

Version 1.0 dtd 040400

THE PALACE AT MIDNIGHT

By Robert Silverberg

The foreign minister of the Empire of San Francisco was trying to sleep late. Last night had been a long one, a wild if not particularly gratifying party at the Baths, too much to drink, too much to smoke, and he had seen the dawn come up like thunder out of Oakland 'crost the Bay. Now the telephone was ringing. He integrated the first couple of rings nicely into his dream, but the next one began to undermine his slumber, and the one after that woke him up. He groped for the receiver and, eyes still closed, managed to croak, "Christensen here."

"Tom, are you awake? You don't sound awake. It's Morty, Tom. Wake up."

The undersecretary for external affairs. Christensen sat up, rubbed his eyes, ran his tongue around his lips. Daylight was streaming into the room. His cats were glaring at him from the doorway. The little Siamese pawed daintily at her empty bowl and looked up expectantly. The fat Persian just sat.

"Tom?"

"I'm up! I'm up! What is it, Morty?"

"I didn't mean to wake you. How was I supposed to know, one in the afternoon--"

"What is it, Morty?"

"We got a call from Monterey. There's an ambassador on the way up, and you've got to meet with her."

The foreign minister worked hard -at clearing the fog from his brain. He was thirty-nine years old, and all night parties took more out of him than they once had.

"You do it, Morty."

"You know I would, Tom. But I can't. You've got to handle this one yourself. It's prime."

"Prime? What kind of prime? You mean, like a great dope deal? Or are they declaring war on us?"

"How would I know the details? The call came in, and they said it was prime. Ms. Sawyer must confer with Mr. Christensen. It wouldn't involve dope, Tom. And it can't be war, either. Shit, why would Monterey want to make war on us? They've only got ten soldiers, I bet, unless they're drafting the Chicanos out of the Salinas calabozo, and besides--"

"All right." Christensen's head was buzzing. "Go easy on the chatter. Okay? Where am I supposed to meet her?"

. "In Berkeley."

"You're kidding."

"She won't come into the city. She thinks it's too dangerous over here."

"What do we do, kill ambassadors and

barbecue them? She'll be safe here, and she knows it."

"Look. I talked to her. She thinks the city is 'too crazy. She'll come as far as Berkeley, but that's it."

"Tell her to go to hell."

"Tom, Tom--"

Christensen sighed. "Where in Berkeley will she be?"

"The Claremont, at half past four."

"Jesus," Christensen said. "How did you get me into this? All the way across to the East Bay to meet a lousy ambassador from Monterey! Let her come to San Francisco. This is the Empire, isn't it? They're only a stinking republic. Am I supposed to swim over to Oakland every time an envoy shows up and wiggles a finger? Some bozo from Fresno says boo, and I have to haul my ass out to the Valley, eh? Where does it stop? What kind of clout do I have, anyway?"

"Tom-"

"I'm sorry, Morty. I don't feel like a goddamned diplomat this morning."

"It isn't morning anymore, Tom. But I'd do it for you if I could."

"All right. All right. I didn't mean to yell at you. You make the ferry arrangements."

"Ferry leaves at three-thirty. Chauffeur will pick you up at your place at three, okay?"

"Okay," Christensen said. "See if you can find out any more about all this, and have somebody call me back in an hour with a briefing, will you?"

He fed the cats, showered, shaved, took a couple of pills, and brewed some coffee. At half past two the ministry called. Nobody had any idea what the ambassador might want. Relations between San Francisco and the Republic of Monterey were cordial just now. Ms. Sawyer lived in Pacific Grove and was a member of the Monterey Senate; that was all that was known about her. Some briefing, Christensen thought.

He went downstairs to wait for his chauffeur. It was a late autumn day, bright and clear and cool. The rains hadn't begun yet, and the streets looked dusty. The foreign minister lived on Frederick Street, just off Cole, in an old white Victorian with a small front porch. He settled in on the steps, feeling wide awake but surly, and a few minutes before three his car came putt putting up, a venerable gray Chevrolet with the arms of imperial San Francisco on its doors. The driver was Vietnamese, or maybe Thai. Christensen got in without a word, and off they went at an imperial velocity through the virtually empty streets, down to Haight, eastward for a while, then onto Oak, up Van Ness, past the palace, where at this moment the Emperor Norton VII was probably taking his imperial nap, and along Post and then Market to the ferry slip.

The stump of the Bay Bridge glittered magically against the sharp blue sky. A small power cruiser was waiting for him. Christensen was silent during the slow, dull voyage. A chill wind cut through the Golden Gate and made

him huddle into himself. He stared broodingly at the low, rounded East Bay hills, dry and brown from a long summer of drought, and thought about the permutations of fate that had transformed an adequate architect into the barely competent foreign minister of this barely competent little nation. The Empire of San Francisco, one of the early emperors had said, is the only country in history that was decadent from the day it was founded.

At the Berkeley marina Christensen told the ferry skipper, "I don't know what time I'll be coming back. So no sense waiting. I'll phone in when I'm ready to go."

Another imperial car took him up the hillside to the sprawling nineteenth-century splendor of the Claremont Hotel, that vast, antiquated survivor of all the cataclysms. It was seedy now, the grounds a jungle, ivy almost to the tops of the palm trees, and yet it still looked fit to be a palace, with hundreds of rooms and magnificent banquet halls. Christensen wondered how often it had guests. There wasn't much tourism these days.

In the parking plaza outside the entrance was a single car, a black-and-white California Highway Patrol job that had been decorated with the insignia of the Republic of Monterey, a contorted cypress tree and a sea otter. A uniformed driver lounged against it, looking bored. "I'm Christensen," he told the man.

"You the foreign minister?"

"I'm not the Emperor Norton."

"Come on. She's waiting in the bar."

Ms. Sawyer stood up as he entered—a slender, dark-haired woman of about thirty, with cool, green eyes—and he flashed her a quick, professionally cordial smile, which she returned just as professionally. He did not feel at all cordial.

"Senator Sawyer," he said. "I'm Tom Christensen. "

"Glad to know you." She pivoted and gestured toward the huge picture window that ran the length of the bar. "I just got here. I've been admiring the view. It's been years since I've been in the Bay Area."

He nodded. From the cocktail lounge one could see the slopes of Berkeley, the bay, the ruined bridges, the still imposing San Francisco skyline. Very nice. They took seats by the window, and he beckoned to a waiter, who brought them drinks.

"How -was your drive- up?" Christensen asked.

"No problems. We got stopped for speeding in San Jose, but I got out of it. They could see it was an official car, but they stopped us anyway. "

"The lousy bastards. They love to look important.

` Things haven't been good between Monterey and San Jose all year. They're spoiling for trouble."

"I hadn't heard," Christensen said.

"We think they want to annex Santa Cruz. Naturally we can't put up with that. Santa Cruz is our buffer."

He asked sharply. "Is that what you came here for, to ask our help against San Jose?"

She stared at him in surprise. "Are you in a hurry, Mr. Christensen?"

"Not particularly."

"You sound awfully impatient. We're still making preliminary conversation, having a drink, two diplomats playing the diplomatic z game. Isn't that so?"

"Well?"

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"I was telling you what happened to me on the way north. In response to your question. Then I was filling you in on current political developments. I didn't expect you to snap at me .I like that."

"Did I snap?"

"It certainly sounded like snapping to me," she said, with some annoyance.

Christensen took a deep pull of his bourbon and-water and gave her a long, steady look. She ` met his gaze imperturbably. She looked composed, amused, and very, very tough. After a time, when some of the red haze of irrational anger and fatigue had cleared from his mind, he said quietly, "I had about four hours' sleep last night, and I wasn't expecting an envoy from Monterey today. I'm tired and edgy, and if I .` sounded impatient or harsh or snappish, I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I understand."

"Another bourbon or two and I'll be D properly unwound." He held his empty glass toward the hovering waiter. "A refill for you, too?" he asked her.

"Yes. Please." In a formal tone she said, "Is the Emperor in good health?"

"Not bad. He hasn't really been well for a couple of years, but he's holding his own. And President Morgan?"

"Fine," she said. "Hunting wild boar in Big Sur this week."

"A nice life it must be, President of Monterey. I've always liked Monterey. So much quieter and cleaner and more sensible down there than in San Francisco."

"Too quiet sometimes. I envy you the excitement here."

"Yes, of course. The rapes, the muggings, the arson, the mass meetings, the race wars, the--"

"Please," she said gently.

He realized he had begun to rant. There was a throbbing behind his eyes. He worked to gain control of himself.

"Did my voice get too loud?"

"You must be terribly tired. Look, we can confer in the morning, if you'd prefer. It isn't that urgent. Suppose we have dinner and not talk politics at all, and get rooms here, and tomorrow after breakfast we can--"

"No," Christensen said. "My nerves are a little ragged, that's all. But I'll try to be more civil. And I'd rather not wait until tomorrow to find out what this is all about. Suppose you give me a précis of it now, and if it sounds too complicated, I'll sleep on it and we can discuss it in detail tomorrow. Yes?"

"All right." She put her drink down and sat

quite still, as if arranging her thoughts. At length she said, "The Republic of Monterey maintains close ties with the Free State of Mendocino. I understand that Mendocino and the Empire broke off relations a little while back."

"A fishing dispute, nothing major."

"But you have no direct contact with them right now. Therefore this should come as news to you. The Mendocino people have learned, and have communicated to our representative there, that an invasion of San Francisco is imminent."

Christensen blinked twice. "By whom?"

"The Realm of Wicca," she said.

"Flying down from Oregon on their broomsticks?"

"Please. I'm being serious."

"Unless things have changed up there," Christensen said, "the Realm of Wicca is nonviolent, like all the neopagan states. As I understand it, they tend their farms and practice their little pagan rituals and do a lot of dancing around the Maypole and chanting and screwing. You expect me to believe that a bunch of gentle, goofy witches are going to make war on the Empire?"

She said, "Not war. An invasion."

"Explain. "

"One of their high priests has proclaimed San Francisco a holy place and has instructed them to come down here and build a Stonehenge in Golden Gate Park in time for proper celebration of the winter solstice.. There are at least a quarter of a million neopagans in the Willamette Valley, and more than half of them are expected to take part. According to our Mendocino man, the migration has already begun and thousands of Wiccans are spread out between Mount Shasta and Ukiah right now. The solstice is only seven weeks away. The Wiccans may be gentle, but you're going to have a hundred fifty thousand of them in San Francisco by the end of the month, pitching tents all over town."

"Holy Jesus," Christensen muttered.

"Can you feed that many strangers? Can you find room for them? Will San Franciscans meet them with open arms? Do you think it'll be a love festival?"

"It'll be a fucking massacre," Christensen said tonelessly.

"Yes. The witches may be nonviolent, but they know how to practice self-defense. Once they're attacked, there'll be rivers of blood, and it won't all be Wiccan blood."

Christensen's head was pounding again. She was absolutely right: chaos, strife, bloodshed. And a merry Christmas to all. He rubbed his aching forehead, turned away from her, and stared out at the deepening twilight and the sparkling lights of the city on the other side of the bay. A bleak, bitter depression was taking hold of his spirit. He signaled for another round of drinks. Then he said slowly, "They can't be allowed to enter the city. We'll need to close the imperial frontier and turn them back before they get as far as Santa Rosa. Let them build

their goddamned Stonehenge in Sacramento if they like." His eyes flickered. He started to assemble ideas. "The Empire might just have enough troops to contain the Wiccans by itself, but I think this is best handled as a regional problem. We'll call in forces from our allies as far out as Petaluma and Napa and Palo Alto. I don't imagine we can expect much help from the Free State or from San Jose. And of course Monterey isn't much of a military power, but still--"

"We are willing to help," Ms. Sawyer said.

"To what extent?"

"We aren't set up for much actual warfare, but we have access to our own alliances from Salinas down to Paso Robles, and we could call up, say, five thousand troops all told. Would that help?"

"That would help," Christensen said.

"It shouldn't be necessary for there to be any combat. With the imperial border sealed and troops posted along the line from Guerneville to Sacramento, the Wiccans won't force the issue. They'll revise their revelation and celebrate the

solstice somewhere else."

"Yes," he said. "I think you're right." He leaned toward her and asked, "Why is Monterey willing to help us?"

"We have problems of our own brewing--with San Jose. If we are seen making a conspicuous gesture of solidarity with the Empire, it might discourage San Jose from proceeding with its notion of annexing Santa Cruz. That amounts to an act of war against us.

Surely San Jose isn't interested in making any moves that will bring the Empire down on its back."

She wasn't subtle, but she was effective. Quid

pro quo, we help you keep the witches out, you help us keep San Jose in line, and all remains well without a shot being fired. These goddamned little nations, he thought, these absurd jerkwater sovereignties, with their wars and alliances and shifting confederations. It was like a game, like playground politics. Except that it was real. What had fallen apart was not going to be put back together, not for a long while, and this miniaturized Weltpolitik was the realest reality there was just now. At least things were saner in Northern California than they were down south, where Los Angeles was gobbling everything and there were rumors that Pasadena had the Bomb. Nobody had to contend with that up here.

Christensen said, "I'll have to propose all this to the Defense Ministry, of course. And get the Emperor's approval. But basically I'm in agreement with your thinking."

"I'm so pleased."

"And I'm very glad that you took the trouble to travel up from Monterey to make these matters clear to us."

"Merely a case of enlightened self-interest," Ms. Sawyer said.

"Mmm. Yes." He found himself studying the sharp planes of her cheekbones, the delicate arch of her eyebrows. Not only was she cool and competent, Christensen thought, but now

that the business part of their meeting was over, he was coming to notice that she was a very attractive woman and that he was not as tired as he had thought he was. Did international politics allow room for a little recreational hanky-panky? Metternich hadn't jumped into bed with Talleyrand, nor Kissinger with Indira Gandhi, but times had changed, after all, and no. No. He choked off that entire line of thought. In these shabby days they might all be children playing at being grown-ups, but nevertheless international politics still had its code, and this was a meeting of diplomats, not a blind date or a singles-bar pickup. You will sleep in your own bed tonight, he told himself, and you will sleep alone.

All the same he said, "It's past six o'clock. Shall we have dinner together before I go back to the city?"

"I'd love to."

"I don't know much about Berkeley restaurants. We're probably better off eating right here."

"I think that's best," she said.

They were the only ones in the hotel's enormous dining room. A staff of three waited on them as if they were the most important people who had ever dined there. And dinner turned out to be quite decent, he thought calamari and abalone and sand dabs and grilled thresher shark, washed down with a dazzling bottle of Napa Chardonnay. Even though the world had ended, it remained possible to eat very well in the Bay Area, and the breakdown of society had not only reduced maritime pollution but also made local seafood much more readily available for local consumption. There wasn't much of an export trade possible with eleven heavily guarded national boundaries and eleven sets of customs barriers between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Dinner conversation was light, relaxed diplomatic chitchat, gossip about events in remote territories, reports about the Voodoo principality, expanding out of New Orleans and the Sioux conquests in Wyoming and the Prohibition War now going on in what used to be Kentucky. There was a bison herd again on the Great Plains, she said, close to a million head. He told her what he had heard about the Suicide People, who ruled between San Diego and Tijuana, and about King Barnum & Bailey III, who governed in northern Florida with the aid of a court of circus freaks. She smiled and said, "How can they tell the freaks from the ordinary people? The whole world's a circus now, isn't it?"

He shook his head and replied. "No, a zoo," and he beckoned the waiter for more wine. He did not ask her about internal matters in Monterey, and she tactfully stayed away from the domestic problems of the Empire of San Francisco. He was feeling easy, buoyant, a little drunk, more than a little drunk; to have to answer questions now about the little rebellion that had been suppressed in Sausalito or the secessionist thing in Walnut Creek would be a bring down, and bad for the digestion.

About half past eight he said, "You aren't going back to Monterey tonight, are you?"

"God, no! It's a five-hour drive, assuming no more troubles with the San Jose Highway Patrol. And the road's so bad below Watsonville that only a lunatic would drive it at night. I'll stay here at the Claremont."

"Good. Let me put it on the imperial account."

"That isn't necessary. We--"

"The hotel is always glad to oblige the government and its guests."

Ms. Sawyer shrugged. "Very well. We'll reciprocate when you come to Monterey."

"Fine."

And then her manner suddenly changed. She shifted in her seat and fidgeted and played with her silverware, looking awkward and ill at ease. Some new and big topic was obviously about to be introduced, and Christensen guessed that she was going to ask him to spend the night with her. In a fraction of a second he ran through all the possible merits and de-merits of that, and came out on the plus side, and had his answer ready when she said, "Tom, can I ask a big favor?"

Which threw him completely off balance. Whatever was coming, it certainly wasn't what he was expecting.

"I'll do my best."

"I'd like an audience with the Emperor."

"What?"

"Not on official business. I know the Emperor talks business only with his ministers

and privy councilors. But I want to see him, that's all." Color came to her cheeks. "Doesn't it sound silly? But it's something I've always dreamed of, a kind of adolescent fantasy. To be in San Francisco, to be shown into the imperial throne room, to kiss his ring, all the pomp and circumstance. I want it, Tom. Just to be there, to see him. Do you think you could manage that?"

He was astounded. The facade of cool, tough competence had dropped away from her, revealing unanticipated absurdity. He did not know what to answer.

She said, "Monterey's such a poky little place. It's just a town. We call ourselves a republic, but we aren't much of anything. And I call myself a senator and a diplomat, but I've never really been anywhere. San Francisco two or three times when I was a girl, San Jose a few times. My mother was in Los Angeles once, but I haven't been anywhere. And to go home saying that I had seen the Emperor-" Her eyes sparkled. "You're really taken aback, aren't you? You thought I was all ice and microprocessors, and instead I'm only a hick, right? But you're being very nice. You aren't even laughing at me. Will you get me an audience with the Emperor for tomorrow?"

"I thought you were afraid to go into San Francisco."

She looked abashed. "That was just a ploy. To make you come over here, to get you to take me seriously and put yourself out a little. Diplomatic wiles. I'm sorry about that. The word was that you were snotty, that you had to be met with strength or you'd be impossible to deal with. But you aren't like that at all. Tom, I want to see the Emperor. He does give audiences, doesn't he?"

"In a manner of speaking. I suppose it could be done."

"Oh, would you? Tomorrow?"

"Why wait for tomorrow?"

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"Not at all," Christensen said. "This is San Francisco. The Emperor keeps weird hours just like the rest of us. I'll phone over there and see if we can be received." He hesitated. "I'm afraid it won't be what you're expecting."

"What do you mean? In what way?"

"The pomp, the circumstance. You're going to be disappointed. You may be better off not meeting him, actually. Stick to your fantasy of imperial majesty. Seriously, I'll get you an audience if you insist, but I don't think it's a great idea."

"Can you be more specific?"

"No."

"I still want to see him. Regardless."

He left the dining room and, with misgivings, began arranging things. The telephone system was working sluggishly that evening, and it took him fifteen minutes to set the whole thing up, -a but there were no serious obstacles. He returned K to her and said, "The ferry will pick us up at the marina in about an hour. There'll be a car waiting on the San Francisco side. The Emperor will be available for viewing around midnight. I tell you that you're not going to enjoy this. The Emperor is old, and he's been sick; he isn't a very interesting person to meet."

"All the same," she said. "The one thing I wanted, when I volunteered to be the envoy, was an imperial audience. Please don't discourage me."

"As you wish. Shall we have another drink?"

"How about these?" She produced an enameled cigarette case. "Humboldt County's finest. Gift of the Free State."

He smiled and nodded and took the joint from her. It was elegantly manufactured, fine cockleshell paper, gold monogram, igniter cap, even a filter. Everything else has come apart, he thought, but the technology of marijuana is at its highest point in history. He flicked the cap, took a deep drag, passed it to her. The effect was instantaneous, a new high cutting through the wooze of bourbon and wine and brandy already in his brain, clearing it, expanding his limp and sagging soul. When they were finished with it, they floated out of the hotel. His driver and hers were still waiting in the parking lot. Christensen dismissed his, and they took the Republic of Monterey car down the slopes of Berkeley to the marina. The boat from San Francisco was late. They stood around shivering at the ferry slip for twenty minutes, peering bleakly across at the glittering lights of the far off city. Neither of them was dressed for the nighttime chill, and he

was tempted to pull her close and hold her in his arms, but he did not. There was a boundary he was not yet willing to

cross. Hell, he thought, I don't even know her first name. '

It was nearly eleven by the time they reached San Francisco.

An official car was parked at the pier. The driver hopped out, saluting, bustling about-one of those preposterous little civil service types, doubtless keenly honored to be taxiing bigwigs around late at night. He wore the red-and-gold uniform of the imperial dragoons, a little frayed at one elbow. The car coughed and sputtered and reluctantly lurched into life, up Market Street to Van Ness and then north to the palace. Ms. Sawyer's eyes were wide, and she stared at the ancient high-rises along Van Ness as if they were cathedrals.

When they came to the Civic Center area, she gasped, obviously overwhelmed by the majesty of everything, the shattered hulk of the Symphony Hall, the Museum of Modern Art, the great dome of City Hall, and the Imperial Palace itself, awesome, imposing, a splendid, many-columned building that long ago had been the War Memorial Opera House. With the envoy from the Republic of Monterey at his elbow, Christensen marched up the steps of the palace and through the center doors into the lobby, where a great many of the ranking ministers and plenipotentiaries of the Empire were assembled. "How absolutely marvelous," Ms. Sawyer murmured. Smiling graciously, bowing, nodding, Christensen pointed out the notables, the defense minister, the minister of finance, the minister of suburban affairs, the chief justice, the minister of transportation.

Precisely at midnight there was a grand flourish of trumpets and the door to the throne room opened. Christensen offered Ms. Sawyer his arm; together they made the long journey down the center aisle and up the ramp to the stage, where the imperial throne, a resplendent thing of rhinestones and foil, glittered brilliantly under the spotlights. Ms. Sawyer was wonderstruck. She pointed toward the six gigantic portraits suspended high over the stage and whispered a question, and Christensen replied, "The first six emperors. And here comes the seventh one."

"Oh," she gasped. But was it awe, surprise, or disgust?

He was in his full regalia, the scarlet robe, the bright green tunic with ermine trim, the gold chains. But he was wobbly and tottering, a clumsy, staggering figure, gray-faced and feeble, supported on one side by Mike Schiff, the Imperial Chamberlain, and on the other by the Grand Sergeant-at-Arms, Terry Coleman. He was not so much leaning on them as being dragged by them. Bringing up the rear of the procession were two sleek, pretty boys, one black and one Chinese, carrying the orb, the scepter, and the massive crown. Ms. Sawyer's fingers tightened on Christensen's forearm, and he heard her catch her breath as the Emperor, in the process of being lowered into his throne, went boneless and nearly spilled to the floor. Somehow the Imperial Chamberlain and the Grand Sergeant-at Arms settled him properly in

place, balanced the crown on his head, and stuffed the orb and scepter into his trembling hands. "His Imperial Majesty, Norton the Seventh of San Francisco!" cried Mike Schiff in a magnificent voice that went booming up to the highest balcony. The Emperor giggled.

"Come on," Christensen whispered and led her forward.

The old man was really in terrible shape. It was weeks since Christensen had last seen him, and by now he looked like something dragged from the crypt, slack jawed, drooling, vacant eyed, utterly burned out. The envoy from Monterey seemed to draw back, tense and rigid, repelled, unable or unwilling to go closer, but Christensen persisted, urging her onward until she was no more than a dozen feet from the throne. A sickly-sweet, vaguely familiar odor emanated from the old man.

"What do I do?" she asked, panicking.

"When I introduce you, go forward, curtsy if you know how, touch the orb. Then step back. That's all."

She nodded.



Christensen said, "Your Majesty, the ambassador from the Republic of Monterey, Senator Sawyer, to pay her respects."

Trembling, she went to him, curtsied, touched the orb. As she backed away, she nearly fell, but Christensen came smoothly forward and steadied her. The Emperor giggled again, a shrill, horrific cackle. Slowly, carefully, Christensen guided the shaken Ms. Sawyer from the stage.

"How long has he been like that?"

"Two years, three, maybe more. Completely senile. Not even housebroken anymore. You could probably tell. I'm sorry. I told you you'd be better off skipping this. I'm enormously sorry. Ms.- Ms.--what's your first name, anyway?"

"Elaine."

"Let's get out of here, Elaine. Yes?"

"Yes. Please."

She was shivering. He waked her up the side aisle. A few of the courtiers were clambering up onto the stage now, one with a guitar, one with juggler's clubs. The imperial giggle pierced the air again and again, becoming rasping and wild. The imperial levee would go on half the night. Emperor Norton VII was one of San Francisco's most popular amusements.

"Now you know," Christensen said.

"How does the Empire function, if the Emperor is crazy?"

"We manage. We do our best without him. The Romans managed it with Caligula. Norton's not half as bad as Caligula. Not a tenth. Will you tell everyone in Monterey?"

"I think not. We believe in the power of the Empire and in the grandeur of the Emperor. Best not to disturb that faith."

"Quite right," said Christensen.

They emerged into the clear, cold night.

Christensen said, "I'll ride back to the ferry slip with you before I go home."

"Where do you live?"

"In the other direction. Out near Golden Gate Park. "

She looked up at him and moistened her lips. "I don't want to ride across the bay in the dark, alone, at this hour of the night. Is it all right if I go home with you?"

"Sure," he said.

She - managed a jaunty smile. "You're straight, aren't you?"

"Sure. Most of the time, anyway."

"I thought you were. Good."

They got into the car. "Frederick Street," he told the driver, "between Clayton and Cole."

The trip took twenty minutes. Neither of them spoke. He knew what she was thinking about: the senile Emperor, dribbling and babbling under the bright spotlights. The mighty Norton VII, ruler of everything from San Rafael to San Mateo, from Half Moon Bay to Walnut Creek. Such is pomp and circumstance in imperial San Francisco in these latter days of Western civilization. Christensen sent the driver away, and they went upstairs. The cats were hungry again.

"It's a lovely apartment," she told him.

"Three rooms, bath, hot and cold running water. Not bad for a mere foreign minister. Some of the boys have suites at the palace, but I like it better here." He opened the door to the deck and stepped outside. Somehow, now that he was home, the night was not so cold. He thought about the Realm of Wicca, far off up there in green, happy Oregon, sending a hundred fifty thousand kindly goddess-worshiping neopagans down here to celebrate the rebirth of the sun. A nuisance, a mess, a headache. Tomorrow he'd have to call a meeting of the Cabinet, when everybody had sobered up, and start the wheels turning, and probably he'd have to make trips to places like Petaluma and Palo Alto to get the alliance flanged together. Damn. But it was his job. Someone had to carry the load.

He slipped his arm around the slender woman from Monterey.

"The poor Emperor," she said softly.

"Yes," he agreed. "The poor Emperor. Poor everybody."

He looked toward the east. In a few hours the sun would be coming up over that hill, out of the place that used to be the United States of America and now was a thousand, thousand crazy, fractured, fragmented entities. Christensen shook his head. The Grand Duchy of Chicago, he

thought. The Holy Carolina Confederation. The Three Kingdoms of New York. The Empire of San Francisco. No use getting upset-much too late for getting upset. You played the hand that was dealt you, and you did your best, and you carved little islands of safety out of the night. Turning to her, he said, "I'm glad you came home with me tonight." He brushed his lips lightly against hers. "Come. Let's go inside."