent portions of the world also had been at fault for not going to the aid of rapidly doubling populations in the disenfranchised Third and Fourth Worlds.

The blinders worn by TTCB, thought Victoria, had not been heavily tinted, but totally opaque. Exponential growth was totally unforgiving; the global population curve had risen inexorably, soaring upward toward a swooping, near-vertical climb that could eventually mean either extinction of the human species, or a return to prehistoric chaos by the few survivors. Long before the curve reached the saturation stage, however, she was sure apocalypse would most certainly arrive in the guise of thirst, starvation, disease, or an unthinkable thermonuclear Armageddon, whichever happened to come first. The handwriting had not merely been on the wall for TTCB and their successors to read, it had been written large, in blood.

Victoria broke off and reflected on her most recent confrontation with Bennett Rook. Stiff and unbending as always, albeit of truly blinding intelligence, her deputy chairperson devoutly believed the sole path to salvation lay in a draconian solution to overpopulation. Perhaps, she gloomily admitted to herself, his sanguine view might one day prove to have been the correct one. Was it she herself, burdened with a Catholic conscience and overwhelming sympathy for the downtrodden, unfortunate peoples she was forced to help condemn, who was inhibiting the very thing she had striven all these weary decades to accomplish?

After a brief period of soul-searching, she dismissed the notion. Moderated as they were, triage judgments were vile enough in their own right; implementing them caused sufficient agony and grief even for a bloodthirsty ogre like Bennett Rook. Years ago, the newly empowered U.N. Executive Committee had for purely political reasons nominated her, an anonymous physician practicing in New York, to fill the unwanted, undesirable post of chairperson. Secondary factors had contributed to her confirmation: her Catholic conscience and moral outlook, in addition to her qualifications and stature as a licensed, experienced physician.

There was no denying the fact that she had been appointed partly because of her faith, not in spite of it. Rook viewed triage as a mandatory expedient, while she herself considered the actions of the committee a thoroughly frightful necessity, and not, to borrow the definition of Cardinal Freneaux, "an abomination." Some time in the past it had been Rook at his most insistent who had summed up the triage rationale in typically Rookish fashion. "When push comes to shove," he'd drawled in his own, self-satisfied manner, "we shall either have to do the necessary pushing, or allow ourselves to be shoved over the brink into the abyss."

Rook or no Rook, she refused to contemplate the severe measures advocated by her deputy, as a hard-held conviction she was determined never to cease grasping. One eventuality more dreaded than any other raised the specter of where that overworked euphemism, dynamic population control, might lead the committee in the future, when she would no longer be there to provide at least some mollifying influence.

Her work, ghastly as it was, might someday seem rather pale. She had asked herself many times why she'd ever agreed to assume all of the thankless pain and suffering that rested, Atlas-like, upon her own frail shoulders? What was it within her that permitted retaining at least a portion of equilibrium under the snowstorms of criticism and avalanches of condemnation continually showered upon her? She thought of an old wives tale bruited about in years past, an apocryphal story told by a veteran missionary when she and Enrique were practicing in back country Bolivia.

Impoverished Peruvianos, the parents of five other children had lost a newborn in childbirth, hardly a surprising occurrence in light of the primitive conditions obtaining in their village high in the frigid, windswept Altiplano. Unbaptized, the infant had been buried in stony ground without benefit of clergy, or any hope of Heaven. Half in anger, half in sorrow, the grief-stricken husband had journeyed to the nearest town. Confronting a young parish priest, he had demanded to know how God in his infinite mercy could conceive of anything so utterly evil as infant damnation.

"My son," the priest supposedly replied, an unsatisfying answer at best, "in his official capacity God must now and then do things He abhors as an individual."

Was that how she thought of herself, of her mission? Was she duty-bound to continue committing an abomination in her official capacity, perpetrating actions abhorred by she herself? Was that how she justified her actions to herself, how she reconciled the grim, ceaseless, agonizing nature of her work? The self-image that formed in her consciousness was less than comforting, anything but flattering.

Switching off the computer program in frustration, she rose stiffly with the aid of her cane, shuffled to the sideboard and decanted a few swallows of sherry. Sipping slowly from time to time, she awkwardly went through the rigors of preparing for bed, knowing full well that she faced another night of tossing and turning. Sleep, when it finally did come, would not come easily, nor would it be dreamless.

But then, was it ever . . . ?

* * *

A.J. Broward examined the hundred-"D" banknote he'd obtained from Assistant Pharmacy manager Alan Tackett, now in custody. The full-color engraving stretched between his fingers depicted a familiar visage. His chin thrust forward in supreme confidence, but lacking the jaunty-angled cigarette holder clamped in his teeth lampooned by the bygone era's political cartoonist, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's expression was genial. Behind the old-fashioned pince-nez spectacles perched on bridge of his nose, a gleam in the former chief executive's hollow, deep-set eyes proclaimed a readiness to take on the Great Depression, the military might of the Axis Fascists, and any and all other threats to America's health and prosperity.

A.J. turned the bill over. "In God we trust," he quoted, adding a ironic corollary, "all others pay cash. Where the hell are you now, Roosey, when you're most needed?"

Leaning on the expertise derived from a decade and more in office, Broward knew green had been the color of choice for the old-style currency. Circa 1929, on the eve of the worst, most devastating, planet-wide economic downturn of modern times, the greenish hue had been considered difficult to counterfeit or photocopy, and U.S. "greenbacks" had been standardized to comply with that dictum. FDR, as he was popularly known, had in fact taken a hand in designing the older currency, advising the government standardization committee and recommending a number of changes, including relocation of the Great Seal, the pyramid and God's all-seeing eye.

The new-dollar currency now in use, however, had evolved during a period of lesser turmoil. Linking arms in a heated “throw the rascals out” limit-the-size-an — be visited upon their guiltless sons and daughters. A series of protests and civil upheavals had unseated senators and representatives beholden to both major political parties, among them a good number aligned with artfully lobbying multinational special interests.

Inauguration day, January, 2025, had seen a youthful firebrand ushered into the aging White House. The economic doldrums of 2023 had triggered a radical devaluation of the dollar, culminating in a call-in of traditional greenbacks to be exchanged for temporary scrip of low par value. Within months, the attributed par value had sunk practically out of sight, leaving the nation on the verge of bankruptcy when the federal government found itself no longer able to pay the interest due on the multi-trillion dollar national debt incurred by TTCB, let alone a smidgen of the astronomical principal.

For the first time since the Great Depression, the Congress had declared a bank holiday, and had hastily enacted a too-little-too-late constitutional amendment that redefined deficit spending as a criminal violation of public trust. The road to partial recovery had been long, steep, rocky, and fraught with pitfalls. The principal catalyst inspiring recovery had been creation by the Congress of a trust fund similar to the Highway Trust enacted under the Eisenhower administration, legislation responsible for building and maintaining America’s interstate highway network. In a like manner, monies allocated to the Deficit Trust had been declared inviolate for purposes other than reducing the national debt. Neither crafty, pork-barreling senators nor devious, sticky-fingered representatives who’d succumbed to the thrall — and unlimited “campaign contributions” of corporate lobbyists — had been able to designate or “earmark” funds held in trust as riders on the backs of bills then before Congress.

New dollars, minted of an all but indestructible synthetic material semi-immune to normal wear and tear, and color-coded by denomination, were roughly four-fifths the size of the old greenbacks. The hundred-D note A.J. held was pale orange. He prayed that it had been coded in a subtle manner about which the general public knew nothing.

As originally promulgated by the Congress, the concept of “new currency” had at first been shoved aside in a move intended to do away entirely with the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, and thus permit universal electronic bookkeeping and banking as a complement to the near-speed-of-light storage and transfer of valuta and economic data. The government in all its wisdom, specifically the Treasury Department and its illegitimate sibling, the Internal Revenue Service, had fallen deeply in love with the notion of a digital economy as the ideal method of eliminating tax-free purchases and barter, facilitating tax collection, and enhancing the ability to track illegal money laundering, et cetera. The hue and cry raised against this proposal had been deafening. John Q. Public had demanded folding pocket money, and John Q had eventually gotten his way.

A.J. was playing a hunch. The creased but otherwise unsullied hundred-D note appeared to have been minted recently. According to Tackett’s testimony, it had stayed folded, undisturbed, in his wallet during his extended Mexican holiday. Broward, stewing at his desk, had been anxiously waiting to receive a report from the lab, where the bill was being examined microscopically, and scanned under the appropriate ultraviolet wavelength.

Failing in its attempt to do away with folding money, the Treasury Department had adopted a fallback means of minimally tracking the pristine issuance of cash sums consisting of ten thousand or more new dollars. When issued in bulk, ultraviolet encryption on hundred-D and higher denominations formed an invisible record within the bank, savings and loan, credit union

or similar financial institution from which a particular block of currency had been disbursed, as well as the coded identity of the individual, commercial enterprise, academic institution or trust to whom larger denominations had been issued. Data recording ceased after the original issuance, but A.J. had laid down an odds-on bet with himself, reasoning that whoever had messengered the bogus birth-control tablets to Tackett, had also paid him with newly minted currency obtained from some banking house. If that proved true, the report would tell him not only when and to whom the monies had been issued, but also the city or town of issuance.

And if that were not the case — an eventuality he refused to think about — it would scrap the single lead thus far obtained.

Twenty minutes later Leslie, his executive assistant, came into the inner office carrying a sealed envelope. A.J. thanked her, waxed his hands expectantly and waited until she had returned to the anteroom. Slicing the envelope's flap with a letter opener, he subconsciously held his breath and began reading the report.

Grunting an epithet under his breath, he thumped the desk a resounding, triumphal whack, punched up the intercom circuit, obviously agitated, curtly asked Leslie to track down Auntie ASAP and send her straight into his office the instant she appeared.

Detective Forchet showed up forty-five minutes, showering her superior with a dazzling smile.

"Auntie," said Broward, "zip home and pack a bag. You're off to Cleveland on the first available flight. And I want you to take along some muscle; a pair of agents should be able to handle whatever comes down. Pick whoever you want."

Auntie's always-cheerful countenance had fallen. "God help us!"

A.J.'s searing gaze visually assaulted her. "What's wrong?"

"Cleveland!" she exclaimed, giving the city's name the inflection of a curse.

A.J.'s stony gaze softened. Regarding Auntie with a degree of suspicion, he said, "The last time I looked, it was an Ohio metropolis situated on the shore of a scummy pond once known as Lake Erie."

Her demeanor uncharacteristically solemn, Auntie said, "Couple weeks ago, Roy and I went to see the revival of a grand old musical, A Chorus Line. Ever seen it yourself, Chief, heard tell of it?"

His mind elsewhere, Broward said, "Can't say I have. What about it?"

"In the show," Auntie told him, "a cutesy-cute dancer steps to the stage-center footlights and delivers an off-the-wall line. She tells the audience suicide in Cleveland is redundant."

Broward chuckled to be polite, then launched an earnest explanation. Wasting no words, he instructed Auntie about precisely what he wanted her to accomplish in Cleveland.

* * *

Victoria's executive assistant, Harold Strabough, was sick and tired of opening mail — his most onerous task, and boring to boot. He screened and skimmed the content of the voluminous e-mail transcriptions and hardcopy letters arriving in the office daily, especially tiresome was running a secondary backup check on all parcels addressed to Dr. Duiño that had passed primary x-ray and suspicious substance inspection in the tower's basement mail room.

On any given day, run-of-the-mill hate mail flowed across his desk in an endless river, every item creating a large or small pain in his backside, especially the letters invariably outnumbering all other correspondence by a huge margin. Due to the eruption of the abortive, effectively propagandized anti-triage uprising taking place in northern Egypt, the already awesome ratio had swollen and undergone a change for the worse. The incoming flood of

vitriolic letters and nasty packages had piled up phenomenally, not to mention incoming e-mail traffic that clogged multiple servers connected to the computer center's gallium arsenide brain. Along with the electronic missives, stacks and stacks of surface mail, plus bundles of forwarded e-mail printouts, littered the antechamber. In recent days, Harold had at times been swamped to the point of asking for assistance, causing Victoria to order the major portion of incoming correspondence, principally e-mail and certain transcripts, assigned to the review of employees working under a communications superintendent in the sub-basement annex.

With precious new paper and recycled paper rationed, Harold had never been able to understand why the public insisted on wasting a scrap simply to damn his mistress by means of old-fashioned letters in old-fashioned envelopes. The more lurid threats, often missed in the first screening downstairs, that landed on his desk he'd been instructed to pass along to the UNDEP Security Organization for routine evaluation; the worst of these were then dispatched directly to the civil or federal authorities for potential police or legal action. Letter bombs and letters containing dangerous harmful ingredients, were an old story, constituting an ever-present danger. Each unsolicited letter or parcel therefore came under immediate suspicion, slowing Harold's work considerably, since all incoming parcels and packages had been passed through the bulk scanner in the basement, hopefully ensuring that nothing dangerous was contained therein. Harold used a small secondary scanner installed beside his desk to spot-check any letter or parcel he viewed as vaguely suspicious.

He routinely re-routed foreign language correspondence to the appropriate UNDEP office, but was forced to open each envelope and attempt to ascertain the particular language in which it was written. On the previous day, he had again pleaded for assistance in opening and sorting the endless deluge of mail. Thus far, his plea had gone unanswered, though Victoria had promised relief.

Using a letter opener with surgical skill, he deftly sliced the sealed flap of an electronic mail flimsy. The salutation read, "Dear Mother Doom, you Miserable Bitch! Who the hell gave you and your high 'n mighty committee the right to be judge, jury and executioner over poor folks who . . . ?"

Harold tossed the envelope and flimsy sheet into the recycle hopper. He went on to the next, and the next, and the one after that.

Near the bottom of the bag he came across a heavy, two-centimeter-thick parcel. Gingerly lifting it out, he hefted it, squeezed it gently, and grimaced. Postmarked Tripoli, it was dated three days earlier.

Another packet of shit! he thought in disgust. Mailing crap was a favorite method of displaying utter contempt for Dr. Duiño and the committee she chaired, and packages of camel dung dispatched by the sons and daughters of Islam were commonplace. Harold tried the letter opener's pointed tip on a corner of the pouch; it failed to penetrate the tough plastic material. Many parcels arrived sealed, but this one, he decided, wasn't merely sealed, it was sealed.

Holding the slim packet at arm's length, all but certain it contained excrement, he pressed hard with the point of the letter opener and managed to make an incision. Sliding the thin blade along the edge crease with added caution, he slowly parted the plastic cover.

Inside were what appeared to be two sheets of heavy blue art paper with loosely packed, sifted grayish powder of some kind stuffed between them. He warily sniffed the substance; it gave off a tart, acrid odor.

Puzzled, but by no means alarmed, he pushed aside the opened package, spilling a few granules of the contents. Before going on his morning break, he meant to send the parcel down to the lab and have the grainy substance analyzed.

Harold went through the repetitious monotony of opening and sorting four or five additional letters. He paid no attention to the open parcel, gave no thought to the fact that the filtered, artificially humidified sixty-eight degree air circulating throughout the United Nations Tower was invading the envelope, contacting the mysterious gray powder.

* * *

The crumm-m-m-mph! of an explosion rocked Victoria's inner office with the force of a minor earthquake tremor. The shock wave, confined within the outer office and antechamber, bulged the steel-reinforced, sliding pocket door to the outer office nesting in a shallow alcove.

Victoria tried to snatch up her bamboo cane, missed and knocked it to the carpet. She stumbled, nearly fell in her haste to get out to the antechamber, then almost tripped again before reaching the wall, hitting the manual activation switch with the heel of her hand. The bowed-in door squeaked, tried to move, but budged only a few centimeters. She hobbled back to her desk, punched the intercom button. The circuit appeared to be dead.

Anxious minutes passed before a series of loud thuds announced that one or more security staffers were attacking the sliding door with fire axes. Dents appeared. Another minute passed before a thin opening grew slowly between the reinforced door and the sill.

Accompanied by grunts and a metal-to-metal squeal of complaint, two pairs of gloved hands appeared, forced the opening to enlarge. "You all right, ma'am?" The tall security officer was red-faced, puffing from exertion.

"I'm not injured." She allowed the guard to take her arm and assist her in squeezing through the narrow opening.

"We're getting everyone down to a lower floor," advised the guard, not letting go of her elbow. A third officer was spraying a flaming stack of letters with a portable fire extinguisher.

"Out of my way," she ordered.

Harold Strabough lay crumpled against a bookcase, his tunic singed black. Blown completely out of the chair, he was without a face.

Hardened as she had once been to accident victims and OR procedures, Victoria felt her stomach turn. She knelt awkwardly, felt for the pulse at her secretary's carotid artery, finding it thready, weak. But at least it was there. "You've summoned help?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Paramedics should be here any second now."

Another pair of security officers appeared. One of them couldn't help himself; turning aside, he retched.

Harold moved once. His arm stirred, his fingers twitched. Then he slumped flaccidly and Victoria knew it was over. She checked again for a pulse at his throat, rose stiffly without the aid of her cane, and stepped back. There was blood on her fingers.

But then, came the inane thought, bloodstains are nothing new to these gnarled, liver-spotted hands.

* * *

"The lab," reported A.J. Broward an hour later, "is fairly sure it was a salt of fulminic acid $\frac{3}{4}$ mercury fulminate's the best guess. If so, that's why neither his nitrate sniffer, or the one downstairs, didn't beep a warning."

Still in shock, Victoria managed to say, "That sounds too sophisticated for run-of-the-mill terrorists."

"I agree." The image of A.J. in the vidicom panel made his long, horsey features look distended; his expression told Victoria he was angry enough to do murder. "The lab director thinks the perp, or perps, may've had access to someone involved in the munitions business. He told me fulminic acid salts are used in detonators, dynamite caps, other percussive devices, and said fulminate of mercury becomes viciously unstable when exposed to humidified air. The creeps probably packed it loosely so the enhanced humidity here in the tower would get to it quickly and —"

"Please, A.J. Not now. What can we do about it?"

The question made Broward even angrier. "Ever since the long gone World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, terrorists have convinced themselves the only way to save the world is by blowing it up, in many cases along with they themselves. We've no idea where the bomb came from. Not yet, anyhow. I won't try to kid you, Victoria; other than running a trace on whatever residue the lab can turn up, there isn't a whole lot we'll be able to do about chasing down whoever was responsible."

Victoria nodded. "I thought as much. In that case, there doesn't seem to be anything more to say or do. I intend to make the final arrangements myself. Harold was orphaned at an early age; as far as I know, he has no relatives, close or distant. There's no one to mourn him except us, his UNDEP brothers and sisters."

"I, uh, didn't know that," lied Broward, who actually knew as much as there was to know about the late Harold Strabough. Victoria's executive assistant had not been overlooked during the deep background investigation that routinely went hand in glove with U.N. employment in any position of trust. "Listen, I appreciate how hard this is for you, but you can't let it —"

"Not now," she repeated in a more subdued tone of voice. "I really must get back to work, A.J. Harold was a casualty of war, a hero in his own gentle way. I meant what I said; I mean to take care of the final arrangements out of my own purse."

Broward said respectfully. "As you wish. If there's anything I can do to help, anything at all, please let me know. Promise me you'll do that, Victoria."

"Yes, I shall . . ."

Seven

The five-story, red-brick office building in a once genteel Cleveland business district was past the stage of being run down. Encrusted with grime from the sea change wrought by many decades and numberless occupants, it had more or less outlived its usefulness. A faded OUT OF ORDER sign taped to the old-fashioned elevator's filigreed, wrought-iron doors, as well as the cage inside, looked permanently out of service.

Auntie remarked to her companions that the elevator should have been dismantled and junked some time ago, along with the building housing it. Trailed by a pair of plainclothes UNDEP Security agents, she climbed the stairs' creaking risers. At each landing, the stairwell's dimly lit, graffiti-scrawled walls took on a sleazier appearance.

A.J. Broward had again inveighed upon U.N. Intelligence Agency Director Philip Clews, petitioning his colleague to have someone pulse Geneva's encyclopedic database. The suspect's less than wholesome pedigree, unearthed shortly by Clews' people, described one Nasir ad-Lur, alias Albert Lurie, AKA Nathaniel Addison, as an immigrant reared in a remote foothill village of the Posht Kuh Range south of Kermanshah, on Iran's western frontier. Educated in Teheran, the chemical engineer was said to be fluent in Luri, Farsi, Turkish and French, and also spoke English reasonably well, though according to the forwarded report had never been able to overcome a moderate accent.

A.J. and his star investigator had combed the data obtained from Geneva individually and in concert, and compared notes. An Iranian expatriate, the man had entered the U.S. on a long-expired tourist visa. During brief stints as a lecturer and untenured associate professor at Columbia University, "Albert Lurie" had taught chemical engineering until being summarily dismissed for seducing a coed whose uncle happened to be a Bronx detective lieutenant.

Indications were that Lurie had remained in the country illegally. If that proved to be true, Auntie and her Chief judged it ammunition of sufficient caliber to warrant the secondary salvo they proposed to fire in order to hopefully obtain an on-the-spot confession.

A cracked, frosted-glass panel in the door of third-floor office 34A identified the tenant as:

N. A. ADDISON & ASSOCIATES
CHEMICAL ENGINEERING CONSULTANTS

Beneath the words hand-lettered in gold script, a distinctive logo or symbol of some kind had the look of a stylized candlestick topped by doubled curlicues and surrounded by curved, tapering brush strokes.

The younger security agent, Tom, said softly, "What's with the screwy decoration, Auntie?"

"The Iranian coat of arms," she whispered. "The stylized script spells out the Prophet's name in Farsi." Turning to the senior agent, she said, "Marty, hang out here in the hallway a minute or three. Keep your eyes peeled in case our guy decides to scarper by the back door."

The agent glanced down the length of the shabby corridor. "Think there's another exit from this dump?"

"Let's not find out the hard way. Ready, Tom?"

The agent nodded, slid his right hand beneath his jacket and slipped off the safety loop securing his weapon in an underarm holster.

Auntie twisted the knob very slowly, inched the door inward. Much like other parts of the decrepit building, the anteroom had seen better days. A surly looking teenage youth was cranked back in an unpadded wooden swivel chair, his sandaled, stockingless feet propped up on the open drawer of a battered sheet metal desk supporting a banker's lamp with a dusty green shade, an obsolete vidicom terminal, and nothing else.

The dark-complected kid lowered a facsimile printout of the Cleveland Plain Dealer sports pages. He stared incuriously at the man and woman who had dared to invade his privacy. "Whatever it is you're selling," he piped, "we don't need any."

"Good morning," Auntie gave the youth a free sample of her sunburst smile. "There's something important we'd like to discuss with Mr. Addison. Think he'd have time to see us this early in the day?"

"Ain't here," the kid said, returning his attention to the sports page.

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that we've missed him. When do you expect him back?"

The youth did not stir. "No telling. Try next week sometime," was his terse rejoinder. "It'd be smart to give a jingle first. Y'with me?"

Auntie dipped her chin a few millimeters in Tom's direction. The burly agent circled the desk with cat-quick steps. The swivel chair's springs squeaked as large, sinewy hands closed around the kid's upper arms, ungently levitated him and stood him on his feet.

"Hey!" cried the youth. "What the hell you think you're doing?"

"Weren't you ever taught that it's polite to stand in a lady's presence?"

"What . . . ?"

Tom paraphrased the kid's earlier advice: "It'd be smart for you to shut your yap."

Indistinct movement could be seen on the far side of a second frosted-glass door leading to the inner office. Auntie looked up as the door swung wide. Marty, the second security agent, unceremoniously frog-marched a perspiring, middle-aged man through the doorway. "Score one for the home team," said Marty. "He bolted out of a door on down the hall."

Auntie regarded the disheveled man narrowly. Wearing a doleful, hangdog expression, he looked as if he might be nursing a hangover. He had neglected to shave that morning; heavy stubble lent his cheeks and jowls a blued-steel look. His bloodshot dark eyes darted from Tom to Auntie to Marty, and finally came to rest on the boy. His lips worked as if he intended to say something, but he apparently thought better of it and subsided.

"Good day to you, Mr. Addison." Auntie augmented the greeting with a reprise of her ivory-laden smile. "Marty, I think maybe Mr. Addison would be more comfortable back inside his office?"

"You heard her." The agent let go of the suspect's arm.

A short burst of rapid Farsi erupted from the chemical engineer. The boy obediently edged toward the door to the hall. He found Tom blocking his path.

"So this likely looking youngster's your son." Auntie had worked the streets long enough to have picked up a few words of practically every language spoken. "You must be right proud of the lad, Mr. Addison."

"Get out of my way," the kid demanded indignantly. "You can't keep me here."

Tom looked through the youth. He didn't move.

"Tom," remarked Auntie, "I don't believe this handsome young gentleman wants to use the vidicom terminal." She followed Addison into the inner office, closed the door behind her and waited for Addison to shuffle around and sit down at his desk, his shoulders hunched as if expecting a blow.

Her back to the door, Auntie said, "Shall we talk, Mr. Addison?"

"About what?" the other said dully.

"For starters, let's discuss money." Auntie made a production of setting her shoulder bag on the desk and pawing through the contents, all the while muttering to herself while making sure Addison caught a glimpse of her weapon. She had to remove a coin purse, lipstick and a plastic wallet before saying, "Ah, here we are." Unfolding the hundred-D banknote, she smoothed it between her fingers, laid it on Addison's desk and silently awaited his reaction.

Scowling faintly, the chemical engineer stared at the bill. He smacked his lips, sniffed as if he thought the odor given off by the banknote was a means of determining its genuineness. Knuckling bloodshot eyes, he asked, "What's this, some kind of payoff?"

"Not exactly," denied Auntie. "In fact, just the opposite, Mr. Addison; it could more properly be called payback, not payoff. This happens to be one of the hundred-D notes you had messengered to Assistant Pharmacy Manager Alan Tackett as a reward for his promise to sell a packet of birth-control placebos."

Auntie watched the suspect carefully through the ensuing two-beat pause. Addison did not turn a hair. This guy is good, she thought, a lot tougher than he wants anyone to know.

"It might help," said Addison said with a pretense of weariness, "if I knew what you were talking about."

"Oh, you know perfectly well what I'm talking about, Mr. Nasir ad-Lur, Albert Lurie, Nathaniel Addison, whatever you call yourself on Wednesdays. That is something of which I am one thousand percent certain."

Addison blinked, grimaced and did his best to look confused, as if his mental processes were enervated by Auntie's recital of aliases. "Listen," he said a touch stridently, "you can't break into my office with two goons and accuse me of any goddamn thing you please. Not without a search warrant you can't. When my attorney finds out about this he'll —"

"— dump you as a client," supplied Auntie, punctuating the bad news with a second dazzling smile. "Your civil rights would hold up fine and dandy, Mr. Nasir ad-Lur, if you were an American citizen."

Bull's eye! she thought, instantly changing her mind about the succeeding move. She decided to forgo A.J.'s advice about trying to chivvy information from the suspect. Her instincts told her it would make little sense to waste breath soft-soaping a bozo who was already running scared, plenty scared at that. She could almost smell the fear coming off him like a vapor. Pegging him a hardcase on the outside, but a tub of mush inside, she felt Addison a overripe for the fall. The quivering chin and watery eyes signaled that he was teetering, almost ready to fold.

After letting the suspect stew in his own juices a few seconds longer, she rummaged deeper in her shoulder bag, taking her time, and played the trump card she and A.J. had briefly discussed. Laying before Addison a row of four flat photos, she launched a direct frontal assault, pressing hard. "Mr. Nasir ad-Lur, these pics are an overview of the big United Nations slam on Madagascar." She tapped a panoramic shot of the exterior with a manicured fingernail. "Think you'll be able to learn to enjoy a long stay in a beautiful equatorial paradise like Madagascar?"

Addison's dark eyes bugged. "Who are you?"

Auntie reached into her bag and flipped opened her wallet, giving Addison a second glimpse of the weapon, and flashed her UNDEP Security buzzer.

Perspiring copiously, the suspect patted his receding hairline with a none-too-clean kerchief, then daubed it around under his chin, making his dewlap wiggle-waggle. "The, uh . . . United Nations," he said uncertainly, stopped abruptly and began anew. "The U.N. has no jurisdiction in —"

"Oh, come off it! You know better than to say something that foolish. My instructions call for carting your sorry ass straight from this deluxe office suite of yours to Cleveland Intercontinental. You'll be flown directly to Geneva, indicted, arraigned, tried and convicted by the U.N. High Court. They say there was once a mild, pleasant day in Madagascar, except no one alive can remember it."

"I have rights," whined Addison. "I want to call my lawyer."

"No problem," she told him. "You'll be free to call whoever you wish once we get you to Geneva." If he sweats much more, she marveled, the poor sumbitch'll drown. Studying the other with unsmiling, stolid intensity, she tried to emulate the blinkless, soul-freezing stare A.J. had cultivated and employed with devastating effectiveness. Sensing that it was her move to shut up and stare accusatively, she waited in silence for the other shoe to drop.

Seconds ticked away before the figurative other shoe slipped to the floor with a dull thud. Sounding defeated, Addison said, "What is it you . . . want to know?"

"For starters, a name and address."

Once again Nasir ad-Lur, alias Albert Lurie, AKA Nathaniel Addison went through the process of mopping his face and neck with the soggy kerchief. Stuffing it back in a rear trouser pocket with a spastic motion, he cleared his throat and started to talk.

To Auntie's complete and total satisfaction, he didn't stop talking for the better part of fifteen minutes.

* * *

On impulse, Sayyid made up his mind to chance sneaking into the Fort Jesus Museum. A thoughtful young student, he tried to be discreet about it, and stood with his weight on one foot, then the other, until a squad of Kenyan soldiers guarding the entrance descended the steps part way and busied themselves repulsing a swarm of hungry protesters. The rag-tag assortment of men, women and children carrying signs and shouting slogans had been rampaging through Mombasa's jam-packed streets.

It was refreshingly cool inside the huge, five-century-old Portuguese fortress. Sayyid noted how lightly attended the historical exhibits were — no major surprise, since all but a few tourists and foreigners had fled the jeopardized nation weeks earlier. A thin, middle-aged woman wearing a docent's badge looked him over, evaluated his reasonably neat appearance and calm demeanor, and offered no objection when he politely requested permission to wander into the left-wing gallery.

A well-tailored gentleman with Sinitic features, the only other person in the long gallery, had his hands clasped behind his back and while gazing at a diorama that portrayed a Masai kraal of yesteryear. In front of a hut, the mannequin of a muran, a Masai warrior of old, held a clutch of weapons. The deftly posed figure of a woman squatting beside the warrior attended to the needs of a small, naked child.

Sayyid had no particular reason to risk slipping into the museum other than to avoid the human maelstrom out in the streets. Fort Jesus could not be considered a sanctuary, but it was definitely a safer haven than could be found fighting one's way through the angry mobs circulating in the city. He sidled over to a spot near the lone visitor and pretended to study the diorama. Keeping his voice low, he said in Swahili, "Sir, can you spare a few shillings?"

The Asian gentleman turned slowly. He sized up Sayyid without a change of expression. "I judge you to be of hamitic stock, young man," he said, his English rendered in a clipped Oxon accent. "You are too light-skinned for anyone of the Bantu strain. Of Arabic ancestry, I surmise. Portuguese is also a possibility, although I would think it unlikely. You are perhaps one who has given himself to Allah, is that not so?"

Gratified to hear a cultured response instead of the rude rebuff he had anticipated, Sayyid dipped his head deferentially. "You are astute, sir," he said in English. "I am indeed one who has surrendered to God."

The nattily attired Asian gentleman nodded. "And exactly how would the 'few shillings' you've requested be spent?"

Sayyid confessed that he would try to buy something to eat.

"A reasonable goal. Yes, I imagine 'a few shillings' would be enough to sustain you for a matter of hours, although not much longer. Only if," added the other, "it goes without saying, you would be able to find something edible to purchase."

"It will be . . . difficult," admitted Sayyid. "I'm a student, sir . . . Your pardon, a former student at Strathmore College in Nairobi. When things fell apart there and grew steadily worse, the school closed its doors. I worked in a flour mill for a short time. Since then, I've been trying to get to Masaka in Uganda; my aunt lives there. I finally made my way to Kisumu, but all steamer service had been suspended on Lake Victoria. Hundreds of thousands of refugees are jammed into Kisumu, seeking a chance to flee the country."

The Asian gentleman held Sayyid in his analytical gaze. "So you returned to Mombasa," he suggested, "in search of a sea route out of the country?"

“It was . . . Yes, sir; that was what I had in mind. People are starving in the savanna, the Rift Valley, the highlands, everywhere. Animals are being slaughtered for food in the game preserves.”

“Sad, yet inevitable.” The other shot his cuff, glanced at his wrist chronometer. “I’m due to meet someone here in Mombasa later in the day. You shall receive your few shillings, but only on one condition.”

“I’m in no position to argue conditions, sir.”

“Granted. Yet while the condition I wish to impose may strike you as simply stated, it will not be simple to adopt. Before explaining what I wish you to do, I must warn you not to give up. Never give up, just as Kenya itself must never give up. All is not lost. Not yet, at any rate.”

Puzzled, Sayyid politely inquired to whom he was speaking.

“I have an altogether unpleasant assignment, my young student. I am acting as one of several United Nations observers, a gentleman all Kenyans would think of as the enemy, although that is far from being the case. Whether you wish to believe it or not, I am on your side, you see. Should you agree to my condition, all that will be necessary is for you to meet me at the Kilindini docks exactly three hours from now. Do you accept that condition?”

“I, yes . . . Certainly, sir. You will . . . help me escape?”

“No, that I cannot do. There is no escape path. Pre-triage interdiction is being rigorously enforced by the INF troops. What I can do, however, is to provide you with an excellent reason to stay and endure along with the remainder of your countrymen. As an educated young gentleman, you should be first to appreciate what I and my associates have been sent here to observe. There may be a much better solution to your plight — to the plight of all Kenyans — than fleeing the country, even if such a desperate feat could be undertaken.”

“I . . . don’t understand, sir.”

“I’m fully aware of that. But if my condition is met, in time you will understand. Here is the address, as well as the promised few shillings. Do you pledge on your honor to keep our appointment?”

Sayyid thought it over. “Three hours. Yes, of course I’ll be there, sir. I have nothing to lose by keeping the promise.”

“Well said.” The other smiled for the first time. “You have nothing whatever to lose, but perhaps something of genuine value to gain . . .”

* * *

The private service marking the celebration of Harold Strabough’s life was in its final stages. Sans choir, altar boys, or the formal ecclesiastic vestments in which he was normally attired, UNDEP’s aged Jesuit chaplain, the Right Reverend Monsignor Esterhazy, presided over the service in the U.N. Tower’s twelfth-floor chapel.

Seated in a front row pew, Dr. Duiño was flanked on either side by Surgeon General Levi Melnick and Security Director A.J. Broward. The other eight Triage Committee members occupied front pews on the other side of the center aisle, but expressionless Deputy Chairperson Bennett Rook sat stiffly erect four seats away, on Victoria’s left. Behind the officials a scattering of other UNDEP functionaries were gathered toward the front of the chapel; to most of them, the late Harold Strabough had been at best a casual acquaintance.

But not a single blood relative is here to witness poor Harold’s last rites, thought Victoria somberly. Wondering if Harold had actually been alone in the world, she had searched UNDEP’s encyclopedic database in a computerized quest for any and all prospective next of kin. The effort had proved fruitless; she’d been unable to turn up so much as a third or fourth cousin.

An elderly fussbudget, Monsigno Esterhazy was due to retire shortly. A touch off-center in the way he said Mass, not to mention the slightly peculiar sort of sermon for which was famous, the priest had reluctantly agreed to Victoria's suggestion, and conducted what he termed "a nonsectarian service." But after listening to his measured vowels and disruptive sibilances, Victoria had judged the interpolated liturgy reminiscent of Protestant funerals she had attended in the past. Yet whatever the service amounted to, it had served its purpose. By no stretch of the imagination did the Monsignor's interpretation of "nonsectarian" bear any resemblance to the familiar Requiem Mass. But that of course was of no consequence, mattering not in the least.

Her wandering gaze fell upon the altar, where the silver chalice containing Harold's ashes rested beside a hand-carved rosewood crucifix gifted by A.J. Broward; the beautifully sculpted wooden cross evoked memories of bygone funerals. In her youth, interment had remained a fundamental Catholic tradition, with the dear departed laid to rest in a silk-lined coffin fashioned of burnished metal, or polished wood. Dressed in his or her finery after being transformed by a mortician into a rouged, waxlike effigy of his or her former self, the deceased had begun his journey through eternity with obligatory bowers of floral tribute ranged beside the bier.

But America's graveyards and cemeteries had filled to overflowing decades ago, although a few burial grounds had escaped the deconsecration and rededication of most in order to fulfill the demands of agriculture, business or other utilitarian usages. Military preserves like Arlington National Cemetery, and a few other national cemeteries, had been sustained despite loud, vociferous opposition to honor the memory of America's elite departed warriors and political icons. Along with the defunct graveyards and cemeteries, a major U.S. business enterprise, the undertaking industry, had shrunk to a shadow of its former self.

Harold's ashes would rest forever in the United Nations Columbarium niche procured by Victoria with her own private funds. Rest forever . . . ? She tried to imagine how anything worldly could last forever. Forever was a very long time indeed.

Sensing Dr. Melnick's oblique glance of inquiry, she smiled thinly to reassure him she was bearing up. She saw that the smile had little effect on Levi.

Monsignor Esterhazy concluded his eulogy on a note of eloquence. Lifting his eyes to intercede with the Almighty on behalf of Harold Strabough's soul, he referred to the departed as "The innocent victim of a heinous, barbarous crime," and asked all present to bow their heads and join him in a moment of silent prayer.

After the ensuing interlude of quiet, punctuated by a few coughs and rustlings, the organist opened all stops and the sonorous chords of Monsignor Esterhazy's favorite hymn, Handel's "Rejoice, the Lord is King," rolled through the chapel.

* * *

A general stir among the attendees marked the service's conclusion. Several dozen people rose, began filing up the center aisle, and dispersed after passing beneath the chapel's arched, carved-stone entry. Victoria remained seated as one by one Melnick, Broward and her colleagues and committeemen and women stopped to tender their last condolences.

Alone once the last well-wisher had put her through the emotional ordeal of describing the depth of his or her sorrow, she was preparing to rise, looked up and flinched upon meeting Rook's chill gaze.

The tall man bent down, wordlessly offered his arm.

Victoria allowed him to assist her. "Thank you, Bennett."

"We must talk," he said, handing her the silver-handled ebony cane she reserved for special occasions.

“This is hardly the proper time and place.”

“Kenya,” he said, refusing to be put off, “is on its last legs, Victoria. As a nation, it’s finished, kaput. Kenya has already fallen, but the brain hasn’t yet realized the body no longer functions. I realize you won’t admit the truth, but I believe the time has come for you to admit it, at least to yourself.”

“Not quite yet,” was her crisp reply.

Sublimated anger glinted in Rook’s hazel eyes. “Why do you persist in this obstinacy?” he asked with null inflection. “Why keep stalling to no purpose? It will accomplish nothing other than prolonging the agony. What surprises me most is that what you insist upon refusing to do isn’t really a bit like you. Forestalling the inevitable tends to worsen the situation, not improve it. That is something you are as aware of as I myself.”

“The question of Kenya has been temporarily settled, Bennett. During yesterday’s session,” she reminded him, “you made it abundantly clear that Kenya has been wobbling on the brink for quite some time. And, yes; Kenya may tumble into the pit, then again perhaps it may not. Statistically, the poor, ravaged nation has yet to drop off the edge.”

Having posted himself at the chapel’s entry, Monsignor Esterhazy had finished offering his blessings to the departing attendees. He watched Victoria approach, escorted by Rook. She stopped to thank the priest for his efforts. Expressing deepest sympathy for her loss, the aged cleric looked through Rook as if he were made of clear, polished crystal, his manner denying the tall man’s very existence.

Outwardly oblivious to the slight, Rook conducted his superior along the twelfth floor corridor. “As I was saying, the situation in Kenya has degenerated from near-hopeless to utterly hopeless.”

“I thought it was obvious that I don’t agree.”

“Hope springs eternal, is that it?”

“Eternal.”

Rook’s overlarge mouth tightened. “Yesterday’s ballot ended in the usual four-to-four split, making your tie-breaking vote mandatory.”

“I beg to differ,” she objected. “Nothing in our proceedings is mandatory. The skewed parliamentary rules we employ were established long ago. The chairperson cannot be forced to cast a vote if he or she has no wish to do so.”

“I stand corrected. But it’s difficult to conceive how you’ll be able to further stave off a realistic appraisal of the Kenyan crisis. Rejudgment to Class I is as inevitable as tomorrow’s sunrise, and at least two of our colleagues are wavering, on the fence. Let me say state my point one last time, Victoria: Class I reclassification is an absolute necessity.”

“Wavering and ‘on the fence’,” she said, a brittle edge to her voice, “means one or more of our wavering colleagues may continue to weigh the evidence and jump off the fence in either direction. I myself am equally certain that tomorrow’s vote, should there be one, will be precisely the same as the last. The Kenyans must and shall be given a final opportunity to survive, no matter how slim their chances appear to be just now. I am determined to reassure them of that chance. Kenya is being accorded one final opportunity to recover, and there is nothing you can do to take away that opportunity.”

Rook pressed a button; the executive express elevator doors parted. He gazed at Victoria for a brief instant, turned on his heel and his long, purposeful strides carried him away.

A hint of a frown hovered on Victoria’s wrinkled brow as she watched her deputy’s broad back recede. The elevator doors closed, cutting off the view.

Herself once again, serene and self-contained, she left the elevator and stumped toward her office, aided by the ebony cane.

* * *

A.J. Broward left the twelfth-floor chapel in a gloomy frame of mind. Funerals invariably depressed him, and the reason that had nothing to do with reminding him of his own mortality. It wasn't in his nature to fretting about or dread anything that happened to be inevitable, a feeling that included the prospect of paying the terminal debt no one could escape. It was doubly perturbing for him to think that Monsignor Esterhazy's modest, somewhat strange obituary ceremony had been only a somber footnote to the pointless death of Victoria's executive assistant.

Letter bombs were universally senseless despite occasional effectiveness. It deeply alarmed him — frightened him, actually — to realize that one or more disturbed, hate-driven individuals had designed a letter bomb subtle and insidious enough to penetrate and defeat the multiple safeguards put in place to prevent what had transpired.

He detested being alarmed, and liked being frightened even less. In the executive express elevator compartment heading back to his office, he rethought the matter through, and then thought it through again. In essence, if it were possible to thrust emotion completely aside and view the matter in the cold, clear light of logic, it could be said that the letter bomb had not actually defeated all the imposed safeguards. Some would call it a callous observation on his part, but he couldn't help but considering it valid to think the ultimate safeguard had been Harold Strabough himself. He had innocently, unwittingly intercepted the infernal parcel, had prevented it from being opened by its authentic target, and for his unknowing sacrifice A.J. would be eternally grateful.

Ever since leaving the GNYPD and assuming his present post, he had lived and worked under the most terrifying cloud imaginable, the lurking threat of unstemmed nuclear proliferation. Not that the terrorists who might come into possession of one or more awesome weapons of mass destruction were the sole danger UNDEP was attempting to suppress and defeat. Far from it, yet the notion of a nuclear device in the hands of one or more crazies willing and eager to use it constituted a neverending nightmare. If a letter bomb arriving in the mail had wrought havoc, what would it be like if some supposedly sane, level-headed individual or group — characteristics that unfortunately did not pertain to certain foreign dictators and chiefs of state — were to focus their rabid antipathy on UNDEP's detested triage practices and attempt to do the worst?

If that line were to be crossed, it would mark the instant when most remaining vestiges of human civilization would begin to crumble. He had often tried to imagine the catastrophic consequences if even a relatively small fission device were it to be successfully smuggled into, or adjacent to, a densely populated structure like the United Nations Tower. As it had on numerous other occasions, the grisly prospect brought with it a twinge of nausea.

With visions of nuclear carnage dancing in his head, A.J. used his optically encoded key-card to gain admittance to the anteroom. Leslie interrupted his passage with word of an urgent call from Auntie and handed him a sticky-back note listing a Cleveland vidicom number. "She'll be anxiously awaiting your call, Mr. Broward."

"Thanks, Les." A.J.'s demeanor abruptly changed. Perked up visibly, he asked Leslie to put through an encrypted call soon as he reached his desk.

Auntie's sunny smile blossomed in the vidicom display. "Today," said Broward, "I will listen to only good news, Detective Forchet."

“You get your wish, Chief. Best damn news of all ain’t out yet, but for starters this tidbit will do.” She explained the outcome of her interrogation. “To coin a cliché, pics of the Madagascar lockup scared the perp spitless. I honestly couldn’t get the guy to shut up once he started spiling. Mr. Nasir ad-Lur, Lurie, Addison, et al, et cetera, spilled his guts all over the place, and they weren’t pretty. The prime info is that he pulled the plug on a Philadelphia pharmaceutical wholesaler.”

“Name?” demanded A.J.

“Fierst, Yocum Fierst.” Auntie spelled both the given and surnames. “Odd moniker, wouldn’t you say? So much so that intuition tells me Mr. Nasir ad-Lur doesn’t have enough imagination to pick a name like that out of the hat. Any chance this Fierst guy means anything to you?”

“No, not a thing,” said A.J. “Give me a minute to do a quick database check. Stay near the vidicom; I’ll get back to you right smartly.”

“Hold it, Chief. What I plan to do with Mr ad-Lur, Lurie, Addison or whatever is haul him and an obnoxious pup of his over to the local lockup for storage.”

“For all I care,” interrupted Broward, “you can toss all three of him into Lake Erie.”

Millie Forchet’s smile flashed warmly. “Uh-uh, scratch that. Haven’t the time or energy.”

“Go on,” said A.J. impatiently, “spill it. What have you in mind?”

“My first notion was to haul his ass over to Philly and let him give this guy Fierst an earful of face-to-face j’accuse. But that didn’t seem practical, so I figure to cart him and his kid over to a local precinct lockup, let the cops put all three of him on ice while Tom, Marty and I zip over to Philly and pounce on this guy Fierst. Wouldn’t pay to let our Persian pal or his kid get near a vidicom terminal, now would it?”

A brusque nod from A.J. “Good thinking. Sew ‘em up tight, and cut straight to the chase. Come to think of it, why don’t you stay on the line while I get a hurry-up reading on the suspect’s ID?”

“I’ll be here, Chief.”

A.J. slapped a button, putting the Cleveland call on hold, punched the intercom and gave Leslie terse instructions. She used Broward’s authority to pass the order along to the downstairs research center.

Broward got back on the line and chit-chatted with Auntie while they waited. In less than five minutes the computer coughed up a response.

“Sonuvabitch!” gritted Augustus Jason Broward.

“That bad?” asked Auntie.

“Worse than bad. Rotten! Go ahead, stow Addison and his cub in safekeeping for the time being, but scratch the Philly trip and come on home. Mr. Yocum L. Fierst was a shady dealer in pharmaceuticals.”

“Was . . . ?”

“Was,” confirmed Broward. “He’d been arrested twice, but never convicted of his cute specialty — peddling black market drugs of every size, color and stripe. He was collared again a week and a half ago and arraigned on a similar charge. Then some dumbshit judge released him after he posted bail a quarter the size of the national debt.”

“So what’s the bottom line?” questioned Auntie.

“Night before last,” said Broward, “Fierst’s lady came home and found him crashed on the sofa, stone cold dead.”

Auntie groaned. “Natural causes?”

“You could say that,” A.J. told her, his inflection sardonic, “if strangulation and wearing an ice pick that went in one ear and came out the other is natural.”

Auntie groaned again.

Eight

Vincente Cardinal D’Angelo, another of the papal envoys known as legati a latere, appreciated how deep were the troubled waters in which his respected colleague had immersed himself. After debating the matter with himself at length, he could not dismiss an urge to pay a late night call on his friend.

The impromptu after-hours visit surprised Cardinal Freneaux. Clad in night dress, a paisley robe and preparing to retire, he nevertheless warmly greeted the elderly prelate at the door, invited him into his Vatican apartment. “Vincente, this is an unexpected pleasure. Come in, come in.”

Cardinal D’Angelo confronted his sad-eyed host reproachfully. “My dear Louis,” he said, “it’s painful beyond words to watch you throw away your life’s work. Why do you persist upon being so adamant in opposing the Holy Father’s will?”

“I can’t shake my conviction that he’s made a dreadful mistake. It’s regrettable, Vincente, but it forces me to, er . . . I have no choice but to dispute Il Papa’s decision.”

“Forces you . . . ?” D’Angelo’s doleful expression matched his somber query. “What lever, may I inquire, is being depressed that ‘forces’ you to act in such a rash, undisciplined manner?”

“The lever is my conscience,” said Freneaux without hesitation, “the fulcrum, my sensibilities.”

Cardinal D’Angelo settled in an armchair. “How can you possibly consider it fitting and proper for you or I — any of us — to dispute the solemn judgments rendered by His Holiness?”

“It’s neither fitting nor proper, but necessary. I can’t in good conscience bring myself to do otherwise.”

“In that event, my old friend, I must warn you, as I am sure others have already done, of the severe consequence in store. Il Papa has railed and raged over the reports of your endless attempts to persuade others among consortium cardinalis that you, and you alone, correctly view the onerous woman and her murderous practices. Louis, it is more than extremely difficult, beyond all reason, for I myself and your brethren to believe you’ve had the effrontery to suggest that you along, and your self-righteous convictions, are correct, while His Holiness is in the wrong concerning that vile woman’s pending excommunication. To think you’ve offended the Holy Father not once but on several occasions is simply beyond belief. It is madness, sheer madness.”

“In this singular instance,” argued Freneaux, “I’m convinced the judgment he has rendered is very wrong. Ask yourself a simple question, Vincente: where does one find chairing any type of United Nations committee in the roster of excommunicable offenses?”

“Louis, really!” D’Angelo waxed indignant. “Don’t you realize you’re belaboring the erroneous point you wish to make, while in reality missing the point entirely. The Holy Father reigns supreme, and we are his servants. We must therefore remain obedient to his will. In affairs of consequence like the one you so adamantly oppose, try and remember that the will of God’s earthly emissary is in effect God’s will.”

“There I beg to differ,” Freneaux said stiffly. “I’m convinced that the Holy Father has set in motion a flagrant injustice. Had the argument of his encyclical been toleratus rather than vitandus, I might have found it in my heart to remain silent with regard to the utterly unfair

action. But for him to demand, no to insist upon excommunicatio vitandus, thereby denying the sacrament to Dr. Duiño, who I truly consider every bit as devoted to the Universal Church as is His Holiness himself, well . . . I'm afraid in my heart it amounts to a plain and simple wrongdoing, and no amount of rationalization or hairsplitting will make it a just and proper act, nor in the larger sense the proper one."

"Now heed me," declared D'Angelo archly. "It is you, my friend, who is perpetrating a wrongdoing."

"Then I pray that God will forgive me," countered Freneaux, "for I'm unable to choose a different path. Not only will Dr. Duiño be denied the holy sacrament and last rites, vitandus will render her a pariah, a non-person to be avoided by the Catholic clergy and laity everywhere. I've persisted in doing my utmost to sway the Holy Father's resolve now, before it becomes too late and this crushingly severe form of excommunication is divulged to the public. For all practical purposes, the Holy Father is treating the matter as a vendetta, the object of a personal crusade. He refuses to listen to anything resembling a reasonable argument."

"Reasonable!" The word erupted explosively. Cardinal D'Angelo rolled his eyes. "Preaching opposition to the will of Il Papa is . . . Louis," he insisted, "you must appreciate the fact that the cause to which you've committed yourself is futility incarnate. Despite any form of rationalization on your part, what you are doing is actually a form of denying your own faith."

"It may . . . seem so," admitted Freneaux, a note of resignation apparent in his halting diction. "Yet look into your own heart, Vincente. Ask yourself whether this, the most drastic form of excommunication, is at all appropriate in this singular instance."

"What in the world can you possibly mean by 'appropriate'?" demanded his friend.

"Hasn't Holy Mother Church," argued Freneaux, "traditionally employed excommunication as a means of curing waywardness, not punishing it? Il Papa is too stubborn to admit it, but I fear that in his heart of hearts he thinks of Dr. Duiño's pending excommunication not as curative, but punitive. Revenge in a sense is the rebuttal he plans to cast in opposition to her 'sin' of presiding over triage judgments. Were his contemplated action to be done with compassion, and not in the spirit of retribution, mightn't excommunicatio toleratus coerce Dr. Duiño into performing serious soul-searching on her own? Mightn't she then petition to do penance, ultimately gain absolution and return to the state of grace? What the Holy Father proposes is, to my mind, an act of awesome injustice."

"Referring to decisions rendered by the nefarious U.N. committee as 'triage judgments'," declared D'Angelo, "is nothing less than a euphemistic attempt to downplay the stark reality of cold-blooded, premeditated genocide. Many of us believe triage can be thought of as the previous century's Nazi Holocaust reborn, an updated method of ethnic cleansing. You do acknowledge that fact of life, do you not?"

"Wholeheartedly, without reservation," replied Freneaux. "Daring to pass wholesale death sentences on helpless human beings is the crime of crimes, and carrying out the sentences amounts to an unspeakable abomination. The very concept of triage usurps the role of God in the universe. It's a continuing ravage of the human mind and spirit."

Frustrated, D'Angelo said, "If so, why are you so adamant about opposing —?"

"Because unfortunately," replied Freneaux, "not even Il Papa has the power to excommunicate the entire nine-member Triage Committee. Without Dr. Duiño at the helm, global triage judgments would not only continue to be rendered and implemented, but I firmly believe such judgments would become even more harsh, more frequent and more inhumane than

heretofore. I know in my heart this to be true, Vincente. I have dared to confront His Holiness more than once with what I believe is that solemn truth.”

“Even more harsh, you say? What can that possibly mean?”

“During her decades as chairperson,” explained Freneaux, “Dr. Duiño has exerted and will continue to exert an ameliorating influence on the genocidal actions of her fellow committee members. Should the Holy Father succeed in destroying her professionally, a strong likelihood exists that she will step down. But, what then, Vincente? What truly hideous triage activities will decimate our world if her deputy, Bennett Rook, assumes the chairmanship?”

“Rook!” Cardinal D’Angelo spat the name in the nature of a curse. He crossed himself.

“You’ve made root point of my argument for me, Vincente. The Holy Father might well trade the Matriarch of Death for the Angel of Death in all his ghastly presence. And what a thoroughly horrible barter that would be. Perhaps now you begin to comprehend why I have tried so desperately, tried with every iota of persuasive power I possess, to sway the opinion of not only the Holy Father himself, but of the entire College of Cardinals. Victoria Duiño is being offered up as a scapegoat, a sacrificial lamb served up on the altar of righteous indignation. Should the worst come to pass, I assure you she will suffer the most intense spiritual agonies either of us can begin to imagine. But I can also say with total conviction that she will eagerly choose to suffer hellfire throughout eternity before agreeing to relent in her quest for what she believes will someday ensure a better world.”

The elderly churchman grunted. “All well and good, Louis, but is it the act of a sane, intelligent priest such as yourself to actively seek martyrdom in a futile attempt to halt something that already —?”

“Allowing Dr. Duiño to suffer the most severe form of excommunication without raising my voice, shouting in protest,” Freneaux hurried to say, “would be to sinfully neglect justice. I cannot bring myself to give up the battle. In this matter I will continue to oppose His Holiness with every dram of physical and spiritual strength I possess.”

D’Angelo lifted his hands, a gesture of helplessness, and rose from the armchair. He appraised his colleague soberly. “If nothing else,” he said, “you have convinced me of your sincerity, Louis. Yet just or unjust, it strikes me as the pinnacle of unwisdom to pursue this hopeless crusade you are embarked upon. Please keep one solemn fact in mind at all times: the Holy Father can remove cardinals from the rolls every bit as easily as he nominates them. I urge you to think deeply about the ultimate consequences of your actions.”

A wan smile crossed Freneaux’s emaciated features. “I have already done so many times, Vincente. My conclusion is that rather than remaining silent I would happily end my days as a parish priest somewhere in the rural Dordogne.”

Frustrated, but unable for the sake of his own conscience to let the matter drop, Cardinal D’Angelo sat down again. He began anew, earnestly lecturing his colleague, trying with every means at his disposal to dissuade Freneaux from what he himself considered the “suicidal course” his friend had chosen to follow

Eventually realizing that his heartfelt pleas and arguments were less than meaningless to Freneaux, falling on deaf ears, he nevertheless continued to do his best to make the other see the ultimate error of his ways.

He did not succeed.

* * *

A.J. Broward’s executive assistant hastily rearranged the remaining items on her desk. Lifting her coat from the rack, she seized her purse, preparing to leave the office at the close of

the workday. She made a final survey of the antechamber, assuring herself that all confidential paperwork was under lock and key. In the act of punching the cypher code to lock the outer door behind her, the vidicom terminal chimed twice inside, arresting her departure.

Leslie deliberated about whether or not to let UNDEP's secure answering service handle the call. Hurrying back, she set down her purse and opened the blinking channel. "UNDEP Security, Mr. Broward's office."

The image that condensed in the display was of a gentleman no longer young; his soulful blue eyes were sharply at odds with his florid, rough-chiseled features. A transplant from the Ould Sod, thought Leslie, if ever a one there was.

"Director Broward, please."

"I'm sorry, sir. The director's out of the office. May I ask who's calling?"

"Detective Captain Allen, Philadelphia Police Department."

"Yes, Captain. Can I take a message, have him call you back?"

Captain Allen paused as if thinking it over. In a scratchy-throated drawl, he said, "Take no offense, ma'am, but if a second-hand message went through we could both be in trouble. Mr. Broward left word here at headquarters that he wished to be personally advised of any break in a certain case currently under investigation. He made a strong point of wanting a tight lid kept on what I have to tell him. Do you expect him back this evening?"

"Possibly, Captain; I'm not sure. Can I have him call you?"

"Please do. I'll be at my desk another half-hour, forty-five minutes." The detective recited a string of digits.

"I'll let him know the minute I reach him, Captain Allen."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am."

Leslie lifted her coat and purse again, reconsidered and set the items down again. A sixth sense born of years spent fielding calls of a similar nature told her what she'd heard was significant enough to warrant awaiting Broward's return. Ten minutes passed, fifteen. A.J. did not reappear. Reluctant to do so, yet believing it necessary, she rang his suite on the tower's eighty-eighth floor.

Adela Broward answered. "Yeah, Les; he's planted on the sofa right now. Poor overworked man of the house dragged himself in the door a while ago. He's catching up on the evening news, and dinner's about to go on the table. Can whatever it is wait till morning?"

Leslie bit her lip. "I'm not sure how important it is, Mrs. Broward. It could be a mistake to hold off on letting him know."

"Okay, it's as I expected. I'll pry him away from the news, drag him to the phone. Should've married a preacher is what I should've done. Hang on a sec."

A.J. looked tired when he plopped down in front of the vidicom terminal. "Leslie," he said patiently, "you have my permission to scoot home and spread cheer amongst Ted and those boys of yours. Why're you hanging around the office at this ungodly hour?"

Accustomed to her boss' Medusa stare, Leslie was not intimidated by something others found paralytic. She succinctly relayed the caller's name and number, mentioned the importance of contacting him.

A.J. sat straighter in the chair. "Philly, uh-huh." He fumbled for something to write with, jotted down the caller's vidicom code. "As usual, you're on your toes, Les. Thanks for calling; you do good work. Have a pleasant evening. I'll see you bright and early in the ay-em."

Adela raised the roof when told of her husband's intention to bolt from the suite, abandon the dinner she'd prepared.

"I'll be only a few minutes," he protested. "Got to run downstairs and make a call."

"Why? Did the vidicom terminal right in front of you break down?"

"I have to use a secure channel, Adela."

"Right this minute, for God's sake?"

"Sorry, has to be that way."

"Well then, Mr. Augustus Jason Broward, you might as well keep right on running. Go find and yourself some dinner elsewhere, 'cause I certainly don't intend to . . ."

The entry door slid closed, cutting off his wife's tirade, bringing a faint smile to Broward's normally inscrutable countenance. Adela was in fine fettle, but he knew a plate would be warming in the microwave when he came back upstairs.

Stepping out of the executive express elevator compartment, he negotiated the deserted after-hours hallway with brisk strides, punched a cypher combination, opening the door to anteroom. He went so far as to lock the door to his inner office behind him and dropped into the chair behind his desk. Invoked the nationwide police channel, he punched up the code Leslie had given him. The scrambled, encrypted call to Philadelphia was channeled via the most secure satellite link in existence.

A middle-aged someone A.J. took to be a plainclothes detective answered the vidicom's insistent buzz, and said, "Homicide."

"I'd like to speak to Captain Allen, please."

"Uh, think maybe the cap stepped out for a minute. Can I tell him who's calling?"

"Broward," said A.J., watching the other's image closely for any sign or recognition. The name obviously meant nothing to the detective, who either had no idea of the office Broward represented, or didn't care. "Broward, sure. Let me see if I can locate him."

Minutes passed while A.J. stewed impatiently. Another set of features appeared in the display, and the image of soulful blue eyes locked electronically with refractory eyes of deepest brown. A.J. said, "I was informed of your call, Captain. May I ask if you're scrambling at you end?"

"Communications on the direct cop frequency are automatically scrambled and encrypted, Mr. Broward. Glad you got back to me right quick. We've had a break in the . . ."

"Excuse me, Captain," interrupted Broward, able to distinguish figures moving about behind the homicide detective. "Would it be possible for us to speak privately?"

Allen nodded. He turned away from the terminal, and Broward overheard snatches of a mumbled conversation, then a door close softly. The detective took up where he'd left off. "As I was saying, there's been a break in the Fierst case. I'm told you once did grunt gumshoe work yourself, so you're sure to appreciate how flimsy the, uh, 'evidence' may turn out to be. But you left written instructions to be notified at once if anything at all came down, so I —"

"What type of evidence?" Broward wanted to know.

"A latent print, a partial at that. Our forensic people found it on a shard of broken glass someone had chucked into the trash bin under Fierst's kitchen sink. The lab staff here does topnotch work; they pieced together the fragments as best they could and found the partial on what appears to be a chunk of smashed beer stein that had apparently been wiped clean, or so whoever wiped it thought. The partial matched up to a local scuzzball named Earnest Keplach. He's a two-time loser who's headed for strike three and a long vacation at taxpayer expense if another felony rap lands on his head. We collared him four, five hours ago. He's being held for questioning, but we can keep him on ice for only a dozen-plus hours more.

"Excellent, Captain. I'll have some people in Philadelphia before noon tomorrow."

Captain Allen nodded. "Quicker'll be better that later, Mr. Broward. And you'd be smart to send first-team players. Questioning this character could prove about as useful as yelling at a stout brick wall and expecting answers. He's far from being the smartest critter that roams this particular jungle, but when it comes to knowing when to clam up he turns tighter than a rusted-shut crescent wrench."

"You haven't budged him?"

"Nary a peep, not even a dent. The sucker won't say boo, hello, goodbye, kiss my ass or anything else," declared Captain Allen. "I passed a few words with an assistant D.A. before calling your office. The partial print puts Keplach at the murder scene right enough, but it doesn't answer the question of when he was there. The word I got from a sharp lady prosecutor is that we can hold him forty-eight hours on suspicion, period. She said it'd be a waste of time to formally charge him with anything up to and including spitting on the sidewalk. According to the D.A.'s office, no grand jury would ever indict Keplach based on something loosey-goosey as a latent partial on a hunk of broken glass."

"I hear you, Captain." A.J. paused. "For our purposes, charging him is of no interest whatever. You've tabbed the suspect a two-time loser. He's not on parole, by any chance?"

"No, worse luck. His last rap was a routine, garden variety break-and-enter, snatch-and-grab. But he was at least savvy enough to go in carrying nothing more deadly than a tube of lip salve. After his last bust, a lenient judge demonstrated the sort of brotherly love our fair city's famous for and put him out of commission for only a few months. Keplach rode the rap, did the time standing on his head, and was back on the street chop-chop."

"Sounds like you have little love for the suspect, Captain."

"Eh!" grunted the detective. "What's to love? In his late twenties, early thirties, Keppie's a pig-eyed jerkjolly who's let himself run to suet. He carouses with a crumb-bum herd of Nazi biker trash — clucks who shave their noggins and decorate them with tattooed swastikas and cute hate messages. One thing I'll say for the bunch he runs with; they're one hundred percent democratic. They hate blacks, whites, yellows and browns without a whisper of favoritism. No discrimination at all."

A.J. repressed a grin. Deciding he liked Captain Allen, he said, "Sounds like a real winner."

"Oh, you've got that right. One thing, though; one exception. Under all that bluster, bitterness and racist horseshit," said Allen, "I seriously doubt if Keplach could drum up the guts to strangle and ice pick a grape, let alone an older guy dealing in hot drugs."

"Let's hope my people can help you learn whether that assessment is correct," said A.J. "Can't thank you enough for staying on top of it and alerting me, Captain. Two of my best agents will 'copter down your headquarters first thing in the morning."

"It's a top drawer thing?"

"Could turn out to be upper top drawer," admitted A.J. "But then again, maybe not. We'll have to wait and see. At the risk of embarrassing myself, can I ask you to keep this conversation strictly between the two of us?"

"Done," said Allen. "Good hunting, Mr. Broward."

"Thanks again, Captain. Someday I hope to return the favor."

Inwardly excited, though outwardly calm, A.J. switched off. He was in such a sweat to ring Auntie's private vidicom number that he punched up the wrong alphanumeric sequence, had to go back and start all over again.

* * *

"Eggies, dear boy . . ." Newly awake, Bennett Rook yawned and stretched. Covering his mouth with the back of one hand, he rose nakedly from the hydraulic bed, donned and adjusted a silken dressing gown, doing up and tying the sash with panache. "Dear Arthur, where in the sullied universe beyond these soaring walls did you manage to find fresh hen fruit?"

Arthur smirked. "I have some good friends, Bennett. Would you like them fried, scrambled, soft-boiled, hard-boiled, what . . .?"

"I'm certain all your good friends are hard-boiled," said Rook with a twinkle.

Arthur laughed, enjoying the attention. "The eggs, O Lord and Master," he said with feigned subservience, "how do you wish them served?"

"Umm-m-m, fried I should think. Over easy, if that accords with your culinary abilities."

"Don't," admonished Arthur with a grin of pure wickedness, "try being cute first thing in the morning. Your sour disposition doesn't go well with cuteness."

"You have my sincere apologies. You're right, of course; I shall henceforth try to be more appreciative, and less 'cute.' But you haven't answered my question. How did the coterie of dubious, hard-boiled friends you run with manage to conjure fresh eggs from the slough of despond in the remainder of this dismal, all-too-real world?"

Arthur held a conspiratorial forefinger beside his nose. "Trade secret."

"I promise to never to divulge your source, not even under torture," declared Rook. "But I would appreciate being let in on your dark secret. By the way, forget what I said about frying the eggies. Let your imagination run wild, prepare them any way you wish."

"You came in late last night," accused Arthur, sounding disappointed. "I was already asleep."

"In truth, last night's special session proved every whit as intolerable as any committee meeting in recent memory. It dragged on and on and on . . ." Rook yawned again. "The arguments bumbled along on their merry way until I was certain they would never end. I was contemplating suicide when our devoted chairperson finally called a halt to the proceedings."

"You didn't bother to wake me when you came in," accused Arthur.

"Let us say I was too weary, and leave it at that."

"Grump!"

"Manners, dear boy. Mind your manners."

"Was there another vote on Kenya?" inquired Arthur.

"A vote? Oh, more than one until, unavoidably, a final roll call of yeas and nays was aborted. After an interminable, inexhaustible round-robin of debate," added Rook, "intermixed with hour after hour of heated rhetoric, the split, during the preliminary tally, was predictable as the sunrise — four ayes, and four nays. As usual, our dear, devoted, doubt-ridden chairperson had her way, and abstained. She refuses to budge on the issue." Rook hesitated. "But why this sudden interest in my dull work, you predatory wretch?"

"Your committee is . . . What the nine of you do fascinates me," confessed Arthur.

"Condemning people, I mean, trashing whole populations. I think doing something like that would be a super turn-on."

"To you, splendid youth that you are," Rook said lightly, "anything wearing trousers is a super turn-on."

Arthur reached up and lifted a saucepan from the cupboard. "That," he said, sounding petulant, "wasn't a very nice thing to say."

"I rarely say nice things," admitted Rook. Tiring of the banter, he said, "Why not give up this idle chit-chat and get on with our egg breakfast? I'm ravenous."

Rook went into the study. The holovision tank, masked by an excellent reproduction of a Cézanne's Mont Saeinte-Victoire, obeyed his verbal command. The formerly opaque painting gradually turned translucent, then cleared entirely. Rook sat down and surfed the channels in search of a newscast. Moments later, Arthur came in and plopped down beside him on the lounge.

"Where, dear Arthur, are my eggies?"

"The water's about to boil."

Side by side, they watched in silence as scene shifts and the verbal exchanges of talking heads segued from one news topic to another.

"Any hint of the, uh . . . ? Any word about that other matter?" asked Arthur.

"No, no; much too early." Rook's sidelong glance was penetrating. "Our seed may have been sewn less than subtly, dear Arthur, but it was sewn with forethought and purpose."

"Yes, I know. But why does it take so long?"

"I thought you understood it was done that way in order to guarantee catching hints of the scandal through the rumor mill even before the gossip mongering media pundits got wind of it. When they finally do, the few reliable press and media mavens will dig in and ferret confirmation from several sources before daring to give voice to it, or allow it to appear in a single word-processed column. Lastly, but far from leastly, the Christers and their kith and kin will begin to air the item, and the volume will be turned way up."

"That," said Arthur knowingly, "will be when the *merde* hits the fan."

"I rather expect so."

"You know so."

"Do I?" Rook's exophthalmic hazel eyes searched his paramour's eager countenance. "I shall only remind you once, dear Arthur. What you're trying to obliquely discuss is not a fit topic of conversation."

"Not even in private?"

"Not here, not there, not anywhere. Privacy is a chimera; it no longer exists."

"You worry too much," scoffed Arthur. "Broward and his goons wouldn't dare to spy on you."

"That," declared Rook irritably, "is a astounding assumption on your part. You're quite wrong, dear boy."

"Are you serious?"

"Never more so. If I'm not mistaken," said Rook, "your water's boiling."

Arthur rose obediently. Halting in the doorway, he looked back, his expression pensive. "What do you think Broward will do," he asked, "if he finds out about our, uh . . . us?"

Rook chuckled. "Dense lad that your are, once and for all time to come let me make something perfectly clear. Broward and his 'goons,' as you call them, make book on you, me, Victoria Duiño, the other members of our committee, janitors, secretaries and everyone else within the sanctity of this Olympian high-rise where in we do our dastardly work. Living here is like residing in a goldfish bowl; that applies the entire hemisphere, and much of the other. But why start fretting about Broward and his praetorians at this late date? Believe me, dear boy, when I tell you that the super-snoop you disdain found out about 'us' the first time we came together. He couldn't care less, believe it or not."

Arthur's pensiveness degenerated into an unhappy pout. "Easy for you to say. But the bastard's fiercely anti-gay. I have a hunch I'd be hung out to dry if we ever gave him the opportunity."

“Perish the thought,” said Rook. “You’ve nothing to fear on that score, unless for some reason you were to be ejected from under the sanctuary of my wing.”

Arthur’s sober nod evoked another soft, meaningful chuckle from Rook. “Please, no need to tremble, dear Arthur,” he said lightly. “What you contemplate simply will not happen. At this instant your authentic terror should derive from my deteriorating state of wellbeing. The eggies, please!”

“Sure, right away. But if Broward —”

“Arthur,” said Bennett Rook in a different tone of voice, “see to the fucking eggs before I take a strap to your luscious bottom.”

Nine

The white, blue-striped United Nations jetcopter dipped beneath criss-crossing interurban flyway altitudes and began orbiting high above the roof park of a downtown high-rise. A light drizzle fell from leaden skies, dampening Auntie’s spirits. She leaned toward the ‘copter’s rain-speckled bubble canopy, and looked straight down. The vertical perspective was dizzying; buildings clustered cheek-by-jowl became canyons checker-boarded by streets that marked block-square rectangles, the sidewalks teeming with pedestrians. Only a few vehicles could be seen in the streets.

Tom, the senior security investigator who had accompanied Auntie to Philadelphia, followed her downward gaze. At sight of the multitudes flocking the streets below, he said loud enough to hear over the thrash of rotary wings, “From up here, Philly looks like a stepped-on anthill.”

“Yeah, Philly and every other major burg.” Auntie reached forward and touched the pilot’s arm. The man’s head turned. Keeping one hand on the collective, he used the other to pull the headset away from his right ear.

“When,” she asked, out-shouting the ‘copter’s thrash and turbine whine, “does this contraption get grounded?”

“Traffic.” The pilot pointed downward. Police helicopters were lifting off in ones and twos from the roof park’s bulls’ eye helipads. “Dispatcher told me to orbit a couple minutes more. A rash of food riots is tearing up the south side. Shouldn’t be long till we get clearance.”

In mock surprise, Tom said, “My, what a terrible state of affairs! Think of that, Auntie: a ‘rash’ of food riots sounds to me like a slow, peaceful day in New York.”

Auntie nodded absently. She fidgeted, recalling Broward’s parting instruction. “Forget it,” the Chief had declared, responding to her suggestion about employing the time-honored good cop, bad cop routine. “The gimmick’s time-worn; it probably wouldn’t have any effect on this perp. Captain Allen painted him as a small time hood with a grudge against the world and everyone in it.”

“So what approach do we use?” she had inquired. “You told me the sucker’d be a tough nut to crack.”

“For starters, rile him up something fierce. You’re black, like me,” Broward had amplified. “That alone should be enough to get a redneck rise out of any flavor of hate fanatic.”

“Gee, thanks, Chief!” Examining her multi-braceleted forearm, she pinched herself lightly. “Come right down to it, you could say I’m sort of a pleasing shade of light mahogany.” Her dazzling smile had diluted, but not eliminated Broward’s irritated stare. “Chill out, Chief,” she’d urged. “Tell me how you want the sumbitch handled, and I’ll get the deed done.”

"Time's the major crunch factor," Broward had informed. "Philly PD can only hold the sucker forty-eight hours on suspicion, and a third of that's already down the drain. Once you have him thoroughly pissed off, turn on the charm. Charm the liver out of him."

"Yin and yang? Stir his angries to the flash-point, then try getting on his good side?"

"Exactly, if you see anything faintly resembling a good side. Give my way a shot for starters, Auntie. Let him rant and rave and call you names. Swallow all the abuse he hands out, allow him put you down to his heart's content, but let everything slide off your back. Keep smiling, at least for a while."

"And then?"

"Then hit him hard. Turn downright mean and nasty. Go deep down dirty, hit him below the belt as hard as you can. Try and scare the shit out of him, if you'll pardon the expression."

"It'll take most of my day to recover from your crudeness, Chief."

"Above all else," Broward had counseled, "do not under any circumstances pass up a chance to flash the Madagascar slam pics. They turned the trick twice before, and could do it again. Promise the suspect a free airplane ride to Geneva, then a long, extra-warm vacation in the offshore equatorial steam bath."

"Aw, come on," she'd objected. "Sir James himself couldn't wangle an extradition order on the strength of a lousy partial print."

"You know it," had been A.J.'s retort, "and I know it. But I'll bet the nogoodnik sumbitch you'll be entertaining won't have a clue."

Auntie had shrugged. She was not looking forward to the interrogation.

The pilot finally received clearance. The 'copter descended, touched down on a vacant roof park helipad. Auntie spotted a man in a business suit leaning against a doorway out of the drizzle; she correctly assumed it was Captain Allen.

After introductions all around, her first impression of the Philadelphia captain of detectives was entirely positive. He shook hands with both UNDEP security agents, saving whatever words of welcome he had in mind until they abandoned the noisy roof park atop police headquarters and led them to the elevator, where he wished them luck with the suspect. "Keplach's about as easy to question," he said, the gaze of his soulful blue eyes shifting from one investigator to the other, "as a chrome-plated ball bearing."

"How much time's left on the clock?" asked Tom.

"Going by the book, we can detain him until around four this afternoon. I can elasticize that some if you think you might be getting halfway to first base. Five of his Nazi biker pals showed up this morning and made loud noises about posting bail. The desk sergeant shooed them away; he told them Philly's Finest had never heard of anyone named Keplach."

"Good move, Captain. Where's he now?" asked Auntie.

"Stashed in one of the rubber hose cubicles. I had him brought upstairs from a holding cell when dispatch called to say and said your whirlybird was overhead."

* * *

Auntie stood outside the interrogation room's one-way-mirror window, her arms folded, and conscientiously evaluated the suspect's every twitch. His shaven bullet head was just beginning to show the first signs of stubbled outgrowth; the the word MOTHER was tattooed in erratic calligraphy above his left ear, the word FUCKER above his right ear. He was chubby, but disproportionately narrow-shouldered, with blubbery, tattooed biceps. A potbelly strained the fabric of a gray Harley-Davidson sweatshirt boasting the stenciled, tri-color caricature of a flame-trailing electrocycle. He wore tightly fitted black canvas jeans, with spangles sewn along

the outer seams and the cuffs tucked into scuffed combat boots. A conspicuous bulge in his soiled denim trousers told her the scumbag wore one of the codpieces in fashion among street thugs and a hoi polloi, multi-ethnic legion of imitators.

Studying the suspect intently, she searched for any sign of restlessness, nervous gestures, fidgety movements. But the overweight specimen lolled idly, his air one of self-satisfied boredom. Now and then he lifted bloodshot brown eyes and inspected his image in the mirror side of the window, found it satisfactory and resumed his slouch.

"I'll go in solo for round one," Auntie told her fellow security agent. "Stay put, Tom. Keep an eye on what goes on, and listen good. Is the video gear hot?" she asked the captain.

Allen cut a inquisitive glance at the uniformed officer standing beside him.

"Up 'n running," assured the blue suit.

"What if he gets physical?" asked Tom.

"He won't," she said. "If he does, I'll handle it. This's only the prelim. We'll save our high-octane juice for the main event."

Auntie wrenched open the door to the cubicle, slipped halfway inside, and paused in the doorway, regarding the suspect with a skeptical air.

Keplach straightened slowly, his expression one of irritated disbelief. "Kee-rist!" he said, drawing out the word. "Just my fucking luck, a schwartzer!"

Her smile deceptively dazzling, Auntie employed the street drawl she had cultivated. "Mornin' to ya, Ernie. How ya keepin'?"

"Up yours, black bitch cop!"

"Now, now; best if maybe y'learn to be nice mannered, Ernie. Got a couple real simple questions need answerin'. You won't mind helpin' me out on a quick 'n easy like that, right?"

Keplach directed her to perform an impossibly redundant physical act, then slouched lower in the chair, stared vacantly into space and declined to say anything more.

"What in the world made ya do it, Ernie? Why'd you zotz that poor ol' druggie Fierst? Need a fix, that it? He wouldn't part with any nose candy, what? C'mon, why'd ya do it?"

Zero response.

"I could be wrong. Maybe you didn't do Fierst your ownself. Don't look t'me like the sorta fella with enough guts to choke an old man, and shove a ice pick through his noggin."

The sally earned Auntie a dark, burning look of pure hatred.

She responded to the dark, burning look of pure hatred with the sunniest smile in her repertoire. "Might as well give it up, Ernie. Party's over for you. We got the goods on you for bein' in Fierst's apartment, and if you didn't zotz Fierst your ownself it'd be the smartest move of your short, unhappy life to come clean on who done the deed. Safekeepin' a buddy, is that it? Honestly think it's a smart move? Gawdalmighty! How dumb can ya get?"

"Up yours, black bitch cop!"

"You're repeatin' yourself, Ernie. What's wrong, can't you think up a better smartass comeback than that?"

Auntie worked on the suspect for ten minutes, and got exactly nowhere. In the end, all Keplach would say was, "I want to talk to my lawyer. Got a right to call my goddamn lawyer."

Leaving the interrogation room, Auntie shook her head in frustration, "Lean on the asshole hard as you can without killing him, Tom. Bear down, and I mean bear down. When I go back in there I want him so hot he's liable to catch fire."

"He'll be sun-ripened, itching to be plucked," said Tom with a lop-sided grin. Composing his features in a stoic mask, he reached for the doorknob.

* * *

Dr. Levi Melnick bustled into Victoria's anteroom and announced himself with typical blustery bluntness. Victoria had acquired a temporary helper in the person of a prim Latina secretary drawn from the UNDEP labor pool. Sitting in as a replacement for the late Harold Strabough, the young woman had no idea who Levi was, which UNDEP office he represented. She politely explained that Dr. Duiño had left explicit instructions. She was not to be disturbed until after the pending Triage Committee session.

"Plenty disturbed she'll be," assured Surgeon General Melnick, exhibiting customary good cheer, "when she learns you wouldn't let me go in and see her."

"I'm terribly sorry, sir. I'll be happy to let her know you were here, but . . ."

"Don't apologize, Dearie; I'm terribly sorry, too. But it so happens I'm a man on a mission." Melnick stepped into the alcove and pounded vigorously on the new, blast-resistant pocket door.

Horried, the secretary leaped to her feet. "Please, sir! Don't do that!"

Melnick's genial smile washed over Victoria's temporary helpmate. He pounded harder on the door.

The reinforced steel door slid into the wall, revealing Dr. Duiño's quizzical features. "Levi, what in the world?"

"We have to schmooze," he said. "Sorry, darling; what I have to show you won't keep without putting out a more rancid stink than it already does."

Stuttering apologies, the secretary was waving her hands.

"Never mind, Xaviera; it's all right." She ushered Melnick inside. "Ordinarily my door is always open to you, Levi. But you picked a bad time to call. In a few minutes I have to convene a session that promises to turn into another crucial battle. I need a quarter-hour free to sort and assemble my ammunition."

"Kenya?" inquired UNDEP's senior medical official, knowing the answer before he posed the question.

An affirmative nod. "What is it? I really haven't a minute to spare."

"I strongly suspect the ordure, as the high-brows like to call it, just encountered the whirling blades." Melnick held up and rustled a facsimile printout he took from an inner jacket pocket. "Take a gander at a pair of juicy tidbits, then you can kick me out."

Accepting the single sheet, Victoria hobbled to the desk with the aid of her bamboo cane, slipped on a pair of old-fashioned rimless bifocals. The hardcopy Levi had handed her was an extract from the current edition of the Greater New York Trumpet, a yellow tabloid daily that featured garish photos, overlarge type, and a surfeit of italics and exclamation points. Melnick had circled two paragraphs in a gossip column anonymously by-lined, "Pete's Straight Skinny."

The first item, highlighted in yellow marker by Melnick, devoted itself to plucking international heartstrings. It described the "vicious, predatory attack" of U.N. International Peacekeeping Forces on helpless victims of the triage genocide currently decimating regions in and around Egypt's Nile Delta. The column also gave a bloodcurdling account of the famine and incumbent misery ravaging East Africa, crediting the Triage Committee and its notorious chairperson, the Matriarch of Death, Victoria Duiño, for yet another example of the U.N.'s sanguine, conscienceless insistence that genocide was the only solution to the steadily deteriorating human condition in portions of Africa.

Farther down, near the bottom of the column, a second paragraph was also highlighted. Victoria read it, and gasped involuntarily. She went back and re-read the piece more thoroughly:

Straight Skinny Pete usually knows all, sees all, tells all. But Pete admits to being stumped by a tough nut he's been thus far unable to crack. It's a real thorny question, folks, a conundrum only a few selected UNDEP insiders can answer: What high uppity-up official's carefree — or plain careless — granddaughter and her hubby have decided to flaunt the law of the land and start a family without benefit of Genetics Board approval? Wouldn't you say whoever's able to solve that dilly of a riddle is sure to be sure the guilty parties are flirting with disaster? Pete thinks so, and believe me folks that's the straight skinny.

Dismayed, Victoria said, "Where it came from is . . . It had to originate from be someone here in the tower. I don't suppose there's any chance of questioning the publisher, editor, owner, anyone who admits owning that rag."

"Get real!" said Melnick scornfully. "Every night before tucking into their foul smelling beds, these crap mavens hang a prayer shawl around their fat necks and chant the First Amendment. Ask the schmucks, pretty please, whodunnit? They won't even cough up the time of day, let alone name names, or give out their so-reliable sources."

"It's subtle," said Victoria, "and fairly clever."

"Yeah, subtle as a punch in the mouth, and twice as clever as exposing yourself in church. Anyone with half a brain, assuming the folks who read the daily ration of yellow crap own half a brain, will read both items and make the connection. The slimeballs do it that way to cut down on libel actions."

Victoria sighed. "Does A.J. know?"

"Yeah, I stopped by and cornered The Great Stone Face on my way up here to break the sad tidings. He told me he was on top of it."

"What was his reaction?"

"Mr. Medusa . . . ?" Melnick chortled. "Exactly what you'd expect. Said he'd look into it, then clammed up hermetically and doused me with a full-deflection blast of that fly-killing glare he practices in secret, then shooed me out of his office."

Victoria reflected briefly. She glanced at the tick-tocking pendulum clock. "Thank you, Levi. I really must go to work now."

"Shalom, Dear Heart. Don't let the bastards wear you down, or maybe I should say hang tough. Mark me, sooner or later this mess will sort itself out. Wait and see."

The instant the sliding door closed behind Melnick, Victoria opened a secure vidicom channel and punched up the number of Broward's office.

Leslie put her through at once. When A.J.'s stern visage jelled in the display and he saw who was calling, his expression changed. "Not now, Victoria," he admonished before she could say anything. "Melnick filled me in. I'll get back to you later in the day."

"Levi showed me the clipping," she said. "Are you sending someone over to question the people who . . . ?"

"Good God no!" denied Broward. "We can't red-flag the scribblings, call attention to the piece in any way. Giving a nod to that smelly brand of nonsense would tend to confirm the tidbit in the minds of the jokers who run the Trumpet, which is precisely what whoever planted the dirty tidbit is hoping and praying we'll do. Palms were crossed on this gambit, Victoria. Count on it! Trouble is, our chance of finding out from the tabloid clucks who did the palm-crossing is absolutely nil."

"But shouldn't we . . . ?"

"Not now," repeated Broward a bit more harshly. "Don't talk, Victoria; listen to what I'm telling you. We have time to burn when it comes to dealing with loosey-goosey innuendo of this

stripe, but it'd be dumber than dumb to try and do it piecemeal. Kill the root, so says the adage, and the branches will wither and die. In the long term, innuendo can be ten or fifteen times more effective than an outright accusation. But only in the long term, okay? Fortunately, slow-working poison like this also takes ten or fifteen times longer to do its job."

"I don't . . . understand."

"Look at it this way," said A.J. "Honest professional print editors and media chieftains — and a few are still around — demand confirmation from two or more independent sources before they'll run a sensitive story, however damaging and important sounds on the surface. Not these Trumpet crap merchants. The good news is that it gives us plenty of breathing space. Right now, a pair of my top investigators are in Philadelphia. The homicide dicks there have detained someone on suspicion of murdering the shady pharmaceuticals wholesaler I told you about. I also told you what a whiz Millie Forchet can be when she runs with the wind in her sails. Let's give her a chance to pin down something useful before panic sets in, okay? You're not going to like it, but I'm warning you one last time. The worst possible thing we could do at this juncture would be to call attention to this 'straight skinny' drivel by reacting to it in any way."

About to voice an objection, Victoria subsided. "I suppose you're right, A.J. I'll be happy to leave everything in your capable hands."

"That's the ticket. I'll get back to you the instant anything breaks," promised Broward. He rang off with customary abruptness.

* * *

Auntie and the Philadelphia captain of detectives watching through the one-way window listened to Tom's rapid, increasingly sharp questions. The senior agent had been "bearing down" per instructions, first browbeating the suspect and making threats, then cajoling him with his own spiny version of "sweet talk."

"Pounding on Keppie is like beating on a broken drum; not a sound comes out." Captain Allen's negative head shake reinforced his opinion. "In most ways, he's no smarter than the chair he's sitting on, but when it comes to street smarts, whew! He has an ace in the hole, and knows it. We can't hold him much longer on suspicion without charging him. He's accordingly fallen into the role of a put-upon, misapprehended victim of circumstance."

"How about you, Cap? Think he might be the perp?"

"Hell, I don't know," said Allen. "Nor do I expect to find out. What's got me curiouser and curiouser is the hullabaloo an insignificant collar like Keplach stirred up in your house. Here in our fair city, homicides come in family-sized bags and bundles. What's so special about a two-bit hustler and a known black marketeer who literally got himself iced? Why did it blow a hole in the roof at your shop?"

Auntie searched the guileless baby blue eyes incongruously set wide apart in the florid features of a tough Irish-American cop. "Sorry, Cap; I'd love to open up, tell you all about it. But, yeah; it's a genuine biggie for us. The suspect's tied to a major league problem that can't get out, no two ways about that. Tom's in there fighting the good fight, but even he doesn't know the whole story on this one."

Captain Allen nodded. "Just thought I'd ask."

Auntie watched a while longer, listened some more, her mind hard at work. "I guess," she finally said in a tone of resignation, "it's my turn in the barrel. We'd better give Tom a break before he does something we'll all regret. I'll see if I can find some other way to scare the sumbitch."

"You mentioned threatening deportation, U.N. prosecution," said Allen.

“Uh-huh. Think it’d have a chance?”

“Who knows? Give it a whirl; what’s there to lose? But just between you and me, this is still more or less America. I’d call extradition without a substantial reason an idle threat. Keppie probably knows that, too.”

“Only one way to find out.” Auntie signaled her partner by tapping lightly on the glass. Tom emerged from the interrogation room, his features livid. She patted his shoulder to comfort him.

“Let’s shoot the stubborn bastard,” said Tom, “and have done with it.”

The suggestion drew a wan smile from Captain Allen.

“My turn to bear down, Thomas. Go relax a spell, get yourself a cuppa and simmer down.”

Keplach didn’t turn a hair, not that he had any hair to turn, when Auntie came back into the interrogation room. Suppressing an urge to slap his fat skinhead off his fat shoulders, she unzipped her shoulder bag, speculatively fingered the half-dozen photos of Madagascar’s U.N. prison complex, and wondered if the threat of extradition and a long term in the slam would be worth her time and trouble.

“Hey, Ernie,” she yelled on impulse, smacking the table loudly with the flat of her hand, “it’s showtime! Sit up and pay attention.”

His porcine features expressionless, the scruffy youth slumped farther down in the ladder-backed wooden chair. “Beat it,” he muttered. “You won’t get shit from me.”

“My, how amazing! It’s all we’ve gotten from you so far. Why should I think it’ll change?”

Keplach said, “Fuck off, black bitch cop!”

Seething inwardly, Auntie’s smile was a flawed imitation of her usual radiant sunniness. “Got a piece of terrible bad news for you, Ernie. I’m not a cop.”

“So what the hell are you, the Easter Bunny?”

“I work for the United Nations Organization.”

“Bolshoi! Go find some some work t’do,” urged Keplach.

Auntie reined her temper, and it took some doing. For whatever reason, the suspect seemed more talkative than during her earlier try at questioning him, and yet . . . She studied the stout suspect, thinking, thinking.

Drawing a sudden deep breath, she inhaled, and with it a nugget of pure inspiration. “Exploit the suspect’s weaknesses” had been her watchword until now. Instead, what success might come from exploiting his strengths? She kicked herself mentally; it had been there all along, staring her in the face, transforming Keplach from a refractory petty criminal to ripe fruit on the vine, just waiting to be plucked. She hadn’t been able to see the forest because of all the damned trees in the way.

Dropping the street talk, she said with exaggerated sincerity, “Now listen to me, Sonny. Knock off the stonewalling and take notice. I came in here to level with you.”

An adenoidal snicker. “Yah, sure.”

“I mean it. I’m going to level with you, and then you’re going to level with me. Promise to do that and I’ll have you back on the street in ten minutes. That’s a promise.”

“Promise, my ass! It’s bullshit!”

“Now hear me, Ernie!” she said, raising her voice for the first time. “We aren’t interested in burning your candy ass for doing old man Fierst. You just happened to get caught in some gears that are grinding out some very heavy stuff that neither you nor anyone else to speak of

knows zip about, and never will. All we want from you is a name. Drop the name and you're out the door. I mean what I say."

Although he remained unresponsive, at least Keplach's unlovely head turned slowly toward his inquisitor. He stared coldly at Auntie, his expression unreadable.

"Ever heard tell," she asked in an overly casual way, "of the Triage Committee, what it does?"

Keplach's vacuous expression did not change.

"Okay, forget that. Does the name Victoria Duiño mean anything to you?"

"Who?"

"Dr. Duiño," elucidated Auntie, "is the woman who heads up the United Nations Triage Committee."

Keplach's shaven head tilted, his eyes narrowed. Auntie became the object of an oblique, quizzical stare. "Means zilch to me. I don't pay any nevermind to . . . Hey, wait; you mean the cool U.N. outfit that's been wipin' out herds of starving jungle bunnies over in Africa?"

"The same," said Auntie, her temper flaring near the red line. Striving to modulate her voice, she said, "What you've gotten yourself mixed up in is part and parcel of a super-heavyweight scam someone's invented to dynamite the lady doctor and her committee."

Keplach frowned. "Why'd anybody want to put the chop on those goings-on?" he demanded. "They're doin' a Bolshoi job gettin' rid of crumbs who can't afford to feed theirself. Guys I know yak about it all the time. All of us're for goosin' the bigshots in charge to keep right on doin' the same great stuff."

Auntie gritted her teeth. She recalled Tom's semi-jocular remark about shooting Keplach, and was glad she'd followed procedure and left her weapon with the desk sergeant. Had the nine-millimeter automatic been in her handbag, she felt the temptation to use it might have overwhelmed her better judgment.

"Ernie," she said firmly and forcefully, "I think you're beginning to get the picture. We need a name, need it badly. Unless we can track down and collar whoever offed old man Fierst, most likely just to keep us from finding out who's gone out of his way to set up the scam that'll badly injure the lady doctor and her committee. She'll be long gone if you don't come across, and most likely the whole committee with her."

This sober declaration managed to gain Keplach's full attention. "You sayin' there might not be no more cleanin' up messes in Africa and other places?"

"Gone for good," said Auntie with assurance. "Talk to me, Ernie. My partner and I don't have all day. Talk to me and you'll be outside looking in ten minutes from now."

Keplach thought it over. "Like you said, I drop a dime on the guy's name and hit the street?"

"In ten minutes," she insisted. "Right after you come up with a name and we check it out, you'll be long gone."

"Check it out, hah! Could take weeks, months."

"No way; a whole lot less. Computers being what they are, five or ten minutes, tops. How about it?"

"Where's it say lettin' me walk is up to you?" the other asked suspiciously. "How do I know you're not sellin' me out?"

"Turning you loose is up to me and my partner, no one else. I told you we're U.N. snoops, not cops. We quicklike flew into Philly just to check you out and get a name. That's it,

the whole enchilada; it's the only reason we came. Give us a name and we're gone, and so are you."

Keplach sucked his tongue. The wheels seemed to be turning slowly inside his shaven skull. Long seconds slipped away as he made up his mind. "Be damned," was his agonized whine, "if I can think of any reason to trust you."

"Hitting the street ought to be reason enough, Ernie."

"Oh, what the hell!" said Keplach. "I got nothin' to hide. Okay, first off I ain't killed nobody lately. What's more, I got no idea who offed Yokie Fierst. There's a rap sheet on me, sure; but it's for piddlin' stuff, y'know?"

"We're aware of all that. Go on, Ernie."

Keplach lowered his voice, hunched forward in the chair, hands on his knees, and faced Auntie squarely. "Okay, so once in a while I used t'pick up pocket change runnin' errands for Yokie Fierst. Nothing big time, y'understand; a pot shipment now 'n then, cartons of reds and downers here and there, whatever Yokie needed dumped. But no heavy shit, see? Fierst was bi, or haven't you picked up on that? Got hisself spliced to a salty brood sow way back when, but he was bi just the same."

"What does that have to do with the price of drugs?" asked Auntie.

"Not one helluva lot," admitted Keplach, "except a few tooty-fruity studs used t'hang out at his place regular. One night I got to boozin' it up with a slick swish from New York."

"What was his name?"

"Oh, close's I remember Arnie, Artie, something like that. He and me, we yakked and gagged it up most've the night. Come daylight, he laid a proposition on me."

"And you went for it?"

"No, dammit!" Keplach flashed sudden anger. "Not that kinda proposition; I'm not what you're thinkin', see. I'm straight arrow. This skinny dude asked would I be into pickin' up an easy two hundred doing the bagman bit. Said he knew a clown who wanted a package toted to a Cleveland address. All you got to do, the swish tells me, is dump it safe and cut out, no questions asked, no hassle. Figurin' it for some kinda spooky dope deal, I turned the gig down cold, but he went on and —"

"You delivered it," interrupted Auntie with one thousand percent assurance, "to a Cleveland chemical engineering consultant named Addison." It was the easiest guess she'd ever made.

Keplach's small, piggish eyes widened. "Kee-rist! How'd you know that?"

"The Cleveland part of the chase," she told him, "is history. You're doing better than fair, Ernie. Let's hear the bottom line."

Keplach shifted his weight uneasily, licked his lips. "Not long after that delivery," he said, "this faggot sets me up for a second run. Yokie Fierst calls me late one night, tells me I'm to meet with a dude who'll make the handoff outside the Japanese tea house over to Fairmount Park. I hit the park early, checked out the scene to, y'know, stay on the safe side. Pretty soon up rolls a jazzy green sports coupe — a real fancy set of wheels — and this tall schwartzer hops out wearin' a set of threads so sharp he looks like he's headin' for church. He don't say hello, bye-bye, kiss my bum, or anything else, just passes me a packet and two crisp hundreds. Then he climbs back into his flashy ride and lays rubber on the street runnin' alongside the Schuylkill."

"The river, sure. I hear you, Ernie. What was his name?" asked Auntie, almost afraid to hear the response.

Keplach lifted both chubby hands. "Search me. Like I said, the schwartzer didn't say one stinkin' word, never opened his yap once."

"How about the car?"

"Ah, some bitchin' machine *that* was! I remember it real good — nifty green electric two-seater lookin' new, sporty. It had New York plates. I twigged to that."

"Recall the license number?"

"Uh-uh, there wasn't any number, just a name. It was one of those custom shingles suckers pay extra for so they can have a cute moniker on their car, not dumb numbers and letters."

Auntie drew a deep, anxious breath. "What name?"

Keplach scratched his bristly head. "Lemme think." He closed his eyes. "Posa, Praza, somethin' like that, or real close to it, like a foreign sounding moniker, know what I mean?" Keplach thought some more. "Hold on, it could've been Panza. Yeah, that was it: Panza. Means nothin' to me, how about you?"

"Panza, P-A-N-Z-A? You sure, Ernie?"

"Pretty sure, yeah. Sure as I can get about . . . Hey! How about me, black bitch cop? Said you'd turn me loose, and promised I'd be out of out here in ten minutes."

Ignoring Keplach's vociferous plea, Auntie bolted from the interrogation cubicle. "Tom, get on the horn to the office," she said breathlessly. "We need a vehicle make on whoever owns customized N.Y. plates bearing the name Panza, P-A-N-Z-A — not sure about the spelling. Have A.J. look for phonetic variations if he comes up empty on the first try."

"Got it." Tom hurried away toward the desk sergeant's vidicom terminal.

Captain Allen favored Auntie with an over-the-top look of surprise lighting his baby blue eyes. "Bless you, Detective Forchet! You actually pried something meaningful out of Keppie? I don't have a clue what the license plate rigamarole has to do with anything, but getting that sleaze bag to say boo is a minor miracle. Mind if I ask how you did it?"

Auntie grinned. "Turned out to be a snap. I appealed to his better nature as a racist and Nazi biker scumbag. You might as well cut him loose; I don't think he had any part in zotzing Fierst. My smeller says he's telling it like it is."

"If you say so, we'll send him on his way and no harm done," said the detective. "He'll be back inside in a few months, maybe sooner."

They waited in Captain Allen's office until A.J. called back a quarter-hour later. "Jackpot, Auntie!" It was the first time Millie had ever heard Broward sound truly elated. "The Panza plates were issued to a distinguished resident of Long Island named Rodney Vernon James."

Auntie said, "Way it rolls off your tongue, it sounds to me like an alias. Any notion who he is?"

"Much, much more than a notion. He's also a gent with literary sensibilities," said A.J., sounding mysterious. "Think about it: Panza, as in Sancho Panza. Does the name strike a chord?"

"'Fraid not, Chief. Not to me, anyhow."

Broward's image in the display leered at her. "Your formal education's been sadly neglected. This particular Sancho Panza doesn't serve the Knight of the Woeful Countenance."

Her patience wearing thin, Auntie said, "You're starting to give me a woeful countenance, Chief. C'mon, who the hell is this . . . James?"

“For the better part of a decade and a half,” announced Broward, his piercing gaze fully energized, running at full throttle, “Rodney Vernon James has been the Black Knight’s gofer, stooge, and staunch right arm.”

“The Black Knight . . . ?” Auntie’s jaw dropped. “Jesus! Surely you can’t possibly mean Congressman Hamblin?”

“The very same,” said Broward. “All is forgiven, Detective Forchet. Collect Tom and scoot back here on the double. Damned fine day’s work!”

Stunned by the revelation, Auntie couldn’t bring herself to frame a reply.

Ten

Pocked in several places by small-caliber rifle bullets, the weathered sheet metal sign leaned slightly askew beside the roadway:

PRIVATE DRIVE
DO NOT ENTER

Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted

Ignoring the posted caveat, A.J. Broward’s driver wheeled the silent-running electric limousine off the rain slick highway. The limo followed a narrow macadam lane that meandered through the woodland for a quarter-mile. Approaching a wall of native fieldstone topped with a row of iron spikes, the vehicle slowed, halted before a wrought-iron gate of open filagree.

An unsmiling face appeared in the rain-fogged gatehouse window. The elderly gatekeeper had a sailor’s knitted watch cap pulled down over his ears; he peered suspiciously at the limousine before shuffling outside, moving slowly, his head lowered against the drizzle. Consulting a clipboard, he checked and recorded the official UNDEP license plate, nodded and stumped back inside the gatehouse. The high gates swung inward, allowing the limousine to squeeze through before opening completely.

Crushed white stone murmured beneath the vehicle’s tires, a whispering reminder of the wealth required to own and maintain one of Long Island’s baronial Gold Coast estates. Surrounded by acres of meadowland and forest, the drive paralleled an immaculate white split-rail fence that wound for more a kilometer and more beneath rows of maples standing bare-limbed and stark against a buttermilk sky. Beyond the fence, pockets of week-old snow lingered in a pasture where A.J. was sure horses grazed in the summertime. Beyond the pasture, woodlands framed a gray swatch of Long Island Sound.

The sleek electric limousine entered a circular cobblestone courtyard, its centerpiece an inactive fountain, and came to a silent stop beneath the high Porte-cochère entrance. Patinated by age, though scrupulously kept, the ivied Georgian mansion looked down at the intruding limousine through haughty, diamond-paned windows. Wide stone steps led up to the corbeled entry where hand-carved double doors waited to greet new arrivals.

The Black Knight’s castle, thought A.J., stepping out of the limo, lives up to all expectations.

“Good afternoon, sir.” His precise diction unctuously Oxonian, the butler informed Broward that Mr. Hamblin was expecting him. “May I take your wrap, sir?”

Unaccustomed to being sirred and fussed over, A.J. surrendered his topcoat, muffler and gloves. He was shown through a vestibule floored in veined terrazzo marble and into a cathedral-like parlor featuring massive oaken doors recessed in classic, carved stone alcoves. A long balcony graced the landing atop a wide, curving staircase. A huge crystal chandelier depended from the high, shallow-domed ceiling on a golden chain.

Declining the butler's invitation to be seated, A.J. went to warm his hands before an aromatic blaze in the arched travertine fireplace.

Minutes later, once and future senior New York Congressman Charles L. Hamblin descended the stair at an easy lope. Clad in a blue dressing gown, the honorable former Speaker of the House looked vigorous in his mid-sixties. He said simply, "Mr. Broward."

The men took each other's measure while they shook hands, the Black Knight meeting his visitor's implacable gaze squarely.

"I hope you'll forgive me for disturbing you," said A.J. "It's a genuine pleasure to meet you, Congressman."

"The pleasure is mutual, Mr. Broward. At the moment, however," chided the other, "I'm afraid the 'Congressman' label no longer applies."

Broward was aware of that circumstance. For the second time in his remarkable career, Hamblin had fallen victim to compulsory term limitation. Yet while an absence from Capitol Hill may have divorced him from legislative machinations, enforced idleness had done little to sap his political clout. Born to considerable wealth, A.J. knew his host had slipped back into the role of a country gentleman, just as he had during the prior hiatus. But he also knew that Hamblin still pulled the marionette strings of office, exercising power by remote control, refusing to twiddle his thumbs until the next general election, when loyal constituents within his district were certain to return him to his seat, and inevitably to the Speaker's chair as well.

"You must be chilly from the drive," said Hamblin. "Shall we go into the library and sample the Madeira? Or would you prefer mulled wine?"

"Madeira sounds fine, thank you."

Ushered to a leather armchair in the bookcase-lined study, A.J.'s gaze was immediately drawn to a huge oil portrait prominently displayed on polished oak paneling above the fireplace. Artfully rendered, the figure of a middle-aged gentleman clad in archaic, red-trimmed riding togs had just dismounted from a lathered sorrel hunter that chuffed and stamped its hooves. The rider held out his mount's reins to a stooped, white-haired Negro groom. In the background, framed by overhanging magnolia boughs along a wide carriage avenue, soared the columns of a stately antebellum mansion.

Hamblin went to the sideboard, decanted the Madeira and handed his guest a Waterford crystal wineglass. "You seem taken by the bucolic scene in my favorite painting, Mr. Broward."

"Very much so. It's realistic, almost photographic."

"It was meant to be," said the other. "I commissioned the painting with exactly that in mind. After a great deal of genealogical research, I wanted a pictorial reminder for my sons, daughters and grandchildren to cherish. The slave you see pictured is the earliest ancestor professional genealogists were able to track down. His name was Gideon. He was born and lived out his life on the South Carolina plantation of Andrew Hamblin, whose likeness was unearthed from a hand-painted cameo discovered in a woman's locket. Gideon died sometime during the middle 1840s at the age of seventy-five or -six."

The Black Knight paused to regard A.J. evenly. "You seem surprised, Mr. Broward."

"A little," admitted A.J. "I know it was a fairly common practice, but learning that your family adopted a slaveholder's surname jarred me for some reason."

The politician smiled. "According to some moth-eaten documents unearthed by the researchers, Andrew Hamblin was a Southerner of the old school. A slaveholder, yes, of course; yet he apparently lived a gentleman's life of grace and dignity. Ask yourself this, Mr. Broward: didn't every landowner in that locale, in that era, own slaves?"

"I'm sure they did."

"By all accounts," continued the other, "Hamblin was an aristocrat, a paragon of courtliness who treated his chattel with uncommon kindness and respect. Several letters attest to his affection for certain 'house niggers' like my Gideon, whom he apparently came to regard as more or less members of the family. Tell me, have you done anything toward learning about your ancestry?"

Jarred a second time by the other's casual use of a pejorative term he hadn't heard since childhood, A.J. sipped his wine, trying to imagine where the question might lead. "My wife is the one hooked on genealogy, Congressman. She did some work on her own line, with mediocre success I'm sorry to say. In my case, the trail peters out shortly after the War, in the late 1860s. Adela also worked on my line; she was able to confirm the male line of my family all the way back to a slave who belonged to the owner of an Illinois house called Hickory Hill."

Charles Hamblin blinked. "I'm hesitant to point out, Mr. Broward, that Illinois was a free state."

"So it was," agreed A.J. "Ostensibly free, that is. Hickory Hill still stands — a historic relic my wife and I visited more than twenty years ago. It's large house occupying on a knoll overlooking the Saline Valley just west of the Ohio River bordering Kentucky. An exceptionally enterprising 'gentleman' named Crenshaw built Hickory Hill in the 1830s. He made a good living by setting up furnaces to boil-off water from the surrounding saline springs, then extracting and exporting bulk salt. But his major income derived from the slave trade."

"Really?" Hamblin sounded genuinely interested. "In Illinois?"

Broward nodded. "During the height of the dry season," he explained, "the Ohio River occasionally ran shallow and sluggish enough in places to swim across, or in the dead-of-winter on rare occasions when it iced over, to simply walk across. Escaped or manumitted Kentucky slaves would cross into Illinois and rejoice in obtaining freedom, only to be met by Crenshaw's goons and other, uh . . . enterprising country gentlemen. Whole families were kidnapped, smuggled to Hickory Hill and held in cribs along an airless attic corridor equipped with whipping posts, leg irons, and other niceties of furnishing. Then, of course, they were sold back into slavery in Kentucky."

"But it seems," continued Broward drily, "even that enviable source of income wasn't enough to satisfy Mr. Crenshaw. Pregnant slaves earned a considerably higher price than maidens from customers interested in two-for-the-price-of-one bargains. The industrious Mr. Crenshaw imported a stud named Bob whose job it was to service young females, among them a maternal ancestor of mine named Lucy. She gave birth to a male child, Jason, on a farm near Greenville, Kentucky. My middle name is Jason; there has been a Jason living in my family tree ever since."

"Remarkable!" The Black Knight grunted. Tilting back his head, finished the Madeira. "And," he said in a voice made hoarse by indignation, "I thought I'd heard all the horror stories."

* * *

As if hesitant to break the ensuing period of introspective silence, Broward thought it unwise to say anything other than, "Well, Congressman, did I pass muster?"

Hamblin regarded his guest levelly, his manner turning decidedly more cordial. "A grim tale well told, Mr. Broward. What I appreciate more than anything else is that it lacked any vestige of maudlin self-righteousness, no hint of the helpless rage against the past one hears so often. Saying that may strike you as peculiar, but it happens to be the outlook I've cultivated. The

past must bury its own dead. As for passing muster, you've altogether exceeded the extravagant claims Sir James Schuyler-Browne advanced on your behalf."

"Regarding my supplication to the attorney-general," said A.J., "I have to enter a guilty plea. I begged Sir Jim to pave the way for seeing you because I had a desperate need to gain entrée. I hope you won't hold either that or my sad ancestral tale against me."

"Oh, quite the contrary. Everyone, be he black, white or particolored should at least make an effort to discover his origins. It's my firm belief that individuals who care nothing for their heritage tend to give scant thought to the present, and even less to the future. Here, let me freshen your glass, A.J. May I call you A.J.?"

"Please do, Congressman."

"What did strike me as unusual," reflected Hamblin while decanting the wine, "was having an important gentleman like Sir James call from Geneva with what sounded like an extremely urgent request for me to invite your visit. You're a policeman, A.J. Admittedly a high-echelon U.N. security executive to be sure, but nevertheless a policeman. I normally allow others to deal with whatever police business occasionally crops up. You may think me rude and impertinent for playing my less than subtle game, but I was determined to learn something about you for myself before inquiring into your reason for 'urgently' wanting to visit me."

"I happen to be an exceptionally good policeman," said Broward, deciding not to let himself be talked down to by either the Gold Coast atmosphere or his host's position of wealth and power.

A sharp look. "I'm sure you're wonderfully adept in your profession. Whether good, bad or indifferent, however, why you insisting so strongly on seeing me is mildly perplexing. Please tell me, if you will, what service I may be able perform on your behalf?"

"If I'm not mistaken," said A.J., "Sir James also urged complete confidentiality when he spoke to you."

An even sharper look. "You mentioned Jason being your middle name. Confidentiality," declared the politician with a minor display of intolerance for the topic, "happens to be mine." Then, in a different voice, "Enough banter; I have a busy day ahead of me. What exactly do you want from me, A.J.?"

"I came here to discuss Rodney James."

"Rodney . . . ?" Taken aback, Hamblin said, "He happens to be one of my closest associates. What about him?"

Choosing his words, Broward sketched the chain of events leading to the murder of pharmaceuticals wholesaler Fierst. He described the subsequent detainment, interrogation and release of the only suspect the Philadelphia police had managed to loosely tie to the homicide investigation.

His expression one of wary disbelief, Hamblin nevertheless allowed his guest to finish the declaration without interruption. "And you say this . . . twice-convicted Philadelphia redneck told your people it was Rodney who delivered the drug money?"

"Not in so many words, Congressman. We traced Mr. James through the customized New York license plates the suspect described."

"Um, yes — Panza," mused the Black Knight. "Adopting the role of Sancho Panza happens to be a minor conceit of Rodney's. I think of it as a tongue-in-cheek effort to reflect on my own quixotic nature. But I'm not inclined to tilt at windmills, of that you may rest assured. Now then, let me warn you of something before you take the accusation a step further. You've

made a veiled, extremely serious allegation solely on the basis of some lowlife's testimony, a tale I take it your detective believed."

"She did, yes."

"She . . ? I assume she managed to convince you?"

"Fully, Congressman." A.J. set down his wineglass and leaned forward, the diamond-hard stare that was peculiarly his own raking the Black Knight. "Let me put it this way: we can think of no earthly reason to doubt the word of a semi-moronic thug; the simple reason is that he isn't bright enough to have invented the 'Panza' license plate rigamarole. Detective Forchet's thumbnail sketch paints the hoodlum as a hate-mongering skinhead gifted with about as much imagination as the horse in your prize portrait. Describing the customized New York plate assigned to Mr. James to implicate him in a crime is hardly something he would be able to conjure out of thin air."

Hearing Broward cite the rationale for the accusation gave Hamblin cause to ponder. He ruminated, eventually nodded. "Rodney has a quick mind, a facile tongue. His principal virtue where I'm concerned is a distinctive knack of accomplishing whatever it is he makes up his mind to do. He's performed in superior fashion on my behalf, in the larger sense on behalf of my former constituents. My gut reaction to your accusation should therefore be less than surprising. Rodney could not possibly be involved in what you believe is a shadow conspiracy designed to discredit the infamous Victoria Duiño, and her equally infamous committee. But whatever I may believe or say in that regard will not satisfy you. Is that not so, A.J.?"

"Nor you, I should think," dared Broward.

Hamblin pursed his lips. "Point taken. Nor me; no, certainly not, not for an instant. Rodney has never given me the slightest reason to question his integrity or veracity. My faith in him spans almost two decades of close association, yet despite that, especially in light of what you've told me, nothing short of the truth will satisfy me.

"On the other hand," pursued Hamblin, "what leads you, or for that matter Sir James, to imagine that I would be privately or professionally interested in helping to salvage the career of that notorious woman and her committee? To me, and to all but a handful of my one time constituents, triage is synonymous with heartless, cold-blooded mass murder. Look what's happening today on the home continent of our ancestors."

"Congressman," countered A.J. calmly, "try and picture what might take place in Africa and elsewhere without Victoria's mitigating influence."

"Mitigating . . ?" For the first time Hamblin allowed his irritation to flower. "Your loyalty to the United Nations Organization is admirable, A.J. But loyal or disloyal, do you really expect me to believe the universally censured Matriarch of Death exerts a negative influence on the triage judgments handed down by her godlike committee?"

Broward's affirmative nod was solemn, uncompromising. "Mitigating, Congressman, not negative. She always has favored leniency, and on occasion clemency. She always will as long as there's breath in her body. At the moment, Kenya is an excellent example of her mitigating influence. Once one of the most progressive societies on the African continent, Kenya has for a number of reasons slipped and skidded toward the brink of Class I reclassification. Dr. Duiño has stood firmly in vehement opposition to that action. As committee Chair, she's fought tooth and nail against rushing to judgment, has bent over backward to give the Kenyans every conceivable chance to redeem themselves, pull themselves back from the edge of the precipice."

Moderately perplexed, Hamblin said, "I credit what you're saying, A.J. Nor have I any doubts about your sincerity, and yet —"

“The recent voting with regard to Kenya,” pursued Broward hastily, “has in every instance evenly split down the middle on reclassification: four ayes, and four nays. I’m sure you know that Dr. Duiño is eligible to vote only when a particular issue is deadlocked. To date, she has abstained, has held out against a Class I judgment on at least four or five separate occasions.

“You see,” said Broward before Hamblin could interject a comment, “when it comes to my personal view of existing global triage policy I have to plead *Nolo contendere*. I’m far from being neutral on the thorny issue, but I believe it unconscionable to attempt either justifying or discrediting committee judgments per se. On the other hand, what I am extremely eager to do is plead Victoria’s case. May I tell you my own view of her?”

“Please do,” grudged Hamblin, not entirely happy about the direction their conversation had taken.

“Dr. Duiño,” declared Broward, “is the most dedicated human being I’ve ever known. For nearly thirty years she’s been vilified and condemned for devoting herself to a difficult, incredibly onerous task, all because of her selfless dedication to something she believes to be a very worthy cause, and for that she’s suffered physical and verbal agonies of a magnitude most of us could not endure. Consider what she’s going through at present. A planted item in some scum-sucking tabloid hints at a scandal involving her granddaughter’s pregnancy, while at the same time the Roman Catholic hierarchy threatens her with the most onerous form of excommunication. With the fate of Kenya hanging in the balance, and an anti-triage insurrection raging in the Nile Delta, not to mention the populations of several other national entities in jeopardy, sliding toward the pit, what I desperately hope to do with all my heart and soul is get my hands around the throat of the backstabbing son of a bitch or group conniving to destroy Victoria and her works in such a sly, underhanded manner.

“Dr. Duiño,” insisted Broward, now on a roll, “believes strongly in something very basic, Congressman. She’s certain that dynamic population control is absolutely mandatory. Why? Because in her own mind she believes failure to arrest and reverse runaway overpopulation can do nothing less than foreshadow the eventual extinction of the human species, and she therefore regards triage as a grim necessity, and by no means genocide. As you know, non-coercive practices were originally instituted to encourage a more ardent form of ‘family planning’ as it was then called. But spacing out births, rather than restricting them, proved unrealistic, a thoroughly self-defeating policy.

“By the time that methodology proved ineffective, UNDEP had formed the Triage Committee, carefully selected its pristine members, and with equal care appointed Dr. Duiño chairperson. She became wholly convinced that without triage judgments, and their forceful implementation, this world of ours would never again be a fit habitat for our children, their children and their children’s children. I’m asking with all the humility I can muster for your help and support in averting further grief, because while she bears her cross diligently it’s something Victoria Duiño deserves less than anyone else on this sorry planet.”

Charles Hamblin rose slowly. “You’re most eloquent, A.J. I’ll give you that. As a matter of fact you’ve made your case twice over.” Extending his hand to be shaken, the once and future congressman said, “Give me a few days to discover whether or not an iota of truth lies behind the ravings of this Philadelphia person. Whatever the outcome, rest assured that I’ll be in touch shortly.”

“I’m greatly indebted to you, Congressman.”

“Not in any way,” his host said graciously. “It could turn out to be the other way around. In any event, thank you so much for coming, A.J.”

* * *

"Louis, what a welcome surprise!" Noting Cardinal Freneaux's less than formal attire, Victoria bent awkwardly, leaning on her cane, and kissed his ring. "Are you planning an extended stay in New York?"

A wan smile. "It may well work out that way, my dear Victoria. The Council of Bishops is due to convene shortly at St. Patrick's Cathedral. *Entre Nous*, urging me to attend the session was a convenient excuse seized upon by His Holiness to rid Vatican City of my unwanted presence."

"You've fallen into disfavor," she said, "because of me."

"I wouldn't put it that way," dissembled Freneaux.

"Louis, you've joined me in misery, the second victim of an appalling injustice."

"Infinitely less appalling for me," Freneaux told her, "than the frightful, totally unwarranted action pending against you. In ancient times, so they say, the bearer of ill tidings was immediately put to death without recourse. I sincerely hope what I have to tell you will do nothing to compromise our friendship."

"You know better than to think such a thing."

"I certainly do hope so, Victoria. After pleading repeatedly, relentlessly, perhaps excessively, for the Holy Father to relent and impose the lesser of two evils, he is unswayed. It is not to be *excommunicatio toleratus*."

"The lesser of two evils," observed Victoria with a faint shudder, "is still an evil."

Freneaux grimaced uncomfortably. "I fear that in doing what I felt to be right and proper I've badgered His Holiness to the point of viewing me as *persona non grata*. My pleas have fallen on deaf ears; I've been banished from his presence. He refused me an audience, and I received a brief counseling session from the priest acting as the Holy Father's secretary. He instructing me that it would be best for all concerned if I were to take myself elsewhere.

"Unfortunately, my dear," continued Freneaux, "the wheels of the evil deed had begun turning faster when I left Rome. It's to be *excommunicatio vitandus* — a thoroughly horrible, totally unjust action by His Holiness which pains me deeply to so much as know about. You are to be denied the holy sacrament and other comforts of the Church, and will become a pariah in the eyes of every Catholic."

"His Holiness is adamant?"

Cardinal Freneaux sighed. "I fear he is determined, the deed inevitable."

"Then there is nothing more for either of us to fear, is there, Louis? Since for some time I have been a pariah in the eyes of the laity, making the status official means less than nothing."

"Your brave statement notwithstanding," declared Freneaux sadly, "it's impossible for you to dull my awareness of the agony you have to be experiencing."

Feeling a surge of sympathy for her friend, Victoria said, "Here, come sit down, Louis. Can I offer you coffee, tea?"

"I can't stay," he told her. "The bishops are due to begin arriving this afternoon; I must be on hand to welcome them. May I call on you again when we both have the leisure to chat?"

"Need you ask? Welcoming you is always a delight, Louis. I appreciate your concern, but pleading for leniency was hopeless from the beginning. You should never have interceded with the Holy Father on my behalf."

"What's done is done. I have no regrets," the other said, meaning it. "None whatever."

"Well, I certainly have my share, Louis. I feel awful for being responsible for your self-sacrifice. Please call me the first chance you get."

“I shall. Au revoir, my dear Victoria. Until then . . .”

The picture of despondency, Louis Cardinal Freneaux took his leave.

* * *

Intensely curious about what had taken place, Auntie left off working on the report she was writing, and rushed to answer a call summoning her to Broward’s office. She and A.J. were deep in a discussion of his visit to Hamblin’s Long Island estate when Leslie alerted him to an important call. Opening the specified vidicom channel, A.J. announced himself, listened for a second or two, glanced meaningfully at Auntie and switched on the speaker phone.

Auntie couldn’t hold back a grin upon hearing the over-precise diction of former Congressman Hamblin’s manservant. Peeking sideways at the vidicom display, she ogled an image of the haughty, so-correct gentleman’s gentleman employed by the Black Knight.

The gentleman’s gentleman tendered the invitation in an obsequious if roundabout way. “Sir, Mr. Hamblin would like to know if you might possibly be free to dine with him this evening? If doing so is inconvenient, another time can easily be arranged.”

A.J. accepted without the show of enthusiasm Auntie had expected. After listening to a recital of where and when the get together was to take place, Broward said, “Please thank Mr. Hamblin for his thoughtfulness. Tell him I’m looking forward to our meeting.”

"Assuredly, sir. Good afternoon."

“S’pose Hamblin’s seen the light?” asked Auntie after A.J. rang off.

“Let’s hope so.” Broward eyed his star investigator analytically. Thinking Hamblin might want to question her in person about the Philadelphia affair, he asked if she would like to accompany him.

“Oh, Chief; would I ever!”

At seven o’clock that evening, an unmarked UNDEP electric limousine deposited A.J. and Auntie in a Harlem alley. Per instructions, Broward tapped on a featureless sheet-metal door that was opened at once by a middle-aged black man wearing chef’s whites. Standing aside, the chef politely invited them to come inside. The anonymous rear entrance gave onto a short hallway leading into the kitchen of a restaurant said to be owned and operated by one of Hamblin’s numerous cousins.

Ushered through the hustle and bustle of the chef’s domain, A.J. and Auntie earned incurious glances from the culinary staff. They found the once and future legislator upstairs, standing beside the banquette in a small private dining room. Hamblin looking very distraught.

The Black Knight offered a curt greeting to Broward, and not much more than an inquisitive glance at Auntie. He listened without seeming to hear the introduction when A.J. presented Detective Mildred Forchet as the UNDEP Security investigator who had interrogated Ernest Keplach in Philadelphia.

Auntie quickly realized her dazzling smile was wasted on Hamblin, washing over the politician without noticeable effect. The Black Knight cleared his throat. “A pleasure, Detective Forchet he said, his manner perfunctory. “I hope you’ll forgive me for being impolite, but what I have to say is for Mr. Broward’s ears alone. Will you be terribly offended if I ask you to excuse us?”

Auntie’s smile faded. “Of course not, sir. It was a pleasure to meet you, Congressman.” The door to the private dining room closed behind her.

“Have a seat, A.J.,” urged Hamblin. Tight-lipped, he remained standing, managing to make the invitation sound like a directive. “I’m in no mood to dine. Please order whatever you wish.”

Acknowledging Broward's negative head shake with an dismissive gesture, Hamblin began striding up and down the private dining room's carpet. "I won't bandy words," he said tautly. "Rodney James is no longer in my employ, nor will he ever again be remotely associated with any concern of me, or mine."

"He admitted complicity?" inquired Broward, his manner guarded.

"He did so admit."

"May I ask how you persuaded him to confess?"

"No, you may not," said Hamblin, his manner icy, almost feral. "To put it bluntly, I allowed him absolutely no choice in the matter. If you must know, I've had Rodney's heart safely locked in a jar in my safe for a number of years. Ridding myself of his invaluable services wasn't a simple matter of vengeance, however. It had to do with an altruistic will 'o the wisp called justice."

Hamblin's pacing ceased. He swung to face Broward, his acrimonious stare only slightly less penetrating than that of his guest. "I pride myself," he said, "on being an astute judge of human nature. In addition to the stratospheric endorsement Sir James Schuyler-Browne tendered on your behalf, you've demonstrated every indication of being a gentleman of honor, integrity, and no small measure of intelligence. If that sounds patronizing, I apologize; it was not meant to be. Before I divulge the name of the person who engineered and consummated the disturbing affair you've diligently investigated, I have to learn precisely how you plan to use the information. Whatever the fallout amounts to, you see, it can't help but reflect directly upon me and my good offices."

"Making use of the information," said Broward, reluctant to deter Hamblin from whatever he planned to divulge, "will not be up to me, Congressman. I mean to turn everything over to Dr. Duiño."

"Sir James will no doubt also be informed."

"Naturally, Congressman."

"But no others?"

"Absolutely no one else will be told. Not by me, at any rate."

"Have I your solemn pledge to that effect?"

"I swear," vowed Broward, "to inform no one other than Victoria Duiño and Secretary-General Sir James Schuyler-Browne."

The Black Knight frowned. "As reassurance, I suppose that will suffice. According to Rodney's confession, an intermediary was involved, a somewhat, how shall I say, delicate young fellow. Rodney told me that he himself acted only as a messenger, a participant of minor consequence."

Broward experienced a flash of omniscience that made his bowels churn. "Someone named Arthur?"

Hamblin's eyes narrowed in surprise. "Possibly, to the best of my remembrance. 'Artie' was the name Rodney used, a likely nickname for someone named Arthur. At any rate, the young man in question approached Rodney months ago with an offer so magnanimous that, in his own words, my former associate could not bring himself to refuse. No fool he, Rodney ran a check on this 'Artie' creature by having one of his legmen ask around discreetly in certain seamier quarters of Greater New York. He learned who the youth ran with, who might be behind the, er, magnanimous offer."

"Who?" asked Broward, short of breath in anticipation of the answer.

Ignoring the query, Hamblin said, "One of my self-admitted weaknesses is that I allow certain colleagues and confidants an enormous degree of latitude in conducting their personal affairs, and Rodney James numbered among the highly regarded members of that cadre. Over the years he's been actively engaged in several business enterprises of his own, many of which garnered considerable earnings. Yet to the best of my knowledge none were illegal, or of a dubious nature.

"What I'm about to tell you," continued the Black Knight, his crisp, no-nonsense manner persisting, "is strictly off the record. I pledge you to keep your word on that. Please do not be offended, but again I'm forced to extract your solemn promise to reveal our dirty linen to only the individuals we have discussed, and no others. Do you agree?"

"You already have my word," said Broward.

The honorable Charles L. Hamblin smacked his lips, drew a deep breath and dropped a name that fell like a stone into the well of infinity and never struck bottom.

Five minutes later, A.J. Broward stalked stiff-legged across the alley to the waiting limousine. Cursing under his breath, quivering with blind rage, he fell into the limo's rear seat, pulled the door closed with a vicious *cah-h-chunk!* that made Auntie cringe. Seeing how deeply incensed the Chief actually was frightened her. She edged away from him and curl defensively against the armrest on the far side of the seat.

Eleven

Arthur's romantic involvement with Commissioner Bennett Rook carried with it collateral fringe benefits, the most worthwhile among them entrée into the lap of what passed for a carefree, luxurious lifestyle. He had acquired a habit of sleeping late, but only after rising early to fix his lover fresh-squeezed orange juice — an expensive indulgence, since puny navels, if and when available, cost between one and two new dollars apiece. He usually joined his paramour at breakfast, saw Bennett off to attend to his death-dealing labors, and went back to bed.

Most mid-mornings, when he finally did rise and greet the day, he lolled about his patron's executive suite, drank synthetic coffee and watch holovision. And then, often as not, he fell back in bed for another hour or two. His tardiness, coupled with the casual comings and goings he flaunted, were pointedly ignored by the supervisor in charge of the UNDEP unskilled labor pool, where he was supposedly employed. Despite a nagging, subliminal terror of being cast out into the mean, hungry streets outside the United Nations Tower, Arthur had learned to slough off the scornful glances and thinly veiled remarks of the supervisor, not to mention those of one or two braver co-workers. In his wholly self-indulgent opinion, a known alliance with Triage Committee Deputy Chairperson Rook made continued employment his inviolate right.

A hand placed on his shoulder roused Arthur from a late morning doze. Assuming Rook had returned for some reason, perhaps with a romantic inclinations, he smiled without opening his eyes. "Didn't think you'd be back this early."

The hand shook him rudely. "Get up!" growled a deep bass voice. The hand rocked him more violently.

Startled speechless, Arthur sat bolt upright in the hydraulic bed, and shrank back against the headboard, his eyes round in disbelief. Security Director Broward and an Afro-American woman he'd never seen before stood beside the bed. Behind the intruders loomed a pair of overly large gentlemen; their expressions were totally unsympathetic.

"On your feet," ordered A.J.

Arthur pulled the coverlet up to his chin. "I . . . s-sleep raw," he stuttered; it was all he could think to say. He cast a pointed glance at the Afro-American woman.

Auntie's brief smile was less than dazzling. "Seen it all before, pretty boy," she said lightly. "Listen to some sterling advice and chuck the proprieties. It'd be a real smart move for you to climb out of the sack before you get dragged out."

"H-how did you," faltered Arthur, "find out about Rook and me?"

A.J. snorted indignantly. "Don't try and tell us," he declared, "you actually thought your undying love affair was a secret. You and the half-dozen other catamites who've wallowed in Rook's bed are an ancient dirty joke from the top floor to the tower's sub-basement." Losing patience, A.J. signaled one of the accompanying security agents.

Arthur screamed when he was seized, yanked bodily from the hydraulic bed and nakedly, ungently, deposited in an armchair. "Stop it! You can't do this," he whimpered. "When Bennett finds out what you've done he'll —."

"— have to find substitute bedmate," supplied Auntie.

A.J. bent down, his massive, all but macrocephalic head centimeters from Arthur's. His laser glare pinned the youth in the armchair. "Talk to us, Arthur," he said, his rumbling basso echoing in the bedchamber. "Tell us about the deal you offered Rodney James."

"W-who . . . ?" Feeling like a butterfly tacked to a specimen board, Arthur realized his world had come apart at the seams and broke into hysterical sobs.

* * *

Victoria stiffened. The bamboo cane inadvertently dropped from her trembling fingers. "Are you . . . absolutely certain?"

Broward's sober, unblinking visage filled the flat-panel vidicom display. He spoke freely over the guarded, encrypted channel. "Hamblin is a gentleman not easily convinced, Victoria. He's positive, and therefore so am I. Are you acquainted with the congressman?"

Victoria's scalp crawled. She swallowed the bile rising in her throat, tried to calm herself, the revelation sharply at odds with her rapidly blossoming fury. She had difficulty voicing a faltering response. "Met Hamblin . . . no, not really. We were informally introduced quite some time ago, but I doubt if he recall the occasion. He showed little sympathy for me, for what I do . . . Forgive me, A.J. I'm not thinking clearly."

"Understandable. Take your time, Victoria."

"What do you advise? Where . . . do we go from here?"

Broward did not have to mull the question. "As I see it," he told her, "there is no way short of a long, drawn-out trial to obtain a conviction. In my opinion, nailing the son of a bitch through legal channels falls somewhere between iffy and pretty damned unlikely. In the first place, I doubt whether hearsay on the part of that lowlife Philly scumbag, or the 'circumstantial' evidence gathered to date, would gain much credence in court, even if a judge allowed it to be presented. What's more, should the U.N. Attorney-General stretch the envelope a tad and propose a grand jury indictment, the trial itself could easily turn into a farcical three-ring mockery. He's one very, very smart bird, Victoria. He's covered his tracks adroitly."

"Not adroitly enough, it seems," she said, her mind working overtime, "or so you attest. I'm forced to repeat myself, A.J. Are you yourself absolutely certain?"

His electronically transmitted gaze reflecting outrage, Broward eventually blinked, a practically unheard of reaction. "Absolutely, and without question, Victoria. There is no doubt in my mind. None whatever!"

"Then I suppose it's . . ."

“Now listen to me,” Broward hastened to say. “Sir James and I are the only other individuals in the whole, wide world who know all there is to know about the affair. That makes us the only people you can confide in safely, or turn to for advice and counsel, so don’t hesitate for a second to lean on us. In the end game, you’ll have to determine what lengths you’re willing to go in order to rectify this ticklish mess. You must make the decision in your own way, on your own terms; there is no other way. But for God’s sake handle whatever action you decide on with kid gloves. In the meantime, talk to me, talk to us. Learn what Sir James and I believe is wisest before you make a snap decision you may later regret. Talk the matter over with us before you go ahead with something that may be not be too well thought out. Don’t try to go it alone. Promise?”

“I . . . yes, A.J. I will do as you say, follow your advice.”

Fuming inwardly, Broward said, “Not only does the arrogant SOB do damn little straight-line thinking, I’ve a strong hunch he’ll turn three times as dangerous when cornered. Were I in your shoes, I’d give the whole complicated set of circumstances a long, hard think before lifting a finger.”

“What would you do, A.J.? Personally, I mean? What action would you take?”

“Do . . . ?” Broward’s lips compressed. His dark eyes blazing with feverish intensity, he said, “If he’d done to me what he’s done to you, I wouldn’t let the conniving bastard see another sunrise.”

The old woman nodded wearily. “An ideal option, if unrealistic.”

Broward expelled breath slowly, and subsided. “Yeah, true. Enough for now, Victoria. I’ve had my say; the ball’s in your court. But please heed my advice. Spend some time batting options back and forth with Sir James and me before you do anything substantial. Agreed?”

“I . . . yes. I know you’ll take special pains to guard the confidentiality of your findings.”

“You can rest easy on that account,” he told her. “My best detective, Millie Forchet, is the only other person with a glimmer of the truth, and her nose is bent out of joint because I had to keep her ignorant of the gist. After we roused Arthur, I kicked everyone else out and interrogated the little faggot in private. I regret keeping Millie in the dark about certain details, but she’s ten times smarter than she looks, and should have no trouble making the connection on her own. She was also born close-mouthed, if that’s a comfort. Other than my Eyes Only encrypted transmittal to Sir James, I’ll make damn sure the lid’s on tight, stays on tight.”

“Bless you, A.J.! You’ll never know how much I appreciate everything you’ve done. I’ll get back to you soon.”

Broward nodded bleakly and switched off.

* * *

Her thoughts ricocheting wildly from alternatives to contingencies to a potential course of action, Victoria rose numbly from the vidicom terminal, stooped to retrieve her bamboo cane and started hobbling back and forth across the length and breadth of her office, deeply furious, but also deep in thought.

After a half-dozen circuits, she settled behind her desk and sat unmoving, undergoing a further lengthy reflection on all aspects of the situation, now and again giving in to a tsunami of cold fury that flooded her consciousness, enervated her thought processes, but also stiffened her determination. She searched long and hard for the sanest, most sensible method of resolving what Broward had called “a ticklish mess.”

In mid-afternoon she instructed Xaviera, her temporary executive assistant, to hold all calls, and continued to stew in solitude, but failed to arrive at anything resembling a firm

decision. Seizing her cane at last, she stumped into the anteroom, abrupt emergence, coupled with the agitated expression darkening her seamed countenance, startled Xaviera and a trio of VIPs waiting to keep their tardy appointments.

Her mind rife with turbulence, she rode upward in the executive express lift, so deeply preoccupied that she failed to acknowledge the deferential greetings rendered by several UNDEP employees who crossed her path in the corridor. She spent the remaining afternoon and early evening hours secluded in her suite of rooms, pondering one prospective scenario after another.

Late that same evening, one at a time, seven members of the Triage Committee were summoned to her private chambers. Each of her colleagues remained closeted with her for no more than ten or fifteen minutes. Each, in turn, left her tower suite wearing grim, angry expressions. She called UNDEP Surgeon General Levi Melnick on a secure channel and spoke with him for nearly half an hour.

* * *

Apprehensive and confused, Sayyid managed to stay out of sight in the museum for almost two of the three hours the distinguished looking Asian gentleman had prescribed. Having accepted the “few shillings” tendered by that worthy, he wandered about looking for something to eat — anything to eat, anything remotely resembling something edible.

His search was fruitless. Store shelves were bare, the marketplace empty of life, the vendor’s stalls deserted. Most Mombasans were too busy rioting against the deployed U.N. interdiction forces to worry about their growling stomachs.

Cautiously threading his way through the violent, teeming streets, he slipped between a pair of dockside warehouses, peeked around every corner before moving on, and approached the dock at the prescribed time. His benefactor was standing at the rail of a small coastwise steamer.

The distinguished Asian gentleman signaled to a quartet of IEF Peacekeepers in camouflage uniforms and combat boots. Stationed at the foot of the gangplank. the troopers nodded, allowing Sayyid to come aboard.

“You are prompt, my friend. Did my small contribution allow you to procure nourishment?”

“Stale crackers, sir. I was lucky to find them.”

The other smiled. “Fortunate indeed. In that event, we shall dine together later this evening.”

“Here aboard ship, sir?”

“Where else.”

“Will we . . . ?” Sayyid felt a surge of expectation. “Will the ship sail, take us away?”

“No, I’m afraid that cannot happen. It is impossible due to the current situation.”

“Then if I may ask, sir, why did you impose the, uh, condition? Why urge me to come and meet you here?”

“Why, to give you hope.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There in the museum, you told me something about yourself. What you confided in private struck me as a symbol of hope for the Kenyans. All is not yet lost in Kenya. The IEF forces have been posted with instructions only to keep order, and wait, not to act.”

“And you, sir . . . ? You mentioned being a U.N. official.”

“I represent the United Nations Department of Environment and Population, yes. You may think of me as one of several pre-triage observers here on the ground.”

“You report on . . . what is to come?”

“Or perhaps on what is not to come. But, yes; that is my onerous assignment. Remember, whatever you believe may come, could never come. Hope remains. Please keep that thought alive.”

“Your offer of hope, sir, is . . .”

“All anyone can offer.”

Sayyid could not think of anything worth saying.

* * *

The owner and managing editor of The Greater New York Trumpet kept Auntie waiting for thirty-five minutes. When his receptionist finally admitted her, she wrinkled her nose; his cluttered office was tainted with haze of cigar smoke.

What can I do for you, Missy?”

“Nothing, really.” Mildred Forchet’s dazzling smile encouraged the publisher to lay his cigar in an ashtray. “It’s what I can do for you” Auntie went on to say, “that should make you sit up and give me your full attention.”

A grunt. “Riddles, yet! Who the hell are you?”

She laid a flash copy of the column from a previous Trumpet edition on his desk. “Mind coming clean on who this Straight Skinny Pete scandalmonger might be?”

The publisher chuckled, picked up his cigar. “No secret. I myself mostly write the Pete stuff unless I’m too busy.”

“We’d like a full retraction to appear in your yellow rag as soon as you can arrange it.”

A second chuckle. “Who’s we?”

Auntie let him examine the UNDEP Security buzzer in her wallet.

The cigar came out of his mouth. He glanced more closely at the copy of a prior column on his desk. “Yeah, I remember this piece. What about it?”

“How much baksheesh did you get to have it printed?”

“Hey, now look here, Dearie! I don’t ever put up with being hassled by —”

“You do now,” said Auntie accompanying the declaration with a reprise of her sunny smile. “I’m here to do you a favor.”

“Oh, joy and gladness! For instance?”

“I’ll make it possible for you to avoid standing before a grand jury and and suffering through your arraignment.”

The cigar-smoker obviously cared very little for that news item; it brought him up out of his chair. “Now listen close! If you think I kow-tow to every damned . . .” He trailed off uncertainly, watching Auntie lay several documents on his desk.

“These financial statements and sworn depositions,” she said, “will be in the Greater New York District Attorney’s office within an hour if you refuse to print a retraction of the scurrilous article you admit writing and publishing.”

The editor sat down hard. He glanced at each of the documents on his desk, and came close to passing out.

* * *

Shortly after the business day began, Victoria Duiño swept unannounced into the antechamber of Bennett Rook’s office. Breezing past the desk of her deputy’s open-mouthed executive assistant, she offered him neither word nor glance.

The adjoining conference room was crowded. Rook stood before a large whiteboard, expounding on a list of scrawled statistical inferences. The half-dozen underlings making up his immediate staff were absorbed in the lecture, and unaware of her arrival.

Rook could not help but notice her presence. He fell silent, telescoped the collapsible pointer he'd been using and greeted her in a saturnine drawl. "Good morning, Dr Duiño. To what do we owe the signal honor of this visit?"

"I must speak to you in private."

"Of course. Can it possibly wait until we —?"

"No," she said, "it cannot." Brandishing her cane, Victoria took it upon herself to shoo the attendees from the conference room. The unexpected dismissal initiated concerted fumbblings for notebooks and papers. The men and an isolated woman studiously avoided one another's eyes as they filed out of the conference room.

The door slid closed behind the last straggler. Victoria inquired if the room was secure.

"It's swept electronically every other day," assured Rook.

Leaning on her cane, Victoria studied the tall man with analytical intensity. In a subdued, barely audible voice, she said, "Well, is it to be 'wroth in death and envy after,' or are you willing to bargain?"

Rook's neutral expression did not waver, but his pale blue eyes narrowed, creating a subtle transformation. "I beg your pardon?"

"Come, come," she said. "Bluffing was never your forte. If for some reason I should choose to step down," she declared, pronouncing each word with exaggerated clarity, "will you bend a trifle and allow my granddaughter to bear her child in peace?"

Outwardly unruffled, Rook preened himself. "Naturally," he said. "As I told you, I'm no hypocrite."

"That can be safely said." Her fragile, arthritic fingers tightened around the bamboo cane. "Not at all hypocritical, merely . . . !" She choked off the gutter term that sprang to her lips. "May I ask in what way I have offended you so outrageously as to deserve such contemptible abuse?"

"Personalities are not involved," he said equably. "It's the job, not you yourself. It's the crucial job you're failing to accomplish that drove me to seek a solution. That's the entire crux of it, nothing more, nothing less. You left me no alternative."

Victoria swayed, her weight on the cane. Rook moved tentatively to take her arm; she brusquely fended him off. "Please keep your hands to yourself." Suddenly weak-kneed, she sank down on the edge of a chair, and stared up at the man towering above, her dark eyes bright with defiance. Her enunciation crisp, she enumerated certain facts pertaining to a Brooklyn assistant pharmacy manager, a Cleveland chemical engineering consultant, a murdered Philadelphia dealer in black market pharmaceuticals, a murder suspect, the factotum once been employed by a nationally prominent congressman, and delicate young Arthur, his most recent romantic attachment.

"You've been thorough," said Rook smoothly. "Arthur is of course blameless, although I doubt whether you can be made to see it that way."

"Your friend is no longer employed by UNDEP."

"Pity. The dear boy had wings on his heels. He performed yeoman's service on my behalf, but played only a minor role in advancing my dastardly plot — a very minor role, a walk-on part you might say." Rook shrugged. "But dear Arthur is a survivor type, so I imagine he will survive. By the way, when next you speak with Augustus please convey my sincere congratulations; he's accomplished everything I anticipated. However," pursued Rook, changing tack, "you must also appreciate the fact that the sort of 'evidence' he's pulled together will never hold up in a courtroom."

“No attorney general, grand jury, or justice of the High Court will ever learn of the sordid affair, nor be permitted to view what you choose to call ‘evidence’.”

“Then, how —?”

“By this hour tomorrow morning, at the latest,” she said, making it the firmest of firm statements, “you will have arranged official parenthood sanction for my granddaughter and her husband. Spare me the seamy details of how the additional crime will be committed.”

Rook gave no indication of having heard her.

“Once that important matter has been taken care of,” pursued Victoria, “you will visit the editor to whom you passed along the scurrilous tidbit concerning Monique and her husband, which of course reflected directly on myself and our committee. Broward has already sent someone to visit whoever’s in charge of putting out the gossip sheet, but you must also go there to reinforce the earlier persuasion and encouragement necessary to guarantee publication of a full-page retraction that specifically includes a formal apology. And notify the editor that the piece it is to appear prominently on the front page.”

Rook crossed his arms aggressively. “And should I decide to ignore your humble request?”

“It wasn’t a request, Bennett. Nor was it rendered in anything resembling humility. Think of it as a direct order from your superior.” Victoria’s chill, wafer-thin smile blossomed, and quickly vanished — the smile of a canary after successfully evaded the cat. “Late last evening, I visited with the other seven members of our committee. Each of them voiced not merely a willingness, but an eagerness, and in fact a burning desire, to see things my way. You’re quite welcome to persist in your nauseous endeavor if you so desire, but choose that path and you will find yourself accompanying Arthur in the cold, mean streets. Finding another meal ticket in the utopian paradise beyond the tower walls might become a serious problem.”

Rook spent a moment digesting the ultimatum. “In that event, vindictiveness aside,” he said slowly, “I suppose you have won.”

“I suppose so, as such things are reckoned.”

“In all honesty, can you really blame me?” asked Rook, managing to sound the injured party. “I’m really not the ogre you make me out to be.”

“Aren’t you? Please explain, Bennett. If not you yourself, who shall I consider the ogre responsible for this sordid affair? You’ve frightened my only grandchild and her husband out of their wits, sent them into deep despair. Another individual in the concatenation of vilenesses you strung together is the victim of an unsolved murder, while yet another was arrested on suspicion of perpetrating the crime. You have also corrupted a talented individual once employed by the most prestigious representative in the Congress, who’s been summarily dismissed, and your beloved catamite has been turned out into the hungry streets to fend for himself. Tell me who you deem the ogre, Bennett? Tell me who perpetrated this sordid conspiracy?”

“I see no reason for homophobia.” Despite his surface calmness, there was a break in Rook’s fruity baritone voice. “Denigrating a casual relationship, and making it sound like the breakup of Romeo and Juliet, doesn’t become you, Victoria. I refuse to waste breath trying to justify who I am, what I am, or what I’ve done. Just let me say this: you’ve lived a very long time, and have worked very, very hard throughout your long life. You’ve witnessed much of our world’s downhill slide into something ill and decrepit. Why was it so awful — so despicable, in your view — to try and force you to lay down your burden, and rest?”

An excellent choice of words,” she said without hesitation. “Despicable is precisely what it was. Yet knowing you as I do, I would never expect you to understand why that is so. No amount of rhetoric or rationalization will begin to mitigate what you’ve done.”

Rook was in the act of saying something in rebuttal, but Victoria cut him off. “You aren’t a flesh and blood creature, Bennett. No juices of life flow within you. You are cold, utterly dispassionate, yet rational to an almost inhuman degree. Those may be superb assets in many other occupations, but they’re frightening liabilities when it comes to sitting as judge, jury and executioner over millions of helpless human beings.”

“Tomorrow,” said Rook, exhibiting not the slightest vestige of emotion, “I’ll make the necessary arrangements pertaining to your granddaughter and her husband.”

“For your sake,” she said with satisfaction, “I’m delighted to hear it. Now that we have at last begun to understand one another and reached common ground, I have a major bombshell for you. The Matriarch of Death has made a firm, irrevocable decision to stand down.”

“What . . . ?”

“I plan to announce my resignation the instant you’ve fulfilled the promised actions.”

* * *

Rook blanched. “You aren’t . . . You’re not serious.”

“Never more so,” she told him. “As I intimated, my decision is fixed and final. But please suppress your elation for a moment if you’re able. Leaving my work unfinished will not come about because of your shoddy effort to unseat me. About one thing you were correct, Bennett: I am indeed old, feeble, and used up. Tired, too, so very tired. You chose to strike at me through my only grandchild, while His Holiness attacks me through my faith, and my name is anathema from Antarctica to Iceland, in every corner of the globe.”

“You actually . . . mean to step down?”

“The announcement will come tomorrow, if you honor your promise.”

“Once again you’ve managed to amaze me, Victoria. But why now, when the battle is practically won?”

“Because the prospective ‘victory’ as you seem to mistakenly think of it is hollow. All we’ve done to date is conclude a minor skirmish. The major conflict is yet to be engaged.”

“What I fail to understand is —”

“Kenya,” she interrupted, “is one driving forces behind my decision. You see, our infamous committee will be left without a chairperson until the appointment of my successor is confirmed, and he or she is sworn into office. I’ve done some quiet, behind the scenes politicking to assure that no one will be appointed for a reasonable period of time, hence during the interim a continuing deadlock on the issue of Kenya will be practically assured. I’m certain you can be counted on to continue furnishing an assenting vote for Class I judgment, in which case three of the other seven voting members will most like ensure an equally divided tie vote: four nays, and four ayes. As matters stand,” she added, “the valiant, struggling Kenyans will be afforded a final, ultimate opportunity to reclaim their heritage. I believe with all my heart that forcing a postponement will eventually vindicate my decision.

“Furthermore,” she continued, ignoring Rook’s disheartened expression, “had you refrained from the detestable coup you perpetrated, you would no doubt have been appointed to the position of chairperson. As it is, while eminently qualified you’ve proven yourself eminently unworthy to uphold the responsibility that goes with the position.”

“Bitter gall.” Rook grimaced. “That does sting, just as you intended. But don’t count me out quite yet. I may still be able to —”

“Now hear me, Bennett!” The old woman twisted the cane in her withered hands. “This will be our final encounter, and I mean to have the last word. I want to clarify something for you once and for all time, something you simply must try to comprehend. You have obdurately condemned my triage philosophy as being too lenient, too soft, when actually it has been anything but that. Triage is, has always been and will always be, a reluctant concession to the inevitable, not premeditated genocide. Nearly thirty years ago, in the white-hot atmosphere of a newborn crusade, I and the original eight committeemen and women set an idealistic goal for ourselves: semi-immediate reversal of runaway overpopulation. We meant to quench the Population Explosion, as it was once known, with deft, decisive strokes.

“In a frightfully short time,” she said, “we were dismayed to learn the task not that simple. As you yourself surely must realize, the most impenetrable roadblocks occurred then as they do now, at either end of the population spectrum. How can one expect the affluent citizens of a progressive industrial society to be persuaded to limit the number of children they believe necessary to inherit the social order and relative wealth amassed by they themselves and their forefathers? At the opposite pole, how can an illiterate Third Worlder, whose single pleasure in an otherwise drab existence is sexual communion, be persuaded to remain chaste during his wife’s fertile period, even if she happens to be learned enough to accurately, consistently count to twenty-eight?

“Today, whether or not you are willing to acknowledge it, a dim glow brightens the far end of the tunnel. We faced hard, bitter truths back there thirty-odd years ago. We asked ourselves if it would be wiser to disrupt every socioeconomic system in existence by seeking a swift, draconian solution similar to the one you advocate, or to wage a strategically paced war of attrition. Pragmatism helped us dictate the latter course, and the resolve gradually became a policy that has proven itself a far more sane, infinitely more humane solution than would your way. The ultimate solution will no doubt lie farther in the future than either of us will live to see, but eventual victory is also that much more assured.

“I will not be around to witness even a partial victory,” she said, “nor in all likelihood will you. But my great-grandchild-to-be, whose strange godfather you are, might do so if you and the other committee members press ahead without surcease, sustain with intensity and purpose the resolve we formulated then, and make the best conceivable use of the tactics, tools and technological weapons at your disposal.

“Once ZPG has been achieved,” she continued earnestly, “a milestone that should occur fairly soon now, I strongly advise you to turn your back on triage activities and devote your considerable talents toward a second steep uphill battle: rectifying the planet’s critically damaged environment. Devote yourself to actively forwarding the development of bio-compatible pesticides that refuse to wash away in the first rains, encourage the development of hybridized, drought-resistant grains genetically engineered to combat the ever-changing coevolutionary adaptation pests undergo with such rapidity. You must direct your considerable intelligence and energy toward sponsoring the invention of cost-effective means and methods of reclaiming desertified lands, rebuilding the soil bank, and encourage equally cost-effective methods of desalinating seawater in gross volume as a means of slowly allowing subterranean aquifers to restock. You must advocate the reforestation of decimated tropical rain forests, and further adapt to on-going global climate change. I could go on and on and on.

“As in any war,” she went on to say, “you will encounter mini-triumphs and minor setbacks, major victories and hideous defeats. You must learn to bear up under good fortune and adversity alike. You must school yourself to take what you have to take, and give what you have

to give in order to help re-create a world where my unplanned great-grandchild-to-be can enjoy a noble, cheerful existence. You must engage in an unflagging, unstinted effort to bring back into existence the sort of world where a carboy of potable water is no longer a unit of international exchange, where the disposal of plastic containers is not subject to an article of law. You must do everything that can possibly be done to assure the reconstruction of a world where food is abundant and the air is fit to . . .”

Victoria broke off and shook her head sadly. “I can see that I’ve been assaulting an impregnable fortress. Very well, choose to have your lesson the hard way, and so be it. I wish you all the good fortune there is. You’re going to need every gram.”

The old woman labored to rise. Although he dared not assist her, Rook instinctively came forward a half-step.

Victoria refused to look at her nemesis. Dignity pulled tightly about her like a cloak, she seized her cane and made her way to the door,

* * *

Her inner turmoil stilled at last, her mind at peace for the first time in what seemed like ages, Victoria took the executive express elevator directly to her upper-floor quarters. She sat down at the vidicom terminal and placed a call to St. Patrick’s Cathedral, and was forced to spend a minute persuading the youthful priest who buffered incoming calls that she was indeed who she said she was. He finally put her through to Cardinal Freneaux.

In the vidicom display, the prelate’s emaciated countenance jelled in the warm smile. “My dear Victoria, how thoughtful of you to call.”

“I’m so glad I reached you, Louis. I was afraid you might be tied up in conference. I’d like to invite you to have dinner with me this evening.”

“Wonderful!” Cardinal Freneaux looked every bit as pleased as he sounded. “I had made other arrangements, but they can easily be changed.”

“It’s something of a occasion, something worth celebrating,” she explained. “In the morning, UNDEP will issue a press release of some consequence; I wanted you to be the first to know. May I come by for you around seven?”

“Splendid, splendid! That will be fine.”

“Until then, Louis.”

Victoria used the intercom to tell Xaviera she wanted the day’s remaining appointments cancelled. She spent the rest of the morning and afternoon reliving her confrontation with Rook, and contemplating the upshot.

Dressing without haste in early evening, she chose the severe black gown reserved for formal outings, slipped over her thin wrist the tourmaline bracelet Enrique had given her to mark their tenth wedding anniversary. The swollen joints of her arthritic fingers made it difficult to fasten the clasp of a gold brooch at the nape of her neck.

When all was ready, she took up a small satin handbag, the fancy black, ivory-tipped cane and called down to the garage.

The electric limousine and driver, and a pair of Broward’s omnipresent security agents, were waiting for her in the staff lounge adjacent to the multilevel basement garage.

They rode in silence, with the heavily tinted windows rolled up despite the muggy summer dusk. Five hours and more remained until the midnight curfew would clear the streets. Victoria studied with keen interest the defeated multitudes overspilling the sidewalks on both sides of the street. The limo crawled through spotty traffic on East 48th Street and turned right into Fifth Avenue.

When the vehicle nosed its way into a queue of hungry supplicants congregated outside St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dr. Victoria Maria-Luisa Ortega de Duiño crossed herself.

PART TWO - ROOK

Corvus frugilegus, an abundant member of genus *Corvidae*, forms the most intelligent and adaptable family of birds. Young specimens resemble other crows, with glossy black plumage, but lose their face feathers with age. An adult's naked gray-white skin identifies the bird as a rook.

Twelve

Momento, por favor!" The imperative note in Alonzo Mateo de Alarcón's utterance caused his visitor to break off in mid-sentence.

Reposing behind the massive desk in his luxurious office suite, the fastidious Spaniard reveled in his niche as power broker and U.N. minister without portfolio, allowing no one to forget his position as chief counsel and adviser to U.N. Secretary-General Dr. Thomas Spencer Lowndes. Looking down his thin, aristocratic nose at the priest, Alarcón sniffed impatiently. "Monsignor," he drawled, enunciating each syllable carefully, as if it might be fragile, "I do wish you'd make up your mind. First you suggest to me that UNDEP's fossil savant has something of momentous importance to reveal at the upcoming meeting, then without breaking stride you whip about full circle and tell me you have not the slightest idea what that weighty 'something' might be."

Right Reverend Monsignor Theodor Velk, S.J., wore his usual cowed expression, a common occurrence during his long, clandestine association with Alarcón and, at one remove U.N. Secretary-General Lowndes. "I thought I had made that clear," he said, sounding tentative. "The something in question is why I mean to record every word of the proceedings."

His agile mind at work, Alarcón planted his elbows on the desk, gazed at the priest with steadfast intensity. "*¡Seguro!* So you said. However, should it be discovered that you have dared to smuggle a recording device into the closed session it could be damaging not only to you yourself, but would also reflect disparagement upon the integrity of others as well. Christiansen might even decide to dismiss you from your post as chaplain. Has that unhappy prospect crossed your mind?"

"Well, yes; in a way. But I —"

"Wait!" Alarcón lifted his hand, stilling the other's objection. "An even uglier consequence occurs to me. Your archbishop might insist upon having you defrocked. A rather frightening possibility, no?"

Inserting two fingers beneath his white clerical collar, the Jesuit attorney tugged the band open a few millimeters, exposing a triumph of nanotechnology. The molecular recorder attached to the collar's inner surface looked no more threatening than did the flat plastic strip to which it was attached. "To be found out," said Monsignor Velk, proud to indulge in a self-satisfied witticism, "I would have to be defrocked before the fact, not afterward."

"*¡Bueno!*" The priest's sally elicited a thin smile from Alarcón. Then his thoughts turned inward, and the smile faded. "This news you bring me is mildly disturbing, Monsignor. UNDEP's chief executive runs his shop more loosely than other executives might consider proper. Yet prior this upcoming session, the agendas and objectives of the select committees

heretofore appointed by Christiansen were an open book. Seldom if ever has he convened a closed session. This veil of secrecy with which he has shrouded the simple act of bringing his senior staff together strikes me as contrary to Christiansen's overall leadership philosophy. You have no idea at all why he insists upon secrecy now? Surely there must be an outstanding reason."

"A topic of major importance is the only remark I overheard," replied Velk. "On the other hand, should we really feel paranoid about being kept in the dark?"

"Paranoid, Monsignor . . . ? My credo," declared Alarcón, "has always been that only the paranoid survive. Intuition tells me withholding the prospective proceedings from the light of day is the brainchild of Rook, not the director."

Velk's shrug admitted the existence of such a possibility. "I've asked around, pulsed several members of Rook's staff. As always, they're close-mouthed, loyal to a fault, proud to be associated with him. The few I've spoken with seem insanely fond of UNDEP's 'fossil savant,' to borrow your term for that demon."

Alarcón pondered. "Then I suppose we must live with the unknown until it reveals itself. Very well, let us assume the message, whatever it may be, is of a crucial nature, and leave off fretting about it until the truth becomes known."

The Jesuit said self-importantly, "Rook's been out of circulation for months. During my discreet inquiries in one UNDEP directorate or another, I learned that he's been engaged in overseeing an on-going study of some kind. Those I approached referred to it as the 'Black Hole.'"

Alarcón frowned. "Black . . . hole?"

"Everything goes in, you see — specialists in one discipline or another, statisticians and logisticians, not to mention an appreciable amount of funding costing untold man-hours of farmed-out research. But thus far absolutely nothing has come out. Try as I would, I was unable to catch a hint of the subject matter, or the study's objective. No one other than those affiliated with the working group apparently has a need to know, or refuses to divulge any whys and wherefores. All I was able to learn is that the entire cadre, together or in piecemeal working groups, has for some time been sequestered in an off-limits section of the U.N. Tower on a daily basis."

"Hmm-m-m." Alarcón picked up the eighteenth century Spanish poniard he used as a letter opener and toyed with it, testing its needle-sharp point on his thumb. "Here is what I suggest, Monsignor. Let us assume UNDEP's mysterious study, whatever secrets it contains, has reached fruition. Let us further assume that Christiansen's 'black hole' staff conference will disclose and discuss the study's findings. Rook's mercurial nature and declining health are open secrets, which makes me believe . . ." He paused, laid the poniard back on his desk, and chose his words with care. "Should a reasonable opening present itself, mightn't it be prudent for you as chaplain to prime Rook's pump so to speak?"

"Prime his . . . ? I'm not sure of your meaning, Mateo."

"Then allow me to elucidate." Beneath jet-black brows, Alarcón's dark eyes raked the cleric. "Before the aged iconoclast delivers his sermon, whatever the topic may be, I suggest that you try and elevate his blood pressure. When angered, people often divulge not only their true selves, but tend to disclose substantive information and subterranean motives they had no intention of revealing. I encourage you to make a strenuous effort, Monsignor, to get under Rook's skin, see what sort of spontaneous rise you find it possible to elicit."

“Provoke him openly,” protested Velk, “in front of Christiansen, other UNDEP executives and the senior staff?”

Alarcón blinked. “Where else?”

“Um, yes; where else?” echoed the priest, his unhappiness by no means a pretense.

“As chaplain, isn’t it your practice to open important gatherings with an invocation?”

“Most times, of course.”

“Here is I what I should think will suffice.” Alarcón briefly explained what he had in mind.

“Saint . . . Victoria? Really, Mateo! Surely you can’t mean that.”

“Most surely I do, Monsignor.”

Velk paled. “That will not just provoke Rook, it will send him into a blind rage.”

“My thought exactly.”

“B-but,” stammered Velk, “beatification was so recent, and so unexpected after the process had dragged on for decades How can you ask me to do such a thing?”

Alarcón’s smile let the priest know how meaningless his objection was. “When the session concludes,” he said, as usual couching orders in his own brand of left-handed politesse, “please be so kind as to bring the recorded data directly here to my office. We shall go over every utterance with a fine-tooth comb. Something of value may also be learned from the ensuing discussion, should any controversy arise.”

Realizing further argument would be useless, Velk became resigned to his role. A spur-of-the-moment inspiration caused him to seek favor. “An independent psychoanalytic appraisal might also help clarify the meeting’s content and direction, Mateo.”

“Ah, excellent! I shall arrange for that.” Alarcón glanced up at the antique analog chronometer gracing his office wall, its hour markings in Roman numerals. “You had best be on your way. Isn’t the meeting slated for nine o’clock?”

“Nine, yes.”

“Then off with you. I’ll expect to see you again before the close of business.”

On his way to the door, Monsignor Velk acknowledged the other’s words with a less than enthusiastic nod.

* * *

A buzz of subdued conversation among the early arrivals underscored an air of expectancy pervading the expansive executive conference chamber high in the United Nations Tower. The floor-to-ceiling glass wall commanded a birds-eye view of blighted Brooklyn, where the hulk of Elysium’s gigantic, multi-tiered arcology complex dominated the murky skyline. One hundred and twelve stories below, wan midwinter sunlight transformed the East River into a swath of molten metal.

UNDEP Director Nils Christiansen seated himself at the head of the long conference table, and complaisantly folded his workingman’s hands. His thousand-meter stare deceived neither the upper-echelon colleagues already in attendance, nor any lesser minions. Conventional wisdom had it that little or nothing escaped the Great Dane’s folded hands and searching mind.

Behind the director, gracing the wall of pseudo-birch wood paneling, a sculpted bas-relief depicted balanced scales, and UNDEP’s motto, TERRA STABILITA, superimposed upon a stylized version of the planet’s blue-and-silver globe; it failed to enhance the spacious chamber’s utilitarian aspect.

In groups, singles and pairs, executives and staff members filed inside and chose seats. Minutes passed before a powered geriatric chair bearing the lanky, wasted figure of UNDEP

Commissioner emeritus Bennett Rook glided across the threshold. His exophthalmic hazel eyes, set widely apart in a seamed, age-raddled countenance, swept the conference chamber as if seeking a rationale for its existence.

Someone was heard to mutter, “Cometh the iceman.” Desultory conversations around the table petered out on cue.

“My apologies, Nils,” said the latecomer, his reedy baritone conveying neither remorse nor sincerity. “I was unavoidably detained.”

“Then it’s only proper to forgive you,” the director said amiably, “since we’ve yet to convene.” Christiansen waited for Rook to guide the geriatric chair around the long table to a place at his right hand. He rose, a broad-shouldered, ursine presence, and leaned forward, splayed his fingers on the tabletop and addressed the gathering. “Before we begin, a word of reminder. As you were told, this will not be a plenary session, merely an informal, off the record get together, it’s purpose to skim the surface features of a just-concluded study. Take notes pertaining to the preliminary findings if you wish, but please keep them totally confidential. The secretary has been advised to forgo taking official minutes, and we shall also dispense with the usual parliamentary amenities. Now then, first we shall hear from —”

“Your pardon, Mr. Director.”

Christiansen shared a trait common to most other high-level executives; he disliked being interrupted. Caring even less than Bennett Rook for the Jesuit “spy” foisted off as UNDEP’s chaplain by the Archbishop of Greater New York, he noted the expression of mild annoyance clouding Velk’s angular features, and said, “Yes, Monsignor? Does my cavalier method of getting started cause you heartburn?”

The Jesuit attorney met the director’s level gaze obliquely. He cleared his throat. “Not at all, Mr. Director. It’s just that I . . . Well, I had prepared an invocation to Saint Victoria, and . . . No matter; another time.”

Christiansen cut a sharp glance at his senior colleague.

Rook was sitting a touch straighter in the prison of his polychrome metal chair. Head cocked at a slight angle, he regarded the chaplain with steadfast intensity. “Monsignor, UNDEP is in dire need of all the help it can get from any quarter. But will you take offense if I remind you that for someone in your occupation soliciting divine intervention from saintly Victoria Duiño might not be appropriate. Your devout Romish brethren never passed up an opportunity to vilify her in life. The Church she adored questioned her faith ad nauseum, continually libeled her the ‘Matriarch of Death,’ and went so far as to propose excommunication on at least three occasions.”

It worked, thought Monsignor Velk. He pretended to stiffen angrily. “Mr. Commissioner, what purpose will be served by reopening wounds long healed?”

“Furthermore,” continued Rook in an identical monotone, as if he hadn’t heard the other words, “when at last she left us, the funeral mass had barely concluded when the Vatican’s Father and Teacher began proactively sponsoring canonization. What struck me as odd was that for years — no, decades — very little mention was made of the specific miracles leading to the truly awesome ‘miracle’ of her canonization, or why it took so long to unearth those selfsame ‘miracles.’ Bitter irony, I should think, for you to presume sending up a invocatory prayer to Saint Victoria.”

Hoping to halt the eruption he sensed was brewing before it reached the surface, Christiansen laid a cautioning hand on Rook’s arm. “Not now,” he murmured, “not here.”

“I can’t allow his outrageous proposal go by quietly, Nils.”

The director sat back reluctantly, and prepared to weather the coming exchange with folded hands, his searching mind on autopilot.

* * *

Would he take offense? Monsignor Velk asked himself. Would he ever! Hoping to make the most of the opportunity, he made a show of indignation, realized it was not entirely a sham, and choked back a stern rebuttal. Provocative tactics aside, Rook's monstrous talent for sarcasm made the monsignor yearn for bygone days when godless arrogance could be expunged at the stake.

The aged monster's dim view of Catholicism — of theology and theologians in general, for that matter — was common knowledge. While in this instance indicating that he had swallowed the bait, Rook's blatant rebuke to someone of his stature rankled Velk. What made the offensive maneuver even more irritating was that Rook had wittingly enhanced the provocation in front of an assemblage of colleagues and co-workers, not to mention UNDEP's chief executive, an abusive thrust his lawyerly instincts made it impossible to ignore.

"Mr. Commissioner," he said, doing his best to suppress a burr of annoyance marring his diction, "seven decades of the nine God granted Saint Victoria were devoted to a cause she considered selfless, albeit one severely frowned upon by the Holy See."

"I see." Rook paused, his thin lips twisted in a parody of humor, the riposte mocking the priest's choice of words. "What I fail to see," he added, "is how anyone could be more aware of that than I myself."

The wry, calmly stated retort found its mark. Determined to return torment for torment, nettling comment for nettling comment, Velk fell into his courtroom manner. Striving to sound like the calm voice of reason, he played to the audience hanging on every word. "Mr. Commissioner, what I chose to make reference to was Saint Victoria's —"

"— pagan, bloodthirsty triage crusade," supplied Rook with a nice-nasty smile.

Eyes glistening moistly, his anger no longer feigned, the priest said tartly, "Commissioner, Rook, isn't putting words in another's mouth rather self-serving? Correct me if I'm wrong, but do you deny being the principal instrument of Saint Victoria's premature retirement?"

His antagonist's amazement seemed genuine. "Premature, Monsignor . . ? Can anyone's retirement at age eighty-nine be considered 'premature'?"

"Saint Victoria deserved to live to an advanced age. Yet numerous rumors persist about you, Mr. Commissioner. It's been bruited about for some time that you were the primary catalyst responsible for her decision to step down."

An affirmative nod from Rook. "I'm able to confirm the existence of such a rumor."

Smarting at the cynicism inherent in the other's response, Velk bit his words short. "You have no choice, sir. It's impossible to dismiss the least onerous tales, let alone the, er . . . more sanguine others. You know perfectly well what I mean."

"Monsignor, I'm not sure you know perfectly well what you mean."

"That," accused the priest, "is exactly the sort of obfuscating remark one might expect from you."

"Why, thank you."

The last stragglers filing into the conference chamber joined those already seated, and stared at the chaplain and Rook in a silent inquiry. The parqueted doors of the conference room slid closed.

“Tell us, if you will be so kind,” requested Velk hotly. “Did you or did you not serve for a number of years on the infamous Triage Committee? And while serving, did you or did you not derive enormous satisfaction from sitting in godlike judgment, helping to condemn millions of defenseless human beings? To cap the odious business, did you or did you not create a large measure of internal strife and controversy before being, shall we say ‘relieved,’ of your post?”

“Mea culpa,” said Rook, his air one of maddening nonchalance. “Withal, saith the deponent, your cross-examination doth limp somewhat sadly, Counselor. Why not call a spade a spade? I wasn’t ‘relieved’ of my post, I was kicked out — a much more appropriate term.”

“Kicked out, then.”

“Now you have it, Monsignor.”

Velk stamped his foot in vexation. “Have you no sense of decency, no smidgen of moral rectitude, no shame? You played a preeminent role in actively sentencing entire populations to death by thirst, starvation or euthanasia. Anyone possessing normal human emotions would blush at having taken an active part in usurping God’s prerogative.”

“I’m not given to blushing,” admitted Rook.

The priest sniffed in disdain. “Global triage activities were Satanic in concept and execution.”

“Will your Romish brethren think it wise for you to desecrate the professional dedication and lifework of a Saint, Monsignor?”

“Participating in such a thoroughly contemptible, inhumane endeavor will surely send all former committee members to everlasting fire, including you, sir. You will burn throughout eternity in company with historic monsters such as Tamerlane, Hitler, Pol Pot, Stalin, and every other inhuman fiend who stooped to destroy lives wholesale.”

Rook clicked his tongue. “My, an elite roll call! I ask again; is it appropriate to assume your hellish roster includes saintly Dr. Victoria Duiño? I find it especially desolating to learn the Vatican would believe anyone duly sanctified could be viewed as less than perfect.”

Titters from the audience accompanied a few stifled chuckles.

Infuriated at having painted himself into a corner, Velk was painfully disconcerted by his gaffe. He vainly tried to pull in his horns. “I fear . . . that is, uh . . .” The priest coughed into a cupped hand. “Saint Victoria did receive absolution, final rites. Perhaps in the eyes of God it did little to abrogate her, uh . . .” Velk’s emotional turmoil approached critical mass, a passion sensed by everyone in the conference chamber. He glowered at Rook. “As most of us are aware, sir, Saint Victoria’s triage ethic was orders of magnitude less predatory than your own.”

“An inarguably fact,” said Rook evenly. “We clashed constantly over professional differences. Early on, you see, I convinced myself her triage philosophy was far too lenient.”

The churchman blanched. “Lenient! The term is hardly appropriate when speaking of premeditated genocide.”

“Perhaps, Monsignor. Then again, perhaps it was quite appropriate. On second thought, for the sake of argument let’s say you are correct. ‘Lenient’ strikes me as unfitting in a sense, yet be that as it may I was never able to convince my superior that her perception of where we were at the time, and where we were headed, was handicapped by the permanent blind spot that afflicted her. Today, my objection to her long-range triage philosophy seems more valid than it did then, mired as we are in the present waking nightmare.”

“In other words,” said Velk, “you persist in thinking of your gruesome triage philosophy as right and proper?”

“I do so believe.”

“Mr. Commissioner, you strike me as someone who would take pleasure pouring water on a drowning man.”

“Absolutely one could have said it more eloquently, Monsignor.”

So angry that he was becoming thick-tongued, Velk said, “In accord with your remarkable gift for avoiding the issue, you also persist in ignoring one salient fact: the contemporary global population has not simply stabilized, but has entered into a modest decline. The need for triage judgments, conceding as you say, ‘for the sake of argument,’ the need for such a fiendish practice ever existed, it has long since passed.”

“Hmm-m-m, stabilized,” said Rook in a musing tone. His shaggy gray brows knitted. “I stand corrected, Monsignor. In this enlightened era, with a little help from friends like climate change, raging epidemics and a surfeit of natural disasters, the death rate marginally exceeds the birthrate. Our Mecca of salvation, zero population growth, was achieved a decade or more ago, and the generational lag between then and now has allowed our numbers to decline a trifle. Three hosannas seem in order, perhaps even a loud, lusty hallelujah!”

Red-faced, Velk sensed triumph. “Flippancy aside, it amazes me to hear you admit the truth.”

* * *

Rook’s bemused expression suggested tolerance for the naive taunts of a child. He said slowly, “Monsignor, the problem is, was, and ever more shall be not population numbers per se, but the earthly environment in which we’re forced to dwell. For a century and more we squandered our essence by treating the symptoms and permitting the disease to run rampant. Ask yourself this: Has our hideously swollen population stabilized at anything remotely resembling a utopian plateau?”

“Now just one moment, sir.”

“ZPG,” pursued Rook firmly, without raising his voice, “was achieved at a headcount of, give or take, twelve and one-half billions. Unfortunately, a good percentage of those billions still face an early demise because of an inability to sustain themselves. Today, a fortunate majority of the world’s grossly swollen populace survives at the level of bare subsistence, emphasis on ‘bare’.”

“In other words,” declared Velk, “you stubbornly cling to the correctness of your view.”

“Stubbornly have I clung, and shall cling. The Janus head of hindsight hath swung about, saith Prophet Rook, and examined the past with twenty-twenty vision. Archaic language aside, that is not a biblical aphorism.”

His goal of provoking the other forgotten, the chaplain was beside himself. “I am distantly acquainted with Holy Scripture, sir, and even more closely acquainted with your penchant for changing the subject. Tell me, as former deputy chairman of the infamous death-dealing committee, do you hold yourself blameless for aiding in the wanton slaughter of millions?”

Rook sighed the special, long-suffering sigh he reserved for infrequent dealings with clergymen. “Blame,” he said, “lies within the purview of God and small children, Monsignor.”

“You should be struck down for daring to even mention the Almighty!”

“*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, Monsignor. My personal view of the Almighty is . . . I suppose I think of He, She or It as an extremely broad-minded supreme being, with an excellent sense of humor by the way.”

“Someday,” countered Velk, a tremor spoiling his lawyerly enunciation, “you will stand before judgement, Mr. Commissioner. Only then will you learn how dreadfully wrong you have been on all counts.”

Rook’s fleet, infuriating smile further provoked his would-be provoker. “Spoken like a true Jesuit. According to the witchdoctors charged with overseeing my dubious health, what you predict is certain to become a reality fairly soon. But why O why do I feel a need to justify myself, or my actions? Ah, well, since we’ve come this far.

“Monsignor,” said Rook, his voice stronger, more resonant, “Dr. Duiño loved to rub my nose in one diamond-hard, indisputable nugget of truth. Implementing triage judgments did not amount to the cold-blooded, premeditated mass murder condemned by you and your Church. Our committee ceaselessly reviewed and revised the data classifying those who could be saved only by prompt treatment, those who would survive sans treatment, and those who would not — could not — survive despite every conceivable form of aid and treatment.”

“An abomination!” cried the priest.

“By no means,” denied Rook. “Triage was a stark, bitter necessity; it was designed to shorten suffering rather than prolong it. Victoria Duiño thought of triage as a last resort, a concession to the inevitable. To her, the work accomplished by our committee was an excruciating, supremely distasteful, last-ditch attempt to reduce our numbers to something the planet could once again tolerate. We tragically failed to reach that goal, and humanity’s ultimate fate therefore remains indeterminate.

“As for ‘blame’,” pursued Rook, “why not shift the onus to where it belongs? An eminently qualified physician, Dr. Duiño dedicated herself to a cause she believed in with all her heart and soul. Her reward was to be reviled as a worldwide pariah, a universal condemnation due in large to irresponsible media sensationalism and vicious propaganda disseminated by the benighted religious order of which you are a member. If you’re halfway honest, and I would like to believe you are, you will admit that Saint Victoria was canonized for religion-political purposes that had nothing whatsoever to do with her lifelong struggle for the betterment of mankind.”

Rook’s concluding salvo proved too much for the chaplain. Flushed and visibly agitated, he glared at his aged adversary for seconds, and finally turned beseeching eyes toward the director.

Throughout the heated exchange, Nils Christiansen had been trying to decide whether to let the impromptu, controversial debate run its course, and in the end left well enough alone. Intended to make light of the verbal fireworks, his deep-throated chuckle rumbled falsely. “Ladies and gentlemen, the most callous, cold-blooded person who ever engaged in our thankless profession would think twice before impugning the sanctity and dedication of Saint Victoria. Which at the moment is neither here nor there. We’ve come together this morning not to debate non-germane issues, but to learn what new strategies may have evolved from the recently concluded study chaired by Commissioner emeritus Rook.

“Yet if blame we must,” continued the director, “I believe it only proper to allow Saint Victoria to rest in peace, and instead lay the blame for what has transpired at the feet of everyone’s favorite scapegoat, the twentieth century bastards who worked so hard to erect the foundations of our present dilemma.”

“Amen!” someone cried.

“TTCB says it all!” hooted someone else.

A chorus of disgruntled approval punctuated the echoing shouts.

Christiansen raised a hand to quiet the murmurs of concurrence rattling around the length and breadth of the conference table. "Let us proceed with the business at hand?" Searching the rows of familiar faces, he announced that Commissioner Rook would begin by summarizing the tentative results of the study, after which the meeting would be thrown open for discussion.

The director dipped his head toward the aged, outwardly unconcerned man slouched in the geriatric chair. "Bennett, the floor is yours."

Thirteen

His aplomb outwardly intact after the impromptu verbal duel, Rook energized the geriatric chair, turned and rolled up a shallow ramp. Locking the chair in place at the podium, he shifted mental gears, panning the executive conference chamber as if to renew acquaintances with all those present. "Colleagues and co-workers," he began, "a gem of classical wisdom has it that none love the messenger who brings bad news. Since I neither expect, require, nor deserve your love, so be it.

"Our extensive study was effected with the aid of experts selected from practically every scientific and social discipline and function known, in addition to input from a number of highly respected consultants. During our months-long labors, we committed ourselves to a sole objective: devising potential means and methods aimed at preventing what little remains of the sky from falling. I mean to present several innovative measures and recommend their adoption and implementation in the strongest terms possible.

"Before we open that can of wriggling worms, however, a few brush-strokes of perspective are in order. Everyone present is achingly familiar with the woeful tale I'm about to capsulize. Even so, I beg your indulgence. Come with me on a short, guided tour of the primrose path toward oblivion trod by TTCB. Yet the label is not entirely accurate time-wise; their nefarious conduct unfortunately dribbled over into a portion of the present century.

"If weighed in the balance by a dispassionate neutral source, should such exist, those twentieth century bastards would be judged wanting in several dimensions, principally for perpetrating The Great Mistake. Admittedly some of the challenges facing them were cyclical, and a few endemic. Our study nevertheless concentrated upon devising a practical method of correcting the effects of TTCB's conscientious dismissal of the a serious, inescapable threat: reversing the continual desecration of the physical and business environments. There can be no question that they were unaware, or ignored, how all of humanity's eggs were being placed in one basket, and concocted the ingredients of a recipe for disaster with regard to the Earth we stand upon, and the way we buy and sell to one another. Worse, TTCB proceeded to trash the basket itself even after it became clear that the contents — their progeny — would eventually be dumped along with the basket into the dust bin.

"Suffer with me as I project a snapshot glance at the latter part of the previous century and the early decades of the present one, and touch upon the most prominent follies, foibles and outright crimes leading to our past and present difficulties. Give an ear to my account of how TTCB sought to save the world by either neglecting to institute, politicizing, or sweeping under the carpet one or more plans that may have contributed to averting the ruination of our planet, and our way of life.

"A mere groundswell at the start," declared Rook, "the pros and cons of their Earth saving Crusade gradually ballooned into a holy jihad as fervent, fever-pitched and self-defeating as any wrought by fanatical Muslim terrorists. When the first, faint glimmers of an environmental crisis began gaining attention, doomsday messiahs and nay-sayers sprouted like

mushrooms after a spring downpour. Prominent among the former cadre was a sincere gentleman, James Hansen, then-director of NASA's Goddard Institute of Space Research in Greenbelt, Maryland . . ."

* * *

During the dog days of 1988, informed Rook, massive timber fires raged in Yellowstone National Park, a prolonged drought scourged Midwest croplands, and humid Washington sweltered in midday temperatures wobbling near the hundred-degree mark. It was then that Hansen appeared before a congressional sub-committee and delivered a stunning jeremiad.

Others among the agency's scientific elite had warned NASA officialdom that a probability of global climate change was in the offing. Voicing stern caveats and dire predictions of what would likely occur downstream, Hansen described how an atmospheric buildup of carbon dioxide, in addition to methane and other "greenhouse gases," were inferred to be eventually responsible for transforming Planet Earth into a densely blanketed inferno bathed in sulfuric acid clouds similar to Planet Venus, where surface temperatures approach nine hundred degrees, Fahrenheit. Such, declared Hansen, would in time become the Brobdingnagian cross mankind and all other earthly creatures might be destined to bear.

Hansen designated as primary culprits the ever-accelerating combustion of coal, natural gas, and petroleum, coupled with runaway deforestation, human-desecrated and blighted rain forests, the emission of ozone-destroying chlorofluorocarbon compounds, oxides of carbon and nitrogen, halons, methane from livestock and melting arctic permafrost that would release untold quantities of carbon dioxide. Unfortunately, the global village's technological economy had grown healthy and wealthy, if not conspicuously wise, by feeding on these selfsame fossil fuels and contaminant-producing byproducts.

Battle lines were drawn, Rook explained. According to the caveats of Hansen and subsequent others, every national government simply had to be sold on the "evidence" pertaining to prospective global climate change, and with equal certainty had to unanimously accede to monumental behavioral lifestyle changes deemed not merely desirable, but ultimately mandatory. If not, the planet's inhabitants would eventually wither and die, smothered in a hothouse sired by civilization's exhalations and effluvia, with a reflexive coup d' grâce administered by collective human selfishness and greed.

Over a period of decades, worldwide mean temperatures crept upward inexorably. Antarctic ice shelves separated from the continent and underwent accelerated melting along with the ice sheets covering Greenland, Antarctica and numerous glaciers elsewhere. It was predicted that the seas would begin to overflow the shore, inundating low-lying areas such as Bangladesh, Mozambique and grossly endangering the below-sea-level Netherlands. The densely populated Maldives and other scattered islands, archipelagos, and coastal littorals would drown, while catastrophic regional megadroughts would diminish or destroy agricultural production, flinging wide the door to famine and pestilence. And as the oceanic circulation patterns changed; larger and more frequent cyclonic storms would occur, torrential rains would cause major flooding in some areas of the globe, while varieties of severe weather would devastate other regions. Society was repeatedly warned that socioeconomic upheaval of a magnitude never before seen would envelop the world, including mass species extinctions on a scale that long ago decimated the dinosaur population that had flourished for eons, only to vanish practically overnight as Mother Earth tolled time. In the end, the human species would be in danger of terminating not with a bang, but a long, drawn-out whimper.

Controversy resounded within the ivied halls of academe, the Spartan corridors of research institutions, the windowless hermitages of federally sponsored think tanks and by-the-numbers government scientific laboratories. Cooler heads attempted to prevail, arguing that to extrapolate from a flimsy string of “knowns and semi-knowns” could easily lead to faulty conclusions. The nay-sayers concluded that nineteenth century climatological records were prone to error, woefully incomplete and invalid when attempting to obtain the long view. Others insisted that the planet was in a slow recovery stage temperature-wise, still emerging from the most recent ice age, and that by no stretch of the imagination did proof positive exist for claims of a killer warming trend. Some even declared that a “reasonable” carbon dioxide increase would stimulate plant growth, and in turn yield more bountiful crops, while others assured everyone the peoples of Siberia and similar wintry climes would welcome a warmer climate.

Most damaging of all to a clear recognition of the upcoming problem was that rather than beginning to melt, overflights of the Greenland ice sheet provided evidence of minor growth. Studies and empirical experiments proliferated, each attempting to prove or disprove the contention that an early phase of the greenhouse phenomenon was being witnessed. At this juncture the United States Environmental Protection Agency instituted a Global Climate Change Program designed to inventory human-induced emissions from fossil fuel and biomass combustion. Mathematical models, constructed under the direction of scientific experts, projected the coming changes in oceanic circulation patterns as well as mass-energy biosphere-atmosphere transfers and exchanges that would tentatively result from on-going global warming. Soon these programs became the subject of succeeding programs and studies, all of which proved revelatory to some degree, but when added to counter-climate-change propaganda propounded by deniers ended up being so confusing to the public that only a minority was convinced of the danger’s validity.

Scientific logic dictated that the planet’s “heat sink,” the oceans, continued Rook, would provide the most valid clues to the true nature of global climate change as proposed by “theorists.” Layering and segmenting the biosphere and atmosphere in a quest for significant data, the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Agency ran innumerable, complex General Circulation Models, each requiring exhaustive supercomputer time, but when taken as a whole proved very little, one way or the other.

Sound waves, Rook told the assemblage, propagate less readily in a tenuous fluid medium such as air than a denser one like water, hence the warmer the water the more rapidly audio waves travel from source to destination. Overcoming the strident opposition of environmentalists who worried about the health and well-being of whales and other marine life, devices submerged in the ocean emitted sonic pulses of identical frequency and amplitude destined for pickup by subsurface receivers spotted appropriately in the seas. Excruciatingly exact time-lapse measurements were made. Despite meticulous attention to detail, the only conclusions drawn from these experiments were that they proved conclusively inconclusive.

Near the turn of the millennium, related Rook, a series of six sophisticated Earth Observing Satellites were orbited in order to return googols of definitive data, none of which, alas! led to anything approaching a definitive answer.

The doom-criers were not to be stilled, nor were the scoffers. Then as always, an overload of the negative briefly dominated the print and electronic media. News of a looming apocalypse destined to affect the planet’s coming billions of citizens generated sensational tabloid accounts, whereas word of its cancellation would have earned three or four lines on page three of the trivia section. Films and video scare specials were aired, mesmerizing the general

public with in-depth coverage by “experts” concerning future disasters in the making. Certain ad agency executives, the monied commercial sponsors who kept them afloat, and Nielsen-happy television network big-wigs compared the resulting audience ratings to manna from Heaven. Gaggles of grant-seeking academics, vote-seeking politicians, and attention-hungry entertainment celebrities appeared regularly on radio and video talk shows. The assorted talking heads accumulated gratifying quantities of votes, research grants, additional notoriety, and scads of ego-boosting praise for their selflessness in holding back from the viewing public absolutely nothing in the way of bad tidings, or good tidings, of any stripe or texture.

The obverse side of the coin — planet saving — reverberate like a great tonic chord in the fertile imaginations of certain astute government officials who took the bit in their teeth and clambered aboard the greenhouse bandwagon that was steadily gathering momentum. One such, former U.S. Vice President Albert Gore, Jr., lost no time advocating legislation that would mandate a massive reduction in carbon dioxide, et al, emissions, also urging the stiffest penalties under the law for non-compliance. Even more drastic environmental measures were forwarded. Petitions called for an immediate halt to clear-cutting in the world’s terminally ill rain forests and old-growth hardwood forests, in addition to jeremiads circulated elsewhere by ephemeral Earth saving cliques whose militant rallying cries made Greenpeace and the Sierra Club seem like arrant wastrels.

* * *

During the first decade of the third millennium, Rook went on to say, things changed for the worse. Theory turned into fact when it was pointed out that introducing thermal energy into a closed system like the Earth could have only one result: it became more dynamic, meaning that the molecules making up the atmosphere and hydrosphere became more agitated and moved faster, causing circulation patterns to changes in the hydrosphere as well as the atmosphere, which in turn meant bringing on more and longer lasting cyclonic and anticyclonic storms, while at the same time certain other regions experienced severe droughts and even megadroughts. Global climate change suddenly began to be treated as a definite, looming danger.

Splendid! cried the latter day descendants of TTCB, a shout echoed vociferously by an American administration beholden to the lobbyists serving major corporate and private enterprises who ponied up and fund their election campaigns. But, how, they asked, can we make this vision of a utopian world a reality without damaging economic growth, and specifically the profit that encourages shareholders?

Just as warfare is considered too important to be entrusted to the professional military, elected officials and bureaucrats deemed Earth saving far too vital a trust to leave in the hands of the scientific community, whose dedicated professionals might possibly by chance happen to possess at least an inkling of the synergistic effects created by environmental systems, and who might also by chance tend to give only token credence to the iceberg’s tip, and instead concentrate on the four-fifths of the problem submerged beneath the surface.

In the wake of endless consultations with astute legal eagles and the high-ranking judiciary, TTCB’s bureaucracy put its Hydra-heads together and arrived at an ideal bureaucratic solution to the knotty problem, the deregulation of formerly enforced federal and state economic and industrial standards and controls. In some cases, no more than months were required for the introduction and passage of legislation dedicated to maintaining a privileged lifestyle for each and every citizen of the United States, where a relatively small percentage of the world’s burgeoning population consumed the lion’s share of dwindling non-renewable resources, and

much more than its share of former renewable resources that overconsumption and a weakening environment was rapidly making in sort supply.

Excellent! applauded the bureaucrats in unison. Excellent for Americans at least. But, chimed their indignant fellow citizens of the world, what about the rest of us?

What about the oil-rich states to whom the production and export of crude petroleum had for some time been their economic lifeblood? What about the disenfranchised, downtrodden billions in locales like Somalia and Haiti, or vast portions of the African continent? What about the rest of the down-and-outers scattered throughout portions of the so-called Third and Fourth Worlds? Were they to be abandoned to their fate?

Or for that matter, what about the affluent Old World ignoramuses who might choose to decline an invitation to join the party and revert to less luxurious lifestyles involving electric-powered or hybrid automobiles, a shift to ecologically compatible refrigerants, super-stringent emission standards in the factories they owned, the legislated replacement of incandescent light bulbs with longer-lasting, less expensive light-emitting diodes or fluorescents, or the expense of installing “smart” polarizing windows in their homes and offices in order to minimize heat loss in winter and reflect sunlight in summer, et cetera, and so forth, et al? Or more importantly, to pay for limiting or eliminating the issuance of greenhouse gases from their businesses, and thereby diminish profit?

Rook digressed. As time passed and conditions worsened, he told the gathering, a firmer hand at the helm was desperately needed. The revitalized United Nations Security Council, functioning in its self-declared role as a purportedly “benign” quasi-world government, began exercising an authority that was perpetually questioned, undermined, and condemned. Clumsy and prone to abuses and favoritism, breech-born in agonized fits and starts, militancy in the United Nations Organization grew by leaps and bounds and it gradually assumed the role of a geopolitical octopus peoples everywhere ranted and raved against, damned to a fault, yet somehow contrived to tolerate when certain rigid environmental laws and standards began to be duly enforced. Though by no means sufficient, it did however marginally slow the degradation of the environment.

* * *

“Ah, yes,” admonished Rook, “the ‘laws’ were indeed enforced.” He nodded sagely, assuring his captive audience that if viewed in hindsight’s omniscient brilliance inconsistencies, untruths and half-truths leading to the UNDEP study had been seized upon by the “radical” faction that supported his views, plus what he described as “certain clear-headed individuals,” a statement that drew a few chuckles from the audience. Escalating in leaps and bounds from its “save-the-environment” inception, present day surreal environmental regulations had contributed significantly to sending deficit spending soaring far beyond all bounds of reason. The interwoven tentacles of newborn agencies and bureaus, not to mention the astronomical sums allocated in order to instigate and rigorously enforce punitive environmental standards, meant forgoing a number of “minor” items like adequate housing and education, while medical care for all had more or less fallen by the wayside. Urban renewal had ceased forthwith, and care for the homeless and aged, or the recipients of grossly weakened social services and entitlements, had been drastically reduced. Space research and exploration had been suspended practically en toto, likewise industrial research & development, most medical research, agricultural advancements and innovations, projected or revamped mass transit systems, and particularly the construction or renovation of schools, roads, dams, bridges and other incidentals of the infrastructure. The preservation of endangered wildlife species so vital to biodiversity and ecological balance had

been suspended, as well as the eternal battle against crime, principally neverending warfare against the endemic spread of drugs. Save for one or two essential avenues of scientific research, all of these “minor” items had either evaporated, or been truncated to the brink of extinction.

During more recent generations, he related, the hectic Earth saving crusade had concentrated upon adapting to the effects of climate change, and in so doing had consumed untold trillions in government resources, with minuscule progress to show for mainly deficit expenditures that left the great cross-section of humanity foundering in a sea of red ink. Titanic environmental expenditures had made each succeeding generation the inheritors of a worsening lifestyle, the reluctant proprietors of a decrepit, dilapidated technological civilization steadily moving toward eclipse. In the U.S. alone, the general public had found itself the victim of a receding, chimerical mirage called the American Dream, something that once had held forth the promise of a fruitful, productive existence.

“Our great leap backward hit home with sledgehammer force,” declared Rook, “when conclusions deriving from the study indicated that Mother Earth, in league with subtle but discernible solar fluctuations, seemed bound and determined to warm her way toward ultimate disaster, while persistently ignoring the weak as well as strong forms of manmade ‘help.’

“Having reached that conclusion,” he said, “I myself, and our committeemen and women, have arrived at a startling conclusion. Only on rare occasions,” he summarized, “do I permit myself the use of a pejorative, but in this instance a filthy, richly deserved acronym that deserves to be spelled out comes to mind — tee-tee-cee-bee. Our twentieth century and early twenty-first century predecessors, and many if not most of their immediate successors, succumbed to an infectious case of tunnel vision. Successive administrations ignored the necessity to begin corrective actions aimed at defeating or ameliorating the global climate change threat, and simply faced way when something concrete might have been done then. TTCB irrationally subscribed to a universal human trait, the innate, nearsighted wish to experience a “good life” inherent in most if not all individuals. The debacle resulting from their failure to act, and then turning about and overacting, affords those of us the here and now a monumental, wholly unwelcome opportunity to either start waging a life-and-death struggle against stiff, abortive odds in order to gain an upper hand and avoid the consequences of the creeping, inexorable imbalance affecting our planetary home, or allow ourselves to eventually go quietly into the dark.

“Hear me, ladies and gentlemen! Today we live beneath the Damocles sword unsheathed by TTCB, and it dangles by a thread that is fraying fiber by fiber, strand by strand.” Rook rolled his geriatric chair away from the podium, stretched out an emaciated arm, doubled his fist and thumped the conference table for emphasis. “Our goals have been rethought in their entirety, and our objectives must be redirected along new lines. Certain actions simply have to be taken before it becomes too late if,” he concluded somberly, “it isn’t already too late. To date, global mean temperatures have steadily risen by a factor of one and one-half to two degrees. While the consequences are bad enough now, a predicated rise of four to five degrees will be nothing less than catastrophic.”

A smothering stillness enveloped the executive conference chamber. Although seriously affected by Rook’s diatribe, and far from indifferent to his summary, Director Christensen displayed no visible reaction. “As usual, Bennett,” was his rumbling endorsement, “you have been most eloquent.” The director’s calm blue eyes swept the expanse of the conference chamber, gauging the reaction of his colleagues. “Before we learn how well the select

committee has done its homework, does anyone wish to rebut any or all portions of Commissioner Rook's summation, or perhaps offer a comment?"

Meaningful glances were exchanged, a few eyebrows raised. After a muted rash of polite coughs and paper shufflings, silence resumed.

"Very well." Christiansen glanced up, checked the time on a digital wall chronometer, and swung to face the man slouched in the geriatric chair. "We shall break for fifteen minutes, Bennett, then you may proceed."

Fourteen

"*Estimado* Nils," declared Alonzo Mateo de Alarcón, "everyone, especially I myself, holds you in the deepest respect. You are an enormously able professional, so much so that far be it from me to question your account of the, er . . . proceedings, and yet . . ."

Exhibiting as much diffidence as his sanguine Latin nature permitted, the dapper Spaniard touched a button on the multi-function remote controller integral to his desk. The audio playback device came to life with a faint electronic pop.

Christiansen's eyes widened in disbelief as he listened to the thin, sepulchral baritone voice issuing from the recorder.

". . . hence the ultimate conclusion," Bennett Rook was saying, "becomes all too obvious. The optimum solution will be to force the perpetrators, not the grossly overtaxed general public, to pay the astronomical tab for remedying their contributions to a polluted, desecrated environment. Brutally taxing or fining offenders in all sectors, public, private and non-profit, including tax-free ecclesiastic organizations, is not only the most conscionable corrective action, but also the lesser of two evils . . ."

His florid features carved in stone, Nils directed a scathing stare at Alarcón. As if overtaken by a spastic seizure, a massive, blond-haired arm reached across the other's polished desk and killed the recorder playback. "Yesterday's senior staff session," said Christiansen woodenly, "was held behind closed doors for the best of good reasons. I insisted upon an opportunity to obtain feedback from our key technical and senior management people before taking the study's fallout under discussion one step farther."

The other's shoulder-sway signified indifference, a display of body language Nils found particularly irritating. "This Rook person," Alarcón said smoothly, "has taken it upon himself to characterize what he so-colorfully describes as 'brutally taxing or fining' all comers the lesser of two evils. The lesser of two evils still constitutes an evil, does it not?"

Renowned within and without the toils of UNDEP for a slow-building but ultimately volcanic temper, the Great Dane stewed within himself. "After a round table discussion of the study's proposals," he said at last, "I planned to initiate a detailed analysis of the findings, and consequences should any or all be adopted. The results would have aided our executive board in deciding whether to endorse certain recommendations and forward them to Geneva for further evaluation, or revise them, and perhaps quash some outright. Despite my urge for confidentiality, someone obviously slipped out of our private meeting with your recording."

"Nils, Nils! It's useless to feign naiveté." Alarcón managed to sound put-upon. "In these difficult times, the ears in the walls grow ears of their own. I hear your intimation loud and clear, but I plead with you to believe me when I swear in the names of all the Saints that no one from this office, or anyone associated with the office of Secretary-General Lowndes, was dispatched to 'spy' on your secretive meeting."

Alarcón's brand of overbearing, weasel-worded sincerity never failed to further rankle Christiansen. "If so, how can you explain —?"

"Totally unheralded and unsung," said the non-elective official quickly, "the digital mini-tape appeared here on my desk."

The director made no attempt to hide his disbelief. "It turned up in your office gratis?"

"Out of the blue," insisted the other. "Learning its provenance is the principle reason why I invited you to stop by this morning."

Invited! thought Christiansen. A command was a command, no matter how delicately couched in the other's version of politesse. Pursing his lips in frustration, he said, "I won't embarrass you by naming names, Mateo, but let me venture a wild guess. I suspect the culprit's initials might belong to a gentleman known as Monsignor Velk."

His smile resembling a predator's rictus, Alarcón drawled, "Even if I were at liberty to confirm nor deny that allegation, I would of course refuse to do so. Nor am I armed with sufficient information on how to go about doing so, thank you very much."

"Don't bother." For the first time Christiansen sounded gruff, a touch out of control. "Our holier-than-thou chaplain detests Rook with an unhealthy, monomaniacal passion. Rest assured that any professional or private injury the pious gentleman can contrive for myself or Rook will be consummated at the first opportunity, if not sooner."

"Injury . . . ?" His expression querulous, Alarcón said, "Why do you insist upon referring to this case of so-called 'spying' as injurious? An injury to whom, may I inquire?"

"To UNDEP," retorted the director hotly. "To Rook himself, or to me personally if you prefer. I did my damndest to prevent the scenarios born in our extensive, expensively funded study from being pre-judged and trashed without benefit of in-depth analysis. The duplicity of Monsignor . . . Your pardon, the duplicity of our mystery spy tends to shoot down any chance of accomplishing that objective."

As though distantly amused, Alarcón said, "Should the gentleman whose 'initials' you bruit about so freely indeed be determined the culprit, I'm certain he considers his action a sworn obligation, by no means an act of duplicity; nor is his . . . espionage liable to cause injury to anyone. In addition to doing God's will," he added, his cynical smile persisting, "you must at least acknowledge a basic truth. In his disdain of UNDEP's fossil commissioner emeritus, the chaplain stands at the head of a long, well-populated queue."

Christiansen chafed in silence, refusing to comment on the other's sarcastic byplay. "I take it you've already briefed the secretary-general."

"Not yet, no. Dr. Lowndes is having an exceptionally busy week during his visit to our fair metropolis. I have a floating appointment with him sometime after tomorrow's rump session of the Western Security Council."

Christiansen pondered. It had taken a half-decade of forced obsequiousness and cordiality to cultivate a first-name relationship with the crusty, posturing intellectual who made no bones about his perch close beside the throne in Geneva. Nevertheless, the director concluded that a need to clear the air far outweighed the risk of antagonizing the secretary-general's volatile factotum. "Mateo," he said firmly, "what must I do that will make you realize Rook's proposals, wild as they may seem at first glance, are in no way trivial; nor are they the result of guesswork on his part. The scenarios he brought before us deserve a fair, impartial hearing, and Bennett himself deserves equally fair, impartial, bipartisan treatment. I would consider it an enormous personal favor if you were to inform Dr Lowndes that I tentatively concur with many if not most of the corrective measures tendered during the meeting."

“Concur . . . ?” Heat rose in the other’s slate-colored eyes as ego engaged in battle with his shrewdly perceptive intelligence. Ego won out. Studying with an air of stern reproach the huge man seated opposite his desk, Alarcón said crisply, “Mr. Director, to say I am flabbergasted by that statement would be a colossal understatement. I have always prided myself in retaining an open mind, yet my mind is made up firmly and immutably on one point. We shall not presume to argue fruitlessly about the rantings and ravings of a confirmed heretic.”

Despite the storm brewing inside him, and preparing to break, Christiansen refused to give ground. “Commissioner Rook,” he countered, “is an exceptionally able, very brilliant individual.” He instantly regretted saying it, wishing he’d swallowed the angry words that not only made him sound defensive, but as mollification were worse than lame.

“Star bright or dull as dishwater,” was the other’s acerbic rebuttal, “Rook is a vestige of yesteryear, a footnote to UNDEP’s historical travail. Your radical commissioner emeritus persists in posing as a would-be reformer. Actually, he has long outlived any hint of the usefulness which, I grant you, might once have been formidable. His retirement should have been total, not conditional. This ‘emeritus’ status you have conferred upon him is something the secretary-general would never have condoned. By permitting the senile demagogue to retain a position that permits him to dabble in UNDEP policy you have done yourself — your entire organization — a grave disservice, not to mention perpetrating the potentially irreparable harm he may do.”

“Senile . . . ?” Christiansen’s temper flared toward incandescence. “Bennett is by no means senile. Never, not by any stretch of the imagination could he be tar brushed in that manner. As for conceiving and promulgating a radical philosophy, I’m sure he would plead guilty as charged. Why is it so impossible for you to recognize the solemn fact that radical problems often demand radical solutions?”

Now visibly incensed in his own right, Alarcón drummed manicured fingernails on the desktop. “Mr. Director,” he said, his enunciation laced with contempt, “I’m beginning to believe respect for your septuagenarian genius’s former accomplishments has blinded you to the true nature of the outlandish scenarios he is advocating. To begin with, after invoking his dubious authority to commence this latest misadventure, he has organized and directed an encyclopedic, inordinately expensive study of the contemporary human condition. Is that not so?”

“I sanctioned the study personally,” said Christiansen, again put on the defensive in spite of himself. “It was funded openly since it offered an opportunity to —”

“An opportunity,” interjected the other rudely, “to radically worsen the human condition, not improve it as no one except he himself could possibly —”

“That’s totally unfair,” countered Christiansen.

“Do not interrupt me again, I beg you.” Dark eyes blazing, Alarcón forced his visitor to endure a two-beat pause for dramatic effect. “So then, after ingesting certain ill-defined conclusions, the purported fallout from this study you unwisely took it upon yourself to approve, and then extrapolating from the derived misinformation in an illogical manner, your so-excellent commissioner emeritus urges the adoption of threefold legislative measures by the United Nations High Assembly, two of which are nothing less than radical departures from established doctrine. Let us examine the brilliant gentleman’s proposals, beginning with his least contentious brainstorm.

“Firstly,” said Alarcón, ticking off the point with a hard-thrust forefinger, “he advises us to denude nearly all extant research and development programs by diverting every peseta of scarce funding toward intensified blue-sky research that will hopefully culminate in the realization of applied nuclear fusion power generation.”

“We’re almost there,” Christiansen was quick to say. “I have it on excellent authority that within a few —”

“Faugh-h-h, excellent authority indeed! Please try and remember to whom you are speaking. In referring to the fanciful pipe dream of practical, controlled nuclear fusion, ‘almost there’ is the key phrase used forever and a day by every research and practical physicist since before the third millennium dawned. Can you deny the truly extravagant nature of Rook’s claim? He advises us that the realization of a relatively cheap, utterly safe and sound source of endless fusion power will constitute a primary cure-all for the world’s ills. That, Mr. Director, is fantasy pure and simple; it falls on the ear in the manner of a tale told to pacify small children. Fusion power has been grossly overblown as a realistic goal. At root, it is a pie-in-the-sky utopian pipe dream, and nothing more. At best, it amounts to a forlorn hope, a technological prayer to the unknown gods standing guard over the pot of gold at fusion’s end.”

The intensity of the other’s riveting gaze caused Christiansen to reconsider the strenuous objection that came to his lips. He subsided, forcing himself to remain silent.

“Secondly and thirdly,” pursued the other, “the elderly sage whom you hold in Olympian esteem, advocates not merely one but two thoroughly outrageous revolutionary ‘reforms.’ Rather than continuing to invoke the classic environmental penalties in effect for some time, and taxing the enfranchised global population accordingly, he urges us to drive into penury each and every secular and non-secular offender who dares to violate established environmental and ecological standards.

“An unworldly premise of that nature and magnitude,” declared Alarcón heatedly, “is so far-fetched as to be quite beyond the pale. Proposing to put the bite on individual despoilers of the air, seas, rivers, and forests amounts to an utterly simplistic, impractical solution to an incredibly complex, synergistic array of problems. Tell me, sir, would it in any way make sense to bankrupt culprits within the business community by coercing them into paying for the privilege of completing the planet’s ruination? Please think about it if you will. Are we in such an eager rush to outdo ourselves that we can afford to seriously contemplate scrapping every time-tested, reliable measure employed for decades with the objective of averting catastrophe? Shall we, as UNDEP’s resident genius suggests, unanimously adopt the untried, revisionist means and methods he believes in so strongly? Shall we do things his way, even though a galaxy of unknowns is bound to be introduced into what for generations has been a semi-balanced equation? No, I do not believe so. Wait, let me correct myself. I know it cannot happen.”

The Great Dane had listened to the other’s tirade in silence, but he declined to wilt beneath the force of the outburst. “Mateo, you argue with yourself,” he finally said.

“¡Ay de mí!” Alarcón clapped his hands. “Then, if you will be so kind, allow me to complete my argument with myself, a debate in which I cannot help but come out the winner. As frosting on the environmental cake, your able, superbly intelligent commissioner emeritus has baked in his revolutionary pie a proposal calling for squandering valuta, which by the way is sadly lacking in any and all corners of the globe, on advanced biomedical research. He specifically urges the accelerated cloning of vanished and vanishing plant and animal species in order to reconstitute what he chooses to call ‘critical ecosystems biodiversity.’

“I have convinced myself beyond any shadow of doubt,” Alarcón went on to say, “and mean to spend every iota of energy to convince you, sir, that your position makes you beholden to perform an action I deem absolutely mandatory. In your official capacity, Mr. Director, you must cease and desist from this journey into a wonderland, and return to real world activities. You can no longer permit the rantings and ravings of the aged savant you employ to masquerade

as serious proposals. Tell me, do Rook's urgings strike you as the workings of a sound, rational mind? Do his proposals appeal to you as the workings of a mind that definitely has not, so you reassure me, degenerated into senility, a mind filled with raving paranoid delusions, a mind brimming to the overflow with schizoid maunderings? But, senile? Oh, no! Never, you tell me, could Rook be referred to as senile."

Myriad synapses fired within Nils Christiansen's brain, and a crimson veil descended, obscuring his vision. He lurched to his feet, spasmodically clenching and unclenching a pair of huge fists.

"Well, Mr. Director," intoned Alarcón, his manner self-dramatizing, "have you invented a response to my questions?" Slowly lifting his eyes, he gazed at Christiansen with unblinking, lizardlike fixity.

Poised on the balls of his feet, Nils towered above the much smaller man, a huge bronze statue arrested in the act of toppling. "It is futile," he said, holding himself in check by main force of will, "to discuss vital issues with someone whose mind has snapped shut."

"Irredeemably futile," agreed the other, his tone bland, imperturbable. "I believe the time has come for me to bid you good afternoon, sir."

Roiling under an overwhelming impulse to wipe the arrogant, superior smirk from the face of Dr. Lowndes's self-satisfied alter ego, Christiansen spun his heel. His long strides carried him quickly out of the lavish office suite.

* * *

Alonzo Mateo de Alarcón sat perfectly still, fist to chin, staring at the closed door to his sumptuous office while pretending to allow his own Latin temper to subside. Fire and ice, he rhymed sub-vocally, make everything nice.

It was a favorite tactic, and invariably paid bountiful dividends. Proud of the inner coolness and self-discipline he had stringently cultivated and nurtured, he could not recall the last time he'd actually lost his temper. Early in professional life he had discovered that feigned anger was often dozens of times more effective than genuine emotion. Employed judiciously, dramaturgical rage opened doors and windows on raw human nature most individuals preferred to keep tightly shuttered.

Savoring the moment, he bent over, punched the buttons of an electronic cypher lock, and opened a lower desk drawer. He extracted a filter-tipped cigarette from the ornate cloisonné humidor gifted by the former Portuguese ambassador, and regarded the illegal white cylinder hungrily. Closing his eyes, he sniffed the cigarette, savoring its aroma. Rolling it between thumb and forefinger, he felt the illicit tobacco's texture through the paper.

Proud of himself for approaching the edge with no fear of going over, he snapped temptation in half with the same holier-than-thou expression he had worn while working hard to unleash the slow-burn Nordic temper of UNDEP's stubborn, bullock-sized director. Dropping the halves in a hand-tooled leather wastebasket, he dusted his hands of loose tobacco, and touched a button on the intercom panel. "Have him come in now, Miriamne. And hold my calls, if you will. Yes, please; all of them. We are not to be disturbed."

The lanky, funereal figure of Monsignor Velk eased through the austere decorated office's side door and hesitated there, unsure of what was expected of him, what his role would be. Lacking a sign from his host, he lodged himself in the office's centerpiece — the antique, double-curved Barcelona chair warmed a short time before by Nils Christiansen.

Having swung his high-backed executive chair around to face the floor-to-ceiling glass wall, Alarcón was pensively studying the distant mega-sprawl of Brooklyn and Queens, where

low-lying constellations were beginning to wink on in the gathering dusk. Three extensive sectors of either borough remained partially dark, where the compulsory rolling power brownout scheduled on a rotational basis was in effect. Seemingly preoccupied with the view, he said quietly, "You overheard, Monsignor?"

"Every word," assured the Jesuit. "The winsome young lady in your vestibule obliged me by leaving the intercom circuit open." Velk shifted his weight restively, settling himself in the Barcelona chair covered in soft, coffee-colored leather. The chair, a museum piece, was present for ostentation rather than comfort. "Christiansen," ventured the priest for want of something better to say, "sounded distraught."

Alarcón's dry, humorless chuckle acknowledged the comment. "You have a droll way of stating the obvious, Monsignor. He left in a fit of rage, but rest assured; the Great Dane is no lap dog. He swept out of here in a killing frame of mind, for which I confess responsibility. His anger will be temporary, however. At heart, Nils is a decent, honorable executive, a gentleman to use the archaic term. He will quickly regain his equanimity."

"I imagine so. said Velk, as if he harbored a degree of doubt. "Do you think he swallowed your tale about my, uh . . . ?"

"Not for a second." Alarcón continued surveying the patches of darkened cityscape across the river. Thinking aloud, he added, "Gentlemanly qualities aside, Christiansen is no fool. His emotional outbursts, when they finally do arrive and transcend his perspicacity, lend him a certain vulnerability, but otherwise . . . What we must constantly and consistently bear in mind is how damnably intractable the man is, and how loyal. His meld of Scandinavian stubbornness, integrity and unswervable loyalty to all UNDEP employees make dealing with him difficult."

"I'm only too well acquainted with those traits," said Velk.

"Yet a substantive kernel of verity is deeply rooted within him," said Alarcón, still in a pensive vein. "He cannot help himself, you see. He insists upon casting a benign blanket over each and every one of the people laboring under his direction, up to and including a known reprobate, this Rook person. Executives of Christiansen's stamp invariably bend over backward in order to perform extraordinary feats of self-sacrifice. Worshipping at the altar of moral rectitude, they are forever prepared to go to ridiculous extremes, prepared to do anything necessary to shield errant underlings. In this instance, however, UNDEP's *éminence grise*, mad as a waltzing mouse though he is, cannot be considered a run-of-the-mill underling. Never, in the usual sense. My personal opinion is that Rook has finally gone round the bend, although I'm told by dependable sources that he remains as tough-minded and intellectually formidable as he was during his heyday. Would you agree with that summation, Monsignor?"

The Jesuit attorney responded with a sage nod.

The executive chair swiveled abruptly. Alarcón, his eyes the color and texture of obsidian marbles, subjected the priest to harsh scrutiny. "Your pardon, Monsignor," he said in a dangerously silken tone. "I must have missed your reply."

Alarmed by the pale, hypnotic fire in the other's eyes, Velk said hastily, "In my opinion, Rook is certifiable."

"Certifiable . . ." Alarcón revolved the term. "An apt summarization. Yes, withal a valid diagnosis. I agree; the man is eminently certifiable."

"Yet lunacy and lofty intelligence," remarked Velk, "are not mutually exclusive characteristics."

Alarcón considered the ramifications of the other's observation. "Again you have made a most astute comment, Monsignor. But for our purposes such an aberrant condition, although perhaps far from uncommon, can scarcely be called propitious."

"What's to be done about Rook's heresy?" inquired Velk.

"Done?" Alarcón's pencil mustache twitched. "Dr. Lowndes wishes to listen to the recording you thoughtfully acquired on our behalf. I'm certain he will digest the contents with a great deal of interest. Only then shall we learn what is to be done."

The other's knowing smile was laconic. "Mightn't Dr. Lowndes give more credence to your advice and counsel than by listening to a dry, colorless recording?"

The other's chin lifted. "Softly, Monsignor," he warned. "Do not overstep yourself. We have a firm understanding, Dr. Lowndes and I. People accord me immense honor by seeking my counsel, but self-deception is not among my weaknesses. No one, including myself, would dare question who is in charge. Not only is Dr. Lowndes one of the most able executives who ever drew breath, he is also known for . . ."

The intercom's chime interrupted Alarcón's tribute. He glared at the panel's offensive blinking light before irritably stabbing a button. "Were my instructions less than clear, Miriamne? I believe I told you we were not to be disturbed."

"Dreadfully sorry, sir. Secretary-General Lowndes is calling — channel nine, encrypted. He instructed me in no uncertain terms to break in."

Alarcón eased back in the executive chair as if withdrawing from an invisible threat. "You are absolved of all guilt, Miriamne. Please put him through."

Descrambler circuitry erased the flat-panel display's random spatter of pixels. The muzzy hodgepodge jelled into the image of a silver-haired, grandfatherly gentleman whose overt aspect was congeniality personified. Even so, a flinty gleam in the caller's deep-set brown eyes made him appear anything but convivial.

"Mateo," said Dr. Thomas Spencer Lowndes sharply, "what in the name of Jesus X. Christ is going on at UNDEP?" Noting Velk's presence for the first time, the U.N. official hesitated and his manner softened, segued into a facade of practiced affability. "Do forgive me," he said, oozing executive bonhomie. "I hadn't realized you were entertaining the good Monsignor."

The antennae used to gauge his patron's mood fully extended, Alarcón fell all over himself explaining Velk's presence. He delved into the role the Jesuit had played in the current intrigue, intimating that he himself had been on the verge of calling to alert Lowndes after reviewing the recording of UNDEP's secretive meeting.

The secretary-general cut short the explanation with a curt gesture. His demeanor reversed itself; the apple-cheeked Santa Claus visage gave way to a mask of decidedly darker aspect. "In that event," he said, "there's little reason to withhold anything that concerns both of you. One of Christiansen's people, someone named Rook," announced Lowndes, drenching the name with vitriol, "has issued a formal UNDEP press release in order to announce the most utterly bizarre, damfool proposals you or I or anyone else could possibly invent."

Global power-broker and minister without portfolio though he was, Alonzo Mateo de Alarcón felt a sudden cold constriction in his bowels.

Fifteen

His distended features an apoplectic hue, high forehead gleaming with perspiration, Nils Christiansen swept into the anteroom of his office. Looking neither left nor right, he breezed past

four dignitaries waiting to see him, causing his harried executive assistant to rise behind her desk and attempt to interrupt his passage with a recital of the dozen panic calls she had fielded during his absence. Christiansen ignored her pleas; the door to his inner office slid closed behind him.

Alone in his soundproofed sanctum, Nils finally let himself go. Cursing fluently in an admixture of languages, he pounded a fist into his open palm and tiger-paced the suite's length and breadth, giving vent to a rage that refused to abate, or even diminish.

Word of the meeting's agenda could have leaked accidentally — could have — but he knew better. He had always made a habit of running a tight ship; in UNDEP's closely knit universe, happenstance or random occurrences simply did not take place. Intuition told him Monsignor Velk had been responsible for recording the private session, and the Jesuit "chaplain" had then dutifully delivered the nanotape into Alarcón's tender care. But intuition took him a giant step beyond that; in the back of his mind was a suspicion that it had been Rook himself who instigated the leak. But, why for the love of God, would Bennett have done such a disservice to himself, and to UNDEP? Why had he connived to shoot his own pet program in the foot? The elderly reprobate's faults, few as they were, happened to be massive, and were also deeply ingrained within his flint-hard personality.

Yet whether radical dreamer or utopian visionary, the UNDEP's senior ideologue was at least honest and forthright, which was more than could be said for the devious, backbiting puppet Dr. Lowndes had for whatever unfathomable reason appointed as buffer and chief spokesman for the entire United Nations Organization.

His blood pressure subsided slowly. He stalked into his private washroom, doused his face with the lukewarm dribble running from the tap, and used excessive energy to scour his face and neck with a terrycloth towel. His anger on the wane, although he was still indecently perturbed, he went back into his office, poured a stiff dollop of akvavit and knocked back the fiery liquid in two swallows. Dropping into the chair behind his desk, he opened the closed-circuit vidicom channel giving access to every office and domicile within the United Nations Tower.

The trial-and-error search went on for eight and one-half minutes. Altogether, he touched base in five separate offices, making his queries universally succinct and direct, and was eventually able to unearth Bennett Rook's whereabouts, learning from one of the semi-invalid's principal aides that his quarry had signed out for the day and retired to his quarters.

Again speedily bypassing his anxious executive assistant, Christiansen paid no heed to the gaggle of unhappy petitioners, one of whom tried to accost his departure. He took the executive express elevator to the tower's ninety-second floor, marched down the corridor, thumbed the doorbell switch and stood rigidly in the entry while hidden sensors verified not only who he was, but whether or not he was armed.

Rook's treetop-tall bodyguard, Anton, answered the chime. Nils stoically endured the iron-eyed scrutiny of a man even larger and heftier than he himself. Being greeted with a suspicious leer did not bother Christiansen in the least; he appreciated the huge ex-felon's fanatic loyalty to his patron. Anton doubled as Rook's chauffeur, valet, secretary and gofer-of-all-trades.

"Is he in?"

Anton's huge head moved in a wordless affirmative nod.

Ushered into the suite's deserted parlor, Nils was shown down the hall. He found Bennett Rook's bulky geriatric chair drawn up beside a dinette in the breakfast alcove.

Rail-thin, his frailty accentuated by his lofty stature, a light blanket was draped over the spindly knees of UNDEP's controversial elder savant. Lowering a demitasse of coffee laced with

cognac, he set it in the saucer with tremored precision and looked up to regard his visitor incuriously. "Judging from the length of your face, Nils, my little escapade has left you hopping mad. Will you take coffee, perhaps a spot of high-octane energizer to go with it?"

"Thank you, no." Drawing out a chair, the director plopped down heavily and made it obvious that he was waiting for Rook to dismiss the bodyguard. After a nod from Rook, the executives watched in gravid silence as Anton removed the glass coffee service and set it on the kitchen counter. The sliding door to the kitchen squeezed shut behind Rook's watchdog.

"Aided and abetted by our pious, stiff-necked chaplain," began the director, still grossly irritated, "not to mention Alarcón's hypocritical beneficence, your 'little escapade,' as you call it, has left me pinned between a hard place and a much harder rock."

Outwardly unmoved, Rook lifted the demitasse and sipped. He replaced the cup in the saucer. "Ignoble speeches aren't your forte," he said matter-of-factly. "As I'm sure you've surmised, I'm prepared to take the heat. All of it."

"Really? How gracious of you, Bennett! Trouble is, there's no way on God's once green Earth I can possibly avoid taking the —"

"Wait, back off a hair if you will." Rook raised a cautionary hand. "Your move is carved in stone. You know as well as I do that throwing me to the wolves is your . . . that is, UNDEP's one and only out. I urge you, and will plead with you if necessary, to disclaim all knowledge, complicity, active participation, so forth and so on. I have not only anticipated the furor, I've counted on it."

"Planned it, you mean."

"Yes, all things considered that does seem a better choice of terms."

Now more vexed than when he had arrived, Christiansen was breathing stertorously. "Bennett, you of all people should be the first to appreciate how often schemers fall afoul of their own pernicious schemes. You damn well knew the Jesuit poseur was recording our private session, and knew it beforehand. What the hell! You probably arranged it."

A twinkle invaded Rook's bloodshot hazel eyes. "Actually, I'm rather proud to confess that I did indeed provide a tad of inspiration for our lawyerly chaplain's sly endeavor. Why else would anyone waste time sparring verbally with an inconsequential buffoon like Velk. He to tried his best to provoke me. Turnabout is fair play, don't you think?"

"Oh, for the love of . . . ! Listen to me! There's something I have to make you understand. What you've done amounts to incarnate —"

"No, no," interrupted Rook. "Don't say anything more, Nils. You're viewing the matter in topsy-turvy fashion. Just this once, it is you who must listen to me."

The director subsided angrily.

Rook leaned forward in the geriatric chair until he sat face-to-face with his superior. "Much to the chagrin of the entire Society of Jesus, most particularly his worthy bishop, archbishop, or whomsoever Velk reports to in his celestial line of work, the Canon Law-minded cleric providing guidance for UNDEP's collective soul has been indecently bedded down with Lowndes, Alarcón & Company for the better part of a decade. I imagine it gets a mite crowded between the sheets when good Dr. Lowndes stoops to join the nefarious co-conspirators — three men in a bed, so to speak."

The director's disgusted grimace evidenced a lack of sympathy for Rook's recital.

"Bear with me, please," insisted Rook. "Should events fall in place as I have anticipated, the odious trio may soon hold their ultimate rendezvous in a procrustean bed."

“Oh, for the love of God !” Christiansen realized he was repeating himself and cocked his head, angry with himself for allowing himself to be manipulated. “No more riddles or literary allusions, Bennett. I’m in no the mood for word games.”

“Your pardon; it was unintentional. Hear me out, Nils.”

The director kneaded his receding hairline with blunt, sausage-like fingers. “Spitting in the face of city hall,” he declared, “is one thing. But what you’ve done is worse. You’ve stepped on the tail of a hungry tiger, blatantly affronted and insulted the powers that be. And in so doing, my proud colleague, your thoughtful actions have ranged into another league entirely. No, let me take that back; into another galaxy. This time you’ve outdone yourself. You have managed to provoke the tribal chieftains who run this planet, the assorted wise men who will evaluate your machinations as feverish, delusional even. You have created chaos, not what we’ve worked so long and hard to achieve. I’m almost afraid to ask what other pots you’ve stirred.”

A soft chortle. “Then don’t ask.”

“Do come back to the real world if you remember how,” urged Nils, raising his voice to a point that caused Anton to crack the sliding door a few millimeters and peep in to assure himself things were as they should be.

Rook waved dismissively; the door slid closed.

“Martyrdom,” insisted Christiansen, “is the ultimate fool’s trap. Your self-sacrifice will avail absolutely nothing, not one single thing. In fact it can’t help but set matters back several notches.”

Rook’s sober negative head shake was uncompromising. “No danger of that, I insist. Instead of merely spitting in the triumvirate’s collective eye as you suggest, I’ve prepared an eye-filling surprise for them by scheduling a news conference to follow-up today’s press release. When the media sharks, among whom believe it or not are a few genuine sympathizers, get an earful of my —”

“A news conference . . . ?” Shocked speechless, Christiansen pushed back his chair and rose unsteadily. “A news conference?” he repeated. “God in Heaven! What have you done now?”

Mildly taken aback, Rook said, “I knew you would learn of the press release, and I wanted to, uh . . .”

“No more tap-dancing,” raged Christiansen, finding his voice. “Not with me, not now. Stop beating the bush to death and fill me in.”

Rook did so.

The director slumped back into the chair, less angry now, although thoroughly deflated. In a voice laden with stupefaction he said, “Issuing a formal press release, and then capping it with a media conference amounts to professional suicide for both of us.”

Immune to chastisement in any form, from any quarter, Rook calmly finished his coffee and cognac. “Please don’t jog my elbow on this, Nils. Trust me; I know precisely what I’m doing.”

“Trust,” roared the Great Dane. “To perdition with trust! You haven’t the foggiest conception of the dimensions this fiasco is going to assume. You don’t know these people, not like I do. Your life is your own; do with it as you wish. But I refuse to let you drag UNDEP into the grave with you.”

* * *

Ten minutes before his eleven o’clock appointment, Dr. Thomas Spencer Lowndes made whispered excuses, and rose unobtrusively from his seat in the executive conference chamber. He paid no heed to the anxious glance directed his way by the speaker at the lectern and slipped

out of the chamber. His casual departure from what all present assumed was an important meeting created a mild stir among the attendees.

The U.N. Secretary-General nodded politely, acknowledging the smiles and a few greetings from employees who happened to cross his path in the tower's corridors of power. Striding confidently to the executive express elevator, he returned downstairs to the temporary office he'd appropriated during a week-long stay in Greater New York.

Pausing in the anteroom, Dr. Lowndes instructed his traveling companion, the confidential aide who rarely left his side, to hold all calls. "Send Maxwell in the moment he arrives, Stevens."

"As you wish, sir."

Mildly apprehensive about the coming interview with Vonex Corporation Board Chairman Alfred Maxwell, it occurred to Lowndes in passing that he should have heeded his instincts and flown back to Geneva while there was still time to gracefully avoid the coming confrontation. But, no; ducking and running simply would not do. Dodging high-velocity zingers from someone of Maxwell's stature was something a gentleman in his position dared not contemplate, let alone consummate. Beating a hasty exit would have smacked of slyness, a wish to avoid the unavoidable issue he knew would sooner or later have to be faced.

A renowned former industrial psychologist and former academic, Dr. Lowndes mentally rounded up his ammunition for the undoubtedly unpleasant session to come. He spent an introspective moment reviewing the highlights of Maxwell's precipitate rise to a pinnacle of high-tech fame and fortune.

Late in the century's third decade, a subsidiary of the gigantic Vonex conglomerate had achieved a major breakthrough in the mass production of electronic hardware, an innovation principally due to microminiaturization, which had undergone a starkly incredible degree of evolution, or perhaps devolution would be the more appropriate term, that culminated in ultra-complex, myriad-gated circuits, the room-temperature superconductive traces of which afforded virtually instantaneous clock speeds. This miracle of nanotechnology, incorporated in chips smaller than a squared pinhead, had given birth to the "Mainframe in a Matchbox" advertising slogan of a major Vonex subsidiary, Globelectronics. In a span of six short years, GlobElex had blossomed into the conglomerate's flagship company, not to mention becoming its principal cash cow.

But glitches inevitably occurred, Lowndes reminded himself. Murphy's Law dictated that the best laid plans had a habit of sometimes going wrong. Serious problems began to crop up immediately after GlobElex began marketing its sub-sub-miniature devices, and it soon became apparent that microminiaturization techniques had outstripped real world applications. End products, after all, were meant for use by consumers in the macro world — human beings — and the quantum leap from microminiaturization to ergonomically sound, macro-sized, marketable products had grown too enormous for tried-and-true manufacturing techniques and processes. Manifold difficulties had confronted GlobElex technicians attempting to emplace and interconnect smaller-than-pinhead-sized component devices on small but more or less "normal" printed circuit boards via standard automation procedures; or likewise, to assemble them within electronic mini-modules.

Product reliability had been the culprit. Nanoelectronic devices had refused to interconnect reliably, the main bugaboo being disparate thermal coefficients of expansion between minute active and passive electronic components and the printed circuit board's dielectric substrate material. Temperature cycling, fluctuations all but unavoidable in products

meant for diversified usage, had resulted in expansion-contraction “movement” that often cracked or broke conductive traces fine as a human hair, resulting in open circuits and device failures. By virtue of its inherent complexity, fragility, and less than Lilliputian size, a failed microelectronic unit had become the very devil to repair. Discarding a failed unit and ordering a new one, while expensive, was in several ways more cost-effective than attempting to effect repairs under a microscope, or in specific instances under an electron microscope, and then blindly energizing the device and hoping for the best.

Having hoisted itself by its own petard, GlobElex had directed its scientists and engineers to engage in a crash priority program that sought to adopt a step-by-step growth from the ultra-small to a moderately sized end product. Funded extravagantly, teams of engineers working in conjunction with researchers had experimented with advanced additive techniques; i.e., evolving a staged buildup of increasingly scaled “layers,” where both active and passive circuit components were integrally deposited by refined, exotic additive techniques similar to the processes once used to fabricate the microchips alone.

Active and passive electronic circuitry, as well as the minute traces interconnecting them, became two heads of the same beast, enlarging stage by stage as each automated buildup was accomplished, with exhaustive testing at each phase of deposition. The completed assemblies were then encapsulated in a fast-curing resin compound, a technique that resulted in literally “cast in concrete” electronic monoliths, but also made them throwaway items in the event of device failure. However, the mean-time-between-failures — MTBF in engineer-speak — of the monolithic modules soared in truly spectacular fashion. Micromodules not only tended to operate indefinitely, but required zero to minimal service and maintenance. It was at this point that the Vonex hierarchy, long active in the fields of petrochemicals, textiles, distilleries, pharmaceuticals and a broad spectrum of other products and services, had muscled its way to the forefront of electronic manufacturing, and currently rode the crest of the wave. Held close to the vest by virtue of any number of patents and proprietary processes, monolithic microcircuitry had emerged as the tallest, most lucrative pole in Vonex’s enormous, industry-spanning tent.

When his aide announced the megatycoon’s arrival, Dr. Lowndes came forward to meet Alfred Maxwell as the tycoon minced into the office. Small-boned and wiry in his mid-seventies, Maxwell exhibited a degree of diffidence toward the U.N. secretary-general that Lowndes knew was entirely sham. Some nine years older than Lowndes, Maxwell suffered from curvature of the spine, an affliction lending him a stoop-shouldered, hunchbacked posture.

“Well, well,” said the tycoon, exuding artificial warmth, “how’s your game these days, Thomas?”

“Not too short of dreadful, Alfred.” Lowndes tried to appear self-effacing. “For someone with a seven handicap, I should have said horrible.” The men shook hands with exaggerated bonhomie, each taking the other’s measure. “You’re looking chipper, Alfred.”

“Why, thank you. Now if only I felt chipper.” Maxwell took a seat and spent a moment cataloging his complaints and afflictions, all of which he attributed to advancing years. He prattled on, playing a casual game of chit-chat that did nothing to deceive his host. In the empyrean business circles that were Maxwell’s natural element, the “hunchback” was known for his legendary habit of circling his prey in sharklike fashion before slicing in for the kill.

Acutely aware of the other’s reason for phoning Alarcón in person and demanding — not requesting, but demanding — a face-to-face consultation with he himself, Lowndes had of course urged Mateo to slough off the petitioner. But the elderly, crook-backed gentleman, far and away the most influential and powerful megatycoon among a legion of insistent callers, had paid

not the slightest heed to Alarcón's lame excuse when he had explained that Lowndes was preparing to board a hypersonic jet for the flight home to Geneva. Maxwell had proven himself far too refractory for such an easy out to be either acceptable, or accepted.

"Thomas," declared the Vonex chief executive, finally coming to the point, "the irregular rash of disturbing news spilling out of your UNDEP office has our board of directors somewhat concerned."

Beaming what he hoped amounted to toothy reassurance, the secretary-general said, "It's being quietly taken care of, Alfred."

"Really? I am so delighted to hear that, Thomas. I'm certain you realize that I myself haven't the slightest wish to meddle in the internal affairs of your organization, so please take no offense if I ask why your man, Christiansen, has allowed such a ration of irresponsible gibberish to be made public?"

"It was the act of an unprincipled renegade on his staff," confessed Lowndes, accompanying the utterance with a grimace of acute irritation. "The individual in question shot off his mouth without Christiansen's knowledge or approval."

"Intolerable! I find happenings of that nature quite beyond the pale." Alfred Maxwell gave a strong impression that, while aware of making inroads upon his objective, he was less than wholly convinced the other was telling it like it was. "Thomas, you and I are history buffs. You surely appreciate how disastrously far astray skewed logic of this nature has led prior administrations not only in the here and now, but in other times, and other portions of the globe. When I was shown the ridiculous UNDEP press release," continued the other solemnly, "a prominent example of similar wrong-headedness immediately came to mind. I recalled reading how, shortly after Germany's reunification in the wake of the Second World War, legislation was enacted calling for the producers of hard goods to pay a significant portion of the cost incurred in reclaiming and recycling their discarded, worn-out products."

A sage nod from Lowndes. "I remember something along those lines," he said, recalling nothing of the kind.

"Think, would you, just think what an incalculable degree of hardship would descend upon industry in general," said Maxwell with overbearing earnestness, "if legislation were to be enacted that sought to penalize industry for correcting so-called 'damage' to the oh-so-precious environment. Why it would drive CFOs and cost accountants insane, not to mention inhibiting, if not eliminating, every form of industrial competitiveness."

Lowndes wondered wryly how the aging autocrat dared to bring up the topic of competitiveness; his conglomerate colossus was so large it competed only with itself. "You can safely forget about it, Alfred. Put that idiotic press release completely out of mind; it's a dead issue. You have my solemn promise."

"Excellent, my old friend. That is exactly what I'd hoped to hear. A monument," pontificated Maxwell, "should be erected to one of America's lesser known chief executives, and beneath his graven image the words of wisdom he uttered might well be chiseled in stone. 'The business of government'," quoted Alfred Maxwell with pedantic solemnity, "'is business'."

A knowing nod. "With all due respect," said Lowndes, "former President Coolidge was extremely fortunate in having to contend with not much more than a horse-and-buggy economy. But I grant you, the principle remains as valid today as it was when he uttered those words."

"Indeed, indeed." Maxwell got to his feet with considerable effort. "Well, I must trot along. I sincerely appreciate your candor, Thomas. It's been a rare privilege to speak with you."

"Won't you stay for lunch, Alfred?"

“Another time, thank you. I fear my digestion isn’t what it once was. Besides, I have a late afternoon appointment in Connecticut.”

Taking the elderly gentleman’s arm fraternally, Lowndes escorted him down the hallway to the executive express elevator, where a pair of the megatycoon’s associates were waiting patiently.

The powerful, prestigious captain of industry and the U.N. chief executive parted on an outwardly cordial footing despite the fact that they detested one another, always had, and always would.

Sixteen

Bathed in the harsh actinic glare of studio lights, The U.N. Tower’s Media Center was crowded to overflow. Commissioner Rook, seated in his gleaming geriatric chair at the center of the small stage, had just finished a lengthy preamble describing in greater depth the proposals deriving from UNDEP’s recently completed study.

Well into a question and answer session, he was adroitly fielding queries from the floor, and brusquely indicated a gentleman amidst the prominent host of talking heads whose wagging wrist was raised. “You there, in the chic lilac jumpsuit. Or would that be mauve?”

His victim, a syndicated holovision pundit known for his sartorial splendor, disregarded the gibe stoically until titters of appreciation for his lively apparel dwindled. He asked with an air of mordant sarcasm, “Mr. Commissioner, if as you propose most environmental legislation were to be junked and reenacted, wouldn’t it leave the United Nations Organization financially high and dry? From whence would the revenue come to support the International Peacekeeping Forces and other U.N. functions?”

“Is it my salary,” inquired Rook ingenuously, “that concerns you?”

The glib rejoinder earned a second smattering of good-natured chuckles and murmurings.

Seated inconspicuously in the center’s soundproof control booth, Nils Christiansen grudging a paper-thin smile. As the press conference progressed, his acute apprehension had gradually turned into a wary form of enthusiasm. Although still deeply concerned about the outcome, as well as the upshot, the director couldn’t help but admire the way his testy elder colleague was handling the ranks of sharp-minded inquisitors. Rook had leagues and leagues to go before it could be said that the pragmatic news hawks, news hens and media anchors were eating out of his hand, but their collective reaction attested to the fact that Rook had at least begun swaying them toward his way of thinking. If what was left of the print press and much larger media corps were to end up moderately sympathetic to the radical, revisionist doctrines he had announced, mightn’t a majority of viewers in the worldwide holovision audience also be inclined to at least give lip service to the unorthodox proposals?

Continuing to gauge the press corps’s collective reaction, Nils sensed how deliciously refreshing Rook’s upfront responses must seem to the newsies. Media folk, and especially press reporters on the political beat, were accustomed to ingesting a ration of maudlin bureaucratic rhetoric, and then trying to satisfy editors who demanded fresh, incisive, intelligent insight and commentary on the proceedings. In light of the major controversy ignited by Rook’s press release, Christiansen felt it a virtual certainty that sharply divisive reactions were to be expected from the liberal, middle-of-the-road and conservative news camps.

He also began to appreciate why UNDEP’s senior ideologue was doing his best to look elderly and unwell under the harsh lights, a pose requiring very little effort other than to slump in the bulky, polychrome metal geriatric appliance he seldom felt strong enough to leave.

Turning a jaundiced eye toward the unwinking red pin lights glowing in a trio of bulky holovision blimps arrayed in a semicircle behind the audience, Rook pretended to carefully weigh the talk show host's query. In mock dismay, he said, "And here I thought I'd answered that to everyone's satisfaction."

Clearing his throat, he went on to say, "Ladies and gentlemen, let me reiterate loudly and clearly my definitely affirmative, upbeat response. Of course it will be necessary to obtain environmental tax revenues from other sources. Once the proposals forwarded by UNDEP have been enacted into law, any corporate, private, or non-profit entity or alliance that wishes to further pollute the streams, rivers and seas of our once beautiful planet, emit noxious substances into our badly degraded atmosphere and hydrosphere, salt the depleted soil bank with dubious compounds, or ravage a precious quarter-acre of the world's residual forestlands, will be more than welcome to do so. But only if he, she, or it is willing to pay for the desecration, and pay through the nose."

"What you call 'desecration' is paid for now," objected the sartorially advantaged gentleman.

"Why, thank you, sir." Rook's nice-nasty grin clicked on and off. "Made my point for me, you have. Guilty, innocent, or slipping into the wide crack between, for more than three generations each of us — Quaker, baker and candlestick maker, lord and lady, serving wench and scurvy knave — has sunk deeper and ever deeper into the bottomless morass of environmental taxation.

"My friends," he continued, modulating his scratchy baritone to a lower register, "the truly enormous tax bite we've been subjected to for most of our lives has helped drive our society toward deficit spending and eventual economic oblivion. Why is this so? Because we've been conditioned since birth to blithely accept what amounts to a major fraudulence, the horrendous tax levies touted as 'our fair share' of supposedly rigorous environmental enforcement. Until now, no one has dared to question why we, the general public, should be made to pay the piper whether or not we are the parties responsible for damaging Mother Earth. We have been artfully schooled, religiously propagandized to pay, and in fact browbeaten to pay dearly, for the careless or willful desecrations committed by various business enterprises. I am absolutely certain that is a true statement."

Although far from convinced, the talk show host subsided.

"Instead of soaking thee and me to the brink of insolvency," asserted Rook, "and in many cases beyond, why not shove the horrendous environmental tax burden back where it has always belonged, squarely on the broad shoulders of each and every guilty party?"

"Doing it that way," complained a reporter, "would undermine the profit motive of every business enterprise in existence."

Rook beamed. "Dear sir, your comment also earns my undying gratitude. What this so-called 'drastic' changeover will actually accomplish is of immense significance. It will force every commercial, public and non-profit enterprise hoping to stay afloat to toe the line. It will force each of them, from major corporation to small business, to comply with the letter of international laws and regulations, most of which, I might add, have been and are being sloughed off without a second thought by the perpetrators who know — not guess, mind you, but know — that you and I will hasten to step forward and pick up the exceedingly hefty tab."

"Ding businesses that hard," objected a newsman, "and companies will turn right around and jack up the price of goods and services accordingly. We'd be right back where we started, or maybe worse off."

“No, not really.” Rook lifted a knobby, arthritic forefinger for emphasis. “That will not happen, sir. If said enterprises wish to remain competitive, laissez-faire will automatically solve that particular dilemma. Remember, the ultimate goal of the suggested change in taxation will be to lend Mother Nature a helping hand, first by reducing and then hopefully eliminating further damage to an environment steadily sliding toward ultimate catastrophe. The problem of runaway overpopulation has been more or less solved, and our grossly swollen numbers have entered a phase of gradual decline. But the planet where we all must live out our lives has to be encouraged to commence healing itself. Without the helping hand UNDEP is holding forth such a global rejuvenation will never take place.”

Rook let his chill gaze sweep one section of the audience after another. “I sincerely believe we have no choice but to push and shove and strain with all our might toward the noble objectives I have outlined. Let’s take the gawdawful tax monster created in large by big business itself and dump it back in the lap of big business. Manage that enormously difficult task, and perhaps a foothold can be regained. Perhaps stagnation can be replaced with rebirth, and provide a window on re-accumulating the vital, renewable physical assets desperately needed to endow forward-looking enterprises. With things as they are, we find ourselves running as fast as we can, only to consistently backslide.”

* * *

“Mr. Commissioner,” demanded a young woman in the front row, “do you — does UNDEP — actually believe these schemes are practical, feasible?”

“They are eminently practical, and undoubtedly feasible.”

“In the here and now?” asked the woman.

“Time will tell,” admitted Rook. “Practicality in the larger sense is a function of pragmatism, should such still exist under the sorry conditions our society has inherited, and exacerbated as it were, by we ourselves. Feasibility depends upon whether the captains of industry here and there around the globe can be made to see the light at the end of the tunnel. The question is as basic as it is simple: Are the peoples of all nations sufficiently pragmatic to confront the cold, inarguable statistics, recognize where they are leading, and join together in an attempt to balance the pitiless environmental and ecological equations now so far out of kilter? Are the world’s billions willing to keep wearing the same rose-colored blinders beloved by TTCB? None are so blind, it’s been said, as those who refuse to see. The principal question confronting us is not whether the suggested changes are practical, but whether the planetary populace will continue to face away from the ugliest of ugly truths and be willing to sacrifice unborn generations to those who worship the profit gods that continue to reign in Olympian majesty? Will the world’s people admit to themselves the harsh, inescapable facts no one with a minimum of reasonable intelligence can deny?”

Rook paused dramatically, giving the audience a chance to digest his words. “About one thing I myself am absolutely certain,” he said. “At this late stage of a losing game, anyone and everyone must be made to realize that humanity is heading toward the precipice of an environmental and ecological endgame. The alternative to concerted, dynamic affirmative actions consistent with UNDEP proposed redirection verges on mass psychosis. Should worldwide deterioration be allowed to proceed at its present accelerating pace, the dynamic population control agonies suffered by millions of lost souls who were obliterated will be rendered meaningless, and mass psychosis will eventually give way to inadvertent mass suicide.”

“But, Mr. Commissioner,” objected a senior correspondent, “for decades UNDEP’s party line has preached dynamic population control as the answer to most if not all environmental problems.”

“So it did, so it did.” Rook’s head wagged sadly. “I’m afraid I must agree with your veracity, sir. During times past triage implementation was a vile though valid draconian solution to the world’s ills. Triage activities were based upon a sound conclusion, yet the succeeding decades have unfortunately proven triage only an interim solution, a stopgap measure effective only in the relatively short term. UNDEP’s universally vilified and condemned triage philosophy was supremely distasteful to everyone concerned, including former committeeman like myself. Who could possibly argue otherwise? Yet in a pragmatic sense dynamic population control, while a mandatory stride in the proper direction, has caused the ignominy of the drastic, admittedly inhumane judgments and implementations to reverberate forever in humanity’s collective conscience. From our vantage in the here and now, slow but ever-worsening environmental conditions have tended to denigrate the ultimate value of triage implementation. Wherein lies the profit for business enterprises if fewer and fewer people remain to inhabit a ruined planet?”

Rook bore down, launching into a brief dissertation on the milestone of zero population growth. He characterized the semi-stabilized global populace as a significant step on the road to recovery, described the manner in which static, and in some cases declining populations on every continent, had reopened doors once thought to be closed and locked. All to the good, he told the gathering, but now payback time had arrived. Now it was equally mandatory for those selfsame billions to reach out and embrace the dream inspired by his legendary mentor, Saint Victoria, a dream that would forever remain alive and well, its goal inherent in the motto adopted at UNDEP’s conception: TERRA STABILITA.

“Payback time,” he repeated, and said it again more stridently. “Payback time, ladies and gentlemen. Tell me, have any of you recently experienced the misfortune of riding in a powered conveyance? If so, have you found any street, highway, byway or alley free of potholes and crumbling pavements not surrounded by broken sidewalks? Has any public transit vehicle you hoped would take you where you wished to go departed and arrived on time, or for that matter arrived at all and failed to accomplish its task by suffering a breakdown? Do any of you know of a building, large or small, or for that matter a private home, where every appliance and item of functional equipment was in working order? Have you ever worried about whether the bridge you were crossing might collapse beneath you, or experienced other than an hours-long wait in the office of a physician or dentist? I don’t hear any yeas or nays. Speak up!”

* * *

Unresponsive, though still attentive, the assemblage of newsmen and women stirred disquietly.

“I thought not.” Once again Rook dropped his raspy baritone in pitch. Managed not to sound obsequious, he said, “Dear companions in misery, in the past some of us who fought the good fight began a crusade aimed at bringing global population growth to a standstill and achieved not to a win, mind you, but merely a stalemate. The current population of twelve-plus billions equates to a standoff, not the ultimate victory we sought. To our great misfortune, during the course of that decades-long war against numbers run amok the battleground itself has been rent, blasted and torn with the aid of climate change into a dreadfully worsening, potentially terminal condition. It will be up to us, the present generations who have been left holding the bag, to undertake the first giant strides toward mutual salvation. However stumbling those

infantile steps may sound at this juncture, they must and shall culminate in rebuilding the natural and artificial infrastructure that has supported human civilization for centuries. Yet before we dare take such steps, even before lifting a finger, the world's environmental and socioeconomic climates must improve drastically.

"I have therefore laid before you for consideration a three-pronged plan of attack, two elements of which bear directly upon correcting grave past and present environmental and ecological errors and omissions. The third objective may or may not flower in the near future, or indeed in our lifetimes, but it is a seed of equal if not greater importance, and must be nurtured and coaxed into growth. Let me go over UNDEP's proposals once last time. I promise to be brief.

"First, foremost and above all else, it will not be merely essential, but mandatory for us to transfer the staggering environmental tax burden from the general public onto the backs of the perpetrators and desecrators.

"Of secondary importance, if only by a whisker, will be the cloned replacement and encouraged reflourishing of endangered plant and animal species so vital to achieving the future rebalance of worldwide ecosystems. If and when accomplished, we shall see the greatest increase in biodiversity since the Cambrian Explosion."

"Since what?" asked a newsman.

"Look it up, sir," Rook told the reporter. "Thirdly, and arguably the most essential requisite of all, will be to divert each and every penny of funding from the few R&D projects still extant, and rededicate these 'found' resources toward the development of practical, controlled nuclear fusion power generation systems. When finally realized, this limitless, incredibly safe and efficient energy source will become the epitome of human tools. Fusion power will bring about unimaginable societal changes, and will hopefully —"

"If realized," cried someone in the pack, "not 'when'."

Rook's reaction startled the press corps. He lifted a liver-spotted hand, slapped the geriatric chair's padded armrest a lusty whack. "When, I must insist, dear sir, not 'if.' Nuclear fusion will revolutionize every aspect of a global society presently teetering on the brink of bankruptcy with regard to non-renewable energy resources. The world's soil bank has been depleted beyond what long ago was considered the danger level. Large deposits of coal and natural gas, plus isolated pools of fossil fuel, remain beneath the seas and Antarctic ice, but in most respects —"

"Fusion's proven to be a pipe dream," declared a science writer from one of the news services. The ensuing murmurs of concurrence were not music to the ears of the elderly man slouched in a geriatric chair bathed in the studio lights.

Despite a chorus of muttered disclaimers, Rook gave every impression of being unruffled. "Once upon a time," he reminded the audience, "manned space flight was a science fiction pipe dream, not to mention organ transplants, genetic engineering, cloning, stem-cell medical procedures and similar once-fantastic endeavors. I've often wondered what unimaginable miracles of microgravity manufacturing might have been wrought by now, or what vastnesses of deep space might have been plumbed, if not for the environmental and economic wasteland bequeathed to us by those twentieth century bastards."

"You'll get no argument about TTCB, Mr. Commissioner." The science writer sounded exasperated. "But controlled nuclear fusion is orders of magnitude tougher to achieve than space flight or any of the other 'wonders' you cite. Hate to say it, but some scientific and engineering

problems simply have no practical solutions, an established fact. To date, the fusion daydream has resisted every attempt by researchers to solve the awesome associated problems.”

“It pains me, sir, to admit that you are eminently correct,” declared Rook. “What you say is, sadly enough, quite true. But,” he added, “doesn’t every scientific and engineering problem lack a solution until one is devised? If what you suggest holds true forever, I confess to having been misinformed. My sources, which I consider more knowledgeable than most others I could mention, tell me only basic engineering problems remain to be solved. Theoretical solutions to the fusion quandary date back more than a century and one-half.”

“Theoretical is just that, Mr. Commissioner,” retorted the science writer with a touch of smugness. “But the bottom line is that ‘theory’ will not fuse certain hydrogen isotopes and release terawatts of raw energy.”

“Touché,” was Rook’s bland rejoinder. “When practical fusion is eventually developed, however, it will be the product of applied theory. Consider if you will the fantastic boons a limitless power source could one day grant us. Trash and garbage, as well as sewage for that matter, could be cleanly broken down into their constituents and reconstituted as useful substances and compounds. Fusion-powered ships, aircraft and spacecraft could advance commerce and exploration by enormous leaps and bounds. Fusion power could drive magnetically levitated trains, power and guide automobiles by means of induction strips running beneath the highways. The list is endless.”

Nils Christiansen found himself sitting on the edge of his chair, hanging on his colleague’s every word. UNDEP’s senior savant concluded his dramatic monologue, politely thanked the press and media corps for their interest, and guided the powered geriatric chair out of the spotlight, oblivious to additional questions shouted from the floor.

Despite his lingering reservations, Nils felt a surge of genuine excitement and reluctantly admitted that holding the press conference had not been such a terrible idea after all.

* * *

Monsignor Velk nervously fingered the crucifix dangling against his black vestments. Deeply disturbed by what he’d been hearing, he rose and edged toward the door of Alarcón’s luxurious office suite. He was halfway across the deep pile carpeting when Dr. Lowndes said, “Running off, Monsignor? Why leave us now?”

“I must, uh . . . That is, I think perhaps it best for me to excuse myself.”

“Come back here and sit down.” The secretary-general was adamant.

“Dr. Lowndes,” objected Velk, “I’m afraid it’s altogether inappropriate for me to become involved in this, er . . .”

“My dear Monsignor,” said Lowndes drily, “in times past you consistently bellied up to the table and savored our lavish feast. Now that the time has come to bus the dishes, sweep up the crumbs and launder the tablecloth, you feel a sudden urge to duck out and keep your manicured patty paws clean. Is that no so?”

“N-no, nothing like that,” faltered Velk. “It’s just that, I, uh . . . You must understand that while my calling makes me ineligible to practice secular law, officially I’m still an officer of the court. Failure to act upon learning of . . . certain delicate matters might be construed as . . .”

“Sit down!” insisted Dr Lowndes.

“It might be wise,” observed Alarcón, “to do as el Jefe suggests, Monsignor.”

Beads of perspiration sheened the Jesuit attorney’s brow as he slumped back on the settee. “But what you’re contemplating . . . I mean, why do you feel it necessary?”

“Not simply necessary,” denied Dr. Lowndes, “critically imperative.”

Velk found the refractory gaze of the U.N. chief executive unnerving. He swallowed noisily, dismissed his unspoken objection.

Looking aggrieved, Dr. Lowndes steepled pudgy fingers. “Why O why,” he asked no one in particular, “am I forever called upon to explain the facts of life?” After a speculative interlude, he smacked his lips. “Monsignor, have you ever watched a professional tree surgeon at work?”

“A . . . tree surgeon . . . ?” Plagued in equal measures by anxiety and perplexity, the priest offered a stumbling response. “Er, no. Don’t . . . believe so.”

“I thought not.” Lowndes applauded the revelation with a half-smile. “In that case, allow me to elucidate. These days, with hardwood nearly precious as diamonds, a dedicated professional arborist goes about his task with utmost care. He never makes tentative, tidy little snips because he’s aware of how vital the tree, and how negligible the shorn limbs. He knows — knows, Monsignor, not guesses — which diseased or deformed branches must be removed in order to return the tree to optimum health. A competent tree surgeon’s saw is constantly in motion, hacking off many more large and small limbs and branches than a layman might deem appropriate.”

“I’m not, uh . . . What does that have to do with the present situation.”

“Quite a lot,” said Lowndes, his homespun manner blossoming. Firmly in the driver’s seat, he awarded the priest a companionable, chillingly sterile smile, and turned to Alarcón.

“Mateo, with arboreal splendor the guiding premise, would you mind providing enlightenment?”

Eager to please, Alarcón said, “Correct me if I am mistaken, Monsignor, but I imagine you believe our plight has turned from merely worrisome to somewhat desperate.”

“Well . . .” His composure rattled to the brink of extinction, the cleric’s glance darted apprehensively from one associate to the other. “Desperate may be too strong a term, but I do feel that we, uh . . .”

“Rest your mind,” Alarcón said gently. “There actually is no plight, and our situation, while admittedly in a state of flux, is anything but desperate. Other than the nuisance created by a snowstorm of screams and petitions from practically every national and multinational business enterprise in existence, the de facto method of raising environmental tax revenues UNDEP’s reprehensible savant had proposed is, for our purposes, totally immaterial.”

“Immaterial . . . ?”

“A matter of total indifference, Monsignor.”

“Then why,” asked Velk, “must we even consider the . . . ? Where then is the need to . . . neutralize —?”

“If our tree surgeon parable failed to enlighten you,” interrupted Dr. Lowndes, “I can’t imagine how anything further said will do so, Monsignor. You would do well to acquire the habit of listening rather than questioning what Mateo had to say. Pay attention; you may learn something of value.”

Alarcón squinted at the priest, concentrating on his message. “However events fall out at the conclusion of this impertinent gentleman’s asinine crusade to tax the hand that feeds, we cannot afford the luxury of sticking our heads in the sand with regard to his, shall we say, unorthodox proposals. Not that doing so is likely, you must understand, but broadcasting additional foolhardy schemes to the world at large may inspire a potentially irreversible shift in public opinion. Yet the degree of such a shift, whether or not it is in an acceptable direction, or for that matter remotely viable, is presently a subject at the mercy of several imponderables. As realists, we shall embrace Rook’s de facto accomplishments for what they are, what they might become. The cat, as Americans are wont to say, has escaped from the bag.”

“Then, why —?”

“Patience, Monsignor; please allow me to finish.” Alarcón’s prickly form of politesse stifled Velk’s objection. “Let us suppose for the sake of argument the altogether laughable proposals of UNDEP’s so-brilliant commissioner emeritus have not yet come to full fruition. Suppose, for example, what might happen if he were to fall so deeply in love with his outrageous proposals that he becomes disenchanted or dissatisfied with the results of the damage done to date, and decides to invent more grotesque scenarios. Isn’t it obligatory for us, as Dr. Lowndes has suggested, to surgically prune a branch known to be diseased so that the invaluable tree may flourish?”

His throat inhumanly dry, Velk’s voice, when he did manage to speak, turned into a croak. He had to start over. “I make no pretense of feeling other than total revulsion for the arrogant monster, but I can’t conceive our only course to be the, er . . . He’s very old, and by all reports quite ill. Tell me, what is to be gained? Christiansen will surely see that the UNDEP proposals will carry on with or without Rook.”

“Ah,” said Lowndes, “there we are in agreement. Nils has repeatedly shown himself to be above reproach. He has never failed to demonstrate sane, stable leadership, nor can his executive competence be questioned. On the other hand, the unrighteous gentleman laboring under his cognizance has gone far out on a very weak limb to show his true colors. This Rook is a fanatic, not to mention being a first order dog in the manger, a veritable fountainhead of doctrinal heresy. The handwriting is written clearly for all to see, Monsignor. Christiansen is a manageable executive, whereas this Rook person definitely is not.”

Tiring of what to him had become a tedious exchange, Dr. Lowndes rounded on his alter ego and made a quick, chopping gesture at his throat with the flat of his hand. “No tidy little snippets, Mateo.”

“It shall be as you wish, Jefe.”

“It must be arranged delicately, with utmost discretion.”

“It shall be.”

Utmost discretion,” emphasized Lowndes. He swung back, transfixed Velk with a gimlet stare. “Have we anything further to discuss, Monsignor?”

The Jesuit’s response was a barely audible, “N-no.”

Seventeen

“Something bothering you, Anton? You look rather out of sorts.”

“Uh-uh. Not really, Commish.”

“A touch of indigestion, what?”

“Naw, sort of worried, is all.” Bennett Rook’s bullock-sized bodyguard turned away to avoid his patron’s inquiring gaze.

“Worry for its own sake is useless,” philosophized Rook. “What precisely troubles you, if I may ask?”

“You do, Commish. You worry me plenty,” said Anton. “This time you’ve stuck your tit in the wringer and turned the crank yourself.”

Rook chuckled drily.

“Okay, skip that,” declared Anton unhappily. “Make it a goddamn meat grinder.”

“Simply because I’m paranoid,” quipped Rook in typically droll fashion, “don’t think for one instant they aren’t out to get me.”

“Sorry, Commish; you just don’t get it. This’s no damn laughing matter.” Anton scowled darkly. “Try surfing the six o’clock news instead of farting around with your fancy computer. Every time I flip on the holo tank there’s twice as much screeching and hollering and protesting for and against the scams you’re putting out. Some of the big wheels they keep interviewing sound like they’re serious about putting you in your place, know what I mean? And half of the talking heads are big, big wheels. What you figure to do about all that?”

Rook’s slow, condescending smile further darkened Anton’s scowl. “What would you have me do?”

“Jesus, Commish! For starters, it’s dumber than dumb to traipse around the tower all by your lonesome. And if that solo exercise isn’t dicey enough for you, it’s plain crazy the way you hardly ever let me ride shotgun when you decide hit the street. You should leastwise let me come along every time you go outside the tower, and that’s a fact.”

Rook’s thin smile evaporated. “A sensible notion,” he admitted, his tone now less condescending. “It’s your job to be concerned about my safety, which is something I fully appreciate. But if I were to do as you suggest those really big wheels would know I was running scared.”

“Come off it, f’Chrissake! You ought to be running plenty scared, and you damn well know it. There’s a slew of important folks out there to be scared of, believe me. I was you, I’d be scared shitless.”

Rook revolved the issue. “I’m forced to disagree with your assessment, Anton. Having you constantly hovering at my side would dilute the message I desperately wish to send. Controversy is heating up nicely over the proposals tendered on UNDEP’s behalf, and . . . Let me be perfectly clear about something you touched upon. It’s true that the screams you’re hearing were inspired by those selfsame really big, big wheels. An aggregation of shadowy, behind-the-scenes players runs this planet from their high-rise lairs. Collectively, the chief screamers among them are known far and wide as Big Business, Big Banking, Big Insurance, and Big . . . whatever. It’s simplistic to put it in those terms, but nevertheless fairly accurate. A vocal reaction on the part of the really big, big wheels is precisely what I’ve been hoping and praying for. This is only the preliminary bout, you see. The main event will follow whatever hyper-critical, or hypocritical, reaction to my nefarious schemes originates from the throats of *vox populi*. ”

“Box who? What the hell you talking about, Commish?”

“The voice of the people, Anton. Throughout recorded history, this could be the singular instance when the major players, wheeler-dealers, movers and shakers here, there and elsewhere do not dare ignore, or attempt to shout out, the screams of billions of overburdened taxpayers.”

Anton irritably brushed back a forelock of iron-gray hair dangling like a comma against his creased forehead. His craggy features jelled in a mask of exasperation, he stared down at the man in the geriatric chair. “Now you are scaring the living bejesus out of me. You keep picking the fly specks out of the pepper and missing the turds. When I worked for Kappy Smits we had deals cooking right and left with politicians of all sizes, shapes and stripes. Scratch me and I’ll scratch you; that’s how the pol business swings in the real world, and always has. Those big time mover-shaker, wheeler-dealers you shrug off like raindrops are interested in one thing, and only one: whatever greases the skids, helps ‘em line their pockets and get re-elected. End of story. They don’t play for love of the game, they play for all the fucking marbles. And they don’t pay a whole lot of nevermind to the hollerings of your overburdened, tax-paying box poops, either. Hear what I’m saying? You’re missing the honest-to-God bottom line, and missing it wide.”

“Sooner or later,” goaded Rook, “I’m sure you’ll get to the point.”

“Bet your sweet ass I will!” Anton popped a fist into his oversized palm. “The one thing you’ve got to remember, and in fact the only damn thing to keep in mind, is that right after you shot off your yap in that sit-down in front of the newsies, holovision monkeys and flashbulb jockeys, it’s my hunch a king-sized payday’s already been set in motion for some mechanic somewhere.”

“Mechanic . . . ?”

Anton grimaced. “Uh-huh, mechanic! Get with it, Commish. A hit guy who know’s what’s what, a pro who makes his living zotzing people targeted by those same really big wheeler-dealers you don’t seem worried about. The cornball ‘hit man’ tag went out with horses and buggies, but the drill didn’t go bye-bye along with it. The important people you’re giving the finger to,” continued the bodyguard earnestly, “never, ever let anybody off the hook who messes with the juicy scam they cooked up, have had going for bags and bundles of years. Fact of the matter, it surprises me no end to see you still sitting here breathing in, breathing out.”

“Frankly, it also amazes me, for a different reason.” Rook pondered. “Now that you’ve broached the subject, I confess to having given little thought to the wholesale threats that keep popping up. On the other hand, the witchdoctors tell me not to count on a long stay in this vale of sorrows, so a happening such as you suggest would be of almost no consequence.”

“Wrong, Commish; you are dead wrong!” Anton was adamant. “About that you’re so far off base it’s damn near funny,” he declared heatedly. “If you’ll ‘scuse me for saying it straight out, it’d matter one whole helluva lot, believe me. Not just to me, either.”

“I’m touched,” said Rook, unable to subdue a note of light mockery.

“Touched is right, touched in the goddamn head is what you are! Knock off the play-acting and listen to what I’m telling you,” insisted Anton. “You’re way too smart for you own goddamn good, Commish. You’re so fucking smart you haven’t figured out that people are laying down bets on how long you’ll stick around. Think about it, f’Chrissake! If you was to get clipped the scams you’re so proud of, have worked so hard to gin up and put out on the street, would most likely go into the trash bin along with your carcass. Don’t tell me you’ve never twigged to that news flash.”

Bemused, Rook said, “And your solution to my hideous dilemma?”

Anton’s massive shoulders hunched angrily. “That’s easy, dirt simple easy. Before you dipped your fingers into helping set things right in the world, you went and hired world-class muscle like me to watch your backside. Then you pulled a really dumb stunt and hung a muzzle on me, kept me chained up. Don’t get sore at me for getting out of line and saying it like it is, but why the hell won’t you let me do my job? I sit here thumb-twiddling all day long, wondering what’s come down on you, trying to guess who’s been bought and paid for, who’s sneaked into the tower with a grenade, a pellet gun, a shank, whatever.”

Rook held up both hands, palms outward. “Peace, Anton. Your point, once you circled the globe to make it, strikes me as well founded. In fact, you’ve made point, game, set, match and tournament.”

Anton squinted down at his patron. “What’s all that tennis crap about?”

“Forget it. You’re correct, I admit,” said Rook. “Despite having one foot suspended over the pit and the other stumbling on uneven ground, several important items remain that I must deal with in person. From now on it shall be exactly as you suggest. You will be at my side wherever I go, never too far away to do your job as you see fit. If so, however, you must promise to at all times remain as inconspicuous as possible. Is that understood?”

“Gotcha, Commish.” Anton’s toothy grin would have frightened anyone who didn’t know him, and many of those who did. “In that case, there’s another item we should talk about, Commish.”

“What might that be?”

“Wouldn’t hurt none to let me touch base with Kappy, maybe sniff out what kind of word’s flying around the street.”

“You’re hinting that a contract may already be out on this weary bag of bones?”

“Makes sense, lots of sense.”

“My, what a thrilling notion! Just think, a real-life hit man.”

“Yeah, or men, women, children, whatever. Thrilling as hell, isn’t it?” Disgust written large on his less than handsome features, Anton said, “In my book, it figures and figures in spades. Right about now, you’re damn near as popular as Cancer with those movers and shakers and wheeler-dealers whose angrification you’re so proud of riling up to a boil.”

Rook cogitated. “I sense the likelihood of even deeper truth in that statement. Have you any inkling how your former . . . associates feel about you getting clean, staying clean?”

“How they feel? I don’t get it.”

“In simple terms,” asked Rook, “wouldn’t it be risky to rub noses, so to speak, with the pack of Bronx thugs you once ran with?”

“Oh, okay; now I see what you’re coming from. Naw, no sweat. Kappy’s the meanest, most underhanded SOB who ever drew breath, but he plays by his own set of rules, and I was a team player, see? Never opened my yap to the rubber-hose gang of blue suits after I was collared. I never copped a plea, never pissed and moaned about my stay in the joint. I clammed up tight, rode the rap and sweated out my time like a good soldier. Now I’m on the outside, and figure to stay there for good, thanks to you.”

“I believe I understand,” said Rook. “I’m the one who should be thankful, Anton.”

“Kappy isn’t the most patient guy in this burg,” said the bodyguard, “but he’s awful smart. No, make that shrewd. Kappy’s got a store of shrewdness he ain’t got around to using yet. What’s more, he’s got eyes and ears spotted all over hell’s half-acre, and stays up to the minute on everything that comes down the pike. If any business deal along the lines of what we’re talking about is in the mill, Kappy will know.”

“You plan to visit him in person, not just make a call?”

“Got to be face to face. Kappy’s a guy who calls you; you don’t call him. Anyhow, he wouldn’t say boo on vidicom even if there was a way to get through to him, which there isn’t. Give me the nod, and I’ll run over to the Bronx, see what I can find out.”

“Soon?”

“Way things are, sooner’s a lot better than later. Tonight, Commish, if you hand me a ‘go’signal.’”

Rook deliberated. “Very well, handle it your way. But don’t requisition a staff car; I’ll call down to the garage and make arrangements for a runabout. We’ll pretend it’s another of your casual nocturnal errands.”

“Good as gold.” Anton beamed, something that looked unnatural on him. “Now you’re using your noggin for something besides scheming. I better go make a call or two, try and find out for sure if Kappy’s in town.”

The bodyguard’s long strides carried him toward the vidicom terminal in the study. “You won’t be sorry, Commish,” he called back.

Rook’s lips curved in a tired smile.

* * *

Dr. Yamin Lew was out of his office when the encrypted vidicom call came in over the secure satellite link. Dr. Lew's executive assistant of long standing had been instructed to never for any reason page the Nobel laureate physicist. Nevertheless, she evaluated the distinguished looking caller's importance by appraising his serious, no nonsense mien. Her first impression was confirmed when he uttered a single word.

After asking permission to put the call on hold, the middle-aged woman made a frantic vidicom search of the facility. She learned that Dr. Lew was conferring with technicians in the basement laboratory, and scurried downstairs, in too much of a hurry to wait for the elevator. Finding the scientist deep in conversation, she hung back, fidgeting nervously off to one side, not daring to interrupt.

When at last Lew noticed her standing there, and she mentioned an urgent call, he said brusquely, "Not now, Louise. Take a message, please."

"It's . . ." She hesitated. "Sorry, sir; you told me never to have you paged. The caller used that special word."

The physicist stared at her impassively. "Corvus?" he asked in a monotone.

She nodded.

"You must excuse me now," Dr. Lew told the technical consultant with whom he'd been conversing. "I'll be back shortly. I shan't be long."

As director of the government research facility, Lew occupied a spacious third-floor VIP office. A tinted floor-to-ceiling glass wall looked out beyond the Los Alamos National Laboratory mesa into the surrounding scrub forest. Lew eased behind the desk in his office. Hurriedly opening the secure vidicom channel, he had to wait for descrambler circuitry to again solve the encryption algorithms. The display's electronic hodgepodge wash of random pixels gave way to Bennett Rook's unsmiling countenance. "How soon?" he asked without preamble.

"Approximately one week from today," replied Dr. Lew. "Ten days at the outside."

"Would it be at all possible," inquired Rook, "to do a trial proof run before the fact? In addition to the preliminary data you sent, I'm in dire need of proven performance before taking the matter any further."

The physicist's negative headshake emphatically dismissed the notion. "What you are suggesting is simply not feasible. Unless," added the physicist, "you wish me to alert the entire facility, including my non-technical staff. Assembly and piecemeal checkout of the full-blown setup was completed not long after midnight. We are now engaged in wringing out certain components and undergoing the first preliminary systems check. What you ask is something not possible to keep under wraps."

"I understand. Get back to me the instant you're able to verify the definite date and time of day."

"I shall do so without fail."

"Let me restate the urgency of my request," added Rook meaningfully. "Call me when you're absolutely certain, not merely hopeful."

The physicist's expression did not change, but his lips twitched in annoyance. "When I am certain," he said tautly, "you will be told that I am certain, by no means 'merely hopeful'."

"Excellent!" The vidicom conversation terminated as precipitately as it had begun.

* * *

For the fifth time in the past quarter-hour, the intercom's chime alerted Secretary-General Lowndes. He directed an anxious look at his aide, dreading what he knew would be the caller's inevitable message.

After listening for a moment, the aide said, "Afraid it's him again, sir; channel sixteen. He refuses to take no for an answer."

Lowndes swore. Having worn out every conceivable excuse for not speaking to the aged megatycoon, he said in resignation, "Put him through, Stevens."

The sober, waspish image of Vonex Board Chairman Maxwell congealed in the display. "Ah, there you are at last, Thomas," was the megatycoon's frost-rimed greeting. "You've become an even more difficult gentleman to contact than your man in New York."

"Forgive me, Aaron. Please accept my sincere apologies. I've been terribly busy, and so has Alarcón."

"I imagine so. Aren't we all these fractious days? It distresses me no end to have to tell you," said the other, tight-lipped, "that certain vital matters have gotten completely out of hand. Not long since, there in New York, you offered me total assurance that the ticklish situation created by this UNDEP renegade was in the process of rectification."

"You exacted my promise to that effect," said Lowndes more brusquely than he might have intended.

"And what about now, Thomas . . . ?"

"Everything," assured Dr. Lowndes his, conviction sounding forced, "is coming under control."

"You have no conception of what a tremendous relief that is." The Vonex chief executive coughed, and then coughed again, obviously not believing a word of what he was hearing. "I ask your pardon beforehand for delving somewhat deeper into the purported solution to our common problem. Would it be impolite to inquire when we might expect to see something tangible in the way of results?"

"Soon now. Quite soon, I assure you."

"Wonderful, wonderful! Soonest would be optimum. Even better would be immediately, if at all possible. The office of every congressman and senator on the Hill has been inundated with vociferous demands for relief from UNDEP's outrageous proposals. The more pedestrian-minded public servants are staying up nights, furiously writing and revising bills whose passage could well mean the end of civilized business practices as we know them."

"Let me reassure you once more," Lowndes said impatiently. "We are on top of the situation."

"Marvelous! Only yesterday," said Maxwell, giving every indication of not giving credence to the other's reassurances, "the senior senator from Connecticut delivered a polemic before a joint session of the Congress. She condemned in no uncertain terms the radical revisionist legislative changes advocated and sanctioned by your UNDEP organization. Today," added the megatycoon, not attempting to conceal the note of bitterness that crept into his diction, "the senior senator from Connecticut finds herself victimized by a petition seeking her immediate recall. I'm advised that said petition has already garnered signatures from more than two hundred thousand registered voters."

Lowndes drew a deep breath. "I find that extremely unfortunate. Margaret and I are acquainted; I think very highly of her, and would have thought she had better sense than to lay herself open to such damaging flak. What drove her to do such a thing?"

Maxwell blinked uncertainly. “In essence, Thomas, it can be said that Margaret drew the short straw. She’s devastated, naturally; but she’ll be taken care of, no matter the outcome. I didn’t spend years grooming her, nurturing her career, simply to discard her like a worn shoe. I managed to convince her that losing one sacrificial lamb was vastly preferable to allowing an entire generation of elite businessmen and women to be herded like lemmings over the brink and into the abyss. This idiocy will be resolved ‘quite soon,’ so you say. How soon, Thomas? Would it be possible for you to be a tad more specific? I really must have some indication of a time frame in order to pass it along to our directors.”

“Seventy-two hours, give or take,” said Lowndes, fighting to down an impulse and tell the influential megatycoon and power-broker to eat shit, and die. “I’m afraid this thing has gone too far, too fast, for Christiansen or anyone else to think about interceding. What may be even worse is that I’ve received back door information that Rook may have something else up his sleeve.”

“May the Good Lord save us! What precisely is this abhorrent commissioner of yours thinking to do now, may I ask?”

“We aren’t . . . I’m not certain.” Lowndes realized his amateurish form of dissembling sounded abysmally weak. “I expect to learn the specifics shortly.”

“Very shortly one would hope!” Beebe’s mask of executive politeness had slipped. “Unfortunately, that is all we’ve been hearing from you, Thomas: ‘quite soon, shortly.’ You will have to do considerably better than that.”

“When we . . .” began Lowndes, and broke off. “When what we suspect is in the offing has been confirmed, I promise you’ll be the first learn of it, Aaron. I’ll touch base with you the instant I find out. Please accept my solemn pledge on that.”

“I shall, Thomas. Also, I would greatly appreciate hearing it first-hand from you yourself,” said Maxwell snappishly, “not from one that Latin nincompoop who does your bidding. Agreed?”

Lowndes bit his lip hard. “You can depend on it.”

“I shall indeed depend on it. Let us pray that this incredible mess resolves itself without further grief. Good day, Thomas.”

“Until later,” said the U.N. secretary-general. He switched off, gritted his teeth to stifle the rage that had built up inside him. But anger got the better of him, and he pounded a fist on the desk, bruising the heel of his hand. “Rook!” he cried, spitting out the name in the manner of a blasphemous oath.

* * *

Only the unmarked electric runabout’s parking lights gave away the vehicle’s presence in the night-shrouded street. The small, two-passenger runabout turned the corner and crept forward slowly, bumping along the debris-strewn gutter, and came to a halt curbside. De-energizing the vehicle also switched off the parking lights. Anton scanned the deserted street in either direction, and glanced at the digital dashboard clock; it’s illuminated numerals rolled over to 02:04.

The optically encoded credentials furnished by Rook identified him as a privileged UNDEP courier. As such, he was permitted to come and go freely after the rigorously imposed midnight curfew. Despite that degree of immunity, he knew the South Bronx jungle was a decidedly unhealthy place in which to be stopped and interrogated by the ultra-street-wise cops who manned the roving patrols.

The scene was bleakness personified. Rime ice patterned scattered puddles and patches of dirty, week-old snow, whitening the gutter here and there between the runabout and the carcass

of a stripped, abandoned sedan. Before pushing open the little two-seater's door, Anton craned his neck and again twisted all around, searching for movement along what could be seen of the shabby, darkened side street, where every second or third streetlight cantilevered over the crack-raddled sidewalk had been either smashed or was for some other reason inoperative. The few remaining street lights provided only a weak yellow-orange glow, a result of the rolling, power-saving brownouts imposed on a rotational basis throughout each of Greater New York's boroughs.

Satisfied, he stepped out of the vehicle, closed the door with as little noise as possible, and gained the sidewalk, where he stood motionless, gloved hands jammed deep in his overcoat pockets, and took in the scene more thoroughly. Two blocks behind the ancient brick warehouse's dingy facade, the Harlem River reflected Manhattan's myriad lights.

Believing himself alone on the street, he flinched when a shadowy figure separated from the deeper darkness behind a small mountain of uncollected trash.

"Hey, man. Watch the fancy wheels for ya, okay?"

"Bad news happens regular hereabouts," warned a second indistinct figure. "We can make sure your li'l buggy stays cherry. Won't cost ya hardly nothing."

Anton made no rejoinder. Waiting until his would-be benefactors drew closer, he opened his overcoat, slowly withdrew a hand laser from the holster under his left armpit, and exposed it a few millimeters at a time.

Before either would-be car-guarder could react, he flashed the pile of refuse. The millisecond burst sent a cascade of bottles and cans rattling noisily into the potholed street. Luckily, the laser beam had not struck anything prone to ignition.

"Jesus!" chirped a shadowy figure, "a burner! Don't ya those things're outlawed, Man?"

"Slices sheet steel," said Anton. "Any bad news comes near my car, and I'll make sure it slices something softer." By the time he finished the short speech, both figures had melted back into the gloom.

Warily approaching the warehouse's recessed door, he punched the buzzer with a gloved forefinger and stood back until a dim, flush-mounted light came on overhead in the alcove, its old-fashioned, grime-crusted incandescent bulb shielded by a damage-resistant screen. He knew the video camera installed above the reinforced, blast-resistant door was scanning him. "Anton," he said, low-voiced.

The light winked out. The door creaked, swung inward.

Anton stepped into pitch darkness, hearing the door ease shut behind him. An inner light glowed, revealing a middle-aged Asian man built along the lines of a trim-waisted Sumo wrestler, although boasting much less fat and much more muscle. Arms and shoulders bulging his tunic, he regarded the newcomer with an air of casual disinterest. "How goes by you, Anton?"

"Sixes 'n sevens, Sugi. Same as always."

"You know the way," the other told him.

"Sure. Good t'see you."

Sugi nodded without a change of expression.

Anton made his way down a short hallway past the open doorways of several darkened offices. Emerging into the warehouse proper, its concrete floor strewn haphazardly with stacked crates and cartons, he went directly to the freight lift and stepped in. He rolled the gate closed behind him, punched a button and was carried upward two floors. A pair of strangers were waiting for him when the lift cage ground to a jerky stop.

“You carryin’, Soldier?”

Anton nodded and passed over the laser weapon.

“Hoo-boy! Look at this honey of a burner,” said the taller of the two men. He hefted the hand laser, appraised it and handed it to his partner. “Pick it up on your way out, okay?”

Anton nodded again.

He tapped on the inner door and was buzzed inside. Leeuwyn Kapstedter had his size eleven triple-D brogans parked on the edge of a scarred wooden desk. Anton’s former chief was using his shoulder and neck to cradle an antique black telephone. He waved his visitor to a chair. Anton considered Kappy the shrewdest, meanest SOB he had ever known.

“Yeah, yeah,” Kapstedter was saying. “Heard it a dozen times. Tell him Friday, got it? Friday, no later.” A pause. “I don’t give a shit what he says, it has to be Friday. Hear what I’m saying? Get back to me tomorrow before noon.”

Kapstedter caged the phone, his expression sour. “Well, kiss my rosy red patootie if it isn’t my one time star Boy Scout.”

“Hiya, Kappy. How you keeping?”

The other grinned crookedly, meanly. “Older, but not a damn bit wiser. And you?”

“Doing okay. Real good.”

“Thinking about coming back to work?”

Anton returned the crooked grin. “Not so you’d notice. Got a real soft billet watching the backside of a U.N. bigshot. But you already knew that. Guess I plan to keep it that way, at least for now.”

Kapstedter appraised his guest narrowly. “One thing I’ll say in your favor, Anton, is that you took the fall like a stand-up guy. Put a lid on business matters, you did, and kept it on tight. That was something I deep-down appreciated.”

“Goes without saying, Kappy.”

A deep-throated grunt. “Wish to hell a few of the dipshits working for me now had the sense to think like you do. What’re you drinking?”

“I’m, uh ... fine. Been cutting back on the sauce these days. Thanks anyhow.”

“Suit yourself. Listen, I’m busy as hell tonight. Why’d you want to see me?”

“Need info, and I can pay.”

The other’s small eyes narrowed further, making him look even meaner. He rolled Anton’s statement around in his mind, letting it carom from possibility to likelihood, and then bounce back again toward possibility. “Oh, what the hell! Your account’s paid in full. Come right down to it, you paid your dues twice-over. What kind of pitch you after?”

“My boss, Commissioner Rook, he’s living under the gun right now, Kappy. I have to find out whose got the gun, and where and when it gets aimed.”

“Hah!” Kapstedter rolled his eyes at the dingy ceiling. “‘Under the gun’ doesn’t say it by half. Hate to come right out and tell you point-blank, but it’d be smart for you to scout around for a new billet. Yeah, best find yourself a new line of work. Way I hear it, your boss’ll get his wings clipped real soon now. He won’t be doing much celebrating come New Years eve.”

“That bad?”

“Uh-huh, maybe worse. Scam on the street says your loudmouthed meal ticket has been making plenty of real bad noises in all the wrong places.”

“Exactly what’ve you heard, Kappy?”

Kapstedter eyed his guest keenly. “Word went around a few days ago. A major league contract on your friend went out for bid. I was told it had no trouble finding a home away from

home, know what I mean? And when I say major league, I mean a major major league all-star signed up. By all accounts, he's a top-notch mechanic, not the low bidder. Anyhow, he landed the job of work."

"Does he have a name? And where's home away from home, if you don't mind telling me?"

"That I don't know. Out of the country'd be my guess."

"When, Kappy?"

The other rubbed his balding cranium. "Lid's pretty much come down and got sealed on the operation. All I found out came over the grapevine." The other sounded impatient.

"Seems the star performer at the head of the line got himself hired. He's s'posed to be locked and loaded, just waiting till next time."

"Next time? Any notion what stretch comes before next time?"

"Nary a glimmer." The ancient black telephone jangled beside Smits. "Saddle up now, Anton. Got a heavy night ahead of me."

Anton got up. "I'm obliged, Kappy. Real obliged."

"Forget it." Kapstedter reached for the phone. "By the way, you ever get a hot flash about coming back to work, talk to me first."

"It's a deal, Kappy. And if you hear anything solid, will you light up the vidicom to UNDEP?"

"Yeah, sure. Why not?"

"Appreciate it no end, Kappy."

Eighteen

"The . . . next time?" Rook sounded distantly amused. "Is that what he said?"

"It's what the man told me, Commish," Anton told his patron defensively.

Rook chortled. "Not even the Delphic Oracle could solve a riddle of that magnitude. 'Next time' could mean anything, or nothing."

"To me it means plenty," declared Anton in no uncertain terms. "Kappy's street-smart like nobody else before or since. Doesn't tap-dance when it comes to something that matters, know what I mean? And what's more, he never, ever puts out loose chatter. When he told me his people picked up news of the scam on the street, he meant it. Can't be looked at any other way."

"Easy, Anton; don't go pettish on me. I had no intention of denigrating the information furnished by your former boss. It's just that attempting to put such a 'warning' in any form of meaningful context, if a warning it is, would defy the predictive powers of Nostradamus, let alone the Cosa Nostra, or should I say Cosa Nostradamus."

"Aw Jeez, Commish! Knock off the fancy-schmancy bullshit," urged Anton. "Nobody's called the outfit that since that big dust-up with the feds years ago. What we've got to do is figure out ahead of time what Kappy's 'next time' means."

"Umm-m-m, yes. If possible." Rook eyed the bodyguard with a speculative air. "You've tagged after me like a baby duck for days on end, and there's been no hint of trouble. Doesn't that allay your fears somewhat?"

"Exactly the opposite, Commish." Anton lowered his voice. "Truth be told, it makes me antsy as hell. I've been scratching my head, trying to figure out if the bubble's set to pop the next time you sit in on some half-assed meeting, go to see some office flunky, leave the tower and waltz back inside, or maybe the next time you go to the john. Who knows what the hell next time means?"

"No one, Anton, other than the people who allowed your ex-boss learn of it. That would be my estimate?"

"Now there I'm pretty sure you're right, Commish. One or more high-rolling sumbitches out there sure enough knows. Best guess is that a mechanic got himself hired by one or more of the bigshots from the king-sized army who hate your guts."

Rook chuckled. "Take no offense, but you've narrowed the list to practically everyone."

"Oh, what the hell! Get real, Commish? Could be the next time the vidicom sounds-off with a call."

"Never and 'the next time' could be synonymous," pointed out Rook.

As if bent upon substantiating Anton's thesis, the vidicom terminal in the adjacent study chimed twice. The bodyguard looked inquiringly at his patron. "Running kind of late for the morning get-together, aren't you? Do I let the answering gizmo handle it, what?"

"Very few individuals have my private number," said Rook. "See who it is."

Seconds later, Anton poked his head around the doorway. "It's the same slant-eye who's called here a couple times before. Won't give his name, rank or serial number."

Rook's demeanor brightened markedly. "I'll take it," he said. Guiding the geriatric chair through the specially widened doorway leading to his study, he touched a button on the vidicom terminal. The encrypted image unscrambled a second time, giving way to a full-color image of Dr. Yamin Lew.

"Good morning," greeted Rook, praying the call meant what he hoped it did.

The caller's laconic statement was, "The day after tomorrow."

"Is that . . . firm?"

"It is not merely 'firm,' sir. It is a certainty," informed the Nobelist. "If I correctly recall our last conversation, that was the required degree of assurance, was it not? We will be up and running the day after tomorrow, Wednesday, during the hours of early morning."

Rook hated to ask again, but decided it was necessary, he said, "You're sure?"

"More than sure," insisted the physicist, exhibiting a degree of impatience. "Certain."

"Wonderful! Please fax the prepared transmittal no earlier than nine-thirty, Wednesday morning, and no later than ten o'clock?"

"It shall be as you wish."

"My sincere compliments, Dr. Lew. All your efforts are immensely appreciated. You've succeeded where any number of prestigious others have failed. You've opened a door that will hopefully never close."

"We shall pray that it is so."

"You can expect my call immediately afterward," said Rook.

"I will look forward to hearing from you, Mr. Commissioner."

* * *

Looking much less wary than earlier in the week, Nils Christiansen glanced from Rook to the bodyguard hulking behind the elderly ideologue's geriatric chair. "Even so," he demanded, "why another press conference? What's to be gained, Bennett? Ease up a bit. You've stirred the pot to a high boil; the harder you stir now, the worse it will smell. Exactly what will be accomplished by restating your proposals?"

"It will be vital," asserted Rook, "to hold a second session with the press and media corps."

"Vital, how? In what way?" asked the director. "For what reason?"

“For UNDEP, for us. We must keep the public focused on the prize, and not let them be swayed by the on-going rash of anti-UNDEP propaganda.”

“Fine, but I’m not at all sure what end that will it serve? Since yesterday, I’ve fielded dozens of calls, endured a pair of sharply worded confrontations with Alarcón, and survived several severe vidicom wire-brushings from Lowndes, who’s back in Geneva. I believe another press conference could be a serious error. Wouldn’t it be wiser to let things cool a bit?”

Rook’s bushy, grayshot brows lifted. “Is that a hint that you believe the powers-that-be may order my press conference scrubbed?”

“Nothing of the kind, Bennett. You may take it as a hint that you are avoiding the issue.”

“Under the circumstances,” mused Rook, declining to respond to the inference, “I doubt if they would dare to cancel my second dog and pony show. It might be a tad late in the game for a crude sidestep by Dr. Low-down and his beloved grandee. PR did a splendid job of alerting the taxpaying public that another of my proposal séances was upcoming. The print press and media in general have been formally alerted, and it’s slated for nine, Wednesday morning.”

Christiansen ruminated. “Despite my earlier objection, I tend to agree with your conclusion. From the U.N. standpoint, a cancellation order this late in the game would tend to accentuate the negative, not diminish it. It surprised me that neither the attorney-general, nor the gentleman you call a ‘grandee’ who heads the Spanish Inquisition here in New York, have threatened to cancel, nor have either he or Lowndes given any indication of wishing o do so. Actually, the press conference was barely mentioned, which made me wonder at the time about the purpose of any of the wire-brushing sessions, what it was they wanted from aside from browbeating me to a pulp. Maybe the subject matter of your upcoming, er ‘dog and pony show’ concerned them more than the fact of it.”

“How interesting,” said Rook to no particular purpose.

“Yes, in a way it is interesting,” said Christiansen. “I was directed to submit a précis of the topics to Alarcón vis-à-vis your agenda. That’s why I asked you to come by this morning and capsule whatever it is you mean to reveal.”

“What a dreadful shame it will be to slough them off, Nils. By this time, the sinful triumvirs should be aware that my major topics will be amount to nothing more than a heavier, heartier dose of the same.”

The response drew a frown from Christiansen. “All well and good, Bennett. But, I warn you; refuse to cooperate with the wishes of the grandee or his lord and master in Geneva, and you could face summary dismissal. You do realize that, don’t you?”

“What, and lose my wondrous position? No, I think not,” said Rook smugly. “Of course it’s within Lowndes’ power to dispense with my invaluable services at this juncture, but if he did so the public hue and cry would be deafening. No, I’m sure what you suggest is inconceivable. Risking public backlash over a drastic move like that is extremely unlikely. Not yet, at any rate.”

“I wouldn’t be too cocksure?”

“I am,” declared Rook. “Matters have gone too far, too fast, for them to contemplate such a rash, simplistic solution to their mutual problem. Not to sound egotistical, but the sticking point is me myself. I believe the public outcry would quadruple, perhaps quintuple, were I to be martyred in such highly dramatic fashion. I’m certain that is something of which the triumvirate is acutely aware.”

“For God’s sake, Bennett!” said the director in frustration. “It isn’t your way to delude yourself. Don’t think for one instant you have them stymied. If you actually believe you have them over a barrel, it’s my unpleasant duty to tell you you’re gravely mistaken.”

“Don’t wager more on that,” Rook said confidently, “than you can afford to lose. You do plan to attend the conference?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

“Excellent! Prepare yourself to enjoy my dog and pony show, Nils. Strictly between us co-conspirators, I’ve cooked up a genuine tomato-in-the-face surprise for the grandee, his father confessor, and the lord of the manor in scenic, sterile Switzerland.”

The director groaned. “Now you’re scaring me. Why insist upon casting yourself in the role of someone above the fray? Analyze the situation with greater care, and you may come to the conclusion that you are by no means invulnerable; nor am I, nor is any other U.N. employee. Tell me, have you given thought to the way your good works and grand schemes have left me and every other UNDEP official hung out to dry? I’ve endangered my position by going out on a limb and giving you a free hand. I’ve let you act autonomously, and you chose to flagrantly abuse the privilege. Perhaps it’s time to reconsider, time to lead the team within our organization instead of dictating to it. I spend half my waking hours fielding screams from above, and the other half imagining what frightening shock waves you’re about to create the next time you conduct one of your press conferences. If your tomato-in-the-face surprise ends up kicking off some new controversy, I’m not sure we’ll be able to —”

“The next time,” Anton said loudly. The huge bodyguard stiffened and came erect behind the geriatric chair. His expression intense, eyes narrowed, the bodyguard resembled a crag-featured golem, the picture of menace incarnate.

Startled by the outburst, Christiansen said, “What was that, Anton?”

“Pay no attention to him,” urged Rook. “He watches over me like an anxious mother hen.” Rook turned, met the watchdog’s knowing stare, and performed a negative headshake.

A glint of suspicion in his eyes, Christiansen said, “Out with it, Bennett. What type of arcane ‘tomato-in-the-face surprise’ have you invented for this, uh ... next time press conference?”

“Were I to let you in on my little secret,” said Rook slyly, “it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

“Damn you, Bennett!”

“Nils, do me a small favor,” requested Rook. “Inform the grandee and Doctor Low-Down the following agenda has been penciled in on my slate. Tell them I mean to recapitulate the various facets of our proposals in order to doubly reinforce those I touched upon less than thoroughly at the first press conference. Tell them I plan to critique the pending legislation aimed at minimally satisfying the objectives described in those proposals. That should quiet the dynamic trio.”

Although less than satisfied, Christiansen gestured helplessly, turning over the flats of his hands. “Whether or not you know what you’re doing, that agenda won’t do one damned thing to tone down the screams of business leaders large and small, nor the ecclesiastics, nor non-profits, nor consortia, the conglomerates, nor the cartels and legions of fellow-traveler tycoons currently out for your scalp. I hope to hell you know what you’re doing.”

Rook raised his right hand as if taking an oath. He solemnly declared, “I, Bennett Rook, being of sound mind and questionable body, do hereby swear that I know exactly what I’m doing.”

“That,” muttered Christiansen, “is what I’m afraid of.”

“The next time,” murmured Anton, brushing back the comma of iron-gray hair draped on his forehead. “Commish,” he said, “it could be the next time you —”

“That will do, Anton,” Rook said sharply.

Christiansen glanced from his senior colleague to the bodyguard. “Anton, what the devil is this ‘next time’ song and dance of yours all about?”

Rook interceded. “We must run along, Nils. I’m minutes overdue for the morning meeting.”

“In my opinion,” said Christiansen on a sour note, “you’re six or seven decades overdue for a meeting with maturity.”

The director watched with hooded eyes as Anton led the way out of the inner office with the gleaming geriatric chair gliding serenely in his wake. The bodyguard suspiciously scanned everyone waiting in the director’s antechamber.

“The next time,” Christiansen muttered. Chewing over Anton’s odd reference, his forehead wrinkled in thought, then shifted mental gears and consulted the wall chronometer. The time differential in Europe made it late afternoon in Switzerland. Making up his mind not to allow a heated discussion with Dr. Lowndes to get started, he asked his executive assistant to put through a scrambled, encrypted vidicom call to Geneva. Changing his mind at the last instant, he instructed her to call Alarcón instead, and resigned himself to hearing what he knew would be the Spaniard’s vituperative reaction to a recital of Rook’s proposed topics.

* * *

Fraught with anxiety for no reason, Anton felt distinctly uncomfortable isolated in the UNDEP Media Center’s glassed-in control booth. Hovering behind a pair of seated security agents, his attention constantly flicked from one holovision display tank to the next, and the next. Each time the scene shifted in a particular tank, he searched for a hint of hostile intent, any stray glimpse of something not quite right, any person or thing that didn’t quite fit the prescribed template. He had schooled himself to purposely avoid any preconceived notion of what to search for; it might be a face belonging to someone with an obscure reason, or no reason, for being there, a security man or woman absent from his or her station. It could also be a minor oddity, something slightly out of the whack, something a casual observer would automatically overlook.

Now and then he turned aside, studied the scene in the largest holotank — a continuously shifting, panoramic sweep of the throng milling about below in the plaza and thoroughfare in front of the United Nations Tower. Learning of the impending news conference, an overflow gathering of New Yorkers and others had flooded into the area to besiege the Western Hemisphere seat of the United Nations Organization. All entrances to the UN Tower were cordoned off; adjacent street traffic, light to begin with, had been halted or diverted. The boisterous throng was giving harried GNYPD officers and U.N. security agents the usual fits generated by protesters, though to Anton they didn’t actually seem to be protesting, which puzzled him. Men and women held aloft signs, peacefully shouted and chanted slogans, a change in attitude within the surging mass of faces Anton found refreshing. Neither the signs nor slogans signified a typical protest demonstration. It pleased him to note that most, if not all, hand-lettered posters and indistinguishable shouts proclaimed enthusiastic, universal endorsement of UNDEP’s proposed policies and procedures.

Whatever crazy schemes the commish had invented, he thought wryly, he’s sure as hell done something right this time. Even so, he was certain in his own mind that one or more someones out there among the mostly sympathetic crowd, a ringer could be hiding, counting the minutes, waiting to strike. Losing yourself in plain sight was ten times easier, he knew, than trying to stay hidden anywhere near wherever you really wanted to be. U.N. Security touted the tower as totally impregnable; Anton knew better. Getting a pro inside would be a matter of

determination, enough grease smeared on the proper palms, or maybe a meaningful threat delivered to a properly placed person in just the right wrong way.

The bodyguard shifted his weight, returned his concentration to the row of smaller holovision tanks set flush along the control booth's inner wall. Viewing the media center from various angles, ceiling cameras constantly panned back and forth, scanning the group of thirty or more newsies seated facing the small stage, as well as a semicircle of standees watching and listening at the rear of the chamber. Behind the foreign and domestic journalists, network anchors, analysts and commentators loomed an elevated bank of three-headed holovision blimps providing satellite coverage of the event to the worldwide audience.

On edge for the better part of a half-hour, Anton's anxiety doubled and redoubled. Despite Rook's scoffing dismissal of Kapstedter's "next time" warning, he felt that he'd partially solved the riddlesome words to his own satisfaction, and therefore concentrated on staying watchful, alert to every detail of what went on in the media center. In order to do so, he paid little or no heed to the barrage of verbal exchanges ricocheting back and forth between Rook, again ensconced stage center, his polychrome geriatric chair gleaming under the bright lights, dueling with what Anton thought of as "a battery of Q&A-happy news and holovision freaks."

* * *

"But, Mr. Commissioner," asked a reporter, "have you considered the appallingly severe consequences the business community will face for non-compliance with UNDEP's environmental proposals?"

The question earned a scornful gaze from Rook. "Sir, legislation governing producer responsibility has been enacted for most of the past century, and the rules have been either partially or totally unenforced in those societies willing to permit contamination of the environment in the interest of corporate shareholder greed. The acute problem of how to handle dangerous or hazardous materials discarded along with consumer products — cadmium, lead, copper, antimony, chromium and nickel in addition to a number of others — has plagued us ever since technology came of age. At first simply discarded in the trash, materials which have proven toxic, reactive, combustible or corrosive were deposited in landfills and in short order began to contaminate the soil and groundwater."

After the lengthy speech, Rook found a need to pause for breath. "The prospective legislation currently being debated within both houses of the Congress," he went on to say, "if as one hopes the finalized versions adhere to the basic precepts of our proposed courses of action, will result in extended producer responsibility. The manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers of latently contaminating products will be forced to perform two actions if they wish to remain in compliance. Firstly, they must be forced to assume the physical and financial burden of disposing or recycling such products when they are ready to be thrown away by consumers, rather than sloughing off the cost at taxpayer expense. Secondly, the U.N.-enforced penalties may not, yet certainly should, also force producers to design, develop and vend products much less prone to the necessity for expensive disposition or recycling."

Moderately taken back by Rook's vehement response, the reporter said, "But the idea of an extremely severe fine for a first offense, tripling for a second, and lifting a firm's business license for a third will drive any number of companies into bankruptcy along with their shareholders."

"Precisely," gloated Rook. "By refusing to take care of business, that is where they should be."

The exchange brought a chorus of murmurings from the assembled press and media corps.

“Now when I say ‘shareholders’,” amplified Rook, reflecting upon what had just told the audience, “I imagine you mean the insurance cartels, hedge funds, holding companies, investment banks and so forth that sell short just before manipulating the Market into a downward slide by well-paid specialists on the Big Board, and then buying back in when their pet stocks bottom out and the Market is once again ready to be driven upward.”

This sally earned a collection of murmurs from the mainstream newsmen and women, but perceptible cringes from a number of financial columnists and reporters.

* * *

Anton had been grossly disturbed to hear his boss contemptuously dismiss the possibility that some form of bold attack might take place here, in front of the press, media, and a worldwide holovision audience. Privately, he considered that conclusion the reaction of a dunderhead intellectual, the refusal to admit danger by someone so completely sure of himself, so confident of his own ability, and so oblivious to the real-world, that he paid no nevermind to what might be an authentic threat. The bodyguard also knew that he and he alone appreciated how deadly the upshot of that indifferent attitude might become.

In a way, the present gathering smacked of an ideal setup for what he feared might take place. A competent, experienced mechanic could do the deed instant, and bugger off during the ensuing pandemonium without even being noticed, let alone getting scragged. Nor during his intense surveillance had Anton overlooked the handful of plainclothes security personnel stationed in and around the auditorium. If some fat cat or a collection of them had willingly parted with basketfuls of new dollars, the services of a competent professional could be procured from a doz-dozen different sources anywhere in the world.

Despite the air-conditioned control booth, perspiration glistened on Anton’s forehead. He fingered the hand laser snug in an underarm holster, wishing the damned Q&A blather would hurry up and get over and done with. But the boss was in fine fettle. Outwardly at ease beneath the punishing studio lights, he kept fielding questions on the first bounce, with no hint of hesitation. Speaking with customary authority, he kept assuring and reassuring the reporters and media clucks of one thing or another, then often as not ran off at the mouth with an educational lecture meant to put the visible and unseen audiences in their places.

One by one, Anton searched the faces and figures glowing in the holovision monitors, interpreting body language, watching for sudden, uncalled for movements, unwarranted changes of expression, and whatever. A remote camera installed above the proscenium looked downward and slowly swept back and forth, panning the audience, reflecting the studio lights from the triple lenses protruding from each of the three holovision blimps. He watched the leftmost holotank’s scene shift as the camera panned left, its angle gradually changing, with each set of triple-lenses returning a bright reflective eye from the podium’s spotlight glare.

Except for the second-from-left holovision blimp’s center lens, which . . .

Anton jerked convulsively erect. He rudely shouldered aside a security agent, reached past the startled man and slapped a control lever, increasing the magnification on the slowly moving image. The dark, hollow circlet occluding the middle blimp’s center lens looked like . . .

A muzzle!

He whirled, flew past seated Director Christiansen at a dead run, flung open the control booth door and sprinted around the carpeted perimeter behind the array of holovision cameras. Security people tensed, eyed the huge, dashing figure with surprise written large in their open

mouths. Knowing who he was, who it was he guarded, none of them moved to hinder his swift passage.

Anton slowed to a fast walk, halted behind the middle holovision blimp. He reached up without a word, pinioned the cameraman's arms and yanked him bodily from the blimp's saddle. Clapping a large hand over his victim's mouth, he frog-marched the writhing cameraman away, ignoring his muffled protests, and shoved him through a side door into the media center's wings.

The flurry of activity had caused a stir in the crowded studio. Necks craned rearward; weapons suddenly appeared in their hands of UNDEP security agents converging on the bodyguard and his prize.

"What the hell you doing, Anton?" demanded a stern-faced senior agent.

The bodyguard explained in very few words.

Once the suspect holovision blimp had been tilted harmlessly toward the ceiling, disconnected from its cabling and rolled out of the auditorium, Anton went back into the control booth and again gave his full attention to the holovision monitors, continuing his surveillance as if nothing untoward had occurred.

"Mr. Christiansen," announced the senior security agent a quarter-hour later, entering the control room and bending low over the seated director, "a compressed-air dart gun was built into that holoblimp. Damned thing's a slick piece of work; it was set to a rapid-fire burst of four darts smeared with what at first we thought might be ricin, or something similar."

Christiansen blanched. "Has it been disarmed?"

"Yes, sir. The darts were hand-carried to the lab. Forensic's first guess is that the missiles were covered with . . . Got it scribbled here. Uh, pancuronium bromide. It's said to be a real fast-acting, bad news poison. The operator's being questioned downstairs."

Christiansen turned to Anton. "Do you know about that kind of poison, it's effects?"

The bodyguard didn't take his eyes from the bank of holovision tanks. "Yessir, it's curare, the poison used in blowguns down south in the Amazon. Kills real quick; stops your breathing."

The director stepped nearer. "Thank God you were on your toes, Anton! A commendation will come your way for this, and a reward. You have the sincere gratitude of myself and everyone else concerned."

Still refusing to take his eyes from the holovision monitors, Anton said, "Hate like hell being in here behind the glass, Mr. Christiansen. Makes my hand laser pretty much useless."

"The threat's been eliminated," said Nils, "thanks to you."

"Uh, maybe so, but maybe no, sir. Scratch try number one, but that don't mean a backup's not laying low hereabouts. Works like an insurance policy, know what I mean? Whoever paid a hefty slug of cash to the mechanic running the dart show, going to all the trouble of setting up the camera gimmick, wouldn't be the least bit shy about anteing up a whopping insurance premium."

"I see what you mean. Very well," said Christiansen, "you have permission to post yourself behind the curtains at the rear of the podium, or wherever else you think might give you a better vantage. Will that make things easier?"

"Lots, Mr. Christiansen. That'll be ten times better. From there I can get a good peek at everything that comes down, have a wider field of fire. I'm obliged, sir."

"No, Anton. It's we who are obliged." Nils made a point of grasping the bodyguard's hand, shaking it firmly.

* * *

"I've no idea what all the fuss was about," remarked Bennett Rook. "Ladies and gentlemen, something took place back there, but the excitement is apparently over. Now then, where were we?" He sneaked a glance at the control booth's digital chronometer. The illuminated digits rolled over from 9:42.59 to 9:43.00.

"Fusion," was the response from more than one throat.

"Ah, of course; my private daydream. As I was saying, practical application of nuclear fusion power generation is the ultimate goal of our so-called Green Revolution . . ."

Anton stayed in the shadowed area at the rear of the proscenium, his right hand tucked inside the jacket, fingers curled around the megajoule laser weapon. With his other hand, he parted the heavy draperies a few millimeters, looked past the shoulder of Rook slumped stage center in the geriatric chair, responding to questions from the press corps, and scanned the assemblage of newsmen and women.

"Mr. Commissioner," called a woman in the second row, "UNDEP is advocating that all scientific research funding be redirected toward accelerated fusion research and development. Doesn't that amount to overkill? Judging from the recent polls, Americans and the peoples of most other nations are enthusiastic about most of the other UNDEP proposals, but the scientific community consensus is that controlled nuclear fusion is still years or decades in the future."

"By no means do all theoretical and practical physicists hold that view," denied Rook. "According to the experts I've consulted, a breakthrough is not only doable, but imminent."

"How," inquired the woman snidely, "are your so-called 'experts' to be believed? Researchers involved in scientific studies often become famous for keeping their rice bowls filled, not for reaching whatever goal they've been funded to achieve."

Rook directed the full force of his personality at the scoffer, a middle-aged network anchor famous for maintaining her youthful appearance via cosmetic surgery. "That isn't entirely accurate," he said with a flare of pretended rancor, "nor is this the proper forum to delve into associated technical issues. Briefly, as you yourself must realize, the energy input-output break even point was achieved some time ago. Since then, as I understand the ensuing technical quandaries and setbacks, attaining the ultimate objective involves fine-tuning existing techniques, not devising and developing new ones. A variety of sophisticated magnetic containment applications has vied for success with multiple laser bombardment techniques. The research involved in either case meant evaluating and then discarding one failed blind alley after another, and going on to the next, and the next, and the one after that — a tedious process of elimination, granted. Yet I'm given to understand that the problems still to be solved have dwindled conspicuously. Success with the most promising effort appears to be a matter of refining one or more viable methods of sustaining plasma temperature and containment, not achieving those conditions."

"What would you say," asked a news hawk in the middle of the pack, "if someone in the know, someone whose 'expertise' was beyond question told you chasing fusion rainbows was idealistic, farfetched?"

"Not to mention whacko," muttered the reporter's seatmate.

"Why, I would explain to the 'expert'," quipped Rook, "that he or she was wrong."

The sally earned a round of muttered comments.

"What would you say," demanded Rook, "to an infinite, relatively inexpensive, incredibly safe and sane power source capable of replacing billions of times over the fossil fuels TTCB and their heirs and assigns eagerly allowed to go up in smoke? Nauseous smoke at that,"

he added, “smoke that has helped accelerate the climate change nightmare severely impacting each and every human being.”

Referring to TTCB apparently gave the reporters and media pundits pause, and thrill of mild elation that coursed through Nils Christiansen. Seated in the control booth, his manner apprehensive and uncertain due to the recent assassination attempt Anton had aborted. Making an effort to stay calm, he began to more fully appreciate how the ultimate verdict on Rook’s controversial proposals would depend upon the backing of the widespread billions making up the viewing, voting, taxpaying audience. On the other hand, the reverse might also be true; his senior colleague’s third proposal — repeated urgings to turn every centime devoted to scientific research toward applied fusion power — amounted to not much more than the propaganda of a known futurist.

Of vastly greater importance at the moment was the fact that media types in general, and print news hounds in particular, were notoriously reluctant to eat out of any public figure’s hand. It heartened him to note how the professional journalists and commentators were displaying no overt hostility toward Rook himself, or his subject matter. As a group, news people were cynical by nature, a salty crew when taken as a whole, usually an inordinately difficult bunch to convince. News people sustained a collective professional outlook symptomatic of the business in which they were engaged.

Yet the current gathering impressed him as neither cynical nor hostile, but intensely interested in the proceedings. Even when Rook entered into one of his semi-technical explanations that amplified the glowing future fusion power implied, the most ardent disbelievers seemed to listen attentively, hanging on his every word; a few went so far as to jot down notes.

“What does the Security Council think of the way UNDEP is trying to upset the apple cart?” asked a slender black news hen.

“Sorry, you must forgive my lack of knowledge on that score,” replied Rook. “I haven’t the foggiest notion. Yet if you peek a bit deeper beneath the surface, it’s not too difficult to recognize how long ago the wheels came off that selfsame apple cart.”

The comment evoked murmurs of approval.

“Mr. Commissioner, are you sure UNDEP isn’t advocating change simply for the sake of change?”

Rook’s head turned slowly. He awarded the questioner a disdainful look, his only acknowledgement of having heard such impertinence, and pointed, indicating a mahogany-hued foreign correspondent whose hand had been raised for some time. “You there, next question.”

Before a query could be heard, Rook’s chief aide unobtrusively slipped up to the podium, passed his leader a folded square of paper, and ducked away.

Nils Christiansen sat bolt upright in the control room. It was unheard of for a UNDEP official to be interrupted while on the air. Moreover, the deft manner in which the message had been delivered provided a significant clue. The exchange was not extemporaneous, couldn’t be. To Nils, it smacked of having been rehearsed, staged. Knowing Rook’s penchant for convoluted machinations and theatricality, he believed the premise highly likely.

“Pardon me, ladies and gentlemen.” Rook unfolded the scrap of notepaper, scanned it hurriedly. His gasp of surprise startled Christiansen as well as Anton and much of the audience. Jaw clenched, his expression one of deep shock, Rook amazed everyone near and far by clumsily abandoning the mobile prison of his geriatric chair. Struggling to stand erect, he precariously supported himself, clinging to the chair’s padded armrests.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I was just handed . . .” Rook paused, raw emotion twisting his ordinarily sphinxlike features. “A moment ago,” he said, “I was asked a rhetorical question about . . .” He tottered, managed to catch himself.

Anton thrust the proscenium draperies aside, ready to rush to his patron’s aid. He hesitated, held himself in check.

“My . . . friends, bear with me, please. This message comes at an extremely timely moment.” His voice thick with phlegm, Rook cleared his throat. “A joint bulletin issued by Los Alamos National Laboratory in conjunction with the United Kingdom’s Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge, Heidelberg’s Max Planck Institute, and the Kapitza Science Academy in St. Petersburg, has announced a major . . .”

He broke off a second time, chest heaving, drew deep breaths in rapid succession. All but panting, he surveyed the audience, found his voice, and then faltered as if finding it difficult to form syllables. “For the past six hours,” he enunciated slowly, clearly, “the reconfigured tokamak at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico has sustained a controlled nuclear fusion reaction. The output is reported to be constant, on the order of twelve and one-half megawatts. The reaction shows no indication of self-quenching, and the staff at Los Alamos is . . .”

Pandemonium. The rest of Rook’s announcement was lost in a tidal wave of excited exclamations rolling through the UNDEP Media Center.

Rook slumped back into the geriatric chair and closed his eyes.

The hubbub from the congregated press and media corps rose a number of decibels. Reporters seized satellite phones, hurriedly punched auto-dialers. Others scribbled notes with one hand, used the other to grasp their phones and jabber at their editors. Commentators and network analysts in distant studios began haltingly, and in many cases inaccurately, to advise the global holovision audience what had transpired, competing with one another to explain the deeper meaning behind the UNDEP commissioner’s momentous announcement. In short order, additional analysts went to work analyzing the previous analyses.

Christiansen subconsciously held his breath. A ‘tomato-in-the-face surprise’ the cantankerous old demon had called it. Plotting his moves with meticulous care, Rook had acted out his part in the charade with unbelievable verve and showmanship. “Senile,” that devious bastard Alarcón had called him. Everyone, young or old, thought Nils, his emotions roiling, should be afflicted with Bennett Rook’s exotic brand of senility.

Bursting from the glassed-in control booth, his admiration for UNDEP’s bad boy savant unbounded, Nils dodged up on the stage and seized Rook’s hand, pumping it vigorously.

Nineteen

“That conniving monster stage-managed the entire affair,” accused Monsignor Velk. “He’s duped us, duped the world at large.”

His air of nonchalance not very convincing, a nervous tic was jumping beneath the left eye of Alonzo Mateo de Alarcón. “A sleight-of-hand parlor trick,” he said in what passed for an offhand manner. “That is all it amounts to, Monsignor, nothing more if we adopt the long view. I suspect Rook’s penchant for theatrics will be forgotten quickly.”

“But Mateo, he contrived to —”

“Soon,” insisted Alarcón to quiet the priest, “no one will recall the smoke and mirrors he used to ensure dropping his bombshell before a worldwide holovision audience. Of infinitely greater significance than his simplistic, schoolboy tricksterism is the realization of practical, controlled nuclear fusion power generation.”

Instinct prompted Velk to nod and second the Spaniard's view, but a resurgence of outrage prevented him from voicing agreement. Deeply disturbed by the radical turn of events, he refused to admit even to himself that any benefit might obtain from the momentous breakthrough his nemesis had announced in such dramatic fashion. The ultimate meaning of applied nuclear fusion soared far over his. "I . . . yes. I suppose so," he said at last, his tone of voice lacking conviction.

Alarcón checked the wall chronometer for perhaps the twentieth time during the past hour. Shifting his nervous gaze to the priest, he struggled to maintain a casual pose. "Monsignor," he drawled, "arriving at this crucial juncture, the advent of a limitless energy source is vastly more than a triumph of applied physics and engineering. It may become the loftiest monument to serendipity of all time, so much a pinnacle of achievement that we shan't quibble about the cunning manner in which UNDEP's devious savant and his sycophants withheld one word of success until it could be orchestrated in melodramatic fashion. Ah, but throughout history haven't showmanship and a perpetual cry for attention been the primary weapons of demagogues and social heretics?"

"One would surely think . . ." faltered the priest. "Mateo, I apologize for my lack of a technical background. Is this innovation truly of such vital importance?"

"Vital yes, if not more so. History will record sustained nuclear fusion as the supreme technological triumph of the third millennium, and perhaps of all time. It is without doubt the most significant leap forward since our remote ancestors captured fire. The manner in which fusion will change the face and workings of our world will be startling, truly wonderful. A boundless power source is akin to the long-sought philosopher's stone, the answer to a dream fomented by alchemists centuries ago."

"Alchem . . . ? I'm afraid I don't —"

"Fusion power," informed Alarcón with dimming patience, "will bring about a radical departure from the tried-and-true manner in which numerous items are produced, a drastic change in certain processes. It will allow the cost-effective, voluminous desalination of seawater anywhere in the world, the transformation of waste and trash and toxic substances into useful commodities. Fusion installations will power advanced transportation systems and so many, many other items. ¡Ay de mi! The prospective boons are beyond one's ability to enumerate or catalog, including a number as yet undefined."

"I . . . see."

His smile paper-thin, Alarcón said, "Ordinarily, Monsignor, I would give you the benefit of the doubt. Not in this instance, however; it is apparent that your understanding is at best marginal." Again the power-broker glanced up at the wall chronometer's glowing digits. Having hastily summoned UNDEP's chaplain to his office after receiving a message from Dr. Lowndes's principal aide instructing the pair of them to stand by for an impending conference call, he dreaded the scathing chastisement certain to be in the offing. "It is no longer entirely germane," he said, continuing his lecture more to ward off the towering apprehension rocking him than to provide elucidation, "and all but forgotten today, but there was once a harebrained scheme called Swords-into-Plowshares."

"What?"

"A century and more ago," said Alarcón, "in the wake of the Soviet Union's demise, American post-Cold War plans called for redirecting the talents of the scientific community — the weapon makers in particular — toward peaceful pursuits. The Hiroshima Agreement not only encouraged various laboratories and government think tanks to collectively disarm, but to

figuratively beat their nuclear swords into plowshares, a naïve, idealistic goal to be truthful. Yet in hindsight the international joint venture has apparently borne incredibly delicious fruit.” Unable to resist another anxious glance at the wall chronometer, the dapper Spaniard fidgeted. “The coordinated venture was comprised of international brain power connected to a number of appendages.”

He went on to describe how the University of California, then responsible for administering a pair of California facilities in addition to New Mexico’s Los Alamos National Laboratory, had refused to embark alone on a road known to be strewn with exotic pitfalls which had defeated every prior project directed toward solving the riddle of nuclear fusion technology. Berkeley’s wise men, he explained, actively sponsored a scientific community of common interest, advocating the free exchange of technical data between U.S. facilities and their overseas counterparts in Russia, Germany and elsewhere.

A soft chime cut short his lecture. Alarcón stretched to key the intercom. “Yes, Miriamne?”

“Secretary-General Lowndes, sir. Channel seven.”

Closing his eyes for an instant, Alarcón marshaled his thoughts. “Thank you. Please put him through.”

De-encryption circuitry erased the random pixel spatter, giving way to an image congealing in the flat-panel display that would have inspired trepidation in any viewer. His apple cheeks an apoplectic hue, Secretary-General Lowndes let his red-eyed glare rove from his North American factotum to the Jesuit attorney. “Good afternoon,” he said in a restrained monotone. “I trust both of you are having a pleasant day. You have my total assurance that I am not.”

“Jefe,” began Alarcón earnestly, “I realize yesterday’s operation went terribly wrong, yet in a way it conclusively showed the true colors of —”

“Pardon me,” interrupted Dr. Lowndes, his voice cold, utterly dispassionate. “The endeavor you spent such an exaggerated amount of time and money arranging did not merely go wrong, Mateo. It turned positively rancid. Are you able to explain precisely how and why it went into the cesspit? If so, please do so.”

Alarcón found it hard to swallow. “I considered the operation absolutely foolproof, Jefe. The disruptive ingredient was Rook’s bodyguard. You see, just as the . . . cameraman was preparing to key the timer and walk away, he managed to —”

“A disruptive ingredient? I fear your choice of terms is not entirely apt. Is that the best use you can make of your extensive vocabulary?” demanded Lowndes. “Some of us might believe it much too pale a term for designating a ‘disruptive’ circumstance that inspired a mess like the current one. And what of the bumbler? I take it he’s in custody. Is he in a position to name names, spill anything worth hearing?”

“Not a syllable,” denied Alarcón emphatically. “Quadruple assurances were obtained. A pair of dead-ends and a deep cul-de-sac were inserted between source and destination. But let me suggest to you our next move. I have given the matter a great deal of thought, and this time I have something a good deal more straightforward and profound to lay before you.”

“Ah, yes; profound!” raged Dr Lowndes. “Listen, this time really listen. Neither you nor your pious companion have any inkling of the heat I’ve taken since yesterday’s fiasco. Minutes ago, his nose in the air, that obnoxious little ferret Maxwell stalked out of my office after having the effrontery to deliver a harsh ultimatum. The grasping old fool would do the world an immense favor if he were to clutch his chest, do a quarter-turn left or right, and fall on his sanctimonious face.

“Yet justice as far as he’s concerned,” continued Lowndes, “is not merely blind, but deaf and dumb as well. One dares not treat with Alfred Maxwell as an individual; he fronts for a collection of monied buffoons no one would wish to enrage, but that of course is precisely what our proud UNDEP organization has done. The ladies and gentlemen to whom Maxwell is beholden have pledged themselves to a common cause. They’ve promised to serve up my head on a platter if the current situation isn’t remedied now, now, now! They are demanding, not requesting but demanding, that matters be taken care of at once, if not sooner.”

“Maxwell,” faltered Alarcón, deeply disturbed, “dared to threaten you, to threaten your position?”

“Oh, the threat was thinly veiled, but the handwriting on the wall was in capital letters. Our devoted friend and boon companion didn’t bother drawing pictures. He clarified the matter bluntly, and the threat was there. A very real threat it was.”

“Let me explain what I should like to propose,” said Alarcón, thinking to divert the other’s overweening anger.

His stone-faced vidicom image indicated immunity to the first few words of Mateo’s recital, and Lowndes cut off his water, saying. “Forget it!” His flat denial brooking no argument, the secretary-general directed Alarcón to do absolutely nothing. “Not a thing, hear me? The solution to our mutual problem is now in the hands of Maxwell and his friends. He mentioned a fail-safe connection somewhere in the Far East, apparently someone he and his associates have used in the past with excellent results. Whoever the extremely pricey fellow is, he’s said to have lived in the shadows for decades. His other virtue is a subterranean reputation for being an absolute genius in his chosen profession.”

Hesitant to offer an objection, Alarcón did so anyhow. “Jefe, with all due respect I would be remiss not to tell you we haven’t the leisure to sit by and wait for an event over which we have no control to take place.”

Lowndes was adamant. “It’s completely out of our hands, Mateo, so you can stop right there. Maxwell guaranteed a speedy resolution — a matter of days — which struck me as much too quickly for it to be done properly. In the meantime, I want you to stay on top of legislation pending in the Congress. Not one but a pair of egregiously damaging bills are already under debate in various committees. Put your best people on it, and do so at once. Have them monitor progress minute-by-minute in the House as well as the Senate. I want you to canvass the Hill in person and submit a daily report. Maxwell and his associates have procured the services of every worthwhile lobbyist and business advocate group inside and outside the Beltway to complement the midnight oil burning in Washington and other world capitals.”

“I promise to give the matter my exclusive attention,” vowed Alarcón. “Morning and afternoon summaries will be uploaded to your secure files every afternoon without fail.”

“Without fail.” Lowndes grimaced as if he took umbrage at the other’s use of the onerous term. “If the President signs any of those bills into law, the U.N. High Justices will have their say before any global plebiscite can possibly be scheduled. Predicting passage in Geneva is impossible, but if matters were allowed to go that far events will literally be out of not only our hands, but those of Maxwell and company as well.”

The United Nations Secretary-General glared redly at the image of his dispirited factotum during a second or two of silence. Ignoring Monsignor Velk, he switched off without another word.

* * *

Misty gloom enveloped the Greater New York megalopolis, shrouding the flight of a lightless, two-place commute helicopter. The 'copter flirted with the overcast, its proximity radar compensated for minimal visibility, affording it automatic elbow room within the north-south flyway's thin stream of wee hours air traffic.

The helo pitched downward shallowly, descending into clearer air. At exactly 03:00 per the terse instructions relayed via an audio-only vidicom call, the pilot eased back on the collective. The small rotary-winged aircraft dropped lower, approaching an array of evenly spaced red warning lights winking atop the rectangular roof of Manhattan's lofty United Nations Tower.

The craft's rotary wings chewed the cold, humid night air and it flared to a semi-hover above the roof, its ground speed no more than eight or ten kilometers per hour. An indistinct figure clad head-to-toe in a black, form-fitting garments slipped from the copter's side hatch and clung to a knotted loop of thick, trailing Manila rope invisible to radar backscatter.

With the intruder dangling beneath the port-side landing skid, the helo settled gradually, slowly thrashed its way across the rooftop's acreage, and cut a deft, zig-zag course between staggered rows of huge, cylindrical air-conditioning evaporation towers.

When his lead foot made contact, the suspended figure let go the rope and started running along the rooftop. He staggered headlong a few overbalanced strides, tucked up deftly and rolled to a stop.

The 'copter lifted at once, swept off to the north, it's throbbing drone Dopplered away in the distance as it vanished back into the overcast. The pilot spent a few seconds explaining to Greater New York Air Traffic Control how a temporary mechanical glitch had forced his momentary descent below regulated flyway altitude.

Limned in the winking, stroboscopic flashes of the tower's aircraft warning lights, the all-black intruder absently kneaded a bruised elbow, cautiously rose into a semi-crouch. The owner of many aliases, Yasuko Numata, the name forwarded to his nameless employer for remunerative purposes, glided quickly toward the vast rooftop's southern parapet.

His every nerve ending triggered to razor-sharp alertness, Numata circled an evaporation tower and angled toward the immense structure's southwest corner. A silently gliding patch of darker darkness, he reached his destination, turned and paced off thirty-two meters westward, marking the spot with the toe of a black sneaker.

Unbuckling the chest latch, he shrugged off the shoulder straps securing his backpack, unzipped it and withdrew a "U"-shaped titanium bracket and wedged it firmly over the waist-high parapet. Attaching a tension-reel canister to the bracket's outermost horn with deft, economical moves, he pulled free a few meters of wire the size of pencil lead. Manufactured on-orbit decades earlier, in the era before economic chaos forced NASA's Microgravity Manufacturing Satellite into mothballs, the ultra-thin wire's tensile strength exceeded by an order of magnitude that of drawn piano wire.

Numata leaned over the parapet, nonchalantly looked straight down. Manhattan's myriad lights spread beneath him, a far-flung, twinkling blanket that bathed the tower's vertical facade in pale radiance. The wall fell sheer to a park-like setback one and one-half kilometers below. Vertigo would have caused most individuals to cringe back from the abyss. Numata exhibited no fear of heights whatsoever.

"He is elderly, known to be unwell, and rarely leaves the tower," had advised the crayon-scrawled ideographs accompanying his nameless patron's final instructions. "These

circumstances, coupled with a live-in bodyguard who seldom leaves his side, could easily complicate your effort.”

His naive employer, whoever he or she might be, had circuitously laid before him an astonishingly lucrative contract. Wealthy his benefactor undoubtedly was, but possessing no more than a cursory acquaintance with field operations, and absolutely no true sense of what the relatively uncomplicated mission the assignment amounted to: targeting a sick old man confined in a geriatric appliance. Deemed a soft target by his employer, the individual in question was said to be semi-isolated within the huge building, where all surveillance cameras had purportedly been disabled on the upper service stairway and the corridors of pertinent floors.

An accomplished professional, Numata took immense pride in thoroughness; he was certain his preparation had been faultless. Having learned the hard way that “piece-of-cake” assignments rarely turned out as advertised, several equally hard lessons had also taught him that the target a sponsor referred to as “soft” more often than not demanded every bit as much, and in certain cases more, meticulous forethought and planning than those anonymously described as “difficult.” During his leisurely review of the photographs and other messenger-delivered data, he had run through his moves at home in Nagoya, and had constructed a more detailed prospective scenario during the hypersonic flight to America’s eastern seaboard, where he had done so a last time in even greater detail, using what he himself believed fresh and incisive forethought. The ultimate decision had been made while holed-up in the fleabag Newark hotel room where he’d awaited a “go” signal.

A live-in bodyguard should pose no untoward hazard; chances were excellent that at this hour the fellow would be asleep. And if the pathway to the target had been as thoroughly prepared as the note assured him it was, he could foresee only one complicating factor. According to his orders, it was imperative for the strike to appear to be an accident, or at least the result of natural causes, not anything more insidious. The potent barbiturates in the flap pocket of his black tights were intended to delete that complication entirely.

Numata scanned the roof’s visible expanse meter by meter. One he had made certain he was alone on the visible portion of the rooftop, he re-donned the backpack, depressed a self-test stud on the tension-reel canister to check the level of charge in the power pack, and scissored apart the snap-link carabiner at the wire’s termination, securing and closing the horns around a pad-eye affixed at chest lever to his belt harness.

He went over the parapet without hesitation, letting his sneakers bounce lightly against the tower’s sheer wall to keep himself properly oriented as he rappelled, paying out wire in a controlled fall. Most of the building’s floor-to-ceiling glass walls, and the occasional smaller windows he dropped past, were dark; those lighted within vanished upward too swiftly for him to catch a glimpse of any sign of occupancy, or for anyone inside to observe his rapid descent.

He slowed his fall, stopping a dozen meters above the pampered cherry trees artfully clustered along the setback’s esplanade. Planting the soles of either sneaker against the tower, he arched backward, twisted from side to side, searching the dimly lit walkways, dormant flower beds, patches of manicured lawn, and the gaps between dozens of umbrella-topped tables and chairs spotted here and there about the wintry terrace. Taking pains to look for any hint of movement, he found none.

Satisfied, Numata lowered himself through the final meters, hurriedly doffed the belt, harness and backpack, jamming the gear overhead in the winter-bare branches of a cherry tree. He peeled up the sleeve of his black tunic; the luminescent dial of an old-fashioned analog wrist

chronometer told him fifty-two minutes and several ticks remained until the helicopter was due to slip down and pluck him from the tower's rooftop.

Ultra-suspicious by nature, experience had made him much more so. His mistrust of everyone and everything connected with the venture was all-consuming. The note had informed him that the flush, all but invisible service door leading to a caretaker's store room would be unlocked. Cautiously inserting into dual slots the small, tee-shaped spanner provided by his unknown employer, he twisted and pulled; the door swung outward without a sound.

He had also been told that security during the hours of darkness, while extremely tight in the ground floor lobbies, in or near each pedestrian mall and sub-level entrance, and at the lowermost bank of elevators, was relatively lax on the residence floors higher up. But "lax" meant something entirely different to different people; that tidbit of information he had accepted with much more than a grain of salt.

Aided by a pencil flash, he picked his way through the unlighted store room, moving like a silent ghost past orderly coiled hoses, stacked bags of mulch, fertilizer and gardening supplies. Cracking the door to the hall a few millimeters, he inserted a dental mirror in the crack, assured himself the service corridor was deserted in both directions, eased out and moved swiftly, silently along a short corridor.

Entering the main hallway, he ignored the wall-mounted video surveillance camera and glided to the service stairway with quick steps. Speed was essential; it was some distance down to the ninety-second floor. Daily Tae Kwan Do workouts kept him immensely fit, but the climb back up the stairwell would devour precious minutes.

Fleeing downward with light-footed agility, he touched only every second or third riser, dodged nimbly around the switchback landings.

Ninety-four, ninety-three, ninety-two . . . The nubby, cream-colored floor covering in the residence levels was more plush than the utilitarian carpeting on higher floors. Panting lightly after his swift descent, Numata held himself poised, prepared to disable with his bare hands any night person he chanced to encounter. Having committed the route to memory, he prowled toward the designated suite, taking right and left hallway turns without having to think about keeping to the proper path. It was gratifying to learn no one seemed to be up and about.

He found the target's executive suite four doors from the executive express lift, its entry recessed in a shallow alcove flanked by cut-stone vases brimming with real chrysanthemums.

VIP treatment, thought Numata with a mental sneer. He withdrew the electronic key card accompanying the packet that enclosing his unknown employer's final message, as well as dazzling bullion certificates representing one-half his total remuneration. Pausing for a few seconds to let his heartbeat slow, he slipped the key card into the slot. The entry door swung inward with a barely audible whisper from the hinges; he stepped aside to avoid being silhouetted against the hallway softly lit by widely spaced wall sconces.

The executive suite's alarm system was electronically interlocked to the key card, hence no mechanical dead-bolt existed. He dropped silently to all fours, lowered himself to the prone position and belly-crawled forward a little at a time, moving across the threshold of the darkened entry. Groping behind him, breathing open-mouthed for silence, he pushed the door almost shut and lay there without moving for seconds, listening intently.

On his left loomed an open doorway leading into what must be the darkened parlor. A faint ribbon of light emanated from a narrow slit beneath a closed door farther along the hall. He crawled toward the lighted slit, pulled out the dental mirror and used it to peek through the narrow gap between the carpet and door.

His pulse rate jumped.

Assuming the bodyguard was asleep seemed a safe bet; Numata was more than willing to let him stay that way. Rising gradually, one leg at a time, he froze in alarm when a knee joint creaked. Gingerly feeling for the doorknob with gloved finger, he turned it very, very slowly.

Across the book-lined study, seated in his geriatric chair, the target faced a flat-panel computer display where columns of figures scrolled slowly upward.

Numata slipped a protective cover from the nib of a tiny dart tipped with potent animal tranquilizer and carefully inserted it in a short, tubular blowgun he pulled from his backpack. The base of the old fellow's skull, at the hairline, would be an ideal spot for a minor puncture wound to go unnoticed. Having spent hours practicing with the blowgun, he sighted with care, inhaled, puffed his cheeks and sent the tiny missile on its way.

His optimism dissolved into confused chaos. In stunned disbelief, he saw the dart zip through the old man's head and ping harmlessly against the video monitor.

The hologram depicting the target abruptly winked out.

"Freeze!" The hoarse command issued from the study's shadowed alcove.

Numata spun reflexively, whipped a throwing knife from his ankle scabbard and drew back to let fly in one fluid motion, his arm a blur.

Air rushed in to fill the sweeping slice of partial vacuum, and produced a subtle whouppp! as the pencil beam of Anton's hand laser sliced across the would-be assassin's throwing arm, scorching an arc in the simulated birch wood wainscoting beyond.

The knife thudded to the carpet alongside the intruder's severed hand and forearm.

A salted professional, Numata struggled to deny the pain, also denying himself the luxury of a scream. Scarcely any blood was evident; laser wounds were partially self-cauterizing. The would-be assassin sank to his knees, his features impassive, and clutched the raw stump of his forearm. His expression did not change when the geriatric chair bearing the authentic Bennett Rook appeared in the extra-wide doorway.

Stoic or not, intense trauma began to overcome Numata's iron will. He sagged, willed himself to remain conscious to no avail, slumped flaccidly and lay still.

"Make a call, Anton," said Rook with null inflection.

"You want Captain Lucci himself," asked Anton, "or —?"

"No, no," Rook told him. "Let's not disturb the sleep of our security dullards. We'll save this spoiled meat for the rubber hose gang at your friend Kapstedter's hideout. Something may be learned from him, although I strongly doubt it. Go on, summon the Bronx thugs you once ran with; have them carat him away. I'll make sure the way is clear downstairs."

"Gotcha, Commish." Anton checked to make sure the intruder was unconscious. Only then did he holster the weapon and step to the vidicom terminal. Sorting in his mind the few acquaintances still in Kappy's employ, he tried to decide who among them it would be prudent to contact. The answer became obvious at once; it had to be Kappy himself.

Anton was punching vidicom buttons when a grunt of agony caused him to break off and whirl. "Oh, shit! Commish, no . . .!"

Teeth bared in an agonized rictus, Rook had slumped forward clutching his midsection. His mouth worked as he tried to say something, then his eyes rolled up and he slid feet-first from the geriatric chair, collapsed on the carpet in a rubber-legged sprawl.

Anton knelt hastily, wrapped two fingers around the inside of Rook's scrawny left wrist. "Sweet Jesus! Stay with me, Commish!"

Scooping up his emaciated patron without effort, Anton deposited him gently on the lounge and rushed back to the vidicom terminal.

Epilogue

The elevator compartment doors separated, revealing the fourth floor corridor of the UNDEP infirmary. Christiansen stepped out and came face to face with a pair of taciturn security agents. One burly young man recognized him and said, "Morning, sir."

A polite nod from Christiansen. "Is everything as it should be?"

"Yes, sir. Quiet as church."

Nils stopped to greet Anton, who was lounging alertly in company with the security agents. The bodyguard welcomed the director by rising wordlessly.

"How is he?" asked Nils.

"Good's can be expected, Mr. Christiansen."

Nils pushed through the door wide enough to accommodate a hospital gurney, halted there to let his vision adjust to the dimly lit room.

The patient reclined in a freshly sheeted power-bed equipped with adjustable stainless steel side rails. Clad in a backless hospital gown, its bilious gray hue was a perfect complement to Rook's stoic, "putting up with it" expression. He blinked, acknowledging his visitor's presence.

"How are you feeling, Bennett?"

"You don't want to know," grumbled the patient. "Teams of witchdoctors parade through here with monotonous regularity. They never tire of poring over my chart, wrangling over my multifarious afflictions. Heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, take your pick. I think the learned medics are making book on which treacherous organ will be the first to crash and burn."

Christiansen folded his arms and gazed at the patient with bemused affection. "Knowing you," he said, "my money's on your overworked spleen."

"Touché." Rook permitted himself a flicker of smile. "Have you come to gloat, cheer me up, sympathize, what?"

"All of the above. I had a chat with your doctor. He assured me the prognosis was favorable. You're recovering nicely."

"The witchdoctors," said Rook, pretending surprise, "actually provided you with a degree of misinformation? Pity they never bother to reassure me. What other news of medical miracles did you wring from them?"

"The consensus," said Christiansen drily, "is that you are the worst, most obstinate, totally disagreeable patient ever treated by any American physician, nurse, orderly, or member of the administrative staff."

"It's grand to be appreciated."

"The specific prescribed for your ailments," added the director, "is a one thousand percent improvement in manners."

Rook's lips twitched in a second near-smile. "Enough chit-chat. Glad you dropped by, Nils. You're the first caller to this smelly pesthole who's indulged in only one of the thirty-seven hundred and nineteen standard bedside clichés."

"I take it that's an official statistic?"

"Chiseled in granite." Rook groped for the dangling control switch above the bed. He fiddled with it, eventually commanding the louvered vertical window blinds to rock halfway open, and then elevated the bed to a semi-upright position. "Fiat lux! Now that I can see you

clearly, keep me in the dark no longer. What tidings do you bring me from the wasteland beyond this high-rise slough of despond?"

"I do have a juicy tidbit or two," admitted Christiansen. "For starters, our troubled organization has been forced to undergo the rigors of breaking in a new chaplain."

"How very sad!" Rook's protuberant hazel eyes lost their dull luster, lighted with glee. "Wait," he said, "not so fast, please. I have a ghastly hunch you're about to tell me the exemplar of canon law has weaseled his way into a bishopric."

Christiansen chuckled. "Guess again. The Society of Jesus gave Right Reverend Monsignor Velk his walking papers. He's been boxed and shipped to some retreat, presumably to meditate on his sins."

"A distant sanctuary one would hope." Rook wore an indecently pleased expression. "Meditation of that enormity should keep the good friar out of everyone's hair for the better part of a century. May I inquire what fate befell the illustrious grandee of whom you're so fond?"

The director's ursine shrug did nothing to conceal his own delight. "Mateo's part feline, fast on his feet. As usual, he landed with cat-like grace. The High Justices convened a grand jury, but an indictment was not returned. Insufficient evidence was given as the official reason, but it's obvious which strings were pulled, and by whom."

"Did the Good Doctor also escape his just dessert, or should I say desert?"

Nils chuckled again. "Barely. Day before yesterday, Lowndes survived a vote-of-confidence by the slimmest of slim margins. I'm sure his close call convinced Alarcón to dive off the sinking ship. Whatever remaining faith Mateo might have had in his padrone vanished like the proverbial dew. He's said to be in seclusion at the family estate in Andalusia."

"Andalusia's loss," observed Rook, looking even more pleased than before, "is the world's gain."

Tiring of the banter, neither man said anything for a moment. Nils stepped closer to the bed, lowered his voice. "Bennett, you are the eighth wonder of the world. How you managed to pull it off I will never know. You stayed miles ahead of them every step of the way.

"Anton deserves the credit, not me."

"Yes, I couldn't agree more wholeheartedly. But thanks to your dedication and persistence, our goal is a damnsight more realistic now than ever before, closer than I would have dreamed remotely possible. The path ahead, while still winding and rocky, has taken a new twist, turn for the better."

"You must never forget," said Rook, "how that selfsame path will still be strewn with land mines, pitfalls, high cliffs, booby traps and similar frightening incidentalia. But that's not a surprise, is it?"

"Not at all," concurred the director. "I have no idea how Lowndes managed to squeeze by after the screaming sessions he must have endured with Alfred Maxwell and other assorted captains of industry, potentates, shylocks et al, who were screaming for his scalp. He has to know his days are numbered, but that doesn't mean he'll abandon his ambitions."

"Seems unlikely," said Rook.

"As a last, desperate measure," added the director, "he tried an end-around ploy, hoping to subvert and redirect the House Environmental Committee's prospective sanctions. By then, of course, public opinion had forced the issue into a semi-revolutionary state, and the wonder-stricken legislators decided they'd better listen closely to their constituents for a change instead of the lobbyist legion. With a practical application of nuclear fusion popping up from nowhere, environmental tax legislation suddenly became anything but a moot topic. There will be months,

years more likely of partisan bickering, infighting and horse-trading. But eventually the American legislation supporting your proposals will most likely be ratified by some form of global plebiscite and signed into law.”

“A genuine milestone.” Rook’s approving comment was typically low key. “It will either signal the end of the beginning, or the beginning of the end.”

“Either way,” Christiansen said, “it will be a major, major stroke.” The director turned and stared out the window, where acid rain drizzled from a bleached buttermilk sky, lending the aging Manhattan skyline a gray, defeated aspect.

“Despite the newfound ammunition,” he said, “a full recovery from the current mess strikes me as being near-hopeless.”

Rook followed Christiansen’s gaze. “Take an even strain, Nils. You of all people can least afford discouragement.”

Looking surprised, Christiansen said, “Do I hear upbeat philosophy from you, a born-again pessimist?”

“Call me an optipest,” quipped Rook. “It has a nicer ring.”

A weary smile. “Thanks to you and the covey of physicists you coddled in secret, the prospect of global fusion power generation has upped the odds in our favor by a significant factor. Even so, gaining ground with TTCB’s millstone around our necks is like trying to climb Everest with both ankles hobbled.”

Rook’s slow smile reflected his newfound serenity, a sense of being at peace with himself, with the world at large. “Keep that millstone in the forefront of your consciousness at all times. Constantly remind yourself of the bitter object lesson taught by those twentieth century bastards. Yes, keep looking backward as you forge ahead; it will spur you to momentous deeds.”

Christiansen shrugged. “That history lesson is something no one can forget. But the past is dead and cremated. In the here and now, every iota of psychic and physical energy has to stay focused on the future of the human condition.”

Rook sank back against the pillows. “Isn’t it odd,” he asked, “how even casual mention of TTCB grates like a hangnail on a chalkboard. Personally, I very much doubt whether invoking black, white or rainbow-colored magic can undo the stupendous errors of the past generations, yet, win, lose or draw, we’re duty-bound to try . . .”