

WORLDMASTER

1

In the boat bay four Deck Police held guns on me while two more shook me down. When they finished, they formed up a box around me.

"All right, this way, sir," the Warrant said. He was a dandified overweight lad with pale hard little eyes like unripe olives. Four power guns snapped around to hold on me, rib-high. I stumbled a little and the nearest gun jumped. The boys were a hair more nervous than they looked. As for myself, I was long past the nervous stage; it took all I had left just to stay on my feet with nothing left over to wonder about the curious reception given to a surviving captain paying his courtesy call on his admiral after a twenty-eight-hour action in which two fleets had been wiped out.

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Here aboard the flagship everything was as smooth and silent as a hotel for dying millionaires. We went along a wide corridor lit like the big window at Cartier's and carpeted in a pale blue as soft as a summer breeze, took the high-speed lift up the command deck. There were more DPs here, spit-and-polished in blue-black class A's with white gloves, mirror-bright boots, and chromalloy dress armor. The guns they aimed at me were fancy Honor Guard models with ebony stocks and bright-plated barrels; but they would fire real slugs if occasion demanded. The Warrant came up beside me, smelling a little sweeter than ordinary after-shave. "Perhaps you'd like to step along to the head and tidy up a bit before going in," he told me. "I have a clean uniform ready for you and-"

"This one's okay," I said. "Oh, it's got a few cuts and tears and a couple of scorched spots no bigger than the doily under a demitasse, but it came by them honorably, as the saying goes. Maybe I need a shave, but no worse than I did yesterday. I've been a little busy, mister-" I cut it off before it got entirely out of hand. "Let's take a chance and go in. The admiral may be curious about what happened to his fleet."

The Warrant's mouth tightened up as though he had a string threaded through his lip.

"I'm afraid I'll have to insist-" he started. I brushed past him. One of the ratings beside the door leading into the admiral's quarters jabbed his gun at me as I came toward him.

"Go ahead, son, fire it," I said. "You've got it set on full automatic; in this confined space you'll fry all of us blacker than a newlywed's toast."

The annunciator above the door crackled, "Purdy, take those weapons away from those men before there's an accident!" a voice barked. "I'll see Captain Maclamore immediately. Mac, stop scaring my men to death."

The door slid back. I went through into a wide room flooded with artificial sunlight as cheerful as paper flowers and smelling of expensive cigar smoke. From a big easy chair under the windorama with a view of a field of ripe wheat nodding under a light breeze, Admiral Banastre Tarleton gave

me the old Academy smile, looking hard and efficient and younger than four stars had any right to. Behind him Commodore Sean Braze glowered, his hands behind his back, big shoulders bulging under his tailor-made tunic, a pistol strapped to his hip as inconspicuously as a rattlesnake at a picnic. A captain with a small crinkled face and quick eyes looked at me from a chair off to the right. I threw a sloppy salute and the braid dangling from my torn cuff flopped against my sleeve. "Sit down, Mac." Tarleton nodded toward a chair placed to half face him. I didn't move. He frowned a little but let it pass.

"I'm glad to see you here," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't know how I'm feeling, Admiral," I said. "I don't think I want to know."

"You fought your command like half the devils in Hell, Mac. I'm writing you up for the Cross."

I didn't say anything. I felt dizzy. I was wondering if it was too late to take the offer of a chair.

"Sit down before you fall down, Captain," the man on the right said. Little bright lights were sleeting down all around me. They faded and I was still standing. I didn't know what I was proving.

"Anybody get out with you?" Braze was asking me. He was a man who couldn't ask to have the salt passed without making it sound like a sneer.

"Sure," I said. "My Gunnery Officer, Max Arena-the upper half of him, anyway. Why?"

"I saw it on the big command screen," Tarleton said. "A lucky break, Mac. A salvage crew couldn't have sliced that nav dome away cleaner with cutting torches."

"Yeah," I said.

"Here-" the monkey faced captain started. Tarleton flicked a hand at him and he faded off.

"Something bothering you, Mac?" Tarleton was giving me the wise, patient look he'd learned from watching old Bing Crosby films.

"Why should anything be bothering me?" I heard myself asking. "I've just had my ship shot out from under me, and my crew wiped out, and seen what was formerly the UN Battle Fleet blasted into radioactive vapor while the flagship that mounted sixteen percent of our total firepower pulled back half a million miles and watched without firing a shot. You've probably got all kinds of reasons for that, Admiral. Reasons that would be way over my head. Some of them might even be good. I wouldn't know."

"Watch your tongue, Maclamore!" Braze said. "You're talking to a superior officer!"

"That's enough, Sean," Tarleton said sharply. He was giving me a harder, less contrived look now. "Sure, you've had a rough time, Mac. I'm sorry

about that; if there'd been any other way. . . ." He made a short, choppy gesture with his hand. Then he lifted his chin, got the firm-lipped look back in place. "But the Bloc didn't fare any better. They're blasted out of space-permanently. It was an even trade."

Maybe my eyelids flickered; maybe I gave him a look that nailed his heart to his backbone; and maybe I was just a little man with a big headache, trying not to show it.

"An even trade," he repeated. He seemed to like the sound of it. "I watched the action very closely, Mac," he went on. "If the tide had started to turn to favor the Bloc, I'd have hit them with everything I had." He worked his mouth as though he were trying a new set of teeth for size; but it was an idea he was testing the fit of.

"And if the tide had started running our way, I'd have come in, helped finish them off. As it was. . . . an even match. The board's clean." He looked at me with something dangerous sparkling back behind his eyes. "Except for my flagship," he added softly.

The wrinklefaced captain was leaning forward; his hands were opening and closing. Braze took his hands out from behind himself and fingered the pistol bolt. I just waited.

"You see what that means, don't you, Mac?" Tarleton ran his fingers through his still-blond, still-curly hair, wiped his hand down the back of his neck the way he used to do in the locker room at the half, when he was cooking up the strategy that was going to flatten the opposition. "For the past ten years, both sides have poured ninety-five percent of their military budgets into their space arms, while planet-based forces fought themselves into an undeclared truce. Both sides together couldn't put a hundred thousand armed and equipped men in the field today-and if they did-"

He leaned back, took a deep breath; I couldn't blame him for that; he was breathing the heady air of power.

"I have the only effective fighting apparatus on or off the planet, Mac." He held out his hand, palm up, like a kid showing me his shiny new quarter. "I hold the balance of power, right here."

"Why tell him this, Banny?" the brown-faced captain said quickly.

"Button your lip, Captain," Tarleton snapped. "Keep it buttoned." He heaved himself out of his chair, shot a hard look at me, took a turn up and down the room, stopped in front of me.

"I need good men, Mac," he said. He was staring at me, his jaw muscles knotted and relaxed. I looked past him at Braze, over at the other man. "Uh-huh," I said. "That you do."

Braze took a step in my direction. His carefully lamp-tanned face was as dark as an Indian's. Tarleton's face twitched in a humorless smile.

"How long has it been?" he asked. "Sixty years? Sixty-five? Two giant powers, sitting across the world from each other, snarling and trading

slaps. Sixty years of petty wars, petty truces-of people dying-for nothing-of wasted time, wasted talent, wasted resources-while the whole damned universe is waiting to be taken!"

He turned on his heel, stamped another couple of laps, pulled up in front of me again.

"I decided to put an end to it. I made up my mind-hell, over a year ago. My strategy since that time has been directed toward this moment. I planned it, I maneuvered it." He closed his hand as though he was crushing a bug. "And I brought it off!"

He looked at me, happy, wanting to hear me say something; I didn't say it. He went back to his chair, sat down, picked up the long blackish cigar from the ashtray at his elbow, drew on it, put it down again, blew the smoke out suddenly.

"There comes a time," he said flatly, "when a man has to act on what he knows to be right. When he can no longer afford the luxury of a set of mottos as a substitute for intelligence. Sure, I swore to uphold the Constitution; it's easy to die for a flag, a principle, an oath-but that won't save humankind from its own stupidity. Maybe someday the descendants of the people whose necks I'm saving in spite of themselves will thank me. Or maybe they won't. Maybe I'll go down in the book as the villain-a new and better Benedict Arnold. I still say to hell with it. If all it takes to break the cycle is the sacrifice of one man's personal-shall I say honor?-then that's a small price. I'm prepared to pay it."

I heard him talking but it all seemed to be coming from a long way off, remote, unreal. It didn't reach me. I nodded toward the one he'd told to shut up.

"As the man said, why tell me?" I asked him, just to be saying something.

"I want you with me, Mac," he said.

I looked at him.

"I wanted you in it from the beginning, but. . . ." He frowned again. I was making him do a lot of frowning tonight. "Maybe you can guess why I didn't speak to you earlier. It wasn't easy sending you out with the others. I'm glad you came through. Damned glad. Maybe it's. . . some kind of sign." His lips twitched in what I guess he thought was a smile.

"It wasn't easy-but you managed it." I wasn't sure whether I said it or just thought it. The roaring in my head was loud now; a hot black was closing in from the sides. I pushed it back. For some reason I didn't want to fall down right now; not here, not in front of Braze and the little man with the darting eyes.

"We used to be friends, Mac," Tarleton was saying. "There was a time. . . ." He got up again. It seemed he couldn't stay in one place. "Hell, it's simple enough; I'm asking for your help," he finished.

"Yeah, we were friends, Banny," I said. For an instant there was that

strange hollow feeling, the heart-stopping glimpse back down the yellowed and forgotten years to the old Academy walls and the leaves that were on the cinder track as you walked across, heavy-shouldered in the practice gear, the cleats making you feel tall and tough, and the faces of girls, and the smell of night air, and the fast car bucking under you and Banny, passing a flask back, and then again, across the field while the crowd roared, his arm back, the ball tumbling down the blue sky and the solid smack and then away and running-

"But you found other friends," I was saying, with no more than an instant's pause. "They took you down another path, I guess. Somewhere along there we lost it. I guess today we buried it."

"That's right, we've taken our separate ways," he said. "But we can still find common land. I didn't make the Navy, Mac-but after I picked it as a way of life, I learned to live with it-to beat it at its game. You didn't. You bucked it. Sure, you made your points-but they don't pay off for those. What do you expect, a medal for stubbornness? Hell, if it hadn't been for me keeping an eye on you, you'd have been-" He stopped. "Suffice it to say I got you your command," he ground out.

I nodded. "I didn't know," I said. "It was a wonderful thing while I had it. I'm grateful to you. And then you took it away. It was a tough way to lose my ship, Banny. In a way I'd almost rather not have had it-but not quite."

He planted himself again, tried to catch my eye. Somehow I seemed to be looking past him.

"I make no apologies," he snapped. "I did what I had to do. Now there's more to be done. I'm going down tonight to make my report to Congress. There are Cabinet members to see, the President to be dealt with. It won't be easy. It's not won yet. A wrong word in the wrong place and I could still fumble this. I'm being frank with you, Mac. I need a good man I can trust." He reached out and clapped me on my upper arm-a caricature of the old gesture, as self-consciously counterfeit as a whore's passion. I shook the hand off.

"Don't be a fool," he said in a low voice, close to me. "What do you think your alternative is?"

"I don't know, Admiral," I said. "But you'll think of something."

Braze came over. "I don't like this, Banny," he said. "You've said too damned much to him." He gave me a look like a hired gun marking down a target for later on. The other fellow was up now, not wanting to be left out. He flicked his eyes at me, then at the gun at Braze's belt.

"This fellow's no good for us," he said in a rapid, breathless voice, like a girl about to make a daring suggestion. "You'll have to. . . . dispose of him."

Tarleton swung around and looked at him.

"Have you ever killed a man, Walters?" he asked in a tight voice. Walters' tongue popped out, touched his lips. His eyes went to the gun again,

darted away.

"No, but-"

"I have," Tarleton said. He walked across to the windorama, punched the control; the scene shifted to heavy seas breaking across a reef under a rock-gray sky.

"Last chance, Mac," he said in a mock-hearty voice. "The thing happens; it's far too late to stop it now. Will you be in it-or out?" He turned to face me, his clean-cut American Boy features set in a recruiting-poster smile.

"Count me out," I said. "I wouldn't be good at running the world." I looked at the other two. "Beside which, I wouldn't like the company."

Braze lifted a lip to show me a square-looking canine. Walters half-closed his eyes and snorted softly through his nose.

"What about it, Banny?" Braze said. "Walters is right. You can't dump Maclamore back with the other internees."

Tarleton turned on him. "You're telling me what I can and can't do, Braze?"

"I'm making a recommendation," the Commodore came back. "My neck is in this with yours now-"

"Another word of mutiny out of you, mister, and I'll give orders that will have your precious neck stretched before the big hand gets to the twelve. Want to try me?" His voice was like something cut into a plate-glass window. He went to his chair and pushed a button set in the arm.

"Purdy, send those four morons of yours in here-and try not to shoot yourself through the foot in the process." He went over and watched the waves some more. The door opened with a sigh and the goon squad appeared with the Warrant out front, fussing over them like a headwaiter figuring the tip on ten pounds of room-service caviar.

"Find quarters for Captain Maclamore on U deck," Tarleton said in a flat voice.

The Warrant bustled forward, all business now. "All right, move along there-" he started. Tarleton whirled on him.

"And keep a civil tongue in your head, damn you! You're talking to a Naval officer!"

Purdy swallowed hard. I turned and walked out past the ready gun muzzles. I didn't bother with the salute this time. The time for saluting was all over.

2

The medic finished with me and left, and I lay back, listening to the small ship-noises that murmured through the walls. It had been about an hour now since the last faint shocks that meant contact with one of the chunks of debris that was all that was left of forty-two fighting ships-twenty-two UN, the rest Bloc. At least Tarleton had gone through the motions of

picking up what few survivors there might have been from the slaughter-perhaps a few hundred dazed and bloody men, the accidental leftovers of the power plays of Grand Strategy.

I had come through in better shape than most of them, I guessed. With the exception of a few minor cuts and bruises and a mild concussion, aggravated by twenty-eight hours without food or sleep, I was in as good shape as I had been before the fight. My arms and legs still worked; my heart was pumping away as usual; my lungs were doing their job. The brain was still numb, true, but it was working-working for its life.

Tarleton may or may not have meant it when he turned down Braze's suggestion-but he had told me far too much for any man to hear who was arrayed on the opposite side of the fence from the Commodore. I didn't need to break out of my cell to look for trouble: it would come to me. Braze was a man who always took the simple direct course. It had won him a commodore's star; he'd stay with the technique. He'd make his move at the last minute before the ground party boarded the boats for the trip down, to minimize the chance of word getting to Tarleton; he'd have an account of an attempted escape ready for later, if Tarleton got curious-an unlikely eventuality. The Admiral would have his hands full digesting his conquests, with no time left over for pondering the fates of obscure former acquaintances.

They'd be going down tonight, Tarleton had said. He'd have a good-sized shore party with him; all of his top advisors-or whatever ratfaced little men like Walters called themselves-and a nice showing of armed sailors, tricked out in dress blues and sidearms, as a gentle reminder of the planet-wrecking power orbiting ten thousand miles out.

The flagship carried a complement of two thousand eleven men, all long since screened for reliability, no doubt. If I knew Banny Tarleton, he'd have half of them along on his triumphal march. That would call for twenty heavy scout boats. He'd use bays one through ten on the upper boat deck for reasons of ease of loading and orbital dynamics. . . .

I was building an elaborate structure of fancy on a feeble foundation of guesses, but I had to carry the extrapolation as far as I could. I wouldn't get a second chance to make my try; maybe not even the first one-and my quota of mistakes was already used up.

I got up and took a couple of turns up and down the room. I still felt lightheaded, but the meal and the bath and the dressings and the shots and the pills had helped a lot. The plain set of ducks Purdy had provided were comfortable enough, but I missed the contents of a couple of small special pockets that had been built into my own clothes-the ones that had been taken away and burned. The hardware was gone-but with a little luck I might be able to improvise suitable substitutes.

A quick inspection of the room turned up an empty closet, a chest with four empty drawers, a wall mirror, a molded polyfoam chair that weighed two pounds soaking wet, a framed tridograph of the Kennedy monument complete with shrapnel scars, and the built-in bunk to which the medics had lowered me, groaning, ten minutes earlier. Not much there from which

to assemble a blaster-

I felt the tremor then-the teacup-rattling nudge of a scout boat kicking free. Quite suddenly my mouth had that dry feeling. Boat number two pushed off, then a third. Tarleton wasn't wasting any time. At least there wouldn't be any long tedious wait to see whether my guesses had been right. The time for action was here. I set my heart rate up two notches and metered a trickle of adrenalin into my system, then went over to the door, flattened myself against the wall to the left of it, and waited.

Seven boats were away now. A couple of minutes ticked past like ice ages. Then there was a soft stealthy noise outside the door. With my ear against the wall, I could imagine I heard voices. I set myself-

The door slid smoothly back and a man came through it fast-a big thick-shouldered DP with pinkish hair on an acneed neck, a use-worn Mark XX gripped in a freckled fist the size of a catcher's mitt. I half-turned to the left, drove my right into his side just behind the holster hard enough to jar the monogram off the hanky in my hip pocket-not fancy, but effective. He made an ugly noise and went down clawing at himself like a cat, and I was over him, diving for the gun that skidded to the wall and bounced back into my hand, and I was rolling, bringing it up, seeing the lightning-flicker and feeling the hard tight snarl of the weapon in my hand as I slashed it across the open doorway. The man there fell into the room, hit like a horse falling in harness, and the air was full of the nauseating stench of burned flesh and abdominal wounds.

I got up, stepped to the redhead, kicked him hard above the cheekbone; he gave up the attempt to loop the loop on the rug. At the door I gave a quick glance both ways: nobody in sight. There was another gentle shock. Number eight? Or had I missed one. . . . ?

It was a hot two minutes' work to get the unbloodied uniform off its owner. It wasn't a good fit, but I buckled everything up tight, strapped on the gun in a way that I hoped would conceal the fold I'd taken in the waist band, tried the boots: too big. I didn't like touching the other fellow, but I had to. My feet complained a little, but they went in, shrinking from the warmth of the dead man's shoes. The redhead was still breathing; I thought seriously about putting a burst into his head, then settled for strapping his ankles and wrists and wadding a shirt sleeve in his mouth. It cost me an extra minute and a half. So much for the price of a human life.

Out in the corridor things were still quiet: Braze's work again. He wouldn't have wanted witnesses. I locked the door and headed for the boat.

Four more boats were away by the time I reached the steel double doors that sealed U deck off from the main transverse. I pushed against them, swore, kicked the panel. It gave off a dull clang. I kicked it again, then yanked out the power gun, set it for a needle beam, heard sounds on the other side, slammed the weapon back into its holster in time to see the door jump back and a square-jawed DP plant himself flatfooted in the opening, gun out and aimed.

"Thanks, brother-" I started past him. He backed, but kept me covered. A

confused scowl was getting ready to settle onto his face.

"Hold your water, paisan-"

"Knock it off," I rapped. "Jeezus-can't you see I'm missing formation? My boat-"

"What you doing on U deck?"

"Look-I had a sidekick, see? I wanted to see the guy. Okay, satisfied? You want me shot for desertion?"

"Go on," he waved the gun at me, looking disgusted. "But you'll never make it."

"Thanks, buddy-" I struck off at a dead run. . . .

* * *

I had lost count, not sure whether it was eighteen or nineteen-or maybe twenty, too late. . . .

I rounded the last corner, came into the low-ceilinged boat deck, felt a throb of some kind of emotion-fear or relief or a mixture-at the sight of thirty or forty blue-uniformed men formed up in a ragged column, filing toward the black rectangle of Number Two loading port. I dropped back to a walk, came up to the column, moved along with them. One man looked over his shoulder at me with a blank expression; the rest ignored me. A middle-aged Warrant with a long leathery face saw me, snarled silently, came back.

"You're Gronski, huh? Nice to see you in formation, Gronski. You see me after breakaway; you and me got to have a little talk about things-okay, Gronski?"

I looked sullen; it wasn't hard. It's a lot like looking scared. "Okay, Chief," I muttered.

"By God, that's 'Aye, aye, Mr. Funderburk' to you, swabbie!"

"Aye, aye, Mr. Funderburk," I growled out. He spun with a squeak of shoe leather and walked away. The man in front of me turned and looked me up and down.

"You ain't Gronski," he said.

"What else is new?" I snarled. "So I'm helping out a pal-okay?"

"You and Funnybutt are gonna get along," he predicted and showed me his back again. I kept my eyes on it until it was safely tucked away in the gloom of the troop hold. Wedged in between two silent men on the narrow shock seat, I held my breath, waiting for the yell that would mean somebody hadn't been fooled. I wondered what lucky accident had made Gronski late, what other lucky accident had assigned him to a detail with a Warrant who didn't know his face. . . .

But calculating the odds on what was already accomplished was just sorting over dry bones. The odds ahead were what counted. They didn't look good, but they were all I had. I'd take them-and play the angles as they fell like Rubinstein cutting the original soundtrack of the "Flight of the Bumblebee."

3

We berthed at Arlington Memorial just after midnight, and as soon as he had the platoon formed up on the ramp Funderburk called me over. I answered the summons with a certain reluctance; I had closed and locked the door to the room where Braze's gunboys were awaiting discovery, but there was no way of knowing how long it would be before someone went around to check. The trip down had taken about two hours and a half. Of course, even if the room had been opened, it didn't necessarily mean that anyone would have found it necessary to advise the Admiral-

Or did it?

"Gronski, I got a little job for you," Funderburk barked. "A couple of the brass up front had a little trouble with the turbulence on the way in: looks like they kind of come unfed. It don't look good all over the officers' head. Maybe you could kind of see about it."

"Sure. I mean, aye, aye, Mr. Funderburk. Do I get a mop or just wipe it up with my sleeve?"

"Oh, a wise one, huh? Swell, Gronski. You and me are gonna see a lot of each other. You want a mop, you scout around and find one. Take all the time you want. But I kind of advise you to be all finished in twenty minutes because that's how long I'm giving the detail for chow. I don't guess you'll miss the flapjacks, unless you got a tougher appetite than most."

"I'll finish in ten. Save me a stool at the bar."

Funderburk nodded. "Yeah, I can see you and me are gonna click good, Gronski. See you on the gig list." He turned and walked away-just like that. I didn't wait around to see if he'd change his mind. I walked, resisting the impulse to run, to the utility shack behind the flight kitchen, went through it and out the side door and around to the front, crossed a patch of grass and pushed into a steamy odor of GI coffee and floor wax. A door across the room was lettered MEN. Inside, I forced the door to the broom closet, took out a pair of coveralls and a push broom.

Back out in the predawn gloom ten minutes later with my hair carefully ruffled and a layer of mud disguising the shine on my boots that showed under the too-short cuffs, I moved off briskly; in half a block I found a blue-painted custodial cart lettered UNSA. It started up with a ragged hum; I wheeled it away from the curb and headed for the lights of the main gate.

The boy on the guard post was no more than eighteen, a snubnosed farm lad, still getting a kick out of the sidearm and the badge and the white-painted helmet liner. I pulled up to him, gave him a sheepish grin, waved toward a cluster of glare signs half a block away, wan in the misty night. I picked a name from a bilious pink announcement looming above the others: "Just slipping down to Maggie's for a pack of bolts, Lieutenant," I

told him. "Boy, a man really gets to hankering for a smoke-"

"You guys give me a swiftie," the kid said. "Where do you get them big ideas? You think the government buys them scooters for you birds to joy-ride on? Climb down offa there and try stretching your legs one time."

"You're too sharp for me, Lootenant," I admitted. He watched, arms folded, while I wheeled the cart over to the side, parked it beside the guard shack. I gave him a wave that expressed the emotions of a game loser bowing to superior guile, and ankled off toward the bright lights. At the corner I looked back: he was still looking military, savoring the satisfaction of rules enforced. I hoped he wouldn't remember the base pass he hadn't asked to see until I was hull-down over the horizon.

* * *

By the light of a polyarc over a narrow alley behind a row of vice parlors, I sorted through my worldly goods; the odds and ends that a trusted killer named Gronski had had in his pockets when he set out on his final assignment. It wasn't much: a keyring, a white plastic comb clogged with grime, a wallet with a curled UNSA ID bearing an unflattering view of what had never been a pretty face, some outdated credit cards from the less expensive bean-and-sex joints around Charleston, South Carolina, six Cs in cash, and a pair of half-hearted pornographic snaps of a tired-looking girl with ribs. I pocketed the money, went along the alley to a public disposal chute, and put the loot down into the odor of hot iron and fruit rinds.

Clothes were my first problem. When Tarleton got the word that I was gone, a cordon would move out through the town as fast as a late-model Turbocad riot car could roll. It would be nice if I could be over the bridge and into DC proper before then. Nobody got into the megalopolis nowadays without a full scope and NAC. A set of baggy overalls might be good enough to get me past a recruit pulling the graveyard shift on a class-two passenger depot; I'd have to do a lot better to satisfy the gray-suit boys on the front door to the capitol.

Tarleton would figure me to make a run for the hills; for the West Coast, maybe, or the anonymity of the Paved State that had once been called the Land of Flowers. He'd assume that for the moment my objective would be limited to survival; he wouldn't expect me to walk deeper into his net; not now; not until I had lain up for a while to lick my wounds and lay my plans.

. . .

Or so my second-guessing bump told me. Maybe it was as transparent as a bride's nightie that I'd head for important ears to pour my story into. Maybe the gunnies were just around the next corner, waiting to cut me down. Maybe I was already a dead man, just looking for a place to stretch out.

And maybe I'd better stop being so goddamned smart and get on with the job at hand, before I got myself picked up for loitering and did ninety standing on my ear in the vag tank.

* * *

Halfway down the wrong side of a street that had been classy about the

time the sailmakers in Boston began to decry the collapse of civilization, a dim-lit window hung with two-tone burlap sports jackets and cardboard shoes caught my eye. There was a dust-dimmed glare strip along the top, lending the display all the gaiety of a funeral in the rain. It wasn't the smartest haberdashery in town, but it wouldn't be the best wired, either. I went to the end of the street, took a left, found an alley mouth, came back up behind my target. Aside from kicking a couple of rusted cans and clipping a shin on a post and swearing loud enough to wake up the old maid at the end of the block, I came in as slick as a traveling salesman making a late housecall. The lock wasn't much: a mail-order electro job set in perished plastic. I put a hip against it and pushed; the door frame damn near fell in with me.

It took five minutes to look over the stock and select a plain black suit suitable for the county to bury a pauper in. I added a gray shirt that looked as though it would hold its shape as long as nobody washed it, a tie with a picture of a Balinese maiden, a pair of ventilated shoes with steel taps on the heels that would be all that was left after the first rain. The cash register tallied three Cs and some change. I wrote out an IOU, signed it, and tucked it in under the wire spring. That meant that half an hour after the store opened Tarleton would have a description of my new elegance-but by then it wouldn't matter. I'd either be across the bridge or dead.

* * *

Three streets farther up the gentle slope above the river I found what I needed: a blackened brick front holding up two squares of age-tarnished plastex and a door that had once been painted red. The left window bore the legend IRV'S HOUSE OF TATTOO ARTISTRY and the right balanced the composition with a picture of a mermaid seated on an anchor holding a drowned sailor. I walked past once, saw the glimmer of a light in a side window visible along a two-foot airspace that ran back on the right. There seemed to be no activity in the drinking establishment next door; I slid into the alley, walked over bottles, cans, things that squashed, other things that crunched. If there were any dead bodies, I didn't notice them.

At the rear there was a small court walled by taller buildings on either side, a high fence with a gate letting onto a wider alley. The light from the side window showed up a few blades of green spring grass poking up among cinders. Two concrete steps led up to a back door. I stood on the bottom one and knocked, two short, one long, two short. Nothing happened.

A bird let off a string of notes somewhere, stopped suddenly as though he had just discovered he was in the wrong place. It's an uncomfortable feeling; I know it well.

I rapped again, same code, only louder. Still nothing. I stepped back down, found a pebble, threw it at a closed shutter up above, then went back and put an ear against the door. Sounds came, faint and ill-tempered. I heard the bolt rattle; the door opened half an inch. There was heavy breathing.

"It's a hot rasper," I said quickly. "Marple up on the avtake before the fuzz gondle."

"Ha? Wha-?" a clogged voice started, broke off to cough. I leaned on the door. "I got to see Irv," I snapped. "Transik apple ready, tonight for sure." The door yielded. I stepped into an odor of last month's broccoli, last week's booze, and a lifetime of rancid bacon fat and overdue laundry. A fat citizen in a gray bathrobe with a torn sleeve thumbed uncombed gray hair back from a red eye set in gray fat. The fingernail was gray too. So was his neck. Maybe he liked gray.

"You run the skin gallery?" I asked him.

"What's the grift, Jack?" He pulled the knot tight on the robe, shot a look out the door, pushed it shut. I watched his right hand.

"I need a job done," I told him. "They sent me to you."

He grunted, looking me over. The hand lingered on the belt.

"You mentioned a name," he said.

"Maybe you'll do," I said. The hand moved then, slipped inside the robe, was halfway out again with a Browning before I clamped down on his wrist. He shifted, slammed his left at my stomach; I half-turned, took it on the hip, jerked the hand out, bent it back, and caught the gun as he dropped it. He didn't make a sound.

"No need for the iron," I told him. "I want papers-fast. Let's step along to your workshop. Time is of the essence."

"What kinda gag-?"

I hit him on the side of the head with the gun hard enough to stagger him. "No time for talking it up. Action. Now." I motioned toward the curtain that hung in the kitchen entry.

"You got me wrong, mister." He was rubbing his face; his hard palm made a scratchy sound going over the stubble. "I run a legitimate little art tattoo parlor here-"

I took a step toward him, rammed the gun at his belly. "Ever heard of a desperate man, Irv? That's me. Maybe every tattoo joint on the planet isn't in the hot-paper line, but I'm guessing this one is-and I get what I want or you die trying. Better hope you can do it."

He worked his mouth, then turned and pushed through the curtains. I followed.

* * *

It took Irv an hour to produce a new ID, a set of travel orders, a Geneva card, and a special pass to the Visitors' Gallery at the House. Once he got into the swing of it, he was a true artist, as intent on perfection as Cellini buffing a pinhead blemish off a twenty-foot bronze.

"The orders are okay," he told me as he handed them over, "the G-card, too. Hell, it's practically genuine. The pass-maybe. But don't try to fool nobody but maybe some broad in a bar with that ID. Them Security boys

will have that number checked out-

"That's okay. The stuff looks good. How much do I owe you?"

He lifted his shoulders. "Hundred Cs," he said.

"Add fifty for getting you up," I said. "And another fifty for the crack on the head. I'll mail it to you as soon as I hear from home."

"The crack on the head's for free," he said. "How's about leaving the Browning. You don't get them with Cracker Jacks any more."

I nodded. "Let's go down." He went ahead of me down the stairs, back through the kitchen, opened the door. I took the magazine out of the gun, tossed it out into the yard, handed him the Browning. He took it and thrust it away, out of sight.

"The guy who worked on your hands was good," he said softly. "Navy?"

I nodded. He ran a hand through the gray hair.

"I worked with a lot of Navy guys in my time," he said. The red eyes were as sharp as scalpels. "You done time on a lot of quarterdecks, would be my guess. You don't need to sweat me. I don't know no cops."

"Give me three hours," I said. "Then yell your head off. Maybe you could use the Brownie points at headquarters."

"Yeah," he said. I went out and the door closed on his still-gray face.

4

It was a brisk ten-minute walk to Monticello Boulevard. I made it without attracting any attention other than a close look by a pair of prowl-car cops who would never know how close they came to a bonus and promotion, and a business offer from a moonlighting Washington secretary holding a lonely vigil at the Tube entry. A wheelcab cruising the outer lane answered my wave, pulled off on the loading strip.

"You licensed for DC?" I asked him.

"Whattaya, blind?" He pointed to a three-inch gold sticker on his canopy. I got in and he gunned off toward the lights of the bridge.

"You know Eisenhower Drive?" I asked him.

"Does a mouse know cheese?" he came back, fast and snappy.

"Number Nine Eighty-five," I said.

"Senator I. Albert Pulster," he said. I saw his eyes in the mirror, watching me. "You know Pulster?"

"My brother-in-law," I said.

"Yeah?" He sounded impressed-like a car salesman getting the lowdown on a ten-year-old trade-in. "Pulster's a big noise in this town these days," he

said. "Three years to election and you can't open a pictonews without you get a mug shot of the guy. He's parlayed that committee into a clear shot at the White House."

The control booth was a blaze of garish light across the wet pavement ahead. The white-uniformed CIA man was leaning out, letting me catch the dazzle of the brass on his collar. The cab pulled up and the panel slid down, letting in the cool river air. I handed over the ID and the orders directing me to report to Fort McNair a day earlier. He looked them over, turned, shoved the card into the scope that transmitted the finger-print image to the CBI master file, read off the name that popped onto the four-inch screen. It would be mine-the only risk at this point was that Tarleton had already put a flag out on it. . . .

He hadn't. The guard held out a plain plastic rectangle.

"Right thumb, please," he said in a bored voice. I gave it to him; he pressed it on the sensitive plate, shoved it into the same slot, got the same result. All right so far. If he stopped now, I was in; if he went one step farther and checked out the crystal pattern of the card itself. . . .

"Hey," the driver shot a look at me. "He says he's Pulster's brother-in-law."

"So?"

"I never heard of Pulster having no brother-in-law."

The CIA man gave him a heavy-lidded look. "Let's you leave us do our job, fella; you stick to watching those traffic signs." He handed me my phony papers, pushed the button to raise the barrier, waved us on across. My driver drove fast, shoulders hunched. He didn't talk any more all the way out to Eisenhower.

* * *

Number Nine Eighty-five was a big iron gate with twin baby spots mounted up high on an eight-foot fieldstone wall that looked solid enough to withstand a two day mortar bombardment. A graveled drive led back between hundred-year oaks to a lofty three-story façade gleaming a well-tended oyster-white in the faint starlight. There was a porte-cochère high enough to clear the footman on a four-horse carriage, wide enough for three Caddies abreast. There were more windows than I remembered on the west front at Versailles, a door reminiscent of the main entrance to Saint Peter's Basilica, wide steps that were probably scrubbed five times a day by English butlers using toothbrushes. Or maybe not: maybe the servant problem had even penetrated as far as the Pulster residence.

I thumbed a button set in a black iron plate, jumped when a feminine voice immediately said, "Yes, sir?"

"How do you know I'm not a madam?" I snapped back.

"You don't have the build for it, sweetheart," the voice said, sharp now. "You want to tell me what it's all about, or do I just call a couple sets of law to help get you straightened out?"

I squinted, spotted the eye up in the angle of the iron curlicue at the top of the gate.

"I want to see the Senator," I said. "Wake him up if you have to. It's important."

"Would there be a name?"

"Maclamore."

"Uh-huh. Army?"

"Navy. Captain Maclamore. Six-one, one-ninety stripped, brown hair, brown eyes, and a nasty disposition. Hop to it."

"Not even one little old star? Captains we usually take in batches of nine on alternate Wednesdays, and this being Thursday. . . . well, you see how it is."

"You're cute," I told the eye. "With a couple more like you I could start a finishing school for snake charmers. Now run along and tell Albert you're keeping his favorite relative waiting out in the hot sun."

"Like that, huh?" the voice said coolly. "You could have said so. What are you trying to do-lose me my job?"

"It's a thought," I admitted. There was no answer. I took a couple of steps, turned, took two back. The tension was building up now. My small cuts and burns were hurting like big ones; it was time for another load of those nice drugs Purdy's medic had fed me. Instead all I had was the withdrawal symptoms, a letdown of the past few hours' fever-bright energy into a high singing sensation back of the eyes and a tendency to start arguments with disembodied voices. . . .

There was a buzz and a click and the gate rolled back. I went through it, saw a small white-painted wagon rolling along the drive toward me on fat rubber wheels. It stopped and the voice was back.

"If you'll step aboard, sir. . . . ?"

I did and the robocart whisked me up to the steps, past them, along to a ramp that slanted up behind shrubbery to an open entry. I got off and went through it into a wide airy hall full of a melancholy yellow light from wide stained-glass panels above a gallery trimmed in white-painted wrought iron. A waxed and polished girl with a pert brown face, pouty purple lips, and a cast plastic hairdo came out of a carved door, waved toward a chair that looked like a Scottish king might have been crowned in it once.

"If you'll just be seated, Captain-"

"Still mad, huh? Where's his bedroom? I'll overlook it if his hair's not combed-"

"Please, Captain Maclamore." She did a bump and grind, showed me a fine set of big white teeth, came up close, and let me get a load of the hundred-C-an-ounce stuff she wore behind her ears. "The Senator will be

with you in just a moment. . . ." Her voice changed tone on the last words; she'd noticed the bruise on my jaw, the patch of singed hair, the small cuts beside my eye where an instrument face had blown out. I worked up a quick smile that probably looked like the preliminary to a death rattle.

"A little accident on the way over," I said. "But it's all right. I got the other fellow's number."

A bell jangled then-or maybe it purred; it just seemed to me like a jangle. The light was too bright, too sour; the tick of an antique spring-driven clock picked at me like a knifepoint. My cheap stiff clothes rasped on my skin-

Feet rattled on the stairway behind me. I turned, and Senator I. Albert Pulster, short, dapper, red-faced, his hair neatly combed, came across the floor, held out a hand worn smooth by shaking.

"Well, Mac-a long time. Not since Edna's funeral, I think. . . ."

I shook the hand. It felt hard and dry, but no harder or dryer than my own.

"I've got to talk to you, Albert," I said. "Fast and private."

He nodded as though he'd been expecting it. "Ah. . . . a personal matter. . . . ?"

"As personal as dying."

He indicated the door the girl had come out of. I followed him in.

* * *

Pulster's face looked hollow, as though all the juice had been sucked out of it by a big spider, leaving only a shell like crumpled tissue paper. All that in three minutes.

"Where is he now?" he asked in a voice as thin as his face.

"My guess would be that he's in a closed-door conference with some of his friends from the Hill. Naturally, he'll try to do it the easy way first. Why walk over Congress if he can bring them in with him?"

A little life was showing in Albert's eyes now, a little color was coming back into his cheeks. He leaned forward, clasped his hands together as though he was afraid they'd get away.

"And he doesn't know you're here?" His voice was quick now, emotionless, stripped for action.

"I'd guess he knows by now that I got off the ship. Beyond that-it depends on how good his intelligence apparatus is. He may have three squads with Mark Xs trampling across the lawn right now."

Albert's mouth twitched. "No, he doesn't," he said flatly. He fingered the edge of his desk, pulled out a big drawer, swung it up on spring-balanced slides, pivoted it to face me. It was a regulation battle-display console, the kind usually installed in a two-man interceptor: it showed four stretches of

unoccupied lawn with fountains and flowers. Below it was a fire-control panel that would have done credit to a five-thousand-tonner.

"A man needs certain resources in these troubled times," Albert said. "I've never proposed to furnish a sitting target for the first Oswald who might rap at the gate."

I nodded. "That's why I joined the Navy: too dangerous down here." I pushed his toy back to him. "He's counting on putting this over fast and smooth: the public will wake up and it will be all over. The right publicity in the right places-now-will kill him."

Albert was shaking his head, looking shocked. "Publicity-no! Not a word, Mac. Good Lord, man-" He clamped his teeth and breathed through his nose, looking at me, through me; then he focused in, blinked a couple of times.

"Mac, there's no time to waste. What kind of force would it take to neutralize the flagship?" he snapped out. "Assuming the worst: That Tarleton heard of the move, was able to communicate with the vessel, that she was fully alerted."

"A couple of hundred megaton-seconds," I said. "With luck."

"I have no capital ships at my disposal," Albert thought aloud. "I do have over one hundred battle-ready medium recon units attached to National Guard organizations in the Seventeenth District." He looked at me hard. "What do you mean, Mac-'with luck'?"

"Tarleton stripped the ship to make his Roman Holiday. There'll be skeleton crews on all sections. I don't know who he left on the bridge: he brought all his top boys down with him-he'd have to, otherwise he might find himself looking down his own Hellbores. Assuming a fairly competent man, he'll be able to lay down about fifty-percent firepower-and as for maneuverability. . ."

"We can saturate her," Albert said. "Run her gauntlet, grapple to her, force an entry, and sweep her clean! And then"-Albert stopped, let his expression slide back to the casual-"but we'll worry about that later. Our immediate need-"

But he'd already done the damage. "You said 'after,' " I told him. "Go on."

"Why, then, of course, I'd restore matters to normality as soon as possible." He gave me a sharp look, like a pawnbroker wondering if the customer knows the pearls are real. "I think you could anticipate an appointment to star rank-perhaps even-"

"Forget it, Albert," I said softly. "With fast action and the kind of luck that makes Sweepstakes winners, we might be able to get together enough firepower to hit her once-now-while he's off-balance, before he expects anything-and knock her out. You've got your hundred boats; if you can swing the North American Defense Complex into it, we just might blanket her defenses with one strike-"

"Mac, you're raving," Albert said flatly. "You don't seem to understand-"

"That ship's a juggernaut hanging over all of us. I think a call to Kajevnikoff might bring their South American Net into it too-"

"You're talking like a traitor!" Pulster got to his feet, his face back to its normal shade now.

"I'm taking that ship intact." He tried to get his voice under control. "Be sensible, man! I'm offering you command of the strike force. You needn't expose yourself unnecessarily, of course. In fact, I'd expect you to command from a safe distance, then move in after boarding by my troops-"

"You're wasting time, Pulster," I told him. "Start the ball rolling-now. One word-one hint to Tarleton, and he'll neutralize every resource on the planet before you can say 'dictator.' "

"What do you mean-dictator!"

"One's like another as far as I'm concerned. In fact, between you and Banny, I might even pick him. I came here to stop something, not barter it."

Albert's hand went to his console, stopped self-consciously. He was thinking so hard I could almost smell the wires burning. I took a step toward him, slid a hand inside my coat as though I had something hidden there.

"Get away from the desk, Senator," I said. He backed slowly-toward the window.

"Uh-uh. Over there." I indicated the discreet door to the senatorial john.

"Look here, Mac: this is too big to toss away like an old coat. The man that controls that vessel, controls the planet! It's almost in our hands! You did the right thing, coming here-and I'll never forget it was you who-"

I stepped in, hit him hard under the ribs to double him over, brought a right up under his jaw hard enough to lift his toes off the floor. He went back and down like a shroud full of baseballs, lay on his back with one eye half open. I didn't check to see whether he was breathing; I hooked a finger in his collar, dragged him to the toilet door, half threw him inside, set the latch, closed it. I looked around the room. There was a mirror on one wall with a table with flowers under it. I went over to it and a hollow-eyed bum in a sleazy greenish-black suit and a wilted collar looked out at me as though I'd caught him in the act of murder.

"It's okay, pal," I said aloud, feeling my tongue thick in my mouth. "That was just a warmup, almost an accident, you might say. The rough part's just beginning."

* * *

Back out in the big sad empty hall I told the girl that the Senator had suffered a sudden pain in the stomach. "He's in the john," I said bluntly. "Hiding, if you ask me. Pain in the stomach, hah! A great thing when a

fellow can't come to his own relations when he's had a little run of bad luck."

The look that she'd varnished up for VIP use melted away like witnesses at a traffic smash. I made it to the door without a guide-no little cart appeared to ride me out to the gate. I walked, wondering how long it would be before she went in-and whether she would know which button to push on the console to sweep the drive with fire.

But nothing happened: nobody yelled, no bells rang, no guns fired. I reached the gate and the big electrolock gave me a buzz like a Bronx cheer as I went through. I looked back at the eye: if it had been a mouth, it would have yawned. There's nothing like a little poverty to make a man invisible.

5

My last two Cs bought me a cab ride as far as Potomac Quay. I made the three blocks to the Wellington Arms on foot, trying not to hurry even when sirens came screaming across from Pennsylvania Avenue and three Monojag cop cars raced overhead, heading the way I'd come. It was a fair guess that Miss Linoleum had overcome her maidenly modesty sufficiently to force the door not many minutes after I made it off the grounds.

I went up the broad pseudomarble steps, past a Swiss admiral with enough Austrian knots to equip a troop of dragoons, in through a twelve-foot-high glass door, crossed a stretch of polished black floor big enough for the New Year's Yacht Show. Under the muted glare strip that read INQUIRIES I found a small neat man with big dark eyes that flicked over me once and caught everything except the hole in my left sock.

"I have some information that has to be placed in the Vice President's hands at once," I told him. "What can you do for me?"

He reached without looking and slid a gold-mounted pad and stylus across to me, spun it around so that Wellington Arms was at the top, the pen poised ready to be written with.

"If you'd care to leave a message-"

I put my face closer to him. "I'm a little marked up; you noticed that. I got that way getting here. It's that kind of information. Take a chance and let me talk to his secretary."

He hesitated, then reached for a small voice-only communicator, gold to match the pad. I waited while he played with the buttons out of sight over the counter, murmured into the phone. Time passed. More discreet conversation. Then he nodded.

"Mr. Lastwell will be down in a moment," he said. "Or so he says," he added in a lower tone. "You've got time for a smoke. You may even have time for a chow-mein dinner."

"It's a corny line," I said, "but minutes could make a difference. Maybe seconds."

The clerk gave me another X-ray look; this time I figured he caught the hole in the sock. He leaned a little across the counter, squared up the pad. "Political?" he murmured.

"It's not show biz," I said mysteriously. "Or is it?"

That satisfied him. He went off to the other end of the counter and began making entries in a card file. Probably the names of people to be shot after the next election. I looked at the clock: slim gold hands pointed at gold dots representing half past one. There was a lot of gold around the Wellington Arms.

He came through the bleached-teak doors from the bar, a thin, tired-looking man, walking fast, frowning, shoulders a little rounded, eyes whisking over the room like mice. He saw me, checked his stride, looked me over as he came up.

"I'm Marvin Lastwell. You're the person. . . . ?"

"Maclamore. Is the Vice President here?"

"Eh? Yes, of course he's here. If he were elsewhere, I'd be with him, hmm? What was it you had, Mr., er, Maclamore?"

"Do we talk here?"

He looked around as though he were surprised to find himself in the lobby. "Hmm. There's a lounge just along--"

"This is private," I cut him off. "Let's go where it will stay that way."

He sucked his cheeks in. "Now, look here, Mr., er, Maclamore--"

"On the off chance this could be important, play along this once, Mr. Lastwell. I can't spill this in front of every pickup the local gossip ghouls have planted in this mausoleum."

"Hmm. Very well, Mr., er, Maclamore." He led the way off along a corridor carpeted in dove-gray pile deep enough to lose a golfball in. I followed, wondering why a mild-looking fellow like Marvin Lastwell thought it necessary to carry a Browning 2mm under his arm.

* * *

The penthouse at the Wellington was no more ornate than Buckingham Palace, and smaller, though not much. Lastwell showed me into a spacious, dim-lit library lined with the kind of leather-bound books lawyers keep around the office to impress the customers and maybe open once in a while on a rainy afternoon when trade is slow, just to see what they're missing. Lastwell went behind a big dark mahogany desk, sat down fussily, pushed a big silver ashtray with a cigar butt off to one side, flicked on a lamp that threw an eerie green reflection back up on his face, giving his worried features a look of Satanic ferocity. I wondered if he'd practiced it in front of a mirror.

"Now, Mr., er, Maclamore," he said, "what is it you wanted to tell me?"

I was still standing, looking at the cigar butt, probably left there by the last ward-heeler who'd dropped in to mend a fence. It looked as out of place on Lastwell's desk as a roulette wheel at a Methodist retreat. He saw me looking at it and started to reach for it, then changed his mind, scratched his nose instead. I could feel a sudden tension in him.

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear," I said. "It was the Vice President I wanted to see."

Lastwell curved the corners of his mouth into a smile like a meat-eating bird-or maybe it was just the light.

"No, Captain, you can hardly-" He caught himself, clamped his jaw shut. The abrupt silence hung between us like a shout.

"Like that, huh?" I said softly.

He sighed, his hand hardly seemed to move, but now the Browning was in it. He held the gun with that graceful negligence they only get when they know how to use them. He motioned with his head toward a chair.

"Just sit down," he said in an entirely new voice. "You'll have a few minutes' wait."

I moved toward the chair he'd indicated; the gun muzzle followed. It was too late at night to start thinking, but I made the attempt. The cigar was the skinny black brand that Tarleton smoked. I'd probably missed him by minutes. He hadn't been close behind me-he'd been a good jump ahead. He'd had time to give his pitch-whatever proposition he'd worked out-to the Veep. It had been a risky move, but it seemed the Veep had listened. He'd mentioned me; as for how much he'd said, the next few seconds would tell me that.

I reached the chair, but instead of sitting in it, I turned to face Lastwell. The gun twitched alertly, holding low on my chest. That could be design-or accident.

"Maybe your boss would like to hear my side," I said, just to keep him talking. "Maybe my angle's better."

"Shut up and sit in the chair," Lastwell said, in the tone of a tired teacher talking to the oldest pupil in the eighth grade.

"Sit in it yourself," I came back. "The graveyard's full of wise guys who didn't stick around to get the whole story. Did Tarleton tell you I was Weapons Officer aboard Rapacious? Hell, the whole tub's wired to blow at a signal from-"

"You were captain of Sagacious," Lastwell cut in. "Save your lies, Maclamore-"

"Not two years ago I wasn't, when she was fitted out-"

"Save it," he said. Lastwell let his voice rise a decibel and a half; the gun jerked up as he spoke, centered on my chest now. I gave him a discouraged look, leaned forward as though about to sit, and dived across the desk. The

Browning bucked and shrieked and a cannon ball hit me in the chest and then my hands were on his neck, sinking into doughy flesh, and we were going down together, slamming the floor and the gun was bouncing clear and then I was on my knees, with Lastwell bent back under me, his mouth open, tongue out, eyes bulging like lanced boils.

"Talk it up," I ground out past my teeth. I gave him a quarter of a second to think it over, then gave him a thumb under the Adam's apple. A thin sound came from him, like a rivet scoring a brake drum.

"He. . . . here. . . . half-hour. . . ."

I gave him enough air to work with but not enough to encourage enterprise.

"Who's here now?"

"No-nobody. Sent. . . . them away."

"How many are in this?"

"Just. . . . the two of them. . . ."

"Plus you. Where are they?"

"They're. . . . gone to see. . . . others. Back soon. . . ."

"Tarleton coming back here?"

"No. . . . to his place." Lastwell gulped air, flopped his arms. "Please. . . . my back. . . ."

I smiled at him. "Get ready to die," I said.

"No! Please!" What color was left went out of his face like dirty water down a drain.

"Tell the rest," I snapped.

"He's. . . . expecting you. . . . there. . . . if I don't get you. . . . here. State Police. . . ."

"Say your prayers," I ordered. "When you wake up in the next world, remember how it felt to die a dirty death." I rammed my fingers in hard to the carotid arteries, watched his eyes turn up; he slumped and I let his head bump the carpet. He'd come around in half an hour with a sore throat and a set of memories that he could mull over at bedtime for a lot of sleepless nights.

I left him where he was, picked up the gun, tucked it away. There was a chewed place across my coat front where the needles had hit, a corresponding rip in the shirt. The chromalloy plate underneath that covered the artificial heart and lungs showed hardly a scratch to commemorate the event. Six inches higher or to the left, and he'd have found unshielded hide. It wasn't like Banny Tarleton to forget to mention a detail like that. Maybe he was slipping; maybe that was the break that had let me get this far. Maybe I could ride it a little farther, and maybe I was already out on the

skim ice, too far from shore to walk back.

I'd tried to stop Tarleton with indirect methods; they hadn't worked. Now there was only one direction left: straight ahead, into the trap he had laid.

Now I'd have to kill him with my own hands.

6

I rummaged in Lastwell's closet, found a shapeless tan waterproof and a narrow-brimmed hat. The private elevator rode me down to the second floor. The silence in the corridor was all that you'd expect for a hundred Cs a day. I walked along to the rear of the building, found a locked door to a service stair. There was a nice manual knob on it; I gripped it hard, gave it a sharp twist. Metal broke and tinkled, and the door swung in. The luxury ended sharply at the threshold: there was a scarred chair, a dirty coffee cup, a magazine, cigarette butts on a concrete landing above a flight of narrow concrete steps. I went down, passed another landing, kept going. The stairs ended at a wooden door. I tried it, stepped through into the shadows and the hum of heavy equipment. A shoe scraped and a big-bellied man in a monogrammed coverall separated himself from the gray bulk of a compressor unit. He frowned, wiped a hand over a bald head, opened his mouth-

"Fire inspector," I told him briskly. "Goddamn place is a deathtrap. That your chair on the landing?"

He gobbled, almost swallowed his toothpick, spat it on the floor. "Yah, it's my chair-"

"Get it out of there. And police those butts while you're at it." I jerked my head toward the back of the big room. "Where's your fire exit?"

"Hah?"

"Don't stall," I barked. "Got it blocked, I'll bet. You birds are all alike: think fire regulations are something to wrap your lunch in."

He gave me a red-eyed look, hitched at his shoulder strap. "Back here." His Potsdam accent was thick enough to spread on pretzels like cream cheese. I followed him along to a red-painted metal-clad door set a foot above floor level.

"Red light's out," I noted, sharp as a mousetrap. There was a big barrel bolt on the door at chest height. I slid it back, jerked the door open. Dust and night air whirled in.

"Okay, get that landing clear, like I said." I hooked a thumb over my shoulder and stepped out into dead leaves. He grunted and went away. I eased my head above the ragged grass growing along the edge of the stairwell; a security light on the side of the building showed me a garbage-disposal unit, a white-painted curb, the squat shape of a late model Turbocad parked under a row of dark windows. I slid the Browning into my hand, went up, across to the car. It was a four-seater, dull back with a gold eagle on the door. I thumbed the latch; no surprise there: it

was locked. I went down on my left side, eased under the curve of the hood. There were a lot of wires; I traced one, jerked it loose, tapped the frame; sparks jumped and a solid snick! sounded above. I crawled back out, pulled open the door, slid in behind the wheel. The switch resisted for a moment; then something snapped and it turned. The turbos started up with a whine like a waitress looking at a half-C tip. The Cad slid out along the drive, smooth as a porpoise in deep water. I nosed out into the bleak light of the polyarcs along the quay, took the inner lane, and headed at a meticulously legal speed for Georgetown.

* * *

A big fire a few years back had cleared away ten blocks of high-class slums and given the culture-minded administration of that day the perfect excuse to erect a village of colonial-style official mansions that were as authentic as the medals on a Vermouth bottle. Admiral Banastre Tarleton had the one at the end of the line, a solid-looking red-brick finish that disguised half an inch of flint steel, with lots of pretty white woodwork, a copper-sheathed roof made of bomb-proof polyon, and two neat little cupolas that housed some of the most sensitive detection gear ever sidetracked from a naval yard. I picked it out from two blocks away by the glare of lights from windows on all three floors.

There was an intersection nostalgically lit by gas flares on tall poles; I crossed it, slowed, moving along in the shadow of a row of seventy-foot elms with concrete cores and permanentized leaves. The moon was up now, shedding its fairy glow on the bricked street, the wide inorganic lawns, the stately fronts, creating a fragile illusion of the simple elegance of a past age-if you could ignore the lighted spires of the city looming up behind.

The last house on the right before Tarleton's place was a boxy planter's mansion with a row of stately columns and a balcony from which a queen could wave to the passing crowds. It was boarded up tight; not everybody was willing to give up the comfort of a modern apartment a mile up in the Washington sky for the dubious distinction of a Georgetown address. Half the houses here were empty, shuttered, awaiting a bid from a social-climbing freshman Congressman or a South American diplomat eager to get a lease signed before the government that sent him collapsed in a hail of gunfire.

There was a sudden movement among moon shadows on the drive opposite the Tarleton house: a heavy car appeared-armed, by the ponderous sway of its suspension as it trundled out to block the street. It was too late for me to think up any stunning moves that would leave the opposition breathless; I cut the wheel hard, swung into the artificial cinder drive that led up to the bright-lit front of the Tarleton mansion. Behind me, the interceptor gunned its turbos, closed in on my rear bumper. Men appeared in the wide doorway ahead; I caught glimpses of others spotted across the lawn that was pool-table green in the splash of light from the house. They ringed me in as I braked to a stop. I set the brake hard, flung the door open, stepped out, gave my coat belt a tug, picked out a middle-sized fellow with a face as sensitive as a zinc bartop.

"Those clowns in the armor better get on the ball," I told him. "I could have

waltzed right past 'em. And those boys you've got out trampling the flowerbeds: tell 'em to hit the dirt and stay put; they're not in a tango contest-

"Where do you fit the picture, mister?" His voice was a whisper; I saw the scar across his throat, ear to ear. He was a man who'd looked death in the eye from razor range. He was looking at the car now, not liking it much, but pushed a little off-balance by the eagle and the words OFFICE OF THE CENTRAL BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE.

I started around the front of the car, headed for the stairs. "Hot stuff for the Admiral," I said. "He's inside, right?"

He didn't move. I stopped before I rammed him.

"Maybe I better see some paper, mister," he whispered. "Turn around and put the mitts on top of the car."

"Pull up your socks, rookie," I advised loudly. "You think I carry a card when I'm working?" I crowded him a little. "Come on, come on, what I got won't wait." He gave-about a quarter of an inch. "Any you boys know this mug?" he called in his faint croak. His face was close enough to mine to give me a good whiff of burnt licorice: he was on the pink stuff. That wouldn't make him any easier to take.

I saw heads shake; two or three voices denied the pleasure of my acquaintance.

I hunched my shoulders. "I'm going in," I announced. "I got my orders from topside-

Someone came out through the open door, saw me, and stopped dead. For an instant I had trouble placing the horsey weatherbeaten face under the brimless cap. He opened his mouth, showing uneven brown teeth, and said "Hey!" It was Funderburk, the Warrant from the flagship. I took the first half of a deep breath, nodded toward him as casually as a pickpocket saying 'Good morning' to a plainclothes cop.

"Ask him," I said. "He knows me."

Funderburk came down the steps, three or four expressions chasing each other over his face.

"Yeah," he said. He nodded, as if vastly satisfied. "Yeah."

"You make this bird?" the scarred man whispered.

I tried to coax a little moisture into my dry mouth. My minor wounds throbbed, but no worse than an equal number of nerve cancers. I was hungry and tired, but Scott had probably felt at least as bad, writing the last page of his journal on the ice cap; my head throbbed a little, but one of those ancient Egyptians whose family doc had sawed his skull open with a stone knife would have laughed it off.

"Sure," Funderburk said from under a curled lip. "Gronski. Anchorman of the section. Two months ago they plant the slob in my outfit, and I guess I

ain't hardly seen the guy three times since." He spat, offside, but just barely. "The Commodore's Number-One Boy. Better play it closer than a skin-diver's tights, Ajax. He's a privileged character, he is."

There was a mutter in which I caught the word "Braze." I poked Ajax with a finger.

"I'll mention you were doing a job," I said. "But don't work it to death." I brushed past him and past Funderburk, went up the steps and through the door. No power guns roared. No large dogs came bounding out to sample my leg. Nobody even hit me over the head with a blackjack. So far, so good.

* * *

One man was walking behind me, one on my right. I went across the wide Wedgwood-blue reception hall, past a gilt-framed mirror that showed me a glimpse of a pale unshaven face with eyes like char-wounds. He looked like Mussolini just before the crowd got him. The stairs were carpeted in wine red that somehow didn't clash with the walls; maybe it was the soft yellow light from a tinkly glass chandelier that hung on a long gold chain from somewhere high above. The banister was wide and cool and white under my hand. The footsteps of the two goons thumped on the treads behind me.

I passed a landing with a tall double-hung window with lacy curtains and dark drapes, a painting of a small boy in red velvet pants, a weathered-oak clock that didn't tick. Then I was coming up into a wide hall done in dusty green with big white-painted wood panel doors with bright brass knobs. A man sat in a chair at the end beside a curved-leg Sheraton table with a brass ashtray from which a curl of smoke went up under a green-shaded lamp. There was a power gun in his lap. He watched me come, his hands on the gun.

One of the doors was open; voices came from inside. I felt like a man striding briskly toward the gallows, but the thin bluff I was riding couldn't survive any doubts or hesitations at this point. I went on, turned in at the lighted door, and was in a big high-ceilinged room with a desk, heavy leather-covered chairs, bookcases, a bar in one corner. Three men standing there looked around at me. Two of them I'd never seen before, the third was a captain whose name I couldn't remember. He frowned at me, looked at the others.

"Where's the admiral?" the man behind me asked.

Nobody answered. The captain was still frowning at me. "I've seen you before," he said. "Who are you-?"

"Guy named Gronski," my escort said. "The Commodore's dog-robber."

"You have a message from Commodore Braze?" one of the other men asked sharply.

"I want to see the Admiral," I said, looking stubborn. "I've already told Ajax this is a red-hot item-"

"You can tell it again-" the third man snapped. "I'm Admiral Tarleton's aide-"

"And I'm bad news from back home," I snarled. "I'm not up here to jackass around with a front man-" I whirled on the captain. "Can't you people get the message? This is hot!"

The Captain's eyes went to the door in the wall behind me. "He's just stepped down the hall," he said uneasily. "He's-"

"Never mind that, Johnson," the aide snapped out. "I'll inform him-"

"We'll both inform him," the captain said. "I'm assigned here as exec-"

"Save the jurisdictional wrangles until later," the other man cut in. "If this is as important as this fellow seems to think-"

"It's worse," I barked. "I'm warning you bastards somebody's gonna suffer. . ."

The aide and the captain slammed down their glasses and stamped out of the room, neck and neck. I poked a finger at the two who had escorted me. "All right, get back on post," I rapped out. "Believe me, when I tell the admiral. . . ." They faded away like shadows at sunset. The man at the bar had his mouth open. I walked across to him, looking confidential.

"There's one other little thing," I started as I came up to him-and chopped out with the side of my hand, caught him across the cheekbone. He almost leaped the bar. Glasses went flying, but thudded almost silently to the rug. I dragged him behind the bar, went across to the connecting door, gave the knob a hard twist. I almost broke my wrist.

Out in the hall the two who had gone out were nowhere in sight; the gun-handler still sat his chair beside the lamp. I gave him a hard look as though wondering whether he'd shaved that morning, strode along to the next door, reached for it-

"Hey!" He came out of his chair, gun forward. "Get away from that door!"

I turned toward him as he came up, jumped sideways, and kicked out. The burst caught me across the shin, slammed me back against the wall. My head hit hard and brilliant constellations shimmered all around. I clawed, swam up from abyssal deeps where light never penetrated, saw him stepping back, the gun still aimed. Someone yelled-a high tight string of words. Feet pounded. There was a harsh reek of burnt synthetics. I rolled over on my face, got my hands under me. I was staring at the big white door when it opened inward. Admiral Banastre Tarleton stood there, a Norge stunner in his hand. Without pausing to calculate the odds, I planted both feet against the wall behind me, launched myself at his knees. I heard the soft whisper of the Norge as I hit, and the crisper sound of something tearing in his leg, and then we were down together and the stunner hissed again and my left side was dead, but I rolled clear, scrabbled with one arm, saw a man in the doorway just as I caught the edge of the thick metal panel, hurled it shut with what was left of my strength. The dull boom! shut off the outside world as completely as the lid of a coffin.

I looked around. Tarleton was on his back, his head propped up at an awkward angle against the leg of a canopied four-poster bed. His face was as white as bleached bone, and the Norge was in his fist, aimed square at my face.

"I don't know how you got here, Mac," he said in a voice forced high by the agony of a broken knee. "I must have more traitors in my organization than I thought."

"Glad to see you still have your sense of humor, Banny," I said. I thought about trying for the Browning, but it was just a thought. The stunner held on me as steadily as a deck gun. There was a little sensation in the shoulder where it had caught me; a feeling as though a quarter of beef had been stitched on with a dull needle to replace the scorched arm. My legs were all right, with the exception of the burned plastic and scorched metal below my knee where the power gun had seared it.

"A traitor is a revolutionary who fails," Tarleton stated. "We won't fail."

"Now it's 'we,' " I noted. "A few hours ago it was all 'I.' "

"I'm not alone now, Mac. I've talked to people. Not a shot will be fired."

I nodded. "How does it feel, Banny? In a few hours you'll own the world. You and Napoleon. Take it apart and put it back together to suit yourself. More fun than jigsaw puzzles any day. And you'll have CBI men walking ten deep around you. No more broken legs from wild-eyed reformers who walk into your bedroom past what you call an organization." I was talking to hear myself, to keep my mind off what was coming, to defer for another few seconds the only end the scene could have.

"You moved fast, Mac. I thought"-the gun wavered, then steadied-"thought I had a few secrets."

"Tough, not being able to tip your hand. All that power-if you just don't give it away before the hook's set."

There was a muffled pounding, faint and far away. Tarleton jerked his head up. I could almost make out voices, shouting.

"Get over there," Tarleton ordered. "Open that door."

I shook my head. "Open it yourself, Banny. They're your friends."

He moved, and his cheekbones went almost green. The gun sagged and my hand was halfway to the needler before he caught it. There was greasy-looking sweat on his face. His voice was a croak. "Better do it, Mac. If I feel myself blacking out, I'll have to shoot you."

I didn't say anything. I was wondering why he hadn't shot already. He stared at me for five seconds, while I waited. . . .

Then he twisted, reached up and back, fumbled over the bedside table and suddenly sound was blasting into the room:

"-open! The fire's into the stairwell! Can you hear me, Admiral? We can't

get the door open-

"Benny!" Tarleton snapped as the shout cut off. "Blast the door down. I'm hurt. I can't get to it!" He flipped keys.

"I got him," the voice snapped. "Admiral, listen to me: you have to get it open from your side! There's nothing out here bigger than a Mark X-it'll never cut that chromalloy!"

"Get in here, Benny!" Tarleton's voice was a hoarse roar. "Don't give a damn how you do it, but get in here!"

There were many voices yelling together now.

"-out of here!"

"-too late. Let it go, Rudy!"

"-all roast together!"

"-son of a bitch is out of his mind!"

There was a loud crash, as though a heavy table had gone over, scuffling noises, a cracking roar. Banny flicked it off. His eyes were on mine. "Jacobs was always a little careless with a weapon," he said in a voice like dry leaves.

"A good man," I said. "Reflexes like a cat. Damn near got my kneecap."

"And morals to match. It was my fault; I should have warned him about the house. Genuine antiques: wood, varnish, cloth. With the right draft there'll be nothing left but a red-hot shell in half an hour."

"You've been forgetting a lot of things, Banny. Like telling your boys where to aim to stop me. You wouldn't have liked the look on Lastwell's face when he put a burst into my chest."

"You must have wanted to get me pretty badly, Mac." He tossed the stunner aside. "It looks like you get your wish. Save yourself-if it's not too late."

He watched me get to my feet; my paralyzed shoulder felt as though my Siamese twin had just been sawed off, and I missed him. The dead hand bumped my side.

"Just the one way down?"

"Service stairs at the back."

There was a tiled bathroom visible through a half-open door. I flipped on the water in the big old-style bathtub, came back out, and hauled a wool blanket off the bed.

"Get going, damn you," Tarleton said in a blurred voice. "No. . . . time. . . ." His head went sideways and he hit the floor with a thud like a split log. That was good: it would be easier for him that way. He'd been keeping himself conscious on pure willpower; he wouldn't be needing that now.

The blanket wanted to float. I shoved it under, remembering the sound of the fire bellowing in the hall. I could almost hear it through the soundproofing now. Precious seconds were passing. . . .

Back in the bedroom Banny Tarleton lay on his side, his mouth open, eyes shut. He didn't look like a world-beater now; he looked like a fellow who had had a bad dream and fallen out of bed.

He was heavy. I pulled him onto the wet blanket, rolled him in it with a double fold over his head, hoisted him onto my shoulder—a neat trick with one good arm, when I couldn't tell the shoulder was there, except for the feeling of needles prickling along the edge of the paralyzed area. The door seemed a long way off. I reached it, put my working hand against it; it hissed. That didn't change anything: I thumbed the electrolock, heard the grumble inside the armored panel. The knob turned, and the door bucked back against me, driven by a solid wall of black-and-orange flame. I shielded my face as well as I could with one hand and a flap of the blanket and walked out into it.

* * *

The sound was all around me like the thunder of a scarlet Niagara. Under my feet the floorboards were warped and buckled. Pain slashed at me like gale-driven sleet, like frozen knives raking at my face, my back, my thighs. . . .

A section of plaster fell in front of me with a dull boom, drove back the flames for an instant, and through the smoke I saw a once-white balustrade beside the stair, a smoking wraith of blackened iron now. Through a dervish-mad whirl of pale fire, I saw the chandelier, a snarl of black metal from which glass dripped like sun-bright water. The clock stood upright on the landing, burning proudly, like a martyred monk. Beside it, the boy in red pants curled, fumed, was gone in a leap of white fire. Charred steps crumbled under my foot and I staggered; the smell of burning wool was rank in my throat. I could see the varnished floor below, with fire running over it like burning brandy on a pudding, a black crescent moving out behind to consume the bright wood. Somewhere above there was a thunderous smash, and the air was filled with whirling fireflies. Something large and black fell past me, bounced along the floor ahead. I stepped over it, felt a ghostly touch of cool air, and suddenly the flames were gone from around me, and over the surf-roar of the fire I heard thin cries that seemed to come from a remote distance.

"Sweet Mother of Christ!" a high womanish voice wailed. "Look at the poor devil! He's burned as black as a tar mop!"

There was a smoke-blurred figure before me, and then others, and then the weight was gone from my back and I took another step but there seemed to be something wrong with my feet, and I was falling, falling, like a star burning its fiery path across a night sky. . . .

7

I was afloat in cool waters, listening to the distant rumble of thunder portending gentle rain. Then the rumble was a voice, coming from far away

on some frosty white mountaintop sparkling in the blue sky. I was flying, soaring down from the icy heights-or was it the cool translucent depths from which I floated up toward light, warmth, pain. . . .

I opened my eyes, saw a vague cloudy shape hovering over me.

"How are you feeling, Mac?" Admiral Banastre Tarleton's voice asked.

"Like a barbecued steer," I said-but no sound came out. Or maybe I grunted.

"Don't try to talk," Tarleton said quickly. "You breathed a lot of smoke, got some fire in your lungs. You're lucky they were made in a factory."

I had the impression someone had come up, muttered to Tarleton. Then he was back.

"You're at Bethesda. They tell me you're out of danger. You were out for eighteen hours. Second-degree burns on the face, the left hand, the back of your thighs. The coat you were wearing helped. Some kind of expanded polymer job. Bioprosthesis are having a swell time clucking over how their work stood up to the fire. Both legs were melted back to bare metal, and the right elbow was fused. They'll have a new set ready for you in about two weeks, when the bandages come off. You won't even have scars."

I tried again, managed a croak. My throat felt like rawhide dried in the desert sun.

"You'll be wondering about how certain things have gone, Mac," Tarleton went on. "Funny thing, after the fire there seemed to be a certain temporary loss of momentum in the movement. I guess my little band of gentleman-adventurers used up all their drive running out on me when things got hot. My own perspective got a little warped: I had to keep reminding myself that in a society of maniacs, the sane man has a duty to rule. And those lads who got the hell out when the flames got knee-high: they did the sane thing. You can't fight that. It took a crazy man to walk through the fire for me."

It was a long speech. I had a long one of my own ready: I was going to tell him all about how it had been a mistake to rush me to the hospital, because as soon as I could walk, I'd have to come after him to finish what I'd started; that sick or well, sane or crazy, there were things loose in the world that were worse than man's animal ferocity, and one of them was the ferocity of the Righteous Intellect; and that the most benevolent of despotisms rotted in the end into the blind arrogance of tyranny. . . .

But all I managed was a whimper like a sick pup.

The frosty haze was closing in again. Tarleton's voice came from far away, as far as the stars: "I have an appointment with the Vice President now, Mac. I'll have to explain some things to him. Maybe he'll understand, maybe not. Maybe things have gone too far. Whichever way it goes, I'd like to leave one thought with you: Theories are beautiful things-simple and precise as cut glass-as long as they're only theories. When you find in your hand the power to make them come true. . . . suddenly, it's not so simple. .

.."

Then he was gone, and the snow was drifting over me, silent and deep.

* * *

It was hours later, I don't know how many. I was half awake, reasonably clearheaded, wondering if Tarleton had really been there, or if I had dreamed the whole passage. There was a tri-D screen by the bed, playing the kind of soft music that's guaranteed not to intrude on the bridge-table conversation. It stopped abruptly in mid-moan and a voice harsh with excitement broke in:

"We interrupt this program to bring you the following bulletin: The Vice President has been assassinated and the Secretaries of Defense and State and the Attorney General as well as a number of lesser officials cut down in a burst of gunfire that shattered a secret meeting of the National Defense Council at two-nineteen P.M. Eastern Standard Time today-less than ten minutes ago. An unofficial statement by a newsman who was first on the scene indicates that a heavy-caliber machine pistol smuggled into the Capitol by Admiral Banastre Tarleton was the massacre weapon. Tarleton, still heavily bandaged from yesterday's fire and with a cast on his leg, is reported to have died in the answering fire from a Secret Service man who broke down a door to gain entry to the room. A spokesman for the CBI stated that Admiral Tarleton, a national hero since his destruction of Bloc naval forces in a deep-space battle two days ago, apparently broke under the double tragedy of the loss of the majority of his forces in the fighting, followed by the disastrous fire which swept his Georgetown home-"

The sound cut off then. I got an eyelid up, made out the hovering figure of a man in pale-green hospital togs. He fumbled at my left arm, made soothing noises, and things got vague again. . . .

Voices picked at me. I came back from soft cool shadowland, saw faces floating like pink moons above me. I recognized one of them: Nulty, Under-Secretary of Defense.

" ranking surviving officer," he was saying. "As senior line captain since the terrible losses in Monday's engagement. . . . assured you'll be fit for duty in three weeks. . . . temporary rank of vice admiral. . . . grave crisis. . . ." His voice faded in and out. Other voices seemed to come and go. Time passed. Then I was awake, feeling the artificial clearheadedness of drug-induced alertness. Nulty was sitting beside the bed.

" hope you've understood what we've been saying, Maclamore," he said. "It's of vital importance that the flagship be fully operational as soon as possible. I've posted Captain Selkirk to her as acting CO until you could assume command. We don't know what the Bloc may be doing at this moment, but it's vital that our defensive posture not be permitted to deteriorate, in spite of the terrible tragedies that have struck us."

"Why me?" I managed.

"All but a handful of staff officers of flag rank were lost in the fight," he said in a voice that quivered with tension and fatigue. "The President

agreed; you're Academy-trained, with vast operational experience-

"What about Braze?"

"He. . . was one of those lost in the assassination."

"So now Rapacious is my baby. . . . ?"

"I'm hoping you'll be able to board her within a day or two. I've ordered special medical facilities installed, and the surgeon general has agreed you can complete your convalescence there. I have reports for you to read, Maclamore. The Bloc is aware of the confusion here. They'll be wasting no time. . . ." His face was close to me, worried.

"What will you do, Admiral?" he demanded. "You'll be commanding the entire surviving armed force of the UN. What will you do. . . . ?"

A man in green came then and whispered, and Nulty went away. The lights went off. It was late; the shadows of evening were long on the walls.

I lay in the darkness and pondered my reply.