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Unto the Last Generation by Juanita Coulson

Chapter I

"This is as far as I go, mister."

Richard Parnell forced his mind up out of that discouraging sheaf of statistics. He'd spread the charts out, covering his case and the taxi's seat. Now, even as he argued, he began collecting strewn papers. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't he ever get any new jokes." The cabbie irritably slapped at his blaring radio, overriding a faked laugh-track. "Heard that one when I was a kid."

"We all did. Those... comedians... have been on the air for thirty years, at least. But then there's not an oversupply of young entertainers, these days." Parnell slammed shut his case on the bulging files and badly-jogged charts. "Why are we stopping here? I said the Life Sciences Building on Fleet."

"Yuck, yuck, yuck!" The driver sarcastically aped the tinny laughter vibrating the radio's speakers. "It ain't funny, chuckie." Then he threw a bored glare over his shoulder at Parnell. "Told you. This is as far as I go. I ain't rekued to go past Eighteenth. It's in my license."

"I see. And you don't make a practice of informing your fares of that little fact in advance." Parnell scanned the cabbie's

certificate, reading the legalistic details under the photo ident. "Peculiar. There's no such restriction listed here."

"Well, it's in the... the fine print. Anyway, I ain't goin' up to Fleet."

Sighing, Parnell wrestled with the rusted door handle. "As a matter of fact, it *isn't* in the fine print. Or anywhere else. Which you'd know if you ever learned how to read. Don't you oil these things? Get outside and pull."

Eager to assist an unhappy customer on his way, the cabbie helped Parnell pry open the door. The hinges creaked with agony. "Don't make things the way they useta," he complained, kicking a corroded rocker panel for emphasis. "Everything's fallin' apart."

"Including the people—and the service," Parnell said archly. He wondered what the cabbie expected from this pile of junk. Taxis were the only non-military vehicles on the streets now—and the only ones allowed to use those old, dwindling supplies of gasoline.

"Hey, don't blame me," the cabbie flared. "Listen, I'm only a... a municipal employee. Yessir. It's *you* that's crazy, wantin' to go down to Fleet. Don't you know it's a disty day?"

Parnell grimaced. He *had* forgotten. "And you think it'll be safer for me to walk past a dole point than for you to drive me there?"

"Hah! Sure! Food's gettin' scarcer and scarcer. Why, only last week they tipped over Fred's cab in one o' them riots. Some o' those erects go crazy when they miss out on a dole. Course, Fred didn't have much of a cab anyway," the skinny little driver conceded. "None o' them are worth much any more."

Can't get any parts. And they're takin' all the metal and makin' replacement parts for tanks and flitters. Army gets everything..."

Slapping a couple of units in the man's grimy palm, Parnell

said, "Here. That's all this ride was worth. I've deducted your tip and the balance of the fare. If you'll read the fine print on your license you'll find I have that option." An excusable lie. How could the poor fool catch him in it? He set off hurriedly, ignoring the shouted obscenities wishing him *mal voyage*.

Parnell dismissed the encounter with contemptuous pity. A stupid, inept cab driver. But most of the young people were inept, untrained. And too many of them were stupid. Perhaps that wasn't fair. Not much could be done with them, or was. Statistically they were one of the smallest segments of the population. And illiterate. That had been true since the school systems started disintegrating years ago. Not enough children to justify the teaching profession, and eventually there hadn't *been* any teachers, or schools. Or child-sized clothing or furniture or toys or...

He could hear the babble from the disty station now. Parnell stopped, considering alternatives. He couldn't detour left. The block that way was a ten meters' high jumble of debris all the way down to the river; last month's marina fire had ruined the area. Could he go right? All streets paralleling the lake in *that* direction were a no-man's land. If he tried to reach Fleet by that route he'd get brained by a brick.

Parnell dug out his security lock and clamped the brief case to his left wrist. If he held it close to his side the crowd might not notice it as he sneaked past them. The charts and graphs the case contained were worthless to that mob, but they wouldn't know that.

They'd see an object to grab, something that might contain food or other booty.

Wind tore along the street. It stirred trash to a froth and rattled rubbish across the broken pavement. Like a bitter comment from the decaying city, a Greek chorus for human tragedy. Parnell edged forward slowly, staying close to the wall. He was smearing brick dust and smoky residue on his suit, annoyed at the necessity; clothing was hard come by. The noisy rabble was very intent on the barred door of the disty outlet—and they were facing away from Parnell. Good!

"Watch who you're pushin', you old goat!"

"No manners at all!"

"There's enough for everyone, folks. Just be patient." One of the government's distributors, shouting from between the bars. He had better sense than to open up unless he had a food package in his hand, one he could get rid of in a hurry. "Hey, turn that thing down, will you?"

"Aaaaa... !" A stuttering howl of derisive refusal from the under-30s clustered about a guy with a porta-vid. They segregated themselves from the other two groups in the crowd—the Olders and a few out of work Middle-Agers. The young people were a pocket of belligerence. A whip antenna swayed above them and unmuted audio blasted from the porta-vid.

"... sent us to foreign lands to die in their wars. They did that to us all through history. It's on the tapes, Youngers. Listen and learn. And *now* what do they want? They'll expect us to support them in their old age. Well, who's going to support us in *our* old age? You see anybody coming along to take care of us when we're old and feeble? Think about it!"

Parnell gritted his teeth in a silent snarl. Nevin

Detloff. One couldn't escape that punk politician. The porta-vid's screen was hidden by a wall of flesh, but there was no mistaking the slick, inflammatory rhetoric.

I'd like to take that scrawny little demagogue by the scruff of the neck, Parnell thought. Bring him out here on the streets. Give him an up-close sample of what his speeches do. Especially on food disty days. Make him see the friction, the growing hatred between generations Detloff's orations caused.

"Please, young man, that hurts my ears." An old, old woman leaning waveringly on a cane. She clutched a lacy pie-plate of a hat against the tugging wind.

"Too loud for ya, huh, granny? Have a real good listen!" A

runty youngster thrust the porta-vid at the old woman's face, nearly unbalancing her frail figure.

"Stop that!" A portly gentleman with a fringe of white hair around his bald pate played protector. He caught the woman's arm to keep her from falling.

"Aaaaa, you old creet. Why don't you go somewhere and die?"

"Hangin' around to use up the food. You had your chance. You ate good when you was our age, didn't you?"

"Go on, grampa! Get out o' here..."

"Dump it! Aaaaa... !"

Parnell was abreast of the rising tumult, beginning to sweat, watching the seeds of riot sprouting. The cabbie might have been surly, but he'd shown good sense when he refused to drive down this street.

"Watch who you're shovin', chuckie!" came more and more from the crowd.

"Hurry up in there with that food!"

The mass surged forward. A false alarm. Some slight rattling at the bars of the distribution station. The frenzy of movement was enough to send a few in the crowd stumbling to the pavement.

"Get back! Give 'em room! Don't step on 'em!" A humane plea lost in the excitement. The throng was dividing ever more sharply along generational lines. Youngers bumping Olders, the Middle-Agers trying to avoid associating with either group. Respect for weakness and age was evaporating. Hunger was the sole determinant here.

Finally the barred gate shot upward. Immediately several brawny, uniformed government workers blocked the opening. They bellowed, "Have your identity cards ready. Blue cards! Blue cards! No pushing! There's plenty for everybody!" Behind the

men women assistants unpacked the precious food packages. They began an efficient assembly line distribution.

"Cards! Have your cards!"

A forest of waving hands clutched idents. The distributors gripped automatic punches, validated each card shoved at them. Then a box would be thrust into eager hands. The recipient would turn aside hastily, leaving a vacancy for the next dole-seeker. A good system—if no one got panicky, thinking the food supply would run out before they got theirs.

But that problem arose. Fast. "Leggo, dammit!" one of the disty workers yelped. He flailed free of greedy hands. "Take it easy! Cards first! No pushing back there! I said—no pushing!"

He might have been shouting into a thunderstorm, with as much effect. A brutal shoving match had started. Gasps and cries from those bunched in and cut off from air. A thin, middle-aged man leaped up the wall protecting the distributors. Deftly, he snatched a package and dropped back into the crowd, bulling his way out.

"Hey, you! Come back here with that!"

Screams of frustration began at this infraction—a rapidly building whirlpool of motion and noise.

"Get off my feet!"

"Watch it!"

A woman, perhaps in her late fifties, edged away from the crowd. She was gaunt, clad in tatters, clutching a food dole box to her sagging breasts. A Younger rushed at her, struck the woman down, and stole the package.

Impulsively, Parnell took a step forward. But his intended gallantry wasn't necessary. A horde of hijackers, younger still than the thief, bored in. They ran their quarry to earth, using fists and feet cruelly. Violence was breeding more violence, and a savage fight over the spoils.

Many such miniature combats were taking place now. The most helpless and the neediest were the first to fall victim. The aged, the women, the half-starved—their packages were ripped out of their feeble hands. Even when they cowered and offered no resistance they suffered. The strong brutalized them despite their pleas for mercy.

The distributors bellowed for calm, and finally realized the futility of their attempts. A bit desperately, they struggled to put the barred gate back in place at the disty outlet. Things quickly got still rougher as the brawlers fought, not wanting the station to close. If they could have got their hands on the government people, they would have dragged them down to the pavement, beaten them senseless.

Parnell was suddenly very glad he was wearing an inconspicuous grey suit. He felt a natural urge to defend the helpless prey of the mob, but that would be suicide. This was a human jungle now, and survival was the key word.

He moved slowly toward the tall steel and stone sanctuary at the intersection. Yes, he certainly *would* like to get Nevin Detloff out in this crowd—let that little dilettante experience "life" in the flesh. Detloffs loyal "followers" would probably tear him to pieces in their rage.

Just a bit further and he'd be clear of the worst of it. All he needed to do was make it to the Life Sciences Building, and the safety of that impregnable door. He was a lot bigger and healthier than most of the rioters. But a pack of jackals could bring down a lion. They'd already wreaked such terrible havoc. The grim, evidence lay under the mob's feet. A woman—her hair a piece of white, dusty fluff against the pavement, her pale eyes open and sightless. An old man—crawling, seeking a haven, half-crazed, blood pouring from his scalp.

Then Parnell froze, staring in disbelief. A child! Squirming between those thrashing legs and staggering bodies. The wild little human animal looked about furtively. Then that small form was running... toward Parnell.

The quick movement attracted angry eyes. The child was

carrying a package—one of the food dole boxes.

"Hey! Look what that kid's got!" A broad-shouldered tough chased the child. One ham-sized hand reached out for that tangled mop of black hair. It wouldn't be much of a contest. The man could crush his small target.

The gamin's face filled with supplication and a bony body collided with Parnell's knees. Tiny fingers clutched him, begging for protection.

Reflexively, Parnell swung his brief case in a hard, tight arc. It splatted into the man's temple, sending him reeling. The bully stumbled sideways drunkenly, into the wall.

"Look! There! He's got something! Hun and that kid!"

Instincts Parnell hadn't known he owned took over. He swept his free arm about the child and started to run. No point in worrying about attracting attention. Nothing for it but to race the last twenty meters, gambling on his long legs and strong physique. The child was feather light, no burden. But the drumbeat of small fists *was* a distraction. "I dropped my box! Go back, go back!"

"I'll get you another," he growled, loping hard, hounded by those bloodthirsty yelps behind them.

Parnell's heart thundered with atavistic excitement. His ancestors must have felt this way, eons before, outrunning an enraged beast. The child clung like a leech, abandoning arguments over the lost box. The solid haven of a sixteen-gauge steel door loomed ahead. Parnell increased his stride, bellowing his intent to the voice-print circuits. The door sucked upward and he leaped through, simultaneously shouting, "Cancel and close."

In the fortress-strong foyer he whirled to face the oncoming horde. The door's action reversed, slamming it down like a guillotine blade. But without a victim. The mob was shut outside, their howls muffled to incoherency. For a moment Parnell felt cheated. He'd half-hoped one or two of those

barbarians might have been trapped inside with him. A couple of Detloff's Youngers, cut off from the false courage of their gang. He was tempted by the thought of giving them a taste of his knuckles. No, that wouldn't solve anything. Joining them in gutter tactics was demeaning, and a waste of time and energy.

He put his jangled nerves into lower gear, regarding the child. He still didn't quite believe this. A child. A filthy little face scant centimeters from his own. Immense, cunning, dark blue eyes and a flower bud of a mouth. And a coolly intelligent young voice. "You said you'd get me another box."

"Yes, I did. And I will. It won't be a dole box, but we have food here." He set the child down and pointed toward the elevator tube.

After a moment's hesitation, she walked toward it. Parnell felt certain "she" was the proper pronoun. The child moved with an immature yet very feminine grace. She studied the interior of the tube warily. Then she apparently decided to trust Parnell and got in. He stepped up beside her and touched the relays. She inhaled sharply as the tube snapped closed and shot upward.

In retrospect Parnell was incredulous of his own actions. Why on earth had he taken that terrible risk out there in the street? He knew why. A child, definitely less than ten years old. How long had it been since anyone had seen a child that age? Fifteen years? At least. No, his behavior hadn't been very rational— but it had been quite human.

As they arrived at the second level his impulsive gesture won an immediate seconding. Therese had been looking out the wall of glass fronting the street. Now she hurried to greet him. "Richard, we saw you and..." She was smiling wonderingly, afraid the child was a dream.

Parnell brushed the girl's hair. "How old do you estimate she is, Ter?"

"I'm eight," the girl announced proudly.

Therese gaped in astonishment, as did most of Parnell's staff

now circling the scene. Even Jesse Bliss, a professional cynic, on busman's holiday from his own lab, gawked. His shock gave Parnell a fresh opinion of the miracle of this child. Jesse recovered, scratching his scruffy excuse for a beard. "Imagine, the infant can count, too. Better than half those hyenas hi that street."

"Of course she can count," Therese said. She knelt beside the child and tugged ragged garments into some semblance of order. The girl bore this maternal attention stoically, bored. Therese glanced at Parnell, love and gratitude brimming in her hazel eyes.

"He promised me something to eat," the child said, pointing at Parnell. "Him. The big man with the yellow hair."

"Richard saved your life, brat," Jesse put in. "Don't you know that? If he hadn't plucked you out of that melee..."

"You probably had bets with my techs on whether I'd make it," Parnell said wryly. He looked toward a vid screen. The sound was muted by a sharply handsome face shifted through a series of sincere, persuasive expressions. Dark, youthfully masculine good looks twisting into a theatric mask. "Why the hell have you got Detloff on that thing?" he demanded irately.

As an abashed tech rushed to switch channels Jesse shrugged. "They're just studying the competition. We can't plot our strategy if we don't know what the enemy's up to. Or don't you consider Detloff and his ravaging hordes the enemy?"

"And if I do, what of it? You don't care who wins," Parnell said. Therese was fussing over the girl. His wife's obvious delight made the near-escape in the streets worthwhile.

"Well, we all lose in the end," Jesse argued, grinning. The man's cheerful misanthropism made him a sticky debater. Parnell played verbal games with Bliss, and at the same time was annoyed that he let himself be drawn into such time-wasting nonsense.

"And the futility of that entertains you, doesn't it?" he

snapped.

"I'm not so foolish as your esteemed father-in-law. I have few illusions, my boy. Despite General Grigs-by's money and power he doesn't see that politics can't stop this death trip we're OH." Therese glowered but the chubby scientist smirked and said, "Oh yes, my dear. Our beloved military overlord and Nevin Detloff are merely branches off the same tree. The only difference is that they appeal to opposing segments of our dying civilization."

"That's enough," Parnell said sharply. "We've heard your theories before, Jesse."

"Not theories. You'll learn that someday, if you survive long enough. If any of us does." Bliss toyed with a tabletop vid, cueing a newscast. Detloff's picture sprawled on the screen then, as Jesse changed channels, the silver-haired, distinguished figurehead of General Grigsby's party spoke to the viewer. The contrast in technique was minimal. Jesse Bliss nodded, amused, and Parnell shrugged. The clonist was incorrigible. Not in ten years had Parnell decided how much of Jesse's personality was act and what real. If the man weren't a genius...

"What's your name, sweetheart?" Therese asked.

An aching female longing underlined her question.

For the thousandth time Richard Parnell suffered a twinge of guilt. Not that it was his fault. Ter wanted a kid so badly, like a lot of other women. Unlike most of the others, his wife had a good reason; she'd put family plans aside while she pursued a brilliant scientific career. Both Richard and Therese Parnell had thought the delay was temporary. Who had dreamed, when they were young and newly married, that *Ms* would happen to the entire human race? Infertility. Coming on top of other natural catastrophes of overwhelming proportions. Plague, war, famine... and then infertility. No children born— anywhere. Two generations, and the spread of the immuno-factor was complete—into the body of every woman of childbearing age. Every woman on earth, including Therese.

Thirty years ago it had merely seemed puzzling, not yet a

racial disaster. Then the appalling nature of the syndrome became apparent. And its worldwide scope. The Parnells weren't alone. Not at all. One couple out of millions. The clock of life ticked on inexorably, and no children were born. Year after year. And society changed, drastically. Began to panic, realizing that it was dying.

"Can't you tell me your name? Would you like a sandwich?" Therese offered her own meager lunch to the girl.

The child gulped down a mammoth bite and said, "My name's Ariadne."

Bliss turned from his vidcast and exclaimed, "Oh, excellent. And she shall lead us out of this labyrinth. You, Richard, must be Theseus. Come, that *can't* be her real name."

"I read it in a book and liked it," Ariadne said simply. "And he can't be Theseus; he's too tall," she announced, pointing disparagingly at Parnell. Everyone stared at her, stunned. She took their silence for skepticism and lifted her chin defiantly. "I did so read it in a book."

"Indeed?" His eyebrows arched and Bliss handed the girl the top sheet off a stack of lab reports.

"Jesse," Parnell began, worried about Therese's reaction.

But Ariadne had already started. "The form... form-u-la does not seem to have any re-spon-sive ef-fect on the..." She paused, frowning over a difficult word.

"Nucleus," Therese whispered.

"Ah! No help."

"Leave her alone," Parnell warned Jesse Bliss.

Ariadne paid no attention to the exchange. She nodded gratefully at Therese and went on, "Nucleus. Stim-u-la-tion does not pro-duce re-cep-tiv-i-ty to... to sperm. Ov-um remains..."

"Impregnable," Jesse finished for her, cackling at his own pun. "Quite so, little Younger. One more dead end for that line of research. Try what the technicians will in their biolabs, Mrs. Ovum firmly refuses to have anything to do with her husband, Mr. Sperm. She rejects him. Regards him as an invading, alien substance, like a bacterium. Her immunological defenses rush to the rescue. And there you have the chorus of a *liebestod* for the entire human race,-Ariadne, my dear." He took the sheet of microfiche back from the bewildered girl. "My compliments. You *can* read. You may very well be the most youthful—and last—of your generation to possess that skill."

Therese embraced Ariadne and said, "She reads beautifully!" Wherever did you learn how, darling?"

"Not in school, certainly," Parnell said under his breath.

After choking down the rest of her sandwich the girl answered, "In the big library. Downtown. I live in the basement."

"But that's been closed for..." Jesse protested.

"With your parents?" Richard Parnell interrupted. The techs surrounding them leaned forward, hanging on the girl's response.

Her parents. Man and woman. Husband and wife. And *fertile*. Here was proof—a child eight years old. Conceived and born during the last decade—when not a single other living birth had been recorded throughout the United States, the Western Hemisphere, the entire world. Not population zero. Negative growth, in the old terminology, and on a fright-eningly minus scale. The graphs had plummeted. No children born to replace the inevitable losses from age and accident and disease. For nearly twenty years Richard Parnell had headed the Life Sciences Project, frantically searching for a way out of this terrible dilemma. And now, here was that impossible reality—a living child.

"My... mother and daddy are dead," Ariadne said. Then, with a shy smile, she added, "You can call me Ria."

"Ria. That's such a pretty name."

Parnell had to look away, deeply touched by Therese's undisguised joy. This wasn't the way they'd planned things when they'd "put off" having a family. But Ter finally had a child—the only way she could. She was still a beautiful woman, but Dr. Therese Parnell was forty-three. If by some miracle Life Sciences did make a breakthrough, solved the worldwide infertility crisis, in all likelihood it would be too late for Therese. Nature had crept up on the Parnells. Time, ticking away. No child of love for them, ever. Adoption, of course that was a constant hope. But there'd been no children to adopt—until Ria.

He hated to intrude, yet he must. "Do you live alone at the library, Ria?" Parnell was easy, digging gently. "How do you find things to eat? Do you have an ident card? No, don't worry; I'm not going to turn you in." His assurance was for Therese as much as the girl. "Ter, if she's not registered, the government doesn't have any records on her. Her life will start now, with us. We have the influence to..."

"You mean General Ogden Grigsby does," Jesse laughed. "Marvelous how money—and all that military hardware—will dissolve red tape. Oh, I'm sure the General will arrange the adoption. Who's going to argue with that much money and power? Ah, if you could put the wealth of Grigsby and Nevin Det-loff together, they could rule the world—or what's left of it."

Parnell tried to blot out Jesse's remarks. Ria's parents. If only... he'd hoped to use Grigsby's network and resources to locate that couple. Ria's mother had escaped the infertility syndrome. Or had the critical factor been locked in the father's genes? They needed tissue samples—ova and sperm, DNA, RNA—the whole gamut of experimentation. Pin down the isolating element. The answer. Find why and how that couple was unique—and how to synthesize their secret. That would save humanity from biological extinction. But if Ria's parents were dead, that left only...

"Can I stay here with you?" Ria begged wistfully. "It's cold in the library."

"Downstairs. The juvenile section," Therese said,

"Children's books. That's how she learned to read. Reference materials, maybe even tapes."

Ria shook her head. "The tape machines won't run any more."

"Not with the power off," Bliss said. "The municipals won't waste precious electricity on an abandoned library."

"Of course you can stay with us. Richard and I will be your daddy and mommy," Therese promised.

Parnell felt torn. Happy for Therese, for himself. Wanting to take care of that cute little waif, make her life well-fed and filled with pleasure. And at the same time the scientific challenge here gripped him. A chance to break the deadlock that was killing all of mankind. There was so much they could learn from Ria's tiny body. The secret of her very existence lay in her cell structure. He ought not to think of the girl as a guinea pig. But he had to—for the sake of humanity's very survival.

"Call for you, sir," a tech announced. "It's the General."

"He doesn't give me time to breathe," Parnell said as he wended his way to the phone-vid.

"There you are, Rich. Glad to see you didn't get caught in that riot on Nineteenth. We just heard about it," the phone image greeted Parnell. General Grigsby's "gladness" seemed a bit abstract; he'd hate to lose a valuable, highly trained subordinate.

Parnell stared at the bluff, craggy face on the screen. He hadn't noticed recently, but the General was showing every day of his age. Ogden must be seventy or more. "Yes, I made it, with the charts. We'll start processing the new data immediately," Parnell said.

"Good, good!" The hearty but not-really-interested tone irritated Parnell. He bit off a retort. Grigsby might have his own selfish reasons for keeping Life Sciences operating, but his bankroll had been its lifes-blood. Grigsby's reasons—a yearning

for an heir to his line, a longing as deep as Therese's for a child. Parnell glanced at Ria.

"Ogden, there's something I'd like you to see..." He didn't get the chance to reveal his surprise. One of the techs grabbed his sleeve, saying, "Getting awfully hot in here, Doctor."

"What's that?" Grigsby didn't like to be shunted aside.

Jesse Bliss and a number of others were peering down through the wall of glass, toward the street. Now they began to retreat. Parnell saw the first upward lickings of flames shimmering beyond the glass. "What's going on?" the General demanded. "That maniac Detloff's stirred up the whole city with his speech this time. The whole North Central district Hundreds of people dead and injured in riots."

"Tell him we soon may join their ranks." Bliss surveyed the situation coolly. "It's the rioters. They're trying to burn us out. I think you stirred them up as much as Detloff did, Rich."

Parnell started to counter that with a blistering oath, but a tech yelped, "They're piling up the debris! We'll burn to death!"

"Take it easy," he ordered. "This building's fireproof."

"Ah, but we are not, Richard," Bliss corrected him. "We can indeed sit here, waiting while the temperature reaches the frying point. Then... poof! Up we'll go. We and all your research. Yours. Mine's safe outside the city, at my lab. Of course, /'// be dead, but my work will survive." Bliss grinned at the irony. "Those idiots. They don't realize the Life Sciences Project is their species' only hope of survival. Now they're going to kill us without ever knowing what they've done."

Chapter II

"What's going on there?" Grigsby repeated plaintively.

Parnell filled him in, ending with, "Jesse's right. We need help. Fast."

"Harris! Get me the Deputy President. Step on it!" the General bellowed offscreen to his aide. Bulldog-gishly, he faced Parnell once again and said, "Sit tight, Rich. We'll..." Then his jaw dropped.

Ria had slipped beneath Parnell's arm, close to the phone-vid. She surveyed the panel controls, tongue pinkly caressing her lips in childish concentration. Then she raised her sights and gazed directly into Grigsby's startled image. "Are you one of those soldiers who shoots people?" she asked with sweet candor.

"Who... ?" The General's amazement was pathetically comical.

"Allow me," Parnell said, smiling. "This is Ariadne —Ria, for short. Ria, this is General Ogden Grigsby, the man who paid for that sandwich. She was at the dole station, Ogden. I brought her up here for safety's sake."

"She's... Ria. Ria..." The old man probably hadn't used such a fatuous tone since Therese had been a small girl.

"No, you don't look like a mean man," Ria decided. "I'll bet you don't shoot people, even if you *do* have a uniform on."

For a few moments wealthy, powerful General Grigsby was a bemused, doting old man, utterly enchanted. Parnell detected shrewdness in Ria's winsome posturings. She was playing the tough military governor for a sucker, twining herself around his heart, and very adroitly. Reluctantly, Grigsby forced his thoughts back to duty, murmuring, "Ria... Therese, you there? You take good care of that little angel, you hear? Er... ah... wheels in motion now, Rich. I've got some fire fighters on the way to your area. And there'll be some mop-up troops behind them. Be there soonest."

As the General moved off to talk to his aides Parnell looked around. The danger of the fire was very real, yet the techs followed Ria—moths drawn to a pretty little flame. And Ria wallowed in that adoration. She posed and simpered and winked, teasing smiles. Obviously, given any situation short of a food dole riot, Ria could use her natural appeal to get her way. She probably didn't comprehend *why* adults turned to mush

when they met her, but she used their reactions. Parnell understood very well. He'd felt the same awed wonder his techs now displayed. These scientifically trained people who'd been working for years on the life-threatening infertility puzzle. They saw Ria in intellectual terms, grasped the potential here, in her very existence. But they also saw her in quite human and emotional terms.

Parnell sympathized, but Ria's talent for hypnotizing was annoying. She was making useless rubber-neckers out of his staff. He jerked up an arm and ordered, "Get that equipment away from the windows before the heat ruins it."

"Right away!" Abashed, Ria's spell broken, they sprang to obey, pulling at desks, computer consoles, files, moving everything that wasn't welded or bolted down.

"This way... !"

"Lift that end a little."

"There, that gets most of it!"

"And the core tapes are in the vaults. The fire can't damage those," one of the computer specialists said in relief,

Parnell eyed him bleakly. The tapes—safe? For how long? Maybe the fire fighters and Grigsby's shock troops could handle the crisis in the streets this time. But what of tomorrow, next week? The news reports got worse and worse, civilization teetering nearer and nearer complete collapse. At the rate things were going—even with the fresh hope Ria had given them all—by the time Life Sciences could solve the sterility puzzle there'd be no human race left to salvage.

He exchanged a look with his wife. Ter's attention was split, naturally, part of it lingering on the girl. But Therese Parnell was a scientist as well as a woman, and her rapport with Richard had always been uncanny. "You're right," she said, though he hadn't spoken. "We can't take chances. Not now, when we're so close to the answer."

"Closer than any of you realizes," Jesse Bliss muttered into his beard. But he'd been talking major breakthrough so long neither Parnell paid him much heed.

Richard said, "Yates, start an update feed to the sister labs. Everything complete to this hour. I want them to have the full package... while we've still got some com lines and comp hookups operational."

As the computer techs hurried to comply Richard Parnell felt a grim satisfaction. No, that howling mob wasn't going to destroy all they'd worked for hi Life Sciences. Burn the building if they could, but the subsidiary labs in the project would have copies of the data. Viral research, DNA mutation theory, slide prints from the bacteriology section—all fed out. Grigsby's military trunk lines protected the Life Sciences' computer feed, kept it intact from sabotage. Parnell didn't like being indebted constantly to his father-in-law, but if it guaranteed the project survived... *and* humanity...

Humanity which didn't appreciate his bone-wearying efforts. Therese eyed Richard anxiously, reading his fatigue. He'd been up half the night as usual, and then the grueling but necessary trip cross-town to pick up that classified material from Grigsby's HQ, the aborted cab ride back, the riot... and Ria.

All for the sake of that ravaging mob outside, trying to burn out his life's work? *Their* life's work, if only those idiots knew it.

"Astute, my boy," Jesse sad, tipping an imaginary hat in Parnell's direction. "Always carbon-copy one's research. Wouldn't it be marvelous if we could duplicate people the same way? Solve all our problems."

Bliss never missed a chance to hammer on his specialty, cloning. It *was* an intriguing possibility,

Parnell admitted—*if* the snags could be ironed out of the technique. So far Bliss and his staff couldn't produce a viable clone *ex utero* , . . and as everyone had learned painfully, *in utero* was out of the question, as unattainable as natural conception was, nowadays; the same mutation which spontaneously rejected

all fertilization attempts whether normal or artificial rejected an implanted ovum as well. No, cloning wasn't going to be the answer unless Jesse Bliss could conquer the big hurdle—nurturing his embryo to viability.

"Have you considered what happens if the General's goons don't arrive in time?" Bliss was saying pleasantly. "Such a pity if all your intelligence and potential went up in smoke."

Parnell edged close to the heat shimmered glass wall. An optical illusion, or could he really see those angry faces below, beyond the flames? Youngers, under-thirties down there. The middle-aged had screamed off already, to quote the vernacular. The crowd feeding the bonfire and howling like banshees were all youthful specimens—the ones who stood to benefit most if the Life Sciences project solved the infertility riddle. "What's your point, Jesse?" Parnell said. "Or do you have one?"

"Oh, always! I really do have the project's best interests at heart—someday these other blind alleys of research *may* prove useful, I'm sure... *after* cloning saves us from Ragnarok..." Therese was trying to comb Ria's matted hair, and she grimaced at Jesse's boasting. The clonist was unperturbed, going on, "To speak plainly, my boy, I'm offering you the hospitality of my lab. I have a feeling you're going to need a bolt hole if this rioting continues."

"Northwest Cloning?" Parnell said. "That's sixty kilometers out. It'd mean transporting all the equip-ment, specimens, ongoing experiments..." He considered the prospect—hauling delicate gear and irreplaceable bio research items through chuckholed, riot-torn streets, fires, roving mobs or armed toughs.

"Risky, true," Bliss agreed. "But I'm afraid it's going to get far riskier here. Have you seen the latest news? Bad, my boy, very bad. Power breakdowns, political upheaval, wildcat strikes among those few poor deluded souls who still have employment..."

"Yes, yes," Parnell said impatiently.

For once Bliss seemed genuinely altruistic. "Face it, Richard. How long can you maintain power to this building? Even Grigsby's clout can't make the electricity flow if you haven't got enough technicians to man the generators. Look, my lab's smack in the middle of the SDP Agricultural District. We've got our own solar panel installation, and we're surrounded night and day by Grigsby's finest bully boys. Of course they're protecting the crops from raiders, the waste recycling plants from theft. But their cordon also protects us. And I might add food's no problem out there in the sticks; always a little black market bartering in algae and soy concentrates, if you know who to talk to, and we do."

Ria perked up noticeably at those words. A child of the streets, very alert to any possibility of a food source.

"Your lab's too small," Parnell objected. But mentally he envisioned Bliss's setup at the fringe of the metropolis. He'd been to the cloning complex numerous times, of course, as project coordinator. Now he debated: *could* Jesse's facility house all the extra personnel and research material?

"A small thing but mine own," Jesse said theatrically, scratching his beard. "It'd do you temporarily —and isn't that all any of us can hope for, these days?"

"No," Therese countered, and her glance moved meaningfully toward Ria.

Suddenly excited, the girl skipped across to the glass wall, crying, "Hey, look! Fire flitters!"

Through the haze of smoke and flames Parnell saw an oncoming airborne parade. The flitters banked gracefully between buildings, heading for Life Sciences. They wheeled and slowed, hovering above the fire and the rioters.

"Look! Look!" Ria bounced with joy. "I never saw them this close! They're... they're like big bugs! Dragonflies!"

Parnell stared at the child. Ria couldn't have seen dragonflies. Those lovely creatures might still exist, a thousand kilometers

from the cities and the massive chemically-forced food process enclaves. But... Ria might have seen pictures of the insects in library books. And she remembered. Such a bright, retentive young mind!

"When will they start?" Ria was asking shrilly. Therese explained the fire flitters' operation while the girl kept her eyes on the drama outside the window.

The heliflitters hovered for several minutes, studying the situation below. Then the crafts' bellies seemed to zip open, dumping fire-dousing fog through the smoke-filled air. The odorous and suffocating miasma was yellowish, falling on flames and rioters alike. Jesse Bliss laughed and put his impressions of the scene into a pungent scatological phrase.

"Jesse!" Therese complained. "Not in front of Ria. Have a little decency."

"Be realistic, my dear. That urchin's heard far worse if she's been scrounging a living on the streets," Bliss said.

He was probably right. Ria ignored this exchange, engrossed by the fire fighters' maneuverings, giggling at the outrage of the frustrated Younger Party rioters. The flames were dying rapidly to a guttering mess. Sizzling, soggy embers seeped black streaks onto the cracked pavement.

"Can't last much longer," a tech chuckled. "Go on, give up, you cretins!"

"They will," another said. "They don't relish getting wet for nothing..."

Some of the rioters *were* slinking away. They were wiser than their more stubborn fellows. A new element was entering the picture now. Military vehicles grumbled around a distant corner, rolling down Nineteenth, heading for the disgruntled mass of would-be arsonists.

Ria's holiday attitude melted. She clutched the cooled window sill, apprehensively watching the mini-tanks approach. Therese

bent close to the child, whispering, "It's all right. They'll just chase the Youngers away."

She was protesting too much. General Grigsby's daughter knew what her father's orders must be— and how thoroughly his men would carry out his commands. Maintain order in the North Central District. For order, read suppression. And Grigsby was likely to be more ruthless than usual, since this particular riot had been aimed at the General's personal pet project—Life Sciences Research.

"Uhhmm," and Ria bit her lip, pressing her nose against the glass.

Half a dozen mini-tanks scuttled nimbly over the debris left from the food riot. None of the ineffective municipal government's "screamer" cars, here. The soldiers inside the tanks were equipped with sonic stunners.

Parnell and his people were insulated by glass and steel. They couldn't hear—or feel—the sonic waves' impact. But they saw their effect. The trapped rioters flailed at heads and ears, mouths open as they screamed in pain.

Those wedged at the front of the crowd couldn't flee. They took the brunt of those invisible waves. One by one they staggered and fell.

Overhead, the heliflitters swung in narrow circles. Parnell thought of vultures waiting to pick over the victims of a battle. But he knew the fire fighters were surveying the remains of the barricade against Life Sciences' doors, looking for sparks. Apparently the pilots were satisfied with their work. The mechanical dragonflies lined up and headed lakeward, presumably for their base and a new assignment.

Therese was speaking to the men in the tanks, anguish spilling into helpless words. "Please. That's enough. Quit it. They're running now. Please stop..."

But the mini-tanks' drivers mercilessly bracketed the panicky rioters. Again and again weapons operators sprayed unseen pain

into the struggling melee. Those who'd been imprudent, too slow to run were reduced to writhing, crawling agony, clawing their way amid the rubble.

"The General's boys are impressively thorough."

Jesse Bliss said. The misanthrope was a trifle pale, shaken by the scene of carnage despite his avowed cynicism. "Well, at least sonics are cleaner than old-style firearms. Won't kill those poor fools."

"Sometimes it kills them," Ria said, her big eyes accusing the clonist. "The loud guns hurt old people, and sick people. Sometimes their heads hurt awful, and then they start to bleed... and sometimes they die."

- Therese shuddered violently and hid her face in her long-fingered hands for a heartbeat. Then she gathered Ria into her arms, cuddling the child close. The woman scientist wept apologies for the cruelty of her father's troops.

And at that instant the phone-vid hummed to fresh life. Ogden Grigsby bellowing, "Rich, you there? Harris tells me our people should be on the line now. Situation look well in hand?"

Tensing, her breast rising with angry breathing, Therese readied a retort. Parnell said softly, "Don't. You know you can't reach him—not that way." The fury in his wife's eyes died, replaced by tears.

"Rich?" the old man paged again.

Parnell bent over the com unit. "I'm here. You can call off your dogs. The riot's finished. Anything further is overkill."

Grigsby didn't bother to answer, his interest shifting, his voice softening. "Is... where's the little girl? Ria? Are you there, honey?"

After studying Therese's sorrow-creased face, Ria came to the phone-vid, confronting Grigsby's image. "What do you want?"

"Those... those ruffians didn't hurt you, did they, sweetheart?" the General cooed. The adoring, hoped-to-be grandfather. Only very recently had Ogden Grigsby at last accepted the bitter truth—that The-rese, his daughter, like all other women in the world was barren. There would be no grandchildren of his flesh, none to comfort his old age. That hurt Grigsby, badly. He was a man who'd treasured his individuality, his "line"; immortality to him meant survival of his seed through his daughter, her children, her children's children. Learning he too was condemned to family-line extinction had been a body blow for old Grigsby.

Ria had been looking him over at some length, and now she said, "You're the man who has the food?"

"What... *T* Grigsby mumbled.

Tolerant with adult thickheadedness, Ria explained, "You paid for my sandwich. And the hairy man told me your soldiers won't let anyone touch the place where the food comes from."

Cutting through Grigsby's obvious confusion, Parnell repeated Jesse's remarks—the troops in the SDP Agricultural District surrounding the clonist's lab. "Oh," the General said. "I guess if you put it that way I am the man in charge."

"Do you have lots of food?" Ria asked eagerly.

"Sweetheart, it isn't *mine*." Grigsby launched into an account of supply and demand, the difficulties of algae synthesis, the lack of literate workmen, and power failures. Ria was a good audience, nodding in all the right places, very appreciative—getting further and further under the General's tough hide. Finally Grigsby broke off and stared at Ria as if seeing her for the first time. "Where on earth did you *come* from, you little angel? Why, you're just a baby!"

Ria began to pout and Parnell said hastily, "She's eight, Ogden. Not an infant. You *do* understand the significance of her presence, don't you?"

That aging warrior wasn't a scientist. Grigsby always called

himself a working soldier—though one who'd been the behind the scenes power manipulating a strong political wing. During the past decades Grigsby had grown quite wealthy from trusts and secret investments, one of the few winners in a decaying economy. Yet his motives weren't entirely selfish. He'd personally bankrolled his son-in-law's Life Sciences Research and rammed appropriations through what remained of a federal legislature. And his interest was genuine; he read every report of progress—or lack of same. "A child," he said, thunderstruck at the reality. "Eight years old. That means..."

"That she was conceived and born since the sterility factor occurred," Parnell concluded. "Her parents were immune from the mutation."

"And, Father, Ria may also be immune," Therese added. She put her outrage over the street fight out of her mind, backing up her husband with logic and family ties. "Ria's the break we've been praying for." Across the room Jesse Bliss was shaking his head dubiously, still convinced cloning was the answer, not this scrap of a girl.

Parnell smirked at him, then said, "Ogden, if one child was conceived in that time period, there are quite possibly others. And hopefully *their* parents might be alive. Ria's aren't. If we can find just one pair of humans who can reproduce... one woman whose ova won't reject all sperm..."

"But we've already searched exhaustively," Grigsby protested.

"Yet somehow we overlooked Ria. She wasn't recorded on any census," Parnell said. "Understandable, under conditions these past years..."

"I'll... get Vanoort on this right away," the General said, scribbling on a notepad. "We'll find 'em, if they exist."

"Good! And in the meantime we have to get to the library." The old man gaped at him as Parnell said, "Ria says she's been living there. We might find some clue to her parents' background. Where they came from, possible genetic patterns. Everything is important..."

"What is it, darling?" Ter interrupted, concerned with Ria.

The girl trembled with alarm. "No, there's nothing at the library," she said. Too loudly. Almost desperately.

Parnell considered her behavior, then said, "Why don't you want us to go there, Ria?"

She flinched away from his scrutiny, but Therese held her fast. The girl was on the verge of tears, but the woman's soothing gentled her agitation. Finally Ria dared ask, "You... you won't hurt anybody if I tell you?"

"Tell us what?" Parnell was grateful that for once Grigsby didn't butt in with overbearing demands. The child had to be prompted, led along slowly.

Or did she? Ria grew sly, looking as crafty as Jesse Bliss ever did. A cunning, wary little animal, ready to drive a hard bargain. "If I tell you... what'll you give me?"

"Why, anything you want, sweetheart," Grigsby said impulsively. Parnell sighed. In a way it was a good thing he and Ter hadn't been able to give the old man grandchildren; he'd have spoiled them rotten.

"Food?" Ria said, pouncing.

Grigsby didn't hesitate a second. "Yes, that could be arranged." Not a light promise, these days.

"How much?" The girl's greed would have been disgusting under other circumstances. But that scrawny little form, the too-large eyes, the too-white skin... this child had known hunger. Parnell felt guilty for his strong body, for a boyhood spent in years when food was still readily available.

"Well, I..." the General began.

Ria stepped into her miniature actress skin, nobly saying, "It's not for me, you know. It's for *them*." She was a natural ham. Parnell had seen similar melodrama and pathos on vid

performances, but Ria wouldn't have much experience with those.

"Who are you talking about?" Therese put in a bit sternly, injecting some maternal discipline in this developing farce.

Deciding she'd milked for effect long enough, Ria confessed, "The Olders. Emmett and Delores and... the others." As the adults waited for details Ria lowered her head and mumbled, "They... they live at the library too."

"Foster parents," Parnell said, snapping his fingers. "Or foster grandparents."

"All a sham!" Jesse Bliss said with a sarcastic chuckle. "All that heartrending business of a poor, abandoned waif, alone, alone in the world!"

"No, she wasn't alone, luckily." Parnell thoughtfully ran a hand through his sandy hair. "Olders. Retirees, maybe. They'd be literate. They must have taught her. Oh, she's still a bright kid, Ter. No argument. But she'd learn a lot faster with help, agreed?"

Olders—teaching her to read, and how much else?"

Grigsby was nodding, following his son-in-law's speculation. Appropriate, since Grigsby was the unofficial head of what passed for the old people's political party—the Olders, a corollary to Nevin Detloff's Younger Party.

Squatters, refugees, old timers, hiding in a library, raising one of the last children born to humanity. What dying skills and knowledge did those Olders possess? With the human race on its last legs every piece of information, every rapidly-vanishing talent became more precious. In this case, critical.

"Ria's tutors," Therese said, beaming at the prospect. "They may have known her parents, Richard!"

"Keep hoping," he said, clinging to the same idea.

"Library?" the General muttered, dazed.

"Ria said it was downtown, and that there was no power for the tape machines. Undoubtedly she's talking about the Carnegie," Parnell explained. Ria's large eyes agreed. Now that her secret was revealed she seemed to be throwing herself—and her elderly guardians—on the mercy of the adults surrounding her. "She couldn't have walked all the way from a suburban branch. No, it has to be the Carnegie. Ogden, we've got to get there and interview those Olders—now."

Grigsby blinked, shifting mental gears. "Let... let me check my maps. Harris... ! Mmm... twenty blocks, crosstown. You'll need troops."

"Hell, no!" Parnell shouted. "At least not in sight of the building. If these Olders *are* there, they'll think they're being attacked. You want to trigger wholesale heart failures? No, this is going to require trained specialists—medicine, sociology... I'll start assembling a team."

"You'll never make it, Rich," Grigsby said solemnly.

Ria had been listening, very intent. Now she grabbed the edge of the phone-vid. "Oh, please! I promised them I'd bring them some food..."

Jesse Bliss grew arch. "And what happened to all those pitiful appeals to remain here with us... forever and forever? Hmm? Another sham. Sharpen up, my boy. This pretty little urchin planned all along to weasel her way into our hearts. Use us. Find out where the bones—and attached algae concentrates— were buried. Then most likely she'd steal it for her dotard guardians back at the library and tomorrow we'd find her gone. Richard, you've been had."

"No, not yet," Parnell said. "Ogden, what about that food you promised Ria? We'll need enough to supply... how many?"

"Twelve," Ria said in a tiny voice.

"All right. Twelve Olders. And I'll want them put on your permanent food supply lists. If we're going to be pumping them for information, we've got to keep them healthy."

Grigsby blustered, never happy taking orders from anyone. But this wasn't the first time—by far—that he and Parnell had bumped heads. And as usual, when the argument ranged for Life Sciences, the old officer conceded. Grudgingly, he said, "I... I suppose I can arrange for *some* commodities. Things *are* tight, but... but see here, Rich—you *can't* make it to that library on your own. The Deputy President's just declared martial law throughout the North Central District..."

"Oh, Detloff will spit nails over that!" Jesse chortled.

"All the more reason to get to the library before a fire or a riot wipes out those Olders," Parnell insisted. Therese was worried, but she kept her arguments locked up. He threw her a consoling wink then said, "Ogden, how about some heliflitters? Land 'em on our roof like you always do."

"Wish I could! I've had to assign them all to Masterson. He's got a dock fire—three full boatloads of algae concentrates. We can't afford to lose *those*." Grigsby's jowls and pendulous lower lip jiggled, his gaze shifting from his son-in-law to his daughter to Ria. "There's... no option?"

"None." Parnell verbally underlined and italicized.

"Well, perhaps I could arrange an escort..."

"As long as you keep your troops away from the library itself," Parnell said heavily. "The techs and I can walk the last block or so."

"The food," Ria nagged.

Nodding, amused, Parnell said, "Yes, don't forget the food by all means. Let's give those Olders a good motive for cooperating with us."

"And you have to take me along with you," Ria announced.

"It's too dangerous!" Therese cried.

The girl glanced at the window where the fire had danced a

quarter of an hour earlier. She knew the street jungle far better than any of Parnell's pampered scientists and techs, and plainly the child didn't look forward to venturing out again. But she said stubbornly, "The Olders won't let you in if I'm not with you. There's... there's a password." Parnell cocked a skeptical eyebrow and Ria added, "There *is*! I... I *always* bring them back food. I'm *supposed* to. They're too old to go to the disty stations now. They walk too slow. Somebody would knock them down..."

"Richard," Therese said anxiously.

"We *will* have better entree with Ria as our guide," he said. He empathized deeply with his wife's nightmare—a mirror of his own. Gently, he promised, "Nothing will happen to her. I swear."

Much more ominously, Grigsby backed him up. "No, nothing's going to happen to that child, Therese. You can count on that. Harris... ! Give me about an hour, Rich..."

Now that the decision was made the wait seemed interminable. Richard Parnell fought depression, imagining a dozen tragic things which could turn this plan to futility. Riots. Martial law. Roving mobs of Detloff's Younger Party minions, angry at their hunger, their illiteracy, the blank wall of sterility, of non-existence which rode them like harpies.

Twenty blocks crosstown to the library. And when Parnell was in his teens that would have been no more than a half-hour's cab ride, less if the traffic was light. But now...

He busied himself picking a team to accompany him on this expedition. Assigning work during his absence. Ter could handle the broader details, but he hated to dump it all on her, as he was forced to much too often. The second Dr. Parnell at Life Sciences had the seniority and capability to handle directorship, but Richard preferred that Ter not be burdened with administration. She had her bio-medical research to pursue—and she'd already given up a lot for her career. Delaying her natural instincts toward family... until it was too late.

Just his weariness and pique, or were his techs less enterprising than they used to be? Parnell's staff drew on the

cream of the nation's brains. But this decades' long scientific search—a seemingly deadend, literally, street—was getting them down. They all were developing a what's-the-use? syndrome. Like the entire human race, sinking beneath ennui and defeatism. If there wasn't to be another generation to inherit their labors...

"You won't forget my offer of hospitality?" Jesse Bliss reminded Parnell as he put the finishing touches on preparations. The clonist had been watching a shifting telecast, amused at the melange of street-fighting, speeches from Grigsby's Older Party spokesman intoning platitudes of peace and calm intermingled with fulminations against the Youngers, and speeches from Detloff—accusing the military of grinding down his followers, insisting that the martial law order was a plot of the Older-controlled establishment and the Middle-Aged Employables Party...

Snorting at the propaganda, the brainless loggerhead quality of the media, Parnell turned away, nodding a silent assent to Bliss' invitation.

"Hmm," Jesse said, eyeing the debacle of a street war. "I believe I'll spend the night, at least. Catch me trying to get back to my own lab in *that!*"

"I don't blame you. You're welcome as long as you care to stay, Jesse," Parnell said, checking his chrono. "Tune," and his aides scrambled to collect their porta-corders and other equipment.

"I... I found Ria some warmer clothes," Therese said. She'd buttoned the girl snugly into castoffs— all too large. Ria looked up trustfully at Richard Parnell. She was an appealing waif swathed in out-sized gifts of affection. Therese's manner was that of a mother seeing her only child off to a new school in a bad neighborhood.

"Hold the fort," he said lightly, and Ter snapped him a mock salute. Their ritual was for the benefit of subordinates. The Drs. Parnell, a leadership team. He was quietly proud he could leave the project in her hands without any qualms. Not many men had that much woman.

He allowed himself one tantalizing caress along her shoulder, touching Ter's white throat. Never enough time. They'd sacrificed their privacy to the project, the fight against race extinction. Ter's closeness made him ache. The most natural need in the world, that drive which had created all of humanity's next generations. But there wouldn't be any more generations unless...

Grigsby himself showed up with a convoy of mini-tanks and thirty crack infantrymen armed both with stunners and old-style rifles. Tough men, thoroughly professional. Theoretically they remained the tool of civilian authority. But in practice they were Grigsby's personal army—protecting or destroying as the General commanded.

"You ready to take on Detloffs staff?" Parnell said archly, counting the military array. "He's not likely to come out here in the streets."

"Where's the food?" Ria cut in, demanding proof of good faith.

Grigsby had been staring at the girl, plainly longing to dandle the child on his knee. Only the presence of his men kept him in line. He tugged at his blouse and cleared his throat.- "See for yourself."

At his gesture one of the soldiers yanked open a weapons bay on the lead mini-tank. Other enlisted men imitated his action, revealing that all the vehicles held crates, boxes, and plasticene containers. Algae, soy concentrates, even precious wheat-stuff. The biggest hoard Parnell had seen in months. It had to have cost Grigsby a small fortune.

Ria selected a container and wrenched at the lid. She handed it to the soldier beside her. The man grinned oafishly, a flash of ivory-yellow teeth in a black face. He twisted the cap free and Ria dipped a finger into the contents, licked a sample. "Okay. There's really something in all those others? You're not fooling?"

Grigsby was pained. "I promise you. They're all full." Under Ria's steady, calculating gaze he grew uneasy, roaring, "All right!

Ramirez, let's move 'em out!"

Surprised to learn Grigsby intended to accompany them—the commander in chief of the North Central District, on a minor mission like this?—Parnell climbed into the lead tank. Then he considered. Was this a minor mission? Or thanks to Ria and those Olders might it be the most important undertaking Grigsby could endorse? Yes, it just might.

He wedged his long legs into position, perched Ria on his lap. His techs were finding seats elsewhere in the caravan and the infantrymen scrambled atop the convoy's metal aprons and turrets—a bristling, living encrustation of armed might.

The lead tank jerked into gear and lurched forward, its batteries growling. Ria tensed, huddling against Parnell. Leisurely, the tank pirouetted over the debris of the rioters, passed the locked food distribution station.

Parnell leaned forward, peered through the narrow steering port, out at the littered and deserted street. Give Grigsby's shock troops their due—they'd been neat; not a single body left to clutter the grey city-scape. But there *were* a few dark stains on the broken pavement—stains which looked very much Uke blood.

Chapter III

As the convoy neared the intersection of Canal and Nineteenth Parnell noticed the operating building-screen filling three stories of a distant Media Center. Nevin Detloff's handsome visage nodded and mouthed to the world below. But whatever the wealthy young politician said was garbled to unin-telligibility by five intervening city blocks.

Ria too had seen the broadcast screen. "Oh, look! There's Detloff," she said brightly.

"You know him?" Grigsby was glowering at the child's reference to the Older Party's chief nemesis.

"Uhhh, I see him on the big screens. He talks... nice, and he's

so pretty." Ria craned her neck and looked up at Parnell, giggling. "You're pretty, too."

Parnell darted a warning glare at his father-in-law and the driver, quashing any retort. But the driver snickered as he said, "Spotter's report, sir." Grigsby took the mini-corn headset and hunched over, listening, scowling. Parnell suspected he knew the cause. Up ahead—the old central expressway was lined by figures. People, milling about on the sidewalk abutting the expressway's retaining wall.

"May be trouble," Grigsby grumbled.

"They're blocking our route?" Parnell said.

"Not yet. But we'll have to swing past them." The General was thumbing the talk button. "Ramirez, alert. Everybody at the ready." The staticky response was enthusiastic, almost bloodthirsty, and Ria whimpered, burrowing against Parnell's broad chest. Grigsby eyed her concernedly, then amended his orders. "Ramirez, stunners on a Low Two Setting. That clear? I don't want anybody injured. Just discourage them if they try to stop us."

This time the "Yessir!" came just as quickly, but lacked the former bone-in-the-teeth tone.

The mini-tanks had been trundling through the decaying city for half a mile. Now they rumbled down a ramp marked "Wrong Way" onto the old interstate. The rioters—and that Media Building carrying Detloff's broadcast—were directly across the highway. Filtered, echoing with distortion, Detloff was exhorting his party followers. "... Martial law, now. They've taken away our jobs, our schools, our money, our hope of the future... I ask you, friends, what else can they find to take away from us? Except our *freedom... I*"

"Younger Party scum," Grigsby said, assessing the crowd as the lead tank paralleled it. The enlisted man driving was obviously the same age as the rioting Youngers. He kept his mouth shut, though. He knew where his loyalties—and his meal ticket—lay.

Parnell fervently hoped the mob would keep their eyes on Detloff's image. For once he was happy that rich young demagogue was such a mesmerizer. But somebody had a short attention span, looked away from the screen, spotted the mini-tank convoy creeping past on the expressway.

Immediately brickbats sailed out into the road.

The range was too long, but a few makeshift missiles bounced and skittered across the pavement toward the tanks.

A burst of commands crackled over the com unit, and back along the convoy the soldiers riding shotgun cut loose with their stunners. Parnell wasn't shielded from the effect, this time. The sound was too high pitched for human ears, but his viscera squirmed as the sonic weapons operated. Concrete dust spattered off the retaining wall under the rioters' feet, up into their eyes.

"... Aaaaa!..." that litany of the Youngers, a stuttering battle cry rising from several hundred throats.

"Low Two Setting!" Grigsby was shouting into his mike. "Steady now! Ramirez, keep it moving!"

And in Parnell's arms Ria shivered.

The troops raised their sights, and a few bodies toppled over the low retaining wall onto the expressway. Still others in the mob took the initiative, daring the long jump from sidewalk to chuckholed roadbed. Shrieking wordlessly, they charged the convoy. They scooped up shortball brickbats, heaving them at the minitanks.

"They're all mad!" the General said, his burly face twisting with outrage. "Cretins!" Unconsciously he slipped into a slangish derogation popular among the Youngers themselves.

"Get back in there, chuckie," the driver growled, arguing with his controls. He tried to force the tank over a heap of rubble and the battery pack whined protests. Panel warnings flared red. Cursing, the driver punched relays, swiveling the vehicle, starting

a detour. "Have to go around it, sir..."

"Hurry, man, hurry!" and Grigsby pounded the man's shoulder encouragingly.

Parnell stared out the viewport. Several dozen howling Youngers were rushing the convoy, though sonic pain struck down random victims among them.

Six or seven of them made it through the barrage to Grigsby's lead tank. The raving attackers dragged enlisted men off the tank's apron, pummeling them with clubs, fists, feet. "Stop!" the General roared to the driver.

Parnell shoved Ria off his lap, into a narrow crevice between seats, warned her to keep her head down. Then he jerked up the door handle and thrust it outward sharply—into the bodies of the attacking Youngers. While one soldier helped a buddy to his feet a third retrieved his sonic weapon and sprayed the dazed civilians.

"Up top!" Grigsby was yelling, waving at his troops.

Parnell clenched a fist, ready to repel a further attempt from the Youngers. But that final burst of sonics—*not* on Setting Two—had done its work. The Youngers, three men and four women in their twenties, lay on the pavement, twitching spasmodically and moaning.

He pulled his head back inside and dogged the tank's door. Behind them, puffing to catch up, several more soldiers galloped after the accelerating tank. They scrambled aboard, clung to the apron once more.

"Women," Grigsby was saying in an oddly constrained voice. "No more than girls."

"And how, chuckie," the driver *sotto voced*. The General took no notice. He was on the com, angry, "... Unit Five? Why haven't we got somebody on Tenth, outside the Media Building? Well, you move it, Colonel! I want some action! This isn't a game!" Then he put down the com set, muttering. "Girls. Insane. Like

animals, charging us that way."

"As Detloff constantly reminds them, they haven't anything to live for—men *or* women." Ria had wriggled out of her hidey-hole, clinging to Parnell again and sniffing. Not weeping. She'd seen stunners hi action before, was somewhat inured to their effect.

Parnell reached forward and cued the tank's rear periscreen. The driver nodded respectfully at the gesture. Parnell wasn't certain if the man had forgotten that optional equipment, or if he were disinterested in the fate of the rest of the convoy. Or perhaps he'd never been taught how to activate the screen. Or how to read, or...

The other tanks were shaking free of their rabid pursuers, using their sonics freely, leaving a wake of limp bodies. And fading from sight now, that immense image of Detloff, relayed from a studio somewhere. The Younger Party leader, urging his followers to take heart—while dozens of them lay unconscious as a result of too much foolhardy courage.

Abruptly, as if seeking distraction from the massacre, Ria asked, "Is this road specially for... for tanks?"

"Gracious no, honey," Grigsby smiled. "It was designed for cars—automobiles. Do you know what an automobile is? Like... like a taxi." The girl smiled, unconvinced.

No sense hi elaborating, in telling her cars used to run on gasoline—and that there used to be mil-lions of the things, jamming this same expressway. Gasoline, the family car—the family... all things of the past. Parnell recalled the Nineties, when he was a boy, sitting in an expensive, highpowered automobile in bumper to bumper traffic. *Going nowhere fast*. No one had realized that was a prediction of humanity's future, then.

The driver reached his designated map point, an off ramp guarded by several uniformed detachments. The officer in charge saluted Grigsby's tank, waved them through. Parnell was impressed, and disturbed. Usually Grigsby opted for a low profile. The display of weaponry and troop strength was unusual, speaking of deeper trouble than normal in the streets. But what

was "normal", lately?

They were near the lakefront now, a quieter, nearly desolate area of the old city. This hadn't been a residential section for fifty years, and Parnell saw few civilians abroad. Those he did see were well aware of the martial law; they scurried when they spotted the tanks, diving into the shadows like rats. The streets were an empty vista of boarded-up store fronts and drooping marquees from grander days long past.

This had been the city's cultural heart—and now it lay in cardiac arrest. Who cared about museums, theatres, schools of the arts when there was too little to eat, power failed, water supplies were polluted or non-existent? No work, no food, no hope...

"Up ahead, sir," the driver announced.

"Park on State," Grigsby said, and Parnell allowed himself to relax. The old man had remembered the conditions of this expedition.

The tank convoy mumbled to a halt and infantrymen leaped down, rifles at ready, surveying door-ways and rooftops for assassins. Not until they'd checked things out thoroughly did Grigsby open the door. Ria scrambled out and the two men followed. They emerged onto a deserted thoroughfare lined by limestone monuments to mankind's ideals.

"Kinda eerie." It was one of Parnell's techs. They'd dismounted from their carriers and clustered around Parnell. Safety in numbers? That was certainly their attitude, and he sympathized. Few of his staff ventured out afoot these days; they requisitioned a heliflitter or cab when it was necessary to leave Life Sciences.

Grigsby's troops were unloading the food, stacking it into a pile. Ria grabbed a parcel and began walking toward a columned building. Parnell watched her a moment, amused; the box was nearly as large as Ria. Her greed was showing, again. He hefted a crate to his shoulder and signaled his techs to tote their share, too. Even Grigsby was playing beast of burden. His junior officer

was appalled, unwillingly yessiring to an order to "stand by."

Ria climbed straight up the library's front steps. In her wake Parnell stared in nostalgic wonder. The place was surprisingly intact, a relic from happier days. He passed sculptured stone lions, kicking his way through wind-blown litter. No, the library seemed basically unchanged. Probably books hadn't held much appeal for roving gangs hunting food. No food distribution stations in non-residential areas, either. Nothing to attract looters.

"Emmett?" Ria was scratching at the big oaken front door.

"I thought you said you lived in the basement," Parnell said.

"We do, but those doors are all barricaded—from the Bad Time," Ria explained, scratching again. She must refer to the first wave of serious civil disturbances, years ago—when the moribund Federals had officially admitted the sterility problem was true, not a rumor. Again, Ria could have no memory of the Bad Time, but Olders might.

"Emmett? Come *on!* Quin... quin—tes—sence!" Ria said loudly, petulantly, presumably speaking the "password" she'd mentioned.

And after a long wait, the door creaked open a few centimeters. A terribly wrinkled face peeped out at Ria. A beaked nose, rheumy blue eyes, a thatch of white hair, a quavery voice asking, "Is that you, child?"

Then the elderly doorkeeper seemed to recognize Ria wasn't alone. He reacted with fright, particularly to Grigsby's uniform. The ancient tried simultaneously to yank Ria within the building and slam the door.

"No, no!" Ria said irritably, stamping her foot. "It's okay! They're friends. Really! I brought food—lots of food. See? Come on. Open up."

Parnell suspected Emmett lacked the muscle to keep them out. He appeared quite frail. Plainly unsure he was doing the

right thing, Emmett eased open the heavy door. He struggled with impulse, a reflexive old-fashioned courtesy. "Won't... won't you come in? It's not often we have visitors. But if you're truly friends of Ria's..."

The library's interior swept away the years. Memories of Parnell's boyhood rose. He'd never been in this particular building, but libraries shared a common aura. Footsteps echoed off a high, domed ceiling where traces of ornate gilt clung to peeling wainscotting. Faded murals decorated several walls, and startlingly new-looking ones filled others. Pale light sifted through tall windows at the north and south ends of the library; fortunately the panes didn't face the street and had escaped vandalism. The place had a faintly dusty odor. Not unpleasant. It was a scent suggesting honorable age and objects no longer used much.

"What a perfect state of preservation!" one of the techs marveled.

"Absolutely intact," Lynn, another tech, agreed. She was Parnell's socio-pattern expert. Naturally Lynn would be chafing at the bit to examine the library, a living slice from the past.

Emmett himself was a museum piece, but his state of preservation was poor. His wrinkled face was pinched with cold despite the several threadbare jackets he was wearing and he hobbled arthritically. Somehow the old man looked familiar, as if Parnell might have seen Emmett's picture in a newspaper—when the library's doorkeeper was much younger, of course. Then Parnell pulled his thoughts up short. Newspaper? Grigsby wasn't the only one feeling his years! How long had it been since anyone had seen a newspaper? Seen any form of news except the confusing blur which melted and shifted across vid screens?

"If you'll come this way," Emmett said, clutching a worn stair rail'ng, shuffling down steps behind what had been the library's main checkout desk. "Watch your footing. Rather dark here, I'm afraid."

Tactlessly, one of the techs asked, "But why don't you stay up here where there's some natural lighting? You could build a fire,

stay comfortable..."

"And get smoke on the books? Sacrilege!" Emmett exclaimed. Lynn and the other techs glowered at the offender, but Emmett had already forgotten the gaffe. He hailed the dim corners of the basement. "Delores... Leland... everybody! Look here! Ria's back, and she's brought us some company."

Parnell heard a scratching, as of someone trying to light an old-time match. No igniters? No mini-celled torches? In the gloomy basement a tiny golden flame warmed to feeble life.

They'd been sitting in the dark—like the unused books lining the library's shelves. Sitting, waiting... waiting to die. There were, counting Emmett, twelve of them, as Ria had said. One stub of a candle for illumination, sharing a few rags that could have been called blankets twenty years ago. On an empty shelf behind them Parnell saw the glint of glass—preserves! Antique canning jars! Only a few of them, obviously a precious horde, a desperation supply to hold off starvation in case the worst happened. Parnell hadn't seen canned vegetables since... he felt as if he'd stepped into a time machine.

The old faces! Washed by a wavering glow from a single candle, underlighted, wrinkles, sunken cheeks, pouchy eyelids unflatteringly accented. They winked and rustled among themselves, elderly hermits hiding in their book-filled cave.

"Lynn, turn on a torch," Parnell said. "Just one, and a low setting, for now." He didn't want to give eyes unaccustomed to artificial lighting pain. Even so they winced, rubbed at tears.

"Who... who is it? Is it robbers?"

"Oh, mercy! They've found us... found us!" one of the old people wailed.

"Hush! Now you know Ria wouldn't do that," a strong-voiced woman growled, dragging herself up from her seat on the tiled floor.

"I brought you some food," Ria said, prying open her package,

proudly handing out soy patties. "You can mash 'em up pretty good. They're not hard, like those pills."

Toothless old gums gnawed at the gifts. Several of the Olders were senile, past anything but the simplest understanding. Others, like Emmett, a gaunt, skeletal man named Leland, and the loud speaking woman—Delores—were hardier, more alert. They could force themselves to wait on the food, more interested in Ria's new-found "friends."

"A soldier!" Delores said, her snappish dark eyes narrowing at Grigsby. "Did you forget what we told you about soldiers?"

"Wipe us all out!" one of those living mummies whined.

"Madam, I assure you..." Grigsby began.

"Oh, he's okay," Ria said disdainfully. "This time it was Youngers tried to keep us away. You don't have to worry about *him*."

"Quite right." Grigsby was staring at the human wreckage revealed by the beam of the mini-cell torch. The hard-bitten General was moved as he said, "No, my people won't hurt you. Any of you. As a matter of fact, I'd like your permission to bring hi some more food."

At that several Olders looked up, intrigued. Ria was patient beyond her years, making sure everyone had food, guiding crippled hands to trembling lips. Who here was the child, and who the guardian? Ria confirmed, "Oh, yes, he has lots of food. Lots and lots. He can bring it in, can't he, Emmett?"

"Why, I suppose..."

With that lame concession Grigsby hurried out, fumbling his way up the dark steps. As if his emotions were on the ragged edge and he wanted to escape before he showed too much of them.

Delores said thoughtfully, "My memory's not what it was, but he seemed... familiar."

"No doubt," Parnell said. "General Ogden Grigsby, the Federals' boycott-breaker during the Wheat Burnings of Ninety-Five. That's where he made his first reputation, but he's gone on from there."

"Grigsby. Of course!" Emmett exclaimed, and he and the skinny man called Leland bobbed acknowledgement at each other. "That was the same year you opened the Art School, wasn't it?"

Suddenly Parnell knew that he *had* seen Emmett's picture in a newspaper, years ago. He'd also seen Leland's, and probably others in this group. Their photos had appeared accompanying articles on culture: the library opening a new branch, an art school enlarging its staff, an institute of music beginning a new term. Emmett and Leland and the rest were at one time cultural celebrities of the city.

"And who are you, young man?" Delores asked abruptly.

He grinned and said, "Richard Parnell, and these are some members of my staff." After a few quick introductions, he added, "I'm director of Life Sciences Project."

"Oh, the infertility problem," Delores said, nodding.

Parnell was surprised she'd heard of the situation, isolated here in this book mausoleum. "Yes, the Project's purpose is to find an answer to this worldwide infertility..."

"And the reason for it?" Leland put in curiously.

"Reasons—plural," Lynn said. She was switching on a few more mini-cell torches, lighting up the basement. The medical technician was starting an examination of some of the Olders, and other specialists recorded the immediate surroundings. Therese Parnell had guessed right; this was the juvenile section of the library. Part of the furnishings were gone, possibly burned during the long winters. Maybe Emmett wasn't quite so fussy about committing smoke-damage sacrilege to mere children's books.

Delores leaned against a partially empty shelf and demanded, "But you do have some theories about how that all happened, surely? It seems so incredible —after years of worrying about too *many* people."

"Yes, ironic, isn't it?" Lynn agreed. She was Therese's closest friend, and the two women undoubtedly shared many thoughts and emotions. Including their lost chances for maternity. With a sad, guilty smile she said, "Too many people, too little land to grow food for all those mouths—that used to be the story. Now there are too few people, and still not enough food; climate changes, dying agricultural skills, loss of processing knowhow, distribution problems... all ends up the same."

"But how could it have started?" Emmett wondered.

"No simple answers. I mean," Lynn said, "it was one of those impossible happenings where *everything* went wrong at once. The famines, the plagues, the weather disasters, and a dozen brushfire wars occurring simultaneously. But really, it started with us— with women." The other technicians looked up from their work, staring at Lynn, and Parnell frowned. He read her bitterness, considered interrupting her, decided not to. She squared her shoulders and confessed, "Yes, with us women. We succumbed to the heady thrill of being free, unfettered by our bodies, our hormones, our ova."

"You had help," Parnell said. "That was an achievement of science and technology, and men were definitely involved."

Lynn laughed and said, "But the decision to use the results of that science were *ours*. No man could have understood our feelings. It was a miracle. After millennia—no, after millions of years—to say yes ,or no, when *we* chose, to our own bodies. That was very intoxicating!"

She grew silent and introspective, a woman mourning her sex's myopia. Parnell said, "That wasn't it, Lynn. At no time did *every* woman in the world use contraceptives. And remember overpopulation. That was a genuine and terrifying problem. You're the one who's always reminding us there are no simple answers. Now you're offering one."

Emmett and the others were fascinated, listening to an engrossing story. Ria was fussing through a box of antique stereopticon cards, trying to look bored; but every now and then she glanced up puzzling over the adults' words.

Lynn sighed heavily and smiled. "True. I'm exaggerating—because it's a personal thing, maybe. But, the global adoption of contraception *was* critical. We didn't realize how critical at the time. It was a disguising agent, hiding the truth until... it was too late."

"The catastrophes helped," Parnell insisted.

"Human history is full of catastrophes, but these were special. All the graphs coming together at once—even though the 'experts' said that couldn't happen. It did. Deaths from war, disease, starvation, on a scale no one had seen for centuries. It hit particularly hard at children and people—women—of reproductive age."

"And then along came the virus." It was the medical technician. He was wrapping a blood pressure cuff around one of the Older's arms. Absently, as if lecturing, he said, "We're not even sure where the little beastie originated. We *think* it mutated during bacteriological warfare in the Belem Crisis, in the Nineties.. Very insidious, it was. Masqueraded as just one more flu virus, and a relatively benign one at that. No fatalities. Not sufficiently dangerous to warrant developing a vaccine."

"So it spread, through the entire world," Lynn finished for him. "Didn't take as long as you'd think—it was incredibly contagious. We calculate that by ten years later, turn of the century, it had affected every female in the world."

"Except for immunes," Parnell said, eyeing Ria.

"But we didn't know there *were* any immunes, till now." Lynn's voice had a tinge of anger hi it. "We didn't realize until it was too late that a world-wide *option* to procreate had become a global *inability* to procreate." 't

Delores was shaking her head sadly, sympathizing. "How

awful! To..."

"Yes," Lynn said sharply, not wanting pity. "Such a tiny alteration in the body's chemistry, a blending of two semi-related facts. A woman's immuno-system, her antibodies to fight disease—linking up with an automatic, reproductive reflex; when the first, fertilizing sperm reaches a fertile ovum, the ovum rejects all other sperm. Simple, understandable, logical. Preserve the genetic integrity. Every human being is allowed forty-six chromosomes, no more. Except that after a female had the virus—and we all did—her body rejected *all* sperm. And even the few who didn't have the mutation full strength and could conceive, aborted almost immediately upon conception. Oh, Mother Nature played a cruel, cruel joke on us, no mistake!"

"Not to be able..." Delores began, read Lynn's stricken expression, and didn't continue. Wisely, she shifted her approach and said, "That must have been a terrible come-down for the machismo types. No matter how much a man bragged he couldn't..."

Parnell kept his face straight, endured Lynn's nasty laughter. "That's true!" Then she sobered and said, "But that's even worse. Not so much here, or in Europe. But in countries where children and procreation were a life-style... the effect was crushing. The mutation took away their... their hearts. The riots, the mass suicides, the countless little wars —so much of that can be traced to the spread of the infertility factor. Life wasn't beginning any more, and for too many people that meant there was no point in *anything*—except violence, killing, hedonistic satisfactions."

There was a loud thumping, a startling intrusion into everyone's bleak thoughts. Boots, stomping down the stairs. Grigsby's troops, every man carrying a food package.

The Olders tensed, seeing the uniforms, then relaxed as the soldiers paid them no attention. The sergeant directed proceedings, and the human conveyor belt piled food in an ever-growing heap.

"Is... is all that for us?" Leland said incredulously.

"So much of it!" Emmett was shocked. "Ria, how on earth did you... ? Where is all this coming from? Didn't you use our ident cards at the station? You told us you wouldn't steal, this time."

Ria shrugged and said, "I didn't get a chance to use the cards."

Parnell hastily described the circumstances, Emmett and the others hanging on his narration. And when he had finished Delores exclaimed, "Why, you saved Ria's life! I knew we shouldn't let her risk it. She's too young. And all this is from General Grigsby? And here we thought..."

"We were wrong," Leland said simply. "Maybe Jeremy and Karyl were too. But they were so naive, so prejudiced about things—like the military."

Alertly, Parnell homed on those remarks. Jeremy and Karyl? Were? Past tense. People who were prejudiced, naive. Who?

"However can we repay the General—and you?" Emmett said.

Cutting direct, Parnell suggested, "By answering some questions about Ria's parents." He wished the soldiers weren't so noisy. Their clatter was distracting. But as the mound of food grew, so did the gratitude hi those old eyes. Parnell filled in details, trimming away scientific fat, going to the heart. He concentrated on Emmett, Leland, and Delores; they were most likely to help, most able to.

Emmett was appalled, murmuring, "We didn't know just how bad it was—out there. Oh, Ria brought us stories, but..."

"It's a global disaster,"-Parnell confirmed. "A species disaster. Even now that we've found Ria, time is critical. We must start the turn-round *soon*. If the situation gets much worse, it won't make any difference if Ria and a few other children are immune; there won't be any civilization left for them to inherit."

The pile of food now filled the center of the library's basement. The soldiers were tiring, moving more and more slowly, setting boxes down hard, climbing back up the steps instead of running.

"Anything we can do to help," Emmett said earnestly. "Anything," and Lynn nudged a porta-corder mike in close, ready to pick up whatever anyone said.

Delores stared lovingly at Ria. "Her parents—a young couple, very young, hardly old enough to have a babe in arms. They hadn't named Ria. They said she should choose her own name. That's the way Jeremy and Karyl thought." Parnell waited for a further identification, but the old woman said, "I'm sorry. They never told us who they were or where they came from. Just sort of drifted in one day. They said the trappings of the world weren't important. To them it was the free spirit—that's what they called it."

"You saw those new murals upstairs?" Leland asked enthusiastically. "Jeremy's work. He was a fine young talent. Very promising."

"And Karyl—a voice like an angel," Emmett said, sighing nostalgically. "And she was so clever with her hands. She helped me repair books and put together broken shelves. Sewed coats for us out of... of nothing, really! So resourceful. They both were."

They said they could have fixed the tape machines, too, but of course there was no point without electricity. I wish... for Ria's sake... she could have learned so much more if we'd had tapes. We have thousands of them in the files. Not the quality of our books..."

Delores handed a cylindrical carton to Parnell. He blinked, turned it about in his hands curiously. Ria pouted a moment, then looked away, pretending not to care if Parnell opened the little box.

Mystified, Parnell pried the lid off the carton. A rotting label reading "library paste" clung to its side. And inside—two lives. Greeting sheets from years ago: "Happy Birthday to Jerry!"... "The Best Year-End Day Ever, Karyl!" A man's old-fashioned digital chronometer inscribed "From Dad". A heart-shaped locket sealed in plexispray and an accompanying card reading, "Aunt Debbie's high school grad present, 1968." A few other poignant odds and ends... and one item which made Parnell

pounce.

He hefted a solidopic cube and activated the viewing surface. In the space between him and Ria two seemingly three-dimensional forms took shape. A man and a woman, young, holding hands, smiling.

"Is that...?" Grigsby was standing at Richard Parnell's elbow. The General's eyes were wide at this vivid recreation of Ria's parents.

"I assume so," and Parnell carefully studied the holographic images. Jeremy and Karyl sported deliberately torn clothes, shaven, scalped heads, their eyebrows plucked out—a visual slice from the infancy of the Younger Party.

"Hippies," Grigsby snarled. Parnell recalled the term from something he'd read. He'd forgotten the slang word's definition, but knew it was pejorative.

"Youngers, from the Wild Fringe, I believe," Parnell said. "As I recall they were dedicated completely to art and the free spirit..."

"Exactly their words!" Leland agreed. "Jeremy's mural—he called it 'The Last and Best Days of Mankind'."

Lynn ducked her head, hiding tears, and Parnell said, "The last, possibly. May I?" and he handed the de-activated cube to his graphics analyst. "Run that through. I want origin point on everything, this stuff in the carton, too. Special emphasis on parents and siblings, if any." He turned back to Emmett and said gently, "Jeremy and Karyl, they're dead?"

Delores' shoulders jerked with muffled sobs. "Don't know why it couldn't have been some of us. It wouldn't have mattered..."

She couldn't go on, so Leland took over. "Jeremy was intrigued by the decorations on the library dome. We warned him of the dangers, but... there's a catwalk in the attic. He insisted on going up and... he fell." At that memory several of the Older women daubed their eyes.

"Such a waste!" Emmett lamented. "A terrible waste! And Karyl, why she went... a little mad, I think. Poor child! She never should have gone out on the streets while she was hi that state. We... we tried to stop her. No use. Never... never saw her again."

Grigsby scraped the floor with the edge of his boot and Parnell fought depression. Emmett was right. A terrible waste—more terrible than the old librarian realized. If Karyl and Jeremy had been the last reproducing couple on earth..."

No! He couldn't accept that. If there had been two immunes, one fertile woman, there were others. They'd find them. And in the meantime there was Ria.

"You want to take the child with you, don't you?" Delores said flatly. A few of the Olders gasped pro-testingly. Emmett and Leland were morose as the woman went on, "It had to come. I knew it. And it's right. We're... too old. Just too old to take care of her anymore."

Ria's big eyes misted with tears. A bright young mind, and maturity far beyond her years. The erratic genius of her Wild Fringe parents had blended with the gentle, bookish tutelage of Emmett and the other Olders, custodians of knowledge. Ria was a survival type *par excellence*. She wouldn't have reached eight years in this chaotic world otherwise. She could adapt, and would again.

"Yes, if you agree. My wife and I would adopt Ria, care for her as our own daughter." He hesitated, decided to be honest. "There is the scientific aspect. Ria's the key to humanity's future. But I swear she'll be loved, protected—not just a guinea

Pig-"

The Olders looked at each other numbly and Emmett held up a shaking hand. "Would you... let us talk it over?"

Parnell nodded and stepped back. Lynn's mikes would pick up the whispered conference. Science couldn't afford to feel guilty about eavesdropping, and who knew what tidbits of precious information the Olders might let out?

"I'm tired, Rich—getting old." Startled, Parnell turned to his father-in-law. Grigsby's voice was heavy with too many campaigns and disappointments. "Time's running out for me. Like it is for them. I keep telling myself I'm just as fit as I was at Belem, on the Co-Op Insurrection Front. But then..."

"You've got some good years left," Parnell murmured kindly.

"Damned few. And what kind of world will I leave when I die? That haunts me, Rich. Not knowing if..." He stared at the conferring Olders, their bobbing heads and uncertain movements. "And what's going to happen to them?"

"This is their home." Ria had been listening, and now she said anxiously, "You won't make them move? Emmett has to take care of the books."

"The art and idealism of mankind," Parnell said. "Their trust from the past. They're all trying to keep the candle of knowledge and beauty lit." Grigsby was eyeing him thoughtfully, inspiration in his beefy face. Parnell nodded, encouraging him. "They've been custodians for all of us. They shouldn't be made to change now. I think they've earned a right to some help, don't you?"

Grigsby tried to think of an argument, plainly seeing that he was going to be hit in the bankroll— again. Lamely, he said, "Now see here, Rich, just because you married my daughter doesn't..."

"They need a steady food supply, medical care from my people, military protection—and of course we'll be able to tape all the invaluable information they've accumulated over the years."

The General sighed, defeat already in his manner. "Perhaps. We'll have to... discuss it."

Not fair, maybe, hitting Grigsby in the emotions. He couldn't deny fellow Olders, his own empathy, no matter how he resisted. The hero of the Near Eastern Third Front Crisis was caving in, slowly. Parnell winked at Ria and to his delight the girl picked up the cue, winked back. "Of course," he said, hiding a smile. "We'll discuss it."

Chapter IV

Parnell shifted impatiently from one foot to another. Would Grigsby never finish talking and let the heliflitter clear the roof? The General's orderly had already scurried over to the shelter of the stair alcove, waiting beside Parnell. If the enlisted man disliked cooling his heels while Grigsby handed out last minute instructions to junior officers he didn't show it.

Finally! Grigsby stepped clear of the rotors, waved, trotted across the roof to join Parnell. "What's the problem with our power feed, Ogden?" Parnell shouted against the heliflitter's rising noise. "We've had to shut down five floors of lab..."

"I know, I know," Grigsby nodded. "Have to talk to you about that."

Parnell eyed the lifting flitter. "They aren't waiting on you?"

"Have to drop some staff off at Masterson's HQ," Grigsby said absently. He gestured to the enlisted man's backpack com set. "Get a patchthrough to Harris. I've got some new orders." Then he looked wearily at Parnell, trying to orient himself in the midst of several on-going assignments. Yes, the

General *was* showing his age these days. "They'll be back to pick me up after..."

"That doesn't sound right," the soldier muttered, staring past his superior's shoulder.

Both Grigsby and Parnell turned, and Parnell's gut tightened with apprehension. The heliflitter seemed to be in trouble, not moving away as fast as it should. Not at a proper angle. Was she overloaded? A crew and three or four junior officers ought not to tax a heavy-duty military craft...

But something was very wrong.

The angle was much too steep. The flitter slewed across rooftops, trying to rise, dangerously close to the forest of

buildings.

"She's... not going to clear the old Stock Exchange," Grigsby said, gasping in horror. "Sergeant, can you...?"

"Get it up level, you erects," the sergeant was muttering with the helpless desperation of a spectator.

Even had the flitter crew heard him, it was too late. Lazily the craft brushed against the sheer glass face of the Exchange half a city block away.

She didn't seem to hit hard, but the rotors and tail assembly instantly came to pieces. Explosively, shattering the Exchange's wall into thousands of tiny particles, dancing like diamonds in the sunset.

Instinctively, the three watchers on the Life Sciences roof dropped flat, shielding themselves.

Sound battered against Parnell's ears for a few almost unbearable moments, and then it was over as quickly as it began. Cautiously, he raised his head. Not much outward vectoring. No pieces of glass falling on his roof.

He got to his feet, staring. Shards of wall and air-craft were arcing down toward the street. Tumbling, cartwheeling, a grim ballet of metal and plasticene. And bodies... falling like broken dolls, beyond help.

Grigsby clutched the roof ledge, breathing hard. "Dammit! Dammit!" His voice was surprisingly soft, haunted. "She was obsolete. Maintenance has been... can't get parts. I *told* the Subcommittee we had to have new equipment. Can't get through to them, those... nearsighted murderers! That's what they are! Killing my men with their stupidity..."

Very little of the wreck was still airborne. Parnell gazed down at those shattered remains, thinking of the hundreds of times he trusted his life, Therese's, his staff to the heliflitter's reliability. He grew cold.

The General softly hammered his fists against the ledge. "Just plain obsolete, all of my materiel." He forced himself to turn away from the sight. "But at least when it's a land vehicle that fails the poor bastards don't fall twelve stories. Sergeant, contact Major Harris—immediately. Fill him in. Come on, Rich. Let's... go to the lab."

"We'll have to take the stairs," Parnell warned him. "The power's fluctuating too much to risk the tube. Unless you want to gamble?"

Grigsby saved his energy, not retorting. But all the way down ten flights he muttered about the wreck, the continuing riots in the street, a cavalcade of increasing social chaos. "It won't even ram," he complained as they neared the main lab level. "If the weather would just turn bad, chase all of them off the streets..."

"No! I won't do it any more! You're just mean!" greeted them as they stepped onto the second floor.

Ria was screaming, crawling under a desk, trying to elude a med-technician... and a hypo syringe.

She escaped capture and ran toward Parnell. Then the girl swerved, into Grigsby's welcoming arms. "Don't let her...!"

"Of course not!" the General growled.

"Ria, now stop that." Therese came out of the biosciences section and glared at her father. "She's using you, as she would all of us. If we don't put a stop to it she'll end up a spoiled brat."

"There's no need to torture the child, is there?" Grigsby snapped. "Why, look. Her little arm's black and blue from your needles."

Ria aggrievedly rubbed her chest. "Here too. They stick me all over," and she launched into her woebegone ragamuffin routine. She'd barely lived a week in the lab, and already she'd enlarged her routine, thanks to heavy use of the drama-vid tapes. By now Parnell was weary of imitative melodramatics and trite comedy patter.

"Cut it out, Ria," he said sternly. "You know it's necessary, and we made a bargain. Stop this nonsense or you won't watch the Monk and Chuckie Show."

Unoffended, sighing, swallowing the beginnings of sniffles, Ria wriggled out of Grigsby's embrace. Meekly, she went back to the tech, took the woman's hand and walked into the biolab. The General gaped, protesting, "You've done something to force that child to..."

"Threatened to cut off her favorite pastime," Therese said. "Isn't that what you used to do when I was young? Of course, if you'd prefer that we abandon the project..."

Grigsby winced and reddened as Parnell smiled wisely. "No, no, I didn't mean that. It's just that..."

"We're not being cruel. Every biopsy specimen we take from Ria is vitally important. And time is so short..." Therese explained.

Suddenly an entire bank of the lab's lights went dark. Profanity erupted from the techs and maintenance people ran to correct the problem—or try to.

"Just like our feed to Viral Research an hour ago," Parnell said. "Plug in those auxiliaries!"

"There's no response, Doctor," a tech shouted back.

"No, not likely." Grigsby was grim-faced, a man with a secret.

Parnell's suspicions were aroused and he linked thumbs into his pockets and said, "All right, let's have the bad news."

"It is bad. I've just come from the Deputy President. We're evacuating his quarters this minute. Rich, that's a full-scale insurrection out in those streets. It's been going on for a week now, with no sign of let-up." The General paused, ran a worried hand along his jowls. "Nothing seems to help. I've had our party leader on the air as often as possible, asking for calm..."

"Detloff's last speech—that I heard—was low-key," Parnell said. "As if he's trying to get his Youngers to scream off too."

"Well, he's not having any effect then," Grigsby countered sourly. He glanced toward the bio-lab, apparently thinking of Ria and his daughter. "It's... not just Youngers and Olders. We've got strikes."

Several techs within earshot turned, gawking.

Parnell himself was startled. Strikes? There was so little work—so few people to do it—and units, money so meaningless... what in the world could anyone with a job strike *for*?

Grigsby read his questions. "It's the Middle-Aged Employable Party shutting down the nuke power plants that hurts the worst. Cracking the whip on us, showing we can't dump it without them." He smiled crookedly and added, "They're right, too. Rich, I hate like hell to do this, but... you're going to have to pull your people out of here."

"What?" Parnell's dismay was duplicated throughout the lab. The prospect appalled everyone. There were protests for individual experiments, delicate test specimens, the difficulties of transporting research animals,—a chorus of arguments.

Parnell felt as if the floor had disappeared. He'd directed the Life Sciences Project so long, breathed hope into a dejected staff, kept things going—somehow. And now, when they'd found Ria, began to believe they really could make it, Grigsby was saying they had to yank up their roots. "You're giving up? Letting the mobs have the building?" he asked testily.

"Rich, we'll do everything possible to keep it secure," Grigsby said, taut with apology. "But we can't maintain your supplies. Not now. Maybe after we get things under control, the riots quashed. At the moment I simply haven't the manpower. We're stretched so thin that..." Parnell thought of the heliflitter crash. Junior officers and a skilled crew, dead. How many more such losses was General Grigsby suffering? He started to see his father-in-law's dilemma... a dilemma that was becoming his. "The Udetta Sub Station's been shut down for four hours. I got

you an emergency feed from North Lake Nuclear, but I can't tell how long it'll last."

Shaken, Parnell said, "What about the library? The Olders, and my techs?" He didn't mention Grigsby's troops now guarding the ancient facility; he knew the General took care of his own.

"They're all right. Totally on batteries, and the riots aren't anywhere near them. Low profile, don't attract attention. Believe me, Rich, they'll be safe." Before Parnell could relax Grigsby threw his cruncher. "But what you've got here—over fifty people, all the power you need... just can't be done."

The sergeant puffed into the lab, holding out a com headset for the General's attention. Urgent communique from Major Harris, perhaps.

For a moment Parnell stewed alone, rilled with dire speculations. Then Therese's hand touched his arm. She looked up at him with a smile, feeding his strength. "We'll make it," she said. "We always have."

"Right. Start a close-down, Ter. Strip us to the bone. Nothing except essentials," he said decisively.

"Should we pack for heliflitters?"

"No," he said. "I imagine Ogden will get us surface vehicles. Cheer up. That means we'll be able to transport more."

"Yessir," Therese mocked a military response. He watched her hurry away, stirred by errant, untimely impulses. He'd been a monk for days—or had it been weeks? Down to the ragged edge, his nerves sharply honed, difficult to sheath.

"Rich..." Grigsby began, finishing with his radio conversation.

"Ter's starting to pack."

"Tell her to hurry." Something in the General's tone made Parnell eye him sharply. If that old war-horse was *this*

concerned, things must be bad out on the streets. "Can... can you be ready in an hour?"

For a heartbeat Parnell was speechless. Then he attempted some humor. "How about two? We've got a hell of a lot of stuff to move."

Grigsby's smile was wan. "Very well—two hours. But no more. I can't guarantee the perimeter longer than that."

Clearing his mind to tackle the problem headlong, Parnell snapped, "What kind of vehicles can you give me? How much carrier space?"

The sergeant offered a small calculator and Grigsby ran a quick total. "Make it ten... no, twelve Centipede transports, two segments each—one cargo, one passenger, and a guard force. Believe me, if I had more, they'd be yours."

"Thanks. I didn't expect that many," Parnell said, meaning it. Centipede transports. Grigsby's tough, foolproof backbone transports. The old man was being exceedingly generous, considering the circumstances. But Parnell couldn't overlook the fact that they would be leaving the building at night... sneaking away like thieves. To avoid attracting attention. Grigsby's army was really spread thin. "Centipedes," Parnell mused. "That means no temperature controls. We'll have to jettison some of our bio experiments."

"I'm sorrier than hell, Rich," Grigsby said. Plainly he regarded himself as a failure. "Now, about des-tination. Takes a big place to house all these people. How about the Canal Barracks... ?"

Parnell shook his head. "Big but unusable for our purposes." A good director thought of such contingencies in advance, of course. But Parnell had always hoped he'd have longer to make up his mind. "Can you get us as far as the SDP District? Northwest Cloning?"

The General did some blinking, then brightened. "You've got another lab out there, right? Certainly! That's what you need, you'll get through. Sergeant, clear me a channel to Routing. We

can use the slide-roads..."

"But sir, Masterson's people have only got a few of those operational," the sergeant protested, already cranking up his corn-unit. "They said only for emergency use..."

"Which this is!" Grigsby roared. "Put that through. Now!"

As Grigsby bent over the speaker Parnell looked around him. Darkened alcoves and moribund computer banks. Staff starting to pack. When you tore up roots it hurt, especially if those roots had been firmly embedded for a couple of decades. "Ogden, when you get a line clear, I'd like a patch through to Jesse Bliss. Maybe I should warn him he's going to be invaded."

"Soon as I can," Grigsby muttered, busy.

Parnell was busy too, helping his techs pack and stack. Donkey work, and a lot of them weren't used to it. He'd been lax enforcing the physical fitness rule; but it had seemed pushy when humanity's very survival was at stake and the techs didn't dare leave their work.

Momentarily, surrounded by feverish activity, Parnell was pocketed by the window. A box seat looking out on a once-great city, and one still potentially great. But the panorama of lights he'd known as a boy was gone, winked out. The Middle-Aged Employables were striking, and one of the few remaining vestiges of civilization—electric power—was switched off. They had cut off their electrical life-blood in order to spite an Establishment itself sinking into chaos.

No, the city wasn't completely dark. There *were* spots of light—uneven, flickering patches here and there. Fires. Buildings and debris put to the torch by roving mobs... mobs loose in the streets for nearly a week now. Ever since the disty riot when he'd saved Ria...

Anger was an acid taste in Parnell's throat. This madness had to end! Didn't those fools know they were killing themselves, their only hope? Every man and woman out there was unique, a precious and irreplaceable genetic entity. Even the most savage

rioters might carry the seeds of genius within his DNA molecules. And if, through Ria, Life Sciences could unlock reproduction, getting humanity advancing once more... How many future da Vincis, Beethovens, Edisons, Einsteins were dying in those streets?

But how tell a soldier not to fire on someone charging him with an upraised club? How tell a frustrated, unthinking civilian that fire and rapine and looting were futile, self-defeating in the long run?

A small hand slid into Parnell's large palm. He looked down at Ria. "Where are we going?" Not apprehensive, just curious. The child of the streets, sensing she was about to be uprooted—again.

"You remember Jesse, the chubby little man with the beard?"

"The one who talks funny?" Ria said candidly.

"Yes. We're going to his laboratory," Parnell explained.

"Out where all the food is?" A very bright and very retentive mind! Ria never forgot the important things—like survival.

"There'll be plenty of food," he said reassuringly.

Suddenly Ria demanded, "What about Emmett and the others?" Then she answered her own question, morose. "They wouldn't leave the library, though. They said they never would. They talk about how they're just about to die."

"Everyone dies, Ria," Parnell said. "But they won't be disturbed. The General will protect them. You must understand that someday—maybe not for years—but someday they *will* die."

Ria lifted her pointed chin, stubbornly refusing that truth. "Well, I'm not going to die. I'm going to live forever and be an artist and singer and fix things, just like Jeremy and Karyl."

He smiled at her childish determination. Indeed, her genes were right, and in preliminary tests she'd exhibited genuine creativity. Given loving training and education she should

develop into a gifted adult, capable of bringing pleasure to humanity. If there were anyone else alive when Ria reached maturity.

"I wish you *could* live forever," he said. "I wish everyone could, or at least live out a normal life-span. But unless this rioting stops..."

Ria's rosebud mouth formed an O of surprise and

Parnell turned to see what she saw. One of the fires in the city had flared into a globular dome. An immense explosion, somewhere in the heart of the metropolis.

"It's not the library," he said quickly. Not a lie. The blast had been far west of the lake. But someone—many someones—might well have died in that explosion.

"Sir?" It was Grigsby's sergeant, holding out a headset. "I've got Dr. Bliss. It's not a very clear circuit, I'm afraid; Had to go through ten junction relays, halfway to Springfield and back."

Parnell nodded his understanding, putting the receiver to his ear. "Jesse?"

Through a tidal wave of static the clonist's normally acid tones were reduced to comical squeaks. "Right here, m'boy. I have better sense than to wander into Rome when it's collapsing."

"Very wise. I agree. We're moving in with you."

Parnell's announcement took Bliss off-balance. "That's... that's superb. I didn't know you... when will you be here?"

The sergeant silently mouthed "seven hours" and Parnell said, "Call it dawn."

"Oh, how appropriate!" Bliss cackled. "We shall await you all with open arms."

As Parnell signed off Grigsby came up, presenting a rough

map. He was very deferential, apparently still feeling guilty that he'd been forced to evacuate his son-in-law's project. "This'll give you an idea of our route, Rich. We'll send your transports out one at a time—less conspicuous. But don't worry. The area is secure to this line... here. Now you'll link with L Leg of the old slideroad at this point... here.

Harris got a solid confirm from Masterson. It is operational and they have a feed from Cross-State, independent of the striker's stations. No problems."

Parnell wasn't as confident as the General, but military setups weren't his department. He concentrated on salvaging as much as possible from the labs. Not easy. Racks of fragile Petri dishes, frightened animals in cages, test dewars, a vast assortment of paraphernalia. Some of his choices had to be ruthless. Grigsby might promise to guard the building's integrity but Parnell had few illusions. Even if the place wasn't vandalized it would become cold without power, and a lot of the experiments would shrivel and die without heat. Science fed science, relying on technology—and that technology was currently on strike.

"So hard to leave some of this behind," Therese said, brushing a lock of auburn hair off her forehead. "But... we have to compromise."

Grigsby's sergeant jerked a thumb toward the window. "Tell that to those howlers out there."

Time. Not enough of it, ever. Especially not now. They couldn't rely on the tube, not with erratic power. So Parnell and his staff made trip after exhausting trip up and down stairs to the foyer.

Once down to ground level Grigsby's troops could help load the Centipede transports—with supervision. Parnell didn't trust the soldiers to appreciate the delicacy of certain equipment. That left the heaviest chores to his people.

By the time the first transport rolled away into the night the Life Sciences Building was becoming icy, visibly dying. Only power celled emergency panels lit the final teardown.

The procedure called for efficiency and stealth. Parnell was expert at the former and fast learning the latter. Tough, because now they had to work in almost total darkness. Fumbling, stepping on one another's feet, muffling curses. Like thieves, escaping from the city with their scientific booty. It seemed such a haphazard method of rescuing decades of research—research that could spell survival for the entire human race.

There were no convoys. Each transport—cargo tightly packed, passenger section filled with technicians, specialists, and crack, well-armed troops—waggled on its way alone. The Centipede was so named because an impregnable armored drive cab towed two—in this situation—carrier segments. In the darkness the effect *was* rather like watching an alien, bulbous insect creeping away.

And as each loaded Centipede crawled off Parnell felt more and more isolated. He wasn't helped by whispered words from departing techs, hopefully promising to rendezvous out at Jesse Bliss's lab. Hopefully. Parnell didn't like operating in the dark—in more ways than one. He had to rely completely on Grigsby's forces, on Grigsby's staff and logistics. Not a comfortable sensation.

Finally there was only one Centipede transport left. He'd supervised the loading of the cargo segment, Grigsby's men were wraiths, climbing into the outrigger guard-slots framing the transport's carrier sections. Twice as many soldiers as had accompanied any of the other Centipedes. But then Ria was to be on *this* journey, and General Grigsby was taking no chances with her safety.

Parnell squinted into the night, toward the Life

Sciences Building. What had he said about Emmett and the Olders tending a candle of knowledge? Against the long night of ignorance, and oblivion. His own temple of science was darkened, all power gone. He had a peculiar urge to wave good-bye to an old friend.

"Everyone's out?" Grigsby was asking, somewhere to Parnell's left.

Before Parnell could reply Major Harris's voice came sharply, "Checked every level personally, sir. She's clean."

And dead, abandoned. Like the city might be before too many more days.

He met Therese and Ria near the rear seal gate of the Centipede's passenger segment. Scooping the child up, he set her inside the high carrier. "Here we go!" he said softly, lightly, making it a game.

"Mommy... Therese?" Ria called uncertainly, groping. The girl was torn between excitement at this adventure and fear of the unknown. She'd learned, this past week, not to dread uniformed men as enemies, yet...

Parnell lifted Therese in beside the child, saw them move forward together in the carrier. There was a faint light up front, from the monitor screens, enough illumination so that he could see his wife and Ria settle down in seats close to the monitor operator.

"Kill those lights," Grigsby snarled, and the blackout curtain dropped across the rear seal portal "Rich... ?"

"Here," Parnell responded, keeping his voice low. The General caught his elbow, pressed it encouragingly. The old man was unbending a lot recently, perhaps because of Ria. Or perhaps the grim reality of his seventy years, the approach of death, made him want to savor human company.

"Major Harris?" As the officer answered Parnell recalled Grigsby rarely addressed his chief aide by rank. Was Grigsby being courteous, or reminding everyone of who was boss? "Now you have your route, Major. I expect you to rendezvous with the other units at five-hundred..."

"Yessir."

"And... this is Dr. Parnell's project. Don't forget that. The safety of his people and materiel is paramount. And he's the one to decide how it's handled. You have that straight, Major?" He

didn't wait for the man's response but drove the point home. "Any questions, Dr. Parnell has the last word."

A rotten assignment for the Major, Parnell thought. And he wagered if anything went wrong Harris would get the blame—even if Parnell made the bad decision.

"I understand, sir," Harris agreed. Smoothly, no arguments. Whatever his private feelings.

Grigsby's hand sought Parnell's, gripping it hard. Parnell felt a trembling in the old man, emotion. Grigsby was military governor, weighted down with a hundred tactical crises. He'd been in and out of the Life Sciences Building constantly while the staff prepared to leave. And now the press of duties elsewhere forced Grigsby to put the Parnells under another officer's wing. Parnell knew a wrenching empathy, closer to his father-in-law than he'd been in years.

Then he and Harris were aboard the transport and the rear seal portal slid shut noiselessly. The monitor operator cued his lights up again. And as the Centi-pede began to grumble and move the soldiers relaxed, joking softly.

Parnell found a narrow, uncomfortable seat facing Therese. She'd nestled Ria on her lap and the child was already nodding sleepily. Excitement or not, it was late, and she was very young.

Harris edged in between the Parnells, perching beside the monitor operator. "Have we got a steady homer?" the Major asked anxiously. He activated a tie-in with the Centipede's driver, two units forward.

And from the cab came a guttural reply. "Right on target, sir. ETA at L Leg of the slideroad forty-five minutes."

The monitor operator cued his multi-screened console. Views from the world outside shifted with zoom lens scans of the Centipede's equipment—the motors powering the cargo and passenger sections' individually operated wheels, radar tracking systems, all the other military hardware that kept the vehicle moving and tough. Their own path was marked by a blip on a

graph, crawling west by southwest toward the old Western Slideroad.

Parnell watched the blip and snorted. "Sonascan tracking. That's irony." Major Harris looked over his shoulder curiously and Parnell explained, tapping the screen. "That device was invented to help guide the blind."

The scene outside, pictured on the screens, was Stygian. Harris laughed hoarsely and said, "We sure as hell would be blind, without our monitors."

Verbal hash crackled from the com, messages from all over the city, coming in on the military net. "We gotta get some *help* out here, chuckle!..."

"Unidentified intruders at Lake and Thirtieth. Do you read? Anybody?" And frantically a shriek from a heliflitter pilot, "Mayday at Thayston Station! No steering control! Mayday!" The cry stopped abruptly and Parnell envisioned death raining from the skies, piece by piece.

Ria tensed, tossing her head fretfully. Under Therese's soothing whispers she quieted once more. Parnell and his wife stared at each other, total rapport, steeling themselves for whatever might lie ahead.

There was a glow on one of the exterior screens. Parnell checked the directional setting. Right. North of them. A fire. "Planning any detours?" he asked Major Harris.

Harris was youngish, but not *too* young. Thirtyish, somewhat unbending. Very aware of his heavy responsibilities and Parnell's authority over him. "Not if we can avoid it, Doctor. Our route's carefully plotted to stay in a secure area."

"You really think they'll have a slideroad operational when we get there?" Parnell said skeptically.

He'd unintentionally given the Major's ego a boost. The man smiled superiorly. "As a matter of fact..." and he nudged the playback switch on a communications tape. One of Parnell's

chief techs spoke from the recorder: "This is Langsam, confirming arrival at Northwest Cloning. Time, ten p.m. Er... twentytwo hundred. Did... did I say that right?" There was a muffled, amused off-mike conversation between Langsam and the unknown radio operator... female and male laughter intertwining.

Parnell nodded, reassured, and Harris's smile widened into a smug grin.

The view outside seemed sharper. Wavering black and gold shadows danced across the Centipede's path along the street. The scene was oddly like something out of a horror story, pregnant with mystery and menace. Even Parnell felt uneasy, and he suspected the poorly educated and superstitious enlisted men seated along the gunners' ports were imagining the worst.

"Somebody's birthday?" he said jocularly. "There's a bonfire to celebrate the occasion."

It broke the ice. The troops laughed hi relief, dark faces beaded with sweat. "Right! Gonna be a hot time tonight, chuckie!"

"We'll take care o' them fires, don't worry!"

"Have us a party... !"

Parnell and Harris both tolerated this hilarity, encouraging the men to loosen up. They eyed each other speculatively, and for Parnell's part he wondered how far his authority would extend, in a pinch. He hoped there'd be no need to find out.

The Centipede lurched slightly, her independently powered wheels working their ways over an obstruction. The monitor operator cued a key view forward, tracking across the street. "Lotta walls caved in ahead," he commented. "Better take it slow up front, Lennox. Looks like a bunch of dumpy old places."

"Very old," Parnell agreed. The soldier was too young to appreciate architectural antiques. The rubble—and the buildings it had fallen from—dated back before the Big Fires. Genuine

Twentieth Century relics. Therese's sociologist friend, Lynn, would love to see this. Parnell made a mental note to show off these ruins, once the trouble had died down.

One of Grigsby's people was on the corn-set. The monitor operator reported, "Confirm, we are approaching South Haven now. Should cross the bridge at about..."

"What's that?" Harris said tensely, interrupting. He overrode the specialist's controls, punching up an exterior view on the screen.

The Centipede was almost to an intersection. Great jagged streaks of firelight rippled surrealistic shadows across the walls and shattered windows ahead. Wherever that fire off north was, it was huge. But in all other respects the scene was normal—a deserted, debris-strewn old street.

Then Parnell heard what Harris must have detected—an odd pattering noise, like the beginnings of rain or hail. Hail? That thought took him back years, to his boyhood in a rural area a hundred kilometers from the city. No, the noise had started as a gentle tapping. But it was increasing in volume and intensity by microseconds.

An exterior lens homed in on a falling chunk of masonry, a big chunk. It bounced off the Centipede cab. No damage to that durasteel fortress on wheels. But that was only the first assault. Other pieces of limestone and masonry were falling now, too fast for the scanners to focus on them. Liters of rocks, no... tons!

The monitor operator flinched, reflexively pulling away from that visual avalanche.

"Watch it, soldier!" Harris ordered. "Watch your controls!"

Thunder pounded against the passenger compartment's roof and walls. The troopers edged away from the gun ports as the entire vehicle rocked dangerously. The buffeting grew stronger and stronger, a roar of falling rubble washing against the Centipede. Men clutched handholds, growling fearfully. Ria woke, gasping, burrowing into Therese's protective embrace.

Parnell hurled himself toward his wife and the child, sweeping his arms about both of them. Desperately, he wedged between two main bracings of the transport's frame. If *those* went, it didn't matter anyway...

The Centipede rocked sideways in an arc, tilting wildly, losing it. The wall surface was denting beneath relentless battering. Again and again granitic missiles smashed into the now immobilized transport, starting to batter it to pieces.

Chapter V

"Look out... !"

The tilt became unbearable, too much. Gravity won.

The world dissolved into howls of fright and a tumbling confusion of tossing bodies and boxes.

Parnell's knuckles scraped painfully against a hard surface. He braced himself, cushioning the impact for Ter and Ria. His shoulders slammed into an obstruction and for a moment illusionary stars danced in his eyes.

As motion ended and everyone lay stunned, they heard the fading noise of smaller and smaller pieces of rubble hitting the disabled transport.

Then, nothing.

For a split second there was silence. Then groaning and curses, men trying to get to their feet, find their weapons, explore bruises.

"My arm!"

"Dammit, get offa me, you creet!"

"Hey, BUI! You okay, chuckie?"

"Somebody... over here. Help me move this crate!"

Parnell's senses were clearing, the ringing in his ears dissipating. "Ter? You all right? Ria... ?"

"We're... we're okay," Therese assured him breathlessly. "Ria? Honey?"

The girl squirmed free of their too-tight embrace. "What happened? Did the big tank fall over?"

"Something like that," Parnell said calmly. Therese had satisfied herself Ria was unhurt, and now she gently examined her husband's scrapes. He shrugged off her attentions. "That's not important. We'll look at them later. Stay here."

He disentangled himself and struggled to his feet. He was standing on one of the carrier's walls, now aslant. Some of the monitor screens still worked, providing an eerie green light over a scene of disorder. A miasma wafted through the transport's interior—overloaded circuitry frying, most likely. Major Harris and several others were choking on the noxious fumes.

Fighting nausea himself, Parnell climbed over the jumble to the monitor controls. The operator seemed unhurt, but too dazed to think. "We need fresh air, man—quickly!" Parnell snapped. When the soldier didn't react he located the door switch himself, sliding open the seal.

An "Ah!" of relief swept through the carrier. Cold air sucked out the acrid smoke, cleared cobwebby brains. Hurriedly the men staggered outside. Parnell picked up Ria, had Therese cling to his elbow, helping them to the portal. Harris had enough presence of mind to assist the woman safely down to the pavement.

"Would you look at that, chuckie!" one of the men exclaimed amid a babble of similar awed comments.

"We... we almost screamed off for good, that time," another murmured. Parnell scorned the current slang, but agreed.

The entire wall of a five-story building had given way directly in front of the Centipede transport. Perhaps the week of fire and

explosions raging through the city had weakened old foundations. Now tons of brick, masonry, and lumber had toppled into the street, forming a three-meters high barricade. Part of the debris had mashed the Centipede's cargo segment to junk, and the rear segment—as the Parnells could witness—had been knocked completely off its wheels.

He gave Harris credit. The Major knew his business. Once he'd finished coughing smoke out of his lungs he started issuing commands. "Kelley, get up front and see if Lennox is okay." A formality. The driver couldn't be hurt short of a point blank shell burst, not while he was inside that durasteel cab. "Prentiss, check the wheel mounts. Montoya... communications!" As the soldiers scampered to obey Harris turned to Parnell. The two of them regarded the wall of rubble blocking the street and Harris said, "We came off well, considering."

"I doubt if my lab specimens did," Parnell muttered. "I'm glad I sent the animals and more fragile stuff out in the earlier shipments."

"We'll... see what can be salvaged," Major Harris said lamely. Would losing the cargo earn him a black mark from General Grigsby?

Parnell shrugged. "It couldn't be helped, and at least everyone seems intact." He studied the side-tilted rear section of the Centipede transport. "Can we get moving again? And what does this do to our timetable?"

The questions didn't make Harris any happier. "First things first, Doctor Parnell. I've got men checking. I believe we can uncouple the cab and hook on directly to the passenger segment. Probably have to abandon the cargo section—unusable." He ordered a passing non-com, "Sergeant, get some lines. We'll have to put on the muscle-power to right her."

Grigsby had promised Parnell these would be his best troops, and apparently he meant it. Parnell was impressed with their efficiency, once Harris got them organized. The men labored feverishly to dig out of the debris and get the Centipede operational again— and somehow they managed to do it quietly.

That was a tip-off. Secure area or not, the military was still wary of attracting attention. Parnell eyed the darkness, thinking of roving gangs of strikers and Youngers.

The monitor operator was toting a backpack com now, offering the mike to Harris. The officer's tension came through his voice as he said, "You got a patch through to the General's HQ?"

"Yessir! Coming in..."

Grigsby, imperious and worried, spoke from the other end of the signal. "Operation Survival? Rich? Harris? What's the problem out there? We lost our blip on you."

At least they *were* being watched by friendly eyes, though somewhat at a distance, obviously. Parnell suspected Grigsby and back-up troops were much too far away to be of help in this situation.

Harris filled the General in on the Centipede's predicament, painting a much more sanguine picture than Parnell would have. A bit of cross-talk, and he could imagine electronic wall maps and computer printouts shifting, chewing up this new, unexpected data. Calculating the risks for Parnell's party. Modern techniques, but in the end wasn't it going to boil down to individual human beings and their efforts?

"We have a linkage at..." Grigsby broke off momentarily, conferring with his experts at HQ. "... at Kentucky."

Parnell read the Major's unhappy grunt. Apparently Kentucky was a bad option. The monitor operator tapped a hand comp, plugging in a new graph map. A line snaked northward from the Centipede's present, stalled position.

Counting grid intersections Parnell said, "Sixteen blocks? That's a hell of a long way, Ogden." He wasn't sure, but he thought he heard Harris mutter 'longer than you think'. Ignoring that, he went on. "And what's at Kentucky? I see, another slideroad. It's marked non-operational..."

Grigsby's answer was almost too quick, too heartily confident. "We've got people at the Cicero end right now. They'll have it working by the time you reach it."

This time Parnell wasn't mistaken. Harris growled softly, "// we reach it..." Then the Major spoke aloud, "Could we cut south, sir? Down to the Reed Station interchange?"

"That went out an hour ago," the General said curtly. Not allowing his aide any argument. Like most non-scientists Grigsby had a terror of nuclear power stations like Reed. The dangers from an A20 Model were minimal, Parnell knew, but in another sense he approved the old man's attitude; no sense gambling.

Grigsby had dumped the authority on him, and he decided to exercise it, since Harris was dragging his feet. "All right, Ogden. We'll have to try your Kentucky alternate route. The K Leg slideroad, correct? And it had damned well *better* be operational when we get there." His father-in-law started a question about Therese and Ria and Parnell shut him off. "No serious injuries—so far. Now sign off. We've got work to do." He shoved the dead mike at the monitor operator and headed toward the Centipede.

Therese had set up a makeshift first aid station, spray bandaging cuts, doling out acetyls for aching heads. Ria was trying to play student nurse. But the girl kept yawning, nodding off.

"Better move over here, Ter," Parnell suggested. He helped her collect her medical supplies, shifting the aid station further from the tipped over transport. She watched the soldiers rigging lines, preparing to haul the Centipede segment back onto its wheels. Then she cautioned Parnell, "Better take it easy, Richard. You haven't got the callouses for that sort of work."

He tweaked her ear teasingly, glad of the opportunity to hit a light note. "Nag, nag, nag. Mind your business, woman. Can't a man have a little fun?"

She cocked her head and said archly, "Fun?" But she was

smiling indulgently.

Parnell joined the enlisted men on the drag lines, pretending not to notice Major Harris off to one side. Playing officer. No manual labor. Parnell thought one more set of muscles would be welcome, but didn't waste his breath telling Harris so.

He spit on his smooth palms, ignored his scraped knuckles and put his weight on the plasticene cable.

"Lean into it, you creets!" the sergeant chanted, with fine disregard for the civilian's presence.

They got a rhythm going, at first to little effect.

"Heave! C'mon! All together now... !"

Nearly all the men were on the lines. Only the motor techs were, excused. They crawled around beside the wheel housings, goosing solenoids, as if there were no danger should the segment abruptly tip back upright.

As it began to do... but slowly. The techs had time to get clear, still reaching in to prod the whining motors. Mechanical energy joined human, the wheels getting traction, starting to dig in.

"Once more!" the sergeant exhorted. "Hit it!"

Yes, the carrier *was* moving, swinging to its stable one position. Finally, after rocking unsteadily for several long moments she settled drunkenly on her independent suspensions.

Harris, now that the donkey work was done, donned his command suit. "Kelley, cue those motors. Roll her down here on the flat, off that rubble. Get the cab coupled on. We haven't got all night."

The sergeant yessired, started past Parnell. He rolled his eyes sympathetically at the men, including the scientist—one of the gang. Parnell grinned with the rest of them.

But there were other things to check. Cargo. Not a lot worth

saving, as he'd guessed. He commandeered a few men to help him haul crates to the up-righted passenger segment. Harris was plotting route changes with the monitor operator as Parnell began loading the boxes in the already crowded carrier. "Doctor, I'm not sure we'll have room to..."

"You can make it. These specimens are irreplaceable," Parnell said firmly. Therese and Ria were back on board, and his wife shook her head warningly, suggesting tact. Parnell frowned, thinking of delays, unknown dangers out in the streets.

With the additional cargo there wasn't space for all the troops. Five or six were assigned to ride the cab. Parnell noticed they carried heavy-duty stunners, power packs fully charged. "I gather the territory ahead is rough?" he asked Harris.

The Major was stiff, possibly smarting from usurped authority. But he said, "It is indeed. Not the slipper we hoped to take."

Slipper. More slang from vid comedies. Parnell resolved to take Ria off her heavy diet of filmed entertainment. He wasn't being loyal to Emmett's love of books and all the tender tutelage those Olders had lavished on the child, teaching her to read. And besides, Parnell was glutted with bad comics and slapstick humor, including slang like "slipper". He thought the Major was a little old to be using such terms, but kept the comment to himself.

They were underway once more, bumping back the Way they'd come for a block, then northward. Into dangerous territory.

Perhaps unstable walls and crushing masonry falls didn't qualify as dangerous?

"Doctor..." Parnell had been watching the screens, studying the view ahead of the Centipede. Now he looked around. Major Harris was offering him a stunner sidearm. "I think you'd better take this, sir." The officer glanced significantly at Therese and the child.

A primitive emotion tightened ParneU's gut. Dangerous, yes. He didn't think Harris was exaggerating, either. Would it come down to kill or be killed?

Reluctantly, he took the weapon. It was set on Four, Medium Sweep. Lethal. Harris glowered as Parnell jogged the setting down to Low Two. Defensively, Parnell said, "If I have to use it, I believe a low profile is called for. And I'd appreciate it if you'd relay that suggestion to your men."

For a heartbeat Harris resisted. Parnell hadn't exactly made it a command. But Grigsby's *carte*

blanche had its effect. Sourly, he did as Parnell asked.

There wasn't a lot to see on the screens. More dark streets, more rubble. Data spewed out via graphs, tracking grids, a moving record of the Centipede's slow, cautious progress into insecure areas. Not just natural rubble clogged these streets. Burned hulks of buildings, rags, pried up pavement—indications there had been riots here, and recently. Now and then the temperature scanners jumped as the Centipede crawled past a still smoldering ruin.

Other scanners swept rooftops and doorways and alleys, hunting human body heat or any other sign of strangers.

Grigsby's experts hadn't pre-scouted this route. None of Parnell's staff, riding the Centipedes which left earlier, had been forced to go this way. A jungle of masonry and steel—and perhaps inhabited by human predators. Youngers and strikers on the prowl. Maybe even a few hardy Olders, scrounging for food; in the last week's turmoil there hadn't been any dole distributions, and some people must be near starving by now. Desperate, all of them, beyond hope. No thoughts for anything but their bellies and their pain.

Parnell glanced at Therese. Ria was asleep, her cheek pillowed on his wife's breast. Therese smiled at him, then at the child. A family picture as old as mankind, one to arouse the protective instinct in any man more than a brute animal.

But hadn't those gangs on the streets been reduced to that stage?

Parnell's nerves were drawn taut. The Centipede's cab was virtually indestructible. But they'd just had ample proof the carrier segments weren't. Nor were those soldiers riding shotgun on the cab's roof and bumpguards. A well-placed brick thrown by a hidden marauder and...

What? The response would be stunners. Until the weapons were emptied, as they might well be. Then they'd all be back in the jungle, hand to hand. There was plenty of free ammunition in the streets. Anyone could heft a piece of skull-crushing stone, make a club out of a broken hunk of wood.

Humanity had a grisly history. For centuries they'd tried to tame their baser urges, reaching for idealism. Learned table manners, played politics, refined slaughter and caged it with rules. Mankind had dreamed of rising above itself, developing a permanently gentled nature, but...

Grigsby called the rioters animals. But a better term occurred to Parnell: *feral*. That which was once domesticated but through need has reverted to its wild state.

"Up ahead," he said suddenly. The monitor operator tightened focus and Harris leaned forward. Parnell seized the initiative, ordering into the mike, "Driver, stop!"

Inertia dictated they rolled six meters before the Centipede and attached segment could be halted. Parnell intently watched the screen showing the view directly before the vehicle.

They'd traveled several blocks north along their altered route, nearly to Polk Plaza. In calmer days this was a major military check point. Now it was no-man's land.

Further progress was blocked by people. Parnell and the others couldn't see them, but their shadows shifted across the Plaza and out into the bisecting street. Elongated and eerie shadows, and a lot of them. A great many people must be inside the Plaza, ahead and to the Centipede's left.

"The fire must be casting the shadows," Harris said. Then more uncertainly, "I wonder if..."

"We'd better find out what we've got before we try to get by them," Parnell warned.

The Major was in full agreement, ordering the driver to park in the deepest shelter possible. Then he and Parnell started toward the door. Therese looked up worriedly and Parnell nodded and winked. She didn't nag, this time.

They edged alongside the Centipede carefully, very alert. Whispering, Harris collected his sergeant and three troopers who were riding the cab. The six man scouting squad slunk across the street, hiding in boarded-up doorways, quietly leapfrogging toward the Plaza. Parnell almost rated it as a game, something copied from a vid drama. Then he reminded himself the dangers were very real—as real as the stunner pistol in his fist, charged and ready.

A pile of debris formed a low shield abutting the Plaza. The men crouched behind it, peeking over.

Parnell's first startled impression was that he was seeing an old-time carnival, a rally. Not rioters. In fact a rather relaxed crowd, all facing away from the hidden troops.

"Hundreds of them!" Major Harris breathed. His comment slid under the crowd's soft murmuring and reverberations from a public address system. The hundreds of people were facing a jerry-built platform, listening to an orator up on the stage.

"Youngers," Parnell pointed out. "And if I'm not mistaken that's Nevin Detloff pontificating to them."

"You... you're right!" Harris was flabbergasted.

"What's he doing out here? We've got martial law in effect. There's a curfew..."

"Then all of them are breaking it," Parnell observed dryly. "I wouldn't recommend trying to arrest the whole crowd."

One of the soldiers volunteered, "I could pick him off easy from here, Major," and he thumbed the setting on his target stunner all the way back.

Parnell clamped his hand around the barrel, forcing it down. "You want to make a martyr of Detloff? Start a *real* riot? The General would have your hide." The man paled, realizing this truth.

Harris was still marveling. "Detloff. Here. Just like..."

"Real people," Parnell summed up. But not quite. Detloff wasn't alone. The young politician's wealth was legend, and it bought him staff and protection. No uniforms, but nattily dressed guards mingled with the crowd, lined the platform's front, ready to protect their leader. And several cameraman panned the scene constantly, recording. Detloff never wasted a speech or an opportunity. He had a sense of history mixed with his foolhardy rabble rousing.

But he wasn't rabble rousing now.

"What have we been doing to ourselves, friends?" his amplified voice pleaded. "We're tearing our own world apart, making it a living hell. This isn't the way. No, this isn't the way! It gives the enemy a joy-jump. The Olders, and the Employables... they're letting us wreck ourselves. Laughing at us! Calling us irresponsible!"

Parnell cocked his head, listening critically, divorcing his prejudices from his intelligence. The young speaker *was* a true spellbinder, one of the most hypnotic orators Parnell had ever heard. Grigsby's paid front, that silver-haired mannequin, was pallid in comparison.

"He shoulda been a hypnotizer on the vid," one of the soldiers said, spitting scornfully.

"And he would have made a success of it," Parnell agreed. "Listen to him. He's got the secret of effective speechmaking—he believes what he's saying. And that crowd knows it."

Detloff paced the platform, and the cameras swung to capture every lithe movement. Out front, an enraptured audience. Behind Detloff, half a dozen of his personal aides, young men doing their utmost to ape Nevin Detloff's mannerisms, clothes, hair style, his cocksure *notillesse oblige*. But the crowd's attention was riveted on Detloff, inhaling his words... believing.

It was the first time Richard Parnell had seen the Younger demagogue in the flesh and at reasonably close range. He had to admit he was impressed. Physically, the man was attractive. Ria said he was "pretty" and older females felt the same. To men Detloff had the sort of clean-cut, open face that inspired confidence, and an amateur athlete's stride. And topping it all that superbly modulated, masculine voice, full of fire and sincerity. No wonder the politician worked such magic on crowds!

"He's got them in the palm of his hand," Harris acknowledged grudgingly. "And I'll bet an hour ago they were running around looting and burning everything in sight—before he started talking. Look at that." The officer indicated a mammoth bonfire, obviously the source of light they'd all been seeing; an old hotel flanking the Plaza, now put to the torch, serving as flaming illumination for Detloff's rally.

"They're not burning now. They're listening," Parnell said. Nothing between the Younger Party leader and the audience but a thin line of volunteers. If for any reason he lost this crowd, if they turned ugly nothing would save him. "He's certainly got guts."

Detloff was everything the mob longed for— wealthy, physically attractive. A small man, but wiry and agile, a compact gladiator type. A stylish one-piecer fitted the slim, muscular body tautly, revealing surprisingly broad shoulders. Detloff apparently wasn't a traditional flabby rich man. He kept his mind and body equally sharp. Perhaps he saw himself as the beau ideal of his generation. The Youngers. No one over thirty years need apply.

"So what have we got now, friends?" Detloff was asking, in that intimate tone few public speakers' could use successfully.

The crowd was his confidant, a collective comrade. Parnell had no love for the man, yet he gave him points. How much more must an already adoring audience dote on Detloff? Their demi-god, their paragon.

"A whole week of this rioting. And you've got nothing to show for it. Nothing! Except your own misery, friends. Think!"

As Detloff held the crowd some of his people were circulating through the throng. Sling pouches over their shoulders. They were handing out... what? Printed fliers? Ridiculous. Most of this mob couldn't read. The recipients didn't even look down, intent on Detloff.

"What are those men doing?" Major Harris said, narrow-eyed.

"Passing out something. Food, probably," Parnell replied. "Slickest operation I ever saw. When they finally learn what he's given them it'll seem like a gift from heaven. Or from Detloff."

"Bribery," Harris sneered. "Feed them and they'll do whatever he wants."

Parnell smirked, forbearing to mention the obvious. Harris was a career officer, but the rest of these troops... not working for Grigsby for the money. Money didn't mean much, these days. Food, that's what counted. And Grigsby had plenty. Like Detloff's family, Grigsby invested in agricultural land back when it was available. And now... hunger was a very potent weapon, and a very strong bond to purchase loyalty. From a uniformed soldier, or a rioting Younger Party member.

"Every single one of you is important," Detloff said, stabbing a moving finger at the audience. Somehow he seemed to be picking out each individual there. "It's our world, Youngers. We'll have to live in it a long, long time. But think! What are we going to have if we burn it all down? If we let *them* tear it down."

"... And here comes the slander," Harris growled.

Parnell was tempted to recite an old maxim about a shoe fitting. But Detloff's "them" was rhetorical. He was welding the

mob into a docile, obedient gestalt. Controlling them. And for once his motives seemed to be completely non-political.

"Don't you see what he's doing?" Parnell asked. "He's working up to a 'go-home' pitch. And I think he'll make it. Get them off the streets. Stop the rioting. Or their part of it, anyway."

"Well, if he can pull it off..." Harris was dubious. "It would certainly help if we had one less faction to fight."

Yes, civil order must be maintained. But Parnell was thinking of lives. Precious, scarce lives. Young people. A living gene pool. Now, with Ria, there was hope of breaking the infertility riddle. And those healthy Youngers in that crowd needn't be the last generation. They'd be the parents of all the generations to come.

Detloff didn't strut. He was too schooled in mob psychology to do that. Rather his movements were a shifting beacon, avoiding boredom, holding the crowd. Heads swiveled, following him from one end of the platform to the other.

He pounded a fist into cupped palm. A carefully calculated showman's gesture—power under control, performed with grace. "We *must* use our heads, friends. Think! We've got the strength, but have we got the numbers? No. That's the sad truth. You don't batter yourself into a wall. That's only a way to dump it fast. The wall will win. The army? They've got the stunners, the tanks, all their machines. You can't kill a machine, friends."

"No, but you just try killin' *me*, chuckie, and see how long you last," one of the soldiers threatened softly, hefting his rifle.

Detloff couldn't hear that challenge, fortunately. Parnell approved Detloff's tactics. He didn't want to disrupt the effect by letting the audience know the military was eavesdropping.

"Now—what are we going to do, friends?" Detloff demanded, the puppeteer.

"Aaaaa! We gotta keep it together!"

"And how do we *do* that, friends?"

"Aaaaa! We gotta work together for the *Youngers!*"

"That's *right!* But to do that you must have the strength to carry through." Detloff was speaking very rapidly and forcefully, a blazing comet carrying his adoring followers with him. "You must build yourselves in spirit and body..."

Parnell shut it out, momentarily. He felt a burst of insight. Detloff had touched a sensitive area. And he had a right to. The food shortages affected everyone. But the severest economic problems, the collapse of distribution had occurred during the lifetimes of these young persons. Nearly all of them were thinner, shorter than their parents had been. Small-boned, scrawny people... who'd never known enough to eat. Like Ria, acquiring food occupied a lot of their thoughts.

A bountiful nation's seemingly inexhaustible cornucopia had finally run out. Crop failures, no fertilizer, no fuel to power food processing machines, no way to distribute what little came through to the starving populace.

The Youngers, possibly mankind's last generation. Not going out with a bang, but with a sickly, emaciated whimper.

Detloff's assistants by now had been through the entire crowd, shoving those mysterious little packages into every hand. Good workmen. Parnell suspected fewer than a dozen people had been overlooked, and the assistants were scattered amid the mass, ready to take care of anyone shortchanged.

Harris leaned close to Parnell and whispered, "Maybe we should try to sneak past."

"No, not yet." Parnell nodded. The crowd was so large it overflowed the Plaza. No way to get past them with a Centipede without attracting someone's attention. "Wait. He's leading up to those food packages. And I'm betting he'll be able to get them to break up after that."

"Mmm, and leave us a clear field," Harris said. "Throws our timetable off, but... I agree. Better safe than stoned."

"Now, friends," and Detloff smiled boyishly, and feminine sighs rippled through the audience. "None of us have had too many presents these years, have we? Here it is almost springtime, the end of a long hard winter... don't you think that calls for a feast?"

The cameramen were panning the crowd, zoom lensing, ready to catch delighted reactions. Detloff sprang his surprise and the people behaved as expected—gushing pleasure, cries of enthusiasm.

"Hey, food!"

"I got one too!"

"So did I... !"

"Top grade concentrates... !"

Detloff pressed the mike close to his lips, rising above the tumult. "Enough for everyone of you. Anyone get missed? Sing out! Lots more where that came from. Nobody goes hungry tonight, friends!"

It was a promise, and a threat, the demi-god demanding good behavior from his cowering worshippers. And getting it. Yes, he just might be able to pull the whole thing off peacefully...

A movement at the edge of Parnell's vision made him glance away from Detloff's performance. Something in the darkness, up the street, beyond the Plaza. "Watch it," he cautioned Harris. "Those might be latecomers. Could be squabbles until they get their share."

"Chavez, can you make it out?" Harris asked his sharpshooter.

"Not Youngers," the man said, flexing fingers around the trigger guard of his stunner rifle. "And a lot more than one."

Harris motioned his men back further into the sheltering shadows. "On your toes. It may be strikers..."

Parnell could distinguish a few of the leading figures in the approaching group. Wide shoulders, beefy arms. Taller than Youngers. The sharpshooter was right.

The newcomers paused at the fringe of the light, studying the scene within the Plaza. Parnell seemed to sense tangible waves of hate boiling from the men. Harris had out his officer's glasses and now handed them to Parnell. As he raised the binocs faces leaped into focus—hard, angry faces from his own generation. Men in their forties and fifties, wearing workmen's blues. And each one of them carried a club.

"You're right. Strikers. Detloff's got trouble..."

"And so have we," Harris said tensely. "I almost wish... damn! Just a few more minutes and Detloff might have had this crowd't disbanding peacefully. Why couldn't those troublemakers have waited?"

"Because they're hunting a fight..."

At that instant the gang charged, bursting upon the youthful crowd like a shock wave. It was a berserk, thundering attack, loud with threatening roars, punctuated by those ugly, murderous clubs.

Chapter VI

The marauders crashed into the outermost Youngers. Clubs came down on the backs of heads, catching the hapless audience completely off guard.

"This will be a slaughter," Harris assessed. Quite apart from his military tone, he seemed appalled. "They won't have a chance."

"No, listen!" Detloff screamed into his mike. "There's enough food for everyone!"

The attackers hadn't come to listen. In their rush they trampled food packages underfoot. Not food they wanted, but

blood and revenge. Revenge on youth, on approaching old age and death, on a disintegrating society. They wielded their clubs mercilessly wading into the panicky mass.

The sharpshooter said, "Permission to spray 'em, sir?"

Which faction did he refer to? It would be hard to pick targets in this mess. But he guessed the young soldier—given a choice—would turn his weapon on the Middle-Aged Employables.

"No," Harris said sensibly. "Don't do anything to attract attention. They outnumber us ten to one, at least."

Parnell shuffled a few centimeters forward, peering around the corner, into the Plaza. The Youngers on the far side weren't yet sure what was happening. But they scented danger, looked for a way out. The burning hotel blocked their exit. Some of them began scrambling across Detloff's stage and onto the mound of debris barricading the west route out of the Plaza.

Harris was on a hand-corn, speaking to the monitor operator back hi the Centipede. "Got any other human-heat blips?" As Parnell came up beside him Harris sighed and said, "It's an isolated swarm of strikers. Maybe we can jog east, around the Plaza."

He wasn't happy about the prospect, and neither was Parnell. But staying where they were looked riskier by the second. He nodded and Harris relayed orders. "Scan shows an alley, half a block south. It'll be tight, but we can make it... I think."

The howls from the Plaza nearly drowned his words. Detloff was stiu't audible though, his voice boosted by amplifiers. But plainly it was a losing battle. Chaos was taking over.

Parnell and the soldiers retreated slowly, weapons ready. For a heartstopping moment Parnell feared they'd been spotted. A Younger, one of Detloff's cameramen, pelted out of the Plaza and started running their way. The recording pack was still slung over the young man's shoulder, but the severed wires of a lens unit flapped at his thigh.

Then one of the strikers charged after him, roaring curses and waving a blood-stained club. He was taller and longer-legged than his quarry. Parnell rooted silently for the underdog, praying the kid would win free.

But the club came down, driving the victim to the pavement. The striker hit again and again, in a frenzy of bloodlust.

"You..." and the sharpshooter started to lift his weapon.

"No," Parnell said, practically in the man's ear. "I know how you feel—but we can't take the chance."

The striker hadn't seen them, fortunately. He stormed back toward the Plaza, seeking fresh prey. The cameraman lay in his own blood, still. Parnell knew not even Ter's medical training could help the Younger. He swung away, hastened to the Centipede, trying to blot the carnage from his thoughts.

Therese stared as he climbed in and sat down heavily beside her. The transport was warming to softly whining life, reversing, hunting for that elusive alley. Parnell thrust his unused sidearm through his belt. The monitors were picking up the screams now. At the terrible cries Ria stirred in Therese's arms, then snuggled down once more.

Shaken, Parnell caressed the girl's dark hair, smiling thinly at his wife. The nearness of the agony and death out in the streets, ripped at him. He couldn't let that happen to Therese and Ria. He wouldn't, no matter the cost.

"Richard, what is it?" Therese said gently.

It was several minutes before he regained his composure sufficiently to tell her what had happened.

"We... caught a little of it, on the monitors," she said, commiserating. "Not Youngers, this time." Was she thinking of her father's party, and his military watchdogs? Who was the enemy, who the victim in this ongoing disaster?

"I'm afraid Detloffs wealth won't do him any good at the

moment," Parnell said. To his own surprise he felt a pang of regret. Too bad. He just gotten a glimpse of a deeper, more sincere Nevin Detloff tonight, and now...

III

He stared at the monitor screens. The Centipede's tracking devices had located the alley, and now they were traveling along it. Turning, paralleling the riot-torn Plaza. Intervening buildings guarded them from most of the screams, but flame-light rose into the sky. The Centipede's overhead scanners picked up the glow, and some of the verbal debacle a block away.

"Just listen to that!" Parnell exclaimed bitterly. "Are they worth trying to save? All our work..."

Therese closed a hand over his, then bent over his knuckles in concern. A moment later and she was treating his scrapes, taking his mind away from pessimism and disgust. He'd been hasty. No need to write off the whole human race. That included Ter, and Ria, and a lot of other good people. He smiled, watching her fuss over his minor injury. Her high cheekbone was smudged and her hair tousled. She wasn't the type to worry about primping, or need to.

"I changed my mind," he said lightly. "I'll see that they're saved in spite of themselves. That's good enough. I want to check outside."

The Centipede was creeping. Parnell had no trouble dropping out the rear gate and dogtrotting forward to hitch a ride on the cab's bump guard. He joined the sharpshooter, a sergeant, and Major Harris.

"We're about a block north of them now," Harris said by way of update. He kept his voice low. Certainly no one would hear them, but probably caution was a good habit to cultivate, these days.

"Good thing. We'll have to veer west again, won't we?" Parnell commented. "Didn't the map show a dead end?"

Harris nodded. They'd already reached the alley's junction with a cross outlet. The Centipede carefully jogged left, hesitated to scan, then eased onto the main street.

The Plaza was behind them now, and so was the rioting. Flight and pursuit seemed to have headed the other direction. Harris spoke into the com. "Pick it up a bit more, Lennox. They're not likely to hear the motors now."

Parnell absently stared into the darkness, alert for any movement, but not expecting any. Why were these mobs so cretinous? How long would it be before the victorious strikers started squabbling among themselves? Over food, over women, over... nothing but their hatred. The senselessness of it!

He tried to keep the wider view. Ria. Research. Put the world back together again. Tell them all this *wouldn't* be the end of humanity after all. Not the last generation, but the beginning of a new era, hopefully one better than the last. *That* would make the mobs use the brains they'd forgotten they had.

If he could just get out to Jesse's lab, get organized for a fresh push, analyzing the samples from Ria...

"Sir!" The sharpshooter pointed, swung his weapon.

Four men staggered out of the shadows from the left. Two men supporting a third, another stumbling along behind them.

There was a muted whine from the marksman's weapon—sonic primers keying up. "Hold it, soldier," Harris ordered, taking the words out of Parnell's mouth. "Till we make an identification."

The foursome halted, gaping at the truck. Plainly they were near the end of their strength, fearful this was the end—one more attack they couldn't defend against

The real danger was to their rear, though.

Three more men, taller than the first four—and armed—ran out from the stygian fringes of the street. "Here's one for you, you

dirty Younger bastard!" one panted, lifting a club.

Even as he brought it down Parnell and the soldiers were jumping down to the pavement. Harris was ordering the driver to stop as they hurried to counter.

One of the Youngers was down, and the other three were barely fending off the assault. Two tried to protect the third with their bodies, but the match was cruelly uneven.

Parnell caught the shoulder of the nearest striker, brushed off the clumsy swing with the club. Then he used the man's own momentum to send him spinning into a wall.

"What the hell... who you pushin', chuckle?"

Parnell spared a glance down. The young man who'd been struck lay at his feet. The dim light picked out close-cropped blond hair and pale, unseeing eyes. A sickening smear of blood along the back of the neck. Young. Just a kid.

As the middle-aged tough lumbered forward again Parnell reacted instinctively. This time he wrenched the club out of the man's fist. Not as difficult as he thought. The striker wasn't expecting it, and Parnell found he topped the man half a head and a few pounds.

He slammed a knee into the striker's solar plexus, then used the club to pole him backwards into a sprawl.

He didn't put as much beef into it as he could have. At the last moment he pulled his punch, half-horrified by his own vicious urges. Even so the man lost all fight, clutching a bloody nose, crawling into the darkness.

The other attackers hadn't been so lucky. Harris's men turned loose their weapons, sent them down. One of them was still twitching from the blast of the sonics.

Major Harris was smiling slyly. "Rather impulsive of you, Doctor. But glad to have you on our team. Next time try using your sidearm?"

Before Parnell could frame a retort a young voice cried, "Ian! They... they killed him!"

One of the fugitives knelt over his dead friend. The other two begged, "We have to get out. There may be more of them." All of them were bloodied and bruised, their natty onepiecers torn.

"We can't just *leave* him like this," the leader wailed, anguished, lifting his head.

Startled by recognition, Parnell gasped, "Detloff?"

It *was* the chieftain of the Youngers. Detloff had undergone a severe transformation since his performance. Clothing ripped, his handsome face dabbled with dirt and bloodspots, a nasty bruise swelling over his right temple. In the wavering light the young man's dark eyes were glittering, fiery with shock and pain.

"Get out!" he raged, close to hysteria. "I won't abandon him! Won't abandon any of them!"

"I'll be damned," Major Harris said, reaching the identification Parnell had. "Detloff."

One of the other fugitives flared, "Yes, he's Nevin Detloff. He doesn't walk on air. Can't you have some pity? He's been broadcasting without letup nearly four days. No sleep, no food, and now this..." The youthful aide paused, sneering at the uniforms. "But I wouldn't expect *you* to appreciate that—or what he's done to abort these riots."

The second man leaped into the argument. "Trying to blame everything on us. It's Grigsby's goons who stir up the worst trouble. You! And that silver-haired puppet of the General's. Shoving those lies at the Olders and Employables, telling them to hang onto a world they've already ruined!"

Detloff wasn't alone in his exhaustion. All three men were injured on the edge of collapse. The soldiers didn't like being called goons, and Parnell hastily stepped between the factions. "Easy," he warned the Youngers. "This isn't the best time or place."

Shakily, Detloff lifted his hand, gingerly palpating the bruise at his hairline. "Can't... can't think..."

"No wonder." Simple humanitarianism pushed at Parnell. "Where were you headed? Any of your people nearby?"

"These Youngers are breaking curfew," Major Harris began, but Parnell silenced him with a glare. It held momentarily, then the officer snapped, "There's a *need* for martial law right now. Do you want more proof than what happened back in the Plaza? With those strikers on the loose no one's safe. The curfew's for their own protection..."

"We... we lost most of our people, there," one of Detloff's aides said, nodding toward the Plaza. "They ran over us. I... I'm afraid the guards were killed. And they burned the media cars, smashed cameras..." And cameramen, Parnell added mentally. "Smashed everything! They're animals!"

He sounded like a young version of General Grigsby. Parnell didn't linger over the irony. "No, they're just human beings—at their worst. The Major's right. You're not safe here. You'd better come with us." Harris blinked, taken aback by the use of his own logic.

"Nevin?" one of the aides asked tentatively.

"I don't... have we been reduced to...?" Detloff stared at the body of his dead comrade, conceding bitterly, "What choice have we, Lew? What's that old phrase about out of the... the..."

"Frying pan and into the fire," Parnell finished for him. "I can guarantee there'll be no summary executions among us." He didn't look at the fallen Younger but at least Harris caught the clue, nodded assurances.

Detloff mourned the dead man once more, protesting he wouldn't leave his followers. The aides appealed to Parnell, past marshaling arguments.

"It wouldn't be wise," Parnell said gently. "And you said yourself there are others. At times like these the deepest honor

you can offer your dead is to live, carry on their ideals."

Almost out on his feet, Detloff mulled Parnell's words, spoke a half-concession. "That's... that's true." His companions seized that, supporting him, half dragging him toward the Centipede.

Parnell cut off Major Harris's *sotto voce* complaints, trailing the Youngers to the transport. Getting the three men aboard wasn't easy. At first the soldiers didn't want to assist at all. But when they saw Detloff, clinging to consciousness, determinedly attempting to pull himself up the high gate, they were shamed. Half a dozen men lifted the spent refugees into the safety of the carrier.

That accomplished, Parnell rounded on Harris. "If we intend to hit K Leg tonight, we'd better get moving."

"Very well, Doctor. But I intend to report..."

"Report anything you damned well please. But get us out of here, before we end up in a confrontation with more strikers," Parnell said heavily. He hadn't thought he'd need to pull rank, wave Grigsby's authority at the officer. Perhaps it wasn't necessary. Perhaps he was tired. They all were.

The Centipede was starting to roll again by the time Parnell knelt beside Therese. She was caring for the Youngers' injuries, and the troops were back at their gunports, pretending none of this had happened. Detloff and his aides were age contemporaries of the soldiers, but a sharp line divided their loyalties.

An autohypo hissed against Detloff's bared bicep and Therese said, "That should make you feel better. Just sit quietly until I fix these cuts. There don't seem to be any broken bones."

"Th... thank you," Detloff murmured. He gazed wonderingly at Therese, then at Parnell, intelligently making the linkage. Despite his pain he was courteous. "I'm sorry for my earlier remarks, sir. I didn't realize your wife was..."

Then he broke off, dumbfounded. Ria had wakened, yawning

loudly. Therese smiled, and as the girl immediately wanted to play student nurse Therese indulged her. She guided small hands around the sterile spray. "Press evenly. There! We made a nice clean bandage."

Ria made a face. "Keep out the germs. Mean germs. They make you sick!"

"That's right," Therese agreed, rummaging in her med kit.

Detloff raised himself on one elbow, a risky effort in his weakened condition. Wide-eyed, he touched fingertips under Ria's chin. The girl was annoyed, shaking him off. Then she did a double-take. "Heeeey! I know you!" Innocently, she asked Parnell, "Is he really Detloff?"

Before Parnell could reply the young man whispered, "A... a little girl! Lew, I think I got hit worse than I thought."

"No, she's real." Parnell grinned conspiratorially at his wife.

The Youngers gaped disbelievingly at Ria, and the child was somewhat unnerved by their scrutiny. She decided to return Detloff's stare, growing sly. "I thought you'd be as tall as Richard is. You *look* tall, on the screens."

That shook Detloff out of his trance. He met Par-Hell's eyes, astutely pegging the scientist as "Richard". Good-naturedly he laughed, amused at himself. "No, I'm not tall. And I'm sure a psychiatrist—if there are any of them left—would rattle off theories about over-compensation. No matter. Maybe if I'd grown as tall as your father did, love, I wouldn't have this urge to lead my Youngers... to their deaths."

Not letting him succumb to fresh gloom, Parnell said, "Compensation can come in a lot of forms, Detloff. I'm not Ria's father, though I wish I were."

Ria shook her head, confiding to Therese, "They're silly."

Therese smirked, very feminine, treating Ria as should an adult confidante. "All men are, sometimes. Hand me those

alco-swabs, honey."

Parnell sympathized with Detloff's awe, recalling his own when he'd first encountered Ria. At this moment the young politician was very vulnerable, genuinely likable. Injuries hadn't marred his dark good looks, nor the sensitivity in those sharp brown eyes. Further, Detloff had proved amply his courage, and his loyalty to his people. Four days and nights[^] on the media, trying to stop the carnage in the streets. Now risking his life, going out to speak in person, daring anything to help his followers. There was a core of altruism under the political manipulation...

As there was with General Ogden Grigsby's dealings.

If there was a way to strike a truce between Detloff's Youngers and the older people Grigsby could influence...

The prize was certainly worth the attempt.

"She's... not your child?" Detloff said. He looked from Parnell to Therese thoughtfully. His expression was peculiar. Hungry. Not his belly. Something else.

Therese smiled gently at Ria and explained, "I wish we *were* her biological parents. But they're dead."

Suddenly Parnell saw the truth behind that rapacious greed in Detloff's eyes. This young nabob had everything—wealth, breeding, power, intelligence. He was from the cream of human society, the elite. But like Richard Parnell and every other man on earth now Detloff couldn't sire a son or daughter. No child to carry on that illustrious line. All Detloff's many gifts and privileges would die with him.

Parnell was selfless enough to concede that would be a loss to the human race. The young man's genetic structure *was* important. His potential children would undoubtedly be contributors to mankind's progress. The type of people the world would need in the future, people who could think, help put tottering civilization back on its feet.

It was a hunger Parnell knew well. He felt the same deprivation. Childlessness—knowing his intelligence, his being would die utterly when he did—was a festering wound Parnell had learned to live with. Detloff hadn't yet.

The drug Therese had given Detloff was having some effect now. He was sloughing off lack of sleep and physical and emotional stress. Driving himself, mental wheels turning busily. Parnell had seen Ogden Grigsby push himself the same way, often. Neither the General nor Detloff was scientifically trained, but both men had plenty of brains and natural cunning.

"Ria's being here changes the situation, doesn't it?" Parnell said craftily.

"You... you know who her real parents were?" Hope underlined Detloff's question. The child-buyer. And if one woman was fertile, mightn't there be others? Others who Detloff's charm could...

"We're backtracking their ancestry." Parnell was way ahead of the younger man. "So far it seems to be a unique case. But we're testing Ria's genetic structure. In a few years..." Therese eyed him thoughtfully. Parnell felt strangely dispassionate. Disparity of age wouldn't matter. *Could* he think of Detloff as a possible mate for a nubile Ria? Difficult, but not impossible.

Detloff studied all of them. Yes, a very good mind inside that handsome head. "You're scientists. Both of you." They weren't wearing lab smocks, but Detloff had placed them anyway. "Haven't I seen your pictures on a fact-sheet? Lew, Brent?" His aides were groggy, not as swift on the uptake.

"I'll save you the trouble. I'm Richard Parnell, and this is my wife, Therese. We direct the Life Sciences Project."

"Of course!" Detloff said, chagrined he hadn't made the connection.

"That's... one of Grigsby's pets," Lew muttered, suspicious.

"If you want to put it in those terms. Ogden partially bankrolls

us, but our work is completely independent." Parnell was holding Detloff's interest, and that was what counted. A paradox—the media's best crowd-pleaser playing audience to a tired and disheveled immunologist. "For nearly twenty years we've been trying to find a method of making human beings fertile once again."

For several minutes Detloff sat silent, thinking. Therese completed her first aid and Ria helped her repack the kit. Then she took the child onto her lap, cuddling her to sleep. Detloff's exciting presence had already lost its appeal for the drowsy girl.

Detloff stared at foster mother and child. In a seeming non-sequitur he asked Parnell, "You're what... about thirty-five?"

"Thanks for the compliment. You're ten years short."

"The point is when you were my age you believed you had the right—and the ability—to 'start a family'. Or however the quaint term went. No matter that biology was even then proving you wrong," Detloff said. "You believed it, didn't you?"

Therese looked pained. Parnell shook his head, making excuses for the young man's lack of tact. Detloff was tired, hurt, not up to par.

Even as he thought that Detloff realized his error. "I... I'm sorry. That was terribly gauche of me."

Ria blinked sleepily, interested, craning her neck to ask Therese, "What's 'gauche'?" The woman bent her head, whispering the answer, and Ria promptly dozed off again.

Detloff was fascinated by the girl's question, her obvious brightness. With difficulty he picked up his thread. "I meant... the two of you are older. You had hope, however briefly. I never did. Even when I was barely pubescent I knew I was a member of the last generation."

"Nevin..." It was Lew, the less injured of the two aides. He seemed concerned for his chief's emotions. More than an employer and subordinate relationship. Detloff held his men's

hearts.

"No, I'm all right," Detloff said absently. His fiery gaze bored questingly at Parnell.

And Parnell knew what haunted the young man. "There may be other children besides Ria. We think there are. Grigsby's people will conduct a search—if they can ever stop trying to control riots. Understandably, the General can only reach certain segments of the population though. And those aren't the segments where we're likely to find young parents. They'll respond to Nevin Detloff, but..."

Detloff nodded, instantly grasping the possibilities. "I'm not sure how much help I could be. You see me at a disadvantage, sir," he said, chuckling wryly. "Cut off from my staff and operations..."

"The riots will be over, eventually," Parnell countered. "Do what you were telling that crowd to do— think long range. Every person in this city, in the world—even your enemies—is vitally important, genetically. We're working on a lot of alternates. Sperm banks, some success with ova banks, cloning's an outside chance. You see, until we learn if Ria is going to be fertile, we're on borrowed time. And the interest rates are incredible," he finished sourly.

"I've always tried to stop the violence," Detloff defended himself. "That's not my way. But so many of the Youngers believe they've nothing to live for..."

"Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow everyone will be dead. But you can convince them otherwise.

I'll let you film Ria, if that will help. Look at her.

She's eight years old," Parnell said, very intent, using his best persuasion. "You needn't be the last generation, not unless you choose suicide. Think what this means. To you, to me, to everybody. Even to Ogden Grigsby."

Detloff and his aides looked at the soldiers, listened to the soft

whine of the Centipede's motors, reminded of where they were, whose hospitality they were enjoying. "The General... ?"

"Is protecting our project—and Ria," Parnell explained. "The riots killed our power at the downtown lab. We're relocating to a sister lab, out in the SDP."

Therese drew Detloff's attention, lifting her lovely head proudly. "Richard's not being completely honest, Mr. Detloff. We have a bit of additional clout. General Grigsby's my father. But he's sincerely dedicated to our research. You must believe that." She paused, then added a clincher. "You and he share something. The same feelings. Yes, you do. He wants a grandchild desperately... and I can't give him one."

Detloff flushed, sympathetic, moved. Again Parnell began to hope there might be hope for compromise. A coalition. A combining of resources and talents— Grigsby's and Detloff's. Jesse had put his finger on it, a week ago. The clonist had been sarcastic, but hi this case absolutely right. Between them Ogden Grigsby and Nevin Detloff controlled an awesome amount of the country's remaining potential. Was there any limit to what they might accomplish if they became allies instead of enemies? Both men wielded tremendous power. Now if Richard Parnell could only *aim* that instrument...

The Younger Party leader fingered the transparent spray bandage over his bruised temple. "I... it's hard to organize my thoughts tonight. Gets blurry when you've cranked out too much oratory on demand."

A big admission, though possibly inadvertent. "Whose demand?" Parnell asked. "Yours? Or the crowd's?"

Detloff bit his lip. "I'm not entirely to blame for what's been happening..."

"No, all the political leaders share that burden, including powers behind the faces, like my father-in-law. Every politician and string-puller manipulating a special faction, fanning frustrations," Parnell said bitterly.

"They're genuine frustrations!"

"Agreed, but we all have them," Parnell insisted. "With the possible exception of a few rare types like Ria's parents. They were Wild Fringers, free spirits, and they were immune to the infertility factor."

He let that sink in, then hammered Detloff with his own logic and catch phrases. "Think! Maybe there are others like Ria's parents. Fertile women. Men whose sperm won't trigger that immuno reaction from the ova. Those are the people we've been hunting for two decades and more. Immunes! But we're never going to crack this problem if those people are afraid to reveal themselves, reveal their children."

Parnell glanced at his wife and Therese nodded encouragingly. He waded in deeper. "Would *you* reveal your immunity, in their position? Seeing society disintegrating, tearing itself to bits, generation fighting generation. Youngers, Olders, Middle-Aged Employables... killing themselves and each other."

Suddenly abashed by his own glibness, Parnell stopped, sheepishly raking the stubble of beard on his jaw. Detloff grinned admiringly. "You'd have made a fair media orator yourself, Doctor." But behind the humor lay more serious consideration. Plainly Detloff was following Parnell's lead, weighing the argument. "I think we just might..."

Marksmen shifted at their posts and the monitor operator leaned back in his seat, sighing. Parnell became aware the Centipede had stopped.

The rear seal snapped open and Major Harris climbed in. He stood arms akimbo, frowning at Detloff and the other Youngers. Parnell braced himself for one more militaristic and narrow-minded tirade.

But Harris had something else on his mind. "We've reached the K Leg, Parnell."

Not missing the disrespect in the tone, Parnell asked, "Blockaded? Rioters?"

"No, fortunately the area seems totally deserted." Harris didn't let the listeners enjoy his announcement. "With good reason. Nothing here for them. The road *isn't* operational. And we can't get through to the General's HQ. Radiation interference from the nuke stations, maybe."

Parnell snorted at that uniformed fear. "Not likely. Well, if the slideroad isn't moving, why don't you use it like a conventional road?"

He thought Harris would start yelling. The officer reddened, fighting anger. "Do you think I'm so short of brains, Parnell?"

"My apologies. Obviously the same reasoning occurred to you, and you have very good grounds for rejecting it..."

The Major wasn't as triumphant as Parnell anticipated. He seemed, rather, defeated, dejected. "We haven't the battery reserve to even start the attempt. Used it up getting this far. We've got just about enough power to jog her down onto the slideroad." Parnell noted the monitor operator was shutting down his viewscreens, dropping to lowest possible amperage. The sight was ominous, preparing him for Harris's finale. "And then we're through. Dead on the concrete."

Chapter VII

One of the soldiers guarding the Centipede shifted nervously. "Gonna be sunup soon. Hope they get that thing workin' by then."

"You bet, chuckle," another agreed.

Tired of cooling his heels inside the transport, Parnell had come out for some air. He inhaled deeply, stretching, easing the kinks out of cramped muscles. His senses seemed drawn taut by fatigue. Too many crises, too little sleep.

In the east the faintest suggestion of greying light streaked the sky above the metropolis. That cold, eerie time just before dawn, when all the world slept. A preternatural silence surrounded the

Centipede. Only this military vehicle and the troops guarding it. Nothing else anywhere but stone and steel.

The stillness and the glow of approaching dawn recalled a scene from Parnell's past. He was young then, starting his science career, perhaps on some early morning errand. "The sky above the city used to look like that all night, every night," he reminisced, indicating the pale eastern horizon.

The soldiers glanced at him quizzically. Not sure why he bothered to go on, Parnell pointed at a scattering of fading stars. "We had to travel into the country to see those. The city's lights blotted them out."

Now the young men were openly skeptical. They didn't believe him. Why should they? It had been decades since humanity could afford to be prodigal with electric power.

Ruefully, Parnell murmured to himself, "But it *was* true. And the growing season in this latitude was five months long, then. Before the climate shifts. Before the plagues, and the famines." He was getting as bad as Grigsby. Wallowing in nostalgia for the old days.

"Well?" Major Harris was complaining softly. "Come on. You're supposed to be the specialist, Prentiss."

Prentiss was the Centipede's top mechanic. For nearly an hour he'd been laboring over the slideroad control box. And spitting obscenities in frustration. "Can't dump it, sir. Ain't built like the one on the Southwest Leg."

Parnell shook his head sadly. He didn't blame the soldier. The man was probably illiterate, or knew a few simple mechanical symbols. If he hadn't been checked out on this particular system, he was out of luck. And so were the troops and civilians depending on him.

Impatient, aware of their exposed position, the threat of roving mobs, Parnell surveyed their surroundings. Still quiet. So far. How long? How much longer could they risk being stalled here?

Major Harris had been huffy, his toes stepped on earlier. He'd take care of the slideroad problem. A military situation. Slideroads were under North Central Divisional jurisdiction, and this was martial law.

But he'd said that an hour ago, and Parnell saw no progress at all.

"They seem to have problems." Parnell turned. Detloff and his aide, Lew. He thought they'd been sleeping. Perhaps they too were bored, apprehensive at the wait. Detloff was limping badly, shouldn't have been on his feet. Too stubborn to stay put.

"You might say their problems are ours," Parnell reminded the Youngers. "I happen to know Grigsby's forces are stretched to the breaking point. I doubt he can spare any to search for us. As long as the weather stays clear those strikers will be on the prowl, keeping the army busy."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry," Lew sneered. "With those sonic cannons our friends are carrying..."

"Those aren't inexhaustible. And until they are, how many people will be hurt or die? You want more of that?"

Detloff and his aide considered that, abashed. The young politician looked bleak. "I agree, Doctor. Your wife says Brent's in worse shape than we thought. Needs a hospital. If we can find one still operational." Concerned for his people, he added vehemently, "We've got to."

Parnell started toward the slideroad controls. Lew piped up, "Going to offer the Major some intelligent advice?"

"Something like that."

"For Brent's sake, thanks," Detloff said gratefully.

"Don't celebrate yet. I'll see what I can do." Parnell got a chilly reception from Harris, ignored it. He leaned over the tech's shoulder and said, "May I be of assistance?"

"Thank you, no," the officer answered. "We'll manage."

"You aren't doing too well so far. Have you checked time, Major? I think you're due for another opinion. What's the trouble, Corporal?" Parnell said. He used the same tone he would have hi asserting his authority in a science lab. It worked in these circumstances, too.

After a brief glance at Harris the tech sat back on his heels and sighed. "No idea, sir. I been checked out on an O'Neill model, but this one's different."

"Of course it is!" Harris exclaimed. "It was built in the Nineties, never put into use."

"Then or now," Parnell agreed. He tentatively nudged a few controls, found them stiff with corrosion. "This road must have been the ultimate hi bad timing. They completed it just as the worst catastrophes in millennia hit simultaneously. No more cars. Who could waste petrochemicals in an auto engine? This thing's filthy, Corporal."

"Sure is. She was sealed up tight. Controls should have been as good as new..."

"Vandals didn't do the damage. Time and weather did," Parnell explained, studying the schematic on the control cover.

"Y'make anything o' that, chuckie?"

Parnell winced at the abhorred slang. "Basically there's not much that *can* go wrong here, except natural decay. Thing should have had maintenance," he said absently, tracing the circuitry. This wasn't precisely his field, but he could read, and the setup looked reasonably simple. If the integral circuits and relays hadn't rusted out completely, there was a quick way to clean it up, give it a test.

He drew the sidearm Harris had given him. The Major tensed and Detloff and Lew eyed one another curiously. Parnell chuckled at their fears. "What..."

what are you going to do, Doctor?" Harris demanded uncertainly.

"Hopefully, get your slideroad moving." Parnell let the dawn light fall over his shoulder, on the weapon's controls. He frowned and said, "I'll need hypersonics on a tightly coherent beam. What's the setting, Corporal?"

"Now what is that supposed to... ?"

Parnell didn't let Harris get a good start on his protest. "It's a cleaning technique, Major. We've used it in scientific laboratories since at least the 1960s. Take my word for it, it's nothing very unusual. As far as I can see the main thing wrong with these controls is corrosion. And the quickest way to get rid of the surface crud is hypersonics. Now do you tell me how to set this thing, or do I guess at it—and possibly overload?"

Grumpily, Harris nudged a couple of glide switches on the sidearm. "There. That's what you asked for. But I don't see..."

"Have a little patience. You had me growing moss, waiting inside that carrier. I think you can stand a minute or two of suspense." Parnell paced off a few meters, waved Harris and the corporal out of firing range. He trained the sonic weapon on the control box and pressed the trigger.

Clean sound. Used for good purposes. The gun was well designed; no sonic backlash at all when you were behind it.

Parnell lowered the weapon, gestured to the enlisted man. "Check it. See if she's loosening." A positive report. Parnell tried two more fifteen-second bursts. That's about what he would have used in the lab on dirty equipment. Though he'd never encountered quite *this* much corrosion.

He shoved the sidearm in his belt as the tech wiggled the controls. Parnell felt a subsurface quivering, as of machinery stirring out of years of dormancy. He looked expectantly toward the slideroad. A beckoning light winked on at the nearby entry slot. Welcoming the traveler. He hoped that wasn't an idle promise.

Jerkily at first, the gridstrips and rollers out in the main road began to shift. The technician played with the controls for a moment, doing arcane things to the relays. The operation of the mechanical highway smoothed. Then it obediently notched to "hold". Waiting for passengers.

"Y'did it, chuckie!" the corporal exulted.

Detloff and Lew nodded approvingly. Their heads were together, a hasty whispered conference going on. More Younger politics? What were they up to?

"Good work, Corporal," Harris said, pointedly snubbing the civilian who'd done the work.

Detloff interrupted, "Major, we've got a badly injured man in your carrier. Could we take him to our headquarters? He needs..."

"You violated curfew, Mr. Detloff. You and your party are under arrest." Harris was maddeningly officious, the sort of prig who invited a punch in the nose.

"I'm talking about a man's life, you cretin!" Detloff flared, none too diplomatically. Plainly the crowd-pleaser was tired, worn thin by strain and injury— and in no mood to put up with Major Harris's thickheadedness.

Harris didn't give a centimeter, knowing he had the manpower and weapons to back his orders.

"Frankly, sir, with conditions the way they are now, one life more or less doesn't seem to matter much."

"You mean a *Younger's* life doesn't matter," Detloff corrected him, coldly angry.

"Read it any way you want," the officer said, brushing off the politician. "Kelley, let's get organized."

As Harris turned away Detloff started to lunge for him. Parnell had to interpose. "Easy. You don't look suicidal to me,

Detloff. You tackle him and you'll draw half a dozen sonic bursts before you know what hit you." ,

"Brent... you heard that bastard! He doesn't give a damn if Brent dies..."

Tactfully, shunting the subject, Parnell asked, "What were you going to do for your man if you could get to Younger HQ? Hospitals aren't what they used to be. All of them will be swamped, too, thanks to the riots. And really good doctors are scarce these days."

"That's... we've got to do *something*," Detloff said helplessly.

"Okay." Parnell seized the chance to put his proposition. "I've got some very competent people on *my* staff. You might be doing your friend a kindness if you *did* accept the Major's 'protective custody.' Let him call it 'arrest' if he wants. It'll get Brent to some good doctors. Better than you could hope for most other places—and sooner."

"You're... very generous, Doctor Parnell. I thank you," the Younger said, obviously thinking hard, mulling the alternatives.

Pressing it home, Parnell added, "With any luck we'll be at Northwest Cloning in less than an hour. Unless you've got resources I can't imagine, that's better than you could do heading back east, isn't it?"

Grudgingly, Detloff nodded, buried in logic. And by fatigue. Lew slapped his chieftain's shoulder and said cheerfully, "He's making sense, Nevin. Best deal Brent could hope for."

"Besides," Parnell added slyly, "that'll give you a chance to stick close to Ria. Unless I read you wrong, that appeals."

"You read me very well," Detloff said, smiling. He cocked his head, eyeing Parnell thoughtfully. "Ever think about going into politics? You've got the knack. Finding the right buttons to push, and making people think it was their idea all along."

"Oh? That's not the way my father-in-law runs his party. But

maybe he leaves the psychology to the party mouthpiece..."

"You're definitely a leader-type, Parnell," Detloff insisted. Parnell wondered if it was a recruitment pitch. Ludicrous. He was much too old to join Det-loff's Youngers.

"Genetics." Lew was nodding solemnly. Again Parnell felt an unspoken bond between the two young men. "And compromise."

There was a lot of activity among the soldiers now. Trying to be as quiet as possible. Inevitably there were barked shins and elbows in ribs and bitten-off curses. The Centipede had stopped short of the slide-road's entry slot. The heavy transport was pushing its last reserves of battery power, and needed help. Muscles. The cab lurched like a drunken metal elephant, power packs whining.

"A little more... little more," Sergeant Kelley was saying, circling his hand hi a come-ahead signal.

The troops had slung their weapons, put shoulders against the transport. Parnell too grabbed a handhold, added his strength. To the uniformed men beside him this was one more hard job. Parnell saw the larger picture—life and death. It was vital they get the transport, and Ria, out of the city to safety.

Still no radio contact. Maybe a failure in the Centipede's systems. Maybe some slopover from nuke stations. Whatever the cause Grigsby would have had no word from them for hours. Parnell empathized with the old man's worry. If the General's heart failed, if his iron control holding back utter chaos faltered...

"Hey, you! Stop!"

Parnell twisted around. Someone was running away from the slideroad—toward the nearby buildings.

It was Lew, Detloff's aide. Nevin Detloff wasn't exactly cheering his friend on, but he was smiling broadly. This had been planned.

A few of the soldiers were raising their rifles, taking aim on the fleeing Younger.

"Hold your fire!" Parnell snapped.

His unexpected command—even though it came from a civilian—was the deciding factor. The troops hesitated for a fraction of a second. Long enough for Lew to dart into the shadows, out of range. Detloff threw Parnell a grateful nod.

"You told him to make a break for it," Harris growled, advancing on Detloff.

"He's gone now, Major. Drop it."

"Because of you, Parnell." Harris shifted his anger to the scientist. Meeting Parnell's unflinching gaze, he ordered, "Sergeant, I want Mr. Detloff tied and watched at all times from now on."

Completely unperturbed, Detloff offered his wrists to the non-com. Not resisting at all. Parnell guessed that wasn't necessary. Whatever Detloff wanted done,

Lew would carry out. Detloff was content to stay here, a prisoner—accompanying Ria and seeing that his friend Brent had proper care.

Harris was wrestling, none too successfully, with a boiling rage. "I've had just about enough interference from you, Parnell..."

"Then spill your guts to Ogden—when we link up with him. At the moment the only thing that counts is *moving*," Parnell felt an abstract responsibility to the unconscious Younger in the transport; he'd promised Detloff the man would have medical care, and he'd keep his word. But Therese and Ria deserved more. He wouldn't let Harris's temper jeopardize their safety.

Sergeant Kelley and his work gang were already back on the Centipede, pushing hard. With a final, rocking whisper the vehicle slid into the entry slot grooves. "Okay, that's it!" Kelley

said hoarsely.

Technician Prentiss was setting up their pre-plotted route. Westward, out of the city. Not the way they'd originally planned, but Grigsby would track them down once they were clear of the radio interference. The Centipede and carrier segment took up two of the slideroad's gridstrips. Two more strips fore and aft would ride along for the troops.

The strips were slightly less than three meters wide, barely sufficient to accommodate the Centipede's bulk. The slideroad had never been intended to carry military vehicles. But it was well built, tough. Parnell knew weight was no problem. The automatic sequences coupled the four strips together with magnetic pull, a mechanical floating carpet.

They'd travel over an endless succession of frictionless rollers. None of the other lanes need operate.

Not that power was a problem, here. The slideroad was constructed to soak up and use solar energy. A

very efficient, self-contained operation. Virtually foolproof.

The gridstrips were easing through the entry slot, into the main road. Technician Prentiss had finished the programming, resealed the control box. He hopped on the rear panel beside his fellow soldiers. Everyone on board.

The Centipede and her accompanying troops rode out onto the slideroad and began to accelerate. Detloff, his hands tied, awkwardly levered himself down to a sitting position—like a tourist settling in to enjoy the ride. Harris and Sergeant Kelley stood a few feet away, by the carrier's rear door. They were watching the politician closely, alert for any further breaks. But Detloff obviously had no such plan in mind.

Parnell climbed into the transport. Therese was kneeling beside the injured Younger, mopping sweat from the man's face. Brent *didn't* look well. Therese said unhappily. "He's gotten worse. Possible concussion. We'll need X-rays..."

"Soon as we get to Jesse's lab."

"What was going on out there a while ago?" his wife asked. "I heard shouting."

"Lew made a break for it," Parnell said, studying the unconscious man's pale face. "Got away, too. Thanks to me. I couldn't see letting Harris's men shoot him down."

"You're hoping all that talk about compromise soaked in, aren't you?" She glanced at Ria. The child had curled up and gone to sleep atop some specimen crates. Ria was a picture of lovely innocence, her cheek pillowed on an army blanket. "It *would* be wonderful if Father and Detloff quit going at each other's throats..."

"They've *got* to. It's the only long range answer, Ter."

She combed her hair with her fingers absently, still looking at Ria. "Our little angel really got to Detloff, didn't she?" Then Therese stared at the injured man. "They're not what we expected—I mean, Detloff's Youngers. Not the idiotic puppet master and his mindless hordes Father's always said they were. Does he really believe his own propaganda, Richard?"

"He's not the only one who's prejudiced," Parnell reminded his wife. "Detloff's a seething mass of them. That's going to be the big hurdle in both cases— getting them to admit each side's been blind."

"You really think you can pull that off? I thought," Therese paused, seeking a phrase, "you were just distracting Detloff and the others from their injuries."

"It's time for peacemaking, Ter. Now, while there's a chance someone will benefit from it in the future," Parnell said, nodding toward Ria.

"After so many years of hate. Older, Middle-Ager, Younger... all hating..."

"At least Detloff hasn't had as long to build up his hate,"

Parnell said. "He claims he's twenty-five, but I doubt that. Frankly, I think he pretends to be older than he is—for the leadership aura. Which is ironic, considering. But I remember a few old news items. The dates .~. . as I recall, Detloff's father died when the boy was about twelve..."

"Leaving young Nevin Detloff a very wealthy kid," Therese finished sourly, very much her father's daughter.

"Well, you should appreciate that, my American princess," Parnell teased. "The Detloffs were thinking along the same lines Ogden was, back in the

Twentieth Century; they invested in land—agriculture. Certainly paid off."

She relented, seeing how much the two families had in common. Her soft smile stirred impulses Parnell thought he was too tired to feel. He wished they were alone. But there was the monitor operator, working with his darkened communications equipment. And Ria, and the injured Younger. It seemed like he and Ter were never alone, lately. Additionally there was the soft rumble, the greasy feel of the slide-road's operation, a constant sound beneath them.

Not the time or the place, as he'd told Detloff earlier. He returned her tender look, saying, "Princess Ter, think you can help me twist King Ogden's arm?"

"What?"

"When we get where we're going, I imagine Ogden will be waiting for us. Worried sick and ready to explode," Parnell explained. "And it won't help when he learns we've got Nevin Detloff as a guest."

Therese leaned back against one of the gunner's ports, shaking her head. "If only you wouldn't rush in, being so generous. I'll try, but I don't know what I can do. You know what Father's like once he..."

"This time the results are worth it. Wheedle. Play on his

heartstrings, use Ria as a weapon, Ter. Whatever it takes," he said.

She was mildly irritated. "I'm a scientist, not an actress. Soft-soaping Father's not my specialty."

"Make it yours, this time. You're his daughter. Make him remember that..."

Therese coyly poked a finger into the corner of her mouth, imitating a dimple. "Like this?"

He indulged himself in a quick embrace, chuckling. "Keep that up and you can start your own vid show."

"Now stop that," and Therese landed a gentle, mock-slap on Parnell's jaw. "Or I *will* stand back and watch Father tear Detloff to shreds—and not lift a finger."

He'd already started for the rear door. Now he paused and looked back at Therese. "No, you won't. You care too much. About Ria and about the future of humanity. You've always been kind to small animals and bad-tempered men."

Therese rolled her eyes hammily. "As Ria says— you're all silly."

Shaking with silent laughter, he went to the door, pulled back the blackout curtain. No need for it now, except warmth.

The slideroad lane was moving. Not the familiar, rumbling wobble of the Centipede. A slithering, somewhat unsettling motion. He knelt at the carrier's gate, gauging the rate of acceleration, getting his timing.

Parnell dropped to the gridstrip, teetered on the balls of his feet a moment, regaining his balance. He noticed the soldiers riding on the gridstrip following the Centipede's were relaxing, letting down their guard now that they were moving. Detloff was still sitting by a rear wheel, amused by Harris's watchfulness. Parnell hunkered down next to the politician.

"It's pretty chilly out here," he said lightly. "I could probably persuade the Major to let you go inside. You could grab some sleep.

"Thanks, but I'm doing fine," Detloff replied, loudly enough to be certain Harris overheard. Then, more softly, he said, "You look like you could use some sleep yourself, Doctor."

It was true. Parnell envied the twenty years Detloff had on him. The Younger was shaking off exhaustion—or at least holding it at bay—very well.

"I wouldn't miss this scenery, either," Detloff added, waving to the view on either side of the slide-road. "Glorious, isn't it? The very flower of Western civilization. Only thing that cheers me up is knowing it's worse other places in the world."

They were traveling at approximately sixty kilometers an hour now. The sun had topped the skyline, spilling its golden radiance impartially across the city-scape. After a solid week of riots, strikes, and martial law, the effect wasn't attractive.

To Parnell, the best part of any city was always the sense of humanity in concert. The bustle, the hive of activity. But his memories ran back before the Bad Times, before everything started to come to pieces. Things hadn't been that good in the cities for a long while. Robbed of over more than half the population, urban America withered.

What was left was cold, impersonal ugliness, nearly devoid of life. The tall buildings and all the marvels of modern architecture were, without people, merely dead monuments. Cold, inanimate relics of a once-great culture.

Not all of a city was steel and stone. The mobs had found a few things which weren't fireproof— though they'd had to hunt. Lazy drifts of smoke marred the skyline north and south and east of the slideroad. Parnell shielded his eyes against the sun. Now and then he thought he saw a few people moving about in the streets. He remembered his concern for the dwindling human gene pool. Every person out there—a walking bank of potential future greatness.

And probably present danger. He was glad they were moving too fast for roving mobs to attack. Every minute the slideroad carried them further and further from the decaying city's heart.

"Appalling, isn't it?" Detloff murmured. Parnell mutely agreed. The Younger was becoming adept at gesturing despite his bound hands. "See them? How many others have died this past week, I wonder? Oh, we've had bad times before, but nothing like this. The end of winter—food's critically short. I've scraped all my sources, trying to come up with something extra to distribute."

"That's generous," Parnell commented. "Believe it or not, Grigsby does the same for charity cases among the Olders. Philanthropy works whoever's on the receiving end."

"But how much longer can Grigsby and I keep this up?" Detloff said sharply. "It gets worse and worse. Getting so hard to tell them to keep hoping. Hoping... that little girl."

Parnell saw that hunger hit the young politician's eyes again and warned, "Ria's not for sale."

"I know. Not General Grigsby's grandchild..."

"The General's seventy. He's not going to be around to enjoy her much longer. But Therese and I will. I think our qualifications as parents just might compete with yours," Parnell said levelly.

"Do you?"

"If you're thinking about money—Ogden will leave Therese a fortune. And as for the rest of it, your own publicity shoots you down, Detloff. No wife, no mistress you keep long enough to act as a mother for a child. Ria's had too much adjusting to do in her life. From now on she deserves a stable, nuclear family."

"Which is the Parnells." Detloff tried to sneer, but the wistfulness in his expression canceled it out.

"We're not just Ria's parents," Parnell added. "We're

scientists, trying to find the glue to hold the world together. For Ria's sake. We're thinking what's best for her. Are you?"

The younger man gazed bleakly at the smoke hovering over the city. "I'm trying my damndest."

Major Harris and Sergeant Kelley were eavesdropping. Not making a production of it, but rather obvious. Parnell rather hoped they'd report this whole conversation to Grigsby, in time.

Detloff rested his manacles across his knees. "Put yourself in my place, Doctor. I've always been used to wealth and power. Family tradition. Father taught me to regard the Detloff holdings as a trust, a tool to be used for the good of the people."

"I know the attitude, secondhand, from Grigsby," Parnell said, nodding. "But concern for the public's welfare isn't worth much if there isn't going to be any public left to serve. And that's what we're coming down to, unless..."

"We bury the hatchet." As Parnell stared Detloff shrugged and said, "I... read that phrase somewhere. It's an old-fashioned slang term, I think."

"In which event Ria will probably shove it at me eventually," Parnell said with a sigh. "Once she discovers it on those back-file book tapes."

Detloff's jaw dropped. "She... she can read?"

"She didn't have your wealth, or your tutors. But she most definitely can read." Parnell painted a sketchy picture of the girl's background at the library.

Fascinated, the Younger exclaimed, "Why, she's a little genius!"

"That's not a term Ter and I like to toss around," Parnell said. "Not in Ria's hearing. We don't want her becoming a swelled-head brat."

"Little chance of that. If she were only mine..."

Detloff saw the scientist's frown and said hastily, "No, I realize she needs your influence. You're right. It'd be all wrong for me to try to take her away, even if I could. Just knowing there *are* children—that some people *can* reproduce themselves..."

"The Detloff line shouldn't die out with you," Parnell summed up. Not sarcastically. Reading Detloff's thoughts, and agreeing with them.

A glint came into Detloff's dark eyes. "Did I hear you right? Earlier, hi the transport. You were talking about your scientific research, different methods of attacking the infertility problem. Did you mention something about cloning?"

"Matter of fact, we're heading for Northwest Cloning right now," Parnell confirmed. "One of our sister labs."

"Cloning," Detloff mused aloud. "What success have you had so far? Could you use any money, special supplies? I might have a few resources Ogden Grigsby doesn't."

Parnell wished Jesse Bliss were riding along with them. He'd have enjoyed watching the clonist try to conceal his greed. Detloff was exactly the target Jesse's experiments aimed for—a young, healthy, prime specimen. Good genetic background. Intelligent. A sliver of Detloff's cells, a sample of his DNA pattern would be Jesse Bliss's dream come true. "Are you volunteering as a guinea pig?" he asked the Younger.

He wasn't prepared for Detloff's eagerness. "You think I have a chance? I'd certainly be willing to cooperate. To the fullest. What are your results, so far?"

"Promising," Parnell said cautiously. "I warn you."

The clonist in charge wouldn't give you any favored treatment. Before he got through taking cell samples you'd think you were being skinned alive."

"That's a small sacrifice, if it works..."

A son or daughter for Nevin Detloff. Or rather a carbon copy

of Nevin Detloff. His genetic structure implanted on a de-nucleized ova. Assuming Jesse Bliss ever got the lumps ironed out of his research.

"Theoretically, it should work," Parnell said, not wanting to raise Detloff's hopes too high. "It's a slow process. And, as you've guessed, extremely costly. But... you're young enough. You might live to see your own clone reach viability."

"Then we've got a deal."

"I said, 'might'," Parnell cut in. "Cloning's been successful in lower life forms. But the experiments with humans have been less encouraging. We learned immediately that we can't implant a cloned ova into a living host. The woman's immuno-factor mutation works just as strongly against a clone as it would against a naturally fertilized egg. She'll abort it, every time."

Detloff grasped the science more quickly than Parnell anticipated. "That means... you've got to nurture the fetus outside the human body."

"Or a risky amount of chemo-therapy," Parnell said. "If you do that, the woman may develop any one of a hundred fatal diseases. As you say, the best chance is what we call *ex utero*. A test tube baby, if you will."

"The mind boggles..."

"Bliss, our clonist, thinks it'll work. In time." Parnell added wryly, "And he's certainly plowed enough money into the attempt."

"I can help you there, if you'll let me." Detloff stared into nothing. "Long range—cloning. For the present, there's Ria. And other immune children. You said there must be some, among the Youngers. Hiding out there in the city..."

"It's a strong possibility," Parnell said carefully. He had a suspicion he knew why Lew had taken that desperate chance, running away. On an errand for Nevin Detloff. Dare Parnell hope that errand was laying the groundwork for a search? Hunting

out parents and children... immunes. Stepbrothers and stepsisters for Ria.

Jesse Bliss's research aside, Ria was still the most important element in the search for human survival. She was the next generation, right now. And she hadn't cost a fortune in research materials—only to end in failure after failure, as Jesse's clones did.

A muffled boom sounded far to the rear of the slideroad. Parnell blinked, looking that way. They'd traveled quite a distance from the city, into the abandoned suburbs. There were a few remaining trees here, and the beginnings of open farmland. Back in the direction of the city a massive smoke cloud climbed into the sky. An explosion. More people dead, more property destroyed.

Detloff pounded his fists against his thighs. "It's got to stop! Before it's too late. They're killing themselves."

"All ages and all generations," Parnell said, delivering a symbolic punch to Detloff's gut.

"That's... true. The Olders and Middle-Agers are suffering too, as much as we are." He was big enough to admit that. If only Parnell could persuade Ogden Grigsby to come the other halfway.

Open country stretched out on every side. Three-meters high electric fences bordered the wintry fields. Some parts of the complex were covered by vast sheets of plexi—hundreds of square panes fending off the weather, shutting in the warmth of the sun. Immense greenhouses, nurturing soy products. A few open fields were beginning to green with sprouting winter wheat. Some of the new Canadian hybrids, perhaps.

Promise of food for the future. The fences, the guards patrolling the perimeter would make sure the crops reached maturity. In the Bad Times starving city dwellers had roamed into the farmlands, searching for food. In their ignorance they'd trampled immature crops, made things worse for themselves as well as the farmers.

The land. Still the source of bounty. Ogden Grigs-by owned a lot of land. So did Nevin Detloff. Wise investment, for now and for the future.

After the Bad Times the military had taken charge, under General Grigsby's aegis. Ogden Grigsby's army protecting Ogden Grigsby's property—a nice balance, that. It had been one more campaign to the General who'd been in action ever since he stepped out of the Academy. But certainly none of his campaigns had been more important than protecting an entire geographic district's food supply.

"Sir!" It was the monitor operating, poking his head out the rear door of the transport. "I've got radio contact." He stabbed a thumb toward the sky overhead.

Parnell heard it. A heliflitter. Circling in the overcast. Greyness creeping in from the west, overriding the sunlight. Obviously the pilot was keeping an eye on the slideroad, paralleling the Centipede's progress.

The monitor operator tapped the headset he wore. "They say the General's waiting up ahead, at the Three Zero Nine off-ramp."

Major Harris asked crisply, "What's our ETA?"

"I make it about fifteen minutes..."

"That's not going to help them much," Detloff whispered, gazing at the smoke on the horizon, thinking of his friends and followers trapped in the city.

Commiserating, Parnell said, "The army couldn't stop it. It's fed itself. Just have to burn itself out, I'm afraid. If only it happens soon..."

He jerked his head reflexively, then analyzed why. Instinct. A drop of water had splashed on his forehead. And another. Splatters appearing on the slide-road's surface, leaving streaking trails.

Detloff craned his neck, looking skyward. "Is it... ?"

"Rain," Parnell announced. "That's what Grigsby wanted. He said if it'd rain—if the weather would turn bad—it'd send the strikers and rioters for their holes." Harris was nodding his approval. Maybe there was hope for the man after all.

"Yes, that's what the General's experts said we needed. A good all-day soaker of a rain. It'll put out the fires and give us time to breathe, put things together," the Major speculated.

"And when the strikers sit around for a day or two being cold and wet and miserable, they might think about going into work," Parnell went on. "Firing up those nukies and getting the power flowing again."

Rivulets of rain were trickling inside Parnell's collar, his shirt beginning to stick to his back. He helped Detloff to his feet, boosted the Younger inside the carrier. Harris didn't protest, too busy getting out of the increasing downpour himself.

As many of the troops as could crowded into the Centipede carrier. A few of them had to remain outside, but for the moment they didn't grouse too much. The men knew what the rain meant, too.

A cold spring rain, building to a steady mist which drenched the countryside. A downpour, settling in for a long stay. Putting out the fires of destruction.

Chapter VIII

Parnell assumed the heliflitter was tracking them, relaying info to Grigsby. At least now the old man needn't imagine terrible tragedies. Fifteen minutes. That would seem like an eternity to Grigsby.

It wasn't too comfortable inside the Centipede, come to that. Very crowded. A lot of wet and grumpy and tired people—though not as wet and grumpy and tired as the lot losers who had to stand outside. Rain pattering on their helmets and puddling

about their boots.

Their slideroad gridstrips were decelerating now. They were riding up a ramp and into an off-slot. At their destination—or the one they'd had to choose after the detour.

The soft hum of the slideroad had purred beneath the Centipede for almost an hour, audible even during the storm. Now it stopped. The monitor operator shut down his communications unit—the only one he'd dared risk power for. For a moment they all sat in the dark, listening to the irregular rhythm of the rain.

Parnell felt strangely shut off from the real world. Huddling in a metal cave with his wife and daughter and a lot of unknowns. The rain was lulling, sooth-ing him toward sleep, and he had to fight that seductive noise.

"I'm cold," Ria grumbled, shivering against Therese.

Then the rear seal slid open, admitting still more chilly air. A familiar bellowing. "Rich? Ter? You in there?" Several enlisted men crouching near Parnell stiffened to attention when they heard Grigsby.

"That's the General!" Ria cried, hurrying toward the carrier's gate. "We must be home!" The adaptable child. 'Home' was wherever Ria's family were. That used to mean Emmett and Delores and Leland and the other Olders. Now it was the Parnells and Grigsby.

Nevin Detloff watched the family group enviously. But he said nothing. When Parnell offered to help the "prisoner" off the Centipede Detloff waved him ahead. He'd manage.

No way to avoid a boisterous reunion. This time Grigsby ignored the surroundings, the fact that his men were looking on. He was the fond grandfather, welcoming his beloved grandchild, and Therese. Parnell was touched. He'd told Detloff Grigsby couldn't hope for many more years, and it was true. Did he begrudge the old man his joy?

They'd been standing in the pelting rain for so long he was afraid Grigsby had forgotten the amenities. Finally the General raised his voice against a peal of thunder. "We couldn't get the damned slide-road controls operating on this end! Good thing your people were on top of it." Parnell nodded, smirked at Major Harris.

Then General Grigsby saw Nevin Detloff. The Younger was bedraggled, curly hair dripping. But his face and form were unmistakable. Too many vid-casts. Ogden Grigsby's worst enemy, in the middle of his family reunion!

Seeing a fuse sputtering toward an explosion, Parnell said loudly, "Come on, Ogden. Let's get out of this downpour. Ria will catch pneumonia." That was the one approach that might cut short the rising conflict.

They made a dash for a nearby building—an old railroad terminal Grigsby's men had taken out of mothballs. The ancient depot was surprisingly cozy. Someone had unearthed a pot-bellied stove and chopped up some remaining waiting-room furniture for fuel. No one complained about an inadequate flue and a bit of smoke hovering near the high ceiling.

A lot of boot stamping and shaking rain off jackets, wringing it out of cuffs. Some of the soldiers carried in the lab crates and Therese sat Ria atop one, making sure the child kept warm.

"Put him down here. Easy." A couple of enlisted men had toted in a makeshift stretcher bearing the injured Younger. As they laid him on the floor near the stove Therese hurried to check on her patient.

Then Parnell noticed an on-going drama. Major Harris off to one side of the room, reporting. His head and Grigsby's close together, and much whispering. And side glancing. Growing outrage on the General's craggy face. Detloff, understandably, was concerned for his man, Brent. But he too was aware of Grigsby's scrutiny, and returned it.

Part of the General's wrath was reserved for his son-in-law. He dismissed Harris with a mumbled order, then lumbered

toward Parnell. "What the hell possessed you, Rich? Bringing this scum along like a guest."

"I had my reasons. Good ones," Parnell began. "If you'll take the time to listen..."

Therese didn't allow either of them that luxury. "Father, this man needs medical attention immediately. Are we going to stand here talking?" Her hair was plastered in soggy auburn strands and her clothing soddenly outlined a still attractive figure. But the scientist, the doctor, held the stage, not the woman.

"If you don't intend to act, I do. Where's a vehicle we can use for an ambulance?"

"Now just a minute, honey," Grigsby said.

"She's right," Parnell cut in, warning the General. After all these years he ought to know his own daughter. Ter had a temper to rival Grigsby's.

"Have you lost all your humanity?" Therese was a tigress, brooking no argument. Parnell proudly egged her on, underlining the emergency.

Under that barrage, Grigsby backed down. "All right! Sergeant, let's get things moving here."

In a matter of seconds they were carrying Brent to a waiting hover-van on the far side of the depot. There were other vehicles nearby, standard military transports. For the troops. But Grigsby's party was to ride in style. Apparently the General had commandeered one of the last of the plush hover-vans for Ria... and her escorts.

As they slid the stretcher into the cargo bay Grigsby grasped Parnell's shoulder. Hard. "We're going to have this out, Rich."

"No doubt. But later," Parnell said. "Maybe by then you'll be cooled down enough to hear what I've got to say. Come on, Ria."

The girl scampered into Parnell's arms. He swung her up into

the hover-van's snug interior, helped Therese in beside her. Grigsby was pained. Ria tied the old man's heartstrings in knots, yet it was his son-in-law the child obeyed. He was sufficiently irked that he stood out in the cold rain a long moment before he got onto the seat beside Parnell.

The enlisted man at the driver's console waited patiently, knowing his place. The General snapped, "You have the route! Take off!"

"Yessir..."

Parnell looked over his shoulder. Therese and Ria sat in the second seat and Detloff in the cargo bay, beside the stretcher. All of them were an interested audience for the expected confrontation between Parnell and Grigsby.

Parnell knew from the General's bulldog countenance very little kept him from pitching Detloff out bodily. Best to give the old man some time to stew in his pique.

The air rotors under the van reached their proper pitch, lifting the vehicle on a column of air. A cushiony sensation very comfortable. The driver swung the van's nose, pointing it southwestward. Smoothly, they drifted across the rain-swept stubble fields.

After a few minutes travel, shrouded in mist, Grigsby unbent a trifle. "It'll take us about twenty minutes to get to the lab. You know you exited quite a bit north of where we'd originally planned."

"Unfortunately nobody planned the building's collapse," Parnell said. "We appreciate your being right here when we needed it, Ogden."

Therese and Detloff were conferring on Brent's condition, the time factor. His wife tried to be comforting, none too convincingly.

"Well, after I had to move you out of your HQ on such short notice... least I could do." Grigsby was beginning to thaw, now.

He eyed Parnell worriedly. "How was it out there, after you detoured? Rough? I only get the bare facts from Harris. Good man, but he's seen too little of the world I'm afraid."

A more charitable assessment than Parnell would have made. Presumably the Major had his uses, militarily. Parnell tried to be conciliatory. "There were bad moments. Could have been worse. Detloff was trying to cool a crowd of Youngers, get them to scream off back to their homes." He wasn't above using the vernacular, if it would help drive the point home. Parnell went on, "But some strikers hit them, turned it into a massacre. If they hadn't been distracted—it was carnage for the Youngers. And it could have been for us."

"We saw what went on out there, Father, "Therese put in. "Awful! The Youngers weren't rioting, and still... and you've had to cope with that sort of insanity. How *do* you manage?"

The soft-soap was lathering, and Grigsby was succumbing, bit by bit. Ria grinned at him, giggled, winding the General in her web. In that mood Grigsby would forgive anything—even Nevin Detloff's presence.

He stared over his daughter's head at the Younger. Rain dashed against the hover-van's windows. On every side winter-dead farmland stretched to the horizon. It was an odd place to begin a peace conference, but Parnell wouldn't quibble about locale as long as it came off.

"That true?" Grigsby said. "What Rich says about you trying to send those Youngers home, get 'em off the streets?"

"It's true. They weren't rioting. They were hunting food. None's been distributed for over a week," Detloff said, forcibly restraining his anger. "I...

realize the government's problems. They don't dare open the disty stations, of course. But I had to get my Youngers something to eat. They were starving."

"You broke curfew..."

"To save lives! I could import the food, with my resources. I couldn't wait until the riots were over," Detloff said earnestly. "They needed it then."

That evangelistic fervor was creeping into his tone. On screen, it had always sounded like an act. But in person it was apparent Detloff meant and believed what he said. "I had to tell them things would get better—even if I couldn't be sure *how*. I had to give them something to fill their bellies. Was that wrong?"

"But you didn't save their lives, Mr. Detloff," Grigsby said. "A lot of them died..."

"That's unfair, Ogden," Parnell countered. "Not his fault."

"Mmm. From what Harris said, if they *hadn't* been gathered there listening to his speech, they wouldn't have been such easy targets," Grigsby said.

Detloff flinched, acknowledging a hit. "Maybe there's truth on both sides, Grigsby. Maybe in your terms I was trying to buy loyalty, nothing more. But I swear my motives were clean. I wasn't worrying about votes..."

"Neither was I. You think I like sending my troops out onto those streets, risking their lives?" the General flared. "You any idea how many men I've lost in flutter crashes, skirmishes with those strikers?"

Parnell stopped that wind-up short. "So you both have axes to grind, and you've both suffered losses. Not statistics. People. At least this time you were attacking the same problem—ending the riots. Perhaps if you did that more often there wouldn't *be*

any riots," Parnell suggested, driving a wedge into a minute opening.

Ria whispered in Therese's ear—feminine secrets. Parnell's wife nodded and said bitterly, "You're arguing theories, Father. And you too, Mr. Detloff. Drop the politics for once..."

"Look at the broad picture," Parnell agreed. "Survival."

"There's... the matter of your man escaping," Grigsby muttered, unwilling to just let it go. But he did. "We'll... discuss that later."

When the General temporized, there was always a possible opening. Parnell actually began to feel hopeful. Even more so when he saw the introspective expression on Detloff's face.

Get the two giants thinking. Grigsby and Detloff and their power. Get them *together*.

The hover-van's motors whispered, a more soothing lullaby than the slideroad had been. Parnell wondered how much further he could push his body. When he got to Jesse's lab he'd have to take some stimulants. He couldn't afford to let down yet. Not yet. Too much to do, and time running out.

For one thing he didn't dare sleep until he was sure Grigsby and Detloff wouldn't end up at each other's throats.

"Read you loud and clear," the driver was saying into a mike. "Two minutes. Keep that homer beam on. Can't see a thing in this rain."

Parnell's memory threw up a horrifying image. A heliflitter, crashing and falling. Her dead crew tumbling twelve stories to a street. The hover-van moved no more than a couple of meters off the ground. But she was traveling at a fair clip. The potential for disaster was there.

Or was he seeing menace everywhere now?

Northwest Cloning sat amid a cluster of long-unused factories, an old exurban industrial park. Parnell squinted through the rain-dotted windshield. That was the complex, ahead of them. The cloning lab wasn't the only building lighted against the grey Midwestern overcast. Jesse Bliss always bragged he had power to burn. Apparently he was flaunting the fact today.

Arrival was chaos. They didn't pull in at Northwest Cloning but at an adjoining factory. Grigsby's people—the ones he could

spare—had done a hasty job of converting the place into living quarters and jerry-rigged labs to house the influx of Life Sciences staff. Not comfortable, but adequate. The hover-van parked in what had been a warehouse loading dock, decades ago.

The usual babble erupted. Parnell's staff had worried too when the last Centipede in the caravan had been delayed, detoured. Like the General, they'd envisioned the worst. Now they collected around Richard and Therese and Ria, sighing with relief and shouting cheery welcomes.

"Not bad, eh, Doctor?"

"The General certainly pulled out all the stops. Isn't this place big?"

"We'll get along fine. Might even move in with Jesse permanently..."

"You might consult Jesse first," an arch voice said. "Glad to see you, m'boy. Better late than never." A chubby set of fingers wrapped themselves around Parnell's. Jesse's bearded mug leered up at him jovially.

Around him the mingled staff of Northwest Cloning and Life Sciences still exchanged greetings. The natural impulse of human beings who'd worked and lived together so long.

"Please, someone give us a hand with this stretcher," Therese pleaded. "We've got serious injuries here." In seconds she'd been shunted aside, a dozen pairs of willing hands lifting Brent out of the hover-van. Detloff, awkwardly with his manacles, tried to help.

"Take those things off him, Ogden," Parnell said tiredly. "You know he's not going to try to escape."

Grigsby dug in his heels. "I know nothing of the sort. One of his people already made a break for it..."

"You have my parole, sir," Detloff offered. He was striving to be polite, but his attention was on his wounded aide. He wanted

to accompany Therese and the medics to the infirmary. "I swear I won't take a walk, General."

"Besides," Parnell said, "it's a long way back to the city."

Disgruntled but conceding the merits of the case, Grigsby used an officer's override key, releasing the Younger politician. Detloff murmured his gratitude, then ran after his friend.

Jesse Bliss was bemused. "Was that...?"

"Nevin Detloff? Yes. It's a long story," Parnell said, hoping Jesse wouldn't ask for it right now. Lack of sleep was catching up with him faster than he'd thought.

"And a stretcher case. That'll be a thrill for Morrison and some of the others. They love to work on live bodies, but rarely get the opportunity." As Grigsby stared at the clonist in shock Jesse grinned and said, "Most of our surgeons specialize in autopsies. Somehow we don't get a lot of volunteers in our line of work; so few people these days are willing to let anyone slice into their organs for DNA samples..."

"I notice *you* don't have a lot of operation scars," Parnell watched Grigsby and Ria. With Therese gone and Parnell talking to Bliss the old man had a clear field with his adored granddaughter. He used it. The General led the child to a nearby vid console and cued a tape.

"Emmett! And there's Delores!" Ria squealed. Her friends at the library waved to her from the taped image, sent messages.

"They're all on the tape," Grigsby said fondly. "You'll get to see them. Just wait, sweetheart. And then I've got some Monk and Chuckie Shows..."

Parnell shook his head. In the middle of a civil insurrection General Ogden Grigsby had thought to get a recording tape from the library—to please the light of his life, Ria. She might deserve a bit of spoiling after her grim infancy, but so much?

Yet if Ria would inherit the world, what wouldn't be enough to

nurture her, give her pleasure? Dare he quibble over details? Succeeding generations might have robbed Ria's of all the history of humanity. She might someday be the only person left alive if...

"How was your trip?" Jesse asked, and Parnell forced his attention away from Ria and the General. The clonist's question was studiedly casual. Not what was really on Bliss's mind.

"If we ever get moving again, the slideroads will come in handy," Parnell said. "Not for automobile traffic, though."

"Ah, autos. Who remembers those?" Jesse said. "Those taxis are a pale imitation of what used to be." He was making conversation, not listening to his own words. Very unlike Jesse Bliss. Parnell tried to figure out what was eating the pudgy scientist.

For the moment the two of them were on a little island, surrounded by activity—unpacking, getting settled in new quarters—but not part of it. Jesse said, "Can you spare a minute, m'boy? I can show you to your new domicile of course. But there's something I..."

Jji all the years Parnell had known him Jesse had never been furtive. He was now. The effect was intriguing at the least. "What's this all about, Jesse?"

Bliss crooked a finger, then led the way down a cluttered aisle between animal cages. He traded offhand quips with techs as he passed, and Parnell did the same. The meaningless social chatter of a close-knit operation.

There was an extruded plasticene tunnel connecting the factory with Jesse's own Northwest Cloning. Parnell gave the engineering marvel a quick glance as he and Bliss walked through it. Grigsby's staff must have run the tunnel up in a hurry. Plasticene was faster—much—than lumber or metal, and it didn't rust. Everything here had been done in a hurry, but reasonably well. The ozone odor of electro-scouring had clung to the factory, evidence that the conversion from abandoned factory to livable building was very recent. Within hours. Grigsby *was*

organized.

Like Detloff, his cameraman, his food distributors, slipping through a crowd of Youngers.

He *had* to get those two working together.

Jesse was still leading the way, through Northwest Cloning. Parnell had been to this lab dozens of times over the years. Collecting data, checking on progress or lack of same, taking Jesse's requisitions for more money or materials. But he'd never before been in *this* section of the lab. Jesse had always dismissed it as living area.

"What are you up to?" Parnell demanded.

Jesse dramatically laid a finger against his lips. He was fumbling in his pocket, fishing out a key. They'd halted before a door, and Jesse was unlocking it.

No identification plate beside the door. "Jesse, what is this?" Parnell said, mystified and somewhat annoyed.

"Patience. All shall be revealed."

Bliss ushered Parnell into the room. A woman technician was on duty, sitting before a bank of monitoring controls—an impressively large bank. A great deal of money had gone into that series of consoles.

Parnell recognized the woman as one of Bliss's top staff people. And one of the most devoted to Bliss personally. She'd been an early volunteer in the most painful and dangerous experiments. Offering herself as a host for de-nucleized and clone-implanted ovum—and for all the chemotherapy that entailed. She'd almost died when her body rebelled, succumbed to a succession of increasingly deadly infections. Her own immuno-systems lulled to inactivity by potent drugs. In the end, the cloned fetus was aborted.

Now she was monitoring... a secret experiment. What?

Everyone under the Life Sciences Project aegis had agreed from the start there'd be no secrets. All research would be shared. Everyone kept informed of everyone else's work.

But Jesse Bliss had never revealed the existence of this room and this experiment to Parnell. Or, Parnell suspected, to anyone else but the loyal woman technician.

Nothing had prepared Richard Parnell for this shock.

The room was large, its walls filled by the most intricate and advanced monitoring boards available. Obviously this was where a lot of the money Jesse requested had gone. A *lot* of it. And Jesse asked for a lot... often.

Some of the stuff must have been cannibalized from other equipment, so the results wouldn't show on inventories. Everything in the room pointed to sacrifice. For the sake of the room's centerpiece, its main experiment.

An *ex utero* cloning chamber occupied the middle of the room. Parnell had seen other such chambers. He'd commiserated with Jesse when other experiments had failed. Failure after failure.

This time Jesse Bliss had done much better.

A fetus floated in the chamber's nutrient solution. A wizened, funny-faced little human being. The features seemed strangely familiar. Male. A scrap of flesh, possibly weighing well over two kilos. Well-formed.

And alive!

The eyes were closed but the lips pursed and sucked. Tiny, perfectly shaped fingers flexed and curled. Now and then a little foot jerked. The fetus lived, bobbing at the end of a synthetic umbilical, drifting in artificial amniotic fluid.

Alive!

Not an embryo. This fetus was viable. If the chamber should

for any reason fail and force this tiny human into the world there would be peril, of course. Hyaline membrane problems, protection from all manner of disease, all the challenges associated with premature birth. But the infant *would* have a chance, a good one. Jesse's staff was expert, his medical technicians possibly the best in the world in this particular area.

Jesse Bliss had pulled off a scientific miracle.

With luck, the infant floating in that plasticene case would, soon, fill his lungs and stomach.

A living human child, brought to the point of birth *ex utero*. No womb to nourish him. A mother composed of plastic and tubing and electric circuitry.

A baby, ready to be born into a world where conception and live birth were merely memories. A world in which Ria had stunned every thinking adult who met her—simply because she *existed*.

Now, in a sense, here was a sibling for Ria. A baby stepbrother. Another inheritor of mankind's future.

Incredible! And real.

Chapter IX

When Parnell found his voice he said, "So you finally pulled it off after all these years..."

"You remember Ines? Of course you do." Bliss nodded to the woman technician. She barely acknowledged Parnell's presence. In fact she seemed rather miffed that Bliss had let in an outsider. Parnell was an invader on a private precinct—even though he was the director of the overall Life Sciences Project.

That was a tip-off. Quite possibly Bliss and Ines were the only ones fully informed of this particular experiment, Parnell had every right to know.

But he wasn't about to pull a Major Harris and chew Jesse out. He was too awed and pleased by this scientific achievement.

"Ines," he said absently to the technician. Then he gave her a second look. "You... supplied the ovum for this clone?"

Quietly proud, Ines lifted her head. No question she'd been willing to donate to Bliss's project. Just as she had to earlier experiments. But this enterprise had proved far more successful.

"He's doing quite well, wouldn't you say?" In a different social climate, fifty years in the past, Jesse Bliss would have been passing out cigars. The proud new papa—or almost.

Pamell circled the cloning chamber, studying the fetus. "I want to see your data, Jesse. This is absolutely fascinating. Unfair of you to keep it under wraps."

"I didn't want to spring it on you too soon. There was always the chance it'd fail. And I've had enough failures," Jesse said bitterly.

Yes, the clone-child did look familiar. Parnell peered intently at that round-cheeked little gnome in the tank. "That's your clone, Jesse. I'd recognize that smirk anywhere. Your DNA implanted on one of Ines' ova."

"It's only fitting," Ines spoke up, gazing admiringly at Bliss. More than a subordinate to her superior. Affection as well. A strangely asexual relationship, but a lot of a marriage in it.

"Oh, it's my DNA all right," Jesse laughed. "I never considered any other possibility." He postured before the chamber, scratching his beard, doting on his handiwork. "I told you cloning was *the* answer, Richard. Told you that for years. Just needed the right combination of factors..."

"And the secrecy?"

Bliss shrugged off the comment. "This time I wanted to be absolutely sure."

Not begrudging the man that, Parnell remained enthralled. He was eager to learn every detail. With Jesse's notes he could follow the clonist's steps, look over his shoulder, figuratively.

The reality still was amazing. Jesse had done it! Since science's techniques had started to approximate its imagination, man had been dreaming of producing a viable clone. And now Jesse Bliss had accomplished the impossible. Sustained a human clone *ex utero* to a point where birth—and survival—were within reach. If a Nobel committee had outlasted the Twentieth Century and the Bad Tunes, Bliss undoubtedly would have won the Medicine Award for this!

Test tube baby. Not a theory. Alive. Here in this room.

Jesse was unsufferably smug, with reason. "Impressive, isn't he?"

"Oh, you've scored. No arguments." Parnell could have echoed Nevin Detloff's complaint; he was so tired he couldn't think clearly, couldn't come up with a proper compliment for Jesse's genius. "Okay. Now what? Can you duplicate this?"

"I see no obstacle." Bliss tapped the data banks. "The procedure's in here. Ready to go whenever you say."

Parnell ran a hand through his hair. "And why pick today of all days to show it off to me? Why didn't you wait till you were ready to uncase your infant?"

Jesse tried to make a joke of it. "Perhaps... a present for you. A token of my appreciation. There were a few hours there, my boy, when we didn't know if you were alive or dead. Since you are..."

"It's quite a reward for making it through a riot," Parnell agreed. "Thanks!"

"And... I wanted a second opinion. Someone with an overall view to help me make a decision." Jesse's tone put Parnell on the alert. He knew the misanthrope too well. What outrageous statement was Jesse leading up to?

"Decision?"

Bliss waved at the clone infant. "He's reached a stage where we have options. Shall we let him con-tinue to birth? Or shall we do a dissect? Autopsy to check for anomalies. Must make sure all developed as it should. Aim for perfection. That's the motto..."

This was news to Ines. She was first flabbergasted, then furious. "You can't! I won't let you! He's our baby!"

"My dear, we're *scientists*," Jesse said, imperturbable. "Sentiment has no place in our..."

"Nooooo... !" /

Ines flung herself on Bliss, a hurricane of female wrath. Her pointed plastic shoes and sharp nails assaulted the clonist.

Jesse was taken completely unprepared, not defending himself at all. And Ines had never learned the rules of fair play. She didn't wait for Jesse to protect himself.

Hastily, Parnell pinioned the woman's arms, dragging her away from Bliss. Just in time to save the clonist's eyes. Ines' nail had left deep, bleeding scratches down both of Jesse's cheeks.

Her rage was titanic, but uncoordinated. Now, held in check by Parnell, she collapsed into hysterical sobbing. "Our baby! Our baby! I won't let you!"

Jesse was mopping at his cheeks, gazing at the blood on his fingers. "I never said..."

"You did! You *did*!" Ines wailed. Parnell sensed the danger was past and released her. Gulping tears, choking on her anguish, the woman ran from the room.

There was a long, embarrassed silence. Jesse gingerly prodded his shins and groin. Tried to dry the blood dabbling into his beard. He was utterly bewildered by events of the past few moments. "Where... where in the world did she get that insane idea?" he wondered aloud, distraught. "I *never* gave her the

impression this clone was our... our love child!"

Parnell smiled wryly. "Jesse, you're a genius about cloning, but you don't know a thing about women. Or about human beings, come to that." Then he sobered, looking toward the transparent chamber. "Ines is right. It is her child as well as yours."

Contemptuous, Jesse snorted. "That's my clone— my DNA—my genetic pattern to the last molecule."

"Imposed and nurtured on one of Ines' ova," Parnell reminded him. "I've seen your past experiments—and failures. You haven't got the beginnings of producing a clone from your tissue alone. Ines contributed, and her contribution was a big one, Jesse."

"A *scientific* contribution. I don't deny that," Jesse said, offended. "You can call me a lot of things, Richard, but not petty."

"Not very wise, either. Particularly about human emotions. Part of Ines' heart went into this experiment. Part of yours too, if you'd admit it." Again Parnell marveled at the reality of the clone. "He's a human infant, Jesse. Not something you can carve up for tissue specimens."

"We do it all the time to monkeys and rabbits and rats," Bliss argued aggrievedly. He was using a corner of his lab smock to remove the worst of the gore from his face.

"He's a *human* infant," Parnell repeated.

"I am not prey to quaint philosophy." Bliss grew huffy. "This is my experiment. You promised me autonomy..."

"A living human infant. Not an embryo, not a non-viable fetus," Parnell particularized. "If bora now, this child has a damned good chance to survive. That gives him legal rights. And I'll point out to you, Jesse—unlike monkeys, rabbits, and rats, human beings are currently in grave danger of becoming extinct. We can't waste one of them while you play games in a dissection room."

"Now don't quote..."

"I'm pointing out the basic problem, which you seem to have forgotten," Parnell said, cutting Jesse's protest cold. "Humanity's fighting for its life."

"That clone is mine!" Jesse shrieked, an oversized adolescent about to revert and throw a temper tantrum. "I produced it, and I can do what I wish with..."

The door banged open and Ines stood on the threshold. Vengefully, she pointed to the clone chamber and exclaimed, "There! What did I tell you?"

A small crowd gathered outside the room. Apparently Ines had staged a Paul Revere ride throughout Northwest Cloning, spilling the secret to all and sundry. And most of them seemed to have followed her back here, curious to see the truth.

A few people wriggled past Ines, entering Jesse's sanctuary. Therese. Grigsby. Nevin Detloff. Ria peered around Ines, eyes wide, wondering if she would be permitted in this adult province.

"This is treason!" Bliss thundered, exaggerating ludicrously. He shifted his tantrum from Parnell to Ines.

The woman stood her ground. "I told them all. You can't do anything to him now," she said, looking tenderly toward the infant in the chamber. They won't let you. If you kill him it'll be murder."

"You narrow-minded..." Jesse's voice faded as he realized he was the center of a great deal of attention. Ines' attack had left him a mess. Face scratched, smock tqrn, his hair in more than usual disarray.

Therese approached the cloning case, touching the transparent wall reverently, gazing at the infant. Oh, Ines! It's true! You really did it. You must be so proud of him, Jesse."

That derailed Bliss completely, and put him back on his

original course. Willing to accept the plaudits of his colleagues.

Detloff, like Therese, was rapt with awe. "You said this was possible, Doctor. I didn't dare believe you. But this..."

"I didn't know we'd come this far myself, until a short while ago," Parnell confessed. He eyed Ines warily. But now that she'd done her worst to Jesse Bliss, she wept with relief. No longer violent. A mother who'd saved her child from destruction.

Jesse was at a loss. Things were out of his hands. He'd wanted appreciation for his scientific genius— and gotten more than he'd bargained for. Now that he'd achieved his goal, Ines wouldn't let him do as he pleased with the results. Such a thing had never happened to Bliss. His secret was out. And he had no choice in its disposition.

Nevin Detloff caressed the cloning chamber's wall. "A son. Your son, Bliss. You don't know how I envy you..."

"It's obscene." Grigsby's face was working with revulsion.

"Father!" Therese reddened with chagrin. "You knew what Jesse was working on. You read all the reports."

"That's different." The General was appalled to comprehend he'd participated *in* this project. "All that money. Is *this* what it's come to? That... thing."

"A human baby," Parnell said firmly. He drew attention from everyone, not merely Grigsby. "Get it through your head. This can mean survival for the human race. Ria needn't spend her future alone, even if it develops there *aren't* any more immune children."

His seventy years suddenly weighed on Ogden Grigsby. Parnell's words forcibly pointed out that no one was immortal. Death would come, and for Grigsby that appointment wouldn't be far off. With the exception of the clone, Nevin Detloff and Ria were the youngest persons in the room. And probably fifteen years separated those two. When Ria was Ogden Grigsby's present age... what? Who'd be her heir?

"What if we can't find any more immunes?" Parnell stressed. He nodded to the clone infant. "This may be our only answer. Survival for our species."

Ines whispered through her tears, "Yes, yes, our son. Yes..."

Detloff pounced on Jesse Bliss. "Can you make other clones? Can you use anyone's genetic pattern? For instance—mine?" Like Ogden Grigsby, the Younger Party leader wasn't a scientist, but he was intelligent. He immediately grasped the implications, and grasped them firmly.

Reticent, cunning, Jesse said, "A lot of things can go wrong. So many problems."

Grigsby seconded him roundly. "You won't believe the expense involved. Astronomical. You aren't seriously thinking of... this mustn't be repeated. It's... it's unnatural."

Therese looked ceilingward, exasperated. "Quit being so medieval. God gave us brains so we could *use* them."

"Extinction is a natural process, Ogden," Parnell snapped. "Are you suggesting humanity should simply lie down and go the way of the dinosaurs?"

"You... you said Ria may be immune from this... this infertility mutation," Grigsby stammered, growing desperate.

"And if she is? Even supposing there are others. There won't be many, Ogden. There aren't that many people left alive in the world. The race is going to need every new member it can get." Parnell hammered verbally at the old man. "We've had this out before. I thought I'd made it clear. Except for the immunes—however few those may be—all the genetic inheritance of the human race exists in the people who are living *now*. We have to preserve their DNA patterns for the future. And that means cloning."

Softly, adding the final note, Therese said, "quite apart from the science of it, Father—they're people. They deserve to survive. They want to know their seed won't end with them. Isn't that

what *you've* wanted?"

The room was still. Nevin Detloff stared at the floor a few seconds, then looked up at Grigsby. Two men of great power—with the same aching need. Family line. Therese had just reminded them they weren't unique. They shared their hunger with humanity. The drive to reproduce.

Parnell broke the silence. "There's a thing called the gene pool. We need it. Eventually, given enough immunes, the infertility factor can be bred out. Then they'll need a genetic intermix. Believe me, Ogden. Cloning is vital."

"A backup system for the immunes," Nevin Detloff said suddenly, putting the problem into technological terms.

"Exactly!"

"Well, you're not spending any more of *my* money on those... those robots!" Grigsby vowed, stomping out.

Parnell stared after him. He couldn't envision Life Sciences without Ogden Grigsby backing it. One of the techs murmured, "Do you think he meant it?"

"Oh, he meant it," Therese said. "At least for now." She smiled at Ria, sharing a feminine secret. The two of them—Ogden Grigsby's vulnerable point. Parnell knew the General could be wheedled into line, and would be.

"Maybe you don't need this money," Detloff said. His dark eyes glittered with that fire seen so often during his telecasts. "If you can duplicate the process, make a clone from my DNA..."

"I might. If I chose." Jesse Bliss was aloof, nursing his anger.

"I know the process, Mr. Detloff," Ines. Dragging herself out of emotional trauma. Challenging Jesse. "I was with him every step of the way. And we've got the tapes."

"You... you wouldn't!" Jesse was horrified.

"Every step of the way," Ines said heavily. She turned to Detloff. "If you'll back the project, I'll help you produce your clone. I know everything required. The nutrient formula, the necessary current balances." Triumphantly, she glared at Bliss and said, "And it starts with a donor ovum."

The truth lay in the clonist's scratched face. Ines might have pushed her qualifications, but she wasn't far wrong. She had a reputation in the field nearly as impressive as Jesse Bliss's. If anyone could copy his research, she could. She'd had the world's best cloju'st for a teacher, hadn't she?

"You'd better compromise, Jesse, while you can," Parnell warned him. "At this stage it's still your baby—and Ines'. If you want to keep things that way I advise you... what was that phrase you used, Nevin?"

"Bury the hatchet," Detloff supplied, grinning.

If either Bliss or Ines had possessed such a weapon, they'd have been most likely to bury it in the other's skull. Parnell hoped this was a lover's quarrel. The future needed both their skills.

He glanced at Detloff, thinking of the problems of cloning. "Jesse, what are your tissue specs? Can you clone from any age tissue?"

Bliss shoved his hands deep into his pockets and said grumpily, "The younger the better. Humans age at different rates, of course. But... sixty's certainly a top limit. Much younger. That's what's needed."

No clone for the General. But possibly one each for Richard and Therese Parnell. Not a child of their love, but duplicates of the originals. Better than nothing. Much better. And Grigsby just might change his tune if he could be made to realize he might indeed have a grandchild someday. Therese's genetic structure, impressed on a clone. Ogden Grigsby and his wife, their genes recreated, going into the future.

Jesse felt constrained to make things sound difficult. "And as the General pointed out, the cost is enormous."

"Worth it," Detloff said without hesitation.

"Is it?" Therese countered. "All those people who are starving. So many things wrong with the world right now. Where do we pick priorities for the future? Have we any right to spend so many precious resources on cloning?"

"One question at a time," Parnell cautioned her. "Jesse, a while back you suggested if Nevin and Grigsby forgot politics and pooled their wealth, they could save what's left of the world. If that can be pulled off—there'd be surplus resources for cloning research."

Jesse Bliss and Ines regarded each other. Two might-be enemies. "Well..." Jesse said dubiously. "In any project, you can save money if you conduct simultaneous research. The same amount of work to do a lot more producing."

"Good!" Parnell approved. "You're thinking straighter. How can we cut costs and still..."

"Shhh!" Ria pressed her nose against the glass of the cloning chamber. "You might wake him up."

Touched, Therese said, "He can't hear us, darling. But he will, once he's born."

"When will he be born?" the girl wondered, as if the event would be a holiday.

"Soon, love. Soon."

Parnell winked at Bliss, startling the clonist. "Before that time you and Ines had better pick out a name. Something totally and completely from your own. A clone infant will have enough burdens to bear without going through life with a name like 'Junior'. Besides, I don't think we could cope with yet another Jesse Bliss."

Chapter X

"It still doesn't seem quite decent." Grigsby strolled alongside Richard Parnell. The General was pretending to be an unenthusiastic reviewer of the newly-opened wing of Northwest Cloning.

"Why are you complaining? None of it came out of *your* pocket," Parnell said. He noted considerable progress in building additional cloning-chamber rooms, nodded encouragement to the techs. "Everything you see is Detloff's treat. He's bankrolled us to the hilt these past few weeks."

"You didn't need to go to him," Grigsby numbed unhappily. "I... would have helped you. Haven't I angeled the project from the beginning?"

"We thought you wanted to be included out on cloning. How's it going, Ines?" Parnell waved to the departmental supervisor. Ines has been brighter, more outgoing since her blowup with Jesse. The confrontation had done them both good, in Parnell's opinion.

Grigsby heaved a sigh. "Well, I guess I gave you that impression. But you know how I am, Rich. Therese made me see how bullheaded I've been. Just... these new ideas. Too radical for me. Maybe I can't dump it anymore, as the kids say."

The General talked that way more and more frequently. Reminiscing. Wallowing in nostalgia, complaining things had changed since the good old days. At times he sounded exactly like Emmett and the others at the library. Their tapes to Ria were parroting the General's everyday conversation. Including the gloomy mutterings about age and death.

Time made that inevitable. But Parnell hated to see it happen.

"We still need your experience and advice, Og-den," he said. He tried to put the sincerity he felt into those words.

"What does it matter? Bliss can't duplicate *me* in one of those infernal chambers of his," Grigsby said. He stared at his son-in-law and demanded, "Can he?"

"No. Even Therese and I are at the top age limit for usable cloning tissue."

"Thanks, for leveling with me," the General said huskily. "Always liked you for that, Richard. Smartest thing my daughter ever did—marrying you. Won't be so bad going, knowing you're on tap to take care of her, and Ria."

The original cloning chamber was more crowded than it had been the day Ines had exploded Jesse Bliss's secret. Cameras and sound equipment were squeezed in beside monitoring consoles and the central chamber. The last was the feature attraction for Nevin Detloff's in-progress telecast.

Detloff and Ria were standing by the chamber, and the cameramen panned to include all three in their shots.

"... the result of self-sacrifice and dedication, friends," Nevin was saying. "People who work for *your* future. For me, for you, for all of us. You didn't know these people existed, or that they were slaving away. All this tune they've been trying to save the world. Find a way to make sure we aren't the last generation on earth. Think about that, friends! Think about that kind of dedication!"

Parnell had been a spectator at a dozen similar broadcasts throughout these past few weeks. The material was nothing new, but Detloff's delivery retained its freshness. His eagerness was infectious, sparking both the viewers and the scientists he praised. Grigsby had the gift of command—had used it well all his military career. Nevin Detloff's talent was hypnotism—the ability to bring his ideas to life for multitudes.

After several initial clashes, the two men had struck a truce. It wasn't peace. And it wasn't always amicable. But Detloff was no longer under arrest—and he'd started aiming his messages at all generations, usurping the stale speechmaking of Grigsby's party spokesman.

Detloff smiled into the camera and brushed at Ria's hair gently. Big brother introducing his beloved little sister. "Remember friends—Ria was almost killed in a disty riot. Just

one close call she had. Look at her. Imagine her terror. Imagine what it was like for her. And think—what we could have lost if anything had happened to her. Part of our future. Think about it. Think hard! All of us have to share tomorrow. All of us. You and me, and Ria."

"And that includes Youngers and Middle-Agers and Olders. *All of us*," he segued expertly. "We aren't enemies. We're all living in the same world. That's the same future up ahead for all of us. Let's not be so cretinous we rob ourselves of it..."

Sensing what came next, the cameramen widened focus. Grigsby crooked his neck nervously and straightened his uniform blouse. Brightly, Detloff grinned a welcome. "And speaking of a better future for all of us, here's General Ogden Grigsby to fill us in on the new food distribution plan. How's it coming, General?"

A bit broad, but Grigsby lapped it up. He'd always let his puppet do the orating for him. Now Nevin Detloff insisted the General tell his own story. Clever psychology in the campaign to draw the generations together. Detloff and Grigsby, sharing a camera. Side by side, like a man and his grandson. The past and the future..."

"The main problem has always been processing and distribution," Grigsby explained to the unseen audience. "The food's available. The trick is getting it to you. We've had trouble getting help at our processing factories. Loading the product. Transporting it to the cities. You don't have to read to do these jobs, either."

"Hear that, friends?" Nevin said, instantly picking up the ball, bringing it home to the listeners. Anybody can pitch in. All you need is a willingness to work. You'll not only do yourself a favor, you'll be helping others. And that's a good feeling. Why don't you try it?"

"We're open for volunteers," Grigsby chimed in, reciting a series of addresses. Three. One for Young-ers, one for out-of-work Middle-Agers, one for still healthy Olders. The divisions hadn't evaporated completely yet. But Detloff and Grigsby were hacking away at the walls.

"And I'd like to thank everyone who cooperated with the Deputy President's new census," Grigsby added. "We have to know where we've been so we'll know where we're going."

"That's right," Detloff said, putting his talent into high gear. "Cooperation: That's the key to the future, friends. Everyone wants to survive. A natural life span. Everyone's right. Including the next generation's." He gestured to Ria and the infant clone. "We have to live together and work together. Now remember..."

Parnell mentally switched off Detloff's summation. That skillful reprise, telling the public what it must do to survive.

What it *was* doing. A few weeks ago no one had dreamed civil order was possible. The military beat heads and fired sonic weapons. A civilian's job was to resist and riot.

That was before Detloff and Grigsby combined their resources and media outlets. They'd brought the population—via the magic of the telecast—right into Northwest Cloning. Showed everyone Ria and the clone. Told the people there would be a next generation, and told them why and how, on a simplistic level.

It worked. Not all at once. But the shake-up was enough to cause a lot of regrouping. And while people regrouped, they rethought. And when they were thinking they weren't rioting. The breather gave the military and municipal authorities the chance they needed to get organized—get food distribution back on a reasonable basis.

Parnell had been amazed when he'd gone into the city a few days ago. Not as quiet as things were twenty years ago, of course. But a vast improvement over recent debacles.

Detloff raised a questioning eyebrow at Parnell. Did he want air time? Any tidbit of information the doctor wanted to share with a panting public? Parnell, no publicity seeker, shook his head.

Signing off, Nevin Detloff, Grigsby, and Ria postured hammily for the cameras.

"They make quite a combination, don't they?" Therese whispered in Parnell's ear.

The chief cameraman was saying, "That's a wrap!" Parnell felt it was safe to talk out loud now. "Frankly, I think your Father finally found his proper niche. A seventy-year old matinee idol."

The cameraman was ordering, "Okay, let's get this junk cleaned up and out of here. You know Dr. Bliss doesn't like us cluttering the place for these vidcasts."

Parnell accosted the man before he could leave. "Glad to see you back in action, Brent. How's the head?"

"Oh, I feel fine—thanks to Doctor Parnell," and Brent nodded gratefully to Therese.

"Not me," she corrected modestly. "All I did was turn you over to the experts. A few spinal taps and a lot of medication and... here you are. Good as new."

"I sure feel lucky," the young man said.

"You should," Detloff interrupted. He slapped his friend's bicep. That current of camaraderie which ran between Detloff and his aides was strong. Everyone who saw the men knew how much Detloff had worried about the cameraman.

"How grateful are you?" Parnell asked slyly. They stared at him quizzically. "Our medical department could use some trainees. Be a good chance for some

Youngers to get started in a profession. One that's rather important."

"Doctors," Nevin murmured, mulling the prospects. "That's a great idea! You mean... would your people really have the time to mess with..."

"A bunch of illiterate Youngers?" Therese filled in, saving the politician the embarrassment of downgrading his followers. "Maybe by the time we got through with them they wouldn't be

illiterate. If we teach them to be interns and surgeons, I think we just might teach them how to read along the way."

Parnell himself added a clincher. "We wouldn't have to confine the course to medicine. Life Sciences is a college in miniature. Some of our staff have other specialties. Music, literature... and we can tap the library's shelves for material."

"Sounds great! When can we get on it?" No one ever faulted Nevin Detloff for being slow on the uptake.

"I'll ask around," Parnell said, amused. But intrigued by the possibilities. "We *will* need doctors."

He turned to look at the clone infant. Very soon now the tiny human would be ready to come out into the world. Ria was counting the days. To her it was a game, but to Parnell the clone's emergence from the tank would signal a new start for the human race. A backup system for survival, as Detloff put it.

Detloff had been taking a radio message, a receiver hurriedly shoved into his hands. He listened a moment, then laid the set down. His expression was a study. "Richard..."

"Bad news?" Parnell said apprehensively.

"N... no." Detloff was a man surprised beyond no.

his wildest expectations. "Come Therese and the General..." on. You and

"Me too!" Ria insisted, bouncing up and down, yanking on Grigsby's hand. The old man bore the abuse stolidly, smiling at the girl.

"Yes, Ria too. Hurry!"

Detloff led them out of the building onto a meadow fronting the industrial complex. A late spring breeze whipped at them warmly and clouds scudded across a pale blue sky.

"Is it a surprise?" Ria demanded excitedly.

"Yes and no." Detloff was maddeningly uniformative, hands shielding his eyes as he gazed eastward.

Parnell heard it now. Not heliflitters. These weren't military aircraft. Some of those expensive replicas Detloff's people had hand-made from old patterns. Copters, cobbled out of salvaged machine parts and a lot of ingenuity. Nevin Detloff's private air force.

Two of them, sidling in toward the meadow. "Have they got permission to land here?" Grigsby began.

"Next you'll be telling me I'm still under arrest," Nevin said, and the old man actually blushed. The Younger went on, "You might say as General Grigsby's civilian liaison I've ordered a VIP delivery."

"VIP... ?"

Further questions were drowned in noise and windy backlash from the copters' rotors. The reception committee squinted their eyes and hunched shoulders until the long blades spun to a stop, Then stared curiously at the landed craft.

The man who got out first seemed familiar to Parnell. He hadn't seen the face for several weeks, and only briefly then. "Isn't that..."

"Lew!" Detloff cried, waving a greeting. "You made good time."

"I didn't want you to wait for this," Lew shouted back.

Grigsby was stewing, uncertain whether to make a protest. An escaped prisoner. But so many things had changed since the night of the riots and the flight from the city. He wisely decided to let the matter drop.

Lew was helping a child from the lead copter. A girl, not as old as Ria.

All the watchers were stupefied. Even Nevin. As if he'd taken

Lew's call and hadn't dared believe it.

More children got out of the copters. Lew and several other Younger aides and pilots assisted them down to the grass. There were also some adults. Shy, uncertain about their welcome here. Young in their twenties.

The passengers huddled together, gazing warily at the people by the lab. Ria was already on her way to break the ice. She skipped up to the new arrivals, asking the children their names, telling them hers.

Parnell stared. Coloring, facial structure—it was obvious these were children and their parents.

The immunes they'd hoped to find!

Four women and three men and five children. Some families were broken, one child was an orphan. But plainly they were immunes. The infertility factor had passed them by. None of the children was as old as Ria. All these children had been conceived and born within the past ten years, possibly within the last five.

Lew sauntered past Ria and the new arrivals, waving jauntily to Nevin. "Here they are, all safe and sound."

Detloff inhaled deeply, darting a glance at Parnell. "I hope this is just a first installment on the future. These are the people you wanted to find—the immunes and their children. We've coaxed them out of hiding, persuaded them you could be trusted."

Richard and Therese Parnell looked at each other, incredulous. Then Parnell said, "Five children. Four fertile female adults. Do you realize what you've done for the world, Nevin?"

"Given it one extra chance for the future, I hope."

"Maybe now you'll jettison that obscenity in the lab," Grigsby muttered.

"No! Don't you understand, Ogden? Backup systems. When you've got a risky undertaking, you don't let prejudice cancel out

any avenue to the final goal. The clones are necessary to mankind's ultimate survival."

Therese put it in more human terms. "Father, those women are fertile—but I'm not. Very few women are or will be for years to come. Consider the numbers. If humanity's going to avoid extinction, it needs as many people as possible. Unless we produce clones, twenty years from now the human race will be down to a bare handful. And the gene pool will be... wiped out, virtually."

"It doesn't seem..." But Grigsby shook his head, conceding the logic of arguments he could no longer keep up with. "If... if you say so."

"Believe me, that's the way it is," Parnell assured the old man. "Thank you, Nevin. How long did it take you to find these immunes?"

"Ever since Lew made that break." Detloff was apologetic. "I'm sorry there aren't more..."

"I'm grateful. I'm just thinking... it would have been too high a price to pay if Lew had been shot making his getaway," Parnell said.

"I appreciate the compliment, Doctor. I won't take that kind of chance again," Lew said with an amiable smile.

"Let's hope it's never required again." Parnell studied the little group of immunes. "How much territory did you have to cover to locate that many?"

Lew and Detloff exchanged glances. "The whole North Central District," Lew confessed. "I hate to admit it, but I suspect this is about all we'll get in this region. If there are any more of 'em out there either they didn't get the word, or they aren't coming forward.

"Yet," Detloff corrected him hopefully.

Parnell didn't share his optimism. Five children from this

district. A few more in the Eastern, Mountain, and Western Districts, probably. A few more fertile females. That just might be it for the nation which dominated a good chunk of the world.

The odds weren't as good as he'd hoped. They really *did* need the clones. Hang onto every scrap of life they could. He and Therese and Detloff had already contributed DNA samples to a tissue bank, for use in cloning sometime in the future. So had every other scientist and specialist in Life Sciences—those who were young enough to qualify. A lot of Detlofi's Youngers would also be good cloning models.

Ria and five other naturally-born children. It was a start.

"Richard," Therese said softly. She was reading his mind again. "We're going to make it, aren't we?"

He pulled her into the crook of his arm. "You sounded like you doubted it."

"There were times..."

"Not any more. There's too much to do from now on." They looked toward the newcomers.

Ria was the senior in this school of the future. "We live here," she told the other children. "You can too—you and your mommies and daddies."

"Do you have food to eat?" one asked timorously.

"Oh, lots! Grampa and Nevin see about that. Oh, and there's learning tapes and books and..." She paused and surveyed her youthful audience. "You know how to read, don't you?"

She was shocked by the negative response from both parents and children.

"Well... I'll teach you. My mommy will help. And there's an awful lot to learn." Ria was amusingly pontifical. The expert, showing the new kids the ropes. "You'll have to work hard, but it's a lot of fun..."

Ria took a couple of the children by the hands, led the entire group toward Northwest Cloning's door. Her chatter was Pied Piper's tune. They followed her without question.

"I'll show you the clones, too," Ria promised. "You can watch a baby growing—right inside the tank."

The door closed behind Ria's description of a library, and how one was crammed with thousands of books—all of which she could read. And someday the other children could too.

"Better watch it, Nevin," Lew chuckled. "She'll be taking your job away from you one of these days."

Quite seriously Detloff replied, "I won't mind stepping aside for Ria."

"We all have to step aside for the next generation," Parnell said. He was watching Ogden Grigsby. The old man was woebegone, abandoned. Then he perked up and trailed after Ria, obviously going to help out as tour guide. The leader demoted to a doting assistant for a small girl.

Detloff and Parnell eyed each other thoughtfully.

Parnell nodded. "But we aren't going to be stepping aside for some time yet. There's too much work to do.

Right now it's showing those newcomers they made the right decision—coming out in the open with their children."

Familiar eagerness sparkled in Nevin Detloff's eyes. "Well, come on! What are you waiting for?"