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THE LAST SURVIVING VETERAN OF THE WAR OF SAN FRANCISCO

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All you have to do to become a hero is live long enough

The city on the other side of the bay was putting on its best show that morning: shimmering and glorious in the clear December sunlight. Lovely old San Francisco, capital of the Empire, now and always. Carlotta, readying her great-great-multi-great-uncle for his first trip over there in forty-three years, looked up to take in the view from the picture window of the Berkeley War Veterans Center, where he was the only remaining resident: green hills rising far into the distance, the twentieth-century white towers of the downtown closer in, the sparkling, lacy roadbed of the New Bay Bridge, running parallel to the majestic stumps of the old one.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she said, turning him in his swivelseat so he could have a look at it, too.

"What?"

"The city. San Francisco. You see it there, don't you?" She touched the visuals node that jutted like a tiny titanium mushroom from his left temple, giving it a quarter turn. Maybe the sharpness was off a little. Sometimes the old man fiddled with his nodes while he slept. "We're going across in a little while."

"All the way to the city, are we?"

"You know. For the ceremony. The anniversary of the end of the war. They're going to give you a medal. Don't tell me you've forgotten already."

The timeless face, leathery but supple, stretched and twisted like taffy, rearranging its sallow sagging folds into a smile. "The war's over? I'm a civilian again?"

"You bet you are, Uncle."

The wrinkled eyelids made three or four quick traversals of the hazel-colored fiberglass bundles that were his optical inputs.

"When did all that happen?"

"The war's been over for a hundred years, Uncle James. A hundred years today."

"No shit!" Muscle stalks moved slowly around in the crepey convolutions of his cheeks. "Imagine that. A hundred years. That's one goddamn long time." Then he said, after a moment, "Who won?"

"We did, Uncle."

"We did? You sure?"

"We're still a free country, aren't we? Nobody tells the Empire of San Francisco what to do, do they? We're the most powerful country in Northern California, isn't that so?"

He digested that. "Yeah. Yeah, of course we won. I knew that. Really I did." He sounded a little doubtful. He generally did. Well, he had a right. He was one hundred forty-three years old, give or take a few months, and most of him was machinery now, practically everything except the soggy old grey brain behind his optical inputs. His wrists were silicon elastomer, his femurs were polyurethane and cobalt-chromium, his eardrums were Teflon and platinum, his metacarpal joints were silicone with titanium grommets. His elbows had plastic bushings; his abdominal walls were Dacron. And so on, on and on. Why anyone wanted to keep seniors alive that long was more than Carlotta could figure out. Or why the seniors wanted to be kept. But she was only nineteen. She allowed for the possibility that she might take a different view of things when she got to be as old as he was.

"We're just about ready to go, now. Let's do the checkout, all right?" Obediently he held out his arm. She opened his instrument panel and began keying in the life-support readouts that ran like a row of bright metal tacks from his wrist to his elbow. "Respiratory--circulatory-- metabolic--catabolic--there, that's a good reading--audio appercept--optical appercept--biochip automaintain-- aminos-- hemoglobin--enzyme release--glucose level..."

There were two dozen of them, some of them pretty trivial. But Carlotta diligently ran down the whole list, tapping in a query and getting a green from each little readout plate. It took close to ten minutes. The newer-model senior-rehab equipment had just a single readout, which gave you a go or a no go, and if you got the no go you could immediately request data on specific organic or pseudo-organic

malfunctions. But Uncle James was one of the early models, and there was no money in the rehab budget for updating citizens left over from the previous century.

"You think I'll live?" he asked her, suddenly feisty.

"For another five hundred years, minimum."

Quickly, deftly, she finished the job of making him ready to go out. She disconnected the long intravenous line from the wall and put him on portable. She disabled his chair control override so that she alone could guide the movements of his vehicle via the remote implant in her palm. She locked the restraining bars in place across his chest to keep him from attempting some sudden berserk excursion on foot out there. More than ever now, the old man was the prisoner of his own life-support system.

Just as she finished the job Carlotta felt a strange inner twisting and jolting as though an earthquake had struck: the unexpected, sickening sensation of seeing herself in his place, old and withered and shrunken and mostly artificial, feeble and helpless in the grip of a life-support. Her long slender legs had turned into pretzels, her golden hair was thin colorless straw, her smooth oval face was a mass of dry valleys and crevasses. Her eyebrows were gone, her chin jutted like some old witch's. The only recognizable aspect of her was her clear blue eyes, and those, still bright, still quick and sharp, glared out of her ruined face carrying such a charge of hatred and fury that they burned through the air in front of her like twin lasers, leaving trails of white smoke.

Not me, she thought. Not ever, not like that.

She pressed down hard on her palm implant and sent the old man's chair rolling toward the door, which opened at his approach. And out they went into the hallway.

Carlotta had been working as a nurse at the center for a year and a half, ever since she'd left high school. It wasn't the kind of work she had hoped for. She had imagined doing something with singing in it, or music, or maybe acting, at least. When she had first come to the center there had still been seven veterans living there and a staff of twelve, but one by one the old guys had undergone random system malfunctions, probabilistic events that became statistically unavoidable the deeper you got into your second century, and now only Uncle James

was left, the last survivor of the army of the War of San Francisco. The staff was down to four: Dr. McClintock, the director; three nurses. But everybody understood that when Uncle James finally went they'd all lose their jobs.

That morning, when Carlotta showed up, there was a note from Sanchez, the night nurse, waiting for her in the staff room. GOD HELP YOU IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO YOUR UNCLE IN THE CITY TODAY.

"Hot weather today," Uncle James said, as they emerged from the building. "Very nice for December, yes."

"Hot. Not just nice. Hot. It must be a hundred degrees."

"A hundred's impossible, Uncle. It doesn't get that hot even in Death Valley. A hundred and the whole world would melt."

"Bullshit. It was a hundred degrees the day the war started. Everyone remembers that. The fourteenth of October, hot as blazes, a hundred degrees smack on the nose at three in the afternoon. When those Nazi Stukas started coming over the horizon like bats out of hell."

"Nazis?" she said. "What Nazis?"

"The invading force. Hitler's Wehrmacht."

"That was a different war, Uncle. A long time before even you were born."

"Don't be so smart. Were you there? Like eagles, they were, those planes. Merciless. They strafed us for hours in that filthy heat. Blam! Blam! Chk-chk-chk-chk-chk! Blam!" He glowered up at her. "And it's a hundred degrees right now, too. If you don't think so, you're wrong. I know what a hundred degrees feels like."

The temperature that morning was about eighteen, maybe twenty. Very nice for December, yes. But then Carlotta realized that the degrees he was talking about were the old kind, the Fahrenheit kind. One hundred on the old scale might be forty or forty-five real degrees, she figured. But he might be having some appercept trouble, or maybe even a boil-over in the metabolism line. She leaned over and checked the master chair readout. Everything looked okay. He must just be excited about getting to go to the city.

The car that the Armistice Centennial people had sent was waiting out front. It had a hinged gate and a wheelchair ramp so she could roll him right into it. The driver looked like an android, though he probably wasn't. Uncle James sat quietly, murmuring to himself, as the car pulled away from the curb and headed down the hill toward the freeway.

"We in the city yet?" he asked, after a time. "We're just reaching the bridge, Uncle."

"The bridge is broken. That was the first thing they bombed in the war."

"There's a new bridge now," Carlotta said. The new bridge was older than she was, but she didn't see much purpose in telling him that. She swung him around to face the window and pointed it out to him, a delicate, flexible ribbon of airy suspension cable swaying in the breeze. It was like a bridge of glass. The shattered pylons of the old bridge that rose from the bay alongside it seemed as ponderous as dinosaur thighs.

"Some bridge," he muttered. "Looks like a piece of rope."

"It'll get us there," she told him.

According to the center records, he had been taken to San Francisco for his hundredth birthday. He hadn't been much of anywhere since. Just sitting in his chair, doing nothing, living on and on. If you called that living. Old James had outlasted his son by more than a century—he had been killed at the age of something like twenty-two in the War of San Francisco, during the raid by the Free State of Mendocino. He had outlived his grandson, too, victim of an unexplained sniper attack while visiting Monterey. Hell of a thing, to outlive your own grandson. James's closest relative was his great-granddaughter, who lived in Los Angeles and hadn't come north in decades. And then Carlotta.

She felt sorry for the old man. And yet he had managed to have one big thing in his life: the war. That was something. His one moment of glory,

Her life had had nothing in it at all, so far, except the uneventful getting from age zero to age nineteen, and that was how it looked to remain. The world was pretty empty, locally, these days. You couldn't expect much when you lived in a country thirty miles across, that you could drive from one end of to the other in an hour, if you could drive. At least Uncle James had had a war.

They were on the bridge now, meshed with its transport cable, whizzing westward at a hundred kilometers per hour. Carlotta pointed out landmarks on the way, in case he had forgotten them. "There's Alcatraz Island, do you see? And that's Mount Tamalpais, away across on the Marin County side. And back over there, behind us, you can see the whole East Bay, Oakland, Berkeley, El Cerrito . . . "

The old man seemed interested. He responded with a jumble of military history, hazy memories intermixed with scrambled details out of the wrong wars, "The Mendocino people came in right through there, where the San Rafael bridge used to be, maybe two hundred of them. We fixed their wagons. And then the Japs, General Togo and Admiral Mitsubishi, but we drove them back, we nuked their asses right out of here, Then a week afterward there was a raid by San Jose, came up through Oakland, we stopped them by the Alameda Tunnel-no, it was the bridge-the bridge, right, we held them, they were cursing at us in gook and when we went in to clear them out we found that Charlie had planted Bouncing Betties everywhere, you know, antipersonnel mines . . . "

She didn't know what he was talking about, but that was all right. Most of the time she didn't know what he was talking about, nor, she suspected, did he. It didn't matter. He rambled on and on.

The bridge crossing took ten minutes-- there was hardly any traffic--and then they were gliding down the ramp into the city.

Carlotta felt a little wave of excitement stirring within her. Approaching the city could do that to you. It was so lovely, shining in the bright sunlight with the waters of the bay glittering all around. A place of such infinite promise and mystery.

Let me have an adventure while I'm over there, she prayed. Let me meet someone. Let something really unusual happen, okay?

She hadn't been in the city herself in six or eight months. You tended not to, without some special reason. If only she could park the old man for a couple of hours and go off to have some fun, see the clubs, maybe check out the new styles, meet someone lively. But that wasn't going to happen. She had to stick close by Uncle James. At least she was here, a perfect day, blue sky, warm breezes blowing. The city was where everything that was of any interest in Northern California went on, It was the capital of the Empire of San Francisco, and the Empire was the center of the action, Everything else was small-time, even if the small-time places wanted to give themselves fancy names: the Republic of Monterey, the

Free State of Mendocino, the Royal Domain of San Jose. Once upon a time, of course, it had all been a lot different.

"San Francisco," Carlotta said. "Here we are, Uncle!"

They came off the bridge at the downtown off-ramp. There were bright banners everywhere, the imperial colors, green and gold. Crowds were in the streets, waving little flags. Carlotta heard the sound of a brass band somewhere far away. The driver was taking them up the Embarcadero now, around toward the plaza at Market Street, where the Emperor was going to preside over the ceremony in person. Because theirs was just about the only car in the vicinity, the spectators had figured out that someone important must be riding in it, and they were cheering and waving.

"Wave, Uncle! They're cheering you. Here, let me help you." She touched her finger to his motor control and his right arm came stiffly up, fingers clenched. A little fine tuning and she had the fingers open, the palm turned outward, the arm moving back and forth in a nice sprightly wave.

"Smile at them," she told him. "Be nice. You're a hero."

"A hero, yes. Purple Heart. Distinguished Service Cross. Croix de Guerre. You ought to see my medals sometime. I've got a box full of them." He was leaning forward, peering out the car window, smiling as hard as he could. His arm jerked convulsively; he was trying to move it himself. Good for him. She let him override her control. He waved with surprising energy, a jerky wave, almost robotic, but at least he was doing it under his own power.

They had a big platform made out of polished redwood up at the plaza, with a crowd of VIPs already there. As the car approached, everyone made room for it, and when it halted just in front of the platform Carlotta hopped out and guided Uncle James's chair down the car's wheelchair ramp and into the open.

"Ned Townes," a fat sandy-haired man with a thick brown mustache told her, pushing his face into hers. "Imperial adjutant. Splendid of you to come. What a grand old soldier he is!" He gave Uncle James a sidelong glance. "Can he hear anything I say?" He leaned down next to Uncle James's ear and in a booming voice he bellowed, "Welcome to San Francisco, General Crawford! On behalf of His Imperial Majesty Norton the Fourteenth, welcome to-"

Uncle James shot him a withering scowl.

"You don't have to shout like that, boy," Uncle James said. "I can fucking well hear better than you can."

Townes reddened, but he managed a laugh. "Of course. Of course."

Carlotta said, "Is the Emperor here yet?"

"In a little while. We're running a bit late, you understand. If you and the general will take seats over there until we're ready to call him up to receive his medal-- well, of course, he's seated already, but you know what I- "

"Aren't we going to sit on the platform?" Carlotta asked.

"I'm afraid it's reserved for city officials and dignitaries."

She didn't move. "Uncle James is a dignitary. We came all the way from Berkeley for this, and if you're going to shunt him into some corner for hours and hours while you--"

"Please," Townes said.

"He's a hundred forty-three years old, do you realize that?"

"Please," he said. "Bear with me." He looked ready to cry. "The Emperor himself will personally decorate him. But until then, I have to ask you . . . "

He seemed so desperate that Carlotta gave in. She and Uncle James went into a roped-off area just below and to the left of the platform.

Uncle James didn't seem to mind. He sat quietly, lost in dreams of God knows what moment of antique heroism, while Carlotta, standing behind his chair, kept one eye on his systems reports and took in the sights of downtown San Francisco with the other, the huge tapering buildings, the radiant blue sky, the unusual trees, the shining bridge stretching off to the east.

Uncle James said suddenly, "What are all these foreigners doing here?"

"Foreigners? What foreigners?"

"Look around you, girl."

She thought at first that he meant people from the neighboring republics and kingdoms: San Jose, Santa Cruz, Monterey, Mendocino. It wouldn't be surprising that they'd be here, considering that this was a celebration intended to commemorate the signing of the Armistice that had ended the war of everybody against everybody and guaranteed the independence of all the various Northern California nations. But how could Uncle James tell a Santa Cruzian or a Montereyan from a San Franciscan? They didn't look any different down there. They didn't dress any different.

Then she realized that he meant visitors from the countries beyond the seas. And indeed there were plenty of them all around the plaza, a lot of exotic people carrying cameras and such, Japanese, Indians, Latin Americans, Africans. They were wearing exotic clothing, most of them. Many had exotic faces. The old man was staring at them as though he had never seen tourists before.

"San Francisco is always full of visitors from far away, Uncle. There's nothing new about that."

"So many of them. Gawking at us like that. They dress like gooks, girl. Didn't we fight that war to keep San Francisco for the San Franciscans? A pure nation of pure people. Look at them all. Look at them!"

"It's the most beautiful city in the world," Carlotta said. "People have been coming from all over to see it for hundreds of years. You know that. There's nothing wrong with-"

He was raging, though. "Yellow people! Black people! Brown people! Why not green people, too? Why not purple people? Their faces! Their eyes! And the clothes they wear! Who let them in? What are they all doing here?"

"Uncle," she said, reaching down surreptitiously to give his adrenaline damper a little downtwist. your country, its greatness, its downfall. To speak with the general, to hear from his lips the reminiscences of his days of battle, the actual descriptions of the warfare-it would be ecstasy for me. Ecstasy. Do you understand my words?"

"His Imperial Highness Norton the Fourteenth!" cried a man with an enormous voice. Carlotta looked around. A ground-effect palanquin bedecked with gaudy banners was floating solemnly up the street toward the plaza.

"You've got to go now," Carlotta said. "Look, the Emperor's arriving."

"But later, perhaps?"

"Well-"

"It is for the sacred purpose of scholarship only. Half an hour to speak with this great man-"

"All welcome His Imperial Highness!" the immense voice called. "Later," the Brazilian said urgently. "Please!" He slipped under the rope and was gone.

Carlotta shrugged. If the Brazilian only knew that nothing Uncle James said made sense, he wouldn't be so eager. She turned to stare at the Emperor, atop his palanquin. She had never seen him live before. The Emperor was a surprisingly small man, very frail, about fifty, with pale skin and tiny hands, which he held extended to the crowd in a kind of imperial blessing. The palanquin, drifting a little ways above the pavement, came forward to the reviewing stand and halted like an obedient elephant. Members of the imperial guard helped him out, and up the stairs of the platform to the position of honor.

Someone began a long droning speech of welcome. The mayor of San Francisco, Carlotta supposed. It went on and on, this grand occasion, this triumphant day of the commemoration of the hundred-year peace, on and on and on, yawn and yawn and yawn. The foreigners' cameras and recorders whirled diligently. Uncle James seemed to be asleep. Carlotta's attention wandered. Now and then a cheer rose from the assembled citizens.

She could see the sleek Brazilian in the crowd. He was staring at the old man as though he were a mound of emeralds. Then he noticed Carlotta watching him, and he flicked his gaze toward her, letting his eyes rest on her in a warm insinuating way, and smiled a sleek smile that gave her shivers. As if he was buying her with that smile.

What did he want, really? Just to talk?

Uncle James was awake again. Instead of looking at the Emperor, who had begun to speak in response to the mayor's oration, he was peering at the rows of foreign tourists, gaping at them as though they came not merely from other continents but from other planets. In a way, Carlotta thought, they did. Who could get to Japan or Brazil or Nigeria from here? They come to us; we don't go to them. It used to be different, she knew. Hundreds of years ago, before everything fell apart, when

America had been all one country of incomprehensible size that stretched from ocean to ocean, its citizens had gone everywhere in the world. But now there were thousands of little principalities where America had been, and no one went anywhere much.

"A century ago," the Emperor was saying, "the fate of this entire area was at stake. Every man's hand was raised against his neighbor. Cities that long had lived in peace had gone to war against their fellow cities. But then, on this day exactly one hundred years ago, the climactic battle of the War of San Francisco was fought. This city and its valiant allies in the East Bay and Marin stood firm against the invaders from the outlying lands. And on that day of triumph, when the peace and security of the Empire of San Francisco was made certain forever-

"Start moving the old man up to the top of the platform," Ned Townes whispered. "He's going to get his medal now. "

Uncle James was asleep again. Carlotta gave him a little adrenaline jolt.

"It's time, Uncle," she whispered.

They had a ramp around back. She touched her palm control and the wheelchair began to glide up it. The big moment at last.

The Emperor smiled, shook Uncle James's hand the way he would shake a turkey's claw, said a few words, this gallant survivor, this embodiment of history, this remnant of our glorious past, and put a sash around his neck. At the end of the sash there was a mud-colored medal the size of a cookie, which seemed to have a portrait of the Emperor on it. That was it. Carlotta found herself wheeling Uncle James down the ramp a moment later. Evidently the old man wasn't expected to say anything in reply. They couldn't even stay on the platform.

For this they had traveled all the way from Berkeley? "Will you find us our driver?" she said to Ned Townes. "We might as well go back home now."

Townes looked shocked. "Oh, no! You can't do that. There are further ceremonies, and then a banquet at the palace this afternoon for all the celebrities."

"Uncle James doesn't eat banquet food. And he's getting very tired."

"Even so. It would be terrible if you left now." Townes tugged at his

jowls. "Look, stay another hour, at least. You can't just grab the medal and disappear. That's the Emperor up there, young lady."

"I don't give a damn if he's-"

But Townes was gone. The Emperor was awarding another medal, this time to a wide-shouldered woman who already was wearing an assortment of decorations that had a glittery Southern California look about them.

"Permit me," a deep confident voice said. The Brazilian again. Leaning over the rope, tapping her on the shoulder. Carlotta had forgotten all about him.

"Is it possible to discuss, now, an opportunity for me to record the great general's reminiscences, perhaps?"

"Look, we don't have time for that. I just want to get my uncle out of here and back across the bay."

He looked distressed. "But before you leave-half an hour fifteen minutes . . . "

She glanced down at the emerald ring. A gleam came into her eyes.

"There's a fee, you know. For his time. We can't just let him talk to people for free."

"Yes. Yes, of course. Why should there not be a fee? It is no problem. We will discuss it." He offered her an engraved card, holding it close in front of her face as if he wasn't sure she knew how to read and holding it close might help. "This is my name. I am at the Imperial Hotel. You know that hotel? You will come to me when this is over? With the general? You agree?"

"Sorry, sir," a marshal said. "This area is for official guests only."

"Of course, Understood." The Brazilian began to back away, nodding, bowing, smiling brilliantly. To Carlotta he said, "I will see you later? Yes? I am very grateful. Obrigado! Obrigado!" He disappeared into the crowd of foreign visitors. Behind her, on the reviewing stand, the Emperor was giving a medal to a man in a uniform of the San Jose Air Force.

It was almost noon now. People were coming out of the nearby office buildings. Some of them were carrying sandwiches. Carlotta began to feel fiercely hungry. Townes had talked about a banquet that afternoon, but

the afternoon seemed a long way away. Uncle James got fed by intravenous line, but she needed real food, and soon, Emperor or no Emperor, she had to get out of here, and Townes could go whistle. Maybe the thing to do was find the Brazilian, strike a deal with him, let him take her to his hotel and buy her lunch. And then he could interview Uncle James all he wanted, so long as the old man's strength held out.

All right, she thought. Let's get moving.

But where had the Brazilian gone?

She didn't see him anywhere. Leaving Uncle James to look after himself for a moment, she slipped under the rope and went over to the place where the foreign visitors were clustered, No, no sign of him. People began to jabber at her and take her picture. She brushed her hand through the air as though they were a cloud of gnats. Producing the Brazilian's card, she said, to no one in particular, "Have you seen Humberto-Humberto Jose de Magal Magal " It was a struggle to pronounce his name.

He must have gone, though. Perhaps he was on his way to his hotel, to wait for them.

She rushed back to Uncle James. Some people had crept into the roped-off area and were pushing microphones into his face again. Angrily Carlotta hit her palm control, backing up his wheelchair and pulling it toward her right through the flimsy rope. At a brisk pace she headed across the street to the parking area where she hoped their driver was waiting. Ned Townes, red-faced, materialized from somewhere and furiously wigwagged at her, but she smiled and waved and nodded and kept on going. He shouted something to her but didn't pursue.

The driver, miraculously, was still there. "Imperial Hotel," she said.

"Where?"

"Imperial Hotel. Downtown, somewhere."

"I'm supposed to take you back to the East Bay."

"First we have to go to the Imperial. There's a reception there for my great-uncle."

The driver, sullen, androidal, looked right through her and said, "I don't know about no reception. I don't know no Hotel Imperial. You're

supposed to go to the East Bay."

"First we stop at the Imperial," she said, "They're expecting us. I'll show you how to get there," she told him grandly.

To her amazement he yielded, swinging the car around in a petulant U-turn and shooting off toward Market Street. Carlotta studied the signs on the buildings, hoping to find a marquee that proclaimed one of them to be the Imperial, but there were no hotels here at all, only office buildings. They turned right, turned left again, started up a steep hill.

"This is Chinatown," the driver said. "That where your hotel is?"

"Turn left," she said.

That took them down toward Market Street again, and across it. At a stoplight she rolled down the window and called out, "Does anyone know where the Imperial Hotel is?" Blank faces stared at her. She might just as well have been speaking Greek or Arabic. The driver, on his own, turned onto Mission Street, took a left a few blocks later, turned left again soon after. Carlotta looked around desperately. This was a district of battered old warehouses. She caught sight of a sign directing traffic to the Bay Bridge and for a moment decided that it was best to forget about the Brazilian and head for home, when unexpectedly a billboard loomed up before them, a glaring six-color solido advertising, of all things, the Imperial Hotel. They were right around the corner from it, apparently.

The Imperial was all glass and concrete, with what looked like giant mirrors at its summit, high overhead. It must have been two or three hundred years old. They hadn't built buildings like that in San Francisco for a long time. Carlotta got Uncle James out of the car, told the driver to wait across the street, and signaled to a doorman to help them go inside.

"I'm here to see this man," she announced, producing Magalhaes's card. "We have an appointment. Tell him that General James Crawford is waiting for him in the lobby,"

The doorman seemed unimpressed. "Wait here," he said. Carlotta waited a long time. Uncle James muttered restlessly.

Some hotel official appeared, studied the Brazilian's card, studied her,

murmured something under his breath, went back inside. What did they think she was, a prostitute? Showing up for a job with an old man in a life-support chair to keep her company? Another long time went by. A different hotel person came out.

"May I have your name," he said, not amiably.

"My name doesn't matter. This is General James Crawford, the famous war hero. Can you see the imperial medal around his neck? We've just been at the Armistice celebration, and now we're here to see the delegate from Brazil, Mr. Humberto Maria-"

"Yes, but I need to know your name." "My name doesn't matter. Just tell him that General James Crawford-"

"But your name-"

"Carlotta," she said. "Oh, go to hell, all of you," She pressed the palm control and started to turn Uncle James around. There was no sense enduring all this grief. Just then, though, an enormous black limousine glided up to the curb and Humberto Maria de Magalhaes himself emerged.

He sized up the situation at once.

"So you have come after all! How good! How very good!"

The hotel man said, "Senhor Magalhaes, this woman claims-"

"Yes. Yes. Is all right. I am expecting. Please, let us go inside. Please. Please. Such a great honor, General Crawford!" He extended his arms in a gesture so splendid that it would have been worthy of the Emperor himself. "Come," he said. He led them into the building.

The lobby of the Imperial was a great glittering cavern, all glass and lights. Carlotta felt dizzy. The Brazilian was in complete command, shepherding them to some secluded alcove, where waiters in brocaded livery came hustling to bring champagne, little snacks on porcelain trays, a glistening bowl brimming with fruit. Magalhaes pulled a recorder from his pocket, a holido scanner, and two or three other devices, and set them on the table before them.

"Now, if you please, General Crawford-"

"The fee," Carlotta said.

"Ah. Yes. Yes, of course." Magalhaes pulled crumpled old dirty bills from his wallet, imperial money, green and gold. "Will this be enough, do you think?"

She stared. It was more than she made in six months. But some demon took hold of her and she said, recklessly, "Another five hundred should do it."

"Of course," the Brazilian said. "No problem!" He put another bill on the edge of the table and aimed his lens at the old man. "I am so eager to record his memories, I can hardly tell you. Now, if you would ask the general to discuss the day of the famous battle, first-"

Carlotta bent close to the old man's audio intake and said, "Uncle, this man wants you to talk about your war experiences. He's going to record a sort of memoir of you. Just say whatever you can remember, all right? He'll be taking your picture, and this machine will record your words."

"The war," Uncle James said. And immediately lapsed into silence.

The Brazilian watched, big-eyed, holding his breath as if he feared it would interfere with the flow of the old man's words.

But there were no words. Carlotta, who had tactfully left the Brazilian's money on the table, thinking it would look a little better not to pocket it until after the interview, began to wish now that she had taken it right away.

The silence became very long indeed.

She reached down and gave the old man a little spurt of heptocholinase through the IV line. That seemed to do it.

"-the invasion," Uncle James said, as if he'd been speaking silently for some time and only now was bothering to come up to the audible level. And then words poured out of him as she had never heard them come before, bubbling nonstop spew. It was like the breaking of a dam. "We were dug into the trenches, you understand, and the Boche infantry came sneaking up at us from the east, under cover of mustard gas-oh, that was awful, the gas-but we called in an air strike right away, we hit them hard with napalm and antipersonnel shrapnel, and then we came ashore with our landing craft, hit them at Anzio and Normandy both. That was

the beginning of it. Our entire strategy, you understand, was built around a terminal nuclear hit at Bull Run, but first we knew we had to close the Dardanelles and knock out their command center back of Cam Ranh Bay. Once we had that, we'd only need to worry about the Prussian cavalry and the possibility of a Saracen suicide charge, that wasn't a real big risk, we figured, all the Rebels were pretty well demoralized already and it didn't make sense that they'd have the balls to come back at us after all we'd thrown at them, so--"

"What is he saying, please?" the Brazilian asked softly. "He speaks so quickly. I am not quite understanding him, I think."

"He does sound a little confused," said Carlotta.

"Well, we drove the Turks completely out of the Gulf of Corinth, and were heading on toward Lepanto with sixty-four galleys, full steam ahead. Then came a message from Marlborough, get our asses over to Blenheim fast as we knew how, the French were trying to break through--or was it the Poles?-- well, hell, it was a mess, the winter was coming on, that lunatic Hitler actually thought he could take out Russia with a fall offensive and damned if he didn't get within eighty miles of Moscow before the Russkies could stop him, and then--then--" Uncle James looked up. There was a stunned expression on his face. All his indicators were flashing in the caution zone. His cheeks were flushed and he was breathing hard.

Carlotta let her hand rest lightly on the little stack of bank notes.

"He's very overexcited," she explained. "This has been a big day for him. He hasn't been in San Francisco for forty-three years, you know."

"Wait," Uncle James said. He stretched a hand toward the Brazilian. "There's something that I need to say."

There was an unfamiliar note in his voice suddenly, a forcefulness, a strange clarity. The cloudiness was gone from it, the husky senile woolliness. It sounded now like the voice of someone else entirely, someone a hundred years younger than Uncle James.

The Brazilian nodded vigorously. "Yes, tell us everything, General! Everything."

Uncle James smiled. There was an eerie look on his face. "I wasn't a general, for one thing. I was a programmer. I never fought an actual battle.

I certainly never killed anybody. Not anybody. It's all a lie, that I was any kind of hero. It was just an error in the computer records and I never said anything about it to anybody, and now it's so long ago that nobody remembers what was what. Nobody but me. And most of the time I don't even remember it myself."

Uh-oh, Carlotta thought.

As secretively as she could manage it, she slid the bills from the table into her purse. The Brazilian didn't appear to notice.

Uncle James said, "It was only a two-bit war, anyway. A lot of miserable skirmishes between a bunch of jerkwater towns gone wild with envy of what they each thought the other one had, and in fact nobody had anything at all. That was what ended the war, when we all figured out that there was nothing anywhere, that we were wiped out from top to bottom." He laughed. "And there I sat in the command center at the university the whole time, writing software. That was how I spent the war. A hundred goddamn years ago."

The Brazilian said, "His voice is so clear, suddenly."

"He's terribly tired," said Carlotta. "He doesn't know what he's saying. I should have just taken him right home. The interview's over. It's too much of a strain on him."

"Could we not have him continue a small while longer? But perhaps we should allow him to rest for a little," the Brazilian suggested.

"Rest," Uncle James said. "That's all I fucking want. But they don't ever let you rest. You fight the Crusades, you fight the Peloponnesian, you fight the Civil, you get so tired, you get so fucking tired. All those wars. I fought 'em all. Every one of them at once. You run the simulations and you've got the Nazis over here and Hannibal there and the Monterey crowd trying to bust in up the center, and Hastings, and Tours, and San Jose-Grant and Lee-Charlemagne-Napoleon-Eisenhower-Patton . . . "

His voice was still weirdly lucid and strong.

But it was terrible to sit here listening to him babbling like this. Enough is enough, Carlotta decided. She reached down quickly and hit main cerebral and put him to sleep. Between one moment and the next he shut down completely.

The Brazilian gasped. "What has happened? He has not died, has he?"

"No, he's all right. Just sleeping. He was too tired for this. I'm sorry, Mr. Magal-Magal-" Carlotta rose. The money was safely stowed away. "He's badly in need of rest, just as you heard him say. I'm going to take him home. Perhaps we can do this interview some other time. I don't know when. I have your card. I'll call you, all right?"

She flexed her palm and sent the chair moving out into the main lobby of the hotel, and toward the door.

The driver, thank God, was still sitting there. Carlotta beckoned to him.

They were halfway across the bay before she brought the old man back to consciousness. He sat up rigidly in the chair, looked around, peered for a moment at the scenery, the afternoon light on the East Bay hills ahead of them, the puffy clouds that had come drifting down from somewhere.

"Pretty," he said. His voice had its old muddled quality again. "What a goddamn pretty place! Are we on the bridge? We were in the city, were we?"

"Yes," she told him. "For the anniversary of the Armistice. We had ourselves a time, too. The Emperor himself hung that medal around your neck."

"The Emperor, yes. Fine figure of a man. Norton the Ninth."

"Fourteenth, I think."

"Yes. Yes, right. Norton the Fourteenth," the old man said vaguely. "I meant Fourteenth." He fingered the medal idly and seemed to disappear for a moment into some abyss of thought where he was completely alone. She heard him murmuring to himself, a faint indistinct flow of unintelligible sound. Then suddenly he said, reverting once more to that tone of the same strength and lucidity that he had been able to muster for just a moment at the Imperial Hotel, "What happened to that slick-looking rich foreigner? He was right there. Where did he go?"

"You were telling him about General Patton at Bull Run, and you got overexcited, and you weren't making any sense, Uncle. I had to shut you down for a little time."

"General Patton? Bull Run?"

"It was that time you nuked the Rebels," Carlotta said. "It's not important if you don't remember, Uncle. It was all so long ago. How could anyone expect you to remember?" She patted him gently on the shoulder. "Anyway, we had ourselves a time in the city today, didn't we? That's all that matters. You got yourself a medal, and we had ourselves a time."

He chuckled and nodded, and said something in a voice too soft to understand, and slipped off easily into sleep.

The car sped onward, eastward across the bridge, back toward Berkeley.