

TRIAGE

William Walling

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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.

BOOK ONE

Victoria

Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth . . .

Genesis, i. I. 28

prologue

Most summer afternoons between three and four o'clock, sixteen million denizens of the Greater Denver megalopolis 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 area, its noisy passage continuing on into the wee hours. Lightning strikes speckled Greater Denver and the outlying exurban sprawl with power outages.

To homeless scavenger Nathan Senich, the blackout was neither an inconvenience, nor a bother. It was the godsent opportunity he'd watched and waited for all summer long. Lightning had blasted a transformer, chopping off power in the neighborhood of the Denver Zoo—more specifically to the high, electrified fence enclosing the deer compound.

His emotional state whipsawed between dread of the consequences if things were to go wrong, and soaring elation if they happened to go well—an ambivalence shared by his three oddly assorted companions—fear burned in Senich's gut like salsa loaded with ripe jalapeños, garnishing his omnipresent hunger. He clenched his fists to still trembling hands, licked his lips. Psyching himself up for the attempt, he whispered nervous urgings to quit bellyaching and get ready, goadings meant to talk the others as well as he himself into risking the bold sortie. He assured them it could be done quickly, exactly as rehearsed.

Heart thudding in his chest, mouth dry, Senich steeled

himself to bolt across the patch of sun-browned lawn and scramble up and over the dead electric fence. But the full moon slid from behind scudding thunderheads. Nate uttered a sibilant curse as a wash of moonlight silvered the trees and walkways, the clump of withered shrubbery behind which he and three other emaciated men crouched.

“Kay,” he whispered, “soon’s the moon dives back under me and Red go up ‘n 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!” Senich’s stage whisper was louder than if he’d spoken normally. “How you figure on hauling 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 the creek,” admitted Red.

“Uh-huh. Without no goddamn paddle, neither.”

The moonlight faded gradually. Before he could reconsider and maybe chicken-out, Senich reared to his feet. Trotting clumsily, bent over as an aid to hoped-for concealment, he was trailed by the redhead. Getting into the deer compound proved harder than expected.

Nate climbed haphazardly, ladder fashion, the pointed toes of his badly worn Western boots slipping 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 coils of vicious concertina wire atop the usually electrified fence. Beside him, Red went over first, snagging his shirt, tearing it on a sharp, lopped-off wire end. Nate threw a leg over in the darkness 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 on his belly, but managed to grab the half-grown animal by one pipestem leg.

Hustling to lend a hand, Nate did not see 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. He charged after the escaping animal. The

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fawn almost scampered away, but he caught it by the hindquarters, rolled it to the ground and slit its throat with a rust-speckled hunting knife.

Stooping over Red, fearful of touching him, he listened for breathing. No breath was left in the redhead. The moon slid from behind fast-moving clouds, 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. He staggered to the fence, the bloodsoaked fawn cradled in his arms. With trembling fingers, he tied a 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. Clambering awkwardly beside it, he helped jigger the carcass over the top with one hand, then 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!"

"We just . . . leave Red here?"

"What the hell d'you think?"

"Don't seem . . . right."

"Move your butt, f'Chrissake!"

Street lights flickered and winked to life as three shadows hastened away from the deer compound. Senich labored under the trash bags holding the carcass of one of the zoo's few remaining mule deer.

Hours later, slumped in the basement of a ramshackle abandoned house in an older, unrenovated section of the Wheat Ridge district, Nate laid both hands across his distended gut. He groaned in ecstasy.

Picked clean, what was left of the fawn hung on a spit he and Slick 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 belched loudly, earning a snicker from one of his mates.

Sated, Art wheezed, "Gawdalmighty, roast venison! Never thought I'd live t'see the day."

"Want . . . more?" Despite a mouthful of badly decayed

teeth, Slick still chewed noisily.

Nate grinned. "Couldn't choke down another mouthful. Besides, ain't nothin' much left 'cept bones 'n gristle."

Slick's chewing stopped. He gasped.

Startled by the other's sudden intake of breath, Nate'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 silently tiptoed down the basement's rickety wooden stairs. Polycarbonate visor-shields pulled down over their eyes, flak vests in evidence, the cops covered the threesome with riot guns. Two more policemen edged downward behind the first pair. One held 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 growl echoed overloudly in the basement's confines.

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

"Stupid assholes!" said one of the officers.

"How'd . . . you . . . ?" Feeling dead inside despite the only decent meal he'd ever had, Nate said, "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 forehead. "The stink of roasting meat only attracted maybe two or three hundred sniffers. They're lined up six deep along the street and sidewalk."

"Sniffing," said Nate dully.

"Uh-huh, 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 Supreme Pontiff's inner circle, few habitués of Vatican City would have recognized Louis Cardinal Freneau. Dressed for travel in a dark gray, summer-weight suit perfectly matching his somber expression, His Eminence kept his gaze lowered, 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, the hypersonic jet would depart Leonardo da Vinci Intercontinental for Greater 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 urgency, he felt an overpowering urge to seek solace in the basilica before commencing the dreaded journey. With faltering resolve that reflected his depressed state of mind, he passed through Raphael's Loggia, then stepped back outside to skirt the Sistine Chapel's inevitable gaggle of summer tourists.

The interview had gone very badly. It had, in fact, turned into a frightful ordeal, a worse confrontation than he had anticipated. Renowned in private for owning a mercurial temper complemented by an acid wit, His Holiness had not been merely angry. He'd been in high dudgeon. The Pontiff's harsh words and strident directives, delivered in staccato Italian, reverberated in Freneau's mind like a cacophony of clangorous bells:

"This abomination has gone on far too long—nearly thirty years. It must be stopped, and we intend to see that it *is* stopped. No, not one word, Louis! This time we shan't listen to your arguments. We do not wish to hear you exacerbate the infamy perpetrated by the United Nations death merchants. Whatever personal opinion you yourself may hold of . . . that *woman* you would do well to keep to yourself.

"During the coming audience," His Holiness had pursued, waxing not merely loud, but deafening, "you will convey nothing in the way of greetings or felicitations. You are not to stand on ceremony. None! You will deliver our message verbatim, and deliver it firmly, forcefully. There can be no misunderstanding. It is our firm conviction to carry through with this solemn judgment. Is that 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, Freneau entered the basilica. There before him lay the shrine of shrines, gloriously lit beneath Michelangelo's soaring dome. Four curlicued, gilded bronze columns—Bernini's *baldacchino*—supported the 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, Louis Cardinal Freneau had enjoyed the spectacle on numerous occasions. It never failed to move him.

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He bent as if to make obeisance, but an inner voice made him 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 rolled down Freneaux's sunken cheek. Turning away, he walked in a semi-trance toward the waiting electric limousine.

It promised to be anything but a joyous trip.

ONE

The tall man waited with outward patience, standing stiff-backed, knees together, opposite the desk where a young male secretary feigned work under his punishing scrutiny. An imposing presence not much less than 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 rolling power brownout had once again paralyzed portions of Greater New York during the night and early morning hours, leaving the anteroom overwarm and stuffy.

The secretary darted occasional glances at the tall man. Their glances crossed, and the young man squirmed. “Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Rook. I can’t imagine what’s keeping her.”

“I’m sure Dr. Duiño is quite busy.” Folding long arms across his chest—a mild rebuff—Rook said, “Don’t trouble yourself, Harold. Pretend I’m not here.”

“Uh, yes sir.” Plunging back into the paperwork littering his desk, the secretary divided his time between a checklist of names and the flat-panel computer display that was an integral part of his desk.

Seconds later the intercom chimed. Harold said hastily, “You can go right in, sir.”

Rook nodded. When the blast-resistant door to the inner office slid closed behind him, the secretary looked immensely relieved.

The sanctum of Dr. Victoria Maria-Luisa Ortega de Duiño, chairperson of the UN Department of Environment & Population’s nine-member Triage Committee, was as severe and desiccated as the old 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 golden, balanced scales superimposed on the globe of Earth—and beneath it the motto:

TERRA STABILITA.

Three utilitarian guest chairs hand-crafted of clear Honduras mahogany were adrift on a sea of wall-to-wall shag the color of

oatmeal. Save for the 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 floor-to-ceiling glasswall that overlooked the East River ninety-six floors below.

Rook did not presume to take a seat. Hands clasped behind his back, he chose a spot just inside the door and stood there, his posture relaxed, regarding his superior with a vacuous, indolent expression.

Although aware of Rook's presence, Dr. Duiño gave no sign. She continued to occupy herself with a sheaf of papers neatly stacked beside several file folders. Her hair, short and brittle as her temper, was roached stiffly backward to form a platinum aura. Her features were wrinkled and sagging, although 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.

Eyes of deep brown lifted at last. "My apologies, Bennett. I didn't mean to keep you away from your desk so long. Please have a seat."

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

"In a manner of speaking." Dr. Duiño touched a button on the remote controller. Across the office, the larger of two holovision tanks lighted and a scene condensed. Rendered with startling realism via satellite, the transmission allowed viewers to eavesdrop on a courtroom trial, now in its penultimate stage, taking place half a continent away.

"I wanted to assure myself," she said, "that we're obtaining full PR benefit from the Senich Trial." Dark eyes intent on her deputy chairperson, gauging his demeanor, she added, "I assume you've been following the case."

Rook turned with liesurely grace. He studied the small holographic theater for several heartbeats, listened to a ringing phrase or two of the public defender's summation. The self-conscious young attorney's contention was abysmally weak—a vain attempt to make use of the only ammunition in his depleted arsenal. He was trying to convince a dozen stone-faced jurors that the defendant had suffered severe lifelong deprivation, and therefore should be held blameless for his crime. To condemn Nathan Senich for the admittedly vile offense he and a pair of luckless co-defendants had committed, contended the lawyer, would be an act of supreme injustice.

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Rook looked away. “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 his superior’s cool rejoinder. The unanimous guilty verdict soon to be handed down by twelve resentful, disgusted men and women was a foregone conclusion. In Dr. Duiño’s mind, the crime itself was incidental. Her interest in obtaining a conviction was purely political. Nathan Senich, a homeless transient, in company with two miserable co-defendants, had again revived the ancient sin of gluttony. In her view, the deed was more a sociological affront than a crime, and totally indecent. It reflected yet another symptom of a society slowly and steadily degenerating toward terminal illness.

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

“The gall of those swine!” Dr. Duiño bit the indictment short, displaying uncharacteristic vehemence. “In a starving world, they dared to slaughter and gorge themselves on the flesh of a fawn stolen from Denver’s zoological gardens.”

Bennett Rook’s lip curled. “Grotesque,” he said, his voice resonant, unruffled. “Yet I can’t imagine what might be in it for us. Within forty-eight hours, or less, the remains of the mischievous gourmands will be fertilizing crops in Denver’s greenbelts. Or perhaps the grounds of the zoo itself. Poetic justice, one might say.”

“Please don’t make light of it.” A throaty burr crept into Sra. Duiño’s enunciation. “In my memo, if you will recall, 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 handled properly.”

“We . . . ?” The man’s brows lifted. “Triage Committee? You’re being overly optimistic, Victoria. Nothing we do or say could possibly improve our public image. Only day before yesterday, *L’Osservatore Romano* again referred to you as the ‘Matriarch of Death.’ PR abandoned all attempts to ‘sell’ the committee decades ago.”

“You know perfectly well what I mean,” she 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 old woman’s steadfast gaze with a coolness

adversaries and sympathizers alike found infuriating. “I’m afraid there are matters we shall never see in the same light. Nothing personal, I assure you. If you want the truth, I admire you tremendously—always have. If that were not the case, I would tell you so. I’m no hypocrite.”

“No,” she conceded, “not a hypocrite. Blunt, perhaps; but not at all hypocritical.”

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

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

Rook sighed. “I would rather not discuss it.”

“Why not? What are you afraid of?”

The tall man stiffened ever so slightly. “I am afraid of nothing. Your pardon; of almost nothing.”

“Your choice of a qualifier makes me curious.”

“My single genuine fear,” he said slowly, “is for the continuation 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.”

“Bennett, really! Do you consider that a fair and reasonable statement?”

“Eminently reasonable,” he said, “and totally fair.” Hazel eyes alight with patriotic fire, Rook stood firm under his superior’s penetrating gaze. “You more than anyone,” he said, “should be familiar with this week’s global delta.”

Victoria hesitated. “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, pantomiming the silent effect of one hand clapping. “Victoria, I hope you’ll forgive my impertinence, but now and then you must look beyond the walls of this, our ivory tower, into the real world, such as it is. During the previous week, despite sanctions, proscriptions, lawful executions and on-going triage judgments; despite floods, 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 a quarter billions who cannot adequately feed, clothe, or house themselves. And you tell me all’s right with the world.”

Taken aback, Victoria said, “I made no such idealistic claim. The world is—has always been—precisely what you just called it: too painfully real. How can you deny that the weekly delta is encouraging? ZPG will become a reality within two or three years.”

“Ah, zero population growth. Nirvana has at last appeared on the horizon. My dear Victoria, even if that particular chimera were to materialize now, today, and the global birthrate were to suddenly dip marginally below the deathrate, it’s too damned little, too damned *late*. I’m certain you’re aware that most of a half-century will have to grind past before the currently mature generations live out their lives and depart the scene.”

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

“My position,” he insisted, “is exactly what it’s been ever since I was appointed to the committee. Had sterner measures been adopted then, we would now be on the downslope, not slouching toward the crest.”

“I’m only too familiar with your view.” Victoria sounded testy. “Stern measures, as you call them, would have made us less than human. Our fellow committeemen and women feel as I do. We refuse to subscribe to inhumanity as a cure-all for the world’s ills.”

“And that,” declared Rook flatly, “is nothing less than the worst sort of head-in-the-sand optimism. The committee’s refusal to face hard facts is precisely what has defeated all of our dreams. An idealistic worldview is a luxury we simply can’t afford.”

“Bennett, Bennett!” Dr. Duiño’s head wagged sadly. “You’re intelligent, industrious, and thoroughly dedicated. Those outstanding virtues are the principal reasons 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 show no slightest twinge of conscience for the awful judgments we vote to implement month after month, year after year, decade after decade.”

Rook did not equivocate. “None,” he said. “Circumstances don’t permit emotions to enter into the equation. I believe it was Josef Stalin who explained a fundamental sidelight of human nature. He observed that when a single individual dies society considers it a tragedy, yet when thousands are slaughtered it’s simply a matter of statistics.”

Victoria frowned. “Quoting the last century’s principal ogre hardly seems appropriate, whatever the present circumstances.”

“Circumstances aside,” he countered, “more than a grain of truth clings to that tidbit of Stalinesque wisdom. Mortal danger to an individual—the victim of a mine disaster, or someone trapped in a fire, a flood, or whatever—never fails to generate a tidal wave of

public sympathy. Yet gross numbers stricken by drought, famine, disease, and so forth, are shrugged off as faceless statistics. Our committee does what it must. We act as we always have: analytically, dispassionately, dutifully. Were it otherwise, there would be no sane committeemen or women.”

“And you,” she declared, “believe me a senile, idealistic old fool for harboring the sentiments you vehemently oppose. You’re certain that I should step aside and allow a young Turk like yourself to chair the committee. Isn’t that so?”

Rook stood perfectly still. “Senile . . . ? Hardly that. Your mind is as clear and incisive as ever. You are one of very few individuals able to best me in debate. Idealism I will not answer; I’m not qualified. No, Victoria. All things considered, you’re less a fool than anyone I have ever encountered. I respect you enormously, envy your dedication, your strength of purpose. Perhaps I even love you in my own peculiar fashion. Yet given the opportunity I would replace you tomorrow.”

“Because I’m too soft?”

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

“Thank you for stopping by. May I remind you once again—a bit more strongly—to prod the Public Relations Director about coverage of the Senich Trial?”

“I’ll take care of it at once,” he promised with a slight head dip. There was no sarcasm in his show of deference. “Until later, my dear Victoria.”

Rook’s eyes were hooded as he left the office.

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

The intercom chimed in mid-afternoon, sidetracking Victoria’s train of thought. She pressed a button. “Yes, Harold?”

“Cardinal Freneau is in the anteroom,” announced her personal secretary. “And your granddaughter is calling—channel sixteen.”

“Monique . . . ? Did you tell her I was occupied?”

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

“I see.” A glance at the tick-tocking pendulum clock. “If I’m not mistaken, His Eminence made an appointment for three o’clock. It’s now two fifty-seven. Surely he’ll allow me three minutes to indulge my only grandchild.”

“Surely he will, Dr. Duiño. I’ll let him know.”

“Thank you, Harold.” Keeping one eye and a portion of her attention on the numbers slowly scrolling upward in the display

panel, Victoria switched off the descrambler circuitry invoked for classified communications and opened vidicom channel sixteen. “Monique, I can’t talk very long just now. I trust you and Stewart are well?”

“Grandma . . .” A full-color image jelled, depicting a petite, attractive young woman whose raven hair was in disarray. Her eyes were red-rimmed, desperate.”

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

“I’ve got . . . big troubles, Grandma.”

“What sort of troubles? Can I help?”

“Oh, God! I hope so. I . . . doubt it. I just got back from seeing Dr. Everett, and I’m . . . I hate to even say it. 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 . . . took my pills. Never missed taking them. I just don’t know.”

“Is Dr. Everett certain?”

“I . . . yes. The test came back positive. Fate, I suppose, or the worst kind of bad luck.”

Victoria allowed the first flush of emotion to wash through her, then relaxed and began to think. Red flags shot up at once. Intuition screamed a warning, telling her that she’d once again become political fodder. Except this time the assault was covert, not overt. She was the victim of a sly, flanking attack by some unknown individual or group among legions of dedicated antagonists. Of one other thing she was absolutely certain: the attack had nothing whatever to do with her granddaughter. She herself, and the committee she chaired, were the actual targets. Seizing a yellow legal tablet and a stylus, she asked her granddaughter where she purchased the birth-control medication.

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

“Never mind, Monique. I assume you buy the BC tablets regularly in a specific store.”

“Well, 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?”

“Why, yes. A few,” said the young woman. “Several, I think. I meant to refill the prescription next —”

“Send them to me, Monique. Get them over here by special messenger, and insure the parcel. On second thought, address it to

Harold Strabough, care of the UN Tower, Floor Ninety-six. Beneath the address write the initials V.M.L. That will assure prompt delivery only to me. I should receive the package before the close of business.”

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

“Leave that to me,” Victoria told her.

“Can you . . . ? I mean, do you honestly think you can *do* something?”

“I sincerely hope so. Now listen carefully, Monique. 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 that?”

“Yes, Grandma. Wh . . . what will they do to me, to my . . . to our baby?”

“For the time being, nothing,” said Victoria with all the assurance she could muster. “Unauthorized birth is a punishable offense, while unauthorized pregnancy is not. We have months—all the time in the world—to effect a solution. Above all, what you simply cannot afford to do is panic. You mustn’t feel afraid, Monique. Neither now, nor later.”

“Stew’s talking kind of crazy,” said her granddaughter. “He’s been raving about running away to Brazil or some equally remote locale.”

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

“Are you . . . ? I mean, do you know that for a fact?”

“Of course,” said Victoria. “After all, I’m in a position to know. Promise me you will do exactly as I’ve advised. We’ll get together this evening when there’s time to thrash matters out more thoroughly.”

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

“I love you too, my dear.”

Seething inside, Victoria killed the vidicom channel. Permitting herself the use of an expletive not in keeping with the dignity of her high office, she reactivated the scrambler circuitry and hastily punched buttons. The refined features of UN Security Director Broward's executive assistant condensed in the vidicom display.

"Why, Dr. Duiño. Good afternoon."

"Leslie, I must speak to A.J. at once. It's imperative."

"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 would very much appreciate it if he . . . No, ask him to stop by my office the minute he returns. It's very important."

"Of course, Dr. Duiño. I'll get word to him right away."

"Thank you, Leslie." Victoria rang off. Grasping her bamboo cane, she rose stiffly, her thoughts awhirl. Monique's call had come at a devilishly inopportune moment. She had only seconds to contemplate the ramifications of her granddaughter's predicament—her own predicament, actually—before receiving Cardinal Freneaux.

Diminutive and birdlike, she hunched beside the desk and squinted down at the carpet with unseeing eyes. Her first impression had been the correct one, of that she was quite sure. It was definitely an attack, but from what quarter? Over the decades since her investiture, she'd been the victim of countless physical and political attacks, not to mention being showered with scurrilous commentaries and scrofulous invective. She had survived six attempts on her life, assassination tries ranging from clumsy bunglings like the homemade bomb thrown by a demented Buenos Aires theology student that had resulted in the permanent impairment of hearing in her right ear, to the ingenious poisoned croissants, three years ago, that had resulted in the death of a respected colleague.

Victoria felt something wither and die inside her. She heaved a deep sigh. Damn them! There was no time to ponder the problem now. No time . . .

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

"Yes, Dr. Duiño."

Victoria hobbled to mid-office, leaning on her cane. Freneaux, a Cardinal Deacon, was one of the *legati a latere*, or papal envoys. He was undoubtedly on a mission of some consequence, she thought, intuiting the purpose of his visit. It had, of course, to do with His Holiness' current fit of acute displeasure. There was no question

about that.

She was not looking forward to the interview.