

Q

by John Grant

The security guard recognized my face but he knew his job. He laboriously checked my ID, then asked me to step out of the limo so he could frisk me and make me give his machines my thumbprint and a retinal scan. Only then would he allow me through the gate. He politely told me that my driver and my bodyguards were not permitted admission—which, of course, we'd already known—and directed them to a low building about a hundred yards outside the compound, where, he assured them, they could enjoy refreshments, entertainment, and restrooms.

He walked with me up to the main entrance, his hand never very far from the gun at his waist.

"Good to see you're vigilant," I said, in the same way I might have commented on the weather.

He smiled formally but said nothing.

At the doorway I had to submit to a second retinal scan before he finally ushered me into a coolly lit reception area. Soft music played in the background, and I stiffened when I recognized what it was. They must have smuggled in the CD.

Paying no attention to my reaction, the guard dumped onto the receptionist's desk the few items of mine he'd confiscated while frisking me: nail clippers, a blank cassette tape, a tube of lipstick someone had given me as a hint and which I'd never used but still carried around anyway, a comb. I wasn't sure why he'd decided they were threats to security.

"Dr. Prestrantra," said the young receptionist. "It's good to meet you, ma'am. Dr. Heatherton will be with you in a moment."

"I'm a few minutes early," I said to him.

I'd hardly had time to wonder why the hell I was apologizing to a receptionist when a door at the back of the room opened and an unshaven man came walking across the shiny stone floor toward me, a hand outstretched. Blue jeans, a Bon Jovi T-shirt, long, dreadlocked hair.

"Dr. Prestrantra?"

"Cello." My dad had liked the instrument. A good thing, I've always thought, that he didn't like the sousaphone instead.

"Cello, hi. Tim Heatherton. Good to meet you."

We shook hands.

"Coffee? Tea?"

"I'm awash. A restroom would be welcome."

"Of course. Charles, could you?"

The receptionist escorted me down a corridor to a ladies' room, waited outside the door, then led me back again. Dr. Heatherton—Tim—was still waiting where we'd left him.

He grinned. "Social niceties, or should I just get straight on with it?"

"Up to you. I have the rest of the afternoon free. I need to be back in DC by eight, though."

"Flying from La Guardia?"

"Yes."

"We have three, four hours then. Should be long enough if we start now. Come on back into my lair."

He led me back through the door he'd come in by and then along a corridor that was largely featureless except for the doors that regularly studded its length. Its walls were painted in one of those colors so tastefully muted you can never afterwards remember what it was.

We made small talk.

"I had a very great admiration for your predecessor," he said mildly.

"So did I."

"Alex did his best under difficult circumstances."

"These are difficult times."

The informal code phrases had been exchanged. We were people of like mind.

Tim gave a relaxed sigh.

"And you plan to carry on in the same way that he did?"

"I do."

"Good. So I can speak freely?"

"Of course. I've made no comment about the fact you people are playing a Mylene Farmer CD in reception, have I?"

He shrugged, then disregarded my comment.

"I nearly wept," he said, "when I heard the bomb had taken out Alex as well. I mean, every-silver-cloud-has-a-dark-and-ominous-lining sort of thing." He looked at me sidelong, checking that I'd really meant it when I'd said he could speak freely.

I nodded reassurance. "I know what you mean."

He stopped at a door that looked just like all the others. "In here," he said, opening it on a crowded office. Books and papers everywhere. You could tell where his desk was because one of the mountains of chaos was bigger than the others.

He cleared a chair, gestured for me to sit on it.

"Who did it?" he said, seating himself behind the desk-mountain. "Planted the bomb?"

"You've read the newspapers, seen the TV."

"They all say it was foreign terrorists. Probably al-Qaeda. Plausible, I guess, but I don't buy it."

"It's safer for you that you do," I said earnestly. "Is this place bugged?"

He gave a low chuckle. "It's about the only place in the country I'm completely certain isn't," he said. "Did Alex tell you much about our work here?"

The question was a test, I sensed. I gave it a straightforward answer.

"Absolutely nothing. After his death, my personal computer received an encrypted e-mail from him. I got our best hackers onto it, but none of them could get into it—could even get started. A few days later, I remembered something he said maybe six months ago ..."

Tim Heatherton raised a hand as if to fend me off. "Don't tell me what the something was."

"I wasn't going to. You might be certain this place is clean of bugs, but I'm not. Homeland Security's sneakier than you think."

"Strange times," he said reflectively, gazing at the picture of him and his family on the wall opposite him, "when we've come to regard the CIA as the torchbearers of liberty."

Alex Bransvuld had been my mentor at the CIA and my immediate predecessor as its deputy director of operations. He'd been appointed under a previous administration; the incoming president—and, more importantly, his veep—had wanted to replace him as DDO, but Alex had decided not to go gently into that good night and had pointed out, with the evidence to back it up, that no one, not even the prez and the veep in their immediately preceding years, was immune from the attentions of the security services. The newcomers didn't like the situation, but there wasn't a great deal they could do about it.

In a way it was astonishing that Alex had ever been appointed at all to lead an organization whose operations were, for the vast majority, necessarily covert, for he was in personal life a great democrat, a great upholder of rights such as freedom of speech and openness. All the greater the chagrin for him that he found a significant amount of his and the CIA's efforts had to be put into safeguarding the life of the prez, a man whom he loathed and despised—the man responsible for the creation of legally punishable thought-crimes, the construction of "education camps" all across the land, the further impoverishment and criminalization of the poorest in society, and much more besides. The man who seemed to be heading confidently toward a fourth term of office thanks to the increasingly obvious manipulation of computer-recorded votes.

But Alex had done it for one good reason.

Beside the veep, the prez was a moderate.

And Alex had still been doing his job right up until the moment that a bomb had exploded inside Air Force One, in which he'd been travelling with the prez and the secretary of defense.

Within the CIA we knew exactly who had been responsible for that bomb: the order had issued from the man who'd started moving his desk toys into the Oval Office almost before Air Force One had taken off for its final flight. But there was no immediate way we could imagine ever being able to prove this in a court of law or even being permitted to bring it to such a court. In the era of independent-minded judges it might have been possible; not today.

I'd inherited Alex's mantle just days before my visit to Tim Heatherton at his Center for Neuronic Research—obviously an uninformative title, for security reasons—and, like Alex, I was talking tough and supportive in public while following my own agenda in private and within certain high-level echelons of the CIA.

Once I'd succeeded in decrypting Alex's final communiqué, much of which concerned fairly standard stuff, I discovered at the bottom of it a final enigmatic instruction:

Cello—Center for Neuronic Research, Dr. T. Heatherton. This is perhaps your most important call of all. Don't do anything of significance until you've seen him.

That was why I was here in Tim Heatherton's office. I was speaking to him with a reasonable degree of freedom because I had with me, despite the frisking, the means to terminate him permanently, should that prove necessary.

"I've no wish to be rude," I said, "but you said we should pitch straight in. Could we put an end to the 'social niceties,' as you called them?"

He gathered himself. "Sure. Sorry—sure. I don't often get the chance just to, you know, *talk*."

"Understood."

He let out another of those long sighs. The office had no windows; in their place, there was on the wall behind him a picture almost large enough to be described as a mural and showing a beach that could have been somewhere in the Caribbean—certainly somewhere a long way away from rural New Jersey.

"How much did Alex tell you about our work?"

"Nothing." After a moment's hesitation I told him the story of the brief note at the end of the encrypted e-mail. "And we have nothing on file about the Center, either," I added.

"When we started working for you people, we were called ScanFast," he said. "Ring a bell?"

"Yes." I knew the name, anyway. All I could remember was that it was one of many companies we'd quietly hired to explore technologies that might be of use to intelligence gathering. Like most of the others, its researches had proved fruitless, and so after a while the contract had been cancelled. The only reason I'd recalled it at all was because of the midword capitalization: ScanFast. *So very Spielberg*, I'd thought at the time.

I explained.

"Yeah," he said, smiling like a schoolboy, "it was a dumbass name, all right. That wasn't the reason it was changed, though. What we were doing was ..."

And slowly, as he spoke, it all began to come back to me.

ScanFast had developed a technique of analyzing the activities of the electrical pathways in the brain. ("Think of it as a series of very rapid CAT scans, about a thousand per second," said Tim.) After an induction period with any particular individual, rather like the induction period required when you first install new voice-recognition software on a personal puter, ScanFast could derive a fairly accurate representation of what that individual was actually thinking. ("In fact," said Tim, "*very* accurate, but with Alex's agreement we began to play down the level of our achievements a bit.")

The CIA had been interested, of course, because of the counterterrorism possibilities. Most terrorists are fanatics, willing not only to die for their cause but even to suffer the extremes of pain before doing so. So, when you capture a terrorist suspect, standard interrogation techniques often produce no results; you have no way of discovering until later, if at all, whether the person who died without telling you anything useful was lying, keeping mum, or even in fact innocent of any involvement.

But if you could read their thoughts ...

"It turned out to be of almost zero value in that respect," said Tim with a shrug. "The problem is—was—that *conscious* thoughts, the ones at the forefront of the mind, produce a signal so very much stronger than the background thoughts that they effectively blot them out entirely. It's like trying to hear a whisper in the front row of a hard-rock concert. The whisper's *there*, all right—the sound doesn't just vanish—but there's no way of making it out in the midst of the cacophony."

Another of those schoolboy grins.

"I'm a Bach man, myself," he said. "Anyway, it's not difficult for terrorists—or anyone else, for that matter—to train themselves to focus their concentration on something quite different from the objects of interest. So precise information about someone's latest lay, or whatever, would come through loud and clear, but nothing about where the hostages were being kept. We soon found ScanFast was far less effective than traditional babble-drugs—which were also a lot cheaper."

"And that's when we pulled the plug on your contract?"

"That's when you *seemed* to pull the plug," he corrected. "In fact what happened was that ScanFast disappeared and the grandly named Center for Neuronic Research popped up in its place."

"A blue-sky company, as they say?"

"A blue-sky *name*," he said firmly. "A very real company. Small, of course. We cut the staff right down to half a dozen, including the pretty dork in Reception—I mean Charles, our esteemed receptionist."

I grimaced at him.

Tim laughed. "He's gay, anyway, in case you were feeling tempted."

"I'm a nun," I said shortly.

"A waste," he murmured. There was nothing objectionable about the comment; his tone turned it into a courtesy.

"Thank you."

"I'm not sure," he went on, "quite why Alex kept us going. The research we were doing was exciting stuff, all right, but it didn't have any obvious military or intelligence applications. Later on it was different, of course."

My ears pricked up.

"Later on," he said with a nod that was only half at me, "we were engaged to investigate the possibility of precognitive dreaming. And, later still, Alex was essentially paying us to keep our mouths shut."

Beneath the Center there was a very extensive basement—perhaps three times the area of the building's ground floor. Head-high screens divided it up into twenty or thirty cubicles, like a large open-plan office. Each of them, however, contained not a desk and chair but what I eventually worked out was a sleeping pallet with, perched above it, an agglomeration of machinery that looked like a cross between a beauty salon hair dryer and a praying mantis. The room's walls and the walls of the cubicles were covered in blood red carpeting material, the floor in a red so dark it was almost black; even though Tim had switched on banks of overhead fluorescent lighting, the illumination was strangely muted.

"What we did when we were ScanFast wasn't entirely fruitless, of course," Tim said as we rode down in the elevator. "It's thanks to our ScanFast work that there's been such a dramatic improvement in the treatment of coma patients, for example—now that we know they're still fully mentally active. And we have a far better understanding of the functionings of sociopaths. Who knows? One day we may be able to cure that . . . ailment."

He grunted, his face grim. I knew what was going through his mind without having to make use of a ScanFast machine. Serial murderers are only one manifestation of sociopathy.

"I'm told great strides are being made in the therapies offered to schizophrenics too," he continued after a few moments. "And so on."

"That must make you feel good," I said drily. "To know your work has been of humanitarian benefit."

He took the remark at face value. "It does, it does."

I was beginning to realize how much I already liked this man—I liked him far better than I liked myself, in fact. He had the looks of a benevolent reggae singer rather than an experimental psychologist, which I guessed was what he was. Or maybe an electronics engineer, a data analyst, an AI researcher; the lines between the disciplines were pretty blurred in his case.

"But that's by the way," he said.

"Precognitive dreams?" I prompted as we walked along an aisle that led between the cubicles. Our footsteps made no sound in the thick pile of the carpet.

"Yeah. If ScanFast wasn't much use for reading anything other than dominant thoughts—conscious thoughts—well, what about the *un*conscious thoughts? Might it be that they were of some inherent

interest in themselves? Course, the trouble was we couldn't listen in on the unconscious thoughts in the normal way, because, like I said, they were getting drowned out by the blare of the conscious ones. Except, there *was* one way."

We'd reached the end of the room. Attached to the wall was a piece of apparatus much like those that crouched over each of the beds in the cubicles, but this one was much larger. Beneath it was what reminded me of a movie representation of a psychoanalyst's couch: overstuffed brown leather, studded into hexagonal sections, kind of expensively sweaty-looking. Tim patted one of its faux-mahogany armrests as he gazed expectantly at me.

"You couldn't 'read' them while people were awake," I said, taking my cue, "but during REM sleep—dreaming—the unconscious mind is allowed free rein."

"Exactly," he replied. He lightly clapped his hands. "Bravo, Cello!"

The jigsaw pieces all began to fit together in my mind. There has always been plenty of anecdotal evidence about precognitive dreaming, but—as with so much else in the parasciences—at the same time there have always been an overwhelming number of good reasons to discount that evidence.

For a start, there's the well-documented phenomenon known as "reading back." If an event in real life reminds you of something that happened to you in a dream, your memories of the dream, quite without any conscious volition on your part, alter themselves so that the dream seems more closely to parallel the reality. Quite how much this occurs has been shown through experiments using dream diaries; the experimental subject is asked, each time he or she wakes from a dream, to write down as much as possible about it. If, later, the person has an experience in real life "that was just *exactly* like that dream of mine," they're asked to go back and look at the description in the dream diary. And they're almost always astonished by the mismatch between the memory information that's by now lodged securely in their brain and what they themselves wrote down immediately after the dream. The general reaction is: "The diary's got it wrong. The dream wasn't like that at all ..."

Then there's the problem that supposed precognitive dream elements are always fragmentary, always ambiguous, and usually cloaked in putative symbolism that makes them difficult to interpret. In the wake of the sinking of the *Titanic*, for example, there was a great deal written about the purportedly precognitive dreams among those on its passenger list—a few of whom in fact cancelled their voyages. None of the dream descriptions stated flat out that "The *Titanic* is going to go down" or anything even approximating that. Some involved shipwrecks; others involved major disasters. Alas, major disasters happen in reality with sufficient frequency that *any* dream of catastrophe is sure to be followed pretty promptly by some fearful loss of life.

Further, almost as a corollary: Dreams of disaster are themselves so frequent that, even if they seem quite specific, their matching up with a real-life event doesn't have much statistical significance. Proper maths aren't possible, for obvious reasons, but to get an idea: In any given week, at least dozens of people around the world will have a dream in which the Space Shuttle explodes. If, in one of those weeks, there *is* a Shuttle disaster, it'll seem to the dreamers concerned as if they were given a forewarning. But this is to discount all the other "forewarnings," during other weeks, that came to nothing.

And yet ... and yet ...

The anecdotal evidence is so voluminous and so persistent that it cannot entirely be discounted.

What Alex must have thought was that, by using ScanFast on a host of experimental subjects, one would

not only get far more accurate descriptions of the contents of their dreams than could ever be achieved through dream diaries but might also be able to detect patterns in the dreams of numerous subjects that, taken together, would comprise a sort of early-warning system. If a whole bunch of people suddenly started having dreams about the Empire State Building being blown up, then it would certainly be worth increasing security at the Empire State Building, putting out feelers to all the informers in foreign intelligence organizations and the major terrorist groups themselves, and so on.

I could understand entirely how Alex might be drawn to this notion.

If, of course, there was anything to the idea of precognitive dreaming at all.

A very big *if*.

I summarized all this to Tim.

"That was more or less exactly the way of it," he replied. "In effect, the Center for Neuronic Research became a sleep-research establishment. Alex was able to supply us with plenty of 'volunteers' from the education camps—people who were only too happy to come stay here for a few weeks or months, enjoying better food and with the promise that strings might be pulled to have their 'education' declared 'complete' earlier than it might otherwise be."

It was my turn to grin. A typical Alex setup, achieving two things at once: he got a supply of unpaid experimental subjects while at the same time he relieved the misery of at least a few of the unfortunates who'd been slung into the education camps.

"What sort of results did you have?" I said. "Presumably not great, or I'd have heard about them."

"We discovered nothing useful . . . at least, not at first." He sucked in a deep breath through his teeth. "Look, there's a much easier way for me to explain all this."

"Oh?"

"Would you like to experience someone else's dream?"

"It's possible?"

"Yeah. That's the way ScanFast works. It's almost the same apparatus, actually. The devices over there"—he gestured vaguely toward the cubicles—"detect the patterns of electrical activity in the dreamer's brain. Only a relatively simple modification of the apparatus is required to make it induce the same electrical patterns in someone else's brain. Same sort of principle as the electric generator being just an electric motor in reverse. We have all the data from our experiments stored on hard drives here; I can easily pick out a dream at random from the thousands available and replay it for your benefit."

I wasn't sure I liked the idea. There was something pretty creepy about it. As a professional spook, I'm totally accustomed to invading other people's privacy—I'd not be able to do my job otherwise—but this, the dreaming of someone else's dream, seemed somehow an invasion of privacy too far. As if I were, in a way, stealing a part of their identity. Cello Prestrantra, soul raper.

Even so . . .

"Okay," I said. "I'll try it. I assume it's safe."

"Completely." He patted the couch. "You might feel a little nauseous afterwards, because it's sort of like being on a mental roller coaster. But there are no physical consequences—no hidden brain damage, anything like that. And no psychological risks either, although I'd not like to try it myself if I'd just taken a hit of LSD. You *haven't*"—a mock-serious look in his eyes—"been dropping acid today, have you?"

I forced a smile and made myself comfortable on the couch. The leather smelled of dust and age and polish, all mixed. Above my head, as I lay flat, the opening of the ScanFast—or whatever the playback device was called—looked like the gaping mouth of a lamprey; the lack of teeth offered little consolation.

"And you're sure this machine can't pull any information *out* of my brain?" For obvious reasons, this wasn't an idle question.

"Quite sure," he said calmly. "If you're worried about it, just focus your mind on something you don't care about. I told you, your dominant thoughts drown all the others."

I remembered once reading a story that relied on the fact that, if you're told on no account not to think about a horse, the one thing your mind can hardly *stop* thinking about is horses. But I took his point.

"It'll take me a few minutes to set this up," he said, moving out of my view.

"Whose dream will it be?" I said, hoping my nervousness wasn't translating itself into the sound of my voice.

"I don't know, and I *can't* know," he said. "It'll be a random selection—well, reasonably random. We weeded out all the psychopathic ones, the truly insane ones, the overly violent ones. Then, though we kept the rest of the dreams, we ... um ... we *lost* all our records of the volunteers. Well, Alex lost them for us."

I grimaced. Homeland Security. The business of losing data permanently had become a lucrative one. If Alex had taken it as his personal responsibility to lose these records, chances were they'd stay permanently lost. Some of the commercial systems on offer—clandestinely on offer, of course, because the penalties were severe—were less reliable.

The lamprey's mouth lit up; a low, almost gray light. There was a low hum from it. With a creak the apparatus began slowly to descend toward me. I gripped the sides of the couch tightly. This was suddenly too much like a visit to the dentist. All my primitive instincts—the ones my reptile ancestors had learned—were telling me to bolt. Irrelevantly, I found myself wondering if my skirt were riding too high up on my legs, making me appear less dignified than a DDO should be. I unpeeled a hand from the edge of the couch and checked.

Oh hell, he's not going to jump me, for chrissakes. He's got a photo of his wife and kids in his office. Yeah, and some guarantee that can be ...

The mouth paused an inch or two above my face.

"You'll find it easier if you shut your eyes," said Tim. "The transition, I mean."

Swallowing my fears, I shut the world out of my consciousness.

"Ready?" he said from a million years away.

"Get on with it before I change my mind."

A low murmur of sympathetic laugh—

you are watching the pirates you are among the pirates they are shouting and singing "boil her in oil boil her in oil" you are one of the pirates you are their victim they are seizing you hands between thighs rich brown glow of the smouldering oil you are being held above it the cathedral is on the horizon a distant speck you walk toward it and already you are there and you're naked with the tall guy at the newsstand on the short grass in front of the cathedral one of the gravestones has fallen over you're opening your thighs for him and for his erection you know it's enormous but you can't see it however much you look for it he's lost his erection somewhere but it's inside you and he's moving it back and forth and your legs are curling around him and you're among the fluffy gray clouds bouncing from one to the next of them as you couple only he's gone now and you think he might have vanished inside you the same as his erection did only the skies are pulling open like the shell of a lobster to reveal all the steaming glory of heaven and the air's full of celestial musical instruments which are like harps and flutes and they're playing that stupid jingle from the recruitment ads on TV you can never get it out of your head and your mother's very angry with you for showing your open crotch to God and you try to cover it up as much as you can but your hands won't do what you tell them to do and now they're flying away through the pillows of the clouds like cumbersome lopsided birds and your arms have become wings but however hard you flap them they won't hold you up in the air because of the weight of the newsstand guy's erection pulling you down but that's all right because now you're a telephone ringing and ringing but no one ever comes to answer and you know the only words you'll ever speak again are the words of other people but the message is so urgent and the world has to know about it but you can't pass on the message if no one answers the phone which is on the sidewalk on 41st Street just outside the kosher deli and it's ringing as you climb out of the taxi except your dress has stayed behind stuck to the seat because of the heat of the driver when he was beating his meat to make himself complete which is why you're climbing out of the car when you really wanted to go to Lincoln Center getting out of the car getting out of the cat the cat you've not seen since he was run over by a Harley fourteen years ago it's good to see he's alive and well even though he's grown a lot so he can hardly squeeze his marmalade sides between the buildings and

"Not much of great use to a would-be predictor of the future, as I'm sure you'll agree," Tim was saying sardonically. "Here's a bag, if you need it."

I grabbed the bag from him and put my mouth over it. My stomach tried to decant its contents, but I kept my throat clamped shut. My chest and shoulder blades ached as I fought the heavens.

Finally I looked up at him, my wet eyes making him into a darker smudge against the distant red wall. For a moment that seemed more in keeping with my—someone's—dream than the real world. The transient images had been so *bright*, the emotions so *powerful*, as if there'd been nothing to insulate me from them. And maybe that was what had really happened: decades of self-education shielded me from the full force of my thoughts, but when I was unconscious, when the *me* was no longer in control, I had no such protection. I felt as if I'd casually drunk down a big gulp of what I'd thought was cold water, not thinking about the action, and poured concentrated sulphuric acid into my mouth instead. My mind was burning, bleeding, raw.

I tried to make a joke of it.

"Ten minutes of *that* and I think the most obdurate terrorist would be begging to confess."

"You'd be surprised," he said quietly. "Some of the people who've dreamed other people's dreams actually *like* it. It could get addictive."

I gulped air. "Not me." My throat hurt like hell. "Have you got a drink of water ...?"

I half expected to smell acid when he held a paper cup to my lips, but it was just water. Cold water that tasted of nothing worse than a plastic container. I drank it eagerly, and he fetched another cupful, which I sipped at more slowly, sitting on the edge of the couch, my unshod feet dangling above the carpeted floor.

"Well," he said after what seemed like quite a long while, "now you know what it's like to be inside someone else's unconscious mind. Inside your *own* unconscious mind, come to that, because there's not a huge generic difference in dreaming from one person to another, except at the psychological extremes."

I'd been just about to say that the person who'd had that dream must have been truly insane. Now I realized some of its elements had seemed familiar to me as I'd emerged from it. Yes, he was right. My own dreams weren't so very different.

I shook my head, trying to clear it. I still couldn't rid myself of the feeling that the dream had been realer than reality. What was it Chuang-tzu had said? "I do not know if I was a man dreaming I was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming I was a man"? Something like that. He'd added that "between Chuang-tzu and the butterfly there must be some distinction"; right at the moment, I was finding it hard to work out where the distinction was between myself and my butterfly.

Between myself and *someone else's* butterfly.

"This is all ... very confusing," I said.

Tim put his hand on my shoulder. "It's that way for everybody, first time they do it."

His voice was intentionally comforting, which meant it was hardly any comfort to me at all.

"I don't think I'm game for a second time," I muttered.

"We'll wait a while before we try the next thing," he responded, planting himself down on the couch beside me.

I wished he hadn't done that—I wished he hadn't put himself so close to me. The cotton of my short summer skirt wasn't quite touching the denim of his jeans, but I could feel the pressure of his flesh anyway. The dream had filled me up with undiluted emotions—fear, self-doubt, uncertainty, dread, guilt, lust—and none of them had fully abated. I'd not been lying when I'd told Tim I was like a nun. I hadn't had sex in eleven years, not since Alex and I had decided to terminate our liaison, a somewhat degrading matter of lies and furtively double-booked hotel rooms; after we'd finished it, I hadn't needed or wanted sex. I'd never been terribly good at it—never able wholly to abandon myself into it. Not like in the dream. In the dream I'd been on the brink of orgasm, and I hadn't cared if God and my mother both were watching. And now there was enough of that lust left that I was within an iota of ripping off Tim's clothes and mine and straddling him where he sat. I felt as if there were a weight in my womb.

... *the weight of the newsstand guy's erection* ...

Not that. Just near-uncontrollable horniness.

"I think I should have another cup of water," I said hoarsely.

Mercifully, he stood up to go fetch it.

As he did so, I felt my *self* beginning to take full control of me again. The naked feelings weren't being banished, exactly; just suppressed by my returning intellect.

Whoever had dreamt that dream originally had been a woman, like myself. There could hardly be any doubt about it, could there? Yes, maybe people could dream themselves into being of the opposite sex, but surely only a woman who'd had sex with a man could feel everything I'd felt ...

Which of course led me on to wonder what it'd be like sharing a man's sex dream. Having a hard cock and ...

Yeah, I could understand how some people found this hijacking of dreams addictive. A few moments ago my psyche had felt as if someone had been ransacking it with a chain saw; now I was becoming really quite seriously interested in repeating the experiment.

No, Cello. No.

My inner censor was right. Inside my mind there were dangerous terrains I had no wish to revisit.

Tim must have had to open a new bottle of water, because it took him longer this time to fetch me a cupful of it. The heat had gone from my chest and cheeks by the time he returned. *Oh Jesus, he probably saw the flush ...*

I tried to take command of the conversation.

"As you say, all of this is interesting, but useless," I said. "What did Alex see in it? Why did he want you to pursue your research? What did he think was in it for us?"

Tim sat down beside me again. This time his presence wasn't unsettling.

"A dream like that," he said, "and I'm assuming it was a fairly typical one, doesn't seem to show any signs of usable information content at all. Oh, sure, I'll bet it'd give a psychoanalyst fits of delight—there'd have been information in *that* sense. But nothing anyone else could make use of. No data. Certainly nothing that could give us clues about future events—or distant ones either, because initially we were almost as interested in clairvoyant dreams as we were in precognitive ones. People like Ingo Swann and G. M. Glaskin wrote about dream experiences that seemed to be showing scenes and events in other parts of the world, or even on other worlds. We think"—he gestured to show he was making an aside—"we think what happened in Swann's instance, fairly definitely, was that his unconscious was particularly adept at the reading-back trick."

"It'd have had to be *very* adept to get anything out of the mishmash I just experienced," I said, mustering a grin. "How long was I, um, 'under,' by the way?"

"Eleven or twelve seconds."

"What?"

"Yeah, it always feels like a lot longer. Anyway, where was I? Oh. Yes. Well, you said it yourself. Unless you're a lucid dreamer—or, even better but also even rarer, a *controlled* lucid dreamer—that's basically what all your dreams are like. A mess. A rapid succession of images and emotions that don't make any sense when they're all strung together and which, even taken individually, *still* probably don't make any sense."

"So ...?"

"It was Alex who gave us the insight." Tim stood again and walked across to the nearest cubicle. He turned in my direction, leaning his back against its blood red wall. His dreadlocks fell forward over his face so that when he spoke, because of the curiously flat acoustics of the place, his voice could have been coming from somewhere else entirely.

"When you listen to the radio, what you're wanting to hear is the main signal—the piece of music, the speaking voice, whatever. There's always a bit of noise, of course, that you hear in addition to that: signal hiss and that sort of thing. Everyone—the radio station, the radio manufacturer, you as listener with your finger on the tuning knob—conspires to try to reduce that level of unwanted noise as much as possible. The trouble with an individual dream, like the one you just experienced, is that it's virtually *all* noise. There could be a main signal in there, a genuine informational content, but it's such a small component of the whole that it's impossible to pick it out among the static. It's like your radio was giving you something that sounded like just white noise. You can't get anywhere by trying to tune it one way or the other, because you've no idea what it is you're looking for."

I took another sip of water. "Which is why you get the phenomenon of reading back."

Tim grinned, looking more than ever like a schoolboy. He nodded, encouraging me to keep speaking.

"When you listen to white noise," I said, "you can hear whatever you want in it. Think of a favorite piece of music, and that's what you'll start hearing in among all the hiss. Think about a dream afterward, and you can make whatever story you want out of all the scrambled story elements. What you're doing in both cases is *making sense* out of something that doesn't have any. It's a quality wired into our brains, and most of the time it's really helpful."

I hesitated, waving my free hand in the air to indicate not just the cavernous chamber around us, not just the structures above us, but everything beyond those. "We look at a universe that's mainly chaotic, and we're able to isolate the elements of it that make sense to us until we've built up logical strings; and eventually we can link up some of the logical strings with others until we get a network that explains a part of what we're seeing."

"We tell the universe's story," he summarized, still nodding. "Sometimes we get the story completely wrong for a while—we produce complexes of those ... What was it you called them? Oh yeah, 'logical strings.' We produce bits of false story. They seem okay on their own, smaller scale, like the idea that God made everything in just a few days several thousand years ago, but then the self-correcting part of the process comes in, because those complexes don't match up at all with the other complexes we've constructed. It's like you'd slung a random chapter from a Jane Austen novel into the middle of a Jules Verne adventure. It soon becomes very obvious indeed that it belongs to a different story."

We were batting the line of thought back and forth between us now. "Except that in a dream," I said, "there *is* no main storyline. Each of the complexes we construct when we think about the dream is as

valid as the next one."

He held up a finger, reminding me he was the schoolmaster and I was merely the bright student. "But that's only the case with an *individual* dream," he said. "We were prepared to accept that this was all there was, but then Alex stepped in, as I told you. He asked us the question: What if there are components in dreams that *aren't* completely random? What if there *is* a main storyline in there somewhere? If that's the case, it's going to turn up in other dreamers' dreams as well. While we mightn't be able to separate it out from a single dream, we might be able to detect it as a common factor in a whole bunch of different dreams."

I made to speak, but he gestured I should keep silent while I digested the implications of what he'd just said. Time for the student body to stop making its precocious contributions and start reflecting on what wiser, more experienced heads had already worked out. I swung myself up on the couch and, hands on my gingham-covered knees, stared past the bright colors of my skirt to the drabness of the floor, using it as a blank blackboard onto which I could chalk my thoughts.

"So," I said slowly, "what you could do is play the whole bank of dreams you've got here at once and hope the common elements would sort of reinforce each other until you could pick them out against the randomness. Sort of like they were making the dark fringes in an interference pattern. Then you could, well, sort of ..."

Tim snapped his fingers to make me glance up at him. "A lot of 'sorts of's' in there, but that's the general idea."

"But it's not as simple as that?"

"Too right." He chuckled. Using his ass to shove himself away from the wall, he strolled back to rest his forearm on the lamprey again. "I can give you the long, technical explanation or ... well, you've already given yourself the short one designed for the layperson. Choosing at random, we boost some of the shared elements in a few thousand dreams and see if the result is, uh, coherent and meaningful when we play them all together. Once in a thousand times or so we get some coherence; most of the time, though, the meaningfulness score is low or zero. Oh, meaningful to the dreamers, of course. But not *useful*. Sometimes dangerous too. We accidentally boost one of the strands relating to the deeper shared human sexual impulses and someone experiences the playback, we got trouble." His face had lost its grinning. "Two heart attacks, three people in terminal psychiatric care. I suppose the score isn't bad by government standards. And, anyway, the subjects we played the composites to were from the education camps, just like the dreamers, so maybe we did them a favor."

I took a hand of his in both of mine. He flinched briefly, as if he misinterpreted my gesture, then relaxed again. "By the side of some of the other things going on these days," I said in a very low voice, watching my breath disturb the small hairs on his arm and then looking up into his eyes, "that's nothing."

He shrugged, withdrawing the hand, seeming to shiver. "Yeah. Doesn't make it any easier to live with though." Then he brightened. "But it hasn't happened too often, now we understand better what's going on. We can block out the stuff that drives people crazy, or at least damp it down."

"Which is?" I still held his eyes with my gaze. They were brown and soft and had very beautiful depths. Under other circumstances ...

He moved away from the lamprey a couple of paces to stand with his back to me. "Some of the other common strands we've been able to boost out of the noise obscurity have been very valuable—valuable

enough to more than pay for this installation. There have been a few minor advances in science and technology—not just in psychology—thanks to work done at the Center for Neuronic Research. There have been certain knotty little problems our dreaming psyches have worked out that had proved intractable to our rational consciousness. I can't talk too much about this stuff. Most of it's classified. That probably wouldn't cause any problems, you being the DDO and all, but there might be something even you aren't supposed to hear."

I tried not to look as surprised as I felt. If there were things Tim wasn't sure I should know about, that meant he hadn't told them to Alex either, even though Alex was basically this place's sponsor. I wondered if Alex knew.

Tim was still talking. "Let's just say that a few of our spysats are a bit more effective than otherwise they'd have been, things like that." He blew out a long gust of breath. "But none of this is the really important material."

And now it seemed as if every cell in my body was devoting its attention to him. "Yeah?"

"It turns out we've been making a couple of really fundamental mistakes when we've been reading the universe. Oh, sure, we've been linking up all those complexes of logical strings just about right, and the story we've made out of them has been consistent—no Austen/Verne clashes—but it just happens, more by lousy luck than anything else, to have been the wrong story."

He laughed, a brief bark that had no humor in it. "In a century or a few centuries, the physicists would have found out about it, doing things the long, rational, laborious way. What we got out of our dream assemblages short-circuited the whole process a bit though. No wonder. Dreamers have an uninterrupted feed from the first-hand source of the information. They're not pussyfooting around trying to *describe* all the phenomena associated with it without realizing it's actually there. They've been spoken to by it direct."

"Tim, I don't have the first idea what you're talking about. You folks discovered God, or something?"

"In a way—a rather misleading way—you could say that."

"Huh?"

There was a silence between us as profound as one of those you sometimes get at a noisy party, when for no apparent reason everyone suddenly dries up all at the same time. Usually, at the party, the silence is put there for the local ditz-head to pop some monumental indiscretion into it, so that the whole room discovers Alice is sleeping with Jennifer's husband, or even with Jennifer. Here we didn't have a ditz-head to perform that useful function, so the silence just extended.

It was broken by Tim going abruptly into frenetic motion. He was back beside the lamprey without my really having noticed how he'd got there, and his splayed hand was between my breasts, pushing me back down onto the couch. Now it was my turn to misunderstand what he was doing, or wanted to do.

"But what about Natasha?" I said, knowing even before the words were out of my mouth that there wasn't any need at all to stop him in his tracks.

He paused, eyes narrowing. "What's my wife got to do with this? How'd you even know her name?"

I giggled. Under the circumstances it was the best thing I could have done. He looked down at his hand,

planted, fingers wide, on my chest, tautening the material of my dress over my breasts, and his face flushed even darker as he dropped his arm to his side.

"I, uh, ah ..."

"It's okay," I said, swinging my legs up onto the couch. "My fault. I just ..." I tried to make light of it. "Say, if we as a species can be reading the whole of the universe wrong, seems not too bad if I just this once manage to misread ..."

I was making it worse.

"Oh shit," I said. "I'm sorry, okay?"

"Don't worry," he responded, his attention already having shifted away from me. He was punching keys on the side of the lamprey now. I wondered if he called it the lamprey as well, or if it was only me who'd seen the resemblance. "I'm just reprogramming the activator, telling it to read a different type of file. Imagine you were running Windows on your puter and you wanted to shift from looking at jay-pegs to listening to a WAV file. Same sort of thing. I'm calling up a more appropriate software suite."

We all have our own techniques of getting over embarrassing moments. Mine was to try and joke my way out of it. His was to concentrate on telling me minutiae, so that we returned to the schoolteacher-student relationship again.

"You'll find the experience very different this time," he added, "which'll probably come as a great relief to you."

He grinned down at me. His technique had worked better than mine.

I smiled back, probably a little weakly. I'd been bracing myself for a repeat of the last dream-replay episode, only cruelly amplified. Not hard to see how people's minds could have been wrecked, if the early experiments had been like that.

"Now just relax yourself again, Cello. Like before, it'll be easier if you close your eyes."

I shut my eyes, becoming the student in obedience mode. I felt the mouth of the lamprey swimming toward me ...

The last time, I'd been plunged straight into an alien territory that was alien partly because made up of a complete confusion of thoughts and images, partly because it belonged in somebody else's mind. Who was it who said that other people's thoughts are the most incomprehensibly strange world of all?

This time, when I surrendered myself into the jaws of Tim Heatherton's device, there was no confusion at all. Everything was completely clear, completely simple, completely stark. Yet it was even more alien. The ideas themselves were too simple, in a way, even to be able to generate words or visual images, both of which are quite complex information conveyors even when broken down to their basics, but the mind that was having those ideas was, I was instantly aware, not a human one. It was thinking an enormous matrix of thought—a matrix far too big for me to be able to identify all the patterns that had simultaneously formed in it. I was able to follow only the simple pattern that my human intellect could rationalize into human terms. Yet that didn't matter too much. It was as if I were analyzing a fragment broken off a hologram: I wasn't seeing the picture as clearly as I should be able to, but I was seeing the whole picture nonetheless. Or, in terms of what I was experiencing, I wasn't having the thoughts as, well,

loud as they should be, and the sharper edges of them had been blurred off, but I was having *all* of the thoughts.

And what I saw was ...

No, "saw" is the wrong word, because I wasn't seeing anything. The thoughts were abstracts. They didn't relate into examples drawn from the physical, tangible world.

Okay, what I *understood*, then, was this:

The fundamental building block of life in the universe is loneliness. Yes, the universe is swarming with sentient species, but we're alone among them and ever more shall be. And they're alone among each other. The way that the universe works is that no two sentient species shall ever encounter each other, or ever be made aware that the numberless others exist. The universe wasn't designed to accommodate life, still less to countenance intelligent life. Human scientists have speculated about how the fundamental physical laws of the universe just happen to be tailor-made so that the emergence of life is inevitable and have built onto that somewhat shaky axiom the notion that our universe is only one of an infinitely long sequence of universes, in almost all of which the circumstances for life just don't arise. The opposing idea, that our universe was *designed* to make us happen, is of course unpalatable except to the atavists who make up 99 percent of the human species, the god-believers, the god-lovers, the primitives who are used as cattle by the rest of us.

All very logical so far. All very human.

All very wrong.

The truth of the matter is that the physical laws of the universe *preclude* life.

But life happened anyway, as a result of later tinkering with the universe by another hand. An irresponsible hand.

(*My hand.*)

This hand that was—is—too weak to modify the laws of the universe so that they could take our existence into account. Ideally they would be bent a bit so that life could integrate with the rest of the universe, but the hand is powerless to bring that about. Instead the universe's underpinning parameters simply *ignore* the sentient life that has been grafted onto the construction they support. And because the physical laws cannot accommodate our existence, there is no structure in place in the universe to allow for *interactions* between the different species. Interaction being prohibited by the lack of a mechanism to effect it, the laws of the universe keep the species eternally apart in order to prevent a paradox.

It's almost as if the universe were conspiring to keep the members of the swarm of sentient lifeforms isolated from each other, but that isn't the way the "arrow of conspiracy" is pointing at all. It'd *require* a conspiracy to bring two independently evolved species together, a conspiracy to subvert the fundamental laws of the universe. And, because all of the species are by definition *within* the universe, there's no way such a conspiracy can ever be mounted. A consequence of Godel's Theorem is that, if there's no "outside the system" a logical network can draw upon, the logical network cannot affect the system as a whole.

Conversely, if the walls that isolate the different species were nevertheless somehow to be brought tumbling down, then the laws of the universe themselves would have to alter to compensate, which would mean that *everything else* would instantly lapse into chaos. Dimensions would be jumbled together, the

forces that attract and repel components of the universe just *right* to keep them in the proper relation to each other would break apart, the delicate balance between energy and space and time would be shattered. That sort of thing.

The universe can tolerate its having been infected by life only if its immune system is in a constant state of alert to keep the diverse species separate.

And it does this, in part, by ensuring that we're all, always, in a mess.

We can look around humanity today and see the shambles it is but nevertheless cheer ourselves by saying this is just a transitional stage—that the whole of human history is a transitional stage leading toward some bright new tomorrow when everything will be *better*. But that isn't going to happen. Because we can never interact with other species, there's a tight limit to the amount we can develop, and we're always—always have been—fairly close to that limit. To be parochial, the veep and before him the prez may have made Hell the common currency of this nation, and thereby of the world; but they're only the latest in a long line of Hell-bringers. Every time the human species has looked as if it might break its current bounds, might not just approach the limit but possibly, just possibly, be able to peer beyond it, there's been a Hell-bringer waiting ready to bring an iron-soled boot stamping down to crush the groping fingers of the venture.

And that's just as true for the ether-breathing purple-tentacled beings of Sirius IX, or the aquatic monocellular intelligences of the perky little seventh planet of Aldebaran B, or whatever-the-fuck-else-civilizations the sci-fi writers like to imagine.

For all of the universe's countless species, there will always be that stamping boot. That's how the laws of the universe must have it. There's nothing we can do to change that. Our fantasies of making an overall improvement to the condition of human life, so that somehow "things" will be better tomorrow, are just that: fantasies. We say that life is the only element present in the universe that's capable of reversing entropy, of creating order out of chaos—"making things better"—but that's not really true. What's really the case is that life can, to an extent, stamp its own rules onto a very different rule system, the rule system that keeps the universe functioning. But that extent is very limited; if we try to do it too much, the universe intervenes to stop us.

Because we're not supposed to be here.

We're only here because some meddler came along and saw the perfectly complete universe as a playground.

So it created playthings.

Us.

"Jeez!" I said, incapable of doing anything more, everything floating around me as my mind tried simultaneously to bring itself back into reality and cling to what it had been thinking—or, rather, to the thoughts it had been housing.

There was a warmth on my arm—Tim Heatherton's comforting hand—and I used it as a focus to reel myself back into the world, back into the Center for Neuronic Research's lab.

Reality floundered around me for a long while before it stabilized itself. When it did, I found I was looking into those soft eyes of his again. This time I saw sympathy there. A whole cosmos of sympathy.

For many minutes I didn't try to move, to speak.

Then I said, "That's just a fiction, right?"

"No." Any further syllable would have been superfluous. He knew I knew it wasn't any fiction.

"So the god-lovers have been right all along?"

Again he shook his head. "No."

"That wasn't God I was ... being?"

He let go of my arm. "Sit up if you can."

I managed it—woozily, but managed it. "Spill."

"We call that entity 'Q,'" he said. "You know, a reference to the unknown anonymous originator of the first three Christian gospels." He gave a chuckle that sounded like it had been produced by the voice that tells you you've got e-mail.

"It doesn't matter what God is *called*," I burst out. "He's got nine billion names, hasn't he? I'm sure you could find 'Q' on the list somewhere."

This time when he shook his head it was vehement. I was talking shit.

"God's the guy the holies reckon created the universe, created life, created humankind in his image, guides us on our path, answers our prayers ... You know the whole gamut of the myth as well as I do. Q has none of those attributes. You must have understood it for yourself. Q didn't really *create* anything. Q just encountered a universe that was complete and perfect the way it was and fucked around with it."

"You call it fucking around, I call it creating life—intelligent life."

"No, Q didn't do that. Hasn't done. Couldn't."

"But that's what I—"

"No, I tell you. That's only what Q *thinks* he did. He *thinks* he's got the attributes of God."

"He?"

His face creased with an old, oft-repeated exasperation. "It. We've just found it easier to call Q 'he,' right? Otherwise we tie ourselves in grammatical knots when we try to talk about him ... it."

I shrugged acquiescence. "Okay, 'him.' But that's not the concern. According to Q—and who should know better than Q?—he created life, even though it *was* only as the sort of scum on the surface of a crystal-clear pond." I tugged the back of one hand between two fingers of the other to make a little peak of flesh, so that Tim could see the reality of a living organism in front of him. "That makes him pretty much the same as God, in my book."

Tim watched as I let the skin subside. My fingernails had left two little pink marks that quickly began to

fade.

"Q's good at that," he said quietly. "Consistency."

I snorted.

"You see, Q's in denial about what we really are," he continued, disregarding me, "which means we're necessarily in denial about it too. Which is probably a good thing."

"You're talking in riddles again."

He put a hand on the panel at the side of the lamprey's mouth. "It'd all be so much easier if I—"

I looked at my watch. "Time's passing. Just tell me."

"This is the quicker way of doing it," he said, tapping the device with his fingertips.

My shoulders slumped. "Okay, I admit it. I'm not sure I could take another dose of that—not so soon after last time. Okay?"

He was immediately apologetic. "I'm sorry. I should have thought of that. You've already taken more of this"—he patted the lamprey again—"in a couple of hours than most people can take in a week. I'll try to explain the rest as best I can. It's just knowing where to start is the problem ..."

"You said we were 'necessarily' in denial about things because Q is," I prompted. "That'd be as good a place as any."

He drew himself upright. "Yeah. Okay." I could see him marshalling his thoughts. "I've got to give you the results of at least a dozen renderings here. I'll do my best. Whatever reality we possess—"

I put both hands up as if I were trying to stop an onrushing juggernaut. "Whoa, there!"

This time he chose to contradict. "Bear with me, or we're never going to get anywhere," he said. "Just live with the fact that I'll be telling you things in the wrong order—there *is* no right order, you see."

"Be okay with you if I recorded this, then? So's I can make sense of it later." I groped around on the floor for where I'd dropped my bag. I found it and dug out my hand-held recorder.

"Don't see why not," he said, watching me.

"Your guy took my only cassette. You got one I could bum?"

Tim raised an eyebrow. "A cassette? I'd have thought the CIA would be into more sophisticated technology than that. A digital voice recorder, like."

"The old technology is more secure," I explained. "Stick a magnetic tape on a fire and there's no chance of anyone ever being able to get any data from it ever again. And the recorder itself retains nothing. Something integral like a DVR though ... it's more difficult to make sure they're completely clean. You need a furnace. Can be hard to find a furnace when you want one."

He shrugged. "You're the expert. I live and learn. Thanks for the lesson."

Tim walked across to one of the little utilitarian desks that dotted this hangar of a room and opened a drawer. "Here," he said, coming back toward me and tossing the cassette my way.

"Right," I said. "We're thinking the same thoughts as Q, you were saying." I'd been putting a few twos together to make a few fours—and fives—while he'd been fetching the cassette. "I can understand that part of it. Otherwise this sort of collective dreaming mind of ours wouldn't be all telling the same story—the individual contributions wouldn't be coming together to render up the Q-consciousness. That fits. What I can't understand is the *why* of it."

I pressed the Record button and held the recorder out in his direction. I could feel the little wheels turning inside it.

"You've got it near enough," he acknowledged, dropping down on the couch beside me again and then immediately standing up and beginning to pace. "'Telling the same story,' you said, and that's kind of the crux of it. You see, the only status we have in reality—the *universe's* reality, not the composite reality we construct through our perceptions—is that we're all elements of the story Q is reading. One of the stories, at least. When Q first encountered the universe there weren't any stories going on in it—it had no *need* for stories, being just fine the way it was. But Q is, to rely on a gross simplification for just a moment, a master storyteller. He likes stories. They entertain him. So he invented a whole bunch of them that he could tell, that he could write down using the universe as his blank sheet of paper."

I stared at him, incredulous. "You mean—what you're trying to tell me is we're all just characters in a story someone's making up?"

"That's it as near as dammit, yes." He stopped pacing, looked at the little round microphone on my recorder as if it had been it, not me, that had asked him the question. Then he was moving again. "Q saw the universe as a playground, like I said, but it was a pretty boring playground because nothing was going on in it. So he populated it with stories—thousands and millions and billions of stories. What we'd say is that he created life, sentient life, on all the planets in the universe he found that could possibly maintain it, but that's only the way our minds rationalize it. Q's not capable of creating life—he's not capable of creating anything that impinges on the physical reality of the universe. All he can do is create stories, and, consciously, not even the full stories—just their beginnings. Then he becomes a spectator, watching as the stories tell *themselves*. I said a moment ago you could think of him as a master storyteller, but he's not really that at all. If he's a master of anything, it's of being an *audience*. Just like we read stories into the universe, deceiving ourselves that it's the universe telling the stories when really, for the most part, what's happening is that we're selectively picking out from the random background supposedly conceptual strings that seem to make sense according to our own rules of logic—just in that same way, Q gets things started and then follows where the strings lead. He's projecting his perceptions onto the universe and seeing what stories fall out of the randomness. It's not randomness at all, of course: it's ordered by the laws of the physical universe. But those laws are so divorced from the logical system underpinning Q's own ability to conceptualize—and ours—that what they generate might as well be random."

"Then how do we know they exist at all?" I said, turning the mike briefly toward myself. "How does *Q* know?"

"He doesn't," said Tim, telling me with his body language that this was an aside before the main brunt of his reply. "That's part of his denial. As for us? We know they exist because ... well, you've heard music from other human cultures, right?"

"Right," I said, baffled.

"It sounds pretty strange to your American-educated ears, your Western-culture-educated ears. The progressions and intervals are all wrong. It can even sound less like music to us than like a somewhat unpleasant caterwaul. Most people in this country have difficulty listening to Chinese classical music for very long, and, hoo boy, just wait 'til you try the stuff from Thailand." A smile broke the earnestness of his face so briefly I wasn't sure it had been there at all. "Now imagine you were treated to a burst of the music created by beings from Altair, or wherever. It'd probably not sound like music at all to you, just a cacophony. Its rules would be entirely different. But you'd still *know* it was music, whatever your ears were telling you. You'd still know the music was *there*, even though all you heard was a seemingly random collection of noises."

"I'd know there were rules," I said, "even if I might never be able to understand what the rules were—even if the nature of my own perception made it impossible for me ever to be able to grasp the rules."

"Good to see our new deputy director of operations is even brighter than the old one," said Tim, looking at me with a fresh degree of respect. "It took Alex a long while to work that part out. Or maybe," he added, presumably believing he was deflating me, "I've just learned to tell it better."

"Doesn't matter," I said. I wasn't into games like that. I was surprised, and a bit disappointed, that he was.

But wasn't I setting my expectations too high? Tim Heatherton, me, everybody else—we were all merely story elements. It was no wonder the dreamers were echoing Q's thoughts, no wonder we all of us did. We were just invented characters playing our parts in a fiction Q had initiated to stop himself from getting bored. We were logical developments from an initial set of circumstances Q had set up, so he could watch what happened next. They say that all the characters an author invents for the stories s/he tells are merely different facets of the author: they *are* the author, whether the author likes to admit it or not. Authors can't really create new characters. All they can do is collect up a few of their *own* attributes, give the collection a name, and say it's a person. Our thoughts echoed Q's thoughts because they *were* Q's thoughts. Hell, *we* were just Q's thoughts. I was back with the busted hologram again. I was like a shard of a hologram. Pick me up and look at me and what you saw was a fuzzy, dim, blurred, out-of-focus Q.

And the same went for everyone.

I looked at the back of the hand holding out the little recorder for Tim. Tiny marks were still visible where I'd pinched the flesh. It sure didn't *feel* as if I were just a thought. Try as I might, I couldn't *perceive* myself as such.

But then, I was trying to do the perceiving through the medium of a human mind, which wasn't designed for the task. It's hardwired wrongly for it. The human mind is like one of those stupid robots that's okay for the tasks it was built for but useless for anything else—its limitations so small it can't even conceive anything might exist beyond its selected group of chores. But then, the human mind is an echo of . . .

I made a decision.

"This Q of yours," I said to Heatherton, my voice sounding almost defiant in my ears, "he's pretty dumb, isn't he?"

Heatherton's eyebrows rose, and he looked irritated. I could tell he'd not expected me to get to this

conclusion until he'd told me. The bright student had outflanked the patient instructor again. No doubt I'd missed a lot of links in the chain, but I'd got there.

"You're right," he said. Then he heaved another of those long, expressive sighs of his—those sighs that imparted more than could a multitude of words. His whole body, which I'd thought had been fairly relaxed when I'd first met him, now showed me I'd been wrong. A great burden had been lifted from his shoulders, not because of anything I'd said but because of the thoughts my mind was racing ahead to encompass. He knew I had to be having those thoughts. He was just a different shard broken off the same hologram, after all.

And there was another reason the weight had been lifted from him.

"That's not just a tape recorder you're holding, is it?"

"No," I said. "It isn't."

He looked at the little round hole that functioned as a microphone.

"It does actually record as well," I reassured him. "You've not been wasting your breath. What you've been saying is all on the tape."

"And what'll you do with the tape?"

"Put it in a vault, maybe. Somewhere deep inside Langley where no one'll ever come across it by accident and play it."

"Why not just destroy it?" he said. "Burn it?"

"I'm not sure," I confessed. "I just can't do that, for some reason. Information once gathered should never be lost—something like that."

"But you're going to make sure it is, just as surely as if you'd burned the tape."

I smiled at him. I liked him, liked him a lot, even though he'd irritated me once or twice when he'd gone into his patronizing-schoolteacher mode. "Who said Q was logical?"

I moved my thumb onto the little machine's Pause button.

"Alex wouldn't have done this, Cello. He knew all about us, and about Q, and ..."

"Wrong," I said. "It was Alex who sent me here. You're first on a long list he left for me, a list of calls he wanted me to make should anything happen to him—like, say, a bomb that took out not just the prez but also the deputy director of operations. It wasn't that Alex thought his own death was that important, you understand. Rather, he knew it would be a symptom that the disease had advanced too far for any other treatment to be feasible."

I readied my thumb on the Pause button again.

"There's one more thing you don't know," Tim said hastily. "One more thing you can't logically deduce from what you've learned so far."

"Why bother telling me?"

"Same reason as you. Information shouldn't just be thrown away once you've got it."

"Try me," I said, making my voice convey finality. This couldn't be protracted too long. I didn't want to be late back to DC.

I gave him thirty seconds, and that was all he needed. Then I pressed the Pause button firmly with my thumb. It was a clever little gadget, and there was hardly any recoil in my wrist at all. Almost without a sound, I made a small round hole appear in his forehead, neatly equidistant between his soft brown eyes.

With the minimum of fuss, he folded himself up.

I made a couple more of those tidy little holes in his head as he lay there, just to be sure, and then I turned off the tape and adjusted the tone control to full bass.

"Cello here," I said, holding the speaker grille up to my mouth. "Over."

"Barkelane," acknowledged my driver—or, at least, the guy who drove my limo. "Over."

"We have attained closure," I told him. "I'll tidy up at home. You do the same for the holiday cottage, okay? And tell the other cleaners to get to work. All these houses are real pigsties. Over."

"It's as good as done, boss," said Barkelane.

I switched out before he could add the obligatory "Over." Straightening my bright summer dress, casting around in case I'd discarded anything I shouldn't have, I got up from the couch and stepped over the shell of the Tim Heatherton thought. I would have to do Charles, the pretty receptionist, first. Then anyone else who was inside the main Center for Neuronic Research building—as well as all the puters, of course—before finishing off with the guard who'd let me in here. Barkelane and the guys and gals with him would already be mopping up in the commissary, or whatever the hell that outbuilding was. The rest of my team, the ones who'd split off from the convoy on the way here from La Guardia, would soon, in response to Barkelane's radioed instructions, be making their calls on spouses, siblings, anyone to whom a careless word might have been spoken. I wondered if Tim had known it wasn't just his thumb had been pressing out of existence but also Natasha and—what were their names again?—ah yes, Bryony Heatherton Makepeace, aged thirty-three, and Ellie Heatherton, aged twenty-eight, cute young career women who both had their brother's eyes.

Soft brown eyes.

Purely by the laws of chance, some of Q's thoughts can be very lovely.

I arrived safely back in DC, in plenty of time for my meeting on the entirely irrelevant problem presented by the unexpectedly tough resistance our forces had encountered in Sweden and Norway. After the meeting was over, we adjourned at the new president's behest to have a belated dinner with him in the White House. It was nearly midnight by the time I stepped into my limo and gave Barkelane the welcome news that at last he could drive me back to Langley.

As soon as we were clear of Constitution Avenue I triggered the scrambled radio, and sure enough the news came through of the complete destruction by fire of a building complex, purpose and nature unspecified, in the middle of Nowheresville, NJ. The cause of the fire was unknown, but the emergency

services, who'd arrived far too late of course, were all agreed that its spread had been almost preternaturally rapid and voracious. All they could really hope to do was make sure it didn't spark off a forest blaze while they waited around for the embers to cool down enough to permit them to pick through and see if there were any salvageable remains—which there wouldn't be.

Just this morning, the news would have depressed or upset me, however much my professional training tried to pretend it didn't; now it was just as if it were some special-effects fest happening in a movie on a television set I wasn't properly watching. Those weren't human beings we'd destroyed today, I now knew: they were mere thoughts, figments, story elements. Same went for what one might quaintly, inappropriately, call their life's work.

And that was why we'd had to destroy them—that type of thinking. Thinking born as an inevitable consequence from knowledge that was too dangerous to let be disseminated.

Not long before we reached Langley, my emotions cut back in, and I started shivering from the reaction to what I'd done, and ordered done. I'd done what I'd had to do, behaved with fascist ruthlessness as I expunged several score existences to make sure the news of Q—of who we truly are—didn't leak out. My motives were of the highest, I told myself: to reduce, in the due course of time, the net sum of human misery. I was doing my part to try to ameliorate the future. We might think the horror of the human condition couldn't get any worse than it had already become, but people have been believing that at just about every moment in human history, and sure enough, despite temporary improvements, sooner or later someone's come along with the capacity to make things worse, much worse, than they've ever been before. The Hell-bringers. I'd been a fascist for the day—and would have to be for quite a few other days, as well, before I got to the end of Alex's list. That list was of course somewhat reduced, now, because destroying the Center for Neuronic Research, the root source of the knowledge of Q, meant a good-sized trickle of other enterprises were no longer potential threats. So it wasn't just a vague number of lives in the future I'd saved; by taking those few score lives today I might very directly have saved hundreds, possibly thousands, of other human existences I would otherwise have had to order be snuffed out.

But I'd been a fascist, all right—no getting away from that. And the thought that I hadn't been *as bad* a fascist as the ones Alex and now me were trying to counter didn't seem at all consoling.

So who are they, our Hell-bringer foes?

There are enough people around who don't value human life too highly, enough ruthless bastards who'll consign old people and kids and young lovers and anyone else in whole nations to death by fire and torture and explosion, and whatever new vileness they can come up with—who can do this as easily as they might pop a grape into their mouth or comment on how good the steak au poivre is tonight, my dear, and many of them are here in Washington, D.C., brought here by the True Believers, whether they be believers in the sanctity of human greed or the cattlelike believers in loving and merciful gods. Once upon a time the Hell-bringers preached ideas like democracy and freedom, but that was just until they got where they are, and where they intend to stay for the rest of all eternity. They have their counterparts all over the world, but none of those others have the sheer, raw power these ones have. None of them have the capability to destroy the entire planet and the species with it through either deliberate malice or stupid inactivity. Which they'll do, if they remain unchecked. I give the human species about another two generations, and that's when I'm in one of my more optimistic moods.

If, if, *if* the bastards remain unchecked.

And that's what Alex understood. While Barkelane drove me home to Langley along the freeway, my

stomach well filled by the excellent gourmet meal served up by the executive's chefs, as I looked out the window at the streaked lights, I knew my thoughts were following the same train as Alex's had. There'd been no need for him to leave any extra instructions in his covert e-mail. If the bastards were as bad as this when they believed they were destroying human lives, innocent or otherwise, when they could use phrases like "collateral damage"—that most obscene of euphemisms—to gloss over the agonies they deliberately perpetrated, *what would they be like if they knew they were just destroying figments of Q's imagination?*

The agonies, the miseries, the horrors would be just the same, of course they would; but they'd become even *easier* to euphemize out of existence. The god-lovers would declare their God and Q (dumb, stupid, puerile Q) to be one and the same thing, and then they'd cheer on with ever clearer consciences the infliction of ever more sickening abominations and torments on their fellow human beings.

Everyone else but *me*, you see, would be just an idea, not *real*. It wouldn't matter what happened to *them*, because who cares what happens to an idea?

For I would be the one true Q.

And so would you.

I didn't ever have to replay the cassette that still sat snugly in my recorder-that-wasn't-just-a-recorder to be able to hear again, any time I wanted or didn't want to, what Tim Heatherton had told me in his final moments, the bit he told me he'd never gotten around to telling even Alex.

Q's denial of reality extends far beyond just his inability to effect any real change in the universe. "You see," Tim explained, "what Q most obdurately refuses to accept is the fact that he didn't encounter the universe on his own. He was brought to the universe by someone else, someone who didn't even realize they were bringing him. They looked at the universe for a while, saw nothing there that seemed to have any value for them—or maybe they just realized it was complete the way it was and didn't require any interference from them. Q never knew the full truth of that, even before he blocked off all knowledge of his own true nature. Whatever the case, once the Someone Else had looked at the universe long enough to satisfy themselves, they turned away to move on to somewhere else.

"And, as they did so, the disregarded Q fell out of their pocket, if you like, and they didn't notice they'd dropped him. He was the crumpled empty candy wrapper that's always blowing around on the ground of even the best-maintained of playgrounds.

"That's why Q's so dumb. He's *litter*."

The End

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