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The Dreamfields by K.W. Jeter

This was the dream of Arthur. He thought there was come into this land griffons and serpents, and he thought they burnt and slew all the people in the land, and then he thought he fought with them, and they did him passing great harm and wounded him full sore, but at the last he slew them. When the king awaked he was passing heavy of his dream.

—Sir Thomas Malory, *Morte d'Arthur*

PART ONE The Base

CHAPTER 1

Something had struck the earth and it wouldn't stop ringing. Or so it seemed. Ralph Metric took another pull at the beer can sweating in his hand and watched the heat waves shimmer on the rocks and sand beyond the glass. Below the glaring window the air conditioner whined.

"I just think it's kind of strange," came Stimmitz's voice again. It cut through the aural haze produced by Bach cantatas dribbling into the room at low volume. "Don't you? Strange, a little?"

"Huh?" Ralph turned, from the window. A phantom desert in green and purple slowly ebbed from his vision, revealing Stimmitz sitting in the dark end of the room. On one of the bookshelves behind him the reels of his tape deck inexorably rotated.

"Strange." The too-angular legs shifted their positions, like some part of a mantis flexing. "Don't you think it is?"

Somehow I got lost here, thought Ralph. *While I was looking out the window? I can't even remember what we were talking about.* "Strange?" The word itself had gotten a little fuzzy from repetition, and beer. Bach, too. He discovered he was running his thumb around the top of the beer can at the same speed the tape reels were going around. He switched the beer to his other hand and slid the first into his pocket. "What's strange?" he said.

"Oh. You know." Stimmitz looked past Ralph towards the window. "Operation Dreamwatch, the whole thing. The uniforms and the pretend-military bit. I mean, if they really want discipline so tight, why'd they hire people... like Glogolt, for Pete's sake. That jerk's been here longer than any of us and he still hasn't learned how to do the regulation knot in his tie." Stimmitz's eyes shifted a fraction of an inch and refocused on Ralph.

"Glogolt's got quite a stack, of deficiency notices." Ralph interposed the beer can between Stimmitz's eyes and his own and took another swallow.

"Yeah, but they don't get rid of him. So they must have some kind of use for him, right? But what good is somebody like Glogolt? Or any of the people here, for that matter."

Ralph laid the cool damp of the beer can against his cheek and said nothing. Stimmitz was poking at a group of thoughts that had been wadding up in Ralph's gut for some time now. *About the size of a basketball,* thought Ralph glumly. *That's how they feel.*

"I mean, this is an expensive set-up," Stimmitz's mouth moved again beneath his hardening eyes. "This all costs money, a lot of it. How come there's so much Muehlenfeldt money being dumped into this project while there's a war going on?"

"Muehlenfeldt money?" Through Ralph's mind flashed a brief image of the distinguished Senator M. cranking a printing press in a dank basement.

"Of course. This whole thing's bankrolled through their Ultimate Foundation."

"So? Somebody's got to pay for it."

"Yeah, but *why*?" A slight increase in the volume of Stimmitz's voice eclipsed the murmuring Bach cantata. "What's the whole project *doing* here? What's it for?"

"It's for 125 dollars a week," said Ralph with beer-laden profundity. "Plus room and board."

"Come on."

"Yeah, well, they told us what it's for, didn't they? Therapy, right? For all those messed-up little juvenile delinquents over there at the Thronsen Home."

Stimmitz was quiet for a moment, then spoke very softly. "Do you believe that?"

A thin layer of Bach crept through the room for several seconds. "I guess so," said Ralph finally. "Why shouldn't I?"

"I went into Thronsen yesterday," said Stimmitz. "Helga and I did. We cut a hole in the perimeter fence and went into the main building—"

"Hey, you're not supposed to do that."

Stimmitz looked annoyed, then shrugged. "Sometimes you have to do things you're not supposed to."

"So what'd you find?" Ralph's curiosity had started to unfold a little.

From the tape came a soprano solo, then the chorus again, sounding as if from a great distance. "Maybe I'd better not tell you just now," said Stimmitz. "Maybe later."

"I hate that," said Ralph in disgust. "I hate it when people do that. Teasing you with some crummy little secret, and then they won't tell you."

"You probably wouldn't believe me, anyway. Not yet at least." He seemed to be drawing away from the conversation. "You're still operating out of a whole different universe."

The last sounded like something Stimmitz had always talked about

before, but to which Ralph had never paid attention. "Don't start that." He leaned over to deposit the beer can on a low table already crowded with empties. The can slid from his grasp and dropped the last inch to the table top. A few drops of warm fluid splashed out of the little opening and flecked his hand. "All this talk about universes—" He paused to hold down a belch, "—is just a way of avoiding the real problem." *Which* is? mocked a portion of him that the beer hadn't reached. He ignored it and headed for the bathroom. A couple more empty cans fell over on the floor as his feet hit them.

"Just remember," said Stimmitz as Ralph crossed in front of him, "what went on today. While you were here."

"Sure." Ralph pushed open the door. "Remember this conversation always. Changed my whole life."

"Seriously." Stimmitz's voice followed him into the smallest room of his apartment. "In case... uh, something happens. And I don't get around to talking to you about this again."

Ralph nodded and closed the door without saying anything. *What was that all about?* he wondered.

When he came out, the Bach cantatas tape had ended. The loose end of the tape fluttered as the take-up reel continued to spin. The chair in front of the bookshelves was empty.

Ralph went to the tape deck and switched it off. Small lights died and went out. "Stimmitz?" he said, turning around.

The room was silent except for the air conditioner. Outside the window the desert still vibrated with heat.

"Hey. Where are you? Hey, Stimmitz, where'd you go?" He pivoted slowly in the center of the room.

"What's the matter?" Stimmitz came back into the room from the apartment's miniscule balcony. He had been standing to one side where Ralph couldn't see him. "What's wrong?" he said, sliding the window shut behind himself.

"Nothing." Ralph kneaded his forehead with one hand. Something

during the last few seconds had dissipated the gassy alcoholic haze produced by the beer. *Maybe his universe is catching up on me?* "Just don't—go around disappearing like that, OK?" From the floor he picked up his uniform coat with the green and gold Opwatch patch on the sleeve.

* * *

As he crossed the base, he was aware that to anybody watching from one of the apartment buildings, it would look as if he were now shimmering with heat waves, too. *That's all right*, thought Ralph. *As long as you're in phase*. He trudged on towards the base's Rec hall.

Through its door of dark glass he could see a few of the other watchers. The sweat on his forehead and along his arms chilled as he pushed open the door and stepped into another air-conditioned area.

"What's up, Ralph?" Slouched in one of the sagging, upholstered chairs, Kathy Foyle continued to gaze dispassionately at a section of newspaper. A bit of nail came loose from the rest and she took her forefinger away from her mouth. A lock of her dark hair straggled in front of one ear.

"Nothing much. About the same." The exchange had become a ritual with them, a section of meaningless time that had formed into a loop and kept splicing itself in. There were other loops as well, Ralph knew, which were capable of multiplying into whole days.

The rest of the newspaper lay on the unused pool table in the middle of the room. The table's felt had become gritty with the little bit of the Californian desert that came into the room every time the door was opened. Ralph's fingertips left little marks as he picked up the L.A. Times' front page.

XIMENTO FRONT PENETRATED *Hill B-12 Taken, Says Pentagon*. Where was that? The name sounded Mexican to Ralph, though he hadn't been aware that the fighting had spread that far north. Considering his only mild curiosity, the text below the headline looked too dense to penetrate. He laid down the paper, then headed along the hall's main corridor to pick up his mail.

He peered into the little box set into the wall with all the others. There was nothing except an offer to join some record club—he got a lot of those; he was on somebody's list somewhere—and his weekly copy of the

Revolutionary Workers' Party *Agitant*. A mimeographed note was stapled to the low-grade paper. It stated that if he didn't send a couple more dollars, they would regretfully have to let his one-month trial subscription come to an end. The same note had been stapled to every issue he had received for the past six months.

He took a quick glance at the paper—SUPPORT SOCIALIST MARTYRS OF XIMENTO!—then dropped it and the record-club offer into a waste can and walked back to the main room.

Kathy was gone but Fred Goodell was now sprawled in one of the chairs, gazing out the glass door and scratching between the creases of his sweat-stained Opwatch dress shirt. His bored-ferret face looked up at Ralph. "You on tonight?"

"Yeah," said Ralph. He lowered himself into one of the chairs. The tired upholstery sighed even under his thin frame. "This is my Monday."

Goodell nodded. "Two more nights for me." The watchers' shifts were staggered through the week. "Then I'll be off." The conversation dissolved into silence.

I'd better go fix myself something to eat, thought Ralph vaguely. And then go to sleep for a while. Rest up for another eight hours on the dreamfield tonight. After half a year on this job, there were still times when spending the night wandering around in other people's dreams seemed like an unnatural thing to do.

CHAPTER 2

"All right, men." Operations Chief Blenek paced back and forth in front of them with his clipboard held behind his back. "Straight through, tonight. No heroics. Just do everything by the manual, the Opwatch way. All right?"

"Oh, brother," muttered Chuck Fletchum, and slouched lower in his folding metal chair next to Ralph. "They must be running those World War Two bomber squadron flicks on TV again."

Ralph said nothing. He could recall the week that one of the local stations had scheduled a batch of 1940s' spy movies, and the pudgy

functionary had actually shown up at the pre-shift briefings wearing a belted trenchcoat.

Blenek had fallen silent and was now glaring at the two dozen men in front of him, his small eyes set to impale whomever he had heard talking; they fastened on Glogolt, who was a couple of chairs ahead of Ralph. "What was that smart remark, Mr. Glogolt?"

"Didn't say anything," mumbled the accused. He shifted his sacklike bulk, a small mountain of flesh encased in a wrinkled jumpsuit.

"Look at those shoes," snarled Blenek, pressing his case. "When was the last time you took a rag to them? And pull up your zipper—you're a mess."

Ralph leaned back and studied Glogolt—he *was* a mess. He always looked as if he were somehow disintegrating inside his clothes, as if the effort to retain human shape had become too much for him. It made one tired just to look at him. *Stimmitz is right*, thought Ralph. *What good is there having somebody like that around!*

He looked over at Stimmitz sitting with his chair pushed against the wall of the briefing room. The eyes in the impassive face focused somewhere beyond the room. Ralph wondered what he was thinking. One of Stimmitz's hands gripped the edge of his chair, his knuckles tensed white.

The voice of one of the other watchers broke through Ralph's attention. "Come on, Blenek, get on with it."

Blenek's eyes swept over the group again, then narrowed. They became two thin gauges of the anger he obviously felt over the difference between Operation Dreamwatch as it was and his fantasies of it. *Clashing universes*, Ralph found himself thinking—a phrase picked up from Stimmitz.

"This just came over from the Thronsen Home," said Blenek sullenly. "They've started a new pattern some of you guys might observe tonight. In it, the kid is accused of shoplifting a candy bar, kid denies it, shopkeeper hits kid and searches him, in doing so tears the new jacket the kid's mother gave him, shopkeeper turns into kid's mother, and then it segues into one of the 'angry parent' cycles. Got it?" Blenek had worked himself back into his original gung-ho mood. "Let's keep an eye out for it and get

some reports in on it. Show the brass we're not just sleeping around here." He placed his clipboard under his arm and rocked back on his heels. His wide belly tautened his Op-watch uniform. "Okay, move out—time to get on the line."

As they crossed the short open space between the briefing room and the line shack—the grounds of the base were lit blue by moonlight and the desert's numerous stars—Ralph glanced over at the group of female watchers sauntering out of their own briefing room. In a few moments they would be on the dreamfield of the girls in the Thronsen Home.

At a distance of fifty meters or so, Ralph could just recognize Kathy. She waved briefly to him, holding a lit cigarette. It didn't appear to him as if she had combed her hair since she had woken up last—one of her regular shortcomings, Ralph conceded. He looked, but didn't see Helga Warner in the group.

He turned away and followed the other men into the line shack. The building housing the PKD Laboratories' Field Insertion Device wasn't a shack at all, but the largest cubic pile of cinderblocks and concrete for miles around. "Shack," Ralph had decided, was probably just more pseudo-military lingo.

As he stepped into the building's doorway, a pair of distant screams sounded from the sky. He looked back and up. Two pale luminous jet trails were vanishing into the south. Another midnight terror-bomb run, probably, down to the Brazilian front. *Maybe Blenek should put in for a job over at the Air Force base*, thought Ralph. He pulled the door shut behind himself.

The towering banks of electronics were softly humming as he passed by them. The air inside the building was sharp with ozone. Blenek scowled at him and made a mark on his clipboard as Ralph stepped past him. The last vacant strap was at the end of the thick cable dangling from the lofty ceiling. He grabbed the leather loop and felt the cold metal contact point settle against his palm. The permeating electronic hum grew louder.

Blenek paced slowly alongside the line of watchers, who were hanging onto the line's straps like bored subway passengers. He glanced from them to his clipboard and back again, until he seemed satisfied that everyone was there. Pivoting on his heel, he waved up at the control booth. "Okay, Benny, take 'em on out."

Nothing happened. The man in the little glass booth several meters above their heads remained absorbed in a half-eaten sandwich and a paperback book. He had his feet up on the controls that would activate the line and send the watchers out onto the dreamfield.

"Hey, Benny, come on!" shouted Blenek. "What're you doing up there?"

"What does it look like?" said Goodell, who was standing closest to Blenek. He took Blenek's pencil out of his hand and flung it up at the glass booth. It ticked against the glass and fell back to the floor. Benny lowered his feet and looked down at them.

"Come on!" Blenek waved his clipboard, a stiff rectangular bat flapping around his reddened face. "Throw the switch, dummy!"

Benny's mouth moved, forming words they couldn't hear, but his hands travelled across the control board anyway. The electronic hum whooped up in pitch and held its new note. The fluorescent lights suspended from the ceiling dimmed, reminding Ralph of the electrocution scenes from old prison movies, then the entire building, Blenek, and Benny up in the control booth, faded into grayness.

The dreamfield faded in. The familiar sidewalks and storefronts of a semi-rural small town solidified around the watchers holding onto the line's straps. From a blue sky the fields eternal midafternoon sun shone upon them, but they cast no shadows upon the street's surface.

The humming noise from the shack's electronics back in the real world faded and then ceased entirely. One by one, the watchers let go of the leather straps. The line hung motionless for a moment, then snaked upwards, gathering speed until it vanished in the limitless sky above them.

One of the watchers yawned and stretched his arms. "If I stand around here," he announced, "I'll cork off in about ten seconds. Let's go." He motioned to his observation partner, and the two of them slowly started away from the group.

The rest divided into pairs and headed off in different directions along the dreamfield's sidewalks. They all moved at the same unhurried pace.

"Which way you want to go?" asked Stimmitz. It was the first time he had spoken to Ralph since that afternoon.

"Whichever way looks good to you." Ralph glanced at his watch; for some reason, he and Stimmitz were the only watchers he had ever seen with time-pieces. *Eleven-fifteen*, he noted, and sighed. Seven and three-quarters hours until the line came dangling down out of the sky again.

They walked in silence past a small drugstore. Circular racks of sunglasses and the aisles of cosmetics and other merchandise could be seen through its window. The store, like the others on the block, was lit up inside but vacant—the dream sequences tended to show up farther away from wherever the watchers had been dropped by the line.

Idly, Ralph pushed his fingers through the drugstore window. After an initial resistance, his hand went into the glass as though it were a body of water somehow made vertical. The nature of objects on the dreamfield was described alternately as "cheesy insubstantiality" and "evanescent jello." The mental orientation that kept the watchers on top of the sidewalks instead of sinking slowly through them also gave a slight surface-tension effect to everything in the dreamfield's illusion of a small town. The glass actually felt like water rippling around Ralph's moving hand.

He turned his head and looked behind. The other watchers were all out of sight. Beside him, Stimmitz slowly paced, silent and apparently lost in thought.

They reached the end of the block and crossed the street. On the other side were the same stores as they had just passed, but reversed as if they had walked through a mirror. The entire field was made up of infinite repetitions and reflections of the same small area. If the two of them continued walking down the street, the neon sign that spelled out DRUGSTORE would become EROTSGURD and then DRUGSTORE again... again and again, for as far as they went on the field.

The sound of voices broke the silence. They had come upon the first dream sequence of the night. "In there," said Stimmitz, pointing to the restaurant in the middle of the block on the other side of the street. The voices grew louder as he and Ralph headed towards them. One voice, a child's, cracked with emotion.

Peering through the restaurant's door, they watched the scene, already well under way. "The old puppy-on-a-platter pattern," said Stimmitz.

"Are they still doing *this* one?" Ralph shook his head in disgust. "I thought they had already gone through all the kids in Thronsen with it."

"Maybe the therapists have started reruns."

The dream continued through its sequence. The platter with the boy's dead dog upon it had already been brought to the table. The boy, a pallid-faced teenager, had risen from his chair and, with tears coursing down his face, was shouting at the waiter. As Ralph and Stimmitz watched, the waiter's face melted into that of a middle-aged woman, probably the boy's mother. More shouting, a long, agonized scream from the boy, and he buried his face in his arms upon the table, sobbing beside the dog's corpse. In a few seconds, the mother/waiter dissolved into nothing along with the dog, leaving the crying boy alone in the empty restaurant.

"That's always been one of my least favorite ones," said Ralph as they walked away from the restaurant. "There's something really tacky about it."

"Yeah, well, that's what I was talking about before. You know?" Stimmitz gestured around them at the dreamfield. "Don't you start to wonder if the therapists over at Thronsen really know what they're doing? Or if they do know, do we?"

"Aw, come on." Ralph kicked at a pebble on the sidewalk, the toe of his shoe going right through it. "Don't start mystery-mongering again. Give me a little more to go on this time, all right? If you know so much, come on, show and tell time."

Stimmitz glanced at him, then barely smiled. "Maybe what I know isn't a mystery," he said. "Maybe I just know the same things as you and everybody else, but I think about them differently."

Ralph stopped in front of another of the field's drugstores and faced Stimmitz. "You know you know more than I do. You sneaked into Thronsen with Helga Warner."

"Think about that." Stimmitz tilted his head to one side.

"Think about *what*?" He was beginning to feel a little irritated.

"Why'd I have to sneak into Thronsen."

"Because..." *Because there's something they don't want us to see.* The pieces fell together in Ralph's mind, perfectly formed, like a smooth black stone. *Because they're hiding something.* He felt the weight of Stimmitz's eyes upon himself. "I never thought about that."

"Most people think nothing of everything." Stimmitz turned and walked away.

Ralph stood for a moment in thought, then started after him. "Maybe they have a good reason for not wanting us in there."

"Exactly," said Stimmitz without bothering to even look around.

"Well, what about the dreams?" said Ralph as they crossed the street and entered another repetition of the small town. "What's so mysterious about them?"

"Look. There aren't any dreams here. These sequences they put these kids through every night aren't dreams; they're nightmares. That one we just saw—" Stimmitz jerked his thumb behind them, "—the dog-on-a-platter bit, the girlfriend-into-father-into-cop one, all of the 'angry parent' routines. Man, those are the *worst* kind of nightmares. Those are *epics* of humiliation and frustration and fear."

"Well—" started Ralph.

"Shut up a minute. Now, when you were recruited for Operation Dreamwatch, how did they explain it to you? Therapy program, right? A hundred hard-core recidivist juvenile delinquents, already been through every correctional program in the state, and they've got 'em all over there at the Thronsen Home now. And the therapists in charge of the program put the kids into a common, shared dream state every night and that creates this dreamfield, right? The therapists control the setting, control everything that happens to the kids when they're dreaming—all the different sequences, which are designed to get to the kids' psychological problems when their psychic defenses are lowest, catharsize their traumas and everything. And over here at the base, the watchers—us—are projected onto the field through the line shack, so we can observe and report on the kids' reactions to the dream sequences. Isn't that how it was explained to you?"

Ralph nodded. "Pretty much."

"Okay, do you still believe it, then?" Stimmitz's face darkened. "Do you really think these dreams are helping these kids? Putting them through the same kind of crap they've probably gone through all their lives while they were awake, only worse, because here it's intensified, cut right down to the symbols—this is therapy? The real-life counterparts to these dreams messed them up before, what are these doing to them now?"

"How should I know?" Ralph shrugged, wilting under Stimmitz's outburst. "I don't know anything about psychology."

"Psychology, fake-ology." Stimmitz thrust his hands into the pockets of his jumpsuit and continued walking. "There's a point where psychology has to meet with what you know about the world already. And if this is therapy, then the people in charge have missed that point."

"Hey, maybe it's not therapy—it's anti-therapy." Ralph laughed weakly. "They're not changing delinquents into normal kids. They're changing normals into delinquents."

Stimmitz said nothing, leaving Ralph to his own thoughts for the next couple of hours.

"Look over there." Ralph pointed ahead of them along the sidewalk. "It's ol' Slither."

"Really?" Stimmitz snorted. "I thought maybe they'd finally gotten rid of that thing."

"Wanna go see what it's up to?"

"Yeah, why not?" said Stimmitz, yawning. "That oughta kill a little time."

Ralph glanced at his watch. Two more hours until the end of the shift when the line would come down out of the sky for all the watchers. He and Stimmitz had gone through a couple of dozen of the field's endless segments of small town, and observed half that many dream sequences. Ralph used to jot them down in a little notebook, but all the patterns become too familiar for that to be necessary any longer. There were rarely any dreams to be seen in the last quarter of the shift. On most nights—it

took an effort to remember it was still dark in the real world, crawling towards dawn—nothing broke the monotony of pacing the silent, empty streets and waiting for the line.

Except for the slithergadee, thought Ralph. He and Stimmitz hurried toward the corner where they had seen its tail disappear. *The psychologist who thought up that thing must have some imagination.*

They rounded the end of the block and saw the slithergadee squatting malevolently in the middle of the road. Its corroded-brass scales rattled as its flanks bellowed in and put with its breathing.

Repulsed, Ralph watched the creature. He remembered the poem, one of the classic Shel Silverstein children's-rhyme parodies that one of the watchers had come up with when the thing was first spotted. *The Slithergadee has crawled out of the sea/He may catch all the others, but he won't catch me/No, you won't catch me, old Slithergadee/You may catch all the others, but you wo—*And it ended right there. The name had stuck to the dreamfield's resident monstrosity.

It saw them coming toward it and opened its mouth in a gaping hiss. Its retractable fangs slid out of their sockets, double rows of glistening-wet crescents. Of all the field's illusions, it was the only one that seemed to be able to see the watchers. It was harmless, though, being as insubstantial as everything else.

"You know," said Stimmitz as they halted a few yards from the slithergadee's brooding face, "if they really wanted Operation Dreamwatch to be a therapy program, they'd take those kids over in Thronsen, give 'em our jobs, and let 'em come out here to take a few swipes at this thing. There's really an enormous satisfaction in kicking this godawful thing and having your foot go right through it. It's as if it were the embodiment of all the bogeymen that scared you when you were a child. And then you find out that it's not even real; there never was really anything to be afraid of at all."

Ralph nodded. Whenever it was sighted, about once a week, the slithergadee always afforded a few moments of pleasure to the watchers who had come across it. Ralph stepped forward and brought his foot down upon the thick tip of its tail lying in front of them. The thing hissed through its saucer-wide nostrils and jerked its immaterial tail away.

"Watch this." A boyish excitement had brightened Stimmitz's mood. Of all the watchers he seemed to most enjoy fooling around with the slithergadee. "I'm going to zip one right through its nose." He walked up to its face, then arced his foot through a waist-high swinging kick. The slithergadee clattered its scales in seeming frustration at not being able to snatch the shoe going in and out of its face as though it were a cloud.

"Hey," said Ralph. "With all your snooping around, you didn't happen to find out what this thing is for, did you?"

"No." Stimmitz stood back a few feet and gazed at its swollen bulk. "To be honest, I didn't. I'm really beginning to think the therapists designed it into the field for some reason, and then forgot they had it here. It never does anything in any of the kids' dreams—just lurks around the fringes every once in a while."

Ralph yawned and scratched the side of his face. "Come on," he said. "Let's leave the poor thing alone. Even if it is just an illusion."

"One more time." Stimmitz pivoted on one foot and aimed another kick at its head. The slithergadee opened its mouth, its teeth sliding forward into place, and tore off Stimmitz's leg.

"Good Lord!" Ralph fell backwards onto the sidewalk as the slithergadee reared up in the air, its roar mingling with Stimmitz's agonized cry. There was an enormous gust of wind that smelled like blood and decayed meat, and the sky darkened. The slithergadee plunged back down and sank its fangs into the now silent body of Stimmitz.

Rolling onto his side, Ralph tried to pull his legs beneath him, but they refused to function. A glance over his shoulder revealed the slithergadee shredding the corpse pinned to the ground by its claws. His heart racing, Ralph pushed himself up against the building at the edge of the sidewalk. It resisted for a moment, then yielded and he fell through the wall.

Suddenly, there were no sounds from out in the dream-field's street. Ralph crouched on the building's floor and listened. The slithergadee's roaring had stopped.

He waited a few seconds, then got to his knees. The building he had fallen into was one of the field's restaurants. He crawled over to its front window and cautiously peered out.

The slithergadee was gone. But a mangled pile of flesh and clothing remained, slowly reddening the street.

Ralph stepped through the window glass and slowly walked towards the corpse. Every organ in his own body knotted in hysteria as he looked at what was left of Stimmitz. A small moan of fear slid from Ralph's lips.

"Hey," he said, barely making a sound from his constricted throat. Then he shouted it. "Hey! Anybody! Come here! Quick!" His voice rang through the empty streets, and he kept shouting until the other watchers came.

First was Goodell and his observation partner. "What's all the shouting about?" said Goodell. He paled when he saw what Ralph was standing near.

The rest came from all different directions. They listened to Ralph's few words of explanation. Without speaking, they drew away and huddled together a few yards from the body, and waited for the shift to end. It seemed like a long time until the line dropped out of the sky for them.

CHAPTER 3

I am amazed at how fast my hands can move. Really amazed. Ralph clung to that thought desperately, knowing that if his mind wandered, he would see Stimmitz's crumpled body again. His hands continued their work, rapidly extracting the clothing from his closet and filling the suitcase laid open on the bed.

The last of the civilian shirts was wadded up and thrown in with the pants, underwear, and socks. The Opwatch base uniforms were left hanging or scattered on the floor where he had dropped them; he had been unbuttoning his shirt and pulling off the clothing as soon as he had made it inside the door of his apartment.

His hands brought the suitcase lid down and his thumbs pressed the latches into place. Carrying the suitcase into the front room of the apartment, he set it by the door, then turned around, scanning the apartment for anything else he wanted to take with him. There wasn't much. Objects had never seemed to accumulate around him here. Only trash remained—brown paper grocery bags in the kitchen and empty beer

cans that had rolled too far under the bed to reach. After pausing for a few seconds, he went into the bathroom and slipped his toothbrush into his pants' pocket.

Is that it? he thought as he strode back into the front room. Somewhere he had a bus schedule, if he could find it. Greyhounds passed through Norden, the little town within walking distance of the base. He bent down to look through the old newspapers stacked beside the couch. When someone knocked at the door, his hand clenched, crumpling a page of outdated headlines.

He stood up and stepped towards the door, then stopped as his hand touched the knob. "Who it is?" he said.

"It's me—Fred," came Goodell's voice.

"What do you want?" Ralph still did not open the door.

"What? Hey, are you okay?" Goodell rattled the knob.

"Just tell me what you want."

"Hey, man, are you all right?"

He snatched the door open. "What do you mean, *all right?*" he shouted into Goodell's startled face. "You stupid schmuck, you saw what happened on the field. I'm supposed to be *all right* after that?"

Goodell hastily backed up a few feet into the building's hallway. "That's what I came to tell you." He spread his hands as though to fend off an attack. "The base commander wants to see you. Stiles told the rest of us something about what happened to Stimmitz."

"Yeah? Like what?" Ralph's anger was simmering just below its peak. He felt as if his veins were taut with pressure after months of being half-empty.

"Go get it from him," said Goodell. "He's the one who should tell you." He turned and hurried down the hallway, glancing nervously over his shoulder at Ralph.

Stiles wants to see me, thought Ralph as he closed the door and turned

to face the silent room. *What did he tell the others?* His watch read seven-thirty. He had walked out of the line shack as soon as they were all back from the dream field, leaving the others to relate second-hand what had happened to Stimmitz. His own words, he had decided, were going to be saved for the police back in L.A., or the FBI or something.

Outside his apartment window, the base and the desert beyond it were starting to wash gold with the morning light. Ralph picked up his suitcase, then dropped it and chewed the edge of his thumbnail. *If I try to leave now, he thought, they'll catch me. And then what?* He took his hand away from his mouth and wiped his suddenly sweaty palms on his pants. *Maybe Stiles told the other watchers that I killed Stimmitz.* The conjecture took root in Ralph's mind and blossomed like an explosion. *Maybe that's what he told them, and he'll have me shot when I go to his office, and then tell everybody that I tried to escape. And that it's okay because I was a homicidal maniac anyway.*

He sat down on the couch and leaned forward, concentrating. It seemed as if he had inherited Stimmitz's universe upon the other's death. *Except, thought Ralph grimly, that he knew something about what was going on around here.*

Suddenly, another thought entered his head, like a ray of light. *They might not kill me if they didn't think they had to. If they thought I didn't suspect anything.* He stood up and paced the length of the small room. If Commander Stiles's suspicions could be put off for a while, there might be a chance of getting away later—even today, possibly. It was just a matter of playing dumb for now.

All right, thought Ralph, halting in the middle of the room. If they—Stiles and whoever's above him somewhere—haven't already decided to get rid of me, then that's my only chance. He resisted a powerful urge to curl up into a ball in the corner of the room and close his eyes until they came for him. After several deep breaths, he opened the apartment door and started down the hallway.

* * *

"Just close the door behind you, won't you, Metric?" Commander Stiles waved vaguely with one hand, scattering ashes from his cigarette on his desk. "Have a seat."

Ralph sat down. A wad of saliva had formed in his mouth but he didn't swallow, trying to conceal his nervousness.

Behind the desk, the gray-haired base commander swivelled from side to side in his imitation leather chair. "I see you're out of base uniform," he remarked mildly.

Hell, thought Ralph, *forgot about that*. The ball in his mouth grew bigger, and he had to swallow before he could speak. "Uh... yeah. I guess I am."

"That's all right." The cigarette described a figure in the air. "I understand how you feel." He exhaled a small cloud between them. "Thinking about cutting out of here, weren't you?"

"That's right." Ralph felt as though his mind were racing completely free of all connections. "Actually I've been, uh, thinking about it for some time now. Before today, I mean."

"Nonsense." Stiles took a fresh cigarette from the box on his desk and lit it from the stub of his old one. "You're scared because of what you saw last night. This morning, I mean—about five a.m. or so, wasn't it?"

Ralph silently studied the older man's heavily grained face. "Scared?" he asked finally.

"Come on. Don't diddle with me, Metric. I imagine what you saw on the field was pretty upsetting. You must've thought something pretty big had gone wrong someplace, for something like that to happen. With Stimmitz, I mean, and the—what do you men call it?—slithergadee."

He said nothing. The air in the room felt as though it were tensing and becoming brittle around him: any word or motion might shatter it.

"What if I told you," said Stiles, swivelling around to gaze out the window behind him, "that what you saw didn't happen?"

"Sir?" Ralph's eyes jerked to the back of the imitation-leather chair.

Stiles swung back around to face him. "It didn't happen, Metric. It was an illusion. That stupid jerk Stimmitz sneaked into the Thronsen Home the other day. We know all about it. Those kids live in a very controlled

environment over there; it's part of the treatment, and the therapists are very careful about what they're allowed to see. Because what they see during the day is incorporated into their dreams at night. That's how the sequences are programmed. Several of the kids saw Stimmitz when he was snooping around. We didn't find out about it until just before all of you watchers were starting your shift last night. We pulled Stimmitz off the line just as it was being activated."

"But Stimmitz was on the field last night—"

Stiles gestured impatiently. "That was an illusion. What you saw was the image of Stimmitz that got mixed in with the kids' dreams. You expected him to be there on the field with you, and so your subconscious filled in the details of the image's movements, talking and so on."

"But he was *there*," said Ralph. "I saw the slithergadee attack him, and—"

"No. We pulled the real Stimmitz off the line and fired him for breaking Opwatch regulations. He was over in Norden waiting for a bus out of here when the image you saw of him got ripped up. The stimulus of the new image—this is what the therapists over at Thronsen told me—triggered a hostility-release sequence that's programmed around the slithergadee. It's supposed to be used later on in the program."

So this is what he told the others, thought Ralph. "Stimmitz isn't dead, then? The real one, I mean."

"No He deserved it though." Stiles tilted back in his chair and watched him.

Now what? Ralph avoided the other's eyes. If what Stiles had told him was the truth, then there was nothing to worry about. But if it wasn't, if something was still being hidden... He suddenly felt his universe become vague and insubstantial, like the dreamfield itself. It had been so clear and solid, if dangerous, only a few moments ago. *Foggy knives*, he thought, the odd image creeping through his mind.

"Not convinced, eh?" Stiles lifted his hand. "No, that's okay, I understand, Metric. *You* were the one who saw it, you're the one who should insist on proof." He reached down and lifted a large plastic bag from behind the desk, then dumped its contents on top of the papers. "Go

ahead. Take a look."

It was a wadded-up Opwatch jumpsuit, the kind worn by the watchers during their shifts on the dreamfield.

Ralph picked it up and looked inside the collar. His own initials, RDM, were stamped inside.

"It's yours," said Stiles. "It's the one you were wearing last night. We took it out of the locker room after you had gone back to your apartment. Now, if the slithergadee's attack was as vicious as you described it to the other watchers, and if that had been the real Stimmitz on the field last night, then surely some of his blood would have gotten on you. Right? Well, go ahead, take a look. Not a spot on it."

Carefully, Ralph inspected the jumpsuit. He could remember the blood spraying toward him after the slithergadee's first lunge at Stimmitz. The warm fluid from the severed leg had been like some nightmare fountain, pulsing in time with Ralph's own heartbeat.

There were no bloodstains on the jumpsuit. Ralph laid it down upon the commander's desk.

"That's the way it is," said Stiles. "It was too bad that Stimmitz had to go and be so stupid, cause so much trouble for us and so much worry for you. But you're a good man, Metric, and we don't want to lose you. That's the bottom line of it all. Tell you what; you've been here long enough to qualify for a week's vacation. Get your mind off what you saw on the field." He gestured expansively with his cigarette.

"Maybe," said Ralph. It felt as though a hollow cylinder had formed inside him. Dimly, he wondered if this was the same way he had always felt before. "Maybe I'll do that. I'll let you know."

"Sure, sure. Anytime will do. Close the door after you, will you? Dust gets on everything."

The thought struck him as Ralph closed the door and stepped away from the commander's office. *They could have switched jumpsuits. They could have taken one of my others from the laundry bin and showed me that. They could have gotten rid of the one with the blood on it. It would have been simple.*

"Do you really believe it?"

"Well, sure, Ralph." Kathy brushed her unkempt hair from her shoulders. "Don't you?"

Goodell leaned forward in his Rec hall chair and wiped a line of beer from his upper lip. "Come on," he said. "Do you have a better explanation for what happened?"

"What didn't happen," corrected Ralph vaguely. He looked around at the twenty or so watchers, male and female, gathered in the Rec hall's main room. Some unspoken need had made them seek each other's company. Even Glogolt was there, slouched down in one of the chairs with a beer can perched on his stomach. *Some of them look a little vexed,* noted Ralph. *The ripples from the stone that fell in their shallow waters haven't quite gone away yet.*

"Well? Do you?" said Goodell.

"No," said Ralph. His fingers slowly blurred a trickle of sweat on his forehead. "They told us their story, and nobody can tell one any different, so what Stiles and the others said must be the truth."

"Ralph, don't be so creepy." Kathy looked annoyed at the trace of sarcasm she had detected in his voice. "You're just imagining things."

"Did anybody see Stimmitz leave?" Ralph felt his own desperation, trying to connect the last amorphous bit of suspicion with something solid. "How come he left all of his stuff back in his apartment?"

"I'd want to cut out before anybody saw me, too," said Goodell, "if I'd pulled anything so stupid. Sneaking into Thronsen... what a jerk."

"You mean you're not curious? You don't wonder about what might be going on over there?"

"Why should I be?"

Ralph looked from Goodell's face to those of the other watchers. They all had the same expression around the eyes. He got up without speaking, pushed past their outstretched legs and then out through the dark glass door.

Outside, his shoulders bore the weight of the noon sun. Through the glare he could see the hills and desert beyond the base's grounds; the rocks and sand dunes resembled the other watchers' eyes—flat, solid, objects rather than human. Looking away, he walked on towards the apartment building.

Two men were busily working in Stimmitz's old second-floor apartment. They were loading the books and other things into large cartons. As Ralph looked in through the open doorway he saw the words Zenith Van and Storage on the backs of their gray overalls.

"Howdy," said one of the men, turning and spotting him in the doorway. "Hey, do you know somebody around here named—what was it—hey, who was that package for?"

"Ralph Metric," said the other mover, lifting Stimmitz's tape deck from the bookshelves.

"That's me."

"Here," said the first mover. "This guy left this behind for you." He picked up a flat square object from the floor and handed it to Ralph.

It was a boxed reel of tape. Bach cantatas, on a European import label. He turned it over in his hands and saw the inscription in felt pen. *Give to Ralph Metric After I Leave*. Below that was Stimmitz's signature.

"Thanks," muttered Ralph, holding the box. Damn, he thought, *I don't even have a tape recorder to play this on. Stimmitz knew that. Maybe he really was—or is—flipped out, or something.* "Thanks." He walked slowly down the hallway, then turned and walked back to the doorway of Stimmitz's apartment. "Where's all this stuff being sent to?"

"We're just storing it," said the mover. "Until the guy comes and picks it up."

"Oh." Ralph nodded and started down the hallway again.

Inside the door of his own apartment, he opened the tape box. There was nothing but the clear plastic spool wound about with the tape and a little booklet with the words to the cantatas in three languages. He paged quickly through the booklet—there were the tiny black letters and

odd-looking photos of the soloists. Some of the tape uncoiled from the reel as he threw the entire package onto his sofa in a fit of frustration and disgust.

There was a tape recorder in the Rec hall, he knew, on which he could listen to the tape. *Later*, he thought. *Not now—I'm too tired*. A depressing premonition sapped at him. Somehow he felt sure there would be no messages for him on the tape.

Perhaps there would never be any messages for him. He pulled a chair up to the window, sat down and gazed out over the base. The last of that other universe, where things had seemed to be connecting up at last, was draining from him like blood. *Welcome back*, he thought grimly. *This is just like the old Juvenile Hall all over again*. The memory, an old wound, came sliding back.

* * *

Over a year ago he had been working the graveyard shift at the Juvenile Hall in one of the counties below L.A. From eleven at night until seven in the morning, the same hours as the shifts on the dreamfield, he had been responsible for one of the "living units," as each group of rooms housing twenty or so kids had been called. They were nearly always asleep when he got there. Every half hour he was supposed to walk down the unit's long hallway with a flashlight and peek through the little window set in each room's locked door—to make sure none of the kids being detained there had decided to kill himself with his bedsheet knotted around his neck, or had managed to escape by somehow dicing himself through the tough steel grating over the outside windows. None of the kids had tried to do either while he had been working there.

The rest of the time he was supposed to sit at a desk in the unit's day room, just be available: a good job, he had been told when he applied for it, for somebody going to college or with something of their own to do. After a short walk every half hour for exercise, he could spend the rest of the time studying or whatever. Ralph hadn't been in college then but he had been working on a novel. He would spread his notebooks out upon the desk top as soon as he had arrived.

The book never got written. The same thing happened to him that he had seen happening to everyone else who worked there at night, but no one had ever seemed to talk about it. Like a nerve disease edging along the

spine and out into the arms and legs, a paralysis of the will set in. Every night he would sit there, the hours crawling past, the blank pages in front of him. But the things he had wanted to do had swollen into obstacles of crushing size and weight.

The world of the graveyard shift had become gradually stranger and stranger. Every half hour he would make his room checks, going with his flashlight from one small window to the next. The kids had slept on, wrapped in whatever dreams were theirs alone.

In the Juvenile Hall the kids had been mainly passively delinquent, their offenses often something to do with being stoned too often and too publicly. The violent ones, the ones with psyches corkscrewed into a hard, sick knot were quickly sorted out and dispatched to special state facilities; from these juveniles, the hardest would end up at Thransen Home and Operation Dreamwatch. The ones in the Hall had weightless lives, content for the most part to be pushed along by the current of the adult world they might someday inherit by default.

Sometimes, as he had looked in on their slack faces, it had seemed as if their mild dreams and nightmares had somehow seeped out from under the doors of their rooms like an invisible gas, and poisoned all of the night staff. Most of those who had taken the job in order to study wound up flunking their classes and dropping out of college. Ralph would go home in the morning, feeling as if something had been drained out of him.

Then he received a form letter from the Operation Dreamwatch recruiting office in L.A. He had wound up applying—drifted into it, really—and had found himself here, in this desert that always seemed as vacant as the space that had grown inside him.

* * *

Ralph gazed out his apartment window at the Opwatch base. *Now what?* The sun was setting—he had lost the last several hours somehow. As though he were back at Juvenile Hall, fluid time had leaked away and evaporated again. He rose and picked the tape up from the couch.

As he entered the Rec hall, one of the watchers lounging in the chairs signalled to him with a beer can. "Hey," called the watcher. "No shift tonight. Blenek just told us we've got the night off."

Ralph nodded and walked on. It wasn't unusual, the most frequent explanation was that the field insertion device needed adjusting.

In the Rec hall's small, scarcely-used library, he let himself into the booth containing the tape recorder. After a moment studying the directions fastened to the front of the machine, he snapped the tape into place and threaded it through the rollers. He slipped on the headphones and pressed the Play button.

The tape was nearly two hours long. He listened to it all. There were no messages on it, nothing had been added on top of the Bach cantatas. When it was done he gently touched the empty reel to stop its spinning. He sat in front of the machine for a long time. The silence spread around him.

CHAPTER 4

The clock beside his bed read eight a.m. when Ralph awoke. He shook away the last vestiges of a dream about teeth sliding in a scaled mouth. The room was already bright with the desert sun filtering through the curtains. He sat up and stared at his knees beneath the sheet as though what he was thinking was printed there.

Helga, he said to himself. *Of course, you ass. Why not go talk to Helga Warner? She's the one who went into Thronsen with Stimmitz—she should know something about what's going on.* Ralph swung his legs over the edge of the bed and reached for the clothes he had dropped on the floor the night before.

On the pathway to the other apartment building, he ran into Kathy. "Hello, Ralph," she yawned, idly scratching below the blue and gold Opwatch emblem on the sleeve of her blouse. "What's up?"

"Huh?" He stopped and looked at her so intensely that she took a step backwards. "What did you say?"

She returned his stare. "What's the matter with you?"

"Never mind. Nothing." He stepped past her and hurried on towards the other building.

Helga's apartment was on the third floor. He had never been inside—of all the watchers, she had always been the least sociable—but he remembered seeing her unlock her door once while he had been talking to Kathy in the hallway. Upon finding the right door he knocked, waited, then knocked again.

"Who's there?" Helga's voice came through the still closed door.

"It's Ralph. Ralph Metric. I want to talk to you."

A few seconds of silence. "What about?" Her voice slowed with a strange caution.

"Well—can I come in? It's important."

There was no answer. "It's about Stimmitz," he said.

The door opened a few inches, revealing a section of Helga's wide face. She looked Ralph over, then glanced past him into the hallway. Without speaking, she pulled the door open and stood back.

As Ralph stepped past her into the apartment he felt her watching him. He turned and met her eyes with his own, then looked quickly away. Wow, he thought, *she looks like she's about to bite my head off*. He stared out her window at the harsh desertscape.

"So?" said Helga. "What did you want to say?"

He looked around at her. She studied him with the same hostile bearing, her arms folded in front of her short, square torso. "Actually," said Ralph, "I really wanted to ask you some things—"

"Like what?" she snapped.

"Well, about what you and Stimmitz saw when you sneaked into the Thronsen Home, and—"

"You didn't make that part of your deal, then. Too bad."

"Huh?" Ralph looked at her in puzzlement. "Deal?"

Her expression didn't change. "If you're so curious about what's going on over there you should have asked for some information along with

whatever they did pay you."

"Pay me? What are you talking about?"

One corner of her mouth curled in disgust. "Come on. I told Stimmitz I didn't think he should tell you anything. That you couldn't be trusted. But he went ahead. His last mistake."

"What?" Ralph spun around and faced her. "You think I finked on Stimmitz or something?"

"You were the only one he told about going into Thronsen. You were the only one who knew."

"Hey, that doesn't mean I said anything to anybody about it. Why would I want to get him in trouble?"

She said nothing, only continued her hard, level gaze at him.

Ralph felt a surge of anger, like a heat in his chest. "How much do you think they paid me?" he said bitterly.

"You're so stupid you probably did it for nothing."

"Forget it." He walked to the door and put his hand on the knob. "I didn't set Stimmitz up and nobody's letting me in on anything."

"Get out," said Helga flatly.

He opened the door and stepped into the hallway. He turned to say something more but the door closed in his face. From inside he could hear the small metal noises of the lock clicking into place.

* * *

Ralph cradled the back of his head in his hands and gazed up at the featureless white ceiling over his bed. *I don't know what's going on around here.*

Stimmitz was gone, of that much he was sure. There had been no blood on the jumpsuit, but that didn't prove anything, one way or the other. *So what else is there?* he thought, staring at the ceiling. Helga was acting crazy—but then he had always felt she was kind of strange. Perhaps her

own universe had finally snapped shut around her like a trap.

Give up, Ralph told himself disgustedly. Accept what Stiles told you. Go drink a beer with the others. He took his hands from behind his head and saw that they had clenched into fists, the nails digging into the flesh of his palms. Convulsively, he got up from the bed and stalked into the living room.

The morning sun came through the window in a shaft, bleaching out the color of everything in the apartment. Ralph looked from the couch to the walls, as though some message could have been written there, then across the door and back to the couch. *Stupid-looking couch*, he thought, feeling something going sour in his stomach as he turned and gazed out the window.

If only there was something solid, he thought, *that I had brought back with me from the dreamfield. So that I'd know for sure. Something like—shoes!* He swivelled around toward his bedroom door. The shoes he had been wearing that shift were under his bed—he hadn't left them in the locker room with his jumpsuit.

Crouching on his knees beside the bed, he pulled out the shoes. He hurriedly examined them, turning each one around and studying it from all sides. After a couple of minutes he sat down heavily on the bed. *Still nowhere*, he thought. There had been no spots of blood anywhere on the shoes. His disappointment had a sense of finality.

Come on, he thought. *Why can't you accept it? Nothing happened. Stimmitz is probably in L.A., looking in the want ads for another job.* He tilted one of the shoes and poured a small hill of sand into his palm. For several seconds he stared at the tiny bit of desert before the realization hit him.

That's impossible, he thought. *The base is all paved or landscaped. There's no sand between here and the line shack. There's no way I could have gotten any in my shoes—but it's here somehow.*

He reached for the other shoe and tilted it over his palm. There was even more sand in that one, making a gritty fistful in all. Carefully, he stood up and carried it into the other room.

Standing at the window, he looked from the sand to the desert beyond

the base and back again. *I don't get it*, he thought, baffled. The sand was something tangible, disturbing in its inexplicable way, but the connection between it and everything else that disturbed him seemed tenuous.

Maybe it's a sign. He studied the multi-faceted grains. *Go to the source, or something like that.* He went over by the couch and tore a sheet of newspaper free from the stack beside it. In the center of the paper he placed the sand and then folded it into a makeshift envelope. While stuffing it in his back pocket, he headed for the door. *Then again*, he thought, *it might be just sand.*

When he reached the top of one of the low hills surrounding the base, Ralph turned and looked back at it, shading his eyes from the sun with his hand. From where he was, standing between two large clumps of the desert's dry, prickly brush, he could see all of the base's buildings, the paths linking them, and the fence circling the space.

Turning ninety degrees, his feet crunching against the hill's pebbles and sand, he could see part of the high security fence that surrounded the Thronsen Home. The complex itself was out of sight beyond the chain-link mesh, which was topped with barbed wire and laced with cables for the electronic alarm devices. Somewhere inside there were the kids whose nightly dreams had been merged and formed into the field. *if*, thought Ralph, *that's really what's in there.* He headed down the side of the hill away from the base.

A flat gully, deep enough to be still shaded from the sun, lay at the foot of the hill. Ralph looked in either direction along its path, then started walking toward the east. He wondered if he would recognize what he was looking for when he came across it. From atop a small rock, a dust-colored lizard squirted its tongue at him, then vanished.

This is ridiculous, thought Ralph after walking for a few minutes along the gully. *There's nothing out here but dirt and rocks and—*He froze. From somewhere in the desert's total silence he had heard a tiny, metallic click. After a few seconds of intent listening, he heard it again. The noise, so slight it would have been undetectable anywhere else but in a desert, came from somewhere above the gully.

As carefully and silently as he could, he mounted the gully's sloping wall. Lying flat among the stones near the top, he peeked over the edge.

Several meters away a woman appeared to be photographing something on the ground in front of her. Though her back was turned to him, Ralph knew that he had never seen her before. She was dressed in jeans and a faded blue shirt, with her hair pulled back into a golden curve along her neck. The camera she held in her hands was some battered but functional-looking antique, the size of a small ham—it was no wonder that the ancient mechanism of its shutter made so much noise.

Her body blocked the view of whatever she was photographing. She moved a few steps and clicked off another shot from a different angle. Ralph pushed himself a little higher above the gully's edge, trying to see what was on the ground before her. His foot brushed a few small rocks and sent them clattering down the slope.

The woman quickly lowered the camera from her eye and half-turned her head at the noise. Ralph caught a glimpse of her precise-featured profile against the sky before he had slipped out of sight below the rim of the gully.

He waited several seconds, then cautiously raised his head. The girl with the camera was gone. He scrambled up and went to where she had been standing. A quick glance over the barren spot of desert showed nothing but rocks, scruffy brown brush and sand.

What was she taking pictures of? he wondered. *Maybe I should have just gone up and asked her.* That was the trouble with paranoia—complications multiplied until their source became perfectly insulated from the world. *But then,* he thought, *she did take off when she heard me. How come?*

The sun was now almost directly overhead. Ralph, a little dazed with heat, wiped the sweat from his neck and walked away from the spot. Whatever he was looking for didn't seem to be here. He wondered if he would ever see the girl again.

Several minutes later he came to the Thronsen Home security fence. Well over ten feet tall, its intertwined wire diamonds shone in the sunlight like a radiant net stretching across the desert. The black cables of the alarm system snaked their way through the mesh.

Ralph walked slowly along the fence, until he could at last see a corner of one of the Thronsen Home buildings. Avoiding the thin, black cables, he

stopped and examined the fence. The rigid metal wire was nearly as thick in diameter as his thumb. It would have taken some doing to have cut through very many of the links, in addition to not setting off the alarms. *So how did Stimmitz and Helga do it?* thought Ralph.

As he puzzled over the newest additions to the questions circling in his head, he continued walking beside the fence. A few meters farther on the questions grew even more numerous.

A small, neat square was missing from near the bottom of the fence. The hole was just large enough for a person to crawl through. When Ralph bent down to examine it, he saw that the ends of the severed links were smooth, as though they had been melted through by some kind of torch. Attached to each segment of the alarm cables were small alligator clips with wires leading to a small metal box lying on the ground—a bypass device, he assumed.

He stood up and backed a few steps away from the fence. The whole set-up was more sophisticated than he could have anticipated. *Maybe, he thought, there was more to Stimmitz. than he let on.*

Nervously, he glanced around the area. No one was visible on either side of the fence. *The coast is clear,* he found himself thinking. He stepped up to the fence and touched the cut wires. As he hesitated, his eyes scanned the distant Thronsen House complex.

If he sneaked in, found nothing sinister, didn't get caught—then he'd be able to forget all this stuff and go back to his old life, for what it was worth. If he got caught, then he'd be canned. But that was preferable to straddling the two universes until he split up the middle.

Yeah, he told himself, but what if there is something going on in there and I do get caught? Then whatever happened to Stimmitz will happen to me, too. And it won't be just getting fired, either. He shook his head, dislodging a few lines of sweat down into his collar, and started to turn away from the fence.

But what if I don't find out what they're doing in there? And it's something—dangerous? The thought halted him for a few seconds. Then he went back to the fence and knelt down in front of the hole. *I don't see what good this is going to do anyway,* he thought grudgingly as he crawled through.

Once on the other side, he crouched and ran, veering from one clump of dry brush to another. He suddenly felt ridiculous, as though he were fumbling through an antique grade B combat picture. *If only Blenek could see me now.*

He covered the last few meters to the nearest building in a burst of speed. Panting, he pressed his back to the gray concrete wall and listened. He hadn't seen or heard anyone yet. Cautiously, he sidled along the wall. He came to the corner of the building, hesitated, then peeked around. A metal door was propped open with a folding chair. A large electric fan had been placed in the opening and was whirring softly to itself.

In a few more seconds he was alongside the open doorway. He peered into the dark interior, then stepped around the electric fan and inside the building.

The air smelled of ozone, just as the line shack did back at the base. To one side of the door was an unoccupied desk. Its lamp cast a small circle of light on the floor of the dark, cavernous space.

Ralph froze—he had heard someone breathing. The sound changed into a gurgling snore, and he relaxed. As silently as possible, he crossed over to the desk and looked around it. On the other side a man was sleeping on a low cot, his head resting on his arm. The same laxness in security from the unmended hole in the fence showed here as well. *Maybe*, thought Ralph, *some of them weren't really expecting anyone ever to try to get in here.* It must have been Stimmitz's bad luck to have been seen by someone.

Still cautious, Ralph walked farther into the building. As the ozone smell grew stronger, a luminous blue rectangle seemed to be floating in the distance in front of him: a small window set into a door. He looked through the glass and noted a corridor lined with banks and panels of electronic equipment, illuminated by fluorescent lights overhead.

The door yielded to his touch and he stepped into a long corridor, lined with equipment panels. There was the same manufacturer's insignia—PKD Laboratories—as on the electronics boards in the base's line shack, but this assemblage was much bigger. The corridor went on for some distance, the banks of equipment towering over Ralph's head as he walked past them.

Another door opened into a dark L-shaped passageway. He stepped

into it, then heard footsteps approaching from the other direction. Pressing himself into the corner of the L, he saw the corridor's other door open, momentarily framing a man carrying a clipboard. In the darkness of the passageway the man didn't see Ralph, but let the door close behind him and walked past, leaving by the other door. Ralph let out his breath.

The passageway's other door opened onto a much larger space. A few rows of dim fluorescent lights dangling on cables from the ceiling produced a semi-twilight in the space. Ralph sensed that he was alone here, too, until he heard the sound.

Breathing. Slow, shallow breathing. A muffled sighing, like wind in the distance.

He looked around the space, his vision growing sharper in the dim light. The breathing came from all sides, from some kind of open bins that were stacked in tiers against the walls. He walked over to the nearest group and looked inside a bin that came as high as his chest.

It held a sleeping teenage boy. A plastic tube had been inserted through the boy's nose and taped to his face. Another piece of surgical tape ran across his forehead with a series of numbers scrawled in black ink. At other points on the boy's body different tubes and wires were attached. One black cable ran into a metal plate that seemed to be sutured to the side of his head.

The boy didn't awaken as Ralph looked at him. The breathing was so slow and shallow as to barely raise the boy's bare chest.

Ralph backed away, the skin on his shoulders and neck stiffening. There was a bin below the one in which he had looked, and two above. His eyes circled the room, counting the tiers. It came to an even hundred bins, each with its tube and cables running in and fastened onto its occupant. A hundred children suspended in something deeper than sleep, suspended above death by the plastic tubes that nourished them.

He felt something sink and go cold within him. *So this is what Stimmitz found*, he thought. *There's something wrong, they lied to us, they're doing something here—*

He clenched his fists to keep his hands from trembling. *Get out*, he told himself, *I've got to get out of here. They'll kill me if they find out I've seen*

this.

Fear cramped inside him as he spun around, looking for the door. He spotted it at last and headed for it. His breath swelled in his constricted throat when he pushed the door open and saw another dimly lit space, outlined by the same tiers with tubes and wires dipping into the bins.

For a dismaying span of seconds it seemed as if he were caught in a line of mirror images, like the dream field's repeating sections of a small town. But here it would be an infinity of dark rooms, stale air thickening with the slow breathing of the sleeping children...

Convulsively, Ralph spun away from the door. He saw now that he had lost his bearings in the dim light—the door by which he had come in was on the other side of the room. He hurriedly crossed the space towards the door and collided with a large object set in the middle of the floor.

It was a metal filing cabinet. Gasping to catch his breath, Ralph pushed himself away from its side. The top drawer rattled out as he took his hand away. What he could see of the cabinet's contents produced a chill of recognition.

The stiff manila folders filling the drawer were delinquent children's personal histories. He had seen hundreds of them when he had been working at the Juvenile Hall to the south of L.A. The folders were soiled and battered-looking from too many hands, thick with each child's accumulated court papers, therapist and probation officer comments, booking slips, and other records—troubled lives compressed into dry ink and paper.

The personal history folders travelled with each child to every institution to which he was sent. Now the folders were here, stored close to the unconscious youths. On impulse, Ralph pulled out two of the folders from the drawer and stuck them under his arm. He crossed to the right door and hurried out of the room's semi-darkness.

The man who had passed him in the passageway was nowhere to be seen, and the one on the cot behind the desk was still asleep as Ralph cautiously went by him. In a few seconds he was out of the building, around the corner and running with the two folders clamped to his chest towards the nearest clump of brush in the open desert.

Sliding the folders ahead of him on the sand, Ralph crawled through the opening in the fence. He stood up on the other side and brushed the grit from his pants. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the edge of one of the

Thronsen Home buildings wavering in the noon heat, the unsuspected pools of darkness inside them hidden from sight again. He picked up the folders from the ground and headed back to the base.

When he came to the spot above the gully where the woman with the camera had been, he halted. The light had changed its angle and now he could see distinctly what she had been photographing. As if something had been butchered on the spot and the earth had soaked up the blood, the ground itself was discolored with an irregular, reddish-brown stain.

Ralph paced slowly around the dried mark. Something in its outlines, or its color, pushed back the memory of the Thronsen Home's dark interior for a moment.

A thought crept into his head. He looked away from the stain and towards the base. The concrete cube of the line shack was visible in the distance. With careful precision he tried to recall the different directions he and Stimmitz had taken during the last shift on the field. The adrenaline in his system had sharpened his memory. *The line, he thought, runs east and west inside the building. When we got to the field we turned... right, I think...* He closed his eyes and pictured the section of small town. It was close to being firmer in his mind than the real world.

We turned right. In his mind Ralph saw the two of them moving slowly through the dreamfield sections, stopping occasionally to watch a sequence or to rest, then finally turning the corner to follow the slithergadee—

He opened his eyes and laid the line he had constructed in his head down on the ground between himself and the distant line shack, and suddenly felt cold beneath the desert's noon sun. If his calculations were right, then it was the same distance from where they had let go of the line to where the slithergadee had attacked Stimmitz, as it was from the line shack to this blood-colored spot.

He looked from the gray building, small in the distance, to the brownish red mark on the ground. His thoughts seemed to have frozen in his head. There was the stain, the building, and all the desert in between,

but the connection was still elusive. The more Stimmitz's universe coalesced around Ralph again, the darker things got. He squeezed the manila folders in his hands and walked quickly, then broke into a run away from the spot.

CHAPTER 5

The six o'clock news was on the television in Goodell's apartment. Groups of blurred soldiers were directing great block-long gushes of flame into a blackening jungle. The jungle sagged and crackled. Unseen jets could be heard wailing mournfully somewhere. Ralph put his index finger under a beer can's tab and lifted.

A newsman's rouged face came on, all the way from some studio in L.A., but Ralph didn't hear what he was saying. Little stars lit up on a pink and green map of South America behind the newsman.

Ralph didn't hear the other watchers slouching in the apartment's chairs either. He sipped at the first cold, sharp edge of the beer, and let his mind pace slowly among his thoughts.

The two folders he had stolen from the Thronsen Home were hidden beneath the cushions of the couch in his own apartment. He had glanced quickly through them but had found nothing to throw any light on what he had witnessed on the other side of the fence.

He imagined the spot out on the desert. Its outlines reformed, throbbing, inside his head, fading into the memory of the sand in the shoes, then into the woman he had seen with the camera. Was the Bach tape Stimmitz had left for him part of the mystery also? He sipped again at the beer. *Who knows*, he thought.

After all—a group of sullen-looking South American Indians with machine guns were trooping across the television screen—it could still be all right. *So what if the kids in the Thronsen Home are wired asleep?* Ralph asked himself. *Maybe that's just part of the therapy that they don't tell anyone about. For appearance' sake.* Another pull, and the beer can was half-empty.

There were explanations for everything. All he had to do was to accept them. Or if necessary, invent them. The real world felt like a tide,

pressuring him to accept what everyone else in the world believed to be true. *Except weirdos like Stimmitz and Helga*, he thought.

"Hey," he said, turning in his chair to see the others. They had all come to Goodell's apartment because the Rec hall was getting its monthly floor-polishing by an outside squad of janitors. "Anybody seen Helga recently?" For some reason he felt like trying to talk to her again.

"Didn't you hear?" Kathy yawned and scratched. "She got canned."

Ralph lowered the beer can from his lips and looked at her. "What for?" he said finally.

Goodell looked disgusted. "Same thing that idiot Stimmitz got it for," he said. "They found out that she had sneaked into Thronsen with him." A couple of the other watchers nodded, a silent chorus.

"Did anybody... see her go?" Ralph squeezed the cold cylinder in his hands.

"Naw," said Goodell. "She took off without saying anything to anybody. Wouldn't you if you got caught doing something that stupid?"

"She must've really been in a hurry to get packed and out of here," said Kathy, and giggled. "I peeked in her apartment before Blenek came and locked it up, and it was all torn-up looking."

"Like somebody had been fighting there?" asked Ralph dully.

"Yeah, like that." She giggled again.

Ralph stared at her while he sipped the flat remnants left in the can. *Maybe Helga was in a hurry*, he thought. *It's more likely than all that other stuff*. He noticed that the top button of Kathy's Opwatch blouse was missing, revealing a small triangle of skin below her throat. It was pale white, like the rest of her slender body. The skin of the girl with the camera had been golden. But if that wasn't in another universe, it was far enough away in this one to be not worth thinking about.

He turned and looked past the television and out the window. The sunset was melting the desert. *Maybe*, he thought, *she was some kind of nature buff, taking pictures of the spot where some desert animal killed*

and ate another one. Maybe that's the explanation. He drained the can, stood up, and went past the others into the apartment's kitchen.

There was a small mountain of empty cans on one of the counters—he added his own to it. *Sometimes, he thought, it drops inside you without even making a splash.* He opened the refrigerator for another.

Inside were four sixpacks of two different brands; one whole shelf was stacked with them. It looked like every other refrigerator he had ever seen on the base, including his own. He pulled one can apart from the rest and closed the door.

As he opened the can, it suddenly struck him as funny that, considering how lazy all the watchers were, they had spent so much energy carrying all that beer all the way from the little store in Norden where they bought their groceries. A question of values, he decided. He brought the can to his lips, then took it away, and stared at it.

He had never seen any of them bring any beer back from the town. The realization hit him like a wave. Right now, there were sixpacks of beer in the refrigerator of his own apartment that he hadn't put there. There were always fresh sixpacks, yet he never bought any. And neither, as far as he knew, did any of the others.

Damn, thought Ralph. He opened Goodell's refrigerator, looked inside, closed it again. The beer was still there, mute and solid, covered with moisture not much colder than that now springing out on Ralph's skin. This has been going on all the time, he thought, and nobody's ever noticed. None so blind, right? As those who will not see—until it tears out their throats. He felt ill—his universe was crumbling for good, dissolving at last to reveal the one, the true one, underneath.

That bloodstain, he thought. There's no animal in this part of the desert big enough to have made that. And the base commander's explanation of what happened with Stimmitz and the slithergadee—that's crap, too. If the kids are all unconscious, how could they see Stimmitz and incorporate him into their dreams! It was clear to him that Stimmitz had been right all along and had died because of it. There was something wrong about Operation Dream-watch—something that killed to hide itself.

And the beer. His hand trembled as he looked at the can he held. *Who*

knows what they put in it. Or what it's doing to us. He stepped to the sink and started to pour it out.

"Hey," said Goodell from the doorway. "What're you doing?" He looked from the last golden drops falling into the sink to Ralph's face. "Are you feeling okay? You look terrible."

Ralph set the can down on the counter. "I'm fine," he said. "Don't worry about me."

"You'd better go back to your place and lie down." Goodell put his hand on Ralph's shoulder. "So you'll be ready to go out on the field tonight."

"The field?" echoed Ralph. He stared at Goodell. Some part inside himself clenched with the realization of what might be waiting for him there.

* * *

Commander Stiles was just leaving his office when Ralph caught him. "Hello," said the older man as he locked the door with his key. "What's the hurry?"

Ralph gasped, trying to catch his breath. He had run all the way from Goodell's apartment. "I just wanted to see," he managed to speak, "if I could go ahead and take that week off."

"Sure," said Stiles. "I don't see why not. Be good for you. I'll have the forms ready tomorrow so you can take off right after your shift if you want."

"Uhh... would there be any way I could leave tonight?"

The base commander frowned, his leathery skin bunching around his lower lip. "No, I don't think so. Not according to the Opwatch manual, you know." His eyes sharpened on Ralph. "Was there some particular reason you wanted to leave so soon?"

Careful, Ralph told himself. *Don't let him suspect what you know.* "No," he shrugged. "Just a spur of the moment decision, that's all."

"Come by in the morning, then." Stiles pocketed his key and started

down the hallway. "No need to be impatient."

Ralph watched the broad uniformed back receding from him, then slowly followed after it toward the exit.

* * *

Nothing happened on the dreamfield that night, except for the usual sequences to be observed. As the line came snaking down out of the field's blue sky, Ralph's observation partner remarked on how nervous he had seemed all through the shift. Ralph only nodded, watching the descending line. It looked wonderful, a linear angel.

By nine a.m., he was standing on the one small section of sidewalk in Norden with a single canvas bag in his hand, even though he knew the Greyhound to L.A. didn't come through until eleven-thirty.

PART TWO

L.A.

CHAPTER 6

It felt good to be back in L.A. The farther away from the base the Greyhound had travelled, the better Ralph had begun to feel. He knew that whoever was behind Operation Dreamwatch—Stimmitz's remarks about the mysterious Senator Muehlenteldt echoed in his head—was certainly powerful enough to get at him just as easily as in the desert. But there was still the sensation, the release of a knotted gut, of having somehow escaped a trap. At least L.A. was something of a home base, familiar ground that didn't tremble in the heat, but lay comfortably swaddled in its gray air.

He walked out of the bus terminal and headed for the row of taxis at the curb. Tucking his canvas bag under his arm, he opened the first one's door and slid into the front seat beside the driver. "That all you got?" said the driver, glancing at the bag.

"Yeah, I'll hold it." Through the canvas Ralph could feel the stiff manila folders he had stolen from the Thronsen Home. He gave the driver his

parents' address, and they pulled out into the downtown traffic.

"What happened there?" asked Ralph. One of the towering office buildings had what looked to be a giant hole chewed out of one corner, with warped girders protruding into the air. He twisted around to stare at it as they went past. Trucks and bulldozers were clearing away a small mountain of rubble that blocked one of the streets at the foot of the building.

"One of those damn Ximento crazies," said the driver, scowling. "Wired himself up like a bomb and set himself off in the men's room on the thirtieth floor."

"Really?" Ralph felt a familiar unease at not knowing what everyone else seemed to know. He'd once considered subscribing to *Time*. "What for?"

"Who knows? Maybe the guy had something against pay toilets. Hah."

The uncomfortable feeling went away as it always did when he realized nobody else seemed to know anything either. *Anyway*, he thought, *I know more than they do. Just enough to be scared.*

Several minutes later, he was standing on the sidewalk in front of his parents' house. The taxi's engine faded away, the noise swallowed by the residential street's relative peace. The neighborhood had deteriorated a little since he was a kid—a couple of the houses were abandoned, with broken windows and spray-painted graffiti—but, in general, had resisted the complete decay that radiated from other parts of the city. He lifted his canvas bag and headed up the little path that bisected the front lawn.

The front door was unlocked. Ralph stuck his head into the house and listened for a moment. He could detect the faint, barely audible hum of a television set in one of the rooms. Closing the door softly behind himself, he peeked in the living room—empty, except for furniture—then went down the hallway and looked in the den. His parents were there, both silently watching the television. "Hello," called Ralph from the doorway of the room.

Mrs. Metric turned her head toward him. The garish colors from the pre-embargo Japanese portable glinted from the oval lenses of her glasses. "Ralph," she said, showing no surprise or any other emotion. "What are

you doing here?"

"I'm on vacation." He crossed in front of them and sat down in an armchair at right angles to both them and the television.

"That's nice." She and Ralph's father continued to watch the screen. Some type of game show was on.

"Yeah." Ralph shifted in the overstuffed chair, feeling somehow uncomfortable. "I just thought I'd spend some time looking up some people."

"Oh?" She didn't look at him. "Who?"

"Uh, just people I... used to know."

Several seconds passed, filled with the faint hysterical squealings from some woman on the television.

"Would it be all right," said Ralph, "if I borrowed one of the cars? The Ford?"

"Oh, sure." His mother waved vaguely at the doorway. "The keys are hanging on the bulletin board in the kitchen."

"Thanks."

"There's still some of your clothes in your old room." She seemed to be talking to the television. "Doesn't look like you brought very much with you." Somehow she had noticed his small canvas bag.

"Okay." The sound from the television grew even shriller. Ralph pushed against the arms of the chair, feeling the uneasiness growing in his limbs. "Uh, anything new?" he said, almost desperately. "Hear from Linda recently?" That was his sister.

"She's fine. George got stationed at El Toro, so he sees her and the baby every weekend. He's radio-controlling a Soldier Joe right now."

"That's the big three-ton model," said Ralph's father. His voice rumbled up from some depth in his chest. "With the plasma howitzer."

"He says he's seen quite a lot of Brazil on his view screen." Mrs. Metric

nodded for emphasis. "Even piranha fish in the Amazon River."

"How about that." Ralph stood up. "Well, I'm going to be on my way. Maybe I'll stop back by tonight."

"That's fine. We'll be right here. We're not going to go anywhere."

He crossed the room, picked up his bag from where he had left it in the doorway, then looked back at his parents. The source of the uneasiness he felt became apparent to him. The expression on their faces as they sat absorbed in the television—absence of expression, really, on the border of the inanimate—was the same as he had always seen on the watchers back at the base. And sometimes in his own mirror. A shudder moved across his shoulders and arms. He turned away and headed down the hallway.

In his old bedroom he found a fresh shirt hanging in the closet and, tucked away on a shelf, a shallow rectangular box he had forgotten all about. He knelt beside the open closet and lifted the cardboard lid, revealing a sheaf of paper. On the topmost sheet was his own name, neatly typed beneath the manuscript's title. He lifted out the thin bundle and flicked through the pages of crisp black typing and the slightly blurred carbon copies.

It was supposed to have been a science fiction novel. He had already started on it and was about a quarter of the way through when he had taken the night job at the Juvenile Hall south of L.A. Then his life had bogged down and he had wound up with Operation Dreamwatch out in the desert.

He put the lid back on the box. *Science fiction*, he thought, shaking his head. *What's the point of writing it when you find yourself living it?* He stood up, laid the carton back on the shelf in the closet, and stripped off his shirt.

When he had finished buttoning the fresh shirt, he picked up the canvas bag and laid it on the bed. He zipped it open and took out the two battered manila folders. The booking slips, made whenever the kids had been arrested, had the addresses of their parents on them. He located the most recent slip in each folder and jotted down the addresses on a piece of scrap paper. Folded into a square, the paper lay in his shirt pocket against his heart as he left the room.

His parents were watching the same game show, or maybe a different one, as he stepped into the kitchen and took the ring of keys from the board next to the bright yellow wall telephone. He pulled the front door shut behind himself without them hearing.

* * *

With a hamburger in one hand and vanilla milkshake balanced precariously on the seat next to him, Ralph maneuvered the Ford through the Harbor Freeway traffic. There was a certain elemental pleasure to the car's motion in and out of the lanes—what he supposed he would feel if he had ever learned to dance. He braked for a bus wheezing through its gears ahead of him, whipped the Ford into a small gap in the next lane, cleared the corner of the bus by inches and caught his milkshake as it started to fall over. Pleased with himself, he pulled on the plastic straw, drowning the last of the hamburger's dry gray meat.

The sight of L.A.'s harsh sun on the bending vistas of asphalt and concrete was so familiar and comfortable that it compressed and decreased his fear. A smooth-edged ball in his gut, the fear was now heavy, but at least bearable for the time being.

The last of the milkshake gurgled up the straw and he tossed the empty container on the car's floor. Pulling the scrap of paper from his shirt pocket, he studied the first address, then glanced up and saw the sign for the exit he wanted. He cut across two lanes and barely made it into the mouth of the exit.

The offramp was a long curving descent into another, darker world. The freeway had been coated with the sun's glare. Below it, the light was shut out by the massive cubes of the Nueva Esperanza Housing Project, like the walls of some smoothly machined canyon. The Ford cruised slowly down the project's main avenue with its dividers of yellow grass and stunted palm trees, as Ralph searched the high windowless walls for the right building number.

He strained to make out the stencilled numbers, buried under layer upon layer of slogans and names in the fluorescent spray paints with their oddly kinked style of lettering. *Ghetto baroque*, thought Ralph. Some of the words were meters high and would have required some kind of primitive mountain-climbing skills to accomplish. He envisioned the wiry Nueva teenagers rappelling down the faces of the buildings, propelling

themselves from side to side with squirts of paint like gravityless space explorers in old '50s science fiction flicks. He shook his head to get rid of the image and saw the number of the building for which he was looking.

The Ford managed to squeeze into an open space at the curb between two rusted, immobile hulks. A covey of dirty-faced children peered at him through the smashed windshield of one of the old cars as he got out of the Ford, locked it, and crossed the sidewalk to the building's entrance.

His foot didn't quite clear the top of a mound of trash lying in the doorway. The mound shifted and grumbled, opening one blood-rimmed eye for a moment. Ralph walked faster into the dark lobby.

Inside, he studied the list of names and apartment numbers posted between the two elevators, each bearing an Out Of Order sign. For a few uneasy seconds, the poorly-lit space brought back the memory of the inside of the Thronsen Home. But the air here was sour-smelling with the cramped miasma of old people's diseases and the dry odor of envelopes and checks for too little money from the government offices downtown. A squat woman wearing sneakers and a thin shawl scuttled away from the mailboxes, glancing nervously at Ralph before she disappeared into a stairwell. As he reached into his shirt pocket and took out the scrap of paper, he turned back to the list.

That must be the one, he decided, comparing the name on the paper with one in the middle of the list. He re-pocketed the paper and headed for the stairwell. A short man with some kind of a sheaf of newspaper in his hand was talking to a hard-faced teenager slouched against the wall.

His legs were starting to ache by the time he reached the fifth floor. The building's stale odor was even worse in the upper hallway. He walked slowly, scanning the doors. He heard one open after he passed by, then quickly close again.

One of the metal numbers, a five, dangled head downwards on the door at the end of the hall. After a moment's hesitation he brought his hand up and knocked.

Muted footsteps came from inside the apartment, then the door, spanned by a chain, opened a few inches. A woman's suspicious face peered out at him.

"Mrs. Alvarez?" Ralph had already planned what he would do. He reached into his pants pocket, brought out his wallet and flipped it open to his Opwatch ID card—the way cops in the movies did. "I'm from the, uh, California State Correctional Research Commission. Like to talk to you about your boy, Ruben." That had been the name on one of the folders.

The woman's eyes flicked from the open wallet to his face. Her expression didn't change.

"You are Mrs. Alvarez, aren't you?" He returned his wallet to his pants.

She nodded. "What's Ruben done now?" Her voice was sullen and resentful.

"Nothing. I just want to ask—"

"You can't do nothing 'til I talk to Mr. Hahey at the Legal Clinic." Her chin lifted and her eyes narrowed.

"Ruben's not in any more trouble, Mrs. Alv—"

"It's his probation officer," she interrupted angrily. "He causes all the trouble. Why can't he let Ruben alone?"

"I just want to ask you some questions—"

"Sending him from this place to this place to this place. When's he coming home?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Alvarez. I just—"

"What kinda questions?"

Ralph took a deep breath. "When was the last time you heard from Ruben?"

A shrug. "He writes every week or so."

He had expected that. "What does he say in his letters?"

"Not so much. He don't write so good."

"Does he say anything about the Thransen Home? Anything about the

treatment program he's in?"

"He says he's lonely out there in the desert. And he misses Angela—that's his girlfriend. *Por vida*, he says."

"Anything else?"

"I think he said in his last letter he won the ping-pong tournament. They gave him a coke for a prize." She tilted her head and inspected him harder. "Hey, what're you asking these questions for?"

Ralph swallowed and tried to smile. "We're attempting to find out what the parents of the children in the Operation Dreamwatch program think of it. Sometimes the parents get feedback from the kids that the people who run the program aren't aware of."

"Yeah, a mother always knows."

He nodded. "What do you think of the program he's been sent to? This Dreamwatch thing?"

She looked suddenly tired, as if the mask had faded for a moment to reveal the fatigue beneath the skin. "I don't know." She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "I don't know anything about it. I guess it's okay. Ruben's gotta be someplace, I know. He's kind of a wild kid. He gave me a black eye once, and broke his sister's arm. That was the last time he was home." She sighed. "Maybe if his father hadn't left when he was a baby..."

"But you feel the project's all right? There's nothing wrong with it?"

Another shrug. "I didn't understand when Ruben's P.O. told me about it. Something about dreams—I don't know. But if it changes Ruben just a little bit, that'd be nice. Just so he didn't blow up all the time. Then he'd be a good boy."

"But you're sure he's okay?" persisted Ralph. "Nothing's happened to him?"

"Naw, he's okay. Hey, look." She went away from the door, then returned with an object she handed to Ralph across the chain. "He sent me that last week. He made it in woodshop." She smiled proudly.

It was a short piece of pine board, varnished so inexpertly that little half-beads of clear yellow had formed around the bottom edge. The words TO MY LOVING MOM had been crudely incised into the wood. It looked just like all the shop projects he had seen in the Juvenile Hall where he had once worked. He started to hand it back through the door's narrow opening but Mrs. Alvarez waved it away.

"You keep it," she said. "Then you can tell them at the Juvenile Court that Ruben's not a bad boy. And you can show them that." A kind of childlike hopefulness had filtered into her voice.

He hesitated, then nodded. "All right," he said. "I'll tell them." *She's probably been disappointed so many times, he thought. A couple more lies won't hurt.*

As he headed down the stairwell, Ralph passed the man with the bundle of newspapers he had seen in the building's lobby. Their eyes met for a moment, then the short man continued trudging upstairs. Ralph noticed that the papers under the man's arm were copies of the Revolutionary Worker's Party *Agitant*. He hurried down the dark steps before the man could come after him and ask him to subscribe.

CHAPTER 7

The other address was in an expensive suburb north of the city. Ralph left the Ford at the curb with the neatly stencilled house number on it and walked up the little stone path winding across the trimmed lawn.

The house itself looked like a Spanish mission that had melted in the sun and spread out over the landscape. He pressed the doorbell, heard the muffled chiming on the other side of the high wooden door, and waited. After a minute he rang again, but still no one came.

He turned to walk back to the Ford but a faint sound of splashing water stopped him. His feet sinking in the lush grass, he circled the house and came to a small wooden gate in the cinder block fence that extended behind the house. Stretching on his toes, he peered over the gate and saw a large, irregular swimming pool, like a blue gem cut in two, set in the landscaped yard. A woman's head moved surrounded by ripples through the water, her brown hair trailing. "Mrs. Teele?" called Ralph.

The woman glanced up, saw him, then turned over on her back and swam slowly towards the other end of the pool. "Just leave it at the front door," she shouted over the splashing of her arms and legs.

"I'm not delivering anything, Mrs. Teele." Ralph held his open wallet above his head. "I'm from the California State Juvenile Treatment Department. I'd like to talk to you about your son, Thomas."

"Thomas?" she floated to the edge of the pool and hoisted herself halfway out of the water. "Oh, you mean T.J.," she said, her face losing its puzzlement. "How's he doing?" With a splash she was out of the pool and reaching for a towel draped over an aluminum and plastic garden chair. Her tan was so dark that she seemed to be some species of seal with legs.

"That's what I want to talk to you about." He put his wallet away.

Mrs. Teele walked towards the gate, the towel draped over her shoulders. "Why ask me? You've got him. Isn't he still out there in the desert someplace?"

"That's right," said Ralph. "He's still committed to the Operation Dreamwatch program. We'd like to know if there's been any communication between you and your son—anything Thomas might not have wanted to tell the staff at the Thronsen Home. Does he write to you?"

She wiped a damp tendril of hair away from her brow. "I think he writes every week or so. I'm not sure. Haven't really felt like opening my mail for the last couple weeks."

"Well... when you do read his letters, do you ever sense anything wrong? Anything that just seems funny about them?"

"Wrong?" She laughed. "Listen, I don't know what they're doing to my kid out there, but anything's better for T.J. than letting him back out on the street. It took thirty-eight stitches to put his head back together after that last stunt of his. The car was totalled, of course, but we had insurance on it, at least." Her voice had changed by the last words, making them harsh and steely.

He had to look hard before he could see the faint tracery of lines around her eyes and mouth. They betrayed her real age and the tension beneath the skin. "So you think he's okay, then?"

"Sure." A quick nod of the head. "Look, you got any more questions? I usually take a nap, or go shopping, or something, in the afternoon." She pressed the fingertips of one hand against her brow.

"No," said Ralph. "Wait a second. Has Thomas sent you a package or anything recently?"

"Let me go see." She walked to the house, slid open a glass door, and stepped inside. In a few moments she returned with a narrow, flat parcel, still wrapped with brown paper and twine. She tore it open to reveal a varnished pine board.

"Isn't that sweet?" she said, the same hard tone cutting under her words. "'To my loving mom.'" She handed the board over the gate to Ralph.

He glanced at it, then back at her. "Can I keep this? It might, uh, help us with our study."

"Go ahead. What do I want with a piece of junk like that?"

"That's true. Well, thanks for your cooperation." He started to turn away from the gate.

"Hey. Wait." She smiled at him. "How come everybody's asking about my kid today?" Her voice was relaxed again, the harshness pressed back inside of herself.

Ralph stiffened with her words. "Who else was asking about him?"

"I know there isn't any connection, of course. Just a funny coincidence, is all. You right now, and then that other guy this morning—or was it yesterday morning? I'm not sure."

"What other guy?"

She blinked, surprised at his sudden intensity. "A little short guy. Real dwarf. He was selling subscriptions to some weird newspaper. Hold on, I'll get you the sample copy he left." With an apprehensive glance over her shoulder at him, she ran into the house and returned with the folded newspaper.

He reached over the gate and took it out of her hands. It was the latest issue of the *Agitant*. A brief image shot behind his eyes, of a bundle of the same issue clasped under the arms of a short man in Mrs. Alvarez's building. Ralph gripped the paper together with the pine board in his hands. "What did he ask you about your son?"

"Oh. Gee—I don't remember. Just the same kind of thing you asked, I think. He said he was doing a paper for some college class he was in." She slowly backed a few steps away from the gate.

Hold on, he told himself. Don't let her think anything's wrong. He swallowed, then forced a smile.. "That is... kind of a funny coincidence, all right." He nodded and started away. "Thanks for your help, Mrs. Teele."

"Sure," she said. "Watch out for the bougainvillea behind you."

He threw the board and the paper beside him on the seat of the Ford and drove for several blocks. When Mrs. Teele's house was out of sight, he pulled over to the curb and killed the engine.

As he had suspected, had known in fact, the two varnished pine boards were identical. *Right down to the wood grain*, he thought, turning each over in his hands. Even the blobs of varnish at the bottom were the same. *They must have some kind of factory that stamps them out.*

The boards clattered as he tossed them onto the floor of the car. He picked up the paper and unfolded it. After a few minutes of examining the rough-edged newsprint, he threw it on top of the boards. It was just like any other issue of the *Agitant* he had ever seen—the same as the ones that came every two weeks to his mailbox at the base. He started up the car and headed for the freeway back into the city.

A little while later, he parked the Ford in a hamburger stand's parking lot and watched the five p.m. rush hour traffic creep along a nearby section of freeway. Meditatively, he sipped at a milkshake.

Now what? he thought. There was something wrong about Operation Dreamwatch—something big enough for someone to murder in order to hide it—but he was going to have a hard time proving it to anyone else. He couldn't just march into the L.A. office of the FBI, toss the two identical boards on the counter, and expect much of a reaction. *Probably put me down as just another crank*, he thought. *Must get dozens every day.*

He looked up through the windshield and watched two plasma jet trails trace through the late afternoon light. A sudden urge rose in him, an urge to just get on the freeway and head north. The traffic would thin in a little while, and then he'd be able to make pretty good time. *Oregon or Washington*, he thought. *Maybe even Canada*. The desire to get away, to forget everything about Operation Dreamwatch...

But they'd find me. He squeezed the greasy hamburger wrapping into a ball in his fist. *They'd figure I'd found out something when I didn't come back to the base, and they'd find me somehow. No matter where I hid. And then they'd kill me. Just like Stimmitz and Helga*.

He knew there wasn't any choice now. He either found some kind of proof about Operation Dreamwatch, something solid enough to get the proper authorities into it, or else he didn't—and could start waiting for his own death. *They'll find me out sooner or later*, he grimly told himself.

He picked up the copy of the *Agitant* again and studied it. Tracking down the parents of the two kids whose folders he had taken hadn't revealed anything new to him, beyond the continuous forgery of letters to allay any suspicion by the parents. The newspaper was now the only thread he had left to follow.

Somebody, he thought, *is poking into the same things I am. But the Revolutionary Workers Party? I don't get it. Why would they be interested?*

Two possibilities came into his mind. The little group of radicals was also aware of something being wrong with Operation Dreamwatch. Or they were a front for whoever was behind the Opwatch project.

Ralph considered the last. *Yeah, that makes sense*, he decided. *They could have been talking to the parents of the kids in the Thronsen Home just to see how well their cover-up is working*.

But either way, the RWP was the only point in the foglike mystery he could move towards. He opened the *Agitant* and located a column headed "Activist Calendar." There was to be a public forum tonight at the RWP headquarters in L.A., with somebody named Peter Vallejo talking on "Ximento—The Facts Behind the Myth." Ralph memorized the headquarter's address and closed the paper.

That'll have to do for a start, he thought. He rolled down the Ford's window and stuffed the trash from his meal into the mouth of a container shaped like a malevolently grinning clown.

CHAPTER 8

The front yards of the little frame houses were choked with weeds. Most of the windows were broken, showing like transparent teeth beneath the rough boards that had been sloppily nailed over them. As Ralph parked the Ford at the side of the narrow street, the old street lights came on, spreading weak yellow splotches in the twilight.

He got out, locked the Ford, and headed back along the cracked sidewalk to the busier street he had turned off. The small vacant houses remained silent, as though they were the discarded husks of their former occupants. *Where did they all go?* thought Ralph as he walked past. *Probably all been squeezed into one of the Nueva buildings.*

At the corner of the block stood a large sign depicting the planned extension of the Muehlenfeldt Center that would soon take the place of the little houses. In an already vacant lot up the street, Ralph had seen some of the bulldozers and cranes waiting behind a chain-link fence. The buildings in the picture on the sign looked like quartz crystals or something—great slabs of concrete and glass rearing into a sky bluer than any ever seen in L.A. *Nice stuff for Martians, maybe*, thought Ralph. He turned away from the sign, waited for a break in the traffic, then dashed across the street.

The headquarters of the Revolutionary Workers Party was in a dingy, two-story brick building. Ralph was sure he had found the right address—there was a large poster in one of the upper windows: VOTE RWP IN '84! in red letters that glowed from the lights in the room behind.

The lower part of the building, he saw as he stepped up onto the curb, was occupied by the Red Star Candy Store.

Behind a dusty plate glass window protected by a folding metal lattice, a few scattered candy boxes lay amid the corpses of small insects on their backs. There were no lights on in the store.

To the right of the store window a narrow door opened onto a flight of stairs. The inside of the door was covered with the same poster as in the

window upstairs. Ralph looked inside, saw another light at the top of the stairs and heard voices muffled by another door.

There were more posters lining the walls of the stairwell as he climbed up. The colors were faded, depicting causes and heroes and dates back through the seventies and even into the late sixties. One, the earliest he could make out in the dim light from above, was for a rally against some war in-some place he had never heard of. *I wonder if they managed to stop it*, he thought idly as he mounted the last few steps.

The door at the top swung open under his hand. A flood of light poured out and revealed a large room filled with books. They were arranged on plywood shelves lining the walls and stacked on makeshift tables with folding sawhorses for legs. A sign on the wall read PROGRESSIVE BOOK STORE. A man with a pipe was sitting behind one of the tables with a little metal cashbox on it. He glanced up from the book he was reading as Ralph stepped in from the stairwell.

Ignoring the man's eyes on his back, Ralph stood in front of the nearest shelves and pretended an interest in the books. There were several copies of each title, most still shiny with the look of new books that had never been opened. Some were a little faded and covered with a fine layer of dust.

He pulled a book from one of the shelves. A bushy-bearded face glared at him from the cover. He put it back and took another. This had two men on it, one with a precise goatee and the other with a shock of black hair and small glasses, gazing up at him from the depths of ancient photographs. Ralph opened the book and pretended to read, while sneaking a careful survey of the rest of what he could see of the RWP headquarters.

Through a wide doorway to the rear of the bookstore, he could see rows of metal folding chairs facing an unoccupied podium. More of the posters he had seen coming up the stairs lined the walls of the empty meeting hall.

Behind him, someone came in from the stairwell and called hello to the man with the pipe. Ralph put the book back on the shelf and glanced over at the table. The newcomer, a girl in jeans and a service-station wind-breaker, was talking animatedly to the man. They both were laughing and ignoring him.

Maybe he wasn't watching me to begin with, thought Ralph. Maybe I'm getting nervous for no reason—at least so far. A little bolder, he swung his head around. Through a doorway on the other side of the bookstore another room was visible, its windows overlooking the street outside. The room was occupied by battered wooden desks and surrounded by shelves filled with yellowing stacks of *Agitant* back issues.

Several party members were clustered around one of the desks, sipping coffee from plastic cups and talking. A girl in a pullover sweater too large for her was talking on a phone in the room's corner and writing something down on a yellow notepad.

Ralph suddenly perceived that the room he was looking into was in fact L-shaped, with its far section hidden from view. He was craning his neck to try to sight whatever was around the room's bend when he felt something strike him just below the shoulder blade.

His breath became something solid in his throat for a moment. He whirled around, saw nothing, then looked lower and saw a face grinning up at him. It was the short man he'd seen in Mrs. Alvarez's building. *And Mrs. Teele said he'd been around there, too, thought Ralph.* Looking at the man's round face and uneven teeth, Ralph felt the knot in his throat swell and grow tighter. *Does he remember seeing me?* he wondered uneasily.

"Haven't seen you at our public forums before," said the man brightly. He continued to grin up at Ralph.

"Uh... no." He squeezed his voice out into the air. "I'm new in L.A."

"Well, we're always glad to see some fresh faces around here." The smile evaporated, and the man sighed. "Sometimes you get a little, you know, *wax museum* feeling around here. Know what I mean? Same old people all the time." He fell silent for a moment, then beamed at Ralph again. "Just curious?"

"Huh?" He wasn't sure he'd heard right.

"Did you come just because you're curious, or are you, you know, into political stuff?"

"Well—"

"I mean, it's all right," said the short man. "Lots of people start out just curious, and then become interested, I guess you'd say." He clapped Ralph with enthusiasm on the arm. "So stick around. Peter is really a great speaker. And he knows this Ximento matter from the inside out—he was in Brazil a couple of years ago for a conference." He paused, looking as if he were waiting for something to be said.

"Sounds interesting, all right," said Ralph.

"And we've got a good pamphlet on the subject, too. Just a dollar. Sometimes it's hard keeping the printed stuff up to date, the way things go so fast. Sometimes a whole issue's forgotten before you have anything to show people about it. But we were already researching this before the Front started moving north, so we just had to kind of rush it into print, is all. It's over there on the table. I'd buy you a copy, so you'd have it to read, but that's sort of frowned upon. It's supposed to be the sign of a... well, *serious* person to buy their own literature."

"I'll have to get a copy."

"Yeah, do that. You'll enjoy it." He glanced at the watch on his wrist. "Hey, almost time for the forum to start. I'd better go make sure we got enough chairs out. See you in the meeting hall in a few minutes." The short man turned and hurried away.

He didn't recognize me, thought Ralph as he wandered over to one of the book-covered tables. *He didn't make the connection*. The room was filled with people who had entered from the stairwell while they had been talking. The crowd was clustered into groups conversing, or individuals looking over the bookshelves by themselves.

Ralph found the knot gone and air pouring into his lungs again. At least he had penetrated this far safely—although nothing had been made any less mysterious yet. From the table, he picked up a thin pamphlet with the word "Ximento" in the title. *Not very much for a dollar*, decided Ralph, putting it back down and heading for the entrance of the meeting hall.

"Hey, buddy. Give me a hand with this, will you?"

He stopped and turned towards the voice. A door he hadn't noticed before stood open, revealing a large kitchen. A huge, ancient stove, like a squared-off battle ship, and deep iron sinks stood beneath the bare light

bulbs hanging from the ceiling. The short man was pointing to a massive cylindrical coffee urn standing on a counter by the door.

"What's the matter?" said Ralph.

"Help me carry this thing into the other room." The short man grabbed one of the urn's handles. "It's for refreshments after the forum."

Ralph shrugged and stepped into the kitchen. He grunted as he lifted up on the urn's other handle. "Maybe you should've moved it first," he said, "and then—" He stopped, sensing the door suddenly closing, shutting off the sounds of the crowd in the bookstore. Letting go of the handle, he stepped backward away from the short man. A dull noise he barely heard and a wave of pain swept over him from the back of his head.

"Hell," somebody was saying as Ralph staggered into the counter. "Not like that—you can break somebody's skull like that!" He couldn't lift his head, and saw only the dark and swimming floor as he groped his way out. A pair of boots—they looked like old battered military issue—stepped into his vision.

"Hey, get him!" another voice said. How many were there in the room? "Don't let—"

"For Pete's sake." Somebody grabbed Ralph, pinning his arms to his sides. "Give me that thing."

"Careful."

The room tilted on its side, darkening from red to black.

* * *

"Hey. Come on. Wake up." The voice sounded familiar somehow.

Ralph started to raise his eyelids but the first narrow crack of light bounced off the back of his skull like a mallet. He clamped his eyes shut again, his head throbbing with his pulse. "Go away," he said.

"No, no. Come on," coaxed the voice.

It was no use. Consciousness welled up in him with each imploding wave of his blood. Where had he heard that voice before? He gripped the

sides of the cot he was lying upon and ran his tongue over his dry lips. "What'd he hit me so hard for?" He groaned.

"We're sorry about that." A different voice, a woman's. "We didn't know...."

He grunted, braced himself and opened his eyes wide. Yellowish electric light clamored like a siren in his skull, then faded into a dull headache.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Sure." Ralph lifted his head and turned it to one side. He found himself looking into Stimmitz's face. For a few seconds their eyes met, then Ralph laid his head back upon the cot. "Go to hell," he said. A cold and bitter current seemed to pour out of his chest like a tide as he stared up at the ceiling.

"Hey, man, it's not what you think—"

"I don't care," said Ralph in disgust. "I don't care how you did it, or why you made me think you got torn to pieces on the dreamfield. I don't care about any of that stuff. Real cute trick, all right." He swung his legs over the edge of the cot and sat up, pulling his head down between his shoulders to ease the clanging in his head. Past Stimmitz he could see two or three other people in the room. "Do you mind if I leave now?" he said, the corner of his mouth bending into a snarl. The bitterness had become clearer, refined into a sense of betrayal and anger at having been fooled for so long, whatever the obscure motivation for the fraud had been. *No more*, he thought. *I've had enough*.

"You are Ralph Metric, aren't you?"

"Come on." He kneaded his forehead without looking up. "Cut it out, Stimmitz. I don't know what all of this has been for, what the point was of making me think you were dead and everything, but enough's enough."

A few seconds of silence passed. "I'm not Michael Stimmitz," the other said quietly. "I'm his brother Spencer."

"Huh?" Ralph jerked erect. "What? His *brother*! You're kidding." He looked into the other's face. The differences became obvious—a thinner nose, closer set eyes than the Stimmitz he had known out at the Opwatch

base. "I... he never said he had a brother."

Spencer Stimmitz shrugged. "Maybe he didn't think you needed to know."

"I don't get it." Ralph's anger had drained away, leaving his former confusion. "Why'd you hit me over the head?"

"We didn't know who you were." Just behind Spencer was the short man. "We thought you might be one of Muehlenfeldt's agents."

"Me? I thought *you* were." Ralph looked past Spencer at the others crowding the small room. The short man was there, looking more grim-faced than he had in the Progressive Bookstore. Towering over him was the man whose battered Army boots he had glimpsed in the kitchen, the one, he guessed who had knocked him out. There was something subtly wrong about the wide-staring eyes and the hands fidgeting inside the pants pockets. *I'm lucky my skull's still in one piece*, thought Ralph. *If it is.*

Leaning against a door, arms folded, was the woman he had heard speak a moment ago. For several seconds he stared directly into her face. He had seen her before—carrying a camera in the desert outside the Opwatch base.

"I'm sorry," she said, smiling at him. "We were a little hard on you. But you know we can't take any chances."

The way she said the words *you know* disturbed him. Before he could open his mouth to say anything, Spencer broke in again.

"It's a good thing I came down here." He emitted a quick, barking laugh. "They were talking about how to get rid of your corpse."

"Great," muttered Ralph. He carefully shook his aching head from side to side, but nothing became any clearer. "This may sound stupid," he said at last, "but what's going on around here? Who are you people, anyway?"

No one spoke for a moment. "Hey," said Spencer, glancing back at the others, "maybe you hit him too hard. It's affected his memory."

Scowling, the man with the army boots brushed Spencer aside and

stood in front of Ralph. "Maybe," he said darkly, "this dude's diddling around with us." He pursed his lips and spat.

Ralph looked at the gob of spittle dead-centered between his feet, then back up as the man brought his hand close to Ralph's face. A slight metallic whisper and a knife with a long blade Hashed across his vision.

He stared at the distorted reflection of his face in the shiny blade, until an understanding of its macabre purpose swept like a hot electric wire into his mind. The cot slid into the knife-wielder's knees as Ralph scrambled backwards across it. He flattened himself against the wall. "Are you crazy?" he shouted. "Get him away from me!"

"Come on," coaxed the short man, tugging at the other's arm. "Put it away, Gunther. Not now." The big man looked sullen but with another small noise, the blade disappeared. "He gets nervous," the short man said, turning to Ralph.

"Just keep him away from me." Ralph braced his shoulders against the wall to stop their trembling. He stood there, working at breathing for a few moments before he spoke again. "I don't know who you people think I am, but I wish you'd let me in on it, too."

The woman and the three other men exchanged glances. *I've blown it*, thought Ralph, watching them. *They're probably mulling over the corpse-disposal problem again.*

"Aren't you Ralph Metric?" said Spencer, looking puzzled. He held up a wallet that Ralph recognized as his own. "You've got a California driver's license and an Operation Dreamwatch ID that says you are."

He nodded without speaking.

"Well, then you can relax." Spencer shrugged and spread his hands open. "This is it. I mean, we're the Alpha Fraction."

"The *what?*" Ralph was beginning to wonder if something had been knocked loose when they had hit him. Every new piece of information seemed to make things even more confused.

"The Alpha Fraction. Didn't my brother tell you to come find us?"

"You know, don't you," said Ralph slowly, "that your brother's dead." He watched the other's face.

"We've assumed that." Spencer's voice remained level and calm. "But he wrote us about you in his last letter." He pulled a dirt-creased envelope from his hip pocket, unfolded it and extracted a photograph.

Ralph took it from the outstretched hand. It was a black-and-white shot of himself, taken sometime without his knowledge on the Opwatch base: a colorless, two-dimensional Ralph Metric frozen in front of one of the buildings out in the middle of the desert. *Probably just wandering around*, he thought, studying the photo. *As usual*.

He turned the picture over. On the back were several lines in the late Michael Stimmitz's precise handwriting. *Spence—Possible recruit, name of Ralph Metric. Should be able to trust him: Will be filling him in gradually, & send him on to L.A. if nothing turns up here. M.*

"So that's what it was all about," murmured Ralph. He tapped the picture with his forefinger.

"What's that?" said Spencer.

"All that stuff your brother talked about. Just before... what happened to him. Universes, and stuff. He was trying to *recruit* me, but he didn't have time to tell me everything before he was killed. That's what he was trying to do."

"He didn't say anything about the Alpha Fraction?" asked the short man.

"No," said Ralph. "Nothing."

The man sighed. "Let's go upstairs and see if there's any coffee left. This is going to take a while."

Ralph pushed himself away from the wall and stepped around the cot. He held out the photograph to Spencer, who didn't appear to see it.

"Do you know how Mike died?" said Spencer.

"I was there. I saw it." He watched as Spencer nodded and turned away,

expressionless. Someone touched his arm. He turned and saw beside himself the woman he had first seen in the desert, now making a small gesture with her hand.

"He'll be okay," she whispered, glancing at Spencer's back disappearing through the room's doorway. "He was still hoping, is all. About his brother."

The relief Ralph had felt at the small light penetrating the accumulated mysteries was muted. He followed the woman out of the room and up an unlit stairway.

Interlude: Somewhere in a Corridor of Power

Although the city roared ceaselessly below, it was quiet aboard the jetliner. The carpet was like an ankle-deep sea, temporarily calm. Seamed with age, Senator Aaron Muehlenfeldt's face was reflected in the circular window as he looked down upon the scattered four a.m. traffic on the freeways. Pinpoints of red and white light were wandering among the great L.A. buildings.

"It's ready, sir."

The senator swivelled his high-backed leather chair around to face a young man on the other side of the oval desk, his face as fixed and emotionless as the shoulder-patch on his sleeve. He rested his hand upon the controls of the tape recorder. Muehlenfeldt waited for him to speak again.

With brisk efficiency, the young man opened a manila clasp envelope and laid its contents out on the desk. "This was recorded," he said, "about an hour ago, using one of our devices planted at the Revolutionary Worker's Party headquarters. Through voice-print analysis we've identified the voices of the members of the group called 'the Alpha Fraction.' " He slid a large black-and-white photo across the desk.

Muehlenfeldt picked it up, carefully holding it by the tips of his brown-spotted fingers. It showed a short man waiting in line at a hamburger stand. All the features in the shot were foreshortened, compressed together by the telephoto lens that had been used.

"That's Mendel Koss," said the young man. "He's been acting as head of the group since the elimination of their colleague Michael Stimmitz last week." He slid another photo across the desk. "That's Spencer Stimmitz, the younger brother of the late Michael."

The senator glanced at the pictures, then picked up the next one that came towards him.

"That's the woman called Sarah." The young man hesitated. "We haven't been able to ascertain a last name for her yet. There's only one other member of the group, a man by the name of Gunther Ortiz, but his voice isn't on the tape. So he was either not present or remained silent."

The photos adhered to each other as the senator pushed them aside. "On the phone," he said in his resonant, cello-like baritone, "you mentioned another person being there."

"Yes, that's right." The young man extracted another photo from the envelope and pushed it towards the senator.

It was a blow-up of an Operation Dreamwatch FD card. Not much could be told from the blurry face-shot. He tossed it on top of the others.

The young man tapped the reel of recording tape on the machine in front of him. "From the conversation we've identified this other voice as that of Ralph Metric. He's one of the watchers at the base."

One of the senator's snow-white eyebrows arched upwards. "A watcher? What's he doing in L.A.?"

"He's on vacation, I believe."

"Come on." Muehlenfeldt slapped the desk top. "What's he *doing* there? Seems like quite a lot of initiative for a watcher to take."

"We're aware of that." The young man pulled from the envelopes a sheet of paper crowded with words and numbers. "We contacted the base and they wired us the record of his serotonin/melatonin activity monitoring. It's been well below the necessary levels since he was hired over six months ago. We're checking now to see if he has any abnormalities in his past history that we might have overlooked before."

"Have the monitoring equipment checked out, too." The cello's strings grated. "First that Stimmitz person got past them, and now this one."

In a small book the young man scribbled a note.

"Now what's all this about?" said the senator irritably, waving a hand at the tape recorder.

"At approximately two-thirty a.m., quite some time after the weekly public forum at the Revolutionary Workers Party headquarters was over, the members of the Alpha Fraction and Ralph Metric were picked up by the device we have planted in the meeting hall. We assume they had previously been in a part of the building where we don't have a device yet."

The senator grunted and shook his head in disgust, but said nothing.

"From their recorded conversation," continued the young man, "it appears as if Metric had had no previous contact with the group and was up to this point completely ignorant of its existence, let alone its purpose. Most of the discussion consists of the group members filling him in on the nature and past history of the Alpha Fraction, thus confirming much of what we had already found out about them." He arched his eyebrows as his hand hovered over the tape recorder's play button. When the senator nodded, he pushed it. "The first voice is that of Mendel Koss," he whispered quickly.

A small clattering noise and a voice, slightly tinny from electronic imitation, emerged from the machine. "... you see, Ralph, if we didn't need another person—because of what happened, you know, to Mike—I'd probably tell you to get out of here and forget all this."

Another voice, a woman's. "But we need your help."

"That's the woman named Sarah," the young man said to Muehlenfeldt.

"Well, just what is it you're trying to do?" Another man's voice, sounding puzzled.

"That's Metric."

A cough, and the voice of Mendel Koss spoke again. "We've been... kind

of investigating the Operation Dreamwatch project for quite a while now—"

"Who's we?" Metric's voice. "The RWP?"

"No," said Koss. "Just the Alpha Fraction. The rest of the RWP, both the local and the national organization, doesn't even know we exist."

"How come you call it a 'fraction?' " asked Metric.

A second passed before Koss answered, a trace of impatience evident in his voice. "That's just what organizations like the RWP call their committees. They have an Executive Fraction, and Publications and Fund-raising Fractions, and stuff like that; it's instead of calling them committees. Just the way they've always done it. 'Alpha?' I don't know—that was Mike's idea. Had to call it something, I guess."

"It was all Mike's idea," came another voice. "He created the fraction. He was the first one to suspect there was something strange going on out there with Operation Dreamwatch."

"That was Spencer Stimmitz," said the young man. "He was referring, of course, to his brother." The senator nodded and leaned a little closer to the machine.

"You see," continued Koss's voice, "Mike had quit the RWP. He had doubts about the effectiveness of the party and the work it's been doing. While he was at loose ends, he hired on with Operation Dreamwatch. He was one of the first to be recruited. It wasn't too long before the little odd things about the project started to pile up in his mind, enough to really raise his suspicions about the whole thing. He got in touch with the few of us in the RWP that he trusted—"

"He wasn't sure about the rest of the party," interrupted Sarah's voice. "He didn't want to hazard tipping our hand to any agents and infiltrators in the party. That's always a problem in groups like ours."

"Helga Warner was one of you?" said Metric.

"She hired on with the project," said Koss, "because Mike felt that the two of them might be able to find out more."

"Did they?"

"Not much more than you have already. Or at least not anything that got back to us before they were killed. We knew their plans for going inside the Thransen Home, but yours is the first word we've gotten about what's actually in there."

"Do you know what it means?" Metric's voice seemed to rush from the tape recorder. "The kids on ice and everything?"

"Hell," said Koss. "Who can tell what somebody like Muehlenfeldt is doing with all this stuff."

"How do you know Muehlenfeldt's really behind it? Maybe the senator doesn't know what the Opwatch people are doing with all the money he gives them from his foundation."

"That's something we are sure about." Sarah's voice was grim. "Mike had sneaked into the base commander's office and found a whole file of memoranda from Muehlenfeldt. Nothing that gave away the project's real purpose, of course, but enough to let us know that Muehlenfeldt's been personally directing it from the beginning."

"Don't you think you're kind of outmatched, then?" Metric's voice rose in pitch. "I mean, that guy's got *billions*. If Operation Dreamwatch is his pet kick, and he doesn't want anyone to know what's going on, how's your little fraction going to find out? Let alone stop whatever he's doing with it."

"We've got plans," said Koss.

"Like what?"

"Well, it's getting kind of late—"

The young man pushed another button on the tape recorder. The voice of Mendel Koss came to a halt in mid-sentence. "That's all the important part," he said.

"They left the RWP headquarters and dispersed. Metric went with Spencer Stimmitz to get some sleep and to be briefed on the Alpha Fraction's plans."

The senator leaned back in his chair. "Let's hear that tape, then."

"I'm afraid," said the young man slowly, "we don't have a device planted at Stimmitz's apartment. He has quite a bit of electronics expertise, and it was decided that the chances were too great of his detecting anything we tried to put in there."

"So you still don't know what they're planning?"

The young man hesitated a second. "No."

"Or anything about the other group?"

His lips compressed, the young man shook his head.

The senator's fingers laced together and rested on the desk top. "I assume, though, that you have plans for finding out."

"Uh... yes. Yes, we do. We've just about completed the preparations for a means of breaking the fraction open. We're... very hopeful about it."

"Fine," said Muehlenfeldt quietly, the cello strings whispering their lowest note. "I suggest you hurry with it."

His face bloodless, the young man nodded, picked up the tape recorder, and headed quickly for the rear of the plane.

When he was alone, the senator stood at the jetliner's window and looked down at the city below. Most of San Francisco was still dreaming.

CHAPTER 9

Spencer pocketed the key and pushed open the door of his apartment. "There you go," he said, waving his hand grandly as Ralph stepped inside. Pushed against one wall was a tired-looking sofa half-covered with old magazines and newspapers. "You can bed down here." Spencer jumbled the papers into a loose stack and dropped them on the floor. "I think I got some extra blankets in one of the closets."

While he disappeared into the back of the apartment, Ralph looked around the front room. A small pagoda of dirty cups and saucers tottered on a low table constructed of plywood and cement blocks. The walls were

randomly spotted with pages torn from books and other sources. Ralph stepped over to one and found himself looking at a yellowing newsphoto of a kneeling man engulfed in flames. Blurred oriental faces watched with varying expressions. He glanced at the picture next to it—a glossy publicity still of a grinning dog captioned, Rin-Tin-Tin—before turning away from the wall.

Carrying a mound of wadded-up blankets, Spencer came back into the room. He tossed them onto the sofa and brushed the lint from his hands. "That should do it."

"Who's Rin-Tin-Tin?" Ralph tilted his head towards the picture on the wall.

"Huh?" Spencer looked around and spotted the dog's image. "Oh, yeah—that. He was a dog they made a whole bunch of movies about, long time ago. Mike used to go to film festivals at some of the universities around here and watch them. Rin-Tin-Tin movies were kind of a fad for a while, I guess. They really meant something to Mike, though—a lot of weird things did. He used to tell me that that stupid dog was closer to being human than most people. 'At least he's *trying*,' he'd say." Spencer fell silent, gazing across the room at the picture.

After a moment, Ralph spoke. "I'm sorry about what happened to your brother." He coughed. "There wasn't much I could do. I was pretty scared at the time."

Spencer shrugged and exhaled noisily. "Yeah, well, who wouldn't have been? Even Rin-Tin-Tin. That slithergadee thing sounded pretty fierce when you were telling us about it back at the headquarters. Forget it. Let's go see if we can find anything in the kitchen."

Ralph sat at a table littered with unidentifiable electronic parts and a soldering iron while Spencer rummaged in the refrigerator. He held a carton of milk to his nose and sniffed. "Should still be good," he decided. With his forearm he cleared a space on the table, then set down the milk and two unmatched cups. "Good for the stomach lining," he said. "After all that damn coffee."

Over the rim of his cup, Ralph watched as Spencer abstractedly pushed a couple of transistors around with his finger. They were different colors, like pills, and rolled across the table's surface, waving their small end

wires.

"How well did you get to know Mike?" said Spencer, not looking up. "While you were out there at the Opwatch base."

"Not very well," said Ralph, "it's not the kind of place where you make much contact with anybody." *Or anything*, he thought to himself.

"You know, Mike was okay. As older brothers go. He was—let's see—a junior in high school when I was in sixth grade; the school psychologist diagnosed me as hyperactive, because I threw a blackboard eraser at one of the teachers and talked a lot. So anyway, they were going to give me these pills. Doctor's dope, right? It's legal as long as they *want* you all zonked out. But when Mike heard about it, he loaded me on the back of this little motorcycle he had, and we rode it all the way to San Diego. Checked into a motel—he gave the desk clerk some story about us being part of a rock group and the rest of the band hadn't shown up yet. We waited a couple of days, then he called our parents and said we'd come back if they wouldn't make me take the stuff." Spencer picked up one of the transistors and laughed, shaking his head. "He told me later that he didn't do it because he actually cared for me that much. It was just a matter of principle for him."

Ralph set his cup down. "You must have felt pretty bad when you saw those pictures Sarah took."

"What pictures?" Spencer's brow creased in puzzlement.

"The ones Sarah took out in the desert. By the Opwatch base. You know, of that big bloodstain on the ground."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Spencer. "Sarah's never gone out to the Opwatch base. We decided it might raise too much suspicion if any of us were seen poking around there. And I don't think Sarah even owns a camera."

Frowning, Ralph watched his forefinger circle the rim of the empty cup before him. When telling the Alpha Fraction about Michael Stimmitz's death and the other strange things that had happened at the base, he hadn't mentioned spotting Sarah aiming a camera at the bloody spot. He had assumed the others knew about it—that she had gone out there on the group's orders and had reported to them on what she had found. *But she*

didn't, thought Ralph. *They don't even know she went out there.*

"You okay?" said Spencer.

"Yeah." Ralph nodded. "I must've gotten confused—thinking about something else. Everything's been going so fast, it gets hard to keep track." *So what's it mean?* persisted his thought. *Something else is going on with these people—or at least with one of them.* With an effort, he pushed Sarah's now enigmatic face from his mind. "Tell me about this plan," he said. "That I'm supposed to help you people with."

Spencer pushed aside his own cup and the empty milk carton. He drew an assemblage of electronic parts to himself and studied it. "Remember the Opwatch recruiting office downtown?" he said, poking a finger at one of the soldered wires. "Where you first signed on with them?"

"Sure. What about it?"

"We're going to bug it."

Ralph stared at him for a moment before he could say anything. "That's ridiculous."

The wire pulled loose and Spencer looked up. "Why do you say that?"

"Are you kidding?" said Ralph. "For Pete's sake, that office is nothing but a closet with a desk and phone stuffed in it. You're not going to be able to pry any secrets out of a place like that—there wouldn't be any."

"We've got reason to believe differently. There's more to that little office than you'd think. Our plan's worth a try, at least."

"You people are crazy." Ralph's disappointment had turned into anger. "This sounds like a pretty good way to get picked up by the police for no good reason."

"Hey, we're not asking that much from you," said Spencer. "It'll be safe. If anything goes wrong, you'll have plenty of time to clear out." He pulled another wire loose. "Of course, if that's too much for you..."

Ralph snorted, but felt blood tinge his face. "When are you going to try to do this?"

"Now that you're here, we'll probably pull it tomorrow night."

"What? Isn't that kind of soon?"

"We've got everything ready," said Spencer. "And besides, we don't have much choice. We're running out of time. If we don't get some kind of lead pretty soon, whatever's building up with Operation Dreamwatch is going to go off. It might already be too late to do anything about it."

"Great," said Ralph sourly. "In that case, why bother?"

"It's the only game in town," said Spencer, looking up from the device in his hands and staring directly into Ralph's eyes. "Don't you smell it? Mike could. And so can the rest of us now. Whatever's going on out there in the desert is something big. And something—" He stopped, then went on, his voice lower in pitch. "Different."

Something cold tensed the skin on Ralph's arms. "What do you mean?"

"Doesn't it strike you that way? Some of the odd things about Operation Dreamwatch. Like all those kids you found in the Thransen Home, all kept unconscious, and those dreams they put them through. Mike told us about those. It's not just that that stuff seems inhuman—people have done crueller things, I suppose—but doesn't it all seem, well, *non-human*, too?"

He's crazy, thought Ralph, a sick fear opening in his stomach. But the eyes that met his from across the table were sane. "Go on," he said.

"Have you ever looked at pictures of rich people? Really looked? I don't mean people who just have some money, but the ones who have so much they're like whole nations inside their own skins. The ones with the power. Have you ever noticed something odd about the way they look?"

"Maybe," said Ralph carefully.

Spencer's voice became taut as a wire. "If beings from another star wanted to take over this world, use it for something without our knowing, who would they take the place of, substitute themselves for? Any dumb schmuck out on the street? No—the super-rich. The ones with the power."

"You gotta be putting me on," said Ralph. "I mean, I used to read all

that science fiction stuff, too, but I never let it affect my thinking."

Casually, Spencer tilted his head to one side. "Accounts for a lot of twentieth-century history."

"Maybe, but I still don't believe it." He had almost convinced himself that Spencer had been kidding him.

"Okay, so *you* explain why the ones with all the money look different from the rest of us. Think they eat the stuff or something?"

Through the window over the sink, Ralph could see the sky beginning to lighten. He exhaled and rubbed his eyes. "This is more than I can take right now. I have to get some sleep." He got up and headed for the front room.

"My brother used to say that the only reason anybody slept more than four hours a day was because they had nothing better to do." Spencer picked up the soldering iron and switched it on.

And look where it got him, thought Ralph. He was almost irritable enough from fatigue to say it out loud, but refrained. With his shoes off, he nested the blankets around himself on the sofa and fell asleep.

* * *

A dream filled with great sliding fangs chased him back into consciousness. He opened his eyes and let the sight of the cluttered room press back the darkness inside.

Spencer wasn't in the apartment. A note was taped to the refrigerator. *Ralph—Back in a bit. Feel free to eat whatever you find. S.* While one hand scraped the crusts from the corners of his eyes, Ralph held the note with the other, read it, and tossed it on the kitchen table. Yawning, he shuffled back to the refrigerator and pulled out another nearly empty milk carton. Half a loaf of rye bread was already on the table, nestled among the electronic parts. He sat down and started to eat, propping his head up with one hand.

Must be noon at least, he thought, watching a dusty shaft of light fall into the room. As a child he had always felt a sense of uneasiness or dread—even sin—at getting up so late. *Probably worried that the rest of*

the world was going to sneak something past me. The feeling had dissipated while at the base.

He took another slice of bread, got up, and sat on the edge of the sink. Through the window he could see another apartment building and a section of street with cars parked along it. Somewhere near the RWP headquarters, his parents' Ford was still waiting for him. *I should go get it*, he thought suddenly. *I should get out of here as fast as I can.*

Things had gone so fast yesterday that he had been sucked along with the Alpha Fraction's momentum without thinking. But in this harsh, still light, a part of him was scared. A premonition of pain and trouble increasing with no end, except death, in sight. *Get out*, he thought again, gazing at the street.

Not yet, he told himself. He went back to the table and drank the rest of the milk straight from the carton. There would be, he knew deep within himself, time enough for giving up later, after everything possible had gone wrong. Right now it all still felt too good to be awake and plotting in L.A. *As far*, he thought, *from the base and its sleepwalking death as I can get.*

He heard the apartment's door open. "Spencer?" he called as he headed for the other room.

It wasn't. Sarah, carrying a large brown paper bag, pushed the door shut behind herself with her foot. "Hi," she said casually. Balancing the bag in the crook of one arm, she brushed her hair to one side of her face with her free hand. "Where's Spencer?"

"Out some place." Ralph shrugged. "His note said he'd be back in a little while."

She nodded and walked past him into the kitchen. Setting the bag amid the clutter on the table, she began distributing the groceries inside it to the cupboards and refrigerator.

From the doorway, Ralph watched her in silence for a few moments. When she bent down to put some cans in one of the cupboards below the counter, her long golden hair fell forward over her shoulders. She brushed it back with the same motion of her hand and slight toss of her head. He wondered why something about that should disturb him, until he

remembered. The first time he had seen her do it was out in the desert, when she had straightened up, holding the camera. The bloodstain had been right at her feet.

"You people must be rich or something," said Ralph finally. "Spending all your time on this Alpha Fraction stuff and still being able to buy groceries."

Sarah glanced at him sharply while her hands folded the empty paper bag into a flat square. "We don't spend all our time on it," she said. "Spencer is the only one who doesn't have a job. The rest of us pay his rent and buy his food so he can spend his time building the electronic equipment we're going to use. He's pretty good at that stuff—he built the alarm bypass his brother used to get into the Thronsen Home." She turned away and slid the folded bag into the little space between the refrigerator and the counter.

"Do you make much money as a photographer?"

Her brow creased as she stared at him. "I run a turret lathe," she said. "At one of the Army contractors downtown. Where'd you get the idea I was a photographer?"

"Maybe," he said, "from when I saw you out by the Opwatch base. Taking pictures of that spot on the ground."

"I don't know what you're talking about." She crossed the kitchen and pushed past him, but he caught her by one wrist. Angrily, she jerked her hand free, pivoted in the middle of the front room, and glared at him. The pieces of paper tacked to the wall fluttered.

"Look." She put fists on hips. "It's none of your business, okay? Just forget about it."

Ralph leaned back against the inside of the kitchen doorway. "I thought we were all supposed to be on the same team now."

The anger flared in her eyes. "All right," she said quietly. "That's why I'm asking you not to tell the others. Believe me."

He watched as she turned and left, pulling the door shut behind her. The sound of her footsteps faded. *I don't believe her*, he thought.

Distractedly, he studied the space she had occupied in the middle of the room and wondered how he was going to tell the other members of the fraction.

The door swung open again and Sarah walked back into the apartment. "I'm sorry," she said, standing only a couple of feet away from Ralph. "I shouldn't have blown up at you—maybe it's because of all the pressure we're under. I guess I didn't like the idea of being spied on."

"What were you doing out there, though?" said Ralph. "And why didn't you tell the others?"

She took a deep breath before speaking. "I was out in the desert because I'd had a feeling about Mike—I knew something had happened to him. I got that crummy old camera from a pawn shop and drove out near the base. It didn't take me long to find the bloodstain. I've got kind of a knack for finding things. Or at least things that concern people important to me. It was only after I got back to L.A. and had the pictures developed that I realized they couldn't help anything. I couldn't even explain them, and it was too late to do anything for Mike."

"Wouldn't the others have understood if you'd told them?"

"I wasn't worried about Spencer and Mendel." She paused for a moment. "It's Gunther that scares me. Something's happening to him. We all thought he was stable, but the tension seems to be pushing him back into his army memories. He was given a psychiatric discharge before he joined the RWP."

Ralph nodded, remembering the stories he'd heard of certain wards in the veterans' hospitals where they kept the ones who'd been totally consumed by war's guilt and horror. Even from over a viewscreen it had been too much for some. So *that's what's wrong with Gunther*, thought Ralph. *You can see it in him—all the burning villages and towns, and the screaming South American children compressed in his gut.*

"That's why I didn't tell them," said Sarah. "I was afraid Gunther might go off the deep end if he thought that one of us had betrayed something he identified with. No telling what he might do."

"All right," said Ralph. "I won't tell the others." He turned away. A few seconds later, he heard the door open and close again, and he was alone,

wondering how important Michael Stimmitz had been to her.

Some time later, Spencer returned. He was carrying a small box that rattled and clinked with some type of electronics' gear. "I phoned Mendel," he said. "It's all set for tonight." He went into the kitchen and set the box down on the table. "Anything happen while I was out?"

"Sarah came by with some groceries," said Ralph.

CHAPTER 10

The moon shone above the blue mercury-vapor street lamps. Sandwiched between Mendel at the wheel of the van and Spencer on the other side, Ralph watched the L.A. streets flick past. In the rearview mirror, he could see the rows of electronic equipment banked along the van's interior walls. Mendel steered hard around a corner and all three sets of shoulders bumped into one another.

"Okay," said Spencer, straightening up. "Now here's the deal. We've already managed to get a tap on the computer terminal at the Opwatch recruiting office. It's what's called a vector tap—that's like a long-range bug without wires. We've gotten a printout of all of the Opwatch programs on the duplicate terminal here in the van. Got the picture so far? Now, everything we've gotten through the tap up to this point hasn't been very revealing—mostly just material requisition records and stuff like that. But we've discovered the existence of a Master Historical Program, Limited Access, which should contain the data we're looking for. That's what you're going to help us get."

"What do you need me for?" said Ralph. "As long as you've got a tap on their computer, why not just pull out what you need, like the other programs?"

"Ah. Not so easy." Spencer shook his head. "There's a lock on that program. Limited access, right? Before the Master Historical Program can go through the Opwatch computer, and then into our tap terminal, the locking device has to be deactivated."

"And you want me to do *that*?" Ralph stared at him. "You think I'm a cat burglar or something? I can't sneak in there and flip the switch or whatever it is any better than one of you could."

"Wrong. You're the only one who can." Spencer grinned. "The program lock isn't in the Opwatch recruiting office."

Ralph felt exasperated. "Then what are we going there for?" he demanded. "And what's so special that only I can do?"

"The program lock isn't in the recruiting office," said Spencer. "And it is. They're got a field projection device there, a miniature version of the ones out on the base. The little one in the office creates a separate dreamfield of about three square meters. The locking device for the Master Historical Program is in that space, that pocket universe."

"Wait a minute. How could that work? I thought the dreamfield was a projection of the people who are hooked into it through their subconscious. Like the kids out in the Thronsen Home. So who's dreaming this little field?"

"The computer." Spencer looked pleased. "Ingenious, really. One of its programs is a continuous analogue of a human dream. It's as if part of the computer is actually dreaming of a nine-by-nine-foot room with the program locking device in it. To deactivate the lock, you have to get into that little dreamfield."

"And I suppose you've figured out a way to get in," said Ralph.

Spencer pulled a scuffed-looking briefcase from beneath the van's seat. He snapped its latches and set it open on his lap. Inside was a flat rectangular box made of gray metal. Two copper wires emerged from the sides and were formed into loops, resting atop a black plastic knob.

"This," said Spencer, "is the way in. It's a miniaturized version of the line shack out at the Opwatch base. It's got enough power to put one person into a small field like the one we're talking about. All you have to do is hold these two loops and turn the—"

"Hold it." Ralph drew away from him. "What do you mean, *you*? Are you planning on me doing this?"

"You have to. You're the only one who can."

"How come? Why can't somebody else do it?"

"Dammit," muttered Mendel, hunched over the steering wheel. "Show a little backbone."

Spencer's grin had evaporated. "Uh, we found out something about what happens when you hire on as a watcher for Operation Dream watch; something they don't tell you about. Some kind of surreptitious alteration, using microwave energy, is made in your brain chemistry, in order for it to be possible for you to go out on the dreamfield. They do it to you while you're sleeping. Without that change, the insertion device—the line shack—doesn't work at all. Mike was going to be the one who entered this little dreamfield and unlocked the program, but he was killed before I had the equipment ready. That's why you have to go instead."

Ralph felt something slide sickeningly under his gut. *They did something to me*, he thought. *Without my even knowing it. Something in my brain is different. That'll teach me.* "Well," he said weakly. "I guess I don't have that much to lose. But I don't know anything about computers—how am I supposed to get the damn thing unlocked?"

"There's a radio circuit built in here." Spencer lifted the device out of the briefcase. "See? A signal can still get into a field that small. I'll be able to give you instructions."

All three of them lurched forward as Mendel brought the van to a halt. The empty briefcase slid from Spencer's lap and fell to the floor. "Sorry," said Mendel, shutting off the headlights. "There's Sarah."

After a few seconds of peering into the darkness in front of them, Ralph could perceive the outlines of a car. It was several yards ahead of them in a corner of a deserted parking lot. One of its doors opened and Sarah's silhouette headed toward them. She was carrying a small bundle in one hand.

Mendel and Spencer got out of the van as the figure approached. Ralph followed them and stood, tensed against the coldness of the night air. For the first time, he noticed the towering building the lot surrounded. *The Muehlenfeldt Center*, thought Ralph. It hung over them like a sheer mountain face, though its base seemed more than a mile away. The rest of L.A. was faraway and silent.

"It's all set," said Sarah. "The service elevator's unlocked. That goes straight to the sixtieth floor. Here." She held the bundle out to Ralph. "Put

this on."

He shook it out and saw that it was a pair of dark-colored coveralls. ZENITH JANITORIAL SERVICE was lettered on the back.

"Where's Gunther?" said Mendel.

"There was a note on his door," said Sarah. "He'll be here in a little bit."

Ralph fastened the last button on the coveralls, then shook his pants leg farther down inside them. He listened to Spencer's instructions, then, without saying anything—all his muscles felt tight but somehow good—he stepped out into the lot's blue illumination and headed for the tower.

* * *

"Hey, this is a broom closet." Ralph released the switch on the bottom of the device and waited for Spencer to answer. He had been ignored by the real janitors on his way up to this level and had had no trouble finding the right door. Now he stood in the little room's darkness, surrounded by faintly odorous mops and cleaning compounds. His shin hit a metal bucket on wheels and something inside it clattered.

The device he carried in his hands snarled, then a tinny version of Spencer's voice emerged. "... course it's a broom closet. *Here* it's a broom closet. Stop wasting time."

Ralph squatted down and balanced the device on his knee like a tray. He grasped the two coils of wire in his hands and twisted the knob in the center with one finger and thumb. He felt a tiny sensation he recognized from the times at the base's line shack, and the space became filled with a dim fluorescent light.

Setting the device on the floor—carpeted now instead of bare cement—he looked around. The room was the same size but the mops and cleaning supplies were gone. In their place was only a small panel jutting out from one wall, with a metal chair in front of it.

He picked up the device and sat down in the chair with it in his lap. "Okay," he said, thumbing the switch on the bottom. "Here it is." *Somewhere*, he thought, *a computer is dreaming all this*. The idea seemed to chill the room.

Spencer's voice crackled into the silence. "All right. Give me the layout."

Carefully, starting from one corner of the panel, Ralph described the controls. When he was done he sat back and waited.

After several minutes, Spencer spoke again. "Most of those dials are dummies," came the voice from the flat metal box. "Some of them are alarm triggers. Here's the real ones you'll have to adjust. Count over three from the top right-hand corner. The second red one. Turn it..."

The directions went on for some time. Between the turning of knobs on the panel and other adjustments, there was no time to think. Finally, Spencer's instructions ceased and Ralph sat back in the chair, lifting his hands from the panel.

"Looks good," said Spencer. "Our tap on their computer shows the unlocking process nearly completed without any slips. Two last adjustments, though. These two knobs are spring-loaded, so you'll have to hold them in the positions I give you until the Master Historical Program has finished printing out."

Ralph found the knobs described and turned them against the slight resistance of the springs. He looked up and saw that a tiny red light at the top of the panel had blinked on.

"That's it. Perfect." Behind Spencer's voice could be heard a mechanical chattering, like a rapid typewriter. "The printout's started. This is going to take a little while so just relax and keep those knobs in that position." The voice clicked off, leaving Ralph in silence.

After a few seconds, the bridge of his nose started to itch but he ignored it. *I wonder if Senator Muehlenfeldt ever comes here.* An image came into his mind of the old man—on television and in the newspapers the tangled eyebrows were like snow on a weathered cliff-face—bent over the control panel as though it were some kind of altar. *Maybe,* thought Ralph. *Who knows what somebody with all that money does? Spencer might even be right about him. Who could know?*

The red light continued to glow as more time passed. His arms began to ache from being held in one position for so long. In the van—hidden in a dark corner of a parking lot in the real world—the members of the Alpha Fraction were right now huddled around some piece of equipment,

reading the printout as it extruded and coiled on the floor. A secret history was passing through him, as unreadable as his heartbeat. *First thing*, he thought, *when I get out of here, is to get my hands on that printout.*

The light went out, its red facets dying into black. Ralph held the knobs in position, waiting for Spencer's voice. The device resting in his lap remained silent. He glanced down at it, feeling a slow crawl of seconds across his back. A suspicion of something having gone wrong coiled around him and tightened.

He jerked his hands from the knobs on the panel and pressed the switch on the device's bottom. "Spencer?" The box was still silent when he released the switch. "Are you there?" he called, pressing it again.

There was no answer. The chair fell over as he pushed away from the panel and stood up. He grasped the device's two wire loops and twisted the dial. A metal bucket slammed into a row of mops in the darkness, knocking one over and striking Ralph on the shoulder.

Carrying the device in one hand, he closed the broom closet door behind him and ran down the corridor to the service elevator. The unmarked doors flicked past the periphery of his sight. Panting, he pressed the button and heard the faint whine of the pulleys bringing the elevator to him.

The doors finally drew open, revealing one of the squadron of real janitors, resting his weight on the chrome handles of a floor-buffer. The man glanced at Ralph as he scrambled on, then yawned and looked away.

At the ground floor, Ralph squeezed through the elevator doors as soon as they were partially open, and ran across the building's loading dock towards the rear exit. "Hey!" Alarmed, the janitor with the buffer called after him. "What's going on?"

Under the harsh blue lights the lot stretched forever. He finally sighted the van's shape, hidden in the lot's unlit corner, and ran toward it.

Gasping for breath, he pulled open the door on the driver's side. A wave of relief coursed over him. "What the—" he said, almost laughing. Mendel was stretched out on the seat, asleep. "You're sure taking this easy." He reached down and shook the short man's shoulder. The body rolled over and fell to the van's floor, the head lolling against the accelerator and

brake pedals. The seat was shiny with blood.

Ralph backed away, clutching the device in his sweating hands. He forced himself to walk to the rear of the van and to pull the doors open. Spencer's body couldn't be seen. A wadded mound of paper was smoldering into ashes between the banks of electronics. The interior was filled with smoke.

Gunther, he thought dully. Sarah was right about him. He found out somehow, or something else happened to make him snap. And now they're all dead. Spencer and Mendel and Sarah—

Something moved inside the van. He peered into the smoke and saw a man's vague outline. Was he holding something out to him? Suddenly, Ralph fell back as a flash of light appeared in the obscured hand, followed by a muffled *pop*. The window in one of the doors shattered around a bullet hole.

Raising himself from the asphalt, he looked up and recognized the figure standing above him. *Gunther*.

The hand with the gun pointed down at him. His heart stopped for a moment, then he reached up, grasped the van's door and swung it towards Gunther. The edge of it caught the gun and sent it clattering into the darkness beyond the van.

He was running across the lot before his mind was functioning again. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Gunther's silhouette separate from the outline of the van and start after him. He realized he still had the device gripped in one hand. The image filled his mind of a place where he'd be safe. For a moment, at least.

The service elevator was still open on the ground floor. As he punched the button inside and the doors slid shut, he saw Gunther run onto the loading dock. Then the elevator jerked upwards.

Ralph leaned against the side of the elevator. His lungs burned with each breath. He considered trying to elude Gunther in the building, then making it out into the street. *No, he decided, If I can get into the broom closet and into the field I can wait until morning. Chances will be better when the building's full of people.* The elevator rattled upwards in its shaft, each floor falling slowly past.

Finally the doors pulled open and he stepped out into the corridor. A sound froze him. Somewhere on the floor, one of the passenger elevators was closing. He ran, turned the corner, and saw Gunther hurtling toward him from the other end of the corridor. The broom closet was between them. Cradling the device to his chest, Ralph ran for the door.

He made it into the dark space but before he could close the door, Gunther had pulled it away from him. The man's weight toppled him backwards against the mops. As the enormous hands circled his throat, he grasped the device's wire loops and twisted the knob.

Breath came again, along with the cool fluorescent light. His ears were filled with a wailing, siren-like noise. He stood up but the noise didn't end. *The alarm's been tripped*, he realized. *They'll find me if I stay here*. Something hard seemed to grow inside him, swelling in his chest. He stepped backward against the wall of the small room, tightened his grip on the device's wire loops and turned the dial.

Gunther was still in the broom closet, waiting, his hands spread and tensed. He started to turn as he felt Ralph's presence behind him, but then staggered as the flat metal box struck the side of his head. Ralph swung the device again and Gunther fell heavily to the floor of the closet. The device dropped to the concrete as Ralph's hands started to tremble. He forced a breath and ran out to the corridor and toward the elevator.

Several blocks away from the Muehlenfeldt Center, he found a phone booth and called a taxi. As he stripped off the janitor coveralls he saw that the front of them was stained with blood. *That's from the van*, he thought vaguely—his emotions were burnt out from exhaustion. He left the coveralls in a trash can outside the booth.

"You look like you've really been through it," said the taxi driver as Ralph climbed into the back seat.

"Yeah." He reached up and kneaded the side of his face.

"Must've been some party. Hey, let me know if you're going to be sick and I'll pull over to the curb, okay?"

At the downtown bus terminal, he got out and paid the driver. A few of the people inside the brightly lit building glanced at him as they stood or sat beside their luggage. The automatic doors swung open as he

approached them and he hurried toward the ticket counter.

A few moments later, he sat in the building's lobby, waiting. He leaned forward and studied the ticket, though he had already memorized everything on it. *Norden*, he thought, *and then back to the base. Maybe that'll be the last place they'll look for me. Maybe there'll be enough time to figure out what to do. But L.A.'s not safe any longer.* He leaned back against the bench, a hollow feeling growing inside him. No place would be safe again.

PART THREE

The Base And Beyond

CHAPTER 11

The sun came up as the bus crossed the desert. Ralph awoke from fitful sleep—dreams of more fangs, sliding in the sockets of armored jaws—and saw the red light staining the earth. *Blood*, he thought. A residue of fear and nausea lingered in his stomach.

Nothing had become clarified in his mind by the time the bus pulled into Norden. He had no plans other than getting more sleep, letting the fatigue poisons drain away and seep into the carpet in his apartment on the base. The door of the bus hissed shut behind him as he stood on the sidewalk. The proprietor of the town's miniscule grocery store glanced at him, then continued drawing up the store's window shades.

On the path that led to the base, a lizard scurried away from him and disappeared into the rocks at one side. Ralph wondered if the two bright little eyes were watching him from some dark space as he passed. *And who else is watching me right now?* The thought chilled him despite the morning's growing heat, until he forced it farther back into his mind. *A little time's all I need*, he thought. *To figure out what to do next.*

The town had long disappeared behind the hills' sand and scruffy brush. A few more yards and the buildings of the Opwatch base appeared inside the encircling fence, square and almost featureless, the same color as the dunes beyond them. The sun bounced off the blank walls with such

intensity that he lowered his eyes and walked toward them with his head bent, as though through a storm.

He stepped through the unguarded gate and trudged towards the Rec hall, passing between the other buildings as they slowly sucked up their own shadows. The familiar scent of the Rec hall's air-conditioned interior hit him in the face like a silent blow. The door of dark glass swung shut behind him. Another copy of the *L.A. Times* was spread out on the table. Goodell raised his eyes from behind the sports section. Farther down the hall Kathy was fumbling her hand around inside her mailbox. Suddenly he felt even more tired than before he had come in, his fatigue now extending above him like the sides of a deep well. *Right down here at the bottom*, he thought. *Where nothing ever changes. This is better than L.A.?*

The chair across from Goodell was empty. It sighed as Ralph lowered himself into it. Idly, he leaned forward and pulled part of the newspaper toward himself. It was open to the editorial page. The first one read XIMENTO—Was It Worth It?

Goodell lowered the section he was holding. "Back kind of early, aren't you?" he said. "I thought you were taking a whole week off."

Without looking up, Ralph nodded. "There wasn't anything to do. Really." He sensed Kathy standing behind his chair but didn't turn around.

"I thought it was kind of quick," she said. "For you to hear about it and come back to see. It only happened last night."

He twisted around and looked up into her placid expression. "It? What's it? What happened last night?"

"You haven't heard yet?" said Goodell.

"What?" He felt a spasm of irritation. They were both grinning.

"You'll see." Kathy giggled.

"You must not have gone up to your apartment yet," said Goodell. "You'll see it when you get there."

Their amusement at his ignorance was too much for his exhausted and

frayed temper. He got up and strode out of the Rec hall without saying anything.

As he crossed the grounds to the apartment buildings, a current of fear rose and diluted his anger. *Something that happened last night?* he wondered. *While I was—back there in L.A.?*

He unlocked the door to his apartment, pushed it open, and peered into the dim space. Nothing seemed different. He stepped inside slowly. The air was stale, and a thin film of dust had fallen on everything during the few days he'd been gone. *The window*, he thought. *That must be what they meant.* He crossed the front room to the sliding door and pulled the curtain aside. Seconds passed before what was out there translated from his senses to his mind. Then he felt something—a universe?—drop sickeningly away from his feet.

As he crossed the base by the downward slope of the desert behind the apartment buildings, it had been hidden from him. He had seen it once before in a magazine article but it was much bigger than he could have guessed from the flat photographs of it.

An enormous jetliner, like a horizontal skyscraper, sat poised in the level area behind the base. The space was too small for it—one high dune at the edge actually touched the tip of one wing. Its polished silver surface reflected the sun like a mirror. But even through the dazzling glare, the precise black lettering on the tail section could be read, boldly proclaiming the name of its owner and his international headquarters—MUEHLENFELDT.

Ralph backed away from the glass, his heart accelerating. Hearing somebody pass by the apartment's open door, he spun around, ran out into the corridor, and recognized the figure heading away from him. "Glogolt!" he called. "Hey, come here!"

The fat watcher stopped, turned around, and ambled back to him. "What's the matter?" he said.

Ralph pointed towards the sliding door and the apparition visible through it. "What's that thing doing here?" he demanded.

"I don't know," mumbled the other. "It just kinda dropped out of the sky late last night. When we got off our shift there it was. They gave us

orders not to go out and bother them. Okay by me." He resumed his slow progress down the corridor.

I know why it's here, thought Ralph. He went back into the apartment and stared with a bitter dismay at the silver jet. *Because of me. They know I'm here and who knows what else.* He threw himself on the couch and pressed his fists against his eyes, trying futilely to shut out the reflected light from outside. There would be no breathing space in this universe, no time to figure out what to do next.

Commander Stiles surveyed the remnants of his lunch—crumbs and a wilted lettuce leaf—then pushed his chair away from the desk. "I don't know why he wants to see you," he said. "All I was told was to send you out there." His complexion was strangely mottled and he didn't look up.

Jealous, thought Ralph. *The old guy's jealous because he wasn't invited out to the jet.* "All right," he said and turned to leave.

"How do you rate. Metric?"

He looked back and saw the base commander's face formed into a childish scowl. "Just lucky, I guess." He headed to the building's exit.

A resigned fatalism had gradually overtaken him, and it darkened as he crossed the base. The brilliant noon sun battered the ground but he was barely aware of it. *Even if I just get a couple crummy little answers*, he told himself. *Then I won't mind whatever they're going to do to me.*

To reach Muehlenfeldt's jet, it was necessary to go out the base's only gate and then circle around outside the fence. He stepped off the road and started over the yielding sand, keeping the fence a few feet from his side. Inside it, the base buildings hulked and waited.

The sloping ground behind the base shimmered in the heat as he stood by the fence and looked down into the depression. When he had seen the jet from his apartment, the enormity of it had confused his sense of direction. He saw now that it was much farther away than he had thought. It would take a considerable hike to reach it. He started down the slope but lost his footing and half-slid, half-ran to the bottom.

His shirt was clammy with sweat by the time he stood in the shade cast by the enormous fuselage. The end of one of the jets mounted beneath the

backswept wing gaped over his head. He could see no ramps or steps extending to the ground, only the giant wheels sunk part way in the sand. From beneath the plane, no doors or windows were visible. "Hey!" he shouted at the silver curve of its belly. His voice echoed from it and then was absorbed in the desert.

With a hissing noise an oval section slid aside and a metal stairway extruded from the opening. Ralph backed up and watched its measured descent until its bottom tread settled on the ground. He gripped the rail, raised his head and peered up into the opening. No one was visible at the top. *Here goes*, he thought, forcing his breath to slow. His shoes rang on the metal steps as he climbed up.

When he reached the top a hand grasped his elbow and pulled him off the steps and into the plane. He turned and found himself looking into a young, unsmiling face. The man's eyes were too small and hard. On the sleeve of his jacket was a patch with the letters FSA. Another man with the same eyes and patch stood a few feet away.

"Mr. Metric?" said the first one, still gripping Ralph's elbow. Without waiting for a reply the man propelled him farther into the jet. "The senator's been waiting for you."

As the man pushed him through, he stumbled over the bottom rim of a door. His forearm tingled when the grip on his elbow was released, allowing the blood to circulate again. The man closed the door between himself and Ralph.

An enormous aquarium formed a wall up to the arched ceiling of the jet. A mottled fish as large as Ralph's head opened its ruffled fins, gaped at him, then moved sluggishly into the tank's depths. Ralph stepped around the end of the tank and into the vast open area on the other side.

The high-backed chair swivelled around. He recognized its occupant from news pictures of him, but, like those of the jetliner, they hadn't done the figure justice.

"Come in, Mr. Metric." Senator Muehlenfeldt formed a cage with his long, age-browned fingers. "Seat yourself."

Warily studying the seamed face with its wings of snow-white hair above the eyes, Ralph pulled a smaller chair away from the desk. He sank

back into its padding without breaking his silence or his gaze.

"You look rather worried." The senator smiled. "Is there something troubling you?"

Ralph shifted in his chair. "Maybe I'm a little paranoid," he said. "After what happened in L.A." It didn't sound as ironic as he had intended it to sound.

"That was all most unfortunate. I really only wanted a little information from Gunther Ortiz. The only way to get it was for my psych-technicians to induce a memory flashback from his army experiences, and to identify the Alpha Fraction in his mind with his former enemies. No one, though, was prepared for the violence of the associations he had with that material. He broke loose and got away from us, with the results you saw. I'm very sorry about it all."

"I bet." Ralph pressed his fingers into the thick upholstery of the chair's arms.

"Mr. Metric." The world-famous head moved sadly from side to side. "I sense a great deal of hostility here. And it's needless." He pushed himself up from the chair. "Perhaps someone else can put your mind to rest. Come over here."

The senator led him to a curtain, heavy with an intricate brocade, that was suspended from a curved track on the plane's ceiling. "Still asleep?" said Muehlenfeldt, pulling the curtain aside. "No, I didn't think you would be."

He stood beside the senator without speaking as he gazed at Sarah. She was half-reclining on a small couch, one arm resting along its back. From a circular window she turned her face to them. An elegant dress of some glittery black stuff extended to her ankles, but left her tanned shoulders bare.

"Sarah's my daughter, you know," said Muehlenfeldt. "Since she was a little girl, she's been a great one for secrets."

Her eyes met Ralph's, but no expression came into her face. *She looks rich*, he thought, feeling again the bitter sense of betrayal. *Now that she's in her proper environment.*

The brocaded curtain moved along its overhead track, cutting the little space off from the rest again. Muehlenfeldt had withdrawn, leaving the two of them. Sarah drew her legs up so that Ralph could sit down on the end of the couch. When he had settled onto the cushion, he leaned forward with his arms on his knees and saw a long-stemmed wine glass that had fallen over and made a wet blot on the carpet. Sarah's face had the partly hooded eyes of a joyless, infrequent drinker.

"I know what you're thinking," she announced flatly.

He looked over at her but said nothing.

"You think I fingered the Alpha Fraction. Got them all killed. You think I was working for my father all along."

For a few seconds he watched her. "Yeah," he said at last.

"Forget it," she said. "He had us bugged all the time. Didn't even need anybody on the inside." She tilted her head, letting her hair fall across the top of the couch. "Believe that?"

"Maybe." *Who knows*, he thought. *Maybe it's to the point now where it doesn't even matter.* "Is he really your father?"

"I don't know. I'm not that wise a child."

"Come on," said Ralph. "Is he?"

She sighed. Her bare shoulders raised in a tired shrug. "Spencer used to tell me all those ideas of his, too. They might be true. I never knew my father very well. No rich kid ever does. If a being from another star took his place, I couldn't tell you."

Ralph nodded, wondering if the difference between the man and other men was due to the amounts of money and power he commanded, or to something even more alien than that. A part of himself, he knew, was watching Sarah, looking for that same difference in her.

"I just don't know." She sounded tired. "I was just about to a place where I thought I'd gotten away. From all this." She lifted a hand to indicate the jet's interior. "That's why I left, went to L.A. in the first place, so long ago; even though I knew I could never make it into anybody else's

world. At best I could be free of any connections with here." Her voice grew faint as she fell into some private reverie. "Billions of dollars and light-years away..."

He turned, leaned across the couch, and brought his hands to each side of her head. Her eyes stayed open as he kissed her, in a silver jet in the desert bright with light.

Then he let go of her, stood up, and drew aside the curtain enough to pass into the larger area. A dizzying confusion rolled through him. *I still can't tell*, he thought. *Maybe everybody's from some other star.*

"Ralph." From some direction Muehlenfeldt appeared and put his arm around Ralph's shoulder. The world-famous face of power and authority smiled pleasantly into his. "It was pure good luck that my men were able to get her out of there before that madman showed up and killed the others. Things aren't working out the way I want them to. But you can help. You know what I'm talking about."

"No." Ralph shook his head. "I don't."

"That's not necessary." Muehlenfeldt steered him past the dark leather chairs. "There's time for you to think about it. Then, when you're ready to give me the info—well, I'm right here. Waiting for you."

"I don't know what you're talking about." An eerie perception of words dissolving free of their meanings floated over him. The senator let go of him, a door opened, one of the men—guards?—drew him away.

A few moments later, he was standing on the sand beneath the jetliner, watching the metal steps glide back up into the glistening belly. A hard rock of anger fell through him. "I don't know what you're talking about!" he shouted at the closing door.

CHAPTER 12

Through the apartment window the bright desert stars were visible. Ralph sat up on the couch in the front room and rubbed his taut face. Sleep had eluded him for hours.

Maybe she's telling the truth, he thought again. *Maybe she didn't*

betray the Alpha Fraction. Just a poor little rich girl, playing at revolutionary. Just to get back at her father. Only he turned out to be bigger and more dangerous than she could've guessed. He sorted through his fragmented thoughts again, wondering what sort of picture they would reveal if he could ever put them together in the right way. The senator, the jet, everything that had already happened—it all weaved in and out of his mind. He pressed his fingers to the corners of his eyes and wondered what time it was.

The room's silence dissolved with the ringing of a telephone. For a moment he didn't even recognize the sound. After several rings he stood up and went into the kitchen. He lifted the receiver from its mounting on the wall beside the refrigerator. "Hello?" he said into it.

"Ralph—" The voice jumped into his ear, taut beneath an overlay of static. "Hey, is that you?"

He closed his eyes and felt the room sway a little. "No," he murmured. "You're dead. I can't take any more stuff like this." It was Spencer's voice on the other end of the line.

"No, I made it." Spencer's words came in a rush. "I got away from Gunther. But there's somebody else after me now. Must be some of Muehlenfeldt's people, about seven or eight of 'em. I've been running all this time. Don't know how much longer—" He broke off, his voice replaced for a moment by the sound of deep, rapid breathing. "You've got to listen," he spoke again. "They'll find me any minute. It's up to you. The Master Historical Program—I read it as it was printed out. After you unlocked it."

Ralph's spine went rigid. "Slow down," he said, pressing the phone tighter to his ear. "I can't understand you, you're talking so fast."

"I can't slow down." Spencer's voice wavered, as though he were about to break into tears. "I've been running all day and they're gonna find me any minute."

"*The program.*" Ralph's own voice was tight with urgency. "What was in it?"

The sound of a few more ragged breaths came from the receiver. "Operation Dreamwatch," he spoke at last, his voice only a fraction slower and more controlled. "It's like the Manhattan Project of 1942. You know,

the first nuclear pile? Zip rods—"

The phone went silent for a few seconds, then clicked sharply and began an electronic buzz in his ear. "Spencer?" he shouted into the whining phone, but knew already there would be no answer.

He threw the receiver against the wall. It struck and dangled on the end of its cord, still sounding its faint idiot note. He glared at it, at the wall behind, at everything with a growing anger. This universe was still bent on hiding its secrets from him.

That does it, he thought disgustedly. He strode into the front room and picked up his jacket. *I've got to talk to Sarah. Maybe she knows more—even just a little bit more—that I have to know.*

* * *

Between the moon and the desert three jets left trails into the south. The red lines healed and faded among the stars. Ralph felt like a ghost as he passed the silent line shack. The watchers, he calculated, were halfway through their shift, wandering around bored on the dreamfield.

And here I am, he thought, heading for the gate. *Not bored, at least. Is that an improvement?*

The dunes were a luminous blue in the moonlight. He followed the double trail of his previous footsteps out to Muehlenfeldt's jetliner. Only when he was standing in the darkness beneath it, looking up at the tightly sealed metal flank, did he think, *Now what?* The thought of throwing pebbles up at the circular windows struck him as stupid, but he had no other idea. One of the scruffy bushes behind him rustled.

Before he could turn around, he was on his stomach, his face pressed into the sand. Someone's knees were heavy on his back. Both his arms were brought up behind him and he was jerked painfully to his feet. Twisting his head around, he could see over his shoulder the face of one of Muehlenfeldt's guards. The malice underneath had split open the surface with a grin.

"Whatcha looking for?" the guard shouted in Ralph's ear. "Looking for something? Huh?" He pulled the captive arms even farther up. "Whatcha snooping around for?"

Ralph couldn't speak. The pain in his spine was making the stars go out one by one.

"Come on then. Jerk." The guard trotted him forward. "The senator wants to talk to you."

Another guard stepped out from behind one of the massive wheels. He pressed a button on a stubby-antennaed box in one hand. The jet's stairs began their hissing descent.

Muehlenfeldt was alone in the jet, or at least there was no sign of Sarah. The guards dropped Ralph in the middle of a curved section of sofa. He brought his arm out from where it had been twisted behind him, and felt the blood start to seep back into it. In a fluorescent blue dressing gown with a large red M embroidered on the front, Muehlenfeldt paced, scowling, back and forth in front of him. *That looks ridiculous*, thought Ralph, surprising himself with his calm. *Like a cartoon of the world's richest man.*

"All right, Metric," growled the senator, pointing a leathery finger at Ralph. "I'm not fooling around any more. You'd better open up pretty damn quick."

Ralph massaged his aching arm. "I don't know whatever it is you think I'm supposed to be able to tell you."

"Cut out the games. I want all the details, all the names, everything you know about the Beta group."

Puzzled, Ralph frowned. "You mean the *Alpha* Fraction, don't you?"

The bony hand curled into a fist a few inches from Ralph's nose. "Cut out the games!" shouted Muehlenfeldt. "Don't try to pretend you don't know what I'm talking about! Beta! Beta! Beta!"

Pushing himself back into the sofa's upholstery, Ralph looked into the senator's eyes. It didn't matter whether he was from another star or not—another type of alienness blazed in the lean face. *Insane*, thought Ralph. *The man's crazier than—*

"All right?" said Muehlenfeldt, his voice softer but still trembling with suppressed rage. "There's no point in trying to fool me. I know all about

it."

"Great," muttered Ralph. A weary disgust pushed aside his apprehension for a moment. "Why don't you tell *me* about it, then?"

"Get him out of here." As Ralph was jerked up from the couch Muehlenfeldt slapped the guard on the side of the head. "Careful! Remember what happened to the last one!"

In a few seconds the guard pushed Ralph from the bottom of the jet's stairs. He stumbled forward, landing on his hands and knees in the sand. Rolling over on his back, he watched the guard's scowling face disappear as the ramp retracted into the silver fuselage. The hissing stopped and the silence of the night desert crept up around him.

He got to his feet and walked out from beneath the wing. His hands looked so pale and inhuman in the moonlight he thrust them in his jacket pockets and trudged over the sand.

"Ralph." Sarah's voice.

For a moment he thought some residue of the senator's madness had twisted his hearing. Then he saw her standing on the little trail, waiting for him. Some part of the spectrum was missing, the part that had made her dress sparkle when he had seen her inside the jet. Now the fabric appeared as a featureless black against her skin.

"What are you doing out here?" he said. "I thought your father would've kept you locked up."

She shrugged, listless. "Why should he? Where's to go?"

"Anywhere. Away from him."

"No." She reached out and took his hand. "All that money is very comfortable. I know. It even fills up a little bit of the hole left by the Alpha Fraction."

"What's this other thing he was talking about? The Beta group?"

"Who knows? He's insane." She brought her hand up and held Ralph's against her shoulder. "Something he dreamed up."

Of course, he thought. We're all operating out of them now. "Now what," he murmured. The words were sucked lifeless by the empty spaces around them.

Sarah let go of his hand and turned away. Silently, her figure withdrew into the darkness surrounding the jetliner.

It's all dreamfields, he thought. The dunes wheeled around him as he looked for the trail he had been following. No difference between this and any other one. And the worst is to know you're lost on them.

* * *

He lay down on the sofa in darkness. As soon as he closed his eyes, or so it seemed, he was driving down a freeway in his parents' old Ford. Beside him sat Michael Stimmitz with one arm draped casually out the side window. "I suppose you're pretty mad at me," said Stimmitz. "For getting you into all this."

"No, it's all right. Really." Ralph had the sensation that the car was going very fast, faster than he'd ever gone in anything, yet everything beyond the windshield was a featureless gray haze. *This is all a dream, anyway, he thought. A weary hollowness slid through his muscles, It doesn't matter.*

"Ah, that's the trouble with you, Ralph." Stimmitz shook his head. "That's always been the trouble with you. You just don't get mad at things, do you? If you did, they'd go better for you."

"Maybe." He didn't feel like arguing. Patiently he waited for the dream to end and for comfortable unconsciousness to slip over him again. "You're a fine one to talk about things going better. You're dead."

Michael Stimmitz shrugged. "That's not important. You're still dreaming about me, aren't you? I must've made some impression on the universe, or part of it at least, if people are still thinking about me when I'm gone. Right? I mean, your memory is evidence that I existed once. But you, Ralph—boy, I just don't know." The dream image of Stimmitz kneaded his forehead with one hand. "It's going to be one of those names-written-in-water deals for you if you don't shape up pretty soon."

"Come on. Give me some slack, will you?" Ralph felt a point of resentful

misery penetrate his apathy. "I'm going through enough crap right now without you coming back from the grave and bitching at me."

"I'm only doing it for your own good, Ralph. You don't want to die and just be forgotten, do you? No accomplishments?" Stimmitz's voice dropped in volume and pitch as he leaned closer. "Take a look at what's in the back seat."

"I don't want to," sulked Ralph. "You've probably got something disgusting back there. I don't want to see it, whatever it is."

"Go on," coaxed Stimmitz. "Take a look. What's the harm? Maybe you'll even wake up."

Slowly, Ralph turned his head, his hands still gripping the wheel. Sarah lay curled up on the back seat, her head resting on her bare arm. Her hair spilled down to the floor. *She's dead*, thought Ralph. *Or at least here she is.*

Her skin was white and cold-looking. A tiny drop of red glistened in the corner of her mouth, far below the bruised eyelids.

"What the hell's that for?" said Ralph angrily. He swung around and leaned over the steering wheel, looking for an offramp. "How do I get off this damn thing," he muttered.

"There's more to be considered than just yourself." Stimmitz gestured with one of his long-fingered hands.

"Thanks a lot. If you're trying to be so goddamn helpful why don't you tell me what's going on with Muehlenfeldt and all the rest of that stuff?"

"Come on, Ralph. I'm just a product of your subconscious. I can't tell you anything you don't already know."

"What's the point, then. What's the damn point." *Who needs this*, he thought. He turned to face Stimmitz with more angry words forming on his tongue. But instead of Stimmitz, the slithergadee swelled and clattered its scales as it moved across the seat toward him, its jaws gaping hot and wide. The space outside the car grew dark and Ralph could feel the car falling, falling.

* * *

He woke up on the couch, surrounded by the dark apartment. Through the window he could see the cold stars still glittering over the desert. *What time is it?* he wondered. Everything seemed very still, the world in abeyance.

In his stocking feet he padded to the kitchen and looked at the little clock on top of the stove. Three a.m. *A dark hour*, he thought. *So quiet.*

Back in the living room, he gazed out the sliding glass door at the base and the desert. Nothing moved out there. In the distance, blue moonlight slid over the flanks of Muehlenfeldt's jet. The pale luminescence on the ground had large, jagged black rips in it, the shadows of buildings and dunes and other objects, as the moon ebbed closer to the horizon.

The details of his dreams were fading beyond recall, but had left him with a certain melancholy. Sunlight might have dissipated it, but at this hour, Ralph knew, it was a true vision, a glimpse of dark eternity. *This is the way it is underneath everything else.*

He felt himself alone on the earth. The social construct of time had stopped, along with light and warmth. The dark hours would last forever. Whatever point of conspiracy and violence his life had been hurtling toward still waited in the future. *But this is worse. This is death and knowing you're dead.* He turned from the window, sat on the couch and pulled on his shoes. From the dark apartment he stepped into the dimly lit corridor and drew the door shut behind him.

The building was silent. Ralph passed by the closed doors, feeling like his own ghost. All the familiar components of his life were changed somehow, as though they were never meant to be seen at this hour. *Everyone else*, he thought, *is asleep or holding down a shift on the dreamfield. Far away from here, in either case.* He entered the stairwell at the far end of the corridor and started down.

Outside, the concrete paths were like corroded silver in the partial light. He walked slowly between the buildings, not knowing for whom or what he was looking. *This kind of motion is becoming a habit with me.*

A small asphalt lot at the corner of one of the apartment buildings held the dozen or so cars that belonged to people on the base. A sad collection,

mostly—aged and not well taken care of. Neglect and time had exposed their essential cheapness. Peeling fenders squatted over bald tires. *Things have gotten out of hand*, thought Ralph with grim humor, *when metal starts decaying as fast as human beings*. The dusty lenses of the cars' headlights watched as he went by.

A honk from one of the cars' horns startled him. He spun around on the sidewalk and stared at the dark windshields. Wobbling loosely at the end of a sleeve, a pale hand emerged from a side window and beckoned to him. "Metric," called a voice. "Hey, c'mere."

Ralph bent forward, trying to see who was in the car. "C'mon, c'mon," the voice shouted again. "Up and at 'em, dream watchers." Ralph's muscles untensed as he stepped off the sidewalk and headed toward the car. It was Blenek the operations chief, his voice recognizable even beneath a slight blurring of syllables. *Drinking at this hour?* wondered Ralph.

A brewery odor spilled from the car as he approached. Blenek waved an open can from his seat behind the steering wheel. "C'mon in and have a couple." Beer slopped from the top of the can and rolled down his wrist.

Without saying anything, Ralph circled the car and got in on the other side. The seat was damp and a little sticky from the dregs of a couple of empty cans that rolled and fell to the floor as he sat down. They clattered softly against the ones already there. The cans rolled under Ralph's feet as he pushed his legs into the space beneath the dashboard.

Blenek tore a full one from the six-pack on the seat between them. "Here ya go," he said with boozy friendliness.

Ralph felt intuitively that he had nothing to fear from Blenek; the man was, like the watchers he supervised, simply used and kept in the dark by the ones at the top. Whatever additional connections Blenek had with that uppermost layer were of no more importance than simple instructions to be carried out, revealing nothing of the designs behind them. Ralph knew there was nothing sinister about the car in the unlit parking lot—just a car with an inebriated occupant. The beer, though—Ralph pulled back and waved it off with his hand spread wide.

Blenek looked puzzled at Ralph's motions, then nodded wisely as he signalled an Okay with the thumb and forefinger of his other hand. "Don't

worry, man," he said. " 'S all right. It's not that stuff they stick in everybody's 'frigerators around here. I bought this stuff down in Norden myself."

Surprised, Ralph looked at him for a moment, trying to read something behind the reddened eyes. Then he took the beer from the unsteady hand. "Thanks." He opened it and tossed the ring and tab onto the car's cluttered floor. The can's icy sweat seeped between his fingers as he tilted his head back and swallowed.

The bitter liquid pulsed down his throat and completed a circuit somewhere inside him. "God, that's good." Another swallow stoked the little fire. *Exactly what I needed*, thought Ralph. He was pleasantly amazed at the potency of its effect on him. "What kind is this?"

"Good stuff, huh?" Blenck pulled at his own can, then mumbled some Teutonic-sounding brand name. "This isn't that pale Colorado sugar-water all those pansy college kids and movie stars drink. This is real beer. Put hair on your chest, as my old man used to say."

He had never thought about Blenck having a father. Ralph sipped meditatively at the beer. *But then everybody has one*. More beer deepened this vision. *And mothers. And grandparents, and old friends they see or don't see anymore*. He gazed over the rim of his beer can at Blenck. It suddenly seemed as if the corpulent operations chief, and everyone else in the world, had an enormous cavern he dragged around behind him everywhere he went. He drained the can and let it slide from his fingers. It bounced on the edge of the seat and fell with the others.

Blenck pulled another can free and handed it to Ralph, then took the last one for himself. The small percussive sound of the opening cans stood out again the night's silence.

Ralph wiped his damp upper lip with the back of his hand. "So you know about that stuff, huh? That beer they sneak into your kitchen when you're not around?"

"Oh, sure." Beer gurgled inside the can as Blenck gestured with it. "Suspected somebody was screwin' around a long time ago. Never caught 'em, though. They're pretty sneaky about it."

"Ever tell anybody about what you knew was going on?"

"Naw. I figured, what'd be the point? The only ones who could do something about it are probably the ones doing it in the first place. You know—the general and his staff assistants." Blenek tilted the can into his mouth for several seconds, then lowered it.

"What about the other watchers?" said Ralph. "Why didn't you tell them?"

"Tell *them*?" Blenek guffawed into his beer can. "Most of 'em already know! Jeez, you'd have to be really pretty dumb not to know about it. I mean, free beer showing up in your fridge is pretty obvious."

"Oh? Yeah, I guess maybe it is." More beer slid into his stomach, but instead of connecting with his nervous system and lighting things up the way the first can had done, this one produced a slight fog around his mind. *Pretty strong stuff*, he thought, *whatever it is*. He tilted the last of it out and dropped the empty can with the rest.

"How come—" He groped for words. "How come nobody ever did anything about it, though? I mean, why didn't they stop drinking it, at least?"

"Stop drinking it?" Blenek goggled at him from across the car seat. "What the hell for?"

"Well, there's something wrong with it, isn't there? They put something in it, don't they?"

"Whaat?" Slowly, Blenck's head moved from side to side. "Wow, Metric, you sure got some wild ideas. You mean, like putting saltpeter in prisoners' food or something? That's, uh, pretty crazy if you ask me. It's just ordinary beer they put in the 'frigerators. There's nothing wrong with it. Just beer, is all."

Ralph frowned as he watched the other lean over the back of the seat and snag another six-pack. There was most of a case sitting on the car's back seat. "How would you know?" he said at last.

"Man, I've drunk *plenty* of beer in my lifetime. If anybody added anything to it, *I'd* know. Believe me." With a flourish he ripped the tab from another can. "Most of the watchers prob'ly figure that if the people who run this place want to stock free beer in the fridge, it's fine with them."

What's to complain about? Kind of like a fringe benefit, you know? Me, I just like a better kind of beer. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, I guess. Wait a minute. No—nothing." Ralph lifted his hand to rub his forehead and discovered he had a half-full can of beer in it and no memory of how it got there. The dots of moisture on the smooth cylinder glinted like jewels in the moonlight that came through the windshield. In two gulps he had drained the can. He had never drunk beer this fast before, but now it just seemed to fall without effort into a hole inside himself. *It must be the stress*, he told himself. The desert's horizon beyond the base tilted for a few seconds, then settled down.

"'Nother one?" Blenek's can-laden hand came into view.

Ralph took it and tugged it open. The pleasantly sour foam spilled across his tongue. He leaned back into the seat and closed his eyes. There was no point, he decided, in telling Blenek all that happened, and was still happening. That was all in another universe, far from this cozy alcoholic communion. *Respite*, he thought vaguely. *Time out*. He had read once of how the soldiers in the trenches of World War 1 had sung and jollied around between charges at the enemy a few hundred yards away. Now he understood that. Now he felt free to savor this little piece of time, no matter what terrors he had already gone through and what even worse ones still lay ahead.

The empty cans were two layers deep on the car's floor when Blenek held up an unsteady finger. "Lemme show you somethin'." He tilted in front of Ralph and opened the glove compartment.

"Wha's that?" said Ralph thickly. Filling the compartment was a rectangular piece of electronic equipment with dials and switches studding its front panel. A momentary flash of paranoia bubbled inside him.

"CB." said Blenek. "Citizen's Band radio. Big fad for 'em a while back. Lots of people were stickin' 'em in their cars, chatting back and forth with each other as they drove along. Now it's back to mostly truckers and a few lonely old geezers like me."

A pang of shame hit Ralph, partially sobering him. Who could tell what private sorrow Blenek was drowning out here in the darkness all these nights?

Blenek switched on the equipment and fiddled clumsily with the now softly glowing dials. Voices crackled out of a speaker somewhere on the dash. Disembodied truck-drivers warned each other about speed traps on the highways. A couple of kids swapped details about their radio equipment—much talk of diodes and transistors. Other voices came and went, flying through the dark air. Ralph listened and watched through half-shut eyes. *Too much of that damn beer*, he thought dimly.

"Here." Blenek had pulled a microphone on a coiled cable from the glove compartment. "Say something. See if anybody wants to talk to you."

He took the mike, hesitated for a moment, then pressed the button on the side. "Does anybody—" He spoke slowly and carefully. "Does anybody out there know what's going on? Anybody? Anywhere?"

"What a weird question," mumbled Blenek from somewhere beside him.

No answer came. Ralph dropped the mike and looked across the seat. Blenek had fallen asleep, his head resting against the top of the steering wheel. With a fumbling hand Ralph switched off the radio. The glowing dials lapsed back into darkness. A couple of empty beer cans tumbled to the ground as he opened the door and got out. Under the stars' gaze he reeled back to his apartment.

After relieving his aching bladder, he made his way to the kitchen and discovered that the stove's little clock still read three a.m. He leaned across the cold burners and brought his ear up against the clock's face. There were no tiny mechanical sounds. *Stopped*, he thought, straightening up. *Dead*. He wobbled into the living room and collapsed on the couch. For a moment he thought of Sarah and felt alone and forsaken. At last he fell asleep and dreamed again about the slithergadee.

CHAPTER 13

The sun was well up before he woke again. The familiar teeth of his nightmares faded away. He swung his feet to the floor from the couch. His clothes felt damp and sleazy, with the odor of stale beery sweat from the shirt bunched up under his arms. After finding his way back from Blenek's car he had collapsed on the couch without even taking off his shoes. *But that's over now*, he told himself. *That little interlude. I'm back in my own*

universe again. The comforting alcohol had drained away.

A cold shower perked up his circulation. Then he opened his bedroom closet, threw his wadded-up civilian clothes into the corner and took one of his Opwatch uniforms from a hanger. *Just like an old skin*, he thought, pulling on the shirt. *I thought I'd gotten rid of it for good.*

Half of a box of saltines was all he could find in the kitchen cupboards. The crackers clung so tightly to the roof of his mouth that he could barely swallow. *Now what?* he thought, staring out the window as his molars ground together. *If I ever had a permanent answer to that question. ...*

Spencer had babbled on the phone about—what? With an effort, the frantic words came up from Ralph's memory. *The Manhattan Project. 1942.* Something about that didn't seem quite right. Had it been called something else? *The first nuclear pile.* Through his mind floated vague notions of what he'd learned in some physics class in college. Hadn't they put it together in an underground tennis court or something? He shook his head. *This, he thought, is what comes from being asleep all your life. You never know what important stuff you're going to miss. And what, for Pete's sake, is a "zip rod?"*

He walked into the front room and stared out the sliding glass door. Muehlenfeldt's jet was still out there, gleaming in the sun, painful to the eye. The senator might know what Spencer had meant on the phone. His men in L.A. might even have pumped Spencer for information before they killed him. *So what's the point in asking me anything?* thought Ralph. *Everybody around here seems to know more than I do.* He crumpled the empty saltine box in his hands, dropped it, and went back into the bedroom to get his Opwatch jacket.

There was no one in the Rec hall when he entered. It was still too early for any of the watchers to be awake after their shift last night. *Good thing I'm still on vacation*, he thought in a mixture of irony and relief. He walked down the corridor to the last room, the one least used by anybody on the base—a tiny library with metal shelves crammed full of shabby-looking volumes.

Ralph stepped into the room and ran his eyes over the faded book spines until he located what he was looking for. One shelf held an outdated encyclopedia set. He pulled out the M volume and started leafing through it.

He felt no surprise when he found that the pages had been neatly razored out where the article on the Manhattan Project would have been. *That's real cute*, he thought. *Why not throw away the whole hook? Who would have noticed?* The sense of deranged ingenuity annoyed him. He didn't even bother to open any of the other volumes.

* * *

"An encyclopedia?" The shopkeeper frowned and held the sides of the cash register drawer. "What would we carry something like that for? Don't think we'd get much call for it. This ain't a bookstore, you know." He fished change for a dollar from the drawer and slid it across the counter.

"No," said Ralph, pocketing the pack of gum he'd bought in order to start the conversation. "I mean, do you have a set at home? Where you live?"

"Now that's a funny thing." The man stroked his chin meditatively. "Sure are a lot of people asking about encyclopedias lately."

"Yeah? Who else?"

"Oh, they said they were from some publishing company back east." The shopkeeper nodded his head in the general direction. "They sure had mean little eyes, though. Never can tell, I guess. Anyway, they said their company was bringing out some new fancy type of encyclopedia, and they were going around Norden giving people cash for their old ones. Fred Webb—you know, the barber—he said they gave him two dollars a volume for an old set of Globals that his kids used to do their homework with. They're all grown up and moved out now, of course, so Fred figured he might as well have the money for the books. There probably weren't more than four or five sets in the whole town, and those publishing company people most likely got 'em all. Encyclopedia paper must be getting pretty scarce."

Muehlenfeldt, thought Ralph. *Just ahead of me. There's some kind of info about the old Manhattan Project that he's trying to keep me from finding out. Just like he thinks I'm keeping something secret from him. But what?*

"Whatcha need one for, anyway?" asked the shopkeeper. "Something you wanted to look up?"

"Yeah." Coin by coin he picked up his change from the counter.

"What was it? Maybe I'd know something about it."

He smiled wearily, without hope. "I don't think so. I needed some information about the first nuclear pile experiments."

"The ones in 1942?" said the shopkeeper. "At the University of Chicago, with Enrico Fermi?"

Startled, Ralph looked at the man on the other side of the counter. "I guess that's the one," he said slowly. "The Manhattan Project. What do you know about it?"

"That's not what it was called. The code name was 'The Metallurgical Project.'" He slapped the counter and looked pleased with himself. "I was reading an article about it just the other day. In an old copy of the *Reader's Digest*. I save all my issues—got 'em complete for, oh, some forty years back."

The skin on Ralph's arms and neck tensed with a small but growing current of excitement. "Do you still have that one? Can you find it?"

"Oh, sure. Watch the register for a minute, will you?" The shopkeeper left the counter and headed for the stairs in back that led to the rooms above the store. After a few moments, during which Ralph could hear grunting and sliding noises from above, he reappeared carrying a cardboard box. It was haphazardly filled with copies of the *Reader's Digest*, the top layers of the mound threatening to slide and capsize onto the floor.

"Uff." The shopkeeper was red in the face as he heaved the box onto the counter. "Here we go," he said after a moment of labored breathing. "Let's see now..."

Ralph leaned forward and watched the man shuffle the thick, squarish magazines about. The covers had all faded into pastels while the edges of the pages had darkened into a dirty brown.

"I think it had a picture of some kind of birds on it." The shopkeeper frowned in concentration. "Or was it two deer standing in a forest? No, this is it. This is the one." He held the copy up between them. A cactus

blooming with yellow flowers was on its cover. The shopkeeper leafed through it, stopped, and folded it open upon itself. "Look at that."

He took the magazine from the shopkeeper's hands and read the article's title. I WAS THERE—WHEN THE ATOMIC AGE WAS BORN! His eyes quickly scanned the text but caught at nothing. "Can I borrow this?" he said, looking up at the shopkeeper.

"Eh, keep it." The man made a little pushing motion with his palm. "I only save 'em because I'm too lazy to throw 'em away."

"Hey, thanks." Gripping the magazine, Ralph turned and ran from the store.

When he got back to his apartment on the base he dropped onto the couch and started to read the article. It only took a few minutes to devour.

The article's author had been one of the scientists who had worked in 1942 to create the world's first nuclear pile—CP-1, or Chicago Pile Number One. In typical *Reader's Digest* prose, he described the construction, supervised by Enrico Fermi, of the twenty-four-foot diameter sphere from graphite bricks and uranium metal and oxides, and the work crews—University of Chicago graduate students—smearing their faces with the greasy dark stuff and catching their fingers between the heavy bricks.

As a safety measure—Ralph leaned forward, reading the scientist's words intently—we constructed a "zip rod." This was a wooden rod running through the pile with strips of cadmium metal tacked to it. Cadmium, the best of neutron sponges, would put out any atomic conflagration that got out of hand. The rod had to be pulled out of the pile by a rope before the nuclear reaction could begin; release the rope and it would zip back into the pile, quenching the neutron activity.

The article ended with Fermi and the rest going on to glory, choirs of radiation counters clattering softly in the background, and the Atomic Age dawning its harsh light over the world.

So what's that got to do with anything? thought Ralph, laying the magazine down on the couch. Its pages fluttered shut. He couldn't see any connection between the Metallurgical Project and Operation Dreamwatch. *But why did they tear out the pages from the encyclopedia*

in the Rec hall and round up the ones in Norden? He shook his head, once again feeling weighed down with conjectures that baffled and led nowhere.

Operation Dreamwatch had, he saw now with dismay, generated its own darkness. Sliding over the earth the mysteries bred and multiplied: mysteries that went unanswered, their carcinogens festering until this new inescapable universe had the face of the dreamfield's slithergadee—malignant and inexplicable. *And we just huddle together and cower*, thought Ralph, remembering—bitterly—the night Michael Stimmitz had died. *But nothing will ever come to lift us out of this place.*

He got up, went into the bedroom and pulled open one of the bureau drawers. There, where he'd hidden it beneath layers of underwear and socks, was the tape of Bach cantatas that Michael Stimmitz had left for him. It seemed centuries ago. *And I still don't know*, thought Ralph, *what he was trying to tell me with it.*

In a spasm of anger he plucked the clear plastic reel from the box and threw it against the wall. It bounced to the floor and wobbled around in circles, spinning the mute tape out into a tangled mass.

He inhaled deeply to calm himself but expanded the hollowness he felt growing inside. From the bottom of the tape box, he took the square booklet containing the notes and translations for the cantatas. There were no more secret messages scribbled in its margins now than there had been the first time he had looked through it. *So what's the point?* he thought, closing his eyes and running his hand over the booklet's slick paper cover.

He frowned and opened his eyes. His fingers had touched something—or had they? Turning the booklet to the light, he watched his hand brush across the cover, then stop at the same point he had felt before. A slight indentation, invisible to the eyes, ran around the edges of the capital letter "B" of Bach's name, as though some-one—Stimmitz?—had carefully outlined it with a dry ballpoint pen or something.

B? thought Ralph. His hand moved down the cover, brushing across it until his fingers felt another incised letter—an "O" in the conductor's name.

There were only two more letters with indented outlines, for a total of four. *So that's the message Stimmitz left*, thought Ralph. There was no

need for guessing or deciphering. The four letters spelled BOMB.

Bomb? wondered Ralph, but only for a moment. His mind sorted out the right connections. *Spencer got the two things garbled. The Metallurgical Project—and the Manhattan District, that's what it was called. A long-forgotten fragment of some college lecture came back to him. The Manhattan District was the name for the group of army engineers who constructed the first atomic bomb.* The image of a mushroom-shaped cloud blotted out his vision for a moment. Then he could see again. Not everything was explained but enough was.

The Thronsen Home was the closest construction to the gigantic desert military installation, the home base of the plasma jet bombers whose trails laced the sky every night. What if—the thoughts went through Ralph's mind like electric currents—what if the Thronsen Home wasn't just part of a harmless mental health program for juvenile delinquents? What if the supposed therapy was a front for the creation of a nuclear device powerful enough to incinerate the whole area, military bases included? It didn't seem any less likely to Ralph than any other possible explanation. Perhaps Muehlenfeldt *was* from another star. Perhaps similar "therapy" programs had been set up for the USSR's wayward children. China, too? Possibly. Anybody—or thing—ingenious enough to devise a cover-up as elaborate as Operation Dreamwatch could figure out a way to accomplish what it wanted anywhere else as well. And after the Earth's major military bases were destroyed, would the invasion force that Muehlenfeldt had preceded come at last?

For a few seconds the elaborate explanation that had built itself in Ralph's mind like an instantaneous coral reef trembled, fragile under the weight of everyday logic. Then it solidified, hard as rock. *Who cares if it's weird?* he thought. A kind of desperate hilarity washed through him. *Who cares if it sounds like science fiction? When the world becomes science fictional, then only science fiction will explain the world.* He dropped the booklet, got his coat from the closet, and ran out of the apartment without closing the door behind him.

The base vehicles—two jeeps and a small truck, with OPWATCH stencilled on their sides—were kept parked behind the administration building. Ralph quickly looked inside each in turn, but none of the keys were in the ignitions as he'd been hoping. He stood for a moment with his hands braced against the door of one of the jeeps, wondering where the

keys would be kept. The base commander's office? That seemed likeliest.

Quietly he went to the side of the building, then stooped down and duck-walked beneath the window of the commander's office. For a while he waited and listened, but heard no voices or shuffling of papers. He raised himself up and peeked over the sill, hoping the commander was out to lunch away from his desk. The office was empty as far as he could see, the commander's chair vacant and pushed away from the desk.

Operation Dreamwatch had certainly been cheated by whomever had gotten the contract for the window screens. As everyone in the base apartments knew, the wire mesh could be easily pulled loose from the metal frames. In a few seconds Ralph had a triangular flap loose from one corner, large enough to crawl through. He landed on his hands and feet behind the desk. When he stood up he felt something hard and cold press itself behind his left ear.

"Don't move, Metric," came Commander Stiles's voice. "Or you know what'll happen."

Suddenly he couldn't swallow, though he wanted to very much. He stared at the distant blank wall and closed door on the other side of the desk, and listened to a faint roaring sound—his bloodstream—grow louder in the room's silence.

"I'm going to take the gun away from your head," said the commander evenly. "Then I want you to go and sit down in the chair on the other side of the desk. I'll be aiming at your heart."

The cold circle of pressure against his skull ceased. Without turning to look back, Ralph walked slowly around the desk and sat down in the smaller chair on the other side. Then he looked up.

The gun, a fixed point in space, didn't waver as Commander Stiles lowered himself into his own chair. It remained outstretched in his hand, pointing its dark metal snout at Ralph's chest. Their eyes met over the weapon between them.

"Metric." The commander shook his head slowly, the seams in his face shifting in amusement. "Very irrational of you to come back here to the base. Just as if we haven't had you under suspicion for a long time. Didn't you think we'd keep an eye on anyone your friend Stimmitz was spending

so much time with? I watched you looking through the jeeps outside. I even know all about your little adventures in L.A.—I was told about them as soon as I had reported that you had shown up here. So nothing you've done has really been very clever, has it?"

Ralph's voice moved like a rasp through his dried throat. "No," he said. "I guess not."

The commander sighed. "I'm afraid Senator Muehlenfeldt has run out of patience with you. Frankly, he's been hesitant to use, uh, *harsh* methods to find out what you know, because of what happened with the other Beta group member that was questioned. But we know what to expect now, so the danger caused by an explosion can be limited to just yourself. The worst that can happen—except to you, of course—is that we won't get any info out of you at all."

"Stiles." Ralph felt dizzy looking at the other's impassive face. "Do you know what's going on? Do you know what they're doing here? What they're going to do?"

"Come, come," said the commander mildly. "Of course not. Moral persuasion is of little use here, I'm afraid. I'm too much of a professional to be concerned about the purpose of the whole thing. Everyone who works for Muehlenfeldt is a professional."

The room's contents glowed as adrenaline pumped into Ralph's blood. He had gleaned enough from Stiles's mysterious references to formulate a plan. "In that case," he said, leaning forward, his voice taut, "I'll just have to set off my device right now and take you with me." He reached with careful drama for one ear.

The commander dropped the gun and pushed himself frantically away from the desk. His chair toppled backward as Ralph dove head first over the desk and collided with his chest.

Stiles's arms scrabbled weakly at the carpet as he lay dazed and gasping beside the overturned chair. Ralph reached back to the desk and picked up the gun. He pointed it at the commander but the trigger didn't budge. The older man was raising himself, up on one arm and Ralph still hadn't found how to release the safety on the gun. He threw it by its barrel at the commander's skull, producing a loud crack and a groan from Stiles before he slumped back down and lay without moving.

The keys were in the desk's top drawer. He stuffed all the sets into his pockets and climbed back out through the torn screen. In less than a minute he had matched one of the key sets to the ignition of one of the jeeps and started it with a roar that did much to satisfy and quiet his trembling limbs. He backed away from the building, then threw it into first and headed for the base's gate. Kathy and Goodell, walking on the path from the apartments to the Rec hall, leaped out of his way, then watched with open mouths as the cloud of dust churned towards the highway.

CHAPTER 14

The wind blowing through the open jeep seemed to clear his thoughts and give him a sense of purpose. *Las Vegas*, he said to himself. *There should be an FBI office there. Somebody who'll listen, and he able to do something.* He pressed the accelerator harder against the jeep's floorboard. The decision was already firm within him that, no matter what happened, he'd get Sarah away from whatever it was that claimed to be her father.

Miles of straight or gently curving road passed between the flanks of the dunes on either side, glaring fiercely in the afternoon sun. He found a pair of metal-rimmed sunglasses in the dashboard cubbyhole and put them on. The dark lenses reduced the rearview mirror from a rectangle of burning reflection to the visible awareness of the road piling up behind him. There was someone following him.

He studied the mirror, glancing at the road briefly to keep from going off on the shoulder. The figure behind him was a motorcyclist. He could make out the sleek black fairing that transformed the cycle into a bullet shape, and—was he imagining it or could he really make out so much detail?—the tinted, blank face shield of the rider's helmet as he bent low over the handlebars.

The distance between Ralph and his pursuer was slowly growing less, the figure becoming perceptibly larger in the rearview mirror.

Must be one of Muehlenfeldt's men, thought Ralph. *He'll be on me before too long.* The jeep was already pushed to its limit, at a speed much less than that of the motorcycle behind.

Signs flashed by at the side of the highway. The road would soon divide into two, one branch heading north and the other continuing on to Vegas. *Maybe*, thought Ralph, *maybe...*

When he came to the fork in the highway he took the northward branch, the jeep's tires squealing as he arced through the start of a long curving section running behind a low rubble-faced bluff. He caught a quick glimpse of the motorcyclist taking the same turn behind him, before the bend in the highway brought the bluff between them.

As soon as he was sure he was blocked from his pursuer's vision, Ralph hit the brakes, trying not to skid and leave any telltale black marks on the asphalt. He lost control for a moment and felt the jeep's rear end slide out from beneath him. When the vehicle came to a stop it was sitting cross-wise in the lane, pointed towards the flat desert beyond the side of the road.

Without turning the steering wheel, he dropped the jeep into first gear, trod on the accelerator, and lurched forward. The jeep rolled off the edge of the asphalt, then plunged down a steep bank of loose rock and dirt. The rear wheels spat small rocks into the air as the jeep careened sickeningly downwards. Ralph clung to the jittering wheel.

The jeep came to the bottom of the slope and hit the level desert floor with a *whump* that bounced Ralph from the seat. The engine choked and died but he made no movement to start it again. Instead, he listened, hearing at first only the slight clatter of pebbles dislodged and rolling down the slope. Then came the growling roar of the motorcycle, diminished by the distance to the highway above. It grew louder, peaked in a snarl, then dopplered away, following the curve of the highway.

Ralph started up the jeep and accelerated across the sand, cutting across the interval of desert towards the other branch of the highway. It would be a while, he knew from his memory of the area, before the northbound branch would straighten out far enough away from the bluff for the motorcyclist to see that his quarry had eluded him. By then Ralph should have gained a sizable lead on the route to Vegas. He sped up, the jeep bouncing over the rock-strewn desert. It was, he knew, only a temporary reprieve.

* * *

It was over sooner than he expected. Out on the dark road, with nothing in sight but moonlit dunes and brush, the jeep's engine sputtered, coughed, ran steady for a few seconds, then sputtered again and died. For the first time Ralph looked at the little circular fuel gauge on the dashboard. The tiny needle was set hard against the EMPTY mark.

He sat staring at the dial for nearly a minute, stunned. He marvelled dismally. *Whatever you overlook is just what shoots you down.*

With an effort he pulled his mind from the edge of the pit gaping before him. He switched off the headlights, then got down from the driver's seat and stood away from the jeep. In the dim moonlight it squatted silently on its knobby tires. No longer an ally of his or even neutral, but gone over now to the other side—Muehlenfeldt's universe.

Wait a minute, thought Ralph. He circled around behind the jeep and found a set of dangling straps beside the spare wheel, but not the fuel can. Carefully, not daring to expect anything, he leaned over the side of the jeep and probed the dark interior with his hands. Behind the seat he found the fuel can. He lifted it out and heard a cheering gurgle. Not full, but at least a few inches of gasoline sloshed back and forth inside the container.

When the jeep's engine was spinning again, Ralph let out the clutch and started picking up speed. *Enough, enough*, he breathed to the twin cones of light racing over the road ahead. *Make it enough to get to where I can get some more.*

Anxious miles ticked off on the odometer, until finally the miraculous occurred. A tiny store with a single antique gas pump appeared, nestled in the angle where a smaller road joined the highway. Ralph brought the jeep to a halt beside the pump and jumped out.

The hose's nozzle was padlocked tight to the side of the pump. He tugged futilely at it for a moment, swore, then let go of it and ran to the store. A single fly-specked light bulb dangled beneath the battered soft drink sign, illuminating the screen door. He jerked it open, found the wooden one behind it locked, and began pounding on it. "Hey!" he shouted. "Wake up in there!" The door rattled on its hinges as he kicked it.

Through the window on one side he saw a light switch on in the store's depths. A few moments later the door swung open, revealing a stooped figure in striped pajamas. The old man's wizened head was hairless except

for the gray stubble on his receding chin. His eyes widened at the sight of Ralph.

"Hey, I need some gas." Ralph grabbed the man's elbow and pulled him outside. "And quick—it's an emergency."

"No," moaned the storekeeper. "I... won't give you any."

"What? Why the hell not? I'll pay for it."

"It's *wrong*." The old man feebly tried to jerk his arm free from Ralph's grip.

"Wrong?" He dragged the man closer to the gas pump. "What're you talking about? What's wrong?"

"To be on the road after dark." The cracked voice had shrivelled to a whisper. "There's haunTERS out there!"

"What the—Come on, I don't have time for this crap."

"No, no, it's true! Turrible dark things. The little dot's out there!"

"The little dot?" Ralph stopped and looked into the old man's face, caught for a moment its mask of feeble-minded panic.

"When you turn off your TV," whispered the store-keeper. "And it all turns into a little white dot in the middle, and then the dot goes away and flies through the night, and it catches you and... sucks your blood. It's true."

"No kidding," said Ralph wearily.

"Yes! Yes!" shouted the old man in a sudden fervor. "Turrible dark things in the night!"

"Then you might as well give me some gas. Because I get those kind of things in the daytime, anyway."

"No." Convulsively, the old man pulled his arm free and ran back to the store, his thin pajamas flapping against his narrow legs. Ralph sprinted after him and caught the door before the old man could slam it shut.

Inside the store the old man had seemingly vanished. Ralph scanned the rough wooden shelves packed with cans of beans and sacks of flour that revealed nothing to him. Suddenly he noticed the edge of a shiny pink scalp showing from behind a row of barrels. He walked over to them on tiptoe, then reached behind and pulled the old man up by his stringy throat. "Give me that damn key," grated Ralph. "The one to the gas pump."

"Ak... ak..." gasped the storekeeper. His face darkened as he dangled from Ralph's fist. "You—you're one of... them!"

"That's right. My buddy the little dot is right outside. So hand over the key."

"I don't have it!"

"Where is it?"

"In the cash register." The old man flapped his arm. "Over there!"

Ralph dropped him and went to the counter at the rear of the store. He struck the NO SALE button on the tarnished metal register. Under the change bin in the drawer he found a ring of keys.

When he had finished filling up the jeep's tank, as well as the spare gas can, he tossed the keys at the baldheaded face that peeked out at him from the corner of the store's window. The keys bounced off the glass without breaking it but the old man ducked out of sight anyway. Ralph started the jeep and got back on the highway, wondering, as the wind increased in velocity, what dim mythology he had just gained a place in.

* * *

Las Vegas was beating off the night with neon. He drove past the incandescent casinos, his mind racing faster than the crawling traffic. *A motel*, he decided. *A cheap one—that's what I need. To get the dust off. Nobody will listen to me if I look like I do right now.*

Beyond the city's brilliantly lit center he entered into one of the darker sections. The neon signs were smaller or broken, flickering their odd off-colors over shabbier, squatter buildings and the older cars parked around them. Ralph pulled the jeep in under a sign with red and green

tubing twisted into the outline of a palm tree. The engine clattered for a few seconds when he turned the key, then sighed into silence as the fuel gauge needle fell the fraction of an inch to EMPTY.

"Always glad to see an army man in town," said the gray-haired lady behind the motel office desk. She handed the room key to Ralph. "Have a good time."

Perplexed, he stopped halfway through putting his wallet back in his pocket. He realized then that she had mistaken the Opwatch patch on the sleeve of his jacket for a military emblem. "Yes," he said. "I will."

I should've taken my civvies, he thought as he walked across the motel's courtyard. He had a sudden, irrational fear that the Opwatch emblem, small as it was, could only help Muehlenfeldt's agents spot him.

He let himself into the motel room and locked the door. On the bottom of the pink plastic trash can in the bathroom he found a discarded razor blade, its surface dotted with rust. He sat on the edge of the bed and carefully—the blade was dull and hard to work with—picked at the threads holding the Opwatch insignia to the fabric. When it finally came loose he flushed the patch down the toilet, then laid the jacket out on the bed and sponged the dust from it with damp paper towels. He hung it by the window and then let a hot shower massage the driver's cramp from his shoulders and arms.

"Is there a telephone booth around here?"

The gray-haired lady behind the desk smiled and nodded. "Just around there on the side of the building."

Ralph closed the door and walked into the darkness on the office's far side. He stepped into the glass cubicle and picked up the directory hanging by a chain below the telephone. *I wonder if the FBI is open all night*. He spread the book open, limp from constant use. *Seems like they should be*.

As he flipped through the tissue-pages, he looked up through the booth's glass and froze. The row of parking spaces where he had left the jeep was visible from an oblique angle. Someone, a dark silhouette wearing a helmet, was leaning into the jeep and examining it. The motorcycle with the bullet-like black fairing could be seen, sleek and

ominous under the streetlight.

Ralph ducked behind the metal bottom section of the booth. The telephone book dangled on its chain over his head. Slowly, he opened the folding door and peered out, his head close to the ground. The motorcyclist hadn't spotted him yet. As he watched, another figure separated from the shadows and approached the one with the helmet. They conferred for a moment, then started toward the motel office.

He crouched out of sight in the phone booth, waiting and listening to the tread of his two pursuers across the asphalt of the motel courtyard. The office door opened, then closed. He crouched over and ran awkwardly to the parking spaces, scrambling into the jeep. The engine started with the first turn of the key, and in seconds he was on the street, accelerating and heading for the illuminated area of the city.

Jerk, he cursed himself as he drove. *Just had to screw around and wait for them to catch up, didn't you?* He kept forgetting that in this universe there was no time, that everything was always later than he thought. *Or too late.* The jeep pressed on toward the surging neon.

The traffic was so thick in the main part of the city that he couldn't see whether he was being followed or not. He pulled into a casino parking lot, beating out a wide Cadillac for the only vacant space, then got out and sprinted past the rows of empty cars that surrounded the empty building.

The noise and light inside reassured him. Somewhere out of sight, a band heavy with brass was playing, its sounds interspersed with the constant sound of people and money in motion. Words became altered and lost in a partly mechanical, partly human clatter. Ralph hurried through the lobby, beneath blazing tiered chandeliers and past slot machines with little flashing lights. *Where*, he thought with a combined desperation and irritation, *do they keep the phones around here!*

Across an expanse filled with more slot machines and people he spotted a booth. It was set against a wall that opened onto another gigantic room where people clustered around and stared into the depths of felt-lined tables. He hurried down the wide carpeted steps and started pushing his way through the nearest aisle.

A fat woman with blue hair and rhinestoned glasses—her small eyes glittered behind the lenses—stepped backwards into the aisle to watch the

whirling symbols on the machine she was playing. She collided with Ralph as he tried to get past. A paper cup full of nickels dropped from her hand, and the coins scattered over his shoes and the carpeting. "Hey!" she shrilled at him. "Watch where you're going!"

"Sorry," he called over his shoulder. He brushed past two more women, who stared at him indignantly and held their own paper cups tightly to their breasts. Finally he broke free into the clear space in front of the telephone booth. When he got inside it he pulled the folding door shut and sank onto the little seat in relief. The casino noises filtered softly through the clear panes of the booth. He placed the telephone book on his lap and opened it, the thin paper clinging to his sweating hands.

There was no listing for the FBI. Bewildered, he flipped back and forth through the book, looking under "Federal."

"Bureau," and "Investigation" with no results. He scanned all the subheadings under "U.S. Government," but still found nothing. *What's going on here?* he wondered, feeling cold dismay gathering inside him.

Finally, he slid a dime into the phone and dialed Information. "May I help you?" cooed the mechanical-sounding voice in his ear.

"Do you have a number for the FBI?" he said. "The Federal Bureau of Investigation?"

The line hummed for a second. "That number is unlisted," said the operator. "I can put you through to it, though."

A flurry of beeping electronic sounds, then he heard the sound of another telephone ringing. It went on for a long time until someone answered. "FBI," a man's voice said casually. There were the faint sounds of chewing and swallowing, as though he were eating a sandwich.

Ralph took a deep breath before he spoke. "I want to report a plot. A criminal conspiracy. They're—"

The voice on the other end of the line sighed. "I don't think we can do anything for you, then. You've got the wrong people."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"It's all right," said the voice. "We still get—well, not a lot, but a few—calls from people who still think the Bureau handles that sort of thing. I guess most people don't know that we've been re-organized."

"Re-organized?" said Ralph, incredulous.

"Oh, yeah. It was a long process, but it began when the old Hoover papers finally came out of the archives several years ago. A lot of stuff the old boy had done didn't look too good, and Congress stepped in and started changing things around. The bureau was pretty low in prestige right then—hadn't solved any big kidnappings or anything for a long time. It really began with the Watergate thing. So now we mainly just keep records and send out pamphlets to high school classes. That sort of thing."

"Hell," muttered Ralph. He kneaded his forehead with one hand. "Well, who am I supposed to—"

"What you want," interrupted the voice, "is the Federal Security Agency. They kind of took over the things we used to do. Somebody had to."

"Oh. How do I get hold of them?"

"They're in the book. Okay? They ought to be able to fix you up, whatever your problem is. They all carry guns and do the TV hero bit. Just like the bureau used to be." The voice sounded wistful, caught in memories.

"Thanks," said Ralph.

"Glad to help."

He already had the telephone book open to the letter F when it struck him. *The initials*, he thought. *FSA*. His hand turned the pages by itself and found the listing for the Federal Security Agency. There was a tiny illustration of the agency's emblem. It was the same as the shoulder patch that Muehlenfeldt's guards had been wearing.

No way, thought Ralph, staring at the tiny letters and numbers in the book. *There is no way I'm going to call them. Besides, what's the point?* He suddenly felt like laughing. *They're already here looking for me.*

The telephone book fell from his lap as he stood up and opened the booth's folding door. He stepped out into the open space that bordered the floorful of slot machines and their players. A man was striding rapidly toward him from around the other side. Ralph caught sight of the other's grim face and started in the opposite direction. He broke into a run and glanced over his shoulder to see the man running now as well, brushing a waitress with a tray of drinks against the wall.

The gamblers at the tables looked up curiously as Ralph sprinted past them. A bulky man wearing a uniform like a policeman—one of the casino guards—stepped into his way, but Ralph managed to duck under the outstretched arms. Behind him he heard his pursuer collide with the guard. He looked back as he ran and saw the two men fall entangled to the ground. The sound of a gunshot hit Ralph like an electric shock. There was a second of quiet as the unseen band stopped playing, then a woman's scream mixed with the harsh clatter of an alarm bell.

He had spotted a side exit and was through it before his pursuer had gotten up from the casino guard's limp body. Behind him was the bright chaos of milling figures, scattering gamblers and more guards pouring in from nowhere. As Ralph plunged between the dark shapes in the parking lot he saw another figure running toward him from the street. There were no features visible in the darkness but he thought he recognized the outline of the motorcyclist.

"Metric!" called the figure. "Stop!"

Ralph had already changed directions, dodging between the cars as he tried to elude the other man. The parking lot seemed vast, an endless maze without light. From the street he had lost sight of came a mounting wail of sirens.

More figures appeared at the end of the aisle. He scrambled across the hood of a car and, his lungs aching, headed down another corridor.

The sharp noise of guns came at him from two directions. He dropped to his knees, his hand scraping painfully on the asphalt. Brief spurts of flame accompanied each shot, quick orange red flares in the darkness. A fragmented memory passed through his mind from a book about police: if the gout of fire looked round, then the gun was being fired directly at you—if teardrop shaped, it was being fired in a different direction. There was no time to wonder why the flares at either side of the parking lot were

spurting toward each other and not at him. He squeezed beneath the nearest parked car and crawled, his face brushing the asphalt, to the other side, away from the battering roar of the guns.

The firing became more sporadic but the flashes still tapered toward each other. Ralph got to his feet, crouched over and ran toward the border of the lot. On this side it was flanked by an unlit service road that curved around to the rear delivery entrance of the casino. He reached the road and suddenly heard the whine of an accelerating engine. The shape of a motorcycle was just visible hurtling toward him. Beyond it, a car was turning into the far end of the service road.

Ralph pivoted around in the now quiet parking lot but froze when he saw one of the figures running to him. Then, before he could make any movement, the motorcycle skidded around at his side, its roar drowning out the rest of the world. The machine's rider slammed an arm across Ralph's chest, then fell with him as the motorcycle toppled and spun away on its side.

Stunned, he lay on his back, the stars blurring above him as he gasped for breath. The motorcyclist didn't get up, but still gripped Ralph fast about the waist.

As though from a great distance he heard the car stop and its doors open. Hands gripped him and lifted him from the ground. The motorcyclist's arm loosened and he seemed to fall away in the darkness.

Ralph was emerging from his daze as he was deposited in the car's back seat. The door slammed shut and the car sped around in a tight circle, jostling him against the seat's other occupant as the wheels thumped over the curb of the narrow street.

"You sure gave us a hard time, Ralph," said the person on the seat beside him.

He focused his vision on the other, then slumped down in the seat and stared at the lights reflected on the car's ceiling. His mind was frozen wordless.

"Come on," said Spencer Stimmitz. "Pull yourself together. We don't have much time."

CHAPTER 15

Wailing sirens had surrounded the car as it sped out of the center of the city. The noise was so loud that Spencer had given up trying to say anything more, but had merely grinned and gestured with his open palm for Ralph to be patient—all questions would be answered eventually. They both swayed as the motorcade wheeled off the highway and headed across the desert towards the waiting helicopter.

It seemed to be bouncing gently on its landing gear. The sirens died and Ralph could hear the urgent *whup whup* of the blades flashing silver in the moonlight. In front of the rough semicircle that the police motorcycles formed on the sand, the car pulled up and stopped.

"Come on," said Spencer. He opened the door on his side, got out and strode rapidly to the helicopter. After a moment Ralph followed him.

"Hop in." Spencer held open the curved transparent door.

Ralph looked into the machine's cramped interior. There was barely room for two seats behind the pilot. The clear plastic sphere seemed fragile as a bubble. Something fell and connected inside himself and he suddenly backed away. "No," he said, shaking his head.

Spencer stared at him. "Hey, what's the matter?"

"I'm not getting in that thing. I'm not doing this stuff anymore." He felt his face stiffening with blood. "I'm tired of getting fooled and fooled with by everybody that comes along. You've suckered me enough times already. I'm not going for anymore. You can try that universe out on somebody else." He turned away, disgusted.

"What are you talking about?" said Spencer.

"Come on," he said, turning to look at him again. The noise from the helicopter—the cool, expressionless pilot fluttered the throttle—and the uneasy blue lighting from the headlamps of the police motorcycles drained the reality from the scene. "You know what I mean," shouted Ralph. "All that stuff with that phony Alpha Fraction and everything. Pretending to be part of a group working against Operation Dreamwatch, and then you show up here as one of Muehlenfeldt's agents. And now you want me to climb in that thing? So you can toss me out over the desert or something?"

No way. That's it. Go tell Muehlenfeldt he can blow up the whole damn world for all I care. I'm not going to do anything to stop him. As if I could anyway."

"Have you ever got it wrong," said Spencer, laughing. "You didn't get picked up by Muehlenfeldt's men—we just *rescued* you from them. What do you think all that shooting was about?" He gestured, encompassing the helicopter and the distant car. "This is the Beta group, dummy."

"No such thing," said Ralph sullenly. "That's just Muehlenfeldt's paranoid fantasy."

"Ha. I bet he wishes that's all it is. Unh-unh. This is for real."

"Yeah? Then how come you didn't tell me about it back in L.A.?"

"I didn't know about it then." Spencer shrugged and spread his free hand. "I didn't find out about it until they picked me up, right after we tried to bug the Opwatch office. Remember when I phoned you? *That's* who was after me, not Muehlenfeldt's bunch. Look." He caught Ralph's elbow and tugged him to the helicopter. "We have to hurry. Get in and I'll fill you in on everything. Trust me."

One of the two men who had been in the car's front seat during the rush from the city was now walking toward them. The headlamps glared around his bulky outline. "What's the problem?" he said as he approached. "What are you waiting for?"

"No problem," said Spencer. "Just a little fear of heights, that's all." He pulled harder on Ralph's arm.

He hesitated for a moment, then stepped towards the helicopter. *What've I got to lose*, he thought as he climbed-through the oval door. *The worst that can happen is more lies*. The pilot grinned over his shoulder and formed an O with his thumb and forefinger. Spencer got in, then closed and dogged the door. The machine tilted and the ground fell away.

Ralph looked down through the clear, curved side of the helicopter. The police escort were turning their motorcycles around and heading back into the city. Their lights grew smaller and were lost as the helicopter banked and headed west. Below, he recognized the long strip of highway he had travelled just a few hours ago in the opposite direction. *Back to the*

base, he realized. *That's where we're going.* He glanced at Spencer beside him, as he felt the outlines of what he'd assumed wavering once more. *How much of this should I believe this time?* "Well, let's hear it, then," he said.

"You know," said Spencer, "'a lot of this stuff is kind of hard to believe. Pretty strange and all."

"I don't think I'll have any trouble with it. Not anymore."

Spencer leaned forward and picked up an object from the helicopter's floor. It looked like a miniature portable television, white plastic and gray screen. He set it on Ralph's lap and pressed a button on its side. The screen lit up and began focusing into a picture. "Pretty neat, huh?" said Spencer. "This is a first class operation, believe me. Maybe a little more elaborate than necessary, but really top notch electronics."

The screen held Ralph's attention. He watched as words appeared, almost too small to read: "Beta Group Orientation Aid." Below that was his own name. The words vanished and were replaced by the minute image of a serious-faced young woman wearing glasses with heavy black frames. She was seated at a desk and held several sheets of paper in her hands. "Greetings," she said—her voice sounded tinny coming from the viewer sitting on Ralph's knees. "If you are watching this—"

"What is this?" shouted Ralph. The voice stopped and the woman's image froze as Spencer reached over and pressed the button on the side. Ralph knocked his hand away and slapped the top of the viewer. "I'm not going to sit here and watch some crummy *training film*, for Pete's sake."

"Take it easy," said Spencer. "We went to a lot of trouble to prepare this for you. It went into the can only a few hours ago."

"Yeah, well, what is it?"

"It's an orientation aid, just like it said." Spencer's exasperation showed. "You sure have become hostile. You know that?"

Ralph snorted in disgust. "That's because this is a sleazy universe we're operating in," he said. "As I've been finding out."

"Big deal. Welcome to the club." Spencer pressed the button again. "So

just watch the film, okay? Tape, actually."

The image on the screen was moving again. Ralph focused on it and shut out the cramped interior of the helicopter.

"—this," the intent woman was saying, "Mr. Metric, you will shortly be asked to assist in an endeavor the success or failure of which will literally determine the fate of the world." She paused and the letters FATE spelled out at the bottom on the screen.

"The audio-visual company that did this for us," whispered Spencer, "also contracts for a lot of children's educational TV. I think some of it carries over."

Ralph ignored him. The glowing screen pushed the darkness outside the helicopter farther away.

"The purpose of this presentation," said the woman on the screen, "is to inform you of the actual nature of the organization known as Operation Dreamwatch, and to familiarize you with the agency seeking to counteract this threat to humanity."

"Sounds exciting, doesn't it?" said Spencer.

"Shut up." Ralph leaned closer to the viewer.

"Briefly," continued the woman, "the group you were in contact with before, known as the Alpha Fraction, was not the only one investigating and working against Operation Dreamwatch. The Alpha Fraction was in fact only a diversion designed to help conceal the existence of the Beta group—the real anti-Opwatch organization. Organized as a section of Army Intelligence, the Beta group has been investigating Senator Muehlenfeldt and his activities for over a year. The formation of a separate, clandestine organization for this purpose was necessary due to the domination of the Federal Security Agency by Muehlenfeldt and his associates.

"The existence of the Beta group was kept a complete secret from the members of the Alpha Fraction. This was done in order to maintain the smaller group's usefulness as a decoy for Muehlenfeldt's attention. Knowledge of the Alpha Fraction's existence was deliberately planted in the Opwatch organization. As they were then under varying degrees of

surveillance by Muehlenfeldt's agents, any knowledge of the Beta group on their parts might have endangered the secrecy of the larger organization. One man, Michael Stimmitz, was a member of both groups, serving to coordinate the actions of the two groups."

"Mike didn't even tell me about it." Spencer sounded proud of the fact. "It was only after they caught up with me in that phone booth that I found out."

"Unfortunately," continued the woman on the screen, "last week Muehlenfeldt learned of the Beta group's existence, due to the inadvertent exposure of one of its members who had infiltrated the Federal Security Agency. At the outset of interrogation, the Beta member was able to trigger a miniature bomb planted in his skull."

So that's what Stiles was talking about, thought Ralph. An image filled him for a moment of the unnamed infiltrator's explosive death ripping out from the head's center.

The woman shuffled the papers she held and spoke again. "Other infiltration attempts have been more successful, even onto the staff of the Thronsen Home. Enough has been pieced together just a short time ago to form a picture of Operation Dreamwatch's true intent and the mechanics involved in fulfilling it.

"From the first reports of what was going on inside the Thronsen Home, it was hypothesized that the sleeping juveniles were part of an elaborate cover-up for the project's real purpose. Upon further investigation this hypothesis turned out to be in error. The children are in fact the essential component of Operation Dreamwatch's plans.

"The real purpose of Operation Dreamwatch is the construction and detonation of an explosive device of tremendous force. The children kept sleeping at the Thronsen Home are themselves the bomb." The letters BOMB appeared on the bottom of the little screen.

Ralph felt his innards constrict at the image of the sleeping children. *Stimmitz knew,* he thought. *He had it figured out.*

"The principle involved," continued the woman, "is analogous to the construction of a nuclear reactor pile, but using psychic energy rather than atomic. The devisers of Operation Dreamwatch have developed the

means for converting the basic energy of the human mind into a destructive device of incredible magnitude." The woman paused, the eyes behind the glasses seeming to pierce the double layer of glass between her image and Ralph. "The estimated potential," she said quietly, "is sufficient for the literal destruction of the planet through the conversion of the earth's crust into a molten and/or gaseous state."

Ralph rocked back in the seat and stared at the viewer on his lap. The woman on the tape was watching her hands shuffle through the sheets of paper. He turned his head away and looked out through the side of the helicopter at the night. A vision moved through him of the earth's surface boiling away, exposing the fierce core. There was no question of belief—within himself he knew the world was only a thin shell against all possible furies. The woman's voice brought his attention back.

"The psychic bomb," she went on, "works in the following way. The children involved were carefully selected from psychiatric profiles for their high innate energy levels and low tolerance of emotional frustration. These were the qualities that led to their delinquent behavior in the first place. Maintained in a sleeping state in the Thronsen Home, their psychic energies were then united in a common pool through the formation of the dreamfield. Dream experiences, based on each individual's psychological history, were then administered to heighten the degree of emotional tension, increasing in turn the amount of psychic energy in the pool. Eventually, as in a nuclear pile, levels of energy are reached where further increases take on an exponential growth curve, the energy increasing faster and faster without any further input. This chain reaction continues, eventually resulting in the bomb's fantastic destructive capacity, unless somehow controlled.

"To control the rate of reaction in a nuclear pile, a damping material such as cadmium can be used. This metal, inserted into a nuclear pile, soaks up some of the energy and maintains the reaction at a safe level."

That's right, thought Ralph. *Zip rods.*

"To keep Operation Dreamwatch's 'psychic bomb' from premature explosion, a similar method has been employed. Individuals characterized by low psychic energy levels—the so-called 'watchers'—were inserted into the dreamfield to soak up enough of the dreaming children's released energy to keep the process from reaching its exponential growth curve. Just as some individuals are capable of infinitely higher levels of psychic

energy, the watchers are capable of unlimited absorption of that energy without altering their own nature. This was confirmed by the secret electronic monitoring of the serotonin/melatonin activity in each watcher's brain. While these hormonal levels are not themselves the psychic energy process, they are an indicative side effect of it. To further insulate the watchers from the energy released on the dreamfield, large amounts of ethyl alcohol—in the form of beer—were made available to them. Thus, the children's psychic energy levels were kept damped until the psychological frustration experiences on the dreamfield had developed their capacities to the point of a world-annihilating release of energy."

The woman paused again before going on. "Unfortunately, Operation Dreamwatch has reached that point. The psychic bomb's assembly has been completed. At this moment, the children's collective psychic energy has entered its exponential growth curve, and is increasing to the levels necessary for detonation."

The screen suddenly went blank except for the words "End of Orientation."

"Just in time, too," said Spencer. "Here we are."

Ralph looked up from the now empty viewing screen, then out the helicopter's side. Curving up towards them were the roofs of the base's familiar buildings. Beyond the apartments he could see that Muehlenfeldt's jetliner was no longer there. *And where's Sarah now?* he wondered.

Ralph said, "Wait a minute." The helicopter settled among clouds of dust. Figures could be seen emerging from the administration building and heading toward them. "That tape didn't explain enough."

"That sort of thing never does." Spencer took the viewer and set it on the helicopter's floor. "So what else do you want to know?"

"If all the watchers' energy levels were being monitored, how come your brother wasn't ever suspected of being different? I mean, his energy level must have been pretty high."

Spencer nodded. "Just goes to show what a first class operation this Beta group is. They knew about the monitoring before they sent Mike to hire on as a watcher. So they modified his brain chemistry—this is what I

was told when I asked about it—so that instead of his producing normal serotonin, a molecular tail was added to the hormone. That way, his serotonin/melatonin activity couldn't be accurately determined by the Opwatch monitors, making his psychic energy level seem much lower than it really was."

Puzzled, Ralph scratched his chin. "But what about, me?" he said. "If the watchers are only good for soaking up other people's energy, then why did Mike think I could be of any use to the Beta group? What am I supposed to be able to do?"

"Mike figured you were different from the other watchers. There was something that made him think that your psychic energy level wasn't naturally low, that actually it's normal or even higher. But before you hired on as a watcher you must have gone through a period of being surrounded by very low-energy persons, and a subconscious telepathic ability picked up on that and depressed your energy level to match."

The Juvenile Hall, thought Ralph. The helicopter's cramped interior seemed to fade away as his memory shot back to the long night-shift hours at the correctional facility below L.A. *Of course*, he thought. *The kids there hadn't gotten into trouble because of too much energy and frustration. They were the ones who drifted into dope and petty theft because they didn't have enough energy to resist. So passive that life just blew them along like leaves. And there I was surrounded by them every night, their dreams oozing under the doors of their little locked rooms. Tangling my feet as I walked down the corridor with my flashlight. No wonder I was ready to become a watcher after that.*

"But what was the clue?" he said, focusing again on Spencer. "What made Mike suspect all that?"

"Really want to know?" Spencer grinned. "You were the only watcher—besides him and Helga, of course—that didn't have a television in your apartment. Not even a little portable one. That's a very un-watcherish thing to do. A TV is always the most important thing a low-energy person owns."

"Maybe," said Ralph. He briefly wondered what his energy level was like now, after all that he had gone through. "But what am I supposed to do now? I mean, what did you bring me back here to do?"

Someone unlatched the helicopter's door from outside. Spencer laughed and pushed Ralph toward the opening. "Do?" he said. "Save the world, schmuck! What else is there to do?"

Ralph stumbled out of the helicopter, his heel catching on the rim of the door. A man wearing some kind of military uniform caught him. "Mr. Metric?" the man shouted over the helicopter's noise.

He nodded, shielding his eyes from the grit tossed up by the whirling blades. Behind him he heard Spencer's feet hit the ground.

"Come on, then." The uniformed man steered him by the elbow away from the wind and noise.

The army seemed to have taken over the base. As they headed for the administration building, Ralph pushed his hair away from his eyes and saw groups of soldiers standing at regular intervals around the fence. Dark green military trucks were parked in the base's center. The buildings and the grounds were bathed a harsh electric blue by enormous floodlights at the top of wheeled towers.

A rifle-bearing guard at the door of the administration building saluted as they went in. With Spencer behind, the uniformed man—some kind of Intelligence officer, Ralph guessed—hurried him down the corridor. Another guard saluted and held open the door of Commander Stiles's office.

Inside, a gray-haired man with the face of a crabby eagle set around a briar pipe was sitting at the desk. He was wearing a dark green jumpsuit with four metal stars on each shoulder. This time the man who had met them at the helicopter saluted, then withdrew, closing the door behind him.

"Here he is. General." Spencer turned to Ralph. "This is General Loren. He's in charge of the whole Beta group's operations."

"Mr. Metric." The general stood up and extended a massive brown hand over the desk. As Ralph took it, he could see behind him the torn corner in the window screen and the bloodstain on the carpet where Stiles's head had been. "Glad to have you here with us at last," said the general. "There's very little time left, I'm afraid."

"That's what everybody keeps saying." A sudden impatience broke open inside him as he pulled a chair up to the desk and sat down. "So far, nobody's said anything about what I'm supposed to do about it."

The general sighed through his pipe and folded his great hands together on the desk top. "Mr. Metric," he said slowly, "I wish there was more time to explain this to you. Or time enough for you to rest before making a difficult decision. But you're going to have to act on only a very sketchy knowledge of the situation."

"That's all right." Ralph waved a nonchalant hand. He felt slightly giddy—his emotions seemed to have separated from events, going through their own accelerating changes. "As long as it's a *good* sketchy knowledge it'll be more than I've had before."

"Are you drunk?" said the general, frowning.

"He's all right," said Spencer. "Just overdosed on happenings. Come on, Ralph, this is serious."

"All right!" shouted Ralph. He flushed with anger. "So get on with it! I'm listening."

General Loren made little smacking noises around the stem of his dead pipe. "I presume," he said at last, "that Mr. Stimmitz showed you the prepared orientation tape. Good. Then you know the nature of the disaster we're trying to prevent. *Disaster* is, of course, putting it weakly. If Operation Dreamwatch reaches its culmination there will be no one left afterward to call it a disaster." One of his hands pushed through the sweat on his forehead. "Frankly, the only reason some of us are maintaining any sort of calm is that we've been living with the idea for a little while."

I think, said Ralph to himself, *I'd rather live with it than be chased by it all day*. "Go ahead," he said calmly.

After a deep, steadying breath, the general plunged in. "At this moment, the psychic energy level located in the Opwatch dreamfield is building to the point where it can be detonated. From the information we've been able to get hold of, it's apparent we only have a few hours until that point is reached—"

"Why not blow up the Thronsen Home?" interrupted Ralph. "Bomb it,

as a sort of preventive strike. If the kids in there were destroyed, wouldn't their psychic energy be gone as well? Now I know that sounds callous, but given the alternatives—"

"No." The general shook his head. "It's too late for that. Most of the Thronsen children have died already—physically, because their psychic energy has already been displaced into the dreamfield, where we can't get at it. Once that energy starts on its exponential curve, it has a life of its own. It can't be damped by sending the watchers into the field—even if we could convince any of them to go."

"Wait. Wait." Ralph pressed his fingers to his brow for a few seconds. "If the energy is located in the dreamfield, why should we worry about it exploding? That's a pocket universe, separate from this one. We wouldn't be hurt by an explosion there."

"Not if the dreamfield remained a separate universe. But it can be transposed into this one. Just as part of this universe, the watchers, could be inserted into the dreamfield, the dreamfield can be inserted into this universe."

"That's how my brother was killed," said Spencer. "See, the extent to which this universe and the dreamfield can be overlapped is variable. The watchers were never completely inserted into the dreamfield, but just far enough so they could see the dream sequences the kids were being put through—though that's unimportant—and also to keep the energy level from premature detonation. Premature, that is, if your intention is to destroy the world. Anyway, the watchers were always between universes, so to speak. That's why they couldn't physically interact with the figures on the dreamfield. Until Mike was killed. Then the dreamfield was momentarily transposed onto the same plane as the watchers, and the field's slithergadee was able to get at Mike."

So that explains it, thought Ralph. He saw again the bloodstain on the ground outside the base. The sudden transposition must have pushed us closer to our own universe—close enough to bleed into it.

"That's why the psychic bomb is dangerous," continued the general. "A split second before it's to be detonated, the entire dreamfield containing it will be inserted into this universe."

"Oh." Ralph felt some space inside him diminish, as if to make room for

the dreamfield's intrusion. The inevitability of it seemed to be already darkening the earth outside the window. "You mean you brought me all the way back here just to tell me this? Somehow, that doesn't seem, uh, kind. I could have caught it with everyone else in Las Vegas and been just as happy."

The general giggled, producing an unnerving effect. "Well," he said, "there is a way to keep the psychic bomb from going off. That's why you were brought here."

A small, trembling premonition moved upwards along Ralph's spine. Not of danger—all time, he knew, had now moved past that point—but of a fearful responsibility with its point weighing against his breast alone. A grade-school fear resurrected, but now bigger than himself, bigger than anything—*What if I screw up!* he thought bleakly. The realization that there would be no one to blame him afterward didn't help. He could barely squeeze his voice out. "What am I supposed to do?"

The large brown hands on the desk top were white-knuckled. The general seemed petrified, his teeth clamped on his pipe in a frozen rictus.

A small red spot of anger bloomed in the center of Ralph's vision, blotting out the general's face. *He just realized that the whole thing depends on me.* Ralph stiffened in his chair.

"Forget him," said Spencer. He came over and sat down on the corner of the desk. "I'm surprised the military mind was able to bear up this long. This sort of thing just isn't in their universe."

"So what's the plan?" said Ralph. "What am I supposed to do that no one else can?"

"It's like this. The psychic energy doesn't automatically explode at any point of its exponential growth curve." Spencer held his palms a few inches apart. "In fact, there's only a limited range of the curve where it can be detonated at all. Below that range, the energy will dissipate harmlessly if a detonation attempt is made. Above that range, the energy consumes itself—burns itself out. If the detonator can be set off before the critical range of the growth curve is reached, then the psychic bomb is harmless."

"So where's the detonator?"

"It's on the dreamfield itself. It's the thing the watchers call the slithergadee."

A memory of fangs sliding in their sockets, then Ralph rose a few inches from his seat. "You mean you want me to go back on the field and—and do *what* to that thing?"

Spencer pushed him back down in the chair. The general's pipe fell from his mouth. "The Beta group," said Spencer, "has developed a device you'll take with you onto the field. You merely have to locate the slithergadee, adjust the device as you'll be shown, then use it to set off the slithergadee/detonator—before the energy level's critical range is reached. That'll defuse the bomb."

"Is that all?" Ralph's laugh came out like a gasp. "You're crazy—that thing could be anywhere on the field. And what's to prevent it from getting me like it did your brother?"

"Hopefully you'll get *it* before it gets you. As for locating it—the sooner you go, the better chance you'll have."

No wonder the general froze up, thought Ralph. "It's impossible," he said.

"It doesn't matter whether you think it's impossible." Spencer gripped the edge of the desk and leaned forward. "You're the only one who can even try. Only a former watcher can be inserted into the dreamfield. There's not enough time to prepare anybody who hasn't been one—and you know we can't use any of the other watchers, even if, we could convince one to go. They're useless for daily living, let alone something like this. Face it. You're the only one."

Two images rose in his' mind. Sarah, and—incongruously—the grinning dog named Rin-Tin-Tin. *At least he tried*, thought Ralph. *Or something like that*. "All right," he said. "I'm ready to go."

CHAPTER 16

"It looks like a rifle." Ralph hoisted the thing in his hands.

Spencer nodded. "I think they did take the stock from an army carbine."

Just to make it a convenient shape to hold and aim."

The sports-jacketed Beta group technician who had brought the device in a padded cloth bag now glanced nervously at the desk. The general was sipping at a paper cup of water held in a trembling hand. "Is everything all right?" he said. "Has Shadrach here been briefed?"

"Metric," corrected Spencer absently. He was studying the gunlike device intently. "Show him how to work this thing."

"Really very simple." The technician tapped at it with a pencil. The whatsit—you know, the detonator for the psychic bomb—is really a concentrated energy source in itself. Kind of a small bomb to set off the larger bomb. We haven't been able to figure out yet how the detonator is controlled, except that it's set off by a relatively small energy pulse. This gun will emit such a pulse—three of them, in fact, so you'll have that many chances. Get within fifty feet of the detonator, aim the device just like a normal gun, and pull the trigger. That's all there is to it.

"Except—see these two dials here?" The pencil tapped at two small gauges facing upwards at the gun's middle. "The one on the left will indicate at what level between the dreamfield and this universe the detonator actually is. We can't determine this beforehand because the detonator apparently can be transposed independently of the dreamfield and the psychic bomb—probably as a safety measure until the moment of detonation. You *must*, before firing the pulse at the detonator, adjust the dial on the right—see the little knob here on the side?—to match the reading of the other dial. That will set the pulse at the same level between the field and this universe as the detonator occupies. The pulse has such a narrow 'reality bandwidth' that it will miss the detonator entirely if they're not exactly in the same plane."

"So what you have to do," said Spencer, "is find the slithergadee, get within fifty feet, read the dial on the left, set the one on the right to match it, aim and fire. Got it?"

Ralph nodded. All the moisture from his mouth seemed to have travelled to his hands. "What's this other stuff here?"

"This clips onto your belt," said the technician, attaching a small rectangular box to Ralph. "It's just a battery for the gun. Then this cable runs from it and plugs into the stock. Like that. Now you're all set."

He cradled the gun in his hands and headed for the door.

"Good luck," rattled the general's voice behind him.

* * *

On the way to the line shack, with Ralph in the center of the small procession and bearing the gun like some new totem, they passed close to one of the army trucks. He peered into its open back, then halted suddenly on the path. The truck was filled with former watchers, sitting quietly on narrow wooden benches that ran the length of the vehicle. A few had fallen asleep, heads and shoulders slumped against each other, but most wore the vacant, glazed expression of people trying to notice as little as possible of whatever unpleasant experience they were undergoing.

"Come on." Spencer pulled at Ralph's elbow. "Don't waste the little time you got."

"Just a minute," said Ralph. He had spotted the two watchers he had been seeking, sitting side by side in the middle of the group. "Hey, Goodell! Kathy!"

The two leaned forward from the bench and looked down the ranks of knees at him, framed in the truck's rear opening. "Ralph," said Goodell, smiling weakly. "What are you doing out there?"

"It's too complicated to explain now."

"Well," said Goodell wistfully, "isn't this something? I guess every good arrangement has to come to an end sometime."

Beside him, Kathy suddenly jerked upright, as if jolted from sleep. Even her face tensed, the usual slack lines tautening from within. "Is that all you can say?" she shouted at Goodell. "They round us up and cram us into these smelly trucks and all you can say is your crummy good job is over? Is that all?" She swung and connected her small fist with Goodell's ear. She was still shouting something as Ralph let himself be led away.

"There's hope for us all," he muttered, using up the last of his capacity for amazement. Spencer and the Beta technician didn't seem to hear him.

They passed the saluting guard at the entrance of the line shack and

hurried into its cavernous interior. Another technician was up in the control booth, looking around the little glass-enclosed area and comparing it with a booklet he held.

"Hey!" Spencer shouted up at the booth. "Are we ready to go?" Somehow he had expanded to fill the hole left in the Beta organization by the general's collapse. Perhaps he had been born to. He turned to Ralph. "All right, then. Grab a strap."

Without stopping to think, Ralph stepped into the middle of the space and with his free hand caught one of the loops dangling from the suspended cable. With a shock of recognition, he felt the familiar coldness of the metal contact against his palm.

Spencer turned and raised his hand to signal the control booth, then lowered it. He walked quickly up to Ralph while digging something out of his pocket. Onto Ralph's arm he buckled something that looked like a wristwatch. "I almost forgot," he said. "This will tell you how much time you've got. When the needle enters the red zone, it'll be too late—the psychic energy level will have reached the detonation range. If that happens, you'll probably be consumed by the explosion in a few seconds. So don't try to cut it thin. Find the slithergadee and set it off as soon as you can." Spencer started to back away.

"Hey," said Ralph. "What happens to me when I trigger the detonator? Will I make it back here?"

"We don't know." Spencer turned and gestured sharply to the control booth. "We'll try to get you back—"

There was no time for any more words. The shack faded away and in seconds he was on the dreamfield, the line snaking upwards out of his grasp.

He dropped to his knees, gasping. The dreamfield's sky had turned yellow, writhing with figures at the edge of perception. A cold wind stiffened the air, though the ground seemed to be shimmering with heat. The force that had stricken Ralph on his arrival passed, although his stomach remained coiled with nausea. He pushed himself upright with his free hand.

The field's remembered streets and buildings stretched out in all

directions, the mirror images endlessly repeating themselves. All the shadows were burnt away by the yellow light, except one that lay like a dark cross on the streets. That shadow was cast by Muehlenfeldt's jet, crowded in among the buildings, its enormous wings over their roofs, the cylinders of its engines reflected in the plate glass windows—some silver bird of prey frozen amidst a deserted ant heap.

Ralph studied its blank, staring windows for a moment, then turned away and hurried down one of the streets leading from it. There was no way of telling if the slithergadee would be aboard the jet, but for now he fervently hoped it wasn't. Somehow he felt sure Sarah wasn't in there. *Only dreaded things*, he thought.

He ran down the street, gripping the altered rifle in one hand, past the empty buildings and out of sight of the jet. In the middle of a crossroads he stopped and looked at the dial Spencer had strapped to his forearm. It was impossible to tell how far the tiny hand had travelled toward the red since he had left the line shack. *My time sense is warped*, he realized. The mounting energy on the field was disorienting him in every dimension. At his core fear mixed with the nausea. He ran on, the buildings heaving alongside him like slow waves.

There was no sign of the slithergadee. Ralph squatted down in the middle of the street and panted. He was afraid to look at the dial now—it seemed as if hours of running had gone by, with nothing but an infinity of small-town store fronts entering his vision. *They should've known*, he thought bitterly, staring at the asphalt with his head lowered in exhaustion. *They should've known it wouldn't be just waiting here for me to find. Either it's hidden where I'll never find it, or it's on Muehlenfeldt's jet—and how can I get at it there?*

Something moved in the buildings to his right. He saw its motion from the corner of his eye. Gripping the gun tighter, he rose and walked slowly towards the drugstore where he had seen it.

Inside it was dark, the racks and counters arrayed in oppressive silence. He walked farther into the building, until he stood in its center. As he pivoted slowly around, a figure rose from behind the cash register. "You," it gasped, stretching an arm of fire toward him.

He stared at the swaying apparition for several moments until he realized what it was. *One of the children from the Thronsen Home*, he

thought, dismayed. *Burning up*. The dream image seemed to be that of a boy sixteen or seventeen years old, but with the skin bursting into glowing heat. Red eyes, crazed with fever, stared at Ralph. The facial bones looked as if they were about to break through the incandescence. "You," the image repeated, then flowed around the end of the counter and leaped at Ralph.

Its heat scorched his face as he dodged to one side. The glowing image rolled on its shoulder and clutched at his ankle. Frantically, he kicked free and ran for the door. *It's on the same level as me*, he realized. *Where it can reach me*.

A pair of arms encircled his neck and he was thrown onto the sidewalk. Another burning face hissed above him, pressing him into the ground with its heat and weight. He brought the rifle butt against its chest and pushed it away. Its shrill cry rang after him as he got to his feet and ran down the sidewalk.

The minds of the juvenile delinquents, with no existence now except on the dreamfield, had burnt out with the overloads of psychic energy, leaving nothing but the raw circuits of hate and fear. The street itself seemed to be on fire as more images emerged from among the buildings. Their garbled shouts coalesced into one sound in the air. Ralph eluded the outstretched hands of one only to be tackled around the waist by another. He beat at the radiant hands but more figures clutched at him, until he seemed to be at the core of some burning pit. The heat dizzied him, until the blood rushed into his head and he vomited.

Somehow his finger found the trigger of the rifle. He pressed the altered barrel down into the massed figures scrabbling at him, and fired, A roaring noise mixed with the suddenly deafening cries of the dream figures. He fell to the ground, clutching the gun to his chest. The burning hands were no longer tearing at him.

For a moment he was unconscious; then with one hand he lifted himself onto his side. The figures were scattering from him in all directions, heading for the darkness inside the field's buildings. A few feet away something with the shape of a human being jerked and sputtered on the ground, dissolving into white-hot sparks.

The dial on his forearm was smashed, the needle dangling and useless. He sucked in breath until his lungs stopped aching, then looked up and

across the roofs of the buildings. Far away, the topmost part of the tail on Muehlenfeldt's jet could be seen. He gripped the rifle and started toward the silver beacon, running past the buildings and ignoring the fiery eyes that watched him from within.

The plane's bulk shielded him from the yellow sky. "Hey!" he shouted up at the curved belly. A panel shifted and slid open. He stepped back as the stairs slowly lowered, the bottom step finally grinding against the street's asphalt.

No one stopped him at the top of the ramp. He walked cautiously into the silent interior.

The fish in the cabin's huge aquarium was dead, floating at the top of the water. "Ralph," came Muehlenfeldt's voice as he stepped around the tank. "Come on. You can't avoid this moment forever."

The senator was sitting in the high-backed leather chair. His white hair no longer lay smooth against his skull but stood on end in a corona.

Ralph stood a couple of yards away and pointed the gun at him. "I need to know where the slithergadee is."

"Don't be stupid," said Muehlenfeldt. "Stop waving that thing about. I know what it's for. You can't hurt me with it." He paused, smiling. "Come on. Nothing to say now?"

"Where is it?" Ralph lowered the gun.

"It's no use to ask. You'll never find it." The smile grew wider and more wicked. "You'll never find Sarah either. She's not here—you'll die universes apart from each other. Sad, don't you think. She really is my daughter, you know."

"No," said Ralph. "She isn't."

Muehlenfeldt laughed. "Oh, but she *is*. Though perhaps *spawn* is a better word. We reproduce asexually—ah, yes, your friend Spencer was right about me. Very intuitive of him. Sarah told me all about his theories." He tilted his head to one side. "Sharper than a serpent's tooth—isn't that how it goes? I was very surprised when she turned against me. But then maybe she was sick in some way. Maybe she forgot

what she was and now she really believes she's human. This taking on other creatures' identities can be a dangerous business. So let it be that way, then. She can die with her adopted species."

Lying, thought Ralph. His hands sweated on the gun stock. *Confusion*.

"Still nothing to say?" Muehlenfeldt leaned forward in his chair. "Nothing to ask? Before it ends?" He sighed. "That's the trouble with you—all of you. Too easily distracted by trivialities. Like that military nonsense in South America. That Ximento business. I instigated that—money in the right places, and enough of it. Just as a distraction, otherwise I'm sure my real purpose would have been exposed much sooner. Perhaps even delayed."

One of his wrinkled hands described a sphere in the air. "Think of it as a work of art," he said. "The transformation of your meaningless and dirty little lives into pure light. Perfect and intense. Like a star—that's how it'll look from far enough away. Don't you think that's worth more than the mere continuation of your petty existence?"

"You're insane," said Ralph. "You'll die, too."

"Fool. As if this were the only place in which I exist. I'll be watching from out there when this poor husk is consumed with everything else." He gripped the arms of the chair and laughed with his head thrown back, the cords in his neck beating.

Ralph watched, numb with sickness and the weight of defeat. Muehlenfeldt's laughter grew louder until it filled the space. A string of saliva bisected the cavernous mouth.

The yellowish teeth suddenly lengthened, sliding in their gums.

The teeth. Ralph stared, the realization bursting in him. *He's the slithergadee!*

The laughter stopped. Muehlenfeldt's figure seemed to grow larger as it rose from the chair. It was swelling, changing into its true shape. "Yes," said the voice from the gaping mouth, sounding hollow and distant. "But it's too late! Look out the window!"

He looked and saw that the sky outside had turned red, a fire that

stretched to the end of every universe. Fumbling with the rifle, he backed away from the thing in front of him. The floor tilted beneath him and he fell against a table. The jet was climbing.

"Too late!" The voice was buried beneath the thing's armor. Its claws ripped the carpet as it scabbled toward him, the fangs in its mouth fully extended.

Ralph rolled over the top of the table and fell on the other side. His fingers trembling, he matched the dials on top of the gun. He pushed himself away from the table, lifted the gun and fired point-blank at the thing rising above him like a wave.

A flash of light and Muehlenfeldt's muffled laughter echoed again in the cabin. "Idiot! How can you hit me with that thing when I can alter my level at will?"

"No," moaned Ralph. He lifted the gun to his face. The needle of the dial on the left was swaying erratically back and forth.

"Give up," intoned the buried voice.

Ralph got to his feet on the angled floor. He shouted something but the blood roaring in his ears drowned it out. A mountain of glistening scales and fangs toppled toward him. He didn't look but watched the left dial's needle reach its farthest point, then fall the other way. With the gun butt braced against his stomach, he turned the right dial's needle in the opposite direction. In the split-second when they matched positions he fired.

Light, which grew brighter until he was blinded. He felt himself pressed upward against something. It dissolved and he was falling. Then he burned away as well, leaving nothing.

CHAPTER 17

He awoke on the shimmering desert. Sand and sky danced blurrily until he blinked and cleared his eyes. He lifted himself up on his elbows and looked around. There was nothing to be seen but the empty desert.

I wonder where the base is. He stood up, his knees trembling

unsteadily for a moment, and shaded his eyes. *One direction's good as another*, he thought, shrugging his shoulders. He started walking, his head lowered.

After several minutes of trudging through the sand and dry brush, he heard the sound of an automobile engine approaching. It appeared on the horizon, trailing a cloud of dust, and grew larger. He stopped and waited for it.

Sarah was at the wheel of a jeep. She pulled in front of him and stopped. The black dress, dusty now, was rolled up over her knees. "Get in," she said.

The wind bathed him, coming over the lowered windshield. The jeep bounced over the sand and rocks for a little while, then climbed onto a strip of asphalt road and picked up speed.

"Where'd you get this?" he said finally.

"It was at the base." Sarah pointed behind them with her thumb. "I managed to reach there after he—or whatever it was—dumped me off the plane. Spencer filled me in on what was happening, where you'd gone. Then I sneaked out and stole this." Her hand patted the dash.

"Oh." He looked at the strip of highway bisecting the desert in front of them. "How'd you find me out there?"

"Didn't I tell you once I had a knack for finding things that were important to me? I knew where to look." Her hand drew a line in the air. "You were like a falling star when you came back. Would you like something to eat? There's a carton of something in the back."

He found it and lifted it onto his lap. It was filled with cans marked U.S. Army, followed by a number of several digits. He pulled the opening strip on one and discovered canned peaches inside. He plunged his hand into the warm syrup and pulled out a slippery golden crescent that dissolved in his mouth like part of the sun. "Where're we going?" he asked when he had finished the can.

"I thought up north would be pleasant," said Sarah. "Big redwood trees with lots of shade under them. And it rains every week. Isn't there a town up there called Eureka?"

"I have found it," murmured Ralph. He closed his eyes. He opened them again when an after-image formed inside the lids of a gaping fanged mouth. "Got any money?" he said. "It's a long drive."

She pulled a man's wallet from under the seat and handed it to him. "Should be enough."

It was crammed with folded bills. A twenty fluttered free as he looked inside. The wind caught the bill and sucked it into the dust behind them. When he laid the wallet on the seat between them, Sarah took one hand from the wheel and touched his. Without thinking, he jerked it away, as though it were burned.

Her face turned a little, the eyes studying him. "He told you that I'm—like he was. Didn't he? The same kind of thing. He told me he would say that to you."

Ralph nodded. "Yeah. He said that."

"It's not true. It was just hate on his part, trying to come up with the lie that would hurt you most."

He pressed his hand softly to her cheek. "I didn't really believe it anyway."

They drove on for a while. Ralph scratched his chin. "Won't Spencer and the Beta group wonder what happened to me?"

She shrugged. "They'll probably just figure you were destroyed when you set off the detonator. The whole dreamfield collapsed and went out of existence. They'll look for your body for a little while and then give up. What does it matter? You've done enough for them."

Ralph nodded. *Maybe up north I'll start writing again*, he thought. He decided it wasn't worth trying to get into L.A. and fetching his old unfinished manuscript from his parents' house. They were probably still mad at him for abandoning their Ford somewhere in the city. *Better to start all over. With everything*. He turned and watched Sarah for a few moments, her hands resting easy on the jeep's wheel.

"What's the matter?" Her glance caught his. "Still thinking of what that thing said about me?"

"No," said Ralph. He leaned back in the seat. "I don't really care anyway. It's all right with me if you are really a being from some other star. Just as long as you don't do that thing with the teeth. You know? Where they turn into fangs and come sliding out in their sockets?"

"Okay," she said. And smiled.