**LANGLEY**

The Deputy Director waited until the green light at the base of the phone confirmed that the scrambler was locked in before speaking.

"Hello, Crap," he began brightly, "I've got some good news. Saigon Customs is in the bag. All it took was for Blair Childress to go over and have a little chat with Suk Duc about how daughters of prominent men sometimes disappear and he promised the wholehearted cooperation of every man in his department."

"Well, it is certainly refreshing to see that good old-fashioned virtues are still alive in the world," the voice on the other end chuckled, the humor muted by the metallic edge produced by the encoding and decoding device. "How are things coming along with our plans?"

"Very well, sir. In fact, a piece of paper came across my desk this very morning that may be the answer to all our problems up in the Northern area." He leafed around until he found a short report. "Here it is."

"Let's hear it."

"It seems that there's this group of Marines designated the Special Projects Staff run by a couple of boobs who are so far out they get away with murder. SecDef thinks they walk on water after they pulled off that Submersible Aircraft deal with Edsel engineers so he's sent them to Danang to look into things."

"What's this got to do with us?"

"Well, when I first heard about them I thought that their presence might throw a monkey wrench into our timetable so I had our analysis boys check them out. It seems that they're bloody naturals at getting things done without having the slightest inkling of what's going on."

"What are they up to now?"

"They've been in country for two months now, and they've managed to appropriate all the good facilities on the base. My sources tell me that they intend to take over operational control of all the troops in I-Corps which should be damn interesting since none of them has an ounce of tactical experience or sense."

"Will SecDef let us in on a piece of the action?"

"I sure he will. In fact, he mentioned it to me not an hour ago. He wants to make it the strongest staff in the area but he can't beef it up until they're really active."

"I see. Very well, keep me posted. By the way, what's going on with my grandson?"

"He's doing splendidly from what I hear. Since he has no official title, everyone naturally assumes he's tremendously important, so he goes to diplomatic parties and meets all the right people. In the meantime, Blair Childress has taken him under his wing and working him into the operation, I understand."

"Do you think it's a very good idea?" Crap tried to visualize the lad involved in what was destined to become a very complex and tricky operation and he realized that he didn't really know enough about him to make a judgment. "I probably should have spent more time with him, but it would have cut into other important matters. Have this Childress fellow keep a close eye on him and don't hesitate to get him out of there if he starts to screw up. Which reminds me, what kind of mischief is my son up to?"

"Ah, yes, we do need to talk about him. It seems that Port's guessed what's going on, or he's damn lucky. In either event, he sent a couple of his people out to Maui and another pair to Hong Kong, and they're asking pretty pointed questions."

"Where does that shithead get the nerve to nose around my business - especially since he passed up his chance to join the family business." The scene still gave him chills.

"Go to hell, pop! I've had it up to here playing your stooge. I know what you're doing and why you're doing it, and I'm here to tell you it won't work! One of these days the American public is going to get wise to you and your buddies and when they do they'll eat you for breakfast."

That bit of filial rebellion took place in 1933 right after Crap had tried to explain to his twenty-one-year-old son why the National Recovery Act was based on sound economic principles.

"I've done my best for you, my boy. Sent you to the right schools, seen to it that you ran with the right crowd and all that stuff, but I'll be dipped in walrus dung if I know what else to do. It's time you realized that the day of the free-wheeler has got to come to an end. My God, man, you can't have a bunch of self-serving dunderheads running around jumping into any damned business they feel like. That was fine a hundred years ago when your grandfather C-1 was getting started. In those days, individual initiative was needed because there wasn't enough wealth floating around to steal. Now there is, and that's why we have to cut these interlopers off at the knees before they do the same to us."

"Tell me, son, what makes you think you can go out there and compete on even terms with some jerk who is so hungry to make a bundle that his mouth waters every time he sees a dollar bill? Sure, you might have schooling and smarts, but let me tell you buster, those attributes will get you into the sauce quicker'n greased camel scat. One day you'll be out there thinking 'what a smart sonofabitch I am,' and some snot-nosed punk who can't even speak the language will come out of the woodwork and hand you your ass. Before you and your liberal buddies get around to organizing to protect yourself from these carpetbaggers, they're bigger and better organized than you."

"What I'm trying to pound into that thick skull of yours is that the time to take care of these punks is now before they have the chance to get into the game in the first place. What I'm telling you is that now is the time for us who've got the bucks to close ranks to keep the others in their place."

"Are you beginning to get the picture? Why do you think we've gone to all the trouble of organizing the stock market; creating the Federal Reserve Bank; establishing the income tax; bringing on the 1929 panic; pumping hundreds of millions of dollars into the hands of crooks so they could sell short every time the stock market shows a sign of recovery? Why do you think we spent all the time and money orchestrating prohibition and then backed that arrogant cripple from Hyde Park for President? Do you think we did all that for our amusement? We did it for you, son, and others like you. We did it to free you from having to worry about those ambitious yokels ever again."

The National Reconstruction Act is designed to allow those of us who got our gold out of the country under the old deal to bring it back in at double the value and reconvert it without pushing up prices. The way we're going to do that is to purchase the remnants of companies that will be forced into bankruptcy by a law requiring them to set higher than marketplace prices on their products or face going to jail. God, it's beautiful. What a brilliant stroke this 'prime the pump' hogwash is."

"Thanks for your concern, pop, but I think your way sucks. You and your buddies are masters at screwing things up, but I don't think you have it in you to pick up the marbles. Those guys who 'can't speak the language' as you put it are still going to make it because they've got the determination and the smarts to try new things - use new technologies - and I intend to be one of them."

"Brave words coming from a boy of twenty-one," Port thought as he switched tanks in preparation for landing at Hana Airfield on Maui. "Now that I'm fifty-three, I'm not certain I made a wise move."

It's not that he hadn't done well in the intervening years, but there was always the nagging suspicion that a part of his success was based in some measure on intuiting the aims and methods of his father and friends. As such, he was able to synchronize his activities with theirs, usually to his advantage and their detriment. The trouble was that he had become so adept at figuring out their plans, he was beginning to think like them and that scared him.

Walking out on his father involved real consequences inasmuch as he had no money of his own. The family scion, C-1, had seen to that by tying up the family fortune in a tax-free foundation even before there was an income tax. Crap had further confused the issue by establishing a number of off-shore trusts of which not even Port was aware.

Given the uncertainty of his starting point, Port assessed the situation, listed his alternatives, analyzed the consequences of each, and married Constance Damian, daughter of the film magnate. He chose her from among a bevy of attractive, intelligent, accomplished, wealthy, and available young ladies because she offered one characteristic none of the others had - a father who was not committed to the conventional. He was eccentric, volatile, opinionated, crass, ruthless, and sometimes (perhaps most of the time) a pig-headed jackass.

"I ought to be down on my hands and knees thanking God that you're taking that shrew off my hands," Damian declared emotionally when Port asked for Constance's hand. "But then I have to ask myself what kind of respect can I have for a man who is willing to put up with that spoiled ingrate?"

"Precisely my thoughts, BA," Port interjected, sensing a ripening opportunity. "Perhaps now's the time to discuss just how much it's going to cost you to get Constance out of your hair."

"A man after my own heart," Damian acknowledged grudgingly, sensing that this truly was a marriage made in heaven. "Are you interested in the film business?"

"Not in the least," which was what he told the Hollywood gossip columnist, Fancy Pickens, six months later at the opening of his first smash hit, Arapaho Autumn, starring Lance Adonis and Lily Bazoom plus a cast of thousands (actually less than fifty Ikwik and an energetic film editor).

"Movies are made by degenerates for the consumption of cretins, which is why they're so successful," he told a group of gushing housewives down from Bakersfield for the day.

"People want to see the same thing over and over. It's the boy-meets-girl thing. If you try to change it by gratuitously tossing in a little reality, the critics brand it an art picture and Hollywood pats itself on its collective backside for fostering the illusion that somewhere out there there's a viable audience that really cares."

"Someday, movies will be transmitted directly into the home and people will say, 'think of the possibilities you have for enriching the lives of the masses'. Instead of enriching their lives, it will turn them into junkies, hooked on a stream of electrons designed to sell a lot of soap."

One day he called Little Horned Toad.

"Send one of your Indians down to the make-up department, will you? I want to try something."

"There's a war coming," he confided in Damian, "so I had them outfit one of Little Horned Toad's hotshots with buck teeth and glasses. Damned if he didn't make a great looking Jap. I sent out for some stock footage of Tokyo and had wardrobe make up some uniforms and kimonos but keep it really quiet. There's no sense alerting the rest of the industry. When the war starts, the rednecks will hustle the poor little bastards into concentration camps so they can steal everything they own. It'll be unfair to the real Japs, but we'll have a corner on the nipper market."

"I know you're seeing someone on the side," Constance announced after dinner one evening. "Daddy says you haven't been to the studio for nearly three months." She raised her hand to stop him as he started to reply. "No, I don't want to know who it is. I just want to know if it's serious."

"It's serious, Connie, except that it isn't another woman." Constance was startled by the possibilities of such a statement. "It's a business, an electronics business to be more precise."

"Jeezus Kee-rist," she snapped. "Electronics business? Why the hell an electronics business?"

"Well, for openers, I got a hell of a buy. The poor bastard who owned it had to price himself out of business, so I got it for less than its net operating capital."

"Who cares what kind of a buy you made, don't you know there's a war coming?"

"It certainly looks that way."

"Well what the hell're you doing diddling around with toasters and kiddy toys rather than important things like making bombs and battleships like real Americans? The least you could do is make bayonets like Tyrone Tumescent."

Tyrone Tumescent, it turned out, was also in the baby-making business, one of whom was Chris who plopped into the world at precisely eleven a.m. Pacific Standard Time on December 7th, 1941, the exact moment when Acme Films' stock began its upward surge. Though it made no difference to Chris at the time, another Tumescent offspring was born to an Alexandra Blood fifteen minutes later. Tyrone had had a particularly busy March afternoon and evening.

By Two in the afternoon, Johnny Jarhead was on the set dressed as a Navy fighter pilot ready to get on with the war, and Nips Ahoy could have been in the can by nightfall had not Little Horned Toad's band of yellow peril been captured en route to the studio by the Moorpark chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars who proceeded to soak Tommy Lightningbolt in gasoline and threaten to torch him off if he didn't tell where their goddamn submarine was.

"Submarine, hell," he yelled defiantly when it became apparent that denials and protestations fetched him nothing but savage reprisals. "We've got the whole fleet with two million child-eating rapists running around the San Fernando Valley looking for your wives and families."

It was a stroke of genius. When the vets figured out that these nips had come as liberators, they trotted out some of the good stuff. While LeForce paced and Johnny Jarhead swaggered around damning 'those rotten pilgrims', the Ikwik found out about firewater.

It was a hell of a day all around. While wave after wave of Japanese torpedo planes and bombers ripped into the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet and airfield facilities in Honolulu Bay, Crap was busy explaining to the man in the wheelchair why it had been absolutely necessary to keep Admiral Kimmel and General Short ignorant of Japanese intentions.

"Germany's the enemy, not Japan," Crap reminded his old stamp-collecting buddy. "If we had broken up the Jap attack, they'd have been too screwed up to continue the war. No war with Japan, no war with Germany. This way you've got the entire nation behind you clambering for blood, and they don't give a damn whose.

While Chris was taking his first suck, Tumescent was raging out of control after discovering that the last batch of bayonets off the line was defective. Someone in the heat-treating area had screwed up, producing fifty-thousand blades so brittle they snapped in two when struck on the side.

"What the hell do we do with these," he demanded of his production chief.

"Dump them, I guess," he replied, wincing at Tumescent's fury. "You can't ask a man to go to war with one of these, could you?"

"The hell we can't. We'll get the government to give them to our allies, that's what."

"Which allies? The Brits?"

"Hell no, those rotten stinking Commies in Russia. It'll serve them right for electing that asshole Stalin."

At about the same time, Port was going over plans with his chief engineer for a new shipboard radar when the hospital called to inform him that he was the proud father of a bouncing baby boy.

"Bullshit," he roared at the shocked grey-lady. "Don't tell me about it. Call that sonofabitch Tumescent, it's his bastard, not mine."

"Sorry, boss," commiserated Dr. Klystron, the resident electrical genius. "When we get this radar finished, it'll radiate enough energy to sterilize Tumescent at fifty yards."

"Let's get back to work," he suggested, relocating himself on the schematic. "You know, one of these days we're going to have to see about putting these things up in space where they can keep us posted on what's happening anywhere on the globe. Then you can't have a sneak attack like this happening ever again." And a little later, "someday, the whole battlefield will be electronically monitored. When that day comes, it'll be the commander with the best equipment who wins."

During the three-day brainstorming session which resulted in the Navy's first operational search radar, Port established a pattern for laying out long-term objectives which became the incentive for future sessions. Before the war ended, his electronics company had expanded into a number of virgin technologies including various forms of communications systems and sensory receptors. For three years, Port himself had led a development team from concept to demonstrator stage of a real-time battlefield electronic surveillance system using a lattice of fixed and airborne electro-optical scanners and data transmitter/repeaters that we know today as television.

"What good's that junk," asked Little Horned Toad who was at the electronics plant for a film conference and stayed on to watch the demonstration before a group of Army brass. "The stuff's too big and complex to tote around and set up quickly. By the time you get it working the battle has already been won or lost."

"What the hell do you know about it, Toad," Port asked bitterly, certain in the pit of his stomach that the Indian was right. "Maybe you're in the wrong line of work."

"I've been thinking about that, sir, but I like the freedom the movie business affords me." He paused, wondering if he were about to make a big mistake, but he really did see some possibilities.

"I won't pretend to know anything about warfare, but I'm kind of an expert on how the white man goes about fighting if you get what I mean."

"I hear you, Toad. Go on."

"When the white man gets the brown man or the yellow man to play by his rules, he's bound to win. Even though these Tojo movies are play acting, it doesn't take a genius to see that standing in front of a steamroller is a losing proposition, yet that's exactly what the Indians used to do and what the Japs are doing."

"So?"

"If it were up to me, I wouldn't play the white man's game. I'd change the rules. Let the Americans show up to the war with all their hardware and equipment geared to go head-to-head with a bunch of fanatics. My idea would be to stick them and run. I'd do it again and again teasing them into getting out of their game plan. Americans assume that others are going to fight the fight they're equipped and trained for because that's the way Europeans do it. Fortunately, the Japs are as devoid of imagination as the Germans and Russians or things would be a lot more interesting.

"What's that have to do with my battlefield surveillance system?"

"Only that if you build and deploy it, it will become the master of tactical options, not the servant of the commander. It will dictate tactics, weapons, even the terrain in which it can be employed, and in the end the tail will wag the dog."

"Are you finished?

"One more thing."

"Go ahead."

"The way this thing's set up, you've only got one certain customer with a rather limited requirement, but if you look at other options, your market is virtually unlimited."

"Wha . . .," Port started to argue just as the truth of everything Little Horned Toad had said struck him. It was what he had said ten years earlier about movies in the home, and here was the mechanism in his hands.

"Good God, Toad, do you realize the magnitude of what you're suggesting?" His mind raced ahead. "When the war's over, there'll be investment taking place in homes and autos and buildings of all sorts. Factories will have to change from making guns and tanks to making all the things people have done without for fifteen years. The investment in tooling alone will be staggering. How the hell can I go about raising the capital required to launch an industry that doesn't exist.

"Well, to begin with you already have an interest in the two primary ingredients of this new industry - the technology and production facilities." Little Horned Toad watched Chris out of the corner of his eye savoring a situation which would come but once in his lifetime. "I presume that between you and your principle investors in National Electronics, you could come up with a hundred million or so." Port blinked but said nothing.

"How much stock do you hold in Acme Films?"

"Voting or non-voting," Port asked, puzzled by the question. "I've got forty-two percent of the voting stock and I presume that Damian has the rest."

"Wrong," whooped Little Horned Toad, a grin splitting his face from ear to ear. "I've got twenty percent. We're in control."

""You?" Port had been taken completely off-guard. "Is there anything else you ought to tell me?"

"No," Toad answered thoughtfully, holding back his other holdings for another time. "That should about do it."

Thus began one of the strangest and most successful business associations in history, made all the more absurd by the fact that Little Horned Toad rarely made an appearance that something startling didn't happen. There was the time that Toad arrived at National Television Systems' building as Port was preparing to leave for the airport by helicopter.

"Take a trip up north with me and we can talk," Port offered, brightened by the thought of Little Horned Toad's company. "It's time you found out about flying, anyway."

"What're we up to?"

"There's this professor up at Stanford who invented a thing called a semiconductor that is going to revolutionize the electronics industry." He hastily sketched a diagram and explained the concept. Little Horned Toad let out a low whistle.

"You can see that we can't afford to get left behind on this one. Being able to replace vacuum tubes with chips made of silicon will allow us to make a color television set for less than today's black and white box." Toad stared at the diagram, as if by doing so he could extract its inner secrets. At last he nodded with satisfaction but said nothing.

Port was fascinated by Dr. Shocker, posing a series of questions in order to gain a detailed knowledge of the concept, fabrication, and utility of semi-conductors. Little Horned Toad listened carefully but remained silent throughout.

"What do you think, Toad? You're awfully quiet.

"This plane safe from bugs," asked Toad when they were settled in the A-26's cramped but well-appointed cabin.

"Sure, why?"

"You remember that battlefield surveillance scheme you worked out during the war? Well, this really makes it possible - only this time from space." Port started to interrupt but Little Horned Toad waved him off.

"That's just the tip of the iceberg. You remember showing me your computer room?" Port nodded assent, visualizing the 47,000 square foot refrigerator that housed eighty-eight tons of electronic cabinets requiring the constant ministrations of 300 white-smocked technicians and a battery bespeckled wizards known as programmers. "From this moment on, that baby's history." Port's jaw dropped, an involuntary reaction which lead inexorably to the formation of National Data Systems whose majority stockholders, controlling sixty percent of the stock were Little Horned Toad and Port with equal shares. Interestingly, no one in the financial world knew about Little Horned Toad, much less his position.

Now, ten years farther down the road, the two, joined by an investigator, sat in the spacious cabin of the company Grumman Gulfstream discussing what they had learned during the day.

"That's quite an operation they've got going there," Port spoke with obvious admiration. "You're sure about the destination?"

"Yessir. As you saw today, they put the stuff into standard military packing crates with no markings and place the boxes into military shipping containers which are rafted out beyond the twelve-mile limit where they're hoisted aboard freighters flying the Panamanian flag. Two weeks after they depart, they offload in Saigon at the Spotted Tiger Oriental Industries Company. As far as I can determine, it's a CIA front, but I'm not sure."

"If my dad's involved, it's bound to be."

"What I'd like to know," asked the investigator, "is how they keep the lid on an operation that large and that exposed?"

"Who's to talk," Little Horned Toad piped in. "Everyone on the island comes out ahead. First there's the good outdoor work with nice pay, not to mention the bribes to the police and judges. The business people are happy because of the extra money and the tourists are happy because there's always a little Maui-Wowie around to make the vacation more memorable."

After the investigator left, Little Horned Toad and Port sat in silence for nearly an hour going through the possibilities. Port was first to speak.

"Most people don't see it, Toad, but the United States is on the brink of a giant upheaval as needless as it will be destructive. My father is one of the main instigators, but I'm beginning to see something of his side too."

"Paleface logic always leaves me a little sorry that we didn't have a few communicable diseases to wipe out the settlers."

"Since the founding of the nation, political power has been concentrated in the Northeast. Lately, it's come to be known as the Eastern Establishment to distinguish it from emerging Western and Southern power bases, but it still represents the old-line banking and industrial interests which presented us with the Civil War, the Great Depression, World War II, and now Vietnam."

"I follow everything but Vietnam?"

"It's their last-ditch effort to hang on but it really can't work even though they're bound and determined to give it a try. See if you follow this: The same New Deal that allowed the boys to rip off companies at a wholesale rate created the beginnings of their downfall. You have to remember that even though the lowest day in the depression came in 1932, the second lowest day was in 1938, nearly six years later. So much for the myth that the New Deal licked the depression. By then, Europe was at war and American industry was reawakening. Investment was taking place at an unprecedented rate, particularly in those industries not hampered by outmoded capital equipment. The aircraft industry was a perfect example. The West Coast, particularly Los Angeles, was not hampered with a lot of antiquated infrastructure, so when the war ended it wasn't bound down with a lot of graft, crud, and corruption. These guys out here were innovative, making the kinds of investment that gave them a jump on the rest of the country. As a result, the nation's power base began to shift and with the advent of the microchip, the West emerged as the predominant economic and political center."

"Goldwater could have won the election in 1964 if he had hung onto the team that had gotten him the nomination. Instead, he used the party hacks who sent him out to lose with that disastrous nomination acceptance address where he said 'extremism in defense of liberty is no vice'. The East held on for one more time, but even they could see the handwriting on the wall. The West is more conservative and naive, so the East's only hope now is to put on a war hope to mobilize the liberals into a coalition to save their bacon."

"What's this to do with us?"

"Nothing, except we've got to interdict their dope deal."

"How do you intend to do that?"

"I don't know yet, but we'll find a way."

"If they're on the way down anyway, why don't we get into the dope business ourselves?"

"Huh?" Port looked at Little Horned Toad with interest.

"Sure. First, we could put enough pressure on them to make certain they don't end up with a lock on the business like they did during prohibition, and second, we'll be in position to pick up their network when they get defeated in 1968."

"We're going to need a lot more money to get this thing off the ground than I can lay may hands on. Setting up the production end shouldn't be too hard, but it's the logistics and security that scares me. That'll take big bucks."

"Let me get hold of some people I've met, Port. I think they'll see the picture."

Bernie Kornblum was a rich man. Rumor had it that he was worth as much as twenty million dollars. Rumor was wrong. He was worth easily one hundred times as much. Rumor also had it that he had been bankrolled by his father-in-law's synagogue and that every time he got in a little over his head, mysterious forces would come to his aid. Bernie fostered such rumors not merely because it helped in business, but because it kept people from looking for his real benefactors. As a result, there were perfectly intelligent men who went to pauper graves believing that Bernie was a lucky fool with rich in-laws.

For the most part, Bernie was cautious, approaching opportunity with all the élan of a dormouse, but he had a nose for things which were going to be significant, and for this reason above all certain international interests had paid dearly for his services since the early 1930s. His flyer with Acme Films in 1937 had not only produced a return on investment beyond anyone's wildest imagination, but had also become a major conduit for infiltrating the industry with leftists. When Port mounted his takeover play in order to establish the television empire, Bernie jumped in with both feet, aligning his twenty percent interest (unbeknownst to Port and Little Horned Toad, Damian had pedaled all but twenty-five percent of his voting shares) with the venture. Again, when Port moved into the computer business, Bernie invested heavily, this time establishing an industrial espionage net which had spread from National Electronic Systems throughout the entire industry. Retainers from nearly every manufacturing nation on earth provided him more than five hundred million dollars annually.

Now, sitting across his desk from the little pinched-faced Indian, Bernie knew that he was in the perfect place at exactly the right time. Little Horned Toad was right and so was Port. Crap and his bunch were at the end of their rope. The 1968 elections would do them in, so it was time to align himself with the winning side. The West Coast weapons makers were ready to pounce, upsetting the established Cold War connections. Not only would his communist customers be willing to pay him tens of millions of dollars to establish a second line of supply for dope in Vietnam, the long-term potential for the business was staggering. Most rewarding of all was that none of it was taxable.

"Toad," Bernie smiled conspiratorially, "let's keep this between us for the time being. When we're ready to move, I'll find the guys with the necessary capital. Tell Port it's in the bag."