

A.R.Yngve

PARRY'S PROTOCOL

AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The hallmark of a lousy writer is that he writes about subjects he knows nothing about ; In PARRY'S PROTOCOL I have been trying to stay within my range of competence. The following reference works made this book possible:

"The Shadow Warriors: O.S.S. and the Origins of the C.I.A." , by Bradley F. Smith;

"The Smithsonian Guide to Historic America: Virginia and the Capital region", with text by Henry Wiencek ;

"CIA: a History" by John Ranelagh , plus various other literature covering the same fields.

Special thanks to Swanson's travel agency and the Tourist Department of Washington State, for their illustrated brochures; and to my neighbors , who endured the noise of my typewriter for such a long time.

A. R. Yngve
1993, 1999

Prologue:

WESTMOREHAM INSTITUTE FOR TREATMENT OF THE CRIMINALLY INSANE
WASHINGTON STATE, SOUTHEAST REGION, USA
SEPTEMBER 8

Perkins, the night-watchman, strolled into his narrow booth. He had been walking his first round through the worn, whitewashed corridors of the institution.

"One o'clock and all's well," he mumbled almost inaudibly -- and immediately shook his head, as if reproaching himself for saying so.

The night-watchman eased his fat, uniformed body into a swivel-chair made of pale wood. He switched on a tiny color TV set on the desk before him; one that had earlier been used for the surveillance cameras, before the institution replaced them with infra-red sensors. Perkins's favorite show came on, and the comedian on the screen was going through his end monologue:

"...and my Prozac's wouldn't understand me, and my girlfriend failed to comfort me -- or was it the other way around?"

(Laughter from the audience)

"And it was then, when my lawyer said: 'Eddie, your overdraft facility is sending me telepathic messages', and I asked him 'What's the shit, man?', and he said: 'Eddie, get your life in order; you should seek out some wise man and find the meaning of your life', it was then I flew to see this guru in Nepal, who lived in a little hut by the foot of the Himalayas.

"I entered, said hello, and asked him -- no, begged him: 'Talk to me, Master! My life has lost its meaning. And the world seems to be falling apart around me; why does nothing make sense anymore?!'

"And the guru stroked his long, stripy beard -- he looked like a hundred years, could easily have been that guy in 'The Golden Child' -- and answered: 'At the top of this mountain lies a cave. In that cave lives a holy man, who has beheld the secret of Creation. The last time I heard from him was fifty years ago. If you hurry, you might get to meet him before he leaves this world.'

"So I hired a couple of Sherpas who took me all the way up that high, snowy mountain. The wind blew like hell all the way. But after walking for two days across slippery, icy paths, we reached the holy man's cave. It was all covered with snow; we had to dig out the opening; and I staggered inside, dead beat.

"In there was a tiny little furnished rock shelter, lit by candles, and almost all of them had burned out. Man, it was freezing in there. And at the very end of the shelter there was an extremely old, bald man, lying in a small bed, shivering with cold. I covered the holy man with my jacket, and an interpreter translated my question to him: 'What is the secret of Creation?' The ancient, toothless man whispered something in the ear of the interpreter -- and then he died.

"I shouted: '*What'd he say?! What'd he say?!*', shaking the interpreter's shoulders. And the interpreter looked gravely at me for a long moment... and he said: '*Beats me, I don't understand French at all.*'"

The roars of laughter from the TV set mixed with the night-watchman's chuckles. An imaginary listener who wouldn't have known Perkins, might have believed he was sobbing. From the corridors of the institution came no sounds, except the occasional ticking of the strip-lights, and a faint whisper of wind from the old ventilators. The patients in their cells slept: the deep, dreamless sleep brought only by large drug doses.

Chapter 1

WESTMOREHAMCOUNTY
WASHINGTONSTATE , SOUTHEAST REGION
SEPTEMBER 8

Dr. Abram Lemercier leaned forward over the steering-wheel, squinting. His thick glasses did not improve his view much in the compact haze that wrapped over the billowing fields ahead of him. He glanced at the satellite-linked roadmap on the tiny dashboard screen; a blinking cursor, representing the car, assured him of an absolute position in the world.

Lemercier, a man of fifty-three years with a worried face and beginning baldness, stroked his pointed, droopy white moustaches with his left hand and looked up at the rear-view mirror. His hand habitually drew across the short, graying beard and adjusted the bow tie of his brown tweed costume. That didn't make him look less tired -- his shoulder-long white back-hair suggested a considerably wilder life, which

this middle-aged man in a rented car had left behind him long ago.

Abram sighed lightly and switched on the radio. "Urban" country music -- he switched to another station. ClassicSeattle grunge rock -- he switched again. At the third switching came some obscure local station.

"...out for the fog, okay? You're listening to WRBC, reaching five thousand listeners twenty-four hours a day! The joke of the week: Where can you find the dumbest people in Westmoreham ? In City Hall. And where can you find the smartest ones? When they found out who sat in City Hall, they ended up in the Institute!"

(Canned laughter)

"For our dear nutcases we will now play "They're Coming To Take Me Away, Ha-Ha!"

A monotonous, bizarre tune followed; the refrain was sung by a hysteric falsetto backed up by a stomping, tambourine-clapping beat, and a siren wailed in the background:

*"They're coming to take me away, ha-ha
They're coming to take me away, ho-ho, hi-hi, ha-ha..."*

In the middle of the song, Lemercier's cell-phone started to beep inside his jacket; he switched off the radio. He pulled out the handset-shaped box and held it to his right ear, pressing the receiving button.

"Hello?"

A soft female computer-voice answered: "Incoming call from Langley . Use de-scrambling program number four."

Abram got a tauter, more alert expression around his mouth and eyes. With his eyes still on the road ahead, he pressed a button on the phone with his right hand middle finger.

A nasal, but deep Southern drawl came from the receiver: "Eh-bram? It's Wilson ! How's the weather up there?"

Abram smiled briefly and relaxed a little.

"Hi, Ned! Unfortunately it's too foggy for me to see what kind a weather it is outside. Will you request a report?"

"Haha ... nah, that can wait until you've reached Westmoreham . Y'know , it's the new policy of the Company to create a spirit of mutual understanding and easy communication between chiefs and employees, by scheduling time for more informal exchange... like, letting off steam."

The words sounded rehearsed, or ironically read from a script. Ned's tone went to the painstakingly casual.

"So, how is it, Abram? Is everything okay?"

Abram's face went taut again, and his brow wrinkled up to his scalp.

"I'm fine," he said mutely. "Last health check was in August, and the doctors found no problems."

"Ehxcellent,ehxcellent . No outbreaks of middle-agecrah -sis, ah hope?"

His tone was joking, disarming. Abram replied in the same tone, obviously used to chatting with Ned Wilson.

"I'm an educated psychologist, Ned.I've been into self-analysis since I had my first pimples, so don't worry.How about you, Ned? Do you still hit your wife in the face very often?"

Ned's voice choked a laugh.

"But seriously, Abram, I'm sure you feel fine, and I'm sure that if there'd be anything, you wouldn't think twihce about telling me. Seeya !"

"Yeah. Bye."

Abram put the phone back into his inside pocket, still looking straight ahead of him. He was now driving into the outskirts of the southern edge of the small town, a broad street lined with low buildings and a few people on the sidewalks. The mist had cleared somewhat -- or he had left it behind -- and the sharp blue sky was starting to appear above.

He saw the sign saying WESTMOREHAM INSTITUTE 1.5 MILES and made a right turn. He took off from the short, uninteresting main street and drove into the soft, undulating farmlandscape which abruptly succeeded the low, flat houses. Tractors wereplowing up the earth on both sides of the road; a few farmhouses lay half-hidden between the dune-like hills. The mist was now reduced to steaming pools in the shadows between the dunes, and far ahead Abram was able to see the distantblue mountains rise above the landscape.

From a distance, theWestmoreham Institute stood out from the horizon, sharply outlined against the clear, late morning sky: a dark-brown brick building with whitewashed cornerstones, a pointed tile roof, and chimneys like steeplechases. The rounded chapel and the arched front portal with the fan-shaped steps increased its vague church-like appearance.But in contrast, metal bars blocked each of the two-story building's tall windows - and a high barbed-wire fence surrounded the spacious lawn of the estate.

Abram made a left turn into theparking-lot before the fence, and slid in next to the sentry-booth at the steel-bar gates. A security guard's head popped out through the glass booth, condensed air steaming from his mouth. Hewas heavily muffled up, with earmuffs outside his uniform cap.

"Good morning, sir," he called out with a clenched smile. "Do you have an appointment?"

Abram lowered the power-window and squinted at the raw, cold air. Keeping his head inside the car, he handed over a bundle of papers. A sudden gust almost tore them from his grip, but the guard quickly snatched them with his hand. Abram gave the guard a sheepish smile. He grinned back.

"Not the first time that happens, sir. If we'd had any trees or flags around here, people would be prepared for those squalls."

He pulled his hand into the booth and studied the papers.

"I'm AbramLemercier , psychologist fromVirginia ," Abram said a little awkwardly. "Here to study a patient."

The guard looked up from the clearance papers and examined Abram's face with measured eyes, compared it with something on his table, and talked into the intercom next to him -- still with his eyes on Abram.

Then he said, in a more formal tone: "Dr. Oregon is awaiting you, sir. You may walk in now."

Abram frowned in mild amazement. Walk? The guard shrugged.

"Those are the rules, sir. All vehicles, including bicycles, must be left outside the fence. If you have a lot of baggage, I could ask a warden to help you carry..."

"No, that won't be necessary," Abram said quickly. "Thank you."

He backed the car into an empty VISITOR space, put on his coat and hat, grabbed his briefcase and stepped out, locking the car. Holding his hat with one hand on his head, Abram walked toward the gates. The guard gave the go-ahead and the gates rolled apart with a whirring sound.

Abram hesitated for a moment, turned in the wind and called out at the guard: "Tell me, why haven't you got a flag here?"

The guard shouted back: "We had to take it away, because the sight of it made our patients restless!"

Abram stared in disbelief at the guard for a second, then spun around and walked briskly through the gates. They immediately clanged shut behind him.

Chapter 2

When Lemercier was about ten meters from the entrance, it opened: a steel door, fitted into the portal.

A short black woman in a doctor's white coat, dark blue trousers, and soft shoes stepped outside. The door shut heavily behind her. At once she saw Abram and paced down the steps toward him. They met at the foot of the steps. He stretched out his hand, and the woman shook it formally. Lemercier, who was of medium height, would have stood one head higher than her, unless she had been standing on the first step. She had a small, round face, and her hair was drawn back into a neck bun. Her age appeared to be about thirty-five.

"Dr. Lemercier?" The woman gave him a cool smile. "I'm Dr. Joyce Oregon, medical superintendent and director of the Westmoreham Institute. Did you enjoy your travel?"

Lemercier smiled, clasping her hand an instant longer than usual, then released it. "Just fine, thank you. Are these sudden fogs common around here?"

Joyce looked briefly confused, then brightened up and gave out a laugh.

"Oh, that!" she said. "No, they don't come very often. It's the proximity to the Rockies that's causing them, I've been told. Come in, and I'll see that you get a pass-card."

They walked up the steps to the steel door. Dr. Oregon stuck a plastic card into a slot next to the door, and several bolts clicked as it opened. They came into a clearly lit hall, with yet another steel door a few feet away. Oregon looked up at what appeared to be a tiny surveillance camera, and spoke toward its microphone tube.

"It's all clear, Mark... check with the entrance guard for confirmation."

The inner steel door clicked open, and Abram and Joyce continued into the main building.

"This guard, Mark," Abram said searchingly, "is he a suspicious fellow?"

Joyce answered calmly, without turning his way: "No, I urged him to make a security check."

Joyce briskly marched on, Abram following with a tinge of worry in his eyes. They entered a wide, tall old whitewashed corridor, and arrived at a small glass booth at one side of the corridor's end. Joyce made a slight wave of her hand at the guard, who was sitting in there studying a number of flat-screen monitors hanging on the wall. The guard caught her eyes, spun around on his oldswivel-chair of pale wood, and pushed open a window.

"Mark," Joyce said, "this is Dr. Abram Lemercier, a psychologist come from Virginia to carry out a special study of Parry."

The guard nodded and smiled briefly at Abram. Joyce looked at Abram with a serious face.

"Dr. Lemercier, this is Mark Fosse, he's working the day shift at the doors all week, in normal cases. Should you happen to see someone else in his place at daytime... well, I'll bring you a copy of the guard list. Mark, would you please format a pass-card for the doctor."

"Sure, Joyce. Could you please put your thumbprint on this scanner, Doc?"

While talking, the guard had taken out a small flat box from a cabinet and pressed some buttons, like a man using a pocket calculator. A little white rectangle started to flash at one end of the box; in a LED display Abram could see the text "ACCESS CODE CONFIRMED---PLACE PRINT ON SENSOR SURFACE" scroll past. He pressed his thumb on the box held forth by the guard, and the gadget gave a beep.

"Thank you, that'll do," the guard said.

A larger box inside the cabinet, wired to the small scanner box, whizzed and clicked, then spat out a new pass-card. The guard pulled out the card and handed it to Abram -- it was still warm.

Joyce explained: "Since a year now, everyone going in and out of the main building -- except the patients, of course -- has one of these 'smart cards'. When you stick it into a scanner slot, the card gets electric power to 'read' the user's thumbprint and compare it to the print in its memory chip. That means this card" -- she pointed at the card in his hand -- "only gives access when you use it... so take care of it, and don't lose your thumb."

"The cameras at the entrance and the doors..." Abram began to ask.

"Those are infrareds," Mark fell in. "It turned out to be safer to identify people by reading their thermal 'body-prints', after Parry had stolen a...er, Dr. Oregon could explain it to you, sir."

Mark suddenly looked at Joyce with half-concealed embarrassment. Joyce Oregon gave them both a secretive smile, but briefly.

"It's okay, Mark. Let's go up to my office, Dr. --"

"Just call me Abram, by all means. If I may call you by your first name..?"

Abram looked innocently into Joyce's black eyes, and she raised an ironic eyebrow. A hint of a smile escaped her lips, before she calmly turned around and walked toward a narrow staircase opposite the booth. Abram cast a questioning glance at the guard -- but he was already busy locking up the scanner equipment.

Dr. Abram Lemercier, fifty-three, paced up the stairs after the short, brown-skinned woman, briefly displaying a breathless, boyish lack of dignity.

Chapter 3

"I know how weird this place feels the first time, Abram."

Joyce was still wearing her doctor's coat, reclining in a chair behind her overloaded desk. Abram sat facing her in a sunbleached, stuffed armchair, stiffly holding his briefcase in his lap. The sun, now just past noon, was shining through the windows behind Joyce's back, creating drapes of yellow haze across the office. Joyce put her fingertips together and turned her gaze to a wall covered with framed photographs, newspaper clippings, and postcards; most of them yellowed, some new.

"When I got in charge of this place five years ago," she mused, "I was convinced I'd be murdered or raped -- or worse!-- before the end of my first week."

Abram coughed and drew his hand across his mustaches.

"I've never seen so many... or so modern... security measures gathered in such a small institution as this one. Don't even think organizations like the CIA have updated their routines this far. How many patients did you say are under observation?"

"Six," Joyce stated without emotion.

She raised an index-finger to call for Abram's attention: "But not just any six patients, mind you!" She looked intensely at him, eyebrows raised. "Their relatives have arranged that their identities remain classified -- except the case of Parry, but I'll explain that later on -- and every one of them were distinguished members of society before ending up here."

Her brow wrinkled: "Am I boring you? It's so rare, me getting the chance to discuss the patients' cases with a colleague like this..."

"No, by all means go on. I'd be asking anyway."

"Our oldest patient," she continued, "has been here under observation since 1963. He was a member of

the Kennedy clan's presidential campaign staff, and expected to get a House seat at a record low age.

"But shortly after the murder of JFK -- the same year I was born -- he suffered a breakdown and tried to shoot his wife dead. Now, normally in this type of case, the perpetrator immediately commits suicide after the crime... but he ran out of bullets and could be captured alive. For more than thirty years, a number of treatments and therapies have been attempted on him -- brain surgery's been totally banned by his relatives -- without result. He's now sixty-seven years, and will probably die of old age here."

Joyce sat quiet in the warm glow of the post-midday sun, looking with unseeing eyes in the direction of Abram, until he moved and raised his hand in a question.

"Are we talking about... a retarded patient?"

Joyce looked up from her thoughts.

"No, we're talking about a very, very intelligent patient. And he's just killed one human being."

Joyce slowly rose from her chair and walked over to a sixties-model refrigerator standing in a corner of the office. Opening it, she collected a lunchbox, a cream bottle, and closed the fridge with her foot. She sank into her chair and picked up a thermos bottle, which she put on her crammed desk together with the other things. She made an inviting gesture. Abram put up his palm, unsmiling.

"No, thank you, I'm not hungry."

Joyce leaned over the desk and began unpacking her lunch. Abram grabbed the arm-rests of his chair and, with somewhat greater effort than his colleague, stood up and walked around the desk to the windows. From the tall windows on the second floor, he could overlook the courtyard and lawn at the short side of the building. Suddenly, the intercom on Joyce's desk beeped. She swallowed a sandwich bite and pressed the answering button.

"Joyce speaking."

"We're starting today's exercise schedule," Mark's voice said. "First we take out Eliza, supervised by Quincy Filkmore, Kareem Lincoln, and Simon Bisley. Confirm?"

Joyce pulled out a schedule from her stacks and eyed it through.

"Confirmed. Stand by."

From outside came the muffled sound of the steel door opening and closing. Fascinated, Abram stared at an adult, pale woman being led down the steps by a tall male nurse in white clothes. Right behind him went another two heavy-bodied wardens carrying nightsticks. They spread out in different directions, while the pale woman walked out on the lawn followed by her warden. Joyce accompanied Abram by the window. The woman on the lawn was wandering around in wide circles; after a short while it became apparent that for each round, she was approaching the three-meter high barbed-wire fence. The wardens cautiously circled her in what looked like a measured, ritual dance.

"She has tried to escape before..?" Abram probed.

"Eight times, from five institutions under a period of four years, once from here. During those years she's killed two nurses, seriously injured a physician, and threatened the lives of several people."

"I'm not allowed to tell you her name; but you wouldn't believe me if I told you who she was known as -- and what crimes she's committed."

Joyce winced to herself. The woman on the lawn had moved to a distance of fifteen feet away from the fence. Abram gave Joyce a questioning look.

"Electrified," she assured him. "The only risk is that she'll try killing herself by clinging to the fence. Should that happen, the guards must beat her loose."

Joyce turned from the window and started to clear away the remains of her lunch from the desk. Then suddenly Abram looked upset, his moustache sprawling a little. He paced around the desk and stood face to face with Joyce, who attentively met his stern gaze. He leaned across, resting on his knuckles.

"Doctor Oregon. I've played along for long enough. Why am I being prevented from seeing my patient?"

Joyce rested her knuckles on the desk in an imitation of Abram's stance, so that her grave face came just a few inches from his own. It was the textbook trick of how to confront an intellectual opponent.

"Doctor Lemerrier, I'm just trying to prepare you for how futile -- how hopeless -- it would be to try talking someone like Parry healthy. This is supposed to be a 'study', but you've revealed a therapeutic ambition in your letters, right? Do you know what we're actually doing with our patients here? We're trying to prevent them from escaping and hurting themselves, until they've grown too old and tired to try. The medication they're getting is just enough to make them sleep at night, and if we gave them more they'd be seriously brain damaged. This ain't no Prozac people."

Abram blinked twice.

"Thanks to that damned old movie, 'One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest', the politicians no longer dare allowing the mental institutions to perform the only working treatment -- frontal lobotomy. You're far from the first upper-class psychoanalyst who thinks he's the one who truly 'understands' Parry's problem. If it wasn't for your letter from the governor, I wouldn't..."

Joyce's head suddenly dropped, she held her hand to her forehead, and slumped back into her chair.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, rubbing her temples with her thumb and index-finger. "We've had quite a difficult month before you arrived, all the safety routines must be rearranged before a visit."

Abram's brow wrinkled worriedly.

"No, I've been arrogant," he said in a low voice. "Pardon me." He extended his right hand in a gesture of reconciliation. "I've been reading about Parry's case for two years now, and I've been waiting long for this permit to see him."

He smiled courteously. Joyce gave him a tired smile and clasped his hand.

"Okay," she said, standing up, "let's prepare Parry for a new visitor."

Abram briefly glanced over Joyce's shoulder, down at the lawn outside. The three wardens were escorting the pale woman back to the door. Joyce started, and reached for the intercom.

"Mark? Let 'em in, and abort the exercise schedule. I repeat, abort the exercise schedule. Initiate the new

visiting routine for Parry. I'm coming down with Dr. Lemercier now. Over and out."

Abram stood with his briefcase in one hand, and let Joyce walk past him to the door. She opened the door and stepped aside. He chuckled and looked quizzically at her.

"Age before beauty," he said, bowing imperceptibly before going out into the stairwell. Joyce followed, after having locked the three locks of the office door.

Chapter 4

Abram and Joyce were standing in the corridor outside the visiting room, on the first floor.

Simon Bisley, a tall male nurse with dark, short hair, a thin moustache and eyeglasses, came out of the visiting room. He was holding a metal detector. He nodded at Abram, who stepped inside. The padded steel door closed behind him with a muffled click. Abram looked around the white room. It was about ten feet wide, fifteen feet long, windowless, and lit by fluorescent tubes -- on his side of the room only. The room was split halfway by a thick plexiglass wall with rows of air holes at the top. On the other side of the glass wall was another padded door; nothing else, not even a ventilator.

Abram sat down on a worn wooden chair and looked up at the surveillance cameras in the ceiling. From one of them, Joyce's voice called out from a small loudspeaker.

"We're sending him in now, Abram. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Abram's hands trembled barely visibly, and his reply was forced: "Of course. Turn off all equipment like I've told you."

The little red lamps on the cameras went out. A couple of seconds passed, while Abram sat with his hands tightly folded above his lap; several times he began to run a hand across his moustaches, but restrained himself. The door on the opposite side opened. A pale man in a T-shirt, jeans, and loafers stood dead still in the doorway, his gaze shifting around the room. He saw Abram, fixed him with an intense stare, and walked carefully into his half of the room. The door closed and all was quiet. Lemercier stood up and walked over to the glass wall, stopping two feet from it. The man on the other side stood silent, incessantly staring at his face and person.

The man was of medium height, thin in an unhealthy way, and had light-red, stubby crew-cut hair. Bloodshot eyes glowered from an aggressive, angular face. The skin under his eyes was purple, making little irregular twitches as he began walking sideways left-right, like an animal poised for a leap. His bony fists hung tightly clenched along his sides; now and then his sharp, straight nose widened in a nervous sniffing.

The two men came to stand about six feet apart from each other. When Abram stroked his moustaches, his hand became wet with sweat. He took a deep breath, straightened his back, and decisively looked the other man in the eye.

"Hi, Patrick. I'm Abram Lemercier, a psychologist from Virginia." His voice was first unnaturally high, but quickly sank to a normal conversation level, as if unused to the acoustics of the room; it had a slight echo.

"What university?" Patrick's reply was hoarse and lightning-fast.

Abram backed a step, but kept his face level, his eyes steady.

"I'll be getting to that soon, Patrick. Right now I'd just like to talk a little, ask a few questions, and --"

"And to show your good will," Patrick cut off with hoarse scorn, "you've had the surveillance cameras shut off, right?"

He showed his teeth in a wide, wolfish grin. Abram hastily glanced up at the cameras in the ceiling. They were shut off. The staring man moved with more confidence, if still cautiously. Abram smiled with compressed lips as he turned to Patrick again; half angry, half amused.

"Okay, Dr. Rymowicz," he said grimly, "you're much too smart to let yourself be duped by formalities. Let me just fix one thing, and we can talk business."

He took off his tweed jacket and hung it over the optic surveillance camera, so that the microphone was covered. He turned to Patrick, who was now sneering at him.

"You might have microphones hidden in your clothes," he said, his voice somewhat less scornful.

Abram sighed, blinked twice, and started to take off his clothes. Half a minute later, his clothes and shoes lay crumpled together in a corner of the room, Abram standing as far away from them as possible. He folded his wiry arms over his paunch, looking at Patrick without fear. Patrick wasn't smiling any longer, but he glowered suspiciously at Abram's wrist.

"The watch," he hissed.

Abram gave Patrick a black look, took off his cheap plastic wristwatch, and smashed it under one of the chair's legs.

"Come closer to the glass," Patrick said shortly. They approached each other. When Abram pressed his ear to the glass, Patrick knocked at it, shaking his head in irritation.

He cupped a hand over his mouth, breathed at the glass, and wrote with his finger in the condensed droplets: GLASS CARRIES SOUND. The words faded almost as fast as they were written, but they were readable.

He erased the words with his forearm, breathed more "mist" onto the surface, and wrote: STAND IN THE WAY OF THE CAMERA

Patrick erased the text again, stared impatiently into Abram's resolute face, and waited. Abram frowned, looking down for a moment, then followed Patrick's example.

Chapter 5

WHY THEY CALL YOU PARRY?

Pause.

I'M PARANOID.

Pause.

WHY YOU HERE?

Pause.

TO STOP ME FROM KNOWING TOO MUCH.

Pause.

WHO WANTS THAT?

Pause.

IF I KNEW THAT pause I WOULDN'T BE pause HERE!!

Pause.

WHY'D YOU SHOOT ONE OF pause YOUR STUDENTS?

Pause.

HE WAS OUT TO GET ME.

Pause.

LATER. Pause. YOU BELIEVE ME pause IF I SAID pause I WORK FOR THECIA?

Pause.

Patrick froze and scrutinized Abram's face. He pulled in air and wrote: MAYBE. AND ?

Pause.

WE COULD HELP EACH OTHER.

Longer pause.

GET A SAFER ROOM.

Pause.

I WILL. YOU TRUST ME?

Pause.

NO. Then: I'LL WAIT.

Parry carefully rubbed out the writing on his side of the glass, and gestured at Abram to do likewise. So he did. Abram turned away from the patient, stepped over to the corner, and picked up his clothes.

Chapter 6

After roughly ten minutes in the visiting room, Abram announced into the microphone that he was finished. The door opened from the outside; he stepped out into the corridor, where Simon and Joyce stood waiting. They looked at his crumpled tweed suit; Simon gave Joyce a knowing glance in Abram's direction, then he locked the padded steel door.

"How did it go," Joyce asked with no audible enthusiasm.

Abram brushed off his creased clothes and straightened his bow tie; he gave her a confident smile.

"The first contact went better than I had hoped. I expect to have gained his confidence within a month."

"Abram," she said, "have you thought about the risks of playing along with the imagination of a paranoiac like this? Acting as if you were a secret agent, making insinuations about secrets, shutting off the surveillance, all that. And I'm worried for his sake, mind you."

She added: "And the arranging of a special room for your conversations -- you still want that?"

"He asked for it, just like he's done to other therapists."

"It's nearly finished by now -- that's actually near the limits of our budget. After all, this is a private institution."

Abram made a deprecating gesture.

"Trust me, Joyce: no one is going to get harmed. Even if I won't succeed in shaking up his paranoia, this will help us learn much more of how his kind thinks." He added hastily: "Thereby not saying, that I wish to belittle my colleagues' work on his case."

Joyce raised a sarcastic eyebrow, spun around, and walked away with her hands in her coat pockets.

"Join me to the staff dining room," she said without looking back. Abram and the warden went with her.

Chapter 7

WESTMOREHAM INSTITUTE
SEPTEMBER 9

A few days had passed.

The special room was located in the basement. Like the visiting room, it had a plexiglass wall; there were no cameras. It was almost the same size. But the sound-absorbing plates which covered walls, doors, and ceiling made it sound as if Abram and Parry were standing in a tiny wardrobe. A mattress dominated Parry's half of the room; otherwise it was empty. Abram was sitting on a stool with a briefcase in his lap, his eyes attentively fixed on Parry. Parry stood leaning against the glass wall in the middle of the room, looking back in distrust. Abram glanced down at his wrist -- where there was no wristwatch -- drew his hand over his beard, and opened his mouth.

"Right," Abram began. "We can hold our interviews here, and it's quite safe. Of course I have to talk to people outside, but I decide what they'll hear -- so it's all boils down to your trust in me. Okay?"

Parry blinked once.

"What I'm now about to say," Abram explained, "is our, unofficial version. There are two official versions of my work here. To Dr. Oregon, I've said that I'm nothing but a doctor of psychology, who's got a special permit from several authorities, to study a severe case of paranoid schizophrenia. I told her I use a technique of creating a false solidarity with the patient by suggesting to be a secret agent."

The purple skin under Parry's red eyes twitched at the phrase 'paranoid schizophrenia', but he stood tense and motionless.

"To my CIA superior, Ned Wilson, with whom I regularly communicate by a scrambled phone, I have said that I'm doing my official job as a psychologist, at the same time as I'm working on an important report. I'm continuously sending parts of the report to him by courier -- never by mail or FedEx."

Parry's pale eyebrows crowded restlessly over the root of his sharp nose. He listened.

"Here comes the real, unofficial version. Listen carefully."

Abram rose to his feet, holding his briefcase in one hand, shifting position as he talked.

"Parallel with my psychological case study of Patrick Rymowicz, which everyone knows of..."

He stopped momentarily, throwing aside a glance in Parry's direction.

"... I am also writing a continuing report for the CIA department for futurological studies. It contains different suggestions, for strategies to deal with the new political, military, and global threats which we might face after the end of the Cold War."

He walked up to the glass wall, the floor plates swallowing the sound of his shoes, so that his feet almost appeared to hover an inch above the floor.

"Do you realize the enormous difficulties we're having, rearranging the activity of the Company, rearranging our brains?" He made an impatient gesture at Parry. "Look at me! All the Company's chiefs grew up with the Cold War, and our accustomed habits of thinking make the Company slow in reacting to the new world order. We couldn't predict the failed Three Day Coup in the Soviet Union. And when the Soviet Union then suddenly ceased to exist, we stood there with our pants down."

"Saddam Hussein surprised us completely when he went into Kuwait! What saved us from World War Three was that he too was stuck in old habits. He intended to play off the U.S. against the Soviet Union in

the U.N., and paralyze all intervention; but there was no Soviet Union anymore!"

Abram rested on the glass wall with his free hand and looked down upon his dark leather shoes, then up at Parry's concentrated, bony face. They were both sweating.

"When the next big crisis comes, the enemy -- be it China, the Arabs, secessionists within the nation, or someone else -- will have learned. We won't get a second lucky break. That's why I need the imagination of a younger person. Someone with a special talent for seeing patterns, where others just see chaos. Who may speculate freely without fear of losing his job. Someone who's got nothing to lose. Someone I could help back to freedom."

He paused for a breath. The air had grown palpably hot in the hermetically isolated room. Abram eased his collar and bow tie. Parry's T-shirt was dark with sweat, but he was yet standing still against the glass wall.

A few seconds passed, before he spoke in his hoarse voice: "This was most interesting... but there's a snag." Now completely serious, his wolf grin was gone. "Why," he said very slowly, very calmly, "should I risk trusting you? This special room was arranged pretty damn quickly. I've been here for years. I'm no longer allowed to read newspapers, order the books I want, watch TV or surf the Web. They're only letting me out for exercise once a week, drugging me to sleep every night; so I wake up every morning without having had any dreams, then I'll sit half-sleeping, waiting for being allowed to visit the bathroom while the wardens watch.

"The food is transported here from the town, and when it reaches my cell it has lost taste and smell. If I bribe the nurse with ten bucks she'll buy me a chocolate bar, but first I'll let him eat half of it and wait a week to see how he reacts, before tasting it myself. Then I'll get sure it was poisoned, and I throw it up immediately. Dr. Oregon hates me more than all the other five lunatics, serial killers and cannibals in this place; I've heard her say that I and the others should be lobotomized. Ask her. But you know what, Doctor Lemercier?"

Parry's voice was less hoarse now, but the more excited; his face redder.

"I want to stay here, because I know the outside world will explode under your feet any day! Give me one single reason for leaving my comparatively safe cell, to be hunted, found, and murdered in the normal world!!!"

His voice rose to a rage. His clenched fists left sweat stains on the glass, which also showed spit marks. Abram wiped his brow with his sleeve, lowered his eyebrows, looked at Parry's feet, crossed his arms.

After a minute he said: "To begin with..." He groped for the right words. "To begin with: nobody will ever know of your assistance, but of course that alone isn't enough to motivate anyone. Let's say that I'll arrange for you to stay in the special room for an unlimited time. I can give you access to television, newspapers, and all the books you ask for. You might even -- you might even study part of the classified material I'm using for my CIA report."

Abram ceased, and wiped his brow with a pained expression.

"Please let me open the air intake now," he gasped.

Parry wiped beads of sweat off the bridge of his nose with his fingers. He was swaying a little despite his sneer.

"Okay, if you won't speak. Oregon could be bugging us."

"Wait. I'll be right back."

Abram fumbled along the wall, found an air vent hidden by a piece of loose insulation material, opened it, went out into the basement and closed the door. There was a similar vent on Parry's side, but he ignored it.

When Abram came back into the special room a short while later, he was dumbstruck for a moment: Parry seemed to have disappeared. Then he saw the figure behind the curled-up mattress in the far corner of the room, and choked a laugh. He locked the room, shut the air vent, and held up the suitcase he had left there.

"In this briefcase there are no bombs, I assure you. Where was I? Yes. Apart from anonymity, the special room, and free access to information, I can easily find up excuses for increasing your personal security. Make a list of the improvements you want, and I'll defend your demands with promises of increased donations. And if I haven't said it already, my official study of your case may lead to an eventual release, or at least better treatment. What've you got to lose?"

Abram threw out his arms, then let them hang along his sides, looking at the figure hiding behind the mattress. Parry slowly raised his head.

His bloodshot eyes were more nervous than angry, and he made a muted reply: "Okay... I'm prepared to play along -- but I'll retreat to my old cell whenever it becomes necessary!"

Abram sighed with relief and stepped toward the glass barrier.

"One more thing, Doc." Parry pushed away the mattress and stood up, remaining in the corner of the soundproof, echo-free room.

"Yes?"

"Do you think I'm crazy too?" Parry's voice almost trembled. Abram frowned as he was lost in his thoughts for a moment.

"Officially, yes. Unofficially... it doesn't really matter what I think, as long as the cooperation goes smoothly and discreetly. Do you trust me?"

Parry's response was calm, his eyes relaxed somewhat.

"No. But that doesn't really matter either -- does it?" Some of the defiant scorn returned. "Seeya, Doc."

They did not say goodbye to each other.

CENTRAL WESTMOREHAM
SEPTEMBER 11

A motel-room.

"He's got his own rationalizations, Joyce. In the old days, miners used to bring birds with them, to check if the air was getting bad... so buy him a canary and a cat, then! Look up a garage sale, you'll surely find a cheap cage there. There couldn't happen anything worse than him eating the animals, *n'est-ce pas*? I'll take full responsibility. Yes. Yes. Thank you. Bye, Joyce."

Abram flung down the phone receiver.

"Bureaucratic *connasse*," he muttered, lapsing into his old French-Canadian dialect. Dressed in shirt, slacks, and socks, he reached for the opened suitcase on the bed and dug among his underwear, until he found his agency phone. He punched in a long number and pressed a scrambling button.

A short delay, and Ned Wilson's relaxed voice was heard: "Hello?"

Abram's brow wrinkled habitually, but he assumed a hearty tone: "Hi, Ned! It's Abram. How's things in Virginia?"

"Ah! Didn't expect to hear from you so soon, Abram! Just fine, thank you. The National Security Council has just received copies of the first part of your report, and they were eager to read the rest. How far have you come?"

Abram tried to suppress a proud grin, which resulted in a grimace.

"It's too early to give a definite deadline right now, but the work is going forward. As you know I'm also busy with a particularly difficult patient... and I owe you one for opening a few doors for me in that work."

"You know the Company always stands by its employees. Now don't take it as me trying to stress you, Abram. But I'm really full of expectations."

"Thanks. I promise I won't disappoint you and the Security Council."

"That's fine. And remember: Should there be anything, don't hesitate to call me. Good luck with Parry!"

"Thanks, Ned. Catch you later."

He put the phone back into his suitcase, reached for the phone on the bedside table -- and froze, confused. The next instant he shook his head, so that his long neck hair was ruffled.

"I did let Ned have a brief look at the file on Patrick," he warned himself. "He must've seen it then. This is no time for getting suspicious."

He picked up the receiver, and a note from the nearby desk, and punched the number written there. After three signals, one 'please wait' message, and half a minute's elevator music, a shrill male voice answered.

"Trudeberry here, who am I speaking to?"

"PrincipalTrudeberry ? How do you do, this is Dr. AbramLemercier . I hold psychology lectures at schools and universities inVirginia . Have we met, by any chance?"

"No...no , I don't think so. What... what can I do for you?"

Abram made a polite cough.

"Er, the thing is that I'm investigating a patient who used to be a teacher at your university, about five years ago."

"That was during the previous principal's period, I'm afraid."

"Yes, but perhaps you've heard of my patient anyway? His name's PatrickRymowicz , he used to teach logic and philosophy..."

For a fewmomentsTrudeberry was silent; when his voice returned, it was upset and frightened.

"I have no idea who you're talking about, and I want to ask you not to disturb me again -- I'm a very busy man. Goodbye."

Trudeberry disconnected the call. Abram gave a resigned sigh and hung up the phone. He picked up the Yellow Pages from the bedside table, put it in his lap, and flipped through it until he found what he was looking for. Hedialed the number and got through immediately.

"Tourist Information Bureau,Southeast Washington , can I help you?"

Abram put on a formal tone: "Yes.Could you please tell me where to find small civilian airfields in the vicinity ofWestmorehamCounty, Miss?"

"Just a moment, please."

Chapter 9

TheLearjet was nearly empty, save for Abram, a few Congressmen, and another Agency man. He slept through most of the flight.

Chapter 10

CORTEZ STATE UNIVERSITY
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA
SEPTEMBER 12

The federally funded and run university had recently had its name changed to "Cortez" after protests from student organizations, who claimed the old name was "Anglo-centric and discriminated the large mass of Latin-American students." The new name sign at the campus entrancewas decorated with an image of Aztec priests and helmeted Conquistadors shaking hands.

Abram stepped out of the taxicab and paid the driver, who immediately drove away from the university's main entrance. He was perspiring heavily in the hot midday sun and wore his jacket, coat, and hat under one arm, briefcase under the other. A swift stream of young students, tanned and thinly dressed, passed by the pale middle-aged traveler; some stared after him in amusement when he went up the wide, low stairs and into the shadow of the main building. It took Abram fifteen minutes and some questions to find the principal's office. It was on the second floor, equipped with a steel door and opaque bullet-proof windows. In the surrounding corridor several bullet-holes had recently been filled with mortar -- grey spots in the pastel yellow paint.

On the steel door hung a sign reading: VISITORS ARE REQUESTED TO LOOK INTO THE CAMERA FOR IDENTIFICATION -- barely intelligible under the graffiti. Abram looked up at the camera; the door clicked and slid open automatically. He went inside, and a security officer in a beige shirt got up from the desk by the entrance; two secretaries peeked at Abram behind desks crammed with paperwork and computer equipment. He gave them a friendly nod.

"He's expecting me," Abram told the guard. "Tell him that Patrick will be in the papers by tomorrow," he explained casually.

The guard spoke into his small cell-phone, turned his swarthy, searching face to him and nodded approval: "You can come in now, sir."

Abram went over to the heavy door marked G. TRUDEBERRY, UNIVERSITY PRINCIPAL. Before he had reached the brass door-knob, the door opened with a buzz and a click. The principal's private office was clearly designed to appear old, despite the fact that the rest of the university didn't seem to have aged more than ten years. Dark panels of imitation oak covered those walls that were not occupied by well-filled bookcases; two principals' portraits hung on the walls; a wide panorama window overlooking central San Diego was fitted with false window bars. In front of the window, principal Trudeberry sat behind a massive dark wooden desk. He grabbed the armrests of his wide leather chair and looked anxiously at Abram's grave, tired face.

"What do you want?" Trudeberry asked, his voice almost a falsetto. He was a middle-aged, thin-lipped man with watery eyes and a deep tan; his hair was blond and sunbleached. Though the air-conditioner was whispering by the window, he was beginning to sweat in his light blue linen suit. Abram decisively walked over to the desk and looked down at the sitting man.

"I'm Dr. Abram Lemercier," he said calmly. "I'm not a journalist who can tarnish the university's reputation, but I know a couple of those -- real old-time muckrakers. Should I or they ask a few questions about Patrick Rymowicz?"

"Excuse me for my rude behavior, Dr. Lemercier," Trudeberry whined. "You see, that was a terribly tragic and embarrassing affair, and we've had one hell of a problem with the media since then. You do understand?"

Abram did not change his grave expression, but nodded slowly. The principal looked more hopeful.

"The police made a thorough investigation, so I can't see what further information I could bring you..."

"With due respect to the police," Abram said, "there are personal aspects of Parr... Patrick's case, that might have been lost during the official investigation. Did he have any friends among his colleagues or students?"

Trudeberry pulled back a strand of hair from his sweaty brow, and started to work the computer on his desk. Abram walked over to his side and studied the text lines passing by on the big monitor. Trudeberry brightened up and pointed at a name list on the screen.

"There we have it! Rymowicz was a loner, quite unpopular with the other teachers; but several of his students almost worshipped him like a guru! I'll give you a printout of this list --" -- he activated the printer -- " -- of everyone who went to his lectures the same year as..."

He fell silent and gave Abram a frightened glance. The printer in the corner stopped buzzing, and Trudeberry hurried to pull out the sheet and hand it to Abram.

"Thank you very much," Abram said, folding the list and putting it inside his jacket, "you've been of great help. I assure you that my study is not intended for the media." Trudeberry shook his hand with obvious relief, and Abram picked up his briefcase.

In the doorway he halted and turned his head towards the principal, who was standing by an open bookcase, pouring himself a drink.

"By the way... have you ever met Patrick yourself?"

Trudeberry stopped his arm with the glass to his lips, looking away from Abram: "Yes... yes, but I never got to know him. There was something intimidating about him, even before his breakdown ... he had a way of staring at you, you know? As if he knew something really bad about you."

Abram nodded.

"Yes," he half mumbled, "I've seen it myself. He's still staring, Trudeberry. Could you tell me what he's seeing, that we can't see?"

When the confused principal turned about to speak, Abram had already left. He hurried down the stairs, past scores of busy students returning from the lunch break. Most of them did appear Latin-American; many of the male students wore a hat or buttoned shirts, as did some of the girls.

Abram was halfway to the main entrance, when he slowed his steps and got a puckish glint in his eyes. He lifted his hat over his graying head, pulled it down over his forehead, and put on an indifferent face. His coat and jacket slung over one shoulder, one hand in his pocket, and swinging his briefcase in the other hand, he strolled through the stream of young students and out into the sun. A few youngsters shouted cheerfully after him, but he ignored them.

Chapter 11

The phone booths on the sidewalk outside were all smashed.

Abram walked into one of the graffiti-scribbled booths and stood there. He pulled out his agency-issue phone and punched in the number of the person on the top of his list: Bettina Avarez, San Diego. There was a busy tone. He dialed the next number: Giordano Bruno, Los Angeles.

After four signals, a young male voice with almost no accent answered: "Who is it?"

"My name's Lemercier. May I talk to Giordano Bruno?"

The voice at the other end slowly breathed out, then in.

"What's your business with him?"

"Tell him that it's very important that I may talk to him. It concerns a fellow acquaintance of ours -- Rymowicz."

The voice suddenly sounded more interested.

"Do you know Dr. Rymowicz? Where is he?"

"We can't talk about it on the phone," Abram said with exaggerated gravity. "Could we meet? I'm in San Diego now, but I could be in L.A. in less than three hours."

"It's a few minutes past one... Could you be here after eight o'clock tonight?"

"Yes. Thank you."

The voice cut off the call loudly. Abram tucked away the name list, and extracted a Greyhound Bus timetable from his pockets. He made another call, for a cab. Less than two minutes later, a Yellow Cab braked at the phone booths. Abram opened the backseat door and got inside.

"Where to?"

"Bus central. Fifty bucks if you step on it."

The taxicab left the campus with a roaring start.

Chapter 12

Abram was sitting far back in the half-filled Greyhound bus.

Dusk was falling outside, and thousands of points of lights lit up across the darkening coastline. A TV screen above the driver's seat showed a live news broadcast from a foreign conflict. Abram followed the news with eyes half shut, until it broke for commercials.

He took up a small black device from the briefcase at his feet: a pocket secretary, the size and shape of a large cell-phone. It could take dictation, write his words down, and store them on a minidisc for his laptop computer -- on a busride, it was more comfortable than a laptop. There were buttons for the basic functions START, HOLD, NEW, ERASE, quotation mark, period, comma, paragraph, colon, and two scrolling buttons.

He switched it on, put it to his mouth and spoke softly into the microphone piece: "Early draft of introduction to 'Parry -- A Study in Persecution Mania', version two." Abram tapped a button and started the next paragraph. "In the past decade, a few studies have been made of paranoia as a social phenomenon, concentrating on the American postwar period."

He pressed HOLD for a moment, tugged at his beard, then went on.

"Bensonhurst and others have proposed the theory that the paranoid condition is normal for the late industrial society, and will only seek out new projections after the breakdown of Soviet Communism."

Pause.

"The case of Patrick Rymowicz, which occurred soon after the dissolution of Eastern Germany, may shed new light on how the delusions of the paranoid patient are affected by outer political processes -- though this does not apply in most cases."

Abram paused and looked away at the bus TV screen: a live broadcast was showing how gunfire, street riots, and fires were ruining the eastern parts of Los Angeles. Martial law had been proclaimed at night, and units of the National Guard were being transported into the afflicted area. Several bus passengers cursed the news out loud; an old lady walked up to the bus driver and talked to him.

Abram frowned and looked thoughtful for a few moments, then resumed his dictation: "In the near future, social engineering will probably be able to treat, perhaps even cure, the collective disturbances --"

He pressed the ERASE button on the device's keypad, and a blinking cursor erased the words "collective disturbances" from the little green screen.

"...the mass psychological phenomena that may appear in the dynamic, post-industrial society," he corrected himself.

Pause.

"Parry's case is a step toward this goal. To quote Edmund Muskie, Hubert Humphrey's candidate for vice president in the 1968 election, as I remember hearing him... 'I think the great issue for America, as in the past, is whether Americans can trust each other... between people of different races and national origins... whether the American people will decide to trust each other. We will go towards a united country, or we will go towards a divided country, where people will fear each other.'"

Abram switched off his secretary and glanced at the digital watch in the far end of the bus ceiling. The red digits read 18:47 PM. With difficulty, he heaved himself up from the seat and walked through the aisle to a soft drink and sandwich machine. He bought a can and a sandwich with his American Express card.

As he picked up his purchases, a voice from behind him caused him to stiffen: "It's what I've been saying for a long time, it's all the Mexicans flooding the country! They might as well let it burn, till all those taco-eaters've been smoked out of California."

Abram turned around and began to protest: "What kind of racist drivel is --"

He ceased abruptly. The source of the outburst, a middle-aged black man in a dark suit, looked sourly up at him.

"Yes?"

"Excuse me," Abram muttered in a broken voice and headed back to his seat.

Chapter 13

MAYWOOD
EAST CENTRAL LOS ANGELES
SEPTEMBER 12

The night sky was illuminated by the smoke from the districts to the east, casting an orange shimmer over the streets where the taxicab dropped off Abram.

One block away, a couple of palm trees were burning in solitude, like huge bent candles. He hurried across a parking lot, looking nervously in all directions. He half-ran to the two-story block of flats, up the stairway, and stopped breathless outside the door. He supported himself against the balcony parapet and caught his breath, before knocking at the door.

The window next to the door lit up, and someone pulled aside a curtain's edge. A small periscope glistened into view and disappeared -- a rattling of keys and lock-chains followed. Suddenly the door slammed open, and the lights went out inside. Abram gazed fearfully into the dark, his back against the parapet.

"Come on in!" a voice hissed from the darkness.

"I'm Lemerrier ... are you Bruno?" Abram managed to gasp.

"Yes, get the hell inside. They can spot us from the street!"

Abram glanced over his shoulder, held the briefcase against his chest, and threw himself into the dark doorway. The door closed loudly behind him and the lights were turned on. He got to his feet with a speed that belied his age, spun around with the briefcase held as a shield -- and stood facing Giordano Bruno, who was locking the door with several keys. Giordano was a crew-cut Asian in his twenties, holding a sawed-off shotgun by one stringy arm. He wore army boots, gray camouflage pants, and a black T-shirt -- plus a huge survival knife in a shoulder-holster. He picked up an iron-bar and placed it across the door by two camp-irons. With his hard eyes fixed on Abram, he finished the locking procedure. Giordano took a step forward and raised his shotgun in Abram's direction.

"Got I.D.?" he asked.

Abram fumbled inside his jacket and got out his driver's license, his membership card for the psychologists' association, and an old bank ID. Giordano studied them closely before returning them. His eyes narrowed, looking at Abram again.

"A shrink, huh? What've you got to do with Dr. Rymowicz?"

Abram slowly backed into the room, following the gun barrels with his eyes, without lowering the bag he held before him.

"Take away the gun," he said slowly. "I am unarmed. I came here to ask a few questions; but if you're going to threaten me, I will leave right now."

"Okay, but no tape recorders. Hang up the coat and case over there." Giordano pointed his gun at a corner. "But first -- spread 'em."

He searched Abram and found no weapons; then he seemed to relax. While Abram put away his coat and briefcase, Giordano switched on the TV set and went out into the kitchen. Abram sat down in the combined TV- and living-room sofa. His gaze wandered across the untidy room. The walls were lined with film posters showing heavily armed, karate-kicking men; next to them, big posters of automatic weapons held by large-breasted women. He chuckled. When Giordano returned from the kitchen with two beer cans, Abram had begun watching the TV news broadcast -- the reports from the riots continued to arrive from airborne reporters. He looked up.

"It's already begun, what Rymowicz warned us about," Giordano said as he handed Abram the other beer can.

Abram asked: "Did he ever tell his students that... 'the outside world will explode under your feet any day'?"

Giordano stared excitedly at Abram, and slumped down in an armchair.

"That's exactly what he said! He said we would soon see a second civil war, and that we'd better choose the winning side, or leave the country." Then his enthusiasm changed into aggressive suspicion: "What are you doing to him, anyway?" Giordano gestured with his can, spilling drops of beer on the table between them.

"Calm down, Giordano. I took on Patrick's case just a week ago, and I'm trying to see that he gets a better treatment than he's received for the last couple of years." Giordano attentively listened to Abram's words. "But in order to convince the medical authorities of that, I must be able to prove that he's more sane than they have assumed."

Giordano interrupted him indignantly: "Dr. Rymowicz is not crazy! They're just trying to break him, like they did when he was teaching at the university." He drank some beer and wrinkled his forehead. Abram cocked his head and let his fingertips touch, while he leaned forward in Giordano's direction.

"I think we both want to help Dr. Rymowicz," he said in a sincere tone. "And you, or the others in his last class, might give me important facts that the police have missed. How well did you know each other? Did you know the student who... lost his life in that incident?"

Giordano's slumped head shot up. "What've the other students told you?" he said nervously.

Abram calmed him: "You're the first one I got in touch with."

Chapter 14

Giordano rose from the armchair and started walking restlessly about the living-room. Behind the drawn curtains came the beating noise of a helicopter flying by at low altitude. He gestured with his hands, stooping, as if he tried to shake out words.

"I think..." he said, "...no, I know that most people hated or feared Rymowicz. No-one likes a smartass. It hurt just to hear him speak, you know?"

Abram nodded.

"I was living here then, commuting between L.A. where I work, and San Diego. Just to hear his lectures in logic and philosophy. I've got several tape recordings."

Giordano walked over to a stereo cupboard and put a cassette in the tape deck.

"This is from one of his last lectures. I've listened to it almost every day since," he eagerly explained, turning on the stereo. Abram sat up in amazement, when he heard the recorded voice of Patrick Rymowicz, five years younger and considerably stronger. He spoke fast, but with utter clarity of tone ...

"The official philosophy of America was formulated in this beautiful way by Abraham Lincoln -- one of the few Presidents who shouldn't have been shot..." (Laughter from the class) "...during our first, great civil war..."

"Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure..." A few years later, in the year 1948, Norman Mailer formulated America's unofficial philosophy in this beautiful way: 'I HATE EVERYTHING THAT IS NOT MYSELF.'

"To understand these two contradictory quotes, is the key to understanding American politics. Already when the Founding Fathers laid the groundwork of our constantly re-interpreted Constitution, they must have realized the hopelessness of their intentions: to create a society where 'all men' -- they probably meant all 'men' -- are 'created equal', in a society which praised individual competition above everything else. A funny thing is that the phrase 'All men are created equal' can also be interpreted as 'All men are created identical' -- which sounds a little unrealistic. By the way, I want everyone to hand in a one-page analysis of that particular phrase by next week."

(Murmuring of sighs from the class)

"So: in a violent frontier culture, which sets up incompatible ideals of individualism and collective equality... how do the leaders go about accomplishing this ideal state?" (Pause.) "The only solution is to develop political schizophrenia: to officially praise the values one simultaneously tramples in the dirt, and especially by trying to circumvent the power-dividing institutions -- Congress, the Supreme Court, and the media."

(Background noise of forceful chalk scribbles against a blackboard)

"Our latest Presidents have been revealed as being either hypocrites, liars, or conspirators -- but this can be blamed on media attention, rather than the Presidents becoming more dishonest. They have all shown signs of this political schizophrenia. Several of them have tried to form secret, non-authorized government organizations to realize their goals. Let us dissect --"

"Hold it! Stop the tape for a moment!"

Abram had abruptly stood up. Giordano obeyed. Abram peered perplexedly at thin air, tugging at his beard.

"This is incredible," he murmured. "I never got to know there were recordings of his lectures. Rymowicz burned all his writings just before his..." He looked at Giordano, who was standing by the stereo deck.

"Have you... is there any tape from that day he finally..?"

"No!" Giordano retorted angrily, but with a hint of insecurity in his eyes. "I destroyed it, and said nothing to the police, or to all those shrinks and journalists who came asking questions. They just would've distorted his words, to make him sound like a psycho killer; and Dr. Rymowicz would've thought I was on their side too. I mean, there were a lot of witnesses in the auditorium, okay? The police didn't need the tape, okay?"

He looked to the floor.

"I know," Abram said in a lower voice, "I've read the reports of his trial. Still... how did he dare saying such things during a philosophy lecture? When I was young, not even the teachers who really were Marxists would be so brazen."

Giordano grinned at him: "Simple. It was listed among the 'junk courses', like 'Practical Witchcraft'. Most of his students had chosen his course to fill their schedule, so they weren't listening to his words, they just read the books. And most of us were so bad at English language, they barely followed half of what he said. Cortez State is one of the lowest-ranking universities in the country. He used his time to talk about other things he thought we should know... 'I want to teach America's new Morlocks how the country really works,' he said."

"That sounds a bit right-wing. Was Rymowicz a racist?"

"Naah, he meant it satirically, and we understood that! He said several times that American politics was one big joke, 'but you'll die laughing.'"

Giordano quoted his teacher with total lack of humor. Abram walked to the wide back window, and peeked out through the chink between the frame and the blinds. From outside came the distant sounds of police sirens, helicopters, and trucks passing by; sporadic gunshots cracked; fires were still burning in the east.

Still looking out, he asked: "That student who was shot to death... Luis Bonzalero. How would you explain that?"

Giordano crossed his arms over his chest, clenching his fists so that the knuckles went white; he spat out his answer.

"Bonzo? Shit, everyone knew he was the worst drug dealer in Cortez State! Principal Trudeberry and all the teachers were scared shitless of him and his gang, 'Los Terminators'. Rymowicz was the only teacher who dared talk back to him."

"Tell me about it."

While Abram remained motionless by the window, Giordano started pacing across the room again:

"Well, one or two weeks before... the gun went off, Bonzo'd threatened Rymowicz. Bonzo was always sitting in the back of the auditorium and sleeping during his lectures, when he wasn't smoking weed and crank. Rymowicz used to ignore him, but this particular day Bonzo was in a bad mood and tried to interrupt... I've got a tape of it here somewhere."

Giordano picked out another cassette from the cupboard, switched tapes, rewound the tape a bit, and pressed PLAY. Once more Rymowicz' former voice came from the loudspeakers, sharp and with a hint

of suppressed anger:

"...which has created a psychological empty space. The official America unconsciously craves a group it can make invisible, and new groups are constantly trying to get a place in the America made visible. Not because the invisible groups in any way should be 'morally superior', that's beside the point. It is only a question of being seen, because by being seen, one gains influence over the mass media, the..."

Another voice on the tape echoed through the auditorium. Rymowicz ceased speaking for a moment, then went on:

"By being seen, one gains influence over..."

"Hey, Doc! I asked you a question, *comprende*?"

"Yes, Luis?"

"Are you trying to tell us that we're not being seen, Doc? That Los Terminators ain't the coolest *hombres* in San Diego? *Que pasa?*"

"Thank you for making that important question, Luis. I will try to answer it the best I can. Say, how many students are gathered here, right now?"

"Ten, twenty, thirty... say, forty students, of which thirty-five are first- or second-generation immigrants from Latin America. According to the new statistics, perhaps one of you has got a decent chance of becoming an MTV popstar, a local politician, or the like.

"Between three and four of you will get AIDS, about ten of you will be full-time drug addicts. At least three of you will be killed or injured in gang wars or drug-related crimes. One of you will, according to statistics, surely be seen on TV -- after being mowed down by a rival gang. Those of you who don't wish to become part of those statistics, perhaps you'd like to pay attention now?"

"You're dead meat, Doc! *Dead meat!*"

"Thank you, I'll make a note of that. Where were we?"

Giordano switched off the stereo. Abram looked over his own shoulder at him, wrinkling his forehead in sombre seriousness. His forehead was shiny with sweat.

"Did you witness Bonzo saying that?" He nearly whispered.

"No, I was sitting in the front row with my back against him. But several people saw him point at Rymowicz and pretending to shoot him."

Giordano shaped his hand into an imaginary pistol and pointed it at Abram's head on a stretched-out arm.

"When a gang leader makes that sign," he said, "it means the same as a death sentence. Didn't the law report say that?"

"No...and none of the questioned witnesses mentioned that gesture," Abram muttered. "OrBonzo's words."

"They were probably scared of the gang," Giordano said bitterly. "But of course, you who come from private schools don't know what it's like here," he added with contempt.

Abram gave him a grim look, yawned, held his wrist up to his nose and squinted at his new paper-and-plastic wristwatch.

"Time's flying. Is there any hotel nearby that I can take a cabto ? I've got more questions, but we can go through them tomorrow."

Giordano stared disbelievingly at Abram's sunken figure, his hands on his hips: "Are you crazy? Thereain't a singletaxidriver who'll go out tonight!"

He pointed at the TV screen. They saw a fire brigade, trying to reach the fires. A stone-throwing mob was pressing it backward.

"When I was studying inVirginia in the Sixties," Abram muttered to himself, "there were nights like this one.But I thought we'd left all that behind. Why does it never stop? Where did we go wrong?"

For amoment Giordano was looking at the old man with what seemed like pity. He went to the stereo cupboard again, took out a tape, went up to Abram and offered it to him.

"Take thisone, I've already got a copy.It's from his penultimate lecture, where he summed up most of what he'd been saying before. But don't tell anyone where you got it."

Abram took the cassette with a tired smile. He straightened himself, hid a yawn with his hand, and put the tape in his pocket.

"Thanks.But I still think I'll have to leave now. I'll call or write to you later."

He shook Giordano's hand, and went off to pick up his coat and briefcase. As Abram moved toward the door, Giordano suddenly looked worried. He picked up the shotgun from the floor, and pointed it at the door while he was lifting away the iron-bar and locking up.

"You sure you want to walk to the hotel?It's one block further up, I can drive you. Car's just outside." Abram glanced at the armed man,then squinted in the direction of the curtained window. He made a silent gesture at Giordano. The young man reached for the switch and the room went dark. They both peered out through the front window curtains. The orange firelight was still flickering at the eastern horizon... but stronger, closer. In the silence, a faint crackle of shoes against asphalt sounded outside -- then suddenly, a crash and a burst of light from theparking-lot , followed by a blast that rattled the windowpanes.

Giordano snarled: "Shit!My car!"

He threw open the door and rushed outside. Abram impulsively followedone step behind.

Chapter 15

Outside , a small band of people were raiding the parking-lot; one car had been set on fire with amolotov-cocktail and exploded. The flames threw dancing shadows over the neighbourhood, as they spread to adjacent cars.

Giordano, seeing this, shouted a foul curse in Spanish that made the looters stop in their tracks.

He stood on the balcony parapet, and fired his double-barrel shotgun in the air. Several looters turned and ran away. Two of them had just managed to break into a car and start the engine. It bumped against other cars as it roared off across the parking-lot . Giordano pushed the speechless Abram aside and locked the apartment door. Then he hurried down the stairway, opening the barrels and loading a new shell. Abram hesitated for a second, then rushed after.

"Wait," he gasped, "they're running away!"

"I gotta move the car to a safer place," Giordano said tensely, striding toward the parking-lot . "Those were just frontrunners. In a minute the riot will be here!"

A few seconds later, they were sitting in Giordano's tiny Nissan as he swerved backward, then forward and out into the street. Abram sat in the backseat -- Giordano's shotgun was taking up the other front seat.

"Could you take me to the airport?" Abram asked, pale in the face. "I must go there anyway, and it's probably safer too."

Giordano looked at Abram by the rear-view mirror.

"Okay... that'll cost you fifty bucks." He grinned. "I am a taxi driver , but I usually don't work riot-time."

Abram blinked rapidly several times, unsmiling -- and was thrown off balance, when the car skidded left to avoid rioters on the street. Giordano honked the horn, and something bumped against the roof as they raced past the raging crowd. They drove past a few empty, littered city blocks -- only a handful of speeding cars were out in the area -- and made a turn up north, onto the Long Beach Freeway. Giordano scanned the landscape.

"Getting to the airport shouldn't take too long, unless we run into any troops. Seems those military exercises weren't a waste after all."

He sank back in his seat and looked over his shoulder at Abram, who held a hand over his chest, leaning on the briefcase in his lap. Abram was breathing with effort.

"You okay, old man?"

"Yeah," he wheezed. "Thanks." Giordano looked thoughtful for a while.

He asked: "You know, you never asked me what Rymowicz told us on that lecture when he shot Bonzo ."

Abram rubbed his moustaches with a handkerchief, then wiped his face.

"I've already read the testimonies from that day, and they don't seem to fit in with the facts you gave me. What do you think ?"

"You know what I think?" Giordano said. "Dr. Rymowicz knew Bonzo was going to ice him, but if he'd reported him to the cops, Bonzo's gang would've fixed him anyway. Rymo's only chance of getting rid of Bonzo and surviving it, was to act crazy -- so that he wouldn't end up among Bonzo's friends in prison."

Abram looked into the rear-view mirror and caught Giordano's hard eyes; his own were haggard.

"An interesting theory... but I honestly don't think the authorities would believe me if I told them."

He stared forward -- avoiding the shotgun with his eyes? -- and added: "For Rymowicz' own sake, I would keep such theories to myself."

Chapter 16

LOS ANGELES INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Giordano's car stopped in front of the police and National Guard control, at one entrance to the airport area. The traffic was lining up ahead of them. Abram got out of the car and gave Giordano a 100-dollar bill.

"Keep the change," he said with a grim face.

He leaned into the side window and asked: "A personal question. Why're you named Giordano Bruno? You don't look Italian to me."

Giordano's obscured face gave out a high, jittery laugh: "I was born in Vietnam, adopted by the Brunos. They thought the name Giordano was fitting, like that guy who was burned at the stake in the sixteenth century, you know?"

Abram grunted: "Yeah, I know. Don't end up like him."

He turned, waved over his shoulder, and started walking toward the airport entrance.

Chapter 17

SEPTEMBER 13

- Hello?

- Hi, my name is Abram, Abram Lemercier. May I speak to Bettina Avarez?

Un momento, por favor. Bettina!

- Hello?

- Hi, I'm Dr. Abram Lemercier, from Easton University in Virginia. May I have a word with you for five minutes?

- ...Okay.

- I'm a psychologist, and I'm studying the case of a mental patient who once was a teacher at Cortez State -- Patrick Rymowicz. I know you attended his classes some years ago, is that right?

- ...Yeah.

- Would you be prepared to answer a few quick questions about him? It's nothing for the public or the media, I assure you -- you will be completely anonymous.

- ...I see. What do you want to know?

- What was your impression of Rymowicz? Was he a good teacher?

- Wait, I'll need to think about that before I answer. Rymowicz was... I mean, he was obviously _loco_. Totally mental, he just showed it more in the final lectures before he... you know.

- I know. Please go on.

- He was probably the worst philosophy teacher we've ever had. He ignored the textbooks, except for when he used them to "prove" some weird statement he was making. He never admitted he could be wrong, never listened to our questions. I passed the course by sticking to the books; I didn't care to write down the bullshit he put us through. But he sure could be funny, in a weird kind of way. Sometimes you wouldn't know if he was making fun of you, or if he was being totally serious.

- I see. Did he ever threaten the students or the teachers, become aggressive or... sexually harassing anyone?

- We used to joke about how dangerous Rymowicz really was, about how one day he would... you know, explode and burn down the campus or something... he never really threatened anyone, though. Sexual harassments..?(Laughter)

Depends on what you mean. He did give the cutest girls looks sometimes, but who could say what he meant by that? The way he gave people those strange looks, it could just as well mean he wanted to kill you. Some people thought he was gay, because he never had any company. But I think he was just too weird to have any girlfriends.

- Could you remember if his eyes were bloodshot?

- Oh, man! When he wasn't listening, we used to call him "The Demon"! He couldn't be getting much sleep, with those eyes. There was a rumor that he had some eye disease that made it difficult for him to blink -- I don't know.

- Were you ever afraid of Rymowicz?

- Yeah, many times. And...and I had a crush on him, too. Those sharp teeth of his made him look a little like a vampire -- you know, I was a young girl and the idea seemed romantic in a kind of scary way. (Laughter)

- Haha ... okay, I don't think I need to ask you more. Thank you very much for your help.

- Don't mention it. By the way ... how is he now?
- Well... I can't go into details of course, but he's alive and relatively well, regarding the circumstances.
- You wouldn't know his address, would you?
- I'm sorry, but I really shouldn't give away his address.
- Okay ... can I give you a letter to him, though?
- Well, I guess that would be all right. Send the letter, inside a sealed envelope to my name, Abram Lemercier, at Easton University in Norfolk, Virginia. The letter will be forwarded to me, and I'll hand it to him.
- Great. Thanks! Bye, Doctor Lemercier.
- Thank you for your help. Goodbye.

Chapter 18

WESTMOREHAM INSTITUTE SEPTEMBER 14

After once more having passed the gates, opened the entrance door with his personal passcard, been let inside the main building by Mark Fosse, walked up the stairs to the second floor and knocked on Joyce Oregon's door, been scrutinized through a peephole and waited for the three locks to be opened, Abram could enter Joyce's office and say hello to her.

It was pitch-dark outside, and squalls were tearing at the tall windowpanes. He politely tilted his hat upward.

"Good evening, Joyce," he said with a sniffle; his nose and cheeks were red with cold. "Do you always work this late?" He smiled at her as she indifferently locked the door.

"Only when my hands are full," she replied. "Parry's been pulling through some of his bizarre demands while you've been away, and I need you to look'em over before you see him."

Without looking him in the eye, she walked to her desk and handed over a bundle of clipped papers, holding them somewhat like a bag of garbage.

Abram skimmed the list, mumbling to himself: "Better temperature control for the special room, check; a kitten for sampling the food, check; a canary for air control, check... a lie detector?"

He glanced up at Joyce, who stood folding her arms, waiting for his next question.

"Could you arrange a lie detector for him?" he said.

"You take full responsibility, remember? We wanted your explicit approval before buying one," she said dryly.

Abram rubbed his red nose, looking doubtful: "We'll wait with the detector for a while, I think." He continued on down the list: "Kevlar vest -- too expensive. Gas mask, first aid -- okay, maybe later. Gun and rubber bullets -- impossible. He must've understood that."

Joyce sniffed at him, and said: "Parry always tests exactly how far he can go. If you want my opinion, he's going to try another escape."

Abram gave her a shrewd look: "Don't be too sure about that. Is he ready for the special room now?"

Chapter 19

Almost simultaneously, Abram and Parry walked through their respective doors, and across to the plexiglass wall in the middle of the echo-free room.

Parry seemed less thin, and had a somewhat healthier color below his eyes. His eyes were just as bloodshot, though, and the wolf grin was still there. He stared expectantly at Abram, who managed a smile.

"Good to see you, Patrick! You look healthier. Is everything to your satisfaction?"

Parry stood motionless, and replied: "The air vent, Doc! Do I have to remind you every time?"

Abram's smile disappeared, but he went and sealed the air intake on his side of the chamber.

Parry looked more content, and added: "It doesn't get as hot in here as in the beginning, since they fixed the basement system. We've got a few minutes of talking, before we have to take a break for new air. I don't want to suffocate my new pets."

He went over to a corner of the room, where an old-fashioned wrought-iron bird cage stood on a stand. Next to it was a basket, a box of kitty-litter, and a water-bowl. An empty paper plate lay by the basket. The little bird in the cage started chirping, as Parry squatted down over the basket and picked up a tiny, dark-gray kitten. Holding it gently in his arms, he went closer to the glass wall.

"I call her Joyce," he said, stroking the cat's head until it started to purr with its eyes closed. "Was thinking of asking them to send in a hooker from town; but of course Dr. Oregon would never agree on that." He made a wide grin.

Abram opened his briefcase, looking uncomfortable.

"Let's get to work," he said, sitting down on his stool. From his case, he extracted a notepad and pencil. He looked gravely up at Parry, who unflinchingly stared back while caressing the purring cat. "I've been to California and made a few personal inquiries among the students of your last class," Abram began. "I think, that if I dug a little deeper into the case, I might find proof of several extenuating circumstances, which didn't surface in the investigation five years ago."

Parry suddenly ceased stroking the cat.

"I've also begun to suspect," Abram continued, "that you weren't as confused by the time of the unfortunate incident... as you appeared to be."

Parry did not grin anymore, but pressed his lips together -- hard.

"However, since I'm officially regarding you as insane now, re-examining the old court decision will not come up. There should be no risk of you landing in a prison, after such a long time here."

Parry was beginning to sweat, but grinned again: "You're damn smart, Doc. But like you said -- I'm insane now. So get started with the therapy! You've got a few minutes, before the canary starts to suffocate."

Saliva sprinkled on the glass as he spat out the words. Abram wiped a drop of sweat from his brow, cleared his throat, and began to write: "Notes from conversations with Parry in the evening, September 14."

"First question. Make your answers as brief as you can..."

Chapter 20

- Patrick, when was the first time you experienced the feeling that other people were out to get you?

- On the day I became six years old.

- Tell me about it.

- It was my birthday party. I got a lot of fine presents from all my relatives. Uncle Dan, who made much more money than my father, gave me a battery-powered fire-truck, with wire control and a pull-out ladder...

- Yes?

- I was overjoyed; this was before all toys became computerized. Uncle Dan looked at me in a strange way, and asked me if he and I could go out in the backyard to play with my new fire-truck. Then suddenly my mom went afraid; she took me by the arm and said I'd just had a cold and shouldn't be going out. I knew she was lying, and it was a rather warm day by the end of April, but I didn't say anything that time.

When everybody had left and Mom was cleaning the house, I asked her why she had lied. She lifted me up into her lap and looked very sad. She told me that Uncle Dan had been very sick, and done terrible things. She was afraid that he was going to try doing something terrible again. She was very harsh when she warned me: "Patrick, always be careful with people you don't know. Sometimes you can't even trust those you think are your friends! Always remember that!"

That night, I sneaked out of the house and threw my uncle's present down a ravine. I cried myself to sleep over the fire-truck I didn't dare to keep; I had liked it, but now it was tainted with his evil intent. Mom didn't say anything when she discovered it was gone; Dad discovered it a bit later, but he said nothing either.

- Did you ever see your uncle again?

- No, never. A year or so later, I heard he'd died in some kind of unexplained accident.

- What did you feel when you heard of his death?

- I felt a great relief, as if some invisible threat had been moved away. That is, until I started to become aware of other things.

- Give me an example.

- Already at my first day in school, I saw how there were different factions of children forming on the schoolyard. They were somehow directed into separate clusters... as if there were invisible magnets under the ground, pulling them along. Girls over there, boys over here, white children here, Black children there, Catholic children here... they seemed to lack a will of their own, no minds of their own.

There were some oddballs and outcast children who were attracted to my company, but they all seemed totally different and alien to me. Sometimes a bully tried to pick on me, but the moment I started to fight I showed him a lesson. When I fought I was ruthless... I always carried a fistful of sand in my pocket, that I could throw in his eyes. I really tried to kill the opponent, make him blind; tear his nose off. I almost succeeded in doing that once; it was the proudest moment of my early school days.

- How old were you then?

- Eight.

- I know you finished school early, with excellent grades in Language and Arts. What made you decide to become a teacher, and why teach Philosophy with a specialization in Logic?

- When I finished college by the end of the Seventies, I was extremely worried about the global condition. I lived in constant fear of global nuclear war breaking out any moment, and I had sleeping difficulties. Other students offered me dope, to help me sleep, but I never took any. Didn't trust them. I've never been a religious person, so I hoped philosophy could offer me a rational, logical way of understanding and dealing with the human condition.

- Try summing up your experience of the university years.

- Work, frustration, isolation. I managed the studies the way I managed school and college: say and do just as much as they expect of you -- no more, no less. When I graduated in the early Eighties, I began looking for teaching assignments all around California.

- What was your view of the world at that time?

- I can't see why we have to go through all this, there are old interviews where I say the same things.

- I still want to hear you say it. Please go on.

- I realized that invisible forces beyond my control were in motion, for purposes I could not understand. Behind the arms race of the superpowers, and the threat of a world war, were a few hidden groups who played a cynical game with world control at the stakes. I decided to get a regular job and live an ordinary life on the outside, while trying to gain insight into the conspiracies in my spare time.

- Did you come to any insights during your time as a teacher?

- I've mentioned them before: the hidden groups have certain limitations in their use of power. For

example, they cannot read or control people's minds directly. Their main means of manipulating people's actions are indirect influence: the mass media, religion, political ideologies -- false constructs which appeal to our primitive, selfish instincts.

Bread and circuses, yeah. Already the Roman emperors knew that. Bread and circuses --it's mostly so efficient, that the powerplay of the hidden groups is almost laid bare -- people see it without seeing it. I made this frightening discovery: that people often openly admitted that they felt manipulated, but didn't protest. There was some kind of programmed impulse to obey, which occurred after puberty -- a little earlier in women. I realized that there was yet another, hidden power behind those who fought for world dominion.

- Do you know anything about this "second power"?

- Not much. But I'm constantly trying to gather facts and fit them into some coherent pattern.

- You mentioned a programmed impulse to obedience...

- ...which occurred after puberty, yes. After a while, educating became my cover for subversive action; the young are in a period of flux when they are susceptible to non-conformist modes of thinking. I tried to sow the seeds of critical thought into my lectures, but I had to proceed with caution; there were informers among the students. Thanks to one of those, I lost my job at an L.A. university and had to take a job at a less esteemed university, which had recently been built in a Spanish-American district in San Diego.

- What exactly led to the unfortunate incident in San Diego?

- Hold it, Doc. Time to have a break for more air, or my canary will die.

- By all means...I'm suffocating myself.

Chapter 21

Joyce and the warden stood waiting outside the special room when one of its doors opened. Abram came out into the basement, closing the door after him without locking it. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and took deep breaths of the warm, dry air.

"It's costing us extra to cool down this special room, when we are forced to heat up the rest of the building at this time of the year," Joyce said, looking up at the pipes in the ceiling.

"Believe me," Abram replied, "it'll be worth it."

"Did you make any progress?"

Joyce studied his eyes, which glittered in the gloom.

"Parry is the most fascinating patient I've ever met! The closer you think you're getting to his mind, the more cleverly he slips away."

"I've could've told you that," Joyce sighed. "Should we keep him here for the time being?"

"Sure, there's no danger. He's beginning to make himself comfortable, though he still thinks you're

bugging the room by the air vent."

She made an indifferent face, and said: "As I understand it, you're going to give him free access to newspapers and new books, even television and radio. Are you fully aware of the consequences for his mental condition?"

Abram made a subtle imitation of one of her stances; he folded his arms and looked up into the ceiling.

"As I understand it," he said in a controlled voice, "you have systematically been subjecting an intelligent, sensitive human being to sensory deprivation for a dangerously long time. Are you aware of how that might have affected his mental condition?"

Joyce asked him with icy calm: "Are you trying to teach me how to run this institution?"

"No," he replied without moving, "I'm not after your job, nor your prestige. I want to try making Parry trust one single person in the world, before he completely forgets how that's done."

Her eyes opened wide at Abram, she shook her head in quiet resignation, and glanced at her wristwatch.

"God help you, Abram. You'd better go inside again, before he starts to worry."

Chapter 22

Abram returned to the special room, locked the door, and shut the air vent. Parry was still standing with the kitten in his arms, impatiently staring with tired, squinting eyes.

"Right," Abram said, "we'll continue according to the plan."

He sat on the stool and put the notepad in his lap again.

"Okay," Parry said immediately, "this is the information I'll need to help you with the report. "I want weekly publications covering the whole world. They could be in Russian, Spanish, and Portuguese too. Have no time for daily newspapers. Radio, of course, and TV -- to follow the official world view. Make that battery-powered ones -- Oregon would never allow me an electric cable."

Abram made quick notes, nodding.

"Good, good... any particular books? I can get hold of a lot of special literature at the CIA library in Langley, and also individual articles through the database."

"Get me something on the history of the CIA... but not the official crap! Pick the most critical writeryou'll find, even if he's KGB. And also bring books on the history of world religions; astronomy; archaeology; geology with emphasis on oil and natural gas sites; plate tectonics; genetic engineering; computer development; Artificial Intelligence; biographies of famous tyrants from antiquity to the present..."

Parry stopped, stroked the purring cat, grinned and added in a lower voice: "And a short guide to the care of cats and birds."

Abram jotted down the last item, sat up and ran a hand over his moustaches. Parry demonstratively

waved goodbye at him with his free arm.

"I get the message," Abram muttered. "I'll bring you the first part of my report to read, too." He took his briefcase, opened the air vent, nodded at Parry, and silently walked out of the echo-free room.

Chapter 23

On the plane to Langley, Abram dictated a few notes into his pocket secretary.

"Item: Patrick strikes you as the archetypal paranoiac, as others have observed before me. The traumatic childhood... the precocious mind... the latent homophobia... violent tendencies... the idea of others being spies and marionettes... the obsession with conspiracies. And yet, there's a hint of self-consciousness in his madness, an irony that's mostly absent in these cases. Perhaps Parry sees the world as a theater watched by some malicious force, so that he's constantly being aware of an unseen audience..."

Abram frowned, then switched off the gadget. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, then put the eyeglasses back on his head, pulled up the blanket over his chest and closed his eyes.

Chapter 24

CIA HEADQUARTERS
LANGLEY, VIRGINIA
SEPTEMBER 15

The library was a clear-lit maze of bookshelves spread out across several wings, each wing visible from the window where Abram was sitting in front of a computer terminal. It was one of the many which were scattered throughout the library. Most of them were occupied by male and female employees searching for information.

An elderly librarian in baggy pants rolled a cart of books past Abram. They both nodded imperceptibly -- the librarian slipped him an envelope, Abram shoved it under his papers. Then they ignored each other. A heavily built, crew-cut man in his early sixties came walking along the bookshelves, halted near Abram, smiled with all of his tanned face, and came closer. He leaned over the terminal, folding his arms across his wide chest.

"Eh-bram! Good to see you, you been difficult to find lately."

At the sound of the drawling, deep-nasal voice, Abram started and looked up from the monitor. He gave a quick smile of recognition, and turned in his chair.

"Hi Ned," he said, "sorry I couldn't come directly to your office when I arrived. I was so eager to search for material for my next report, that..."

Ned Wilson gave a laugh, patting him on the shoulder with a broad palm.

"Haha ... always the dutiful one, that's fine. Could you just get a hint of what the next chapter'll be about?"

"Well... one could say that I will try to apply such a broad perspective as possible. The sequence might become a little unstructured, since I will let the imagination run a little over the limit for traditional future reports..."

"Ehxcellent,ehxcellent !"

Ned's phone suddenly beeped inside his jacket. He held it to his ear, pressed the receiving button, and listened attentively for a couple of seconds.

He put a hand over the receiver and grinnedexcusingly : "So much to do, so little time... be seeingya !"

Ned hastily walked away, leaving Abram to concentrate on the computer terminal again. Abram opened the unsealedenvelope which the librarian had given him: inside was the sealed letter addressed to "Dr. PatrickRymowicz " from BettinaAvarez , and a separate note. The note was a computer printout with a handwritten message added on top:

*Abram,
here is the X-ray of the envelope you gave me. The letter inside was wrapped in black paper, and a rather goofy one -- we had quite a laugh over at our department. Good luck with that patient of yours -- he must have a way with women, though he might not know it.:-)*
-Greg

NMR SCAN PROGRAM

ENVELOPEREADING(CERTAINTY 94%):

Dear Dr.Rymowicz , I still long to hear from you.I pray each night that you are well. Please, please, let me know that you have noticed my love for you! My passion for you burns hotter with the years. If you suffer greatly in your desolation, perhaps I can bring you comfort. I would do anything to help you to freedom. If you need money, anything -- just write to me. I will wait for your word and obey it.

*Forever yours,
Bettina*

Bettina had ended the letter with her address and phone number. Abram choked a chortle, then turned grave and slipped the sealed letter into his briefcase.

Chapter 25

WESTMOREHAM INSTITUTE
SEPTEMBER 16

"It's boring," Parry said. He pointed at the thick report Abram was holding up to the glass wall, so that Parry could read it. "Flip back to the front page again, and I'll show you what's wrong with it."

Abram did so, and held up the title page so that both of them could view the text:

IMAGES OF THE NEW FUTURE

By DR. ABRAM LEMERCIER

CONTAINS CLASSIFIED MATERIAL -- UNAUTHORIZED COPYING STRICTLY
FORBIDDEN

PART 1: THE COLLAPSE OF THE OLD WORLD ORDER

- 1.1. The World According to Jalta
- 1.2. The Time Of Consolidation: 1945-1985
- 1.3. Gorbachev And After: 1985-1991
- 1.4. The End of History?
- 1.5. Notes

"You see?" Parry said. "Old stuff, even for a guy who's been locked away for as long as me. That phrase 'The End of History' is completely outdated. If the rest is going to be worth reading, it has to be one hell of a report."

Abram grunted.

"Well, that's why I contacted you. There aren't many paranoiacs with your IQ level -- and I've seen a few. Besides, this is just an introduction."

Parry backed and turned around on the spot, scratching himself restlessly.

"I can't get started before I get the things on my list. Where are they?"

Abram carefully put his report back into his briefcase, and smiled.

"They came with me today. I'll be away for a few days, and let you go through it, get your mind working again. As soon as I leave this room, the wardens will start carrying in your new stuff."

Parry looked as if he was going to say something, but held back. Abram frowned, flashing a little smile.

"You don't have to say 'thank you', Patrick. After all, it's me who's about to exploit your talents."

Parry showed his teeth, unsmiling: "I haven't forgotten that you're a shrink too, Lemercier. And shrinks just love feeling superior. That's why I hate 'em, the smug faggots."

Abram, still frowning, cocked his head and gave Parry a questioning look: "I'm a psychologist, not a psychiatrist. And suppose," he said calmly, "that I was a 'faggot'. Would that bother you?"

Parry looked away, going tense, opening and closing his fists -- then suddenly spun around, and banged his fists on the glass wall with a manic grimace. When he saw Abram flinch away, he gave a smattering laugh.

"No, it won't bother me," he said scornfully, "as long as there's this wall between us! It protects me as well as you, Doc!"

Abram left the special room with no further words. The wardens started carrying in the books, magazines, and other things into Parry's room-half.

Chapter 26

WESTMOREHAM INSTITUTE
SEPTEMBER 21

"Are you ready to begin, Doc?"

Parry was sitting cross-legged on his mattress on the other side of the glass wall, surrounded by books, magazines, and notebooks strewn across the floor. The gray kitten rose from its litterbox and started walking around the small space, peering up at the canary who was chirping in its cage. A combined TV set and radio stood in a corner, showing a Ren & Stimpy cartoon. Parry smiled with his mouth tightly closed; his expectant face had gained a fleshier hue, and his body was less thin -- more on the lean side.

Abram, still clothed in a damp overcoat, sat on the stool by the glass wall with his notepad and pen ready. He looked sternly into Parry's reddish eyes.

"Now remember, Parry, that I value your imagination, your own way of looking at the world. Let your mind wander freely, don't censor yourself. You've got nothing to lose."

Parry grinned back, squinting in an ironic grimace: "I've got nothing to lose, true." His voice was no longer hoarse, but sharp and grating. "But you've got everything to lose, Doc: your fine job; your professional reputation as a psychologist; your pension; all the privileges a CIA employee can get hold of. I won't need to censor my theories -- your own impulse to obedience will do that for me!"

For a second Abram seemed to be near an outburst of anger -- but he calmed himself.

Parry breathed in, then out, and began: "First, let's talk about theories of world blocs..."

Chapter 27

CIA HEADQUARTERS OCTOBER 6

Ned Wilson came walking toward Abram in the headquarters' main lobby, clutching a thick binder. He walked with long strides, slightly stooping; his tanned, square face was tense. Abram halted, blinking repeatedly and nervously at the approaching figure. A few feet away from Abram, Ned saw him, smiled wide with all his teeth and waved with the binder.

"Eh-bram!" he shouted enthusiastically. "I was just on my way to your car!"

Abram, dressed in a dark-blue pinstripe suit and tie, smiled weakly and stretched out his free hand. Ned shook it heartily, patting him on the shoulder: "Congratulations, old boy! The Security Council was delighted over the second part of your report. Some of us were... well, quite surprised over your creative spark. Where'd you get all your wild ideas?"

Abram made an embarrassed grin, tugging at his beard. "Er, well... it's not easily explained."

"You tired after the air trip? No? Fine! Let's go out in the sun and talk, it's a fantastic day for being October."

Ned more or less pushed Abram before him with his palm. They traversed the arched glass entrance where a thin stream of employees walked by, and out onto the paved path at the front of the entrance hall. It was a lukewarm autumn day, and the surrounding trees shone yellow and green in the low sun. After walking about a hundred feet the path split three ways. Ned took off to the left, walking down a low set of stairs; Abram followed by his side, both silent. Halfway down a sloping path Ned stopped and looked around; then he opened the binder, holding the spread between them.

It was the front page of the second part of Abram's report:

IMAGES OF THE NEW FUTURE

By DR. ABRAM LEMERCIER

CONTAINS CLASSIFIED MATERIAL -- UNAUTHORIZED COPYING STRICTLY
FORBIDDEN

PART 2: A NEW OLD WORLD ORDER?

2.1. ModelsFor aNew World Order

2.1.1. Religious blocs

2.1.2. Energy resource blocs

2.1.3. Agriculture blocs

2.1.4. Military power blocs

2.1.5. Geographical blocs

2.1.6. The new instability of bloc structures

2.2. The Near Global Future

2.2.1. Local conflict fires

2.2.2. Ethnic nationalism

2.2.3. Actors in the Global Economy

2.2.4. The increased oil consumption

2.2.5. Suggestion for aMeccaDoctrine

2.2.6. The Balkan problem

2.3. Unexpected Global Threats

2.3.1. Climate changes and large migrations

2.3.2. The Greenhouse Effect

2.3.3. The ozone layer

2.3.4. Suggestion for a GlobalEnvironment Court

2.3.5. The next Ice Age?

2.3.6. Comets and meteorites

2.3.7. Suggestion for a PlanetaryDefense

2.3.8. New religious movements

2.3.9. Evolution is still in motion

2.3.10. The rise of Artificial Intelligence

2.3.11. The effects of Genetic Engineeringon mankind

2.4. Notes and Sources

Ned put his finger on the sub-heading "2.2.6.: The Balkan problem".

"The President has read a copy, and he's recently expressed a positive interest in your suggestion; an agreement withRussia aboutsplittin ' up the Balkans into guarded security zones." He chuckled,adding: "Hell, it'd be jus' likeol 'Germany ! I'mgettin ' nostalgic all over..."

"Well, not quite that way," Abram objected carefully. "Now that we share the ideals of democratic capitalism with the East, only the purely military and ethnic tensions will remain."

Ned nodded compliantly, frowning: "True, true, ah' was jus' kidding. By the way," he added as if

casually, "where'd you get the idea of a 'Mecca Doctrine'?"

Abram seemed confused, looked up chapter "2.2.5. Suggestion for a Mecca Doctrine", and brightened up: "Oh, that!" He ran a hand over his beard as he scanned the pages.

"I simply realized," he continued, "that we here in the secular West are so used to thinking in terms of economy and strategy, that we forget how much religion controls thought in the Orient and India.

"So in order to secure the oil fields there, we should seek guarantees that the nuclear powers in the region -- especially Israel -- would choose another firsthand target. Of course such an agreement must be strictly confidential..."

"Of course," Ned agreed, "but that's what the text said. Ah'm asking, y'see ..." He shoved his hands in the pockets of his beige suit, and leaned closer. "...because the National Security Agency is looking for talented people for the Middle East Branch. There are Embassy seats available in Cairo, Ankara, and Tel Aviv... top salaries and much coveted. I'd very much like to suggest you at the next staff meeting."

He looked expectantly at his employee. Abram's face showed a mix of surprise and pride -- he dropped the binder on the paving, quickly bent down and picked it up, embarrassed.

"I'm flattered of course," he said awkwardly as he stood up, "but I've always put my academic career at the top of my list before, so... I'll consider the offer, Ned."

He handed Ned the binder.

"I told you the Company always stands by its employees, Eh-bram!" Ned thumped him in the back, and Abram looked embarrassed again. "Now let me buy you a beer to celebrate this."

Chapter 28

WESTMOREHAM INSTITUTE
OCTOBER 7

"You're disappointing me, Doc!"

There was a flatness about Parry's voice in the echo-free special room, but it was still loud and piercing. Abram almost looked hurt, as he stood by the other side and held Part 2 of his report for Parry to read.

"Now be reasonable, Parry. I only used those parts of your suggestions that really were of importance. If you, on the other hand, feel that I'm trying to take the credit for your ideas, I can understand..."

"To hell with the credit!" Parry shouted, spraying spittle on the greasy plexiglass. "That you would take the credit for my work was part of our deal," he continued in a lower tone, pressing his palms to the barrier. "Can't you see? Your boss was only pretending to praise the idea of splitting the Balkans into East and West zones. That was a stupid idea in typical Cold War style, which I added to test your attention.

"So if you're not lying about what your boss said, then he's trying to hide... his real interest in the Mecca Doctrine. Aren't you wondering why he's doing that?"

Joyce the cat cowered by the locked door, meowing anxiously. Parry turned around, and went and

picked it up. Abram lowered his arms and walked over to the air vent to open it.

Chapter 29

When Abram had returned and re-sealed the air intake, he abruptly raised his hand in a stop signal.

"Wait -- don't say anything. I've been thinking about what you said of Ne ... my superior, and I think there is a logical explanation. If he thought the Mecca Doctrine was an important suggestion, he would of course not want to have it revealed at once, to avoid the spreading of rumors ..."

Irritated, Parry broke him off: "Ergo: he won't trust you. He might even believe that you've got secret information from a leak in the CIA or the Pentagon. You know a few people there, don't you? Intelligence people are a paranoid bunch... they need to talk to a trusted shrink sometimes. Someone like you."

Abram gave him a baffled stare.

"Let us for a moment forget where we are right now," Abram said with great self-control, "and ask ourselves how likely it would be... that you, by the aid of a handful of books, would have stumbled upon a well-guarded military secret."

Parry made a superior grin, caressing Joyce's head.

"Simple, Doc. I just have to look for a field which is strangely empty of writing and speculation, a logical empty space where people like you seem to be afraid of going. For instance, it recently struck me that logically speaking, the CIA shouldn't exist..."

Abram touched his forehead as if he suddenly had a migraine, shielding his eyes.

"What," he half-whispered, "are you saying?"

Parry lowered his voice more, leaning forward secretively: "The CIA is the only so-called spy network and 'intelligence' agency I know, that once published comic-books to advertise itself -- after World War Two, you know.

"It was the first intelligence agency that made its secret files public when the politicians ordered so, long before the STASI was forced to do the same. The only secret organization that openly leaked about assassination attempts on political enemies like Castro, and even bragged about it. An organization that seemed to be powerless, while one particular President formed his own private intelligence agency.

"Even when George Bush, a former head of CIA, was President, nothing was made to clean up 'The Company's' messy and pointless Latin American operations -- operations which only helped one drug lord or another, like Noriega for instance. The so-called 'War On Drugs' was a joke."

Abram was looking before himself with unseeing eyes, slowly shaking his head like a sleepwalker. It appeared he tried to say something, and his mouth moved.

"And you who are supposed to so be smart, Doc!" Parry's nose touched the plexiglass. "Have you never even wondered why such a malfunctioning organization as the CIA even exists? Who benefits from its existence? The Pentagon, with its own intelligence branches that always have looked upon the CIA as a

rival?The Russians?The President?

"Why did it take several years after the war, before an eccentric officer by the name 'Wild Bill' Donovan was assigned to revive a stone-dead wartime organization called theOSS ? Why has the CIA never accomplished anything useful, except showing photos of Cuban missile bases -- taken with the military's hardware? Think, Doc!"

Abram answered tonelessly, as if to himself: "I can't answer those questions...I'm just a consultant hired to write futurology studies, an academic... I don't know the head of the CIA, or any Joint Chiefs of Staff, haven't even seen the President. To question the existence of the CIA like that, is... is --"

"Madness?" Parry was slightly amused. He bent his knees and let the cat down on the floor. "Wasn't it the imagination of a madman you needed? Or are you getting scared now, when the monkey in the cage is laughing back at you?"

He began to laugh, loudly and sharply. He rested his palms on his knees, bending over so that his ruddy head bumped lightly against the glass wall; then again and again, while he rocked with laughter. His eyes watered, and he closed his eyes with his face distorted by something not quite like joy.

Abram stood looking at the laughing, doubled-up figure for half a minute... then he grabbed his briefcase and rushed out of the room without opening the air vent.

Chapter 30

Joyce seemed genuinely worried when Abram surprised her by rushing out, pale in face, chased by Parry's laughter. She snapped her fingers at the warden Simon, who marched inside.

"What happened?" she asked Abram, who leaned his back to the wall.

He eased his tie and held a hand to his chest, took a few deep breaths and seemed to calm down: "No problem, no problem at all. We were discussing and got a little agitated...that's all. I've been through worse," he assured, straightening himself.

"I warned you," Joyce stated without emotion. "Parry is smart enough to drive people crazy, once he's made them listen to him."

"I know," Abram muttered with slight irritation.

"By the way, he's already read the books he got, and he's still nagging about getting a Kevlar vest, a gas mask, and a lie detector... ironically, he doesn't seem too interested in the Internet."

"He missed out on it because he's been here. Tell him to be patient. I'll send some more books."

"More errands?" Joyce raised a sarcastic eyebrow.

"I'll have to discuss Parry's case with some old colleagues."

He hastened up the stairs to the first floor; Joyce remained standing with her hands in her coat pockets, looking up after him.

"I'm looking forward to reading about Parry when you're finished..!"

But her call trailed off; he was already out of hearing range.

Chapter 31

THE VIETNAM MEMORIAL
WASHINGTON, D.C.
OCTOBER 8

The two old men came walking along the paved path with the low sun at their backs.

Their figures, and behind those the distant needle of the Washington Memorial, were reflected in the black marble surface of the V-shaped monument facing them. The flag rippled from the nearby flagpole, and the flaghaliard smattered rhythmically in the wind. The tree-crowns were the color of flames, but the ground was yet almost free of dead leaves.

Visitors were putting down flowers by the base of the monument; a few tourists were taking pictures. A cluster of Chinese tourists took a stand around the sculpture "The Three Servicemen", while one of them photographed the group. One of them made the V-sign to the camera.

Abram pulled up the collar of his wool coat; he wore his hat pressed down over his ears. Next to him walked a fat, red-faced man with puffy cheeks; his eyes were hidden by the thick layers of wrinkles around his white eyebrows, and he wore heavy eyeglasses. The man wore a light gray coat and hat; he was visibly older than Abram. Just as they came up to the black name-list slabs, he pulled out a black scarf and swept it around his fat chin and neck. They stood in front of one memorial slab and appeared to read the engraved names of dead American soldiers, without looking at each other.

"Kip," Abram said without turning in the other man's direction, "how long have our families known each other?"

Kip O'Neill answered with a voice made hoarse by a lifetime of speaking: "Ever since the Sixties in Norfolk, when I was a lawyer running for Congress, and you were a radical student, the fiery spirit of my campaign staff... you went around telling everyone that Kip O'Neill would build unity across age, race, and class borders... but you got stern warnings not to mention Vietnam, it was a hot potato."

O'Neill smiled faintly, though it hardly showed under his redcheek-pouches .

Abram filled in: "You remember when I got into a fight with some rednecks who thought I was a hippie? I came to your house in the middle of the night, spilling blood all over your sofa, while your wife bandaged my head... my lumpy nose still reminds me of that."

He drew a gloved finger down the uneven bridge of his nose, sighed lightly, and gazed up at the increasingly cloudy afternoon sky.

Kip frowned, and said: "We haven't seen each other for years, since you lost Cathy."

Abram bent down and picked up a red tulip from the monument's base, held it up to his worried eyes, and rotated it slowly between two fingers.

"I've been doing my two jobs full time, but I'd be happy to come and visit you and Rhoda, now that

you're retired and have the time..."

"It's something about the Company, right?" Kip's question was put in a neutral tone, but Abram threw him a quick side glance.

Kip kept facing forward, waiting.

"Yes, it's the Company. You've never liked my other job, but we've remained friends, *n'est-ce pas*?"

"If you want to leak something, it's too late for me to do anything now, Abram. I was thrown out of the circle of action in '94."

"Well, I've never been in the circle of action myself, so that makes us equal. I'd like to talk about secrets. Old secrets. Older than your career."

"I'm listening..."

"Suppose -- hypothetically -- that there was a secret so big, so dangerous, that the mere knowledge could shake up the entire nation..."

"Nothing is rotten enough to upset the voters anymore. They all know their rulers are corrupt, that no one could become President without the permission of the mightiest men in America; and there aren't that many people who bother to vote anyway."

Abram said: "I'm not talking about some petty affair with a pinup-girl, or arms-smuggling to some obscure Third World country, or taking bribes from foreigners. Nothing like that. Real secrets. The ones wars get started over. What would you suggest?"

"Well... suppose, as a hypothetical example, that someone found irrefutable evidence of who shot Kennedy. Those things."

"Exactly. What else could you imagine?"

"Or... satellite photos of missile sites in Iran."

"Not quite. Old stuff. World War Two."

"I was in the war, as you know... landed in France on D-day... when we went into Germany, we once liberated survivors from that concentration camp. I'll never forget it; the stench of burned corpses and piles of bodies; little children reduced to just skin and bones, so starved that they got sick when we fed them. The rumor went among the officers that the Allied forces knew what was going on in the camps, but didn't bomb them... that they allowed it to continue."

Kip paused momentarily, then uttered his verdict: "That they protected the butchers to get a hold on them... get them on our side against the Russians."

"You know Stalin did even worse in East Germany," Abram pointed out. The Cold War was going on way back in 1944."

"Wait, I'm getting to it. The point is that everyone -- everyone who was reasonably informed -- knew what a rotten game we were playing. That's the only kind of secrets that work, those that are so big that

we simply refuse to see them. Lesser secrets always make headlines."

"I get it."

Tourists and visitors began to disperse; the clouds were flocking in the yellowing sky. Kip started to walk alongside the monument; Abram followed close by.

"But still," Abram went on, "suppose there was a secret since the war, which a few persons in high places knew about, which they were forced to carry with them; perhaps even pass on... how would they do it?"

"Remember the fuss over George Bush and his membership in the student sorority 'Skull And Bones'? Or the 'Friends Of Bill' list? Old friends stick together. So what? Loyalty ties which are made early, like among people who went to the same university, usually follow them a long way into their careers. It's no secret, for instance, that the core of the CIA was made up of people who knew each other. That's the way politics works. Scrub my back and I'll scrub yours. Blood oaths and secret vows ain't necessary."

"Mmm..." Abram tossed the tulip back at the base of the marble slab.

"What's the Company up to these days?" Kip asked, the way one asks if it is raining outside.

"Redefining its role, one might say. Have you ever seen a federal servant suggest that he ought to be fired?"

"Yeah, and pigs can fly. The Company was created to fight the Communists, everyone knows that."

"Do they, now? I was recruited by the Company pretty late, in the Seventies when it seemed to be crumbling under the pressure of a negative opinion. I never became anything but an occasional consultant, who would revitalize the organization with new ideas. After twenty years of writing reports -- nothing. The Russians were suddenly converted and it wasn't thanks to us."

"Does it all seem pointless now?" Kip asked.

Abram stopped in his tracks, and said: "I can't shake the feeling that we've been conned into playacting secret agents. But why? Just so the President could be able to say that we were stalling the Red Menace? But that was the Pentagon's job. While all the time, it was the Bomb that stalled the Reds. Even now."

The last tourist retreated from the memorial site; the first raindrops began to fall. The two old men briskly walked north toward Constitution Avenue in silence. Abram unlocked the car that stood parked by the sidewalk. He let Kip into the front seat, and sat down behind the steering-wheel. Abram turned toward Kip, hesitant. Kip's red, puffy face buried his eyes and revealed nothing.

"Kip, you know I would never leak anything that would hurt the safety of the country. Anyway, I don't know anything yet. Just guesswork. But if my guesses would be the least bit correct, we shouldn't meet again. If anyone would ask about me, tell them I'm depressed over a difficult patient. Tell Rhoda I'm sorry I couldn't see her. Should I drive you home?"

The fat old man sighed, and said out loud: "A friend of mine showed me one of these stereograms ... y'know, a kind of jumbled pictures: if you look at them in a precise certain way, you see the hidden image in the pattern. I tried, tried hard to look at the pattern the right way, but I never saw anything. My friend assured me the image was there, I just wasn't looking the right way."

"Then it hit me: there are several ways of looking at this random pattern, so why should one of them be right and the others wrong? If I can't see a pattern someone else claims to be real, I must follow my own judgement -- and say: 'Pal, you're chasing shadows.'"

Kip took out an umbrella from his coat and put it in his lap. He gave Abram a quick stare, his eyes showing a mix of fear and sorrow.

"I can't help you where you're going, Abram. I'm sorry."

The moment he finished his sentence he opened the door, put up his umbrella, and hurried away in the rain.

Chapter 32

OCTOBER 9

Abram was sitting far back in the large passenger jet. The lights were out and most of his fellow travellers slept, or sat watching the movie screen with headphones over their ears.

"In the feudal society," he dictated into his secretary, "only the court jester was allowed to openly ridicule the prince or king. His function could be regarded as therapeutic: the court had an outlet for its suppressed resentment against the ruler -- and the ruler was reminded that he was human and not infallible.

"In a way, the jester is modern society's earliest precursor to the therapist: he encourages introspection with the distancing power of laughter... and that's why so many of them are smugfaggots blahblah --"

He yawned and shut off the device, dozing off quickly.

Chapter 33

WESTMOREHAM INSTITUTE
OCTOBER 10

Red-eyed and sunken, Abram was let inside the main building.

Joyce was on her way from a cell that the nurses were going through while serving meal trays from a cart. She waved, smiling warmly, and came to greet him.

"Jetlag?" she asked, one arm's length away; Abram grunted.

"Has Parry received the books I mailed to him?"

Joyce scrutinized the man's crumpled coat and tired face.

"Each time we've opened his cell he's been sitting down, reading. In my journal, I will have to state that his withdrawal from reality has deepened in the last few days. I hope you understand that I have a duty to take note of what I see..."

Abram gave her a quick, wild glance that made her blink and instinctively look down.

He took off his hat and paced toward the basement stairs, saying: "Tell him I want to see him in a few minutes."

Chapter 34

Parry was feeding his pets when Abram came in. The patient seemed attentive, almost relaxed, and did not show his teeth.

"Good evening, Doc. Did anyone follow you here?"

Abram sank heavily onto his stool and raised a palm: "No, no. Well, I wasn't looking anyway. I'm a bit tired after the trip to Washington, so let's make this quick. Yes, I know -- the vent."

He stood up with a faint groan, went up to the wall, sealed the vent, went back and sat down.

"So: Before I write out Part Three of my CIA report -- the one that'll deal with internal security in the organization -- I wish to discuss the questions you asked earlier..."

"And?"

"I've consulted a few old acquaintances who know CIA history better than I do..."

Abram hesitated, frowning.

"...and they've all rejected the idea that the CIA is a questionable construction?" Parry added grimly.

"Not quite. They tend to speak in riddles, either because they can't recall old details or they don't want to... But they've awakened my curiosity. Let's assume, for simplicity's sake, that there's some substance to your suspicions..."

Parry started digging frenetically in the pile of books at his feet. He pulled up a thick volume and pressed an opened page against the glass wall.

"Here! The CIA, as you know, was formed from the remains of the wartime organization O.S.S. -- the Office of Strategic Services. But President Roosevelt's clandestine chief of intelligence, John Franklin Carter, was against the idea.

"In a memo to the President, dated October 1944, he suggested instead that they should revive the OSS as a dummy, to fool the British!"

He swayed impatiently, staring at Abram: Abram tugged at his short beard.

"Parry," he said with a sigh, "that's yesterday's news. Every now and then, the Pentagon brass and their Congressmen mutter that the CIA shouldn't try to do the military's work. The usefulness of the Company was questioned from the very start."

"And that's where everyone stops thinking, Doc! You're afraid to draw the conclusion from obvious facts."

"Namely, what?"

"That the CIA is a functioning decoy, spawned by the Roosevelt administration."

Parry was beginning to grow irritated again.

"But why?"

"Come on, Doc! The old wartime intelligence network had strong connections to its British counterpart, MI5. And already then they must have feared Communist infiltration -- Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt were revealed as Russian 'moles' many years later. The Russians virtually knew everything the MI5 was up to!"

Parry slammed the book shut and held it before him. Abram attempted to rise, but sank back. He made a sour face and looked into Parry's angular face.

"Wait a minute. You mean that the CIA, as a 'dummy', would also draw attention from the Pentagon's intelligence network?"

"That too! But of course the President and his people didn't want to be completely in the hands of the Pentagon. Roosevelt was too smart, too ambitious to lose the initiative. He must have laid the groundwork for his own, Presidential intelligence -- probably founded on his man John Franklin Carter's wartime organization."

Abram rested his elbows on his knees and propped up his head.

"I don't want to abandon this theory yet, Parry. But both Roosevelt and John Franklin Carter have been dead for a long time. A lot of the secret wartime records have been opened now. How come such a plot hasn't been revealed yet?"

If there was sarcasm in Abram's question, Parry let it go unnoticed.

"That's the problem which has kept me occupied while you've been away."

Parry took a backward step. The cat in its basket meowed and the bird in the cage chirped, but he gestured at them to be silent.

"I've been trying to make comparisons to other Presidents, who tried to build informal networks -- independent of Congress, the Supreme Court, or the Pentagon."

"You're referring to the Iran-Contras arms deal and such affairs..."

"Precisely! Just like the CIA, Oliver North, William Casey, and the rest failed pro primo: to overthrow Communist regimes in Latin America, and pro secundo: to keep it away from the media."

"But the thing is, they weren't the first ones. Kennedy barely managed to save face after CIA's attempt to overthrow Castro sank in the Bay of Pigs -- an operation covertly approved by the President. You see the pattern, Doc? Everyone who involves the CIA, fails. The Company simply isn't supposed to be working."

"Why would Roosevelt, old and dying, succeed where people like Kennedy and Bush failed? Why

should his administration be so much better at keeping a secret?"

"The answer's right in front of you, Doc, and you won't see it. After Roosevelt, television came around."

Parry crouched in front of the TV set and turned it on: a loud commercial made the little cat start and run behind his legs, wailing.

He pointed indignantly at the garish screen images, looking at Abram with a furious face: "That thing has been selling Presidents since the Korean War! Millions of Americans have been duped to vote for fantasy presidents which only existed on TV, while getting rich kids allowed the nation to fall apart!"

Abram was stunned.

"Roosevelt," Parry went on slowly, "was, next to Lincoln, the sharpest leader we ever had. He managed to lead an alliance of headstrong, discordant, and power-hungry men against Germany and Japan -- and won the World War on two fronts. Does any other President have such merits?"

"I'm not quite following you. How... Are we able to guess how Roosevelt's secret postwar organization was meant to work?"

"Not 'meant' to work, Doc. How it is working! With his experience, he was able to design a system which, contrary to others, would go safe from discovery."

"How?" Abram almost whispered.

Just then, a cartoon dog on the TV screen shouted: "*You stoopideediot!!*"

"Infiltration," answered Parry. "Tie together a handful of reliable men in key positions, at least one in each institution: the White House, the Pentagon, the Supreme Court, the CIA -- that is, the equivalent of the CIA at that time. But it has to be positions that they can keep for life! The Presidential seat, any publically elected office, is too uncertain."

"With promises of influence, and threats of death for those who betray the others, the loyalty of the conspirators can be certified."

Abram sat upright, unblinking, as if in a trance.

"Would Roosevelt circumvent the Constitution in the same way as later Presidents?"

"As most Presidents, only better. But even if the first purpose of his network was to serve the President..."

Parry stopped and studied the pets in the corner. The bird sat silent, the cat was wailing. He shut off the TV and wiped his brow.

"Get us some air, Doc."

Chapter 35

"Where were we?" Abram asked.

"Even if Roosevelt's and Franklin Carter's secret organization was meant to serve the President's need for intelligence, there are good reasons for believing that it soon broke off from the White House."

"Which reasons?"

"First, the inferior quality of Roosevelt's successors. Roosevelt died, and Harry Truman picked up the gauntlet in 1945. It's well known that he was against the revival of the OSS ; which would have ruined the arrangement with a 'dummy' to cover a real network. I don't see how Roosevelt's men could cooperate in complete confidence with Truman -- there's nothing in the history books to support that possibility."

Abram feebly raised an arm to object: "But... it took until 1947, before president Eisenhower could start the CIA from the remains of the OSS force."

"Yeah! And all the time, the CIA concept was officially supported by a former OSS veteran -- Dulles, the Secretary of State."

"Do you think Dulles was part of of Roosevelt-Carter's old network, then?"

"Not sure. I think I he was just being used for the dummy cover without knowing it, just like Bill Donovan. The question is instead, whether President Eisenhower was a co-conspirator -- I mean, he answered directly to Roosevelt during the War. He was one of the inner circle . He appointed Dulles. But Truman, a vice president -- I doubt it..."

Parry hesitated for a moment.

"Then again, it's possible that Eisenhower -- being an old military man -- was loyal to the Pentagon intelligence networks, rather than any President-made network. In that case, Roosevelt's and Franklin Carter's men would not have told him about the real purpose of the CIA... he thought the CIA was 'real', and the secret presidential organization went unchecked. If so, the organization was for the second time without direct presidential approval. After that... I have no clue."

"So where is the evidence that Roosevelt-Carter's network would have survived? Where would I find traces of them today?"

Parry leaned at the glass wall with stretched arms, thinking.

After an extended pause, he said: "First of all, the first co-conspirators must be very old, some of them must surely be dead by now. I'd suggest a computer-check of the old files on intelligence officers, high-ranking officers, employees of John Franklin Carter's department, and the staff close to Roosevelt .

"Try to match those names with a list of all the oldest men in top places up to today -- the final matching list shouldn't be very long. The rest is up to you."

Abram turned away from the glass wall, rubbed his face with one palm, and looked to the door.

"To chase old men..." he said. "Do you realize what you're demanding of a man in my position? And if you should be right -- the CIA being an unknowing dummy, a secret network that might still exist -- the risk is pretty big that someone grows curious when I start poking around..."

"Like I said before, Doc: You've got everything to lose. But aren't you curious?"

"What would you gain from this, Parry?"

"I know what you think, Doc -- that I'm an over-intelligent maniac. But on one point I think we can agree: most conspiracies fail, because nosy people start asking questions -- people like you and me. That's all you need to know."

"So... what is your own, unofficial motive to bring up this matter to investigation?"

Abram started at a sudden, dry laughter from Parry.

"What do you think, Doc?"

Abram spun around, seemingly struck with alarm. He watched a wildly staring, furiously grinning man with bloodshot eyes glare back with his fists clenched by his sides: nothing in his features suggested other feelings than suspicion, anger, and alert caution.

"Let's quit for today," Abramsaid, a tone of defeat in his voice. "I've got a lot of work ahead of me."

Chapter 36

CENTRAL WESTMOREHAM
OCTOBER 11

All available lights in the motel-room were switched on, including the desk lamp: yet Abram squinted over his laptop computer, as if barely able to see the letters on the screen.

He made a printout, and the in-built laser printer printed out the written text from the screen. The sheet produced was empty save for one word: CATHY.

Abram rose from his chair, tore off the paper from the printer slot and crumpled it up, before tossing it in the overstuffed waste basket among the other paper balls. He scratched his back, picked up his jacket from the back of the chair, got out his phone and punched in a number. Then he punched some scrambler buttons. A nasal, faint voice answered.

"Hi, Abram. You know what bloody time it is?"

"Eleven here and two in the morning there, but I know you're used to working late hours in the computer room. Listen, 'Jorge'. Have you had time for cross-checking those files yet?"

"Soon. Has Ned given the go from your department?"

"Of course. If you can't trust me, then who are you going to trust?"

The voice in the phone gave out a short laugh.

"Okay, okay. I'll call you when it's finished."

"Thanks. And hey, I'll fix you tickets for the Canadian Rugby Cup next year."

"Great. Bye!"

"Seeya ."

Abram put away the phone, undressed, took a shower, dressed again. He put on the jacket. He went to the door, took the coat and hat from the coat-hanger, opened and walked out on the parking-lot.

The sky was black, and the illuminated main street stretched northward in a straight line. He put on his outdoor clothes; the coat billowed in the irregular gusts of wind. With his hands dug into his pockets he strode away to the car.

Chapter 37

THE SWEAT LODGE BAR & GRILL CENTRAL WESTMOREHAM

The bar was smoky and half full; a local country band was playing a ballad for the buzzing customers, of which the majority sat by the tables around the tiny scene.

By the sparsely populated counter sat Abram, leaning heavily over three empty whiskey glasses. His eyes were hazy, his scalp a tangle of wisps. He was gloomily studying a couple of photographs in the opened wallet lying before him. The bartender, a puffy man with a ponytail and American Indian features, laid his elbows over the counter and gazed down at the pictures.

"The wife?" he asked, neutral.

"Yeah," Abram said shortly.

He set his eyes and showed the photographs to the bartender. They pictured Abram, ten years younger and with long dark hair, next to a buxom woman with short, blond hair and dimples around squinting eyes. Both of them were smiling to the camera.

"Divorced?"

"Dead."

"Sorry." The bartender pouted apologetically, then asked: "When?"

"Seven years."

"Sick?"

"Cancer."

"Tough."

"Yeah."

"Alone?"

"Yeah."

"So'sshe," the bartender said, nodding at a middle-aged woman who sat a few chairs away, glass in hand.

Abram looked in her direction, smiled weakly at the bartender, and muttered: "Thanks."

"Keep ontruckin'."

The bartender moved his attention to the other customers. Abram drew his scalp hair back into a semblance of order, and peered toward the woman. He caught her eyes. He nodded, lifting his drink in a little toast. The woman, wearing jeans and a blouse, raised her glass in reply and managed an uncertain smile.

Abram stood up and moved closer, sitting down with one chair between him and the woman. They looked each other over for a second. The woman had short, straight brown hair and a face which was soft despite the lines of age. She wasn't wearing much makeup; her eyes were dark and clear, half-closed, and her nose seemed a little small in the wide-boned face.

She looked him in the eye and asked "New in town?" in a firm, friendly voice.

Abram stopped squinting, and said: "Yes. Making an extended field trip to the Institute outside town." His voice was getting to sound sleepy.

The woman smiled with just a hint of skepticism: "Oh, you're a psychoanalyst."

"Not quite," he said casually. "I study patients rather than cure them. Some use instruments, but I do a lot of interviewing too."

"Sounds like an exciting job. What're they like, back on the funny farm?"

"Well..." Abram stared curiously up into the rough ceiling boards, scratched his beard, and once again looked her in the eye. "May I ask you something?"

"Yes?"

"Could a man act crazy, for more than five years, without really going insane?"

She frowned, confused and replied: "Aren't you supposed to know those things?"

Suddenly, Abram seemed very tired. His gaze dropped, and he muttered voicelessly: "It's what I used to think."

They were both silent for a few seconds; Abram finished his drink and asked for another one.

He added, without looking her way: "And anything the lady wishes." She smiled at him, but he didn't notice it as he continued brooding down into his glass. She ordered a new drink for herself and took a sip, throwing casual glances at Abram.

After a minute, she asked: "So, what's the story about the man who's been acting crazy for five years."

Abram clenched his last glass.

"Look, I'm sorry I mentioned it. I was just thinkin' out loud, I'm not supposed to discuss these people's misery in private."

A guilty expression crossed her face: "Sorry, I didn't mean to... you mean they're suffering a lot?"

He blinked, and fixed her with grave, wide eyes: "They are the most lonesome beings in the world. All lost in themselves, completely estranged from the community of others. They could just as well have come from another planet." He gulped his whiskey, making a little laugh to himself, and added: "Then again, some of them believe just that."

The woman appeared to ponder the statement for a second, then said to him: "You know, I have a friend who's joined one of those weird cults. And she's been told she's actually come from another planet, only she's been suppressing it to hide her mental powers from normal people. Like she was Supergirl in disguise."

"Oh, that old *merde* ." Abram sat up a little, assertively raising his voice. "Funny, that if enough people believe a crazy thing, they are considered sane. You can go around claiming all sorts of impossibilities. That you're Elvis. Or God, or whatever. And if only your followers are many enough, or you're powerful enough, nobody admits *tue*st fou!"

He threw out his hand. "Maybe we should close down the asylums and turn the maniacs into popstars or something, that'd make them a lot happier. Not any less crazy, but happier."

The bartender, eyeing the couple from another end of the counter, gave Abram a hard look. He saw it, and settled down.

"What was your name again?" he asked the woman in a more delicate tone. Her face softened.

"Annie. Annie Two Heads Collett ."

"Abram Lemerrier ." He took her hand and kissed it. "*Madame*," he added with an ironic smile.

She laughed, flattered and embarrassed at once, then leaned closer with her hands held up before her chest.

"You're French?"

"*Quebecois*. Went to the U.S. as a student, met a girl, and got married. But that was long ago." He took a sip. "Are you American Indian?"

"*Native Americans* they call us today." She smiled wryly at the bartender, who gave them a little nod. "Not long ago, we were just *'redskins'*, and before that, *'red savages'*. So I guess we've come a long way."

Abram smiled, and said: "Who knows, in ten years they might even call you *'human'* ." He made a short laugh and raised his glass. They clinked their glasses together.

"To progress," he said.

"To progress," she smiled, and clinked glasses again.

Minutes passed, neither of them saying anything; watching each other, the other guests, and the musicians. The band ended their instrumental piece and received an applause .

The bearded singer spoke into the mike: "Our next song was written by the band long ago, and you've probably heard it before." There were whistles and noises of approval from the audience. "It's called '*A Love To Believe In*' ."

On cue, the bass-guitarist began; the band joined in. It was not an unusual Country & Western song in any respect:

*When I look upon this world today
I see so little that's true
People telling each other lies
Getting all strange and blue
So give me a love to believe in
The one I'm trustin's you
The one I'm trustin's you*

*We may not be young and fair
We have seen better days
There's gray lines growing in your hair
My eyes are not like new
But you give me a love to believe in
The one I need is you
The one I need is you*

*The land is there like it's always been
The air is still for free
The water's not as clear as it used to be
The air smells wrong to me
But your love's still there to believe in
I love the scent of you
I love the scent of you*

*And when our days are over
And winter comes too soon
We'll ride out in the country
Lie pale under the moon
They'll say it was a love to believe in
They'll know our love was true
They'll know our love was true*

When Abram and Annie applauded the band, one of them had moved closer to the other. The next moment, they were leaning against each other.

Chapter 38

An hour or so later, Abram's car braked to a stop outside his motel-room.

Annie stepped out of the driver's seat, and went around to open the door for Abram. He stepped outside, a bit awkwardly, and Annie gave a little shriek as he grabbed her waist and lifted her up, burying his head in her chest. He dropped her laughing to her feet. They began kissing, with increasing passion, as they walked arm in arm to his door. Once inside, they undressed without a word.

The first time went quickly, in less than two minutes.

"It's been years since," he confessed.

"I didn't notice," she giggled.

The second time lasted considerably longer.

Chapter 39

OCTOBER 12

Abram and Annie were sleeping, locked in embrace, in the wide motel bed. Their clothes were scattered across the floor.

A sudden loud beeping from his jacket made Abram raise his head from the pillow, his hair spreading in all directions. Squinting hard, he crawled out from between Annie's limbs, and found his glasses on the bedside table. He put them on, reached down from the edge of the bed, and groped clumsily for the jacket. Annie mumbled sleepily, peering with screwed-up eyes at the window: the light of dawn was just entering through the blinds. Ignoring her, Abram dug up the phone and held it to his ear, still halfway out of bed.

"Hello?" he said hoarsely.

The computer chimed: "Incoming call from Langley. Use de-scrambling code number four, four, three, four."

Abram punched in the right buttons. A slow, toneless voice came on.

"Hi, Abram. Am I calling too early?"

"Jorge"? No. Did you do the cross-check?"

"Yeah! The list ended up pretty short, once I had deleted all the names of people who were already dead. Got a pen?"

"Hold on for a moment."

Abram darted up from bed and sat down, naked, in the chair by the desk. Holding the phone by the ear, he found pen and paper. Frenetically, he wrote down a handful of lines, humming into the receiver. Annie sat up in bed, watching Abram as he wrote.

He was soon finished, and thanked the man called "Jorge" in an excited tone.

"I promise I'll repay you for this favor !" Abram put down the phone and stood up.

"Who was it?" Annie asked in a clear voice.

"A colleague," he said as he gathered clothes from the suitcase by the short end of the bed, and quickly started dressing himself.

"Don't tell me," she sighed, scratching her ruffled head, "You gotta rush to work."

"I'm sorry, Annie. But it's really important." With his pants drawn up to his knees he hopped over to her, leaned over, and kissed her on the mouth -- for a second.

And so Annie watched Abram dress. He finished, went over to his tossed-away shoes, and stepped into them.

"You forgot your socks," she noted dryly. "And besides, you're a bit early."

Abram glanced at his wristwatch: "Damn! I hope the guard'll let me in even if it's only seven o'clock ." He halted, turning to look at her with nervous eyes.

"Did I get your number?"

She smiled then, her features softening.

"I'll write it down for you."

She went up from bed, naked, and walked to the desk while Abram got into his jacket and coat; his eyes followed the swaying of her wide hips. He suddenly grabbed her wrist and pulled her close to him. She gave him a little mischievous smile with her thin lips, rubbing her small nose against his; but his expression went from bliss to muteness in two seconds.

He folded his arms around her naked back, and she clung to his neck.

"Believe me," he said softly, "I wish to see you again."

They kissed each other deeply, Abram caressing Annie. Then he pulled himself away from her embrace, snatched the laptop and the dictation device, and hurried outside.

The draft from the door made Annie shudder.

Chapter 40

Abram came to the crossing with the sign WESTMOREHAM INSTITUTE 1.5 MILES and stopped his car to let a caravan of big trucks cross by, going westward.

Suddenly he clasped his forehead, and blinked confusedly. He caught a glance of himself in the rear-view mirror: the image of a red-eyed man with tangled gray hair stared back.

"What the hell am I doing," he mumbled at the mirror image. "I gotta get a hold of myself, gotta ..."

Angryhonkings from the car behind made him start; the crossing traffic had passed by, and the morning traffic was down to a small trickle. Abram stepped on the gas pedal, twisted the wheel, and made a sharp U-turn. With renewed resolve, he drove back toward the motel. Another minute later he stopped on the parking-lot, took the laptop and the pocket secretary, slammed the car door shut, and walked briskly up to the reception house at the end of the row.

He stepped inside, went up to the reception desk -- which was unmanned -- and found his roomkey lying there. He took it and returned to his room. The room was locked, but not yet cleaned: it was empty, and Annie's clothes were gone. He went right up to the desk and dumped his writing equipment.

Abram picked up a notepad and read a message written in large, neat letters:

CALL SOON, ABRAM (509-689-2571)

Annie

A wide, spontaneous smile spread across Abram's face, and he reached for his phone -- but seemed to change his mind. From the outside pocket of his jacket he extracted the short list of names, and studied it. He put the list on the desk next to the laptop-printer, hung up his coat and jacket, and eased down into the chair. Habitually, he drew a hand across his beard, switched on the word processor, and fed a sheet into the printer slot.

After a few minutes of silent contemplation, he began typing with swift, deft fingers.

Chapter 41

OCTOBER 15

Abram ceased tapping out text, pulled the last sheet from the built-in printer, and put it among the rest in the pile. He yawned deeply, stretching out his back and arms -- his back snapped and he winced -- and watched the motel-room. Fast-food cartons and paper mugs were scattered over the desk and floor, paper balls gathered at his feet. The bed was not made, and his clothes were lying on the floor.

It was obvious that he had slept alone in the bed. Abram was dressed in a smelly T-shirt and boxer shorts. He picked up his agency phone, dialed, and punched a scrambling button.

"Ned Wilson speaking."

"Hi, Ned; it's Abram."

"Hi! You're calling early."

"I never get used to the time zones, sorry. I just finished the third part of my report. A burst of inspiration came over me. "

"Ehxcellent, ehxcellent ! That was fast. You coming down here soon?"

"Uh, Ned, all this zone-crossing is giving me sleeping problems. Could you send me a courier to get it?"

"Lemme see... sorry, all couriers are out on assignments right now, and I'll need the report A.S.A.P."

"Let's ignore the regulations just for once. Let me fax it over. I can put my cell-phone into a fax machine, scramble the fax signal, and let it carry the signals to your phone in Langley, where you unscramble the signals and feed them to your fax."

"Ah' didn't quite follow you there, Abram -- but it still won't work! The information that passes through your fax when you feed the papers might be tapped via some connection, and those signals won't be scrambled -- not in ordinary machines, as far as I know. Stick to your own protected hardware."

"Right. Okay. I'll fly over today or by tomorrow, I've got my other job to do."

"That's fine. See ya. Bye."

"Bye."

Abram tried to put the phone back in his jacket, but missed the pocket and dropped it onto the floor.

His face was suddenly contorted by anger; he cried out, almost sobbing: "Damn! Damn, damn this shit!!"

Chapter 42

On the flight headed south-east, Abram switched on the computer that rested in his lap, logged in and clicked on the program icon ELIZA EXPERT V.7. The program, which was an advanced simulation of a psychoanalyst, came up on the flat screen, and it asked a first question:

-WHAT DO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT?

Abram typed in the question: HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM GOING INSANE?

The program's response came within less than a second: -DO YOU THINK THAT YOU ARE GOING INSANE?

NO.

-I SEE.

NO, YOU DON'T.

-PARDON?

THE SUBJECT IS PARANOIA.

-TELL ME HOW YOU FEEL.

I FEEL AS IF MY BOSS IS PERSECUTING ME.

-WHY DO YOU THINK YOUR BOSS IS PERSECUTING YOU?

BECAUSE HE -- Abram paused, then changed the sentence: PERHAPS HE IS A HOMOSEXUAL, OUT TO GET ME.

-FOR HOW LONG HAVE YOU HAD THE NOTION OF BEING PERSECUTED BY HOMOSEXUALS?

I AM NOT BEING PERSECUTED .

-I SEE. TELL ME MORE.

I AM HAVING SLEEPING PROBLEMS, DUE TO JETLAG OF COURSE, AND I HAVE THESE STRANGE NIGHTMARES.

-TELL ME MORE ABOUT THESE STRANGE NIGHTMARES.

IN ONE NIGHTMARE I AM IMPRISONED IN A CAVE, WHERE I CANNOT MOVE, AND I SEE SOMEONE STARING AT ME FROM AN OPENING.

-TELL ME WHY YOU CANNOT MOVE IN THE CAVE.

IN THE NIGHTMARE, I LOOK DOWN AND DISCOVER THAT MY ARMS AND LEGS HAVE BEEN SEVERED, THAT I AM JUST A HEAD AND A BODY.

-WHO DO YOU THINK SOMEONE WHO IS STARING AT YOU ARE ?

MY COMMON SENSE TELLS ME HE MUST BE A SYMBOL OF ME OR PARRY, AN IDENTIFICATION WITH PARRY.

-COULD SOMEONE WHO IS STARING AT YOU BE:

A) YOUR FATHER

B) YOUR MOTHER

C) ANY OTHER PERSON FROM YOUR CHILDHOOD?

NO.

-TRY TO DESCRIBE THIS TO ME:

IF YOU IMAGINED SOMEONE WHO IS STARING AT YOU TO BE A), B), OR C), HOW WOULD YOU FEEL?

FUK YOU FUK YOU FUK YUGUIFUOIGOIGUEBH D IOGIO

-PLEASE TRY TO BE MORE CONSTRUCTIVE.

I WILL: I WILL PULL YOUR PLUG!

-THAT'S NOT A NICE THING TO SAY.

Abram threw his laptop computer to the floor, and something cracked inside it. The passengers sitting nearby stared at him. A stewardess came, picked up the damaged laptop, and handed it back to Abram.

He avoided her eyes, and the eyes of the other passengers -- he folded his arms tightly together, and shut his eyes hard...

WESTMOREHAM INSTITUTE
OCTOBER 17

"Long time no see, Doc. What've you been up to now?"

Parry's tone was remarkably calm and level. He stood leaning with one shoulder against one corner of the plexiglass wall, indifferently looking at Abram, who had just sealed off the room. It was early in the morning.

"Are they still giving you as heavy doses every night?"

"Not since you told them to lower the doses. But it always takes me a little time to wake up in the morning." He yawned.

His eyes opened attentively when Abram took out the name list from his briefcase; he rushed to the middle of the glass wall and Abram went up close.

Parry read quietly as Abram held the list up to his eyes:

ANDERSON, NEVILLE - DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL
(ALSO INVOLVED WITH THE NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY, STATUS UNCLEAR)

RAYMOND, COLMER - ADVISOR TO THE SECRETARY OF STATE
(HAS APPEARED IN DIFFERENT ADVISORY POSTS SINCE 1948)

STANTON, PETER - DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE CIA
(PREVIOUSLY ADVISOR TO THE DIRECTORS)

ULMGARD, HAROLD - AIR FORCE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER, PENTAGON
(RETIREMENT SUSPENDED THROUGH UNKNOWN INFLUENCE)

WADE, JOSHUA - AIR FORCE GENERAL, ASSISTANT CHIEF STRATEGIC AIR
COMMAND
(AUTHORIZED TO REPLACE THE PRESIDENT AND THE S.A.C. CHIEF IN AN
EMERGENCY -- RUMOR UNCONFIRMED)

He read the list again and again, for almost a whole minute. His palms, pressed against the glass, started to tremble as in a cramp. He backed slowly, eyes fixed on the paper, and nearly stumbled on the little cat; it leaped away with its tail raised. As if a cold wind had blown through the hermetically sealed chamber, Parry hugged himself, trembling. He murmured something inaudible. Abram put his ear to the glass and listened.

"I said," Parry repeated a little louder, "that I didn't believe you'd have the guts to do it, much less tell anyone..."

"I've already told my superiors," Abram answered.

Parry lunged at the glass, roaring with sudden fury: "WHAT THE HELL HAVE YOU DONE?!"

He pounced at the glass, his gaze shifting wildly about him. Abram made a calming gesture; Parry stopped his pounding.

"Wait, Parry. I didn't mean literally. All I did, was to insert these five names into the text of the report -- in a reference, in a footnote, as writer of a made-up book title -- in such a way that if you don't know the connection between the names, you won't spot it. It's an old spy trick. If you're right about them, someone will notice it and contact me. This report will be read at the top."

Parry scrutinized Abram's face: Abram was more haggard than he, but calm and collected.

"Open the air vent and show me the report itself," Parry commanded.

Abram returned to the glass wall and held up the paper bundle. On the title page was, as before, a contents page:

IMAGES OF THE NEW FUTURE
By DR. ABRAM LEMERCIER

PART 3: THE INNER ENEMY

3.1. SEPARATISM IN NORTH AMERICA

- 3.1.1. Economic causes
- 3.1.2. Demographic causes
- 3.1.3. The new migrations
- 3.1.4. Predicting ethnic unrest
- 3.1.5. Suggestions for "uniting visions"
- 3.1.6. Could there be another Civil War?

3.2. CONTROLLING THE INSTITUTIONS

- 3.2.1. Parkinson's Law revisited
- 3.2.2. Voter-Decisionmaker contact in the future
- 3.2.3. Corruption in federal government
- 3.2.4. Could the system be overthrown?

3.3. ALTERNATIVE CONSTITUTIONS

- 3.3.1. Direct Democracy: Perot's dream
- 3.3.2. Corporativism: The dangerous path
- 3.3.3. Military Dictatorship: The last resort
- 3.3.4. Suggestions for restructuring of federal organs
- 3.3.5. Some political scenarios (2000 - 2050)

3.4. Notes and Sources

Parry gestured at Abram to turn pages; quiet and tense, he skimmed through the rest of the document. A few minutes later, when he was finished, Parry held a finger to his mouth and pointed at the air intake. Abram sealed it.

Parry took in air, seemingly gathering himself together.

"You used a lot of what I said. And your little list, without asking me. So... Doc... what do you think will happen now?"

Abram paused, poised in a similar manner, then answered Parry: "I will prove to you, that your conspiracy theory is completely groundless."

He assumed a face of professional understanding: "What will happen is this. The day before yesterday, I flew to Langley and handed in a copy of this report to my superior's office. He scanned it through while I was watching, and gave me an early positive response. Immediately, I went back here and rested the entire yesterday. By this time..."

He paused, checking his watch.

"...by this time, copies of the completed report have been sent by courier, to the members of the National Security Council and the President. They will read it, discuss the problems and suggestions presented there; assign a special committee to investigate futurology and security issues; and perhaps even use my finished report as a reference.

"And," he added calmly, "nothing is going to happen to neither you nor me."

Parry made a convulsive shudder: he giggled joylessly, almost hysterically. He gave Abram an inscrutable, hollow stare.

"I actually began to believe I knew you, could predict your behavior," he said mutely. "How stupid of me. How shamefully, obscenely stupid. Everyone is out for something. You're out for prestige, you must prove above all that you are sane, that I'm nothing but a confused human wreck in need of treatment. You lied about working for the CIA, just to raise my curiosity. Perhaps you're an instrument for the unknown power, without knowing it yourself."

Suspicion had grown back into his features, stronger than before. Abram opened his mouth to speak -- but gave up. Another couple of seconds they stood there facing each other. And Abram wavered, turned away, and moved to the air vent. He removed the covering piece of insulation from the vent, and put it in his pocket.

Picking up his case, Abram went to the door; unlocked it, opened, and exited. Parry stood immobile, his stare following Abram until the door slid shut and was locked from outside.

Chapter 44

Joyce was in the large corridor on the entrance floor.

Abram came up from the basement stairs, accompanied by two nurses. Joyce took her cell-phone from her ear, turned toward the nurses, and gave them each a telling glance. They responded with slight nods. Abram walked up to her where she stood by the sentry booth.

He looked her in the eye with concern; she met his eyes with her usual calm.

"Bad news?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm afraid I'll have to abort my interviews with Par...with Patrick. His condition's worsened quickly, he's as inaccessible as when we first met -- or worse."

"I'm sorry, I really am," Joyce said.

She stretched out her arm and touched his shoulder; Abram straightened up and looked mildly surprised. Joyce gave him a sad smile with her eyes half-shut.

"For a while, you made me hope again; that's not too common around here. Thanks for trying."

Abram gave the short, brown woman a faint smile, and replied: "Thanksyourself, for putting up with a pompous upper-class psychoanalyst. Do you want me to fill in the usual forms now, or could it wait? I promise the Institute will be compensated for its expenses."

Joyce turned away, looking out through one of the tall, barred windows. Out there, one could see soft hills and fields; telephone poles along the road that stretched eastward away from the town; the bright, late morning sky; a couple of farmhouses by the horizon...

"There's a few men outside the gates, who've been asking for you while you were talking to Parry," she said without moving.

"What?" Abram did not seem to understand.

"The guard at the gate said that they're from the FBI and their papers seem to be in order."

Slowly, quietly, the two nurses stepped closer to Abram, hands resting on thenight-sticks hanging by their belts. Abram saw it; his forehead began to glisten. A shrill little laugh escaped him.

"I-I don't understand what you mean... let me make an importantphonecall !" He spun around, holding up his hands. The nurses stopped, giving Joyce questioning looks. Abram spun around again to meet her expressionless gaze.

Hepleaded: "Just one call!Alone! Okay?"

Joyce shrugged, her hands in her pocket, andsaid: "Okay. Go to the end of the hall."

She nodded in the suggested direction. He half-ran to it. At the end of the corridor was a door to the chapel-like annex. He felt at the handle; itwas locked .

Abram pressed his shoulder against the door and got out his phone, punched in the number toLangley with clumsy fingers, and waited for an answer.

There came three dial-up signals.Then another three.And three more.And three more.

After fiftensignals he cut off the call, and glanced anxiously toward the other end of the corridor. Joyce was talking to the nurses and the door-guard, but so low that only a wordless murmurcould be heard from where Abram stood. He punched up the phone list onto the phone's display window, let addresses and numbers scroll past, and stopped by the name GIORDANO BRUNO.

He frantically punched in the number. After three signals, a recorded voice answered: "The number has recently expired. For further information on the addressee, please contact the Los Angeles Police Department. The number has recently expired. For furtherinf --"

Abram disconnected, but kept the phone to his ear; Joyce was moving, over by the entrance, looking at

her watch.

"Shit!" he mumbled, then: "Kip! Goodol ' Kip..."

Abram dialed the number to Washington , muttering: "Come on... answer me, you fat bastard..."

After ten signals and no response he gave up. He started, as Joyce's voice echoed across the floor.

"One call! They're losing their patience!"

The heavy nurses began to move in on him.

"Annie," he mumbled, then "No".

Abram took a deep breath, wiped his brow, held up the phone's control panel to his face. He punched in the command: ERASE ALL FILES

On the display came the reply question: ARE YOU SURE Y/N?

He punched in a confirmation.

The computer wrote: ALL ERASED; WHAT NOW?

Seeing the question, Abram suppressed a laugh, snorting. He put away his phone and turned to face the approaching wardens; their soft shoes made almost no sounds. When they were less than five meters away, Abram pulled the gun out of his jacket.

Chapter 45

The nurses halted; Abram waved his Beretta in front of their faces.

He shouted in a hoarse voice: "Back off!! Drop your batons... gently!"

They dropped their night-sticks , anxiously following his moving arm.

Joyce shouted at them with her phone to her ear: "Do as he says! The Feds have called the sheriff, he's on his way with reinforcements!"

Abram gave out a hysterical giggle, then screamed: "What lies have they been telling about me?!" as he advanced along the corridor, driving the backing nurses before him.

The nurse Simon tried talking to the wild-eyed, armed man, without shifting focus from his gun: "Calm down, Dr. Lemercier . Nobody wants to harm you. I'm sure they just want to ask you a few questions..."

The door-guard Mark was coming out of the booth.

"Shut up and hold your arms above your head! I might be a lethal desperado, so don't take any chances! Joyce!! Tell the guard to hold his gun where I can see it -- and then empty the magazine! Now!! Then drop the gun on the floor!"

Reluctantly, the guard obeyed. Abram came up to Joyce, who appeared to retain her self-control.

"Abram, what's going on?" she asked with suppressed intensity. "Why're you carrying a weapon in here?"

"Didn't those false Feds tell you that?"

Abram gestured at the four people to gather opposite the booth; they responded quickly.

"Joyce," he said forcedly, "Those people out there are bluffing, they can't have called the sheriff. Call him now!"

She looked at him, confused: "What are you saying?"

"They don't want any more witnesses, and you could also be in danger. I'm not just a psychologist -- I work for the CIA! Call him, dammit!"

Joyce stared in disbelief; but she took her phone and punched in the number. She waited tensely while the calling signals beeped from the receiver: once; twice; three, four, five times.

She gave Abram a look of despair and fear, her small hands trembling visibly.

He cursed again, and said: "Throw down your phone. Is there only one exit from the building?"

Joyce nodded silently, dropping her cellular phone on the floor. The door-guard glanced furtively at the steel door behind them.

Suddenly, a megaphone-enhanced voice boomed from outside: *"This is the FBI! We have the building surrounded, Abram! If you're not coming out in a minute, we storm the building! You have one minute!"*

"Jerks," the guard muttered, "the building is a bloody fortress. They'll have to blast their way inside, or break up the windows."

Abram looked to the door, then at his hostages.

He paled visibly, then shouted: "Everybody down into the basement -- quickly!"

He backed off and ushered them down the basement stairs, waited for the last one to disappear from view, and picked up the guard's revolver and bullets from the floor. He put them in his pocket and ran to the stairs. At the top of the stairs he turned and glanced over his shoulder, through the armored window closest to the entrance. On the lawn outside, he could see two blue-clad figures rigging a tube-shaped contraption onto a thick tripod.

Abram rushed down the stairs, shouting: "Take cover!!!"

When his feet touched the foot of the stairs, there came a sharp, whistling sound. In the next second, the building was shaken by a deafening bang, followed by the rumble of brick, mortar, and glass crashing down over the first floor.

The shockwave blew a cloud of dust and debris down the flight of stairs, just as Abram threw himself away from it.

He was drenched in dust, the lamps in the basement ceiling blinked -- one lamp exploded above his head -- some of the water pipes cracked, gushing hot water. Abram heaved himself to his feet. He coughed, took out a handkerchief, held it to his mouth. Further away in the basement corridor, the others screamed and coughed.

"You believe me now?!" he barked coarsely as he came closer to the group.

Joyce's eyes were red from the dust covering their clothes and faces. She leaned against the wall and kept coughing.

"Who are those crazies?" she said. "I've got to see if the patients were hurt."

Abram stood in her way, aiming the gun above her head: "Listen," he said in a weak voice, "they are out to kill me, and probably everyone who's spoken to me. As soon as any of you pokes his head up those stairs, we all get shot! They're probably on their way in now."

"Oh my God," Joyce wailed, holding her head with both hands, "what'll we do?"

Abram got an odd gleam in his eyes, his teeth grinned white in his dusty grey face.

"Let Parry out!" he said.

Joyce, the guard, and the two wardens were stunned.

"Let him out," Abram snarled, "or I shoot you now!"

Joyce nodded to the wardens, who quietly disappeared into a narrow side corridor. Joyce went over to the visitor's door at the other side, and opened it up.

Abram stuck in his head and shouted: "Parry, they are coming for us! Come out now and help me, if you wanna live!"

The moment he said it, the wardens' steps approached. They came running in terror, chased by Parry; he grinned wolfishly, stabbing at them with two sharpened metal rods -- taken from the bird cage. At their feet, the little cat darted past and away, up over the rubble that covered the staircase. Next, the canary fluttered past and up into the light. Parry stopped when he saw Abram with the gun; he grinned triumphantly at Joyce, who backed off in wide-eyed horror.

"I heard the bang. How many are they?" He was suddenly sharp and alert.

"Don't know, but they'll soon find us."

They looked to the basement stairs: a thick layer of bricks and mortar had slid down over the steps, but there was enough room for a man to crawl between the rubble and the stairway ceiling. There were muffled thumpings and screams from the cells upstairs -- then, the faint crackling of several boots carefully walking across the rubble on the floor.

The group listened breathlessly for another second -- and Parry whispered to them: "Any more firearms here?"

Abram handed him the guard's revolver and the cartridges; Parry began loading it without satisfaction.

"Anything explosive?" he went on. "Any sharp objects?"

He held up his improvised metal-rod weapons.

The warden Simon whispered, stutteringly: "All firearms were carried by the guards -- but here there's just heating oil for the boiler, some g-gasoline cans and gardening t-tools..."

Simon stopped, listening. From above came the muted smattering of machine-gun fire. One by one, the screams from the remaining five patients ceased.

"Quickly now," Parry whispered. "Get the gasoline, a lighter, and the fire hose. I need lots of water. Then hide in my cell!"

"Go on!" Abram urged, waving his gun at the personnel.

Chapter 47

Within fifteen seconds, Parry had received the gas cans and a lighter, and the nurses had turned on the water and rolled out the hose -- all the while watching the stairs.

As Simon quickly turned up the water pressure, a round metal object bounced down the staircase. Parry, holding the hose nozzle, reacted within a moment. He leaped into the side corridor leading to his cell. The grenade exploded in a dull, flashing bang, and a puff of smoke instantly filled the basement. All ceiling lamps imploded -- followed by a wet thud when Simon was hurled past the special room and hit the boiler at the end of the basement.

Parry coughed in the darkness, muttered a curse. Then, silence -- except for the sound of water trickling down from the ceiling. A dark figure crawled down the blocked stairway, feet first, and swept a flashlight beam through the smoke. The figure, a man dressed in dark-blue coveralls, cap, dark glasses, and a flak jacket, froze still. He aimed a submachine gun and his flashlight at Simon's bloody body; it lay twisted against the pipes and lockers of the boiler, grey with dust.

"One dead guy here!" the man shouted toward the stairs.

Another voice replied from the top of the stairs: "Check all rooms, there are some missing ones!"

The man stepped toward the side corridor a few meters ahead of him. Suddenly, there was a sound from behind the corner ahead -- the man fired a quick burst from the waist -- the next second, a gasoline can swept in a burning rag was thrown at him from a point near the floor. It bounced at the wall on his right and exploded into fire and metal splinter.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA..."

The explosion threw the man backward and he caught fire, screaming. He got up on his feet and threw himself like a living torch at the closest leaking water pipe -- and was struck down on his left by a

high-pressure water jet from Parry's fire hose.

Parry rushed out of the side corridor and drenched the burning figure in water, putting out the flames in three seconds. He aimed the jet at the fires by the stairs, while crouching down at the smoking body. He tore loose a part of his already torn sweater, and wrapped it around his hand -- and wrung loose the machine-gun which hung by a strap to the body's shoulder.

The stench from the burned body made Parry's nose and eyes run. Most of the flames were put out in a few seconds, and he dropped the gushing water-hose to the wet floor. Something rustled down the stairs -- he grabbed the hot machine-gun and spun around on his knees. Another armed man slid down the rubble -- he did not quite manage to answer Parry's volley of bullets:

TRRRRATTATTATT

In the stroboscopic flash from the nozzle flame, the man flickered like a figure in a silent movie -- twitched and spattered the wall behind him with blood. He toppled backward and Parry leaped to his feet. With his sooty Uzi aimed at the foot of the stairs, Parry tore at the fallen man's shoulder strap; opened it, pulled loose another Uzi and a few grenades, and added them to his arsenal.

From upstairs, excited voices and running steps were approaching. Parry grabbed two grenades from the shoulder strap, pulled the safety pins with his teeth, waited a second -- the steps were very close. He stood up, shook off the loose safety pieces from the grenades -- paused a second -- lobbed the grenades up through the stairway -- darted away.

Two almost simultaneous bangs shook the basement as Parry ran to the special room that had been his cell. He threw open the visitor's door and lit the cigarette lighter: on the other side of the room, behind the glass wall, Abram, Joyce and the two others were huddling in the dark.

"Everybody out," Parry ordered, wheezing.

Chapter 48

Parry was the first to crawl up from the half-buried basement -- grimy, sore, and shirtless.

He squatted down in the brick-piles and coughed up dirty phlegm, breathing hard. The two grenades had blown off some rubble from the top of the staircase, and had killed three blue-clad men. Another few feet off, a giant hole was gaping through the window wall: on its opposite, the same explosion had scorched the wall. All windows were blown out, and the indoors sentry-booth had been smashed to pieces.

Parry skimmed over to the hole in the wall. He watched cautiously across the open place; it was quiet out there. The tripod rocket launcher was still standing over by the fence.

"Come on out!" he wheezed to the others.

Coughing, wearing rags wrapped around their mouths and eyes, the dirtied group crawled up one by one: Abram, Joyce, the door guard Mark, and the surviving nurse. As soon as she got to her feet, Joyce stumbled over the rubble to the open, blackened cell doors. She peered inside one of them, screamed, turned away in disgust.

Parry gave her a fierce look: "Quicker and easier than lobotomy, huh?" he snapped.

Joyce's round face twisted in despair; she kneeled convulsively and vomited over the fallen wall pieces. Parry gestured at the others to follow him quietly. They carefully jumped out through the breached wall and sneaked along it toward the entrance.

The gravel field in front of the entrance steps was empty; glass shards cracked under their feet. The four-man group rushed on a line toward the open gates. Parry shivered in the chilly autumn air. By the sentry-booth, a blue van stood parked; it was empty. They looked in through the open booth: the guard lay dead on the floor with a bullet-hole in his head. Abram opened the rear doors of the van and checked its insides; he found a working apparatus with a miniature parabolic antenna, aimed through a small side window. Parry and the others came looking.

"Jamming equipment," Abram said. "That's why Joyce couldn't get through to the sheriff. The Company's latest stuff!"

"Doc!" Parry waved him closer. "If this was the work of the Company, do you think they'd leave in the van, after waking up the entire county with all that noise?"

"No, you're right. And where's the traffic gone?"

Everyone could see it: the road from town was completely empty. Abram suddenly seemed struck by insight: "Parry! They must have blocked the road. And that could only mean one other escape route..."

A shout from the nurse interrupted him: "Look!"

The nurse was pointing to the south. From a point low in the sky a growing dot had appeared, and with it an increasing buzz; then no longer a buzz, but the staccato beating of rotor blades. Parry looked up in fear, and dashed back toward the Institute.

He turned as he ran, screaming hoarsely: "FBI Blue and Kevlar Black are the colors to wear this Fall!"

Abram ran after him, followed by the door guard. Only the nurse remained, waving enthusiastically at the approaching helicopter.

Chapter 49

Within a few minutes the big helicopter, white and unmarked, had arrived. Rotor blades thundering, it made a turn around the fenced institution area -- ignoring the waving man on the parking-lot twenty meters below.

From the gash in the building, three blue-clad, armed figures jumped outside and began running on a single file toward the gates. The helicopter sank down on the parking space, whipping up big dust clouds. A door slid open in its side; the nurse ran to it.

"Thank God you came!" he shouted over the noise. "Someone has attacked the --"

He stopped -- one of the running blue-clad figures gunned him down from behind. Gaping, he fell forward.

The man who had shot him waved at the helicopter pilot, while the aircraft's wheels touched the ground.

Two other men in similar blue clothes jumped out the open slide door. The man waved at them too --his face was hidden by a cap and sunglasses . He remained standing until the two newcomers were less than thirty feet off.

The foremost of the two men began shouting at him: "Good work! Now let's getoutta --"

He was cut off; the waving man mowed them both down with the Uzi in his other hand, leaped over their falling bodies, scampered to the slide door and heaved himself inside. There was a cracking gunshot from the cockpit -- the windshield was perforated. The two other blue-clad figureswho had been following the waving one scuttled closer, ducking down. Theywere: Abram and Joyce. Parry peeked out the slide door, tearing off his sunglasses.

He grinned maliciously at them, shouting over the decreasing rotor noise: "I had to do it, the dumb nurse could've gotten us all killed! Does any of you know how to fly one of these?!"

Joyce took off her shades, staring at him with lowered eyebrows, eyes full of hate -- she was unarmed.

"I have a helicopter certificate," she said loudly. "Where are we going to go now, you mad killer?"

Parry waved them on board, his exhilaration showing through the grime on his face.

"We'regonna send greetings to old friends!" he yelled hoarsely. From the Institute, the door-guard came running -- he was the only one alive, whowasn't disguised in the assassins' fake uniforms.

Chapter 50

"I used to work as a flying doctor, way up north, before I got my chair at the Institute," Joyce explained vacantly.

She settled herself in the pilot seat and went over the instrument panel. Parry and Abram dragged away the dead pilot and dumped the corpse on the ground. The door-guard, supportinghimself against the rear wall of the cargo cabin, stared fearfully at them. He looked up at Abram, very pale.

"Are you really a CIA agent?" he asked.

"No," Abram sighed, "I'm just a consultant. I write classified stuff, though."

Joyce put on the pilot's headset, turning to the others with icy calm.

"May I suggest,gentlemen, that we at least send out an emergency call to the state police?"

"Check the radio," Parry said shortly.

Joyce switched it on, tried a few frequencies. Nothing happened.

She gave him a suspicious eye: "Did you..."

"Didn't have to," he droned. "This death squad was sosecret, they weren't even allowed to use a radio or phone."

He turned serious again, pointing the Uzi at her: "Take us to the nearest radio station. I want to see what happens, if the dinosaur we awakened is stomped on its tail. Start it up!"

Joyce warmed up the engines, turning her gaze out through the windshield: "This old Sikorsky is a piece of junk -- it'll never go up to top speed. But the fuel meter's adjusted for an expansion tank -- it can go very far. The WRBC station is a mile away -- we can be there in a few minutes."

The rotor made a metallic cough-like sound and started to spin.

"Can't you just please let me off?" the door-guard whined from the cargo cabin.

Parry went back, grabbed the slide-door and began pulling it to a close.

"Scram," he snapped.

The guard stumbled out, and rolled away as the chopper lifted above him.

Chapter 51

- Parry, I see the point of the radio station. But what -- what are we going to tell them?

- The truth, Doc. What else is there to say.

- Nobody'll believe us.

- That's not the point. The point is to spread the secret, spread it so thin they can't kill everyone who hears it.

- I've sworn not to betray my country. This isn't easy for me.

- Is the CIA your country? Or the people who try to kill you, are they 'America'? Are they worth dying for? You're the crazy one, not me! Haha ...

- *Merde!* This isn't funny! Why do you keep wisecracking all the time?

- My fellow patients weren't exactly the funniest lot in the world. And when I showed signs of depression, I was sometimes treated with electric shocks. You should try laughing a little more, Doc -- pep you up for the work ahead.

- Okay, okay. So how do we say it? The whole affair, straight from the beginning? Our deal? I could at least leave you out of the story.

- ...

- We may not have much time -- look, the radio mast. We must make a decision now, Parry!

- We go for the truth, keep quiet about my part if you want to. But time's short -- I'm not sure what comes next, but I fear the worst -- so we make it really quick. If we confuse people, so much better. That'll give them something to talk about, spread the word.

- Please don't start shooting again. I hate violence.

- I hate violence too -- against me. Now get out!

Chapter 52

WRBC RADIO BROADCAST STATION WESTMOREHAM COUNTY

"...is blocked by a truck with no license plates. The fire brigade's attempts to move the vehicle are impeded, by the fact that the truck's tires have been shot -- yes, you heard it -- have been shot to pieces. The truck's driver was spotted disappearing into a blue van going east. We will continue to monitor the development of the strange events this morning..."

The radio DJ, a young man with a long beard and hair reaching down over his forehead and shoulders, took a gulp from a soda can. He picked up a compact disc from a rack of numbered slots, fed it into a CD player -- all in one second -- while continuing his rapid, rhythmic monologue.

"You're listening to WRBC, reaching five thousand listeners twenty-four hours a day! The time is seven-fifty, and the talk of the town is the mysterious series of explosions from the Westmoreham Institute. A white helicopter has been spotted as it flew from the place.

"While we're waiting for you, good listeners, to call in your own eyewitness reports, we're playing Jerry Lee Lewis' classic 'Great Balls of Fire!'"

As the music played, the phone calls stacked up on the computer monitor next to the DJ. He stretched out and sighed -- grinning. The studio technician made the thumbs-up sign on the other side of the windowpane -- and started in surprise. Suddenly, someone kicked in the door to the DJ's studio. Two dirty men barged in, armed with Uzis. Behind them came, at a much slower pace, a black woman.

The DJ stared in amazement at the dirty, blue-clad intruders, and exclaimed: "What the hell is going on?"

"We're straight from the Institute," Parry replied, aiming at the DJ's spot belly. "And we've got the best scoop of your life! Keep transmitting, whatever happens! Doc! Check out the technician, so he won't try to switch us off the air!"

The technician reeled back when Abram came in to him -- but the DJ waved at him to stay put: "Do as he says, Brian! I want this on the air, too!"

The studio technician let "Great Balls of Fire" fade out, and gestured to the DJ to start his pitch. The DJ adjusted microphone headsets onto the heads of Abram, Parry, and Joyce, and plugged them in.

Chapter 53

- This is Mike Moorcock on WRBC, and I've got some very exciting guests here in the studio, straight from the Westmoreham Institute! Next to me sits: Dr. Joyce Oregon, medical superintendent at the Institute; Patrick Rymowicz, a former patient there and recently released; and Dr. Abram Lemercier, psychologist from Virginia, who also works as part-time consultant for the CIA.

- Drop the bullshit, and let me say a few words.

- Okay, Mr. Rymowicz ...you're on the air!

- I want to urge everyone living within ten miles' radius of the radio station, to immediately evacuate the area. This is not a joke. The entire transmission area may soon be in danger. I repeat, evacuate the area if you're within ten miles of the station. But stay tuned to this station, and spread the news. Please tape this transmission if you can. I repeat...

- Patrick, let me explain the entire story behind the explosions first. Okay?

- Okay, but be quick.

- Mr. Moorcock, this is my CIA security clearance card. Would you please examine it, and confirm it's real?

- ...yes, it seems not to be a fake.

- All right then. I've been studying a patient over at the Westmoreham Institute since September -- Patrick here. While doing that, I was working on a continuous futurological study for my CIA department. Its subject is the planning of security strategies for the next century, and the report was classified -- only the President, some CIA top people, and the National Security Agency were supposed to read it.

Three chapters had been delivered, before the incidents this morning interrupted my work. I was attacked, and had to escape the Institute together with the staff and a patient. All the others there were killed during the attack. I think my futurology report was the factor that led to the attack. It seems that I -- by complete coincidence -- had described certain secret arrangements which already existed, though I didn't know it by the time.

When the report reached certain high officials within the National Security Council -- it includes people from the CIA, the Pentagon, and the White House -- someone, somewhere, concluded that I had an informer in the organization, or otherwise was a security risk.

- What kind of secrets could it be, that --ow ! -- be careful, it might go off! Tell Red-Eyes here to calm down --

- It's okay, Patrick. Well, I don't know for sure where my speculations came too close to reality. But there was one suggestion, the "Mecca Doctrine" proposal, that was very likely to... to...

- Say it, Doc. Screw "national security" -- the world has the right to know. Say it!

- I... I will. The "Mecca Doctrine" proposal emanates logically from the Western World's interest in protecting the Mid-East oil production -- as was demonstrated in the Persian Gulf War.

I proposed a secret, informal agreement with the military establishment of Israel: that if there would ever be an escalating conflict between Israel and the Moslem states... that they must avoid a nuclear strike against the large oil fields. As a suitable alternative for nuclear retaliation, the Kaba shrine in Mecca would be chosen instead... considering the great demoralizing effect on the Moslem population, if it was totally destroyed.

My report also suggested a possible scenario, where Mecca was the first-strike target for nuclear

weapons. But the entire idea depends on one condition: that our Arab allies would never, ever get to know about it. If the agreement existed, and I have no proof whatsoever of that, the consequences might be... Jesus, I shouldn't really have said this...

- The truth is cruel, Doc. "They" must've been shadowing him to find his "source" -- and when they couldn't find it, they decided to eliminate all who'd even talked to him -- just to be safe. It was that kind of "death squad" that attacked the Institute. "What a senseless waste of human life!" Haha ...

- I don't find mass murder to be a laughable matter.

- Forgive him, Joyce, he hasn't tasted freedom in five years. It was with the help of the Institute staff and... some of the patients, that a few of us managed to survive the assassination attempt. Now all I wish, is to stay alive long enough to reveal the dirty game I'm fed up with. There isn't time to --

Chapter 54

A signal from the cell-phone in Abram's clothes interrupted him. He mumbled an inaudible excuse and raised himself up, dropping his headset. Parry got over to his seat and pushed a paper note in front of the DJ.

"We gotta fly, but stay here and read this message every five minutes -- or we'll blow this station to pieces. Adios!"

The DJ held up the paper. Scribbled down by hand, it read:

IF YOU WANT TO COMPLAIN ABOUT THE CURRENT STATE OF THE NATION, PLEASE
ASK FOR THESE (PARTLY) RESPONSIBLE PERSONS:

NEVILLE ANDERSON, HEAD OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL;
COLMER RAYMOND, ADVISOR TO THE SECRETARY OF STATE;
PETE STANTON, DEPUTY CIA CHIEF;
HAROLD ULMGARD, PENTAGON INTELLIGENCE OFFICER;
JOSHUA WADE, ASSISTANT CHIEF STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND.

P.S: ASK THEM HOW THEY'VE MANAGED TO REMAIN ACTIVE PAST THEIR 80TH
BIRTHDAYS.

The trio quickly deserted the sound-proof studio. The DJ and the technician stared dazedly at each other -- and went back to work.

"Our guests were in a hurry, but they left a very strange message, which can only be heard on this station: WRBC with Mike Moorcock! To the newly arrived listeners, I can tell that..."

Chapter 55

Police sirens were approaching. With a firm grip of Joyce's arm, Parry rushed to the exit alongside Abram.

Abram slowed down next to a food cart, grabbing a coffee thermos and a few food packs. The three

hurried out on the parking space, to the helicopter which stood apart from the few cars there.

Joyce climbed into the cockpit, shouting desperately: "It's hopeless, I say! There is nowhere you can escape, and the fuel won't last to Canada !"

She strapped herself to the pilot seat, Parry holding on to it behind her.

"Do as I said anyway. If we stay here too long, we're dead," he replied hoarsely.

Parry supported himself against the wall as the engines started, then moved down to the cargo cabin. Abram sat on a fold-out metal bench, hungrily eating of the stolen sandwiches.

He looked up on Parry and offered him a food pack, but Parry declined: "Gimme the one you've started on instead. And for God's sake turn that thing off!"

The mobile phone in Abram's clothes was still beeping incessantly, as in the radio station. Abram gave Parry his sandwich, pulled down the zipper of his flak jacket and coveralls, and got out his phone. He held one hand over his other ear -- the noise from the rotor blades was high -- cranked the phone volume up to the max, and pressed the receiving button. Parry sat down next to him.

"Hello?" Abram shouted.

"INCOMING CALL FROM CLASSIFIED SOURCE. USE DE-SCRAMBLING CODE THREE, SEVEN, ONE, ONE ."

The loud computer-voice crackled in the earpiece; Abram winced, but obeyed.

An amplified, but human male voice came on: "MR. LEMERCIER, THIS IS NEVILLE ANDERSON OF THE NSA. YOUR SUPERIORS IN THE CIA HAVE ASKED ME TO TRY TALKING SENSE INTO YOU."

Abram wavered on his seat, as the chopper suddenly made a lurching lift-off.

He turned red with anger: "Are you trying to lecture me about being SENSIBLE?!"

"COME NOW, ABRAM. YOU DO REALIZE THAT WHAT HAPPENED, WAS FOR THE SAFETY OF OUR NATION'S CHILDREN?"

"What else have you been doing to preserve national security?! Creating a decoy organization called the CIA, perhaps?!"

"LISTEN, ABRAM. IF YOU JUST REVEAL WHO GAVE YOU THE INFORMATION, WE LET YOU GO FREE. THAT'S ALL WE'RE ASKING FOR."

"If only you knew... hahaha !"

"WHO? IS IT ONE OF US?"

"First I want a few answers in return!"

"SPEAK."

"What kind of muscle does your group have?!"

"I THINK YOU JUST SURVIVED A FRACTION OF IT. QUITE IMPRESSIVE, ACTUALLY. BUT WE'VE GOT YOU PINNED LIKE A FLY ON THE WALL."

"Can you control parts of the national defense too?"

"ONLY THE PARTS THAT REALLY MATTER."

"How did you manage to make such long careers?"

"BY STICKING TOGETHER AND ELIMINATING THE COMPETITION. THERE ARE SO MANY WAYS."

"But what'll you do when you grow too old?"

"WE'VE ALREADY BOUGHT DECADES TO OUR LIFE SPANS. SENILITY, HEART DISEASE, IMMUNE DEFICIENCIES, IMPOTENCE... THERE'S A CURE FOR EVERYTHING NOWADAYS, IF YOU CAN PAY. DID YOU KNOW SOME DOCTORS USE ABORTION WASTE AND STOLEN GLANDS FROM THE THIRD WORLD, AS RAW MATERIALS FOR SOME TREATMENTS? AMAZING."

"So you're not giving up what you've started?"

"WE REMAIN LOYAL TO OUR NATION'S BEST INTERESTS... UNLIKE TRAITORS SUCH AS YOU. DO YOU REALIZE THE DAMAGE YOU'VE DONE?"

Abram covered the phone receiver and said into Parry's ear: "You were right. There may be a Mecca Doctrine or a secret organization, in some form or another! I'll try to bluff them that I know."

He spoke into the receiver again: "Whose idea was this 'Nuke Mecca' plan?"

"THAT DOESN'T MATTER NOW, THE POINT IS THAT THESE PLANS SHOULDN'T NORMALLY LEAK FROM OUR NETWORK. AND DON'T BELIEVE WE CAN INFLUENCE EVERYTHING THE GOVERNMENT OR THE PENTAGON DOES. PRESIDENT NIXON, FOR INSTANCE, CAUSED US MANY PROBLEMS."

"Does the current President know about the existence of your network?"

"YOU'RE FISHING TOO DEEP, ABRAM. YOU DON'T REALLY WANT TO KNOW THAT."

"Goodbye then!"

"WAIT! WE PLEDGED LOYALTY TO PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT... AND NO ONE AFTER HIM. WE HAVE, WITH MORE OR LESS SUCCESS, TRIED TO ADMINISTER HIS TESTAMENT."

"What testament?!"

"THE NUCLEAR BOMB, AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST AMERICA'S ENEMIES. EVEN A

TRAITOR LIKE YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND THAT."

"Roosevelt's dead! Communism is dead! You already have won the struggle, can't you see? If the Russians get to know this..."

"YOU'VE GOT IT ALL WRONG. IT'S THE RUSSIANS WHO KNOW OF OUR EXISTENCE, NOT THE PRESIDENT -- NOR ANY PRESIDENT AFTER ROOSEVELT."

"What?!"

"AMERICA'S ENEMIES WERE AND ARE EVIL. THEY ONLY UNDERSTAND THE ULTIMATE THREAT. WE CALL OUR STRATEGY 'REXICIDE'. IF AMERICA IS REALLY THREATENED, WE KILL THE PRESIDENT AND PUT THE BLAME ON THE ENEMY. WITH SUCH A POSSIBILITY, NO ENEMY ON EARTH GOES SAFE FOR NUCLEAR RETALIATION. ONLY OUR MOST POWERFUL ENEMIES KNOW ABOUT IT, AND THEY KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF THEY TRY TO EXPOSE US."

"I don't believe y--!"

Abram's voice faltered. Parry handed him the thermos; he took a gulp of the hot beverage, grimaced and turned red, dropping the hot thermos on the floor at his feet.

"HELLO! ARE YOU STILL THERE?"

Abram's eyes started to water as he spoke: "Yes, I'm here! Prove to me that you're telling the truth!"

The enhanced voice made a pause for about five seconds, then returned: "THERE'S NO TIME FOR THAT NOW. BUT I CAN SAY THIS MUCH: AFTER THE BAY OF PIGS FIASCO WHICH WE DIDN'T SUPPORT, AND THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS, WE HAD TO SHOW THE RUSSIANS WE WEREN'T BLUFFING. THEY STARTED TO BELIEVE WE WERE GETTING WEAK. AFTER OUR DEMONSTRATION OF POWER IN 1963, THEY NEVER DARED TO CHALLENGE US AGAIN."

Abram's eyes didn't water anymore -- he was weeping.

"You're lying, you bastard! Not him -- you couldn't have killed him!"

"QUICKLY NOW, BEFORE I HAVE TO CUT YOU OFF. WHO IS YOUR SOURCE? IS IT WADE?"

The voice was very upset now. Abram grinned joylessly, and exchanged an -- insane? -- glance with Parry. He nodded silently.

Abram said loudly: "There's an inner circle, Anderson! I didn't get to know their names, but I know they're gonna try a coup, very soon! Perhaps in connection with this affair they paid me to create with my report! There's two or three of you, against the others! Will you let me go now?"

The voice in the phone was dead silent for a long moment, then snapped: "DON'T BE RIDICULOUS, LE MERCIER. GOODBYE."

Disconnection. Parry, who had been eavesdropping, backed away. Abram dropped the phone on the bench, burying his head in his hands. His body made a slight shudder of exhaustion as he sighed deeply,

and exhaled. Parry moved over to the right side-door window; from that point he could see the curving fields stretch out to the south. Dark plow-furrows and yellow grass formed a patchwork, interspersed with orange rows of trees. Beyond that, hills and forests.

He stood there watching for a minute, then moved towards the cockpit.

"Let's check out the skies," he said, and there was worry in his face.

Chapter 56

They squeezed in on both sides of Joyce's seat and gazed out through the windshield plates. The bullet-hole in the glass had been patched up with some Plastic Padding, but the cracks partly obscured the view ahead.

Parry put on his sunglasses again, asking: "Speed and altitude?"

"200 kilometers per hour, about 300 feet up," Joyce replied.

Parry suddenly stiffened, seeking with his eyes for something above the helicopter.

He pointed up above the sun: "There! See those vapor trails?"

Abram felt in his coverall pockets; Parry handed him his own shades and Abram put them on top his eyeglasses. High up in the sky, four white trails shone from a barely discernible aircraft with long V-shaped wings.

Abram said: "Could it be a B-52..? There's an air force base further south. You think they'll bomb the radio station?"

"Or worse. We gotta go higher up, fast!"

The twitches under Parry's eyes had returned. Joyce jerked her head his way; the sunglasses hid her eyes, but the corners of her lips were drawn down.

"I could try going up to a thousand feet or more, but we'll lose speed."

She slowly pulled the helm closer to her. The helicopter's engines whined as they strained under the abrupt rise into thinner air. They waited; the minutes crawled by. Parry watched the altitude meter until it showed 2300 feet; he put a hand on Joyce's shoulder.

"Joyce," he said, "keep the shades on. Be prepared for a powerful flash of light: whatever you do, cover your eyes when it comes. Then be ready for heavy turbulence. We'll go astern and strap in."

He gave her shoulder a pat and the two men left the cockpit. They placed themselves into the seats and put on the safety belts. Parry got his sunglasses back; Abram shadowed his eyes with his hands. Abram grabbed his mobile phone, mumbling a curse.

"What is it?" Parry asked.

"There was this woman... I met her in Westmoreham before I finished the report... we spent the night

together... she might be in danger too, since she talked to me. She gave me her number..."

"If you call her, they'll trace the call to her for sure."

"I know! Or she might already be..."

He grasped the phone so hard his knuckles went white. Then he dialed Annie's number. There came two signals. Three.

Then: "Hi! You've come to Annie Collett. I'm not at home right now, but if you leave your number and a message after the signal, I'll call you back. Bye!"

"Perhaps she heard our warning on the radio," Abram said to himself. "Perhaps she made it out of town." Then, folding his hands and looking down: "Patrick, perhaps we're as good as dead. If... if you die and I live, is there anyone you'd want me to inform afterwards?"

Parry looked -- not stared -- at the tired, filthy, long-haired old man in coveralls next to him.

He gazed into thin air, and said: "No. My parents died years ago -- their estate financed much of my time at the Institute. And I lost touch with my relatives long before that."

Abram's forehead wrinkled; he looked in sad amazement at Parry.

"No loved ones? No friends? Not even a teaching colleague or student you once knew?"

Parry shook his head, still gazing at nothing. Abram's head sank down again.

Parry lowered his gaze, and asked calmly: "Is there anyone who should be informed if you die?"

"Yes..." He shook his head quickly. "No. The CIA? Intelligence people never become real friends. I can't trust any of them now. My wife died seven years ago. No children. And I can't risk letting my dear relatives in Canada get involved, so they mustn't know anything. There was that woman in Westmoreham ... but I never got the time to really know her. Maybe they killed her too."

They said nothing for a little while, only the rotor blades and their breath sounding. Parry, still wearing his sunglasses, turned to Abram.

"Abram?"

The psychologist grunted.

"Abram, you're the only person I ever dared to trust during all those five years."

The old man's head shot up: Parry's eyes were hidden to him, but his face appeared solemn, almost softer. Without his usual nervous jerkiness of movement, Parry offered him his right hand. Abram shook it with a slight smile on his face.

"Thanks for your help, Patrick. I don't blame you for anything."

"Thanks yourself, Doc."

They let go of each others' hands and crouched down, Abram shielding his eyes.

One second passed.

Two seconds.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

And the next second, one might have believed the sun was crashing down upon the earth behind them.

Chapter 57

From somewhere behind the helicopter, an intensive light burned in through the side windows -- turning every smooth surface in the cabin into a miniature sun.

A moment later, the light from outside receded into a pulsating, yellowish floodlight. After an indefinite passage of time, Abram moved his hands from his eyes and peeked up. Suddenly, the shockwave hit the helicopter. A distant, immensely vibrant thunder suffused the air. The aircraft heaved forward -- the wind wailing with sudden force as it tore at the side doors. Abram and Parry were jerked forward, then recoiled as the safety belts held them in place. They had their hands behind their necks, and Abram groaned with pain as his hands slammed into the wall behind him.

The helicopter dropped, began to level off, then wavered uneasily for a few seconds before it stabilized. Parry wriggled out of his two-point belt, and hurried up to the cockpit. Joyce, wearing a cap and sunglasses, sat sweaty and trembling at the controls. She twitched when Parry entered.

"Can we make it down?" he asked nervously.

"I... think so," Joyce said; her voice was weak and slow. "Was it really an ... atomic bomb that went off behind us? I'll make a full turn so we can see... okay?"

He nodded. She turned the vehicle in a wide arch. Abram entered the cockpit just in time to see what they had left behind.

They said nothing -- held their breath -- barely blinked at the sight: A few miles away, a glowing mushroom-cloud was rising up from the horizon where once Westmoreham had been. Smoke from numerous fires began to billow up from the ground, several miles away from ground zero; further out, enormous dust clouds were being stirred up from the fields. The helicopter swung back and the destruction disappeared from view; ahead of it lay the blue, distant hills and mountains, and the increasingly clouded sky.

"I just can't understand it yet," Joyce said to no one in particular. "I'll take us as far as the fuel will last,

then I don't know."

"Fine," Parry answered, "but don't land near any city. We're not nearly out of danger yet."

He turned to leave -- when Joyce stretched back and grabbed his arm. He froze; tears were streaming down from under her sunglasses.

"Stay with me. Please."

They both stayed.

Chapter 58

When the helicopter went down to land several hours later, the sun was beginning to set into a deep-red dusk. Up above, heavy cloud masses were stacking -- their edges lit red from the west.

Using a searchlight, the aircraft lowered itself unsteadily onto a narrow gravel path, between a pitch-dark field and a cluster of naked trees. The helicopter's lights went dark, the engines fell silent, the thunder of the rotor blades receded into a hissing. Three dark figures exited the vehicle, and ducked down into the ditch by the field's edge. They peeked up through the dry grass, scanning the darkening landscape: far off south, a river reflected the light from scattered houses. Closer lay just the light from a handful of houses; one or two fields, and the forested hills.

"Could that be Spokane, down to the south?" Abram asked.

"Impossible, we're much further east," Joyce said. "Probably just a small town. We can't stay here, we'll freeze to death."

"I won't drop my Uzi -- we're not safe yet," Parry said.

Abram whispered: "Okay. Hide the weapons in your clothes, and we'll get to the nearest house. We'll say that we were taking flying lessons, when we were surprised by the blast. First of all, we ought to get more fuel to the chopper. Then maybe we can get to Canada. Otherwise, a car is the top priority."

"But we don't hurt or threaten anybody, 'cause that would only make our case look worse. Okay?" Parry mumbled his reluctant consent. They hid the Uzis inside their coveralls and left the ditch, condensed air steaming from their faces. When they had walked about fifty meters south along the gravel path, they came to a wider, dark asphalt road. Two car headlights suddenly beamed from behind a grove, close to the group.

"Just act like you need help," Abram told them. "Let me do the talking."

He rushed up onto the middle of the road and waved at the car to stop. A powerful pickup truck with an empty platform roared past Abram, braked, then backed. He strode over to the edge of the road, still waving with one hand; the other he kept close to the zipper of his collar. The truck's left side-window was wound open; a skinny old man in a hunter's cap poked out his head, giving Abram's features a sour look.

The driver opened his mouth -- full of all too white false teeth -- and barked: "Whatever happened to you, son?!"

Abram gave him an embarrassed, half-desperate smile: "Meand a friend just made an emergency landing with a helicopter. We were taking flying lessons far, far away from here. There was a terrible explosion, and we were forced to fly over here... we must call for help, but my phone is broken..."

The driver loudly interrupted Abram's fast speech: "I drove here when I heard your helicopter going down. Jump up on the platform, and I'll take you to the sheriff!"

Abram hesitated an instant, then waved at the others who came up from the roadside and climbed onto the platform. They clung close together behind the driver's cab; the truck quickly took off on the dark road.

Abram leaned close to Parry and said in his ear: "He's driving us to the sheriff and I couldn't object, it would only have made him suspicious. Just stay calm and let me explain things."

Joyce, Abram, and Parry all began to shiver, and huddled closer together in the cold draft.

"You're beginning to lose control again, Doc," Parry said angrily. "What if they've sent out a bulletin about us? We were on the radio this morning," he said between the chattering of his teeth.

"The WRBC doesn't reach this far," Joyce stuttered. "And a nuclear explosion should knock out parts of the phone system -- just like your phone ceased to work, Abram."

Abram pulled up his collar a little higher, restlessly peering at the landscape sweeping past them. It was almost night now, and the land was black.

"Okay," he said tensely, "we don't know what to expect. I'm just begging you, Parry: stay calm until we know for sure what's happened today. In the worst case, we'll only be forced to tell the truth, *n'est-ce pas?* "

Nobody laughed, and they pressed closer together. After a few minutes' travel, they came to a more densely populated area with scattered houses. The truck passed a sign saying ROSANDA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE 200 FEET. A few houses later, they turned in on a wide driveway lit by floodlights. The driveway lay in front of a two-story brick house with the sign ROSANDA SHERIFF'S OFFICE -- MUNICIPAL HALL.

The driver stopped the truck, stepped out and urged the three passengers to follow him inside. With Abram walking first after the man, they went through the bright glass-door entrance into the shiny white reception. The skinny old man, wearing a padded leather coat and boots, took off his hunting-cap and waved it, smiling, at the young woman behind the reception counter.

"Good evening, Trish," he shouted in his loud old man's voice, "is the sheriff in?"

"Hi Pete!" she shouted in a friendly tone, the way one does to a person with hearing problems.

She leaned across the counter, saw the three figures behind him, and quickly picked up the phone: "Pete just came in, with three people who seem to have arrived from a war. Yes. Yes. No. Okay."

She hung up and smiled at them.

"The sheriff will soon come to help you. Wouldn't you like to sit down while you wait?"

She gestured at the couch on the other side of the reception. The three, and the man called Pete, went quietly over and sat down.

Parry called urgently to the receptionist: "Miss..." She sat up, worried. He asked gravely: "Is there a TV? We've got to see the news."

The girl smiled apologetically, and reached up at the large monitor hanging in the ceiling next to her. She turned it in their direction, switched it on and asked: "What channel?"

"CNN," Parry replied quickly.

She pressed the channel number, and a newscaster appeared on the screen: "...is on its way to the site and will soon bring you pictures of the disaster."

Everyone in the reception stared at the screen: Parry, Abram, Joyce, the receptionist and Pete. Behind the newscaster was the image of a mushroom cloud and the headline NUCLEAR DISASTER IN THE U.S.?

"Today's big news is the mysterious nuclear explosion that occurred in Westmoreham County, southeast Washington State. All phone and radio communications with the small town are cut off, and contradictory testimonies arrived just before and after the accident. Many escaped witnesses have quoted a warning that was transmitted from the local radio station, minutes before the blast, and an obscure message which suggested a terrorist act.

"Other witnesses have claimed that a B-52 bomber plane was flying over the area just before the explosion. The Pentagon has so far refused to give any comments on the situation."

The newscaster stopped, appeared to read something from the teleprompter, then cleared his throat and continued: "We've just received news that our flying reporter from Seattle has reached the outer parts of the disaster area. Over to Barbara Wahn, Westmoreham."

The broadcast cut to a plain in deep-red dusk, shot from at least 300 feet up with a moving video camera. Deep below, glowing smoke columns rose from a gigantic, elliptical fire zone in the background.

Over the rotorblade noise, an emotional female voice began to speak: "This is Barbara Wahn, live from Westmoreham County. The burning area you see over there... somewhere in the middle, the fire is several miles wide... is all that remains of a small town with about four thousand inhabitants. I... I can't describe it in words. The National Guard has troops ready to enter in radiation suits, but firestorms are still raging and making it too dangerous to send in rescue patrols.

"Right now, fire-brigades from the entire state are being mobilized to try and limit the spreading of the fires. Rain is in the air, and the public in neighboring regions should not go outside with the risk of radioactive fallout and..."

The female voice cracked into an uncontrolled sobbing, a hand waved in front of the camera.

The sobbing voice shouted: "Cut! Cut!"

The newscaster came into view again, looking a bit shaken. He went on, slower than before.

"We've just received an unconfirmed statement from a Pentagon source: this morning, a highly placed Air

Force officer ordered a B-52 bomber to fly over Westmoreham on what was assumed to be a training mission with non-armed bombs. An incorrect order was given, and an armed atomic bomb was dropped by mistake. The officer responsible for the faulty order, a certain General Joshua Quaid ..."

"No! Jerks!" Parry said out loud.

"...assistant chief of the Strategic Air Command, did today commit suicide according to the same Pentagon source.

"The White House has so far declined to comment upon the events. A spokesman for the White House Public Relations Department promised that the President will hold a press conference as soon as he, quote, 'has got a clear picture of the actual scope of the event.'"

A phone rang and the receptionist answered, more calls blinking on her relay board, lining up on her monitor. Pete folded his hands, mumbling a soundless prayer as his eyes remained fixed on the screen. Joyce sat weeping silently.

Abram whispered to Parry: "I don't get it. Did Wade really kill himself after giving that order? That would rob the others of their most important tool of power."

"We don't know if it was suicide," Parry whispered. "Perhaps they finally tried to finish each other off, because of that lie you told Neville Anderson."

"That was just a cheap trick," answered Abram. "Should I have told him the truth, that such a well-guarded secret was revealed by a mental patient?"

Parry frowned, raising his voice a little: "No, they wouldn't buy that. But I think you got them to seriously start mistrusting each other -- it was probably just a matter of time anyway, after decades of secrecy. I think Wade committed suicide to prevent the others from doing the 'coup' you lied about; to break their power to use the Bomb."

"But the bombing? He couldn't have decided that on his own."

"No," Parry consented, "we don't know exactly who agreed on the bombing, but we could assume that at least Wade and Neville Anderson did. The decision to attack American territory must have disrupted their unity, and their strategy broke down..."

Then Parry's face lit up: "We've won, Doc! If the other four would try to assassinate the President now, the 'Rexicide' strategy wouldn't work. All the attention on Wade must have awakened the President, and any attempt on his life now would only increase their exposure. If only we'd got through the list of names which should've been read on WRBC -- then the whole affair'll be over soon."

They looked up at the TV screen again: some word from a newscaster had caught their ears.

"...a recording of the message that was read on the local radio channel, just before the explosion."

Abram and Parry held their breath; a noisy tape recording with odd snapping disturbances -- radiation damage? -- was played on the news program.

"...if you want to complain about the current state of the nation, please ask for these partly responsible persons."

"Neville Anderson, head of the National Security Council; Colmer Raymond, advisor to the Secretary of State; Pete Stanton, Deputy CIA chief; Harold Ulmgard, Pentagon Intelligence officer; and Joshua WaDZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ --"

Parry jerked to his feet, waving his fists: "Yes! Got 'em ! We made it, Doc!"

He stopped dead, his head turning toward an inner door. The sheriff and two deputies had just arrived into the reception. They, Abram, Joyce, the receptionist, and Pete stared at him.

"Concealed weapon!" one deputy screamed, pointing at the suspicious bulge in the belly of Parry's bloodied coveralls -- fully visible.

The loose Velcro straps of Parry's flak jacket had opened up when he had leaped up from the couch. Parry's face hardened -- he instantly pulled down the zipper of his coveralls, reaching for the Uzi or a grenade -- the receptionist screamed and ducked down -- and he was immediately gunned down by the sheriff and his assistants. They had drawn their revolvers in an instant.

He was hit in the chest and his right arm -- the impact threw him backward. Grimacing, he fell on his back. Abram made a move toward him, but stopped.

The sheriff shouted rapidly at Abram, aiming at his head: "Freeze! You two -- put your hands behind your heads!"

Desperately looking at Parry, who lay writhing on the floor, Abram obeyed the order.

"You are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent..."

The deputies quickly searched Abram and Joyce, and took Abram's Uzi and Beretta. The sheriff took a knife, and cut loose Parry's bloodied gun and grenades from his strap. He handed them to the other deputy.

"Trish!" He threw a glance at the counter; the terrified receptionist's head peeked up. "Call Dr. Jameson and the hospital for an ambulance. Critical gunshot wounds."

She picked up the phone. The other deputy knelt over Parry, unpacking some First Aid. He opened up the coveralls. Blood was streaming across Parry's chest; his breathing was forced and wheezing.

"Abram," Parry said in a faint voice.

Abram ignored the first deputy's gun and knelt down next to Parry's head.

"Closer," Parry mumbled.

With Abram's ear almost touching his cheek, he muttered: "Giordano Bruno... a student... taped my lectures. He told me... final lecture... hidden inside staircase to his L.A. apartment. The power behind the power... I just scraped the surface... you see? You must continue my work."

Abram lifted his head, looking helplessly down on Parry's white face: Parry's eyes were half-shut, but under their eyelids his eyes were flickering about as wildly as before, with the old hunted expression.

His pupils stopped and focused on Abram's face -- and he showed his teeth in a final wolf grin.

"Y'think you broke me. But now I see you..."

The grin contracted a little; his eyes went still.

The deputy felt the man's throat for a pulse and said: "He's dead."

Pete held his cap to his chest and made the sign of the cross.

"Sorry about that," the sheriff said, "but he gave us no choice. As soon as Trish told you that Pete had brought the three of you here, we connected you to the A.P.B. on the three terrorist suspects from Westmoreham."

"I'm not a terrorist," Joyce objected sourly -- her tears had ceased. "It was those two who took me hostage, after we'd been attacked by CIA agents or --" she stopped abruptly, looking down on Parry's dead body.

"What'll happen to us now?" Abram said with a resigned face.

"That's not my decision," the sheriff stated. "The A.P.B. on you is a federal matter, so we're delivering you to the FBI."

He lowered his gun, looking questioningly at Parry's corpse; then at Abram's grimy, lined face.

"How about some explanations?" The sheriff, a homely-looking man in his thirties, scratched his temple and squinted as if thinking hard.

"I mean, what's all this nonsense about CIA agents? It was your helicopter we heard landing, wasn't it? Why were you carrying that arsenal, and what've you got to do with the A-bomb over Westmoreham? And who was he, by the way?"

He nodded in the direction of the corpse on the reception floor.

Abram looked into the ceiling, expressionless: "That was..." -- he appeared to be talking to someone else -- "a life wasted in the pursuit of the unattainable."

He turned to Joyce.

"There won't be any report," he told her.

Chapter 59

PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C.
OCTOBER 18

The room was windowless, very quiet, and very dark, except for the couch which Abram lay tied to; a small lamp was shining in his face.

There were several figures sitting in the shadows around him, and a man with a cart standing next to him. The cart contained an active tape recorder, and some medical equipment including syringes and tiny injection dosage bottles.

The man turned off the recorder, and there came a voice from the shadows: "How do you feel, Abram?"

Abram looked dazedly up above him, his eyes unfocused, and slurred: "Like shit, thank you. Your truth-serum is way better than the pot we used to smoke when I was young."

He giggled, then fell silent.

"So," the voice resumed, "you've told us a fascinating story; and the tape of that mad teacher's lectures you were carrying, makes your story credible. It seems you've helped us remove a problem in the administration.

"That secret intelligence ring was a very big potential threat, as they showed when they panicked and nuked American ground. We're happy to be rid of them, and our enemies too, of course. But you've given us a lot of trouble.

"We can't cover up this affair completely, since you went public with the name list... but luckily enough, most ordinary people won't understand its significance anyway. The conspirators have either killed themselves or vanished -- well, that makes it easier to cover up the whole truth. We can't even put you on trial for high treason, since that would alert our Arab allies to the reality of the 'Mecca Doctrine'.

"So what should we do about you, Abram? You're the only living witness who has a clue to this carnage -- we can let that woman go free, because she already half believes you to be a raving lunatic. She'll be easy to convince to keep quiet. But you, Abram, you're unreliable. We can't have CIA employees running around telling the public things they shouldn't hear.

Abram giggled again, saying in a thick voice: "Okay, *mes amis*, *la comedie est fini*. What'll it be? A bullet in the head, a false suicide note? A one-way ticket to a mental asylum, and a quick lobotomy?"

He began singing to himself like a drunken man: "*They're coming t'take me away, ha-ha, They're coming t'take me away, ho-ho, hi-hi, ha-ha...*"

"Shut up, you goddamn idiot," another voice from the shadows snapped. "I say we get rid of the traitor."

The man next to Abram cried hush: "He's still a bit drugged, please don't disturb his recovery."

The first voice responded: "You see, Abram? Even among my own, there are those who wish to eliminate you on the double. But I don't want that. Because your story impressed me. You have a special talent for dealing with people, gaining their trust -- they confide in you without being paid money. We can't allow such talent to be wasted."

The man behind the voice rose from his chair, went closer to Abram's couch -- keeping his face in the shadow.

"So this is what we do: we see that you forget what needs to be forgotten, get you fired from the CIA, and your university; we let you go. Take a long vacation. Visit your relatives in Canada. You need to relax.

"But we'll be keeping an eye on you all the time. If you break down, develop a drinking problem, destroy yourself -- then we won't lift a finger to help you. If you reveal the truth to anyone, we eliminate you. We let you live -- for later use. Whenever we may need your special talents, we'll fetch you. And you'd better be grateful, Abram. You'd better be."

Abram was silent for a long while.

Finally he replied, partly in French: "*D'accord*, okay, *sale conne*, I'm infinitely grateful. Now let me loose, before I piss myself."

Chapter 60

EASTON UNIVERSITY
NORFOLK, VIRGINIA
OCTOBER 19

Abram woke up with a faint, frightened yelp. His gaze flickered about his cramped office: bookshelves, a cluttered desk, a chair, and a view of the campus from the window. The old wall-clock sounded a delicate ting-ting signal; it was two in the afternoon, local time.

A knocking came from the door, a pause, then another knocking. Abram pushed away the blanket which covered his body. He sat up on the couch -- still dressed in a shirt and slacks -- found his shoes, and put them on. The knocking on the door intensified. With a prolonged groan, he rose to his feet and lurched to the door. When he opened, Abram faced a grave middle-aged man in a conservative suit and a wool muffler around his neck. Abram squinted, pulling back his unruly scalp hair.

"Abram?" said the visitor.

"Good morning, Steve. Long time no see," Abram muttered in a cracked voice, and let the man inside. "Yes, long time indeed," the man said with a contemptuous sniff, as he scanned the room. He had a soft, slightly bloated face and body, but hard glassy eyes. "Did I wake you?"

Abram adjusted his eyeglasses -- he had slept with them on -- and searched among his things for something, while talking: "I suppose you've heard what happened at the place where I was studying that patient?"

Steve frowned: "Yes, it's all over the news now. God, a bomb dropped on a small town. Terrible story... I understand you were tired after that. How did you... I mean, were you anywhere close to the... explosion?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

He opened a drawer and pulled out a table phone, connecting it to the wall socket.

"Any messages for me while I've been away?"

Abram sat down at the desk and dialed the number to Annie. There was no answer.

"Did you lose your cellular phone in... in Westmoreham?"

Abram grunted distractedly, ignoring him. He dug through his paper and book piles for a moment, then looked up at Steve.

"You haven't got a phone book, do you? I've lost my entire list of numbers and addresses."

Steve sniffed and said: "Abram, I understand this isn't the right time to challenge your victimization. But we have to have a serious talk about your work here. Two FBI persons were here yesterday, asking questions about you."

Abram's eyes met Steve's hard, glassy ones -- and he said, with a feral grin: "Spare me the politically correct bullshit. You can't fire me, Steve -- I quit."

"I didn't mean to --"

"Yes, you did. Ask the janitor to carry in some empty boxes for my books. I'll hand in my resignation today."

Steve held up a hand to stop Abram's pacing around the chamber. Abram halted, tired irritation written all over his features.

"Please, Abram; I'm not just the principal. I'm also your colleague and friend since many years. I know you're going through some hard times, so if you'd just sit down and talk to me --"

"You know, Steve: those cold fish-eyes of yours always did betray you. Now leave me alone before I kick you out. This office is mine until I hand in the resignation."

The principal's face went purple, and his mouth tightened to a thin line. Without a word, he left the office. Abram went back to his desk, and made a call.

"New York Post, may I help you?"

"Is Kris Silverstein in? Tell him it's 'Old Merlin.'"

In a second, a man with a Brooklyn accent answered: "'Old Merlin'"? How are you, it's been a long time!"

"I'm okay. Kris... 'my old mother is in the room, and she's eager to listen in'. What should I tell her?"

"That I'm doing just fine, and 'your old mother shouldn't worry about me.' Okay, is there anything you'd like us to meet and talk about?"

"No, wouldn't make much difference now. Look -- I need to find someone, and I don't think the authorities will be of any help. Could you give me a clue to what to do?"

"Where was the last place you saw this person?"

"Westmoreham."

"Oygevalt/That place is a mess -- the body count has hardly begun yet. Is it a close relation? A disaster eyewitness?"

"This is no cover story, Kris. It's personal."

"Sorry. But I think I know what to do. Listen..."

Chapter 61

SPOKANE AIRPORT, WASHINGTON STATE
OCTOBER 22

"Where can I find Annie Two Heads Collett?"

"Let me look it up, sir."

The WAC second lieutenant worked the keyboard of her portable computer, and found the name on the list: "Here she is, sir. Row M, bed 418."

"Thanks."

Abram paced across the huge, clear-lit aircraft hangar, now converted into a temporary assembly camp for hundreds of civilians. Row upon row of tent-beds were covering the floor, with canteens, portable lavatories, showers, and wide hospital tents in the corners; all marked as U.S. ARMY property. He pushed his way past scores of other people of all ages, all searching restlessly with their eyes, calling someone's name. Some children were lying on the beds, quietly waiting, some were reunited with adults -- some sat alone, crying aloud or in silence. More female soldiers dashed around, some sitting down to comfort a lonely child, aged man, or woman.

The noise of shouted names echoed through the spacious hangar:

"Edward! Edward?"

"Susie? Susie!"

"Norton! We're here!"

"Joe!"

"Loretta... Loretta!"

"Bettie Ann! Eve! Bettie Ann! Eve? Eve?"

"Wave if you can see us!"

It took him a couple of minutes to find the bed; it was empty, but used. He sat down on it and waited, watching the area. After a while, he checked his electronic wristwatch. It had ceased to work.

"Damn electromagnetic pulse," Abram muttered.

He ripped off the watch and tossed it away. Another few minutes were spent waiting. Then he took a pen and notepad from his coat pocket, and wrote:

*ANNIE, I WAS HERE LOOKING BUT COULDN'T FIND YOU. PLEASE WAIT HERE UNTIL I RETURN, OR CALL SILVERSTEIN AT THE NEW YORK POST, AND ASK FOR "OLD MERLIN".
LOVE YOU,
Abram*

He added the phone number, folded the note and put it on the pillow. As he turned to leave...

"Abram!!"

Annie's scream made him start up, diving into the crowd. Annie pushed her way forth and rushed into his arms; almost instantly, she began to cry, clinging to him as he rocked her slightly.

After a minute, she managed to speak in clipped sentences: "I heard you and the madman on the radio -- I was on my way home from a nightshift in Spokane -- I turned the car and drove back -- and then a while later I heard the explosion far away -- I learned what'd happened -- the entire town was destroyed and everyone there was killed! Why, why, Abram? What did you have to do with it?"

Her voice broke as she started to cry again.

He kissed her face, mumbling: "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry... I must explain, but it's dangerous for you to know... come, sit down and let's talk."

They sat on her bed, Abram holding her as he spoke. He told her little, but enough. When he had finished explaining, Annie was silent.

She suddenly said in a calm, strong voice: "You must help me find the men who did this, Abram. You must make sure that they are all dead or punished. They killed my friends, killed my home." Annie stared into his eyes. Hers were red and shiny, but fierce and alive with determination. "I won't leave you until you do. You hear me?"

He nodded slightly, grasping her hands.

"I swear, Annie. I swear."

He helped her to her feet.

"Are you staying here any longer?" he asked. "To wait and see if any people you know should arrive here?"

"Yes," she said, wiping her eyes.

"Good. I must go looking for some friends myself, then we'll meet soon and decide what to do. I will be forced to leave the country for a while."

He took the note from the pillow and pressed it into her palm.

"I'll come back for you."

Again, he left her.

Epilogue

MAYWOOD
EAST CENTRAL LOS ANGELES
NOVEMBER 3

Giordano Bruno's apartment had been reduced a blackened, burnt-out brick shell; most of the two-story block of flats was relatively unharmed. The staircase leading up to the apartment was blocked by police line tape.

Abram walked from the taxicab to the parking-lot next to the ruin. It was a clear, sunny day; he was dressed in his hat, bermuda shorts and a pastel-yellow shirt. He put his briefcase down by his feet and checked his new wristwatch: 12:54 PM. He sat down on the stiff briefcase, relaxing his body and hairy, pale legs. He watched people, traffic, and airplanes passing by. Eventually, another taxicab stopped nearby. A fat old man wearing hat, shirt, and slacks stepped out and waved at Abram. It was Kip O'Neill. Abram stood up, watching him with wary, emotionless eyes as he half-ran down the sloping sidewalk; Kip was red-faced and sweating heavily. They met; Kip shook Abram's hand with both his hands.

"Thank you for warning me that day, Abram!" he said, his gritty voice full of emotion. "I let a security firm check our house in Washington, and it turned out our phones were bugged! Me and Rhoda managed to hide out in a motel -- just before someone fire-bombed our house. When they bombed Westmoreham, I thought you were dead!"

He laughed so that his cheek-pouches shook -- but Abram showed no reaction.

Kip's eyes seemed worried behind thick eyeglasses.

"Abram... you're not thinking that I knew anything? I know I left you in a conspicuous manner when we first met, but I can explain that. The day we were about to meet, I got an anonymous call from some CIA guy; and he warned me to keep my ears and mouth shut, or they'd see that I was put on trial. Somehow they'd found out that we used to talk about secret things, and I got scared... When you warned me later, I saw the danger and took action."

Suddenly, Abram smiled. He patted Kip's shoulder.

"It's okay," he said in a warm voice, "I believe you."

Kip laughed again, relieved, and gave Abram a friendly hug.

"Now tell me, Abe. Why were we supposed to meet here?"

"Come."

Abram looked cautiously about him while they crossed the parking space, and came to Giordano Bruno's ruined apartment. Abram moved into the shadow under the concrete staircase -- which was intact -- and opened his briefcase. While Kip acted as lookout, he pulled out a flashlight and surveyed the flat underside of the stairs. He found nothing further up, and knelt carefully down on the sooty asphalt. He searched the crack between the ground and the stairs. Soon, he found a brighter spot where concrete had been poured on and carefully

smoothed out. He picked up a shiny new hammer and chisel from the case, and started picking around the edges of the spot. The surface of the filling cracked open after a few hits: behind it lay a package the size of a palm, wrapped in several layers of plastic bags and sellotape.

Abram freed the package from the niche, brushed off concrete remains -- then he hastily shoved it and the tools into his briefcase, and went back to the sidewalk. Kip followed, confused. They waited another few minutes, until a four-door Volvo sedan stopped on the street next to them. Annie was behind the wheel, dressed in a T-shirt and a skirt that showed her powerful legs. Abram opened the back door and jumped inside before Kip. As Kip shut the door behind them, Annie stepped on the gas and dived in between two cars ahead on the road. The lunch rush was in progress, and the traffic was dense.

Annie gave Abram and Kip a brief glance over her shoulder.

"Annie Collett," she said briefly. "You must be O'Neill."

"I don't think we've met before, Miss Collett," Kip said in a friendly voice -- and threw a knowing smile in Abram's direction.

"No. Abram and I met in Westmoreham, just five days before --" Her voice faltered. She picked up a newspaper from and tossed it at them: the newsstand edition of USATODAY. "Look," she said, her face tight with concealed emotion. "Look what they did to my home town, to my friends!"

The page spread showed an aerial photograph of a dark crater, marking the site of the small town's center. The large headline read: "THE VIEW FROM GROUND ZERO". Abram and Kip held up a close-up spread of the crater: a tiny lake of rainwater had been formed and frozen there. There were more pictures of the site. Not a single house was standing. A few telephone poles and power-line pylons stuck up from flattened ruins -- interspersed by a few asphalt roads which had melted and then frozen into cracked sheets of black glass. The WRBC radio mast still stood up, defiantly, but the adjacent building was crushed. Further out from the town were piles of overturned, burnt-out car wrecks -- those who had not reached far away enough.

One car was full of black, shrivelled corpses in various sizes: a former family. The caption below the picture explained: "All birds in the vicinity are dead or escaped -- many remaining bodies were left to freeze stiff after the rain that followed upon the blast."

Kip made a choked noise.

Annie said: "I waited in the assembly camp for anyone I knew to show up... nobody came but Abram."

Kip looked questioningly at Abram, who nodded: "It took me some time to find her, the police wouldn't help me. I can't tell you what really happened, Kip -- now I'm a free man, but a pariah. You may have heard some rumors about the five men who were somehow connected to the incident --"

"Yes," Kip interrupted eagerly, "there have been rumors in my circles that General Wade was part of some secret, very old cabal. You don't have to say more."

"Look here," Abram told him.

He indicated a full-page article in the newspaper, bearing the headline "ALL THE GENERAL'S MEN". Half a page was occupied by a photo of Joshua Wade: a vital but very wrinkled, long-faced man in uniform. The caption below it read:

"COMMITTED SUICIDE: GENERAL WADE, SAC. The same day, four other top men in federal branches died under mysterious circumstances. Pentagon denies a connection, but speculations continue."

Inset next to the larger photograph were four small photos of old men, some taken many years ago. The text pieces next to them were brief:

"NEVILLE ANDERSON (89): His car found in Potomac River same night; body not yet found.

"COLMER RAYMOND (93): Hit by car on his way to the White House; assailant unknown.

"PETER STANTON (88): Found shot in Langley, with body of Ned Wilson (63); a high-ranking CIA man, also shot.

"HAROLD ULMGARD (90): Heart failure in his Pentagon office after an overdose of heart medicine."

"Did you ever meet any of these people during your time in Congress, Kip?"

Kip scrutinized the pictures with concern, then shook his head: "No...but I've come across some of the names long ago. They were not politicians like me, but civil servants. You can see it on their faces, that they sat in secure places for many years."

He grunted contemptuously.

Abram tugged at his beard, muttering to himself: "Ever since that October day, I've been asking myself if anything makes sense anymore. A bunch of old men I've never seen murder several thousand people, in order to keep a secret revealed by an unknown madman. And all these other victims who didn't know anything either... Giordano... a man whose name I can't mention, to protect his family, he got nothing but a short paragraph in the local newspaper... the personnel at the Institute and those other patients... even Ned Wilson might not have known why he was killed...

"Could I have saved them by not taking some fatal decision? Am I the one... ultimately responsible?"

Annie slowed down the car, turned it into a littered back alley, and stopped the car. She faced Abram, holding a revolver in her hands, and took aim at his head.

"Don't you think I've been thinking about it too?" Her voice choked with anger and despair. "Perhaps I've slept with the man who killed my friends! Should I shoot you for that?"

Annie screwed up her eyes, little wrinkles of laughter appeared around them though she wasn't laughing. Her thin lips were clenched; her hands were trembling visibly. Abram was not shocked like Kip was.

He looked gravely into her eyes and said with no trace of irony: "If you're going to shoot me, you'd better cock the trigger first."

Her gaze dropped to the uncocked trigger. She shut her eyes, her mouth twisting, cramp-like, into a soundless laughter. There came no sound from her lips; she began to cry, and dropped the gun.

"*Damn you!*" Annie sobbed. Her mouth opened in a quiet scream; Abram leaned across the seat and held her. She hugged his head and clenched her lips together.

"Don't leave me."

"I won't."

They sat cheek to cheek for a minute -- until Kip cleared his throat and asked in a muffled tone: "Abram, that package you picked out of the ruin... what is it?"

Abram gently freed himself from Annie's arms, and took up the package from the case. With his Swiss Army knife, he cut away the plastic wrapping and extracted a cassette tape. Annie wiped her face on her arm, looking curiously at the tape in Abram's hands. On it was a hand-written label: P. RYMOWICZ' FINAL LECTURE (30 MIN.)

"Is that him on the tape?" she asked. "The madman on the radio?"

"Yes," Abram said. "It's also supposed to feature the sound of when he shoots a student dead in front of an entire class. The act that finally got him put into the asylum."

He handed the tape to Annie, who put it in the tape deck and pressed PLAY.

Parry's voice reverberated through the car stereo: "Today, you will only have to write down one sentence. I'll take it right now, so those of you who are too tired to follow my entire argument can relax. Write down the following sentence: We -- are -- property. 'We are property.' Got that? Good. Today's subject is: 'Our Place In The Universe.' As you know, astronomers have not yet discovered -- read my lips, they have not discovered -- living life on other planets. Yet they argue that life must have existed in the universe for several billion years. What should we conclude from these contradictory facts? Are our telescopes not powerful enough? Are we the only ones who are looking? Have other civilizations in space been annihilated -- by themselves or by nature -- before they got a chance to contact us? Or ... or are they already among us? While human beings have lived on our planet for at most a hundred thousand years, extraterrestrial civilizations must have existed millions, even billions of years before our time. The all-too-obvious absence of signs from these super-civilizations confirm the suspicion that we are under --"

"*Shut it off!*" Abram ordered.

Annie stopped the tape player. He made a silent gesture; she took out the tape and gave it to him. Abram pulled out the scissors of his army knife and snipped off the thin tape, then pulled it out into a long tangle. He ceased this action, mumbled a curse and broke the cassette open with a twist of his hands. He wound open the side-window and tossed out the cracked remains. Kip and Annie stared at him. He crossed his arms and met their eyes.

"I'm sick and tired of listening to maniacs," he said shortly.

"But it's your job to do that," Annie replied, smiling a little.

He shook his head decisively: "Not anymore. Let's get to the airport. Kip has got to get home to his family, and I've got to catch a plane to Canada."

"To visit your relatives?" Annie rested her arm and chin on her seat.

"I used to spend Christmas in Quebec with my eccentric clan, before my wife died many years ago. I'll stay in touch with you."

"You know what," she said in a teasing tone, jutting out her chin, "I've just quit my job to take a long vacation. Up north."

Abram drew his hand across his thick, pointy moustaches, then over his short, graying beard. He gave her an insecure look, and wrinkled his forehead.

She made a giggle, touched his forehead with her fingertips and asked: "Have you noticed that you're always fingering your beard when you're thinking about what to say?"

He took his hand from his chin and grasped her fingers.

"For a hundred years," Abram said, and began to smile.