

An admittedly inhumane method of population control via global triage.

TRIAGE

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TRIAGE

William Walling

tri•age (tre-ahzh) n [Fr. “sorting”]. Classification of casualties of war, or civilian disaster, to determine priority of treatment.

CLASS I Those who will die regardless of treatment.

CLASS II Those who will live regardless of treatment.

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

PART ONE

Victoria

Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.

Genesis, i. I. 28

Prologue

Most summer afternoons between three and four o'clock, thirteen million denizens of the Greater Denver megalopolis have to deal with a minor inconvenience. Prevailing westerlies shove warm, humid air from the Great Plains against the Continental Divide. The moist influx rises, collides with cooler, drier air high above the mountains, and the moisture condenses. Pedestrians scurry for cover as thundershowers drench the region. But not for long. The air soon clears magically, the sun reappears. For a time, until endemic high altitude smog settles back in, the Rockies can be seen rearing stark and majestic against a cerulean sky. The exception that proved the rule occurred late one summer evening, when the minor inconvenience turned into a major bother. A window-rattling

electrical storm stalked the region, its noisy passage continuing on into the wee hours. Lightning strikes speckled Greater Denver and the outlying exurban sprawl with power outages.

For homeless scavenger Nate Senich, the blackout was neither an inconvenience nor a bother; it was the godsent opportunity he had watched and waited for all summer long. A lightning strike had blasted a transformer, chopping off power in the vicinity of the Denver Zoo, specifically the high, electrified fence enclosing the deer compound.

Senich's emotions whipsawed between dread of the consequences should things go wrong, and soaring elation if everything were to go well — an ambivalence shared by his three oddly assorted companions. Fear burned in his gut like ripe jalapeño peppers, garnishing his omnipresent hunger. He clenched and unclenched his fists to still the trembling, licked his chapped lips, psyching himself up for the attempt. Whispering nervous urgings to his companions, he told them to stop bellyaching and get ready, goaded them into risking the bold sortie, reassured them it could be done quickly and easily, exactly like they'd rehearsed.

His heart thudding in his chest, mouth dry, Senich steeled himself to rise, bolt across the patch of sun-browned lawn and scramble up and over the dead electric fence. But at that moment the full moon slid from behind scudding thunderheads; a wash of moonlight silvered the trees and walkways, the clump of withered shrubbery behind which he and three emaciated men crouched.

He loosed a sibilant curs. “Okay,” he whispered, “soon’s the moon dives back under me 'n Red go up and over. We grab a fawn, heist it over the fence. Art, you and Slick man the rope. Then we cut and run like the hammers of hell.”

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

“Terrific!” His stage whisper louder than if he'd spoken normally, Senich wanted to know how Red figured to haul a full-grown buck or doe over a ten-foot fence topped with barb wire. “Snatch a fawn and scarper is what I say. The zoo guys could get power back any minute. Then where’d we be?”

“Up shit creek,” admitted Red.

“Right, without no goddamn paddle, neither.”

The moonlight faded gradually. Before he had a chance to reconsider and maybe chicken-out, Senich drew a deep breath and reared to his feet.

Trotting clumsily, bent over from the waist to aid hoped-for concealment, he was trailed by the redhead.

Getting into the deer compound proved more difficult than anticipated. Climbing haphazardly, ladder fashion, the pointed toes of Senich's badly scuffed Western boots slipped on wet chain-links. Praying that power wouldn't come on and fry him like a bug, he used a pair of dikes stolen from the nearby fire station to snip the coil of vicious concertina wire looped atop the normally electrified fence. Beside him, Red went over first, snagged his shirt and tore it on a sharp, lopped off wire end. Nate threw a leg over in the darkness, and almost lost his balance. He slipped twice more climbing down, with Red wheezing and grunting beneath him.

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

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

Nate swore softly, charged after the fawn as it scampered away and caught it by the hindquarters. He rolled the animal to the ground, slit its throat with a rust-speckled hunting knife.

Stooping over Red, afraid to touch him, he listened for breathing. No breath was left in the redhead. The moon emerged from behind scudding cloud anvils, dimly illuminating a dark pool forming beneath the other's head. Red's eyes were open, staring blindly in the moonlight.

Panic drained Nate's strength as he staggered to the fence, the blood-soaked fawn cradled in his arms. His fingers trembled so badly that he had trouble tying the dangling length of frayed hemp around the animal's forequarters. Art and Slick yanked on the rope; the fawn bounced against the fence, moving upward in fits and jerks. Nate clambered awkwardly beside it, helped to jigger the carcass over the top with one hand. He nearly fell again in his haste to descend the other side.

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

“Stove-up, deader ‘n yesterday’s news. Get a hustle on!”

“Can’t just leave him here,” objected Art. “It ain’t right.”

“What the hell can we do? Move your butt, f’ Chrissake!”

Street lights flickered and winked into life as three shadows hastened away from the deer compound, with Senich laboring under the trash bags holding the carcass of one of the Denver Zoo’s few remaining mule deer.

* * *

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

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

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

Sated, Art wheezed, “Gawdalmighty, roast venison! Never thought I’d see the day.”

“Want . . . more?” Despite a mouthful of badly decayed teeth, Slick was chewing noisily.

Art grinned. “Couldn’t choke down another mouthful. Besides, not much left ‘cept bones ‘n gristle.”

Slick’s chewing suddenly stopped. He gasped.

Startled by the other’s sudden intake of breath, Senich’s alarm peaked when the old fellow loosed an exclamation of dismay. “Oh, Jesus-my-beads!”

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

“Against the wall, spread ‘em!” The cop’s basso, not-to-be-argued-with directive echoed in the basement’s confines.

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

"Stupid assholes!" remarked one of the officers.

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

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

"Sniffing," Nate said dully.

"Yeah, and drooling."

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

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

* * *

Eight thousand kilometers eastward, in Rome, it was getting on toward noon of a humid summer morning. Although a prominent member of *Famiglia Pontificia*, the Pope's inner circle, few habitués of Vatican City would have recognized Louis Cardinal Freneaux. His Eminence was dressed for travel in a dark gray, summer-weight, a perfect match to his somber expression. Eyes lowered, his head heavy in thought, he descended the steps leading up to the papal apartments and made his way across the San Damaso courtyard.

There were only minutes to spare; in less than two hours, with or without him aboard, a hypersonic jet would depart Leonardo da Vinci Intercontinental for New York. His limousine driver had been instructed to pick him up on *Via di Porta Angelica*, at the gate adjacent to the Swiss Guards' barracks. Despite the need to make haste, he felt an overpowering urge to seek solace in the basilica before commencing the dreaded journey.

With faltering resolve reflecting his depressed state of mind, Cardinal Freneaux passed through Raphael's Loggia, and then stepped back outside to skirt the Sistine Chapel's inevitable gaggle of summer tourists. The interview had gone badly, had in fact turned into a frightful ordeal, a worse confrontation than he could have anticipated. Renowned in private for a

mercurial temper and acid wit, His Holiness had not been simply angry, he'd been in high dudgeon. The Pontiff's harsh words and strident directives, delivered in staccato Italian, reverberated in the cardinal's mind like a cacophony of clangorous bells:

“This abomination has gone on far too long, Louis — nearly thirty years! It must be stopped, and we mean to see that it *is* stopped. No, not another word! We shan't listen to any of your arguments. We never again wish to hear you try and exacerbate the infamy perpetrated by the United Nations death merchants. Whatever personal opinion you may hold of that . . . that *woman* you would do well to keep to yourself.

“During the coming audience,” His Holiness had pursued, “you will convey nothing in the way of greetings or felicitations. You will not stand on ceremony, none! You will deliver our message verbatim, and you will deliver it firmly, forcefully. There cannot possibly be any misunderstanding, Louis. It is our firm conviction to carry through with this ultimatum, and that is something you must make perfectly clear.”

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

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

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

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

It promised to be anything but a joyous trip.

o n e

The tall man waited with outward patience, standing stiff-backed, knees together, opposite the desk where a male executive assistant feigned work under his punishing scrutiny. An imposing presence just under two meters in stature, the man was forceful in appearance, with a proud aquiline nose, sleek dirty-blond hair, and chill hazel eyes. The wraparound collar of his pearl gray tunic was fastened even though a scheduled rolling power brownouts had paralyzed portions of Greater New York during the night and early morning hours, leaving the anteroom overly warm and stuffy.

The executive assistant darted an occasional furtive glance at the tall man. Their glances crossed, and he squirmed. “Terribly sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Rook. I can’t imagine what’s keeping Dr. Duiño.”

“I’m sure she’s very busy, Harold.” Rook folded long arms across his chest, a gesture of mild rebuke. “Don’t trouble yourself; pretend I’m not here.”

“Yes, sir.” Harold plunged back into the paperwork littering his desk, dividing his time between a checklist of names and the flat-panel computer integral to his desk. At last the intercom chimed. Harold was quick to say, “You can go right in, sir.”

Rook nodded curtly, turned on his heel. When the blast-resistant door to the inner office slid closed behind him, the young executive assistant looked immensely relieved.

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

TERRA STABILITA.

A pair of utilitarian guest chairs crafted of clear Honduras mahogany were adrift on a sea of wall-to-wall shag the color of oatmeal. Save for an

antique French pendulum clock, and a floor-to-ceiling bank of video panels — now dark — the austere yet spacious office was enclosed by oyster-white walls. Damask draperies of pastel yellow shrouded a glasswall overlooking the East River ninety-six floors below.

Rook did not presume to take a seat. Hands clasped behind his back in an outwardly subservient stance, he chose a spot just inside the door, regarding his superior with a vacuous, indolent expression.

If aware of Rook's presence, Dr. Duiño gave no sign. She continued to occupy herself with a sheaf of papers neatly stacked beside the computer terminal. Her hair, short and brittle as her temper, was roached stiffly backward, forming a platinum aura. Her features were wrinkled, sagging, but her eyes retained the dark and shining luster of youth. Around her frail neck, pendant against the lace *mantilla* thrown over her shoulders, hung a polished silver crucifix. In two months and eleven days Dr. Duiño would celebrate her eighty-eighth birthday. She was the most reviled and detested human being on the planet.

Victoria lifted her eyes. “Apologies, Bennett. I hadn’t meant to keep you away from your desk so long. Please have a seat.”

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

“In a manner of speaking.” Dr. Duiño touched a button on the remote controller. Across the office, the large holovision tank lighted, and a scene condensed. Rendered with startling realism via satellite, the secure transmission allowed viewers to eavesdrop on a courtroom scene. Now in its penultimate stage, the trial was taking place half a continent away.

“I wanted to assure myself,” she said, staring intently at the committee’s deputy chairperson, gauging his demeanor, “that we are obtaining full benefit from the Senich Trial. I assume you’ve followed the case.”

Rook turned with liesurely grace. He studied the scene in the holographic theater for several heartbeats, listened to a phrase or two of the public defender’s summation. Despite his contention being abysmally weak, the self-conscious young attorney, was vainly attempting to make use of the only ammunition in his depleted arsenal. Less than eloquent, he tried to convince a dozen stone-faced jurors that the defendant had suffered severe lifelong deprivation, and that his punishment should therefore be relatively lenient. To condemn Nathan Senich for the vile offense he and a pair of

luckless co-defendants had committed, pleaded the lawyer, would be an act of gross injustice.

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

"It is," was Victoria's cool rejoinder. In her mind, the unanimous guilty verdict soon to be rendered by twelve resentful, disgusted men and women was a foregone conclusion, the crime itself no more than an ugly, despicable incident. Her interest was purely political. A homeless transient, and two miserable co-defendants, had capped their crime by reviving the ancient sin of gluttony. In her view, although totally indecent, the deed amounted to more than simply an affront to human society as a whole, exemplifying as it did, yet another symptom of a global population slowly and steadily degenerating toward terminal illness.

For UNDEP's Triage Committee, however, the trial carried important propaganda implications. Widespread howls of public indignation, fanned by print and electronic tabloid journalism, had created a welcome avalanche of calls, letters, and electronic mail. If UNDEP press releases were to milk the sordid affair for all it was worth . . .

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

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

"I would rather you didn't make light of it, Bennett." A throaty burr crept into Sra. Duiño's enunciation. "In my memo, you may recall that I asked you to get PR cracking on this court action. Thus far, you've chosen to ignore my request. I believe we stand to reap a certain amount of public sympathy if trial coverage is properly handled."

"We . . . ?" The tall man's brows rose. "Triage Committee? You're being overly optimistic, Victoria. Nothing we do or say could possibly improve our image. Only day before yesterday, *L'Osservatore Romano*

once again referred to you as the ‘Matriarch of Death.’ PR abandoned all attempts to ‘sell’ our committee decades ago.”

“You know perfectly well what I meant,” the old woman said tautly. “Bennett, must we always fence? Can’t you ever bring yourself to sit down with me and converse sociably?”

Rook’s arctic smile was a parody of humor. Rocking back on his heels, he returned the chairwoman’s steadfast gaze with an imperturbable coolness that never failed to infuriate both adversaries and sympathizers. “I’m afraid there are matters we shall never see in the same light. Nothing personal, I assure you. If you want the truth, I admire you tremendously, and always have. If that were not the case, I would tell you so. I’m not a hypocrite.”

“No,” she conceded. “Blunt and outspoken perhaps, but never hypocritical.”

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

Sra. Duiño gazed at her adversarial colleague with unwinking concentration. “Bennett,” she said, “I need your cooperation, not your enmity. In fact, I must insist upon having it.”

Rook sighed. “How many times have we had this same conversation? I would rather not discuss it.”

“Why not? What are you afraid of?”

Rook stiffened slightly. “I’m afraid of nothing,” he declared. Then, after a pause, “Your pardon, of almost nothing.”

“Your use of a qualifier makes me curious.”

“My one genuine fear,” he said slowly, “is for the survival of our species.”

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

“To little avail.”

“Do you honestly consider that to be a fair and reasonable statement?”

“Eminently reasonable, totally fair.” His eyes alight with refractory intensity, Rook stood firm under the old woman’s penetrating gaze. “You more than anyone,” he added, “are familiar with this week’s global delta.”

Dr. Duiño hesitated. “Certainly I am. It’s most encouraging. Worldwide growth during the past week amounted to less than a quarter of

one percent.”

“Bravo!” Rook applauded the statement in his own sardonic fashion, by pantomiming the silent effect of one hand clapping. “Victoria, do forgive my impertinence, but now and then you must look beyond the walls of our ivory tower and view the real world as it is. During the past week, despite sanctions, proscriptions, and lawful executions; despite floods and the effects of climate change; despite earthquakes, plagues, volcanic eruptions and the further desertification of the planet’s remaining arable soil bank, some twenty-five thousand *more* human beings came into existence, joining the twelve and one quarter billions unable to adequately feed, clothe, or house themselves. Can you yourself 'honestly' say all’s right with the world?”

Taken aback, Victoria replied more sharply than she might have intended. “I made no such idealistic claim. The world is, and has always been, precisely what inferred: all too painfully real. May I ask in turn how you can possibly deny that the weekly delta is not encouraging? ZPG is certain to become a reality in several years.”

“Ah, zero population growth! Nirvana,” said Rook, “is at last on our doorstep. Yet even if that particular chimera were to materialize this afternoon, and the global birthrate suddenly dipped marginally below the death rate, it’s too damned little, too damned late. You must be aware that most of a half-century will have to grind past before currently mature generations live out their lives and depart the scene.”

“That is . . . so,” she admitted reluctantly.

“My position,” he insisted, “is no different than it’s been since my appointment was confirmed. Had sterner measures been adopted then, we would now be on the downslope, not slouching toward the crest.”

“I’m quite familiar with your view.” For the first time during the encounter Victoria sounded testy. “Stern measures, as you call them, would have inspired our committee to act in a less than humane manner. Fortunately, most of our fellow committeemen and women feel as I do. We refuse to subscribe to inhumane judgments as a cure-all for the world’s ills.”

“As a triage philosophy,” Rook said flatly, “that amounts to the worst sort of emotion-based, head-in-the-sand optimism. The committee’s refusal to squarely face the cold population equation is precisely what has defeated our dream . . . Your pardon, *my* dream. An idealistic worldview is a luxury we can afford either professionally, nor privately.”

“Bennett, Bennett!” Dr. Duiño’s head wagged sadly. “You are intelligent and industrious, thoroughly dedicated to the grisly task we are committed to undertake. Those outstanding virtues are why I selected you from the crowd years ago. Yet on the negative side of the ledger, you apparently own no sense of compassion. You haven't the slightest twinge of conscience for the awful judgments we vote to render month after month, year after year.”

It was not in Rook’s nature to equivocate. “World conditions,” he said, “automatically exclude emotion from the population equation we persist in striving to balance. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I believe it was Josef Stalin who best explained a fundamental sidelight of human nature. He observed that when a single individual perishes society considers it a tragedy, and exhibits an appropriate degree of remorse. But when thousands die, they are treated as faceless statistics.”

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

“World condition aside,” countered Rook, “more than a grain of truth clings to that Stalinesque tidbit. Mortal danger to an individual — the victim of a mine disaster, someone trapped in a fire, a flood, whatever — never fails to generate a groundswell of public sympathy, while the fate of gross numbers stricken by megadrought, flooding, famine, disease, et al, are shrugged off as inevitable happenings. Up to a point, our committee does what it was organized to do, what it was *forced* to do by those selfsame statistics. We are given no choice but to act, but in order to undertake the task effectively we must learn to act analytically, dispassionately, dutifully. Were it otherwise, there would be no sane committeemen or women.”

“And you,” she declared, “consider me a senile, idealistic old fool for harboring the sentiments you disavow. You’ve convinced yourself that I should step aside and allow a young Turk like you to chair the committee. Isn’t that so, Bennett?”

Rook stood perfectly still, his manner relaxed, speculative. “Senile . . . ? Hardly, my dear Victoria. Your mind is clear and incisive as ever. You remain one of very few individuals able to best me in debate. Idealism I will not answer; I’m not qualified. And as for being a fool, no, let me correct your false impression. All things considered, you are less a fool than anyone in my acquaintance. I respect you enormously, envy your dedication, your strength

of purpose. Perhaps I even love you in my own peculiar fashion. Nevertheless, given the opportunity I would replace you tomorrow.”

“Because I'm too soft?”

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

Her executive assistant announced that Cardinal Freneau was in the anteroom. “And your granddaughter's calling — channel sixteen.”

“Monique . . . ? Did you explain that I was occupied?”

“I tried, Dr. Duiño. She said it was urgent. Actually, she told me it was extremely urgent.”

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

“Surely, ma'am. I'll let him know.”

“Thank you, Harold.” Keeping an eye and a portion of her attention on cascading statistics scrolling upward in the old-fashioned flat-panel computer display, Victoria switched off the descrambler circuitry invoked for classified communications and opened vidicom channel sixteen. “Monique, I can't talk very long right now. I trust you and Stewart are well?”

“Grandma . . .” The full-color image jelling in the vidicom panel depicted a petite, attractive young woman, her raven hair in disarray, her dark eyes red-rimmed, desperate.”

Victoria straightened in the high-backed executive chair. “What is it, Monique? What's wrong?”

“I've got . . . troubles, Grandma. Big troubles.”

“What kind of troubles? Can I be of help?”

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

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

“No, I don’t think so. I don’t know. I, uh . . . I took my pills, never missed a date. I just don’t know.”

“Is Dr. Everett certain?”

“I . . . yes. When the test result came back, Dr. Everett laughed it off, called it a ‘false’ positive. But the second test, uh . . . It’s fate, I suppose, or the worst sort of bad luck.”

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

“Where . . . ? What does that have to do with —?”

“Never mind, Monique. I assume you buy birth control meds regularly at some pharmacy.”

“Why, yes. I usually fill the prescription at Gilbert’s Pharmacy here in the arcology complex. But I don’t see what that has to do with —”

“Have you any left?”

“Meds . . . ? A few, I think” The young woman sounded uncertain. “Several, I believe. I’ve been meaning to refill the prescription the next time I happen to be up on level —”

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

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

“Nothing, Monique. Leave everything to me.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Hum-m-mph! To live in what was once a vast rain forest with throngs of other outcasts? Is that what Stewart has in mind? Think about it, Monique, and think hard. Amazonia is still a jungle, but not in the former sense. Ask yourself if much of the region’s denuded quagmire would be a fit place for you and Stewart to raise an infant? Doing what Stewart suggests would be nothing short of suicidal. Why, you wouldn’t last long enough surrounded by the two-legged wildlife down there to give birth, let alone build more than an animal existence for yourselves.”

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

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

“God bless you, Grandma! And . . . thank you. I love you so very much.”

“I love you too, my dear.”

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

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

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

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry,” intoned the middle-aged woman. “He’s somewhere over in Queens. There’s a problem with —”

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

“Of course, Dr. Duiño. I’ll call now, get word to him.”

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

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

Feeling something wither and die inside her, she heaved a deep, heartfelt sigh and muttered, “Damn them!” Unfortunately, no time was left to ponder the problem, no time . . .

Closing her eyes tightly, Victoria washed the residue of Monique's call from her mind and touched the intercom button. "You may show Cardinal Freneaux in now, Harold."

"Yes, Dr. Duiño."

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

Hobbling to mid-office, she waited there leaning on her cane, not looking forward to the interview.

t w o

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

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

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

Victoria straightened. In a different voice she said, "Must it be like that, Louis?"

"Take no offense, please. The Holy Father is . . . He wishes me to, er . . . I fear what we must discuss will be less that pleasing."

Throughout their long acquaintance, Victoria's high opinion of Freneaux hadn't faltered. She appreciated his firmly held convictions, cherished their friendship, deeply respected his humanitarian outlook. Nevertheless, she thought on occasion he carried formality to unnecessary extremes. Aware that for years Freneaux had made it a point of honor to limit his caloric intake to something commensurate with that of the deprived

members of the Holy See's vast flock, she considered him one of the more enlightened churchman in her acquaintance. "I assume," she said, testing the waters, "His Holiness is even more displeased with me and our committee than usual. I regret having caused him further pain. What is it this time, Louis?"

"Egypt, my dear Victoria."

Dr. Duiño's nod of understanding was slow in coming. She turned away and stumped to her desk. Setting aside the bamboo cane, she invited her guest to be seated. "Roughly three million inhabitants of the Nile Delta," she declared, "were formerly Class III. Last week, they were judged Class I; the vote was unanimous, eight ayes and one abstention, by me. As you know, I'm eligible to vote only in the event of a deadlock. Euthanasia is being provided for the unfortunates who elect to choose the easier path."

"Deplorable!" said Cardinal Freneaux.

"No one," she told him with feeling, "could deplore its necessity more than I myself. *Damanhûr, El Mansûra, Tanta, Zagazig, El Faiyûm* and *El Minya* share the fate of numerous villages scattered around the delta of the dry gulch where once a mighty river flowed."

"The remnants of a Coptic Christian community survive in Egypt," said her visitor, his intonation somber. "When United Nations pre-triage Peacekeeping Forces interdicted the Delta preparatory to . . . Well, to prepare the populace, if that term is appropriate, their arrival sent the Patriarch into a blind rage. He immediately petitioned the Vatican for redress."

"Ah, I see." Her dark eyes flashing pale fire, Victoria demanded to know why the Patriarch had failed to petition the governments in Moscow, Kiev and elsewhere for redress. She accused the collective leadership of the Balkanized Commonwealth of Independent States of being guilty by association, by adamantly refusing to allow the Egyptians to help themselves.

A grimace of frustration preceded Freneaux's response. "Help . . . themselves? Even if I were to agree with you, what purpose is there in reviving —?"

"Some time ago, Louis — decades," she pursued, "UNDEP geologists repeatedly warned of the dire consequences in store if the decrepit Aswan Dam were allowed to remain a threat to every downstream community. The structure was built and duly propagandized by the former Soviet régime, but that does nothing to excuse present day CIS autocrats for

backing down, looking the other way. Not when the problem was created by their predecessors.”

Freneaux did not reply.

“Swollen by spring floods in East Africa,” continued Victoria determinedly, “the weight of Lake Nasser on unstable terrain helped create a severe seismic disturbance. The upper Rift Valley developed a subsidiary fracture, and the river found a new channel to the Red Sea. Today Cairo is a dusty, decaying ruin as useless as the pyramids across the Nile. You may not believe me when I tell you the disaster was prophesied. Moreover, the catastrophe was judged not to have been a result of global climate change, but entirely due to laxity on the part of those who should have held themselves at least partially responsible.”

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

“Prophesied,” insisted Victoria. She pulled a leather-bound volume of the Holy Bible toward her, opened it to a red-ribbon bookmark. “Indulge me, Louis. Let me to read from Isaiah 19:4.5. ‘And the Egyptians will I give over into the hand of a cruel lord. And a fierce king shall rule over them, saith the Lord, the Lord of hosts. And the waters shall fail from the sea, and the river shall be wasted and dried up’.”

The papal envoy sniffed, lowered his eyes. He failed to comment on the words from Scripture, although the grim set of his mouth revealed what he thought of biblical prophecy in particular, or for that matter prophecies in general. “Rationalization is as useless as prophecy,” he said, doing his best not to sound defensive. “We have no choice but to be practical.”

“Practical, is it! Louis, in the modern Nile Delta more than a thousand *fellahin* compete viciously for every diminishing square kilometer of arable land, and while doing so watch the remaining topsoil vanish before their eyes. Something had to give, Louis.”

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

Victoria drew back as if she'd been slapped. “That was unkind of you, Louis. They're helpless human beings. They work together, love together, cry together, have aspirations and perhaps even laugh together on occasion, like you and I. Unfortunately, they also have appetites. Do you — does the Holy Father — imagine that I or any other members of our committee *enjoy* our work?”

“Of course no. Not in any way.”

“Then why hasn’t the Vatican exercised whatever influence it has over Eastern Orthodox churchmen within the Commonwealth of Independent States? Why hasn’t His Holiness thrown his weight behind a worthy crusade of that nature? His good offices might have helped make the Russians, Ukrainians and the other leaderships appreciate their obligation to resolve the Aswan problem before it became too late, too enormous for corrective action. With CIS help instead of hindrance, triage judgments in the Nile Valley would have dwindled significantly.”

A small sound of disgruntlement escaped the cardinal. “A meaningless argument, Victoria. You know how little Holy Church is able to influence decisions in Eastern Europe, or all of Asia for that matter. The CIS, for one example, is plagued with its own problems, titanic problems one might say.”

Willing her temper to subside, Victoria tapped a stylus on the desktop. She silently recited a novena, requesting an award of special grace in order to deal with the cardinal. “Titanic indeed, or perhaps an order of magnitude larger than that. Yet hasn’t God put us here to solve problems, however titanic? Can you deny that the impoverished portion of the Third World sprawling across Africa, the Mideast, Southeast Asia and much of the Indian subcontinent was at least partially a creation of states once belonging to the Soviet Union? Despite their loud, self-serving boasts about several becoming authentic democracies, it’s common knowledge that certain CIS leaderships where corruption is rampant have not entirely relinquished the Soviet philosophy, and never will where the exercise of power is concerned.

“Specific CIS entities,” she pursued, “have perpetuated conditions in portions of the Third World for use as political weapons. What can the United Nations do? I know it’s difficult to believe, but to this day Chapter Seven of the U.N. Charter has resisted any and all pleas for badly needed amendment. Chapter Seven continues to restrict U.N. Peacekeeping Forces to half, or less, of the military personnel and armaments of any major state with veto power. Allowing the U.N. peacekeeping military to be outnumbered two-to-one, or worse, is an affront to civilized society, to my mind an altogether disgraceful state of affairs.”

Waiting in silence, Freneau let the chairwoman's statements and accusations echo hollowly in his mind. His manner unbending, he acknowledged nothing she had said.

“Call it what you will,” said Victoria, her blood pressure rising. “Call it the CIS, USSR, or for that matter the Tsar’s holy *Rodins*. The congenitally paranoid, manipulative Russian Bear will forever remain the Great Russian Bear. The U.N. is powerless to inflict the will of the majority on certain regions of the Third World, except as the Great Bear permits.

“Even today,” she went on to say, her voice choked with resentment, “CIS leaders graciously condescend to permit triage judgments rendered and implemented wherever and whenever they are decreed, and then either individually or collectively they point a long propaganda finger and label our committee the ‘genocidal murderers of millions.’ But let the U.N. wise heads suggest something beneficial, something designed to aid in restoring the environment, something that will defeat or ameliorate global warming and improving living conditions — something like the Qattara Project — and the Great Bear immediately exercises its veto, killing the measure without remorse without questioning its value.”

Freneaux shifted his weight disquietly. “I’m not, uh . . . I don’t believe I’m familiar with the . . . project you mentioned,” he dissimulated, hoping to divert the old woman’s waxing anger.

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

“I, uh . . . yes, of course.”

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

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

“In and of itself,” she said as if unmindful of the interruption, “the desert battle is neither here nor there, except that the British high command

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

* * *

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

"UNDEP ecosystems analysts and civil engineers proposed a fifty-kilometer-long canal excavated by 'clean' mini-fusion devices from the seacoast near *El Alamein* to the brink of the depression. A hydroelectric power station was slated to be built there; roughly seventy years would have been required for a broad, fan-shaped inland sea to form, stretching from Siwa Oasis near the Libyan border to the foundations of the pyramids at Giza, with a long neck extending southward along the *Ghard Abu Muharik* wadi almost to *El Kharga*. The prospective Qattara Sea would have helped alter the climate of the arid Western Desert, bringing added rainfall to the rich, parched soil; in antiquity, much of the region was a lush garden. Egypt could have reclaimed hundreds of thousand of hectares of fertile land, thereby helping alleviate perpetual famine, and perhaps avert the fate of the Ethiopians, Eritreans and Somalians.

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

Freneaux had watched and listened to her recital in stoic silence. "My dear, you have a most uncanny knack for making complex matters sound

brave and simple. I'm afraid world conditions are a good deal more tangled than you picture. Visionary schemes like this . . . project are inevitably dismissed due to —"

"Not at all, Louis," she denied. "There was nothing 'visionary' about the Qattara Project; not a single visionary aspect pertained to it in any sense of the term. I mentioned it because it forms a primary example of many similar UNDEP proposals that have succumbed to CIS geopolitical nearsightedness and obfuscation."

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

"I can," said Victoria, sounding subdued if by no means defeated. "The holocaust you envision would either extinguish our species once and for all, or reduce our numbers to something the planet could once again tolerate. Triage on a grand scale, Louis."

Aghast, Freneaux halted in his tracks. "How can you think to voice such a horror?"

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

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

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

"Studies have shown," Freneaux said defensively, "that the planet will

support between twenty and twenty-five billions.”

“Ah, yes — studies!” Sounding doubly perturbed, Dr. Duiño said slowly, “Correct me if I’m mistaken, Louis, but I suspect the amazing numbers you just quoted were derived from the Vatican’s most recent *Humanae Vitae* conference. If so, aren’t you being a touch over-conservative? During the past century, similar conferences published estimates decreeing that our planet could support up to *forty* billions. Perhaps the decaying world we’re forced to live in could indeed support such an outrageously extravagant number, and maybe forty-five or fifty billions. But support them in what *condition*?”

Again Freneaux failed to respond. After a moment of thought, he said, “I hope you will understand my single-mindedness, Victoria. I fear our conversation has strayed far afield, and the purpose of my visit is . . . Well, I have a duty to perform. I am acting as the surrogate of His Holiness concerning . . . Well, a certain vital matter that must be resolved. The Holy Father has directed me to ask, in his name, a question of extremely personal nature. Will you be offended if I simply blurt it out?”

“Ask whatever is necessary, Louis.”

“Do you consider yourself a good daughter of the Church?”

“You know that I do.”

His Eminence pondered an invisible something that had come between himself and Dr. Duiño. “His Holiness was in an unusually stern, refractory frame of mind when he dispatched me. He instructed me to earnestly plead immediate reclassification of despairing inhabitants along the Nile Delta. He also urged me in the strongest possible terms not to take ‘no’ for an answer.”

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

“Then I must warn you of the dire potential consequences. Please do not take this warning lightly, my dear Victoria. Should you fail to change your mind and act on his plea, His Holiness has spoken of excommunication.”

Victoria grew deathly pale. Her fingers flew to her throat, touched the

silver crucifix. “Does the Holy Father,” she asked with a calmness she did not feel, “expect me to be intimidated by such an awful threat? Do you, Louis?”

“Not for one instant. I’ve known you too long, too well, to think you would ever give thought to discarding your principles. Not even in the face of . . . of such an abominable consequence.”

At once enraged, in shock and afraid, Victoria tossed her head. “I’m amazed to hear that His Holiness would stoop to attack me in such a dastardly, underhanded way. It’s impossible for me to believe he would try and coerce the manner in which I am determined to conduct my lifework. Why is he threatening eternal damnation, Louis. Why? How can he possibly imagine that exacting such a revengeful threat would cause me to bend to his will? Not in good conscience, certainly. Has the Holy Father somehow convinced himself that being excommunicated from everything I hold sacred will destroy me professionally?”

“I believe . . . I think that, uh . . . rationale explicitly sums up his decision.”

“Were such a horrible form of retribution to be carried out, doesn’t he realize it would mean absolutely nothing to the workings of our committee, just to me personally? Why doesn’t he appreciate that?”

“I’m not . . . sure.”

Victoria fingered the silver crucifix, then she clutched it tightly as if fearing it might be ripped from her throat. “What have we come to, my old friend? The Church — our Church — is now permissive regarding the ancient question of homosexuality. Even therapeutic abortion is countenanced under certain circumstances, and euthanasia is semi-condoned when the burden of life becomes too great for the sons and daughters of Mother Church to bear. Yet the Holy Father continues to obstinately face away from an irrefutable truth. A continuation of exponential population growth will mean nothing less than the eventual extinction of our species. In the absence of dynamic population control, the global curve will continue rising toward asymptotic heights. Yet long before the hideous curve reaches climactic ascension, our world will cease to exist as a fit environment for human beings.”

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

“For me as well, only much more so.”

Looking solemn, the cardinal said, “I am obligated to once again for your definitive answer.”

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

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

“Let us hope so.”

* * *

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

Her thoughts racing in the wake of the desolating interview with Cardinal Freneau, she closed her eyes and reviewed the nightmare judgments she had not only lived with, but directed for more than a quarter-century. The total unfairness of the Holy Father rested upon his faulty assumption that she herself and the committeemen and women were inhumanly responsible for attempting to stem, or hopefully reverse, the pell-mell surge of humanity toward oblivion. The raw numbers shouted loudly on their own accord, speaking for themselves. Eight millennia before the Savior's birth, the global population estimate had ranged in the vicinity of five millions. When Caesar had fallen to the daggers of envious men, unbeknownst to his envious assassins the Roman Republic had fallen with him, a turning point when the worldwide population was estimated to have hovered in the vicinity of two hundred and fifty millions.

During the mid-seventeenth century, roughly five hundred millions had occupied the planet, and by 1850 the number had climbed to approximately

one billion — a thousand millions. Circa 1930, just under two billions had lived out their lives in the world's continents and islands, and by the turn of the millennium in excess of six billions had crowded the globe.

The numbers were frightening, continuing to swell at the alarming, exponential rate of three or four additional births each second, eleven or twelve thousand per hour. A grim corollary to that equally grim statistic was that by calendar year 1999 between forty and fifty thousand children had starved to death each day, roughly fifteen millions per year; nor had that total included the victims of, or children orphaned by, AIDS, Ebola, and one or another of the multiplying diseases, their respective virulence accelerated by mutating bacteria and viruses.

Most modern demographers conveniently chose the first year of the third millennium, 2001, as a major knee in the population curve, a watershed year with which Victoria herself fully concurred, principally because it brought with it an American administration much more concerned with economic profit margins than population statistics, or for that matter concerned with the living conditions of its citizens. A critical decision point had arrived during the century's turn, a crucial nexus, a major crossroads where something that could have been fought for and possibly saved had been artfully swept under not only America's political carpets, but those of other nations as well.

Most political leaderships then in authority had kept their eyes wide shut despite the fact that hard evidence portending what might be on the horizon had been written legibly and indelibly for all to see. Around the globe during that fateful era, twenty-eight individuals per thousand had been born for every ten who perished. Translating those figures into a "per hundred" ratio equaled a growth rate of one-point-eight percent, a rate of increase then considered a relatively minor problem, although certain criers-in-the-wilderness had proven with simple arithmetic that it meant the planetary population would double in the relatively short span of forty or fifty years. The upshot, of course, meant the world's then-current six billions-plus would become twelve billions-plus by calendar year 2041, or 2050 at the latest.

It galled her deeply to realize that those selfsame criers-in-the-wilderness had been correct all along, accurately predicting that for a excellent reasons the twenty-first century would come to be known as the Age of Shortages. The world's politicians, bureaucrats, technocrats, dictators and warlords had naturally wasted few words blaming the rapidly degenerating

human condition on atmospheric pollution, the depletion and pollution of surface and ground water in various aquifers, increasing acidity in the oceans, vanishing topsoil, disappearing forests and wildlife impacted by global climate change — a trend possibly exacerbated, and probably compounded, by the fact that Planet Earth was still experiencing mild warming in the aftermath of the last ice age.

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

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

The intercom's chime dissolved Victoria's gloomy retrospective.

“Mr. Broward is in the antechamber,” announced her executive assistant.

Victoria changed mental gears. “Thank you, Harold. Have him come in, please.”

* * *

Jacketless, lacking the old-fashioned necktie he occasionally wore, UNDEP's saturnine security director wore a mussed tan tunic open at the throat. His hangdog expression and deep-set brown eyes reflecting an equally deep weariness, Augustus Jason Broward trudged into Victoria's office just as the digital chronometer on her desk rolled over to five o'clock.

"Thank you for stopping by, A.J."

"Will this take long?" Broward eased his large, slightly overweight frame into a guest chair across from her desk. "A passel of loose ends need to get tied up before I —"

"And miles to go before you sleep," supplied Dr. Duiño.

"Uh-huh, that too. But make it light-years, not miles." The security official's throaty chuckle rumbled softly, without a vestige of humor.

Broward's timbrous basso voice and fisheye stare never failed to disconcert Victoria. A.J., as he was known, had cultivated both of those attributes, and used them with great efficacy. His vocal and visual assaults had served to loosen the tongues of untold miscreants under interrogation when Chief Inspector Broward had been a star investigator of the Greater New York Police Department. Although holding her colleague in immensely high regard, Victoria admitted to herself that A.J. was not, had never been and never would be, a particularly likable individual. The corollary, however, she indeed liked very much. Lacking its intelligent, dedicated leader, UNDEP Security could never have become the efficient, hard-as-nails organization it was.

"Problems in Queens?" she asked rhetorically.

Nominally unflappable, Broward performed a phlegmatic shrug. "The mother of all food riots," he said. "New York's Finest were undermanned and overwhelmed *tout de suite* — no surprise. I dragged four squads of U.N. Peacekeeper uniforms over to Queens, plus a doz-dozen off-duty blue suits scrounged from one Manhattan precinct or another. We did our bit to help bail out the Queenies."

"You succeeded, naturally."

"Depends on what metric you use to measure success." A.J. uttered an indignant snort. "Tote up something in excess of two thousand arrests, and we sure as hell did succeed in collaring a flock of bad-deed-doers. Catch is, there's no way on God's formerly green Earth to hold one one-hundredth of

the happy rioters more than a few hours. Every slam, lockup and holding pen from here to California bulges with inmates. Aw, what the hell!” Broward made an impatient gesture. “Keeping the herd of bad asses penned up is someone else’s headache. Now then, Victoria; speaking of collars, what sort of ‘extremely urgent’ burr is under your collar on this miserable afternoon?”

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

Broward finally did blink. All he had to say was, “Terrific, just goddamn terrific! One more dose of bad tidings is exactly what I need on my plate right now.”

“It’s an attack on me personally, A.J. It can’t be anything else. My granddaughter and her husband have absolutely nothing to do with it. They’re innocent foils.”

“Umm-m-m, could be a strong likelihood of that,” conceded Broward. “But let’s not conclusion-jump just yet. I’ll pigeonhole your conclusion as a probable, by no means a given.” A.J.’s blinkless stare persisted. “Hate to sound like a know-it-all, but with PRE-VENT, PREG-NOT and all the implants and other methods and goodies available to staunch conception, why in the name of Saint Swithins does your granddaughter play horse-and-buggy era games with old-fashioned birth-control tablets?”

“It bewilders me as well, A.J. I’ve asked Monique that identical question more than once. She said she and her husband don’t trust modern implants, devices or medications.”

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

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

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

“Why . . . yes, of course.”

“Doesn’t sound like a real smart move, Victoria. How do you know that nice looking youngster isn’t in on the scam, if a scam there be?”

“I trust Harold implicitly.”

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

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

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

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

“It’s impossible to believe Monique could possibly be careless about something so important.”

“And upon exactly what do you base that conclusion?”

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

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

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

“Obvious reasons, or ethical reasons?”

“Aren’t they one and the same, A.J.?”

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

“You’re paranoid, A.J.”

“Only the paranoid survive,” observed the other.

“Please, no cynicism.”

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

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

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

“I will.”

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

t h r e e

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

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

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