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Earth, Air, Fire and Water William Walling and Stephen Nemeth

Prologue
July, 1969.

For a major event watched avidly by untold millions of viewers, the TV production was atrocious, the lighting abominable, the video definition poor. Nebulously, a booted foot groped downward from a silhouetted ladder, a backlighted, spacesuit-encumbered figure, wearing life-support equipment, felt gingerly for the LM's dish-like landing pad. The astronaut hesitated for one heart-stopping instant, then stepped outward to lay a pristine footprint in ageless Lunar dust.

"Bravo!" Alessandro Volpone surged up from the white settee popping hoarse, benedictive profanities. He performed a little war dance across the luxuriant shag of his study. "Leonard," he said, "I'm a man of guarded enthusiasms, but did you *hear* him?"—one giant leap for Mankind'.

Leonard Colo's lips curved in a grudging smile. "They are much men, these astronauts, no doubt of that. But, will landing on the Moon open a practical technological door, or is it simply a very dramatic stunt?"

"Stunt!" In his mid-forties, Volpone was large-boned, robust, mahogany-tanned from hours of pool-side lounging at Foxhaven, the Volpone family mansion. Bushy, high-arched brows framed his dark eyes, now smoldering with banked fires of speculative resentment.

"Stunt," he repeated in the rich *basso*, rising full-flower from the depths of his broad chest. He studied his financial manager, chortling with gentle sarcasm. "Leonard you've just witnessed the grandest achievement ever sponsored by our human species, and all you can see is a carnival trick."

"Isn't it?"

"It is *not*," said Volpone heatedly. "Blundering, victimized America has beaten those conniving vermin on the other side of the globe. The Moori landing itself may prove nothing. But attendant publicity will tip the pendulum of international opinion *our* way for a change. Mark me!"

"Twenty-five billion dollars' worth?" asked Colo bluntly.

"Billions — *trillions*—cost be damned! Dare we assign dollar values to such milestones? Think of it, the Moon!"

"Dare we?" Colo's fragile smile evidenced doubt. "You begin to sound like your father, Alex. For me, everything must equate in terms of dollars and cents. I observe the flow of dollars."

"And provide a -pitiless sounding board for my wild schemes." Volpone grinned hugely. "That's your true talent, Leonard—and my single most valuable asset."

"Thank you." Colo's voice was dry, colorless. "I admit that your latest 'wild scheme' has me a trifle concerned."

Volpone sobered. "Our bid on the tube transit equipment?"

"Yes. I think your—our—bet rides on a doubtful entry, Alex. The horse may run well, if he's ever allowed to leave the starting gate."

Volpone pinched the bridge of his generous nose, hesitating beside the window to ponder the dim, twilight outline of a dense growth of maples, lining the road toward Lloyd Harbor, which framed a darker patch of Long Island Sound. "Calculated risks are connected with any proposal," he said slowly. "Our competitors—tight, small-minded penny pinchers, every one—as well as the fuel and power interests, have fought adoption of the gravity-vacuum tube transit system with every conceivable weapon. But our Washington pipeline has leaked the fact that operational economy, plus low easement and right-of-way

costs, have heavily weighted DoT's trade-off studies in our favor."

Volpone paused, glowering at the smaller man. "Be reasonable," he requested humbly. "Our proposal cost less than two hundred thou. If only *one* segment of the Northeast Corridor Network actually gets built, we'll show a handsome profit."

Colo nodded sagely. "*If* the horse isn't scratched."

Alex Volpone sighed. "Leonard, Leonard, there are no sure things in this' precarious world. It has to be an excellent bet, a clean, tremendously efficient innovation in mass transit, tucked neatly out of sight subsurface, providing .aircraft speeds, near-foolproof safety, and gravity compensated acceleration-deceleration passenger comfort.

"You've watched the model work, listened to Dr. Seymour's pitch on the compressor equipment we're to build. Can you ask more than CompAir's chance to participate in such a gigantic enterprise?"

"*If* the horse is allowed to run," maintained Colo doggedly. "And *if* young Seymour's blue sky approach proves feasible in this, the real world."

"Again?" Volpone looked sharply at the dapper, elderly accountant. "Has Dr. Powers complained about Seymour again?"

"Powers, among others," conceded Colo. "The R&Ds team is evenly split, pro-Seymour, and anti-Seymour. You can imagine what sort of working atmosphere *that* creates."

"Hummph!" Volpone's eyes narrowed. "Have Seymour stop and see me tomorrow morning," he said, resignation in his deep voice. "I hired him on the strongest possible recommendation. But we'll not suffer a maverick among our staff scientists, no matter how exceptional."

"You've already spoken to him twice," reminded Colo.

Volpone looked up, his thick brows knitted. "So J have," he said firmly. "But I hired him personally, Leonard, this time, if he doesn't settle down, I fully intend to sack him!"

Arriving early Monday morning at his thirty-fourth floor mid-Manhattan lair, Compressed Air Corporation's voluble board chairman exchanged greetings with only the elevator operator, the security guard, and the omnipresent Leonard Colo. At eight-thirty, a pair of commercial artists showed him some rough sketches of a stylized blue-and-silver foxhead device, encircled with the legend *Volpone Enterprises*, a name he'd tentatively chosen for the conglomerate, industry-wide holding company he planned to erect upon Comp-AirCorp's firm foundation.

Volpone did not act overly enthused, suggesting a longer nose for the fox, and the label *Volpone Industries*. The artists left, sounding discouraged. He leafed idly through his calendar, noting that Arne Seymour's name had been scrawled in the eight-forty-five slot. Seymour—a damned nuisance! The young staff physicist's bold audacity had rather intrigued him in the beginning. An interesting fellow, Seymour, if one overlooked his touchiness, his overweening ego, his obdurate reluctance, to take direction, *and* the insufferable bluntness which blossomed into outright rudeness upon the slightest provocation. But his overall effectiveness was unquestioned, Arne Seymour had but one style—attack! He assaulted major and minor assignments alike in the manner of a karate expert demolishing a column of bricks, neglectful of where the shards flew, or whom they might injure. Seymour met all objections to his highly original, unproven methods with scalding logic, with equations that proliferated—like epidemical bacteria cultures, and with stubborn refusal to consider what he un-blushingly referred to— as the "stupid" solutions of others.

Seymour's mind, Volpone had discovered, was far-ranging and—ignoring his infuriating manner—possessed of an uncommon fund of general knowledge. But the man had absolutely no charm or tact, which was unfortunate. Volpone had looked forward to bringing Seymour around, to graduating him, so to speak, from the Volpone "school." His father had bequeathed him definite views— about wasting potentially profitable raw material—human and otherwise. Thoughts of losing Seymour were galling, causing a pang of anxiety.

When his secretary buzzed to announce Seymour, moments later, Volpone covered the half-year marketing reports on his desk and leaned back, relaxed. The door to his paneled office was flung wide without benefit of a knock. The pale, thin physicist charged in as if the building were on fire, white shirt

rumped, carelessly knotted purple tie askew.

“Come in, come in,” invited Volpone needlessly.

Seymour augmented his other social graces with a total ineptitude for small talk. “You wanted to see me?” he demanded, his voice high-pitched, irritating, yet perfectly controlled.

“Er, yes.” Volpone sounded distantly amused. “Arne, you came to us—let’s see, nearly a year ago, isn’t it? Your technical progress has been exemplary. In fact, your performance on the tube transit studies tempted me to give you a lab of your own, .free rein to do pure research. How would that strike you?”

“I’d like it,” blurted Seymour.

“Fine, fine!” Volpone tugged fitfully at one earlobe. “In the meantime, I want you to prove yourself a cooperating member of our team here at CompAir. Dr. Powers feels concern—”

“Powers,” said Seymour, making it a simple statement of fact, “doesn’t know his ass from third base.”

Alessandro Volpone’s lips twitched, the pulse beat at his temple quickened. “I was about to say,” he continued, a burr in his voice, “that Dr. Powers is now sixty-three. He will soon—”

“If you’re going to fire me,” suggested Seymour, “get on with it. I have things to do.”

Volpone lurched to his feet, scooting his castered armchair into the unoffending bookcase behind him. He bowled his way around the desk. “You,” he growled, “are an intellectually arrogant, thoughtless, and thoroughly reckless young man.”

Seymour’s innocent blue eyes bulged behind thick lenses. “Now the vendetta,” he said, his face maddeningly immobile. “The” empire-builder, wounded in his only vulnerable spot—his pride.“

“Perhaps I am a prideful man,” admitted Volpone. “You may leave now, Seymour. I don’t care to listen to your apology, even if you have one in mind.”

“Apologize for what, the truth? All you care about is money.”

“Money!” Nostrils flaring, Volpone took firm hold of his temper. He began prowling between Seymour and the large picture window. “Truth,” he asserted, “is a fragile, intangible ideal, Money, on the other hand, is the diamond-hard pivot upon which this weary world spins. Money isn’t everything, no, but whatever’s second is quite some distance back. Someday soon, when you are without it, you may begin to appreciate the deeper meaning behind ‘money’.”

“Spend yours,” advised Seymour with a knowing smile. “Enjoy yourself while you can. You probably have time left.”

“I fully intend...” Volpone folded his long arms. “Time left? What, in the name of sweet Ever-lasting, does *that* mean?”

“Why,” said Seymour in a beguiled tone, “I thought even tycoons read newspapers. Open your eyes! The US is preparing in Vietnam just as Japan, practiced in Manchuria thirty years ago, as Italy warmed up in the Ethiopian highlands. The USSR is getting ready in the Mideast, like Hitler did in Spain.”

“Preparing for... *er, nuclear war?”

“Hardly.” Seymour looked cunning. “Neither side wants that. Ours for obvious reasons, theirs because the wise old Soviet marshals don’t want to own a heap of rubble. As for China, guess. Or better, try to *buy* the answer with all your money.”

Volpone’s dark eyes glistened. “Do you believe this nuclear stalemate will continue indefinitely, or-?”

“Hell no! Only until the balance of power—and the odds—favor *them*. Brushfire wars will break out at high friction points like Southeast Asia. I suspect one’s brewing now in Israel. They’ll bleed us white, militarily, economically, morally. We’ll go fascist—a police state with all the trimmings—or go *under*.”

“Hm-m-m, not an entirely original speculation, but...”

Seymour waved his hands, excited at last. “They’ve already undermined our will to fight, our aggressive instincts. Look at the spreading use of narcotics, the conscription rebels, student militants, organized revolutionaries—minority, and otherwise. Social patterns like those don’t start by spontaneous generation, Mr. Volpone. How many millions of rubles do you suppose the Soviet Union spends annually on subversion?”

Volpone blinked repeatedly. “We’re straying far afield,” he said. “For a scientist, you make an entertaining prophet, Seymour. I wish there were time to listen to your philosophies.”

“There is a way,” said Arne Seymour smugly.

“A... way?”

“A sure way to defeat the stalemate, bring them to their knees. It’s certain, quiet, no muss, no fuss, unless they panic and push the button. Even then, we’ll have a few hundred thousand worthy survivors salted away. They’ll have almost *no one*. Here’s the clincher,” said the physicist, standing much too close to his employer. “There is *no possible way* for them to recoup the lead once we have, say, a four- or five-year headstart.”

“Fascinating.” Volpone edged away, scowling.

“It will take decades,” said Seymour, “and could cost ‘tens—even hundreds—of billions, but it will—”

“Billions!” Volpone’s laugh was “caustic.

“I’m perfectly serious,” insisted the annoyed Seymour. “It’s a natural corollary to the interurban’t.ube transit concept. I was going to approach you after a few more weeks’ research, but...” Seymour cleared his throat. “I, uh, want to stay on at CompAir, Mr. Volpone. You’re smart enough, tough-minded enough, not to let silly moral considerations stand in your way. And you’re wealthy enough,” he added.

“Why, thank you, Arne.” Volpone looked benign. “Am I to understand that you’re pleading with me to stay?”

Seymour nodded, staring fixedly out the window.

Alex Volpone laughed heartily. “Like hell you are! You’re *demanding* that I keep you.”

“Call it... what you will. Shall I tell you about it?”

Volpone shrugged. “My first inclination is to take you by the scruff of your scrawny neck...” He glanced upward at the office clock. “I have an important meeting in twenty minutes—at nine-thirty—which allows you just nineteen minutes, Seymour. It will take far less than one whole minute to fire you.”

“Good. We’ll use the conference, room,” said Seymour over his shoulder. He disappeared through a side door.

Rocking his leonine head in wonder, Alex Volpone trudged after the physicist. He lighted a cigarette and settled himself behind the conference table with an air of heavy-lidded resignation.

Seymour pouched his cheeks several times in thought. “As you now,” he began, “Earth’s atmosphere consists of roughly twenty percent oxygen, seventy-nine percent nitrogen, and one percent argon, xenon, and miscellaneous gasses...”

Arne Seymour assaulted his subject unmercifully for thirty-one minutes. His excitement fed upon itself as the chalk squeaked ever faster on the green-tinted blackboard. Blue eyes blazed behind bottle-bottom lenses as, now and again, a small slide rule was whipped from a torn shirt pocket bulging with pens, pencils, and a six-inch scale mounted on a clip. A scrawled chain of sigmas, deltas, numbers and integral signs grew across the chalkboard in an unkempt pattern of symbolic logic.

Managing not to interrupt, Volpone soon became absorbed.

Minutes later, his secretary popped in, saying that the budget committee was awaiting him. He told her brusquely to have Leonard Colo chair the meeting in his place, that he was not to be disturbed, then motioned for Seymour to continue.

When at last Arne Seymour fell silent, wispy blond hair bedraggled, glasses coated with a thin film of chalk dust, it was seven minutes to twelve. Alex Volpone’s manner was solemn. He rose slowly, dark eyes hollow, placing a confidential hand on Seymour’s frail shoulder. “I want you to say nothing of this to anyone.”

“All right,” agreed the physicist.

“Arne, you will have your own facilities, and will henceforth report directly to me. We’ll do something about your salary, too.”

“Fine. Shall I definitize my data, refine my calculations?”

“Yes, yes.” Volpone waxed enthusiastic. “By all means, Arne. And please be certain to erase the chalkboard thoroughly.”

Volpone returned to his desk like a sleepwalker, swiveling his chair around to examine the

smog-shrouded Manhattan skyline as if searching for something. “Merciful God!” he muttered plaintively.

Then his mood changed. He began humming ‘an operatic melody in his resonant, oddly unmusical bass. He hummed for half a bar with gusto, then launched into the opening passage of “Le Veau D’Or” from Gounod’s *Faust*. His heavily wooded voice ringing in his ears, he made up in gusty volume what he lacked in tone.

At last he subsided into thoughtful silence. What an incredible idea that arrogant young snot had come up with. But was it remotely feasible?

Volpone ruminated, noting that it was lunchtime. He would have *prosciutto*, crumbly cheddar, and large, torn chunks of Anton’s home-baked sourdough covered with sweet butter, some melon, perhaps, and a half-bottle of that splendid *Chianti*.

Thus fortified, he would drive home to Long Island and spend the afternoon walking about Foxhaven to mull Seymour’s startling proposal. By evening he would know, deep within his innermost self, if it was merely another chimerical teaser like so many others he had run across in his career, or a tangible, attainable goal.

And whether he dared attempt it!

Alessandro ‘t Volpone laughed into his cupped fingers—a humorless, Mephistophelian laugh that hung in the seventy-two-degree, filtered air of his plush office like a vapor.

Straightening his cravat, he got up and confidently eased the door strut behind him.

I

December, 1987

Major Lewis Craft woke with a sense of displacement. He was definitely not in his familiar room at the bachelor officers’ quarters in South Base, deep under Antarctica’s ice cap.

He propped himself up on one elbow and yawned. Things immediately fell into perspective. In the subdued light, random shapes metamorphosed into the characterless, utilitarian furnishings of a seventh-floor room in downtown Washington’s Statler-Hilton. He relaxed, skimming in reverse order the rapid flux of events which had brought him here, the long, dull flight from Oahu to the capital, the even longer, duller flight from Marie Byrd Land to Hawaii, the rousing send-off party at the officers’ club in South Base that had made him recipient of a throbbing skull, and his surprising receipt of orders to report to General Thayer at the Pentagon.

Craft threw back the coverlet, dropping his feet to the carpet. Entirely naked, he stretched and bent to touch his toes, a compact, muscular man who stood exactly six feet tall, with a boxer’s slope-shouldered stance and the slightly sway-backed, sacroiliac-lordosis condition which spelled “runner.” Cadet Lew Craft had been a unanimous pick on everyone’s All America Team as middle linebacker during his last two seasons at West Point. Had he been a half-step faster at falling back to cover passes, the pro scouts would have kidnapped him. A first-round selection by San Francisco’s 49’ers, he’d resisted the professional football draft in favor of a Career in the US Army Corps of Engineers. He occasionally regretted this decision.

Craft went to the window, pushing aside musty-smelling gold draperies. Across L Street, the Sino-Sov Coalition’s somber embassy loomed next to the *Washington Post* building. He impassively studied huge Soviet and Chinese flags, hanging limp in the thin winter sunlight a half-block away where week-old, patches of snow lingered in gutters, on lawns and the roofs of buildings.

Craft let the drapery fall, crossed the room, flipped on a light and went into the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later he emerged, close-cropped dark hair plastered to his high forehead, a loosely wrapped towel wound around his middle. He snapped on the TV, lighting his first cigarette of the day, and crossed “one thick-calved leg over the other, smoking and watching the newscast.

Mostly, it was dull stuff. Eddy Gerhardt, the fire-breathing Midwest evangelist, had successfully rescued hundreds of souls in a giant Christ Rally the previous evening. Soviet Ambassador Vasili Kirilov had again suddenly and mysteriously departed for Moscow on the midnight *Aeroflot* SST. Rioting had broken out afresh over Stable Population legislation, recently enacted by Congress and signed into law

by President Blair, which limited offspring to 2.11 viable births per union. Craft wondered how even the most ingenious and law-abiding parents would go about having 2.11 children.

Finally a pair of items caught his full attention, a commentator's analysis of "malaise," the shortness-of-breath syndrome which had been driving indigenes of such lofty places as the Andean Plateau and Alta Himalaya ever closer to sea level, and a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the opening of the Calais-Dover tube transit loop which linked the European continent, at long last, with England. Craft pushed the off-button and busied himself dressing, wishing there'd been time to have his uniform pressed. It looked like he'd slept in it, but would have to do, Pentagon generals, or no Pentagon generals.

He adjusted his tunic, squaring the engineer's castles pinned to the lapels, gave a final swipe to his shoes with a specially treated paper strip he'd found in the bathroom, and grabbed his -cap and briefcase, leaving the room without a backward glance.

He checked out in the lobby, stopping for a hot-buttered roll and coffee in the grill, then made his way out into the chill of Sixteenth Street. It was cold, the breeze had a damp, "penetrating edge. The notion that he, newly arrived from a frozen continent, should feel discomfort on a mild winter day in Washington struck him as absurd. Craft hailed the first cruising taxi he saw, opening the door on the fly, and vaulted in before it stopped rolling.

The electric cab drove east several blocks, turning south on Fourteenth Street, and swept past the stone hulks of Commerce and Agriculture, bore right past the Jefferson Memorial, still showing evidence of minor 'disfigurement suffered in last fall's progeny taxation riots, then crossed Mason Bridge into Virginia.

The driver pulled up at the Pentagon's river entrance. Craft suspiciously eyed two dozen protesters who orbited the broad walk, carrying signs and swinging their free arms to keep warm. Scowling faintly, he paid the hack, tipping less than generously.

The pickets converged. A spindly, pimple-faced kid carrying a sign advocating PEACE AT ANY PRICE! fell in step. "Hi, soljerboy! Goin' in there t'figure out better ways of *killin'* people?"

Craft maintained his leisurely gait. He was soon surrounded by sprightly fellows with mascaraed eyes, dressed in party-colored Renaissance tights, "old soldiers" of nineteen, wearing ragged fatigues with empty bandoliers circling their torsos, a few short-haired girls who affected no makeup and wore brightly colored women's lib buttons commanding KID ME NOT!

Craft watched the guards at the entrance as he walked, guessing they wouldn't interfere unless there was trouble. Thus far, no one had touched him.

A gentle voice at his shoulder breathed, "Let's go somewhere and have some fun, honey. You won't have any fun in *that* place."

Craft looked the kid in the eye. "You're too fem for me, Charlie," he said lightly. "I'm for leather, whips and chains, y'know?"

It got a laugh. Someone yelled, "The Gay Nineties're almost here!" And someone else called, "We'll be ready for 'em, won't we?" Which got an even bigger laugh.

Suddenly Craft's path was barred by a huge black man dressed in a leather greatcoat, a silk scarf, and jackboots. A growth of woolly hair the size of a basketball framed his solemn face. "Whoa, General," he said softly. "Give us a minute of your time, hey?" He grinned down at Craft through a drooping, evil-looking mustache. "Not- uptight about me calling you 'General', are you?"

"Mercy, no," said Craft. "I am a general."

The grin disappeared. "You should complain," said the "black man. "They've laid the golden oak leaves of a mere major on you."

"I'm traveling incognito." Craft stood perfectly still.

The black man chuckled. "A witticism, withal! It's obvious that you're a man of rare intelligence and wit, Major."

"I'm very witty," said Craft. "And I'm a general, remember?"

"Your pardon, General, sir," apologized the other. His manner became overbearingly sincere. "I'd like to point out," he said slowly and distinctly, "that you are a paid killer of innocents, employed by our

fascistic state to do its dirtiest dirty work.

"I know—I mean I *know*—*because* I spent two years in the Mideast, helping pluck Israel's chestnuts out of the fire. I've seen with my own glims what napalm can do (o an.Arab village. I've sworn an oath to do everything in my power to convince you, and others like you, that you're nothing but paid mercenaries, employed by a warmongering, military-industrial elite who—"

"Imperialist lackey," said Craft. "You forgot to call me that."

The black man came a half-step nearer. The other protesters hung back, listening. "You are trying my patience, Major."

"Your minute is up," said Craft. "Stand aside."

The black man frowned. "Stubborn!" He waggled his index finger in Craft's face. "You've got to stay and rap with me, man!"

Lew Craft changed his briefcase to his other hand. When the black man reached out to stop him, he lowered his shoulder and drove forward with a lashing surge that emptied the bigger man's diaphragm, dumping him on his butt among the pickets.

Craft strolled on toward the entrance, ignoring cries of, "Fascist pig!" and "Dum-dum soldier!" The guards were suppressing pleased grins when he gravely nodded and entered the Pentagon.

Brigadier General Martin Thayer prided himself on his famous ancestor Sylvanus Thayer, one of West Point's founding lights. To Craft, he looked much older than during their last meeting, three years before, as he acknowledged the fact that Craft was reporting as ordered by nodding toward the only other chair in his cramped cubby of an office, then resumed his writing.

At last he looked up, pushing aside a mound of paperwork. "Major Craft," he said tiredly, "I understand that you were involved in a minor fracas outside the building a few minutes ago."

"Yes, sir. Someone wanted to give me... a lecture."

The general's smile was bleak. "You were fortunate it ended so quickly. The news media love to cover a riot at the Pentagon. We urge all personnel to use one of the minor entrances, but you had no way of knowing that, *of*, course. I imagine you're curious about why you were whisked away from South Base like this."

"It did surprise me, sir."

"Well it might. If your orders surprised you the reason behind them will astound you. You were promoted just two months ago. *That*, believe it or not, is the reason. Every competent man under my command seems to reach field grade only to disappear into the Department of Transportation's maw."

"I'm... I don't follow that, sir," said Craft.

"Damned if I understand it myself." Thayer's headshake was bewildered. "Someone's pulling strings I've never learned the existence of, Craft. Unfortunately, you're one of the puppets."

"DT has an awesome task on hand—riding herd on construction of the nationwide interurban tube transit system. Everyone recognizes that ITTS has Transportation overburdened, just now. Why, they can't seem to find civilian engineers smart enough to pour you-know-what out of a boot, so they raid my command for bright field-grade officers like you, and *never* give any back."

"Am I to understand that I'll be working on the ITTS project?"

"Correct, Major, the Sacramento-Reno loop that's abuilding under the Sierra Nevada out in California. You'll be acting as consultant to DoT, 6n detached service for an indefinite period. Or even longer," added the general wryly. "I allowed the first four men to go without bitching, then got up on my high horse and screamed about the fifth—letters to the Defense Department, the Joint Chiefs, more letters to Transportation Secretary Jergensen, and Undersecretary Alex Volpone. And *more* letters up through echelons, which got me only a polite 'go-to-hell' note from some bean-counter in DoT, *and* a quiet word telling me to shut up from someone who shall, I assure you, remain nameless. Never seen anything like it in thirty-two years of service!"

Craft looked intrigued. "One of my pals at South Base—a Captain Archer—was promoted late last year, and—"

“A perfect case in point,” said the general, fuming. “Red Archer was number thirty-seven—something like that.” The general extracted a paper from Craft’s folder, examining it with unconcealed distaste. “We have another exercise to go through,” he said. “A secrecy oath, Major. Yes,” pursued the general acidly, “it seems your oath of commission won’t hold water in the face of a *civilian* job.” He let the document settle to his desktop as if it were unclean.

Major Craft skimmed it. Mostly mumbo-jumbo, it commanded his strict silence while performing DoT activities, “—such activities, and information pertinent thereto, are to be considered very highly classified, whose possession by unfriendly powers-would be detrimental to the best interests of the American people, and to their common defense.”

“Defense?” Craft looked up questioningly.

General Thayer grunted his disgust. “Buzzwords! Whoever wrote that thing threw in every authoritative sounding noun and verb he could glean from all of the security oaths ever devised. I doubt that any of it means much...”

The general broke off, rising stiffly. He came around the desk to stand near Craft’s chair. “Lew, off the record I’m a worried man.” His tone was low, confidential. “That gobbledegook is part and parcel of our nation’s -leadership vacuum. Oh, demagogues aplenty, but no clear-headed, decision-making *leaders* of, say, Roosevelt’s or Truman’s stamp. That goes for the Congress and Cabinet as well, I’m sorry to say, not to mention the military. I had occasion to visit the Academy -last month, classrooms and lecture halls filled with sloppy-dressed, sloppy-minded cadets whose minds were probably occupied by girlie magazines like *Swinger*, or the fleshpots of New York, rather than partial differential equations.”

Thayer sniffed his displeasure, folding his arms across his beribboned chest. “I studied your folder last night, trying to convince myself it was for the best, that DoT’s need was greater than our own.” He looked into Craft’s eyes. “It isn’t. No amount of rationalizing will make it so. In these times, when we import sixty percent of our petroleum—principally from the offshore fields in the South China Sea, right under the Sino-Sov Coalition’s nose—when civilian fuel is strictly rationed and the military worries constantly about the diminishing supply, tapping Antarctica’s deeply stored mineral and petroleum wealth has become essential.

“Lew,” said the general, “you ranked seventh in your class—no small achievement, considering the number of hours you spent away from study because of football. More, you had the judgment and sense of duty to realize that football is only a game. I respect that.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’re most welcome. But I wasn’t going out of my way merely to compliment you,” said Thayer. “My point is simply this, the theft of your abilities by DoT leaves a hole which is impossible to fill. Multiply that hole by the numbers of competent, skilled officers who’ve been snatched away to do God-knows-what, and it creates a gaping wound which may never heal completely.”

General Thayer leaned close. “Something’s going on—something *big*. And it’s connected somehow, with ITTS. I’ve chased leads right and left, chased them high and low. I’ve no notion what it is, or who’s responsible. But stay on your toes out in California. Use your wits. The finest definition of an engineer I ever heard was, ”a qualified schemer—someone who schemes day and night about how to do it better, more cheaply, with fewer moving parts. Be a schemer, Lew. I can’t order you to violate that stupid goddam security oath, of course, but...” Thayer trailed off uncertainly, looking sad.

“I’ll keep my eyes and ears open, sir.”

The general grinned. “I’m sure you will. Did you sign that ridiculous thing? Ah, yes. OK, it goes into your file. You’re scheduled to report to the Sacramento DoT office ASAP, but I’ve amended your orders to include a fifteen-day de-lay-en-route. Your home is still in California, am I right?”

“It was kind of you to remember, sir,” said Craft. “My parents are both gone, but there’s... a girl.”

“Good.” Thayer looked pleased. “Well, enjoy the holidays.”

“Thank you, General.” Craft shook Thayer’s proffered hand. “It’s been a pleasure serving under your command.”

“The pleasure was mine purely mine, son.”

Five hours later Craft was boredly watching the snow-drifted Nevada desert unroll sixty thousand feet beneath the great delta wing that stretched its titanium sheen outward into the stratosphere beyond his window seat.

Ordinarily, he would have studied the sunwashed immensity surrounding him and thought poetic thoughts. Today it irritated him, he wished the pilot would push the throttles to the firewall and make the aircraft march. The Lockheed SST was restricted—as were all commercial flights over the North American land mass—to subsonic cruise, thus avoiding the danger of plowing a sonic furrow across America.

Craft was thoroughly and completely fed up with flying. This cross-country junket, coming as it did hard upon the heels of his tedious journey from Antarctica, made him fidget in his narrow seat in the coach section of the half-filled bird. He'd tried to doze, then tried to interest himself in the torpid in-flight movie. He'd also attempted conversational overtures with the pert stewardess who served him tough roast beef and lukewarm coffee somewhere over the Midwest, feeling not at all surprised when she'd rebuffed him—probably because he was still in uniform. It had reminded him of the lines from Kipling that Red Archer liked to toss around after becoming adequately sloshed in the officers' club at South Base, something about, "makin' mock o' uniforms that guard you while you sleep." Or, more in line with recent events,

*While it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that,
an' "Tommy, fall behind,
But it's "Please to walk in front, sir," when
there's trouble in the wind—*

And trouble in the wind - there seemed to be. Craft had been gone from the States long enough to feel out of touch, but could not imagine a tough old bird like General Thayer running scared of shadows.

There was a tangible feeling in the air, something more than was accountable to peace marchers, anti-birth-control rioting, or general civil strife. He had sensed it at the airport in Hawaii, in the streets of Washington, even here aboard the plane.

Restless, he walked up the aisle to the coach class lounge, rummaging through the magazine rack. Nothing caught his eye until a young, petite, rosy-skinned girl draped in a single strand of strategically placed Christmas bunting winked at him from the January issue of *Swinger*, the magazine for swingers.

Craft smiled to himself. He flipped pages to the table of contents where he found Betty Dancer's miniature, smiling likeness. Betty, the original nudie cutie in the brightly ribboned swing that *Swinger* had made as famous as *New Yorker's* Eustace Twilley, or *Esquire's* Eskie, had posed for the masthead shot about five years ago. He carried the magazine back to his seat and browsed.

It was the annual Christmas issue, replete with bawdy Santa Claus jokes, cartoons, and flat photos of unclothed, nubile young girls in one provocative pose or another. Youth! That was what *Swinger* was all about—the sale of youthful sexuality to young urban males who hadn't the wit to realize they already owned it.

He returned to the logo shot of Betty Dancer in the swing—the same saucy grin, flying honey-blond hair, pert breasts, flat tummy, and long, "tanned legs. Craft studied her hungrily. His memory did nip-ups and his bowels churned in sheer want.

He and Betty had been quite serious at one time. It had ended in coolness and bickering dis-affiliation. Craft had promised to write, and so had she. Neither of them had quite gotten around to doing so. Her "marriage" to *Swinger* had been the primary sore spot, aggravated when Lew asked her not to pose for any more nude photos.

Craft recalled the afternoon when she had told him she now worked directly for Hoo Hanford, *Swinger's* millionaire publisher. Their magnificent argument about his "Victorian" attitude had severed things rather permanently. But Betty was now twenty-five, or thereabouts, her days of nudie centerfolds were long in the past. What the hell! She was probably married, with one or two children, by now. Still, it wouldn't hurt to call and find out. Thoughts of Christmas alone in some dreary hotel room did not cheer him.

When the FASTEN SEAT BELTS and NO SMOKING signs lighted, he cinched his lap strap,

hearing the conducted hum of servomotors as the flaps rolled backward and down, braking the SST into a nose-high landing approach attitude.

Moments later, the tandem trucks touched down with a scorching bark, and Craft sighed. He was back where he longed to be—on the ground.

The pay phone in the boarding concourse had no video channel. Craft punched the once familiar code automatically, surprised that he still remembered it. “*Swinger* magazine,” said an affected feminine voice. “Merry Christmas.”

“Uh, a very Merry to you,” he said. “Can I talk to Betty Dancer, please?”

“I’m sorry, sir, Mr. Hanford is not in his office this afternoon. Would you care to leave a message?”

Craft pursed his lips. “I want Betty Dancer,” he said, “not Mr. Hanford. There’s a big difference.”

“Oh, I beg your pardon. Miss Dancer is Mr. Hanford’s personal secretary, and I assumed... One moment, sir, I’ll connect you.”

“Thanks.” The girl had said “Miss” Dancer.

Two clicks and a buzz later, Betty’s warm contralto said, “Mr. Hanford’s office.”

“Hi,” he said. “This’s Lew.”

A sharp intake of breath at the other end of the line made him visualize Betty’s characteristic head toss—the little, unconscious movement that flicked her long blonde tresses out of her eyes. “Lew... you’re home?”

“Almost. I’m at Palmdale Intercontinental. I just got in from the East, and wanted to call and see if... “Craft cleared” his throat. “I wanted to know if we could get together while—”

“Why, I... I’d be delighted to see you. God, it’s been such a long time. Years! How have you been?”

“Fine, real good.” She sounded confused. Betty had never been an easy gal to fluster. “When,” he asked, “would be a good time?”

“Lew, I... Right away. Now.”

“Do you mean it?”

“Certainly I mean it,” she said. “Take the ITTS direct loop from Palmdale to the Civic Center, then catch the urban feeder to West Los Angeles. I’ll meet you at the Wilshire-La Cienega station in... Let’s see, about twenty minutes. All right?”

One thing could be said for Betty, feminine wiles formed no major facet of her character. She rarely played cutesy female games. Betty spoke her mind, though that could be a painful thing on occasion, too. “On my way,” said Craft. Then, after a short pause, he said, “Betty, I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve thought about you a lot, too,” she said. “Hurry!”

“Twenty minutes,” he said, and hung up.

II

December, 1987

“Public acceptance, gentlemen.” DoT Undersecretary Alessandro Volpone looked around him, waving a tiny dessert spoon for emphasis. “A decade of public use has proven the ITTS system—safe, quiet express service, adaptable to long or short haul transit. Passengers like the convenience, the absence of sway or what we call ‘elevator effect’.”

“It’s a marvelous way to get there,” agreed someone nearby.

“It certainly is.” Pleased, Volpone brushed back a shock of iron-gray hair, the remark had come from a slender black gentleman known in financial circles as “Black Midas.” A devotee of “sure things” by all reports, he now voted a block of shares third only to Clyde Clinton’s large holdings, and to Volpone’s own fifty-seven percent, which the SEC had ordered held in trust while executing his present DoT duties. But it was Clinton who craved wary walking. Lying in the weeds all through dinner, Clinton had been awaiting the opportunity to attack.

And his chance was coming. A covert glance at his wafer-thin atomic-electric wrist chronometer

showed that Volpone's sixteen guests, now almost finished with dessert, would soon forgather in the lounge for brandy and cigars—sixteen wealthy, influential men and women who would have him and Leonard Colo at the mercy of their calculating, rehearsed questions for an hour or so of agony. .

Volpone wiped moist palms on the napkin in his lap. His father had instituted the ceremonial wining and dining of principal shareholders prior to CompAirCorp's third annual stockholders meeting in the late Thirties, "It soothes them," his father had counseled, "making them less liable to attack your policies head-on from the floor when it matters." Volpone could remember when the dinner had been pleasurable. Even ten years ago, when the conspiracy in which he was deeply embroiled had been less of a nightmare, he'd actually looked forward to describing corporate programs which never failed to earn bountiful dividends. Each subsequent dinner had been worse. Someday his incredible juggling act—borrowing from Peter to pay Paul—would come to light. There was no way to fend it off.

"I surely enjoy the tube," said a lumberman hoarsely. "Ride - from Seattle to Spokane an' back every day, I do. Just like sittin' on a soft, downy cloud, but I have trouble believin' the darned thing's goin' five hundred miles an hour."

"I find it incredible myself," said Volpone. "Perhaps we're becoming spoiled, taking ITTS for granted."

Muttered exclamations of assent traveled around the near end of the table. From the corner of his eye, Volpone saw Clinton look his way, something steely and unforgiving in his glance, and sensed it time to launch his warm-up speech. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "if we review the history of land travel, salient milestones become dearly pinpointed. Early wheeled vehicles allowed the building of towns and cities far from waterways or the seas. Then horse-drawn conveyances came along, enabling town dwellers to live in the rural countryside and work- in the city, farmers could market produce in high-paying population centers. There's an adage, 'When it's time to railroad, railroads will be built.' Technology evolved machine-driven vehicles—automobiles and trains-creating a mobile society, encouraging westward expansion in America.

"But this 'progress' brought along a series of curses, pollution of the air we breathe, the water we drink, noise, congestion, deterioration in cities marking the treasurehouses of our culture."

Volpone paused, gauging their attention. "You're politicking," accused a voice. "Two years ago, when you were only a board chairman, your speech had more snap, even if it was the same speech."

Clinton's casual remark stirred a ripple of laughter. Volpone forced a grin. "I had much more time to rehearse it two years ago. Seriously," he continued, "ITTS's rationale is inescapable. When we first proposed building compressors for the earlier, less sophisticated prototype in the late Sixties, we were struck by the logic behind DoT's trade-off studies.

"Consider a twenty-five by fifteen foot elliptical bore—a true pendulum arc—reaching thousands of feet underground, blending into controlled involute approaches tangent to the surface at either terminus. The same question always cropped up, What would be the astronomical cost of such geometrically accurate bores? DoT's systems engineers looked at it from an overall systems standpoint, as a *gestalt* problem. Their answer was amazing, the cost-effectiveness of sending nuclear-powered boring rigs through the Earth's crust proved far superior station-to-station to any other high-speed systems solution—between four and five million dollars per mile for a totally completed and equipped tunnel.

"There were no rights-of-way to buy, no eminent domain payoffs, no easements to declare, nor would there be the history of surface property devaluation traditionally created by unsightly, noisy surface rail lines.

"The boring vehicles—ultimately designed for inertial guidance-were developed by one of the oil tool companies, atomic borers, fusing rock at the ferocious pace of twelve feet per hour, while tungsten-carbide bits chewed a neat ellipse. Ergo, the tunneling problem was solved."

"Then came this maglev business," remarked the lumberman.

"Magnetic levitation," said Volpone, nodding "Guidance and tram suspension are achieved by bipolar repulsion, without the concomitant energy losses normally induced by rolling wheel friction, or wheel flange roller-bearing friction. Maglev is drag-free—excepting minor eddy'current generation, plus minute drag from, the power wipers themselves."

“It sounds ingenious,” ventured Black Midas. “We ride on magnetic currents, and are propelled by air.”

“Exactly.” Volpone warmed to his task. “Our compressors operate on a continuous duty-cycle, evacuating the side-by-side tubes to an average underpressure of 2.1 psi, allowing high pressure-low pressure differentials behind and ahead of the train respectively—the ‘blow gun’ principle. Squirts of quick demand, high pressure air are released in fractions of a second by means of computer-operated ports spaced along the casing walls. The beauty of this is that no propulsive energy device need be carried aboard the trains themselves, making each assemblage of cars a lightweight shell.

“There are secondary virtues,” he went on, “Aerodynamic drag effects and turbulence are greatly reduced in a semi-vacuum, hence the high velocities attained. And the underground system is relatively maintenance-free—complete environmental protection, with subsequently reduced corrosion in ferrous parts.”

“How about safety?” asked a gaunt, elderly woman across the table. “The notion of rushing along blindly makes me nervous.”

“Ah, but you aren’t rushing along ‘blindly’, madam,” corrected Volpone. “Each ten feet of casing is strain gauge monitored at a central station. Every pneumatic valve, power distribution point, wiper section, and compressor station is visually monitored on closed-circuit TV.

“None of the unexpected hazards common to conventional carriers can occur, no traffic crossings, bridge washouts, snowdrifts covering the rails. Complete electro-pneumatic failure would cause your train to stop smoothly on its skids as the tube fills with air from automatically opened ports—a sort of ‘deadman switch’—though that’s never happened. Emergency lights will come on, a supply of compressed air, plus backup thruster bottles,” will propel your train to the nearest emergency elevator shaft. You’ll still be home in time for dinner.”

“Well...” The lumberman waxed his hands reflectively. “All I know is it gets me from ray front door to the office in about two hoots an’ a handshake. We take ITTS for granted, nowadays.”

There was a concerted scraping of chairs. “Thank you Mr. Volpone,” said Black Midas. “It was an absorbing account.”

“It was my pleasure, sir.”

Clinton was waiting to pounce, lighting a cigar and pretending to listen to what was being said around him. He dropped his eyes when Volpone herded Black Midas into the lounge.

Alex Volpone squared himself mentally, deciding it was better to get it over with. He confidently approached the group surrounding Clinton. “Gentlemen, did you enjoy yourselves at dinner?”

“First rate... excellent... very nice.” The muttered politenesses diminished. Clinton’s sulky baritone cut the air like a scalpel. “We should have enjoyed it, it cost us enough!”

“You’ve heard discouraging rumors, Mr. Clinton?” asked Volpone.

“It’s easy to guess what the dividend will amount to—peanuts!”

“I’m afraid you’re correct. The quarterly dividend will again be quite moderate,” admitted Volpone in a strained voice.

“I thought so.” Clinton’s lips compressed unforgivingly.

“I realize how disappointing that must sound.” Volpone lighted a cigarette, studying the, smoke. “The dividend will not be significantly larger than the last quarterly. Blame diversification, the plowing of profits back into expenditures for tools and materials. Our assets have increased five-fold in the past twenty months, new earth-moving equipment, conveyor systems, derricks, barges and tugs. And we have, I must remind you, ventured into deep ocean mining, cement and glass manufacture, hydroponic farming. We have spent millions on research, and pioneering is always expensive.”

“But,” objected Black Midas, “is growth our only prospect?”

“You mustn’t forget our large, continuing expenditures for ITTS air reduction equipment, either,” said Volpone, trying not to sound defensive despite oppressive odds. “When progress payments from DoT begin to roll in—”

“Growth is too *fast*,” insisted Clinton with heat, “too damned single-minded! I know you’ve stepped away to help Jergenson at DoT, but the fact remains, you should be home minding the store.”

Volpone rocked on his heels, smoking with outward calmness. “Gentlemen, we’ve undertaken a job projected to last another fifteen years—building a network of ITTS tubes linking population centers throughout the contiguous United States, Alaska, and Hawaii. We’ve now purchased, or constructed, all tools necessary to complete that job. The payoff is on the not-too-distant horizon. I ask your patience, VI’s backlog and potential profits are absolutely fantastic.”

“Fantastic, eh?” Clinton ground out his cigar. “OK, let’s see you field this one, I’ve had reports of continuing excavation on or near sites purportedly completed six months ago. Why, Volpone? Aren’t we meeting schedules?”

“A half-truth, Mr. Clinton.” Volpone’s deep voice was steady. “The scope of the job—which I admit appears peculiar—was altered slightly after the contracts were let. We’ll soon receive a nice cost renegotiation fee on the enlarged portion of—”

“Enlarged?” Clinton’s eyes narrowed. “What’s enlarged?”

“I… didn’t mean in size,” Volpone hurried to say. “Let’s call it an expansion of performance criteria, rework will require supplemental electronic and electrical modifications that—”

“Strange,” said Black Midas. “Why would ‘electronic’ modifications require additional excavation?”

“Damned right it’s strange!” chimed Clinton. “You don’t ‘excavate’ electronic mods. Care to clarify that, Volpone?”

The industrialist cleared his throat determinedly. “The answer is a technical one. I’m not prepared to answer such questions at this time, but I do want to say—”

“I’ll bet you’re not!” Clinton thrust his jaw forward in vexation. “Two evasions out of two, you’re batting one thousand. Let’s take one more, just in the interests of science, Why is VI running so phenomenally high on long-term interest payments?”

“It’s because,” said Volpone immediately, “we’ve borrowed so heavily against phenomenally high long-term potential profits.”

Clinton looked as if he’d bitten into a wormy Apple. “But the goddam loans are pushing three *billions*, Volpone. The interest-plus-principal payments are staggering, yet your price-to-earnings-ratio is still fifty-to-one. That makes absolute nonsense!”

“I’ve explained the backlog of work, our accumulation of assets, the impending cost-plus-incentive-fee progress payments.”

Clinton was furious. “Two-bit quarterlies on an eighty dollar stock!” he said, the color high in his cheeks. “Damned poor management! You’ve squandered time, labor, profits. Why, it’s so obvious… if some dumb-ass buyers would come into the market and turn the price around just a little, I’d dump the whole rotten mess!”

Volpone sadly bowed his leonine head. “I can’t believe you’re serious, Mr. Clinton. You’ve got land, buildings, equipment that’s operating, earning a great deal of money daily. VI is solvent. You shareholders have earned a gigantic equity, and for you to—”

Alessandro Volpone found himself addressing the back of Clinton’s swiftly retreating thousand dollar suit.

Afterward, alone with Leonard Colo in the rear seat of the speeding limousine, he felt only all-encompassing weariness. The dinner had been a fiasco. Clinton had eaten him alive, not forgetting to spit out the skin and seeds. He closed burning eyes, the nightmare question rose to haunt him—a specter foretelling future troubles. “You don’t suppose that cobra knows, do you?”

“No,” said Colo. “He has no way of finding out.”

Volpone sighed. “You reassure me. What would I do without you?”

“You would probably go to jail,” said Leonard Colo.

Volpone chuckled tiredly. “A peaceful jail cell, sounds delightful, just now,” he said. “Lord, if Clinton and the others discovered that my shares—supposedly held in trust while I’m acting for DoT—are mortgaged to the hilt, they’d trample us like a herd of elephants. I would lose Volpone Industries.”

“Nonsense!”

“It isn’t nonsense. I’d be forced to resign and reclaim my shares if it ever came to a proxy battle.

You and I both know how impossible that is. Everything would come to light—everything.”

“Yes, you know it,” said Colo, “and I know it. But Clinton and the others don’t know it. I spent months and months mortgaging your securities. Only our . . . good friends invested.”

“Invested!” Volpone’s bass was laden with self-reproach. “I have wheedled, cajoled, begged, lied and cheated. I wonder how understanding our ‘good friends’ will be? They’ve thrown their money behind a worthy cause, true. But few of them will ever learn of it.”

“As have you, so you tell me,” reminded Colo.

Volpone’s shrug was eloquent. “I’m dry—almost completely dry. But not sorry. I would do it again, in exactly the same way.”

“I would shoot you first,” said Colo.

Volpone snickered. “Leonard, the world political Situation makes me thank everlasting God—and Arne Seymour—for the opportunity to *do* something concrete before it became too late.”

“World politics today is precisely what it has been for the past five thousand years,” said Colo dryly. “You’ll discover sympathy for destitute billionaires to be rather a scarce commodity, Alex. Especially for one who’s been convicted and sentenced on fifty or more counts of willful conspiracy to defraud.”

“Oh, you’re scoffing and cynical, Leonard. I would rather be imprisoned by a free society for flouting its laws than enslaved, or vaporized in the coming holocaust, by its enemies.”

“I beg you, no patriotic speeches,” pleaded Colo. “I’m too old, too tired for flag waving. I have watched *you—helped* you—dissipate an enormous fortune. Not through drink, gambling, or in any of the classic ways, but in pursuit of a madman’s dream.”

“A very competent madman,” modified Volpone.

“A madman, nevertheless, who advocates building expensive compressors and gargantuan air storage tanks in untold quantities at ruinous cost for ever and ever and ever . . .”

“You’re exaggerating. Remember, your madman’s dream is shared by myself and four of America’s most powerful men. Our present dilemma was created by people problems, not by hardware. Had Senator Stillworth been less ambitious, or Secretary Jergenson less obstinate in the matter of the Federal auto license proposal—”

“Whatever, Alex, whatever!” Colo waved his hands in frustration. “You must have your nose rubbed in it, eh? Very well. I’m in a position to know your personal finances. You will soon have trouble meeting your daily household expenses. What about that?”

“True.” Volpone looked very dubious, very subdued. “Nearly everything is in the pot. Did I tell you I’m thinking of selling the yacht? Why should I be burdened with a yacht?”

“Because you love the yacht,” answered Colo sourly.

“Aa-a-agh! I haven’t set foot aboard the *Spindrift* since last year’s Bermuda cruise with Marissa. There are a few hundred thou—perhaps even a million—in the yacht, and quite a few millions more tucked safely away in Switzerland.”

“Switzerland?” Colo sounded surprised. “So, you’ve begun to keep things from me. No matter, I’m damned glad you have it. You badly need a cash buffer.”

“Most of it will go for debt interest, I want the collateral returned on my securities. Proceeds from sale of the *Spindrift* will keep Foxhaven going another four or five years.”

Leonard Colo turned slowly.

“And after these five years?”

“Afterward, if there is an after, we’ll find a way to cross that bridge. Please, I don’t feel up to an argument tonight.”

“As you will.” The accountant lapsed into moody silence.

Absorbed in watching the lights of Flushing hurtle past across the less and less used Long Island Expressway, Volpone made a request. “Leonard, remind me to buy Marissa a Christmas present.”

“Certainly,” rasped Colo. “I’ll even lend you the money.”

Transportation Undersecretary Volpone guffawed, slapping his financial manager’s knee in delight. “Leonard, you’re ageless. You never change,” he said as the quiet-running electric limousine raced on into the night.

III
December, 1987

Major Lew Craft rode a descending ramp into the long, spacious main concourse of Palmdale Intercontinental Airport's ITTS station. He found a lavender-colored ticket kiosk labeled *Los Angeles Civic Center*, and dropped his credit card into a slot. The ticketing machine spat out the plastic card wrapped in a lavender ticket.

Another slideway carried him three levels downward. He stepped off into a correlated lavender branch vestibule—an artificially skylighted gallery containing rest rooms, benches, trees, and planters filled with bright-hued perennials. The lavender ticket admitted him through a floor-to-ceiling turnstile which gave onto the boarding concourse.

Craft inspected everything with renewed interest, admiring the conscientious effort to keep all functional equipment completely out of sight. He had not used ITTS for nearly two years, the fact that he would soon be employed at a similar installation made him aware of the nicety of furnishing, the appealing detail design, that had gone into this one. Nothing warned of an arriving train until a series of doors opened simultaneously in a hitherto muraled wall, exposing row upon row of the two-hundred-compartment train's eight-passenger compartments, only ten of which were visible in this segment of the boarding concourse. Had these eighty seats been filled, he could have either hunted through other segments, or simply waited for another train. There were many vacant seats, the ITTS trains ran seven minutes *apart—exactly*.

He stepped across the flush threshold, choosing an unoccupied seat. The entire eight-passenger module had automatically swung to a horizontal attitude when the inbound train reached the crest of its involute approach, running straight and level into Palmdale Station. The seats were deeply contoured, covered in glove-soft vinyl, with double armrests and semi-wraparound headrests. His body triggered a pressure-sensitive switch, soft stereo music emanated from the headrest wings inches from either ear.

seconds later, an attention-commanding buzz warned of imminent departure, an inner diaphragm began drawing closed across the ovoid doorway. When no boarding or disembarking passenger interrupted the closing membrane, its sections joined, activating an interlock switch, relays closed along the train's length, and the computer commanded all hermetic doors to roll down and seal. There was a sibilant hiss of air, then silence. He could hear only a muted whisper from the air conditioning.

Mild acceleration pressed Craft gently into the seat, easing off after perhaps ten seconds, followed by no sensation of movement whatsoever. The train, accelerating down the involute section of tube, "caused the compartment to cant unobtrusively, maintaining an attitude which kept the seat of his pants aligned with the axis of acceleration. But that acceleration was regulated computerwise to coincide with the gravitational nulling effect of falling down the tube's descending pendulum arc. Deceleration at the far terminus would work in precisely the opposite way.

Craft knew the southern California network to be crisscrossed with many geologic faults, and fracture zones, the Pacific Coast's earthquake belt, a portion of the "ring of fire" girdling the Earth. As well as lesser known crustal fractures, the Mojave-Los Angeles trunk line penetrated the renowned San Andreas Fault, which had been excavated to form a large chamber filled with dampening material—no mean engineering feat in itself—hopefully permitting enough compliance, or elasticity in the casing-fault interface, to prevent tragedy in the event of a major quake.

Craft could have watched a newscast, or selected a minutes-old financial computer readout. Had this been a long haul interurban train, he would have had time to read a magazine, order a drink, or watch prerecorded entertainment.

Not very many minutes later, the seat of his pants told him mild deceleration forces were at work. Deceleration abated, then ceased. When the compartment door opened, he was exactly fifty-five kilometers as the crow flies from Palmdale Airport.

He did not ride all the way up to main concourse level in Los Angeles, pausing at a three-dimensional model of the entire complex to select one of the many suburban feeder lines color-coded to the city's

southwest quadrant. This time it was a vermilion kiosk. His vermilion ticket allowed him to board a commuter-jammed train. He stepped out minutes later at the Wilshire-La Cienega station, seventeen minutes after leaving Palm-dale.

This time he stayed on the slide-way, emerging into the main concourse lying directly beneath Wilshire Boulevard's pedestrian esplanade, where clusters of tall palms and subtropical foliage were illuminated by translucent skylights set dramatically in the swooping planes and curves of a high, free-form ceiling. Craft let the broad central slideway carry him toward the far end of the mile-long concourse, watching the signs. He got off at the foot of an ascending ramp labeled *La Cienega Drive*.

He hefted his briefcase impatiently and searched the crowd, his uniform earning more than one casual glance from passers-by. But Betty was nowhere in sight. He was excited by the prospect of seeing her again.

Then he glanced upward and spotted her, there was a small catch in his throat as he watched her enter the descending ramp above him. Craft ran lithely up the downward moving ramp against the grain, causing pedestrians to dodge nervously out of his way. Betty Dancer's eyes widened, she started to say something, but he caught her in his arms and swung her around, then simply held her, until-the ramp carried them down and deposited them at concourse level.

Betty ignored the many stares. "I've been swept off my feet before," she said breathlessly, "but not like *that*."

"You never wrote to me."

"Well, neither did you." Betty disengaged herself.

"I... wanted to." Craft guided her toward the ascending ramp. "I-meant to write, tried to write. I didn't because..."

"I'm not married, if that's what's worrying you." Betty smiled. "Marriage is... Marriage is obsolete."

"Marriage," he said, "will be obsolete when people are. obsolete, which may be sooner than we think."

Betty caught her breath. "Oak leaves—you're a major now!"

"Just an accident," he said. "Betty, you look smashing."

"But older," she said ruefully. "Does it show?"

Lew Craft made no rejoinder, leering at her as they rode the - slideway leading to. the parking strip. He didn't kiss her until they were seated side-by-side in Betty's tiny electric runabout. She pushed him away after the second long kiss.

"Oh-h-h! High voltage, Major. I do like, but no encores. We have to get going, I'm taking you to a super Christmas party."

Craft stroked her hair. "You can go to Christmas parties any time at all," he said.

"Never out of season," she pointed out. "It just isn't done. Besides, Mr. Hanford needs me. And he's the boss."

Craft kissed her again. "I need you, and I'm the boss."

"You're a male chauvinist..." She ran her finger along the line of his jaw. "Sorry, Mr. Hanford's still the boss, Lew."

"Let Mr. Hanford find his own Sheila," he said softly.

"Sheila?" Betty was intrigued. "Wherever did you learn that?"

"Um, I spent a month's leave in Australia and New Zealand last fall, if you must know."

"It sounds vulgar." She wrinkled her nose. "I'll bet only chippies are called 'Sheilas'."

"Negative. It's a term of endearment." Craft kissed her again.

"Oh-h-h!" Betty pushed herself away resolutely. "You stroll home and I leap into your arms..." She looked into his eyes for a dreamy instant, then impatiently flicked back her hair and turned the key, energizing the little runabout.

Betty wheeled rapidly to the surface and drove west on Wilshire, saying not a word until they turned into the underground garage beneath her high-rise Westwood Village apartment.

"Welcome home, Lew," she said in a tender voice.

It was after midnight when the runabout finally rolled up a limousine-jammed drive high in the Hollywood Hills. Publisher Hoo Hanford's palatial mansion looked like a random set of glass boxes piled atop one another high above the San Fernando Valley's lights. Craft studied the *moderne*, stylized Christmas tree blazing on the rolling lawn. He made a rude noise with his lips, a thumbs-down gesture. Betty smiled and squeezed his hand. Inside, the party was 'in full swing—even for swingers.

Betty let him circulate while she hunted up her boss to apologize for being AWOL. Craft surrounded a double Scotch and felt more in the spirit of things despite his weird getup. Betty had stopped somewhere in the vast Wilshire District shopping maze, where no one ever slept, persuading him to buy something more suitable for a party than his uniform. Still sated with the smell of her hair, the smooth warmth of her skin, he hadn't felt inclined to argue, picking out what he thought was a ghastly formal lounging tunic replete with spangles. and a frilly collar, bright orange form-fitting tights—declining the codpiece a salesman insisted went with them—and shiny, tasseled pumps. Five minutes on the terrace, where two dozen guests floundered drunkenly in the pool under a high bubble cover, convinced him that he was the most conservatively dressed man at the affair.

At least ten Santa Claus characters wandered about, Ho-ho-hoing! and ringing bells, having a helluva time pinching Hanford's squads of Swingerettes, who wore next to nothing and wore it well, buoyed up in front by tiny uplift bras that clung magically to the underside of each breast. Deeply curved, abbreviated wisps of shimmering fabric accentuated the inner thigh line, making even the dumpiest girl look leggy and svelte. Above him, a nude Swingerette floated back and forth in a jazzy, ribboned swing.

Many nominally male guests wore Renaissance tights, now in vogue, Craft noticed, others favored the ruffled sleeves and starched collars of Beau Brummell. Not a few of the younger women wore sheer body stockings—with nothing but sheer woman underneath.

Beginning to enjoy himself, Craft was searching for a waiter when a petite Oriental Swingerette accosted him. "Major Craft?"

Craft leaned close, saying, "We've got to Stop meeting like this."

The girl giggled. "Miss Dancer asked me to find you and invite you into the study. Please, will you follow me?"

"Anywhere!"

The Swingerette giggled again, leading him, bouncing and jiggling pleasantly, around clusters of laughing, drinking guests on the terrace. It was quieter indoors, they threaded their way across the stark, cavernous simplicity of the living room, and turned down a carpeted hall. The Swingerette knocked politely, standing aside.

Conversation broke off. Hoo Hanford excused himself and came forward, one hand outstretched. "Craft, good to have you back."

"Great to see you again, Mr. Hanford."

"Hoo. By all means, call me Hoo."

A ruggedly-built, graying man seated on the sofa next to a demure looking woman grinned a boyish grin. "You're hooting like a barn owl, old-timer," he complained. "Bring Betty's fella in here so we can get a look at him."

Hanford took the pipe from his jaw, looking vaguely amused. Then he put it back again. "Major Craft," he said around the pipe, "I'd like you to meet Virginia and Victor Lewellyn. Senator Lewellyn loves to put me down. I let him get away with it because he's bigger than me. Besides, Vic's our guest of honor tonight."

The senator laughed good-naturedly, rising to shake hands. "My pleasure, Craft. Betty just finished telling us you're newly arrived from the South Pole. Come fill your glass, she'll be back."

"Nice to meet you both," said Craft. "Scotch, no ice, please," he told Hanford, giving him his glass. "I, uh, didn't get quite to the Pole," he confessed. "South Base lies under the Whitmore Mountains in Marie Byrd Land, about five hundred miles from the Pole."

"Of course —South *Base*." Lewellyn regarded Hanford, genial torment in his grin. "You blew it, old-timer, South Base houses an experimental Earth resources project."

"Naturally." Hanford was nonplussed. "We ran an article about South Base not long ago. Happen to

see it, Craft?"

Lew Craft looked sheepish. "I, no... I can't seem to get past the pretty... pictures in *Swinger*," he said.

Lewellyn and his wife both roared with laughter. "Your readership speaks," giped the senator. "Give up articles and stories, Hoo, concentrate on more nekkid fillies." J Hartford rattled the pipe against his teeth, making a point of ignoring Lewellyn. "What's the main target at South Base, Lew?"

Craft sipped his Scotch. "Mostly petroleum, of course, though diamonds and anthracite coal were found back in the Sixties. The ice cap—about seven billion cubic miles of it—weighs down Antarctica with tremendous pressure, depressing the underlying land mass below sea level in places. South Base is slant drilling experimentally in spots where there're only a few thousand feet of ice. In some places, the ice cap is fourteen thousand feet thick."

"Whew! Sounds expensive," said Hanford. "Very expensive."

"Waiting until more accessible fields run dry might prove even more costly, now that we've lost the Mideast supply."

Senator Lewellyn set down his glass. "Hell, everything's expensive! As a member of the Senate Finance Committee, I can tell you there's not one government agency or bureau which isn't drowning in red ink just now. There's some justification for heavy military spending, what with the Sino-Sov Coalition's saber rattling, but the real villains are State and Transportation. State spends billions on foreign aid, -while DoT has the transit project on its hands. And ITTS really costs a -fantastic amount."

"I'll be joining the ITTS program next month," said Craft.

"You will?" The senator looked at Craft with new interest. "In what capacity, if I'm not too inquisitive?"

"As a consultant," informed Craft. "My specialty is heavy equipment—earth-movers, nuclear boring rigs, that sort of thing. I've been assigned to the Sacramento-Reno loop that's..."

Craft broke off as the door opened. Betty Dancer popped in, carrying a sprig of mistletoe. She held it over Craft's head, pecking him on the cheek. "Merry Christmas, Major mine. Did you meet the Lewellyns?"

"Sure did," said Craft.

"Aren't they dolls?" Betty took his arm. "Let's go join the party, what say? Maybe you'll be lucky and win a goodie, Lew."

"A... goodie?" asked Craft, perplexed.

Hanford nodded affably. "We're about to kick off the third annual *Swinger* Olympics, it's been a popular feature of our Christmas parties—sack racing, three-legged racing, bobbing for apples, and so on. It may sound corny, but it's fun."

"Just like an Iowa pumpkin doins'," said Betty. "Wait till you see all those super-sophisticated swingers tossing a raw egg back and forth, stepping away from each other until it breaks in someone's hand." She opened the door. "Come on, all, a party needs its guest of honor."

Smiling, Hoo Hanford got up to follow them. "Stay a minute," called Senator Lewellyn. He waited until he was sure Betty and the major were beyond earshot. "How well do you know this Craft?" he asked earnestly.

"Oh, we met occasionally when he and Betty were running around together," said Hanford. "Why?"

"I've been looking for him—for someone like him—for quite some time." Lewellyn became very serious. "Do you suppose Betty will agree to get the major to do some snooping for us?"

Hanford scratched behind one ear. "Probably. I imagine Betty could make Craft roll over and bay at the moon if she wanted to. But, why, Vic? He's just an Army engineer."

"He's an *inside* man," corrected Lewellyn, looking pleased with himself, "or will be when he reports to ITTS. You wouldn't believe .the smokescreen someone's thrown around the inner workings of ITTS, Hoo. That project literally eats like an elephant, and defecates like a flea. I hate mysteries. When the Senate Finance Committee can't find out what's causing the money drain, I worry."

Hanford fiddled with his pipe, developing a faraway look. "Couldn't you subpoena enough principals

to find out?" he asked.

"Oh, we've tried. Alex Volpone, who's a good front man for Jergensen in. DoT, testified some time ago, then took us on a personally conducted tour—inside the guts of the Washington-Baltimore loop, not just for a ride on the train. He impressed everyone with his expertise, but we learned nothing new. After separating out the obfuscations and drivel obtained in other hearings, little remained but a morass of technical reasons for over-expenditure."

"Hm-m-m, I may assign one or two of *Swinger's* bird dogs to it," mused Hanford, sounding interested. "Maybe there's a story."

The senator made an annoyed grimace. "Hoo, if your staff included Dick Tracy and Sherlock Holmes you still wouldn't get a story," he said matter-of-factly. "That's if Dick and Sherlock didn't turn up missing afterward. A half-dozen private shamuses, two Naval Intelligence agents, and five or six Justice Department investigators have dropped from sight while sleuthing around ITTS."

"Don't be too sure, Vic, we have a handful of good men. Remember that story on Volpone I showed you?"

"Volpone makes fascinating copy," said Lewellyn, "but a character study of Alessandro Volpone has nothing to do with finding out why ITTS gobbles dollars like an Open rat hole."

Hartford shrugged. "What makes you think Craft could find out?"

"Because he's an *inside* man," repeated Lewellyn, "a professional military officer who's above suspicion. I think Craft's a good bet, he doesn't say much, but he seems pretty darned bright."

"OK, I'll see what I can do, Vic. I'll talk to Betty."

"Major Craft looks familiar," mentioned Virginia Lewellyn.

"You may have remembered *Swinger's* All-America Team pictorial spread around '78 or '79," said Hanford. "He was a standout linebacker at West Point."

"You mean *he's* the fellow who turned down a pot of football gold to stay in the Army?" asked Lewellyn. "Hell, I remember him now, too. Better and better, Hoo, see what Betty says about it."

"I'll sic Betty on him," promised Hanford. "C'mon, let's party."

Senator Lewellyn took his wife's hand. "Maybe another sprig of mistletoe's hanging somewhere, eh, Ginny? Could you stand a Christmas kiss from the old man?"

Virginia Lewellyn made a wry face. "I'll spend the whole night shooing Swingerettes away from you," she said resignedly.

"Deck them halls!" cried the senator happily.

IV

January, 1988

"Michigan Bluff," remarked Arne Seymour, his breath steaming in the cold. "Not much of a place this time of year, is it?"

"It sounds rather like a card game," said Alessandro Volpone idly. "Is that the name of the small town we flew over?"

"Michigan Bluff," assured Seymour. "California's Gold Rush began in a crossroads called Coloma about twenty miles over that ridge. We're exactly half way between Sacramento and Reno." Seymour peeled down the cuff of his mitten, glancing at his watch. "Where the hell is he, Alex?"

"Patience. He'll be along directly." Volpone lifted his face toward leaden skies hanging over the lightly forested, snow-clad Sierra Nevada foothills. "Parkinson is fetching him from the Sacramento Airport. They probably ran into snow flurries."

Seymour puffed his cheeks, doing a little jig to warm himself. "I'm sure there'll be snow here later today," he said.

Both men wheeled toward a diesel growl above them as another seventy-ton bite of fused and pulverized rock started its seven-mile downhill trip toward the middle fork of the American River where the rail spur terminated. The newly cut rock would be taken 't to an automated Sacramento Valley plant producing both .cement and glass needed to build the many ITTS stations proliferating up and down the

Pacific slope. The monster earth-mover crawled past them down the macadam road at a stately five miles per hour, on the flank of its huge bucket was stenciled a blue-and-silver foxhead device encircled by the legend *Volpone Industries*. Alessandro Volpone's multibillion-dollar corporation had installed the gargantuan elevator which hauled slag and pulverized rock topside from steadily-burning boring rigs burrowing through solid granite more than a full mile beneath their feet.

"They're nibbling away down there," mused Seymour, chafing his cheeks with mittened hands. "I imagine the air storage complex is almost finished. I want to look over—"

"Your mouth, Arne!" Volpone grabbed the other's arm, exerting sudden, hurtful pressure. "Watch what you say, here in the open."

The physicist winced. "Hell, no one's within a half-mile of us!"

"That's absurd. Modern eaves-dropping techniques are extraordinary. Last week I was shown a prototype laser windowpane pickoff device capable of modulating the vibrations induced in a pane of glass by low-level human speech, Clear, ungarbled reception, Arne."

Seymour flexed his arm gingerly. "But we aren't under glass."

"Aa-a-agh!" Dark eyes clouded with anger, Volpone whirled to stare up at the mountains. "You're impossible! Someone on that ridge could read your lips with low-power binoculars. Several people know I am here, several thousand would like to learn why."

"You're getting paranoid, Alex." Seymour rubbed his arm. "Why *are* we here, by the way? Why chase around to 'these... sites, talking to every new engineer the Army sends us?'"

"Habit, my loose-mouthed friend. Thus far, personal acquaintance with high level strangers on the project has paid off handsomely."

Seymour shrugged. "Parkinson works for us, doesn't he? You didn't bother interviewing him."

Volpone had a gleam in his eye. "There's a difference. Parkinson is actually one of Emmerson's men, though nominally on our payroll."

"CIA?" Seymour looked thoughtful.

"Of course. But, in addition to that..." Volpone regarded the physicist more as an object than a person. "Psychology is not your forte, Arne. Why not admit it."

"OK, I admit it. So what?"

"So I like to think that it is *mine*." Volpone scowled. "Put yourself in the place of this engineer. He was torn from another assignment, directed to report here by some superior who resented the theft of his talents. Our new engineer may be disgruntled, perhaps annoyed at having his love life disrupted. What will make him feel more important, more needed, than a personally conducted tour of the Sacramento-Reno... er, tunnel, by a Cabinet official?"

Seymour's pale eyes twinkled. "You almost said—"

"Be silent! We both know what I almost said. You make me wish I'd left you in New York to play with your slide rule."

Seymour giggled. "I like to watch you turn on the old oil, Alex. Here comes your chance." Seymour pointed to the lowering sky.

The copter, a ghostly black teardrop, flirted momentarily with the overcast's fringes, then popped down into clear air, thrashing overhead in a wide arc to descend a thousand yards away in the meadow beside the road. Two men jumped down, jogging heads-lowered beyond the rotary wing's sweep. The copter's fuselage was decaled in the familiar blue-and-silver foxhead logo.

Volpone studied the approaching men from afar. CIA Agent Parkinson,, supposedly a new Volpone Industries employee, was adept at playing the role of a likable, "hard hat" superintendent. The engineer accompanying him looked sturdy, capable of handling himself. Volpone had been pleased by the performances of the forty men whom he had caused to be spirited away from the Army. They had proven diligent and trustworthy—with several notable exceptions.

"Arne, let's meet at the shaft head in about two hours," said the industrialist, making it a subtle directive.

"Right, Alex." Glad of the opportunity to get in out of the cold, Seymour turned and trudged toward

the crest of the hill.

Alessandro Volpone strolled a few dozen paces down the road. "Ho, Parky," he hailed. "Have a good flight?"

"Right nice, Mr. Volpone," called the laconic Parkinson. "This here's Major Lewis Craft. I told him you were visiting us."

As they exchanged amenities, Volpone looked the younger man over. Craft's bearing indicated strength of character, as did his firm handshake, establishing a rapport both men sensed immediately. Volpone spun the customary tale—his chance presence while on an inspection tour of ITTS facilities. Then Craft briefly related his recent duties in Antarctica.

At the first opportunity, Parkinson interrupted. "Pardon me, Mr. Volpone. Think I'll hop an empty and ride back down below." "Certainly, Parky." Volpone waved him away, smiling. "Thank you for meeting Major Craft. I appreciate your trouble."

"Nothin' to it, Mr. Volpone. See you later, Craft."

"Well, would you like some coffee, Craft?" asked Volpone. "We can talk for a bit, then go below in the dig and look around together." "Sounds great, Mr. Volpone." "Wonderful! Let's round up that coffee, then." Volpone led the way up the road, his easy gait belying his years.

The elevator had been designed to lift seventy tons of fused, powdered rock, passengers were negligible, incidental cargo. Volpone and Craft entered a small six-passenger operator's cab that perched on the rim of the gigantic bucket like a teacup balanced giddily on the lip of a double boiler.

"Standardization," commented Volpone, noting Craft's interest. "The computers decided long ago that seventy tons was an optimum bite, both for raising and cartage. A boring rig's nuclear torch and tungsten-carbide bits fuse and grind two hundred tons of reduced rock in little more than one hour, so there's ample logistics time to run a single bucket to the surface and back."

Craft gasped despite himself as the floor fell away beneath his feet. Empty, the carrier dropped with disconcerting swiftness. He grinned. "It's fun," "When you get used to it."

The huge elevator dropped steadily for minutes. Then subtle, ever-increasing pressure made their knees tend to buckle as the cab came to a smooth stop Volpone had taken a transistor-radio-shaped device from an inner coat pocket and was holding it near the double doors while pressing a stud with his forefinger. The doors rolled open, exposing a second set of heavy steel doors.

"We couldn't be at bore level yet," said Craft uncertainly.

"You're observant," commended Volpone. "This point is only about seven-tenths of the way down to bore level."

The main doors rumbled open. Craft tensed, finding himself looking into the muzzles of a pair of submachine guns held by two sleepy-eyed United States Marines.

"Conestoga," said Volpone in a quiet voice. The nearer marine brought his weapon smartly to port arms, the other, maintained his watch on Craft. "This is Major Craft," said Volpone, affixing a green-striped badge to his lapel. "He is reporting today. Mr. Parkinson will see that he's issued a badge and formally briefed later in the day. I'll vouch for his presence now."

"Yes, sir," said The black Pfc. "Thumbprint, please, Major, sign your full name, rank, ACfO, number, and date of commission."

After they had satisfied the marine guards, Volpone led the mystified Craft along a narrow granite passage disfigured by a sea of jack-hammer scores, turning right at the intersection of a longer, broader tunnel lighted by crudely strung construction lamps. As they walked, the distant growl of heavy equipment grew louder. The temperature was comfortable, 'Craft doffed his coat.

Alex Volpone showed the major into an alcove hollowed from living rock. He closed the door and snapped on a light. "Over here, Craft. I'm sure your curiosity has been whetted by this cloak and dagger business which, I assure you, is quite necessary." Volpone drew back a rude curtain from a large picture window, stepping aside to let Craft look his fill.

The chamber dwarfed the great hall at Carlsbad Caverns many times over. Arc lights set in the vaulted ceiling stretched almost to the vanishing point, illuminating the jumble of machinery, workmen, and

equipment scattered across the vast floor. Squat, tracked vehicles carried crushed rock to a point beneath the window and disappeared from view, hundreds of workmen were busily erecting frame structures, preparing precast masonry walls, installing piping, slideways, paving. Along the side wall, rows of potted shrubs and trees waited to be set out.

Lew Craft turned to regard the industrialist quizzically. Outwardly nonplussed, his eyes were bright with curiosity. "I give up, Mr. Volpone. What is it?"

"A city, Major Craft." Volpone's smile was paternal. "We are standing above D Level—what might be termed the central square. There are three levels above us, and eight below." He hitched a battered wooden chair around to face Craft. "As a professional military officer," he began, "you are cognizant of the enormous strides Communism has taken in recent years. World War Two lent impetus to the USSR's territorial ambitions, practically all of Eastern Europe fell under Marxist sway, followed by the Cold War, and Korea.

"But the Reds had only begun. Cuba and Chile fell to them, Vietnam toppled slowly, propped up for a time by American lives. Then Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, the bloody Philippine Revolution reversed the political polarity of a traditionally West-oriented society. The USSR even managed to bring Yugoslavia back into mainstream Communism after Tito's passing. Then Peru, Ecuador, many South American nations are now teetering, deciding which light to follow."

Craft himself was teetering back and forth in his chair. "You're telling me they're winning. Is that it?"

"They *are* winning." Volpone was doubly emphatic. "A sober, proven fact which is obvious to even the most naive geopolitical philosopher. A fact, unfortunately, which at least five US administrations have refused to face. Until the passing of Mao Tsetung, we were confronted with only the Soviet menace. China remained an enigma, accusing the USSR of revisionist Marxist doctrine, engaging in endless border disputes with her neighbor. But after the Common Market signatories banded together to form the United European Nations, Russia made hasty unity overtures, Chinese and Russian differences vanished, if *authentic* differences ever existed. Joining in a common front against the Western democracies was cheaper for both the USSR and China."

Volpone paused, marshaling his thoughts. "Major Craft, an extrapolation of the curve plotting Communist gains since Cold War days points clearly to an approaching climacteric. A decisive confrontation seems unavoidable. The Sino-Sov Coalition, and their satellites, form an awesome, monolithic power bloc. They've successfully subverted other nations, and made serious inroads upon yet others—including the United States, I'm sorry to say.

"Being chief signatory to the SEATO alliance forced us into a hopeless, untenable battle we could not hope to win in Vietnam. But that was merely a dress rehearsal for the Mideast War, which found the Arab world calculatingly armed and funded to mount a holy crusade against tiny, fiercely independent Israel. Israel survived—barely. But Islam fell under the Sirio-Soviet thrall in the end."

Volpone waxed his hands. "Major," he said slowly, "the National Security Council believes the world balanced on the brink of cataclysm. We don't have twenty years, we'll be damned fortunate to have twenty *months*."

Craft's eyes were slitted. "And we're digging in, preparing?"

"Precisely." Volpone's nod was sober. "The National Redoubt under construction around us is being forwarded on a crash priority basis—a round-the-clock effort to provide safe haven for a representative sampling of our populace. People from every walk of life will be chosen, invited to move to California or Nevada, as nearby the complex as is practicable."

"Chosen... by whom?" asked Craft.

"Final selection will amount to a lottery, really. Numerous candidates have already been screened and nominated. Those ultimately picked will be taken from the lists by computer—unique qualifications, age, family status, lifetime accomplishments, and availability being the prominent criteria. Archives will be kept in the redoubt's lowermost area—M Level. The entire contents of institutions like the Library of

Congress, plus still photographs, moving pictures, corporate business records, banking and financial “records, and so on, will be stored on microfilm.”

“How many people will the complex sustain?” asked Craft.

“Between seventeen and twenty-five thousand.”

Craft looked startled. “*That* many? For how long?”

Volpone smiled grimly. “Prepare yourself for a shock. They’ll be able to remain underground approximately twenty-five years.”

“Jesus H. Christ!” said Major Craft.

Alex Volpone looked pleased. “Now you begin to see, why we had you pulled away from Antarctica, why I came all the way out here in order to talk to you personally. It’s a *gigantic* enterprise. I must try with every iota of persuasive power I possess to impress upon you the scalding importance of what we are doing here.”

“I... it seems unreal,” said Craft.

“It is a waking nightmare,” said Volpone. “But we felt a moral obligation to save at least something, win or lose.”

“That’s... reasonable,” said Craft with less than complete assurance. “Mother of God! How do you propose to store consumables for more than twenty thousand people *that* long?”

“It isn’t necessary,” Volpone explained. “You see, the National Redoubt lies adjacent to the chordline run of the Reno-Sacramento Jeep. Think what that means, easy access from either the Nevada Side, *on* California, a believable cover story for thousands of workmen and engineers purportedly engaged, in ITTS i construction, a secret, isolated site, interdicted from thermonuclear attack by thousands of yards of solid, overlying granite. Our chief boons are all spinoffs from ITTS. My corporation manufactures compressor equipment. Guessing what other purpose those compressors are used for shouldn’t be difficult.”

Craft shrugged. “Storing air,” he said. “Or oxygen, if you take the trouble separating it out.”

Volpone clapped his hands. “You’ve confirmed my first impression of you, Craft. No, we don’t bother-isolating oxygen, not with Earth’s entire ocean of air at hand. We’ll store enough air within eighteen months—clean, filtered, smog-less air. Likewise water. The Sierra snowpack will be adequate, assuming we’re allowed this winter, and next, before... the climax. Air-driven turbines will provide wattage to throw away, backed up by an emergency nuclear power station. Tell me, does it begin to make sense?”

“I... yes. It’s pretty far out,” said Craft, shaking his head. “I want to think about it for a while. How about food?”

“Food is no problem, compared to the thirty-four mass-pounds of air each person will require per day. A six months’ supply of indispensable staples will be stocked. Another of VI’s diversified product lines is hydroponic farming equipment. The techniques are established, our ‘tenants’ will grow their own food, raise stock animals and fowl...”

A light tap on the door caused Volpone to call, “Yes?”

One of the marines who had admitted them to the redoubt thrust his head in far enough to say, “Phone for you, sir.” He pointed to the squawkbox on the wall with the snout of his submachine gun. “You can take it here, if you want.”

“Thank you.” Volpone rose stiffly. “Excuse me, Craft. This should only take a minute.” He switched on the intercom. “Volpone.”

“Stand-by for voice check, sir,” crackled the speaker.

In a sing-song bass, Volpone chanted, “Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow. Mary had a little lamb.”

He waited. Presently, the squawkbox erupted. “Thursday night at eleven o’clock.” There was a faint click. The line went dead.

Volpone turned, glancing at his watch. He eyed Craft speculatively, his manner suddenly distant. “I must apologize for this,” he said. “I’d intended for us to have dinner together and continue our discussion.

Now, I'm afraid that's impossible.

"Why don't you wander around for a bit, Major, and get acquainted? Your temporary badge will admit you almost anywhere within the complex. When you're ready, have the marines at the portal call down for Parkinson. Parky will see you to your quarters."

"I think I will, Mr. Volpone," said Craft. "It was really a kick meeting you like this and, uh, thanks."

"The privilege was mine, Craft. I'm sure we can count on you." Volpone held out his hand, beaming. "Good-bye."

After the Undersecretary of Transportation closed the door, Craft went to stand before the window, pondering the movement of men and machines far below him. He seemed entranced.

"The Hall of the Mountain King," he muttered under his breath.

Then he frowned. Today was Wednesday, January eighteenth. He speculated about what sort of person might be able to summon a big wheel like Alessandro Volpone with a single, cryptic phone call, for he recognized a summons when he heard one.

He thought about it for a time, then dismissed it with a shrug.

V

January, 1988

"I wish you didn't have to go out." The lovely, raven-haired girl pouted, petulance in her voice. "You've been away three days, Alex. I'd so looked forward to our being together tonight."

Volpone touched her hand. "Business, Marissa. I've no choice."

The limousine drew alongside the curb on Adams Drive. The central Washington ITTS station had been built under The Mall, offset slightly so that near-surface arrival and departure tubes would avoid, sub-basement levels of the Capitol, as well as the Washington Monument's underpinnings. It was thirteen minutes to eleven when Volpone kissed the girl and got out.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" she asked in an injured tone.

"I'll call." Volpone smiled reassuringly, still holding her hand. "We'll go to dinner—perhaps see a show."

"Good night," she said, turning away.

Volpone watched the limousine out of sight, then sighed and hurried to the descending ramp. He did not buy a ticket, making his way through the turnstile by virtue of an electromagnetically keyed DoT pass card which he dipped briefly into the ticket slot. The yellow slideway carried him to a boarding concourse labeled *Central Baltimore*, whose decor was also yellow.

Volpone quickly checked all ten visible cabs when the first arriving train's row of doors flashed open. Few people got off, one or more individuals still occupied every compartment. He sauntered to another segment of the boarding concourse, found a vacant eight-passenger cab, and entered, activating the device he'd used to gain admittance to the California redoubt. The safety shells and outer door of his particular compartment closed immediately.

He relaxed through the first gentle surge of acceleration, then tugged out a collapsible spike antenna from the electronic keyer and depressed a second stud, watchfully studying the lucent passenger information display. Suddenly the message read, AN UNSCHEDULED ONE MINUTE STOP WILL BE MADE FOR MAINTENANCE PURPOSES. PLEASE REMAIN SEATED.

Volpone waited patiently until much heavier than normal deceleration pressed him deeply into the seat. He braced himself as the cab rocked to a horizontal position, watching the door.

When diaphragm seals expanded to allow pressurization in the adjacent tube, the outer doors separated vertically. He bolted from the compartment, holding the keyer chest-high in front of him. This aspect of entering the sanctuary always frayed his nerves. One whole minute was allotted for entrance, true, and should something go amiss there was always the opportunity of jumping back aboard the train before the tube diaphragms relaxed, the door sealed, and most breathable air whooshed away.

Nevertheless, thoughts of stumbling, perhaps dropping the keyer, made him doubly careful.

Pressures equalized, the steel-sheathed portal opened. Volpone entered the redoubt with forty-two

seconds to spare, sorting over in his mind the week's passwords. "Pickaxe," he said in his resonant bass, clipping on the green-striped badge.

"Yes, sir." The marines lowered their weapons, ushering him briskly to an elevator marked *Authorized Personnel Only*. He used the keyer to command the elevator's doors to dilate, gripping the handrail as the floor fell away beneath his feet. He emerged into a stark corridor more than six thousand feet beneath Laurel, Maryland.

Three men were waiting when the sanctuary's door opened. Senator Raymond Stillworth, shaggy-maned and florid-faced, conversed quietly with his alter ego, United Television Network board chairman Nathaniel Abrams. Dr. Rolfe Emmerson, who had been CIA Director under two preceding administrations, made coffee with saturnine concentration.

"Gentlemen." Volpone drew out a chair, settling himself.

"General Patt'll be late," drawled Stillworth, regarding Volpone with the innocent, vacuous grin that masked a mind capable of cutting through side issues and non-germane detail like a rip saw. "The President called a fitte drill at the White House, Alex. Patt'll be along directly. How're you keepin'?"

"Not too badly, Ray," admitted Volpone. "I was notified of the meeting out in California yesterday. Who ordered it?"

"Me." Nat Abrams held one finger aloft in the manner of a toddler asking permission to go to the bathroom. "The money situation's still rotten as hell, Alex. I thought we needed a powwow."

"I see. Did you manage to squelch that magazine article, Nat?"

"Not yet," said Abrams. "I'm going to squeeze Hanford," The publisher, slowly. He'll come around, leave it to me."

Abrams then launched into a dissertation on money and its uses which utterly bored Volpone. The TV boss, a pipsqueak promoter at heart, had not the slightest knowledge or "feel" for making money work to -best advantage. Volpone found him repellent, disliking him in a casual, someday-we'll-do-something-about-him way. Volpone lighted a cigarette and listened with half an ear.

He was lighting his second cigarette, ten minutes later, when USAF Lieutenant General Michael Patt strode through the opening doorway and set his briefcase beside the table. "Good evening."

"How y'all, General?" Senator Stillworth leaned back, pudgy hands clasped across his ample belly. "Nathaniel here was goin' over the dreadful lack of capital we're experiencin' right now. Lordy, our little project surely does spend a potful!"

"You'd better bring me up to speed," said Patt in a monotone.

Volpone liked the general every bit as much as he disliked Abrams. Ramrod straight, Michael Patt was all of sixty, he looked a robust forty-five, exuding that undefinable air of command Volpone knew was impossible to counterfeit. Despite his lack of a fourth star, Patt generated the Strategic Air Command and acted as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"In a nutshell," said Abrams eagerly, "we've milked every cow in the barn twice-over. We've still got the shorts. Unless new money shows up, we'll have to hold the line right where we are."

"Just where are we, as of today?" asked the general.

Four pairs of eyes swung expectantly toward Volpone. "There are 3,250 districts in operation," he said from memory, "with a thousand compressor sites in each dis-trict-3,005 sites, offshore, the remainder land-based. Call it 3.25 million compressors."

"Which means?" asked Stillworth, squinting.

"Every twenty-four hours, about 7.02 times 10¹² mass-pounds of compressed air is—"

"Alex for Chrissakes cut out the gibberish!" Stillworth wagged his head in frustration. "What's that mean in English?"

Volpone regarded Stillworth narrowly. "Every day, we store some 3.5 billion mass-tons of compressed air," he said clearly and distinctly, "less the minute fraction ITTS uses."

"It sounds a helluva lot!" Stillworth scratched his shoulder. "Don't suppose it amounts to a sizable dent, though."

"Except at higher altitudes, no," said Volpone. "We have a long pull before, the effects become noticeable at sea level." "None of us'll live that long," said Stillworth wistfully.

“Aren’t we tracking our major milestones almost exactly?” inquired Patt. “Maybe it only seems to be moving slowly, Ray. My chief concern is that Sino-Sov agents may penetrate our activities before they can become effective. Have there been any red flags in your department, Rolfe?”

Emmerson cleared his throat, setting his coffee cup slowly and deliberately in the saucer. “There’s been no hint of penetration” by foreign agents to date,“ he said in a thoughtful manner. ”Our people in China and the USSR have watched Closely for signs of a security break. “The ITTS cover story would seem to be working nicely for Lifeboat. As for Project Luft, our supposed oceanic radioactive waste disposal cover tends to shy people away. More, who is going to trot about measuring air intake at the various sites? Frankly, I’m much more concerned with keeping Army and Naval Intelligence, and the FBI, off our necks.“

A debate began at once. General Patt took a stand in favor of toughing it out along the lines of the “game plan” laid down more than thirteen years before, whereupon the senator made a lamentable pun about “standing pat,” contending that hastening Luft’s fruition in some manner was the only viable alternative to building more compressors and storage tanks.

Rolfe Emmerson listened carefully, contributing nothing. Volpone decided to stay out of it himself, since Patt needed little help. He studied the senator covertly. The Senate Majority Leader’s incisive, country-boy drawl made him sound like some low-pressure auto salesman. It hadn’t always been so, Volpone reminded himself. In the past decade Raymond Stillworth had changed radically. Volpone remembered their lengthy conversations in times past, debating the responsibility of government to business, and vice versa and the tacky, long-gestating progeny taxation measure. Ray Stillworth had once been known as “Old Fog-cutter” on Capitol Hill—a noble sobriquet for a legislator of the old school, a southern knight who duelled with rhetoric rather than pistols, but in a fashion every bit as deadly.

Now Stillworth was aging, his former ruddy glow had given way to the broken-venuled complexion of a tippler, and his patient, career-long search for a path to the White House had transformed itself into a pell-mell dash toward political power at any price. Volpone had reason to believe that Stillworth now nursed dictatorial ambitions through his covert leadership of the ultra-right-wing American Rangers, which no one was supposed to know about.

Volpone had first been introduced to the barrelchested, silver-tongued senator at a party following the 1972 national convention, drawing him aside with showered compliments and explaining who he was. He clearly recalled Stillworth’s exact words, “Oh, ho! So you’re one of the fellas who’re buildin’ those fancy underground tube trains.”

They’d gotten drunk together, Stillworth and Alessandro Velpone, getting along famously. Sometime during the evening, he’d invited the senator to weekend at his Long Island estate.

Working in his office the following Thursday, Volpone had received a call from Stillworth’s secretary. The senator could be picked up at La Guardia on Saturday morning, if that was convenient. Volpone would have none of it, insisting upon sending his personal Jet to Washington to collect him.

Cordially greeting Stillworth when the plane landed, the drive out to Foxhaven had formed a good beginning. Stillworth had not said as much, but Volpone sensed that he was thoroughly impressed by the welcome.

All day Saturday—golfing, dining, lounging about the estate—had been wasted motion so far as Volpone’s purposes were concerned. But by late Sunday morning the senator had begun to let down his hair, his true feelings about the nation’s future sounding dour indeed. A student of history, Stillworth had delved. into the traditional evolution of Western cultures, frontier society to agrarian society, followed by a crude republic, then a shortlived democracy which degenerated into revolution and eventual dictatorship. He felt America was traveling the same rutted course, providing Volpone with excellent ammunition.

Their views on the threat posed by Communist territorial ambitions had dovetailed precisely. Alone on the terrace for sundowners, he’d taken a deep breath and told Raymond Stillworth of the grandiose programs he’d undertaken, remembering his numbness while awaiting the man’s reaction.

Stillworth had roared with laughter. “You’re gonna do *what!*”

It had taken the rest of their time together to convince him it wasn’t a joke. At the airport, just before the senator explained, they’d shake hands. “It surely does intrigue me, Alex. Sounded like a screwball notion when you first told me, but-I do begin to see possibilities. Call me next week and we’ll talk some more.”

Five months and eleven days later, working together in a hard-sell, soft-sell tandem, they had solicited CIA Chief Agent Rolfe Emmerson, and Emmerson had paved the way for recruiting then-Brigadier General Michael Patt. But Stillworth, and Stillworth alone, had recruited Nat Abrams, saying “We got a military big wheel, an industrial tycoon, a government windbag, and a super-spy. What we need bad is a media boss. Then we got ‘em surrounded,”

Surround ‘em they had! In less than sixteen months the first redoubt came off the drawing boards, construction starting in late fall of 1973—this very complex, paralleling the Baltimore-Washington ITTS bore, the first-built segment of the Northeast Corridor Network linking all major population centers from the nation’s capital to Boston.

And Raymond Stillworth had provided the primary impetus, had been the driving force behind Project Lifeboat, as the redoubt system was known, in the early days.—

“Well, Alex?” Eyes bulging, the senator was staring at him.

“Pardon me,” said Volpone. “I wasn’t paying attention, Ray.”

“Money, Alex,”- said Nat Abrams. “We’ve been racking our skulls, trying to come up with new sources of revenue. It’s that, or live with what we’ve got for a few months—years—then go like the hammers of hell later to catch up.”

“Luft? There can be no such thing as ‘catching up,’” rumbled Volpone. “I thought I made that clear. Luft works exactly like mortgage amortization. When you begin paying off a fully amortized loan, most money goes toward paying the interest. Gradually the principal curve steepens, during the last years, almost all of the payment is applied toward repaying the principal. Our timetable calls for expansion on an ever-slackening, but steady, never-ceasing scale. The frantic building pace we paid for so dearly in the beginning will earn tremendous dividends, but the ‘principal’ curve is still practically flat. We *must* maintain our projected manufacture schedule for both compressors and pressure vessels, or the base we’ve labored so long to create will be meaningless.”

“Hell’s fire! None of Us’ll live to see those ‘dividends.’”

“We knew that when we began, Ray,” said General Patt, irritated. “We weren’t thinking entirely of ourselves, were we?”

Swelling with anger, the senator started to frame a retort. He thought better of it and subsided. “OK, if any more tanks and compressors get built, we gotta figure out a way to pay for ‘em. How about it?”

Abrams, awaiting his chance to regain stage center, said, “Alex, I’ve been running down the list of public revenues. We’re mutually agreed, our private resources have completely dried up.” Abrams gave a nervous laugh. “Unless you have a few bucks tucked away somewhere...”

Alessandro Volpone scowled. “I have sufficient personal funds to meet household expenses for another year or two,” he said sternly. “I’ll be happy to bring in statements and invite each of you to match my contributions dollar-for-dollar.”

Stillworth wheezed with laughter, throwing back his head and clapping his hands with glee. Abrams barked appreciatively, while the general merely chuckled. Even Rolfe Emmerson smiled sadly.

“That’s kind of you, Alex,” gasped the senator. “A *billionaire*, invitin’ us peasants to pony up and match the pot with him!”

“An ex-billionaire,” corrected Volpone. “But I’ve purchased something the entire gross national product couldn’t buy today. I’ve ‘helped create an irreversible advantage over conniving vermin who are cold-bloodedly planning our extinction. When the evil day comes, what will *money* be worth?”

It was quiet in the sanctuary for five seconds. Then General Patt said, “Let’s go over that list again, Abrams.”

“Sure.” Abrams leafed through his papers. “We’ve never tapped Federal income, or sales taxes, or

tried. Too many people and too many agencies are involved. We catch a dribble from public land rentals—parks, and so on—and a little more from faculty taxes.”

“Which’s that one?” demanded Stillworth.

“The rated earnings tax on a person’s trade or profession. We’ve also hit social payroll levies—social security, unemployment, health insurance—though that was a damned hard nut to crack. The senator opened some doors for us there.”

“The *crooked* senator,” smirked Stillworth.

“Then we come to the gravy,” continued Abrams. “Commodity tariffs, and consumption taxes—the value added tax on manufacturing, packaging, and distributing goods—have done us the most good.”

“Not forgetting the hundreds of millions we’ve siphoned from DoT’s legitimate budget over the years,” reminded Volpone.

“Uh... sure, DoT,” conceded Abrams. “All in all, the new progeny taxation should eventually provide the greatest source of public revenue in sight. What the hell, we set it up! But it isn’t being felt, nor will it be for a long time. People are really up in arms, thoughts of paying for the privilege of having chil—”

“The goddam Stable Population Bill short-circuited it, anyhow.” Stillworth glanced around the table, daring anyone to refute him. “First we make ‘em pay to have kids, then tell ‘em they cain’t have but two even if they can afford it. Dammit, to me that don’t make a whole helluva lot of sense!”

When no one offered a comment, General Patt asked, “What new programs are in the offing?”

“Citizenship tax,” said Abrams. “protection tax—fire and police support levies—and the Federal auto license fees.”

“Y’ might get the protection thing passed, what with riots an’ longhaired scum meanderin’ about the streets,” said Stillworth impatiently, “but that ‘citizenship’ tax won’t fly. Letters would fill my office to the rafters if my constituents had to pay somethin’ called a citizenship tax.” He looked questioningly at Volpone. “Federal auto licensin’ was your peanut, wasn’t it?”

Sourly, Volpone assured him that it was. “Secretary Jergenson showed me the door last week when I broached the subject again,” he told them. “He refuses to let his name be used as an endorsement, though I’ve done everything but get down on my hands and knees and beg.”

“Uh-huh. Win some, lose some,” philosophized Stillworth, inspecting the rock ceiling with a faraway expression. “Goose egg,” he said. “Anybody got any bright ideas?”

It had turned into a rather glum gathering. Volpone looked from Emerson to the general, from Abrams to Stillworth. “I have some friends,” he said cautiously, “who might be persuaded to invest.”

“Friends?” Stillworth’s bloodshot eyes narrowed. “Seems to me we’ve kicked that melon around before, Alex.”

“We have,” admitted Volpone, “but never realistically.”

The senator snickered. “Your ‘friends,’” he said in a scornful voice, “may be the last bastion of American democracy, eh?”

General Patt looked perturbed. “Gangsters, Alex?”

“Businessmen,” corrected Volpone. “You’re thinking of the old days, General. Some of America’s most prominent families were established by slave traders, robber barons, pirates. My friends do have a similar heritage, but for many years they’ve been only businessmen, i assure you.”

“Crazy goddam notion!” Stillworth rudely banged his fist on the table. “I propose puttin’ it to a vote, an’ good riddance.”

“After all, you did ask for suggestions,” pointed out Volpone. “As always, majority rules. Shall we vote?”

“One moment, Alex,” cautioned Rolfe Emerson. “Will you have to give them full knowledge of our affairs?”

“Yes,” said Volpone. “No fish story would sway them, I’m sure.”

“But do you—*can* you—trust them?”

Alex Volpone smiled disarmingly. “I can and do, though it’s not easy to explain why. You have to know them as... I do.”

“Well, hooray! that surely is a convincin’ argument.” Stillworth banged the table again. “I say we

vote, dammit. A show of hands, all in favor of lettin' Mr. Volpone put our necks in the wringer by sharin' our little secrets with his 'friends'?" Volpone lifted his hand casually, watching Emmerson. The CIA Director's features were placid, but the conflict in his eyes was plain. Rolfe Emmerson eventually raised his arm.

Which made Patt's the deciding vote. Predictably, Abrams and Stillworth formed a common front. Disgusted, Volpone was about to lower his hand when the general reluctantly lifted his.

Stillworth was astounded. "I cain't imagine you're serious!"

"We've got to continue building tanks and compressors," said Patt in a low voice. "Money is a *must-horn* anywhere."

"But... from the goddam *Mafia*?"

"From anywhere," insisted Patt. "The end justifies—"

"You're pullin' my laig!" Stillworth cried. He shook his head angrily. "Well, I been beat before, an I'm gonna get beat again in the future, but... you gentlemen surely do surprise me."

"You'll find It's for the best," placated Volpone. "Unless I'm mistaken, we can count on a very significant contribution."

Volpone felt the senator's burning eyes upon him. "Let's all pray you're *not* mistaken, Mr. Volpone," Stillworth drawled.

With a scraping of chairs, the meeting began to break up.

VI

February, 1988

A tarred road led from the main highway to a three-story rock gatehouse. An old man wearing an officer's billed cap came out slowly to examine the silent electric limousine with rheumy disinterest. He lifted the locking pin and rolled the wrought-iron gate aside, saluting gravely as the car squeezed through.

Under the tires, crushed pink-stone made a whispering reminder of the wealth required to own and maintain such an expanse of private land. The drive wound for more than a mile beneath a row of maples standing bare-limbed?, and stark against the buttermilk winter sky, paralleled by a spotless white rail fence. Beyond the fence were stretches of open meadowland where horses and cattle, grazed in the summertime.

The drive ended in a cobbled court partially covered by a porte cochere entrance. Patinaed [sic] by age, though scrupulously kept, a Georgian mansion built entirely of field-stone looked down through diamond-paned windows. Five or six wide stone steps led to a fifteen-foot-high arched doorway where the butler waited.

"The stocky, unsmiling driver held the limousine's door for his elderly passenger, whom the butler showed into a lofty vestibule containing giant mirrors, statuary, and floored in terrazzo. Beyond the vestibule, a cathedral-like parlor offered mahogany-paneled doors recessed in classic alcoves of carved stone. Monstrous chandeliers depended from a domed ceiling above twin balconies and the travertine chimney piece of a huge fireplace.

Alessandro Volpone descended the stair in a weary lope. "Vito," he called, beaming, "you look well. *Very* well."

"For an old man," temporized Vito Vico, inspecting Volpone with candor. "You, on the other hand, seem very tired."

Volpone's laugh boomed through Foxhaven, sounding a trifle forced. "Come, let's go into the library. We'll have some of that Madeira you prize so and renew acquaintances."

Don Vito Vico, *Capo Mafioso* of the largest "family" on the Eastern Seaboard, was not primarily known for his tact. "You said that our meeting was important, Alessandro. Business first?"

Crestfallen, Volpone watched the Don warm his hands before the blazing fire. Drawing out a hundred-millimeter cigarette, Vico inserted it carefully into an ivory holder with palsied hands. Volpone hurried to bend and snap his lighter, saying, "Vito, I'm in trouble. I'm forced to beg for help—a great deal of help."

“*Salud!*” The Don smiled sadly, holding his wineglass aloft, trouble was an ancient, well-known adversary. “What are friends for but to help one another? And, the nature of your... trouble?”

Volpone sipped his wine. “Money,” he said unsteadily.

Vico’s craggy features remained expressionless, his lips pursed in a silent whistle. “I find that surprising,” he said. “For many years you have owned a large, prosperous corporation—”

“Which is deeply mortgaged.”

“I’m aware of that. We were amazed when Leonard Colo” came to us with the proposal to mortgage your holdings. I’ve no doubt that it was necessary, but... all right, you need money. What shall we expect in return, Alessandro?”

“Call it a guarantee that business will continue to prosper. Without money from you, I can’t... be sure.”

“Protection?” Vico’s lip curled in amusement.

Volpone chuckled tiredly. “That sounded absurd, I know. Forgive me. You’re right, I’m very tired this evening.”

“Take your time, explain the situation slowly. You remind me of your father the night he came to us pleading for money with which to begin- a new business venture he had in, mind.”

“My... father?” Volpone looked surprised.

The Don nodded. “It was 1934— the height of what people call the Great Depression. Many were without jobs.”

“My father included,” said Volpone. “He mentioned it often.”

“Your father included,” agreed the Don. “He had been unemployed nearly two whole years, no one was hiring engineers in those days. He told us of an itch to put a radical new air compressor design on the market. We tried to persuade him it was the wrong time, the wrong financial climate, but he was right, we were wrong.”

“Compressed Air Corporation!”

Vito Vico brightened with pleasure. “Knowing him, I’m not surprised that he never told you. We were paid back handsomely for our faith in your father. He was an honorable man, Alessandro.” The Don looked up at Volpone with a satisfied expression. “And you are your father’s son.”

“Thank you, Vito, I’ll try to live up to that.” Volpone took to pacing the carpeting, hands behind his back. He suddenly went to the hand-carved double doors of the library, glanced briefly into the hall, then closed and locked the doors. He came back to Vico, pulling an armchair around to face him squarely. “I must tell you something in strictest confidence, Vito. It must not pass beyond these walls.”

Vico’s brows lifted. “You would pledge *me* to secrecy?”

“Even you, Vito.” Volpone leaned forward. “I *must*.”

“Walls sometimes overhear things,” warned Vico.

“Not these. Foxhaven is one place I’m absolutely sure of.”

Vico stubbed out his cigarette, laying the ivory holder to one side! “I’ll keep your counsel, Alessandro. *Omerta*.”

Volpone began his dissertation by tolling Communist gains since World War Two, being extremely well-versed through having lectured over forty Army engineers. Vico listened, without discernible emotion, extracting another cigarette after a time. Volpone lighted it for him, then resumed his narrative.

“Let me be certain that I understand you,” said the Don at last. “You, and this group of other important individuals, have taken, it upon yourselves to safeguard the US from attack *forever*?”

“Um, it’s much more involved than that,” said Volpone. “We’ve adopted both long- and short-term plans, Project Lifeboat to counteract the threat of thermonuclear attack, and the other to gain an ever-increasing advantage, over a period of many generations, which our enemies cannot hope to equal. Every passing hour gives us further advantage. We hope to develop Project Luft into—”

“Luft?” questioned the Don.

“The German word for air,” explained Volpone. “Luft will become a club in the hands of generations yet to come.”

Don Vito Vico sighed. “Hearing that from a lesser man, Alessandro, I would leave this house and

never-enter it again. Why haven't you approached the authorities with your schemes?"

"We tried twice with Lifeboat," said Volpone. "It's sad, but our government seems to have the attitude that no problem is too big, or too complicated, to be successfully ignored. But approaching certain selected officials did form the basis of our immediate safeguard—the 'Lifeboat' 'redoubts.'"

"Redoubts?" Vico frowned. "The word is not familiar."

"It's an archaic term," Volpone told him. "In the days of cavalry and sabers, it described an earthwork, a rampart thrown up to protect the defenders of a military position."

"I believe I understand. You convinced the government of the need for defensible hideaways against attack by atom bombs."

"Correct, though they never became fully convinced, I'm afraid. The upshot was a series of Federal allocations with which to build two underground redoubts—the first adjacent to the Baltimore-Washington ITTS tube, and another we're working on now out in California. You see, constructing and supplying the redoubts with breathable air goes hand-in-hand with building ITTS tubes. We've funded construction of... er, others on our own."

"Others?" asked Vico, "interest in his voice." "How many others?"

Volpone said, "In all, there are forty-one redoubts."

The Don sat upright. "Forty-one! How big...? That is, how many individuals are to be saved in each of these... fortresses?"

"Each will accommodate fifteen to eighteen thousand computer-warned occupants in the event of attack," said Volpone, "with added space for growth as children are born underground."

"Children!" Vito Vico stared at the younger man for several seconds. "Alessandro, you would not jest with an old man?"

"Never Vito. It would be an extremely unfunny joke."

"In the names of all the Saints, how *long* must these poor... Lifeboat people remain in their holes in the ground?"

"Years. Perhaps as long as twenty-five years—until the Earth above them cleanses itself of radioactivity."

Vico passed through another lengthy period of silence. "And *that* is your 'short-term' safeguard—twenty-five years? They will breathe," asked the Don in awe, "work, sleep, eat, and make love?"

"Deep down in-the Earth's crust," assured Volpone.

"I'm almost afraid to ask about your 'club' to hold over the heads of our enemies. Project Luft, is it?"

Volpone looked haggard. He leaned close to the Don. "Vito, our long-term solution is absolutely fantastic."

"Alessandro, I believe you!" Vico shuddered slightly. "Remember, I have already had one mild heart seizure."

Volpone became very sincere. "Fantastic both in concept, and as it's being carried out. Funding Luft is the reason why I came begging to you this evening, continuing our air storage tank and compressor building programs is *vital*. It's"... tell me, do you ride the ITTS trains often?"

Vito Vico had a dazed look about him. "Seldom. Driving out to see you this afternoon is the longest trip I've undertaken in weeks. Alessandro, can you really be serious about all of this?"

"Deadly serious. You're familiar with the pneumatic-driven tube trains, aren't you? Compressed air pushes the cars—"

"Vaguely familiar." The Don waved his hands helplessly. "Your company manufactures the air compressors. Am I wrong?"

"You're perfectly correct," said Volpone. "But what very, very few people know is that we have also been building vast numbers of intake impellers and huge compressors designed to snatch air and store it at thirty-two hundred atmospheres in enormous pressure vessels constructed of steel and reinforced concrete."

"Air," guessed Vico, "for the underground people to breathe."

Volpone's smile was charitable. "In addition to that," he said He started to continue, then paused.

“Vito, have you heard of malaise, the respiratory complaint which recently drove the inhabitants of high altitude locales like the Himalayas in Tibet, or the high Andean plateau, down toward sea level?”

Vico looked smitten. “I confess that I have not.”

“Malaise is a debilitating weakness caused by anoxia, the lack of sufficient air to breathe. It’s the first perceivable symptom resulting from Project Luft, our long-range program to slowly but surely deplete the Earth’s air blanket.”

Vico blanched. “You are stealing the Earth’s atmosphere?”

“Slowly but surely,” repeated Volpone solemnly. “Or at least a significant portion of it. No one will be protected, *Vilo*, except those fortunate, chosen few who will populate the redoubts. Carried to ultimate fruition, generations hence, Project Luft could depopulate the Northern Hemisphere, if not the entire Earth.”

Don Vito Vico made the sign of the cross on his frail chest.

VII

February, 1988

The sun hung low in a crystalline afternoon sky. The evening wind, quickening over snowy ridges bordering Squaw Valley, sent plumes of powder cascading from far-off slopes and made the ascending chair-lift sway giddily beneath them as Betty Dancer half-shouted, “One more run and I’ve had it. How about you?”

Lew Craft nodded. “I could use a hot shower, and dinner. I’ll race you down to the lodge.”

Betty made a face, trying in vain to tuck her windblown hair back under the fur-lined parka’s hood. “Not me, you won’t. You schuss like a bullet, and take such *crazy* chances.”

“Absolute control at all times,” scoffed Craft. “Skiing consists of applied muscular dynamics, and the intuitive ability—”

“Oh, shut up!”

They slid off together onto the packed snow and poled out of reach of the rotating chair. Betty squinted against the westering sun. “Lew, what’s that ... roof?” She pointed.

“It’s the summit A-frame shelter,” said Craft, “covering the ITTS emergency escape elevator shaft.”

“Reaching down to where you’re working?”

“Not quite yet. The chord-line runs haven’t met and linked up. Nothing’s down there now but solid granite.”

The girl frowned. “How do they know the tunnels will meet exactly? I mean, Sacramento’s back there in the valley, and Reno’s beyond the Sierra. How do they arrange a thing like that?”

“The same way porcupines make love—very carefully.”

“Smart aleck! You said ‘chord-line’ runs. I thought ITTS trains went from place to place in a series of loops.”

“The short suburban feeders do that,” explained Craft. “Interurban runs dip to a preselected depth just as the shorties do, then strike straight line chords that would be tangent to the surface midpoint if they were lifted aboveground.” Seeing her blank look, he said, “OK; try it this way. If you took an orange and pushed a needle through the skin at right angles to the vertical centerline of the orange, what would you have?”

Betty dimpled. “An orange with a needle pushed through it.”

“Do I have to shove snow down the neck of your parka?”

“Brute!” She suppressed a giggle. “Sorry; I’ll be good. So long runs loop down, then zip off in straight lines to wherever they’re going, then loop back up again. What’s your job down there?”

“Answering a lot of damn-fool questions, mostly,” he said. “Heavy equipment maintenance is my gig. I got my feet wet by doing a downtime study of the major heavy implements we use—earth-movers,

high-temperature boring rigs, elevators, like that. Why, luv?"

"I was just curious," she said.

"You?" Craft eyed her closely. "Uh-uh, you're just not a nosy broad, Betty. What started all the questions?"

Betty shot him a guilty glance. "Lew, if I told you that Senator Lewellyn and Hoo asked me to get you to snoop around and find out what's funny about ITTS, what would you say?"

Craft stiffened slightly. "Ha-ha funny, or phony funny?"

"Don't be cute. You know what I mean."

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I don't. Why should your boss and Senator Lewellyn be interested in ITTS?"

"Lewellyn thinks ITTS smells of fish. Hoo asked if I'd persuade you to help unravel the mystery, that's all."

"Mystery? The only mystery is why they'd bother. ITTS is a civilian job, Betty. Nothing about it's classified."

Betty looked sly. "You're hedging, Major mine," she said.

When Lew Craft became angry, it happened all at once and in a hurry. "Knock it off!" he said curtly.

"Hum-m-mph! That *proves* it." The girl threw out one ski, made a graceful turn, and schussed around the slope toward the head of the downhill run. The sun had touched the rim of hills. The wind keened along the exposed summit, wielding a knife edge of cold. Below, lights were coming on in Squaw Valley's purple depths.

Craft settled his goggles on the bridge of his nose with weary patience, and followed the girl. The summit was all but denuded of skiers now. He knew from the determined thrust of her jaw that Betty was in a pettish mood.

"Let's for God's sake not quarrel," he said lightly. "I hate it when our weekends wind up on a sour note. Please."

Betty thawed visibly. "All right," she agreed. "I didn't mean to start a fight. Lew, there's something you should know." Betty ran her tongue over chapped lips. "You've heard of DoT Undersecretary Alessandro Volpone, haven't you?"

"Who hasn't?" Craft brightened. "I met him just last month."

The girl looked very surprised. "You . . . *met* him?"

"Yep. He happened to be out here inspecting the ITTS dig when I reported aboard. He seems like a real dynamic guy."

"You're not kidding me? About meeting him, I mean?"

"In the flesh, Betty. What's the big deal about meeting Volpone?" Betty Dancer pulled the parka's hood more snugly about her ears. "Only *you* could ask a question like that! Hoo decided to run an article about Mr. Volpone. A great layout: pictures, biographical tidbits, color stuff on the man himself. And he does make fascinating copy: the wealthiest industrialist since Getty, stepping away from his life's work to undertake the burden of ITTS, and so forth. The writers did a fabulous job.

"But it seems someone up there doesn't like the idea of articles about Alessandro Volpone appearing in *Swinger*. Hoo got some calls from UTVN's attorneys, then another high-powered lawyer showed up and had a closed-door chat with him. Finally, just last week, UTVN board chairman Nathaniel Abrams dropped by in person. When he left, Hoo acted pretty glum."

"This Abrams, is he a big wheel?"

"Medium large," informed Betty. "Abrams is powerful in the world of the boob tube. He also owns two or three magazines."

"What's the connection between Abrams and Volpone?"

Betty told him she had no idea. "As far as Hoo can find out, they're just social friends. But Hoo was really upset about it, especially after the threatening call."

"The . . . what?"

"Someone whose voice was mushy, like he was talking through wadded cheesecloth, or something, told Hoo over the audio-only phone that if he didn't nix the article, he'd burn in hell forever."

Craft rubbed his jaw with a bemused expression. "It brings to mind a vivid picture: Hoo Hanford on the barbecue, surrounded by hordes of lovely, nude girls armed with teensy pitchforks—"

"That isn't funny. Hoo was worried sick."

"Yeah, I guess threatening calls aren't too funny at that." Craft stuck his ski poles into the snow, clapping his shoulders with mittened hands. "Hey, it's getting dark. Take off! We can talk about it over dinner."

Betty pulled down her goggles. "Do I get a headstart?"

Craft waved one ski pole. "Sure. I'll wait till you're six chains, three cubits, and a long spit ahead. Take off!"

He watched Betty pitch off and fly down the first steep slope in a straight run, then swing right in a flurry of powder. He moved his skis back and forth twice and followed her, skiing easily, his mind alive with fresh doubts.

First General Thayer had warned of 'something big' he suspected to be brewing in the "ITTS Project. Then Alessandro Volpone had made his devastating revelation of the National Redoubt, which was tied to ITTS, confirming and at the same time invalidating the general's warning, easing Craft's mind on one score, and scaring the liver out of him on another.

Now Betty had succeeded in again raising the question. It was damned peculiar; a US Senator had inveighed upon a millionaire publisher to cajole his personal secretary into persuading *him*, a mere GI engineer, to ferret out the "mystery" surrounding ITTS. It began to sound like some two-bit TV melodrama: baffled officials, having gotten wind of ITTS hanky-pantry, were turning to their only remaining hope, intrepid Major Lewis Craft . . .

Nonsense! Senator Lewellyn was a member of the Senate Finance Committee; he'd mentioned the fact in Craft's presence. Surely a senator would have access to such information. At any rate, it was a trifle wearisome to have sundry individuals spring out of the woodwork, urging you to spy for them. The next gent who approached him was in for a very hard time.

Betty had finished stacking her skis in the shed behind the lodge. "What kept you?" she teased as he trudged in. "Did you fall?"

"Course not! I took it easy' to keep from running over you."

"I won." The girl wrinkled her nose. "I get to shower first."

Craft performed a mock bow. "Be my guest. I think I'll go over and surround a brandy or two while you pretty up."

"Go ahead, souse! I'll meet you upstairs." Betty smiled, pecking him on the cheek, and skipped up the stairs and into the lodge.

Craft stood in silent admiration of the way her fanny wiggled under the tight ski pants, then sighed and stepped back outdoors. He strolled around the lodge, his breath steaming in the frosty air, admiring the sunset glow now illuminating higher ridges.

He had stepped off the curb, heading for the rathskeller a half-block away, when someone behind him called, "Lew."

Craft turned in the road, dodging a bus. The figure of a tall man was silhouetted by a streetlight. Startled, Craft came back to the curb. "Archer, you old crock! Where'n hell did you drop from?"

"Hi, Lew." Red Archer shook his hand warmly, grinning. "I spent a week's leave in San Francisco. Before I left Denver, the grapevine announced your arrival at the Sacto-Reno dig. I called the site; they told me you'd left the number of the lodge here for weekend emergency call. I thought it'd be fun to look you up."

"Great to see you, Red." Craft clapped Archer's shoulder. "Denver, huh? Let's go sit down over a brandy. You can fill me in."

"I can always use a brandy," said Archer, "but . . . look, Cobber, I don't mean to cramp your style. I saw you come down the mountain with that spectacular blonde bird a while ago . . ."

"Betty? She's upstairs, 'freshening up'," said Craft. "She has to go home right after dinner. We planned to take the bus down to Sacramento together. Then I have to kiss her good-bye."

"Tell me true," said Archer, "is that the same delicious blonde whose picture you had plastered all

over your quarters in South Base?"

Craft looked pleased, walking with Archer toward the rathskeller. "Sure is," he said. "Betty works for *Swinger* magazine in Los Angeles. I thought I told you about her."

"Uh-huh; you did, Cobber. I just didn't believe you."

The basement bar, jammed with bumptious skiers, smelled of beer, tobacco smoke, and sweaty ski togs. The babble was countered effectively by a quadraphonic audio box blaring twelve-tone rock that could not have made sense even to its composer. Craft leaned between stand-up skiers at the bar, whistling up two glasses and a quarter-filled bottle of California brandy. He and Archer retired to a rear table little bigger than a dinner plate. "Here's to the Corps of Engineers!" toasted Craft. "Or what's left of it."

Archer was sober. "Lew," he said, "you knew me pretty well at South Base. Would you say I had paranoid tendencies?"

Craft paused, his grin lopsided. "Sure, not to mention being schizoid and a bit of a kook to boot."

"Can it, Cobber; I'm serious. Someone's been keeping close tabs on me, watching every move I make underground. It's getting spooky. But I'm sure no one followed me up here. I drove Carson Pass—a two-lane affair—and pulled off the road twice to douse the lights. No one was behind me."

Craft set his glass carefully in the watery ring on the table. "What made you think you might be followed, Red?"

Archer's jaw muscle worked nervously. "Habit, I suppose." He swallowed the contents of his glass in two gulps and reached for the bottle again. "Lew, do they watch you day and night, too?"

Craft was elaborately casual. "Not that I've noticed."

"Are you still mother-henning the big stuff?" asked Archer. "In the tube dig, I-mean. Not the . . . other."

"Craft settled in his chair, his face expressionless. Another one! First Thayer, then Betty, and now—out of the blue—Archer. "Still working with earth-movers and boring rigs," he said.

Archer nodded. "Me, too . . ." He glanced secretively around the crowded bar. "I . . . I've got to say something in confidence, Lew. I've *got* to. Listen, unless I've been flummoxed, we're building a redoubt under the Rockies exactly like the one you're doing."

"Red, you talk too much," said Lew Craft.

Archer leaned forward. "Knock off the jive, and *listen*."

"You signed a security oath," warned Craft. "Besides, you're fishing, and I don't like it one damned bit." Craft started to rise. He was practically out of his chair when Archer grabbed his wrist.

"*Listen*, I said. You also swore an oath to uphold the Constitution when you were commissioned, didn't you? Swore to protect and defend our country against all enemies, both foreign and domestic? *Domestic*, Lew."

Craft eased back into his chair. "What are you getting at?"

"I mean that some of our fellow Americans are engaged in a conspiracy of such scope, such far-reaching implications that . . . I didn't come all the way up here just to pay a social call." Archer's manner was very sincere. "There are five of us—you'll make the sixth. Some of them you know: Cummings was at South Base, and Posie Thomas was at the Academy, class ahead of yours. There's a colonel named Michaels up in Alaska, and another major named Oliphant in New Mexico. Posie recruited me, just as I'm trying to—"

"Get on with it!"

"Take it easy, Lew. I can tell you everything that's happened since you reported in at Sacto-Reno. You were met by Mr. Volpone himself, who 'just happened' to be on an inspection tour of ITTS facilities. He showed you the you-know-what, and spun a lot of words about the threat of Communist aggression, about saving 'a few' Americans when the balloon goes up. I'm not guessing; it happened to me and Abe others when we—"

"Thin ice, Red." Craft's eyes were veiled. "You're still fishing, and I still don't like it."

"You needn't admit a thing, Cobber. But, haven't you twigged yet? A Cabinet official tells you of *one*, er, installation. I have sure knowledge of five—six, if you'll own up."

"Six like the one . . . what I meant was—"

"*Exactly* like the one you're working on," said Archer, capitalizing on Craft's slip. "What's more, we've had hints of a number of others scattered hither and yon. And the American taxpayer has not the slightest inkling of what's going on. Do you have any notion how many Army engineers DoT has swiped? More than *thirty*."

"You're inferring *thirty* . . . installations? Ridiculous!"

"Is it?" Archer put back the dregs in his glass neatly. He reached for the bottle once more. "I honestly don't know, Lew."

"If you're thinking of telling me to keep my eyes and ears open underground," said Craft in an even voice, "I'm going to break this bottle over your flaming red head!"

"Go ahead," encouraged Archer with a sickly grin. "But let me kill it first; no sense wasting it."

Craft groaned. "Use your head! The US is building one . . . *some* installations designed to save a slice of its population. Secrecy strikes me as being reasonable, proper, and necessary. Think of the panic there'd be if the installations, however many, became public knowledge. Not to mention their effect on the Sino-Sov warlords. Hell, that might precipitate nuclear war.

"My sincere advice," pursued Craft, "would be to quit blabber-mouthing and get on with the job. You and the others can't get together and plot an exposé, if that's what you have in mind."

"Exposé?" Archer flushed. "I came to you because I trusted you, Lew. Always have. We've no god-dam intention of exposing anything. If it had only been a matter of the redoubts, I wouldn't have bothered you. You see, there's more."

"Not sure I want to hear any more, Red."

Archer sighed. His sense of urgency seemed to evaporate. "Maybe you're right, Cobber. It's dangerous to know too much, I'll grant you. And if you're scared . . ."

"That won't work, either," said Lew Craft.

Archer slowly pushed back his chair. "Sorry if I was out of line. Guess I'd better take off. You can reach me at my apartment in Denver on weekends. If you change your mind, call me." He scribbled hurriedly on a napkin. "There's the address and phone number." "Thanks," said Craft. "I won't change my mind."

Archer looked glum. "If I were a betting man, I'd bet you will." "Don't bet more than you can afford to lose."

"We'll see," said Archer. "Shake my hand, Lew, and I'll be on my way. No hard feelings, eh?"

"Only with girls," said Craft. "Bye." He watched the tall officer wend his way out of the rathskeller with no expression whatsoever, then finished his brandy quickly.

"Carry on, Major Archer," he muttered under his breath.

VIII

February, 1988

The argument went on for almost an hour before Alessandro Volpone lost his famous temper. When that happened, everyone in and around the Department of Transportation walked on eggs. Many lifted eyebrows and eyes-raised-to-heaven shrugs occurred in the corridors and hallways surrounding the office of Secretary Jergenson when Volpone stormed out, looking like a vengeful thundercloud.

He had himself whisked to the airport by limousine. It was Friday afternoon; he was far too agitated to share the ITTS tubes with commuters.

His personal jet put him down at La Guardia; a VI helicopter felt its way through the light drizzle and deposited him on a concrete landing pad in the meadow adjacent to his estate. He jumped down and vaulted the guard fence, scuffing his knee painfully, then hurried toward the mansion, cursing in a petulant monotone.

When the door opened, he snapped, "Thank you, Andrews," ripping off his jacket and tie, flinging them in the general direction of the butler, who fielded them adroitly. "Were there any calls?"

"None, sir. Mr. Colo and Mr. Vico are waiting for you in the study."

"Good, good." Volpone charged down the hall like an angry water buffalo. He flung open the double doors to find Vito Vico reading the afternoon paper, while Colo dozed before the fire. "Leonard, Vito," he grunted, going directly to the wet bar.

Reviving, Colo yawned and joined the Mafia Don in watching Volpone pour a stiff dollop of Scotch. Downing it in three gulps, he turned to face them. "Jergenson!" he spat, making the name sound like a curse. "He is impossible. He finally condescended to see me at three, after letting me cool my heels for a proper interval like some junior lobbyist. When I brought up the Federal auto license measure, he threw a childish tantrum, saying I'd better not mention the subject again or he'd vomit.

Damned Scandinavian stubbornness!"

"Why is this license thing so important to you?" asked Vico.

"It's the largest untapped source of money on the horizon," said Volpone. "It's essential; without proceeds from Federal auto licensing, all your generosity will be wasted, Vito. The auto license measure was designed to squeeze lower-income-group motorists off the roads and freeways and into the ITTS tubes. Those who choose to drive will pay, and pay dearly, for the privilege, adding a steady, dependable source of funds to DoT's coffers.

"There's absolutely no doubt in my mind," added Volpone, "that we could force the bill through Congress. Senator Stillworth has informally polled both Houses. He thinks we have a better than even chance of passage. But without Jergenson's endorsement, hoping to get the bill before Congress this session is purely academic."

"You must wait him out, Alessandro," advised the Don. "He may yet come around to your way of thinking."

Volpone took to pacing the room. "Not after today's argument, I'm afraid. He'll never sponsor the bill, Vito. I made a serious error in losing my temper with him today, something I'd promised myself would never happen again."

"Don't blame yourself," consoled Vico. "These situations have a way of sorting themselves out, given time."

"Ah, there's the rub—time. We've little time before lack of funding forces things to grind to a halt. Once stopped, they may never start again. We've completely exhausted our excuses for hiding costs of that magnitude."

"But," the Don protested, "there's the money we contributed."

"It provided only interim funding," pointed out Volpone. "We must live through the period from now until Federal auto licensing revenues begin to be felt, plus cash flow from other sources."

Vito Vico frowned. "That wasn't made clear when we had our discussion last month," he said slowly. "Was it?"

"If you'll remember," said Volpone, choosing his words with care, "we talked about it at length."

"Ah, yes. No matter, Alessandro. How much time are we talking about?"

Volpone glanced at Colo. "Six or seven months until compressor production stops. Maybe a bit longer for the pressure vessels, wouldn't you say, Leonard?"

"It sounds like a fair off-the-cuff estimate," agreed Colo.

Vico nodded sagely. "A tremendous sum, but . . . it will sort itself out," he said confidently.

Volpone sighed. "I hope so, Vito. Would you excuse me now? Stay, and we'll all have dinner together after I wash up."

Waving him away casually, the Don slowly inserted a cigarette into his ivory holder, chewing the bit for several moments before lighting it. "Alessandro looks very tired," he remarked.

"I know. I'm worried about him," said Colo. "How he manages to function with the load that's piled on his shoulders amazes me."

"They are very broad shoulders," said Vico. "What can you tell me about this Jergenson? What sort of man would you say he was?"

"I've never met him personally." Colo ruminated. "Alex speaks of him as a hardheaded executive who spent his career years in the automotive industry. He supposedly helped President Blair years ago during his campaign for governorship of Pennsylvania. Jergenson's appointment came, probably, in payment of a

political debt."

"I see. This is an election year," speculated Vico. "Would you guess that Blair will retain Jergenson if re-elected?"

Colo seemed unsure. "The conservatives, radical right, radical left, and senior citizens are up in arms," he said. "Blair's opposition would seem overwhelming at the moment. But if the popular vote is again split among many factions, as in '84, he may squeeze by. His chances are no better than so-so, I'd say."

"No matter." Vico waved his cigarette holder airily. "The new administration wouldn't take office for almost a full year. If what Alessandro was telling us is true, that would come much too late to be of any value. How old is Jergenson?"

"Somewhere in his late sixties, I'd judge."

Vico's smile was cold. "A member of the hated minority—a 'senior citizen'—even as you or I, eh, Leonard?"

Colo looked distraught. "Alex describes him as a bull of a man. He jogs and keeps fit. He'll probably live forever."

"He lives hard, and will die hard, is that it?" Vico coughed. "It does not necessarily follow."

Leonard Colo blanched, sitting far forward in his chair. "Vito, I believe I know what you are thinking," he said worriedly.

Vico coughed again. "Do you? Leonard, I'm a practical man," he said, "who knows how to protect an investment."

"But . . ." Colo paled. "A Cabinet member?"

"A roadblock, an outsider," corrected the Mafia Don.

"It might be ... terribly unwise," objected Colo.

"Perhaps." Vico inspected the dapper accountant analytically. "As a personal favor, I would appreciate your not mentioning this to Alessandro. He has enough on his mind already."

"I . . ." Colo rose uncertainly. "I'll say nothing to Alex. Nothing at all. But, Vito, is it *necessary*?" The Don swayed his shoulders. "As necessary as Alessandro says it is. We shall see." He lifted the phone and punched a code, waited a moment or two, then said, "Fiore?"

Vico rattled something in rapid-fire Italian while Leonard Colo stood alongside the fireplace, staring into the flames and waxing his hands endlessly with a look of world-weary patience that did not match the cold misery in his heart.

There were no witnesses. The accident occurred around eleven-ten P.M. It had snowed lightly in downtown Washington during the early evening, and Mrs. Jergenson later told police that her husband had waited until the snowfall abated before walking the family's Matched pet Welsh Corgis, Port and Starboard, through their quiet Georgetown residential neighborhood.

Police reports reconstructed the accident—technically a hit-and-run felony: an electric-powered delivery van, which had been reported stolen from a Maryland bakery yard earlier in the day, had leaped the curb and crushed Ole Jergenson and one of his pet Corgis against the brick wall surrounding a private residence on Dumbarton Avenue. The Secretary of Transportation was rushed to Georgetown University Hospital, where he was pronounced dead on arrival. A reward was posted for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the occupant or occupants of the delivery van. The reward money was never claimed.

That evening, one of Vito Vico's lieutenants caused fifty unmarked hundred-dollar bills to be passed into the hands of a "soldier" named Tomaso Phalangi, a thrice-convicted felon.

Leonard Colo consulted his physician, complaining of his total inability to get to sleep at night, while Alex Volpone went into seclusion at Foxhaven, declaring the death of Secretary Jergenson to be a tragic, irreparable loss.

Eleven days later the Congress confirmed President Blair's appointment of Alessandro Volpone as United States Secretary of Transportation.

IX
March, 1988

Riding down to the sanctuary, Alex Volpone reflected on the whirlwind events which had buffeted his life since his last meeting with Patt, Stillworth, and the others. Jergenson's death had left him shocked and not a little disgusted with Vito Vico for having had the effrontery to order such an "accident."

He had stewed about his entanglement with the Don for days, regretting the necessity of having to do business with such tactless animals.

Ole Jergenson's death had been a damned shame! Any number of people needed killing much more than Jergenson. He was once again filled with an aching, uncharacteristic remorse. Volpone thought of himself as a forward-looking individual; recrimination was unnatural for him. He decided to avoid contact with Vico whenever possible in the future. Nonsense! The whole thing had been his own fault, really. It wasn't fair to blame Vico, though blame him he did.

His Cabinet appointment had also come as a surprise. Volpone had met President Blair only twice during his months as Jergenson's assistant. Obviously someone had plumped for him—someone high up.

The elevator slowed its plunge. Volpone emerged into the subterranean passage leading to the sanctuary, pausing for an instant to compose himself before opening the portal.

All four men were awaiting him, Patt looking taciturn, reserved, Emmerson busy at his self-appointed chore—making coffee. Stillworth and Abrams connived quietly across the conference table.

"Well, lookee heah, if it ain't or Alex . . ." Senator Stillworth put one hand to his mouth in mock horror. " 'Scuse me. I meant *Mistah* Secretary of Transportation Vol-poner."

"Please accept my sincere congratulations, Alex," said General Patt, ignoring Stillworth. "They picked the right man."

"Let me add mine." Rolfe Emmerson set a cup of black coffee at Volpone's elbow. "We'll expect great things from you, Alex."

Volpone thanked the CIA Director and Patt, as well as Abrams when he muttered, "Congratulations, Alex."

"And last but not least by no means, mine." Stillworth's drawl was edged in sarcasm. "Always like t'see a good man move up, I do. Proves there's room at the top for someone who's diligent, 'specially when he's man enough to *make* room."

Volpone breathed deeply, a crimson haze before his eyes. Flushed and dull of eye, Stillworth had obviously exceeded his normal quota of Bourbon this evening. "Your manners were poured from a bottle," Volpone said slowly. "I'll take no offense."

Stillworth chuckled. "That's right gracious of you," he said. "All I know is you got some 'friends' I wouldn't care t'make enemies of. Not by a damn-sight!"

"As have you, Senator," said Volpone in a ruffled tone.

"Stop bickering and let's get down to business," urged General Patt. "I have to return to the Pentagon tonight."

"One moment, please," requested Volpone. "You gentlemen are all thinking the same thing, even if most of you are polite enough not to mention it. Let's air the matter and have done with it." He regarded the senator sternly. "Ray has made a veiled allegation that I was responsible for Secretary Jergenson's death. It pains me to say that it's true, though not precisely in the manner he imagines. I am innocent of complicity in the murder."

"Murder?" Abrams looked startled.

"If the term offends you, Nat, I apologize," said Volpone, past the use of euphemisms. "I'd gone to see Jergenson over the Federal auto license matter. His stubbornness infuriated me; we had a violent argument, and when I told my . . . friends . . ." He paused. "It was a sin of omission, rather than commission, though that does nothing to excuse it."

Stillworth's grunt was caustic. "Be that as it may," he said, "y'cain't sleep with pigs an' not expect to whiff of the sty."

Volpone swelled visibly. "Your philosophy is comforting," he said, steel in his deep voice.

"Hell, I warned you what'd come of dealin' with hoods!" barked Stillworth. "You wouldn't listen. We've put our collective ass in jeopardy, an' there's no easy way out."

The others watched, silent and apprehensive. "My friends have contributed to our cause," said Volpone savagely, which is more than one can say for *yours*, Senator!" Stillworth looked suddenly wary. "The best defense is a good offense, huh? You could run for Congress with those tactics."

"Senator," demanded Volpone, "exactly how many dollars have the American Rangers contributed to our project? How much hard cash?"

"You're doin' some real fancy speculatin'," mused Stillworth. "Senator, Senator," retorted Volpone, "no speculation is involved. Last September you sponsored a convocation of Ranger hierarchy in the Tennessee hills. You addressed the meeting twice, promulgating revolution against our country's `sorry lack of leadership'. You are, and have been for many years, nominal head of the American Rangers."

"Ridiculous!" said Abrams, looking frightened.

"Is it?" Volpone swung on the TV boss. "You, Mr. Abrams, edit and publish a scurrilous rag called the *Tin Star*. I think it's time the pot quit calling the kettle black."

"Even if what y'say were true," scoffed Stillworth, "I defy you to compare 'em with those murderous scum *you* run with."

Volpone leaned across the table, hands flat-pressed and bloodless, his rage Olympian. "Sleep with pigs, and smell of the pigsty, Senator! I've listened to enough holier-than-thou nonsense from you! When it comes to 'murderous friends', may I remind you that last December a pipe bomb exploded at a political rally in Jacksonville, killing seventeen Americans, and maiming—"

"Communists," corrected Stillworth vehemently, "*not* Americans!"

"Senator," said Volpone, "if we're having an airing, let's air it *all*. The Sino-Sov Coalition's leaders dearly love you, your endeavors, and everything you stand for."

"That's a goddam lie!"

"It's the truth. Your Red-baiting, reactionary Rangers form one more major movement engaged in fractionating and polarizing our society. We have numerous radical right and radical left causes, several Black militant organizations, that evangelist, Eddy Gerhardt and others like him, spreading the Gospel in the name of a hoped-for religious dictatorship, student rebels who can't decide exactly what they want, but want it *now*, and a hated minority made up of older people who have committed the unspeakable crime of living too long.

"That doesn't satisfy you," went on Volpone, thoroughly incensed. "Now you are operating to disrupt our own tightly knit group. Look at us, Ray! Do you see any starry-eyed idealists? We can't afford to let your overwhelming ego, your dictatorial ambitions, confuse and subvert our purpose."

Stillworth's anger had wilted under Volpone's ferocious counterattack. "If you expect me t'knuckle under to your paranoid accusations, you got another think comin'," he said in disgust. Ever the consummate actor, Stillworth chose to play the role of injured party, standing head-high above such petty charges.

Rolfe Emerson waited for a minute as if to make sure the pyrotechnics were over, then took some notes from his jacket pocket and cleared his throat. "I called the meeting because I wanted to discuss something very unusual," he said. "Our people inside the USSR have reported a series of alarming incidents. During the past months, large numbers of Soviet citizens have disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Abrams blinked. "Killed?"

"We don't know. No major figures were among them, merely second and third line directors, government officials, and so on."

"That doesn't sound like a purge," surmised General Patt.

Emmerson touched the tips of his fingers together lightly. "Purges, as such, were more or less abandoned as Soviet policy shortly after Stalin's death."

"How long have you known about it?" asked Volpone.

"A matter of four or five weeks. Our team in Novosibirsk reported that the physicist they'd had on the verge of defecting—the task leader of the Soviet laser weapons research program—mysteriously

dropped from sight overnight. Assuming our operation had been penetrated, we pulled the team out immediately. Then Alexei Komarov, third-ranked official in the Soviet space program, vanished days before the launching of their new hundred-ton satellite station from Kasputin Yar."

"In China, too," asked Stillworth, "or just Rooshia?"

"Only in the Soviet Union, so far as we know," said Emmerson. "What started slowly has gradually but inexorably snowballed into a rash of disappearances: isolated dignitaries, scientists, writers, educators, artists, composers—even dancers."

"Have you, er, discovered the reason yet?" asked Abrams.

"No." Emmerson was blunt. "Our usual sources of information seem as ignorant as we are." •

"Y'say no big wheels are missin'?" asked Stillworth.

"None." Emmerson paused to reflect on his notes. "All members of the Presidium, the visible government, and military, seem to be living normal, public lives. Here's another fact which may be important: few, if any, medical researchers or physicians have dropped from sight to date."

"That's puzzling," said Volpone. "I hate to sound alarms, but mightn't it be wise to staff the redoubts with some of our own?"

Emmerson nodded, saying, "It's dangerous to leap to conclusions, of course, but the most obvious inference is that the USSR has penetrated our Lifeboat Project, and countered the gambit with similar installations. Should that be the case, why staff them now? Are they readying a preemptive strike, or merely being cautious?"

A chill breeze seemed to have whispered through the sanctuary. General Patt closed his eyes, gently waxing the tips of his index fingers. "Other than the usual war games postulates, I know of no specific threat at the moment," he said. "The Soviet Union and China appear to be playing out the strategic arms limitation charade while developing new classified weapons systems, just as we are. Nor have untoward military buildups been reported in either China or Russia."

"What's this medical holdout got to do with it?" demanded Senator Stillworth. "I don't get that at all."

"We've no idea—perhaps nothing," said Emmerson. "We have constructed a mathematical model of the situation in Foggy Bottom. Disappearees have been coded by regional area, date and time of day when last seen, age, occupation, and Communist Party affiliation. After collecting more data, we'll plug in one set of surmises after another and look for projections."

"Surmises, huh?" Stillworth's lip curled. "Seems t'me somethin' ought to be done right this minute."

"What would you suggest, Ray?" asked Emmerson quietly.

"Well . . ." Stillworth subsided with a bleary-eyed, vacant expression. "Blessed if I know, to tell the truth," he said.

"Let's keep a close watch on it for now," said General Patt. "You were perfectly correct in alerting everyone, Rolfe, but I think this can be pursued effectively through normal channels topside. Have the President and National Security Council been advised?"

"Not fully. We've had a paper prepared, but I wanted to discuss it here before making the presentation."

"Then we're probably on top of the matter." The general rose tiredly. "If there's no further business, I want to leave first." Eyeing Volpone and Stillworth speculatively as he turned toward the door, Patt departed with a curt nod. The sanctuary was largely silent for five minutes until Nat Abrams left.

Stillworth got up after observing the appropriate interval between departures. Volpone placed a restraining hand on his arm. "Stay a minute, Ray," he requested. "Please."

The senator's pudgy face wrinkled in disdain. The aftereffects of their earlier argument still smoldered in his eyes.

Emmerson took his cue, pausing to don a topcoat and unplug the coffeemaker. "Good night," he said.

"Good night, Rolfe." Volpone lighted a cigarette, rising to dribble the dregs from the coffeemaker into his cup. "We must patch up our differences," he said, solemn-voiced. "There's no other way."

The senator's jowls quivered with mirthless laughter. "So you managed t'get the goods on ol' Ray Stillworth, didja, Alex?"

Volpone lifted his hands in a silent appeal. "All of them know—have known for years," he said. "Neither I, nor any of the others, care one whit about your personal ambitions, your politicking."

"I reckon you're right, at that," said Stillworth. "Why should they? Not when we got a tiger by the tail, sure 'nuff."

Volpone sipped his coffee. "If the blow-off is coming, it's an occasion for rejoicing, for being thankful we're prepared, not a time to be frightened into squabbling among ourselves."

"Uh-huh; that's logical. That's a valid statement, Alex, but there're some matters you an' I will never see eye-to-eye on."

"You've been in the Senate over twenty-five years," said Volpone. "How many compromises have you made in those years?"

Stillworth's grin was uneasy. "More'n a few," he admitted.

"General Patt thinks Emmerson's an egghead, an intellectual bumbler," Volpone pointed out. "And he has absolutely no use for Abrams. But Patt would die before letting his feelings show here at the conference table. He's simply too much of a professional, too much of a man, not to sublimate his ego in the interests of getting the job done. I'm asking—pleading if necessary—for your cooperation. It's our only salvation if things are coming to a head."

Stillworth nodded in concurrence, but his eyes were hooded. "No more feudin', Alex," he said, "an' that's a solemn promise."

Volpone came slowly to his feet. "I'll respect you for it, Ray." He threw his topcoat wearily over one shoulder. "You'll remember to set the destruct mechanism and turn off the lights?"

"Sure thing. G'night, Alex." Volpone keyed the door, uncomfortably aware of the calculating, bloodshot eyes that bored twin holes in his back as the sanctuary's steel-clad portal clanged shut behind him.

It Alessandro Volpone had gone to the meeting feeling remorseful, he came away in superlatively downcast spirits. It was after midnight of a wet, filthy night when Bartlett picked him up in the limousine at the mall entrance to Washington's ITTS station. The rain was cold, needle-sharp, threatening to turn to sleet at any instant. The weather matched. Volpone's mood exactly.

Not at all sleepy, though bone-tired, he toyed with the idea of having Bartlett drop him off at Marissa's apartment. No, he didn't really want to sleep with Marissa tonight. What he really wanted—needed—was an hour's chat with Leonard Colo. But Leonard was home in New York, minding the store in his absence. Wait, hadn't Leonard mentioned a recent difficulty in sleeping? Volpone glanced at his watch.

He lifted the speaker. "Bartlett, let's drive around for a while. Down by the river would be nice." He opened the compartment behind the front seat and lifted out the phone, tapping the code of Colo's Manhattan suite. The phone rang three times.

"Yeah?" said an unfamiliar voice. "That you, Lieutenant?"

"Pardon me. I must have punched the wrong code."

"Uh, maybe not, buddy. Just a sec."

There was a short pause. "An old gent named Colo lives here. You a relative?"

"I . . . no," said Volpone. "Where is Mr. Colo? Who are you?"

"Take it easy, friend. They took him to Bellevue a while ago; a seizure of some kind—a stroke, I think. There's no police business here; we just followed up the ambulance call. Hello?"

Hands trembling, Volpone let the phone dangle. "Leonard!"

He slammed the phone back into the compartment, his mind racing. By air would be quickest—maybe. That would mean rousing the pilots, who might be God-knew-where, and waiting for them at the airport. "Back to the ITTS station, Bartlett. Hurry!"

Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Trenton, Manhattan—he made it in less than forty-five minutes, flagging a taxi outside the Midtown Station. The electric cab trundled across town to First Street, taking its time on the city's icy streets. Volpone threw a bill of one denomination or another at the startled driver, then bolted up the steps of gloomy old Bellevue Hospital.

Several clusters of discouraged-looking people were waiting in the lobby. Anxious to find Leonard

without delay, Volpone decided to use some clout—something he did rarely. "You!" He accosted a passing male nurse: "Take me to the night administrator."

The man, a Puerto Rican, kept walking. "Sorry, sir; I—"

"Here!" Volpone tugged out his wallet. "I am United States Secretary of Transportation. Hurry; it's damned important!"

The nurse ushered him to the night administrator, who called the chief of emergency. In a very few minutes Volpone was shown into a hushed room on the third floor. A laconic doctor introduced himself. Volpone didn't hear him. He was staring at the wasted figure under the oxygen tent, listening to the wheezing rattle of his labored breathing. "Will he live?" he asked simply.

"We can only wait and see," said the doctor matter-of-factly. "You see, his age . . . Are you, uh, related?"

"No," said Volpone. "Isn't there something else you can do for him? If it's a question of money, I want nothing spared."

"Nothing," assured the doctor.

He sat in the corridor, smoking through the wee hours. They left him alone because he looked like he wanted to be left alone. At daybreak, a nurse brought him a cup of coffee which he took, unheeding, and set to one side after touching it to his lips.

When the first, wan winter sunlight struck the filmed window at the end of the corridor, the administrator and the doctor came to tell him that Leonard Colo was dead.

Volpone's grief was boundless.

X

March, 1988

Craft was dozing on the sofa in Betty's Westwood Village pad when the shattering announcement came. The tri-di program was interrupted by a gray-faced announcer with panic in his eyes.

"Take shelter!" the man cried. "This is *not* a practice alert!" Lew Craft sprang to his feet as the announcer went on frantically. "Unidentified submarines are reported off both coasts. The US is under attack. Take shelter!"

"God, what'll we do?" Betty put one hand to her throat. Dry-mouthed, Craft hung on the announcer's words. They were to switch to an emergency radio frequency for further instructions; UTVN and all other TV stations were leaving the air. "Good-bye," cried the announcer. "God bless you, and good luck!"

The tri-di tube erupted a hiss of static as the hologram dissolved into meaningless, random flickers of light.

"Dammit, I should have listened to Red!" Craft swore in a grim monotone. "The redoubt's too far away."

"Lew, we've got to *do* something," shrieked Betty.

Craft was kicking himself for being pigheaded. Archer had gone to considerable bother, looking him up that weekend at Squaw Valley. Why hadn't he *listened*? Five redoubts—six, counting Sacto-Reno! They'd have had a chance if only he'd listened. For all he knew, there was a redoubt between Los Angeles and San Diego. "Grab a coat," he instructed. "We'll try the ITTS tubes. There'll be a stampede, but it's our best shot. Move!"

Stifling a sob, Betty scampered into the bedroom. Craft jumped to the window and slid it open. A tremolo, low-pitched wail rose from the general direction of UCLA's campus, intermixed with the rapid ululation of police sirens and the faint, chilling shrieks of terror-stricken thousands who ran in all directions below him.

He had turned from the window, chiding himself for having driven Archer away without a full hearing, when a blinding light brighter than the noonday sun flooded the apartment

Craft awoke half out of his bunk, enmeshed in a twisted jumble of bedding. The marine corporal who had just switched on the light stared at him curiously. "Feelin' OK, Major?"

"Yeah, I'm . . . fine. Thanks for rousing me, Courtney."

The nightmare stayed with Craft while he showered and dressed, vivid, authentic, and terrifying. Lew Craft seldom dreamed. He'd stewed about Red's visit for weeks. This was the first indication that Archer's warning was nagging at his subconscious as well. Why had he sloughed off his well-meaning friend?

Cursing his own doubting nature, Craft left his cubicle on H Level, riding down the construction elevator past J, K, and L Levels, where legions of workmen labored to finish the sprawling living quarters, to M Level's deserted concourse. His cramped office looked exactly as he'd left it—rolled A&E drawings of the redoubt scattered over both his desk and drafting board. He picked up his slide rule, stuffed it into its plastic holster and put it away in a drawer, then went about tidying up until both the desk and drafting board tops reappeared.

Yesterday he had gone over the redoubt blueprints inch by inch, comparing them with the general specifications for survival and housing that Art Parkinson, VI's taciturn superintendent and security coordinator, had reluctantly allowed to pass into his hands after numerous petitions. Gaining Parky's confidence had been no easy chore. Craft had tried flattery, had tried buying Parkinson a beer after hours in the B Level canteen. The super had seemed willing to guzzle Craft's beer indefinitely, had absorbed his flattery like a deadpan sponge, and had listened to his persuasive techniques with a deaf ear—until the evening Craft idly mentioned that what the redoubt lacked was a handball court.

Parkinson had perked up. "Handball, eh? Play, do you? There're some courts on M Level; you just haven't found 'em."

At handball, Parky was a demon in the guise of a quiet-spoken, middle-aged man—quick, resilient as the hard rubber ball itself, and possessed of a fierce competitive drive. After their fourth or fifth epic battle, Craft had casually mentioned his gridiron days at West Point. "Handball's a good conditioner, but I never played enough to really get good at it."

"Craft? Hell's tinkling bells! You're not the same Craft who played middle linebacker for Army around '78 or '79?"

Craft had admitted modestly that he was.

"I'm a sonofabitch!"

That had broken the ice. Parkinson had paid for the beer that evening; he'd seen the Navy game in '79 and replayed it with absolute and total recall, complimenting Craft's part in Army's game-saving goal line stand with less than a minute to play.

Parky had issued him a temporary electromagnetically-keyed pass to the inner microfile, but only after Craft pleaded the necessity of becoming familiar with the entire redoubt complex if he were to do his job properly. But the inner "black" file, guarded round-the-clock by armed marines, probably contained the information he wanted.

Then, two weeks after talking to Archer at Squaw Valley, the heat exchanger had failed suddenly on a huge, vane-axial compressor in the redoubt's M Level air storage complex, causing the high-speed bearings to overheat too quickly for the malfunction-detector alarm system to react and shut down the machine. By the time a watching technician hit the panic button, the great compressor had turned itself into a smoking mass of ruined windings and insulation. Craft had ordered another compressor shipped from the VI depot in Sacramento, logging the burned-out unit's serial number as it was sent to the salvage yard.

He'd forgotten it until the new unit arrived, coming up short as he was logging the new compressor's serial number. A separation of almost thirty-five thousand significant digits yawned between the old and new serial decals. Either there'd been a model change, requiring new serialization, or almost *thirty-six thousand* model RR-17-21C vane-axial compressors had been produced since the ruined unit came off VI's assembly line.

Which was absurd! Whistling raucously through his teeth, he swung about to the drafting board and unrolled a thick sheaf of prints labeled, "Redoubt Complex MB California—General Plan."

A half-mile below the surface, the hundred-foot torus of the air intake plenum surrounded Michigan Bluff's elevator shaft, a twenty-foot-diameter vertical bore six thousand feet deep. Large feeder lines

dove downward from one hundred and fifty booster impellers ringing the hemispherical walls of the primary intake pit which, from aircraft in flight, resembled a plowed, fenced field enclosing a ramshackle house and barn—roughly a six-hundred-foot square.

Inrushing air passed through a thick structural mesh of steel and fiberglass that did double duty as both camouflage and gross air filter. The "farm" would not stand close inspection, being intended to deceive only aerial and orbital surveillance.

Craft traced down through the redoubt's dozen levels with his index finger. His first concern—aside from multiplying everything he discovered by Archer's factor of five—would be to determine steady-state temperature levels of the vane-axial compressor motors. He would investigate with thermocouples to verify the effects of convection, as well as heat exchanger efficiencies, tank cradle heat-exit temperatures, and random ambients throughout the air storage complex.

But that problem came later. Craft pushed the roll of prints to one side, rubbing his cheek with the flat of one hand. Where, in the microfile open to him, could he hope to find a clue toward providing Archer's magic number—five. Six, counting this redoubt. And hadn't Red mentioned something about there being "more" to the conspiracy? He decided to search the master index again. Something *had* to be there. He'd already spent hours winnowing data from the microfile, but what other path was open?

His tiny electric maintenance buggy was beetle-slow; the redoubt's personnel trams and slideways would be inoperative for at least another two months if current turn-on schedules were met. He trundled down the branch corridor, through a vaulted arch, and into the main concourse, heading toward the far end of the air storage complex.

Craft would feel ever small and insignificant here. The sheer *scale* of things lent a larger-than-life air of grandeur to the immense hall which never failed to make his pulse rate jump. Smooth, spheroidal pressure vessels of steel and prestressed concrete loomed one hundred forty-five feet in diameter, and over two hundred feet long, cradled in massive welded frames and interconnected by a maze of heavy-walled pressure lines. It was these gargantuan tanks—a single, continuous row of monster eggs, vanishing to a pinpoint under the scored, high-arched ceiling—that rocked the imagination. The air storage complex was just over two miles long.

An overhead traveling crane, supported by derrick-like stanchions straddling the string-straight necklace of tanks, moved thirty-five working compressors from platform to platform for individual container pressurization, enabling each spheroid to be used as a single source of compressed air. The platforms also supported pressure monitors, feeder lines, bleed valves, and a manual override console housed in a sheet metal control booth atop each fifty-foot-high steel stairway.

He arrived impatiently at the alcove fronting the microfilm vaults. Viewers, serving the open files, were scattered throughout the redoubt; the inner file was restricted to use by those individuals who'd been cleared for access. He turned in and encountered the only living persons he had seen in the empty vastness of M Level: a pair of armed marines, lounging outside the small-arms-proof plastic bubble housing the "black" file. Inside, Art Parkinson grinned at Craft slyly.

"Hi, young fella," called the superintendent as Craft parked his cart. "Come in and shut the door."

"Lo, Parky." Craft slumped in a chair, propping his feet on the desk. "I'm trying to chase down the reason why that heat exchanger crapped-out last week. Whatever it is, it cost us a whole unit." Craft hooked a thumb nonchalantly toward the solitary viewer behind the desk. "How about the secret file? Could be the data I need is in there."

Parkinson met Craft's eye. "It's off limits," he drawled. "No two ways about that."

Craft sighed. "OK, but what if the info I need is stored there? I can't do my job without some answers, can I?"

"Mighty few people on this job know *all* the answers," said Parkinson. "Tell you what; I'll run a recheck on you through DoT and government security, and see if we can get you a provisional clearance. Meantime, use the inner file as best you can. No damned reason why your hands should be tied, but I got my orders." Parkinson lifted his hands helplessly.

Craft made a rude noise with his lips. "What's the sense of even having a black file if no one's allowed to use it?"

"Search me. I was told it held some data vital to national defense—stuff the big wheels will need if things ever go pop." Parkinson smiled. "I don't know what's in there, either, or if access'll help you, but it will only take an hour or so to find out."

Parkinson rose. "Let's cut out. I'm going to lock up, now. If you come up with the answer to that heat exchanger problem, I may let you beat me at handball tonight."

Grinning, Craft said, "That'll be the day!" He went to his cart and retrieved a notebook and some drawings. The marines ignored him as he let himself into the inner file. He inserted the key, unlocking the board, and started with, "Compressors—Air Storage," as a general heading, scanning down the list until he came to, "Emergency Redundant Facilities—Parts, Tooling, Jigs, Fixtures." He stepped to one of the viewers hulking in a row along the near wall and punched an alphanumeric code. Unseen, spool CC-96 popped into the viewer; the screen lighted. He moved the joy-stick control to fast wind, watching the fiducial mark as it rose toward the level indicated by the index. The material was voluminous, covering many microfilm frames: horsepower curves, usage factors, drawings of compressor piece parts, fabrication jigs, tools, materials and processes involved in manufacture, ad infinitum.

Craft spent the better part of an hour reviewing design data on the heat exchangers, learning nothing new. At the end of the section he found a two-frame table devoted to logistics spare parts. He read it, then read it again, mildly shocked. In round numbers, there was logistic provision for six hundred and twenty spare parts—enough for *twenty* redoubts.

Lew Craft tilted his chair backward in thought, whistling. Redundancy was one thing, but . . . the vane-axial compressors were identical; interchangeability had been a primary design criterion at VI. It made little sense to store spares in those quantities; air storage would cease instantly in the event of attack, since the outside atmosphere would presumably become contaminated. Why, then? The only explanation, logic said, was that *other* nearby redoubts stored redundant backup hardware for quick relocation and transportation of basic necessities. *Many* others. But, twenty? Then he remembered that Archer had suggested *thirty*.

He stared fixedly at the logistics table, then rewound the spool and vent back to the master index, checking, "Heating, Refrigeration, Office Supplies, Medical Supplies, and Culinary Supplies." The spares' ratios were roughly the same. He came away half-convinced; the new factor would seem to be Archer's "five" times four, which equaled twenty. He tried to imagine twenty vast, subterranean fortresses like the one he was standing in, and his mind balked.

Removing his key from the master index panel caused the file to lock automatically. He waved to the marine guards and returned to his office, having discovered nothing he could point to and say, "There's the proof." Nevertheless, Red's story began to look like it had plenty of meat in it, though it wasn't very plausible.

Craft scowled, deciding he didn't like the role of snoop; it was contrary to his nature. So his government—or *somebody*—was providing havens for ... For *how many*? He pulled out his slide rule and manipulated it, then whistled softly. Twenty redoubts like Sacto-Reno would house a total of half a *million* persons.

Craft swore, jamming the slide rule back into its holster. Enough goddam butterfly chasing! Frustrated, he got up and prepared to go back to work. The intercom buzzed. "Yeah?"

"This's Parkinson," announced the squawkbox. "I just got my ears burned and my arse chewed, and you're to blame. Government security did a double back flip and came up spitting fire when I asked for your provisional black file clearance. No one but Gawd Almighty and the Archangels can get near that stuff. Sorry."

"Uh, so am I, Parky. I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

"Naw, you didn't," assured Parkinson. "I was joking. I called comp'ny headquarters in New York. After getting shuffled around for a while, they let me talk to Dr. Seymour. He says the heat exchanger dope, and a lot of other specs and proprietary jazz, is locked in the VI secret file right in my very own office."

"Hey, that sounds like paydirt. Give me a chance to take some temperature readings, then we'll dig into your file and—"

"Whoa, son; it ain't that easy," said Parkinson. "Everybody and his brother are hiding secrets on this program. Doc Seymour says it's OK opening that file, providing I stay with you at all times. Now I'm a nursemaid. Ain't that something!"

"Nothing's easy any more," pacified Craft. "When's a good time for you?"

"Oh, maybe tomorrow afternoon . . . Hey, Doc Seymour wants feedback on that heat exchanger problem. He asked me to have you call him and discuss the details when you've got a handle on it."

"Sure thing; will do. What time's our game tonight?"

"Handball?" asked the super. The intercom remained silent for several seconds. "Tell the truth, I might not be up to it tonight."

"That's OK, Parky. Take care of yourself."

Craft washed up and combed his hair after going off watch late that afternoon. Thoughts of a lonely meal in the commissary made him grimace horribly at himself in the mirror. Without Parkinson to duel at handball, the evening lacked purpose. He might find a poker game up in D Level, or roll a few strikes with Matt in the M Level bowling alley, or play some billiards. It all sounded dull.

As a consulting engineer, Craft had freedom to come and go as he pleased. He changed into a pullover and slacks, grabbed his ski parka, and headed for the elevator.

Michigan Bluff was little more than a wide spot in the narrow mountain road. Craft bummed a ride from the shafthead to town in a delivery truck that was heading back to Sacramento. It was after six o'clock, and dark, when he thanked the driver and swung off.

The single drugstore featured faded advertising displays and a collection of dead flies in the front window. He asked the counterman for change, since the pay phone was an antique and he could not use his credit card to make the call, then got out his wallet and looked up the hastily scrawled number, placing the call with a surly-voiced long distance operator. The phone lacked a video channel. It rang twice, then a woman's voice said, "Hello?"

"I'd like to speak to Major Archer, please. Is he there?"

"I'm sorry. We've just moved into the building." The woman sounded anxious to please. "The phone hasn't been changed yet, but . . . I could let you speak to the apartment house manager. He's here fixing the faucet."

There was a long silence. Craft could hear mumbling away from the phone. "Hi, I'm the manager, Can I help ya?"

"I'm trying to reach Major Archer. He gave me this number."

"Oh, yeah—Archer. Red-headed fella. Didn't see him for a couple of weeks, then two fellas came by one day and collected his things. Paid his rent clear till the first of May, they did."

"He's moved? Uh, did he leave a forwarding address?"

"Didn't leave nothing," said the man, chuckling. "He just quit coming home, is all. Kinda peculiar, ain't it?"

"These men who picked up his belongings, who were they?"

"Damned if I know. They didn't say. Sorry; I'd like to help ya."

"Yeah," remarked Craft sourly, "so am I. Thanks, anyhow."

He hung up, standing before the phone for a long moment, imagining his friend talking when he should have been listening—probably in some public place. Red had made a point of mentioning that he was being watched. Had someone seen him make the wrong move?

Craft walked out into the night, thinking as he paced along the sidewalk of Michigan Bluff. He made a bet with himself that none of the officers Red had mentioned were any longer in circulation. He *knew* they weren't, though he couldn't explain why he knew.

But he did!

What else had Red discovered? That more than thirty officers had been transferred to DoT from General Thayer's command. Craft now had superficial knowledge of six redoubts at minimum. A hunch, and the logistics spares' quantities described in the microfile, implied twenty. To cap it off, Red's information hinted at *thirty*. Thirty redoubts would house three-quarters of a million persons. That wasn't just ridiculous, it was obscene!

And Red had said that there was *more* to the affair than just the redoubts. He had no idea—none at all—what Archer had meant; he'd been too damned impatient to find out what kind of "more." But now he fully intended to try.

Stubbornness was a trait with which Lew Craft was richly endowed. He decided to discover, once and for all, what was at the bottom of this crazy business, not for General Thayer, Senator Lewellyn, or Hoo Hanford, but simply for his own satisfaction.

And he would lay the groundwork for saving his own hide, too, when the time came. No one was going to put him in a bottle, as they seemed to have done with Archer. No one!

Craft had a drink in a shabby bar, silently toasting Archer. Red had bet that he'd change his mind. Score one for Red!

Afterward, he walked down the street and ate something anonymous in a greasy-spoon diner that was getting ready to close, then returned to the redoubt early and sat staring at the wall of his room until the wee hours in a very determined frame of mind.

XI March, 1988

Senator Victor Lewellyn was having breakfast alone when he ran across an interesting story in the *Washington Post*: "A spokesman for Volpone Industries today announced the sale of Alessandro Volpone's fabled yacht *Spindrift* to an unspecified Argentinian shipping concern.

"*Spindrift*, long acknowledged one of the largest, most opulently appointed private pleasure vessels afloat, had been reportedly placed on the block by the billionaire industrialist both because of his age, sixty-three, and because his duties as Secretary of Transportation denied him time to make use of the ship."

On page six, Lewellyn found a photo of Alessandro Volpone standing somberly, eyes closed, head bowed, at the graveside services for Leonard Colo, his business manager and lifelong friend.

He thought about Volpone as he polished off a second English muffin and finished his coffee, then went to his study and seated himself at his desk. He punched a phone code, idly tapping a pencil while waiting for an image to form in the phone's small video tube.

"Good morning. Mr. Han—" Betty Dancer's image brightened with a sunny smile. "Well, hi! How's my favorite senator?"

"Tol'able, Betty. Is our 'favorite publisher' his smiling self?"

Betty wrinkled her nose. "More or less; he just got in. He's arguing with someone on another line. Can you hold?"

"Sure, if he won't be tied up too long. By the way, Betty; had any luck persuading your boyfriend to help us with, uh, that matter?"

"Not much." Betty Dancer sobered. "Lew's a stubborn fella when he wants to be. He insists ITTS is a civilian job, that you or anybody can find out all about the project simply by asking DoT."

"He does, does he." Lewellyn was bemused. "Uh, Lew's wrong, Honey Chile," he said dryly. "It's not that easy, believe me. Will you keep after him?"

"Well . . . sure." Betty's manner informed the senator that she was less than eager to do so. "I'll turn into a regular old nag, if you insist. But I can't promise anything."

Lewellyn smiled. "I accept your offer humbly."

"Oh, he sometimes talks about the job in generalities," she said, "when he's prodded. Lew's his own man; it's hard to explain how darned independent-minded he is. God, I could tell tales!"

The senator nodded. "Say, is Hoo still on the phone?"

"He's just finishing," she said. "Here he is."

"Hello, old-timer," greeted Lewellyn as Hanford's angular visage took Betty's place in the tube. "Listen, the morning paper tells me Volpone's upped and sold his cherished yacht."

"I know," said Hanford. "The story come over the wire yesterday afternoon. It puzzled our staffers; they showed it to me."

"Kind of odd, isn't it?" asked Lewellyn slowly. "I read the manuscript of your article on my last trip west, remember? According to it, Old Moneybags would have parted with his mistress, or an arm and leg, before parting with his yacht."

Hanford sucked his dry pipe thoughtfully. "The story mentioned his age, his total involvement in DoT and the—"

"You didn't *buy* that explanation?"

"Didn't I?" Hanford's brows arched. "Why not?"

"Because it makes nonsense," remonstrated Lewellyn. "So he's sixty-three! Think about it, Hoo; that's the time of life when a gentleman of Volpone's stature would *need* a yacht."

"Wel-l-l," granted Hanford, "that makes considerable sense."

"Sure does. And Cabinet appointments are temporary," pressed the senator, "lasting until the next administration takes office. In this case, next January, if the polls are telling the truth."

"Hm-m-m, what other motives could he have, Vic?"

Lewellyn's grin was sly. "Maybe he needs the money."

Hoo Hanford chuckled around his pipe. "That *must* be it." He snapped his fingers. "Like I need appendicitis!"

"Let's not laugh it off too quickly, churlish publisher. I had a hot flash when I read that piece in the paper, and I've learned to trust my hunches—some of 'em, anyway. Is there a way you could do a quick, quiet check on Volpone?"

"A *what*?" Hanford shook his head in wonder. "Take a week in Bermuda first chance you get, Vic; you need a rest. Investigate the *credit rating* of someone worth three-plus billions? It's easy; he has none—none at all. You can find out how GM's doing, or Bethlehem Steel; they're public enterprises. You can check out Volpone Industries, too. But not old Alessandro himself, for Crissakes!"

"You filthy rich bastards are all the same," grouched Lewellyn.

"Heh, heh; very funny. The wolf's not at my door, Vic, but Volpone could buy and sell people like me with petty cash."

"I ... uh, see what you mean." Lewellyn was chagrined. "Isn't there *some* way to discover a mogul's financial status?"

Hanford shrugged. "Yes, if you're willing to spend that kind of money for mere information, but no sane, practical way I know of. The Supreme Court has made some astonishing decisions recently about respecting the right of privacy."

Senator Lewellyn developed a faraway look. "Volpone's picture was also in today's paper," he said, attending the funeral of one of his employees in Brooklyn. He looked a thousand years old, with the weight of the world resting squarely on his shoulders."

"Ever see any cheerful people at a funeral?" demanded Hanford. "No, but I . . . OK, I give up. Maybe I'm so strung out by the ITTS money boondoggle that I'm reading things into Volpone which simply aren't there. Sorry I bothered you."

"Bother me anytime," said Hanford cheerfully. "Say, weren't you planning a trip out to the coast sometime soon?"

"Next month," Lewellyn told him. "Just for the weekend, but Ginny and I will stop by and say hello. Will you be in town?"

"April? Uh, yes; I'll be home all month. See you then."

"Right. So long, old-timer." Senator Lewellyn switched off.

"Not again!" Bent over donning ski boots, Lew Craft raised his head, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "I thought we settled the question of me spying for Lewellyn and your boss last time around."

Betty Dancer finished tying her long blonde hair into a bun, glancing at Craft in the vanity mirror. "My, aren't we touchy! I only asked how the job was going, and got my head bitten off."

"Come off it!" he said, a rasp in his voice. "I won't be used; not by Hoo Hanford, or anyone."

"You've been moody and grouchy all weekend," complained the girl. "This's me, Lew," coaxed Betty in a softer voice. "Something's eating you. Why don't you tell me."

"Drop it," he said, stamping the floor of their room to settle the boots on his feet. "Let's get up the hill;

it's after twelve."

"I don't feel much like skiing today," she said petulantly.

"Then I'll go alone," he said. Betty turned, looking stricken. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to start one of our weekend bickers."

He came over to stand beside her. "Our regular Sunday battle," he said in resignation, touching her hair. "Damned if I can explain it; the last thing I ever want is a fight."

"I . . . know." Betty got up and put her arms around his waist, nestling her head on his chest. "Let's stay here and lounge around. We'll get tipsy and make love, then go down and sit by the fire and swap lies with the other ski bums until dinnertime."

Craft smiled lamely. "That's a good notion. But there's something I have to do up on the mountain this afternoon."

The girl made a moue of frustration. "*Must* you always be so damned mysterious about everything? What do you have to do?"

"Stay here and relax, if you want," he said. "I'll be back." Betty's lips compressed with determination. She reached for her parka. "I won't let you out of my sight today. Not after *that*."

Craft held the door, watching skeptically as she stepped into the hall with dainty grace.

The day was gray and overcast, with no wind—the sort of hushed, expectant weather which presages falling snow. A few random flakes settled around the chair-lift as they were carried upward toward the summit, but it did not begin to snow in earnest until they left the chair and poled around the brow of the hill.

The girl pointed. "That particular A-frame building," she lectured, "covers the ITTS emergency escape elevator shaft reaching down to where the tunnels will shortly join up."

"God, you're smart!" Craft whistled in appreciation. "Where did you learn all that good stuff?"

"My boyfriend told me," said Betty smugly.

"Better straighten the clod out," suggested Craft. "You said, 'will' join up, instead of 'have' joined up."

Betty skewed to a stop beside him. "Already, Lew? Tell me true; did the tunnels miss by much when they came together?"

"Miss!" Craft grinned. "There's no margin for error in an ITTS job, luv. The Sacto-Reno bore interface was so smooth that we needed only a thousand-or-so feet of blend casing. Not bad, considering the disparate elevations of Reno and Sacramento, or the distance separating the origination point of each bore."

"Blend casing?" Betty looked puzzled. "More engineeringese?"

"Uh-huh. They enlarge the bores on either side of the-interface, then fair in the out-of-line segments with special casing centered around a slow-setting cement liner. The tube ends up with a minute ripple in it, but no one could ever find—or feel—it."

"Fascinating! I suppose they'll put in the elevator next."

"It's installed," informed Craft. "The elevator went in right after breakthrough. A path to the surface is like money from home when you're working miles and miles from daylight."

The girl's eyes widened. "Miles and miles . . . oh-h-h, that sounds so spooky! Have you been in the new section yet?"

"Twice," he said. "I supervised the crew who preassembled and installed the elevator components."

Betty Dancer stuck her ski pole in the snow. "OK, we're here." She brushed away a few snowflakes from her sleeve. "Whatever it was you wanted to do, you'd better do it fast, partner. We're liable to get snowed in."

"*You* may end up snowbound," said Craft, waving toward the A-frame building above them. "I have a way home—snow, or no snow."

Betty pouted demurely. "You're cute! Gallant Major Craft, who abandons damsels on snowy hillsides!"

"Let's climb up to the shelter," suggested Craft.

Seen close up, the structure was larger than it had appeared from below. A galvanized sheet metal

roof covered eaves swooping steeply beneath the snowline on both sides of stone steps leading to the entrance. The interior consisted of a single, huge room rimmed with a shallow loft on its three visible sides. Craft explained that the shelter was stocked with emergency rations, a fuel-oil-powered furnace, a wireless telephone, flares, snowshoes, and a fuel-oil-powered generator for lighting. The stone floor looked uncomfortable, though Betty promptly admitted that camping on it would be vastly preferable to spending nightmarish hours trapped deep in the bowels of the Sierra. A DoT placard warned that casual use of the shelter by skiers would result in federal prosecution.

It was snowing heavily when Craft decided to schuss around to the north side of the building, poking the snow in a speculative manner. Betty followed, watching with doubt in her eyes as he studied the darkening, swirling sky.

"What are you doing?" she inquired after a moment.

"It should be shady out to about . . . here," he mused.

"Shady?" Betty was exasperated. "What, exactly, are you doing?"

In answer, Craft bent double and popped loose his Saloman bindings. He stepped from the skis, sinking thigh-deep in the powdery drift ten feet from the A-frame shelter's eave, and began to dig a trench in the snow with mittened hands.

"You're insane!" accused Betty, staring in disbelief.

Craft worked steadily. When the trench was deep enough for his liking, he buried the skis and poles, then floundered around the end of the eave to the stone steps, brushing away the ice crystals clinging to his ski pants. "There, that should do it. The skis won't be hard to find; I buried them in line with the roof."

"Why did you bury your skis?" Betty was not to be put off.

Craft shrugged. "I may want to do some skiing if it gets stuffy down below. You never know."

"I don't believe that. That's crazy!"

"Do me a favor. Schuss over and shove a little snow into the trench, then come back toward me and cover my tracks. The drifts will wipe everything out soon, but more is better. OK?"

"Why did you bury your skis?" shrieked the girl.

"Don't get excited," placated Craft. "I told you."

"Y-you expect me to believe . . . *that*? You," she announced dramatically, "are a nut—N-U-T!"

"Let's get back to the chair-lift," said Craft, unperturbed. "It's beginning to snow fairly hard."

"What the hell do you plan to do, *swim* down?"

Craft smiled. "There's a macadam path somewhere under the snow. If I step off the edge, I'll find out in a hurry. C'mon."

Almost in tears, Betty gave up and followed him, groaning. They rode the chair-lift together, walking through falling snow into the warmth of the lodge. They had hot buttered rum and popcorn in front of the huge fireplace that afternoon, while snow fell and the oak-beamed lounge took on a rosy, congenial glow, then ate dinner early and spent their remaining hours locked in each other's arms while purple twilight seeped in through the windows and the snowfall abated and eventually stopped.

Arm in arm, they boarded the bus and rode, silent for the most part, down the wide, gently curving freeway to Sacramento. Craft kissed Betty and held her for an instant at the ITTS station. Then he reluctantly let her go.

"Someday I'll find out why you buried your skis," she called. "Someday," he agreed.

"You're out of your mind, but I love you anyhow."

Lew Craft was smiling secretly when he left the station.

XII

April, 1988

"I love it!" Marissa pirouetted at the window, enchanted by the view. Their suite in *Hotel Baur au Lac* looked out over the *Zurichsee*, with the clean white silences of the Great Alps hanging along the horizon. "It's so bright and cheerful now," Marissa exclaimed. "Last night, when we landed, Zurich was moody and misty. I wasn't sure I'd like it. But, today ..."

Volpone watched her, thinking how like a lovely butterfly she was with sunlight streaming through the French windows, illuminating her filmy negligee. He realized sadly how little he now felt for Marissa. Beautiful in a classic, more-than-human way, like perfect porcelain, she dressed fashionably, knew all of the right people, and was very, very competent in bed. But no longer exciting. The nagging worry of growing old rose to haunt him. "Come and dress," he urged. "Weren't we going shopping?"

"Oh, we must," she said. "You rushed me away from Washington with nothing but the clothes on my back."

They windowshopped along Zurich's Fifth Avenue—the *Bahnhofstrasse*—admiring quaint buildings, old signs, medieval lanes, tearooms, and the city's incongruous baby-blue streetcars, a holdover from another era. They spent a half-hour at the *Grossmünstler Kirche*, where *Karl der Grosse*—Charlemagne—lies halfway up the south tower, visited his somber crypt briefly, then returned gladly to the lucid sunlight of *Bahnhofstrasse*. The sky was azure; the air crisp. Linden trees were already beginning to cast perfume.

They had lunch in a so-so restaurant near the Urania Bridge, then Marissa began shopping with a vengeance, modeling chic pantsuits and gowns in one salon after another. Glancing at his watch often,

Volpone finally asked, "Would you mind terribly if I went out for a drink and a stroll, my dear?"

She touched his cheek. "Run along, Alex. I know you're bored." Leaving the boutique, he hurried along the boulevard toward the bank. It would be his first dealing with the "Gnomes of Zurich" since Leonard Colo's death. Volpone sorely missed Leonard; he had grown accustomed, over the years, to allowing Leonard to run important errands like this one. He had taken Leonard for granted. Now he must do it himself, since there was no one else—no one.

He entered the bank, going directly to the barrier, and let himself in as if he owned the place. "*Buon Giorno*. Signor Valenti to see *Herr Rothenberg*," he said in Italian. "I believe he expects me."

"*Grlietj*." A thin-faced, spectacled man rose diffidently. "If you'll have a seat, *Signor Valenti*, I'll tell him you are here."

Volpone paced the carpet. *Zurchers* had always intrigued him, for some reason. Polite enough if one did not look too far beneath the surface, they reminded him of New Yorkers—stand-offish and brusque, often to the point of rudeness.

"This way, if you please, sir." The thin-faced man ushered him into a paneled office, closing the door discreetly as he left. *Herr Rothenberg* rose behind a large ebony desk, a pink-skinned, chubby bear of a man who smiled and shook hands cordially.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Volpone," he amazed the other by saying. Dismayed, Volpone bristled. "I was led to understand that the identity of clients was held sacred in this firm," he rumbled.

"It is, sir." Rothenberg smiled nervously. "But you are much too prominent to make charades necessary. That is, I thought . . . Sit down, if you will. This office is soundproofed; you may trust me implicitly not to divulge your presence in Zurich to anyone."

Volpone eased himself into a chair, still glowering. "You realize how embarrassing it would be for me—for my country—to have the purpose of my visit disclosed?"

"*Aexglisi*." The banker seemed desolated. "I see that I have taken liberties by using candor, Mr. Volpone. I would not have offended you for the world, but last night when you landed at Zurich Intercontinental, went through customs . . ."

Volpone stroked his jaw. "How dull of me."

Rothenberg tugged out a handkerchief, daubing under his ample chin. "We are honored to have you visit our house," he said sincerely. "I would like you to understand that we observe strictest discretion at all times. Believe me, no mention of your presence will ever be made. It is second nature for us to observe—"

"Shall we get to business?" asked Volpone, low-voiced.

The banker reversed a yellow legal tablet lying on his desk, offering Volpone a pen. "Be so kind as to write the number of your account, and we can complete the transaction immediately."

Volpone scratched his number quickly. Rothenberg pressed a buzzer, summoning a clerk. When the door had closed behind the clerk, the banker waxed his hands, saying, "May I take this opportunity to

congratulate your phenomenal success with tube transit, sir."

"Er, thank you."

"On my last trip to London I rode the new Calais-Dover tube. Extraordinary! We Swiss have contemplated a similar project."

Volpone relaxed slightly. "I should think ITTS would be admirably suited to Switzerland," he said.

"We've made significant progress already," the banker assured him. "I've had several conferences with . . ."

Rothenberg broke off at a polite tap on the door. He got up and the clerk passed him some papers. Closing the door, the banker slowly resumed his seat, studying the material. "There are two separate accounts under your number," he remarked. "Which, er . . .?"

"I wish to close the larger account," said Volpone.

The banker looked up. "With accrued interest, the larger amounts to more than one and one-half billion Swiss francs," he said with a polite cough. "Well over four hundred million dollars."

Volpone drew a folded slip of paper from his jacket pocket. "Will you please see that the money is deposited in these separate American banks? I have indicated the way I want it distributed."

"Certainly. It will be done within forty-eight hours," assured Rothenberg. "And the other account—precious metals, principally tantalum and tungsten, I see?"

"We will leave that undisturbed for the time being."

Rothenberg came around the desk to shake hands. "It was a privilege to meet and to serve you, sir. Our services will be held at your complete disposal whenever you need them."

"Thank you. I must apologize for being crusty a while ago."

"Tut!" said the banker. "Apologies are unnecessary. I hope you enjoy your stay in Zurich, Mr. Volpone. *Wiedersehen.*"

So that's all there is to it, he thought, back once more in the brisk air of *Bahnhofstrasse*. All of his fluid cash was represented by today's withdrawal, plus what he'd realized from the sale of the yacht. He walked back to the hotel in a sudden dark mood, feeling penniless and insecure.

Arne Seymour was playing billiards with Volpone in the game room at Foxhaven the following weekend when the butler announced Vito Vico, causing the testy physicist to muffle an easy shot. Seymour swore under his breath. "Were you expecting him?"

"No." Volpone racked his cue, instructing the butler to show Mr. Vico into the library. "I wonder what's on his mind."

"Just gangster business, I suppose," quipped Seymour.

"Shut up!"

"I was only joking, Alex." Volpone's dark eyes were half-closed in thought. "I'm afraid Mr. Vico isn't noted for his sense of humor," he said.

"Do you want me to leave?" Volpone pondered. "Stay, Arne. Perhaps it's time for you two to become acquainted. Follow my lead, and for God's sake be polite."

Vito Vico looked dapper, and the least bit suspicious, when Volpone introduced Seymour. "So you're the young man who dreamed up this wild air scheme," he exclaimed, not offering to shake hands. "Alessandro told me all about you." Vico chose an armchair. "I tried to call you twice during the week, Alessandro. Your man told me you were out of the country. Did you have a pleasant trip?"

"A pleasant change, yes," said Volpone. "I was in Switzerland—a combination of business and pleasure."

"So?" Vito Vico nodded, eyes averted. He inserted a cigarette in his ivory holder. "We must talk about a mutual problem," he said slowly. "My associates are displeased about one aspect of our, er, arrangement. They think they've been left in the cold if an atom bomb attack should come. An oversight; perhaps?"

"Oversight? Of course not, Vito. Provision will be made for your people in the redoubts. If you'll furnish me with lists of names, addresses, phone numbers, we'll have their data added to the computer tapes. They'll be called along with the others."

"Good." The Mafia Don nodded, exhaling a neat cascade of smoke rings. "Can the members of four

families—between two and three hundred, including women and children—be accommodated?"

"I see no problem," said Volpone. "We have ample—"

"Enforcement!" cried Seymour without warning. "That's it, Alex. It fills a big hole in our planning."

"What . . . did you say, young man?" inquired Vico, startled.

"I know what he means," said Volpone. "Arne is thinking of using the services of your people for maintaining law and order in the purely civilian redoubts. Without some sort of enforcement, we would be faced with absolute chaos underground. Can it be arranged?" Vico seemed pleased by the idea. "I don't see why not. Law and order," he said, chuckling. "It will be a new role for us." He inspected Seymour with new interest. "You are very direct, young man. I like that."

"Er, thank you, Mr. Vico." Seymour's manner was overly polite, almost fawning. Volpone retired to the bar and poured himself a dram of Scotch, listening closely.

"Tell me something," suggested the Don. "I'm curious to know how you ever thought of stealing Earth's air. I didn't believe Alessandro when he first told me about it."

Seymour took a seat across from the Don, leaning forward eagerly. "It's true, Mr. Vico; it would seem insane to do what we're doing. But you must view it in perspective. The time, the technology, and the temper of geopolitics were exactly right.

"We'd developed a vane-axial compressor of dazzling efficiency, had just finished a proposal on the air-driven ITTS transit system, and were facing ever-mounting threats of Sino-Sov aggression. I balanced the equation with a pair of answers, one satisfying the need of preparing for immediate attack, and the other—the inevitable corollary of the first—providing a sure, quiet way of gaining the upper hand over our enemies, one which they could never emulate in time."

"You are to be 'praised for such a daring idea," said Vico. "I see why your air project will take so long, and be so expensive."

"Expensive!" Seymour seemed surprised. "It's dirt cheap, sir."

Vico smiled. "Alessandro advises me that over eighty billion dollars have gone into the redoubt and air storage programs."

"Cheap, insisted Seymour, blue eyes flashing. "How can anyone put a price tag on survival?"

"You must admit he has a point there, Vito," said Volpone casually. "A point that's hard to evade. I've spent a major fortune, sold my yacht, and mortgaged my company to the brink of bankruptcy to further Project Luft. We have no choice—none whatsoever—but to go on. If we're attacked, what will *money* be worth?"

Vito Vico looked from one man to the other. "If I had not been fully convinced, you would not have seen one thin dime from me."

"We need more now," said Seymour bluntly. "A lot more."

Vico scowled, shooting a questioning glance at Volpone. "What does he mean? Is this true, Alessandro?"

Volpone looked grim. "A little more, Vito. I withdrew three hundred million in Switzerland last week. I'd hoped it would tide us over until the Federal auto license revenues became felt, but the lag will be too great. We desperately need a cash buffer."

"From ... me?" Vico's eyes were cold. "How much?"

"One hundred million dollars." "Impossible!" The Don flew up out of the leather armchair like a much younger man. "Every time we meet, you hit me again, Alessandro!"

Reflecting on his cavalier statement to Volpone long ago, Seymour asked, "What will you spend it on afterward, Mr. Vico?"

"Be still!" The Don glared at Seymour. "I complimented your directness just now, but there's a limit to what I will hear."

"I'm not really asking a lot," said Volpone, "compared to the sums I've personally contributed."

Vico folded his arms, frowning severely. "The families will never agree, even if that much money is readily available."

"You must explain the futility of holding back," argued Volpone in a calm voice. "Sink or swim, Vito; it's that simple."

"Simple?" Vico swung to face Volpone with a cunning look. "This time it's one hundred million. What will it be *next* time?"

"I will not ask you to contribute again. You have my word."

"You promise that?"

"Faithfully, Vito. Never again."

The Don rubbed his withered hands together. "It will be damned difficult," he warned. "*Damned* difficult." He turned to Seymour. "I have listened to arguments about the 'afterward.' A ruined civilization, with hundreds of thousands—millions—of Americans dead and dying. Plague, starvation. Such things are not conducive to business, if you know what I mean, young man."

Seymour smirked. "How would *Mafiosi* be treated by Sino-Sov Coalition conquerors—if they lived through the firebath?"

Vico sighed. "Young man, you have the annoying habit of thinking up answers even before questions are stated. Are *you* prepared for the death and destruction your scheme will cause? Think before you answer; I've been told it could mean the end of life on Earth."

"That won't happen", Seymour was adamant.

"You are . . . working to suffocate the world."

"Never, Mr. Vico. If it ever comes to all-out warfare," said Arne Seymour intently, "many, many individuals will die. But history repeats itself; northern Europe was depopulated at least twice before. Once by vast sheets of ice, crushing the land as they crept toward the equator from the poles, only to be repopulated later by a superior species—Cro-Magnon. Then again by the Black Death in medieval times. And Africa, and Asia, as well, I'm sure. It's probably a much older, much grimmer story than that.

"But the race survived. It always has. It probably always will."

Vito Vico shrugged. "I see your point. Murder is, after all, only murder; the numbers do not matter in the least." He started toward the door of the library, turning to face them with one fragile hand on the knob.

"I will talk to them, Alessandro," he said wearily. "I will tell them. But I promise nothing. Never did I dream that your 'protection' could cost so much money."

XIII

April, 1988

Holding himself rigid, Major Lewis Craft stifled the exclamation of disbelief welling up in his throat by sheer force of will.

He closed his eyes and slowly exhaled, then glanced at Art Parkinson who lolled at his desk across the office, seemingly disinterested in what Craft was looking at in the desktop microfilm viewer. This afternoon, for the third time, Parky had opened the hulking safe built of tool steel which contained Volpone Industries' closely guarded secret data. Earlier in the week, Craft had been obliged to do honest research into heat exchanger thermodynamics, which provided his excuse for being here. He'd used today's session attempting to prove that a multitude of clandestine redoubts were scattered across the United States.

Irrefutable proof, contained in the microfilm spool laying innocently beside the viewer, told of forty-one redoubts. Two were overt, sponsored and funded by the Department of Defense, which accounted for the presence of military personnel and a government "black" file. The other thirty-nine had been constructed covertly, which seemed incredible.

But Craft had begun to sense an obscure logic behind the redoubts. The ITTS system's air-driven trains required deep subterranean bores, ergo the concept of equally deep nuclear-weapons-proof havens served and supplied by ITTS. Masking redoubt construction with a cover story that had workmen purportedly engaged in building ITTS facilities was a stroke of minor genius.

He had stumbled across the true stunner quite by accident, coming upon a set of drawings depicting what appeared to be a floating "island" replete with simulated derricks, sheds and other buildings. Digging deeper, Craft had unearthed a sectional view of the "island," in reality a camouflaged ten-acre-square

intake much like the "farm" above the installation at Michigan Bluff.

Perplexed, he'd chased down some references given on the face of the drawing, encountering a steel and concrete pressure vessel which could be towed underwater to any specific site, then submerged in the manner of some titanic caisson. Underwater redoubts made little sense; there was no way for ITTS to serve underwater redoubts one hundred and sixty miles offshore.

He had pressed on, finding a dazzling general plan: the floating "island," linked by underwater lines to a great nest of air storage tanks submerged and stacked along vertical cables in up to seventeen thousand feet of water, and a sequence of drawings and specs for land-based air storage complexes. Bewildered, Craft had encountered the compressor information he'd been searching for in order to solve the heat exchanger problem. Then, six frames from the end of the spool, he'd come upon a milestone chart and a graph which plotted cryptic numbers against calendar years running entirely through the Twenty-first Century.

Locating the intersection of date and curve somewhere between 26.1 and 26.2 times 10^6 , Craft had stopped short. Twenty-six million, one hundred thousand *what* this year? A tiny double asterisk called his attention to the bottom of the frame: "" VI Vane-axial Compressor Model RR-17-21."

Twenty-six *million* compressors? Who the hell was kidding who?

Dismayed, he'd gone back to the milestone chart and followed the block downward from 1988, finding the figure, .09 percent. He'd run his finger along the curve: .16 percent by '91; .51 percent by '97; 1.1 percent by the year 2004, and so on. Craft's skin had begun to feel clammy; the realization of what the percentages related to had hit him squarely between the eyes.

Air!

He sat perfectly still until the panicky feeling abated. Someone seemed intent upon collecting and storing a significant portion of the Earth's atmosphere! The proof was in his hands, except it wasn't really proof. Anyone could dummy up a set of documents; producing and implementing hardware to match was something else.

But the documents were not phony. Craft knew it with absolute certainty; knew it in his soul. The problem would be to convince someone in authority. He'd at last found out what Archer's "more" alluded to, and almost wished he hadn't.

He palmed the spool lying on the desk, slipped it smoothly into his right-hand pocket, then rewound the one in the viewer, extracted it and dropped it into the left-hand pocket of his dungarees. He casually bent in front of the safe as if restoring the spools to the rack, then rose on tiptoes, stretching expansively.

"That's it for today, Parky. Lock up whenever you're ready."

Craft turned around and froze. He was looking directly into the muzzle of a .45 automatic pistol held in Art Parkinson's hairy, rock-steady hand. Above the barrel, the super's eyes were cold.

"It sure as hell took you long enough," said Parkinson. "Put your hands behind your neck—slowlike."

Numbed, Craft did as he was told, glaring at the superintendent. "So it wasn't for real, eh?"

"Call it a final exam," said Parkinson, "where we gave *you* all the answers. You flunked."

"Uh-huh. What happens now?"

"Well, you're a mite dangerous," drawled Parkinson. "Not that anybody'd believe you if you shot off your mouth. But, still . . ."

"Then the data isn't . . . phony?"

"Not at all," Parkinson told him. "It's the straight skinny."

"And you blew a whole compressor just to sucker me in?"

"Naw, coincidence. Usually we egg an engineer into looking through the file," said Parkinson. "If he digs around, then goes quietly back to work, we know he's Honest John. If he looks too long, maybe slips a few spools into his pockets ..."

"Slick!" Craft clucked approvingly. "I suppose you know all about the compressed air storage bit,

and go along with it."

Parkinson got to his feet, backing toward the door. "Murphy's Law: 'Mother Nature is a bitch.' We're just helping her along a little, is all. Now come over here," he said, holding the automatic waist-high. "Drop those spools on my desk."

"And if I don't?"

"Aw, don't make me use this thing," pleaded Parkinson. "I hate loud noises. Besides, you're a nice young fella. It'd be a shame."

Craft let his arms droop in resignation. "OK. It's your round, Parky." He took two halting steps toward the desk.

"Easy!" Parkinson raised the weapon, his arm extended.

Craft smiled lamely, laying one spool down. He tugged the other from his pocket, eyeing the pistol four feet from his chest. "You'll have a tough time scaring me with *that*," he said. "The safety's on."

Craft hadn't expected it to work—not with Parkinson. But as the superintendent's gaze instinctively shortened to the weapon in his hand, Craft let go a backhanded swipe at the man's wrist.

The pistol went off alongside his ear with an agonizing *blam!* He continued his turn, driving off his left foot, and smashed Art Parkinson into the doorjamb with his shoulder.

The scuffle lasted mere seconds. Parkinson had cracked his head sharply against the door frame; he was twenty years older, and thirty-five pounds lighter than Craft, who managed to get both hands on the other's wrist, whip him around, and crack the sidearm free across one knee.

Craft scooped up the automatic, retrieved the microfilm spools, jamming one into each pocket, and stood poised.

Chest heaving, the super rubbed his temple, his eyes round and worried. "Aiming to kill me, are you?"

"No, Parky. You're a nice old fella, and it'd be a shame." One eye on Parkinson, Craft eased open the door and scanned the corridor. Satisfied, he jumped through the doorway and took off at a dead run.

Still woozy, Parkinson struggled to his knees, calling, "Don't run, Craft! Marines are on the way, with standing orders to shoot anyone who runs on sight. Come back here . . .!"

Craft bolted headlong down the corridor leading toward M Level's air storage complex, desperate to reach the main floor before marines poured down on him. He discovered there was something exhilarating about being totally committed.

When he approached the intersection, he went down on his belly, peeking around the corner of jackhammer-scored granite. A squad of marines was jogging toward him from the left.

He pulled back and raced toward the first office. It was dark inside; he whirled, whipping the door almost closed, and watched the marines double-time past his hiding place, rifles at port-arms, their leader "Hup-hup-hupping" energetically. When the last marine vanished into the alcove leading to Parkinson's office, he launched himself full-tilt toward the concourse.

This would be the test, he thought as he hit the open floor. He cut diagonally under one of the fifty-foot-high service platforms, where a compressor labored day and night to force eight hundred atmospheres of pressurized air into a gigantic steel and concrete egg, striding along parallel to the far wall in order to place all possible obstructions between himself and the marines' line-of-fire. The main elevator shaft was more than a half-mile away.

Running easily, he heard the alarm klaxon's distant groan, resisting the impulse to look back. No one had ever dodged a rifle bullet by watching for it. The far wall loomed nearer. He tried to ignore the pain in his side, the fire in his lungs. Something was spoiling his gait, making him work harder than necessary. He found Parkinson's heavy automatic pistol still clutched in his right hand and flung it away angrily, hearing it thud to the stone floor and skid across the rough surface just as a swarm of bees droned past his head. Rifle-fire rattled far behind him an instant later.

More bees flew by. Craft jinked and jibbed, then swung under the next-to-last air storage tank's swollen belly, hoping the low ceiling would limit the marines' sighting. He wove around the buttressed pressure vessel's cradle as a slug went *spaang-g-g!*, ricocheting from the steel plate.

When he rounded the last cradle, it was bees, hornets, wasps, and perhaps a few yellow jackets. Rifle-fire sounded like belligerent popcorn in the distance. He did the last fifty yards in a weaving, bobbing sprint, and was less than twenty feet from the elevator alcove when white pain stabbed at his left calf.

His leg buckled; Craft sprawled on the stone floor. He crawled through the archway as stone splinters showered around him. Gasping for breath, he clawed up his dungaree trouser, inspecting the leg as best he could. Luck again; a grazing flesh wound, probably made by a spent slug coming off the floor. The ripped calf muscle bled freely; he couldn't afford to trail blood just now. He hastily wrapped a handkerchief around the leg, then gained his feet and hobbled to the elevator.

This time gold-plated luck prevailed; an empty car stood in the shaft. Craft reached in, punched the topside button, then ducked out again before the doors rolled closed. Good! The dial would indicate C or B Level by the time the marines got here. He prayed they'd take the bait as he dashed toward the rear stairs, a convenience used during construction phases which were to be removed and the stairwell sealed when ITTS went operational. He clattered downward and found that his luck held. It was after five-thirty; the equipment assembly chamber adjoining the raw tubes lay still and empty. The last construction crew had knocked off for the day.

Double tube orifices loomed in the shadows, black holes yawning toward distant Reno, interrupted now by the chamber which would one day become the redoubt's access-egress point. Craft picked his way through a chaotic jumble of stored magnetic levitation half-shells, wipers, pneumatic lines, welding gear, electrical cable, and conduit. Favoring his game leg, he jumped down into the nearer tube's right-of-way and felt a pang of dismay. No flatbedded electric trams were in sight. A dim red light in the leftmost tube beyond the tunnel mouth made him charge into the gloom, almost crashing into the first of four ghostly trams parked in a line.

He swung aboard the first, fumbling for the light switch in the operator's cab. The tram was soaking up current from a portable battery charger. He had no quick way of determining the charge level of the batteries, nor any practical method of ditching this tram in favor of one parked behind it.

He leaned down and unplugged the charger line, then energized the vehicle, shoving the drive lever forward against its stop. The tram obediently surged ahead. There was no need to steer. Hard rubber wheels, splayed outward in a self-centering arrangement, rode in the, shallow valley formed by concave mag-lev shells. When five minutes of tube were behind him, he switched on the forward light, finding it unnerving to rush blindly along through inky darkness, though reasonably certain nothing lay in his path.

The tube walls flowed past endlessly, unmarked by distinguishing characteristics. Work crew foremen traveled by timing themselves against the tram's velocity, but Craft never wore a wristwatch. Let's see; the Sacramento terminus and Reno were one hundred thirty-four statute miles apart. Michigan Bluff lay squarely at the midpoint, while the Squaw Valley emergency elevator shaft was situated halfway between the redoubt and Reno. At fifty miles per hour the tram should bring him to the shaft in . . . Call it forty minutes, give or take a few. Which was too damned long!

He hoped the pursuit had stopped to comb the redoubt after meeting an empty elevator car topside. That, of course, was wishful thinking. Parky was cleverer than that. The only exits were at the eastern terminus, western terminus, the two emergency escape elevators, and the Michigan Bluff construction lift he'd used; hopefully, to lead the chase astray. Parkinson would order *all* exits covered.

Leg throbbing, he thought about how cold and dark it would be when he emerged. Oh, well; better cold than caught! But maybe he could do something about the dark. He bent and opened the compartment between the tram's front seats, freeing the large, square flashlight. He tried the on-off switch. The flashlight worked.

He lifted his head with a sharp twinge of panic. The tram had slowed perceptibly. Transfixed, he watched the speedometer needle crawl gradually counterclockwise, then snapped off the headlight to conserve energy. His luck had finally run out; the tram, probably used by the last crew to reach the redoubt this afternoon, lacked anything near a full battery charge.

He switched off the cab light to further conserve energy, riding in total darkness. The redoubt must be thirty-five miles or so behind him now, which meant at least four or five miles remained. Next time he

checked, the tram had slowed to thirty-six miles per hour. Apprehensively, he watched the speedometer mete out his remaining freedom in diminishing seconds of arc, stemming the urge to brake to a stop and bolt headlong up the tunnel on foot. After seven or eight minutes more, he de-energized and let the tram coast, allowing the batteries to recover, hoping to conserve the last fraction of a remaining amp-hour of charge. Two or more miles of tube still lay ahead of him; the tram had no chance of making it. He would have to hoof it in a minute—on a bum gam!

Craft flicked on the flashlight; the speedometer registered less than eleven miles per hour. The wheels coasted over each butt-welded seam in the magnetic levitation shells with a faint clumping sound. He listened to the diminuendo thumping. One more, and he would re-energize and see what he could get from the exhausted batteries. One more . . .

He cast a nervous glance rearward, then whirled around in the seat and stared. A barely distinguishable diamond of light glimmered miles down the tunnel. Craft took a deep breath and energized the tram, watching the speedometer by flashlight. The acceleration was very gradual up to fifteen miles per hour, hung there for a short time, then began to fall off rapidly. This time there would be no recovery. He thought of a way to delay his pursuers as the tram slowed further, studying the speedometer, steeling himself for the effort. When the needle dipped to five miles per hour, he cramped the wheel with all his strength. The little tram protested; only ten degrees of movement had been built into its steering mechanism. He bore down hard; the tram slowly climbed the concave mag-lev shells until, finally, the left front wheel rode over the lip. The bottom of the vehicle scraped to a halt with a grinding sound.

He leaped down, holding the flash, and ran clumsily along the center of the mag-lev shells toward distant Reno.

The tram, stuck effectively half-on, half-off the shell it rested on, would prevent his pursuers from pushing it ahead of them. It would delay the marines; that was what counted.

Craft pounded along, running hard, practicing something he'd all but forgotten since his football days—ignoring pain. After a while, the flashlight hindered him more than the bad leg. The light meant everything to him—probably his life. The emergency elevator, located adjacent to what would later become a twenty-foot-wide underpass fitted with hermetic doors, would look like a wide spot in the tube. He couldn't miss seeing it.

He ran on and on, eyes watering, lungs burning. Something made squishing noises each time he put down his left foot. Craft realized that it was blood. He didn't stop. He wouldn't stop for anything now.

Some time later he fell, ducking one shoulder instinctively and rolling. The flashlight slipped from his hand and clunked down the maglev shells ahead of him. Suddenly the flashlight went out.

Heart in his mouth, breath sobbing in his throat, Craft crawled forward to feel for the light in Stygian blackness. Not too far, he told himself. He groped ahead—and nudged it with the back of his hand. He grasped it and shook it gently. The light came on.

He rested on his haunches, almost crying with relief, and glanced over his shoulder. The diamond glint was brighter than before. He started off again determinedly, then staggered to a halt, wiping his eyes with his sleeve. My God! There it was—a dark band encircling the tube. He whooped in delight, running toward the elevator with new energy.

Breaking the glass with the corner of the flashlight, he cut his hand as he reached in to unlatch the outer door, then activated the lift control with the last of his strength. He collapsed against the elevator's wall, semiconscious, sucking huge gulps of air.

Later, he never remembered the ride topside. By the time the elevator carried him to the summit, he had partially recovered. He broke out a first aid kit in the A-frame shelter and quickly washed and dressed the wound, gingerly removing and swabbing the blood from his Wellington boot, then ransacked cupboards, finding a stack of cheap, lined plastic slickers.

Donning one, he muttered, "Catch me now, you bastards!"

Sierra spring rains had eroded the snowpack; one ski tip actually protruded from the drift. He dug up the skis and poles, carrying them to the stone steps, having difficulty getting the bindings to lock over his Wellingtons, which were much less bulky than ski boots. Elated, he switched off the flashlight and poled away downhill in the chill starlight.

The spring snow was mushy, untrustworthy. Craft skied conservatively until he heard a helicopter thrash over the ridge beyond the trees. Behind it two others bore across Squaw Valley toward the summit shelter. He'd cut it close!

He made a careful turn, straightened, and headed for the line of trees. Again it was close; the first helicopter's searchlight swept the slope where he'd been as it circled to land.

Chafing anxiously under the pines, he waited until the other copters hurtled past overhead, then poled away viciously, turned downhill, and let it all hang out.

Skiing this fast on rotten snow invited disaster, but he had to reach the road before they discovered his tracks and began combing the area from aloft. He was tempted to stay near the trees for cover, but there the going looked even more treacherous in the starlight; watery and soft, with dark patches of bare ground showing now and again under the thick stand of Ponderosa and Jeffrey pines.

The first flare blossomed above and behind him near the summit, illuminating the slope with daytime brilliance. He cut back toward the trees in desperation. Two hundred yards more!

Craft dared a glance over his shoulder, and gloated; two helicopters were orbiting the ski run, working their way downward, searching, he suspected, for a man on foot. At any moment some sharp-eyed observer would spot fresh ski tracks in the soft snow, and the chase would be on.

At last he swung in under the trees, throwing himself sidewise in a flurry of ice crystals. He dropped the poles, unsnapped the bindings, and stepped out of his skis, dodging trees as he ran, limping, through shallow snow down toward the village.

He emerged near an apartment hotel where he and Betty had once spent a weekend. He was glancing up and down the chilly road, when footsteps crunched behind him. Craft turned, nodding pleasantly to the man and woman who were walking toward a parked car, eyeing him curiously. "Evening," he called. "Wonder if you could help me?"

"Trouble?" asked the man uncertainly.

"Oh, the darned batteries are down in my car," said Craft.

"Maybe you could call a garage," suggested the man.

"I would, but I've got a heavy date over in Stateline."

The man hesitated. "I suppose we could take you to Tahoe City."

"Hey, great! I'd sure appreciate it."

"OK, hop in." The man introduced himself and his wife.

"Nice to meet you both," said Craft. "I'm Lewis . . . uh, Paul. Paul Lewis." They shook hands.

As the runabout drew away from the curb, the woman remarked at all the bright lights flashing and flittering back and forth through the trees on the hill above them.

"I noticed that," said Craft. "Maybe they're shooting a movie up there." He settled himself in the rear seat, luxuriating in warmth as the car's heater began to make him feel just a tiny bit human once again.

Betty Dancer was mixing cocktails for Hoo Hanford and the Lewellyns when Hanford's butler beckoned from the pantry. "Call for you, Miss Dancer—a gentleman who says it's most urgent."

"Really?" Betty excused herself, thanking the butler. She turned on the extension phone in the kitchen.

"Betty?" asked a familiar voice, even before Craft's image grew to fill the small tube.

"Lew, what are you thinking of, calling me here at Mr. Hanford's? I'm working tonight, and—"

"Name the most important thing you have ever done in your life."

"What?" Betty inspected his image closely. "Where are you, Lew? Listen, Mr.. Hanford has house guests—Senator Lewel—"

"No names," said Craft quickly. "Get a pencil and copy this number. Calling me back will be the single most important thing you're ever likely to do." When he saw that she had a pencil, Craft read off the number hurriedly. "Talk to you in a few minutes. Remember: *the* most important thing. And if the gent whose name you almost dropped is there, tell him I've got what he wanted."

Betty started to frame a retort, but Craft's image died in the tube. "Well, of all the . . .!" She returned to the living room.

"Something peculiar just happened," she told the others. "Lew Craft called, acting . . . strange. I'm to

call back at this number immediately. Funny, he said it would be the most important thing I'd ever do in my life."

"Let's see." Hanford looked at the slip of notepaper, reading the area code. "Hm-m-m, northern California. Go ahead; call him."

Lewellyn chuckled. "He's finally decided to pop the question."

Betty shook her head. "No, it isn't that . . . Lew never *sounds* excited," she said slowly, "but he came as close just now as I've ever heard him. There was something about the way . . . Oh, and he asked me to tell you he had what you wanted, Senator."

"He what?" Senator Lewellyn became suddenly interested. "You mean the ITTS business? Mind if we listen in, Betty?"

"Certainly not."

"Let's use the phone in my study," suggested Hanford.

They crowded around Hanford's desk as Betty punched the phone code Craft had given her. Craft answered on the first ring.

"OK, listen; I don't have much time. I figured it would be harder to trace the call from your end. I'm hot; on the run, phoning from a booth in front of a service station in Tahoe City.

"I've got two spools of microfilm containing proof of the damndest conspiracy you, or I, or anyone else ever heard of. I've been chased, shot, and I'm so tired I can hardly stand up."

"Shot!" Betty put her hand to her mouth. "Who shot you?"

"Too long a story, Luv. I called to let you know where I plan to bury the microfilm. It's too important to hang onto when . . . make that if they catch me."

"Just a minute." Lewellyn shouldered forward. "If who catches you? The police? Are you in some kind of police trouble, Craft?"

"No, Senator, marines—three helicopters full of them at last count."

"Marines? United States Marines?"

"Right. Glad you're there, Senator. Someone of your political stature has *got* to get this data into the proper hands if I'm—"

"Whoa, son," objected Lewellyn, "you're going way too fast for me. You've gotten hold of secret data, you say. Does it relate to the ITTS money boondoggle? Is DoT Secretary Volpone involved?"

Craft nodded emphatically. "It does, and he is—up to his hairy ears. But it's so goddam much bigger than that . . . !

"Listen, I have to cut and run. Really; the search will spread out fast when they don't turn me up in or near Squaw Valley."

"Squaw Valley! The skis," cried Betty. "Your buried skis!"

Craft grinned wearily. "They came in pretty handy."

"Skis? What the hell! Craft," said the senator in frustration, "if those marines do catch you, where will they hold you?"

"Uh, chances are they won't bother holding me," said Craft. "They'll shoot me."

"Lew!" Betty paled.

"That's the way it is," said Craft matter-of-factly.

No one spoke for several seconds. Then Hoo Hanford asked quietly, "Are you anywhere near the Tahoe Airport? It's located somewhere in the north shore vicinity, I believe."

"The airport's not far from here," admitted Craft. "Why?"

Hanford's manner was speculative. "I own several aircraft," he said. "I'm thinking of coming up there to collect you."

"No good, Mr. Hanford. Thanks a lot, but they'll have every bus terminal, airport, and ITTS station in the state covered."

"It will work," insisted Hanford, "if we do it properly. Can you stay out of sight and be at the airport in exactly two hours?"

"Well . . . yes, I guess so." "Look for a white tri-jet STOL with green striping," said Hanford. "We'll be at the far end of the main runway, opposite the tower. Got it?"

"Sure, if you're certain you want to mix in this."

"It's now seven-twenty," said Hanford, unimpressed by Craft's warning. "We'll touch down at nine-fifteen sharp."

"I'll be there," said Craft. "Mr. Hanford, can your plane take us to Washington?"

"Eh? You want to go there right away?"

"*Right* away—to the Pentagon. Bring a microfilm viewer along on the plane," urged Craft. "I'll show you some drawings and specs that'll curl your hair. Happy landing!" Craft's image faded.

Betty was crying softly after the call. Virginia Lewellyn comforted her, while the two men simply stood looking at one another:

"He sure as hell whetted *my* curiosity," said Lewellyn, his brow creased. "What should we do? Shall we take him to Washington? We could easily make fools of ourselves, old-timer."

"Craft never struck me as the sort who'd go off half-cocked," said Hanford. "He seems to have risked his neck to get that microfilm. We probably goosed him into it, Vic. The least we can give him now is a fair hearing. Let's make up our minds on the plane."

"A sensible notion. And a mighty magnanimous gesture, Hoo; going after Craft in your own plane like this."

"Who's the most influential person you know in the capital?" asked the publisher, ignoring the byplay. "Could you possibly talk our way into the White House if the situation warrants it?"

Lewellyn looked dubious. "An audience with President Blair? That just isn't practical, old-timer. But call the airport and have your jet stand by anyhow. I know someone who'll help us get the message across posthaste—if there is a message.

"We're on opposite sides of the aisle, politically. But if we can manage to get the old warhorse motivated and trotting, he'll get plenty of attention and action—right now!"

"Who do you have in mind?" asked the publisher.

"Senator Raymond Stillworth," said Lewellyn confidently.

XIV

April, 1988

The stock market break came on Thursday, April fourteenth, when the Dow-Jones Industrials plummeted forty-odd points. Fifty-three million shares were traded during the session.

Friday morning President Blair made an unheralded return to the White House from a vital primary campaign junket through the Southeast. The head of the Securities Exchange Commission, and a few selected financial advisers, met with him in the Oval Office.

That afternoon Alessandro Volpone learned, via the Cabinet grapevine, what had transpired. In an atmosphere of concern, he made four calls, using the gray audio-only phone—he kept locked in his desk, and a small electronic voiceprint comparator with which he verified the identity of each person to whom he spoke. The messages themselves were terse, identical: "Tonight, at midnight."

After repeated accusations of being inattentive, Volpone left Marissa's apartment at eleven-forty, thereby missing Arne Seyinour's frantic call by mere minutes. As a result, he failed to learn of Major Craft's defection and escape until returning to his Washington townhouse in the wee morning hours.

He wore a worried frown as he left the elevator and entered the sanctuary, finding all four of his associates awaiting him. "President Blair has decided not to sign the Federal auto license measure," he said, wasting no words on preliminaries. "He will hold it through the grace period, and may decide to invoke the veto."

Volpone sat down heavily. "Blame the financial crisis," he said. "We can't expect the President to jeopardize re-election by signing an unpopular bill into law just now."

"Huh, that's a crusher, Alex." Senator Stillworth heaved his bulk upright, studying Volpone from beneath bushy brows. "Looks like all your work on that damned bill went for nothin', eh?"

Lacking conviction, Volpone held out two faint hopes. "The country's financial climate may undergo abrupt reversal, or the Congress may decide to override the President's veto."

"Sure, sure!" Stillworth snorted in contempt. "We better face up to it; this puts our whole Luft endeavor in deep yogurt."

"I called the meeting to discuss contingency plans," said Volpone.

"Such as?" demanded the senator rudely.

Volpone reined his temper, determined not to let Stillworth anger him tonight. "That's what we're here to discuss, Ray. Failing other sources of revenue, we must live through a hiatus in Luft construction until the financial squeeze lessens."

"You were dead set against that last time," objected General Patt. "It will wreck our Luft timetable completely."

"True," admitted Volpone, "but we're faced with a genuine economic emergency, General. I see no other way out."

Patt was rankled, "Alex," he said heatedly, "we've spent billions of stolen tax dollars in order to *deal* with emergencies. The time has come, I think, to move large numbers of people underground."

"Into the redoubts?" Volpone was puzzled. "Why now, General?"

"Why? Pretty damned elementary, isn't it? Ignoring Luft's air depletion timetable for the moment," said Patt, "I contend that significant numbers of citizens should be brought into the redoubts nationwide—a cadre of residents, not transients, who'll establish the routines of daily life."

"Now?" asked Abrams. "For what purpose, General?"

Patt regarded the TV executive coldly. "I believe we should prepare for the worst, Mr. Abrams. Call it instinct, if you wish. I have a gut feeling, based on a combination of small indicators, that things are about to go pop."

"Take the grain shortage in the Soviet Union, for example. It doesn't ring true; their bumper crop of last fall seems to have been stockpiled rather than consumed. Or the disappearing Russians Dr. Emmerson reported on last time we met, or keeping track of Soviet Ambassador Kirilov. That's gotten to be rather a chore; he's been flitting back and forth from Washington to Moscow like a starling these past months. Plus military data I'm not at liberty to divulge even to you gentlemen."

"An' you suspicion some overt move by the Reds is in the offen', eh?" Stillworth sniffed, then blew his ample nose with gusto. "Wouldn't surprise me none if you were right, General."

"You could call it intuition," granted Patt. "But I do have that feeling."

Volpone, who had listened attentively, sat forward. "Forgive me for disagreeing with you, General, but mightn't it be an error to staff the redoubts now? If no war appears for ten, fifteen years, think of the consumables they'll use: food, power, air—"

"If we are allowed ten or fifteen years," was Patt's rejoinder.

"But . . . yes, I concede that things might not hold together much longer," said Volpone.

"Nevertheless, we're reasonably well prepared; an attack alert will instantly warn three-quarters of a million people. They've been briefed on what assembly points they're to meet at, know as much as we can allow them to know about saving themselves."

General Patt's headshake was adamantly negative. "The false security of the past, Alex. You're thinking in terms of a fifteen- to forty-minute warning. This is 1988; a preemptive time-on-target strike by combined Sino-Sov orbital, aerial and undersea forces would barely give us time to mount a counter-strike, let alone hustle that many people safely underground."

"I . . . it would appear that we'll have to change our thinking." Volpone paused, realizing he sounded confused. "What you've said bears careful thought, General. Shall we make it an action item on the next agenda to discuss streamlining—"

"That's a cagey way of putting me off, Alex," remarked Patt, smiling without humor. "But I meant what I said: we must establish a permanent cadre of redoubt personnel—now!"

"Dammit, that ain't enough, neither," objected Stillworth. "Seems to me we gotta *use* the advantage we've earned with the air depletion shenanigan. Goose 'em; force 'em t'show their hand."

"Pick our spot, our own time and place to start the fight?"

"Right, General. It's been thought of more'n once," said the senator, looking sly. "I venture to say you War College boys have included similar postulates in your situation games, not so?"

Patt looked bemused as Volpone hurried to say, "Then *we* would become the aggressors, Ray."

"So let's become the most aggressive goddam aggressors in all history," advocated Stillworth. "It's not 'American', you'll say. I say this time it is. If we don't have the stomach for it, we're gonna pay the penalty, be owned property someday. An' there won't be such a thing as the 'American' way on the face of the globe."

In a restrained voice, Volpone said, "Ray, you're not addressing an audience of American Rangers now. I'd like to redirect our discussion toward concrete, practical suggestions as to—"

"Concrete an' practical, is it?" Stillworth's chin lifted; his blood shot eyes lighted with challenge. "OK, try this for size: that ol' boy who works for you, Arne Seymour, was doin' some talkin' the weekend me an' Nat spent out t'your place on Long Island, oh eight, maybe ten years ago. He got liquored up an' fired off the damndest spiel I ever heard, sayin' we weren't doin' near everythin' we could to hurry the air depletion scheme along.

"Seymour talked about *addin'* in every possible way to social chaos an' environmental pollution. Poison the oxygen producin' plankton in the seas, he told us; deforest the wilderness areas; abolish the commercial waste an' atmosphere emission standards we got now; cut out all foreign aid an' welfare programs. Make 'em so miserable an' sick of livin' they'll work their tails off suckin' air down into the Earth, an' go gladly to live there themselves till the swarms of heathen Communists die off."

Alessandro Volpone was aghast. "You're joking, Ray."

"Jokin' hell! Seymour's *your* boy, Alex. To perdition with fresh air an' clean livin'; what's that got us? Why, we've gone about this whole Luft thing arsey-versey. Progeny taxation an' stable population programs my Great Aunt Nell! Wipe out all that namby-pamby crap, I say. Let 'em breed; the more folks there are, the more misery there'll be. An' that, my idealistic colleagues, is exactly what we need an' are gonna get!"

A violent argument erupted. Volpone found the senator's accusations oddly indefensible; being charged with adhering too closely to traditional American ideals did not, after all, constitute a slanderous indictment.

Volpone in turn raised the strong point that, moral considerations aside, doing as Stillworth suggested was positively unthinkable. It was their goal to sustain, not escalate, the air depletion effort; to wait out the other side, hang tough and scrape up the required funds somehow. He stressed the fact that their advantage grew with every passing hour, sensing with a sinking feeling that his co-conspirators seemed to have heard that argument once too often.

General Patt was bestride the fence, seemingly favoring Volpone's tack on general moral principles, but not by any significant margin. Emmerson listened in stoic silence; the light reflected from his glasses and veiled his eyes, lending him a vaguely sinister appearance.

"What are we?" demanded Volpone, pulling out all stops. "Are we poisoners, murderers? Isn't it enough that we've provided a refuge for many of our citizens, given them an insurmountable advantage over the Sino-Sov Coalition?"

"No, dammit, it ain't!" bellowed Stillworth. "*You* called tonight's meetin', Alex, 'cause our backs are agin' the wall. We've got one foot caught in a bear trap, an' the hounds are closin' in. We have to get hard-nosed, *practical*, an' carry Seymour's thesis to its ultimate conclusion: store all the goddam air we can get hold of, sure, but at the same time *use* the club it's cost us so much time an' money to build."

General Patt surprised and dismayed Volpone by saying, "It makes sense. But only if we staff the redoubts immediately."

"Surely, surely; we'll start marchin' 'em underground soon as we can set up the machinery," agreed Stillworth. "Let's stop buildin' compressors an' tanks for the time bein', save the capital, an' commission Seymour to dream up a detailed plan for screwin' up the atmosphere an' hydrosphere as much as possible, as quickly as possible. By God, I'm askin' for a vote on that."

"But, Ray—"

"No, y'cain't hedge this time, Volpone. I'm makin' it a formal request." Stillworth leered in red-faced

triumph.

Volpone searched one grim face after another. "Very well."

As usual, Stillworth and Abrams voted in unison. Volpone thought he could count on Emmerson's farsighted cooperation, while a quick ballot might tip the general's vote his way. "A show of hands, please; all in favor of adopting the senator's resolution?"

Alex Volpone's scalp prickled; he cringed inside himself. Four hands were raised against him around the table.

"Record the vote," snapped Stillworth, rising with a self-satisfied grin of victory. "Now maybe we'll begin to get somewhere with this crazy air stealin'. Any other business tonight?"

Volpone shook his head glumly.

"Good. Then I'll see y'all." Senator Stillworth and Nat Abrams broke a hard-and-fast rule, leaving together arm-in-arm.

General Patt waited the prescribed interval, then paused beside Volpone's chair. "It wasn't easy to vote you down, Alex."

Volpone mumbled something about wondering if they'd reached the proper decision. The general left, his face blank.

The CIA Director sipped his coffee, regarding Volpone over the rim of his cup with an air of patient deliberation. "I realize how disappointed you must feel," he said. "It wasn't an easy decision for me either." Emmerson put his cup down sadly. "Alex, altruism won't solve our dilemma," he observed. "Nobility, high ideals, energy and perseverance; those are your major attributes. I admire you, respect your integrity, your strength of purpose. You've held this thing of ours together by sheer force of will.

"Ray Stillworth is a creature of the political jungle; a gut-slashing, Red-baiting, dirty fighting son-of-abitch. But we're about to engage in a fight for survival, if what Patt suspects is true, not a championship match with Marquis of Queensbury rules. His way might—just might—give us the edge we need to win."

"Come off it, Rolfe," scoffed Volpone. "You don't believe in the general's intuitive powers any more than I do."

"Perhaps not," said Emmerson. "But, Alex, I *do* believe it's impossible to hold things together here at home while our grandiose Luft Project matures. We're predicating depletion of ten percent of the Earth's atmosphere by the year 2070. Think about the nation's political plight, its socioeconomic climate. Can we expect the revolutionary radicals, disenfranchised senior citizens, various minority blocs, or the fifteen percent of our citizenry taxation has forced to live on welfare, to spend a century waiting for something they have no knowledge of to ripen?"

"I'm ignoring another fact of life," continued Emmerson. "Neither Lifeboat, nor Luft can be hidden forever. This nation's half filled with blabbermouths; the other half are newshounds. Someone's bound to blow the cover story in time. But how much time? Ten decades? That's unreasonable. For all we know, Sino-Sov agents penetrated Luft and Lifeboat years ago. Both are too large, too inordinately expensive to hide much longer."

Alex Volpone wearily rubbed his eyes. "Rolfe, I'm much too tired to defend my position tonight. I'm sorry."

Emmerson donned his hat and coat, unplugging the coffeemaker with paternal care. "Call me next week, Alex. We'll have lunch."

"I will. Good night." Volpone set the destruct mechanism on the heavy file-safe, switched off the lights and left the sanctuary.

Reaching home, he learned of Major Craft's extraordinary feat of derring-do in eluding pursuit with damning evidence of the entire Luft and Lifeboat Projects. Alessandro Volpone found that for some strange reason he didn't even care.

Twenty minutes out of Washington, DC, Hoo Hanford's sleek jet whispered through the night sky, flying toward a gray wash of light along the eastern horizon which heralded the coming sun.

Virginia Lewellyn dozed. Across the cabin on the other lounge, Betty held Lew Craft's head cradled in her lap, while Hoo and the senator huddled in front of a portable microfilm viewer.

Lewellyn massaged the back of his neck. "Damned if I believe it," he said, "*any* of it." It was a phrase he'd used often since the publisher's jet had plucked Craft from the darkness-shrouded taxi strip at Lake Tahoe's airport.

"There's a milestone chart and graph that're both eye-openers," remarked Craft, yawning. After becoming airborne, Virginia Lewellyn had washed out his gunshot wound, dusted it with sulfa powder from the plane's first aid kit, and bandaged the leg with semi-professional skill. As a result, Craft felt much better.

"The *magnitude* of this air storage caper is what gets you," Hoo Hanford chewed his pipe's nylon bit., "Volpone must be deeply involved; the drawings and specs have his company's name all over them. But he couldn't have swung this alone."

"Hell, no! A consortium of the wealthiest men on Earth couldn't have done it." Lewellyn rubbed the crick in -his neck again. "Where-oh-where did they ever find that much *money*? Robbing ITTS appropriations blind wouldn't scratch the surface of their needs."

"You're both beginning to believe it," said Craft.

Senator Lewellyn sighed. "I do . . . reluctantly. If you'd blown the whistle without showing us these documents—"

"You'd have had me sewn into a white jacket with funny sleeves."

"Not to mention the forty redoubts," put in Hanford.

"Forty-one," corrected Craft. "The Sacto-Reno complex will be ready for occupancy in three or four months."

The senator grunted. "One thing bothers me. Boo and I have listened to your pitch, looked over this material—what we could understand of it, since neither of us is technical-minded—but how can it be proved?"

"People will take Lew's word for it," insisted Betty.

Lewellyn chuckled. "Some may be harder to convince than that," he said. "Seriously, Craft, do you know of, any demonstrable, physical evidence we can use to support the documents?"

Craft raised his head, looking thoughtful. "Aside from raiding the installations themselves, or forcing whoever's responsible to own up, I can't . . . Hey, how about malaise?"

"Malaise?" Lewellyn's expression was quizzical.

"About four months ago," said Craft, "when I first came back from Antarctica, there were stories of Peruvian Indios, and Sherpas and other Tibetans living in the High Himalayan plateau, who'd been migrating down into lower valleys in droves, complaining of anoxia symptoms, the inability to lead climbers to the higher slopes during expeditions."

"Not exactly dynamic proof," said Hanford. "The malaise phenomenon created quite a stir, then the topic faded away."

"Sure," said Craft, "after every person living in Alta Himalaya, or the Altiplano, moved down toward sea level—or died."

"That's horrible!" Betty shuddered. "It's . . . murder. Why would anyone want to do a dreadful thing like that?"

Senator Lewellyn looked inquiringly at Hanford. "Now there's a question no one's bothered to ask, old-timer. What spurred the crew of ghouls who are responsible for this nightmare?"

"I can't imagine." Hanford frowned. "Any notion, Craft?"

Lew Craft's lips pursed in speculation. "I haven't had much chance to think about it. To me, it hints of international blackmail, though the government seems ignorant of what's happening."

"Geopolitical blackmail, eh? An interesting theory," said Lewellyn. "There may be some kind of skewed logic behind that. Well, sooner or later we'll find out. Let's all go rest up at Ginny's and my place in Maryland. I won't be able to contact Senator Stillworth until later in the day."

Craft deliberated with himself. "Mind if I stop off at the Pentagon, Senator? If I don't report in, they'll charge me with all sorts of nasty stuff."

Lewellyn's eyes narrowed. "What if your superiors fail to give you a thorough hearing? They'll have you behind bars—"

"Or tending shadows in a funny farm," guessed Craft.

Lewellyn smiled. "A distinct possibility. My point is, we need your testimony to brief Stillworth. He's got to be one hundred percent convinced we're not chasing rainbows."

Craft looked unsure. "OK, it's your show now, Senator."

The plane's intercom came alive. "Letting down toward Washington National, Mr. Hanford," announced the pilot. "It's forty-one degrees and hazy in the city. I suggest everyone fasten his seatbelt."

"Where shall I tell the crew to let us deplane?" asked Hoo.

"Hm-m-m, let's see; be wise to stay as far as possible from the passenger complex," said Lewellyn, thinking out loud. "Have us assigned a parking spot, then send one of the pilots to call a cab. We'll get right over to Maryland; our apartment in Kensington is only thirty minutes from the airport."

Glowing with crusader's fire, Senate Majority Leader Raymond Stillworth emerged from his private quarters in the Senate Office Building. "Ah! These our friends, Vic?" he asked rhetorically. "Come in; come right on in, ladies an' gentlemen." Listening closely to Senator Lewellyn's introductions, he was the picture of Southern courtliness with Betty, and with Virginia Lewellyn, whom he'd never before met, then shook publisher Hoo Hanford's hand, exhibiting all of the charm and dignity he reserved for equals.

Finally he turned to Lew Craft, appraising the major's blood stained dungarees with heavy-lidded skepticism. "Major Craft," he said solemnly, "if the very startlin' facts Vic has just laid before me prove true, America owes you a tremendous debt of gratitude."

"Thank you, Senator," said Craft. "They're all true."

Stillworth raised pudgy hands, palms outward. "Don't misinterpret my meanin', son; I haven't a single misgivin' about your intentions, your integrity, or the veracity of your story. But, to quote an adage from a neighborin' state, 'Show me!'"

"I intend to. The microfilm spools are right here." Craft patted the pockets of his dungarees.

"Good, good. Hang onto 'em for a few minutes, though. I made a couple of calls. Rolfe Emmerson an' the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff are on their way over here, loaded with questions."

"Emmerson?" Lewellyn's tone was questioning. "Would CIA be interested in a purely domestic problem, Ray?"

"Ordinarily, no," said Stillworth glibly. "But we've no assurance it is strictly a domestic affair, have we, Vic? Besides, Emmerson was handed the thankless job of gettin' to the bottom of the ITTS money puzzle after the Justice Department an' FBI both flunked out."

"I . . . see."

"Sit down; make yourselves comfortable," urged the elder senator as the intercom buzzed softly.

"Scuse me, folks. Yeah, Minnie?" "A call for you, Senator. Line four."

"Thought I asked you t'hold all calls, Minnie, dear."

"It's Dr. Emmerson. He insisted on speaking to you."

"Oh, I see. All right." Stillworth picked up the old-fashioned handset. "Rolfe, you there?" There was a lengthy pause. "Is that right? He does?" Another silence. "Well, that may be kinda premature, don't you think?" Stillworth listened attentively. "I guess so; he's the boss. OK, see you in about an hour."

Stillworth caged the phone, waxing his hands. "Listen here; Dr. Emmerson just spoke to the President. I personally think we're runnin' off to do we-know-not-what, but President Blair wants all of you an' that microfilm safely beyond reach of whoever may be perpetratin' this conspiracy. General Patt, Dr. Emmerson, an' a passel of Secret Servicemen are gonna meet us in the—" Stillworth broke off, looking cagey. "Aw, what's the matter with me! You folks know more'n me about the redoubts."

Lew Craft looked troubled. "We're going to a nearby redoubt?"

"Correct. The Washington-Baltimore Redoubt; the twin of the one out'n California. Patt's havin' a closed van sent over, along with an armed escort. We can't let you be seen. Not till the microfilm's safe, an' we have everythin' we need to corral some people for questionin'. Pardon me one second; I want to tell my secretary somethin'." The senator bustled into the anteroom.

Craft stepped close beside Lewellyn. "Senator, that phone call; I couldn't hear anything at the other end," he said quietly.

Lewellyn looked at him askance. "What did you say?"

"I didn't hear a voice-buzz from the earpiece," insisted Craft. I was sitting next to Senator Stillworth's desk, remember? I think he was talking into a dead phone, like an actor."

"Sure you're not imagining that?" Lewellyn was mystified.

"What is it?" inquired Hanford.

"Craft thinks—" Senator Lewellyn broke off as Stillworth reentered his office. "I expect we can go now, folks," the portly Southerner announced. "The van's waitin' down in the garage."

"Fine," said Lewellyn unsurely, darting a glance at Craft.

"Before we go, is there a men's room handy?" asked the major.

"In there." Stillworth pointed to a door across the office.

"Me too, I guess." Senator Lewellyn followed Craft. He shut the door, whispering, "Do you realize what you're suggesting?"

Craft hesitated. "Yes, but my alarm circuits are jangling, Senator. Didn't it strike you as damned peculiar how easily he bought the whole goofy story? I read Stillworth as a wary, hard-headed old coot who wouldn't let the Pope direct him to Saint Peter's without checking a roadmap, yet he hasn't even *looked* at the microfilm."

"Hm-m-m." Lewellyn scowled. "Now that you mention it—"

"He went ahead," whispered Craft, "and called in some big wheels just on your say-so, without even making sure of what we had."

Lewellyn puffed his cheeks, looking harried. "What can we do?"

"Take this." Craft held out one of the microfilm spools. "First chance I get, I'm going to bug out with the other and head straight for the Pentagon. If I'm wrong, no harm done."

"You've managed to alarm me," said Lewellyn, swallowing uncomfortably. "Do it, Craft. I hardly believe he's implicated, but your way is safer. Let's get back to the others."

Betty, and Virginia Lewellyn, were chatting with Stillworth's secretary, while Hoo and the impatient senator stood at the door.

Craft started visibly when he saw armed marines waiting in the corridor near the elevator. "You're jumpy, Lew." Betty took his arm.

"It's nothing." Craft eyed the corridor. There was no way out; not up here on the third floor. He decided to bide his time until . . . until when?

The marines rode down with them to garage level, while Craft's mind spun furiously. With a game leg, he wouldn't be able to run for it this time. He had to stall, somehow. He made his limp more pronounced. He and Betty fell slightly behind the others,

"That laig actin' up?" asked Stillworth, stopping. "Stiffness is probably settin' in, huh?"

"It's beginning to hurt," said Craft. "Could we stop at a hospital somewhere and have a medic look at it?"

"Good idea," endorsed Stillworth. "Better yet, we'll have a GI doctor fix you up when we get down below. Howzzat?"

Craft exchanged grim-faced glances with Lewellyn as Stillworth ushered them toward the rear of the vehicle, then looked longingly at the square of daylight far down the length of the garage. A marine helped him climb aboard the van; Craft could think of no alternative to climbing in, other than perhaps getting shot again.

The van's doors closed with dual clumps of finality.

Being unable to see outside made it worse, somehow. The van's occupants seemed very subdued. Stillworth pronounced repeated sympathy for how tired they must be, saying there would be plenty of

opportunity for rest after they'd been assigned quarters in the redoubt, which chilled Craft to the core.

After half an hour, the van stopped, turned sharply, and backed for what Craft judged must be several dozen yards. He steeled himself, preparing to seize whatever presented itself in the way of an opportunity for escape.

There was no opportunity. The double doors were opened from without; they exited onto a loading dock inside a vast sheet metal building where a squad of marines lined the concrete apron leading to a set of immense, steel-sheathed doors Craft immediately recognized. The doors rumbled open five feet, and stopped. The enormous bucket used for lifting fused and pulverized rock had been dismantled and, doubtless, shipped to yet another incipient redoubt site, having been replaced by a large platform.

Craft hung back, clinging to Betty like a crutch, while Stillworth led the rest of the party into the elevator.

"What's the matter, Lew?" asked Betty. "Does it bother you?"

"Just feeling a little wobbly," he said, freezing in the doorway. Last chance! If he crossed the threshold, it meant being put back in the bottle. But armed marines were beside him, waiting.

"Give you a hand, sir?" A lance corporal took his elbow. Without seeming to resist, Craft planted his feet in a fixed stance.

Senator Stillworth called, "How ya keepin', son? Not so good?"

Tugging loose from the marine, Craft moved to lean against the steel wall formed by the elevator door. "I'm woozy," he muttered, taking a tentative step away from the elevator.

Stillworth stepped out, his florid features showing concern. "We'll take care of you; don't fret." He motioned to the marine beside Craft with a scalloping movement of one pudgy hand.

Three other marines aided the first. They lifted Major Craft bodily and carried him into the elevator, depositing him next to the handrail, then held him erect.

"Hang on, folks," advised Stillworth. "The first, step's a honey!"

Fuming inwardly, Craft heard Betty and the others gasp as the floor dropped from under them with startling swiftness.

"Gosh, it's worse than a roller coaster," exclaimed Betty.

Craft did not answer. He was standing, knuckles white on the handrail, trying to quell the urge to swear and smash things.

They got off at C Level, and Craft's hopes dissolved entirely. The squad of marines who had accompanied them in the elevator was met by what seemed a whole platoon. Craft again crossed glances with Senator Lewellyn, exchanging visual shrugs.

"This way, ladies an' gentlemen." Stillworth led them onto a slideway running down the center of C Level's main concourse.

"It's so big!" Virginia Lewellyn said excitedly. The concourse stretched ahead of them, diminishing to a single point, the startling perspective accentuated by smooth, severe walls, floor, and ceiling. Only a few persons were visible in the vast expanse.

The marines showed them where to step off the slideway. They passed through an arched alcove into a wing which Craft inferred, from knowledge of the Sacto-Reno Redoubt, to be largely living quarters, marching past a guard point, down a secondary branch corridor, and halting in a vestibule of some sort containing lounges, chairs, and dozens of potted plants.

Senator Stillworth hung back, regarding them with hooded eyes. "Someone'll be along directly to show you your quarters," he remarked in a cynical voice. "Make yourselves t'home."

"Where are General Patt and Dr. Emmerson?" asked Lewellyn. Stillworth said nothing.

"Er, how long will we be staying?" inquired Hanford. "I should be back in Los Angeles on Tuesday at the latest, Senator."

Raymond Stillworth leered at them, barking a short laugh. He turned on his heel and waddled from the chamber without looking back. The marines filed out after him, standing on either side of the entrance until the doors slid shut with a disheartening thud.

"What the . . .!" Hanford stared blankly at the others.

"We're in the bottle!" Craft seethed with helpless fury. "They just drove home the cork."

"Bottle? What do you mean, Lew?" asked Betty, worried without understanding w'hy.

Lewellyn grasped at straws. "We still ... have the microfilm."

"We have it, all right!" Craft's sarcasm was scathing. "The trick will be to find someone who'll bother *looking* at it."

"I . . . I'm sorry, Craft." Lewellyn looked devastated. "It's my fault—all my fault."

"What is, dear?" asked his wife.

Senator Lewellyn sagged into a lounge. "I blew it," he said in a defeated voice. "Boy oh boy; I really blew it!"

"Will one of you *please* tell me what the hell's going on?" demanded Hanford.

Craft told him, choosing his words with care, in a few biting sentences. When he had finished, he drew Betty down beside him on the lounge opposite Lewellyn, and put his arm around her.

Virginia Lewellyn sank slowly beside her husband, while Hanford stared at Craft open-mouthed.

"My God!" said the publisher. "How long can they keep us here?"

Craft shrugged. "I don't know whether it's a killing bottle, or just . . . The best we can hope for is the rest of our lives, I guess."

A door opened somewhere behind them. A tall, red-haired man wearing a gray jumpsuit stepped into the vestibule, regarding them silently. "Hello, Cobber," he called. Lew Craft came to his feet in one motion. "Red!"

"Wish I could say I'm glad to see you here, Lew." Major Archer studied his friend, shaking his head. "But I'm not."

"The rest of our . . . lives," said publisher Hoo Hanford in a dazed voice.

XVI

May, 1988

Alessandro Volpone's manservant disturbed his master's restless slumber by gently shaking his shoulder. "An urgent call, sir, from someone whose name is on the list—a Dr. Emmerson."

"Thank you. I'll take it here." Groggy, Volpone waited until the valet left the bedroom, glancing at the bedside clock's illuminated dial face. It was a quarter to three. He lifted the old-fashioned French telephone, a valuable antique, "Yes, Rolfe?"

"At once, Alex. The condition is red."

Alex Volpone sat bolt upright in bed. "Have I time to run over to Glover Park?" he asked, thinking of Marissa.

"No," came Emmerson's cold, flat denial. "Minutes count." With a barely audible click, the line went dead.

Volpone bounded about, drawing on a pullover and slacks. He grabbed a topcoat, a hat, and the suitcase he'd kept fully packed for almost fifteen years. Another like it reposed in his bedroom at Foxhaven; a third was in Marissa's apartment.

Minutes after receiving Emmerson's call, he backed an electric runabout from the garage. A few cruising taxis and cars carrying night people disputed his exclusive use of downtown Washington's streets. Pulling up to the Mall ITTS entrance, he disregarded the red curb, snatched the suitcase from the passenger's seat, and hurried across the sidewalk, pausing to glance at the sky.

Flinty stars winked in the clear, moonless night. He studied the softly lighted Capitol dome, the Washington Monument's illuminated spear, wondering if he would ever again know the sweet sights and sounds and smells of the upper world.

Thrusting aside a twinge of conscience at being forced to abandon Marissa to her fate, he pushed his way into the deserted ITTS station, emerging minutes later more than a mile beneath Laurel, Maryland.

Stillworth and Emmerson were waiting when Volpone let himself into the sanctuary. "Fill me in," he requested brusquely.

Arms folded, Emmerson had been pacing the cramped, rockwalled chamber, deep in thought. "Alex, the signs are ominous. Yesterday morning Ambassador Kirilov returned to the Sino-Sov embassy from

his fifteenth visit home in as many months. Our people inside Russia have reported numerous, conspicuous absences during the past week or ten days—Premier Balinin, the entire Presidium, Politburo, et cetera. Late yesterday, all leaves are canceled for Red Army and Navy personnel."

"Tell him about the goddam pill," urged Stillworth sourly.

Rolfe Emmerson searched the industrialist's face. "Alex, it's frightening in implication; within a single twenty-four-hour period, every man, woman and child within the USSR's awesome boundaries seems to have been administered some sort of pill."

"Pill? What kind of pill?"

The CIA Director shook his head. "We don't know. Medics dispensed them; people were forced to take them on the spot—including some of our agents—precluding the opportunity for thieving a sample and having it analyzed."

Volpone's eyes narrowed. "My first impression," he said slowly, "is that our Russian friends have developed some medication which counteracts, or palliates, the effects of radioactivity."

Emmerson seemed doubtful. "Possible, but not likely, according to Dr. Hershkowitz. It seems radiation's too basic, Alex; it first attacks the least specialized body tissue—the intestinal lining—then progressively destroys more and more complex tissue."

Numbly, Volpone removed his topcoat. "We'll have to discover what the pills are for, then. Where are Abrams and Patt?"

"General Patt has established a command center in M Level," Emmerson told him. "Strategic Air Command is standing to yellow alert, in readiness for an all-out counterstrike."

"And Abrams?" Volpone cast a questioning glance Stillworth's way.

"I dunno, Alex," said, the senator. "Rolfe tried three times to contact him. I called twice myself from up in the redoubt. Maybe Nat's latched onto some new galfriend. Who knows?"

Volpone said, "I hope it doesn't cost him his life. I'm going up to M Level and make some calls. There's a lady I'd very much like to have escorted into the redoubt. Do you think there's time?"

Emmerson wasn't sure. "We've nothing upon which to base an opinion, as yet. Go ahead; it's worth a try. In fact, why don't we all adjourn to M Level? The sanctuary may be a shade safer, but it's damned inconvenient being cut off from everything like this."

The ensuing day, Thursday, May fifth, was passed in what might be termed a fingernail-chewing state, punctuated by four-way debates as to whether or not a call-in of redoubt candidates should be implemented as a crash priority. It was General Patt, surprisingly, who offered the strongest argument for holding off, insisting that fully-staffed redoubts had never been his intention; that a premature alarm would cause much more damage in the long run than a last-minute panic call-in. But the slow process of bringing hundreds of permanent residents underground was increased fivefold as a precautionary measure.

Volpone managed to get through to Marissa—who had the maddening habit of turning off her phone upon retiring—at one o'clock that afternoon, defying Rolfe Emmerson's dire warning by going up himself to fetch her into the redoubt. Shocked and disenchanted by the utilitarian living quarters assigned her, Marissa stamped her dainty foot and wanted to leave. Volpone cut her protests short by locking her in.

The four men met shortly before sundown topside, deciding—over Emmerson's strenuous objections—that if no overt move was forth, coming by Sino-Sov Coalition forces within forty-eight hours, they would scrub the operation, return to normal life, and await developments.

The CIA Director, certain in his own mind that some form of BW attack was imminent, was patently unhappy with suggestions for quitting the redoubt before adequate reasons for the USSR's dispensation of mysterious pills were discovered. Feelers had been put out to hospitals and clinics across the nation with, thus far, negative results.

They were relaxing, watching a satellite-relayed *Cinco de Mayo* celebration in Mexico City over commercial tri-di, when the first report came in via the CIA medical team's land line to Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Seven cases of an undiagnosed respiratory ailment had just been reported. The patients all exhibited symptoms peculiar to bronchial pneumonia—or pneumonic plague. Dr. Hershkowitz called Emmerson back immediately; classical pneumonic's incubation period was known to be thirty-six hours, or more. These were full-blown, galloping cases, every one.

Quite understandably, the news excited Emmerson. He urged General Patt to order all surface air intake halted at once over the guarded para-military network linking all forty-one redoubts. Before Patt could get on the air, Hershkowitz called again, and Emmerson nearly fainted. Washington's hospitals were becoming choked with cases. Within twenty minutes, the seven cases had blossomed into seventy, then seven hundred—then seven thousand! Unable to contact the President, or convene the National Security Council, General Patt declared martial law over the inter-redoubt network.

"We're in it," he said, grim-faced, tacitly ordering Strategic Air Command to red alert status. All aircraft, land-based missile squadrons, orbital missile launching stations, and Naval undersea forces were deployed for counterstrike preparedness.

The general then placed another call to the White House, returning white-faced, moments later, with chilling news: a press aide had informed him that President Blair was in the underground White House shelter, apparently ill. Shivering and coughing, he seemed to be having difficulty breathing. The Vice President was also afflicted.

Reports flooded in—an avalanche of hideous, doubt-removing assurances: Denver, Kansas City, San Francisco, Detroit, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles . . .

When Patt started to initiate the alarm which would have manned the redoubts, Emmerson cried, "We can't!" He looked shaken. "They're a step ahead of us, General. We'll have to assume that everyone aboveground is now infected, or at least exposed."

"Plague," said Volpone, "like something from the Dark Ages!"

"We've no choice. We must seal the redoubts," said Emmerson.

General Patt winced. "But . . . they're almost empty!"

"I know. It can't be helped. They've hit us with a clever stroke—every population center in the nation, all at once." Emmerson stared at the ceiling. "What's our best countermove?" he asked in a monotone. "Come on, put your minds to work; we have very little time."

"I got a notion," said Stillworth eagerly.

"Yes, Ray?"

"It's about 5:45 here on the Eastern Seaboard—the rush hour. Let's see how many commuters we can pull inside from the ITTS tubes. How's that sound?"

Emmerson sat forward, revolving the idea in his mind. "It may work," he said at last. "But if any redoubt becomes contaminated, we can write off the entire complex. Pneumonic is highly contagious. It's probably what they want—expect—us to do."

"Well, seems t'me we gotta chance it. There ain't much choice."

"I agree completely," said Volpone.

Patt spent a moment making up his mind. He nodded soberly.

"We have unanimous agreement," said Emmerson. "Alex, you know the ITTS system best. Can you think of any method of improving our odds against bringing contaminated people into the redoubts?"

Volpone started to frame an answer, then lapsed into silence. "Perhaps. Positive outward airflow in the tubes would satisfy noncontamination of passengers aboard the trains, would it not?"

Emmerson's brow wrinkled. "It might, if they had inspired no live organisms before boarding the train, but—"

"How'n hell's the bug bein' spread around?" demanded Stillworth. "Any idea?"

"We have no definite information as yet," said Emmerson. "Let's postulate air-vectored bacilli—aerosol dispensers, or something similar, would be a good bet."

"Kirilov!" General Patt made the name sound like a curse. "He has made fifteen trips home and back in his personal SST. Now we know why."

"But," objected Stillworth, "it'd take an army of immunized agents to distribute an' trigger that many aerosol bombs."

"Not necessarily. A very few, placed to take advantage of local prevailing winds, could have been triggered remotely by radio-controlled squibs, or timers." Emmerson paused. "The important question is how to hold trains in the tubes, and at the same time interdict passengers against contamination. Suggestions, Alex?"

Volpone suddenly clapped his hands with enthusiasm. "The ITTS safety officers; it may have been solved for us! Why hadn't I thought of that before? Each safety officer sits at a console, ready to manually override any malfunction in computer-operated traffic control circuits. There are multiple redundant feedback loops which—"

"For Chrissakes talk English!" complained Stillworth.

"Listen; each safety station operates like a deadman switch. Pressure sensors in the officer's chair are connected to a time-delay relay. If the chair is unoccupied for twenty seconds, the relay drops out, opening that sector's ITTS tubes by energizing all motorized air valves full open, which quickly fills the tubes with braking air. The trains will come to a stop somewhere in the tubes automatically.

"Don't you see? Until each officer's chair is once again occupied, a steady, continuing outrush of compressed air will stop the ingress of *contaminated* air."

Emmerson perked up as he digested what Volpone had told them. "I think I understand," he said. "As safety officers become ill, leave their posts, the condition you've described will come about automatically. Chances are good that only 'healthy' people will be aboard the trains, especially the long interurban runs."

"Exactly. The safety stations are air-conditioned, of course. But no simple particle filtration will stop micro-organisms."

"Get on the redoubt network, Alex," directed Emerson. "Tell them what to expect, what to do."

"I could, er, rough out a procedure," said Volpone.

"There's no time. If we don't act instantly, ITTS emergency procedures will send the passengers topside—to their deaths."

"Just a second there," warned Stillworth. "Better tell 'em to freeze those passengers right where they're at. If any particular trainload's contaminated, it'll screw up a whole redoubt."

"A good point, Ray," said Emmerson. "We'll let them cool their heels for an hour or two in the trains while we set up medical checkpoints. One infected individual will determine the status of each group. Turning some away won't be easy, but . . . I've been told classical pneumonic takes three or four days to reach terminal stages, but Hershkowitz *is* postulating a new, fast-acting strain of bacillus. Our first step will be to develop antigen serum—"

"Damnation! I'll tell ya what we got to do first," cried the senator. "Hit 'em! Hit 'em high, an' hit 'em low; hit 'em with everythin' we got!"

"It may soon come to that, Ray," said General Patt. "But not yet."

"Why'n hell not?"

"Because," said Patt evenly, "up to now we've been out-maneuvered, out-foxed. That will cease, as of this instant. The Sino-Sov masterminds expect a retaliatory strike; they're prepared for it. Therefore, we will not oblige them—yet. We'll make no unconsidered moves out of sheer panic."

"Then we're *losers*, dammit!" said Stillworth.

"Not at all," said Patt coldly. "We will win in the end because we *must*."

Volpone's thesis proved accurate. Dozens of local ITTS trains yielded passengers who were free of bronchopneumonic symptoms. After hours in quarantine aboard the stalled trains, they began streaming slowly past teams of overworked medics by the mystified, frightened thousands. The scene was repeated endlessly across the nation, causing Volpone to comment on the terrible irony created by circumstance: the common "workingman," homeward bound in an ITTS train by random chance, would be saved, while nearly three-quarters of a million carefully screened and briefed candidates were left to survive or perish as best they could.

It was after seven o'clock when the senior epidemiologist of Walter Reed Hospital's staff, rapidly falling ill himself, delivered four sealed vials containing live bacilli to the redoubt elevator head in suburban Maryland. He was met by a pair of volunteer medics from the CIA team who wore fully protective plastic suits complete with self-sustaining air bottles. The epidemiologist also passed over some notes written in indelible ink on mylar.

Carrying vials and mylar, the CIA medics—whose bodily hair had been shaved beforehand—chucked their protective suits into an incinerator at the entrance to A Level, undergoing

three separate cleansing sprays before being readmitted to the redoubt. An hour later, the first preliminary report was laid before Emmerson.

The blame was placed squarely on a new, rapidly-incubating strain of *Pasteurella Pestis*. Laboratory animals on L Level had become infected by as few as five airborne organisms. Greatly accelerated incubation caused the animals to reach terminal stages in as little as one-half hour, which astounded the medics. Extrapolating from this, it was estimated that infected human beings would commence dying within four to seven hours, rather than the customary three or four days common with classical pneumonic. The infection's course, leading to severe bronchopneumonial edema, depended entirely upon the physical resistance inherent within each individual patient; the very young, very old, and the infirm would be the first to go.

Dismayed beyond words, Volpone and the others learned at nine o'clock of reported widespread infection within the People's Republic of China. The Soviet Union had, it seemed, practiced a particularly vile form of duplicity on her populous Asian neighbor. The pattern of World War Three began to reveal itself: Soviet Russia was engaged in knocking down her ideological Western enemy, and supposed Eastern Communist brother, at one and the same time.

Emmerson called a council of war, looking very determined as he faced them. "I've taken the liberty of making the following assumptions, judgments, and inferences," he said, searching their sober faces. "Before any of you voice objections, let me recapitulate. Afterward, we'll hear discussion and, hopefully, establish tentative courses of action.

"First, as General Patt already pointed out, we've been successfully out-maneuvered. The Soviet Union presumably penetrated our redoubt cover story—perhaps long ago—and used the information as a basis for the current BW attack. We've no way of knowing whether or not they are also aware of Luft. For the present, let's assume they are.

"Secondly, the nature of their soft attack—though devastating, we will refer to it as a 'soft' attack—and the USSR's failure to follow it with massive thermonuclear bombardment, leads us to believe Russia is looking forward to easy victory, both here and in China. Our only reasonable procedure would seem to be one of watchful waiting until we begin to see—"

"Waitin'!" sneered Stillworth. "Sure, let's be humane an' hold off! Let's be pushovers, too chicken to strike back!"

"Be still!" General Patt half-rose from his chair. His customary patience had vanished. "Let him finish, Stillworth. It makes sense; if at all possible, the USSR would like to occupy a fully intact America, not a radioactive field of rubble."

"That was precisely my contention," said Emmerson, nonplussed by Stillworth's outburst. "We can look for immunized troops to be landed here after chaos mounts to the utmost—say in a week."

"Not if we *hit 'em!*" raged the senator.

"They expect that," countered General Patt. "They may have forty, fifty divisions underground, waiting for the effects of our counterstrikes to diminish."

"An' you're tellin' me we'll sit on our duffs an' watch the United States of America go down the drain without liftin' a finger?"

"Absolutely not," refuted Emmerson. "We're trying to decide upon the best possible course of action, Ray. We must stop doing anything predictable, anything which can be anticipated. We have time—not much, but perhaps enough—to allow medical development of a counteracting antigen serum. If we remain cool-headed, deliberate, there's a strong likelihood of turning the situation around, of saving hundreds of thousands of lives.

"Then there is China," continued Emmerson. "It's a relief, certainly, to find we're at war with only one enormous power, rather than a coalition of two. We must establish communication with China's leaders at once. Now that Russia has shown her hand, we automatically become allied with China. We may conceivably help China to—"

"*Help* those schemin' Reds?" Stillworth was beside himself. "How can ya even suggest such a thing, Emmerson?"

"I think you're correct, Rolfe." Patt ignored Stillworth completely. "Our ultimate salvation may lie with

the Chinese."

Senator Stillworth began ranting uncontrollably. When an aide entered the command center, moments later, and tried to inform him of a call, the senator was too worked up to even hear him. Volpone took the call. The caller turned out to be Nat Abrams.

"Where are you?" asked Volpone, looking into the face of death.

"In ... New York," said the TV executive, coughing. "I feel rotten, Alex. What is it?"

Volpone told him in solemn tones.

"Plague!" Abrams blanched, staring from the video tube in horrified disbelief. "Wh-what can I *do*? How can I get help?"

"The redoubts are quarantined," said Volpone with sympathy. "I'm sorry, Nat. Get to the nearest hospital at once."

"Quar—" Abrams broke off, coughing spasmodically. "But . . . people are sick, dying all over town. For the love of God, put Ray on, will you?"

It took Volpone several seconds to gain Stillworth's attention. He watched darkly as Nat Abrams pleaded with his friend, not liking the scene. Then, with a sour expression, he rejoined Patt and Emmerson.

"Six hours," said General Patt, "is every minute we can afford to wait. It's almost midnight now. I'm going to invoke a six-hour countdown, beginning at twelve."

"But, you're asking *miracles* of Hershkowitz and his staff," objected Emmerson. "Six hours won't give them sufficient time to evolve antigens. Can't we stretch it, give them more time?"

"I wouldn't dare." General Patt was stern. "If our SAC aircraft commanders, or Trident submarine captains, become too ill to initiate the counterstrike, we've lost."

"But, General—"

"Lost!" reiterated Patt. "I can't let that happen. Should nothing new develop by 6:00 AM, we will launch a concentrated retaliatory strike against the USSR. We will hold *nothing* back."

Rolfe Emmerson looked very drawn. He nodded glumly, then got up and hurried from the command center.

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Leaving the command center in Emmerson's footsteps, Volpone tried to lie down for a while. Unsurprisingly, sleep would not come. Rolfe Emmerson's call, half an hour later, provided a welcome excuse for rising and hurrying back down to M Level.

Obviously sorely troubled, the CIA Director met him at the elevator, leading him into an empty office. "Alex, it isn't working out," he said. "I just came from the lab; the medics are working in a frenzy, but with only five and one-half hours to go . . ."

"We mustn't expect miracles," comforted Volpone.

"Nor will we get them," assured Emmerson. "The bacillus shows signs of being hardy, laboratory-cultured; probably a mutated strain evolved over a period of years. If Hershkowitz were to develop effective antigens tonight, it would still take hours—days—to produce and administer serum. And I'm afraid we'll lose three redoubts. Perhaps four."

"Contamination?"

Emmerson nodded. "Denver-Cheyenne, Detroit-Cleveland, and Houston-Austin were all understaffed. At least one contaminated trainload slipped past the medical screening and entered each of them. New York-Trenton's fate hangs in the balance; we don't know whether or not they'll be able to contain the infection on upper levels."

"New York-Trenton?" Volpone was stricken. "I just spoke to Seymour and Vico," he said. "Both are in that redoubt."

"I know. We'll continue to hope for the best, of course, but . . ." Emmerson paused. "What I was driving at, a moment ago, is that General Patt will not countermand the six o'clock strike unless the

situation changes drastically. I sympathize with his position; he has the big picture to contend with. I've listened to arguments from his staff, trying to persuade him that military personnel from the 'clean' redoubts, wearing self-contained protective suits—we have a few dozen in stores—can go out later and man the SAC missile launch bases. Patt's comments about inexperienced crews manning his SAC complexes were elegantly profane."

Volpone was grim. "Not even in ultimate emergency?"

"Patt insists not, and I believe him; it couldn't be done. We must deliver a massive, all-out strike if—"

"And go down swinging," finished Volpone bitterly.

"Perhaps." Emmerson sighed. "The alternatives are clear-cut. Between you and me, Alex, I have the gut feeling that once multi-megaton warheads start flying back and forth between here and Russia, nothing in God's universe will stop the conflict from ravaging the entire world. The result will be . . . Armageddon."

"Frightening, but plausible," agreed Volpone. "If it should come, we'll have to survive belowground. Thank God we're prepared!"

"Are we?" Emmerson regarded the other closely. "Think it through carefully. We've managed to bring a rag-tag collection of uninfected private citizens into the redoubts. Patt suspects, justifiably, that Russia's postulated havens contain a number of Red Army divisions. What does that imply?"

"Invasion, of course, after we've spent our forces," said Volpone, "and after radioactivity levels decrease to a point where Soviet forces can deploy. For us to strike now would only postpone the inevitable. *If* Patt's right."

"I think he is." Emmerson radiated sudden enthusiasm. "But Patt mentioned something earlier which gave me a notion I think worth following up. We *must* do something to give Patt proper grounds for delaying the retaliatory strike. It's our only hope."

"I agree," said Volpone, "though I thought you'd already decided the counterstrike mandatory under the circumstances."

"It is," said Emmerson, "under the circumstances. I propose changing the circumstances, reshuffling the deck."

"How?" Volpone became very interested.

"It struck me," said Emmerson slowly, "that we aren't playing all of our available cards, Alex. Patt suggested that Ambassador Kirilov had most likely imported plague dispensers under the cloak of diplomatic immunity. He'll be immunized, of course. Right this minute he's probably sitting in his Washington embassy, reporting the effectiveness of the BW attack. I want Kirilov brought into the redoubt, Alex. At once."

"To question him?"

"Well ... yes. But that isn't the primary reason." Emmerson removed his glasses, polishing them with a handkerchief. "Follow my reasoning," he said. "Tell me if the logic is flawed."

"We're caught in a two-way squeeze; one a bacteriological vise, the other of our own making—time. Assuming the Soviet Union has learned about our Lifeboat Project, they've come up with a very effective countermove: infecting our urban populace with swift-acting pneumonic plague, creating chaos."

"The USSR's major premise seems to have been that we would hurt them in retaliation—hurt them very, very badly—but not *kill* them as a nation," continued Emmerson. "A price they seem willing to pay. They predicate the day when their armies will be sitting cozy in underground havens, waiting until radioactivity levels diminish to a point where invasion and occupation of our decimated nation, and China, will be feasible. Their plan worked—almost."

"The Commuters?" guessed Volpone. "But, I don't see—"

"The commuters," confirmed Emmerson with an affirmative headshake. "We've managed to do something—thanks largely to the operational design of ITTS—which their planners didn't take into account. Hundreds of thousands of Americans are safely underground, whereas their scheme calculated that fast-incubating pneumonic would be brought into the redoubts as the panic alarm went out and candidates scurried frantically for cover."

"The upshot is simply this: we must persuade them that we, too, have a large standing army poised

underground, waiting to repulse their landings."

Volpone was profoundly baffled. "We don't, Rolfe."

"Ah, but do *they* know that?" asked Emmerson, ever the cool chessmaster. "We must make them believe we do."

"I can't imagine how."

"It calls for a bluff, Alex," said the CIA Director quietly. "A bluff must always be on the grand scale; never mean, never small-minded. I suggest we rub the Soviet Ambassador's nose in the fact that instead of a small technical staff, each redoubt is manned to the hilt with battle-ready elite troops."

"How in the devil can we convince him of something nonexistent?"

Emmerson's wan smile was confident. "There are many, many people in each redoubt, are there not? If we were to have sterile teams from each redoubt go topside and bring down 'clean' weapons, uniforms, military accouterments, then dress and arm the commuters accordingly, would Ambassador Kirilov know the difference over video?"

Volpone digested it. His eyes widened in amazement. "Rolfe, that's simply brilliant! Remind me not to play poker with you again."

"We'll show Kirilov that we've matched his country move-for-move—and *more*; show him undramatically, matter-of-factly, that Russia cannot win in the end. If we succeed, the USSR may back down and agree to meet at the conference table. The fact that we've made no immediate counterstrike probably has them sweating already."

"It might work, Rolfe. Then again . . ."

"Have you a strenuous objection?"

"There's always the chance," surmised Volpone, "that calling their hand might drive them toward full-scale thermonuclear war."

Emmerson swayed his shoulders as if to say, 'who knows?' "Remember, they want an intact America if at all possible, not a pulverized wasteland populated only by the dead. Were they to mount a major nuclear strike, their intended invasion would be delayed indefinitely, if not canceled; we'd be no worse off, essentially, than we are now. My way could buy us time to negotiate. The path we are taking now means . . . *finis*."

"Kidnapping the ambassador won't be easy," said Volpone. "He's probably surrounded himself with an armed, immunized staff. Don't mistake me; I think it's a brilliant concept, Rolfe. Still, it could require sneaking up on a wide-awake tiger."

"I envision a commando raid," said Emmerson. "Kirilov must be taken alive, unharmed, if what I have in mind is to succeed."

"Urn, it will be a delicate piece of work, if not a suicide mission." Volpone beamed. "Shake my hand: it's worth every ounce of try either of us has left in him."

Riding the slideway with Emmerson toward the command center, eager to convince Putt of the CIA Director's ingenious plan, Volpone saw four men and two women standing at the foot of a steel stairway leading upward to one of the air storage complex's control booths. The great compressor lay silent, as did all others in the vast hall, now that air intake from the surface had ceased.

"What are civilians doing on M Level," Volpone asked.

"Stillworth's catch." Emmerson was preoccupied. "Senator Lewellyn is on the left; Hoo Hanford, the publisher, is standing next to that Army officer who absconded with all that secret data from the Sacramento-Reno Redoubt last month."

Volpone grunted. "Ah, yes; Major Croft, isn't it?"

"Craft, I think," said Emmerson. "Craft, then. Have you read the report on his escapade?"

Emmerson nodded. "A remarkable adventure," he said dryly.

Volpone studied the group closely. "Excuse me," he said suddenly, acting on impulse. "I'll catch up with you, Rolfe."

Leaning backward slightly in order to more easily preserve his balance, Volpone stepped from the slideway, striding energetically across the granite floor. Craft's audience was much too intent upon Craft's lecture to notice his approach.

"Major Craft," boomed the Secretary of Transportation. "It's good to see you again."

Volpone was greeted by five startled faces. Craft merely swung toward him, standing on the lowermost riser of the steel stair, his features perfectly composed.

"Mr. Volpone," said Craft calmly, introducing Betty, Virginia Lewellyn, and the others without noticeable inflection.

Alex Volpone's antennae were full-out. He sensed outright hostility radiating from Senator Lewellyn and the red-haired officer named Archer, strong waves of feminine interest from both women, and latent outrage boiling up inside the lanky, horsefaced publisher. Craft, however, displayed no emotion at all, which gave Volpone cause to ponder. "I simply wanted to stop for a second and compliment your courage and resourcefulness, Craft," said the industrialist. "Eluding Parkinson's men and making good your escape was an amazing feat. I'd have wagered heavily against your chances."

"Thanks," said Craft. "I might just as well have stayed where I was. I guess I did what I had to do."

"Of course," said Volpone. "Each of us must do as he thinks best."

"Including you, I suppose." Lewellyn's sarcasm was unalloyed.

"Why yes," said Volpone. "Including me—and my associates. Where would you be now, Senator, if we hadn't?"

Lewellyn flushed. "Either dead, or dying—or home in bed sleeping," he said harshly, voice cracking with emotion.

"I sincerely doubt the latter."

"Do you? Do you know for a fact that your air stealing madness didn't *force* the Soviets to germ warfare, that you weren't the cause rather than the deterrent? You drove them to the wall," said Lewellyn with heat, "gave them no alternative, except this!"

"Ridiculous!" Volpone bristled. "The constituted authorities refused to listen, so we went ahead on our own. If you knew the heartache and pain we experienced—"

"I know the heartache and pain my country's experiencing!"

Volpone met the California senator's eyes, trying unsuccessfully to stare him down. "We've done nothing I feel necessary to apologize for," he said stiffly.

"In bypassing the Constitution and elected representatives of the American people, Mr. Volpone, you may have thrust five thousand years of civilization right over the precipice."

Now thoroughly angered, Volpone folded his arms. "I'll not waste any more of your precious time, Senator. Cherish your opinions, but bear in mind that we've entered into a struggle for survival. Let us pray we are given the opportunity to survive."

"No thanks to you!"

"Forgive me for bothering you!" thundered Volpone. Turning on his heel, he marched back to the slideway. Approaching Craft and his friends had been a grave misjudgment. Hurrying to catch up with Emmerson, he dismissed the incident as trivial, his brisk stride augmented by the slideway's stately progress.

Senator Stillworth was crowing about something when Volpone entered the command center. Emmerson sat tapping a pencil on the conference table, staring into space, while General Patt paced the chamber's floor, now and again glancing woodenly at the display screens filling one wall.

Stillworth gloated. "Now we're in it for sure!" he hooted. "We may take a temporary lickin', sure; but we'll *win* the war, even if we lose the goddam battle!"

Volpone ignored Stillworth, sliding into the chair next to Emmerson. "Have you explained your idea to Patt?" he asked.

The CIA Director refused to meet his eyes. "It's too late."

"Too . . . late?" Volpone looked up at Stillworth.

"We're in a shootin' war at last," rasped the portly senator.

Patt paused in his tiger-pacing. He regarded Volpone fixedly, agony in his gaze. "One of my colonels . . ." General Patt cleared his throat. "A SAC base in Wyoming . . . became infected. The colonel saw his officers and men sick, dying. Can't really blame him; it was a dying effort for revenge."

Alex Volpone stood up, knees suddenly wobbly. "You mean he . . .?"

Lieutenant General Michael Patt's nod had a hangdog quality about it. "The colonel salvoed on prime Soviet targets, Alex. Seven birds carrying MIRV warheads are on their way over the Pole, and all the good intentions in the world won't bring them back!"

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USAF Skywatch Satellite Alpha and both missile launching stations had been knocked out the preceding evening by Soviet orbital missiles. Before it too blossomed into an Earth-circling cloud of radioactive dust, Skywatch Beta's crew managed to report SAC's inadvertent strike in comprehensive detail. Four sober-faced men gathered in M Level's command center, learning bit-by-bit of repeated hammer blows being rained upon Moscow, Kiev, Minsk, Gorky, Leningrad, Odessa ...

Still, there had been no answering Russian nuclear strike. At 2:45 the tension became unbearable. Doubly determined to launch an all-out, annihilatory attack as more and more SAC bases reported pneumatic raging within their underground silo complexes, General Patt's characteristic reserve began to crack. Though many Trident submarines were at sea, he refused to be convinced that falling back solely upon naval retaliatory weapons systems was a feasible alternative to the prospective six o'clock strike. Emmerson doggedly persisted, urging the general to hold off and give his medical team what he termed a "reasonable chance" to develop antigens, which infuriated Stillworth to near apoplexy.

Volpone waited patiently until the senator quieted down somewhat before speculating, "Maybe we can still adopt your plan, Rolfe."

"What plan?" demanded Patt irritably.

The harried CIA Director glanced at the wall chronometer. "Time's growing short," he said. "I'm surprised we haven't been hit."

"Perhaps no Soviet nuclear strike will take place," surmised Volpone. "Mightn't the USSR consider our missiles part of the limited retaliation they were expecting? After all, they've already 'hit us' in a sense. If they *are* lying doggo, waiting us out . . ." He left the thought unfinished.

General Patt perked up, concentrating. "A good point, Alex. In the heat of the moment, that aspect never occurred to me."

"Explain your plan, Rolfe," urged Volpone.

Emmerson blinked, looking haggard, then outlined his scheme for kidnapping the Soviet Ambassador, proving to him that America had—literally—an ace in the hole: bogus underground 'troops'.

"What's that?" demanded Stillworth. "What did you say? Bring that murderous Red bastard in *here*?"

Emmerson patiently explained why it would be necessary.

"Now I heard it!" Stillworth's florid face contorted in outrage. "That is, all in all, the silliest god-dam notion you've come up with yet, Emmerson! I can't believe you're serious!"

General Patt remained silent, contemplating the ramifications of Emmerson's proposal. "What the hell have we got to lose? It might work. If not, we've neither improved nor worsened our position."

"That's essentially quite correct," said Emmerson before Stillworth could object. "It must be done quickly and rather quietly, if possible—a small detachment of assault troops, led by someone fully informed, cool-headed, and determined. We've no way of learning what sort of defenses Kirilov has surrounded himself with at the embassy. He must be taken alive and unharmed, or not at all."

Volpone's eyes lighted. "Rolfe, you've just described Major Craft; cool-headed, resourceful, and *very* determined," he said. "I wonder if he can be persuaded to lead the mission."

"Who are we talking about?" Patt looked perplexed.

"That Army engineer who slipped out of the Sacramento-Reno Redoubt last month with all our secrets," enlightened Volpone.

"Oh, yes." Patt's lips compressed. "Persuade him, hell! I'll order the son-of-a-bitch to go if you're sure he's the man for the job."

"That might not be, er, wise, General," cautioned Volpone. "Let me talk to him. He's reasonable, intelligent; I'm certain he can be made to see the importance of doing this."

"Get on it then. Quickly!" Patt returned his attention to the wall-filling array of video monitors, holding a deaf ear toward Senator Stillworth's sarcastic outburst.

Lew Craft's ready agreement came over the vociferous objections of both Senator Lewellyn and Betty Dancer that his leg had not yet fully healed. When things quieted down, Craft made two stipulations: one, that Major Archer be allowed to accompany him to the Sino-Sov Embassy; second, that he be allowed to hand-pick volunteers from the marine regiment to man his assault team.

Emmerson and Volpone gave him *carte blanche* permission to take along anyone he saw fit. The CIA Director managed to embarrass himself, stressing over and again the vital importance of grabbing Kirilov unharmed, then hurried away, anxious to advise the other redoubts to go topside and bring in sterile weapons and uniforms as quickly as possible, and to rehearse America's "standing army."

It was five after three when two medics finished dressing Craft, Archer, and the marines, for their sortie. Craft had selected five enlisted men, telling them the simple truth: they would all be betting their lives that a Soviet nuclear strike would not take place while they were topside in Washington, adding that, should a torn suit expose them to pneumonic, they would be forced to remain aboveground. The marines were leery of the operation until told where they were going, and why. Armed with submachine guns, grenades, and sidearms, the seven-man team was given flat photographs of Ambassador Kirilov which Emmerson had pulled from the redoubt's CIA files. Their air bottles would sustain them four hours. Before Craft sealed his headpiece, Volpone drew him aside. "Things may look grim and rather hopeless up there," he said. "The men may give you trouble, perhaps try to aid someone who desperately needs help. You must not let that happen."

"I think I understand."

"I'm sure you do," said Volpone. "I felt it my duty to prepare you, nevertheless. Steel yourself; ignore anything which might interfere with your specific task. Dr. Hershkowitz tells us certain individuals may be naturally immune to the plague. You could encounter scenes of horror and savagery. Keep your distance, and go on. Your mission *is* much, much more important."

"I'll be an ice cube, Mr. Volpone."

"I suppose that's why you're going." Volpone's brief smile was encouraging. "Craft, you may not admire my methods or principles, but I assure you I had, and have, only the country's best interests at heart. Please try to believe that."

"I do." They solemnly shook hands. "Don't worry; we'll fetch him." Snapping down his fishbowl, Craft found it suddenly difficult to communicate. The all-enclosing protective garments had been designed for individual use, without two-way radio headsets. Riding upward in the elevator, he gingerly touched helmets with Red Archer, asking if he could hear what Craft was saying.

"Sure; good enough." Archer bobbed his chin.

The cluster of buildings atop the elevator shaft, advertised publicly as the Laurel; Maryland, US Marine Corps Motor Repair Depot, lay well-lighted but unoccupied as Craft's small army hustled through. Craft checked fuel gauges in several vehicles before choosing a rotary-engined troop carrier. Boarding with haste, a lance corporal started the vehicle, driving through the night out the post's main gate toward the Baltimore-Washington Parkway that passed less than a mile to the southeast.

The twenty or so miles into downtown Washington rolled past swiftly. They encountered no vehicular traffic until crossing the Anacostia River into the District of Columbia—that a lone, red sports car, going the opposite direction at a tremendous rate of speed.

At Bladensburg Road, the parkway turned into New York Avenue. The city's streets looked normal, but eerie; buildings were dotted with emergency lights, cars were parked lawfully, everything was in its place, looking exactly like any other quiet after-hours night in the nation's capital—except for the total absence of living things. There were no pedestrians, no stray dogs or cats roaming the sidewalks, no heads or shoulders visible in any of the few lighted windows they rode past, nor were there any prowling cars or taxis.

The troop carrier rolled across

New Jersey Avenue against a still-operating traffic light. The ruddy glow of a burning building illuminated the sky several blocks to the north; Craft made a bet with himself that no one would bother putting out the fire.

The vehicle veered sharply around two bodies lying in the street near Mt. Vernon Square, slowing as if to stop. Craft urged the driver onward with a slap on the arm. Then, as they were passing the central library, the driver took one hand from the wheel and pointed excitedly. Following the line of his arm, Craft had the urge to reach in through the acrylic bubble and rub his eyes. A solitary man unconcernedly walked his dog through the small park surrounding the library. Craft and Archer exchanged baffled glances.

Just beyond Eleventh, a middle-aged woman could be seen crawling along the sidewalk. She faltered and rolled on her side, not looking up as they drove past. Craft craned to watch her out of sight, the urge to stop and go to her aid all but overpowering.

He alerted his squad with hand signals, commanding the corporal to turn right on Sixteenth Street. Two smashed autos formed a mangled heap of metal and glass in front of the Statler-Hilton Hotel where he'd stayed five months ago upon returning from Antarctica. Five months! It seemed five years.

Sheathed in dark stone, with twin Chinese and Soviet banners hanging from fourth-floor staffs, the monolithic Sino-Sov Embassy loomed beyond L Street. Erected after the old Soviet Embassy had been razed to make room for it, the building's lights were oddly reassuring. Craft had the driver pull to the curb across from Franklin University, passing a flat photo of Ambassador Kirilov to the lance corporal, another to Archer, and keeping one himself.

He pressed his helmet against Archer's. "Take four men and reconnoiter around back, Red. See if there's a delivery entrance. The corporal and I will have a look at the lobby. Don't fire unless you have to. Move!"

Archer made a thumb and forefinger doughnut in response, tapping the shoulders of four marines. They trotted away toward the mouth of the limousine entrance running between the embassy and the *Washington Post* building.

"Stay close," urged Craft, touching helmets with the corporal.

"Wish we didn't have on these stinkin' yellow suits, sir," complained the marine. "They make great targets."

Craft grinned mirthlessly. "Try doing without yours, friend. Quit bitching, and come on."

The embassy's lowermost windows, ten feet above the sidewalk, were covered with ornamental, expanded metal grilles. Craft hugged the building's stone facade, moving forward until he could peek into the main entrance, a tasteless, pillared affair enclosed by tinted plate glass walls. Inside the glass, a grandiose mosaic depicted rippling Sino-Sov banners borne by a legion of smiling workers, while larger-than-life bronze statues of Mao Tse-tung and Lenin hulked in either corner. The lobby was brightly lighted; there was no one in it.

Craft pulled back, puffing his cheeks and scowling. The setup smelled *wrong*, though he couldn't put his finger on a specific reason. He peeked again, scanning the lobby item by item, and finally spotted three wide-spaced apertures high on the paneled wall.

"No dice," he told the corporal, helmet-to-helmet. "The lobby's covered by closed-circuit TV. The doors are almost certainly locked. Maybe booby-trapped."

"How about a grenade, sir?"

"No good," said Craft. "It might start a ruckus; we need The Man alive and in one piece."

As the marine corporal trailed Craft back toward the rear of the building, submachine gun at the ready, Archer and his squad emerged from behind a hedge. "Any luck?" asked Craft, touching helmets.

"Uh-uh. Heavy-gauge steel doors cover the auto entrance. It'd take dynamite to get in that way. What next?"

Craft pondered, looking the building over, then pointed upward. A thin column of smoke wafted bits of fluttering, flaming ash aloft from a rear chimney. "Someone's in there," he said. "Dammit, I guess we'll have to make some noise. Let's try around front."

Reaching the Sixteenth Street sidewalk, Craft chose the lighted window farthest from the lobby. Two

marines boosted him up until he could grasp the ledge. Getting one hand on the grille work covering the window, he clawed to raise himself until he could see inside. The room, a spacious office, was unoccupied. Craft eased down, dropping back to the sidewalk.

He touched helmets with the lance corporal. "See if you can find any sort of line in the troop carrier. We'll rig a lanyard, tie a grenade to the grille, and pull the pin from down here. Hurry!"

The marine took off at a dead run, trotting back three minutes later with a length of braided nylon tow rope barely small enough to fit through a grenade pin's ring. A tall, rangy marine stood on the shoulders of two mates, wedging the grenade tightly into the lower grille, then dropped to the pavement, leaving the thick nylon tow rope dangling.

Craft grabbed Archer's arm, bringing their helmets into contact. "When she goes bang, me first, Red. Then you and the others. Tell your men to be careful going over the broken glass; if one of them cuts his suit, he'll be a permanent guest."

Archer made a terse head movement, turning to give the orders. When everyone was out of range, Craft pressed himself flat against the embassy and signaled the tall marine to pull the pin.

He watched the man run, counting seconds until a ripping blast echoed along Sixteenth Street, sounding muffled through the acrylic bubble of his headpiece. The warped, smoking grille work swung back and forth for an instant, held by one remaining lag bolt, then clattered to the sidewalk.

Craft ran to the spot, kicked aside the grille, and lifted his foot into the stirrup formed by the joined hands of two marines. Vaulting upward, he rested his weight against the building, unslung the submachine gun from his shoulder, and quickly chipped away shards of glass clinging to the bottom of the frame. Pushing the weapon in ahead of him, he chinned himself, muscled-up, and rolled headfirst into the office. Shattered glass had showered over the carpet, pocking the far wall. Craft helped Red climb through, then went to the door and eased it open.

Papered in rose-colored fabric, the corridor lay softly lighted and silent. A philodendron in a glazed urn embellished with Chinese ideographs rested at the corridor's junction. They moved toward the lobby, gingerly opening door after door, finding only empty offices.

"Have your men search the ground floor," Craft told Archer, helmet-to-helmet. "You and I will see what's upstairs."

The second floor contained a library, a huge formal dining salon, and a sizable ballroom floored in parquet. There were any number of doors which they didn't bother opening.

Craft led the way up to the third floor, taking the stairs one riser at a time, his submachine gun's snout elevated. Again, the hallway was empty. The hair at the nape of his neck lifted; the Sino-Sov Embassy was like a morgue.

Moving with extreme caution, Archer opened the first door to the right of the stairs, beckoning urgently. It was a bedroom; a fully-dressed Oriental of indeterminate years lay sprawled across the bed, breathing with apparent difficulty. His eyes were open. If he saw the intruders, he made no sign.

Craft opened the next door along the hall. A man was huddled on the floor near the door; another lay on the bed, chest heaving.

At the end of the hallway loomed double walnut doors inlaid in tortoise shell. Craft worked the latch silently, standing to one side. Inside was a paneled study; bookshelves lined three walls. The fourth was taken up by a large marble fireplace. His back to them, a man wearing a dressing gown was patiently feeding papers to the flames. He turned to face them incuriously, then resumed slipping papers into the fire, shoulders hunched as if expecting a bullet.

Craft and Archer moved forward into the room. The man turned again to face them. Hands dangling defenselessly at his sides, he said something indistinguishable.

When they were closer, Soviet Ambassador Vasili Kirilov shouted, "Well, gentlemen; have you come to surrender?"

Kirilov listened attentively, his attitude stoic, his thinning hair still damp and unruly from repeated cleansing sprays that he, Craft, and the others had undergone upon entering the redoubt.

"That is preposterous," he said quietly when Emmerson at last fell silent. "You would have me believe this . . . fabrication?"

"It's the unvarnished truth, Mr. Ambassador," said Volpone.

Kirilov smiled almost sadly, disregarding Volpone. "Your gambit is clever, Dr. Emmerson. You hope to convince me, and through me the Soviet Government, that you have a quarter-million trained troops sequestered here and there underground. But the concept is irrational, thoroughly unbelievable. There is also something amiss with your arithmetic. We learned of more than forty underground establishments, yet you mention only thirty-seven."

"Four have become contaminated," admitted Emmerson. "Hoping for one hundred percent interdiction would have been wishful thinking. We are also on the verge of effecting an antigen serum with which to treat survivors. In a matter of hours, we will have it."

Kirilov solemnly shook his head. "No, I do not intend to buy my life by agreeing to terms," he said. "My life is of no consequence. My life is forfeit."

"Your life is in no danger," corrected General Patt, "even though the USSR has committed an unprovoked act of war. We hope to avert total disaster by showing your government the magnitude of their mistake. You cannot win, Mr. Ambassador."

"Unprovoked?" Kirilov was ruffled. "And was *your* act, then, not an act of warfare, General: pirating and storing vast quantities of the Earth's atmosphere?"

"Naturally," said Patt stiffly, "you would have preferred us to wait until your laser weapon was operational," earning a wary look from Ambassador Kirilov.

"The air depletion project," rumbled Volpone, "was a device employed to gain, and retain, an upper hand over two Communist societies who had joined in a common front, brazenly advertising their immutable purpose to enslave the world."

"Rationalization, gentlemen!" Kirilov's composure weakened. "Arguing ideologies would seem futile, now. I defy you to show me your quarter-million healthy, battle-ready troops."

Emmerson pointed to the wall chronometer. "It's four-twenty, Mr. Ambassador. In one hour and forty minutes we'll be forced to launch a concentrated strike against every military and civilian target in the Soviet Union. Your country will be destroyed."

"To rise again," said Kirilov, eyes glistening.

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Ambassador," said Volpone distinctly. "The pneumonic attack effected its purpose, but large, scattered portions of our populace will survive. After repulsing your landings, we have no doubt as to the eventual outcome. We have the means to outlast you. And we will."

"You will permit *me* to doubt," said Kirilov forcefully. "It will be interesting to see what manner of sideshow has been prepared for me."

Sensing the propriety of a dramatic gesture, General Patt lifted the remote controller lying on his desk. Without a word, he began switching on one video monitor after another in the curved bank covering the command center's wall. In every monitor the scene displayed was nearly identical: massed "troops" milled about or stood at parade rest under the vaulted ceiling of each redoubt's D Level plaza.

Video monitors continued to light, one by one; the effect was dazzling, even to Emmerson, Volpone and Patt—cameo-clear, tri-diholograms, in very authentic color, of entire armies drawn up in ranks for inspection.

The general continued switching on monitor after monitor, each image augmenting the effect of the preceding. Below them, the name of each redoubt glowed into being.

"A commendable collection of dolls," speculated Kirilov. "Am I asked to believe that *all* of these troops are indeed safely underground somewhere?"

"Where else could healthy troops be just now?" asked Emmerson, answering a question with a question.

Ambassador Kirilov glanced sharply at Emmerson, then rose. He paraded past the glowing wall, hands behind his back, eyes masked. "You have gone to immeasurable trouble, I see," he said slowly. "But this could have been arranged in any of a dozen ways. I'm afraid I must demur, gentlemen."

"All we ask," insisted Emmerson, declining the bait to argue, "is the opportunity to sit down and negotiate with your government. We need your help to avoid what now seems inevitable: absolute and utter world destruction."

"Negotiate, er, toward what end, sir?"

"An immediate cessation of hostilities," said Emmerson. "The formation of an interregnum international council, with a view toward eventual establishment of a world government."

Kirilov cocked his head, his face inscrutable. "It is too idealistic, too flimsy, Dr. Emmerson. I judge you to be sincere, but . . ." Kirilov paused. Second from the left in the bottom row of monitors, was a hologram labeled Washington-Baltimore. As in the others, row upon row of uniformed "troops" stood at parade rest.

"If I am not mistaken," said Kirilov, pointing, "we are here in this complex, are we not?"

"We are," said Patt tersely.

Kirilov half-smiled. "Might I be permitted to personally inspect these troops?"

"Certainly, sir. At once." Patt pushed a button on the remote controller, calling in a natural voice, "Atten-hut!" Several hundred thousand "troops" came to attention in the various redoubts; some a bit raggedly, though the Soviet Ambassador seemed not to notice. "This is Lieutenant General Patt speaking. Thank you all for your cooperation. The Washington-Baltimore unit will stand by for immediate inspection. All other unit officers may dismiss their men."

Kirilov watched intently as a confusion of barked orders emanated from varied speakers; the massed units dissolved into random, moving masses of men and arms—save one.

"This way, Mr. Ambassador," urged Emmerson. "We must hurry."

Kirilov remained silent and introspective riding up to D Level in the elevator, keeping his thoughts entirely to himself. Alex Volpone said a mental prayer of thanks for the fact that Washington-Baltimore was one of two redoubts which had been sponsored and funded by the Department of Defense. The marine regiment Kirilov would be inspecting was made up of authentic combat troops, battle-hardened in the recent Mideast War, not civilians dressed in soldier suits.

The party left the elevator and entered the vast floor of D Level to an accompanying, "Atten-hut!" and the concerted click of thousands of polished boot heels.

Emmerson and Volpone hung back, allowing Patt and two of his aides to follow Kirilov down the rows of arrow-straight marines.

As the ambassador stopped twice to speak briefly to men in the ranks, the scene indelibly stamped itself in Volpone's mind: the high granite ceiling, looming over a fully mobilized and equipped marine regiment, while the color guard's haughty Stars and Stripes hung in the breezeless, air-conditioned vastness of D Level's great hall.

When General Patt returned with Kirilov in less than five minutes, the ambassador's face was expressionless. Volpone hoped fervently that it was more than his imagination which detected a wavering glint in Kirilov's dark, Slavic eyes.

XIX

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Re-entering the command center, Ambassador Kirilov seemed far too self-composed to be encouraging. Volpone groped for a cigarette, realizing why his hands were trembling: the wall chronometer's digital readout now stood at 04:53.17.

Kirilov asked if he might take a minute to refresh himself. Patt curtly ordered the pair of marine noncoms on duty to escort him to the washroom, then turned to survey his situation reports while Volpone and Emmerson sat down with unfelt casualness.

Volpone found himself hypnotized, watching the chronometer dribble precious seconds into the bottomless pool of eternity. At 04:53.47 he looked away with a faint shudder, asking, "Is Craft ready? We'll want him on instant notice if Kirilov should, er . . ."

The CIA Director surfaced from a gloomy study. "Craft was dressing for topside when I called from D Level. He'll be waiting outside the command center if . . . when we need him, Alex."

"I'm still not clear on why you want Kirilov taken back to his embassy if he does . . . that is, if he should decide to contact his government."

"Insurance," explained Emmerson. "It will be safer to have him use his own communications line. Think about it; were he to contact the Kremlin via the White House hotline, or over normal satellite audiovisual channels, mightn't it arouse their suspicion—their man, on our Comm link?"

"I see your point. How do you read Kirilov's reaction, thus far?"

Emmerson squinted at the video displays, not really seeing them. "Cagey," he said, "on the fence. He's still undecided. I wish Ray Stillworth were himself these days, Alex. For all his faults, he's the finest personality judge I've ever run across. Where has Ray been keeping himself?"

Volpone shrugged. He stubbed out the half-consumed cigarette with one vicious jab, reaching for another. "Off brooding someplace, probably—or drunk. I haven't seen him since Kirilov was brought in, Rolfe. Say, do you really suppose we have a chance?"

"With Kirilov? Absolutely," said Emmerson. "He's far too intelligent not to chase the bait to some sort of logical conclusion, even if he refuses to swallow it whole. Before he decides, we're liable to see a tactical counterbluff—perhaps some histrionics. He'll scour every nook and cranny of our story, looking for flaws."

Volpone glanced at the chronometer. "We haven't much time for games, Rolfe. I pray he hurries!"

"Sh-h-h, here he comes."

The picture of cultured dignity, Vasili Kirilov resumed his seat as the digital readout tolled 04:55.03.

Emmerson's intuition proved correct. Without preliminaries, but exuding confidence, the ambassador asked, "Gentlemen, do you truly believe it possible to decimate the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' entire land mass, as well as that of her sister states, with a wave of preemptive thermonuclear strikes?"

"Twice over, Mr. Ambassador." General Patt was stern. "And again in sixty days, yet again in one hundred and twenty days, then yet again in two hundred and forty days."

"Ad infinitum?" Kirilov smiled thinly. "Your undersea forces—those which still exist—have the capability for remaining on subsurface patrol approximately six months, no more."

"During which time they will turn the major portion of your homeland into a sere, radioactive wasteland," said Patt, smiling thinly in turn. "We will then fall back on silo-based ICBM's, aircraft, and . . . and a few surprises."

"Whereupon I predict stalemate," said Kirilov, brows lifted. "My government will be forced to retaliate with thermonuclear weapons. Larger and more powerful ones, may I point out, than exist in your arsenal."

"Were that situation to obtain," asserted Emmerson, calm-voiced and assured, "there would be no stalemate, Mr. Ambassador. Our redoubts were designed with such attacks in mind. Even deep-penetrating warheads will fail to destroy more than a handful. Take Denver-Cheyenne, for example; the mass of the Rocky Mountains lies above the installation. Penetration would require blasting away the overlying continental divide.

"No," persisted Emmerson, "what you envision is precisely what we wish to avoid: exhaustive, reciprocal nuclear devastation leading to a global holocaust, and the subsequent demise of civilization."

Ambassador Kirilov acted keenly absorbed, though Volpone thought he seemed ever-so-little taken aback. He became sure they were gaining ground after the ambassador's next question.

"And how long will your redoubts, as you call them, sustain their occupants?"

"Twenty-five years," Volpone heard himself say.

Kirilov swiveled around, almond-shaped dark eyes locked with Volpone's. "That is an incredible length of time, sir. Can you substantiate such an extravagant claim? Your air storage facilities are known to be widely scattered in offshore waters. You will have no access to the air in the event of—"

"Nor do we require access to *that* air," interrupted Volpone triumphantly. "General, can we have M Level's air storage complex on the large video monitor, please?"

General Patt lifted his hand controller, uttering several terse words of direction. In seconds a hologram jelled within the largest tri-di tank. The view was awesome; even in facsimile: a vast, two-mile-long gallery containing monster egg after monster egg cradled in a diminishing, geometrical row. The tanks dwarfed a scattering of human figures riding to-and-fro on slideways in the near distance.

Kirilov stared, obviously impressed, as General Patt said, "We can raise an entire generation of

Americans underground if we must. Do we have to, Mr. Ambassador?"

Vasili Kirilov squirmed in his chair.

Noting breathlessly that the man's balding forehead was beaded with a light film of perspiration, Volpone shot a nervous glance at the chronometer. The digital readout stood at 05:04.28.

"Phone, Mr. Emmerson," called the nearer marine noncom. The CIA Director rose, stepping briskly to Pates desk. He spoke briefly, then caged the handset, looking pleased. "Good news. Dr. Hershkowitz' medical team is on the brink of developing antipneumonic serum. He'll call back as soon as both the treated and control animal subjects have undergone suitable tests."

"Hershkowitz?" murmured the Soviet Ambassador. "Where have I heard that name before?"

"Chaim Hershkowitz was chief of medical research in Moscow University until 1983," said Emmerson. "He was expelled from the USSR after being forced to reimburse the Soviet state for his medical education. He is a Jew."

Kirilov heaved a deep sigh. "I suppose," he said resignedly, "there is a certain amount of irony in that." The ambassador ruminated for several seconds. "May I call my superiors, please."

"I think that would be wise." Emmerson stood as if jerked to his feet by invisible wires. "We've made arrangements for conducting you back to your embassy, Mr. Ambassador. Contacting your government from there will be much more desirable; Moscow must understand the call to be solely a matter of your own volition."

"As you will." Kirilov studied Emmerson, his manner reflecting profound respect. "Mate in three moves, Dr. Emmerson; I congratulate you. Might Ike, perhaps, find time for a game or two while I'm being held in your country?"

"I'll look forward to it, Mr. Ambassador. But you'll have to hurry now; time is critical." In an aside, Emmerson asked Volpone to fetch Major Craft, then returned his attention to Kirilov. "Tell your government," instructed Emmerson, "that time is essential. General Patt, who is acting Chief of State under martial law, will insist upon a face-to-face meeting as soon as possible. You may choose the site; it's of little consequence to us where the meeting takes place . . ."

Elated, Alex Volpone opened the door, expecting to find Craft waiting outside. A submachine gun muzzle was pressed firmly against his chest.

Volpone edged backwards, hands raised instinctively, too surprised to voice a protest. Behind the man holding the weapon was Major Craft, dressed once more in the protective plastic garment, the bubble of his fishbowl tilted back, his hands held shoulder-high.

Behind Craft, three other men wearing gray jumpsuits also carried weapons, and behind them waddled Senator Raymond Stillworth, brandishing an automatic pistol.

A whiff of stale Bourbon hit Volpone as he retreated into the command center. He felt a sharp twinge of panic; Stillworth looked wild-eyed, dangerous, capable of anything.

"Well, lookee heah what we got—the Rooshian Ambassador an' all his new-found friends. Now ain't that a picture!" Stillworth motioned with his sidearm. Two of his men herded the startled marines into a corner of the chamber. The other pair of armed men stationed themselves watchfully near the door, their weapons raised.

General Patt broke the heavy silence after sizing-up Stillworth. "Good evening, Ray," he said pleasantly. "This is an unexpected treat. I take it these men are some of your American Rangers?"

Stillworth chuckled, enjoying himself. "You take it correctly, General, suh. They, an' me, are here to prevent a sell-out."

The command center remained deathly still for several heartbeats. "Ray, I think—" began Emmerson cautiously.

"Shut up! I'll do the thinkin' an' talkin', egghead!" Stillworth glared at the CIA Director, then swung again to face Patt. "General, suh, can I ask a simple, straightforward question, an' get a simple, straightforward answer?"

"What would you like to know?"

"Whether or not you've already sold out your country to this Rooshian pig? That's what I'd like to know."

"Could you be a little clearer, Ray?"

"Sold out, dammit!" Stillworth pointed to the chronometer. "Is our strike still set for six o'clock, or have you consummated a deal with this bloody-handed Red Rooshian bastard? Which is it?"

Pates face seemed carved from stone. "We are counting-down; the strike will take place as ordered, unless—"

"Unless nothin'! I'm damned glad to see you've retained enough sense of duty to fulfill your obligation to the United States, Patt; to all those sick, dyin', pitiful creatures up there who're dependin' on your guts an' command judgment t'square accounts."

"Thank you," said General Patt dryly.

"Ray, listen; let's sit down and talk it over," suggested Volpone, his throat webbed with cotton.

"No, Mistah Secretary of Transportation, suh, we will not," denied Stillworth with a wolfish grin. "An' I'll thank you t'not interfere again. "Now then, General; who else, besides yourself, is able to countermand the strike order?"

Patt stood firm, meeting the senator's antagonism head-to-head. "No one, of course. You knew that before you asked. No one, that is, except President Blair himself, or—"

"Who's dead, or dyin'," rasped Stillworth. "So's the Vice President, an' probably the Speaker of the House, as well. Not to mention a few million other good Americans.

"Well, I expect I've found out what I wanted to know, General. Thank you kindly, suh."

Stillworth raised his automatic pistol. The weapon produced tremendous repercussions within the command center's confines as a slug smashed Lieutenant General Michael Patt backward against a communications console.

Patt sagged to the floor like a boneless doll. The chronometer tolled 05:09.32—and counting.

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"Stand!" Stillworth's hoarse bark arrested Volpone and Emmerson as they moved to aid General Patt. "Stay where you're at, unless you want to join Patt there on the floor."

Volpone's heart pounded almost painfully. His throat was inhumanly dry. "That was cold-blooded and cowardly," he bellowed.

"Cowardly, huh?" Stillworth cocked his head, eyes glazed, voice brittle. "In a minute I'm gonna show you exactly how cowardly I am, Volpone. Nothin' I'd like better, frankly, than t'blow a hole in your hide, too. Just give me any or provocation, an' that'll be sufficient. Now sit down, all of you."

Major Craft chose the end seat at the conference table, with Volpone next to him. Emmerson cast one agonized glance at Patt's recumbent form before drawing out a chair for Kirilov. The Soviet Ambassador's features were stoic, emotionless.

"That's better." Stillworth beckoned a pair of Ranger accomplices. "You two; take the marines on outta here an' turn 'em loose. Yeah, it's OK. Then stand watch outside. I figure we got four or five minutes, an' that's all I'll need."

The portly senator faced them, bloodshot eyes lighted with fervor. "Cowardly, y'say? Let's see what you think after I tell—"

"If you've any decency or patriotism left," raged Volpone through gritted teeth, "you'll let us see if we can help the general."

"Forget him," said Stillworth coldly. "Patt's dead. I came here to prevent a sellout, and prevent one I did. You gentlemen—I explicitly disclude that Rooshian pig—have got the wrong idea about me. Stoppin' you from makin' a deal with that blood-soaked butcher sittin' beside you is the most patriotic thing anyone's done since Patrick Henry spoke his piece. What we got, an' are gonna keep, is the best of all possible solutions. It ain't worth botherin' to explain it, but I'm gonna try. You see, we got 'em dead to rights; got 'em on the run. It just ain't the proper time to be thinkin' of makin' deals."

"You're an undertaker," asserted Volpone, "presiding over the death of the world!"

"Then you're gonna be a pallbearer, Volpone. Death, hell!" repudiated Stillworth. "Cain't none of you

see that bilateral destruction deof America an' the USSR is inevitable? If not here an' now, why then sometime when we won't be sittin' in the catbird seat. American Democracy an' Red Communism are poles apart; they ain't ever gonna live together peaceably on one planet. Never!

"No, siree; thoughts of givin' in, negotiatin' with 'em now that we got 'em bent over a king-sized barrel would gag a maggot. We're gonna play it *my* way. We're gonna let go some big ones at six o'clock, then sit back an' sweat out their big ones, then throw a few bigger ones, an' yet bigger ones, an' keep throwin' 'em, by God, till they come crawlin' outta their holes an' beg for mercy!"

"When they do," announced Stillworth, "we're gonna show 'em *their* kind of mercy: the biggest nukes of all—right down the chute. An' when none of 'em are left, we'll wait patiently till we can come out an' build the kind of world it should've been all along—a *free* world!"

"Bravo!" Alessandro Volpone beat his hands together softly in mock applause. "That speech might have earned you a ten-minute ovation at a Ranger convocation, Ray. But I happen to know you're wrong—pitifully, horribly wrong. Human beings will again be living in caves, in your 'free' world, if any should survive."

Stillworth flushed. "Well, we ain't gonna be the ones who'll find out whether I'm right or wrong, Mistah Secretary of Transportation, suh."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean . . ." Stillworth's florid features broke into a sunny smile. "Shucks, I'm a practical man; I got no chance t'run a blazer on a whole damned regiment of US Marines. The only reason it's worked so far is that those marines were drawn up on D Level for inspection by this Rooshian mass-murderer, an' we knew it. They'll be all over us like flies soon's word gets around. Except, by then, it won't matter none.

"Y'see, I propose to open this here redoubt to the outside an' let in the Rooshian bugs. One redoubt's a dirt-cheap price to pay for final victory. Then you fanciful, dreamin' idealists'll find out what it's like to sicken an' die same as the ordinary, workaday Americans topside who didn't have high mucky-muck titles to hide behind, nor deluxe, air-conditioned redoubts to crawl into when the goin' got rough. Maybe when *your* lungs get t'burnin', when you're coughin' your lives away, you'll have a deeper appreciation of what those Communist swine you were tryin' hard to make a deal with have *done* to us."

Regarding them with a pleased smirk, Senator Stillworth asked, "How cowardly do you think ol' Ray is now?"

"Much, much more cowardly than I'd thought," said Volpone, voice cracking with emotion. "Suicide is the coward's last resort. You are like Hitler, pulling his country into the grave after him."

"You will die, too," pointed out Emmerson somberly.

"Sure I'll die, egghead—just another wartime American casualty. But not everyone in this redoubt'll die. The Rooshian's immune to the godawful plague he's helped spread across these United States. I *want* the son-of-a-bitch to live to witness the absolute an' total destruction we're gonna visit on Mother Rooshia. That'll make a very fittin' windup to this sorry affair, right enough."

Stillworth stole a quick glance at the chronometer; it stood at 05:12.42 "I expect we'd best cover some ground, boys," he said, waggling the pistol. "On your feet, Craft; you're comin' with us."

Outwardly unsurprised, Lew Craft rose obediently. The remaining pair of American Rangers backed toward the door, their submachine guns in readiness. Senator Stillworth paused before leaving the command center. "Adieu, my sometime friends. One day, if any of you live t'see it, you'll realize ol' Ray Stillworth was right all along."

Volpone, Emmerson, and the Soviet Ambassador returned Stillworth's stare in helpless silence.

The senator shrugged and went out. The doors closed. They heard a security bar being lodged in its slots.

As the padlocks clicked shut outside the command center, the chronometer registered 05:13.01. Volpone rushed to General Patt's side, while Emmerson anxiously switched on the intercom.

"Now then, Major Craft," began Stillworth as they boarded the M Level slideway, two Rangers leading the way, the other pair trailing close behind, "y'saw me shoot General Patt back there, didn't ya?"

Craft looked straight ahead, his face immobile.

Stillworth dug the automatic into his ribs. "Didn't ya?"

"I saw."

"Fine. I shot Patt, even though I considered him a friend of mine, because it badly needed doin'. Have you serious doubts about whether I'll shoot you as dispassionately as I shot Patt? If so, let's hear about 'em now."

"I have no doubts."

"Better an' better; now we're gettin' somewhere. I happen to know that the number one control booth down yonder affords a handy way to bring surface air down here into the redoubt. Y'see, I did my homework. I never claimed to be much of a technical man," continued the senator, "but at least I'm smart enough to understand basic pneumatic diagrams an' operational procedures. We're gonna have us a hand of cards, you an' me. Play poker now and then, do ya, Major?"

"Sometimes," admitted Craft.

Stillworth snickered. "I figured as much. A close-mouthed devil like you always imagines he's a great shakes with the cards. Well, you ain't gonna be allowed to look at my hand, son. You're gonna have t'guess just how much I really know about operatin' that air control console. Guess right, an' we'll get the job done. Then you'll be on your own, takin' your chances same as the rest of us. Guess wrong, an' it earns you a quick bullet. Do we understand each other?"

Craft's nod was grim. "Heads you win, tails I lose," he said wryly. "What's the percentage?"

Stillworth half-smiled. "I s'pose you're right, at that," he said. "But who's t'say? Maybe you won't die. You're young, strong, healthy as a tick. What the hell! Open 'er up, an' we'll all take our chances together. We all got to die sometime."

"How about your friends, here?" asked Craft, tipping his head. "How do they feel about dying?" He made his voice loud enough to carry clearly, earning sullen looks from the Rangers behind them.

"Naw, don't mess with Roy, or Les," advised Stillworth. "Roy lost two brothers defendin' Jerusalem in the Mideast War, an' still walks with a limp hisself from a Red Rooshian-made mortar shell.

"Don't tease Les, neither," said Stillworth, jerking his thumb. "He's the tall fella. I call him Les, but his real name's Laszlo Somethin'-or-other. His papa died throwin' rocks at Rooshian tanks in Budapest in 1956. Get my point? These boys are *Americans*. They ain't afraid to die for what they know is right."

Major Craft said nothing.

The lead Rangers stepped from the slideway. Craft, Stillworth, and the other pair followed, walking swiftly across the vast granite floor of M Level in a loose cluster. Stillworth, noticing the chafing, plastic sounds produced by his protective suit, asked Craft if he would like to stop and remove it.

"It doesn't bother me," said Craft, holding up the acrylic bubble of his headpiece with one hand.

"Whatever y'say." Stillworth instructed the Rangers to keep a sharp eye out for intruders on the floor around them. None were in sight at the moment.

The control booth lay atop a fifty-foot-high steel stairway. Catwalks which skirted the enormous, spheroidal pressure vessel, connected its foundation platform to another holding a smaller control booth at the number two station. No compressor was installed in the station they were approaching; it had been removed, reinstalled at a farther station, then eventually shipped to some other site after all local tanks had been fully charged. Two Ranger's climbed ahead of them, scanning M Level's floor at each landing. Craft, with the senator wheezing noisily in his ear, sensed how carefully the trailing pair scrutinized his every movement.

Number one station's booth was larger than the others; it had been designed to do double duty both as compressor controller, and control point for the complicated manifold of air lines leading downward from the subsurface air plenum chamber. Stillworth had been right; this, the closest, most convenient place from which to effect his purpose, also offered the least chance of being observed and apprehended.

Craft pondered as he climbed. Strangely, he felt no apprehension, though realizing he would be allowed one shot, and one shot only, at doing what he had in mind. If he failed to be convincing, if Stillworth caught him at it ... What the hell! Even if it *did* work, hoping to evade the firepower of five armed men was fanciful. Try as he would, he could think of no remotely feasible alternative.

Craft knew he had toyed with oppressive odds in taking a loaded weapon away from Parkinson in

the Sacramento-Reno Redoubt last month. He'd been very, very fortunate to get away with it. He did not care to abuse odds like that again, and certainly not the much higher odds he faced now. Trying to disarm wily Senator Stillworth was unthinkable, not to mention his four armed cronies. Besides, the senator was not the relatively easygoing Parkinson. Stillworth was determined, cagey, and had nothing to lose. He would be damned difficult, if not impossible, to overpower *or* outwit.

Poker, huh? Craft considered the thousands of hours he'd squandered playing poker when he should have been doing something else. OK, Senator; let's see what kind of poker player you really are!

The Ranger called Roy unlatched the steel bar and swung the control booth's door half-open, scowling as he allowed Craft to enter first.

The sheet metal compartment was no more than fifteen feet square. A gray console containing four control panels, an operator's chair, and a small desk and second chair took up most of the floor space. Below a girlie calendar, a maze of heavy-walled stainless steel pressure lines ran behind the console along the bulkhead, vanishing into an insignificant bulge forming the booth's right-hand wall—actually the gargantuan air tank's outer face. Inside the pressure vessel, four hundred atmospheres of compressed air lurked like an unfused bomb.

Craft dared a glance upward. The welded snout of the tank's emergency bleed valve protruded inches from the booth's acoustical tile ceiling. He looked away quickly, pretending to push back the bothersome acrylic bubble of his yellow topside suit.

"OK, Craft; ready to open 'er up?"

Craft nodded, taking no pains to conceal his reluctance.

"Dandy!" Stillworth wagged the automatic with authority. "'Cept we're gonna do a dry run or two first, so's I can learn which way t'bet—on ya, or agin' ya. This's the only hand you're gonna be dealt; better try an' play it kind of conservative."

Lew Craft rudely scooted the castered operator's chair to one side, forcing the Ranger called Les to spring back out of the way, which earned him a dirty look. He said, "I'll stand, if you don't mind."

"Easy, son; don't get uptight an' ornery. Stand, or sit; no matter to me." The senator took a position close by Craft's shoulder. "Turn the cards over slow-like," he said, "'cause I'm a novice at this here game."

Stillworth and Craft faced the console side by side. One pair of grim-faced Rangers were poised near the desk; the other two stood alertly, their backs to the air tank's outer shell.

"This," said Craft, indicating the uppermost panel, "is the control sequence for inlet gate valves topside, lower plenum valves, and the collection pit's impeller guards. Follow the chains of arrows engraved on the panel and you can find out how to choose feeder lines through which to bring air down . . . here." He pointed to the second panel from the top. "These devices control air line manifolds on M Level. You can select which tanks to charge, and in what order."

"Go on," directed Stillworth with a curt nod.

"The third panel controls number one station's compressor, when one's installed," explained Craft. "We won't need it. The lowermost panel controls and distributes power for motorized valves throughout the system, as well as circuit breakers and overload warning devices."

"First, I'll energize the console by throwing this guarded toggle switch, then put us in manual operations mode by cycling this switchlight, overriding the central computer up on F Level."

"Sounds real good. You're doin' fine, son. Then we start openin' valves to the surface, eh?"

"Um, not yet."

"Why'n hell not? The way's gotta be open for air to come sailin' down those pipes."

"Sure, but the air has to have some specific *destination*," said Craft bitterly. "Before opening valves, we have to switch from TANK CHARGE SELECT to DISTRIBUTION SELECT. See here?" Craft pointed to a switch-light in the upper left-hand corner of the panel second-from-the-top, stretching in the crinkling plastic suit to reach it.

"Uh-huh," murmured Stillworth uncertainly. "Then we open the valves?"

"Right; starting with the manifold valves, here. Then the lower plenum valves, upper plenum valves, and finally a sequence of seven gate valves in each descending duct—the radioactive debris baffles."

"An' then?"

Craft shrugged. "Then we crank up the collection pit impellers and B Level blowers and stand by for a breeze."

Senator Stillworth stared hungrily at the console, obviously running through Craft's intended sequence of operation and comparing it in his mind with what he remembered from the procedures manual. He looked at Craft, eyes glowing with distrust. "Go through that there DISTRIBUTION SELECT thingamajig again, will ya? I don't recollect nothin' like that."

"It's simple," said Craft with complete assurance. "You can select charging lines to any specific compressor station here on M Level, or air diffuser lines to the whole redoubt in general—distribution. The redoubt's air conditioning system drew distribution air for years and years before we sealed up."

Craft looked directly into Stillworth's rheumy eyes, his expression innocent, unchallengeable. He had neglected to inform the senator that DISTRIBUTION SELECT referred to whichever pressure vessel the operator chose to draw compressed air from—the exact opposite of TANK CHARGE SELECT—though he himself wouldn't know which tank in the line, if any, was activated until he powered-up the console, since the indicator light—the first in a row directly beneath the selector switch—was now inoperative.

He was betting his life on the fact that Stillworth would have to be mighty sharp with unfamiliar equipment to detect the indicator light when the console came to life and it lighted.

"I ain't sure I believe ya, son." The senator looked wary.

"What the hell!" Craft screwed his features into an exasperated grimace. "Check the manual; that's the only way you'll move outside air down here into the redoubt."

"I ain't got the manual with me," said the other, studying Craft with unblinking persistence.

The major gestured angrily toward the desk. "There's probably one in there. Look it up!"

Stillworth's eyes shot toward the desk momentarily. Seemingly satisfied that Craft was willing to let his intended procedure be verified, he chewed his tongue for an instant, then checked his wristwatch. He was beginning to worry about the time.

Stillworth finally made up his mind, pressing the pistol firmly against Craft's rib cage. "Let 'er rip, Craft. But no quick moves or I blow you apart an' finish the job myself. Understood?"

Craft seesawed his chin, almost as if he hadn't heard. He lifted a red dayglo guard and pulled up the detent-captured main power toggle, thumbing it upward into the ON position, then released it. The spring-loaded guard snapped down immediately, again covering the switch.

The console's panel-mounted control and display devices lighted promptly; the cooling blowers came on with a soft rush of moving air. Craft's optimism for the "hand" dealt him leaped by a factor of twenty. The indicator light he needed was already cycled to read TANK NO. 1.

"Now we choose manual operations mode," said Craft, depressing an illuminated switch, "and we're ready to select distribution air."

"Make it march, son," directed the senator. "We ain't got all day." He watched Craft's hands intently. Lew Craft quelled his jumpiness. He leaned to his left and stretched toward the DISTRIBUTION SELECT switchlight. While doing so, he unobtrusively felt for and flicked forward a guarded toggle switch marked EMERGENCY BLEED with his right thumb.

Stillworth, eyes glued on the upper panel, failed to notice.

Craft relaxed completely, as before an opening kickoff. In his mind's eye, he could see the opposing team's kicker approaching the ball, getting nearer, nearer, while the butterflies in his stomach fluttered and chased themselves in panic . . .

He hit the switchlight and slammed down the acrylic bubble over his head in one motion, falling backward away from the senator's handgun.

He never learned whether Stillworth fired or not; a piercing, banshee screech filled the control booth with hellish noise, drowning all other sounds, as the emergency bleed valve vented.

Craft landed on his shoulder, banging the acrylic bubble on the steel floorplates, and rolled to his right. The frightful scream of suddenly liberated six thousand psig compressed air was agonizing, even though dulled by the plastic bubble covering his head.

He threw himself blindly toward the door, noting from the corner of his eye that Stillworth and the Rangers, staggered by the unendurable wall of noise, had dropped their weapons. Clapping both hands over one's ears was an automatic, instinctive survival reflex. Craft had depended on just that—and won!

He had real difficulty shutting the door against suddenly ballooning overpressure within the control booth. He grunted, fighting the agony in his ears, straining with one shoulder against the door, one foot braced on the platform's steel guard rail. With his more-or-less free hand, he brought down the latching bar.

Inches more! Some added resistance appeared as neoprene door seals made contact with those bonded to the jamb, but by then the latching bar had fractionally entered the welded "U" bracket. Craft bore down with all his weight and strength; the bar slipped into place, jamming the door tightly closed just as something heavy crashed into it from the other side.

He fell to the platform, quivering, then tumbled down the first section of steel stair, hopping to relieve the cramp in his leg.

The stair was a never-ending nightmare of sharp turns. He finally gained the floor, sprinting hard for the slideway, glancing backward over his shoulder from time to time as he ran. Ahead, a squad of marines was double-timing up the great hall, running on the slideway for added speed. Craft frantically waved them back, throwing himself prone on the nearer slideway.

He lay there, letting it carry him toward the air storage complex's nearby wall, gaping at the control booth in abject disbelief. The walls were bulging, distending before his eyes.

Silently, as in a slow-motion film, the control booth came apart like a dollhouse. The wall opposite the pressure vessel ripped free to fly in an erratic cartwheel, smashing into the granite face of M Level's air storage gallery. The other wall sections fragmented; warped sheet metal pieces rained to the stone floor, some missing Craft by scant feet. The roof followed in twisted sections, among them the console, desk, and several loose-limbed mannequins.

Totally absorbed in the spectacle, Craft stumbled from the slideway when it disappeared into the floor at its terminus near the elevator alcove.

"Call and raise, Senator," he mumbled to himself.

Face suddenly contorted, Craft clutched at the fishbowl covering his head, shouting inanelly. Nothing! He couldn't hear a sound!

He paused for an instant, searching out the bloody huddle of flesh that had once been a United States Senator, then jumped aboard the other slideway, riding back toward the command center.

The marines had heeded his warning, shrinking away from the infernal screech of escaping compressed air. They waited for him, hands pressed firmly over their ears, joining him as he came abreast of them on the slideway.

Craft recognized the lance corporal who had accompanied him to the Sino-Sov Embassy. The corporal grinned broadly, took one hand from his ear, and thumped Craft's shoulder in jubilation. Another marine yelled something. Craft heard nothing. He lifted the acrylic bubble, pointed to his ears, and shrugged.

A team of medical corpsmen were trundling away a hospital bed bearing General Patt when Craft and the marines reached the command center's alcove. Patt's face was uncovered, which surprised Craft, who had assumed that he was dead.

Alessandro Volpone spotted Craft first, bounding forward to pump his hand, his lips working. Emmerson and the Soviet Ambassador were right behind him. For some reason, Kirilov seemed especially glad to see him.

Volpone's lips moved again; Craft could hear absolutely nothing other than the deafening, ringing sound now surging inside his skull.

After the lance corporal told Volpone something, the Secretary of Transportation whirled and plucked a pad and pencil from Patt's desktop. He scrawled a note and passed it to Craft. It read, "Patt

conscious for a while—delegated authority over network. SAC now in one hour hold. Archer taking Kirilov back to embassy."

Craft pumped his chin vigorously. "Great!" he said. It sounded like distant thunder inside his head.

Overcome by the relaxing of tensions, Volpone and Emmerson were silently laughing, clapping his back affectionately, when Betty Dancer appeared in the command center's doorway.

With a small sob he could not hear, she flew into his arms.

XXI

May, 1988

The following week passed swiftly in an on-again, off-again nightmare of tantalizing uncertainty. Lieutenant General Michael Patt died in C Level's hospital just two hours after Red Archer brought Ambassador Kirilov back from the Sino-Sov Embassy. The Soviet Government had tentatively agreed to a cease-fire, pending a meeting of heads of state. USAF General Boice Clavell, Patt's designated stand-in, concurred at once.

Next day, Moscow, Leningrad, and other major cities in European Russia were mysteriously devastated by further nuclear attacks, throwing the conditional peace agreement up for grabs.

Vasili Kirilov spent the better part of one whole day persuading his government that the United States was not responsible for the surprise attacks. Surviving military elements in China ultimately proved the culprits—a last-ditch effort for revenge, motivated in much the same way as SAC's earlier inadvertent strike against the USSR. After feverish hours of listening to bombastic Soviet threats against her former ally, the summit meeting was re-scheduled to include surviving Chinese leaders.

On the day following the new crisis, Dr. Hershkowitz announced a workable serum for counteracting the pneumonic plague ravaging America. Every redoubt from Florida to Alaska began manufacture of antigen serum with which to start treating the mutilated nation.

That night, at Volpone's insistence, immunized volunteers from the Philadelphia-Allentown Redoubt were sent to succor possible survivors in the New York-Trenton installation, finding a vast subterranean tomb. Only eight thousand commuters had managed to reach "safety" before the redoubt was sealed—too late. Pneumonic plague had entered with them. Of the few handfuls still living, none were saved—including Arne Seymour and Vito Vico.

When told, a shocked, haggard Alessandro Volpone merely grunted, then went right back to work.

On the fifth day problems began multiplying logarithmically. Throughout the country ever growing numbers of immunized survivors defied the standing orders of General Clavell—who feared Soviet duplicity more and more as the redoubts emptied—to go topside and aid their stricken fellows. Misery was universal; water supplies became quickly contaminated, though stored food was still plentiful.

The dead rapidly became a health hazard. Bodies were stacked like cordwood in the streets; huge funeral pyres lighted the night in a thousand cities and towns. Pestilence abounded. In a nationwide morass of human suffering, nothing seemed worth saving.

First, rough casualty figures indicated that between forty-five and fifty million Americans had perished, with many more dying every hour. The United States, having absorbed a very punishing body blow, had somehow managed to exercise restraint, to hold back its terrifying retaliatory punch. People everywhere demanded to know why. The answer, when given, was not a simple one, nor did it satisfy an aroused citizenry busy burying its dead.

More and more immunized people streamed from the redoubts. As a last resort, General Clavell ordered interdiction. Guards were posted in every redoubt to prohibit further egress; anyone who could prove immunization could enter. None were allowed to leave.

A summit meeting place mutually agreeable to both the USSR and the United States was finally fixed—Reykjavik, Iceland. Rolfe Emmerson talked with General Clavell more than two hours over the inter-redoubt net just prior to the general's flight to Reykjavik. They wished the general well, asking to be informed of daily progress, then signed off, had a cup of Emmerson's famous coffee together, and went right back to work.

Two days later, still laboring around the clock along with many others, Volpone and Emmerson were trying to sort things out, to find a starting place for reconstruction and rehabilitation amidst all-encompassing chaos. Deep circles under his eyes, Dr. Emmerson pushed away from the communications console, having just spoken to General Clavell's adjutant in Reykjavik. He removed his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose in weariness. "God, I could sleep standing up!"

Equally tired, Alessandro Volpone felt they had regained some minuscule command over the situation. "Not yet," he said. "Come with me, Rolfe. I have something I've been saving just in case."

"In case what?"

"You'll see."

Too weary to argue, Emmerson trailed Volpone to the slideway with leaden feet, apathetically riding with him up to E Level. Volpone went to his quarters. He took a long, rectangular box from the suitcase he had brought with him into the redoubt.

"Alex," pleaded the CIA Director, "couldn't I just go to my room? I'll fall over if I don't sleep soon."

"This will keep you up only a few minutes longer. Come; indulge my whim."

Emmerson was uncomplaining during the ten minutes it took to locate Major Craft. They found him in the E Level commissary, drinking coffee and conversing quietly with Betty and the Lewellyns.

Senator Lewellyn noticed Volpone and Emmerson enter the commissary. Rising slowly, his manner vaguely sarcastic, he said, "Well, this *is* an honor."

"Glasses? Have we any wine glasses?" Volpone demanded, setting his package on the tabletop.

"I doubt it, Mr. Volpone," said Betty. "There are some paper cups on the counter, but . . . *wine* glasses?"

"Excellent, my dear," approved Volpone. "Paper cups are much more appropriate under the circumstances." He bounded to the serving counter, returning with a short stack of paper cups. "Where is Mr. Hanford, by the way? I wish he were here."

Victor Lewellyn glanced at his wristwatch. "Hoo should be landing in Los Angeles about now," he said, "if he makes it."

"If he makes it?" Volpone's brows lifted.

"He's not the best pilot in the world," said Lewellyn. "Hoo got the damn-fool notion that he ought to go look after his people out in California. I couldn't talk him out of it. He hooked a ride to Washington National Airport, where we left the plane last month, saying he'd fly the jet himself."

"I see." Volpone was preoccupied. He carefully withdrew a bottle of 1966 *Dom Perignon Blanc de Blancs* from the box. A silver corkscrew was tied to the bottle's neck with green ribbon. "I've been hoping to find an occasion for opening this," he said in a slow, satisfied manner. "And now we shall."

"Champagne?" Betty looked puzzled. "What, exactly, are we celebrating, Mr. Volpone?"

"A very interesting question, Betty." Lewellyn was grim.

"Senator, Senator; hate me later at your leisure," appeased Volpone. "For the moment, can't we break the spell of gloom long enough to let me propose a toast? Please; we'll all go our separate ways soon, and probably never meet again."

Craft and the others waited in silence as Volpone skewered the cork, twisting it free with a soft pop. Smiling, Volpone poured for them, raising his own paper cup on high.

"To Major Lewis Craft," he said with feeling, "a man of intelligence, heart, and determination! Without him, I'm certain the course of history would have been altered drastically."

"Hear, hear!" Betty became animated. "Hey, I *will* drink to that!" She tasted her champagne, then decided to taste Major Craft. Their kiss was long, mutually enjoyed, earning a scattering of good-natured applause.

"My turn." Senator Lewellyn studied Volpone and Emmerson with an air of challenge. "Here's to the United States of America—bloody and battered, but unbowed!"

That brought forth a ragged cheer.

"Bravo!" Volpone was unembarrassed to find his eyes misted.

The festive atmosphere withered almost as rapidly as it had been born. Everyone seemed suddenly immersed in his own thoughts.

"Great champagne, Mr. Volpone," said Craft. "Mind if I propose a toast?"

"Certainly, Craft; go ahead," encouraged Volpone.

Craft paused to slosh champagne, then lifted the paper cup. "To Senator Raymond Stillworth!" he said. Draining the champagne in one gulp, he crushed the cup in his hand, tossing it on the tabletop.

"Maybe you think that was in bad taste," said Craft, "since I was directly responsible for the senator's death. I don't. I killed him—and four other pretty good men—because I had to, not because I wanted to. You could call it unpremeditated self-defense, or something.

"Mr. Volpone," he went on, grimacing uncomfortably, "you and Dr. Emmerson came here to celebrate a victory. Don't deny it; I saw it in your eyes. I hate to put a damper on the party, but in my modest opinion the battle's just begun.

"Your 'celebration' smacks of Armistice Day, 1918, V-3 and V-E Days in 1945, or celebrations marking the end of the Korean War, Vietnam War, Mideast War—probably the First, Second and Third Punic Wars—and every other miserable goddam war that was ever fought.

"Did those celebrations lead to peace? Well, just long enough for everyone to rearm, yeah. Usually they paved the way for a world council, or equally farsighted international forum of some kind, that met holding aloft the highest possible ideals, then degenerated into a debating society, a sewing-circle of elderly, self-important men."

Craft paused self-consciously. "What got me started, I suppose, is that powerful, influential men like yourselves are going to have a large say in what happens during coming years—tough, critical years. Think back, now and then, to what Senator Stillworth told us there in the command center. 'American Democracy and Red Communism,' he said, 'will never be able to live together peaceably on one planet.' Maybe he was right. We managed to squeak by this time, but *next* time . . .

"Hell, I'm no speechmaker!" Craft took Betty's arm, steering her toward the corridor. "Betty and I have decided to go topside and see if we can help clean up the mess," he said. "Bye."

Stunned by the major's outburst, Volpone called, "But . . . Craft, the guards won't let you leave the redoubt."

Lew Craft turned, his grin almost boyish. "Oh," he assured them, "we'll figure out a way."