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CHAPTER ONE

Finally they were going to let him have his first dream with Project Ephialtes. All the pleading he'd done, all the arguing with Max and the others, and the big front he'd put up had reached ridiculous proportions before he got his way.

He was sitting in the lounge having coffee with Kate, trying to pretend this day was no different from any other, but he wasn't fooling Kate at all.

"Getting to you, isn't it?" she said, half teasing, half serious. She put a hand over his, a very small, fine-boned hand. "You don't have to tell me."

He had to smile and shake his head. "I didn't think it would be like this."

"It's not major surgery. Look at it that way."

It had belatedly and abruptly occurred to Gary Carmody that he had absolutely no control over what he might dream. Would he be a coward? Would he dream some terribly sexual dream that would embarrass him when they played it back? Would his dream be a big bore? Some of the others had had dreams that almost put *him* to sleep.

Max Easton, who headed up the project, dreamed once that he was adrift on a raft in the middle of the Atlantic and Debussy's *La Mer* sloshed in the background. They all sat under the monitor helmets, of course, and took the trip with him. Sam Nevis, who was handling the console as well as witnessing, got seasick toward the end. It was a strange dream for Dr. Easton, whose gruffness made him seem older than he was. Gary had thought he'd have a more romantic dream or at least one involving people.

Casimir Javanovski, who ran the vital signs modules most of the time, dreamed of other worlds, strange universes where time ran backwards and intelligent life wore feathers instead of skin. That had been an exciting dream at first because it was so different, but when nothing happened after half an hour they all tired of it.

Dr. Kathleen Keegan, who had promised to be Mrs. Gary Carmody when the project was over, when the funding ran out, or when Gary could convince her life in the lab wasn't all there was (though they had already discovered that), had dreams about castles and knights on white chargers and wasn't at all embarrassed by them. "A girl has to find release somewhere," she explained after the last one, when she stepped off the ebony table and Max had turned off the holograph recorder. She grinned at Gary, ran a few steps to his arms and gave him a wet kiss. "Present company excepted."

Ralph Finsterwald mocked, "The lab's no place for that sort of thing. No wonder we're not making any progress."

Sam sighed. "Don't knock it, Ralph. At least somebody is making progress in something."

"We're not living together yet," Gary said. "I keep telling her two can live cheaper than one, but Kate's not buying it."

"Oh, I buy it, all right, but I'm just not ready yet. When they raise the rent where I am I'll consider it"

Gary rejoined, "What if they raise the rent where I am?"

"Then I'll move in with you," Sam said. "Unless you'd rather have Ralph."

"Okay," Max cut in, making some final adjustments on the console. "Let's do the evaluation and knock off the small talk."

"Any last requests?" Ralph asked after Gary had climbed up onto the ebony table. "We could send out for pizza."

"Just give me the T.O.T.," Gary said.

"Hey, Sam," Ralph called, filling the syringe with trinopterine, "Gary here's in no mood for humor. Can you figure that out?"

"Oh, you guys!" chirped Kate. "Leave him alone with his thoughts. It's his first time, for heaven's sake."

"It had better be for Project Ephialtes' sake," Max said, taking the lead

monitor and lowering the helmet. "Ready, Dr. Carmody?"

"Ready," said Gary. In that moment Ralph shot home the fluid and a haze appeared, Gary's limbs felt heavy, he closed his eyes and left the lab.

His B-17 was at 25,000 feet and starting its run for the bomb release line. The flak was light and inaccurate. The Me-109s and FW-190s the Luftwaffe had sent up to stop him remained at a respectful distance. And well they might! He, General Gary Carmody, USAF, Chief of Air Operations, ETO, terror of the Nazis, was personally assuming command of this Bomber Group to show them all how it should be done. He was in no mood for failure.

A few minutes later his bombardier informed him that, though he had released the switch, the bombs would not drop. Just then the German fighters turned and zoomed in for the attack. A 20 mm cannon shell suddenly burst inside the cockpit and Gary felt the pulsing of blood from his shoulder. The plane went into a dive because the co-pilot, who had been instantly killed by the shell burst, was pressed against the control column.

Gary Carmody was no longer feeling good. Instead, he was filled with righteous anger. Now he would show the enemy what he was made of in spite of the fact that the instruments, the panels and the plexiglass windows were covered with blood. Someone told him through the headphones that an engine was aflame. He did the only thing a pilot could do in such a situation. He ordered his crew to bail out. But the bombardier now told him they were all wounded and couldn't jump. Gary gritted his teeth. There was only one thing left to do: make a run for England. Quickly he punched the extinguisher button and the flaming engine stopped burning. The gunners, he was happy to see, were now making hash of the buzzing enemy fighters.

In no time at all Gary spied the Allied fighter base at Ludham and informed his men he was going to pilot the *Scorpion II* in, even though they were out of gas and another engine was on fire. As he came in low, the crowd assembled on the runway sent up a cheer as Gary fought stubbornly for control- and finally brought the Flying Fortress settling in for a wheels-up landing. Sparks flashed from the belly as the heavy bomber scraped the concrete of the runway and careened into the grass.

Though the propellers were neatly bent back, the plane at last skidded to a shuddering stop. The waiting crowd ran for the plane.

Gary was surprised when a young woman with the delicate features came right into the cockpit and kissed him full on the mouth. She wore only a thin-printed sky-blue silk tunic and hemp sandals with black lace ties, and her long blonde hair glinted in the sun while the fires were being extinguished. Ambulances were rushing the other wounded to the hospital.

When they carried him out, the girl kept to his side and told them all, "Careful with this man now; he's something special. He's just won the war."

They all looked at Gary with respect bordering on awe. The girl smiled. Her teeth were white and evenly spaced. Her eyes were blue, and they regarded Gary with such warmth that he forgot the blood running down his arm and onto the cement.

He saw the girl wince and then draw back, her eyes narrowing. It seemed a signal of some sort, for suddenly running toward them from the control tower was a tall, swarthy man dressed in a black hooded robe and carrying a gleaming, curved, gem-studded sword.

Suddenly the men carrying him on the stretcher turned and dumped him into a swimming pool. Gary came up sputtering and out of breath, piqued at this action. The girl stood at the poolside, glaring at him. The man in the hooded robe stood behind her. It was impossible to see his face.

Gary started to climb out of the pool.

"All right," Max Easton said with urgency, "bring him back."

Ralph disengaged the molecular probes while Kate, Casimir and Sam lifted off their visual monitor helmets to assist in the consciousness-restoring operation.

One moment Gary's heavy bomber pilot uniform was dripping wet as, under the full, hot glare of the summer sun, he clambered out of a pool

somewhere in England. The next thing he knew he was leaving the dream and felt reality returning as the probes left his head. It was a shock, coming back to the real world and finding he could move his limbs again.

He opened his eyes to see the bright fluorescence of the laboratory ceiling. He was no longer drenched in water but in the sweat the dream had caused. The intoxication of the trinopterine solution began to dissipate, things came into focus, and he looked up into the eyes of Kathleen Keegan. "You all right?" she asked.

There was just the right amount of concern in Kate's voice and Gary liked that. He reached out, put a hand over hers. "I'm okay," he said, though the dream was still very much with him, more so than an ordinary dream would have been.

Max's face appeared behind Kate's. Dr. Easton's eyes were bright. "We almost had something."

"Really?" This was good news. This was what they were working for. "When?"

"When you were being carried across the airfield."

"So that's it!" Gary said. "What's that?"

"It was the girl. She—wincing, I guess you'd say." He sat up on the ebony table. "Then she became angry."

"Angry?" Max frowned. "I thought it was surprise more than anything else." He thought about it for a moment, then said, "Whatever it was, she was aware of something going on, not much question about that. That's the first time that's happened."

"Congratulations," Ralph said as he, Sam and Casimir removed the rest of the equipment.

Gary sighed with weariness as he got off the table. They had been trying for months to shunt one of the dream creatures into the colloid entrapment unit without result; they'd all had their innings, and he, Gary Carmody, had been the dreamer when first contact had been made.

First contact! He had to laugh at himself. How worried he'd been about

his dream and how it might turn out. He hadn't thought he'd be the one whose dream would be in any way unusual. In his dream someone had winced and then become angry in a strange, un-dreamlike way. The whole thing, the whole dream, was still real to him and he felt submerged in it.

It was Dr. Max Easton's theory that one of the dream figures could be captured. When Gary'd first heard about Easton and the theory, he'd thought it was preposterous, but the more he talked with Easton and the others, the more he became convinced Easton's theory was not only a good one but that capturing a dream being was possible. He remembered how ridiculous theories about the telephone, radio and television had once seemed to people before they were realized; now they were an integral part of everyday life. So it would be with Easton's theory. There was something to dreams besides just the dreaming of them. He was sure of it.

With Kate's arm around him to steady him Gary stood up. He hadn't realized how much a lab dream would take out of him, and he couldn't seem to forget the look on the girl's face in the dream; she'd blanched for no apparent reason. Why had she reacted so to what the team was trying to do? And why had the hooded creature come running the way he had?

"Still with it, huh?" Kate said.

"Yeah. Still can't figure it out. It was so *real*...."

"I know, and some day we're going to get one of those creatures transferred to the lab where we can take a good, long look at him. Or her." She grew solemn. "They've done enough to us in our dreams. Now it's going to be our turn to find out how and why."

Max came over to them. "How do you feel?" They all moved to the after-bench where Gary began to wash off the paste that had held some of the monitoring devices to his body.

"Pretty good," Gary said.

Max smiled. "We all feel strange the first time, but you have reason to feel even stranger. Yours was a special experience because of the girl's reaction." He put a hand on Gary's shoulder. "Getting one of them into the entrapment tank here is going to happen sooner than any of us dared hope, thanks to you."

CHAPTER TWO

They left the dream lab for the lounge, where Gary really began his recovery over a steaming cup of coffee. Kate shook her head, the devil in her eyes. "All I have to say is, when you have a dream, it's a dandy."

"More like a nightmare."

"What about that girl? She someone from your past?"

"No." Thoughts of the girl flooded over him again. Since the whole Ephialtology Section had sat in on the dream, there was no holding back secrets. "I was as surprised as anybody."

"You didn't do anything when she kissed you," Kate teased. "That's not like the Gary Carmody I know."

"I was wounded, remember?"

"War. Why do you men dream of violence all the time?"

"I'll tell you that when you tell me why you women dream of romance."

"I mean it seriously, Gary. You weren't even born yet when World War II was going on. How would you know anything about it?"

"Military history was one of my minors in college, and I just finished reading a book about the battle of Britain."

"It made quite an impression," Kate said, pouring herself more coffee. "I just don't see where the girl fits in."

"Neither do I," he conceded, sipping the almost scalding coffee. He was coming to earth now and feeling quite himself.

"I'll never forget my first dream," Kate said. "I dreamed I was Fay Wray and King Kong was carrying me to the top of the Empire State Building. When I came out of it I was embarrassed because of what I thought everybody was reading into it. Later on I realized I had dreamed it because I had seen the movie on the late show on TV the night before."

Kathleen Keegan was a doctor in her own right and she'd been at the Meta Complex in the Ephial-tology Department three months longer than

Gary, so she knew much of what had gone on in the planning and building of the dream machine. She was young, red-haired, and full of surprises. She seldom took anything seriously, except her work and Gary.

"Evaluation in five minutes," Max announced over the speaker system.

Kate sighed. "I hate evaluations." She got up. "It's like sitting through a rerun." Then she turned. "You shouldn't mind it, though. You'll get to be kissed by that girl again." She walked away from his answer.

Gary grimaced, got up and followed her into the lab. Why Kate should be jealous of a girl who lived only for a few moments in his dreams was beyond him. But he never pretended to understand women.

"This is a helical scan for a change," Sam Nevis said as they all began to position themselves in chairs beneath the transparent helmet monitors. The see-through arrangement made it possible for an auditor to cut off the dream and see what was going on in the lab itself simply by opening his eyes. Life-sign variations could then be monitored at the same time as the dream was being observed.

"There was dropout," Max Easton said as he slid into his seat. "Did you do anything about that?"

Sam nodded. "We compensated. There was also a little high chroma you might not have caught because the eye compensated. We fixed that, too."

"All right," Easton said, looking around at the others while Sam seated himself beneath his own unit in front of the control console. "You can begin any time."

For Gary the dream was different now that he was merely an observer. It was really very much like a movie in which the viewer was the camera. What had been recorded was what Gary had seen and experienced and it was this dream that was now being projected for them all to see for the second time. This time the dream could be stopped whenever the observers wished.

There he was in the B-17, a gossamer image, as if it were being seen

through a silk screen, which is the way it was with most of the dreams. The German fighter planes and the accompanying sounds were there and the wind rushed by as Gary had experienced it. The projected dream was accompanied by every emotion Gary had felt. At the moment, it was one of near megalomania. He was the head of everything airborne in that war theater on the Allied side. He wondered why he'd cast himself in that role.

Then came the crises, one after another: the bombs not falling, the cannon shell from one of the fighters crashing through and exploding in the cockpit, wounding him. It was all very real, even more real, the second time. Gary opened his eyes to look over at Easton, but Easton had his eyes closed and was concentrating on the dream.

Gary experienced the anger he felt in the dream, and the feeling of exultation he had had at bringing the plane in at Ludham to the plaudits of the crowd.

The girl appeared. She was more beautiful than he remembered her. He saw that she was no one he'd ever seen before.

"Normal ECG."

Gary opened his eyes to see that Easton's eyes were on the electrocardiograph monitor, which was now duplicating what had been recorded during the dream. What had Max expected?

Sam Nevis punched for stop to give them all a good look at the girl. She did not seem American, at least not in the tunic and the way she wore her hair.

"Dr. Carmody?"

Gary looked to Easton. "Yes, sir?"

"Did you ever study Grecian or Roman history or read any novels about Grecian or Roman times?"

"No."

"This girl could pass for a hetaera."

No wonder the girl put off Kate! A hetaera, indeed, a member of the

highly cultivated courtesan class in ancient Greece! Gary found himself blushing.

"Proceed," Max Easton said.

Sam got the tape dream record rolling again. The girl kissed Gary and the medics began carrying him out.

"Slow, now," Max ordered.

They watched the dream. The girl winced.

"Hold it!"

They all saw the red flashing light, which signified that at that precise moment Easton had pushed for transfer.

"She felt it," Easton said, exultant. "It's just as I thought." He frowned at the controls. "If she felt it, it must be coming through. Sam, suppose we increase the frequency and the power? That might jolt one of them through."

"How much of an increase?"

"Double the frequency and boost the power a hundredfold."

"A hundred times?" Sam looked to Easton to see if he'd heard correctly.

Easton said blandly, "We want to bring one of them into the lab, don't we?"

"Very well," Sam agreed.

"That will be all for today," Max said, slipping out from under his helmet monitor. He turned to Finsterwald. "You're slated for the next session."

"I am?" Ralph Finsterwald seemed surprised. Then he grinned, looked over to Gary and said, "Well, I'm ready. Especially if I can meet the gal that Gary did."

"If you do," Easton said, "maybe this time we'll trap her."

ALEPPO

My name is Aleppo. Beings who are older than I named me that because in my flesh and blood life I lived in Aleppo when it was the Greek and biblical Beroea, a main caravan route across Syria to Baghdad.

In dreams I am a murderer, as I was in life, waylaying travelers along the drifting sands, caravan to caravan, slashing and slaying with my jeweled scimitar, but never killing without reason.

I am one of the Beings in the Consciousness Pool who has become a Volunteer, as have Adrea and Ronsard. You see, there are some among Us who feel that humans, should they reach the point where they can communicate with Us without danger to themselves or to Us, should be allowed to do so. Beings here who believe this are new. They do not know how things are. That is why some of Us have volunteered to stop the humans who call themselves scientists. They are dangerous.

It is peaceful here in the Consciousness Pool and We mean to keep it that way. It is good not to have the bother of flesh and blood bodies and all the ills that go along with them.

We are only entities when We invade dreams. We do that when We wish (and We must invade dreams now and then in order to continue being part of the Consciousness Pool). We live at peace with humans, orchestrating their dreams with what seems to them to be living beings. We do not want them to know what and who We are because men cannot live at peace among themselves in what passes as life for them. We do not want them to create the chaos here that they create where they live.

Because I once led a violent life and still do so in dreams, I have become head of the Volunteers. The Volunteers among us have moved into trouble areas from time to time, such as those with diviners or psychics who would conjure one of Us up in seances for their own delight or the amusement of others. We have pulled mediums through to this side to become Beings here leaving their mortal remains behind— and at last they have understood how it is with Us! We have done the same for spiritualists, spectrals, clairvoyants, and those who do have special powers and seem to be able to catch glimpses of those of Us in the Pool.

I will not deny it: some among Us seek a reality more vivid than

dreams, more like the lives they once had. These malcontents defy Pool tradition and dominion and return to human life by invading a newborn in order to be its life essence. When they do this they erase their Pool Being. When the host they have entered dies, they return to Us again, without memory of their former Pool consciousness. I would not want to change what I was, what I am, what I will be for eternity.

I will kill first.

The thought of returning to a host body is repugnant to me. I have lived one life, and that is enough. I would not now want to be inhabited by another Being the way humans are sometimes if We so desire or their dream requires it. I think it against all Pool ethics to deny life to an embryo essence by taking possession of a host body-to-be. I have seen too many Beings return defeated or damaged. I have also seen hosts diminished and unfulfilled all their lives without knowing the reason.

It is better to be what each Being is meant to be: a dream person. Sometimes, if We fancy, We share with the host what We feel—hate, fear, lust, shame, cruelty. Sometimes We are him whom We enter as he sleeps. Sometimes We are his enemy because he needs to fight or overcome or be overcome. Sometimes We let him have his way. Sometimes We do not.

Sometimes We kill him.

Adrea nearly killed the young man who dreamed he was a high-ranking general during World War II. Word spread quickly in the Consciousness Pool and I, Aleppo, was summoned. Adrea felt the grasping and grappling and she was surprised because she had never felt such power before.

We both stared down at the young man in the swimming pool. If he had not been taken from us by the humans who have discovered how to operate such dreams, we would have killed him.

We must be alert. The next one to invade our area, the next one sent to pry, to seek our secrets, must die.

I will gladly kill whoever he or she is. As a Volunteer, I took that pledge. I have required all under me to take the same pledge.

I am not sure Adrea will kill, though I know Ronsard will because he has done so before, though not for this reason. Adrea was one of the most beautiful girls of one of the noble families of Thebes when she was chosen to be consecrated in the temple of Ammon. She gained honor and profit by the life of a courtesan but she lost her life at a young age when Constantine demolished the temples before she could find a grand marriage.

Adrea does not lie, though it does seem strange she has not felt the pull of the human essence in all her years of inhabiting dreams. Perhaps it is because she is such an object of love to Ronsard, even though such love cannot be consummated here. She has promised to work with Ronsard and with me and to be ever alert to unnatural attachments or powers that may begin to cling to her or draw her into the human arena. She has asked me why the humans are so intent on pulling Us to them. I have told her only a small number, a very few, try such things, though they do increase from year to year now that there are more humans.

What Adrea experienced in the young man's dream and what I saw of it makes it a grappling hook different from any I have experienced. It is as if there is a plan, as if the humans have organized in some way, as if they have built up an enormous power with which they will try to compete with Our power. It is a good thing there are Volunteers here to stop it, for stop it We will.

Even if We have to kill, though there are some Beings here who say there must be other ways. I say the Consciousness Pool must not be violated and We Volunteers will kill if We have to.

Sometimes, particularly after a rousing dream experience, I wish for Syria and the Hittite kingdom that was there before 1000 B. C. and before I died in my prime when Abdel slew me. For many years as a Being I remained drifting about the Byzantine Empire entering dreams, watching it being taken by Arabs in the Seventh Century and sharing many a

troubled dream with them, and with the Turks who invaded in the Eleventh Century. The Crusaders besieged it in 1124 and Saladin seized it before the Mongols.

Now that humans are all over the world the Pool of Consciousness has expanded and We who used to ply our dreams in one area have moved to

cover the world and even to outer space now that humans have sent some of their numbers aloft to circle the earth and to land on the moon. Wherever humans are, they must sleep, and when they do We enter their dreams. Fragile creatures, humans! Sometimes if a dream is too exciting, they do not survive it.

They have their dreams, these humans. What do they seek by invading Our world?

We know of their world because We all came from it, every last Being.

It is best they do not know of Ours.

We Volunteers have Our instructions.

CHAPTER THREE

They were gathered in the briefing room waiting for Dr. Easton and their assignments. All were drinking coffee except Dr. Finsterwald whose turn on the table it would be that morning. Ralph loved his coffee and regarded them enviously as they enjoyed theirs. Max Easton was in his office filing what he called the day's flight plan with Meta Foundation in Washington, as well as with Meta-Los Angeles, which was where they were.

"Coffee?" Casimir teased Ralph, holding out a hot cup and assuming a pouring position with the glass carafe.

"Very funny," Ralph rejoined, ignoring his eyes and tapping his fingers on the tabletop where he was sitting.

"I think he's nervous," Sam said.

"Why should he be nervous?" Kate asked. "He dreams shoot-'em-ups and he does all the shooting."

Ralph shrugged. "I admit I haven't dreamed anything as nice as Gary did yesterday, that girl and all, but there's always a first time."

"Eat your heart out," Gary said.

"In your case it would be a relief," Kate added. "After all, how many

cops can you kill?"

"I'm not responsible for what I dream," Ralph replied stiffly. Ralph was tall, fuzzy-haired, and Gary liked him a lot. He was addicted to James Bond and all sorts of mysteries and crime novels; it was no wonder his dreams were so action-oriented. Ralph admitted to reading them to relax and guessed that deep down in his psyche he really wanted to be a hero. "I used to think it was only little shrimps who dreamed of kicking sand into the big guy's face, but I'm living proof that it's not." Ralph Finsterwald was well over six feet, even taller than Gary.

Casimir was a heavy-set, lardy man, a bit older, balding. He wore thick-lensed glasses and was sometimes called Igor or Dr. Frankenstein—but only when he was in a good mood. He said now, "Doctor," and he looked squarely at Ralph, "do you believe dreams have a definite sense of reality?"

Ralph stared. "A sense of what?"

"Reality, man."

Ralph snorted. "What's reality?"

"Oh, come on, Ralph," Kate said with impatience, "everybody knows dreams aren't a random psychic production number. They fulfill a vital purpose in our mental economy."

"Listen to the expert," Ralph rejoined, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling. "You give these feminists an inch and look what they take."

Sam said, "Don't you agree with her?"

Finsterwald considered it. "All right, so dreams safeguard sleep, so they foster a solution to needs and conflicts too dangerous for solution in reality. At least that's what the training manual says."

"The training manual's right," Dr. Easton said, moving into the briefing room on easy feet, big man though he was. He went to his desk and hoisted his rump to it and gazed at them with his calm, large blue eyes. Gary had never seen him flustered. He admired this man, this project head. Max Easton continued: "You haven't quoted it all, Doctor. Dreams also provide an outlet for the discharge of instinctual tension, they allow a

working through of destructive and traumatic experiences that defy our coping abilities in our waking state."

"Then why does he dream comic book stuff all the time?" Kathleen asked.

Max smiled as his eyes found hers. "Why do your heroes come charging up on white horses to whisk you away to the castle?"

"I haven't ever had a dream exactly like that!"

"You've come pretty close. But what does it matter? Dreaming is a universal psychic function. We know it's an essential psychobiological function and if it's suppressed, psychic disturbances result." He blinked at them. "But we all know that. What we've come here to do is plan this morning's dream experience and assume our posts."

As Dr. Easton gave out the morning's assignments—Gary would be in charge of the medical end—Gary thought about the truth in Easton's words. Sleep shut out sensory receptors and progressively inhibited the cortex of the brain so that the dream itself worked in the manner of a primitive mental apparatus. Visual images often became distorted, thinking sometimes didn't make sense, and often what happened could never have really happened. Gary's dream of the B-17 mission over Germany the day before was a good example.

It was a good thing they had the trinopterine or they'd sit there for hours waiting for the subject to fall into a snooze and dream. The T.O.T. sent the subject into an immediate dream state and he or she stayed in that state until all the connecting apparatus was removed. If the subject didn't waken then, they would often inject a stimulant, usually ten milligrams of methylphenidate because it was such a good stimulant to the central nervous system. This morning it would be up to Gary to prepare the T.O.T. and the stimulant.

Kathleen would do the injections, Sam would run the console, Casimir would be in charge of the monitors, and Max would supervise all the operations.

"Okay, cop killer," Kate said. "Up on the table like a good little boy."

Ralph made a wry face. "Look, I never killed a cop in my life. I wish you'd all get off my back."

Casimir nodded. "You dream it, so you've just got a latent hostility toward authority you didn't know you had."

"Personally," Sam said, "I think he hates us all, Dr. Easton, all of Ephialtology and the Meta Complex and Foundation itself."

"Will you cut it out?" Finsterwald said, clambering atop the ebony table. "It's hard enough dreaming dreams under these conditions without having to take all that nonsense."

Easton spoke sharply, "Let's stop it. I don't have any objection to a little fun, but I think you're all carrying it too far." He turned to Casimir Javanovski. "Everything ready to go?"

"All set."

Max then looked to Sam Nevis. "Have you checked the helmet monitors for levels?"

Sam nodded. "The distribution amplifier says the signal strength's the same. And I've upped the phase for better color in playback."

Easton ran his eyes over the console's switch positions. "Don't forget the shunt voltages. When we make for a grab, I want it to be felt again. If we get anything, I'll handle the life support system in the colloid compartment myself. You ready, Doctor?" He was looking at Ralph Finsterwald.

"As ready as I'll ever be." He lay down. "Please, God," he said as Gary handed Kate the syringe full of trinopterine, "let me dream of knights on white horses for a change."

"That would be out of character and you know it," Kathleen smiled, dabbing at a vein with a cotton swab. She inserted the needle as others pulled the primary helmet down over Finsterwald's head so that the molecular probes made contact. The helmet was fashioned so that it moved in to make contacts at centimeter intervals on the cranium. Kate pushed the plunger. The colorless T.O.T. solution ran into Ralph's vein.

Finsterwald closed his eyes and relaxed. Kathleen moved to her cubicle and maneuvered herself into her monitor.

It was quiet.

"Fan out," Finsterwald said to his men, waving his blue automatic this way and that.

They had reached a point in the heart of the city's west side in the dead of night, each of the dozen men walking carefully on sponge-soled shoes. They were there to watch the police payoff. Members of the underworld would be there to make those payments. Ralph Finsterwald, lone fighter against city hall corruption, had carefully recruited his men and now here it was, the final showdown. There was no doubt in his mind who was going to win. The forces of law and order always won out over those of evil and corruption.

His men remained quiet in their positions behind barrels at the edge of the clearing near the dump in the middle of this depressed area. Their only illumination was a lone street light strung from a pole.

They would wait. They would wait forever if they had to. Their informant had said it would be this night and—there was the first cop! He walked as if he owned the city, moving to the area illuminated by the light. From other areas now came other policemen, plainclothesmen, patrolmen, sergeants, lieutenants—and the Chief of Police, Allan Pinkerton!

Then from still other areas came the underworld leaders and their minions, low-browed and evil-eyed, their movements those of jungle beasts.

Finsterwald stood up just as the head of the underworld, Tony Ambrioli, gave the satchel of money to Chief Pinkerton. "Hold it!" Finsterwald said, pointing his blue revolver at them.

As one, the policemen and underworld figures turned and began firing. None of them fired at Finsterwald, though Ralph fired at them and killed several. The sounds of gunfire were deafening.

"Ralph, Ralph," Kate said under her monitor, shaking her head. "It gets

boring!"

"Doctor..." Easton didn't have to say any more.

"Blood pressure rising," Casimir said. "A hundred seventy over ninety. Pulse one hundred twenty."

About what one could expect, Gary thought, considering the action. It was, as Kate had said, boring. Kid stuff.

Finsterwald ran out of ammunition. All of his men lay dead around him. The big beetle-browed Chief of Police approached him, glowering. "Arrest this man!" he ordered.

They rushed Finsterwald, locked him in handcuffs and ankle chains and pushed him ignominiously down the alley ahead of them to the waiting patrol cars.

"You'll never get away with this, Chief," Ralph said. "I'll get you yet."

There were snorts of laughter from the monitors and even Gary, who tried not to be too critical, could not help being amused at the way Ralph was playing out his dream. Of course he had no control over it, so he couldn't be blamed. But why the same dreams all the time?

Gary thought Max would push for shunt when Ralph brushed against the police chief, but he did not. The dream dragged on.

The authorities took Finsterwald to city hall. Monitoring the dreaming man, the lab people experienced with him the supreme confidence that only a maniac would have in such a situation. To Gary it only proved the absence of clear logic in the dream state.

They didn't put Finsterwald in jail. Instead, they sat him in an enormous chair facing what looked like the entire police force. The faces wavered in and out of focus, all of them hazy. There was no one any of the monitoring personnel could recognize. (On occasion Easton showed up in some of the dreams, which amused everyone. Suppose they zapped Easton? How was this possible? As Max himself had said, they had a lot to learn about dreams and the people and things that populated them, and they had yet to learn the first provable thing about them.) The policemen weren't looking at Finsterwald but at the papers before them. Chief

Pinkerton sat in the center of the group of neatly groomed, silent men at the long orange table. Finsterwald was thinking they had all the information they'd need to electrocute him. But they hadn't reckoned with Ralph Finsterwald. He'd taken a course in escape when he was a kid and now it was going to pay off. He moved his feet a certain way; the chains broke as if they were made of cheap metal. He'd practised his isometrics so that when he braced one hand against the other, he pulled the handcuffs apart.

He threw them at the assembled law enforcement people. They gaped at him.

"You tricked us!" the Chief said.

"An omen!" Ralph shouted, leaping over chairs, running toward the immobilized officers. He jumped over the table before any of them could stop him or even draw a gun. He crashed through an opaque brown pane of one of the windows and plunged into the clear, bright sunlit air outside.

It was only a three-story drop to the street, but Ralph Finsterwald sailed gaily down in beautiful slow motion, his heart exultant. He had tricked them again. He had fought them to live another day!

He could hear the policemen firing behind him. The bullets whizzed by and kept going *pock-pock-pock* on the street, sending up little puffs of debris and dust. None of the bullets hit him. They were lousy marksmen. They were good at taking graft, but not good with their guns.

Kate groaned, opened her eyes and looked around. She sighed, closed her eyes to re-enter the dream.

Ralph Finsterwald landed on his feet with cushioned ease, ran into a dark alleyway. Little did he know until he was at the end of it that it was a *cul-de-sac*.

The giant figure of Chief Pinkerton came down the alleyway toward him.

Ralph was defenseless. He had no gun. He would have to do hand-to-hand combat. Well, he was ready for it. The Chief of Police moved toward him, assuming a Kung Fu position. Ralph lashed out with a dragon stamp power kick. He'd show the Chief! The Chief went down. Ralph

approached him. "Shunt!" Easton said, pressing the lever. The red light over the control console began flashing.

The Chief shuddered, blinked with surprise and then fear. Ralph seemed to be momentarily at a loss. With a wrench of his body, the Chief whined and began to crawl away, clawing at the ground as if something were pulling him backward. When he became clear of entanglement, he got up and ran off. "Disconnect!" Easton said. The red light went out. Gary opened his eyes, guessing that Easton would now bring Finsterwald back. In that case Gary had to prepare the methylphenidate stimulant for Kathleen to administer.

But Easton said only, "Continue." Gary closed his eyes.

A door Ralph hadn't noticed before suddenly appeared behind him. He opened it and ran through it, his shoulders hitting the sides of a long hallway.

Finally the hallway emptied into a brick street. The brick street ran into a long athletic field. He walked into it a short distance, calming himself down. The athletic field became a park.

"Hey, Mister!" a boy called in a voice that sent a chill through Ralph because it sounded very much like his own voice when he was a kid. "Help me, will you?"

Ralph ran over to the bushes to help, but the boy, older than he thought, black-haired and blue-eyed, lay in weeds dressed immaculately in white tie and tails, and he showed a gold-crowned molar as he opened his mouth to laugh.

A beefy man in weight lifter's trunks, waist cincture, wrist and ankle bands, came lumbering out of the brush toward Ralph, his face impassive, his gigantic sweat-glistening muscles rippling.

Ralph stood where he was. This was not the police. He had no grievance here with this man. But the man might have been an undercover operator. Ralph moved toward him to see what the man would do. That would let him know if he were friend or enemy.

"Shunt!" Easton said sharply.

Easton depressed the shunt lever. The red light above the console began flashing. Sparkles began to fill the colloid entrapment unit.

The weight lifter shuddered, then bared his teeth in an angry snarl. He moved toward Ralph and surprised Ralph by putting his arm around his neck.

Then the weight lifter began to squeeze the life out of Dr. Ralph Finsterwald.

CHAPTER FOUR

"He's being choked!" Sam Nevis cried with alarm, though they could all see what was happening to Finsterwald.

During a dream with T.O.T., the chemical solution had always kept the subject motionless and relaxed, but now Ralph was beginning to writhe on the ebony table and the leads from the molecular probes swished like reef-anchored seaweed.

They all came out from under the monitors. Easton wrenched his eyes from Finsterwald and his sudden, unexpected agony, to the physical monitors which were on the upper part of the wall console. They all watched the undulating illuminated green line and its accompanying dancing dot, fearful of any cardiac disturbances, even atrial and ventricular arrhythmias, but particularly the lowering or inversion of the T wave and exaggeration of the U wave.

Gary saw no lengthening of the QT, which would be symptomatic, as he prepared the syringe of methylphenidate. Kathleen pushed for a more direct ECG reading and now Gary saw the peaking of the T waves and the widening of the QRS complex and knew that Ralph was really in trouble. He quickly ran his eyes over the other monitors and saw that the other vital signs were similarly affected.

He turned to Finsterwald and saw that his face was getting red—beet red. Soon it would become cyanotic unless something was done and done at once. But what could be done? It was merely a dream in which Ralph was being choked by a strong man. Once he woke up...

"Dr. Carmody!"

Easton turned to Gary and told him to administer the antidote, forgetting that Kathleen was assigned that duty. Gary inserted the needle and emptied the cylinder. Max and Casimir disengaged the last of the dream patchcords. The others stood by mentally wringing their hands and wishing there was something they could do. By all rights Ralph Finsterwald should have begun to regain consciousness.

Nobody bothered to look at the computer console colloid tank trap and the flickering flashes there. Instead, they viewed Ralph's dying with anguish, for dying was what he was doing.

Casimir, who had kept one eye on the monitors, now said, "Watch it!"

All eyes swing to the cardiac module. The lines spelled trouble. Gary knew what would be next.

"Multiple PVC's!" Casimir cried out.

The premature ventricular contractions of the heart were a grave sign and weren't at all helped by what Gary had administered.

Max was chewing a knuckle. Whatever he decided at that moment could mean life or death.

"Lidocaine!" Easton ordered tersely. "Fifty milligrams."

Gary could not prepare it fast enough. He was sweating and his hands were shaking. Kate rushed to his side. He shoved the syringe into her hands. She quickly administered it to Finsterwald who was now gasping for breath.

"Blood pressure," Easton demanded, not wanting to look up but slapping the sleeping man's face. "Ralph! Ralph! Wake up!"

"Eighty-eight over sixty-four and falling," Casimir said ominously.

Gary brought out the emergency kit. Even as he was rolling it into position, Casimir Javanovski said what they all feared most: "Ventricular fibrillation!" The carrier took the words and coded it to all pertinent Meta Hospital Sections.

Gary looked to the cardiac monitor and saw nothing but waves like

those at the beach, rolling and uneven, no points, no sharp breaks.

Easton reached over Finsterwald, moved the levers that would stop the holograph filming. Then he hoisted himself to the table and began to administer closed cardiac compression. Sam Nevis began to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

People were streaming into the dream laboratory, running in with airways, IV's, oxygen, and the all-important defibrillator. If blood could not get to Ralph's brain—oxygen-carrying blood—he might be a vegetable the rest of his life, even if they revived him. Speed was of the essence. Gary found himself moving as if in slow motion, though he knew his responses must be as always, preparing a 3 1/2 inch needle on a hypodermic syringe containing adrenalin and calcium.

Kate snatched the hypodermic from him and plunged the needle into Ralph's left ventricle. The shock of the solution caused Finsterwald to shudder.

Then they stepped back while the defibrillator team went to work. Dr. Edward Keddington, who was in charge of Meta's emergency squad, took the electrodes in his hand, positioned one over Ralph's left chest wall, the other on the sternum, and told an assistant that he was ready. The assistant said, "Stand back, please," and then pressed the switch in the handle. A high voltage shock of nearly 7,000 volts slammed into Ralph for four milliseconds, causing his limbs to twitch convulsively; his body arched briefly so that only his heels and the back of his head touched the ebony table.

They worked quietly and efficiently, waiting ten to fifteen seconds for the defibrillator to charge up again. They all watched the monitor. There was no change. The emergency team did not even have to speak to each other. They administered epinephrine when it was needed, kept a hand on the femoral artery for pulse signs, as if they didn't trust the monitor, and guessed what was happening to the blood, trying to neutralize it with IV's, checking for electrolytic imbalance.

But it wasn't enough.

Dr. Ralph Finsterwald died despite the best that could be done; when the emergency team left and all that remained was to call for the morgue team, everyone stood looking at Ralph as if they expected him to get up

from the ebony table any moment and begin to upbraid them for what they'd been doing to him. But he never moved.

"It's a damn shame," Sam muttered in a low voice, as if he didn't trust himself to speak any louder. "It's a terrible thing that's happened."

"It shouldn't have happened," Easton said.

"*Why* did it happen?" Kate wanted to know, turning to them all, her green eyes flashing.

"He was a good man," Gary said. "I was happy to have him as my friend." He knew the full shock of Ralph's death had not yet hit him.

Casimir said, "I'm sorry I baited him the way I did, but he took it well, as he took everything."

It was then that Gary happened to glance toward the colloid trap.

The weight lifter was in it. But not all of him.

The others saw where he was looking and now began to move toward the unit. Through the milky opaqueness that was the life-support system, they could all see something floating in the sea of sparkling nothingness: a heavy man in trunks, but a man with only one arm, and a band around the wrist of that arm.

It was his face—or what was left of it—that shocked them.

Kathleen turned away. "It's awful." For a moment Gary thought she was going to be sick, but she was not.

The face was not all of a piece, but what there was of it was agonized, in misery. An eye was missing, part of the cranium was gone, half the lips were simply not there, exposing some teeth. There were parts of the man they could look through as he floated and turned. There was no sound. The mottled flesh, the almost-humanness of it, was stomach-lurching, and Gary had to turn away.

"What is it?" Easton asked.

"The weight lifter," Sam answered.

"He's screaming," Kathleen almost shouted, "but I can't hear him. He must be in terrible agony."

"That's because he's not whole," Max expressed his thought out loud.

"He deserves to scream," Casimir said. "After all, he choked Ralph to death."

"What is it, really?" Kate asked.

"I don't know," Easton replied truthfully, staring at the figure inside the tank. "Perhaps what we see is merely a projection of Finsterwald's unconscious."

"Finsterwald's dead," Gary reminded him. "If he's dead, he's not dreaming, so how can there be anything in the tank, then?"

Kate said she was in favor of turning off the life-support system and putting the thing out of its misery.

"No," Easton decided. "This is the first hard evidence we've had. I know the—the thing, whatever it is—seems to be suffering, but it's all we've got."

"A piece of ectoplasm," Sam said.

"Possibly," Max rejoined. "Perhaps half a dream."

"Where's the other half?" Kate asked.

Nobody had an answer to that.

ALEPPO

Let those other Beings in the Consciousness Pool be shocked and saddened by the return of Ronsard as an incomplete Being; I, Aleppo boil with rage. The others do not seem to realize that We have been intruded upon and one of Our numbers made less than whole by humans.

Adrea understands. Ronsard was a beautiful Being who, in his flesh and blood life, was a roving member of a band of inquisitores formed in the town of Viterbo. Because of his size and strength, he strangled the

errant upon order of the witch hunters. Some of the things that happened to him were more vivid than even the dreams he has been part of, though his dream role is often that of strangler, which follows life.

Ronsard was in the B-17 raid. Many of Us took part in that dream as crew members or stretcher-bearers or whatever roles that were needed by the young man whose dreams We were in. But only Adrea felt the tug of power in that dream, and as I have said, summoned me. We had not yet decided what to do with the young man in the swimming pool when he was snatched away, his dream ended. We, of course, returned to the Consciousness Pool when his dream was cut off so unexpectedly.

In the dream with the police, dreamt by another young man; Chief of Police Pinkerton was created to fulfill the demands of the man's dream desires. In this dream it was Pinkerton, who was Albion in flesh and blood life, who experienced the drawing sensation we have now become familiar with. He tried to escape it and he was successful.

Ronsard, one of the Volunteers, was nearer to the dreaming man than I, and he was summoned. It was to be his duty to extricate Albion/Pinkerton from his predicament. This always has been possible before because humans, while they may exert some force over Us, have never succeeded in causing any Being more than the briefest discomfort. It was this discomfort that Ronsard thought he would assuage.

But then the unexpected happened and Ronsard was caught up in the power. The humans' grappling hook, or whatever force it is, drew him into a vortex. From what Ronsard has been able to communicate to Us with that part of him that returned to Us, it is a dreadful pulling thing, this force. It is far more powerful than the force Adrea felt when she experienced it.

Ronsard did the right thing. As a Volunteer he had no choice. In an effort to break the hold this new force had on him, Ronsard had to kill his host. This We seldom have to do because dreaming humans are never a threat except if they are psychotic or are able in some strange psychic way to force their way into Our world. While humans have on rare occasions done this, no one ever before has pulled a Being away from the Consciousness Pool. And a Volunteer at that. Now half of one of Us is no longer with Us.

We have decided that, since Ronsard is not whole and can remember

little, he may not re-enter the Pool until the missing parts of his Being are retrieved. The Volunteers among Us will try to bring this about, though how it will be done is a mystery.

Unfortunately, though We may have been humans once, We have no better understanding of our Beingness than humans have of their humanness. There is an order to all things, as Ruaha has assured Us, and even some humans understand this.

As I say, that Ronsard was forced to kill, no one among Us questions, especially no Volunteer. All who feast on dreams know how difficult it is to pull away from difficult situations. Ronsard did not kill by accident or by malfunction, which sometimes happens with an inadequate host, but with deliberateness because he was being divided. I would have done the same. So would Adrea.

The humans, and I believe them to be scientists— and scientists are always causing trouble probing things that had better be left alone— must be stopped. But how to stop them puzzles Us all since this has never happened before and We do not know where the other half of Ronsard is. For the time being We have spread Ronsard among Us and are hopeful that he will recover from this and that we Volunteers will find the other half of him and join it with the half that is spread out so.

There is a way. There must be a way. Of late, humans have pushed forward through many frontiers by using their many inventions and devices, and now it appears that, not willing to let well enough alone, they have reached into Our world and have taken part of Us from Us.

Before my rage becomes uncontrolled and I swing my scimitar in dreams for no reason, I must stop to calmly consider how to deal with what is happening.

We Volunteers are pledged to the status quo and We have once more agreed to destroy any humans who would attempt to invade Us and change Us, as Ronsard murdered the host who was trying to drag his entire Being from Us.

Some Beings are trying to reach Ruaha, the wisest of Us all, but he has gone forth beyond this place to visit other Consciousness Pools in distant parts of the Universe.

They would have Ruaha return, but what, I ask, would that accomplish? Ruaha is better off wherever he is. The Volunteers will handle this. After all, is that not why we volunteered in the first place?

CHAPTER FIVE

Gary awoke in his apartment, feeling sluggish and tired, which was the way he usually felt when he first opened his eyes. It never lasted long, the moment being ordinarily followed by his trying to figure out what day of the week it was and whether or not he had to go to the lab or could spend the day or maybe the whole weekend with Kate.

But this morning everything from the previous day hit him at once: Ralph's death, the hideous thing in the tank, and the fact that they had to abandon everything. When there was a grave accident or a fatality, all project work had to be stopped until after a hearing into the cause or causes and a consideration of how such incidents might be avoided in the future. It had happened before, in Dr. Glenn Gautier's psychosurgery lab, Gary had heard, and it was days before that department could get back on the tracks.

He got up and went through his morning routine without enthusiasm, not because of the hearing he'd have to go to that day but because he wouldn't be seeing Dr. Ralph Finsterwald any more. It seemed incredible, with all the laboratory controls they had, that Ralph could have died. He began to think that if this could happen to Ralph, it could also happen to Kate. Of all things, he didn't want anything to happen to her. Call it love, call it something else, I don't care, he thought, I just know life would be not worth living if Kate weren't around to share it with me.

For a few minutes he thought that perhaps he should have chosen another area of Meta after he'd completed his medical training, something less dangerous, though he hadn't thought the dream lab would be dangerous at all. There was Memory and Intelligence, for example; the Altered States of Consciousness lab; Stress, Strain and Psychosomatics; the Psi lab; Psychosurgery; the Brain Wave Section; and Cerebrovascular Diseases. But he knew he'd never change labs. Dr. Kathleen Keegan happened to be in Ephialtes for one thing, and for another, he'd developed a drive to prove Max Easton's theories.

He left his apartment for the Meta Complex with a feeling of

foreboding, and he knew it was because of Dr. Cassoit. Andrew Cassoit was a thin-lipped, stony-faced and sharp-minded man who headed up Meta-LA. He administered the Memory and Intelligence unit personally and oversaw everything else in the complex. The complex was a cluster of buildings situated on six acres in East Los Angeles. The land had been donated to Meta by the late Samuel Berwyn, a California entrepreneur who made a fortune out of cinematic engineering.

Dr. Cassoit didn't frighten him, but from what he'd seen and heard of him, Gary knew the man was arbitrary and could be rash. If anything, Gary stood in awe of him, for Andrew Cassoit knew more about the three and one-half pounds of pinkish-gray jelly inside man's skull than any other man alive. Dr. Cassoit was devoting his life to the pursuit of truths about it, and to Gary that was an admirable vocation indeed, for what man presently knew about what went on in the brain would fill only a very small book.

Gary parked his car and walked up tree-lined streets closed to vehicular traffic until he came to the administration building. There, waiting solemn-faced in the sunshine, stood Kate. She took his hand, kissed him lightly on the lips, and then asked, "How'd you sleep?"

"All right," he said, ashamed to admit the truth in view of what had happened, "but then I remembered everything and I began to feel terrible."

"I didn't sleep at all." She pulled him by the hand to a bench in front of the entrance. "I kept thinking about Ralph and the thing in the tank."

As it turned out none of them had slept well except Gary, which only disturbed him more. Sam came up, puffy-eyed, and then Casimir, looking dour and brooding. Even Max did not seem to have his usual energy and optimism when he joined them in front of the building. They were reluctant to go in.

Finally Kate asked, "Max, do you think old Cassoit will let us continue with the project?"

"If he can see his way clear," Max said, moving to sit in the shade on another bench. "He has to be shown that what's happened was no one's fault. That will be up to us to prove. We'll have to point out the project's value and show that progress was being made."

Sam nodded soberly. "All for the benefit of Meta-DC, the Washington headquarters from which all blessings flow. It takes money, you know."

"Just the same," Kate continued, "if he decides we're at fault the project could be scratched. Couldn't it?"

When Max nodded, Gary said, "We weren't at fault, though." And when he saw the look in Max's eyes, he added, "I mean, there's no possibility we could have done anything wrong, is there?"

Max did not answer because Casimir said, "If you have to ask that, then you don't belong in the dream project"

"I'm sorry," Gary said. There weren't and could not be errors in what they were doing. They were dealing with forces and powers that were unknown and unpredictable. It had already cost one man his life.

Sam mused, "With all the safeguards we've got, I don't see how one of us got choked to death."

Kate regarded Casimir with some outrage. "Choked to death! How do you know that?"

"You were there." Casimir looked around. "We were all there. We saw it."

"But if he was choked to death," pursued Kate, "then that proves Max's hypothesis about dream creatures, doesn't it? Ralph did not die in vain."

Sam considered it. "All right. I see your point. You could say it was the stigmata syndrome. Ralph so believed his dream that he died from it."

"Which brings us," Kate said, "to the thing in the tank."

"What about it?" Gary asked.

"Well, Max?"

Max said they'd have to leave it there. "We can't do a thing until Andrew Cassoit gives us the okay to get on with the project."

At just that moment Gail Robbins, Cassoit's secretary, opened the door to the building and told them the meeting would not be held out on the

lawn but rather upstairs.

"How's the old man?" Kate asked her.

"Ready to bite your head off," Gail replied, holding the door wide so they could all go through.

"I believe it," Kate whispered to Gary when they were inside and the others were following. "Dr. Cassoit's been known to whittle doctors down to half their size."

The conference room where tire hearing was to be held was a formidable place. It was empty of art, of things esthetically pleasing. It contained only a long table behind which the heads of the seven Meta departments sat with Cassoit in the center.

The members of the Ephialtology Department sat in the chairs placed facing the department heads. There was much clearing of throats on both sides, the reading of hastily prepared material, and a testing of the AV machines by the technicians who were charged with the responsibility of recording the proceedings for the Meta Foundation in Washington.

In a way it all reminded Gary of Ralph's dream, only these seven men facing them weren't officers, there weren't any windows behind them to jump out of, and this wasn't a dream.

Cassoit was stern and coldly efficient right from the start. The rules required him to introduce those at the hearing and he did so.

Then Dr. Cassoit rapped for order. It became very quiet in the room.

Cassoit's wandering eyes found Gary's. "Dr. Carmody," he said, "will you accommodate us first?"

Gary sat frozen where he was for a moment, since he had no idea what Cassoit meant until he realized that the doctor wanted him to be the first to take the witness chair. Gary got up, the AV machinery began to operate, and he walked to the chair feeling surprised that he could be called so early to testify and hoping he would be able to help rather than hinder Max Easton's cause.

CHAPTER SIX

Gary found himself intimidated by Cassoit's laser eyes and harsh manner, and the noncommittal gazes of the other members of the panel. He'd been asked to describe how he had followed Finsterwald's dream while under the helmet monitor.

"Everything looked good. We could have tried to capture one of the dream people several times when they got close to Dr. Finsterwald."

Cassoit nodded impatiently. "What killed Dr. Finsterwald, Dr. Carmody?"

"Why, the weight lifter."

"The weight lifter?" Cassoit made it sound ominous.

"Yes, sir. He was a big bear of a man and he came out of the weeds and started choking Finsterwald."

"Then Dr. Finsterwald was choked to death?"

"It would seem so, yes."

"He was choked to death by a dream figure?"

"I know it sounds strange, Dr. Cassoit, but—"

"Have you read the pathologist's report?"

Gary's face reddened. He had, indeed, read the report, and he saw now how neatly Cassoit had trapped him.

"What does the report say is the cause of death?"

"A heart attack." Gary didn't dare look around to see the reaction of his colleagues. He wondered how he could possibly reverse the direction matters were taking.

Dr. Cassoit nodded, picked up the autopsy report, as did the others. "The pathologist also states that shortly before the incident with the weight lifter, Dr. Finsterwald's urinary catecholamine secretion was extremely high." Cassoit looked up. "What, in your estimation, does that

signify, Doctor?"

"That he was frightened."

"Can't you be more specific?"

"He was in a panic state, sir."

"What do people do when they are in a panic state?"

"Run away. Act chaotically."

"And what did Dr. Finsterwald do?"

"Nothing. He just lay there."

"Then it was not a true panic state?"

"It was an imaginary one, one caused by the dream, Dr. Cassoit. It happens—"

Dr. Cassoit waved him quiet. "Tell me, Doctor, do you think the rigors and pressures of research could have precipitated Dr. Finsterwald's heart attack?"

Gary swallowed. "It would seem odd to me, sir. Dr. Finsterwald was only twenty-seven."

Dr. Cassoit's eyelids drooped a little as he took time to ponder what Gary had said. Dr. Ethelbert, who headed the Brain Wave research lab, whispered something to Dr. Gautier, and other members of the panel shifted in their seats uncomfortably.

Gary felt anger building up in him because of the way the questions were being phrased, but he made himself control it. Cassoit was spokesman for the panel, he had a job to do, and he had his own way of doing it; Gary had to live with that, so he calmed himself and waited for the next question.

Cassoit looked at him. "What happened just before the incident with this—man—you call the weight lifter?"

"The usual dream stream. Comic book action stuff. Cops and robbers.

In his dream, Ralph—Dr. Finsterwald—felt that the underworld was buying police protection. In the dream image of himself he was heroic. He alone would stop the pay-offs." Gary paused. "It is my understanding that Dr. Finsterwald always dreamed police action stories in which he was the hero."

"Could what he was dreaming be responsible for his death?"

It was phrased so smoothly, so casually, that Gary considered it carefully before answering. It did not seem a trick question; he decided to go with the only thing he could, which was the truth. "Doctor, where there's a lot of dream action, adrenalin is released, the blood pressure goes up—"

Dr. Cassoit was referring to a paper before him. "You are referring to paradoxical sleep?"

Gary found himself sweating. Dr. Cassoit, it appeared, knew everything about the project. "Yes, sir. It follows the first four stages of sleep and comes on like fireworks. The body's sympathetic nervous system responds with alarm, the heart rate varies widely, the body temperature goes up, stress hormones increase and so do levels of fatty acids—"

"What was Dr. Finsterwald's physical condition?"

"I understand he was in excellent shape, sir. He had a physical only a month ago."

Dr. Cassoit nodded. "How long have you been with the project, young man?"

"Six months, sir."

Dr. Cassoit rewarded him with a thin smile. "You seem very sure of yourself and I find that an admirable trait. I'm sure the rest of the panel shares my view. That will be all."

There was testimony from the others and more from persons connected peripherally with the project.

"I think Dr. Cassoit likes you," Kate whispered, squeezing Gary's hand. "That makes two of us."

"Three," Gary said, and when she stared at him blankly, he pointed to himself as the third person. She almost laughed.

Sam Nevis was the one who brought up the matter of the weight lifter in the tank.

"Well," Cassoit said, "it is indeed gratifying to know that something is happening at Project Ephialtes besides heart attacks. Is this thing you describe still there in the tank?"

Sam assured Cassoit and the panel that it was and he invited them all down to have a look at it

"The panel would be pleased to do just that," Dr. Cassoit said, "but if we took the time to inspect every anomaly in every department of this particular Meta complex, we'd get nothing done." His eyes moved from Sam Nevis to Max Easton. "The panel would like to hear from the project head at this juncture. Dr. Easton?"

Max played it right, getting up slowly and taking the witness chair and staring unflinchingly into the gray green eyes of Dr. Andrew Cassoit. Gary knew that Max would have to weigh his words carefully because Cassoit and the panel, who had to answer to the Meta Foundation in Washington, could very well recommend undercutting his funding or dispensing with it altogether.

"Doctor," Cassoit began, "will you tell us your thoughts on the death of Dr. Ralph Finsterwald?"

"As you know," Easton said calmly, "the electro-physiological study is what the project's all about. Dr. Finsterwald was an unfortunate subject, as we have seen. And, as the others have indicated, his malfunctioning heart, if that is what killed him, certainly exhibited no abnormality in examination."

Cassoit leaned back, studied Easton through narrowed eyes. "Doctor, is it possible that a normal man dreaming a dream that scares him to death *figuratively* could be scared to death *in fact* if his normal heart were overtaxed?"

"It's an area we're exploring, sir," Easton said. "Anything is possible. For example, there is speculation that the sudden-death syndrome in

infants happens during paradoxical sleep. I'm sure you're as familiar with that as I am, Dr. Cassoit."

"Yes. Nightmares."

"It would seem so."

Cassoit said coldly, "He died in his sleep. How many times have we heard someone say that, Doctor? Isn't that what happened to Dr. Finsterwald?"

"I would have to say yes to that. However, I would like to consider Dr. Finsterwald's case as an isolated incident."

"For the record," Cassoit said dryly, glancing toward his technician/clerks, who were handling the audiovisual recordings of the proceedings, "would you explain what you are trying to do?"

Gary knew the report would be at Foundation Headquarters in Washington in the morning. He watched as Easton proceeded carefully to explain it.

"Years ago," Easton began, "all we had for investigating the nature of dreams were the brain wave recordings (EEGs), electroculograms (EOGs) and slow eye movement (SEM) during sleep, as well as what little the subject could remember of his dream when awakened at intervals.

"Now, with the helmet monitor concept and the color taping of the dream through the molecular probes which rest at strategic areas in the cranium without danger or aftereffect, what is going on in the subject's dream state is projected so that we can all see it as it happens. The recordings can even be stored and replayed. If you would like, we could play back Finsterwald's last dream."

Cassoit shook his head. "I don't think that will be necessary, Doctor." He sighed. "Is there more?"

"Yes. The Senoi, who people the Central Mountain Range of the Malay Peninsula, have learned to cooperate with the 'spirits' that populate their dreams. As a result, they live longer and healthier lives than we do. Among the Senoi there is no crime, no mental illness. Dream researchers have long wondered why this is so."

"I imagine," Cassoit said dryly.

Dr. Albert Downs, chief of the Cerebrovascular Diseases section, intervened, with apologies to Dr. Cassoit, "Dr. Easton, let me see if I understand all this. Project Ephialtes was started in an effort to determine the true nature of dreams. Is that correct?"

"Yes. We're trying to establish a scientific platform upon which more definitive experiments with dreams may be conducted."

Cassoit took over, regarding Easton solemnly. "I think you should know, Doctor, that there are some at Foundation Headquarters who think the Ephialtology Department here isn't needed at all. The death of one of your researchers isn't going to help."

It was ridiculous, Gary thought. Here they were, talking up a storm, defending themselves, accomplishing nothing, when they might all be in the lab working it out. Finsterwald was dead. Why? Surely that was more important than sitting where they were and trying to fix blame.

And what had they trapped in the colloid tank? Was it really part of the weight lifter? Were dream people real people who lived on a plane different from man's? It angered Gary that they couldn't proceed to resolve these important questions because the facility had been closed down because of the fatality. It seemed to Gary that Finsterwald's death should have been a signal to proceed even more vigorously with the experiments. He was certain that Ralph would have wanted it that way.

Easton took a deep breath to keep his impatience from showing. Gary knew Easton must be feeling much the same way as he did. Easton said, "I know very well I'm not exactly popular with some of the planners."

"It's not only that," Cassoit said, "you're also a maverick. But I know you are a stickler for detail and that you push people hard. I have no criticism of a man who does that and I may as well tell you that in Meta you are, in fact, admired for this facet of your character, and I don't mind at all putting this in the record. But there is something that bothers us all, those of us here and those at headquarters."

"And what is that, sir?"

"Your preoccupation with demons in dreams. It is demons you are

obsessed with, is it not?"

"Well—"

"Oh, come now, Doctor. Is it or isn't it?"

"Let me answer this way. The Senoi believe in battling dream demons, and they—"

Dr. Cassoit said sharply, "I don't want to hear about the Senoi, Dr. Easton. I want to hear about you."

Easton said evenly, "I only wanted to explain that it is through such excursions into dream violence that they emerge as a well-balanced people with no need for violence in their daily lives."

"I am sure everybody finds that very interesting," Cassoit said with underlying sarcasm. "But for the record will you tell us why you call your unit Project Ephialtes?"

Well, there it was, Gary thought. More for the record and more time wasted in non-essentials. But that was the way Meta worked, so he had discovered. He looked around and saw that everybody was as annoyed as he was. But, as Cassoit had said, it was for the record, so they had to go through it.

"Project Ephialtes," Dr. Easton responded, "was named after Ephialtes, the Greek demon who is supposed to have had the power to inflict nightmares and participate in them at will."

Cassoit made a wry face and interrupted. "I don't mind telling you, Doctor, it disappoints me that a life has been lost in the pursuit of such a questionable line of research." He glanced at the technician/^{Thorson} Project clerks to make sure his face and remarks were being recorded for posterity.

"If it affects you," Easton said, "then think of how it affects us, for we were closer to Dr. Finsterwald than you were." Easton did not try to keep the sharp edge out of his voice. "As far as labeling the project a questionable one of dubious value, let me assure you, all lines of research are questionable until the premise is proved or disproved."

"I am not a dunderhead, Doctor," Cassoit said angrily, "but I am beginning to wonder about you. Are you still expecting to capture one of those— things—whole? I say 'things' for lack of a better word. And if you are, wouldn't you say your work is more occult than scientific?"

Easton smiled. "You have been invited to see this 'thing', as you call it."

"Hunks of protoplasm or whatever it is would not mean anything to me."

Gary presumed Cassoit was making himself the adversary for reasons of his own. He was the linchpin that held the Meta Complex together, but he was proving to be a divisive man.

"What is occult," Easton said, "remains occult until it makes sense, like the eclipse of the sun. Then it becomes scientific."

"I am not a child," Cassoit snorted. "You don't have to describe things in terms of Dick and Jane."

Easton proceeded as if he hadn't heard. "Years ago we would have said that the spirit residing in bread mold eaten by a sick man healed him. Now we know it's the antibiotic, penicillin, that makes him well."

"You *are* a dunderhead," Cassoit said, flaring, shifting in his chair. "If you are still convinced of the existence of these—other creatures—and give them human characteristics, like being able to lift weights..." He leaned forward. "Where do they exist, Doctor? The effluvium? And what do they eat, phlogiston?"

Easton ignored the sarcasm. "We're trying to find out if they do exist or are merely projections of our own unconscious. If they do exist we want to know why."

"Do you think, if they exist, that they are alive?"

"I don't know. They might be"—Easton searched for the word—"anabiotic."

"And when they resuscitate, assuming they do, what do they eat, Doctor? As a scientist, I assume that you are familiar with the principle that all living things eat."

Easton did not honor the question with a reply.

"And so, if these things eat, then tell me, Dr. Easton, just what exactly do they eat?" Cassoit leaned forward again, certain of his victory.

"They eat us."

Even Gary was shocked by the answer.

"Us?" Cassoit's eyebrows shot up. Then they came down. "This is no time for levity, Doctor. You'd better explain that."

"I think we are food for them. I think that dream people are symbiont."

Cassoit blinked hard. "Pray tell me, then. Just what part of us do they eat, Doctor?"

Easton was unruffled. "Poisons."

"Poisons!" Cassoit was startled.

"Nothing in nature is done without a purpose." Easton paused. "I am sure you are familiar with that concept, Doctor." Touche, Gary thought, and Kathleen squeezed his hand. Easton went on. "I am speaking of the poisons that accrue during the day in our bodies, the poisons that interfere with our well-being. People who are deprived of sleep for any length of time begin to collect more poisons in their systems than they can stand and they begin to hallucinate and exhibit strange symptoms. There have been cases of sleep deprivation that have killed, if you will recall the Thorson Project."

Cassoit snorted. "Of course I remember it. I remember it only too well. In fact, it reminds me a great deal of your project." Then Cassoit sighed. "All right. Let it be shown in the record that this panel finds no criticism of Easton's project, that the death of Dr. Finsterwald was without cause, and that Project Ephialtes will continue as planned." Then, after the AV people had disconnected, Cassoit smiled at Easton and wished him good luck. "When you and your teams finally succeed in trapping a whole demon, let me know. I'd like to come down and see what one looks like."

"We'll do that, sir."

"Very interesting," Cassoit said before he turned away, his hand on Dr. Easton's shoulder. "Just make sure that the demon doesn't capture you."

Cassoit walked out and Gary reflected on his parting shot. It was strange, but one could view Finsterwald's death as his capture by the dream people. And when he told Kathleen what he had been thinking she said, "I never thought of it that way," bit her lip and added, "and that makes it kind of scary, doesn't it?"

"To say nothing of dangerous," said Casimir, who had been standing nearby.

It was a sobering thought.

ALEPPO

Ronsard has left us to seek Privacy.

Throughout all the centuries Ronsard and I have shared experiences in dreams as part of the Consciousness Pool. One would think that he would tell me, Aleppo, his friend, that he was leaving Us for Privacy.

Privacy is a thing that any of Us can have but, when We feel the need for it, each of Us announces intentions and goodbyes are said. Also, the Being who is going to Privacy will tell Us when he will return from it. But Ronsard told no one. Not even Aleppo, his friend. It makes me sad.

I knew him so well and care so much about him that it makes me anxious now that he has disappeared from among Us, for even though he could not be in the Consciousness Pool itself as he was, being only half himself. We all shared him in bits and parts, and We thought this would do until it was determined how to make Ronsard all of a piece.

He has gone looking for the rest of himself. I know that because Ronsard is so much like I am. But this makes me afraid: If he can lose half himself, could he not also lose the other half? And if he is in Privacy, what can any of us do to help him if he gets into trouble? In Privacy it is forbidden to communicate either way, from without or from within.

Some say that because Ronsard was no longer a whole Being, he simply disintegrated. But no Being has ever done that. I would not know how to do that and I know that if I do not know, Ronsard would not

know. And Ronsard, being only a half-Being, would have only half the ability to do it if he could do it at all.

No, knowing Ronsard as I do, I know he was unhappy being an incomplete Being. That part of him here in misery wished to be joined with that part of him that was not here, which was also in misery, for We could all feel it.

I am sure I would have acted the way Ronsard has. I would have gathered up my scimitar and disappeared for vengeful purposes. What Being would wish for a mere half life divided among friends in the Consciousness Pool inhabited by whole Beings? Perhaps Ronsard has defied tradition and has not sought Privacy at all but has flowed toward re-entry in some soon-to-be-born human. But why would he want to do that?

Since We all know what each thinks, all Beings being one, there are those who say they know that Ronsard wanted to go on even if he were two incomplete Beings. But I know Ronsard. He is vain. Otherwise why, in the dreams he inhabits, does he appear with oiled muscles rippling so beautifully in the sun? Ronsard would not be happy unperfected. Ronsard is my friend even though he is gone. It doesn't matter what the others, the philosophers, wives, alchemists, astrophysicists, hunters, nuclear scientists, political figures and jewelers here say, which is that I should weigh my loyalties or at least wait until I know what has happened to Ronsard. I think he will return. Whole. He would not want to go on not whole. As a Volunteer my loyalty is to Us. If anything happens to Ronsard it will be time for me to move then.

The thought occurs to me that perhaps they, the human scientists, have somehow managed to get the rest of Ronsard, but I do not see how this would be possible since We all had a part of Ronsard and We would have all felt the pull.

Ronsard is as angry as I am. I know that. I am afraid for him and afraid for whomever he meets in his present mood. Divided the way he is, he is even more unpredictable than he was when he was just himself and one Being.

It is best that Ruaha is not here. This is a job for Volunteers like Ronsard and Adrea and—yes, Aleppo.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The colloid entrapment tank was as big as a small room. It resembled an aquarium in that it had reinforced stainless steel construction and tempered glass windows. Where one could ordinarily look through it because there was nothing in it, now it was opaque and the whiteness seemed to extend beyond the sides of the tank. The life-support substance was a combination electrostatic fluid and a responsive computerized, hothouse bank from which any imbalance—electrolytic, endocrine, hormonal— known to science could be corrected. In it floated a half-figure.

The researchers milled around it, viewing it from every angle, studying the floating, twisting shape. Gary found himself feeling uncomfortable looking at it and he guessed this was because he felt as if he himself were the one who was twisting and turning like a scrap of paper caught up in a breeze. Forcing himself to examine it from a detached, scientist's viewpoint, Gary saw that it really was a connected piece of flesh in the shape of the weight lifter with parts of him missing, floating in infinity and looking terribly alone, crying out and unable to be heard, reaching out for reference points and not finding them, just half a thing adrift in emptiness, an emptiness that, up close, looked more vast than outer space.

"It's the weight lifter," Sam said. "At least part of him. No doubt of it. Can we all agree on that to begin with?"

Yes, they thought that they could.

Then Kate asked, "Why did we trap only part of him and not all of him? Anybody got an answer to that?"

Casimir did not reply to her question. "My question is more puzzling than that. I'd like to know why it exists now that Ralph is dead, if that thing in there is what he was dreaming."

"So there is life after a dream death," Max stated emphatically. "Let's keep the talk going. We're getting someplace."

Max Easton's eyes darted this way and that, squinting one moment, opening wide the next as Gary watched him. Absorbed, the man stood first on one foot and then on the other. He was different from what he'd been. Before, he'd been gruff, his eyes had been merciless; there was work to be done and his eyes could accuse you if you weren't doing your fair

share. Gary was familiar with the look. But now Gary saw a different Max, a Max enraptured because something was happening, there was a puzzle to solve, and he was working closely with them all, ready to admit he was as much in the dark as any of them. It was, Gary guessed, the mark of a mature man, a man who could be hell on wheels when he had to be and one who could ask for help when he felt the need of it. It made Gary respect him all the more.

Casimir said, "Okay, how about trying this on for size: How can anything be alive with that many holes in it?"

"Have we determined that it is alive?" Kate asked.

"If it is," Gary said, "we haven't determined how somebody's dream could live on after his death."

"It's done every day, Gary," Max rejoined. "Books, plays, movies, television."

Kate bit her lip. "I'd quit watching TV if that's the kind of picture I got on my tube."

"Maybe our antenna's twisted," Sam said, but nobody laughed.

Easton sighed and moved away from the tank. "Maybe we ought to take a look at Finsterwald's last dream." When they had, Casimir frowned and shook his head. "Strange, strange," he said.

"Why do you say that?" Easton asked.

"Upstairs we told Dr. Cassoit that when Dr. Carmody had his dream you almost trapped a girl you said looked much like a Greek or Roman temple girl."

"A hetaera, yes," Max said. "What about it?"

"It bothers me," said Casimir, screwing up his face. "I don't know why."

Sam asked, "Let's back up. What happened as soon as you pressed for entrapment?"

"The hooded figure appeared." Easton began to get excited, and an avenue opened in Gary's mind.

Gary added, "Yeah, in Finsterwald's dream as soon as you pressed for the entrapment of Chief Pinkerton, things changed, the alleyway was no longer a *cul-de-sac*."

Kate chipped in, "That's right! Finsterwald went through a door that magically appeared behind him!"

Easton wasn't so sure. "These things happen in dreams. Dogs are bigger than houses. People are trapped in match boxes."

Gary pressed him. "Look, Max, what happened after he went through the door?"

"The boy called to him in what he thought was his own voice."

"And then?"

Kate said, "Then it was weight lifter time."

Casimir was confused. "You think the weight lifter is the man in the hooded robe?"

Max shook his head. "I don't know what to think."

Gary spoke up, "Look, every time we push for entrapment, some figure has come from somewhere and seems to be bent on rescuing whoever we're trying to trap."

Easton walked to the tank and regarded it thoughtfully. "What you're saying, Gary, is that there are people on the other side, that they are intelligent, and that they try to rescue their own."

"Call it a theory," Gary said, " a gut thing."

"I'm not criticizing," Max replied, moving to a stool and hoisting himself up to sit on it. "What we really need now is some plan, some way to proceed, to go on, to make the project fail-safe. I don't want to lose anybody else."

Kate said, "Maybe Ralph's death was a fluke."

"Maybe," Easton rejoined. "Maybe not. It's the maybe not that I'm worried about."

Casimir asked, "What are we going to do with the thing in the tank?"

Easton shook his head. "I don't know. I've thought about shutting off the life-support system, but that wouldn't accomplish anything."

"The thing in the tank's the only clue we've got," said Kate. "Even if it's only half there."

"Could the other half have died with Ralph?" Gary offered.

Kate turned to look at him with sudden zeal. "If it did, then part of Finsterwald is still inside the tank. If not, then the other half is floating around somewhere. And I'd like to know where that somewhere is. Not only that, I'd love to trap something else in there. A whole entity this time."

In the end they almost abandoned doing anything at all because Max could not bring himself to ask any of them to be guinea pigs again. "I don't want any more victims. I can't ask any of you to risk your lives."

"Look, Max," Kate said, "it's something that has to be done."

Gary said, "Scientists have been risking their lives since the first experiment, whatever it was, probably with fire. We can't stop now."

"No," Max said. "I can't ask you to do it."

Sam was disbelieving, "You really mean to abandon the project?"

"No, I mean to be the guinea pig myself. That way I won't have any misgivings or any feelings of guilt."

They all began talking at once telling him they would not stand for that, he was the project chief, he was running Ephialtes, he was the one giving the orders.

"Look," he said, "I believe in the project and I'd like you all to continue in it with me and thanks for all you're saying, but I want each of you to know you're free to go, to transfer out to some other department of Meta. It would be without prejudice and with my recommendations. I'll sign the papers myself and I'll understand. So will everybody else."

Casimir said, "I know how you feel, Max. So okay, there are a lot of

unknowns, so there are a lot of dangers, so let's get on with it!"

"If I went home right now," Sam said, "and I made out papers for a transfer, I wouldn't be able to look myself in the eye in a mirror ever again."

Kate spoke impatiently, "I think we ought to continue the way we were, and if there's any doubts about where I stand on things, I'm willing to be the first dreamer."

Each wanted to be the first to lie on the ebony table. It finally came down to working things out on the lab computer. During the coffee break Max said, "It still bothers me that somebody is going to be risking his or her life on the table."

"We've all done it before," Gary answered. "We've come back. That's why I'm going to be first."

"Not on your life," Kate chimed in, her chin jutting out, her eyes flashing. "I was first to volunteer and you're still new to the project. I'm first and that's that. Isn't that right, Max?"

They didn't decide by computer or by seniority or by design or wishes or anything scientific. They decided in one of the oldest ways decisions have been made since the beginning of time: they decided by straws.

And of course Kate drew the shortest straw.

She would be followed by Sam, then Gary and then Casimir. If they needed another dreamer, there would be Max. He'd picked the longest straw.

Kate was happy with the way it had gone: they'd made preparations for the next day, and then Gary took her out to dinner. She insisted it be Dutch because, she said playfully, she didn't want to be beholden to anybody.

"You can buy mine," Gary said. "I wouldn't mind being beholden to you."

She peered at him. "Hey, what's wrong? I just meant that as a joke."

"I know." He didn't see any reason to hide how he felt. "I just don't like your being on the ebony table, that's all."

"The table trip?" She was surprised and looked at him for a long moment before she put a hand on either side of his head and kissed him. "You're worried about me. Maybe I should let you buy my dinner after all. It would be such a pleasure paying you back—because I intend to come back." She looked steadily into his eyes. "I saw how it was with you this afternoon."

"It just suddenly dawned on me what it meant," he confessed. "I wouldn't want you to go like Ralph."

"*You* wouldn't! How about me? You think I would want to?" She leaned back in her chair and said rather harshly, "I'm not about ready to let Ralph die for nothing. Whoever handles the methylphenidate is going to have to be right there at the first sign of trouble. I'm not being heroic, I just want us to get on with it." Then she softened, leaned forward and looked down at her salad. "I want you to know something, Gary. I'd feel the same way if you were going to be the first to jump up on the ebony table."

"Then you understand. I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you, Kate."

"Me either," she said with an attempt at a laugh.

Then she put a hand on his. "Now, not another word, okay? We've covered the ground enough. On with our salads." She plunged her fork into her lettuce.

In the morning, Kate lay on the table, nervously awaiting the injection.

When everything was ready, with Sam at the console and Casimir handling the monitors, Gary injected the trinopterine. Easton started the holograph recording.

Kate drifted toward sleep quickly, the electrical pattern of her brain changing. Gary watched the volleys of slow, large-amplitude alpha waves appear on the EEG monitor, to be followed by a downward shift to sleep

spindles, the loose, jagged patterns very pronounced. She was in Stage 2. Quickly the EEG picture changed to great peaks and valleys. Kathleen's blood pressure dropped, her heart rate went from 70 to 52, her body temperature from 98.6 to 95.

Then came the slow waves. Stage 4. And finally the paradoxical sleep they wanted: Fast EEG activity, loss of muscle tone, doubled blood volume in the brain, heart rate increase, erratic blood pressure, stress hormones evident, fatty acid level up.

Kathleen's eyes beneath her closed lids began darting about frantically.

Gary slipped into his helmet monitor and saw what the others had been following. Kathleen was at a beach, it was a sunny day, and she was on one blanket talking animatedly to a young man on another blanket nearby. The sky kept changing colors, and the ocean was sometimes smooth, sometimes rough. There were a few other people on the beach but Kathleen didn't have eyes for them. She was interested in the young man who was wearing white trunks. She wanted to move over to him, onto his blanket, but she was too shy to suggest it.

Gary could understand why her heart was beating so fast and why her blood pressure was so erratic. It was ridiculous of him, he knew, but he was feeling jealousy, though he knew the young man was merely a dream person.

Kathleen's attention was jerked away from the young man by a cry from the waves. It was a girl, a young girl, and she was calling for help. Kathleen became very frightened, got up and ran toward the ocean, the young man calling after her in alarm.

She dashed into the waves. The girl who'd been crying for help was nowhere to be seen. Kathleen dove beneath the waves and touched flesh. It was the girl. She brought her to the surface, struggling for air. She started for shore with her.

Just as Kathleen pulled the girl out of the water, Easton called, "Shunt!" and punched the mechanism for it.

Nothing happened. In the dream the young man came over. Kathleen was giving the girl artificial respiration. The young man ran off for help. The girl Kathleen had rescued began to stir.

Later, when they evaluated the dream, they learned something they thought was significant.

"I thought surely the hooded figure would come running," Gary said. "I had the stimulant ready if he had."

Easton shook his head. "I don't understand it. Why should the shunt get a reaction one time and not another? We've increased the power."

Everyone thought about it but initially nobody had the answer. Then, suddenly, Kathleen brightened and said, "I know why the girl didn't react!" She shook her head. "How dumb can you get! That girl was my sister, Agnes, and I was reliving an episode. It wasn't exactly like that—it was a lake and there was a dam—but once I did rescue my sister from drowning."

Casimir said, "But the girl in the dream, even if she was your sister, should have reacted to the shunt."

"No, don't you see? My sister is still alive. She *couldn't* have been shunted here to the colloid tank."

Easton frowned. "Then you are saying that if we dream about people who are alive, they can't be trapped in the tank?"

Kathleen shrugged. "I don't know, but can you think of any other explanation?" She looked around.

Nobody could.

CHAPTER EIGHT

After a break for coffee, Sam Nevis took his turn on the dream table. Sam, who was a lean, highly strung man with eyes that missed nothing and a reaction time that had always amazed them all because it was so short, told Gary to give him a little more trinopterine than normal.

"The way I have it figured out, maybe with more dream juice I'll come upon that girl in the tunic."

Easton said he didn't think this would occur no matter how much T.O.T. he'd be given. "Dreams are individual. You'll probably dream about the old swimming hole you're always talking about."

The truth was that Sam did dream about his childhood much of the time. It was a happy period for him and he went running through fields of clover, playing baseball, helping with chores at the farm, and hunting squirrels with his buddies. In the evaluations it was agreed that Sam's dreams were boring.

"Well," Sam had said, clearly miffed, "everybody can't be bizarre. As a matter of fact, I think my dreams indicate that I'm the only undisturbed person on this team."

"Ha!" Kate snorted. "Yours are the most bizarre dreams of all, they're so unexciting. Who ever heard of dreaming about an old baseball game? Didn't you ever do anything exciting in your life?"

"Not until after puberty," Sam said nastily, which shut Kate up.

Sam went under quickly, his vital signs remaining stable, though his blood pressure soon went up twenty points systolic and ten points diastolic.

Gary put on the helmet at that point to find Sam dreaming he was in his lab getting a call from the Nobel Prize committee.

"The Prize?" Sam said with elaborate indifference while a host of co-workers stood around admiring him. "What work did I get the Prize for?"

"The discovery of the cure for cancer. There was no question, Dr. Nevis, you were the leading contender for physiology and medicine."

"Oh, that," Sam said loftily. "That was my project last year." His co-workers nodded their approval. "Just wait until the committee learns my latest triumph. Wait till I perfect what I'm working on now."

The caller didn't ask what it was; he just told him to be in Stockholm to pick up the prize, and in a flash there was Sam Nevis dressed as they'd never seen him dressed before, making his acceptance speech. All of his co-workers attended and applauded at the end of his talk.

"This is as boring as the baseball game," Kate said.

"Wait," Max said in a tense voice.

Then Gary saw why. The girl in the tunic was there, the girl with the delicate features in the printed sky-blue silk. She was barefoot, carrying in her hand hemp sandals with black lace ties. Her long blonde hair wafted about in the breeze, though nobody else's hair was being wafted about. The girl was sitting to one side, and when Sam looked at her, she smiled fetchingly.

"Hello, there," Sam said.

Gary could feel the attraction. It was like a warm magnetic oven.

"Well," Kate said huffily from beneath her helmet, "there goes your girl, Gary."

"Evidently she's not my girl," Gary said.

"We women are a fickle lot."

Easton said sternly, "Let's have it quiet."

The girl got up and approached the podium. Sam stepped down to meet her. The girl did not join him but kept a wary distance. She crooked a finger at him. Sam followed.

"Where are we going?" Sam inquired, delighted at the prospect.

"You'll see," the girl said, her voice full of promise.

Those monitoring the dream shifted uneasily in their positions. Sam tried to keep up with the girl, but she walked faster than he did out of the hall. People turned to watch them, curious, pleased, thinking it was love.

"Not so fast," Sam said when he was outside. He made a desperate attempt to reach her. When he was within touching distance, Easton cried out, "Shunt!" and pressed for colloid entrapment; the red light over the console flashed.

The girl in the tunic turned, shuddering, her face full of fear. Then she angrily bared her teeth and seemed to be having a terrible struggle freeing

herself from the cone of influence. She opened her mouth and Gary thought she was going to cry out, but then she—spit at Sam.

The spittle struck a surprised Sam Nevis. He stopped in his tracks and looked after her as she turned and ran off as a woman would run, which Gary thought was prettily, with sum, long legs flashing, body graceful and hair flying.

Max ordered the methylphenidate and Gary administered it to Sam immediately.

Sam was as surprised as the rest of them that he had dreamed about the girl in the tunic. "I know I joked about it before the dream, but I really didn't expect to do so."

"Well, Max," Kate said, "it seems you're wrong."

"In what way?"

"Dreams aren't individualistic."

Gary had to agree. "The girl is proof of that."

"I wouldn't be too sure," Casimir said. "I don't think Sam would have dreamed about the girl if he hadn't first witnessed Gary's dream. She's such a unique dream creature it doesn't surprise me a bit. I don't think you could take somebody off the street and put him on the table and expect him to dream about the girl."

Max was thoughtful for a while. Then he said, "There is something wrong here."

"What's that?" Gary asked.

"The girl," Max said. "She was too perfect in every detail. People don't see things in the same way."

"Here we go," Kate sighed heavily. "Individualism again."

"And then there's something else." Max looked at their blank stares. "Evidently nobody saw it."

"Saw it?" Kate said. "Saw what?"

Max got up and moved to the console to set the adjustments. "Let's go to evaluation. Maybe I'm just imagining things."

So they ran Sam's dream again and even when Max stop-framed it they didn't see it at first. Then Gary uttered a harsh cry and said, "The hooded man! That grove of trees. Just to the right of it."

It was just after Sam had taken his leave of the awards hall and was pursuing the girl. Nobody had taken the time to look at the surroundings except Max, but now that Gary mentioned it, they saw it. To the left of Sam, in the far distance, was a grove of trees that could have been olives or cherries or even bushes. And to the right of it—no mistake about it: *There stood the hooded man.*

Kate gasped and delivered another shock. "Look there!"

"Where?"

"Behind the trees—barely visible— isn't that the other half of our thing in the tank?"

It was hard to make out. Lighting conditions weren't that good. When the creature was caught on film, there was a grainy effect in stop-frame that prohibited recognition, though the illusion was there when Easton caused the tape to be run forward and then backward at that point. There was a hazy something there and it did look very much like part of a weight lifter.

Easton rubbed his forehead. "Maybe we're purblind. We're seeing what we want to see."

Kathleen was aghast. "You think the others are responding to my suggestion?"

"I don't know what to think," Easton said miserably. "At this point I even wonder why I started this project." Then he gathered himself together. "No. Forget I said that. I'm just tired, that's all. Who's next?"

"I am," Gary said grimly.

"Be careful, darling," Kate said as she gave Gary the trinopterine injection.

Before Gary could be surprised, he found himself sinking into a morass of recollections and colors and designs, all of them swirling and beautiful. At first they were chaotic, but then they began to slow down.

Finally, it was dark. Peaceful.

Then it was cold. He wrapped his thick coat around him and walked along the edge of the lake. The sky was clear for January, which only made Lake Michigan seem colder. Because the sky was clear and the sun was shining it looked like summer in Chicago.

He kicked at the sand, but it was hard-packed, frozen from recent melted snow and rain, and he hurt his toe. The wind roared from the Loop toward him and he wondered how that could be, with all the buildings there to stop it. It froze his ears, his hands were numbing, and his feet felt like cakes of ice. He could see his breath three feet in front of him as one giant plume.

"Hello."

He looked. There, seated on one of the park benches at lakeside was the girl in the sheer tunic. He'd always wondered who she was, and looking at her, the way she looked at him, so inviting and warm, he knew he was going to find out.

"Do you always go walking around the lake like this?" She laughed and added, "I don't mean around the whole lake."

He said nothing. He didn't even notice that it was a cold January and her breath did not make a plume. She crossed her bare slim legs attractively and patted the bench beside her. "Come and sit down." She reminded him of someone he knew. Was she Lee Remick? Marilyn Monroe? She should have been.

He walked toward her and sat on the bench feeling very warm but not saying anything. Everything was moving slowly. She moved closer to him and together they looked out at the lake with its ice crusts and foam. There were bushes nearby, but Gary wasn't thinking about them. He was thinking about the girl. The picnic he'd left was right down the beach, and

if his friends found out he'd deserted them for this girl, he'd be in trouble. He started to get up.

"Don't go." He felt her hand on his arm.

"Shunt!"

Gary had no idea where the word came from. It must have frightened the girl because she was crawling away on her back, shoving with her feet, her face fierce, snarling.

He looked up just in time to see the hooded man running toward him from the lake. He had no sooner wondered about him than the weight lifter—what was left of him—rushed out of the bushes toward him, his single eye blazing ferociously.

"Bring him back!"

Everything faded.

ALEPPO

I, Aleppo, have followed Ronsard into Privacy. It is forbidden to seek out those in Privacy, but Ronsard was in trouble and I did not want him to have to face that trouble alone. I ignore the fact that he is only a half-Being. I try not to think of him as hideous, which he is. It is dangerous, what we Volunteers must do, but how else are We to cope with the menace facing Us? We cannot sit back and let humans ruin what We have.

When Ruaha returns it will be done, the peril to Us will have been erased, and he will be able only to congratulate the Volunteers for cleaning muddy waters. The Consciousness Pool must be pure forever.

When I reached Privacy, I found Adrea with Ronsard, which surprised me. I had for the moment forgotten that they were lovers, though in the Consciousness Pool one cannot be the lover of another in a carnal sense. But they love in a Being way, attuned and sharing vibrations in a manner that Ruaha says should be the goal of Us all. For myself, I was never one for such things. It has been difficult for me to adjust to being civil when in my flesh and blood life the scimitar ruled. They say that humans have loved like Ronsard and Adrea in what passes

for life for them and that this is called spiritual love. That may be. I do not understand it when I hear them say that it is a pity I have never known it.

Adrea did not announce her decision for Privacy, which is why I was surprised to see her with Ronsard, but she told me that she did not want to draw attention to herself and that she hoped she would not be missed. She wasn't. A Being can move to Privacy without fanfare but might be missed at the first attempt at contact in the Pool.

I, Aleppo, Ronsard and Adrea have cut off all contact with the Pool, though we will still participate in dream adventures together. We hope to complete our Volunteer mission before Ruaha returns because he would be angered by our being absent from the others.

Our task was clear. Stop the humans. Do not let them intrude on Us. First we saw that one of the humans, Kathleen by name, was in a dream state. She was talking to one of Us, a Being none of us knew, on a blanket, and there was a girl in the water. The girl was not one of Us but rather a projection of Kathleen's memory; she was, we discovered, Kathleen's sister. We hurried toward her on the beach but we were too late, for even as we hurried we felt the grappling force where we were. When Kathleen rescued the girl and left us for her life form and was no longer out-of-body, the Being on the blanket returned to the Consciousness Pool for his next adventure, the scene was dissolved and we were forced to return to limbo, an empty place, which is what Privacy is all about. It is different from returning to Us.

The next creation by one of the dreamers was the Concert Hall in Stockholm. Sam Nevis, a colleague of Kathleen Keegan's, was the subject. (It is expressly forbidden to interfere in any way with human life, but since we three Volunteers are trying to recover the rest of Ronsard, and since humans have interfered with Us and Our Beingness, we feel we are doing no wrong by prying into their minds even though the We of the Consciousness Pool would report us at once if they knew and action would be taken against us.)

This Sam dreamed he was being awarded a Nobel Prize, so Adrea wanted to sit in the Concert Hall and entice him outside where we three might hold him and learn something about what happened to Ronsard's other half.

Adrea was successful in this. I was standing near a grove of trees and Ronsard was standing as best he could (my heart cries out for Ronsard!) behind the trees, not wanting to frighten the human. But then a terrible thing happened; before Adrea could draw any information from Sam or enter his mind for information search, the horrible grappling force began to exert its pull, nearly sucking Adrea from us, or part of her, as was the case with Ronsard.

Adrea became angry, bared her teeth and slid away successfully, but the dream was dissolved and we once again returned to the nothingness of limbo.

Then another human, a Gary Carmody, a friend of Sam's (how many do they have working on this?) who came dreaming out-of-body, creating Chicago's lake front with his subconscious.

Adrea gritted her teeth and took a seat on a bench near the human. She was successful in luring Gary to her side. Poor Adrea! Just as she was beginning her probe of him the frightful grappling force slammed into her once again.

I was down the shore where I had materialized and had started toward them, ready to pull Adrea away from the clutches, when Ronsard, who was nearer, left his cover to run toward the man, Gary. He would have killed him had he reached him. As it was, as soon as he started for this human who, along with the others, is wrecking the world of the Beings, the dream evaporated, the scene vanished, and we became incorporeal and fell into oblivion again. It is at times like this that we regret having left the Consciousness Pool. But good soldiers that we are, we know it is the only way to victory.

There are many questions we ask each other. What are these humans trying to do? Why do they try to wrench us (and the Us in the Pool) from where we are? Why can't they let us alone, and by that I mean not only us, but the Us in the Pool. And, are there to be more humans coming this way to do this?

We are not fast enough, we Volunteers. We are too sluggish to respond when we first enter their dreams. We must speed up. If we are to kill them, one by one, we must act before they do.

CHAPTER NINE

They replayed and evaluated Gary's dream, and then they discussed it in the lab, in the lounge, and outside in the bright noon sun.

Early on, Easton said, "Well, does anyone need more proof?"

"But what exactly does it prove?" Kate asked. "Gary could as easily have been influenced by Sam's dream as Sam might have been influenced by his. So they all see the dream figures, the same ones. It's like a *folie a deux*, where one psychosis breeds an identical one. Happens in families all the time."

"I don't like it," Max said.

"Who says we have to like it?"

"It doesn't matter," Casimir said, "because I don't think that's it. It would be too coincidental, everybody dreaming about the same people and each person seeing the dream people the same way, all dressed alike, all having the same bodily proportions. If it were true that it were a *folie a deux* or *trois* or *quatre* or what have you, then we'd all be repeating dreams or orchestrating them with people from others' dreams."

They were in the lounge at that point, sitting there trying to eat sandwiches, considering it and succeeding only in becoming more moody with the effort.

Finally, Easton said, "I think the girl, the hooded man and what remains of the weight lifter are intelligent dream creatures." Then he shook his head. "No, I don't really mean that. Let me put it another way. Let me merely suggest that we *presume* that they are."

"Okay," Kate said, snapping her fingers. "*Voilà!* So they are. Now what?"

"What are they after?" Gary posed quizzically.

Sam asked, "You want to give them hungers like we have?"

"Intellectual ones, maybe," Max answered.

"Like we hunger for truth," Casimir said dryly.

"If that is what we do," Kate added. Then she said brightly, "Is it, Doctor?"

Easton said gravely that he certainly hoped so.

When they were out on the lawn, the dream lab seemed unreal and far away. Gary wished they could have done with it so that he and Kathleen could go away somewhere, forget the project, and make love. He turned to look at her as if to reassure himself she was worth all he felt she was, only to find her looking at him. She smiled.

"All right, love birds," Sam said. "Come back to the problem. The way you two moon around after each other is very unscientific."

"Love," Kate said, "is unscientific."

"How about love for science?" Casimir asked.

Easton said, "What I would like to know is how the weight lifter can function in a dream when he's only half there."

Gary said, "Anything's possible in a dream. We've all said that often enough. It's a merry-go-round."

"So where do we go from here?" asked Kate, getting up and stretching.

"We go to me," Casimir said.

"Oh, so now *you've* got the answer," Kathleen said. "Let's hear it."

"I didn't mean that. I mean I'm the next candidate for the ebony table."

Max said glumly that it looked to him as if the weight lifter had come after Gary with murder in his one remaining eye. "Are you sure you want to be exposed to that?"

"Frankly,' no," Casimir said. Then he laughed, albeit a little nervously. "I intend to dream about life in Tahiti and be attended to by a dozen dusky maidens."

Then they all laughed because none of them could picture the balding Casimir Javanovski, the heavy-set researcher with the thick-lensed glasses being waited on hand-and-foot by a girl in a sarong.

"I can't imagine it," Kathleen said, "but I suppose it is possible."

"Don't misjudge him," Sam said. "I know Casimir Javanovski better than any of you and he has a way with dusky maidens."

"Listen," Casimir said, turning to Sam, "I don't want you giving away any of my secrets."

"Give them away?" Sam wailed. "I've been trying to learn what they are!"

It didn't take long for Casimir to reach a hypnogogic state between wakefulness and sleep, and already Gary and the others could see with him the rookery and feel the danger there. The researchers could wonder why there should be danger in such a place but Casimir, who was having the dream, had no such option.

Then Casimir was in a deep sleep and dreaming that he was entering the heronry, hearing the cries as the big birds left their nests high in the trees to fly up into the bright blue of day, sun flashing on their wings.

"This isn't Tahiti," Kathleen said so the others could hear.

Sam nodded. "It's a disappointment. No dusky maidens either."

"I'd prefer quiet," Easton said. "If that's possible."

They quieted and Casimir walked into the cool, dank woods feeling relaxed and not at all afraid now, the 12-gauge shotgun cradled in his arms, though he'd never hunted. He came upon a man in a bright red vest and a derby hat sitting on a stump chewing herring while birds wheeled and cried overhead.

"Strange," Sam said.

The man looked up at Casimir and said, "Go back, go back," shaking his head.

Casimir blinked at him. "Go back where?"

"Anywhere but here," the man said, chomping on the herring and

biting off two of his fingers in the process. He began looking around on the forest floor for them.

"Really wild," Sam said. "He's never had a dream like this."

"Reaction formation," Max Easton said. "He was really afraid all along, only he wouldn't tell us."

"That's Casimir for you," Sam said.

Casimir walked on. A giant blue heron swooped down out of the sky, nearly hitting the branches of the trees, and made a perfect two-footed landing on a long log a few yards in front of him, preening and nibbling at its wing feathers as Casimir approached.

"This is better than Disney," Kathleen said.

"Shh!" Max admonished.

The heron said, "You don't listen, do you?"

Casimir stared.

The heron continued: "You really should have listened, you know."

Casimir laughed, but it was a mirthless laugh. The bird gave him a withering look and took off, crying, "You'll be sorry," over and over again until it was out of sight.

The path curved this way and that. It was all very beautiful, Gary thought, every part of it: the sculptured trees green with life, the lush ripeness of the bushes, the whirling, chattering, many-colored birds.

"You could have trapped the heron," Kate said. "Maybe he likes Swiss cheese weight lifters."

"Jokes," Sam said, "we can do without."

Casimir seemed to float on his feet along the path. The trees were thinning out though they were bigger and taller and had begun whispering, "Go back."

"He's really talking to himself when these things talk to him," Easton

said.

Casimir clutched his gun more firmly.

"Why the gun?" Kate asked. "He's not the violent type."

"I don't think he's ever hunted," Sam said. "It must be a dream symbol."

Casimir saw a bright, sunlit meadow beyond the edge of the woods. He decided he'd stop there in the sunlight.

It was at that moment he saw the weight lifter move to stand in the sun and he froze where he was.

The researchers who sat under their helmets watching the dream now stiffened. Easton reached for the shunt control.

They looked with Casimir at the missing parts of the weight lifter—all of them.

The weight lifter did not move but stood quietly, his face twisted grotesquely, only half there, one-armed, one-eyed and one-legged. Casimir could look through parts of him.

Neither of them moved for a long moment.

Then, with a whistling sound through the orifice that passed for a mouth, the weight lifter started jumping on his foot toward him.

In the far background the girl in the tunic and the hooded figure were running hard across the meadow toward them. It was becoming unbearably hot.

Casimir lifted the gun and fired both barrels. The shots went clear through the weight lifter without leaving a mark. They could have reached the running figures in the background; if they did, they did not stop them.

The weight lifter growled and gnashed what few teeth he had.

Casimir, really frightened now, turned and ran.

"Pulse up," Sam said. "One hundred and twenty."

Casimir had never been so winded in his life. The air whistled past his ears as he ran. But he could hear the *thump-thump-thump* of the weight lifter's leg behind him.

"Should I bring him back?" Gary asked, opening his eyes and turning to Easton.

"I want the weight lifter," Max said.

Gary returned to the dream just as Casimir was grabbed around the neck by the weight lifter's one arm.

"Shunt!" Easton shouted, punching the control and getting out from under the helmet. "Revive!" Gary saw that Casimir had fallen to the ground with the weight lifter and was having difficulty getting his breath. He lifted the helmet and rushed to the ebony table where Casimir was thrashing around. Kathleen caught and held his feet. Easton tried to steady his head. Gary sent the needle home and pushed the plunger. The methylphenidate disappeared into Casimir.

"Wake up!" Easton said, taking away the probe helmet and slapping the man's face. "Wake up, Casimir!"

Sam came up, his eyes round with fear when he saw the way Casimir's eyes were bugging out. Casimir was beginning to turn purple, his tongue protruding.

Easton punched an emergency button and within a few seconds the dream laboratory was full of technicians and emergency personnel who began resuscitation.

Casimir tried to get imaginary hands away from his throat. He struggled valiantly, but in the end he lost.

Easton and his group stood helplessly by while Casimir's life slipped away with squeaks and groans until at last he was still, an empty hulk on the ebony table.

Sam approached his friend. Casimir's eyes were open but unseeing. Sam said, "Casimir?" Sam seemed possessed of some idea that he might bring the man back to life. He shook him. "Casimir?"

"It's no use," Max said gently, moving to Sam, putting a hand on either shoulder.

Tears began to course down Sam's face.

Kate turned away. Gary took her in his arms and comforted her as she began to sob.

It was a terrible thing they were doing, Gary thought, putting talented men on an ebony table and killing them. Why? Was science worth this? What did it matter what was in the mind or on the other side of it or beyond life? What did it matter about the dream world and who or what populated it if it took the lives of good men like Ralph Finsterwald and Casimir Javanovski to find out?

Suddenly Gary felt Kate stiffen in his arms. Then she drew away, and he saw the horror in her eyes. She was looking beyond him. He turned and saw it, too.

The weight lifter—the *whole* weight lifter—was in the colloid tank, but he wasn't just turning slowly over and over and twisting.

He was watching them. His face was pressed against the glass of the tank and his eyes were filled with mad ferocity, his muscles straining.

As one they moved to the tank and stared at the creature there. Sparkles flew around the hulking hardiness of the big man, and there was deep hate in his eyes as he looked at them. Abruptly he slammed a hand against the tempered glass of the tank, but the researchers heard nothing. The force of the blow sent the weight lifter rolling backward, end over end, like a pig on a spit.

"He's—hideous!" Kathleen said in revulsion. Sam balled his fists. "He's what killed Casimir."

"And Finsterwald," Gary said. Sam turned to Easton. "Why? Is this what they do?"

"What who do?"

"These—these creatures."

Max said quietly, "I don't know."

Suddenly the weight lifter turned and moved toward them like a swimmer, uttering a hoarse cry they could not hear, baring his teeth, his arms extended to take Sam who stood nearest the tank, only to crash into the opaque glass barrier limit like a fish in a tank.

Gary was sickened by the sight of the man. From whence had he come? From out of the brain of Finsterwald? Then how could he have been conjured up by the rest of them? Were such dark creatures hidden deep within the recesses of every man's brain?

"I think it should be exterminated," Sam said tightly.

"No," Easton said. "I hate him as much as you do because of what he's done to our colleagues, but we would lose everything if we destroyed him."

The weight lifter snarled, clawed and bared his teeth like some feral beast in the tank, trying to get at them.

Kathleen could not stand looking at the thing. She turned away. Gary went to her and put his arm around her. They avoided looking at Casimir who remained on the ebony slab and went out into the lounge where Kathleen drew a deep breath. "I didn't know it was going to be like this," she said, with a shudder.

"Neither did I."

She sat down in one of the chairs, sinking deep into the cushions and saying gloomily, "I wonder what happens now."

"We're always wondering that. I suppose now we'll have to go through the thing with Cassoit."

Kathleen said, "Maybe he'll stop the project."

"Do you want the project stopped?"

"I don't want any more of us to die."

"What about the weight lifter?"

"The thing in there?" She looked at him. "The scientist in me says we've

had some kind of breakthrough, but with what's happened I don't care much about it any more."

"Maybe Cassoit will see it that way, too."

Just then Easton came out of the lab with Sam Nevis. "The morgue people will be here shortly. In the meantime I think we all ought to go home."

"Will there be an inquiry?" Kathleen asked redundantly.

Max nodded. "In the morning."

Gary said, "Cassoit?"

"None other."

ALEPPO

Ronsard lives. That much I, Aleppo, know. But where he lives, I do not know. His presence, held to Adrea and to me by a thin thread of knowing consciousness, tells us he is alive, but that is all.

At least they have not killed him.

Perhaps Ronsard was too eager to kill and for that reason they have him, these human scientists, if they do have him. (But what else would he be except a victim of the grappling hook these humans have constructed to reach into our world?)

It is heartening in one way that Ronsard is alive, for that means he is all of a piece and himself again. If we were not in Privacy, Adrea and I, Aleppo, we might search out the man, Ralph Finsterwald, who must be somewhere in the Consciousness Pool. He is new, of course, and does not yet know what his capabilities are or even where he is. Some who enter the Pool are satisfied merely to be and do nothing. Others spend eternity locked into thinking large thoughts. Then there are those of Us who live again through dreams. And still others who become Volunteers to police the frontiers between the human world and the Pool world.

The way things are, Ruaha will be angry with us when he returns. That is why we must put an end to all this soon. Ruaha has always

preferred peace and coexistence and becomes recharged by entering human dreams, for We feed off humans in their dreams, removing poisons from their minds. If We did not do this, humans would go mad, Ruaha has said. But that is no reason for humans to try to get closer to Us.

The lamb is shorn. The wool clothes men. Well do I remember how each thing lives off another, how in my life as a human I saw the worms that produced the silk and then I saw how cottons were made into textiled things, how hides were used and how fruit fed so many and provided such sweet tastes. So everything has its purpose, the humans have theirs and We have Ours. Ruaha has said this and it is true.

What Adrea and I, Aleppo, fear is that we might have disturbed the delicate balance that Ruaha always spoke of. Adrea and I would have been satisfied to gently probe the humans who left their bodies to dream, but Ronsard did not see it that way. He was in pain—oh, not the pain that goes with life as humans live it but with psychic pain for being halved. And so, to end that pain, he killed. I, Aleppo, believe this, as does Adrea.

We kill, it is true. Sometimes it is better to kill some human nearing the end. But Ronsard's killings were out of balance, Adrea says. She says the young men he killed were in good health, they were dedicated and they were only trying to explore a new world.

I, Aleppo, am not that generous. I view them as invaders. I have told Adrea that as a Volunteer she must see it this way and now she does. In Our history there have been times when murder was the only way out. This is the way Ronsard felt. That is the way I, Aleppo, feel.

If Ronsard is together again, then we must find a way to return him whole to the Consciousness Pool. If we can do that, then we can perhaps forgive those who have been trying to penetrate the barrier. If we can do that, then Adrea and I will return to Us.

Perhaps they will send Ronsard back to Us and give up their probes and grappings. The Pool Beings could once more go back to the existence they had without fear. We Volunteers would continue to patrol the barriers.

If they do not send Ronsard back to Us... I dare not think of that.

Neither Adrea nor I, Aleppo, would stand idly by to let Our world be violated.

Ruaha says that humans are capable of deep thoughts and from what We have seen of them, we can agree, Adrea and I.

If I could warn men, I would. But surely, haven't they been warned enough by Ronsard's acts?

CHAPTER TEN

Gary Carmody sat on the moon. He was viewing the lunarscape and thinking how forbidding it was: no warmth, just silver and black—dust, rocks, craters and holes.

"Aren't you interested in who we are?" the girl asked, moving around so that Gary was forced to look at her. She was wearing a beautiful turquoise tunic that stopped just above the knees and was belted at the waist. She had pretty knees, pretty eyes, pretty teeth. "My name is Adrea." She turned her shapely head, her blonde hair flowing slow-motion as in a television commercial. "And this is Aleppo." She looked back to Gary and made a provocative pout with her mouth. "Can't we be friends, Gary?"

Gary felt a sudden renewed flush of attraction for Adrea and it discomfited him. It wasn't as if they were alone. There was the hooded man she said was Aleppo and he was there to spoil things. All he could think of to say was, "Where are your sandals?"

"On my feet, darling sweetheart." She laughed. Her laugh was silvery and delightful. It caused goose bumps to rise on Gary's arms.

It was true. Adrea's sandals were on her feet.

"Look my friend," Aleppo said. Gary could see his face. It was a fleshy face, dark and oily, and the eyes were dark and flashing. "Where is Ronsard?"

Gary thought it was very nice of these two people to come with him to the moon. Otherwise he'd have been very lonely.

"Ronsard," Adrea said, "is a weight lifter, a strong man by profession.

Your people captured him."

"It was nice of you," Gary said, flushing again. His face felt as red as a beet. "Nice of you to come here."

"Careful," Aleppo said to Adrea. "He might slip away, invent some other environment, make it more difficult."

Adrea moved to him, slipped an arm around Gary and nuzzled his neck. Now goose pimples were forming everywhere and blood was racing to his head and his hands and his feet. He would have loved to take the girl in his arms, but there was Aleppo to contend with.

"Tell us where the strong man is, the one you captured half of a while ago and the other half recently."

Gary thought this girl was the most attractive woman he had ever seen. He could feel the heat from her body. She was running hands over him. He was beginning to sweat.

Aleppo came close to look into his eyes. "I, Aleppo, ask you: Where is Ronsard?"

When Gary did not reply because he was held spellbound by the fire in the man's eyes, Adrea said, "Suppose he tells us? What good will it do?"

"If we can reach Ronsard where he is, perhaps we can explore some way to bring him back to us." The hooded man's eyes bored into Gary's. Gary felt ice forming inside his skull. Aleppo said, "I've gone in and now I have it." He turned to Adrea. "Ronsard is in a thing called a colloid tank in a place called the Meta Complex in Los Angeles, California."

"You went in?" Adrea was concerned.

"How else were we to get the information? You know how people are. In their dreams nothing makes sense. It was the only way." Aleppo moved away from Gary.

"I hope Ruaha will understand."

"I am more concerned about Ronsard than I am about Ruaha at this moment."

"That would make Ruaha very unhappy."

Aleppo turned to her. "Don't you want Ronsard back among us? Don't you want him returned to you?"

"Oh, yes!"

"I am doing this for you, too, Adrea."

Adrea was no longer sitting beside Gary on a rock, Gary realized. She was at Aleppo's side. "I appreciate it, Aleppo, I really do."

Gary tried to get to his feet but he seemed rooted where he was. Adrea and Aleppo turned to him. Aleppo said to her, "You see how they are."

She nodded gravely. "That is how they are now, but that is not how they are in life."

"Sometimes they are more in dreams than they are in life because what they are in life is so miserable. You know the kind of dreams they dream."

"Let him go."

The scene wavered, there was a roaring sound, and Gary sat up in his bed, sweat oozing from every pore. The moonscape was still very vivid in his mind, but the two figures were diminishing and becoming indistinct. Had he dreamt of the hooded figure? And the girl—yes, he'd seen the girl, he could recall her with micrometer perfection, and she'd been sitting next to him—on the moon!

Gary got up, shaking his head to try to clear it. The dream was receding. He went to the kitchen of his small apartment and poured himself a glass of milk. Strange what dreams do, he thought. He'd have to tell the others in the morning, the parts he could recall, see what they would think of it.

He nearly dropped the glass he was holding when the telephone rang because it was so unexpected and so shrill.

It was Sam.

"Gary," Sam said, breathing heavily into the mouthpiece.

"What's wrong?" Gary felt his skin prickling. Sam did not sound at all like himself.

"I'm at the lab." Sam was slurring his words. "Could you come down here?"

"Sure, but why? What's happened?"

"Tell you when you get here." There was anguish in Sam's voice. "Got to tell somebody, got to explain. You'll come, won't you, ol' buddy?"

"If you think it's important, Sam."

"As a favor to me."

"What about the others?"

"Just come." Sam hung up.

It could have been a different dream but it wasn't. He still had the glass in his hand and it was cold, the vinyl floor was cool to his feet, and he could feel the milk he'd drunk making its way through his stomach. He quickly downed the rest of the milk and put the glass in the sink, thinking he'd better call Easton, but then thinking it would not be fair to do that until he found out what Sam wanted and what he was doing at the lab.

The phone call had had an ominous tone to it. He looked at the clock before he left the kitchen. It was 2.47 a.m. He went to the bathroom and dashed some cold water on his face and then dressed hurriedly. Maybe he should call Kathleen. He decided there wasn't time.

Gary found Sam in the lab in Easton's chair, his eyes bleary, unshaven, unslept, his head bobbing from all he'd had to drink. He wasn't a pleasant sight, for Sam was taking no joy in what was happening to him. He looked close to tears.

"He's gone," Sam said as Gary came over to him thinking he'd get him up and out into the lounge where he could feed him coffee. What in the world had prompted this behavior? Sam was a solid person, dependable,

and not at all given to such emotional collapse.

It was then that Gary glanced toward the colloid tank and saw that it was empty. He could see clear through it. The weight lifter was not there.

Gary felt shock. He said, "Where is he?" and started to look around thinking that somehow Sam had freed the specter to roam the laboratory.

"I killed him," Sam said. "I turned off the life support system."

Gary turned to Sam. There was a kind of mad hilarity in the researcher's eyes. "I'm not unhappy," Sam said. "He deserved to die. He killed Ralph and he killed Casimir. Two of the best guys you'd ever wanna meet." Sam eyed him unsteadily. "I just pushed for disconnect, and the electronic stuff just faded him out." Then he laughed and said, "You shoulda seen him. Was as if he knew what was happening. He was snarling and clawing and baring his teeth. And then he was surprised. Was he ever surprised!" Sam was silent for a moment, lost in the recollection of it. "Then he just disintegrated and all the sparkles went out of the tank and it became clear like it is now."

"How are you going to explain this to Easton?"

Sam was unhappy about that, "I dunno," he said miserably. "I had to tell someone, though, and so I called you. You've always been a good friend." Sam got to his feet, swaying a little. "That right, ol' chum, ol' buddy?"

There was nothing to be done. Sam had no doubt brooded about the deaths, particularly about Casimir's, and had worked up such a terrible hatred for the creature in the tank that he drank until he had the courage to kill him. It wasn't the kind of thing Gary thought Sam would do but it was done and there was no turning back.

"That's right," Gary said, helping to keep Sam on his feet. He guided him to the door and took him home and put him to bed, Sam babbling away all the while about how terrible the weight lifter was and how much he deserved to die.

When Sam slipped into sleep, Gary picked up the telephone and called Easton and told him what had happened.

ALEPPO

A terrible thing has happened!

Ronsard is gone. He is nowhere in this world or that. He was cut off from Being, snuffed out. Adrea and I were in Privacy when the consciousness we felt that told us he was still alive, winked out.

We immediately returned to the Consciousness Pool and renounced our Privacy. We are once again one of Us and we felt immediately upon our return the reverberations in the Pool as the obliteration of Ronsard was experienced.

What has happened has never happened before to a Being. Since it has happened once, it could happen again.

It must not happen again!

Some foolish Beings say it was bound to happen sooner or later, but the wise ones say such a thing should not have happened at all and should be made not to ever happen again.

Ronsard was still alive when Adrea and I, Aleppo, entered Gary Carmody's dream. I confess we maneuvered the locale to the moon so that there would be no intruders. We found out that Ronsard was being kept in a thing called a colloid tank in a place called the Meta Complex in Los Angeles, California. That I used my special powers to reach in for this information should not be held against me in the current emergency (I am sure Ruaha will see that!) even though I do not know what we might have done with the information. We, Adrea and I, had entered the dream and I reached in for the place and then started to call Ronsard. Then the thin thread that bound him to Us all was broken.

There are those in the Consciousness Pool who do not feel that We Volunteers can handle this, that Ruaha must return, cut short his trip to the Far Reaches. That is their right, but I, Aleppo, as leader of the Volunteers, will not wait for someone else to do the job for which I have Volunteered.

We have talked it over, Adrea and I. She is grief-stricken, as well she might be, for when Ronsard vanished, part of her vanished with him. But she was able to think clearly. What can be done? How can we

prevent human scientists from moving into Our world and taking another of Us and then disintegrating him or her?

We will keep the vigil, We Volunteers. I, Aleppo, will move into the arena, leaving Adrea as rear-guard head of the Volunteers. I will determine what is happening, using what special powers I have.

I will not be reduced, divided or dismembered as Ronsard was. Ronsard did not know what was happening to him and he reacted with rashness rather than brain.

I will be on guard. With my jeweled scimitar I will slay, cut to pieces, any who would diminish me or any of Us in the Consciousness Pool. I will fight to the death the enemy who has destroyed one of Us. In this way I will make it so that the dream people will never again have to fear entering hosts.

We do not need Ruaha when We have Aleppo.

I am Aleppo. I await the moment to move.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gary Carmody lay on the ebony table trying to keep calm but knowing his heart was beating like a jackhammer and that cold sweat was running off him. He was looking into the moist eyes of Kathleen Keegan and that didn't help matters any. She was holding his hand; both their hands were like ice. "I don't want you to do it," she said, and she appeared to be on the edge of tears. Gary did not trust himself to reply. She knew why he was there, why he was doing it, and so did he, and it was the last place he thought he'd ever be, considering the events just prior to the resumption of the experiments.

At this moment his only hope was that he would live through it and that it would not be his last dream as it had been Ralph's and Casimir's. He kept looking at Kate's eyes and he saw the worry and concern there.

"It's time," Max Easton said. "Everything's set."

Sam said stoutly, "We'll be ready for anything, Gary, believe me. Nothing's going to happen to you."

Kate turned away. "I wish I could believe that. With all my heart I wish I could."

"It's okay," Gary said. "I know the risks." Now Kate's eyes were spilling over with tears as she prepared a syringe for the injection. She hesitated, she and Gary locked eyes for the last time, and then the trinopterine coursed through Gary's veins.

His dream began.

Gary had been the first one at the lab the morning after he'd phoned Easton and Easton had phoned the others. When Kate, who was first to arrive after Gary, came in, she embraced Gary, and as she did so she saw the empty tank. "How could he do it?" She walked to the tank then and looked through it. "Sam's always been such a steady guy. Our anchor."

"He went over the edge," Gary said. "He loved Ralph and Casimir. It got to him. He felt he had to do something."

"I know," Kate said. "It got to all of us. But he's destroyed the only evidence we had. Cassoit won't let us proceed now."

When Max came in with Sam, Max said he intended to say nothing about the missing weight lifter at the hearing into Casimir's death. "I won't lie," he said. "I just won't offer anything."

"You don't have to do that for me," Sam said, still looking spaced-out. "I'll take the blame. I'll resign from Meta."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Max said. "You're too good a man to resign. We all hated the thing in the tank. Any of us could have murdered him for what he did."

Sam said gloomily, "But by actually doing it, I blew the project."

Max then told them Sam hadn't ruined anything, that he intended to abandon the project anyway. "It's too dangerous."

"We can't do that!" Kate wailed.

"I'll volunteer for the ebony table," Sam said. "I've got to do something to make up for what I did. We'll trap something."

"And die in the attempt?" Max shook his head. "I won't let you do it." He said he had expected good work from his people, but he didn't feel it was his right to expect them to risk their lives. He sighed. "And that's what we do every time one of us dreams."

It was then that Gary told them of his dream of the night before. Max listened in a curious state of agitation and said, when Gary finished, that it didn't seem like a dream to him even if it happened on the moon. He blinked his eyes and was obviously thinking furiously. "We have the hooded man and the girl in the tunic and they want to know the location of the lab. That makes too much sense for a dream."

"The girl introduced herself?" Kate asked.

Gary said she did but he couldn't remember who she was, it was all so vague, so dreamlike.

"Think," Max said. "Try to remember."

Gary closed his eyes. He was on the moon, he was looking at the sky, the girl... "Her name is Adrea." He opened his eyes, surprised to have remembered. "And the man's name... it was something like 'a leper.' No, it was Aleppo. I remember now." The dream was becoming clearer in his mind. "I wasn't interested in their names or what they were trying to do. I was feeling floaty and eerie. I told them I was glad they'd come up there to keep me company. And then this hooded man, this Aleppo, looked deep into my eyes and I felt my mind go cold. Then he turned to the girl and told her he'd extracted the information that the lab was in the Meta Complex here in Los Angeles and that that's where Ronsard was."

"Ronsard?" Max stared at him.

Gary was startled by his mind's revelation. "It must have been the name of the weight lifter."

Easton sat down to consider it. "A people who can kill, have names, inhabit dreams, maneuver people to the moon, dredge information from them—"

"These people are real?" Kate said.

"I've always felt so, ever since we nearly caught the girl in the tunic."

"If they're real," Sam said, "then why haven't they let themselves be seen by us before?"

"I always thought they had," Max said, "but I was never sure. It was merely a theory. But what's happened here now proves it. At least it does to me." He looked around at them. "How many people have you heard of who'd had visions, swear that seemingly impossible adventures have happened to them and swear they weren't dreaming?"

"They don't want us to trap them," Kate interjected. "I think they kill us when we get too close."

Gary replied, "We've all had dreams here and we didn't die. Even in my dream at home one of them said, 'Let him go,' and the dream ended."

"It was the weight lifter," Sam said. "He's the only one who's killed anybody, and now he's gone."

"A life for a life," Kate said. She shuddered. "Just the same, I wouldn't want to meet the hooded man face-to-face."

Sam pleaded, "Max, we can't kill the project now!"

"It may be already dead," Max said coldly. "I can't see Cassoit letting us go on with it now." He was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "On the other hand there just might be a way...."

They were all there, Cassoit and the whole panel, all with grave faces and stern manners. Cassoit looked even more displeased than usual. Gary felt the project was doomed, if the faces were any indication.

Dr. Cassoit didn't bother with incidentals. He went directly to Max, fixing him with a baleful eye and saying, "Dr. Easton, there have been two deaths on Project Ephialtes. Is there any valid reason, in view of the dangers that seem inherent in the project, that it should be continued?"

Max said he understood why the question was being asked. "I felt pretty much the same way myself, Doctor, but I have now decided that killing the project would be moving backward. Suppose Pasteur had quit, or Madame Curie? There are risks and they have to be taken. We are very

near to answers."

"So I've heard," Cassoit said dryly. "But one third of your research team has been wiped out, Doctor. In the line of duty, you might say. What guarantee does Meta have that there won't be more deaths?" When Max said he could give no guarantees, Cassoit added, "Perhaps all of you over at Ephialtes will eventually succumb and that will end it."

"You could have a heart attack in the next five minutes," Max said, "but that would not end Meta."

"I've heard that you had your answer and that you destroyed it," Dr. Cassoit said, completely ignoring the previous statement.

"The weight lifter was homicidal and therefore dangerous to the project."

Cassoit shook his head. "You capture your demon and then you destroy him."

"He killed two of our people."

"Wasn't he imprisoned in the colloid tank?"

"We have no idea what his parameters were," Easton replied. "None of us did."

Cassoit referred to a paper. "There were petechial marks on Dr. Javanovski's throat. That's a parameter for you."

"We'd like to know what the others are."

Dr. Cassoit shook his head. "Meta can't ask a man to risk his or her life in such a dangerous pursuit as Project Ephialtes."

"I don't intend to ask anyone to do that, Doctor," Easton said. "I intend to sign a waiver and be the subject in whatever further research we decide on. In that way the project can continue."

Cassoit was surprised and so were the other members of the panel. He barked at Easton and had no ready answer. "There is, to my knowledge, no directive against such a thing," Cassoit admitted. Then he added, "If you want to be damn fool enough to put your life on the line and waive

your rights and indemnify Meta, then there isn't much we can do about it." Then he said, "I admire your courage, Doctor. Good luck."

None of the research team had expected Max to sacrifice himself and, when they returned to the lab, they told him they didn't want him to.

"It's my choice," Max said grimly, readying equipment. "I'm ready to go through with it."

"No," Sam said. "I'll sign a waiver. I'll go. After all, I was the one who did away with this Ronsard person."

"After me," Max said. "If I don't come back, then you can try your luck."

In the end they all volunteered, they all agreed to sign waivers and indemnify Meta, but Max wouldn't hear of it. He told them it was his project and as its originator he was going to go it his way. When the others said they wanted to vote on it, Max was adamant. "I couldn't ask any of you to risk your life, vote or no vote. My mind's made up." So saying, he crawled up on the table.

"We won't help," Kate said. "As far as I'm concerned, you can dream yourself into oblivion." She started to walk away.

Gary, seeing how it was, agreed. "It's no go, Max. I'm joining Kate."

"And you can't run the dream machine all by yourself," Sam said. "So there you are." Sam sat down and beamed at him.

Max was furious. He sat up, told them they were all fired. They laughed at him.

Finally, he told them he gave up, if they wanted to vote, he wouldn't stand in their way.

They voted 3 to 1 to conduct the experiment on a volunteer basis with waivers and indemnification statements. Then they voted to draw straws again. It was only when Gary got the shortest straw that Kate felt her first misgivings, but she carried on.

If Gary didn't come back, then there'd be Sam. If Sam didn't come back, there'd be Kate. Which left Max to survive his own project.

But this is terrible!" Max said as they readied Gary for the table. "This isn't what I told Cassoit I'd do. You all blackmailed me into this."

"You wanted the project continued," Kate said, "and so did we." Then she looked at Gary with panic. "Only I thought I'd be first."

"Let me trade with you," Sam said to Gary.

"Not on your life," Gary said.

Sam said glumly, "Not on *your* life, you mean."

And so Gary crawled up on the table, looked at them all and wondered if he'd ever see them again.

And in a few minutes the dream had started.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gary was behind a Volkswagen that was traveling at a mere forty miles per hour, and he found it impossible to change lanes because of the dense traffic. He was heading south on the San Diego freeway and the late afternoon sun reflected blindingly off the hood of his car.

"Well," Kate said, "I'll say this for him: it's a different dream."

Sam nodded. "No hooded man, no girl."

"A nightmare, nonetheless," Easton said. They knew what he meant: Freeways during rush hours were bad dreams.

Suddenly Gary saw an opening, darted swiftly to the faster lane on his left, and then, when he saw another chance, moved to the next-to-center fast lane and managed to boost his speed to seventy miles per hour to keep up with the traffic.

Sam said, "He's going to get a ticket if he keeps this up."

Easton said that the man who tagged him might be the hooded man and that they ought, therefore, to be alert for him to appear at any moment.

They were quiet.

It was hot on the freeway. Gary turned on the air-conditioner. He never took his eyes from the road, however, because he knew that would be not only dangerous but foolish. He sailed blithely past Mulholland Drive and now all the cars headed down hill. The road curved slightly and they were all going past Sunset Boulevard.

He looked at the speedometer and realized he was going eighty. It bothered him to go that fast, but then, since they were all going eighty, what difference did it make? The highway patrol couldn't ticket them all. Just to be on the safe side he kept a good distance between his car and the car ahead, but people were crowding from behind and flashing their lights in an effort to get him to speed up. The man right behind him was so close he was afraid he was going to get bumped from the rear, so he accelerated to ninety and wished now he'd stayed behind the VW. He looked but could see no opening to get into one of the slower lanes.

"I don't like this," Kate said nervously.

Gary's mouth felt dry. His car was moving now at ninety-five miles per hour. Everything had to go smoothly at this rate or there would be one great crash. His hands were sweaty in spite of the cool air now circulating in the car. But Gary wasn't really worried because he had the revolver in the glove compartment and the shotgun in the rear seat.

"A hundred miles an hour now," Kate said, her small hands clenching nervously. "Gary, Gary...."

"I'm glad I'm not having his dream," Sam said.

"What if he crashes?"

"He crashes," Max said, "and we bring him back."

"He's being maneuvered," Kate said. "I feel it."

"Me, too," Sam said.

Gary was finally rewarded with a vacant space and he moved to the right. Then he saw that people were making room for him, and he looked at the drivers, to see why they were being so polite. They had heads but no

faces. That did not seem strange. It merely meant he couldn't get any reaction from them.

"Faceless," Max said. "That's freeway drivers for you. Very symbolic."

"Take it easy, Gary," Kate said.

Santa Monica Boulevard. Speed: 105 mph. Gary wet his lips, moved another lane to the right. His 105 was slow now compared to some of the cars that were flashing around him. Olympic-Pico off-ramps. He was getting close.

Yes! Finally, there it was, the interchange. He made for the Santa Monica Freeway, tires screeching as he took the two-lane overpass that curved eastward downtown off the San Diego Freeway. He was grateful there were no other cars beside, before or behind him, and he did not think this strange at all.

Abruptly he saw that there were no cars anywhere on the freeways. They had disappeared.

Gary zoomed down from the interchange to the wide expanse of open freeway. He was alone.

"Watch it, Gary!" Kate cried out

A man in a hooded robe stood in the middle of the freeway half a mile ahead, waiting for him. Something he held flashed in the sun.

The researchers under the helmets tensed.

Gary thought: A man here? It was against the law for a pedestrian... Gary slammed on his brakes to avoid hitting the man and was thrown against his seatbelt harness as the car, burning rubber, screeched to a stop barely twenty yards from the man who stood so silently and alone in the middle of the freeway.

"He's taken the shotgun and the revolver," Kate said. "But will they do any good?"

Max Easton's hand was ready to hit the shunt button, Kate ready to administer the CNS stimulant, methylphenidate.

As Gary moved toward the man, he glanced at the city on either side of the freeway. It looked like a city painted on a gigantic backdrop. Not a breath of air. Nothing moved. Nobody was in sight anywhere.

When Gary was close enough, he stopped. "You're an Arab," he said. "What's your name and what do you want?"

The Arab glared from beneath the darkness of his hood. It was deathly quiet in the city.

"Oh, please be careful," Kate breathed.

Suddenly, without warning, the Arab darted forward with a harsh cry, the blade whistling in the air.

Gary lifted the shotgun and fired both barrels. The Arab was a maniac, no doubt of it. The pellets whooshed past the oncoming figure. Not only was he a maniac, but he possessed magical properties and was no doubt responsible for the cyclorama that was the city.

Pulling the revolver out of his pocket, Gary aimed it at the crazed Arab with the gleaming white teeth and the black, piercing eyes and prepared to fire it pointblank. A deft maneuver with the blade sent the revolver sailing before Gary had a chance to pull the trigger.

For the first time Gary was afraid.

"Pulse one hundred and forty," Sam said.

Max nodded, dared glimpse at the blood pressure module. "BP rising rapidly."

"Be careful!" Kate cried.

The two men collided and began to fight over possession of the scimitar.

"Shunt!" Max said tersely. Immediately the red light began flashing over the control console. Sparkles began to form in the colloid tank.

They watched as the two men fought hand-to-hand, Gary neatly avoiding the blade. Kate wanted to be at Gary's side to administer the stimulant but Max had not yet ordered Gary brought back. She was

thankful when she saw the blade go sailing in the air and skitter away along the freeway.

Gary grabbed the Arab and wrestled with him. They fell to the freeway and the Arab put his hands to Gary's throat.

"Bring him back!" Max ordered urgently.

Kate moved like a quick jungle cat to Gary's side, jabbed the needle into his arm and pushed the plunger. Sam disconnected Gary and Max began making adjustments on the console prior to discontinuing the holography.

Gary was breathing hoarsely, trying to get more oxygen, but his blood pressure was falling and his heart was hammering.

"Gary! Gary!" Kate began to slap his face.

Suddenly Gary let out a harsh cry and started writhing on the ebony table. It took all the strength Kate, Sam and Max had to keep him from injuring himself as he began to regain consciousness.

"He's all right," Max said. "Just overexcited."

"A sedative?" Kate asked hopefully, holding the thrashing Gary.

"Methocarbamol, five hundred milligrams," Max ordered.

Kate jumped to fill a syringe with the proper amount of the skeletal muscle relaxant. When it had been administered Gary still looked wild-eyed at them, so Max ordered a slow injection of paraldehyde to fully sedate him.

The drugs had their effect. Gary sank into a deep sleep; Kate stood, syringe still in her hand, and said, "Thank God he's alive."

Max stood looking at Gary. "I didn't like the look of him; his vital signs still aren't normal."

Kate whirled to him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I think he needs to sleep it off in the hospital section where he can get the proper attention and be given a good physical examination when he wakes up."

It wasn't until Gary had been taken by gurney to the hospital section that any of them bothered to look into the colloid tank.

Sam saw it first and stood rooted, shocked by what he saw there.

Then Max came over with Kate and she gasped and put a hand to her mouth.

There, inside, floating in the opaque mist, was Gary Carmody.

ALEPPO

I, Aleppo, am alive. I not only have Being, I have flesh and blood aliveness because my essence is in the body of a doctor named Gary Carmody. But I can still communicate with you, Adrea.

I am in my host's body in a place known as the Intensive Care Unit. I know everything that Gary Carmody knows because to all intents and purposes I am Gary Carmody, and believe me what he knows is considerable. His memory and feelings now have duality. His body exists here and I inhabit it while Gary Carmody's essence lives in the colloid tank. His colleagues will be puzzled to explain how this can be since it will appear that there are two Gary Carmodys, but fear not, Adrea, for they will not learn that I, Aleppo, inhabit this one. They will suspect it. They may even insist that I, Aleppo, inhabit Gary Carmody's body (and how right they will be!), but there is no way they will be able to prove it until I have completed what must be done.

Ruaha and everyone in the Consciousness Pool will be proud of this Volunteer when I am finished. Singlehandedly I will rid Us once and for all of the threat that Project Ephialtes holds for Us. I intend to kill them all, one by one. It is the only way. I will destroy their records, their machinery, their modules, monitors and consoles. The laboratory is fireproof, but I will make such a shambles of it that no one will ever be able to reassemble any of it.

When they kill this body that I inhabit (for they surely will eventually learn that I do inhabit it), then I will return to the Consciousness Pool.

Before I will let them kill this body I will shut off the life support system for the tank so that Gary Carmody's essence will not continue. He will go the way of Ronsard, which is into true oblivion.

Was that fight not a magnificent dream? I felt the grappling but I fought against entrapment. My mind entered Gary Carmody's body at the exact moment that Max Easton called for entrapment. I forced out Gary Carmody's mind—or essence, as We know it. It amuses me to think what he must be feeling at the moment. He must surely think he is dead. Do not worry, Adrea. I will look in on him. In person. I will take one long look, our eyes will meet, and then I will pull the plug that sustains him.

There is much to be said for living as a flesh and blood person, though at the moment I am not conscious. I have tubes running from me to everywhere because I was in shock. Gary Carmody's body was, for a few moments, in trauma when its essence was transferred to the tank and I took over, though no physiological harm was done. They filled his body with a central nervous system stimulant, which brought him out of the dream and then they injected a powerful sedative.

I am on the third floor of a place called the Hospital Section. It is a room with a red door. From raised control centers specialized nurses are keeping watchful and wary eyes on continuous monitors, gauges, ECGs, tubes, and they are busy exchanging intravenous bottles, measuring, titrating, injecting, testing, sensing, feeling, palpating, listening, ever alert for any change in me. My cardiac monitor's green dot traces a line just like all the others, and there are twenty-three others in this room.

Be assured, Adrea, I will not do anything foolish. As these people say, I hold all the cards. I can keep this body together as long as I need it. I could kill it by creating an endocrine or electrolytic imbalance, if necessary, but I will do nothing until my work is done. This body is the instrument through which I shall wreak vengeance for Ronsard's destruction and eliminate the threat to Us forever.

Tell those in the Consciousness Pool that if they send for Ruaha he might not understand and that the situation is in capable hands. I, Aleppo, am doing only what must be done. These humans are worse than dogs. They seek dominion over each other and now they would seek to dominate Us.

It is true I have no scimitar here, but there are knives everywhere, including microtomes and scalpels. I will have no difficulty. I will lull them into a false sense of security first and then I will attack and it will come as a surprise to them. Only in this way can I make sure that they will all be dead.

Vengeance will be sweet and it will be mine! Ruaha will be proud of me as will everyone in the Pool. Fools that they are, humans will never again try to break through the barrier that separates our superior spiritual nature from their carnal and odious one.

Have faith. I, Aleppo, will not fail.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

They stood watching Gary in the tank. It was as if he were in a London fog without support and was tumbling over and over. His eyes were open but they did not seem to see anything.

"If only he'd look at us!" Kate said, biting her lip. She tapped on the glass. There was no response from Gary.

"He isn't in any pain," Max said. "The support system is taking care of all his needs."

"What I want to know," Sam said, "is if that's Gary in the tank, then who was it we sent to the hospital?"

"The hooded man," Kate said. "Aleppo, Gary called him." She grimaced. "Even saying the name repels me." She turned to Max Easton. "But if it is Aleppo in Gary's body in the hospital, then what happened to Aleppo's body?"

Max took a long moment to think about it. "If I understand the way this works, Aleppo's body is a material thing only in the dream, created by the dreamer. It is the only time the dream person is alive. The rest of the time he must just exist waiting for a chance to invade a dream, to feed off us in some way."

"Then he exists in Gary's body's brain for now." Kate said.

"If he exists in Gary's body."

Kate turned away. "Even thinking about the possibility makes me sick. Poor Gary!"

"Okay," Sam said, pursuing the thought. "So that's Gary in the tank. How are we ever going to get him out of there?"

Max sighed and moved away from the tank. "I don't know that that's really Gary in there and neither do you. And that's the trouble with what's happening; there's so much we don't know."

Kate sat down in one of the chairs. "I know what I want."

"What?" Sam moved from the tank to look at her curiously. "I mean, besides wanting Gary sitting next to you."

She narrowed her eyes. "I want to be there when he wakes up in the intensive care unit. I want to look into his eyes and get his reaction, test him out. When I do that, I'll know whether Aleppo's inside him or not."

Sam nodded. "Sure, you will. And what happens if this Aleppo is inside him?"

Kate stared at the floor. "I don't know. I just don't know." She turned to Max. "Isn't there some way we can communicate with Gary in the tank?"

She knew the answer just by looking at his face. Max said, "You saw how he is."

"It's as if he's not even alive!"

Sam said, "Maybe he's not."

This only sent Kate to the tank for another look.

There had been the fight, Gary remembered, all very dreamlike and in slow motion, the city out there somewhere frozen in time, not a living thing moving, while he and Aleppo slugged it out. Yes, he knew it was Aleppo now, now that he was no longer dreaming, now that he was—dead.

He'd heard small sounds, clicks and beeps, and even voices as Aleppo had started to choke him to death. So he'd been throttled like Ralph and now here was Gary Carmody in the same place as Ralph and Casimir, which was nowhere.

There had been pain. There had been a gasping for breath. Then everything receded, the main control of his life was being turned down all the way and somehow it didn't matter. It was when the blood coursing

through his body stopped that he knew he was dead. None of his senses worked any more except his brain and he didn't see how this could be. No doubt Kate and Max and Sam were even now having to answer to Cassoit for what had happened, though they shouldn't have to do that because he'd signed the release, the waiver. There was no sound, no smell where he was, just a nothingness into which he had fallen. He had reached that vast and profound solitude to which no created thing had access: Death.

It was tranquil and it was peaceful and— strange!—he felt good. It was a waiting in a void that stretched in its whiteness in all directions. He was One, full of wholeness, serenity and awe. He had no idea it was going to be like this. Here there was no anxiety, no fear. What was there to fear when there was nothing where he was?

There was nothing beyond this place where he was which was nowhere.

Yet there was something.

Something!

A prickle of his mind. Something was trying to get through to him from somewhere... something from another plane... a voice from another world?

He tried to focus on the whiteness. Maybe he could see what it was, though he knew it was opaque although he did not know how he knew that. Something was moving... There was something out there! It was something a different color than the whiteness. There were lights. Pinpoints of lights! How was this possible?

He was in no hurry. The pinpoints moved this way and that... until he realized *they* weren't moving, that it was *he* who was moving.

And then it struck him.

He knew where he was!

The colloid tank. Of course! How could he have been so stupid? He was in the tank and not dead after all. He drifted this way and that, excited with his discovery but in a strange way, for he had no heart to beat... or had he? Was this mere illusion?

He was near the end of the whiteness. The pinpoints of light were

brighter now. The mist was receding. He came up to the end of it and realized it was the tempered glass of the tank. The two pinpoints of light were—the eyes of Kathleen Keegan!

His mind reeled with shock. She was staring at him in a strange way. Unblinking.

Then he realized that her time was different from his. She was somehow slower, for when she blinked it seemed to take forever for her eyelids to come down and then go up again. He wanted to say something, but he could not. He opened his mouth, but he did not feel it open. He tried to say her name, but there was nothing. No sound. No feeling of air coming out of his mouth.

He tried to raise his hands, tried to wave to her, but suddenly he was too weak.

He bumped into the glass barrier and at once he was sent spinning backward, the pinpoints of light moving around his head. I am moving and not they, he told himself. I must remember that.

Why couldn't he move his arms and legs?

What was it that was holding him?

Why couldn't he do what the weight lifter did and bang on the glass? If he could move he could spell something out to Kate... and wasn't that Sam and Max with her in that brief time he saw them?

Then he thought of the life support system.

Look out for Aleppo! he wanted to say. He's there somewhere and he'll turn off the life support system if you give him a chance.

How did he know Aleppo was there?

Strange. He knew things, yet he could not move.

Kate? I love you, Kate. I never told you that in so many words... I suppose I didn't have to...

White was all around. He must be in the middle of the tank. If he could only move, he could somehow propel himself over to where Kate was, if she

was still there.

So he was in the tank.

How was he going to get out?

They had never considered the problem.

And that, he thought, was too bad.

"Max!"

Easton came to stand at her side and watched her point to the rolling figure in the tank. "I could swear he looked at me."

"If he did," Max said, "it is a good sign." She turned. "What's that supposed to mean?" Max said nothing. Sam, who had been elsewhere in the lab, moved up to say, "He means Gary isn't like the weight lifter, Ronsard. Remember how the strong man used to pound on the glass with his fists?"

"Are you both trying to tell me something is wrong with Gary?"

"I don't know." Max was uncomfortable. "He should be moving around, showing some emotion. But look at him." They all turned and saw Gary's tumbling about in the mist, his arms hanging at his sides, his face expressionless, his eyes vacant. "Something isn't right."

Kate stood looking in at the twisting man. After a moment she said, "I wish I'd never joined the Project. All it's been is misery for everybody, and now, with Gary the way he is..." She couldn't go on.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?"

"Gary's in the ICU."

"I haven't forgotten that. If that's Gary." The thought seemed to

galvanize her. "And I mean to find out about that right now. Do you think he'd be awake yet, Max?"

Max looked at his watch. "Any time now. Want some company?"

"I'd prefer being there by myself when he wakes up." Before either of them could say anything, she picked up her purse and left the lab.

She found herself walking stiffly because, she realized, she was so tense. She was wondering what would happen if it did turn out to be the hooded man in Gary's body. The hooded man would probably reach out and try to strangle her.

It wasn't a comforting thought, the idea of being choked to death by the man you had planned to marry some day.

The afternoon had turned chilly. She shivered as she moved across the grass toward the walk to the hospital.

She wondered if she had better alert the ICU nurses, but decided they had enough problems without her mentioning a possible demon that might or might not have invaded her beloved. Besides, if she did, maybe they'd put her under observation in the psychiatric section. Thinking about being in a hospital under observation did not frighten her because she suddenly felt very weary. It would be a rest from all this.

She went through the main entrance of the hospital and left a moist palm print on the door.

So, I'm nervous, she thought. Hello, there, Aleppo. How are you? What's new? And what did you do with Gary Carmody?

She tried swerving her mind from the prospect ahead. Gallows humor wasn't going to help.

Kate stood before the big red door to the Intensive Care Unit thinking it looked big and strong enough to withstand a wrecking ball. There was a bell. She pushed the button, tried to control herself before the nurse came. She had her pass. As a Meta colleague, there had been no great difficulty, though it had taken visits to three offices, and conversations and signatures in each. "Dr. Carmody? Oh, yes. Heard what happened to him. Hope you find him well in the ICU." Well in the ICU! What a silly way to

put it! Nobody in the ICU was well.

A small, pale nurse with red-rimmed eyes opened the huge door and peered out.

"I'm Dr. Keegan and here is my pass." She handed it to the harried-looking RN.

"Oh." The nurse looked at the pass and then at Kate and then she opened the door wider and let her in.

The room was without windows but brightly lighted. There were twenty-four beds upon which lay unmoving, waxlike figures flanked by bottles and tubes and wires that ran every which way. Some wires ran to monitors and some to pacemakers. Over it all Kate heard the constant *beep beep beep* sound of the cardiac modules. Which one of these persons was Gary?

"Where is Dr. Carmody?"

"I'll check." The nurse scurried away to the control station where she talked to an older nurse who was keeping her eye on the monitoring display center.

She looked to the men. There was Gary, over in the corner dressed in an intravenous gown, tubes everywhere, including two in his nostrils.

"I'm sorry."

Kate wrenched her eyes from Gary. "What?"

"I'm sorry," the nurse who admitted her repeated. "But Dr. Carmody has been moved out."

"Moved out?" Kate's voice was shrill. She turned back, saw at once that the man she had been looking at was not Gary. He was a balding man much older than Gary. She turned back to the nurse, her heart lurching. "Where... where is he?"

"Are you all right?" the nurse asked, holding out an arm to steady her.

"Yes, yes. Did you say where he's been taken?"

"Eight sixty-two."

"Thank you," Kate mumbled, turning to go out the door the nurse opened for her. Out in the corridor Kate leaned against a hard, cool wall to recover herself. She hadn't even asked why Gary had been removed from the ICU, and that had been foolish of her. Then she calmed herself. He was transferred because he was better. That had to be the reason.

Still, it did not solve the problem of Aleppo. Was it possible? If he had been removed—if *Gary* had been removed from the ICU, and she *must* think of him as Gary—then he'd wakened. He must be Gary because if he was Aleppo, he'd have raised hell as he had in the dreams.

She gathered herself together, took a few deep breaths and moved to the elevator bank. She was sure it must be Gary and that he must be awake; but there was a seed of doubt and she knew that if she let it that seed could grow to a concern out of all proportion before she even saw him.

ALEPPO

I, Aleppo, have been moved. When I so abruptly broke off with you, Adrea, it was because Gary Carmody's body was in the process of waking up. Now I can tell you all his body signs were normal and they needed ICU space for another, so I was detached from all the modules and monitors, and I was moved.

After so many years in the Consciousness Pool, I am finding it difficult to adjust to human life. I know this is not a dream, yet I find myself acting as if it were. I must remember that I am inhabiting a human, though however briefly, and that I am inhabiting that human for a purpose. I must not allow my host to be killed before my mission is accomplished. Once the project has been disposed of, it does not matter what happens to Gary Carmody's body. I will cause it to have an accident or dispose of itself in suicide, if its death cannot be accommodated by those around it whom I will cause to be its enemy.

They are not sure yet that I am who I am, but I know, with Gary Carmody in the tank as well as Gary Carmody in Room 862, the question will be raised, for these people are not unintelligent. I must be wary in all my actions.

I am now asleep in a private room here, a beautiful place by contemporary standards, though I have been in far more beautiful places in dreams. There is oxygen here, should I need it, and television in color, which is much like dreaming, though in no sense like the real dreams since it is two-dimensional and only has sound and vision. Very primitive when compared to the night journeys that we populate, Adrea. Still, the people, according to Gary Carmody's memory, are hypnotized by it and spend long hours watching these tiny squares of colored motion. I had seen television in our dreams but I had never paid any attention to it before.

Adrea, I think it is marvelous what you have been able to do With Gary Carmody in the tank. Keep your control of this man. If he were to be allowed to communicate with others on the project it would certainly harm my actions. I think it is well, even if it is in violation of the rules, that you act as a buffer to others in the Consciousness Pool who might inadvertently contact the man. He is safe there until I turn off his life support system. I know Dr. Keegan, Dr. Easton and Dr. Nevis are trying to communicate with him, too, but if you maintain your militant control over his essence and prevent him from moving in any way, they will soon lose interest in him.

I feel like a prisoner in this body. As I have said, not for years have I felt running blood and a beating heart. Inhabiting a body is disgusting, for one is then prone to all the glandular functions that flesh is heir to. I am referring principally to this body's physical yearning for Dr. Kathleen Keegan, whom Gary Carmody thinks of as his love. What he seeks to do with Kate, as he calls her, is of no interest to me, but while I am imprisoned here in his body through my own will and volition, I am subject to it. I had forgotten what carnal appetite is like. It is a wonder humans ever get anything done when their thoughts

seem to stray into the erotic area so often. I am always having to pull Gary Carmody's attention over to other things.

I still sleep but I sense there is someone in the room with me now and so I must break off with you again, Adrea, and prepare myself for the total awakening of this body to deal with whoever it is. Probably someone from the project.

Yes, Adrea, I will be on my guard. Have no fear. I, Aleppo, am in command of this situation.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Kate hurried to Room 862 and found Gary asleep. *If* this was Gary who was occupying the bed. She went in and took a chair near him. She would sit there until he woke up; she was certain that once he had wakened she would be able to tell who it was.

Whatever had been wrong with him physically was now right, for his face was calm, his color the flush of good health, and his breathing regular. She reached for his wrist, felt for a pulse and found it a fine 72. She had seen the chart results of the trauma he had suffered; his cardiac output had been low, his central venous pressure was low, as was his blood volume and blood pressure. It was then that his pulse rate was rapid and he looked like death warmed over. It was gratifying to see him now. Perhaps he was all right and her fears were groundless and the problem of the figure in the tank and the same figure here on the bed would be resolved.

She had just got up and walked over to the window to look out on the broad avenues that comprised the Meta Complex when she heard a voice.

"Kate."

It was Gary's voice. But of course it would be his voice. Her heart had jumped when he said her name, and now she knew she must turn and look at him and she didn't want to for fear of what she might discover.

She turned, steeling herself.

The eyes. They were warm. The mouth; it was appealing and wore a wry smile. His manner was disarming.

She approached the bed. She must be careful. No strangling for Dr. Kathleen Keegan; she would stay out of the way of those arms until she was sure.

"Kate." It was the way he always said it.

"Gary," she said, taking the chair again and allowing herself a chance to flirt with death by taking his hand. "How are you, darling?"

Gary put his other hand to his head. "Right now I'm okay, but for a while there..." He shook his head. "What happened, anyway?"

"We brought you back," she said carefully. "You were fighting with Aleppo, the sword had fallen, and he was beginning to choke you."

He put his hand to his throat. "Yeah." His eyes looked troubled. "I can't recall much after that, I guess I must have blacked out."

"You went into shock and were taken to the ICU."

He nodded. "I remember that. I woke up there and they gave me something and I went back to sleep again." He smiled for the first time. "I feel fine now. How are you, Kate? How's Max and Sam?"

"Fine." She smiled wanly. "We were all worried about you."

He held her hand and patted it. "Glad to know somebody is. When can I get out of this place, do you suppose?"

"If you're fully recovered, I suppose any time."

"I feel pretty good. Nothing broken or anything. Also, I'm hungry, and that's a good sign." He grinned at her. "Hey," he said.

"Hey yourself."

"Come here."

Now it comes, she thought. One way or the other. How else could she tell?

She got up from the chair and moved to him. He pulled her down to him and kissed her. It was such a warm, honest and affectionate kiss that she felt woozy. This was Gary, all right. This was the way Gary was. This wasn't Aleppo. Not these lips. Not the way this kiss was.

When he released her, he said, "It's good to be alive, Kate." Then he stirred and said, "But I've got to get out of here and back to the Project." He sat up. "Anything new with it?" Then he said almost immediately as he looked at her, "Something's wrong. I can tell. You're... tense." He regarded her sharply. "You keep watching me in the strangest way and I can't figure out why."

She told him then about the other Gary Carmody. She was satisfied to see his surprise.

"Another me?" he declared with astonishment. "But—but how could I be in the tank and be here, too?"

"That's what we are all wondering."

He frowned. "I don't feel divided. I feel like there's just one of me."

"Your tank duplicate doesn't seem to feel much of anything," she confessed. "He isn't like the weight lifter. He just floats around looking dazed."

"I've got to see that." He made a wry face. "It'll probably give me the creeps."

"It will. It's not very pretty. It looks like...." She couldn't bring herself to say it.

"It looks like what?" He put a hand over hers again. "Listen, you're my lady love, remember?"

Come on, no secrets, Kate. I'm not full of holes, ami?"

"No. It's just that you look—dead."

He looked like he was digesting this revelation. Then he breathed the word. "Dead." He shivered. "I don't like it. What's going to happen to the "other me?"

"We don't know yet."

It was a hideous experience, an experience it would have been better not to have had—this consorting with this human creature, Kathleen Keegan. But from her reaction Aleppo knew she believed everything he was saying. That was good; if he could convince her, then he could convince any of them. With their guards down, it would be a simple matter to slaughter them all. Of course this foolish creature in the room with him would have to go first. It was bad enough having to be civil to her, she who shared the responsibility for Ronsard's death, though he now

knew it was Sam Nevis who had actually stopped the life support system that evaporated Ronsard for all eternity.

Even though he was speaking civilly to Kate, Aleppo could relish the satisfaction that a large, razor-sharp blade slicing through her midsection would bring him. He would tell her to come to him and then, while in embrace, he would slip the blade into her belly. No! It would *not* be in embrace. That would be too repugnant to him. Let her know what was happening. Let her know what was coming. Anticipation of pain would probably be worse than the pain itself. And that would be good.

Kathleen Keegan. She would be first.

Then Sam Nevis.

Then Max Easton.

And by that time they would all be after Gary Carmody and little would they know that his death is exactly what he would want after he had cut the power to the tank and killed all the Project people.

All he needed was a knife. If he had one right now he could kill her where she sat. Then he would move out of the hospital and down to the dream lab where the others were. And then, the sublime pleasure of turning off the machine that was giving life to Gary Carmody! After that, the death of Gary Carmody's body, and finally Aleppo's return to the Consciousness Pool where peace would reign until some other fools thought they might disturb the tranquility of it. He only wished Adrea could be there with him to experience the exultation. He'd forgotten about how exciting the primitive human emotions could be. Blood was pounding through him. He was excited.

To Kate he appeared calm. "I'm not worried," Aleppo said. "I'm sure we're equal to bringing me back from the tank. We've solved all the problems as we've gone along, haven't we?"

"Yes," Kate said, "but I'm not sure any thought has been given to reversing the operation."

"With everybody working on it, there's bound to be a way out." He grinned Gary's boyish grin. "Maybe we'll discover something new when we do."

Kate was dubious. "I wish I could be as sure as you seem to be."

"Don't worry," Aleppo said. "Just relax. Just sit back in your chair for a while. I'm going to sit where I am and try to regain my strength."

"It's rather warm in here," Kate said. "Maybe I should turn on the air-conditioning."

"Not for me," he said. "I'm comfortable. Tell you what, though..." He let his essence overpower her.

"What?"

"Just look at me." Their eyes interlocked. "Just let me see your face, what you look like, let me explore you visually... that's right." She was his. "Isn't that nice? Isn't it comfortable here? A person could fall asleep. Isn't that right?"

"Yes."

"Don't you feel your eyes getting heavy?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you close them, Kate? Close your eyes and lean back. Relax. That's the way. That's right."

Kate leaned back and relaxed with a sigh. Aleppo continued to give her instructions and in a few minutes she was in a deep hypnotic state. He waited until he was certain that she would not awaken, then got out of bed. He was still wearing his hospital gown. Well, he would get rid of that.

He looked through the drawers of the furniture in the room, the dresser, bed table, chest along the wall, and then he explored the closet and the bathroom.

No knife anywhere. Nothing even remotely resembling a knife. He was not Ronsard. He could strangle Kate, but it was not his way. He, Aleppo, murdered with the scimitar. He knew he would not find exactly what he wanted but anything that had a sharp edge would do, provided it was big enough. Big enough to lop off a head, for example. That would give him the satisfaction he sought.

He stood in the room, thinking with Gary's mind. The operating room was on the floor above. Surely there would be knives there. Scalpels, if nothing else.

Kate was in a deep sleep. He could go to the O.R. and come back and she would still be asleep and he could do the job then.

He would also have to change clothes with someone. Aleppo moved out into the hall cautiously and started down it. There was an elevator bank but he did not go to it. He would have to take the stairs. Somebody would be on the elevator and patients did not wander around in hospital gowns.

He walked quickly to a sign marked "stairs," went through the door and hurried up the stairs to the floor above. He opened the door and came face to face with a startled young man, an orderly, from the way he was dressed. Good.

Aleppo made as if to turn away, then came up with a hard punch to the cheek that made his hand tingle. The orderly collapsed unconscious to the corridor floor.

There was no one to be seen on the floor at that moment. Aleppo reached down, dragged the unconscious man back through the door he'd just come out of and exchanged clothes with the orderly. He then hoisted the orderly on his shoulders and opened the door.

There was no one in sight.

He went through the door and started down the corridor and stopped when he saw a door marked "linen."

He opened it and went inside with his burden. He set the orderly on the floor and looked around for something to kill him with. There was nothing.

At the rear of the room was a large canvas hamper. He unlatched the top of it, saw that it was filled with towels. He removed half of them, carried the orderly to it, dumped him inside, then piled the towels on top of him.

Not as good as a scimitar, perhaps, but in the end the same result. The orderly would suffocate. And well he should. If he, Aleppo, left anyone alive

behind him, the alarm would be sounded and the whole mission would be a failure.

No. He, Aleppo, knew what he was doing.

The next stop, the ninth floor operating arenas. Aleppo straightened his clothes, opened the door, and strode out into the hallway.

So far, so good.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Room 862 in the Meta Complex's Hospital Section had a telephone and it was ringing. The bed in the private room was vacant, but in a chair beside it, her head resting on the back of it, was Dr. Kathleen Keegan. She did not hear the ringing because she was asleep. She was in such a deep sleep that she was not even dreaming.

After nearly a minute of ringing, it stopped. Five minutes after that Max Easton and Sam Nevis came running down the corridor and into the room in feverish haste; some of the nurses and other personnel followed them.

When they came into the room, they halted, alarmed to see the empty bed. Then they began shaking Kate. When she did not at once awaken, Max said, "He must have given her something." The room by this time was crowded with hospital people.

"Where is Dr. Carmody?" the supervising nurse said severely, frowning at Max, as if he ought to know.

"You tell me," Max replied, continuing to try to rouse Kate.

"He couldn't have given her anything," Sam said. "He had just come from ICU."

Max looked around at the faces which all were question marks. "Has any of you seen Dr. Carmody?"

Nobody answered, but Kate began to moan. Then she opened her eyes. At first they were unseeing, then they focused on the people in the room and finally found Max's face. She smiled and said dazedly, "I must have

fallen asleep." She turned to the bed, her body tensing when she saw it was empty. She was fully awake now. "Where's Gary?"

"Don't you know?" Sam asked.

"Was it Gary?" Max asked Kate.

"Oh, yes," Kate said, leaving no question about it. "But why would he leave the room?" She got up. "I suppose because I fell asleep." Then she saw the orderlies, the supervising nurse and the duty nurses. "What are these people doing here?"

"If it's Gary," Sam said, "then what we have in the tank is Aleppo."

"If it isn't Gary," Max said ominously, "then the tank is where he's headed."

Kate drew in her breath sharply. "Leaving me like this—that's not at all like Gary. But I was so sure..." Her face clouded with doubt.

"Let's go," Max said urgently, pushing past the people who had gathered at the door to see what the excitement was.

Kate prayed they would not be too late. The kiss had been so true, the way he talked was so right... was it possible? Then she vaguely remembered looking into Gary's eyes and falling asleep. It was possible, she decided. And then she began shaking so hard that Sam put his arm around her as they moved down the hallway to the elevators.

The young nurse looked at Aleppo inquiringly. "Are you Dr. Baker?"

Aleppo's mind worked in frantic agitation for a moment. Then he realized he had nothing to fear. The girl didn't seem to know much, he observed, drawing upon Gary's experience. "Were you expecting anybody else?" he asked with a smile.

"Then you should be in here," she said, very officiously, opening a door. "Mr. Ambrose is still in severe shock with poor renal profusion," she said, approaching a bed where an old man lay looking pale and wan. "At least that's what Dr. Kilota said." She turned. "I was supposed to help you."

He could have killed her. He would have if he had an instrument. His right arm ached for the scimitar. But he only smiled and then regarded the patient. He shifted through what Gary Carmody knew. "Has a thorough investigation for infection been started?" he asked, taking the chart from her. He nodded, seeing the notations. "A broad spectrum antibiotic has been instituted. Good." He looked at the man, then at the nurse. "Cortisone acetate, fifty milligrams, every eight hours. And I want three milligrams of desoxycorticosterone IM stat to begin with."

"Yes, doctor," the nurse said, rushing from the room.

As soon as she was gone, he moved out to the corridor. At the end of it were the operating theaters. He hurried to the doors. Surely inside... but even as he approached he knew he would not find what he wanted there.

He looked through the door windows. Every position was busy, doctors and nurses everywhere.

"Excuse us!"

Aleppo turned and avoided being hit by a gurney with a patient on it being pushed hurriedly through the swinging doors, its IV swinging in its holder. One of the men accompanying the cart eyed him curiously. "You going to transfer to surgery, Dr. Carmody?"

"No such luck," Aleppo said as the doors swung shut.

The kitchen. That was the place. What he needed was a good, strong butcher knife or a good stripping knife. That would be more than adequate for what he had to do.

It was strange, floating the way he was, having no control over anything, like a dust mote suspended in midair, having no appetite, no feeling anywhere. It was like being in a straitjacket, Gary decided, except he couldn't move his legs either.

He wished he would swing around so he could look out the window and see Kate again. And thinking of her and Max and Sam, he wondered what they were doing about him. Would they find a way to bring him back to the ebony table? If he had got where he was with the machinery, surely

they could work it so he could get back to where he belonged.

Suddenly all the things that had bound him fell free. It was as if every muscle in his body had come alive at the same time. He found he could move his fingers, his hands, his eyes. He swallowed. He could feel his heart beating. What was happening to him?

He twisted, hard. Instantly the whole tank began to whirl. He hit the bottom of the tank and bounced off, hit the top. It didn't hurt, but it was getting him nowhere. He saw the bottom coming up again, tried to soften his landing on it. This time he did not bounce but sailed upward much more slowly.

Then he was stable in the tank, only slowly moving to one side. When he reached it, he looked out. There was nothing to see. Nobody was there. He gave a gentle shove and was propelled to the other side. Nobody was there either. Where was everybody? Was he going to be left forever to float around in the tank like an astronaut in a space capsule free of the earth?

Dr. Carmody.

Gary was so startled he pushed against the glass and started a yo-yo motion again. It took him a while to slow down and try to reason out what was happening. Where had the voice come from? Yet it wasn't exactly a voice...

Can you hear me, Dr. Carmody?

Gary tried to speak the words, Yes, I can hear you, but nothing came out. Why was that?

Because we are speaking on another level, Gary Carmody.

Maybe he was losing his mind.

No.

Who are you?

I am Ruaha.

The kitchen lay at the rear of the first floor of the hospital building and Aleppo, trying to look busy and officious, hurried to it. It was an off-hour

and there weren't too many people there, which made his entrance conspicuous, for everybody looked up at him when he came in.

A beefy chef who reminded Aleppo of Ronsard, looked up from something he was preparing and said, "Help you, Doc?"

"I don't know." Aleppo didn't know just how to handle the situation. He wanted a knife, *a* knife, and he could see a row of them on a wooden boom, carving knives, paring knives, grapefruit, bread, skinning and cook's knives, all of them gleaming and sharp. The skinning knife. It was perfect for his purpose. No, he would have to heft it first. It must not be too light.

The cook followed Aleppo's eyes to the knife rack. He turned back. "Run out of knives in the O.R.?"

"That knife there," Aleppo said, moving into the kitchen, passing copper cauldrons steaming with soup.

"What about it?"

Aleppo turned to him. "I want it." He fixed the man with his eyes. The chef's eyes went wide and vacant. He swayed on his feet, put a hand out on a meat block to steady himself.

Aleppo turned back to the knife. Three young men, athletic and trim, were moving toward him. One had picked up a heavy stainless steel ladle which he was holding menacingly, another was holding a heavy wooden rolling pin, and the third had picked the biggest knife off the rack.

If he had his scimitar, Aleppo would have made easy work of them, but he did not have it, so he turned and ran past the chef who was now wheezing and trying to collect himself.

He was angry, Aleppo was, and it was a strange sensation but a welcome one. He would waste no more time. There was a knife in the building somewhere and he'd find it... and then Gary's memory supplied it: Dr. Andrew Cassoit had knives in his office. He was a collector of knives from his travels all over the world.

He would pay Dr. Cassoit a visit.

The voice came to Gary as if from a deep cavern. It was a male voice, virile and full of authority. He could not ignore it.

You have been held immobile by Adrea, and I have released you and made Adrea immobile...

Gary had no idea what he was talking about.

I know it is difficult for you to understand.

Where are you?

In what is called the Consciousness Pool. It is a peaceful place.

Why are you speaking to me like this?

Because you have fallen victim to one of our numbers who has exceeded his authority. His name is Aleppo.

Yes. And the girl Adrea is the one in the tunic.

She usually appears so to dreamers.

Why can't I see you?

Because you are not dreaming. If you were dreaming I could be part of your dream.

Perhaps I could fall asleep where I am. Perhaps I could dream then and see you.

It is possible, but there is not time, Gary Carmody.

Why?

Because there is something you must do instead, something I want you to do. You must do it if you and the others of your project are to survive.

What is it?

You must first promise that you will do as I say.

You will not be harmed in any way. But you may not BE if you do not do as I say.

It was dizzying, being in the tank, listening to the disembodied voice that spoke to him not through his ears but through his brain.

Yes, it is a heavy matter to grasp.

Gary kept forgetting that Ruaha could monitor his thoughts.

You must promise. Quickly, now!

Yes, I promise.

Very well. Here is what you must do.

Gary's memory told Aleppo where Dr. Cassoit's office was and he hurried there. When he went in, he was greeted by Cassoit's secretary, Gail. "What brings you to the *sanctum sanctorum*, Dr. Carmody?" she asked.

"Is Dr. Cassoit in there, Gail?" Aleppo asked, indicating the door to one side of her desk.

"Not at the moment. He's over in the Psi lab talking to Dr. Cummings."

"I've got to get in there," Aleppo said. "I left something in there and it's very important."

"Can't I get it for you?"

Aleppo went to her and put his hand under Gail's chin. "I'd appreciate it," he said, "but it is rather personal, and I need it right now." He fixed her with a warm look, direct and head-on.

Gail flushed. "Well, I suppose," she said, and she uttered a little giggle.

Aleppo gave her a peck on the lips. "Thanks, doll."

He closed the door behind him and looked toward the display case on the wall. Gary's memory told him that Cassoit had traveled extensively in South America, in the East and in the Philippines and now Aleppo moved toward the cabinet to see what it contained. Behind the glass of the door there were dirks and daggers and machetes, executioners' axes, Bowie knives, boning knives and blades for almost every purpose, some old and some ancient but all looking sharp on their velvet mounts. The knife that caught his eye and held it, however, was a bolo, a Philippine knife that looked more deadly than his scimitar. He fell in love with it at once.

He tried the door to the case. It was locked. He considered what to do, his mind was inflamed with the idea of the damage that he could do with the bolo. Its long single edge gleamed wickedly. He uttered a harsh cry and picked up a paperweight from Cassoit's desk which stood in front of the cabinet and threw it at the glass.

It crashed through and glass went flying in every direction, shards falling even to Cassoit's desk.

The door to the office opened. Cassoit stood there staring at him coldly. Aleppo reached in, wrenched the bolo from its fastening on the velvet, turned and faced the doctor. Behind Cassoit stood his secretary, her eyes wide and frightened.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Doctor?" Cassoit asked angrily, striding into the room.

Aleppo hefted the bolo. It was beautiful. Its handle was solid, the blade just right. He lunged toward Cassoit, the blade shining in its arc.

Cassoit proved to be faster on his feet than Aleppo had thought he would be. Cassoit ran around the desk and tried to get a drawer open. Aleppo figured he had a weapon there, so he brought the blade of the bolo down to cut off Cassoit's hand at the wrist. Cassoit pulled his hand away so that the blade missed it by a mere millimeter. Cassoit backed away, regarding Aleppo with surprise and alarm.

"You've gone mad!" Cassoit hissed.

Aleppo lunged, Gail screamed from the open doorway, Cassoit sidestepped, opened a door and closed it behind him. It was the door to Cassoit's lavatory, Aleppo saw in the brief glimpse he got of it. He was so

angered by Cassoit that he wanted to run the bolo through the door and break it down, but he suddenly realized that killing Cassoit would not be killing Project Ephialtes, so he tried calming himself, which his anger and frustration made difficult. Finally, he strode out through the reception room. Gail had abandoned her post at the desk.

Aleppo hurried his steps. He was in for it now. He had to finish his tasks in a hurry or it would all be over: the people in the dream lab would be alerted and they would be waiting for him. That would never do. Still, no one knew for sure he was going to the dream lab, and that was all to the good. As he moved down the corridor to the front doors he stuck the bolo through his belt and buttoned his white jacket over the handle. The blade was visible, it was so long, but there was no way he could hide that.

First he would cut off the life support system, for Gary. After that he would kill them one by one, Max Easton, Sam Nevis and the girl, Kathleen Keegan. He would hide the blade so that he could do away with Gary first. Then he would pick up the blade and complete the job with the others.

They would be expecting nothing, and that was good. Aleppo was feeling buoyant. It would be so good wielding a blade again, feeling it slice flesh and cut through bone, and it would be real and not in somebody's dream!

There were advantages to being alive after all. But his place was back in the Consciousness Pool and not here. He would do what he had to do and then return.

He was actually running by the time he got to the dream lab building.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"He's changed!" Kate said when she took her first look at Gary. She, Max and Sam had rushed into the laboratory to find it the way they had left it. "He's seeing me!"

It was true. Max and Sam moved to the tank and peered inside. Gary was very much alive and well and he was gesturing with his hands and he kept twirling about.

"I wish he'd stay still," Kate said. "Why is he doing all that?"

Max said, "I think he's trying to tell us something."

"Well," Sam said, drawing up a chair to watch Gary, "we'll never learn what it is unless he stays in one spot."

"Kate," Max said, "does he seem to be Gary?"

Kate nodded. "Yes, he does. I don't understand it. How can Gary be in two places at one time?"

Max said he didn't think he could. "I think one of them is Aleppo."

"Which one?" Kate asked in a shaky voice.

"I don't know. I wish there were some way to tell. If Aleppo is the one that was in the hospital, he has all of Gary's memories to draw on. He could fool anyone. We'd never be able to tell if he was Aleppo or not."

Sam nodded to the figure in the tank. "What about our friend here?"

"What I don't understand is why he changed," Kate said. "One minute he looks like he's in suspended animation and the next here he is waving his hands."

"Look," Max said, drawing up a chair beside Sam's. "Maybe it would be better if we stopped talking and tried to figure out what he's trying to tell us."

Kate was too nervous to sit down. She was worried that Gary/ Aleppo had left the hospital room. Where had he gone? Why hadn't he come to the lab? Maybe he had come! Maybe he'd come and done something to Gary! She turned to say so to Max, but Max was concentrating heavily on Gary.

She forced herself not to think about the missing Gary. Maybe that is what the Gary in the tank was trying to tell them, that Aleppo had been there.

Gary kept pointing and Max said, "I think he's pointing to the table."

Kate said, "Wait a minute," and got a tablet of paper. She wrote on it TABLE and showed it to the Gary in the tank. Gary nodded wildly and pointed to the ebony table. She wrote EBONY before TABLE. Gary nodded

even more excitedly.

"What about the table?" Sam asked.

"I don't know." Kate turned and looked at it. "It's there and it's not changed."

"Maybe he's saying that the other Gary was here and did something to the table," Max said.

"I was thinking that, too," Kate said. "Maybe the other Gary got this one out of his doldrums."

"He doesn't like our just talking," Max said, shifting his chair closer. "Let's watch."

Gary pointed at Kate.

"Me?" She turned to Max. "Why should he point to me?"

"Ask him."

She wrote WHY ME? and showed it to him.

Gary mouthed "table." Kate said, "He wants me to get on the table. Do you think that's it?"

"It seems to me," Sam said, "that he wants you to do a little dreaming." Gary had just made the motions of putting on the molecular probe helmet and injecting himself with a phantom syringe.

They sat watching him in a welter of uncertainty. Max said, "if what was in the tank was Aleppo, then it would be bad for Kate to get on the table. On the other hand...."

Aleppo let himself into the dream lab very quietly. He withdrew the bolo from his belt and silently placed it on a shelf near the door. Then he stood where he was to watch them. They were absorbed with what was in the tank, and that was good because they did not see what he had placed on the shelf. Kate was saying, "Oh! I wish Gary were here."

"I *am* here," Aleppo said, moving from the entrance. He knew what they must be thinking, so he had to play it carefully, convincingly. "I don't know why I should be, though. A girl who goes to sleep like that with a sick colleague in a hospital bed beside her."

Startled, they all turned and stared. Their eyes were not at all friendly. Kate was biting her lip. Aleppo considered how to win them over, for no doubt they had surmised the truth. But truth was a fragile thing; it was just a matter of working it around in a way that would only *seem* truthful. Gullibility had its limits, but he would have to try. After all, there was Cassoit to consider, and he could be alerting everything including the Marines at this point.

Kate's eyes narrowed. "Why did you leave the room?"

Gary grinned disarmingly. "I don't know whether you deserve to be told or not." He walked toward them, but they were wary. He looked at the tank as they watched him. His movements were purposefully loose and casual. "The truth is, I went to get some coffee. When you came in I saw you were exhausted, so I let you have that little catnap while I chatted with some nurses in the dining room. But when I came back you were gone." He tried to invest his voice with a little harshness. "I wasn't too pleased, the way you ran out like that." Then, as if dismissing her behavior and forgetting it, he said, as he watched himself in the tank, "So that's the other me! What's he so excited about?"

Max said evenly, "He thinks you're Aleppo."

Aleppo turned, shock on his face. "Hey, now, wait a minute." He looked at their faces, one at a time, and saw their doubts. "If he thinks so, he seems to have done a pretty good job convincing you, the way you're looking at me."

"Well," Kate said coldly, "are you?"

Aleppo turned stiffly, as if hurt. "I won't honor that with an answer." Then he added, "I'm disappointed in you, Kate." He pretended a great interest in the figure in the tank once again. He was alarmed that Adrea had lost control of Gary Carmody. "I find this hard to believe, that I could be out here and in there at the same time."

"So do we," Sam said bluntly.

"Okay," Aleppo said, turning and moving a few steps this way, a few steps that. "I'm not blaming anybody, but I am *not* Aleppo. I don't care what you think. What I'm concerned about is how to get the me in there back in me so we're one again. Has anybody figured out how to do that?"

"I wish I could believe you," Kate said.

He was making progress. He shrugged. "What's to be done?"

"He," Kate said, indicating Gary in the tank, "wants me on the table. I'm supposed to dream something, I guess."

"Maybe he's in cahoots with the dream people," Aleppo said. "Maybe they're calling the shots, trying to help out, get things back the way they were. It would seem to me that would be of vital concern to them as well as to us."

Max nodded. "That makes sense."

"Whether I'm Aleppo or not?" Aleppo laughed Gary's laugh. "Well, you don't have to trust me, but I do think we should get on with it." If he could get Kate dreaming on the table, there would be only two of them to contend with, not that Kate was all that formidable, but it would be easier. "How can I help?"

They considered it. Then Max said, "Sam, you can give the T.O.T."

In a few minutes they had all loosened up considerably. Kate even took Aleppo's hand. "I believe you," she said. "I did up there in the hospital and I still do." He helped her onto the ebony table. "It's just... I must have dreamed it." She smiled wanly. "Forgive me, Gary."

One down and convinced. "Listen," he said, "I'm sorry I ran out like that. If I thought you'd get worried about it, I'd never have done it. Now lie back."

A minute later Sam had administered the trinopterine and the dream had begun; they took their places under the helmets, but not without Aleppo noticing that Sam and Max seemed not as sure as Kate that he was Gary. Aleppo slipped under his monitoring hood and closed his eyes.

Under his monitor helmet Sam determined to keep an eye on Gary, the console, the monitor modules and Kate, even while the dream was going on. He'd loaded the syringe with methylphenidate to have it ready, he'd waken Kate at the first sign of trouble either in the dream or with the man who said he was Gary, for Sam did not believe him. He was Aleppo. How Sam knew this, he couldn't say, but know it he did. There was something about the man that didn't ring true, although Sam could not put his finger on it.

Kate was in her gothic dream, moving into the big house, up the broad steps and through the huge oak front door. Inside it was bright and colorful, but there was something dreadful about it nonetheless, a feeling that something was not quite right. Kate moved out of the entrance hall and into the area before the circular staircase.

Sam opened his eyes. Gary was still there under the monitor, absorbed in the dream. Well, maybe Sam was wrong about him. Maybe he was really Gary...

The curving, broad stairway was covered with red plush and Kate's feet sank into it as she moved up, marveling at the glowing chandeliers, the lush paintings on the walls, the ornate appointments everywhere. The house truly belonged to someone who had no worry about money. But where *was* everyone?

The telephone rang shrilly and Sam reflected for a moment on how odd dreams were, that in this old house there would be a telephone and it should be ringing—then he realized it was the telephone in the lab. They had forgotten to cut it off, as they always had before. He opened his eyes.

There was no doubt who Gary was. He was Aleppo, for he was out from under the helmet and moving toward the life sustaining switches for the colloid tank. There was no doubt in Sam's mind what Aleppo planned to do.

The phone rang again, but Sam did not hear it. He only saw Aleppo turn around fearfully as Sam moved out from under his helmet monitor. Sam was aware that Max had seen what was going on and was moving out from under his monitor. Together they moved toward Aleppo who had not yet tripped the switches because he'd been so startled by the phone and by their movements toward him. He leaped for the controls, but Sam was there banging his hands away from them. Aleppo was sent reeling, only to

lurch back. This time, with a grunt, Max let him have it in the face. Aleppo staggered back and stood there dazed for a moment. Then he started for the door. They ran after him.

But he did not go for the door. He went for something on a shelf, and Sam and Max both saw the gleaming edge of the heavy bolo knife.

"Gentlemen," Aleppo said. "Out of my way, now, please."

Sam and Max did not move. If they moved, it would be death for Gary Carmody and then death for Kate and then death for themselves. It was all clear now.

Aleppo smiled evilly, raised the bolo and charged, whirling it in circles around his head. It would come down on whoever or whatever stood in his path.

Max would have stood there had Sam not pulled him away. Aleppo went sailing by. They turned and saw Aleppo's victorious grin as he pulled down the levers.. They watched the sparkles within the tank become fewer and fewer, the mist whirl less thickly as motors ran down to a halt, and Gary Carmody inside the tank fade and disappear.

"One," Aleppo said, moving toward them. "Your colleague has joined Ronsard in oblivion. You will not be so unlucky. You will merely die."

Sam and Max backed away together, stunned and numbed by the annihilation of Gary Carmody and fearful for Kathleen Keegan who continued to dream on the ebony table. Not only was the project doomed, so were they.

"Come now," Aleppo said as he moved with them. "Die like men." He brandished the bolo with practised ease. "It is a relatively painless death." He laughed. "Don't ask me how I know."

"Hold it!"

They all turned to the doorway where a half dozen Meta Complex policemen stood, Cassoit behind them. The largest policeman advanced toward Aleppo, his gun drawn and pointed at Aleppo. "Let me have that knife," he said.

Aleppo bared his teeth like some feral animal, the bolo making a small circle as he moved it.

"Don't shoot him!" Max said, recovering.

Cassoit said, "They won't kill him, but they will shoot him. In the leg, preferably." He glared at Aleppo coldly. "Give up the knife."

Aleppo whirled. He was going to rush at Kate, but the policeman in charge was as quick as Aleppo and moved to stand between him and the dreaming woman.

Then Aleppo darted behind the control panel; they all ran after him. He rushed through a rear fire exit.

When they emerged to pursue him, Aleppo was nowhere in sight.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He had done what Ruaha had wanted: he had convinced Kate, Max and Sam that Kate should go under and dream the dream that Ruaha said would be the most important dream ever dreamed by mankind.

And then, through the tank's glass walls, Gary was shocked to see himself enter the laboratory. Now he knew who Aleppo was! Aleppo was inhabiting his body! Gary looked at the others and tried to signal them frantically, but Max, Sam and Kate were talking to his *alter ego* and not paying any attention to his frantic bid for recognition.

Then he came and looked in at himself and said something. Their eyes met, the eyes of Gary Carmody in the tank and the eyes of the Gary Carmody of the real world, and Gary saw hatred in his own eyes, the ones that stared back so hostilely at him. It was obvious Aleppo hated him, hated them all, and Gary was helpless to do anything about it.

He watched in cold frustration as Aleppo went back to talking with Gary's colleagues. Gary could shout his warning; he could pound on the side of the tank all he wanted to. It would be nothing because his voice was no voice at all and he had no real substance. There was only the image of himself in the tank, the image surrounding his essence, as Ruaha had explained.

What now? he asked Ruaha.

There was no answer.

With horror Gary saw Kate climb up on the ebony table. Didn't they even suspect that Aleppo was hiding in his body? He watched as Sam gave her the shot of trinopterine.

"Don't you know?" he wanted to shout at them. "He's Aleppo, the one who looks like me, the one who is using my body! Don't trust him!"

But of course they did not pay any attention to him. So he stood at the side of the tank peering through the glass and watched Kate go to sleep and then Max, Sam and Aleppo slip under the monitoring helmets.

Then Aleppo was watching the others and at the same time slowly slipping out from under his monitor.

"Watch out!" Gary shouted soundlessly.

But Aleppo was not going to do anything to Kate. Not right away, anyway. Aleppo was moving to the life sustaining controls and his plans were obvious.

Gary thought there was hope when Sam and Max tried to stop him, for Aleppo turned and started for the door. But then Aleppo picked up a horrible-looking knife he had evidently hidden and started for the tank. Sam and Max blocked his way, but it didn't matter; Aleppo was swinging the knife and Sam was pulling Max out of the way.

In another moment Aleppo had done it; he had switched off the life sustaining controls and Gary began to feel the effects immediately.

Suddenly it was black and Gary no longer had a body, even the image he'd had in the tank. He guessed he was truly dead, and it came to him as a great, jarring, crashing and final reality. He was beyond recall. He had returned to that place where he began. Which was nowhere.

No.

Ruaha's voice! Where am I, Gary asked.

I sensed what was happening through you and I intervened and have

plucked you from the oblivion to which you were headed.

But where am I? he persisted.

You are attached to the Consciousness Pool momentarily.

I feel like I'm floating in nowhere.

You are.

What's going to happen?

You will see.

And then there was silence.

Gary was in the middle of a dream and in the center of a gigantic ballroom. There were mirrors along two walls. The whole room was longer than a football field. Everywhere there were chandeliers and candelabra and tapestries and thick carpeting. It had the look of opulent unreality, which Gary realized it was.

Then he saw, on a raised area at the end of the room, near to where he stood, a distinguished old man sitting in a gold chair. "Kathleen Keegan is having this dream," Ruaha said. "Soon she will enter this room."

The man's eyes sparkled with blue life and his thick mane of white hair glistened in the bright lights. He looked just the way Gary imagined Ruaha would look.

"Yes," Ruaha said. "It so happens that each person sees me the way he imagines me." He adjusted his toga.

There was a fanfare of trumpets, the giant gold doors at the end of the hall opened and Kate, dressed in a stunning red ballroom gown, came in. An attendant removed her carmine fur cape and Kate strode regally across the room, her dress a shimmering length of rustling taffeta.

Gary reached out to take her hand and was surprised to find himself in shining armor.

"Remember," Ruaha said, "it's her dream."

"Gary," Kate said with a loving smile.

"My sweet," Gary said, wondering if that would fit in with what she was dreaming. It did. She smiled even more warmly.

Somewhere a tremendous clang sounded, like that of a gong. Kate turned, her eyes widened. "It's the King!" she said, breathlessly.

Gary turned. Ruaha, now wearing an ermine robe, stood as a king should, hand extended as if in benediction. There was a jeweled crown on his head. Then the extended hand held a jewel-encrusted scepter. "I command you, Kathleen Keegan, to remain still, while I speak."

"Yes, your Highness," Kate said.

Two chairs appeared miraculously behind them. Gary sat with Kate. The King sat on a throne now.

"This dream will be replayed as part of Project Ephialtes," Ruaha said. "I command it." Gary caught Ruaha's eyes and saw the amusement in them. But Kate was quiet and serious at his side.

Ruaha went on: "I, Ruaha, therefore, through my good offices, welcome contact with living men and women who have shown such ingenuity as to penetrate the barrier that separates our two worlds.

"To you, Max Easton, Sam Nevis, Kathleen Keegan and Gary Carmody, we of the everlasting Consciousness Pool offer our congratulations. We are not all Ronsards or Aleppos or Adreas. Ronsard has been relegated to oblivion. It is no great loss. Adrea has been remanded to a new life not yet born. Her essence, so implanted, will grow, live and die and return to us as a new and different Being filled with the compassion she lacked."

Ruaha frowned. "Aleppo, however, still wanders in your city, and he is an obstacle that must be overcome. If Gary Carmody is lucky, Aleppo will live as he is. But he is a volatile man. I cannot interfere in your world. I could not in your waking state in any case."

Kate stirred. Ruaha said, "Patience, my dear, in the presence of your King." Then he went on: "We all welcome contact with Project Ephialtes

and with man. You have reached a maturity We had expected eventually; it comes sooner than We had thought it would. You are now ready for Us, and We are ready for you, ready and willing to share the wisdom not only of this world but of countless worlds, for We are all part of the Greater Consciousness."

Gary said, "What about Aleppo? Will I ever be able to return to my own body?"

Ruaha considered it. Then he said, "That depends on you. Aleppo has probably forgotten that he will eventually have to sleep. His earthly body will demand it. When it does, his essence will leave his body as Aleppo, the one you refer to as the hooded man, and it will be an out-of-body experience as all dreams are. He will want to return to your body to complete his unholy mission. You must return to it instead."

"And how can I do that?"

"It will not be easy," Ruaha said. "Since I plucked you from the colloid tank, Aleppo does not know that you still live as your essence. When he dreams he will be surprised to find you. He will try to drive you back to your world, to some body other than your own, perhaps to one not even yet born. He has power, much as I have power. He will provide arenas that will aid him. I will help you by providing arenas that will aid you."

"I will fight him?"

"Yes, Gary Carmody, it will be essence against essence. His evil against your good. Whichever is the more powerful will win. This is the way it has always been since the beginning of time."

"What if he wins?"

"Then you must return to another host, as I have said: to one yet unborn."

"I will not be me! I will lose my identity! I will be someone else!"

"I am afraid so."

Kate turned shining eyes to Gary. "You will win, darling," she said, nuzzling his shoulder.

He no longer wore the armor. The mirrors began shimmering. Kate's form wavered. The room rippled and then faded.

Then there was the blackness again and Gary was once more in the void.

Aleppo walked swiftly down the dark street, cursing the fact that he was wearing whites. But how could he have found anything else to wear? Even in winter in Los Angeles people seldom wore coats at night.

Police cars came by, sirens hooting, red lights flashing. They were all bound for the Meta Complex, there was little doubt of that. Maybe they'd found the man in the hamper by this time, too. Old Cassoit was probably screaming his head off. I should have taken the time, he told himself. I should have sliced through the door and let him have a taste of his own bolo knife. As it is, he's responsible for what's happening to me now.

He ground his teeth. He, Aleppo, would get them all yet, and before he would let them take him, he'd get that Cassoit who'd caused him this trouble. The next time they considered breaking through to where the dream people lived, they'd think twice about it. He'd made a promise, not only to himself but to all the people in the Consciousness Pool. There would be no leaping the barrier. There would be no contamination by humans with their needs, their greeds, their hungers, their curiosities.

Aleppo was moving down the street so quickly that people he passed gave him a wide berth. He didn't care. Let them think what they wanted. What he wanted was time to think. How could he get back to the Meta Complex and into the dream lab and do away with Max Easton, Sam Nevis and Kathleen Keegan?

Three of them gone: Ralph, Casimir and now Gary. He dared not go back to the Consciousness Pool without completing the job. They were depending on him. And Adrea. What would she think if he showed up and had to tell her that he had not avenged Ronsard's erasure? Well, their trust was in the right place. He'd do it somehow.

On a dark section of street a woman who had been walking toward him by herself suddenly let out a scream and ran across the street. She was nearly hit by a car that had to swerve, its tires screeching. Aleppo stood

there in some amazement wondering what had got into the woman. It was only then he realized he was carrying the big bolo in full view.

He looked at it. It was such a big, heavy blade it was a wonder more people hadn't seen it. And the police cars! They'd gone by without even noticing him!

Aleppo considered what to do. If he threw the blade away, he'd have no way of killing the people he'd planned to. On the other hand, carrying it openly was foolhardy. He decided to see what he could do with it, ran across a vacant lot to a fence and ducked behind it. It was very dark. He took the blade, pushed it down inside his pants at his hip. That way it would not be visible and he could grab the handle and take it out when he needed it. It was uncomfortable, but he could put up with that.

It would have to do.

He strode out into the lighted streets again. The bright lights hurt his eyes. He couldn't for the life of him recall which direction he'd come from, and that startled him. Then he realized he was tired and sleepy. It was a sensation he had not felt for hundreds of years.

It jerked him awake. He could not sleep! If it was true that some of the dream people had sent for Ruaha and he had returned, then if he went to sleep there might be a confrontation, and Aleppo preferred the confrontation *after* he'd done his job. If Ruaha should by chance not approve of what he'd done, then it would be a matter of Ruaha's power against his. Ruaha was always spying on him anyway. They liked Ruaha, the dream people did, and he was their leader, but Ruaha, by Aleppo's measure, was weak. If it were up to Ruaha, he'd give the humans everything, all the secrets.

It was true Aleppo did not have the power to move from one star system to another the way Ruaha did, but if he could confront Ruaha, if he could somehow fight him—and what did the peaceful Ruaha know about fighting?—Aleppo could become the leader of the people of the Pool. He was stronger than Ruaha because Ruaha did not think the way he did. Ruaha was not the proper one to run the Consciousness Pool. Aleppo was.

He yawned; his thinking was getting fuzzy. He had forgotten how frail the human body is and what its needs are and how demanding they could be. Right now he would have given everything for five minutes of sleep, yet

he knew he could not do that.

Aleppo began to panic as he moved about the streets, before he remembered that he was a doctor. Amphetamine sulphate, that is what he needed. Dexedrine. He could write himself a prescription for one of the amphetamines... except that he had no prescription pad, no proof he was a doctor. But he needed a stimulant badly. It would elevate his mood, increase his wakefulness, alertness, confidence and concentration, to say nothing of his physical performance. With, say, 40 milligrams of dextro-amphetamine, he would be able to do what he had to do; but how to get it?

If he were at the Meta Complex he could have walked into the pharmacy and asked for it, or he could have got it from a number of sources. The only other place he could get it now was a drug store. If he were to stay awake he'd have to have it... have to have it... have to have it...

A police car went by slowly. Its occupants eyed him suspiciously. His adrenalin was released and that gave him a shot of energy. He could not afford to be stopped by anyone. He moved along, trying to act nonchalant. The police car speeded up down the block and went out of sight, on a call, its red lights flashing.

He saw a coffee shop and was going to go in when he discovered he had no money. He found a billfold in his back pocket but there was nothing but identification in it. It said he was RONALD B. KEVINGTON and that he lived in Fullerton. He thought of going to the address, but Gary's memory did not immediately pinpoint Fullerton so he had no idea how far away it was.

He'd been walking for hours, it seemed, and it was tiring him more than ever. He found a drugstore but it was a big place with the pharmacy in the rear. He'd never be able to go in and force the druggist to give him amphetamines or anything else.

It was getting late; he absolutely had to sit down somewhere, so he moved to a residential area and walked the streets there. He knew he looked out of place but it was better there than under the harsh lights of the more commercial areas. He came to a corner and another vacant lot covered with weeds. He decided to go into it, and sit down and rest for a few moments to collect his wits. In a few moments he was sitting in the middle of tall, yellowing grasses and weeds, his feet feeling relieved.

He lay back and looked up at the sky. He could hardly see a single star because the night was a dull glow caused by all the lights of Los Angeles.

Before he knew it he was asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

They ran Kate's tape for evaluation and the two men classified it as another of Kate's ridiculous dreams of splendor and castles, knights and kings.

"So you populated it with Gary," Max said in a dispirited, tired voice. "You didn't know he was gone. You couldn't have known Aleppo killed the switches because you were asleep and dreaming by that time."

"But what about Ruaha?" Kate asked. "What about all the things he had to say? You mean none of it is true?"

Max shrugged. "A wish-fulfillment dream, Kate. We have all had grandiose thoughts about the project and the big breakthrough this is going to be for mankind. You can't be blamed."

"He's right," Sam said. "If I got on that table now I'd probably dream something just like it."

"I don't believe that," Kate said heatedly. "Here we have a monster who has taken over Gary Carmody's body, a homicidal maniac, and he's running around the city, and we haven't made a breakthrough?"

"In that sense, yes," Max said. "We captured him. But he outwitted us and transferred himself to Gary instead of the tank. Can we prove it?"

"He exists, doesn't he?"

Max said gently, "What would a psychiatrist say, Kate? He'd say Gary was overworked and had suddenly turned psychotic, thinking he was this hooded creature, Aleppo."

"You don't *want* to believe all of it!"

"No, I want to believe all of it. But I can't until there is some kind of proof."

Kate sank heavily into one of the padded chairs along one wall and thought about it. Then she looked up at the two men brightly. "Look, in the dream this Ruaha says something about how he rescued Gary from the tank. I was the dreamer when that could have happened, how would I know that?"

"I know," Max said. "And don't think I haven't thought of it. But some people under anesthesia in the operating room hear what the doctors are saying. That is why some of them go into shock for what appears to be an unaccountable reason."

Kate stood up, defiant. "I don't care what either of you think. *I* believe it. And that's enough for me." She went out to the lounge for a cup of coffee.

After a moment Sam said, "You were pretty rough on her, Max."

"I know. I wanted to straighten out my own thinking on it."

"Then you don't really think the way you were talking to her?"

Max sighed. "I don't know what to think." He waved his hands at the entire lab. "I don't even know whether we ought to go on with this or not, considering that there are two dead and one driven out of his mind."

Sam said evenly, "I know you can look at it that way, Max, but I'm with Kate. I really am a believer all the way."

"Let's go get a cup of coffee." Max put an arm around Sam's shoulders. "It's just the scientist in me. Why must we be such disbelievers until something hits us over the head?"

Sam stood where he was. "There is a way to prove things. One of us could dream again."

Max shook his head. "No. There is no way to separate dream from reality. So we meet Ruaha in a dream again and he asks us where we've been and why we're not exchanging information with him and his kind? Who is to say that that is not merely a dream, a projection of what we *want* to happen?"

"What would it take to really convince you, Max?"

Max thought about it. "If Gary came through that door and said, 'Did you hear what Ruaha said in that dream that Kate had?' Then I would believe because Gary could not have known about the dream. We were battling over the tank when that part of the dream took place."

Sam walked with him toward the door to the lounge. "There's not much likelihood of that, Max."

"So there you have the problem. We are able to trap things in the tank, but we really don't know any more than we did before. All of the rest of it could be our imagination."

"And Gary could be dead right now."

Max opened the door. "If he starts brandishing that blade around they'll either shoot first and ask questions afterward or they'll spirit him away to a padded cell somewhere."

"You really think he's flipped?"

"I didn't say that. And don't ask me what I did say. I need some coffee. If that doesn't wake me up, I'm going home. In fact, I think maybe we all ought to go home and get some sleep. Maybe in the morning we'll be able to think it through."

Gary had no idea how long he'd been suspended in dark nothingness before the blinding desert sun at midday fell upon him like a hot coal. Cruel sand moved like a carpet beneath him, cutting into his legs. He was already parched.

The riders came over the dune and surrounded him, their djellabas fluttering in the breeze. They were swarthy men on Arabian steeds and very sure of themselves. One of them dismounted, gave him a drink of weak red juice from a bota, and then tied his hands behind him and made him follow him, Gary on foot, the Arab on his horse. The others spurred their mounts and moved quickly out of sight.

After a long walk that Gary did not think he would survive, they finally arrived at a cluster of tents and he was conducted to the most magnificent one in the center.

Inside, it was cool. When his eyes became accustomed to the dimness, he saw Aleppo seated among some cushions surrounded by pretty harem girls.

Aleppo said, "Welcome to your death, Dr. Carmody." He picked up his jeweled scimitar and approached Gary, his dark eyes shining with malevolence. When he reached the spot where Gary stood, he said, "Kneel."

Gary decided not to kneel. If he was going to die it would be on his feet. He would kneel to no one.

Aleppo smiled thinly. "Amazing that I should dream of you, Doctor. I have nothing to fear from you any longer because you are dead, really dead, in oblivion, your every molecule destroyed. Yet here you stand." He laughed. "What muse gives me this pleasure to kill you again and have your blood gush into the sand on which you are standing?"

There was no doubt in Gary's mind that Aleppo could do it, and there was no doubt also that Gary could do little or nothing about it. He could squirm or fall or wrench around, but in the end he would be run through by this dark man.

It is only his dream. Ruaha's voice.

Aleppo's eyes flashed fire and snapped as he looked around. "Ruaha!" Then he smiled cruelly. "So you are behind this! I might have guessed it." Then Aleppo backed away from Gary to ponder the situation. "I dreamed of Gary because you have brought him from the brink." And now angrily: "Why don't you show yourself? Why don't you come out and have it out with me, old man?"

Without warning Aleppo rushed Gary and the scimitar came down in a wide arc to behead him.

Before the blade could touch him Gary was in the pilot's seat of the Phantom jet and Aleppo was seated behind him. The F-4 Phantom II was flying at its maximum speed, 1,585 m.p.h. at 48,000 feet somewhere over the Pacific, far from its carrier.

"You will die," Gary told him, beginning to understand how it was being played. "If you want to live, press the red button."

When Aleppo pressed it, he was ejected.

Gary laughed to see him fly into the air at that speed. He also laughed because he was the best fighter pilot in the world.

Good. Now you are dreaming. How could he be dreaming?

The market place was crowded. A man led a number of sheep through the open-air trading area, their sides marked with purple for slaughter. Vendors were selling wine and grapes and oil, hawking their wares. The streets were so narrow it was hard to go down them.

Gary turned up a small alleyway to get away from the hustle and bustle. He stopped because hooded men stood at the end of the passageway. He turned around. There were more hooded men standing at the entrance.

Then, from a doorway, stepped Aleppo. He was dressed in a flowing robe and a turban, and in his belt was the gem-encrusted sword. He smiled at Gary. "You make much amusement, Dr. Carmody. Except that I am not amused." Gary saw him nod to the men behind him.

Ruaha?

Gary heard the whistling blades but did not feel them because he was filling a syringe with chlor-promazine and Aleppo was strapped to a table before him.

"A lethal dose," said Ruaha, who was standing on the other side of the table.

"Wait!" said Aleppo, his eyes bunking with his fear. He strained at the restraints. Then, as Gary approached him, he turned and looked Gary straight in the eye.

Aleppo's was a powerful look, one that impaled, and it immobilized Gary because of its intensity and hate. He found he could do nothing, not even think.

Now Ruaha was concentrating on Aleppo and Gary understood now that this was some sort of crisis, a test of wills and power as Ruaha had promised in the dream.

"Stop, old man!" Aleppo growled.

The desert tried to intrude on them, but Ruaha washed it away. Then they were soaring somewhere high like eagles, except that they were all where they were in the emergency ward and Aleppo was still tied down. It was like superimposing one experience over another, and there was danger in each.

The emergency room began to glow with the heat that Aleppo was creating. Metal began to melt. A tidal wave created by Ruaha swelled through the room and cooled it.

Gary found himself on the floor, gagging and sputtering.

When he looked up he was witness to a terrible sight. Aleppo was on his feet, hands clenched at his sides, his eyes holding Ruaha, muscles in Aleppo's neck bulging with his efforts.

"You will not last, old man," Aleppo said. "My strength is that of a young man."

"You are a fool," Ruaha said, standing like stone where he was, his blue eyes cold and merciless as they regarded Aleppo. "Your brain is that of an infant. You do not belong in the Consciousness Pool. You will be sent to grow into a new and hopefully useful essence."

"I have reserves," Aleppo said. "I have reserves that I have not yet touched."

"They are as nothing," Ruaha said, still not at all fazed by Aleppo, "because you do not know what my reserves are. They are a gestalt."

"Mine are a synergy."

Gary watched. Ruaha wavered slightly. Aleppo grinned. If Gary did not help....

Gary got to his feet, planted himself firmly behind Aleppo, put his arm around his neck and began to choke him. Aleppo's mouth opened in surprise.

"You will go back," Ruaha said, meeting Gary's eyes and recovering his

strength. "You will go back to your body... back to Gary Carmody... when he wakens."

Aleppo struggled mightily, but Gary held him because he knew his life depended on it.

"I will hold Aleppo here until you return to your body," Ruaha said.

"You—cannot—hold me!" Sweat was running down Aleppo's face. He wet his lips. Gary did not know how much longer he could hold him.

"Wake up, you! Come on, wake up!"

Gary stirred. There was something hurting his side. He woke and looked up into the faces of a half dozen Los Angeles police officers. He groped to find out what was hurting him.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a sergeant said, and it was then that Gary noticed they all had shotguns trained on him. He was lying among weeds in a vacant lot. It was day.

"Nice and easy," the sergeant said. "Just get up without touching anything and then roll over on your stomach and let's have a push-up while we relieve you of that thing."

That thing turned out to be the sword that Aleppo had exhibited in the laboratory.

They handcuffed him and put chains on his feet before they put him in a black and white patrol car for the ride downtown.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

They rode to Parker Center in the Meta limousine with Cassoit's driver at the wheel and Cassoit, Max, Sam and Kathleen as passengers.

It had been difficult getting Cassoit to even consider taking any action. "Your man broke, Doctor," Cassoit told Easton, when the group had assembled in the chief's office. "Under pressure he went to pieces, tried to kill Orderly Rankin by stuffing him in a linen closet hamper and then he

threatened me with my bolo and he scared Gail Robbins half to death. And now you want me to talk to him and if he answers right to get Meta to go to bat for him."

"I'm not denying any of it, Andrew," Max said.

"Oh, 'Andrew' is it?" Cassoit's eyes glittered coldly. "Since when have we become so chummy?"

"Since all this has happened."

Cassoit, who was seated behind his desk at the time, gave a loud snort. "Getting a little public relations sense in your old age? Well, it won't hurt you. You've always been too bull-headed. Now, if you'll go over all that again."

Max told Cassoit how it was, how Gary had been located in a vacant lot by some people in the neighborhood, how they had called the police and how the police had picked him up and were holding him downtown.

And now, in the limousine again, Cassoit was saying, "I am doing this only because you're one of my good men, Doctor. I don't believe your man is going to come through with a thing. It was, as far as I can see, a psychotic episode. If he doesn't recall this dream you're harping about, then I think he should be dropped from the Project. He's far too unstable for Meta."

Kate said, "What about the Gary Carmody in the tank? He was there, you know."

"Yes, so I have been told," Cassoit said frostily. "And once again you lost what you were looking for."

"The support system was turned off again," Sam said. "That's all."

"And by whom?" Cassoit asked. "By Gary Carmody. Is that an act of a well-balanced individual?"

"It might be," Sam said.

Cassoit glanced at him sharply. Nobody had ever told Cassoit it had been Sam who had pulled the switch on the weight lifter during an

episode of retribution.

"We feel it wasn't Gary who pulled the switch," Kate said stiffly.

"So Max tells me," Cassoit said. "It was a demon named Aleppo." He grimaced as he regarded the passing scenery. "If you ask me, it sounds like a case of schizophrenia with paranoid overtones."

"He couldn't have known what Dr. Keegan dreamed," Max said. "All I'm asking is that we give him a chance to recount it. If he does, then it was he who was sitting beside Ruaha, because Aleppo was inhabiting his body at the time."

Cassoit sighed. "I saw the dream tape and I confess it all seems to make sense, but then a motion picture can make sense and be the invention of a screenwriter."

"So now I invented it all."

"I didn't say that, Dr. Keegan."

Cassoit's hands fluttered in air. "There's no sense in discussing it." He went on. "It all hinges on Dr. Carmody's recollection." And then he added: "And I don't want to hear anybody putting words in his mouth."

Gary was happy to see them all when they came through the door of the interrogation room. He could understand all the formalities because, when Aleppo had been in control of his body, he had acted savagely and without restraint. But it would all be over now, he'd be free, he and Kate could start where they had left off, and the breakthrough to the Consciousness Pool would make them all famous.

The first hint that there was any trouble was when the sergeant at his side would not let him get up. Gary wanted to go to Kate and take her in his arms and assure her everything was all right, but the sergeant—his nameplate said he was SGT. JIM KAMINSKY—put a hand on his shoulder and prevented his rising. "Just stay sitting there," he commanded.

The second hint of trouble was the sober faces he saw before him, the furtive glances, the lack of greeting. Max nodded gravely as he took a

chair, Cassoit stared at him icily, and Kate's eyes, though they betrayed warmth, were stand-offish. Only Sam seemed to feel for him and started to say something only to be quieted by a look from Max.

Cassoit said, "How do you feel, Doctor?"

"Tired," Gary said.

"Where did you spend the night?"

"In a vacant lot in some weeds."

Cassoit nodded. "How did you get there?"

"I don't know. Aleppo was in charge of my body then, so he must have decided to stay there."

Sergeant Kaminsky was looking at him strangely.

"This Aleppo..." Cassoit started to say.

"What is this?" Gary asked, fearful for the first time. "What's going on? Max? Kate? Sam?"

They looked as if they wanted to tell him.

Max said, "Maybe it would be better if we just let Dr. Carmody talk, tell us what he wants." He glanced to Dr. Cassoit. "All right?"

"All right," Cassoit said, letting out his breath. "What have you got to say, Dr. Carmody?"

"What have I got to say!" Gary was incensed. "We've made a great breakthrough, that's what I've got to say."

They said nothing. He began to understand that there was something they wanted to know.

"Look," he said, "I know it was Aleppo in my body because I saw him there." And when they remained silent, he said angrily, "Am I on trial or something?"

"Just go on," Cassoit said dryly.

"I looked out of the tank—"

Max leaned forward. "You looked out of the tank?"

Gary eyed Max strangely. "Sure. I was in the tank, remember?"

"Go on," Cassoit said. "You saw yourself in the tank. Then what did you do?"

"That's not what I said," Gary said hotly. "I looked *out* of the tank. I saw Aleppo go over to the life sustaining switches. He pulled them all and that was the end of me in the tank."

"That's right," Cassoit said. "Aleppo in your body pulled the switches. We can all attest to that, including you, since you're the one who did it. Can you deny that those hands you hold in front of you pulled those switches?"

"No, I can't," Gary said miserably, "but I wasn't in command of myself when that happened."

"Aleppo was," Cassoit said. "You told us that." Cassoit raised his eyes to the sound-proofed ceiling. "Tell me, what exactly is Aleppo? He's a dream creature, isn't he?"

"Yes. He lives in the Consciousness Pool."

"I see. And this dream creature took over your body?"

"Look," Gary said, trying to hide his uneasiness, "we're working on Project Ephialtes. That has to do with dreams. We try to capture dream creatures in the colloid entrapment unit."

"You were in that unit," Cassoit said, "yet you're not a dream creature."

"Why?" Gary looked around at them. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Kate was biting her lip.

"Is there anything you want to tell us?" Cassoit said. "Think about it for a minute."

Gary's mind was racing. What had happened? What weren't they

telling him? What did they want to know? The palms of his hands began to get wet and he brushed them on his trousers. What were they looking for?

"I didn't know anything about what happened until I entered my body this morning after the fight."

"The fight?" Cassoit's eyes became interested.

"Sure. The fight with Aleppo. I don't know what happened, how it ended, but I do know that I came back to my body and Aleppo didn't. I think Ruaha won over Aleppo and probably banished him from the Consciousness Pool. You remember the dream, Kate. You must have all evaluated it, isn't that true? The dream where Ruaha was talking to you, where I was sitting next to you in the big hall..."

It was like the sun coming up. Relief showed in every eye. Max grinned. Sam and Kate exchanged happy looks. Even Cassoit looked relieved.

"What's happening?"

"You've just said the magic words," Max said.

"About the dream? You did evaluate it, didn't you?"

Cassoit said, "You remembered it, yet you weren't around at the time and you hadn't seen it. You were running around the city trying to escape from the police. Only it wasn't really you who was doing the running. It was actually the person you call Aleppo."

"That's right. That's what I've been trying to tell you. I was being held somewhere. Ruaha grabbed me out of the tank just as Aleppo cut off the support system. I came alive in Kate's dream."

"Release him," Cassoit told the sergeant.

"Him?" Sergeant Kaminsky stared at Cassoit with disbelief. "You've got to be kidding." His face became stern. "Not on your life. The men in the white coats will be coming up after this one."

Cassoit said coldly, "There is the phone. Pick it up and tell your superior that I want to talk to the Meta Foundation in Washington, D.C."

It took time, the call was made, the arrangements and red tape were cut to a minimum, and before long Gary was able to embrace Kate.

"For a while there...." Gary started to say.

But Kate was kissing him and he couldn't go on. The only thing he could do was return her kiss.

"How long has this been going on?" Cassoit said, regarding the kissing couple with a cold eye.

Max smiled at the scene. "As long as recorded history," he said. "And I imagine a long time before that." He turned to Cassoit. "Didn't anybody ever tell you about the birds and the bees, Andrew?"