

Main Characters

Alfonse Dubarry	<i>Geologist</i>
Marge Gilbert	<i>Physician</i>
Robert Marks	<i>Captain of the Star Ranger</i>
Wolf Spyder	<i>First Officer of the Star Ranger</i>
Barry Olson	<i>Shuttle Pilot</i>
Bill Dobbs	<i>Chief of Security</i>
Barb Jones	<i>Microbiologist</i>
Rick Muller	<i>Biologist</i>
Wendy Jackson	<i>Botanist</i>
Joe Hillary	<i>Psychiatrist</i>
Lottie Highland	<i>Chemist</i>
Omar Dixon	<i>General, Member of the High Command</i>

Chapter 1

“They are staying at the Hyatt Towers, Burns. I want no foul-up this time. This is a most important assignment.” General Dixon paced the floor in his spacious office. He halted by the window, adjusting the louvers of the window shades. It was early afternoon here at Fleet Headquarters, the large navy base in Arizona. Although the calendar read February the weather was more like the middle of July.

“I wonder why they can’t do a better job at Weather Control,” the general mumbled as he squinted at the brightness outside. Far to the south the mountain range shimmered purple in the noon-day heat.

“Yes, Sir,” Captain Burns replied. He sat in the armchair facing the general, his posture uncomfortably erect.

“I want you to take personal charge, Burns. They must not escape our net.”

“Yes, Sir. I shall fly to Washington at once. This Alf Dubarry is a dangerous and rebellious character. He turned down a position his father had arranged for him. Imagine, turning down a secure job with the government! Alf Dubarry and this Marge Gilbert.”

“We shall take them into custody as soon as possible, tonight, if you can manage it. Get yourself to Washington. Take a navy shuttle.” General Dixon looked at the clock on his desk.

“It is 12:30 now. That means 14:30 in the east. You could be there in a couple of hours. Pick a time when there are few people around and make it discreet. I want you to have them under arrest the next time I see you.”

“Yes, Sir. What about Admiral Griebler, General? He is still in a position to overrule”

“Griebler has announced his retirement already. He’ll step down at the end of April. He has no real authority any more. At this morning’s meeting of the High Command he had to back down. The *Star Ranger* will be decommissioned and her crew - we shall have to figure out what to do with the sailors, maybe disburse them among the fleet. This Captain Marks is the problem. He is one of the old guard, if you know what I mean. He still has some influential friends. He spends almost all his time on the ship. We must find a way to neutralize him.”

“He can’t go anywhere without a crew, General. If we were to quietly reassign his crew he would be stuck here. Sooner or later he would have to leave the ship. My bet is that it would be sooner.”

“We will consider it. But my first priority is to get the Dubarry-Gilbert team detained, even if they still have a week left on their furlough.

Be on your way then.” General Dixon stepped up to the window again and was studying the landing field.

“Oh, one more question, Burns. Has the Star Ranger been refueled yet?”

“No, Sir, not up to the present. I don’t expect that to happen until a day or so before the ship is ready to leave. The only thing they took on this past week was some food.”

“Good. It will be some time before ... See to it that the ship will not be refueled but be discreet about it. Without fuel no space craft can get very far.”

“Yes, Sir. I shall attend to it as soon as I get back from Washington.” Captain Burns stood at attention. When the general turned around Burns saluted stiffly and then walked to the door.

Outside he took a deep breath. He was obviously in the general’s favor. It should not be long before he was promoted to major and then it was only one short step to colonel. The future looked bright. The High Command beckoned. Perhaps in only a dozen years he could occupy the same position as General Dixon did today. He would still be young then. He could remain at the top for at least twenty years. Captain Burns lifted up his shoulders and cockily walked along the corridor towards the elevator.

The flight to Washington was uneventful. The sun was not much above the horizon and dusk was about to fall when the aircraft set down on the landing field at the naval base. Like in Arizona the weather was superb. There was not a single cloud in the sky. It looked almost like the middle of summer outside as the craft majestically rolled towards the terminal building. It came to a stop a hundred meters from several low structures.

Captain Max Burns had already worked out in every detail the sequence of steps he would take. There was nothing to it. Shortly after nightfall he would have his task accomplished. If it really was as important as General Dixon had implied - success was always rewarded. In his mind’s eye Burns could already see major’s epaulettes adorning his shoulders.

Captain Burns was impatiently waiting inside the shuttle, his mind painting vivid pictures of the glories to come. With a soft hum the door split in the middle and the two halves slid into the wall while at the same time the three steps to the ground unfolded. As the door opened a cold gust of wind hit him and made him shiver. It was still only February and although it looked like summer the temperature outside was only a couple of degrees above freezing, a far cry from the thirty-one degrees they had had to endure in Arizona.

Nothing is ever perfect, he thought. He took a deep breath and held it. With a show of indifference he stepped down to the ground and quickly moved towards the nearest building. As he walked through the front door he felt chilled to the core.

It took almost two hours before Burns reached the Hyatt Towers hotel, properly dressed for the cold weather. Stores at the base had found

him a parka. It was ill-fitting but it was the only one with captain's insignia they had had in stock. Even requisitioning a vehicle had been vexatious. As soon as he had taken care of this assignment there would be a shake-up of the Washington base. He, Captain Max Burns, by then having the rank of major, would personally see to it that the incompetent officers in charge would be posted to some out-of-the-way place where they could while away their careers waiting for reassignment.

Burns was not in the most pleasant mood when his car finally pulled up in front of the Hyatt Towers.

"Wait here," he snapped at the driver as he got out of the vehicle. He slammed the door hard. That made him feel good and his anger lessened somewhat. In what he thought was a dapper manner he mounted the few steps to the terrace and marched towards the main entrance. As he approached it a uniformed doorman pulled the door open for him. Burns nodded as he stepped inside the spacious lobby.

I must make a note of it, he thought. They will have to install automatic door openers. This archaic system will have to go. It is almost like in the Middle Ages. No wonder the economy is not performing as well as it should.

Although Burns counted at least forty people standing around and sitting on the comfortable armchairs and benches the lobby gave the impression of being almost empty. He slowly made his way to the desk while he opened his parka and then took it off. It was far too hot in here. They should not be allowed to waste precious resources, he thought. They could lower the temperature by at least five degrees and still be comfortable. And if not, a sweater would do wonders in overcoming a chill.

"May I be of assistance, Major?" the clerk asked as he came to a halt in front of the long service desk.

"That is captain, Madam. Yes, you may. I am looking for a Dr. Alfonse Dubarry."

"My apologies, Captain. Sometimes I get confused with the ranks of the military. There are so many of them." She was punching number sequences into the board in front of her while she talked.

"I am afraid Dr. Dubarry is not in, Captain. They are a most pleasant couple, Dr. Dubarry and his lady. They usually have dinner just about now. Perhaps you would like to check the dining room. It is through that door to your left." The clerk was pointing to the far side of the lobby.

"Couple? Did you say couple?"

"Yes. There is a lady who accompanies him everywhere, well, almost everywhere. As a matter of fact, Dr. Dubarry returned from a trip only this afternoon."

"From a trip? You wouldn't know where he had been, would you?"

"No, I am sorry, I don't. But I overheard him talk to Marge. That is the name of his lady. He said something about having been in Hilo on business, wherever that is. It seemed to have to do with some university thing. Say, you are not from the Secret Service, are you?"

Burns tried to smile. "No, no, I am not a Secret Service agent. I am from Fleet Headquarters. We would like to talk to Dr. Dubarry. Perhaps we could use his specialized knowledge. Maybe I'll go to the dining room. You know a lot of what Dr. Dubarry does, don't you?"

"No, not really, Captain Burns. That is your name, isn't it?"

"Yes. How did you find out?"

"It says so on your uniform."

"Yes, so it does."

"I still think that you have something to do with the Secret Service. Why would you be asking all these questions? There was a Secret Service agent here just about an hour ago. He must be still here. He also asked for Dr. Dubarry. He said he would wait for him in the rotunda."

"Much obliged. In the rotunda?"

"Yes. Up that way. One floor above the mezzanine." The clerk pointed to the stairs.

Without being aware of it Burns saluted and turned towards the stairs. His posture and manner of behavior implied that he felt way above everybody else, only nobody noticed it except the hotel detective. Max Burns disappeared up the stairs. He was barely out of sight when Alfonse Dubarry, Marge Gilbert and an elderly gentleman crossed the lobby to the side exit leading to the hotel grounds. Captain Burns had missed them by mere seconds.

When Burns reached the rotunda he found it deserted. He walked around the central column twice. He tried the soft leather benches. There was even a magazine lying about. The clerk at the front desk had been right. The Secret Service had been here. There was no time to waste. Maybe they were still in the dining room. He quickly went down the stairs again, taking two steps at once.

The lobby was as he had left it a few minutes ago. He slowed down so as not to attract too much attention although it made him feel irritable and the impatience gnawed at him. General Dixon had put a great deal of emphasis on apprehending this Dubarry fellow. If he succeeded there certainly would be a promotion in it for him.

At the entrance to the dining room two couples were in front of him, waiting to be seated. It seemed to take forever for the hostess to find them a table. And then it was his turn.

"I would like to have a word with the head waiter," Burns said to the girl in her spotless hotel uniform. "It is regarding an urgent matter."

"The head waiter? Oh, you mean the maitre d'?"

"The maitre d' then."

"He is tied up right now. If you care to wait I'll advise him. Please follow me." She walked through the dining room which was almost half full by now. Near the far corner next to the entrance to the kitchen she stopped.

"Is this suitable, Sir? You will have some privacy here for a short while. I'll send a coffee over to you or would you rather have a drink?"

Rum? A brandy? Or the specialty of the house?"

"I never drink while on duty," Burns said stiffly. "Coffee will be fine. And it is urgent that I speak to the head..." But the hostess had disappeared already. Burns let himself fall heavily into the big, wooden captain's chair. His mood did not improve much while he waited. On the contrary, he felt more and more annoyed.

"Do you care for a drink?" Burns heard a voice next to the table. The young man had appeared without Burns noticing it. Startled he sat up.

"No, no, thank you. Just a coffee."

"Very well, coffee it shall be."

Burns was going to ask him to send the head waiter over but the young man had left. Annoyed at himself and at the world Burns scrutinized the dining room with his eyes. People were coming in all the time now. It was difficult to be thorough. But there on the opposite side at a table for two a young couple was sitting. Burns was about to go over and ...

"Your coffee, Sir," the waitress said, placing a cup in front of him. He had not seen her approach. Her words made him flinch.

"Ah, thank you," he managed to mumble.

"Is there anything else, Sir?"

"No, not at the moment. However, I would ..."

As soon as he had said no the waitress had disappeared. Once again Burns felt annoyance crossing his mind. In fact he was seething and it was becoming difficult for him to maintain a debonair appearance. He was debating with himself whether he should go over to that young couple and inquire whether the man's name was Dubarry when another waitress approached his table.

"Are you ready to order your meal, Sir?" she inquired.

"Actually I would like to have a word with the head waiter," Burns replied.

"The head waiter? You mean the maitre d', do you?"

"Yes, yes, the maitre d'."

"He is engaged right at the moment, but I'll tell him that you are waiting. He'll be with you as soon as he is free. It should not be long now."

But it was. Burns had to wait for a full ten minutes before another hotel employee approached his table. The coffee had been strong but not bad tasting. Burns drained the last of it when the waiter took a seat across the table from him.

"I am told that you want to see me," the waiter said.

"I am from Fleet Headquarters," Burns said, pulling out his identity card and flashing it in front of the waiter. "I am looking for a Dr. Dubarry. I was told that he was in this dining room having dinner. I would like you to point him out to me."

"Dr. Alfonse Dubarry? Is he wanted by you people too? My name is Smithers, Naval Intelligence. I was told to keep an eye on him here and report his movements. He left not fifteen minutes ago."

"He left? That's a fine mess."

“Yes, he left, accompanied by Dr. Marge Gilbert and an elderly gentleman whom I took to be his father.”

“His father died six years ago! Fool!”

“I am sorry, Captain. I was not briefed on his family. You should have met him outside in the lobby before you came in.”

“I should have met him out in the lobby? I don’t even know what he looks like!”

“Now if you ask me, that is foolish. How can you locate a person if you don’t know what he looks like? I overheard them talking about going to a revue. I just reported it to my superior, Major Lees. He is head of the local intelligence branch.”

Burns had trouble keeping his feelings under control. “So he has escaped?”

“I should think not. Maybe the older man was Gilbert’s father. They called him pops and talked about a family reunion. If you will excuse me now, I am wanted elsewhere.” Smithers rose, bowed, very briefly stood at attention and was gone.

Burns rose as well. He almost knocked the chair over. Luckily the table behind him was still unoccupied. As he strolled through the lobby he drifted back to the front desk. His eyes searched for the clerk with whom he had talked before but she was not there.

“Yes, Sir, what can I do for you?” the impeccably dressed young man behind the counter asked.

“I talked to a young lady here a short while ago. Slim, medium height, auburn hair ...”

“Oh, Mathilda. She has left. Her shift ended fifteen minutes ago, Sir.”

“She has left? Where does she live?”

“I am not permitted to divulge that kind of information, even if I knew her address, Sir.” The young man’s voice had cooled considerably.

Burns pulled out his identity card again. “I am from Fleet Headquarters. Actually I am looking for Dr. Dubarry. Dr. Alfonse Dubarry. We would like to have a word with him.”

“Oh, my apologies, Sir. I thought ...” the clerk was punching a number sequence into his computer. For a short while he watched the screen. “He is not in his room, Sir.”

“Yes, I know. Did you see him walk through the lobby?”

The clerk shook his head. This captain asked a lot of questions and his tone of voice was not the most pleasant.

“No, Sir, not while I was on duty.” Even if he had seen him he would have said no. This captain had some vaguely distasteful manner about him. He seemed almost obnoxious.

“You didn’t? All right,” Burns said. Turning around he marched towards the front door. The clerk’s eyes followed him. An enforcer, the clerk thought. I must warn Dr. Dubarry when he gets back. Fleet Headquarters, pah!

Max Burns walked though the front door. That promotion to major

was not so easy to win after all. One had to have a considerable amount of luck. Looking up he saw his car in one of the parking spaces across the road.

“Naval Intelligence,” Burns snapped at the driver as he got into the vehicle.

The ride was a short one. Naval Intelligence was housed in the business district in one of the new office towers. At this late hour the visitor’s parking lot was only half full.

“This should not take long,” Burns said to the chauffeur as he got out. “Wait here.”

He walked into the front entrance and thence to the elevator. Naval Intelligence was on the fourteenth floor, the directory proclaimed. When the doors of the elevator opened again Burns was looking at a comfortably arranged waiting room with a secretary sitting behind a desk at the far end. Boldly he walked up to her.

“I wish to see Major Lees,” he declared.

The secretary looked at Burns with a bored expression.

“Major Lees is tied up. I am sorry.”

Burns pulled out his identity card. “I am from Fleet Headquarters. General Dixon sent me. It is imperative that I talk to Major Lees at once.” He flashed the card in front of the secretary.

“Here, let me see that card,” the secretary said.

Reluctantly Burns handed it over.

“Yes, it appears to be genuine. I’ll see what I can do. Please take a seat.” She returned the card and waved towards a row of chairs.

Burns took the card and slipped it back into the pocket of his uniform tunic. He was less than happy about the delay but he could understand it. He walked over to the row of chairs and was just about to sit down on one of them.

“Which General Dixon?” the secretary suddenly asked.

Burns looked up startled. “There is only one. General Omar Dixon of Fleet Headquarters.”

“You are right. There is only one. Go right in, Captain. Second door to your left.”

Burns moved over to the door indicated. He was about to knock when the door split in the middle and the two halves slid into the wall. The captain stepped through the opening. He came to a sudden stop, took a deep breath and held it. Behind him the door slid shut again.

“Great view, isn’t it?” a voice said from the left, a deep voice.

To Burns it looked like he was standing at the very edge of a canyon which fell away vertically. The bottom of the chasm was lost in the half-light far below.

“I am Major Lees. What can I do for you, Captain Burns?”

“How is it done?” Burns asked and exhaled noisily.

“It’s a hologram. Realistic, isn’t it? Takes your breath away. I bet you didn’t expect such a view.”

“No, I didn’t, and it sure looks like I am standing on the brink of a sheer cliff.” Burns had himself under control again. “I am here to inquire about a certain Dr. Alfonse Dubarry who is staying at the Hyatt Towers. We would like to talk to him at Fleet Headquarters. That is to say General Dixon wants him there.”

“I am afraid you are too late, Captain.”

“You mean to say that you have him under arrest already? On what charge, may I ask?”

“No, we don’t have him under arrest. I mean to say that he has disappeared without a trace.”

“That’s impossible. How can a person disappear without a trace in this day and age? Two persons, actually. He was last seen with Marge Gilbert, a medical practitioner. I am led to believe that the Secret Service is involved.”

“We checked already, Burns. They know of nothing.”

“Then who was the elderly man who took them away?”

“We are trying to find that out right now. And we are also discreetly checking all the theaters. I think that somebody in the know must have tipped him off. Our orders were simply to keep an eye on him. Not to shadow him, mind you, just to keep an eye on him.”

“That’s a fine situation! I don’t think that General Dixon will be overjoyed when he finds out that this Dubarry fellow ...”

“We followed orders, his express orders, Burns. I specifically asked him a couple of weeks ago whether he wanted us to take Dubarry and Gilbert into custody and he said no. I am sorry, Captain. You might as well return to Fleet Headquarters. If Dubarry shows up here again which I doubt, I will personally guarantee you that we will grab him. We checked with his sister already. She has not seen him or heard from him for several days.”

“Thank you, Major Lees.” Burns rose. “I’ll be in touch.” He briefly stood at attention, saluted and then left. What was he to do now? It was a big problem. To return to Arizona was out of the question. He could not go back there unless he had this Dubarry fellow under arrest or was ordered to report to Fleet Headquarters. I might as well live it up, he thought.

“Hyatt Towers,” he snapped at the driver as he got into the car again.

Chapter 2

"After I talked to Dr. Danzinger in Hawaii I made up my mind, Marge. We will re-enlist in the navy. While we are physically only twenty-nine years old, in the eyes of prospective employers we are fifty-two years old. And there just are no positions available for fifty-two year old unemployed people. I have sent out over one hundred and fifty inquiries and you have sent out more than one hundred and thirty and in addition we have also applied to many ads seeking persons with our training and experience yet we did not garner one single interview. The navy is not the worst choice. Not by a wide margin!"

"You are not doing it just for my sake, are you, Alf?"

"No, Marge. We were born in thirty-four and we have now eighty-six. Let's face it. We are old. Not physically old, but ..."

"Yes, we must be able to support ourselves. But we still have almost a full week left of our leave. If we ..."

"No, Marge. We will not succeed. Let's go down to navy headquarters here in Washington and re-enlist. Let's go first thing tomorrow morning."

"The navy has been our life for some time, Alf. We will have a secure future. And the way they figure it here, one more five year term will put us over the thirty year mark and we will then be entitled to a pension which is not bad by today's standards. Yes, let's go first thing tomorrow morning."

"I know it's early, Marge, but I am hungry. How about dinner?"

"I am not starving but I could eat. Let's make this a feast. And then we could go down to the Potomac River for a walk, Alf."

"It's a great idea. And it looks like a pleasant evening."

They had just finished dressing for dinner when the communicator sounded.

"Dr. Dubarry," the voice of the front desk clerk said, "there is an elderly gentleman here to see you. He would not give his name. He said he would be waiting for you in the rotunda."

"An elderly gentleman? All right, I'll be down shortly." He pushed the disconnect button.

"Do you care to come along, Marge?"

"Sure, why not? I have nothing to do and I am curious why an elderly gentleman would want to see you."

Together they left the room. The rotunda appeared to be deserted when they stepped off the elevator.

"There's nobody here," Gilbert said. "Let's go and eat."

As they rounded the big column in the center of the rotunda they found somebody sitting on the bench behind it, reading a magazine.

“Dr. Dubarry?” Alf heard himself addressed. “Dr. Gilbert?” The person was indeed elderly and a man. “If you don’t mind I’ll have something to eat with you. I did not want to be noticed too much. That was the reason for not waiting at the front desk.”

“Who are you?” Marge asked.

“A friend. I’ll tell you later. Let us slowly walk to the dining room.” The old gentleman was surprisingly agile for his age as he led the way. He picked a table next to the wall not far from the exit. “The meal is on me. Would you like to see the menu?”

“Yes we would. We were going to come down for dinner when you had the clerk call us.”

“Very good.”

The attentive waiter came over, three menus in his hand. “Would anybody care for a drink?” he asked.

“No, thank you, not for me,” Dubarry said and opened the menu.

“No, thank you. I don’t drink. It befuddles my mind.” Gilbert smiled at the waiter.

“How about you, Sir?” the waiter asked and looked expectantly at the older gentlemen.

“Sure, why not? How about some red wine?”

“Thank you, Sir. Red wine it is. Anything special?”

“No, not really. Whatever you recommend.”

The waiter bowed and left. Dubarry glanced at their host. He did look somehow familiar but Dubarry could not place him. Gilbert studied him as well. A minute later the waiter brought the wine and then they ordered their meals.

“I can see that you are curious,” the old gentleman began after he had taken a sip from his glass. “This is good. You should try it. My name is Strange, Bill Strange.”

“Admiral Bill Strange?” Dubarry asked. Suddenly both he and Gilbert were sure of the identity of their host.

“Just Bill Strange. I am a private citizen.”

“But at one time you were not!”

“That was a long time ago, Alf. May I call you Alf?”

“Yes, certainly, Admiral.”

“For the time we are here please call me Dad or Father. Or Pops, if you prefer. It is important.”

“Sure, Pops, if you say so.” One of the hotel staff had drifted over. Now he moved away again.

“I take it that both of you have not been successful in securing a position so far.”

“No, not yet. It is very difficult.”

“Don’t I know it, Marge. May I call you Marge? There just are no positions available for people born in thirty-four.”

“Yes, you may call me Marge. You are Admiral Strange, aren’t you?”

“Was, Marge. Was. Listen carefully now. There is not much - ah, there is the meal.”

“Would you like another glass of wine, Pops?”

“No, Alf. One will do me.”

The waiter was putting the plates in front of them. They were silent until he was finished.

“Why all this cloak and dagger business, Pops?” Dubarry asked.

“There is an ordinance coming down from headquarters which will prevent any further movement of vessels away from Earth, navy vessels, that is. I have my sources. Admiral Lars Griebler wants that ship on which you came back check out another planet. We have given it the code name of Adar. It looks good but we can’t tell how good. Maybe it will turn out to be just another Procyon Four. But there is also a fair chance that it may not. It’s about ten light years away towards the edge of the galaxy. Will you go?”

“When - how much time do we have, Pops?”

The waiter had drifted over again. “Coffee for anyone?” he asked.

“I’ll have some,” Dubarry said. “How about you, Marge? And Pops, will you have a cup as well?”

“Half a cup for me,” Gilbert said and smiled.

“No, thank you. Not for me. It prevents me from sleeping.” Bill Strange held his hand over his cup.

The waiter served them and then withdrew.

“They are mighty suspicious,” Strange said. “We shall have to be very careful.”

There were some other guests coming in now.

“You will have to be on your way by midnight,” Strange continued his story. “The orders are going to be issued first thing tomorrow morning. By then you will have to be out of the near-Earth region. The navy has a shuttle standing by for both of you.”

“That is rather sudden.”

“Yes, Marge. Unfortunately it is. Of course you have the option to refuse. However, I would not advise it. You have seen how hard it is to find employment when you are fifty-two years old.”

“But I am only twenty-nine!”

“We are on Earth here, Marge. You were born in thirty-four and we have now eighty-six. You are fifty-two years old, Marge.”

“Let me call my sister Mimi,” Dubarry said. “Tell her and her family that an unforeseen development prevents us from....”

“No, Alf. I cannot permit that.”

The waiter had drifted over again.

“Could we have the check, please?” Strange said to him, and turning back to Dubarry, he continued: “If you don’t mind we could meander through the grounds. It helps my digestion. I always go for a walk after a meal.”

“At once, Sir,” the waiter was eager to assure Strange. Apparently this oldster was harmless. Maybe he was a relative. Those two young people had called him pops. Evidently management was mistaken. He certainly was not navy trying to spirit away his two guests.

“I am all for it, Pops,” Dubarry said, getting up and stretching himself. “A walk would wake me up. As a matter of fact Marge and I were going to go down to the river before you arrived. Do you care to go there?”

“It’s too far for me, Alf, my son. I am getting on in years. The grounds will be fine. Ah, there is our bill.” Strange took out his wallet and removed a couple of bills. “Keep the change,” he said to the waiter. “Come on, Alf, Marge. It’s good to see you after such a long absence.” He led the way to the exit.

They are completely harmless, the head waiter thought. They were family. There was no doubt about it. He had managed to slip up to them quite unnoticed. The younger man had called the older one pops, and the older one had referred to the younger one as my son. He was certainly not navy. Management was becoming paranoid. Still, it paid to be alert. The three of them were now standing near the exit, evidently discussing something. The head waiter drifted over again.

“I really think that you’ll like it, Alf. And with Marge’s sense of humor, she’ll find it hilarious.”

“I don’t fancy revues, Pops.”

“Don’t be so stubborn, Alf,” Gilbert said and poked him in the side.

“I am sure you won’t regret it. If we hurry we’ll still be in time to get a balcony seat. How about it, Alf?”

“I am not thrilled with live theater, Pops. What about our walk?”

“We’ll walk through the grounds and catch a taxi. It’s faster than public transport. Don’t worry about the cost, Alf. It’s on me. This reunion after all these years”

The head waiter hovered near the exit for a little longer but the trio was out of earshot. It was nothing more than a harmless family reunion. He’ll report it as soon as the evening routine was taken care of.

Once outside Strange led Dubarry and Gilbert through the grounds at a brisk pace. At the far corner there was a narrow opening in the perimeter hedge. Bill Strange forced his way through it. Even Gilbert found it a tight squeeze.

“Is anybody following us, Alf?” Strange asked.

“No. I can’t see a soul,” Dubarry replied and also slipped through the opening.

“Good. Ah, there is our taxi.” Strange went to the curb and waved. Obediently the vehicle came to a halt in front of them.

The ride to the navy base was uneventful. On the way there Bill Strange briefed them on the precarious political situation.

“There are a number of changes going on behind the scenes,” he said. “Have you heard of General Omar Dixon?”