

# The Empty Door

The Empty Door

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# Chapter 1

Beauford Smith cursed as he wrestled with the limp, bloodied body, greedily searching for its guarded treasure. He patted down the old woman's clothing and tipped her up on her side to look underneath. Even in death, she was still clutching the box tightly.

Despite his employer's attempts to deceive him, Beauford had found out about the box. It had been hidden under the base of a small pyramid beneath the Nile River, until drought had caused a narrowing of the river's path. The stone hieroglyphics covering it had been quickly whisked away from public view by representatives of the Egyptian government, never to be seen again. Legend had it that the box once belonged to a renegade king who had visited the Earth on pillars of fire centuries ago. The Egyptians had nicknamed it Ellila-that which opens doors within—in the period predating the Tower of Babel.

Beauford wrenched the box from the cold, dead hand. He raced out the back door, and down the lonely, wet alley, his footsteps echoing in the night. At the end of the dirty brick corridor his car waited, the trunk ajar. He threw the bloodied iron into it, jumped into the driver's seat, and sped away. What irony, he thought, all those hours spent learning the shopkeeper's routine only to have some gray-haired, bearded old man show up at exactly the wrong moment and almost ruin everything. Had he not looked up after whacking the old lady, he might not have noticed the guy step out from behind the antique swing mirror. How the damned tire iron had missed the old bastard's head was a mystery. It had to have been by less than an inch. The son-of-a-bitch had gotten too good a look, and had run away as though he hadn't been harmed at all.

Pulling into his carport, Beauford cursed himself for letting an eye witness escape. He scanned his sleepy neighborhood then paced nervously across the lawn. With a last look around, he slipped through the front door. It was unlikely anyone had seen him go out at this hour. He went directly to his garage-workshop, switched on an overhead lamp, and placed the box on the orderly wooden workbench in the middle of the room. Immediately he began twisting and pulling, but the stubborn box would not open. He reached for a small chisel and hammer hanging nearby, and placed the point of the chisel in the small suggestion of a seam near the top of the uncooperative box.

Slowly, he raised the hammer. The first strike would be gentle—a test to see how much force might be needed. He took careful aim, but stopped abruptly. The seam on the box had suddenly opened slightly, and a faint glow was now escaping from inside. Hammer and chisel discarded, he again began working at the container with his bare hands. This time the cover hissed and slowly opened.

Wide-eyed he stared down. Bright amber light from within blinded his view. He gazed into the light, trying to focus through it, and thought of the gruesome murder he had just committed. He was a thief and a murderer and had been one throughout this life, and the life before that, and the life before that.

A low, gurgling scream began to escape Beauford's open mouth. His body stiffened and the box slipped from his grasp and fell back to the workbench. Abruptly he turned and ran howling from the shop, charging through the rickety back door like an animal fearing a predator. Gurgling and shrieking, he crossed the backyard and hurriedly climbed up and over the barbed wire topped security fence surrounding the power transformer station that bordered his property. Once inside the high-voltage perimeter, he climbed furiously among the large stacks of active transformers and wires like a mischievous chimp, until his body finally completed a 13,200-volt path and momentarily lit up the late night skyline. In the explosions of power that followed, the station's array of transformers erupted like giant Roman candles, showering a hail of sparks down onto the weathered, shingled roof of the Smith residence. In seconds, the night was alive with the glow of fire.

## Chapter 2

Professor Cassell's sudden disappearance was an untimely annoyance to several different groups. The University had learned to endure his frequent tardiness and occasional recorder-dispensed classes, but this indiscretion was different. Never before had he neglected his duties for a full three days. Finding someone to pick up a quantum physics class three-fourths of the way through the semester was certain to be an onerous affair for the already overworked university staff.

For the University's security department, the Professor's unscheduled absence was no less a headache. Because he was well known for his eccentric behavior, they could not be sure this absence was worth looking into. They had once searched the entire college district for him for two full days only to discover he had locked himself away in his laboratory and not realized how much time had passed.

There were few relatives to contact. The professor's wife had long ago abandoned him, fed up with his absentmindedness and infrequent attention. Only his lovely and devoted daughter had maintained some semblance of family. Except for his faculty associates, she was his only reliable link to the real world. Most friends felt Cassiopia had inherited the Professor's streak of genius but been spared his lack of social grace.

Cassiopia fumbled in the darkness for the key to her father's house. The faint illumination leaking through the aging curtains on the front door was of little help. A gentle Florida breeze, flavored by night jasmine, pressed at her as she searched for the key. She felt mildly irritated at her forgetful father. She loved him more than anything and was probably the only person who had ever understood him. In the laboratory, she usually assisted him better than anyone, and the fact that she often comprehended his work never failed to pleasantly surprise him.

Cassiopia winced as she recalled how many times her inherited intellect had been a source of social embarrassment. There was that time a would-be suitor had gone to great lengths to have his sports car break down in a secluded spot beneath a moon-lit sky. To his dismay, she had graciously climbed under the hood and fixed the problem in only a few minutes. An awkward moment of silence punctuated by a disillusioned stare made Cassiopia slowly realize that

her ingenious efforts were less than appreciated. Unfortunately little had been left to do but shrug it off and climb back in the car. Many such romantic blunders had left the angelic-faced girl with the long ivory-blond hair still unattached at twenty-five. Men seemed to suffer an intimidation psychosis when dating women more intellectual than they. Somewhere deep inside Cassiopia felt a certain deficiency from that, and it was a feeling becoming more and more difficult to catalog and file away.

At last she found the key and let herself in. She called out, but there was no response. A quick walk through the house failed to produce her absentminded parent. He rarely left lights on in his home when he was away; a futile effort to reduce his enormous power bill, which everyone but him knew was due to his basement laboratory. The man could explore and understand quantum mathematics, but not an electric bill.

Because some lights were on, it was likely he had again locked himself away in his lab, engrossed so deeply in some project that he had lost interest in the passage of time. She went down the carpeted, sparsely decorated hallway to the expensive metal door that opened to the stairs, and punched her access code into the keyboard lock on the wall.

The stairway lights were also on. She descended the carpeted stairs, pondering the best way to remind her dad of his commitments to reality, hopefully without embarrassing him too badly. She reached the gray-tiled floor at the bottom of the stairs and looked around, but to her surprise found the lab deserted. She rested her hands on her hips, and with a baffled expression, continued to survey the room.

Everything seemed to be in order. To the left of the stairs against the far wall, the chemistry bench was scattered with test tubes, Bunsen burners and chemicals. Across the room were the familiar racks of power supplies and electronics gear. On the right were the many, disorderly stacks of experimental projects gone wrong, along with a hodgepodge of supply racks loaded down with cords, parts, and boxes.

In the center of the lab was the large, brown, veneered project table. She went to it, trying to discern the tangle of wires and electronics strewn across the surface. Something new was there, a six inch Plexiglass cube barely visible through the colorful glob of wires and sensors attached to its surface. Cables ran to an array

of black boxes that eventually mated with a computer terminal. None of the equipment in the room was operating, and she knew better than to switch power on to anything her father was working on without his consent. That knowledge had been learned through the growing pains of childhood curiosity.

There were no signs of him anywhere. With new concern, she hastily climbed the stairs, hoping a more thorough search of the house would provide some simple explanation.

After finding his car still parked in the garage, she reluctantly called the university, hoping they had learned something more. She stammered her concerns to an indifferent answering machine, and sat nervously by the telephone, fearing that she might be overreacting. Her father despised outside intrusions. She could only hope this was all a big misunderstanding, one that would be quickly and discretely resolved.

On the opposite side of town, Ms. Julia Vasal caught her son by the arm, anchoring him long enough to peel away the shiny box he from his grasp.

“Now where did you get this?” a tired Mrs. Vasel asked of her energetic six-year old.

“Billy found it in the garage of the old house that burned down, Mom,” he answered, hoping to avert any unnecessary responsibility.

“This is brand new, don’t you lie to me, young man.”

“I’m not! Me and Billy were exploring ‘round there and there it was.”

“I told you never to go near that place. It’s not safe. Now go upstairs and straighten your room; we’re having guests later.”

After a second, brief look at the mysterious silver box, she decided it was a perfect addition to her china cabinet. She opened the glass door, and placed it carefully on the top shelf.

## Chapter 3

Scott Markman was not Cassiopia's idea of a real investigator. He wore washed-out jeans, tennis shoes, and a brown corduroy sports jacket that did not conceal the bulge of the holstered handgun on his belt. He was well-conditioned enough, but his brownish-blond hair fell well past the collar of his jacket and seemed like an extension of the flippant personality that was apparent when he spoke. Cassiopia liked just about everyone she met, but the more she studied him, the more she believed he would not be suitable. He seemed completely disinterested in her, and his regard for her missing father was tenuous, at best. He wandered casually around the deserted house, plucking things up at random, looking at them, and setting them down out of place as though they had been idle curiosities.

"You realize the lock on that front door isn't worth much, Ms. Cassell," he said.

"I've told my father that a dozen times but he's never taken care of it. He's always been more concerned about the basement."

"Basement? A house in central Florida with a basement?"

"Yes, I know it's a little unusual. This house was built back when Homestead Airbase was active. The basement is actually a bomb shelter the house was built over. For my father it was perfect. He wanted a basement lab for privacy and security."

"I'd like to see down there."

"It's this way—."

She led him down the hall, opened the stairwell door, and waited impatiently for him to catch up. He stopped and gawked at the cipher lock on the wall by the door. "This is kind of silly, isn't it?" he said as she switched on the stairway light. "The doorknob lock on the front door is a piece of junk, but you've got a pricey, coded cipher lock on the entrance to your basement. Kind of weird, eh?"

"Yes, I agree with you, Mr. Markman. My father is an eccentric of sorts. You could break into his house and steal all of his household belongings and I doubt



he'd barely notice, but getting into his laboratory is quite another thing. He is very particular about his work." With an annoyed glance, she started down the steps.

Markman shrugged and followed close behind. "You found nothing at all out of place?"

"Nothing," she said, as they reached the darkened lab. She carefully made her way across the room in the dim light and switched on the lab's single, overhead bulb.

"I don't get it," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"The light switch. There's one right here by the stairs, but you had to cross the room to turn on the lights."

"The switch has always been on the wrong side of the room. The one by the stairs is new. My father must be in the process of changing it over, but really Mr. Markman, shouldn't we be concerned at the moment with what has happened to him?"

"Sorry, I just get hung up on details sometimes. It's just me. I did check before I came over, and the last people to see him were his Tuesday morning physics class. When did you last talk to him?"

"It was that same day. I spoke to him before I left for a robotics convention in Houston this past weekend. I was part of the planning committee."

Markman began to idly wander about the room. Cassiopia rolled her eyes in dismay when he stopped and began rummaging through the chemistry supplies.

"Mr. Markman, unless you have a sound understanding of acids and bases, I would strongly suggest you not touch anything on that table. You may find it less than pleasurable."

"Was this placed turned on when you came in?" he asked, ignoring her warning, and with the same nonchalance he headed toward the supply area on the opposite side of the room.

“Nothing, and please don’t even think of pushing any buttons, please...,”

“This must be an antique or something, huh?” He said, standing next to a large trunk amid a tangle of electronic supplies. He had lifted the lid open and stood looking at Cassiopia blankly.

“I don’t know. It’s just a trunk. I’ve never paid any attention to it.”

“Well did your...sorry, does your father collect antiques?”

“No he does not, and what has this got to do with anything?”

“This trunk is empty.”

“Yes. So?”

“Well, there’s junk stacked up everywhere, but this big old trunk is empty. I mean, why would you stack a whole bunch of stuff around an empty storage trunk?”

“Really Mr. Martman, does it matter?”

“It’s Markman, ma’am. Call me Scott if you’d like. And sorry, but maybe this trunk was to bring something in or take something out. Is there anything like that you know of? Something valuable?”

Before she could answer, an object on one of the storage shelves behind him captured her attention. It was a telephone, something quite strange in itself. Her father hated telephones. There was only one in the house, and it had always played second fiddle to the answering machine. For him to have a phone in his lab was unthinkable. It didn’t make sense. She stood staring, dumbfounded by the sight of a blasphemous telephone in her father’s lab. Perhaps the old phone had been there all along and she just hadn’t noticed it. She recalled her father’s favorite personal first law, “When confronted with a mystery, take everything that doesn’t make sense and fit it together. It will point you in the right direction.”

“Ms. Cassell?”

Cassiopia snapped her attention back to the annoying man. “Yes...what?”

“Is anything wrong?”

“No, no, nothing, I was just trying to think of someplace he could be.”

“Are you sure? You seem distracted.”

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m just worried, that’s all.”

“Well, tell you what, I think I’ve seen just about enough for now. I need to check with some of his other associates. Here’s my card. By the way, I don’t actually work for the college, at least officially. I help them out from time to time when privacy is called for. If they need to avoid publicity, or if something needs to be kept low key, I can sometimes arrange that. Actually, I’m pretty good at it. They’ve given me your cell phone number. I hope that’s okay. I’ll do some more checking around, and let you know what I find. If we don’t come up with something say within twenty-four hours, we may need to consider going to the police. In the meantime, if you think of anything or hear of anything, please call me, okay?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied politely, happy to be rid of him. She watched as he turned and disappeared up the cellar stairs.

Cassiopeia reappraised the room. Finding a telephone in her father’s lab made her wonder if some of the detective’s seemingly irrelevant questions had actually been very appropriate. The new light switch on the wall was no less a curiosity. Her father would never delegate any of his precious personal time to install such a trivial appliance unless it was somehow project-related. So, all of these things that would usually appear so ordinary, seemed completely out of place.

She studied the old empty trunk. It had always been there, but had never been of any interest. It was covered with perfectly-spaced wooded slats and was heavy and very well preserved. The heavy coat of light brown stain looked freshly applied. There was nothing inside other than the plain brown cloth liner. She allowed the cover to close and went back to the telephone on the storage shelf. There was no dial tone, but a wire ran out from the back and disappeared into the baseboard. She pressed the pushbuttons and found they produced tones in the earpiece. On a whim, she entered her key code, but nothing happened. She glanced back at the new wall switch and went to it. A wire also protruded from the side of it and disappeared into the wall. She threw the switch several times and looked around, but nothing happened. She flipped the switch to the up

position and went back to the phone. There was still no sound in the receiver and neither her key code, nor any other random combinations produced any results. She was probably making something out of nothing. Perhaps the trunk was a keepsake, and the wall switch was intended to become just that—a wall switch. Beginning to feel somewhat silly, she returned to the unexplained switch and flipped it down. She went back to the telephone and, promising her self this would be the end of it, one last time dashed in her key code.

Suddenly a soft swishing sound came from the trunk, startling Cassiopia. She walked over to it and cautiously raised the cover. Where the trunk bottom had once been, there was now a dimly lit shaft. An aluminum ladder led down to a bare cement floor. The soft light in the passageway below came from around a corner at the ladder's base. Cassiopia stood dumbstruck by the discovery of a place in her father's home of which she was completely unaware. Wide-eyed, she peered down into the hole as surprise quickly gave way to overpowering curiosity. With a hasty glance around the basement lab, she stepped into the trunk and onto the welded ladder. Carefully, she lowered herself down into the unknown of the shadowy passageway.

The air was cooler at the bottom—the walls covered by slightly damp, crudely finished cement. There was a narrow aisle that led around a corner from which fluorescent light beckoned. A faint hum from electronics equipment accompanied it. With one hand resting lightly against the cold, hard tunnel wall, she leaned around the sharp corner and stared intently into the intrigue of the adjacent chamber. The portion of the unexplored room that suddenly became visible caused her to gasp. She gazed in disbelief at captivating sights. Casting caution aside, she traversed the short, narrow corridor, and entered the secret lab, astonished by what she had found.

Standing majestically in the room's center, was a white, door-sized monolith. It was mounted on an inclined, blue, antistatic base that rose a few inches above the floor. It was larger than a standard door would be, and its black-framed outline was packed with the same familiar array of sensors and emitters that had encompassed the small Plexiglass cube in the upper lab. Captured within the thick, electronic frame was a porous, white material that reminded her of acoustic ceiling tile. The structure stood seven feet tall, supported only by its base. A fat, black cable the size of a fire hose was attached at its base. Her eyes followed it to something that made her gasp once more.

To the left of the majestic slab, stood a large, older model, mainframe Drack computer. Its five rectangular towers, each of them six feet tall, were grouped together in the familiar circle that was a trademark of Drack Industries. This was a computer well out of the financial reach of most private individuals. Its speed and capacity were nearly infinite. To find one here was unimaginable.

Turning to study the right side of the room, something that had been out of sight suddenly gleamed into view, something whose presence dwarfed even the Drack system. Cassiopia stopped and stared in shock-her mouth agape in disbelief. There in front of her was a shiny, armor-covered robot, parked upright in its base station charging unit against the wall. It was no ordinary household machine. It was a TEL 100.

Cassiopia tried to shake herself awake. Her mind raced to find an explanation for what she was seeing. No one owned a TEL 100. If you were incredibly rich enough to purchase one, the odds of your also having the technical knowledge to operate it were slim at best. And, even if you did try to obtain one legally, the government would require an in-depth background check that took months, and your petition would still likely be turned down. So profound were the breakthroughs made by the TEL Corporation in robotic mobility that the U.S. government had felt it necessary to intervene in the distribution of the company's technology and products.

Robotics was Cassiopia's specialty. She knew the history of this model very well. Anyone even remotely involved with robotics did. TEL corporation executives had been profoundly successful at combining the most advanced robotic componentry into their own single package design. Products from dozens of other companies had been incorporated into their masterpiece, many of which the parent company did not fully understand itself. The TEL people had invested their own technological resources on only three main elements. The first was computer integration of all the best available componentry into a single chassis design. The second, more difficult, had been development of a highly reliable inertia measurement gyro subsystem that would enable a biped machine to move upright and anticipate and maintain its balance even in hostile environments. The third and probably most ingenious innovation had been the virtual type bio-silica buss interface that allowed a TEL to use any one of a hundred existing microprocessor-based computers as its central brain. A user could make his own choice of computer controllers or even design his own. The possibilities were limited only by human imagination.

The results of this far-reaching design policy had become clear the day the TEL Corporation demonstrated its first prototype 100 at one of the many robotics conventions Cassiopia had helped organize. There had been quiet anticipation in the hall as members of the scientific community watched the TEL 100 drive smoothly around center stage on its tractor-driven aluminum alloy shoes, and a few ahs were heard when it locked the treads and stepped up the portable stairs, quite gracefully for a mechanical device. When the robot had coasted back to its demonstrator however, and was abruptly and rudely pushed over, falling to the stage floor with a loud crunching bang, most thought the exhibition had gone embarrassingly awry. There had been a few awkward seconds of silence, punctuated by one or two inappropriate laughs-until the TEL rolled over onto its side and got back up under its own power. A near riot broke out in the convention hall as people scrambled and fought their way out of the auditorium in hopes of reaching one of the few phones already in use by reporters, competitors, and would-be stock holders.

Cassiopia stood gazing with deep affection at the glistening robot, remembering those scenes well. The company had taken the genius developed by other companies and combined it with their own to create a technological paragon that was more than the sum of its individual parts. They had given every remaining, unassigned square inch of the robotic housing the capability of holding additional state of the art memory. Nothing was wasted, and everything worked. There was much talk of using TELs for space exploration, and many rumors that testing was already underway.

How such a device had come to be in the possession of an individual even as renowned as her father, was completely beyond Cassiopia. But her shock quickly gave way to delight and curiosity, as she found herself standing in front of the dormant, silvery machine, her hand on the reflective metal arm that rested in its dark tan, molded body panel.

She touched the gold-tinted pulse-shield visor that was recessed into the robot's contoured metal face, and then moved her hand down across the dark grated opening where speech synthesis terminated. The silver chest plate was bordered in red where the triple redundant gyros were installed, and there was an automatic door below that to provide the TEL interface capability with other computers. Cassiopia looked closely at the model label on the robot's collar. The latest model was a 100C, but certainly her father would not have had access to the newer models. This was probably a 100A or more likely just a 100.

The polished metal label read, TEL 100D. Impossible! This was the next prototype in the series. How could he have obtained such a priceless piece of technological jewelry as this?

Dazed, she turned to study the rest of the room and awkwardly bumped into someone standing close behind. She shrieked and raised her hands in fear.

Scott Markman held up one hand and tried to reassure her. “Hey, take it easy. It’s just me.”

## Chapter 4

“What are you doing here! How dare you sneak up and spy on me!” Cassiopia stammered.

“Sorry, but that’s part of my job you know-professional sneaking,” Markman replied, stifling a laugh.

“How did you get in here anyway?”

“The same way you did—down the ladder.”

“You’re not supposed to be here. You said you were leaving.”

“I asked you to call me if you found anything. I didn’t say I was leaving.”

“Well, you led me to believe you were.”

“And you led me here. What, are you trying to hide something?”

“No!”

“Just what is this place, anyway?”

“I-I really don’t know exactly.”

“You didn’t know about this room?”

“No, actually I did not.”

Markman approached the robot and stood gazing in wonderment at it. “Well, I’d say this is no toy-store robot.”

“Don’t touch it. It’s far more than that. It’s almost beyond state of the art actually,” she replied hesitantly.

“Something pretty expensive even for a well-known scientist. I’m sure he’s not paying for it with payroll deduction.”



Cassiopia became quiet, suddenly afraid for her father.

“And even though I’m not very technical, I do recognize that industrial mainframe computer over there,” he continued, turning to nod in the direction of the conspicuous tower-like stacks.

“How do you know about such a thing?”

“Military Intelligence uses them. So does the FBI.” His attention turned to the monolith in the center of the room. He walked to it and cautiously climbed the blue, matted ramp. He removed one hand from his pocket and touched the coarse white material that filed the area within the electronics-riddled frame.

“Please Mr. Markman. You really shouldn’t touch anything. It could be dangerous.”

“Do you have any idea what this is?”

“No, none at all.”

“Looks like some kind of weird door to me. I’d say we do have a situation here, Ms. Cassell.” He bent forward for a last close look at the surface of the monolith, then stepped off the ramp and faced her. His eyes were deep blue and piercing. She felt as if he was almost able to read her thoughts.

“What do you mean?”

“Several million dollars worth of hardware hidden away here, and the only person that we know of connected with it is missing. This sure looks like high level government crap, or espionage, or something like that. Something way out of my league, and yours too, if you don’t mind my saying”

“But it’s possible my father is just off somewhere doing something and has forgotten to check in. He has done that before.”

“That doesn’t mean we’re not in way over our heads here, does it?” Markman surveyed the room again. It looked barren except for the scattered electronics consoles that lined the rough gray walls. “I don’t see a single notebook anywhere. Wouldn’t he have kept records?”

“He considers his own free time so valuable he generally only keeps computer files, and even then it’s usually voice entries.” Cassiopia turned to the TEL 100D. “It would be an intrusion of course, and there may be access codes blocking us, but if anything could tell us where he might be, I’ll bet this could.”

“The thing might be dangerous.”

“Absolutely not! They are research machines. They wouldn’t have the faintest idea how to respond to violence. To program such a machine for violence would be unthinkable.’

“Well, gosh, the military would never do anything like that. Duh!”

“That’s nonsense. A machine that powerful could easily misinterpret someone’s actions and respond harmfully. There is no way to give it that kind of authority.” Cassiopia went to the robot and flipped open a small chest plate near its neck. Small indicator lamps inside flashed at random, matching a pattern of similar lamps on the robot’s base station.

“Are you sure about this?”

“It’s my specialty, Mr. Markman,” she replied, smiling to herself at the thought of finally having the irreverent investigator at a disadvantage. “That convention I went to? It was a robotics seminar. I helped set it up. Most recently I’ve been working on a neural net for exactly this type of application. I’ve been toying with robots since I was seven years old. Of course we won’t know how the programming on this one is set up, but there are generics in most voice recognition.”

“I’ll just stand back out of the way.”

“These machines are always on, unless the power core is removed, but even then, all the programming is preserved indefinitely.” Cassiopia tapped a few keys on the robot’s keypad and stepped back. The robot’s visor began to glow. With a subtle whirring sound, its head moved downward and then to the left, stopping to stare at Cassiopia. “Standby. User verification.” A moment later it spoke again, “Pattern model match. Good evening, Miss Cassell. Please state your full name for voice pattern recognition”

“Cassiopia Cassell.”

“Voice pattern recognition complete. Identity confirmation complete. Self checks complete. Ambulatory checks complete.

Markman stared. Cassiopia smiled, feeling admiration and pride, even though none of this magnificent technology was her own. “T-E-L, step forward.”

Markman jerked further out of the way as the robot’s large, complex legs moved gracefully from their custom-fitted platform to a faint sound of whirring motors and escaping vacuum. He cursed under his breath, embarrassed by his reaction, but quickly forgot it as the robot stepped forward and stood under its own power.

“It’s magnificent,” Cassiopia murmured

“If you say so,” he replied, “but I want you to know, if that thing goes berserk, I’ll bet I beat you to the ladder.”

With a cynical glance at Markman she commanded, “T-E-L, say location of Dr. Cassell.”

The robot answered, “Dr. Cassell is currently in Dreamland.”

Cassiopia shook her head and looked at Markman with a puzzled expression.

“It’s saying that your father is asleep somewhere?”

“T-E-L define Dreamland,” she ordered.

“There is no current definition for Dreamland.”

Cassiopia appeared perplexed. She looked again at Markman who had inched up to stand next to her.

“T-E-L, list file entries, keyword Dreamland.”

“Files currently referencing Dreamland are: Cassell log

entries, Cassell test entries, Cassell theoretical analysis, T-E-L 100D excursion data files, T-E-L 100D analytical base.”

“Wow, what is all this about?”

“Interrogation is part of what I do.” Markman said. “Let me try. Ask it where Dreamland is.”

“T-E-L, say location of Dreamland.”

A short pause preceded the robot’s reply. “Please rephrase inquiry.”

“What in the world? T-E-L, where is Dreamland?”

The robot persisted, “Please rephrase inquiry.”

“Ask it what time your father went there.”

“T-E-L, say Dr. Cassell’s time of departure to Dreamland.”

“Dr. Cassell last entered Dreamland on zero three, zero nine, at zero seven four five Zulu.”

“That accounts for the time he’s been missing.” Markman’s attention suddenly peaked. “Okay, ask it for directions to Dreamland.”

“T-E-L, say physical path to Dreamland.”

“Dreamland is accessed through the SCIP transformer.”

Markman frowned. “What? What is that? Sounds like a kid’s toy or something.”

Cassiopia stepped back and placed one hand partially over her mouth. “Oh my! This is incredible! My father can’t have... T-E-L, say location of SCIP transformer.”

“The SCIP transformer is located in the center of this laboratory, four point four two two five meters from the north wall, five point five five one meters from the west wall as currently measured.”

Together they turned and stared at the huge white column in the center of the room. A look of sarcasm abruptly came over Markman. Cassiopia’s face flushed from shock to dismay. Her overloaded mind understood immediately. “Oh my God,” she gasped, one hand on her chest, staring at the foreboding monolith.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute, I’m not buying into this for one minute! Is that

thing really trying to say your father disappeared through that?”

Cassiopia cast an angry stare at Markman but did not answer.

“T-E-L, define SCIP.”

“SCIP, acronym for Spatial Corruption Interface Program, as hypothesized by Dr. H. Cassell. For further extrapolations, refer to related data files.”

“Oh, for crying out loud. I think I’m starting to get the picture here, Ms. Cassell. If you think anyone is going to be stupid enough to fall for something as ridiculous as this, you are the one in dreamland. I’m insulted that you would even think I’d believe any of this crap”

Cassiopia ignored him. She placed one hand on her forehead, and began to mumble to herself. “He’s been conducting revolutionary research in complete secrecy—even from me! The work clearly has been dangerous, yet he’s been doing it without any backup at all, except for the robot. He made sure I had access to the lab, but even that wasn’t very obvious. That must’ve been in case he got into trouble. That means he’s in trouble.” She looked up worriedly. “What? What did you say? Mr. Markman, I really don’t quite give a damn what you think.”

“Well then let me tell you what I think, Ms. Cassell. I think this very expensive equipment around us is probably stolen, or illegal, or something. For one reason or another the bill has come due so to speak, so in an effort to avoid facing charges, you and your father have arranged this amusing little publicity stunt to explain his disappearance. Sound familiar so far...? I expect that this doorway-thing here is about as real as any good movie prop and can do just about as much, sealing the poor Professor’s fate forever. No one to prosecute. No one to blame. How’m I doing, Ms. Cassell?”

Cassiopia flushed with anger. With a piercing stare she returned his harsh tone, “Well then, let’s just see about that, shall we?”

## Chapter 5

Cassiopia glared at Markman and turned to the robot, “T-E-L, say power-up procedure for the SCIP transformer.” Without waiting for a reply, she went to one of the control stations at the Drack computer and listened as the requested instructions were dispensed.

“Activate power panels TP, DP. Run Drack program IT-A. Enter transformer-engage routine TE10.”

Mounted on the wall near the Drack, she spied a group of circuit breaker boxes. She went to them, found the one that was labeled TP and pushed up the large gray lever on the side of the panel. A subtle hum rose from beneath the ramp the electronic doorway sat on and lights began to race around its frame. Black light tunneled up and around the edges of the door where the chalky, white, porous material was joined.

Next to the panel marked TP was another larger gray panel with DP scrawled on it in black Magic Marker. It took all of her strength, but with angry determination she forced the lever up. It clamped in place and the Drack columns burst to life, lighting up in eerie violet-fluorescence from within. Monitor screens placed at intervals around the grand computer glowed with scrolling start-up data. The hum from the Drack phased in and out with noise from the monolith. Colors from nearby panel lights reflected off the robot’s mirror-like finish.

“Ms. Cassell!”

“Please shut up, Mr. Markman.”

“Ma’am, if you’re not sure exactly what you’re doing, how can we be sure it’s safe?”

She stopped, looked, and shook her head, “But Mr. Markman, you just said yourself, nothing at all is going to happen. Didn’t you?” She turned back to the keyboard control panel, looked mockingly over her shoulder once more at him, and stared down at the monitor screens. The phosphor light illuminated the soft contours on her tired face. Without looking up, she called, “T-E-L, come here.”

Markman stood his ground this time, as the robot motored smoothly forward on its tractor drives. As it passed, he felt like a man trying to conjure up any good reason to excuse himself and leave.

With the robot standing beside her, Cassiopia entered several commands into the Drack's keyboard. She cursed under her breath. "T-E-L, enter and execute SCIP program initiation."

The robot quickly rocked itself into position. Its touch sensitive fingers found the Drack keyboard and entered the proper series of commands with machine speed.

"T-E-L, on my command, enter and initiate transformer engage sequence." With an air of expectation, she came back to stand beside Markman. Her animosity was gone. She looked at him with complete resolve. "Let's back up a few steps. Are you ready?"

"No. For what-exactly?"

"For your nothing, Mr. Markman. Your nothing at all. T-E-L, execute!"

The robot's complex fingers whirred and clicked at the keys. A drone of power began to swell and oscillate throughout the room. Rapidly it grew louder and more ominous. Suddenly a loud reverberating crack made Markman jump. His body tensed. He glanced over his shoulder as though looking for potential cover, while Cassiopia, appearing fragile and vulnerable, stood entranced, gazing obsessively at her father's arcane creation. Popping and burning sounds rang out and grew louder and louder. Streaks of blinding lighting flashed across the slab's surface in rapid fire, until it became so bright it was difficult to watch. The air became heavy with a static-charge as the strobing radiance from the monolith cast distorted shadows on the walls and ceiling. Jagged bolts of high voltage energy arced across the white surface of the monolith with such intensity that Markman grabbed Cassiopia by the arm and pulled her back still further. The frightening roar of confusion rose to an ominous crest, and gave way to a second pounding clap of thunder. Suddenly stillness and quiet returned, leaving only a charred smell in the still air.

Markman released his hold on Cassiopia. He forced himself to relax and breath. He wiped away the tiny beads of sweat from beneath his nose and watched as she pushed away from him and approached the monolith in silent awe. Together they stared in shock at the altered form of the slab. Something was very

different. The white door had disappeared and in its place stood a shimmering, suspended mirror. It was the purest mirror either of them had ever seen. It looked more like a wall of mercury than glass, almost liquid. The reflections in it were strikingly lifelike and textured, as though looking into another room.

They stood captive and silent in a common state of awe. Neither could speak. Both remained motionless, gawking at the flowing, synthetic mirror, unable to grasp exactly where reality stopped and reflection began.

Cassiopia finally recovered. She walked slowly up the ramp and leaned forward for a closer inspection. The smooth surface seemed to ripple as she approached. Her image had depth and dimension unlike any she had ever seen, and the portion of the lab that back-dropped it seemed completely real. It looked like a place that could be entered.

She reached forward to test the undefined surface, her duplicate imitating each movement perfectly. Caution suddenly overcame curiosity and she hesitated. She looked around and then back at Markman, who remained dumbstruck.

“Bring me something from that desk over there, anything will do.”

He shook himself awake and went to the small desk near the robot’s base station. A silver letter opener was in the center drawer. He came to the side of the ramp, hesitated, then handed it up to her. She took the long narrow blade in her right hand and raised it to the smooth, glassy surface. The point of the letter opener touched the tip of its own reflection and stopped. But the touch had been light. She pressed harder and watched in astonishment as the blade disappeared into the liquid surface. There had been little resistance. Wide-eyed she continued pushing until only a small portion of the handle remained visible. Markman looked on in disbelief. From his position he could see both sides of the mirror and no part of the letter opener had emerged out the back. Cassiopia withdrew the instrument and studied it. It seemed unaffected. She turned and faced him with a narrowed stare.

Markman could find no appropriate words. He gestured nervously with one hand and tried to appear skeptical. He struggled to think of an explanation for what he had just seen, but could only shake his head in frustration.

“Bring me something larger.”



Hoping a second test would reconstruct reality, he

quickly fetched an aluminum stool near the Drack and handed it to her. With the same quiet determination, she promptly pushed the legs through the mirrored wall and drew them back out again. They too, appeared unscathed.

Rubbing her left temple she looked over at Markman. “I think my father went through this door and didn’t come back. What do you think?”

Markman shook his head and looked up at her with a wrinkled brow. “I don’t understand any of this, Ms. Cassell. I’ve seen some pretty unbelievable things in my time, but nothing like this. I guess I’m sorry I suggested you were part of a hoax. I was raised to believe anything that anything is possible, but I’m afraid this has caught me off guard. The only thing we can do now is make a request to the university to bring in some experts on this. I’m open to suggestions, if you have any.”

“There are no experts on this,” she replied stiffly. “Can’t you see this is groundbreaking science? No one understands this, except maybe my father.”

“Well we can’t go any further until we figure out what is happening here. I’ve got to call my contact. I’m overdue.”

“Grant me one small favor then?”

“What’s that?”

“Allow me some time to review my father’s files before you bring the whole world swarming onto this house. If I can have some time to study them in peace, it’s possible we could both learn more about what’s happening here. Once you turn this over to the authorities, they’ll probably lock us both out and neither you nor I will have anymore to say about it. I love my father very much. It would kill me to be shut out from finding him.”

He looked into her persuasive brown eyes. How could he explain what had happened anyway?

“How long do you want?”

“Just give me tonight.”

“I’ll hold them off, but only for tonight.”

For the first time she looked back appreciatively. “Thank you for that.”

“It’s possible we didn’t really understand what the robot said. Your father may still show up.”

“Yes,” she replied, but she looked at the glistening body of the TEL and realized it had been left there for a reason. It had been waiting.

## Chapter 6

Markman returned from calling the university to find the lab deserted. Already in a bad mood from the unprofessional exchange with the chancellor, he now found himself absent the only person who could validate the strange story of the Cassell case. He had described the situation to the people in the director's office as best he could, and had they not been using the conference caller, probably would have been much more successful at it. Periodic comments from the background, such as the suggestion he not forget to check the robot's alibi, punctuated with howling laughter, had disrupted the verbal report to the point it had been beyond salvage. The Professor's history of eccentricity clearly had harmed his credibility with some groups.

And, contrary to Cassiopia's fears, there was little chance of any involvement by the police, at least for the time being. News of the murders of an elderly antiques collector and a homeless street dweller in a back alley, combined with the strange death of one Beauford Smith, whose house had subsequently burned to the ground, meant the resources of the local police agency were needed elsewhere. As for the university staff, Markman had just learned there had been some sort of disturbance on campus, as well. The school's attention and resources had shifted away from Dr. Cassell for the time being.

And now there was no sign of Ms. Cassell. She could not have left the house. He had made a point to watch from the kitchen while making the calls. She had given her word not to leave and he had believed her. Her deception was an unpleasant surprise, since his instincts about people were nearly always correct.

The strange, unexplained mirror loomed before him, still on, humming steadily, dominating the room around it. The robot had not moved from its position by the Drack control station. It stood facing the side of the mirror, waiting.

He cursed under his breath as he quickly realized the most likely prospect was that the dizzy woman had recklessly gone through the electronic mirror in search of her father. Markman's lack of familiarity with computers now left him feeling helpless and inadequate. Few things frightened him. The unknown never did. But he had been raised in a foreign land where technology was considered magic, and machines were sometimes the work of demons.

He looked at the silent mechanical servant that continued to ignore him. “Robot, where is Ms. Cassell?”

To his surprise, the machine answered. “There is a message for you, Mr. Markman, from Cassiopia Cassell,” it said coarsely. “Her instructions are for you to wait here until she returns.”

“Where is she?”

The robot made no attempt to answer. It stood by, as though it were alone, waiting as instructed.

“Robot, where did she go?”

No response.

Well that’s just great, he thought, still eyeing the metallic statue with distrust. You draw the most preposterous case possible, get laughed at during your first call-in, and lose the only witness you have—all in a matter of a single hour. On top of that, she leaves a message for you to wait, as though you’re stupid enough to sit around here and do what you’re told. You’re losing your touch, Scott, old buddy. Brother, some people will ruin your day, if you let them. I should have taken that office job in New York. Or, I ought to just blow this whole thing off and go get a drink.

Disgusted, he began to wander about the room, carefully appraising the robot with each step in the event it intended to restrict his movement. It stood motionless and silent, its golden visor glowing passively. In the desk by the robot’s base station, there were a few papers with scribbled formulas on them, but nothing that was of any use. He came around from behind the ominous, electric monolith and approached the robot with great care. It continued to ignore him.

Satisfied that its programming didn’t include manslaughter, he dared to touch the cool reflective metal on one arm. The robot offered no resistance. He studied the complex cable driven arms and hands, and realized with a rush of apprehension that this creature undoubtedly possessed superhuman strength. He was standing beside a machine which thought for itself and could crush him in an instant without feeling any need to explain. He stepped back and again considered his judgment of the Cassell woman. How bad had it been?

He tapped nervously at his right thigh, his patience wearing thin. Finally, in exasperation, he marched up the mirror's ramp and stood in front of his own lifelike image. It was bad enough to lose someone from under your nose, but that would be nothing compared to trying to explain how she had gotten away through a six-inch thick door that went nowhere. Lightly he poked at a section of the mirror's outer frame to be sure it was not electrified, and then used it to brace himself. Boldly he probed the liquid-silver surface with his free hand, finally pushing all the way through to the wrist, and then quickly pulling back out again.

His curiosity became almost unbearable. The electronic magic trick in front of him was much more interesting than it was frightening. He cursed to himself and decided he could stand it no longer. With a deep breath, he recklessly stuck his head through the plane of the mirror.

Inside, there was nothing-almost. A similar mirrored-door stood about three feet away, parallel to the first. But other than these two man-made objects, there was only emptiness: no ceiling, no floor-just a nothing that seemed to go on forever. A strange sort of ambient light with a golden tint to it was present, but no source apparent to produce it. Markman searched in every direction and found only vast emptiness. He considered stepping across the short gap to the other door, but hesitated when he looked down. The empty space below appeared bottomless-like a nightmarish free-fall. It left him with the overwhelming feeling that he was standing on the edge of infinity.

Bewildered, he pulled back out and gasped for breath. His mind searched for some reassuring explanation for what he had just seen. He marched restively down the blue cushioned ramp and began to pace back and forth before the glistening monolith.

Just great, he thought, the woman's father most likely went through there, and he's been missing for days. Now she's charged in after him and she thinks I'm going to wait around here, or try to go find help, or something. Man, people will run right over you if you let them. Why do I get the weirdo's?

Markman continued his relentless pacing, muttering to himself about wasting time, and glancing frequently at the liquid doorway. He was forced to admit that it wasn't only his displeasure with the Cassell woman that was bothering him. There was something else. He wanted badly to see what lay beyond the second door. Finally, annoyance and intrigue overcame him. He stopped, cursed once

more, and marched deliberately back up to the mirror. From the shoulder holster hidden beneath his sports coat, he drew his handgun, and boldly pushed his body through the silver wall. Tensed and ready, he stepped across the void to the base of the inner door, grabbing onto one of its uprights for leverage. So intent on being prepared for any dangers that might lie beyond, he stumbled while passing through, and practically fell out the other side. Suddenly there was noise and confusion everywhere. He quickly regained his balance, then crouched and pivoted, his black Berretta outstretched and poised to fire.

It was a busy downtown street. A pale yellow sun was high in the hazy sky. It was hot. People were everywhere, and some of them had stopped to gawk at the weird man in the middle of traffic waving a gun. It was a city of glass, grey office buildings, and sidewalk cafes. A hot dog vendor had ceased pushing his cart to stare. A chartered bus was unloading passengers. Pedestrians in the immediate vicinity began to hurriedly put distance between themselves and the crazy man standing in the street. A uniformed traffic cop who had been directing cars at an intersection had paused and was staring menacingly.

Markman's face reddened with embarrassment. "Sorry, it's okay," he yelled as he quickly tucked the gun back in its holster and tried to wave off the moment. With that, the disturbed pedestrians continued on their way, some shaking their heads in disapproval, others gesturing in disgust. A passing car honked at him several times as he made his way to the crowded sidewalk. The street cop continued to stare but resumed his orchestration of impatient motorists.

Out of the way at last, a new concern caused Markman to turn and search in the direction from which he had come. An old-fashioned movie theater was set back from the sidewalk across the street. In a large, poster-covered ticket booth, a fair-haired high school girl was reading a magazine. Next to it, mounted on a red brick wall, was a sight that allowed him to breathe again. Superimposed on a tall, glass display case, was the outline of Dr. Cassell's mirror-door. The way back seemed to still be available.

He worked his way to a spot near a store front, and with a tentative calm studied the city around him. The overcast sky added to the gray hue that accented everything. Shops and office buildings bordered the busy one-way street in both directions for as far as he could see. Steam jets rose from gratings near the curbs. In the distance, a manhole had been cordoned off, and men were working around it. The air was filled with street vendor smells of sausage and hot dogs. A

constant grinding drone from car engines, jack hammers, and people talking came from all around.

Markman searched the skyline for clues to exactly what city this was. It looked like a section of New York, but no tall, easily recognizable skyscrapers were nearby to confirm that. Cassiopia was, of course, nowhere in sight. He scanned the sidewalk for someone to talk to, and quickly decided the police officer would be his best bet. At least he could find out what place this was.

The patrolman directing traffic had begun stopping cars, getting ready to allow pedestrians to continue on their way. Markman worked his way to the intersection and joined the waiting crowd just as they were given the hand wave to cross. He approached the preoccupied officer, squinting in a vain effort to read the markings on his black uniform. “Officer, excuse me can you help me out a moment, I’m...”

“Keep moving please, don’t stand around in the middle of the street, keep moving...”

“Officer, I need some help here. I know this sounds pretty stupid, but could you just tell me what city this is?”

“What are you, some kind of nut? You want a free ride downtown? Now get moving!”

“Look, I know it sounds ridiculous, but where exactly am I?”

The traffic cop blew his whistle loudly and held the pedestrians to the curb. “I ain’t gonna tell you again, mister. Get the hell out of the street-now!”

Traffic was waiting. Disgusted, Markman hurried back to the sidewalk. An orange street sign overhead marked the intersection of Day Boulevard and Meard Street. Halfway down Meard Street, a battered wooden sign waved in the gusting wind: “Guy’s Lounge”. Markman pushed his way into the flow of pedestrian traffic and headed for it.

The place was in a rustic, multi-story brick building that provided an intricately decorated entrance: a tangle of snakelike forms that gave way to a small, opaque, eye level window. It took most of his weight to swing the heavy door open. Inside, his eyes required a minute to adjust to the dim light. The interior was

much nicer than he had expected. It was larger than it looked from the outside, and was well patronized. Shadowy figures sat at tables placed neatly around a small, empty stage in the rear. Colored spots drew small, intersecting circles on the unswept floor. An oak bar ran the length of the room on the right. Several men were sitting at various points along it, quietly drinking and smoking. Markman pulled up a stool near the end as an elderly bartender approached, wiping a glass with a clean white towel. His hair was a short, wiry gray and he was smiling.

“And what kin ah do for ya? Ya lost or something?” he asked.

“How’d you know that?”

“Ha, ha, goes with the territory. What’ll it be?”

“I need to ask you something.” Markman hesitated. “What city is this?”

“Man, every time ya think ya heard it most all! Ya means I gots a customer who really don’t know where he’s at?”

“Yeah, I know that sounds crazy, but take my word for it, it’s a long story. How about just humoring me?”

“You in the Bronx, mister. Now that ya knows that, yas better have one on me. Ah mean findin’ somethin’ like that out, be a shock to any soul.”

The bartender placed the newly cleaned glass on the bar and filled it. “Ya gots any other tough questions, friend?”

Markman gazed out over the darkened lounge and suddenly realized it had been evening when he arrived at the Cassells. He looked back at the front entrance, at the rays of sunlight beaming through the little spotter window. He stared down at his digital watch. It read eleven thirty, P.M.

“What the..! Hey, what time have you got?”

“Hoo..oo..ly, ya mean ah got myself a customer, don’t know where he’s at, nor what time it be? Tell ya friend, when the sun be up in the middle of that sky, that usually ‘bout noon.”



Markman choked up a laugh with the old man. He shook his head in exasperation and gazed with confusion into his drink.

“You’s gonna drink that drink or’s not?”

Feeling obligated, Markman downed the whiskey. Something about it did not taste right. It was like a poor imitation, watery and oily. Poorly mixed.

“I don’t suppose you’ve seen a pretty girl with long ivory-blond hair in the past half hour, have you, bartender?”

“Can’t say ah has, can’t say I has.” The old man smiled and headed toward someone that had waved to him at the other end of the bar.

Markman looked again at the sunlight beaming through the tiny window in the front door. How could it be daylight in New York at eleven thirty P.M..? Was this some kind of bad dream? He threw some money on the counter and decided it was time to be getting back.

## Chapter 7

Outside the bar, the flow of people and traffic had grown even more intense as the lunch hour rush peaked. As Markman started back along the gritty, grey sidewalk, a wide alley alongside the drinkery caught his attention. It was a perfect short cut to the old movie house where he hoped the strange mirror-door would still be waiting. The alley looked deserted. With a last quick glance around, he cautiously entered. It was an uneven, black-topped passageway, strewn with trash and garbage. Dirt and paper whirlpools formed within the uneven corners where buildings joined. Rusty, black fire escape ladders hung from the brick and concrete overhead. At the far end of the shortcut, Markman could make out the blur of people and traffic passing by in the echoed commotion of daily routine. As the sounds of the city faded eerily behind him, he began to worry that the way back might not be there. He hastened his pace and cursed under his breath about the presumptuous woman who had led him to such an arcane place. He winced and realized he had been just as impulsive as she.

Suddenly the blaring sound of car horns and an engine racing startled him. He looked up in time to see a black, late-model sedan pull in to the alley ahead. The girth of the shiny car barely fit between the dirty alley walls. It blocked off the other end completely. Markman stopped and squinted in surprise, but then decided it would be impossible for the car to traverse the full length of the alley. The walls narrowed still further in some sections. He relaxed and continued to walk, hoping the driver, who was concealed by a black-tinted windshield, did not plan to remain parked there. To his surprise, the car's engine began to race menacingly. The sedan rocked from side to side, like a bull pawing the ground.

Markman stopped and looked back over his shoulder. He had nearly reached the halfway point. Passing clouds began to shadow the dark alleyway further. He looked back at the sedan. Its engine continued to race. Once again he dismissed concern. The car looked new and expensive. The alley walls were jagged and coarse. No one would ruin a car like that by forcing it down too narrow a path. He took another step, but stopped with abruptly.

The sedan had lurched and begun to creep slowly forward.

In disbelief, he raised one hand and waved, thinking perhaps the misguided

driver had not seen him. Clearly there would not be room for the car to get by and there were no quick exits in sight. Alarmed, he turned and scanned the alley walls. There were no open doorways or vestibules to take refuge in.

The sedan crept ahead and began to pick up speed, so close to the side walls that dust and dirt were swept up from the cracks and crevices. Off-balance, Markman abandoned his frantic waving and turned to start a quick walk in the opposite direction. In response, the engine of the mechanical predator wound still higher. Still out of range, pedestrians walking past the alley were not noticing what was happening, and another quick glance over the shoulder confirmed that the auto was closing in too quickly to reach the street.

Markman began to run.

The hideous sound of grinding metal broke in over the racing engine as the car picked up still more speed though its fenders had begun to drag along the alley walls. The maniac driver pumped the throttle on the straining motor, forcing the damaged vehicle onward. Markman ran faster, glancing back to see the spray of sparks trailing behind the bent and twisted fenders as the car ground its way forward. The noise had become almost deafening. The driver continued to accelerate, like a madman out of control. Sweat began to break on Markman's face as he sprinted with all his might, knowing the car would not stop when it caught up.

As the roar of the engine closed in, he dared not look back again. He focused ahead and realized he could not possibly reach the main street in time. He sucked for air in short, quick gulps, wondering if the maniac planned to hit him and stop, or drive right over the body and continue on. In the gasping, sweat-filled moment he could almost feel the front bumper tapping him behind the legs. Visions of being knocked beneath the car raced frantically through his mind as he ran full out.

The wining engine roared up on his heels. Through the sweaty blur something on his left suddenly became visible. It was a closed door set back a few inches into the red brick wall. At the last possible moment, he flung himself at it, not knowing if he would feel the impact with the car or the solid wood door first. He slammed face first into the tiny alcove as a mangled front bumper brushed by the backs of his legs. The driver yanked the wheel hard to the left, trying to crush him into the narrow slot, but succeeded only in crashing harder into the wall just

beyond it. Markman wrenched around to his right trying to get a look at the person who was so intent on killing him. The tint on the driver's door window was much lighter. There was a faint human outline. It was a woman, shoulder length hair, blond. Sparks flew from both sides of the car as it continued on its wild ride. At alleyway's end, red brake lights flashed as it careened around the corner and into traffic. Horns honked, people yelled. Abruptly the alleyway became quiet once more.

Dazed and exhausted, Markman slumped back against the dirty brown wooden door that had saved his life and began to breath again. Slowly he sank down into a squat, drained from physical exertion and fear. For a split second the adrenaline again surged and he jerked up to see if the madman had thought to return.

The alley remained empty and ominous. Deep, black scars marked the walls where the car's mangled body had cut grooves. Quickly he collected himself and stood up. He straightened his clothes and brushed the dirt off his jeans. His Berretta was still secure in its holster. He looked nervously around and began a brisk walk in the direction of the old movie theater-now more anxious than ever to depart from this insane place. His overloaded mind searched for a reason someone might have to run him down. The driver had been crazy-that was the only possible explanation. The vague, tinted silhouette played over and over in his mind as he walked. It had definitely been a woman. It had looked somewhat like Ms. Cassell, but he knew that was impossible. His brief dealings with her had been enough to convince him she was not capable of such violence, and his instincts about people were nearly always correct. She was certainly no murderess, and besides, it was highly doubtful she could handle a speeding car with the level of skill the would-be assassin had demonstrated.

The bang of a loud backfire coming from behind jolted Markman. He spun and watched wide-eyed as the badly maimed black sedan reappeared, forcing its way through traffic to reenter the alley. Its headlights were broken; its front end crushed and twisted. He stared in disbelief as the driver paused and rev'd his engine exactly as before. Markman narrowed his stare. He scanned the area around him until he found the right place, and made a dash for it, drawing his Berretta as he ran.

The tires on the sedan smoked and screamed as it began its second homicidal run, its crushed body helping it fit more easily through the narrow spots in the

tight corridor. This time it picked up speed much faster. The driver bore down on Markman with the same cruel determination as before.

He turned, crouched, and brought his gun to bear, cradling it in one hand. He drew a bead on the driver's side of the blackened windshield, and paused hoping the threat would have an effect. The car's engine roared still louder.

This time he stood his ground. With the pistol grip resting in one palm, he began to squeeze off shots. Fractured holes from well-placed shots exploded in the driver's glass as the gunfire rang out over the scream of the engine.

The car kept coming. It did not slow, but began violently bouncing back and forth off the alley walls. At the last possible moment Markman jammed his pistol into its holster, leaped upward, and caught the bottom rung of the overhead fire escape ladder he had positioned himself beneath. He jerked his legs up and out of the way, as the car thundered past.

Quickly, he dropped back to the pavement and turned poised to fire again, but pedestrians on the sidewalk at the alley's end were in the line of fire. The sedan raced away, disrupting the flow of people and cars as it forced its way back onto the busy street. Amid a chorus of horns and angry voices, it disappeared once more around the corner.

Markman ran, jamming his handgun back in its holster as he went. He reached the main street and searched in both directions, but saw no trace of the sedan. The police officer who had been directing traffic was nowhere in sight, although traffic seemed to be moving just as well without him. He exhaled in exasperation and looked around in disbelief. No one seemed the least bit interested in what had just happened. People were going about their business as though nothing at all had occurred.

He shook himself out of the daze and jerked around to look across the street at the old movie theatre. A flush of anxiety came over him as he searched for the outline of the mirror-door. It was there, waiting in the same glass display case. With a sigh of relief, he went to the curb.

Lunch hour traffic continued to be heavy. As Markman waited to cross, a stumbling drunk rose into view from a basement apartment alongside the movie house. The man began to stagger his way past the front of the theater, pushing off against the red brick wall as he went.

Markman paced nervously, anxious to get across. The drunk was getting dangerously close to the glass display case. If he leaned against the mirror he might fall into it.

The painfully slow traffic kept on. Markman stepped off the curb hoping it might provide some leverage against the unyielding flow. But time ran out. Just as the street opened up, the vagrant reached the display case and fell hard into it, nearly breaking the glass.

To Markman's astonishment, nothing happened. The drunk wavered momentarily and continued on, hindered only by his own inebriated stare.

Relieved, Markman hurried through the stalled traffic without taking his eyes off the mirror-door. Not only had the unwary drunk failed to pass through, neither he nor anyone else seemed even aware of the out-of-place silhouette. He made his way to the theater entrance and stopped at the ticket booth where the cute young girl was now engrossed in manicure. She looked up and smiled.

"Ticket?"

"Um, no thanks, I'm working. Did you just see a black sedan come flying out of that alley over there?"

"I'm sorry, no. I haven't been paying attention."

"Well tell me this then: Have you seen an attractive lady with long blonde hair go by here recently-in the past half hour or so?"

"No, no one like that at all, sir."

"Well, thanks anyway." He nodded and turned to leave.

"You're welcome. But come back and make it with me in the store room some time, okay?"

Taken back for a moment by such casual bluntness, Markman looked back in puzzlement. He smiled, gave an awkward wave, and escaped around the corner. The outline of the mirror-door was still waiting.

After a quick glance around to see if anyone was paying attention, he pushed his

left hand and arm into the void to make certain the passageway was still available. Nothing had changed. One more quick look for the right moment and he stepped back into the mirror-door and across the void, much more carefully this time. A second later, he was standing once again atop the ramp in the Professor's secret lab.

## Chapter 8

“Mr. Markman, just what in God’s name do you think you’re doing?”

Markman paused at the top of the ramp and looked down to find Cassiopia staring back in anger. With a dazed look, he realized she had not ventured through the mirror-door at all. Quickly he collected himself and tried to appear unruffled. “Looking for you!”

“You must be absolutely crazy. I was upstairs in the study.

“When I returned you were gone.”

“You were told to wait here. If it had not been for the robot, I wouldn’t have known where you were.”

“I thought you took off after your father—through there,” he answered, cocking a thumb at the mirror as he came down the ramp.

“Well, you came very close to remaining in there!”

“What are you talking about?”

“The SCIP transformer has a time limit. It can only be operated for a limited period. Some of the emitters in it get hot and can burn out. The robot was programmed to turn it off. If I hadn’t been here he would have. Another fifteen minutes and I would have had to let him.”

“But I was only gone for half an hour!”

“You were gone for more than three hours, you...you...JERK!”

Markman stared in disbelief at his watch. Only thirty minutes had passed. He looked at the big digital timer on the Drack computer station. It showed three hours and forty-five minutes had elapsed. He stared at Cassiopia blankly. She scowled, turned and tapped at the keyboard on the Drack console. Power to the transformer doorway slowly ebbed behind him. The chalky white surface gradually faded in to replace the mirror. The invasive hum that had filled the room quieted.



Cassiopia turned back to her vexatious guest. Stacks of computer printouts surrounded her. She took a deep breath and tried to regain her composure. “Mr. Markman, that was a very foolish, impulsive thing to do.”

Ignoring the reprimand completely, Markman stared blankly into the distance and began thinking out loud, as though she were not even there. “Damn, I was in a city where it was noon when it should have been night. A maniac tried to run me down twice, and nobody cared. My watch says I was there for only thirty minutes but the clock here says almost four hours. What the hell is going on?”

“Mr. Markman!”

He looked up with a sudden sobriety. “What is this, some kind of brainwash experiment for the military or something? There’d better be some really good explanations about this. What just happened to me? It had to have been a dream. How the hell did you do that?”

Cassiopia threw up her arms in frustration. She sighed and tried to sound sympathetic. “Would you please just sit down. I will try to explain —as much as I can, anyway.”

Markman stood looking disheveled and uncertain. He came down the ramp, pulled a chair over near her, and sat. “You have my full attention, Ms. Cassell.”

Folding her arms in front of her, she cast a scolding stare. “While you went dashing around madly rescuing me, without having the faintest idea of what you were doing, I used the time to review some of my father’s files. I’m very happy that you somehow managed to find your way back, apparently unharmed. From what I’ve read so far that in itself must have been quite a feat, especially for you! Now if you will kindly tell me what you saw and did inside the SCIP transformer, I will explain it as best I can.”

Markman shook his head and raised one finger in protest but abruptly thought better of it. He looked at her with distrust, shook his head, and decided not to argue. He sat back and carefully recounted all that had happened beyond the mirror-door. Cassiopia listened captively. His depiction of events was even less believable to a scientific mind than it had been to him. As he finished telling his strange tale, she rose pensively from the desk and walked up to the transformer door. She touched it lightly as if to reassure herself that it was real. “I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it! He’s really done it!”

“Done what exactly? —If you don’t mind my asking now?”

She returned and sat near him. “It’s a long story and a bit difficult to describe in layman’s terms, Mr. Markman.”

“Well, by all means, give it your best shot. There’s really nothing I’d rather be doing.” He slumped back in his seat and folded his arms.

She studied him somberly for a moment. Her tone of voice became almost wistful. “For many years my father has had this pet theory. We called it the ‘nothing is something’ theory. It was kind of a joke. My father has always insisted that there is no such thing as nothing. He thought that if you could, say, produce a perfect vacuum in a container, you would still have something in the container.”

“Like what?”

“The vacuum itself. To actually have nothing, you would need to remove the vacuum. He also believed that if a way could be found to do that, you would still have something in the container, but he often admitted he wasn’t sure what that would be. His best guess was that you would have a piece of another dimension. He’s got theoretical equations on string theory that no one else has even considered yet. He’s expressed his ideas mathematically, but it’s such an esoteric and lengthy group of formulas that some new symbols had to be defined. No one has paid much attention except me and I’ve lain in bed at night for hours trying to grasp a single page of it.”

The thought of the Professor’s daughter lying in bed at night caused Markman’s overloaded mind to slip off track. It seemed like such a pleasant thing.

“Mr. Markman-are you still with me?”

“Oh-yeah. Please continue.”

“Upstairs in the other lab, there is a small Plexiglass cube with an emitter matrix attached to it. According to the records in the robot, it’s a miniature version of the SCIP transformer. It was my father’s first successful attempt to displace a vacuum. The files say he was running the experiment when a logic probe accidentally fell into the cube and disappeared completely. That was the last entry in that particular diary. After that, a whole new set of password protected

files were started. It will take me a while to get in. I'm certain he left me a back door."

"Back door?"

"A hidden way into the computer files. Something only I would know."

"And then you'll be able to explain what just happened to me?"

"I can't really promise that yet. But, when I access his other records, I will be able to tell you much more."

"And how long will all this take?"

"Not long. I'll get in tonight. I'm at least certain of that."

Markman looked lost. He sat back and rubbed his face with one hand. "Are you alright, Mr. Markman?"

"As well as can be expected. I was just wondering what to do with all of this."

"Well, were you able to keep your promise to allow me time to look into these matters without interference?"

"Oh, that. Yeah. It was nothing. We probably couldn't have gotten any help if we had wanted it. There's so much going on right now we're small potatoes. There was an incident this afternoon at the university, by the way. Someone fell or jumped from a third floor balcony or something. Honestly, those college kids will never learn."

"Oh, that's terrible. Who was it? Was he hurt badly?"

"I've told you all I really know. The school is looking into it."

Cassiopea leaned back in her chair and folded her hands in her lap. Markman's instincts told him she was about to ask for something.

"I have a proposition for you, Mr. Markman. Will you keep an open mind?"

"I'll listen."

“Are you for hire by private individuals?”

“Sometimes. If the cause is right. Are you trying to hire me, Ms. Cassell?”

“Yes, Mr. Markman.”

“You’re getting me for free right now.”

“No, the university has your contract.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Well,” she paused, “for one thing you’d be getting paid quite a bit more. I can afford it.”

“If you get to know me better from all of this, you’ll find money doesn’t mean much to me, Ms. Cassell.”

Surprised, Cassiopia again paused. “I want to conduct the search for my father my own way. I know him and his work better than anyone. You can help prevent the bureaucrats from interfering. They would almost certainly hurt my chances of finding him. You could report that progress is being made and that would be true. I wouldn’t ask for anything unethical. And I would have you to back me up. I certainly need someone like you. You’re the perfect choice actually, in several ways.”

“And just what is it you plan to do?”

“My father is somewhere in Dreamland, whatever that is. You’ve apparently been there and returned. He may be just wandering around doing research and not giving a damn about the outside world because his discovery is so-profound. The robot was ordered to energize the door every day at noon for as long as it could be safely left on. That was probably so my father could return. It’s simple, Mr. Markman. I want to visit Dreamland and try to find him, if only to confirm he’s okay.”

Cassiopia looked hesitantly into Markman’s blue eyes. Only a situation as absurd as this could have required her to depend on anyone this way, especially a member of the opposite sex. He was perfect for her needs, however; athletic, quick thinking, casually bold to the point of being foolish. She could not

remember a time when she had needed someone to say yes to her this much, and he had turned out to be someone she decidedly disliked.

Markman listened with one elbow on the Drack station and his chin firmly planted in the palm of his hand. He sat thoughtfully for a moment and then opened his mouth as if to begin some gallant dialogue on police ethics.

“Okay,” he replied flippantly, and they stared at one another in veiled distrust.

## Chapter 9

A light, steamy rain greeted Markman as he guided his sleek, black, Mustang 5-0 homeward. The slow sweep of the wipers added an eerie beat to the lonely, overcast night. The streets and sidewalks glistened in the wash of the car's high beams, creating shadows that appeared and faded like creatures from a dark dream. Keeping his eyes on the road, he shifted in his seat and tugged at the shoulder belt, his discomfort caused more by feelings of misgiving than fatigue. He draped one hand over the steering wheel and wondered about the intriguing woman who had convinced him to help her. How had she managed that? She seemed to be a victim, but could just as easily be a suspect. Nothing that had happened since he had met her made any sense. A hidden laboratory with millions of dollars of unexplained equipment? An artificial doorway that led to a place that couldn't possibly exist? And what had the trip through the mirror-door done to him? Was she using him in some carefully orchestrated scheme? To confuse matters further, he was strongly attracted to her. Very poor judgment. He squirmed in his seat as he reconsidered his promise. How could he have agreed to privately assist her? His exhausted mind could not fathom it all. Sleep would not come easily tonight.

The twinkling yellow-red fluorescent lights of an all night convenience store beckoned through the rain. He pulled into the parking lot and headed for the entrance. Inside, he found the fogged over freezer doors and searched for the right brand of beer.

"Come back for your change, did you?" a gruff voice called from the cash register.

Markman glanced back inquisitively. He pulled out a six-pack, and headed toward the elderly man and woman who waited behind the counter. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Your change, you left it here when you came in before."

"I think you're confusing me with someone else."

The gray-haired clerk looked at his wife and let out a gritty laugh. "Well, he looked just like you and he was wearing the same clothes," he said with a shrug

as he rang up the purchase.

“Honestly, I’ve never been in here before. It wasn’t me.”

“Mister, you got an identical twin or somethin’ then. I’d swore it was you,” the woman said.

“Yep, this guy dressed just like you came in, got an ice cream, and threw a twenty at us and kept right on goin’. I figured he thought it was a one,” the clerk added.

“Wow! Expensive ice cream. Sorry, wasn’t me.”

The couple continued to stare as Markman left the store. He felt far too weary to care, and casually shrugged off the encounter. There had been enough mysteries for one day.

Markman followed the wet, black highway home, luminous green from the instrument panel reflecting off his tired face. The dwindling rain was barely spotting the windshield enough to satisfy the dragging wipers. He pulled into the dimly lit parking lot of his duplex, still contemplating the best way to withdraw from his promise to Cassiopia. Within the solitude of his own, modest apartment, he headed straight for the couch, and collapsed on it in a tired heap. Sleep was almost immediate. The six-pack sat warming on the kitchen table.

He awoke with a start, wondering if the previous evening had been a dream. It seemed as though he had slept for only a moment, though the small alarm clock on the makeshift, orange-crate table insisted it had actually been seven hours. There would be no time for breakfast-black coffee on the road would have to suffice.

The morning was bright and clear, though a wisp of fog hung near the damp ground as moisture from the previous night’s rain returned to the cool morning air. A gray squirrel, balanced precariously on an overhead power line, chattered at Markman as he climbed into his car. He pulled onto the gray-white, shell rock pavement and headed east into the rising Florida sun.

Markman resumed his mental debate over the Cassell dilemma. Perhaps the old man would show up and there would be no further need of his services. It was possible he might reach the Cassells to find the problem had been solved. He

nodded to himself hopefully. There were other matters to be concerned with right now.

The first stop of the day would be a visit to Aunt Vasal. She wasn't really an aunt. It was a title of respect from the days when Markman was not allowed to accompany his military Dad to some of the more exotic places he was assigned to. Margaret Vasel had frequently filled in for the mother who had left long ago. She was the closest thing he had to a family now, and this visit was long overdue. He wished she had not needed to call him. He should have stopped by on his own.

Emit Street was on the east side of town. It was a crowded, lower class neighborhood where wet lands had once ruled. Barren of trees, the filled lots were bordered by drainage canals. Aunt Vasel's home was tin-roofed and weathered, but well-kept. She was waiting on the porch for him, her graying-brown hair in a tight bun. A flowered apron covered her dark blue, ankle length skirt. Her bright blue eyes seemed to have that permanent smile drawn into them. He pulled into the driveway and waved, then climbed out and met her on the porch with a hug.

"My Lord, skinny as ever!"

"It's the kata's. I still do them, you know."

"Of course, like father, like son."

"Not really. He didn't care so much for the oriental ways. You look well."

"Been worse. Guess I'm better than some. Did you see the burned down place on your way in?" Aunt Vasel pulled at her rocker and slowly sat down. "Please sit." She gestured at the wicker chair beside her.

Markman sat and smiled, "It's good to see you."

"Sometimes I think life is getting too tough for me. Sometimes I think the old ways were better. Kids nowadays, they think hamburgers come from MacDonalds. Most of 'em never seen a plow. The other day I had some folks visitin' from the church. One of 'em was this young engineer, supposed to be like the top of his class, a real genius-type. I served them sandwiches with pickles. He and me got to talkin' about farming. You know what he asked me?"



He asked me if pickles were a member of the cucumber family?

Markman blurted out a laugh. “Well, there’s some stuff that’s better, nowadays. The dentists are better.”

“Only if you still got your teeth.”

“People are living longer.”

“There’s too many of ‘em. That’s part of the problem. Used to be you could sleep with your front door unlocked. You could walk home through town at night and not think twice about it. Weren’t no drugs, ‘cept for the doctor’s elixirs. Now you ain’t safe even if your doors are locked. This place is getting’ too tough.

“That was a long time ago, I’d say.”

“That’s right. A long time ago when we knew if you wanted to eat you had to either grow somethin’ or raise somethin’. We knew where the food came from, and we knew we needed to be grateful for it. I never saw a banana until I was nine years old. We took the train to the next town and some guy was walking up and down the isle sellin’ ‘em for five cents each. I bought one just to see what it was like. Had to ask the guy how to open it.”

Markman laughed, “That had to be a long time ago.”

“Not that long. That’s what I’m sayin’. We’re forgettin’ an awful lot, awful fast.”

“You’re usually right —about a lot of things.”

“So you didn’t answer me. Did you see the burned down house down the street.”

“Sure. What a mess.”

“The guy that lived there, Beauford his name was. He was a shady character. Lots of late night things always goin’ on. Strangers comin’ and goin’. Then last week I’m in bed sound asleep and these big booms wake me up out of my skin. Jump out of bed and there’s no electricity. Whole neighborhood is in the dark. Couldn’t see nothin’ out the window, so I go out the front door in my bathrobe and it’s like the fourth of July. Sparks shootin’ up in the sky settin’ the grass on fire in some people’s yards and a few minutes later Beauford’s house is lighting

up the sky. Fire trucks got here real fast, but not fast enough. Place was gone. All they could do was keep it from spreadin’.

“Gosh, you should have called me. I would have come right over.”

“Cept for the smoke it was all over in an hour. Nothin’ you coulda done. We set out flashlights and went back to bed. Didn’t find out that Beauford was killed until the next day. They said he got shocked or somethin’”

‘Geez, I’m glad you’re okay. Did it scare Jimmy?’

Aunt Vasel snorted a laugh, “Scare him! I been holdin’ him back. He’s way too bold for his age. Reminds me of you. I’ll be glad when his folks get back from Venice. Think I’ve bitten off more than I can chew this time. And by the way, he’s why I called you. The little monster went climbing around in Beauford’s place after the fire. I should have tanned his hide. He came back with this odd little silver box. Says he found it in the ashes but it don’t have a mark on it. That guy Beauford didn’t have no family that I know of, so there ain’t no one to give it to. It’s probably nothin’ anyway, but I thought maybe you could take it and see if it’s worth somethin’ and if it is then we’ll figure out what the right thing is to do with it. Sit right there I’ll go get it.”

Aunt Vasel soon returned leading a reluctant Jimmy out onto the porch where he pulled impatiently at her skirt.

“So how’s the throwing arm, Jimmy?” Markman asked, with a playful poke at the six-year old.

“Ah, okay,” the boy replied, as though it were a question of merit.

“I should talk to you, you bandit.”

Jimmy stared back with raised eyebrows.

“You went past the police tape over at that burned-down house, huh?”

“Uh-oh!”

“You’re gonna get busted, buddy. It’ll be hard time at San Quentin.”

Jimmy eyes became wide. “Where’s that?”

Markman laughed. “It’s where they make you stay in your room all the time with no toys.”

Mrs. Vasel raised one hand to her mouth and stifled a laugh.

“Wouldn’t want to go there!” Jimmy answered with an exaggerated frown.

“Well, you better stay away from that house then. It’s dangerous. Okay?”

“Okay!” he yelled and he dashed back through the front door without looking back.

“Was that of any use at all, do you think?” Markman asked.

“Believe me, it’s hard to say. Here’s what he found in the basement of Beauford’s place. I have no idea what it is, just a decorative piece, I would guess. I can’t tell if there’s anything in it. It won’t open.”

She handed Markman the small, silver box. He took it without paying much attention. After heartfelt hugs and promises, Markman returned to his car. He waved at Jimmy playing in the yard and was rewarded with a distrustful stare. He strapped in, glanced briefly at the reflective box, and decided it was of little interest. He tossed it idly on the passenger seat beside him, and after a final wave to Aunt Vasel, headed for the Cassell home.

The Professor’s place looked much more unkempt in the daylight than it had the night before. The lot was dotted with palmetto and pine trees, and was much larger than the neighboring properties. Except for the weeds and pine needles, the pavement on the horseshoe-shaped driveway looked almost new. An old oak tree, decorated by dangling Spanish moss sat in the center of it. Most of the lawn was borderline wilderness, and the tan, single-story stucco home had weathered areas that needed attention. A rusty lawn mower was submerged in weeds beside the house, as though the high grass had won the battle.

The front door was locked. Markman rang the doorbell several times, but no one came. He drew a credit card from his wallet, looked around hesitantly, and wiped the card through the slot of the door. It opened easily. He shook his head at the thought that Cassiopia had spent the night alone here.

Halfway down the brown-carpeted hall, the gray metal door to the basement was blocked open as if she was expecting him. In the basement he found the old trunk had been left with the lid up. Light and sound came from the tunnel below. He climbed onto the ladder and lowered himself back into the surreality of the hidden lab.

Cassiopia stood with her back to the entrance, working on the robot near its empty base station. Using both hands, she was fidgeting with a small panel on one side of its chest plate. She glanced over her shoulder momentarily as Markman entered. "I thought you'd find your way in."

"Master-key," he replied.

She smiled and stopped briefly to appraise his appearance. Brown leather jacket, jeans, and tennis shoes. Nearly identical to what he had worn the day before. But this time she approved. It was appropriate dress for the streets of New York and similar to the jeans and dark blue, hooded sweatshirt she had chosen for herself.

"I've been making improvements to this TEL. My father left him with only the most basic voice response programming. There's a lot more I can do for his communication skills, but it's got to be done a little at a time to avoid corrupting the resident stuff my father installed."

She snapped the panel door shut, straightened up and looked at Markman. "He'll answer to you now. You don't need to know the program nouns and verbs. He'll understand most spoken words, and he can initiate speech or action to a variety of conditions on his own. He'll answer to the nickname 'Tel' now, also. Try saying hello."

Markman instantly looked uncomfortable. He hesitated but finally spoke. "Hello, Tel. How's it hangin'?"

There was a short pause. "Good morning, Mr. Markman. Please rephrase your inquiry."

Cassiopia cast an annoyed glance at Markman. "Hardly an appropriate question for a robot," she said.

He ignored the sarcasm. "What's the plan?"

She headed for the Drack controls and spoke without looking back. "I'll set the timer for one hour. We enter Dreamland and collect data. We concentrate on anything we can that might suggest the whereabouts of my father. Tel will remain here and monitor the equipment as he has. We'll spend no more than fifty percent of the SCIP transformer's operation capability, that should be enough of a safety margin to avoid problems with the time distortion that seemed to happen to you."

"Are you kidding? You mean you want to go right back in there? Already! You don't know what's going on in there!"

Cassiopia looked tired and perturbed. "Listen, I've spent most of the night studying my father's disjointed files. We'll take just a short excursion to confirm some things. Do you have a better suggestion?"

Markman balked, but decided he did not. "Tell me something. Why don't you run some sort of cable and camera or something in there to take another look around first?"

Cassiopia shook her head. "Unfortunately that doesn't work. My father's notes give stern warnings about bridging the inner and outer doors. The void is like a buffer zone between two potentially very different environments separated by something like a surface tension almost. In the earlier experiments my father had Tel try to run a data line across that space, and it burned explosively when it contacted the other side. Bio-fields seem to be much more inter-compatible, but that's something to keep in mind when we're crossing over."

Markman shook his head. He took a long breath, raised one hand and began to protest, but changed his mind and with a scowl waved it off. "What's in the bag there?"

She knelt and began repacking items in a brown leather satchel on the floor beside the Drack. "A camera, tape recorder, and a few other data collection devices that might come in handy, plus some street maps of New York." She paused and turned to the robot. "Tel, power up the SCIP transformer."

The machine obeyed instantly. It whirred past Markman and took its place at the computer control station. Its metallic fingers raced across the keyboard and the SCIP began to groan to life. They watched as the man-made lightning crackled and burned until the mirror-door again dominated the room. A still, apprehensive

silence followed.

Cassiopia cursed in a whisper as she struggled with the zipper on the bag. Nervously, she brushed back her hair with one hand, trying to conceal her apprehension. She stood upright, slung the pack over her shoulder, and marched deliberately up the ramp. At the top, she turned and waited with a haughty look at Markman.

He reached beneath his jacket, checked the snap on his holster, and came up the ramp to stand beside her. Standing so near, the smell of her perfume was mildly intoxicating. A wisp of her fine hair waved against his face in the transformer-created air current. He wondered what it would be like to wrap his arms around her softness and stand even closer.

“I’m ready if you are,” she said.

He stared into her eyes. “What?”

“Are we going or not?”

Markman snapped out of it. The stark reality of the mirror sobered him. He looked at his own reflection, took a deep breath, and leaned through it. Nothing had changed.

Half submerged, he blindly tapped on her arm. With a grimace, she forced herself through the mirror plane. Markman held her tightly as they stared together at the silent, unending emptiness. She squeezed into a better position, and with a nod to him, jump-stepped across the void. Her slim figure quickly disappeared through the second doorway. He jumped after her, expecting to emerge on a hard, concrete sidewalk in the back streets of the Bronx, where he hoped there would be no black sedans lying in wait.

## Chapter 10

There was no city. Markman looked down and found himself standing on thick grass. He hurriedly scanned the surrounding terrain. As far as the eye could see, there were rolling green hills, spotted with lush green forest. Cassiopia was nearby, a bewildered look on her face. They were atop a small hill, and to the right, a narrow, well-worn dirt trail led down a gentle grassy slope to the edge of a thick section of forest that overflowed with exotic plants, ferns, and trees. Markman watched Cassiopia survey their surroundings. A warm, gentle breeze lifted her long, fine hair from her shoulders.

“How can this possibly be? This whole thing is impossible! Markman stared at her with a disarmed look. “ow And so much for your street maps. We should go back, right now.”

She continued to turn slowly, taking in the mystical land that surrounded them. Far in the distance wild horses grazed contentedly against a pale blue sky. “Let’s see where this trail leads,” she said, without looking back.

“What? You mean you want to go on?”

“Of course. The alternative is to give up, Mr. Markman,” she answered, hiking the strap of the leather bag higher on her shoulder. “We’ll just walk a short distance in, and then start back if we haven’t found anything.”

“What is this place?” he asked, as he hurried to catch up.

“I have no idea. Maybe we’ll find out.”

He stopped. “Maybe we shouldn’t want to.” She continued on without looking back.

The narrow, winding trail led to the forest’s entrance. The foliage and trees seemed to break away naturally to provide passage. Though the tall umbrella-shaped treetops blocked much of the daylight, colored light seemed to emanate from within the forest itself. The plant life was of a deep, rich color, and some of the red tulip-shaped forms glowed brightly. The towering tree trunks were fat and heavily knotted, forming mystical designs in the deep brown bark. There

was a sound in the air like running water ringing through the strings of a harp. Cassiopia paused momentarily as if to regain her bearings. With Markman peering over her shoulder, she dug one heel into the sparkling sand. The granular surface resembled finely crushed diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. She looked back at him, shook her head in disbelief, and continued on. Further ahead, the trail became a patchwork of large, ruby-colored, crystal stones, embedded in the sand.

They walked the trail of iridescent light. The air sparkled, and from time to time tiny stars would form, brighten, and collapse around them. Soft waves of sweet-smelling breeze passed by, its incense-like odors constantly changing in flavor. Time was lost here-it had no place. The forest was an oasis from emotional want.

Suddenly Cassiopia became distracted by something nearby. She turned as if to say something but froze, pointing to the trail's edge, her hand close to her heart. On her left was an outcropping of light blue flowers, similar to roses. Hovering and darting around them was a hummingbird that looked as though it were made of glass. Colors from the forest were visible through it, including the soft blue hue of the roses when it passed in front of them. It moved in complete silence, stopping at each brilliant petal to collect tiny beads of colored light. In a flash, it disappeared into the forest palette.

They stared at each other in astonishment but neither spoke. Cassiopia pushed on with Markman following close behind. She dug in her satchel for the camera and stopped again to set it, took several pictures, then resumed her quest.

Light now beamed up through the ruby crystals below their feet. Some of it was faint, but every ninth or tenth stone emanated a soft, reddish ray that reached up to the forest ceiling, illuminating the treetops. In a few places it reflected back down in miniature rainbows of vibrant, changing color.

Cassiopia slowed. Rounding an abrupt turn, she stopped and gasped. Markman strained to see around her. Before them was the source of the forest song: a stream of tiny diamonds, forming a small cascade that splashed along a border of crystallized stones of varying shapes and sizes. The shapes of the flowing diamonds seemed to be constantly changing. Some would strike the crystalline rock and dissipate into beads of light, only to coalesce farther down the brilliant stream.



A cliff wall of wet, black rock rose up on the opposite shore. A cave entrance sat within the pointed, yellow ferns that bordered it. Amber light glowed from within. It was tantalizing, but there was no time to continue. Cassiopia snapped pictures and briefly recorded the music of the rapids. She turned to Markman, nearly breathless. “Really, it’s improper to disturb any part of this, but I must take some samples. I’ll return them, if I can.” She knelt by the stream and collected three walnut-sized emeralds and placed them in her sack. “We should start back. We’ve been here long enough.”

Markman looked back at the colorful tangle of forest in the direction from which they had come. “It’s a good thing there’s only one path. It would be easy to get lost in here. Maybe that’s what happened to your father.”

Cassiopia was momentarily taken back. “You’re right. If the Dreamland environment is as unpredictable as this, it’s not safe to make these trips without better safeguards. We need a better method of finding our way back to the door. If that’s how my father became lost, we can’t let it happen again.”

“We could have marked the trail. It would have given us something to follow.”

“We’ll need something better than that, Mr. Markman. Bread crumbs will not do. We need a homing device of some kind that will show us the way back, no matter where we are.”

“No problem. I can get that.”

In silence, they followed the trail back to the forest’s end, and climbed the steep hill. The SCIP door was waiting. After a long, last look around, Cassiopia stepped through. Markman also paused to take a last, affectionate look at the most beautiful place he had ever seen. He pushed through the silver surface of the mirror, and breathed a sigh of relief at the familiar sight and hum of the Professor’s laboratory.

“What happened?” demanded Cassiopia irately.

“What do you mean? That was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. It reminded me of the gardens of Tibet. Only the colors were more intense.”

“Where were you? Where’d you go? We were supposed to stay together!”

“What are you talking about? I was with you the whole time.”

“Me? I never saw you. You never came through the door.”

Markman stared in confusion. “I stepped through the door. You were there waiting. We explored one of the most incredible places imaginable. You were with me the whole time.”

“My God,” she mumbled as her look of anger turned to astonishment. “I stepped through into a desert. You never came. I waited a few minutes and came back but you weren’t here either. I thought, ...I thought something had happened to you.”

“I guess it did,” he answered calmly “I’d swear we just spent more than an hour together.”

“You were gone fifteen minutes,” She stared blankly as the realization of what had happened set in. Before either could speak, the robot interrupted. “Cassiopeia, someone is at the front door.”

Confusion gave way to concern. They looked at one another like delinquent school children about to be caught.

“How can it tell that?”

“Sensitivity you and I do not possess. It must be one of your associates.”

“I don’t have associates. Wait here and I’ll check it out.”

“Tel, disengage the SCIP transformer, please,” Cassiopeia said dejectedly as Markman headed for the exit.

“Yes, Cassiopeia.”

Markman hurried upstairs to the hallway and went cautiously to the front door. He remained carefully concealed as he peeked out from behind the curtains on the door.

No one was waiting. A black Mercedes Benz that had been parked in front of the house pulled slowly away from the curb. There were three dark figures in it,

though none were clearly visible. The license plate was soot-blackened and unreadable, but it looked like a consulate tag. He watched the car creep out of sight around a corner and then returned to the lab.

“Know anyone in a late model, black Mercedes?”

Cassiopia turned in her seat at the Drack controls and stared back with concern. “No, what did they want?”

“They left without saying. Could they be associates of your father?”

“No one I know.”

“There was something wrong with them.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s an instinct I have for danger. I’m not sure why, but those guys were trouble. Trust me. I’m never wrong about this.”

Cassiopia quietly worried. She felt a great relief in having Markman nearby, and did her best to conceal that by avoiding direct eye contact with him. Between the dynamics of the mirror and the uncertainty concerning her father’s expensive acquisitions, she suddenly realized that danger might exist on both sides of the electronic door. She sat with her hands in her lap and tried to act unconcerned.

“What would you suggest if they return?”

“I’ll handle them. You’d better keep at what you’re doing. This whole thing is giving me the creeps”

“I guess I never really thought much about the problems I might create, Mr. Markman. Is there a chance I could be in danger of losing your services?”

Markman smiled wryly. “Not really. Not with the deal I’m getting.”

“But, I thought I was the one who made the deal?”

“And so you did, Ms. Cassell. When you tried to hire me it was kind of impulsive, at least for you. But, there’s a lot you don’t know about me. Right

now my job is to find your father. Probably the only person in the world that could help me do that is you, and you want to pay me! Did you know that in some parts of Africa, the money they use is actually small bits of a certain kind of bone? Where I grew up the major exchange was Yaks, grain, and butter. Here in the states it's carefully cut strips of paper. Sounds kind of silly, doesn't it? Money never did mean much to me. You can keep yours. I'm here for other reasons.

Cassiopia sat quietly reappraising him once again. "Thank you, Mr. Markman," she said with a softness he had not heard before.

"My pleasure, Ms. Cassell, but I can't say it looks too good. You have no idea what's happening in there, do you?" He nodded toward the SCIP door.

"I do know what I'd like to try next."

"I'm almost afraid to ask."

"Let's try it again, after I've had time to review a few more files. Believe it or not, I do have a basic idea of what might be happening. I think I know now why my father calls it Dreamland."

"That I'd like to hear."

"Not yet. It's too radical, even after what you've already seen. But tomorrow, with luck, I'll be able to prove something, one way or another. Will I have time? Will the school become more involved?"

"I doubt it. One missing eccentric is pretty low on the priority list right now. I've got to stop in at the university when I leave here. I'll be able to get an update on what's happening there."

"Maybe I can help with them a bit also. I'll call them. But, come as early as you can tomorrow. We'll do things differently this time."

"Okay, I'll pick up a set of high frequency direction finders. If we get separated, we'll both have one to find our way back."

"You have such things?"

“It goes with the territory.”

“What territory is that, exactly?”

“From time to time I take jobs from people who for one reason or another have no other options.”

“I’m not sure what that means, but the direction finders are a great idea.”

“I can’t take the credit. You thought of it.”

“I thought of it? What do you mean?”

“Your imposter came up with it on that last excursion.”

“That’s amazing.” Cassiopia paused thoughtfully. “So we’ll be able to find each other in dreamland and we should be able to find the door, right?”

“Let’s just keep the trips short, okay?”

## Chapter 11

Markman's overdue visit to the university brought interesting, though unsettling, news. The second floor security office, usually buzzing with activity, was nearly deserted. A dispassionate secretary directed him to meeting room 201.

Room 201 was crowded. It had that somber atmosphere of group apprehension responding to leadership dissatisfaction. The man pacing at the head of the room paused at Markman's entrance but quickly showed disinterest and resumed his motivational speaking.

"So let me review for you, Ladies and Gentlemen, since something of such unbelievably deserves further reflection. An uncleared individual comes on to campus in the middle of the day, and gains direct access to our main computer facility and no one intercepts him or even sees him. He accesses dozens of classified records spends a good deal of time transferring them, and nobody notices him. He gets into finance, grades, interdepartmental communications, payroll, and nobody notices him. He downloads his own special virus into the system, and nobody notices. I'm sure you can understand my astonishment when I'm told everyone was on station, but nobody saw anything. And when Ms. Faye finally walked in on this 'invisible man' and scared him off, she reports that he was a gray haired old man who proceeded to jump out the third floor window and take off running. Does anyone here share my frustration? Any comments of explanation? Okay, answer me this, were there any classified sites this individual was not able to get into right under our noses?"

The discussion seemed to be destined for longevity. Markman waited for the right moment when the speaker's back was turned and quietly slipped out. Back at the security office the terse secretary was so anxious to get rid of him he easily double-talked her into giving him a copy of the full report, and sat in a deserted waiting area reading it.

Surprisingly the detailed description was much worse than the inspirational talk being given to the staff. The culprit had somehow accessed most of the locked-out files, including those related to bookkeeping and finance. Oddly enough, there seemed to have been no attempts at illegal transfers of funds. Instead a peculiar computer virus had been left behind effecting disastrous social and professional results for some of the faculty.

The rogue program had apparently invaded every locked-out personal data file in the system and had subsequently displayed some of the most scandalous documents imaginable on every active terminal in the school. The virus' display format was designed to provide broad exposure of confidential files and used a comedy backdrop to do so. The unfortunate letters and diaries that were so revealingly printed on-screen were accompanied by classical music usually heard on Saturday morning cartoons.

Some items were of little interest, but every so often a particularly damaging revelation had come to light, such as the graphic letters written between the Dean of students and an associate athletics instructor, describing their torrid affair and methods of concealing it from their spouses. Another, even more controversial affair had also been uncovered. It involved Dr. Patricia Farley, the head of the psychology department and one of the stars of the girls' basketball team. And, even more embarrassing, there were documents showing the occasional purchase of full size inflatable love dolls by one of the sociology professors, who had justified the expense by describing it as, "anatomical research equipment".

Had these runaway file displays been limited to personal matters there might have been some chance at controlling the resulting chaos. What followed, however, were matters that were certain to produce even more significant liabilities. As the monitor screens had continued on, it had become obvious that some federal funds intended for student tuitions were being diverted to bogus companies owned by certain members of the board of directors. There was also a consistent pattern of lost property that was carefully listed and filed in places it should not have been.

The full ramifications of the expose' were yet to be known, but an eerie silence had fallen over the faculty population since the first viral-imposed revelations had begun. In many instances the ongoing chaos of data was being hurriedly typed out on unrelenting printers, and in most cases no one seemed to be making an effort to shut them down.

The computer staff relegated to arrest this problem found themselves faced with a difficult dilemma. They had the choice of killing power to the system, which would destroy valuable and irreplaceable files and would not necessarily cure the crisis, or, they could allow the synthetic illness to run its course, and by design, operations would likely return to normal. It did not appear that any real

corruption had been done to the resident data thus far.

Toward the end of the telling report, there was something else, something that made Markman sit up and take notice. It would have been easy to believe that some computer whiz student had managed to pull such a devious prank on the university. A hazing initiation would have been the perfect explanation.

Unfortunately, it was not so simple. The data processing secretary, who had inadvertently walked in on the culprit, had sworn that he had looked like Professor Cassell. She firmly insisted that the bogus operator had sprung from his seat, run out onto the balcony and jumped three floors to the grassy park below. Somehow, he had gotten to his feet and disappeared into the trees.

How a sixty-year old man could survive such a jump, let alone get back up and run, was a scenario that required imagination to believe. Markman tapped one finger against his lips as he read and decided it was simply someone in disguise. What better garnish for such a prank, he thought, than to have it seem the transgressor had been one of the more eccentric faculty members.

Markman guided his black muscle car back to his small, duplex apartment. There was still a tinge of guilt about the agreement with Cassiopia. The glare of oncoming headlights became unwelcome recalls of the flashes from the artificial lightning created by the SCIP transformer. He had become secretly involved in potentially dangerous explorations of the unknown. Were anything to happen to Cassiopia, he would be forced to consider himself responsible. Cassiopia had become an unexpected distraction. Reluctantly, he backed off on the accelerator pedal and promised himself he would proceed with extreme caution in his dealings with her.

He arrived at the modest duplex development, and pulled into a parking space directly in front of his darkened apartment. Immediately something amiss caught his eye. In the wash of his high beams, he could see the front door of his apartment ajar. He killed the engine and watched with the headlights still on as he unsnapped the Berretta and cleared the safety.

Slowly, he got out and circled around to approach the entrance from just outside the blinding beams of his headlights. Stopping next to the partly open door with his back against the wall he held the Berretta pointed upward. It was quiet inside. He kicked the door open the rest of the way and listened.



Nothing. The cool night air smelled clean and lacked any suggestion of an unwanted presence. Adrenaline pumping, he leaned partly around and flipped on the wall switch that was just inside the door. He spun inside and crouched, scanning the gun across his own small living room.

There was no one. Room by room, he carefully shadowed the trail of debris left behind by the anonymous invaders. The apartment had been systematically ransacked. In each room there were unpleasant signs of wanton destruction that suggested someone was earnestly searching for something. What that could have been, he had no idea. Probably money or drugs, he thought. Pillows had been cut, carpet torn up, drawers everywhere had been emptied. Even the refrigerator was face down on the kitchen floor. No room had escaped the mayhem. In the bath the medicine cabinet had been torn from the wall and now hung by wires, and the toilet back cover lay broken in the fractured bathtub.

Most disturbing of all was the discovery of two ragged bullet holes in one of the living room walls. They fell chest high and were closely spaced, but there was no sign of blood or tissue anywhere.

The situation left him more flustered than angry. He found the telephone buried under torn pillows in the living room and picked up the receiver. By some miracle there was still dial tone. He started to punch in 911 to call for police, but thought twice about it and hesitated. There would be an awful lot of distraction and inquiry if the police became involved. They might suspect he was involved in illegal activity. It was possible they'd pull his investigator's license while they looked into it. They'd want to know what cases he was currently on. They might even trace him to Cassiopia. Markman hung up the phone. This was a terrible personal assault, but as bad as it was it wasn't worth the imposition the police would bring, and in so many cases home breakins went unsolved anyway. It was probably a gang thing. Frustrated, he gathered a few needed items, locked up, and left. There would be no relaxing at home tonight.

By the time he reached the Cassell place it was getting late. Lights were still on. He rang the doorbell only once, knowing the infallible robot would hear it and alert its mistress. Several minutes passed before Cassiopia appeared in the hallway, staring apprehensively. Her expression brightened for a moment when she realized who was there, but then quickly changed into one of cautious curiosity. She quickly opened the door, let him in, and closed it behind them.

“Don’t just come walking up to the door like that,” Markman grumbled.

“Well, how else can I answer the door?”

“You go to the living room window first, and you stay behind the curtain until you know who it is.”

She stared back blankly.

“You pull the curtain slightly apart, but stay back so you can see them, but they can’t see you. Like this...,” he said, sounding dismayed, and he went into the living room to demonstrate. “Never show yourself at night until you know who it is.” After an awkward pause he stuttered, “I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

“You wouldn’t?”

Their eyes locked. Markman flushed with embarrassment and quickly looked away. “Well...I’d be pretty helpless downstairs, wouldn’t I?” he stammered, but quickly regretted it.

“Oh. Well, why are you here, Mr. Markman?” She folded her arms in front of her.

Markman suddenly remembered why he had come, and wished he had been more diplomatic. He began to twitch nervously and stammered as he spoke. “Um...I was wondering, ah, it’s probably completely out of line-maybe I should just go.”

“Mr. Markman, what is it?”

“Could I possibly sleep on your couch-tonight?”

Cassiopia laughed. “Oh my, such tact. Let me get this straight. I’ve only known you for a few days. It’s been strictly a professional relationship, and now you want to spend the night with me under the same roof?”

“I’m sorry, really. It was stupid. I shouldn’t have asked. I’ll just go. It’s just that I’ve stayed in so many hotels that I’d do almost anything to avoid them. I, I.”

“Of course you can stay.” she interrupted, “but not on the couch. There is a spare room. It’s at the end of the hall-but why?”

“Someone trashed my apartment tonight. I’m guessing it was a local street gang looking for money for drugs, or something like that.”

“That’s terrible. I can’t believe how much crime there is these days.”

“My Aunt Margaret would agree with you.”

Cassiopia nodded understandingly. “Well, make yourself at home. I’m busy in the lab. I’ll be up very late. I always have trouble sleeping anyway. So don’t wait up for me,” she gave a tired laugh and left him.

Markman narrowed his stare and was not sure whether to laugh with her or not. Was she suggesting that intimacy with him was an instant joke? He watched her delicate figure disappear down the hallway toward the basement door.

With his male ego slightly bruised, he worked his way around the modest home, closing curtains and checking locks, mumbling to himself about the carelessness of the attractive lady with the high IQ. He retrieved his things from the car and locked it. It was a quiet evening in the middle class neighborhood-a very neatly manicured residential area with the exception of the Professor’s place. Street lights glanced off the windshields of several economy cars parked along the curb. Lights had begun to go out in the homes nearby.

Inside he found a bedroom that seemed to be the spare. It smelled stuffy and unused. A picture of a much younger Cassiopia sat on a small stained-wood night stand beside the bed. He dropped his bag, allowed himself to fall face first onto the soft, blue bedspread, and slipped quickly off into dreamland.

## Chapter 12

It had been a very busy evening for the Nighthawks, despite the fact that all but three members were locked away in jail, awaiting trial. The best part was that the night was not over! It was still only 4:10 am. The protective shroud of early morning darkness, necessary cover for most gang-related activities, would last another hour or two. Already the small group of delinquents had successfully broken into the largest auto dealership in the area and cleaned out the locked cabinet that held the master keys. They had stolen the most expensive customized van on the lot and had spent a good deal of the evening cruising the city in search of some careless, good-looking lady to abduct.

It was annoying that they had been unsuccessful at that. Such rudimentary amusements were becoming more and more difficult to accomplish these days. People were getting wise; not taking chances; protecting themselves.

As a consolation for not having found someone to rape and maim, the Hawks humored themselves by letting the van drive itself into a roadside canal where it sputtered, listed, and sunk partially into the muck. Temporarily satisfied, they continued on foot through a short stretch of woods and into the sleepy neighborhood of Professor Cassell, where they searched for a fast car to steal—one vulnerable to their newly acquired set of master keys.

So it was not purely by chance that they happened upon Markman's sleek, black Mustang. One Hawk watched the house while a second stood guard by the street, a practiced routine. The third checked one key at a time in the car's passenger door until the correct one unlocked it. Quietly he opened the door and signaled to his friends.

The two look-outs immediately converged as their associate leaned inside to search for valuables. He backed out with a shiny, metallic box in his hand, fumbling and almost dropping it as he examined the sealed cover.

“Whacha holdin' there, Icky?” asked Big Dog as he joined his friend.

“I don' know. Maybe jewelry or sumptin'. How do it open?”

“Gimme it. I kin do it...”

The two of them stood in the glow of the car's interior light, struggling with the intriguing little box as Mace, the third gang member looked nervously around. "Bust that sucker on the cement. There's gotta be somethin' in there."

"Man, we gonna wake these crackers up. Pitch that thing and let's take this ride; get our ass out'a here," insisted Icky.

It was then that Big Dog noticed that the shiny silver box had opened slightly. A narrow edge of amber light marked a split in the cover's seam. Without speaking, he pulled the cover back fully and peered inside. Icky pushed in closer and stared with him down into the fluorescent interior of the stolen artifact. A moment of breathless excitement passed as they struggled to focus on what they were seeing.

Icky reacted first. "Whoa...oh man...whoa...!" Startled, he lurched back from the group. He clasped his hands together and looked left, then right. He turned and began to trot away down the street, moaning, "Whoa...oh man!" As he ran he twisted back around, swatting at things behind him that were not really there. His labored footsteps and frequent moans continued long after he had disappeared into the shadows of the night.

Big Dog was still holding the box-staring hypnotically down into it. He looked up with a sour smile locked on his face, his eyes wide and dilated, and began shaking his head. "I get it. I think I get it."

Mace, the third Hawk, lost interest in anything Big Dog had to say. His own perplexed gaze drifted up from the open box and became fixed on the dew droplets that had formed on the deep, black surface of the car's roof. He watched as a single drop slid in slow motion to the edge of the open passenger's door and hung in suspension for a lingering moment, then fell free. It twisted and sagged and turned in the moist night air, plummeting through the depths of night space, finally reaching the surface of the hardened driveway and exploding into a kaleidoscope of tiny beads of waterlight that formed a miniature cascading umbrella at his feet.

Mace looked up at Big Dog. Big Dog's mouth was moving, but no sounds were coming out.

"I get this, Mace. I understand. I get it!"

Mace said nothing. He backed away and began to stagger along the sidewalk. Moon shadows pointed him in the correct direction. He stared down at the dirty run-off around a grating built into the curb. A pool of brown, stagnant water was seeping downward into the drain. Mace realized how beautiful and perfect it was. He was going home now. It didn't matter which road he took. They all led there eventually.

Big Dog tossed the silver box back into the car. It bounced once on the seat and rolled onto the black, carpeted floor. He shut the passenger door, and pulled the grey sweatshirt he was wearing over his head and threw it aside, exposing his bare, hairless chest. "I've got the answer!" he cried and took off between houses, heading for the main highway a few blocks away.

Halfway to his intended destination, Big Dog stopped momentarily to unlace and discard his army boots, then resumed his quest in bare feet. As he hurried along, he unbuckled his baggy green trousers and pushed them off also. By the time he reached the main intersection on Route 50, he was completely naked. He ran onto the four lane highway beneath the amber street lights, waving his hands, jumping up and down, and yelling at the early morning commuter traffic, "I've got the answer!. I understand! I know the answer!"

He danced precariously among the early morning traffic. Drivers swerved wildly to avoid the nude man waving in the middle of the road. An off-duty reserve police officer finally came across the extraordinary event and pulled over to call for backup.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee awakened Markman. He found the hallway bath unoccupied and wrestled through a quick shower. He dressed from the small travel bag, stuffing yesterday's jeans back in where today's had been, and then followed his nose to the small, but tidy kitchen. A large empty mug that read "Ignorance can hurt you," was waiting conspicuously on the counter, as was a tray of warped-looking biscuits and other unidentifiable breakfast delicacies. They all tasted unexpectedly good. Feeling full and mildly guilty, he retrieved the spare slide bolt that he had brought from his ransacked apartment, and installed it on the front door using tools from the trunk of the Mustang-partial payment for his room and board. With a third, steaming cup of coffee in hand, he headed downstairs for the SCIP lab.

As expected, Cassiopia was already there, hanging over an open chest panel on

Tel as it stood patiently by the Drack stacks. She wore a snug, tan, jump suit. A brown leather shoulder bag, that looked overstuffed, lay on the floor next to her. She glanced up nervously as he entered.

“Wow, did I just scare myself,” she said.

“What happened?”

“I was rushing through some fairly complex autonomy enhancements on Tel, and crashed the whole system! The personality stuff somehow got into my father’s analytical base. What a catastrophe that could have been!”

“It’s okay now??”

She snapped the panel shut and straightened up. “God, that scared me. The screen went completely black. I didn’t think it was going to come back. Then, thank heaven it just fixed itself! He was down for a good five minutes before he came back on. My father must have had virus protection or something in there, although I can’t imagine him taking the time to do something as nonessential as that.”

The robot waited quietly. Cassiopia patted it affectionately on its shoulder. “Tel, systems check.”

“Self test complete. Ambulatory systems check complete. All systems nominal.”

“Guess I should quit while I’m ahead,” she said, with a sigh of relief. “Tel, bring up the SCIP.”

The robot responded immediately by taking small, slightly rocking steps to the left until it was facing the Drack control station, then began to methodically enter the requested start-up sequence.

“Oh boy.” Markman winced.

Cassiopia glanced up and smiled. “That’s right, Mr. Markman. Get ready.” She put a hand on the shoulder of the TEL and stood alongside as it finished clicking in the SCIP start up sequence.

“There are some things I think you should know about what happened at the

university.”

She stopped and gave her full attention to him, listening with intense interest as he explained the colorful, though sordid details of the runaway computer virus that had infiltrated the college’s central computer. She seemed distressed by it, and found none of the scandal humorous. As he sympathetically recounted the description given of the unlikely old man who was suspect, she became even more disturbed.

“I know my father, Mr. Markman. Obviously that was not him, for several reasons. Certainly he could not endure a three story jump. That had to be one of the college’s athletes.”

“And I agree with you. I just thought you should know about this before we continued.”

Cassiopia shook her head. “Thanks for filling me in. I can’t imagine who would do such a thing. It’s appalling.”

The Drack computer had begun to hum efficiently. Having completed its current task, Tel waited patiently at the controls for further requests. Cassiopia seemed momentarily distracted by Markman’s troubling report. Finally, she returned her attention to the robot. “Tel, engage the SCIP.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“Very simple. This time we will maintain physical contact going through the door.”

“How do we do that?”

“It’s simple. We’ll hold hands. I think then we will emerge to a common environment on the other side. If it works it will explain quite a bit.”

“Such as?”

“There’s no way I can go into right now. Just trust me until we get back. Then I’ll go over all of it with you. We’ll leave one of the homing devices just inside to show the way back. If it works, I’d like to leave it behind so that we can look for it on our next trip. That will tell me if there’s relativity between any one door



manifestation and the next.”

“Personally I’m still really worried we might not be able to get back.”

“Thinking of backing out on me, Mr. Markman?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“I’m more concerned about the time distortion. It’s possible we could exit Dreamland and find ourselves in the past or even the extended future, never mind being trapped forever in a world that doesn’t make sense. It wouldn’t surprise me if you changed your mind.”

“Who are you trying to talk out of it, you or me?”

“We’ve done pretty well so far.”

“Man, that’s stretching it a bit, isn’t it?”

Cassiopia cast a discerning look. “I’m surprised more by you than anything else, Mr. Markman. You have no kindred interests in all of this, and yet you persist in helping me. You are in just as much danger as I am. Why do you continue?”

“I go where life leads me, Ms. Cassell. You probably wouldn’t understand my end of it.”

She paused and looked at him with a narrow stare, then turned and spoke to the robot. “Engage the SCIP transformer, Tel.” Before she had finished speaking the robot was moving to comply. “Let me know if you start having any new second thoughts, Mr. Markman.”

“You’ll be the first. I promise.” An uneasy moment of silence followed, as though they both expected each other to back down. Neither did. The SCIP door crackled to life beside them, a stark reminder of the seriousness of what they had committed to. The sparkling mirror became alive again, ready and waiting, breaking the impasse.

Cassiopia stooped down and briefly rearranged her utility bag. She stood up, hoisted the strap over her head and shoulder, and came up beside him. They exchanged a quick look and headed up the blue ramp together, taking positions

facing each other, next to their surreal, electronic reflections. With a touch of fear in her eye, she took his hand in hers.

“Ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

They pushed through the silver membrane of the first mirror and found the empty corridor beyond. In unison they stepped across and into the vertical pool of the second mirror, and pushed brazenly through to the other side of reality.

## Chapter 13

Cassiopia emerged from the mirror and immediately stopped to gawk at a place that seemed to defy explanation. Markman bumped against her shoulder as he stopped alongside. Together they stood silently trying to make sense out of what they were seeing. The only things visible in any direction were their own reflections. They turned in small circles and finally realized they were in a small room partitioned entirely by mirrors. The floor was plywood, painted black, worn, and very dirty. A black dropped ceiling hung just above the mirror tops and a semisweet and vaguely familiar smell lingered in the air. The room was quiet.

“It’s a maze of some kind,” Cassiopia said, as she continued to turn and study the glass puzzle.

“Rats in a trap,” complained Markman.

“Not really. There’s an easy way out of any maze you know.”

“Smash all the mirrors?” he replied, as he pressed carefully on a mirror panel to test its resiliency.

“Typical male solution. No. The answer is that you put one hand on any wall, and you can walk right out as long as you never let go. It’s not the shortest route but it does get you there.”

“Really?”

Cassiopia reached into the leather sack and drew out the homing device and a roll of silver duct tape.

“Tape it to the top of the SCIP panel so that it’s out of the way,” she said, handing him it to him. He switched the small device on, and stretched up to the top of the mirror to secure it.

“It’s working!” She moved around within the small space, studying the tiny indicator needle on her direction finder.

“That is, unless it and you are both impostors,” said Markman.

“Trust me, Mr. Markman. It worked. I’m me,” she reassured him, “but, of course, you won’t really be sure of that until we get back. Just don’t let it be a problem. Here’s the other direction finder in case we get separated. Let’s go.”

With that she hoisted the leather bag back up onto her shoulder and began lightly dragging one finger slowly along the mirrored wall to her right as she walked. Markman lagged slightly behind, and watched as she disappeared and then reappeared from behind a mirror that concealed a passageway. He caught up, keeping one eye on the pointer of his homing device. It pointed reassuringly behind.

The maze became an optical wonder. There were dozens of reflections, all moving along in harmony, but from many different aspects. Cassiopia would stop from time to time, thinking she had noticed independent movements within the mirrors, but each time the ghostly perceptions stopped with her. The labyrinth became an eerie visual challenge, and a powerful distraction that could have led anyone in circles, including Cassiopia had she not been taking her planned path. Holding to one wall did seem to be keeping them moving, though sometimes it led them in and around dead-end chambers that produced even greater numbers of repetitive reflections. In one antechamber alone, they found themselves confronted with more than one hundred unique images that were difficult to distinguish from real people.

“From what I’ve seen of Dreamland so far, this could go on forever,” Markman suggested.

“We can get back the same way if necessary,” she replied. “Besides, don’t you hear it?”

“Hear what?”

“Listen.”

Markman cocked one ear and strained to listen. Faintly, he could perceive sounds coming from somewhere ahead.

Quickly they resumed the search. As they made their way farther through the maze, the noises grew louder and more familiar. It was crowd noise and loud

music of several different styles jumbled together. Soon the commotion reached the point that it seemed very nearby, and the reflective passageway grew wider and less difficult. Finally, there was a sharp turn to the left that opened to a large ramp beneath a clear night sky. As far as they could see, there was carnival.

Nothing could have prepared Cassiopia for the depth and detail of the noisy, colorful celebration going on before her. Spread out in every direction were the whirring rides and prize-stuffed game booths that decorated one of the largest amusement parks she had ever seen. In the distance, a huge Ferris wheel, outlined in green and yellow lights turned slowly across the new-moon, star-filled blackness. People of all shapes and sizes were playing the games and waiting in lines. Suddenly she and Markman had become nothing more than part of a busy crowd.

The booming noise and music, the smells of open air food dispensaries, and the spotlights dancing artfully across the heavens made the mystifying event seem larger than life. There was nothing missing and nothing out of place. In awe, they stood gawking by the exit of the house of glass.

“Absolutely fascinating!” Cassiopia gasped. “We must record it.” She fussed in the travel bag for her camera as other fairgoers emerged from the mirror maze and pushed their way past without a second glance.

“What I want to know is-is this real?” Markman asked.

“Seems very real to me,” she replied, as she adjusted the small, black camera and began photographing some of the crowd around her.

“Well, excuse me if I don’t go on the Ferris wheel, okay?”

“Let’s try to talk to some of these people!” She exchanged her camera for a small voice recorder and charged down the ramp of the worn wooden platform.

“Wait a minute. Be careful!” warned Markman, trying to stay close behind. “It’s might not be as easy as you think.”

A short distance away, to her right, stood a target shooting booth next to a candy apple stand. There seemed to be a serious business slump in that area. She headed toward it at breakneck speed. It was all Markman could do to keep up with her in the dense crowd. His halfhearted gestures and muffled calls went

unheeded.

She approached the handgun-laden counter of the shooting booth with a determination that quickly gained the attention of the unkempt attendant. “Excuse me sir, could you answer a few questions for me?”

The booth operator’s eyes lit up. Requests suggested compensation. “Ya want to take a try ma’am?” he replied in a raspy voice.

“Ah...no, I don’t know about guns. What I’d like to find out is...”

“Ah’d really like to talk with ya ma’am, but business is been so bad ah really got to attend to it. Sure ya don’t want to shoot?”

The beady-eyed look on the attendant’s face made it quite clear that participation in the game booth’s challenge was necessary if any kind of cooperation was to be gained. Fortunately Markman had caught up and now stood alongside her. He smiled and handed the appreciative vendor a one dollar bill.

The attendant launched into his script. “Good for three shots every time. Break two bottles get an extra shot. Break three bottles you get one ah them stuffed bears hangin’ up there on the wall left ah ya.” The unshaven man’s dissertation was done with such rapid fire speed it was obvious he had recited it a thousand times before. Markman picked up one of the Colt style hand guns from the counter and held it appreciatively. “What the...? This thing’s real!”

“What’d ya expect, a water pistol?” the vendor replied hoarsely. “Ain’t ya ever used a Colt forty-five before?”

Markman hefted the gun on its side in his open hand. The balance was good and the blue steel felt cool. “As a matter of fact, I have,” he replied. He spun the pistol once and stopped it with the barrel pointing in the direction of the target area.

“Whoa! Careful, partner. The last cowboy that tried that shot the guy next to him in the foot. That’s why business is so bad ‘round here.”

“Let’s make a deal,” proposed Markman. “You keep the stuffed animals, but for every bottle I hit you answer one of the lady’s questions, no matter how crazy they might sound.”

“Hey, that’s an easy. I’ll take a freebee any day. Shoot your best shot, partner. Ya got a deal.”

Markman took a shooting stance and smiled playfully at Cassiopia. He drew back the hammer on the Colt and appraised the row of bottles that stood on a bullet-riddled board, roughly sixty feet away. Cassiopia looked on, wondering if two questions would be too much to hope for on this dollar.

Abruptly three loud, rapid fire shots rang out, causing her to jump. The booth attendant stared in surprise at the shattered glass that had rained down onto the dirt floor. Three bottles were missing from the center of the target area.

“Hoooooly. Sir, ya’ have indeed used a Colt before. Glad ah’ made that deal now. You could’a cleaned me out. That is fine shootin’, no doubt about it. Ask away, good lady, I’ll give it ma’ best.” The dealer took the six-gun from Markman, happy not to have lost any merchandise, and began to empty the spent shells from their chambers.

Cassiopia silently reappraised Markman. She quickly regained her composure and turned her attention to the rough-looking booth operator. “We want to know what fair this is and where?”

The man scratched his chin with one hand and looked back curiously. “Oh ah’ get it. This is one o’them trick question deals right? Okay, ah’ll play along. This here’s the Lancaster annual county fair, in yers truly, Lancaster, Louisiana.”

Cassiopia’s eyes brightened with intrigue. She held her tiny recorder in a better position to catch the conversation. “What day, month, and year is this?”

The amused vendor laughed. “Saturday, July twentieth, nineteen sixty-nine, ma’am.”

She opened a small flap on the front of her bag and drew out a pocket-sized photograph of her father. She held it up for the attendant to see. “We’re looking for this man, have you seen him?”

The mildly interested gunsmith squinted and stared closely at the annoyed-looking, gray-haired man in the picture. “Nope. Ain’t seen ‘em. But ya really should try the fortune teller lady across the way there. She’d be the best one to know someone’s whereabouts. But ah don’t get it. Ain’t there supposed to be

some kind ah joke here er somethin'? Ah mean that's three questions, ain't it?"

"No punch line partner," Markman replied. "But we appreciate the help."

"I'm a gunsmith durin' the week ya know. Ah just do this fer fun. Come see me and ah'll fix ya up with one ah these here Colts. They're darlin', ain't they?"

Markman nodded and waved as he and Cassiopia turned to make their way back through the crowd.

"Make ya a good deal," he called after them.

"So is this place for real?" Markman asked when they had found a place between booths that was sheltered from some of the continuous racket. "It damn sure isn't nineteen sixty-nine, that's ancient history."

"We've been here too long. We need to start thinking about getting back," she answered, ignoring his question. "But I do want to see that fortune teller for a minute, just on a long shot."

"Nothing seems like a long shot anymore," Markman said, as they headed toward a small, brown tent. A disproportionately large sign read, "Madam Emista, Seer Of The Unknown".

The entrance of the tent was partitioned by two large, gray canvas flaps that waved slightly with the wind. They pushed their way inside to find a much larger inner chamber than they had expected. The dirt floor interior was barren, except for a red, felt-covered table in the center. Madame Emista sat patiently behind it, with her hands folded in her lap. She wore loosely fitting silk robes and was generously decorated with jewelry made of oversized semiprecious stones of many different colors. A large, glimmering crystal ball was centered on the table in front of her. Two straight back, red felt-covered chairs were positioned facing her. Cassiopia and Markman were her only customers.

"Ah, come in and sit, expected ones."

Markman smirked at Cassiopia, who in turn responded with a threatening glance. They approached the old woman and took seats next to one another.

"Say that which you seek, my child."



Cassiopia surveyed the gaudy conventionality of the scene, but quickly found she liked the strange and exotic seer. She smiled and gestured toward the crystal ball, "What is your fee, Madam?"

"Ask that which you would, young one. My fee has been paid."

"Who would have paid my fee?" inquired Cassiopia.

"Questions from young lovers bear no labor," she replied.

Cassiopia blushed. "We, uh, we are actually together on business. We are looking for someone."

The fortune teller smiled and said nothing.

The silence became awkward. Cassiopia fumbled with her bag and again drew out the photograph of her father.

"It is your father you seek, is it not?" asked the old woman, before she had seen the picture.

It startled Cassiopia. She stopped and looked at the expression of affection on the palm reader's face and then handed her the slightly wrinkled print. "Have you seen him or do you have any idea where we might look?"

"That which you ask is a riddle. Answer the riddle correctly, and you shall know what has become of your loved one. In that you may find him."

The mood in the mystic's tent had become deceptively intense.

An atmosphere of power surged through the canvas-enclosed room like an eerie wind through an empty house. Cassiopia shivered. Markman looked over his shoulder. Madam Emista continued in her musical tone of voice. "When does a man wake, but not wake?" The old woman paused as though waiting a reply. "Seek you the true answer, one whose name lies in the stars. And fair luck to you."

Suddenly the flaps at the tent's entrance snapped wildly, cracking like bullwhips. Markman jumped and turned. Cassiopia twisted around to see behind her but the disturbance subsided as quickly as it had begun.

When they looked back, the fortune teller was gone. Only a half full hourglass, its sand draining down, remained on the otherwise empty table.

## Chapter 14

“I’m telling you there was no other way out of that tent,” Markman insisted as they headed back toward the house of glass.

“Oh, really, Mr. Markman. How can you be so gullible? There must have been.”

Unconvinced, he grabbed her by the arm and stopped. His unexpected touch startled her. “I’m a professional investigator, Ms. Cassell. I have a knack for seeing through people and their tricks. I’m telling you there’s more going on here than just...time distortions.”

Before she could respond, a loud fanfare rang out above the crowd noise. On their left, a brightly lit stage burst to life as a booming voice came over the loudspeakers. “L-a-d-i-e-s and gentlemen! For your evening’s pleasure, the two greatest sword and fire masters alive! Please greet...the Cardoni Brothers!”

The gathering crowd applauded wildly as flames shot up from burners set around the stage. The orange, silken robes the two performers wore appeared to be fire resistant as the men walked among the yellow-orange jets, twirling golden-bladed swords in both hands. They danced in high steps around the fire, then drove their swords into the wooden stage, and knelt to bow between them.

“Of course there’s more going on here, Mr. Markman-more than you can imagine!” Cassiopia yelled above the applause and laughter.

“I can imagine quite a bit these days!” Markman yelled back.

The crowd roared again when one of the performers tossed a flaming orb into the air, as his counterpart spun 360 degrees and sliced it twice before it touched the ground.

“The fortune teller knew more than she was saying. We should track her down,” Markman insisted.

“We’ve been in here too long. We don’t belong here. On the next trip I’ll have more control.”

Markman looked back in puzzlement. In the background something out of place was happening. While one entertainer was busy performing spectacular feats of swordplay, the other had withdrawn to one side, and was peering intently over the crowd at Cassiopia.

“We’ve still got to find our way back through the maze. We better get going,” she insisted. They stared at each other defiantly, unaware that the performer watching Cassiopia had come to the edge of the stage. Sword in hand, he somersaulted into the crowd and began weaving his way toward her.

Markman shrugged off the impasse. He searched the distance trying to locate their destination. “It’s this way,” he shouted and began to push his way through the throngs of stage viewers.

From out of nowhere, the mysterious swordsman was suddenly on them. He grabbed Cassiopia rudely by the arm and began dragging her roughly in the opposite direction.

“You are my choice tonight!” he announced in broken English, and yanked harder at the frightened woman when she tried to pull away.

She opened her mouth to call for help, but felt Markman’s muscled hand grasp her other arm. For a moment she found herself the centerpiece of a violent tug-of-war, but abruptly a flash of movement changed the odds.

Markman’s right forearm was suddenly in front of her face, and clutched in his hand the dark-blue Berretta was leveled between the eyes of the would be abductor.

“Bad idea, Sinbad,” Markman growled. “You’re two feet from dying, mister. It’d be worth dropping the blade.”

Stunned, the kidnapper hastily released Cassiopia as though she had become too hot even for him to handle. He froze where he stood, but opened his right hand, allowing his golden sword to fall to the dirt. From the corner of his eye, Markman caught sight of the second Cardoni brother and two allies jumping from the stage and barging through the crowd to assist their friend. An irreverent smirk came across the face of Cassiopia’s assailant. He too had seen that reinforcements were on the way.

Markman lurched into a jumping sidestep and drove a side kick into the stomach of his unprepared opponent. The man's face became wide-eyed as he bent over and groped at his stomach. He tumbled over backwards and crashed harshly to the dirt amid startled cries from the surrounding throng of onlookers. On the ground, he rolled from side to side, holding his chest and gasping for air.

Markman tugged at Cassiopia's arm, pulling her into the growing crowd, stuffing the Berretta back in its holster as he went. So many people had gathered to see the fight that it had become very difficult to find a way through. Over his shoulder, Markman could see disturbances in the crowd where the pursuers were bullying their way in an attempt to catch up. Tightly he held to Cassiopia as she struggled to follow him through the waves of gawking strangers. Several stocky men cast threatening stares as he pushed his way past, but their animosity quickly dissolved into lust at the sight of Cassiopia.

They fought their way to the House Of Glass, only to find its entrance almost completely blocked by a long line of patrons waiting to buy tickets. Over the crowd noise, Markman could hear the shouts of warning being made by his pursuers as they badgered their way through the confused masses. They were closing. With an exasperated look at Cassiopia, he forced his way past the line and up the ramp to the mirrored entrance. The ticket taker, a man in dirty grey coveralls, immediately ordered them to stop. People waiting made rude gestures and demanded they go to the back of the line. At the top of the platform, Markman stopped only long enough to spot five men weaving and shoving their way through the crowd. With Cassiopia holding tightly to a fistful of his jacket, he led her into the corridor of glass. Once again, they found themselves surrounded by their own reflections.

Within the realm of Dreamland mirrors, progress came to an abrupt halt. Only a few steps inside, Markman banged into one of the heavy glass panels which was reflecting a passageway that did not exist. The large glass pane wobbled noisily from the impact, casting eerie images that were recreated a thousand times in the mirrors surrounding it.

He turned to Cassiopia as she struggled to catch her breath. "Will your little maze trick help us find our way in?"

She nodded. "Yes! It should. If we hold to one wall we will always find the next passage. But it will lead us in and around larger chambers. They could catch

up!”

“We’ll have to chance it. If we run into one of these panels hard enough we may break it. We could get cut to shreds.”

Cassiopia grimaced. She removed the homing device from her bag and stared down at it nervously. “I’m getting a reading. The homing beacon is somewhere ahead.”

In a low tone, Markman replied skeptically, “Which way is ahead?”

Ignoring his sarcasm, she led the way, keeping her right hand on the wall of smooth glass beside her. As sounds from the carnival began to fade, the sudden cry of the angry ticket taker’s voice echoed through the hall. Others had pushed their way into his amusement without paying. The pursuers had now entered the maze. An eerie, muted silence descended over the arcade.

Markman did his best to keep close as she wound her way around columns of mirrors and walls of silvery infinity. Their own fearful-looking reflections came from every direction. They stealthed along the claustrophobic surreality with no place to run and no place to hide. Markman found himself continually looking back, expecting an assault to occur at any moment. The persistent hunters were now keeping very quiet, moving like predators in search of prey.

Cassiopia felt earnestly for the hidden openings, not noticing the subtle change coming over Markman. His expression had become one of inward resignation to mortal combat. Skillfully she worked her way into a large circular chamber of repetitive reflections that went on into endlessness. Tall, wide, free-standing mirrors were scattered throughout the vague boundaries of the room. Patiently, she began to find a broken path around it, as hundreds of images followed along.

Suddenly, a loud crack broke the tense silence. The sound of shattering glass rang out in the air, followed by a whimpering cry of alarm nearby. “Son of a bitch! I’m cut!”

“Shut-up, you imbecile, or we’ll cut you worse than that!”

A hollow silence returned. Cassiopia turned worriedly to Markman. The voices had been frighteningly close. She stiffened and began to quietly search even faster. Markman strained to focus on the optical illusions that were everywhere.

He tapped nervously at the gun in its holster, and realized it would be completely improper to fire it in a place surrounded by hundreds of innocent carnival-goers.

Cassiopia began to have trouble finding her way. Nervously she felt along the glass, but suddenly jerked to a stop and covered her mouth with one hand. A third figure had suddenly appeared within the multiple reflections being cast throughout the hall. A burly man, dressed in sleeveless grey coveralls, searched among the reflections. He appeared uncertain and angry. A fresh, red cut beneath his bottom lip was still bleeding. He brushed back his ragged, oily-black hair with one hand, and strained to find the real people among the curtain of reflections. As he stood bewildered by the great many choices, he was joined by a companion—a man wearing a black leather motorcycle jacket and dirty torn jeans. His long red-brown hair was tied back in a pony tail.

Cassiopia and Markman froze. Both parties stared at one another, though the countless number of reflections made it impossible to tell who the real people were.

Without speaking, Markman motioned to continue on.

Cassiopia moved breathlessly forward, her duplicates moving with her. The predators resumed their slow, confused search. They called out to their friends who were lagging behind in other culverts of glass. “Hey, you guys—we can see them, over here.”

Unexpectedly Cassiopia found a hidden opening between mirrors. She turned to quietly alert Markman, and was startled to find him gone. Reflections of him were everywhere, though the real person was no longer near enough to touch. She paused anxiously and wondered if she should hide in the next corridor or wait to lead him to it.

A sudden explosion of violence made her forget her indecision. Out of the dreamlike surreality, the muscular, hairy hand of the man in black leather shot out and roughly captured her by her chin. So tight was his hold that it was immediately painful. She was yanked around to face the wild-eyed carnival worker. He was unshaven, dirty, and smelled of cheap cigars. He leered gleefully as she cried out and struggled, and then widened his grin and let out a low, throaty chuckle.

As the overconfident man celebrated, a reflection of Markman suddenly

appeared beside him. Cassiopia opened her mouth to call out, but was interrupted when the man's head was violently yanked back by his ponytail. His bloodshot eyes bulged wide in pain as he tumbled over. Involuntarily he released his grip and flailed wildly as he tried to break the hard fall to the unswept blackened floor. Markman slid in along side the man and knelt with him as he fell. The plywood floor sagged from the collision and the surrounding mirrors echoed his distorted image in a radical orchestration of twisting and bowing. The back of the man's head slammed into the floor and bounced. His eyes became foggy and unfocused. Dazed he blinked up into Markman's cold stare and attempted to raise his throbbing head from the floor. His last, out of focus image was Markman's open left hand, slamming against his forehead, driving his fractured mind back down. With a stare of disbelief locked into his face, his eyes fluttered and closed.

Reflections of a body, prone on the hardwood floor now wavered around the mystical amusement. Tense silence returned as the mirrors slowly stilled. Three human images remained standing in infinity. The thug's partner had watched everything. Cassiopia looked again to Markman and realized she was staring at a reflection. He had again slipped away.

With one hand on her heart, she looked down in disbelief at the sleeping body on the floor nearby. Before she could collect herself, the gruesome sounds of physical combat began to echo around her once more. The images in the mirrors became a blur of violence. Everywhere she looked men were fighting. As her thoughts came back into focus, she realized it was Markman and the man in grey coveralls, trading blows, moving, and then clashing again. Grunting and slapping sounds echoed from every direction. She wanted dearly to yell at Markman to run, but knew it would only help give them away.

Then, for an instant, there was a heavy stillness. Suddenly multiple images of the carnival worker, pummeling through the air surrounded her. The hideous sounds of glass shattering mixed with a gruesome, low pitched scream rang out. All around Cassiopia, images of the man's body crashed through shattering mirrors as it fell hard to the floor among the jagged, scattering glass. An adjacent chamber, suddenly visible through a newly made hole, cast its own wavering images of the man in grey lying in a bed of red stained glass.

She jumped at the touch of Markman's hand on her arm. He leaned into her ear and spoke in a low tone. "Let's go, the others are close."



Flustered, she looked up at him, and tried to point to the next corridor. As she did, a third figure abruptly appeared. She jumped back, shrieking in horror. “Scott, look out!”

With lightning speed, Markman spun to confront the danger. But it was not enough. The second Cardoni brother was there, with his razor-edged sword already raised. As Markman came about, the downward motion had begun. He moved to block too late. The curved blade drove down through Markman’s unprotected forehead.

## Chapter 15

An explosive wave of darkness engulfed them—a brief interlude of useless time, existence without environment. With his arm still raised in defense, Markman found himself standing in the desert, a late morning sun in the sky and a cool breeze drying the sweat on his face. Cassiopia had one hand on his heart and was holding his left arm with the other. Dazed, he touched his forehead but found no wound.

“My God, Scott, are you all right?”

Even in the aftermath of near-death, Markman’s flippant attitude prevailed. But though his skull appeared to be intact, the thought processes taking place within it were thoroughly fractured. He hurriedly organized the broken pieces into an acceptably sarcastic reply. “Well, yes and no,” he answered and continued to search for the horrendous wound that should have been, but was not.

As his panic subsided, he cast an appraising stare at the new environment. Surrounding them now was a barren sandscape. In every direction, the horizon was distant and lightly dusted by sand. There were no structures of any kind visible, no sign of civilization. Cassiopia continued to hold his arm, her attention fixed exclusively on him.

“Well, either I’m dead and this is Purgatory, or we have changed locations somehow, or this whole thing is an illusion. Gee—there’s so many possibilities!”

Recovering from her own state of shock she let go of him and stepped back, embarrassed by her uncontrolled display of emotion. “This is the same place I was in before,” she said, shifting the weight of the bag on her shoulder and turning to look over the empty landscape.

“That guy cheated. He just appeared out of nowhere. If he had come at me I would have sensed it. All of a sudden he was just there!” Markman turned to scan the immediate area. “I don’t see the doorway. This is probably the kind of thing that happened to your father.”

“The direction finder is still working!” Breathlessly, Cassiopia held the small device out in front of her and moved to center the indicator. “It’s that way,” she

said, pointing behind him at the desolate skyline. Without asking if he was ready, she trudged off through the loose sand in the direction indicated.

Markman shook his head and trudged after her.

Concern grew within Cassiopia as she walked. She realized that time had suddenly become an indefinable enemy. The empty panorama was threatening enough by itself, but no part of her plan had included being so violently cast away from the SCIP mirror. Two hours had been expended on an excursion that should have required one. Now there was nothing left to do but follow the dubious indications of a small needle driven by a few integrated circuits and a nine-volt battery, and even they were not from this world. She shook her head at the thought that this was not the most desirable way to bet one's life, especially since Markman had lost his once already.

They shuffled slowly onward through the dry, granular texture of the forbidding desert, Markman continually cursing at the sand that kept invading his shoes. Cassiopia struggled to conceal her fears and sought to distract herself with idle conversation. She dug into the sand with deep steps and spoke in a reserved and uneasy tone. "So, Mr. Markman, what is it about fighting that you find so alluring?"

"It was 'Scott' a few minutes ago, wasn't it? And where'd you get that?"

"From what I've seen you are very good at fighting. You must study boxing, or karate, or something. Am I right?"

"And just what would you know about karate, Ms. Cassell?"

"I know that you people sit around quietly meditating and then suddenly jump up and punch and kick everything in sight!"

Markman let out a sarcastic laugh. "You watch too many movies. Smashing somebody's face is not my idea of a good time. On the other hand, sparring with friends is one of the most enjoyable things I've ever done. Actually fighting with someone is a lose-lose situation. Even if you win, they're libel to lay in wait for you with friends later on."

"But that's what karate is, is it not? Controlled violence —force as a means to an end."

“No way. Karate? It’s a Japanese discipline. Tae kwon do is Korean. Kung Fu is Chinese.

“Oh? And which might you be, Mr. Markman?”

“My study is the Tao Chane, the pen name of the master who developed it thousands of years ago. It is much more than a martial art. It is from China, the Danamn province. You can call it Chinese, but I wouldn’t do that in front of a real Tibetan citizen. We are quite adamant about our solidarity.”

“We, Mr. Markman? You are from Tibet?”

“You could say it’s my real home.”

“I don’t understand. You are an American citizen.”

“I was raised by my father, an Air Force officer stationed overseas. We shuttled back and forth between the U.S. and Asia, but more time was spent there than here. I pretty much grew up in Thasa. I got to play with the students from the local monastery. They began to teach me their ways. I learned enough that eventually a Master from the temple noticed me and took me under his wing. Eventually I was able to complete my training. Unfortunately when they have had enough of you, the monks throw you out, so to speak. You cannot be a true master of Tao Chane until you have been tempered by the harshness of the outside world. It was easier for me to return to America afterward. I was still an outsider over there. But I was just as out of place here. I have my father’s annuity to live on so I don’t need to hold a steady job. I use my abilities to help people from time to time. It’s what I seem do best here.”

“And so, will you return to China eventually?”

“Tibet, Ms. Cassell. I could go back there as a teacher’s assistant when my tenure here is done. I would be welcomed. But I would be saying goodbye to the modern world.”

“So then you do seek violence to satisfy a personal discipline that advocates violence?”

“Just the opposite. The idea is to find peaceful selflessness within. Some consider it a way to prepare for death. If you exist within such a place, then

death holds little consequence for you, because there will be no real inner change when it happens.”

“Fighting helps you find a state of peace?”

“You must control the space around you in order to find peace within. Could you stand by and do nothing while an innocent, helpless person was being harmed? We live in an ocean of emotion. Every bad action or thought is a pollutant to the atmosphere. Every good deed or thought purifies it. The Buddhists say that if we all could find inner peace, some call it the Tao, we would have created Heaven on Earth.”

“So meditation is actually a technique intended to aid you in combat?”

“Boy, you are stubborn, aren’t you. It’s like this: If someone throws something at you, your eye sees it and sends a message to the brain. Your brain decides what to do and sends a message to your hand to shield you. By then you’ve been conked on the head, right? The true Way, is to empty your mind, become an empty vessel, a tool. Then, your eye sees the danger, and the message goes directly to your hand. Get it?”

“What about all the deadly weapons that your types use? Why take the time to invent such things if all you really want is peace?”

“They are not my types, Ms. Cassell. I come from a place different than any you’ve ever seen, a place you wouldn’t begin to understand. And the weapons? Farmer’s tools.”

“What?”

“Farmer’s tools! That’s all they are. The staff, the whirling staff, nunchakus, practically all of them, derived from ancient farmers’ tools. In ancient times there were no real police, you know, those guys in the uniforms you ‘city types’ take for granted until you’re in trouble. The farmers in the fields learned to defend themselves while they worked the land. All they had were the things they used to beat grain and harvest the crops. It became a skilled tradition. Have you ever gone into the fields to beat the grain from the harvest, Ms. Cassell?”

“Of course not.”

“Ah, well, if you had, you would have recognized some of the weapons you speak of being used in the work. In ancient times, the only police were the Buddhist monks and priests from the temples that the villages had been built around. Who better to enforce justice than they? That’s why it became a part of their religion. Many of the martial art theologies are based largely on nature. Have you ever studied how the tiger stalks or how the cobra strikes?”

“I had a housecat once...”

“Animals are nature’s ultimate predators. There is no hesitation in them when they fight, and usually no anger either.”

“So, Buddhism is a religion that advocates the use of violence then?”

“Some of us say that Buddhism was never meant to be a religion. When Gautama Buddha set down his teachings, he never intended them to be a religion. He never declared himself a priest or monk. In fact he gave up his position as a wealthy prince in protest of how the poor were treated. He said that life was pain, and the Way to escape that pain was to give up all want, and find selflessness. It was so successful that many religious groups grew out of those teachings. People who are extremely preoccupied with worldly possessions will never understand it. It’s ironic you know, because you actually end up giving away nothing, and gaining everything.”

Cassiopea stopped for a moment to study her companion, brushing sand off herself as she did so. “Mr. Markman, you are a strange one. One minute you are flip and incorrigible, the next an unlikely philosopher. I fear I will never understand you.”

Markman shuffled up beside her in the gentle wind and replied softly, “As the greatest master of all once said-my yoke is light.”

Their eyes locked hypnotically. In escape, Markman glanced over her shoulder and pointed toward something in the distance. “Look, that might be it!”

Far ahead, a small dark object interrupted the flat line of the desolate horizon. It was at least a half mile away. As they hurried toward it, occasional glints of light reflected at them like someone signaling with a mirror.

Wet with sweat, they reached the waiting monolith. Without speaking, they

anxiously took their positions and jumped the inner void to the safety of the SCIP lab beyond. Cool air chilled their tired bodies.

“Where’s the robot?” Markman asked. The SCIP lab seemed unchanged, but Tel was nowhere to be found.

Cassiopia breathed a sigh of relief and moved down the blue ramp to the Drack. She went to the Drack main control console, stopped, and gasped. “What the...?” she exclaimed, staring at the blank monitors. She looked back at him with an unsettling glance. “This equipment is turned off!”

“What are you talking about?”

Intently she appraised the power control panels on the wall next to the Drack. They too were in the off position. She stared silently at Markman for a moment. “This isn’t really the lab,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s a fake, an imitation. The SCIP door is functioning, but there’s no power here. It’s not possible!”

“Now wait a minute. Just hold it. There’s the exit from this place right over there,” he insisted, and pointed to the corridor leading from the lab. “I don’t know about you, but I’m going to go have a look around!” He marched down from the ramp and took the short corridor to the ladder. He placed one hand on a rung, looked up, and froze. Where the trunk bottom should have been, there was a solid cement ceiling. It was a ladder to nowhere. Markman jerked his head back and moaned. Dejectedly he returned to Cassiopia.

“Well, what did you find?”

“Never mind. There’s no way out. What do we do now?”

“We’ve got to go back through.”

“Oh, just great.” He wanted badly to protest but the logic of it had become too obvious to refute. He looked reluctantly at the shimmering SCIP mirror. Cassiopia took his hand and led him up the ramp. Together, they jumped back across the chasm of emptiness, and again into the unknown.

## Chapter 16

The two lost travelers stood again at the top of the mirror ramp and stared apprehensively at their newest surroundings. They had emerged in still another SCIP lab. But this time Tel stood dutifully by the Drack computer and the droning hum of active power filled the room.

“Oh, this is just great! We’re caught in some kind of loop,” Markman moaned. “Now every door leads to another lab.”

Cassiopia ignored him and studied the room. “No, this is real.” She marched down from the ramp and leaned over the Drack station.

“But how can you be sure?”

“I know what happened. I was already worried it might. We went through a false SCIP door in the desert. The real one must have been nearby, probably right behind it. We wanted to see the door so badly, we must have created a false one with our own subconscious thought. The false door took us to a new Dreamland reality, and since the SCIP system was still on, the real mirror appeared there also.”

“Oh-sure. Of course. Well, now that that’s clear,” Markman grumbled. He opened his mouth to argue when the robot interrupted.

“Cassiopia, your departure time approached SCIP limitations. During your absence there were intrusions in the upper areas.”

“This is it, everything’s fine,” she said, still absorbed by the display monitors. “Tel, shut down the system.”

Tel moved to the Drack and began entering codes to power down the hot transformer electronics. Markman came up beside and touched her on the arm. “Did he just say someone broke in here?”

Cassiopia looked back at the robot. “Tel, when did the intrusion occur?”

“Audible noise not associated with automatic household functions began at



fifteen hundred Zulu and continued until fifteen-thirty Zulu.”

“And do you detect anything or anyone in the upstairs right now?”

“No evidence of unusual activity has been detected since fifteen-thirty Zulu.”

“Mr. Markman, did you close the entrance to the lab when you came down?”

He nodded, “You know me, security nut, remember?”

“We’d better go up and have a look.”

“How about if I go up and have a look, okay? It’s more my line of work, remember? Besides, I haven’t been killed or even in a fight for at least half an hour. I’m really starting to miss it, as you know.”

Cassiopia placed her hands on her hips and huffed as she watched him leave.

Cautiously he climbed the ladder and searched the house. There were obvious signs of intrusion in two of the upstairs rooms. Cassiopia’s bedroom had been partially ransacked. Various items from the closet had been emptied onto the floor, drawers were left open, and the bedspread was ruffled as though someone had been jumping on it. The contents of her purse had been poured out onto the bureau, but her wallet and money remained. Markman found himself confused by it. It looked more as though an ill-behaved child had been exploring than a burglar at work.

The kitchen had a similar trail of disarray. The refrigerator door had been left open and strawberry ice cream was spilled across the hardwood floor. Chairs were overturned. A few dishes were broken. Hastily he completed his brief tour and returned to the lab. Cassiopia tuned in her seat as he entered. “Are you absolutely sure we’re back?”

“Yes, why do you ask that? What did you find?”

“Someone was upstairs alright but it doesn’t make any sense. It looks like the only thing they took was ice cream!”

“They broke in to steal ice cream?”

“That’s another thing. Nobody broke in. There’s no sign of forced entry. It had to be someone with a key to the back door.”

“Or a professional, like a locksmith, right?”

“Professionals rarely go for the ice cream,” he said, as he walked over to study the dormant SCIP doorway.

Cassiopia guessed what he was thinking. “No way,” she insisted. “No one except my father could have come out of there.”

“And how can you be so sure of that? Isn’t it possible someone or something could have? It’s a two-way door, isn’t it?”

“Tel, has anyone or anything besides Mr. Markman or myself come through the SCIP transformer since Dr. Cassell left?”

“There have been no other excursions of any kind observed.”

“And that’s not the only reason I know nothing could have come out of there,” Cassiopia added and swiveled in her chair to look at him.

“It’s about time you filled me in, wouldn’t you say?”

Cassiopia hesitated. She rose from her seat by the Drack and went to Tel, touching it lightly on the chest plate. Markman took her seat and slumped back, waiting for answers.

She stared affectionately at the loyal robot. “He was the first to go in you know. It’s why my father acquired him. My father hates doing trivia, but he’s not careless. He was afraid to go through the SCIP door himself, so somehow he got this TEL. I’m not sure I want to know how, but, of course, Tel was the perfect candidate. It made five trips inside before my father even considered going.”

Pausing to take a deep breath, she pulled a stool up and sat next to Markman, facing him, with the robot waiting alongside. “It’s another dimension, Mr. Markman. My father’s eccentric theories were unbelievably accurate. He’s opened a door to a place no one knew existed.”

“It’s a two-way door,” repeated Markman.

“There is nothing of substance in Dreamland. Nothing goes in there but what you take with you, and so nothing can come out.”

“Really? Then nothing grabbed you by the arm and intended to take you by force.”

Cassiopia felt a chill as she remembered the seriousness of the recent incident. “Yes, and I believe that probably could have happened, except...,” she left the remainder unspoken. “It was a nightmare, but that’s all it was.”

“Starting to lose me.”

“Dreamland is what we make it. It forms itself out of our subconscious. Somehow, when we enter, our presence influences the formation of the environment. That’s why my father nicknamed it Dreamland.”

“Are you trying to say that your father has opened a door to the place where we dream? I mean, you’re saying that dreams happen in a real place?”

“Certainly not real by our standards, but if I’m correct, yes, that’s a fairly accurate description. Everything you’ve seen there is generated by subconscious thought. My father calls it ‘thought-matter’, and when we went through together, a common environment resulted. Nothing there has substance. Subconscious thought cannot manifest in our world, only in there. That’s why nothing could have come out of that door but us. Even the tape recordings I made are blank, and I’m already sure the film is exposed and useless. Until now there was only one way into Dreamland, and that was sleep. My father has changed that.”

“I have to tell you, I know something about the realm of dreams. What you’re saying doesn’t exactly fit. And what about the sword strike that should have killed me?”

“Nothing in Dreamland could actually harm us, except maybe emotionally. The attack on you frightened us so badly that a new, scenario formed, just as if you had actually had a bad dream.”

Markman pondered the absurdity of her theory. He sat up and leaned toward her. “Show me one thing that proves what you just said. Give me just one example of how it works.”

She smiled knowingly. “That’s easy. How about if we start right at the beginning-that first time you went in. Just before you so carelessly went through the door looking for me, what were you thinking about?”

Markman leaned back and looked at her with skepticism. He sat quietly for a moment and remembered. “I was angry with you. I thought you were the one that had gone through. I tromped around here until I couldn’t stand it anymore, and then went after you.”

“Yes, but what were you thinking during that time?”

“That people will walk all over you if you let them. That I should have taken a real job in Long Island instead of freelancing.”

“Long Island? You mean New York?”

A look of shock came over Markman. “I was thinking of New York!”

“And what was that about people walking all over you? Could it have been ‘running all over you’?”

Markman nodded. “Maybe it was. I thought of that twice. Once before I went through, and then again just after I went into the alley. That’s incredible. Things I was thinking did happen in there. That’s unbelievable!”

“In Dreamland, Mr. Markman, you must be careful what you wish for. You may very likely get it.”

“What about the rest of it. The carnival, the desert, the forest?”

“All things from within us. Symbolisms, secret wishes, inner fears. The possibilities are endless.”

“So I guess your father really is lost in there-like we might have been if the homing beacons had failed.”

“A frightening thought, isn’t it. I’m still not sure the homing beacons were really functional.”

“They worked, didn’t they?”

“We believed they worked, and that may have been the only reason they did. Were we to go in doubting them, they may not work next time.”

“And can you tell how big the place is? How much area is there to search?”

“That’s another thing.” She turned and addressed the robot. “Tel, what dimensions have been recorded on your excursions into Dreamland?”

“No perceivable boundaries of any kind were recorded in Dreamland. Professor Cassell’s analysis indicates a finite, but boundless area of manifestation.”

“Definitely lost now...,” quipped Markman.

“It’s actually quite an old theory, applied to several different aspects of the universe, Mr. Markman. As the theory goes, if you walk in a straight line long enough in such a place, you will wind up back where you started.”

“So then, what’s that make the chances of finding your father?”

“A moment hasn’t gone by that I haven’t thought about that. We must find him quickly. I don’t think someone lost in Dreamland could survive long. If you managed to find food or water, it wouldn’t be real. You would think you had eaten, but be just as hungry as when you started. But there may actually be a way to find him,” said Cassiopia and she eye’d him forebodingly.

“Oh boy, here it comes.”

Cassiopia smiled. “I think there might be a way to control what environment forms in Dreamland-that is if you’re willing to give it a try.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“It’s quite simple actually. I want to implant an idea in your subconscious that will manifest itself when we enter Dreamland.”

“You want to what?”

“Hypnosis, Mr. Markman, subconscious suggestion.”

“How would you do it?”

“It would be a simple procedure, using a mild hypnotic. The subconscious suggestion would be activated by a keyword before you went through the door.”

“Let me see if I’ve got this straight. You want to drug me, mess with my mind, and then send me back in there.”

“I wish you wouldn’t interpret things so...so radically, Mr. Markman.”

“By the way, that’s another thing. What was it you called me after our little adventure with Lawrence of Arabia?”

“I don’t understand, what do you mean?”

“Oh come on. You must remember. When you thought I was blocking sword strikes with my head, there was a couple of times there when I was no longer ‘Mr. Markman’. What was it you called me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“But you do want me to be your guinea pig?”

Cassiopia balked. “Um, do you mean... Did I address you by your first name or something?”

“And that was?”

“...Scott?”

“Just wanted to hear you say it again, that’s all.”

## Chapter 17

The late afternoon sun painted orange on the broken clouds that bordered the skyline of the shadowy city. The blacktop streets and cracked sidewalks glistened from a brief rain that had fallen earlier. Most of society's regular clients had not yet returned to the alleyways and street corners that provided their usual vending spots. The borderline hustlers always seemed to have a place out of the storm, no matter where they practiced their trade.

Markman was becoming overloaded with concerns. The breakin at his apartment was easy to write off as common home invasion by a street gang or some other low-life, but the subsequent disturbance at the Professor's home was a bit too coincidental. It was possible there was no connection, but then there was the black limousine to consider, as well. Maybe it was just a wrong address, but it didn't feel right. There was nothing to suggest these things were connected to the experiments in the Professor's secret lab, but there were no comforting explanations for any them, either. Markman needed more information.

It was time to go fishing. Calling the police in on the ransacking of his apartment was still not an option. But he did have a close friend in the department, a man who had served with his father, someone Markman had worked with in the past. And, a call to the dispatcher had verified that Dan Parrish was on duty.

Markman pulled into the fenced parking lot of the station, where a few patrol cars occupied temporary slots, waiting for patrolmen to finish struggling with the recently apprehended, and the mountain of paperwork owed them. As he levered the car into park, he noticed the little silver box on the floor by the passenger seat. He leaned over and recovered it, and once again considered the shiny curiosity with only a passing interest. He opened the glove box, flipped it inside, and snapped the compartment door shut.

On his way up the worn wooden stairs to the investigative offices, Markman ran into Dan Parish coming down. Parish was an overweight sergeant who looked as though he had been on the force forever. His grey-brown hair was crew cut, and the old scar by his left eye blended almost perfectly with the age lines on his weathered face. He smiled crookedly at Markman. "Well Scott, old buddy! You doin' okay these days?"

“Chasing ghosts, but that’s nothing new.”

“It’s our job, partner, it’s our job.”

“Are things settling down around here at all?”

“Not really. Man, seems like we’ve been goin’ in circles the past few days. All kinds of stuff happening, half of it don’t make a bit of sense. You know they brought in a stark naked guy who was out in the middle of the highway preachin’ or somethin’. I’m tellin’ you the drug trade is killin’ us.”

“Well, at least I’m not alone then. They took my apartment apart the other night while I was out,” Markman groaned.

“Yeah? Sorry. Hey, what’s the deal you got goin’ at the Showboat Men’s Club anyway?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You lookin’ for somebody in there or somethin’?”

“I haven’t been near the place.”

“Hey, you know you don’t hafta’ worry about me. I know how straight you are. They had that place staked out yesterday and saw you going in there. I figured you were on to somethin’.”

“Honest to God, I haven’t been near the place.”

Parish stared at Markman with a puzzled expression. “They were gonna ask you about it. They raided the place but didn’t find you inside. Nobody could figure what the hell happened, all the exits were covered. Must’ve been someone who looked exactly like you or somethin’, I don’t know.”

“It wasn’t me, Dan. I don’t know anything about it.”

Parish scratched the back of his head and stared at Markman with a perplexed look. “I don’t get it, Scott. Two officers swear they saw you go in there.”

“All I can say is, it wasn’t me. I’ve never been near the place.”



“Don’t get me wrong, now. I know you. Everybody around here respects you. If you had a case goin’ on on the side, you can tell me about it. You know that.”

“I’m doing a job for the university, looking for the absentminded professor. I was with his daughter all day yesterday researching possible places the old man might be.”

“Well hell, Scott. It’ll take more than a case of mistaken identity to put you in a bad light with me. I’m not forgetting you’re on your second vest. I still got my other one. It’s hangin’ up in my gun rack as a reminder. Keeps me sharp, you know.”

“You know that day was the last time I worked auxiliary.”

“Yeah? Well that’s probably a good thing I’d say. You’d never be able to stay out of anything.”

“Dan, let me ask you something. Like I said my apartment got trashed the other night. Is there a gang thing happening on my side of town, or something?”

“As a matter of fact there is, Scott. Sorry they found you, but I wouldn’t worry about it too much. That guy I told you about that was brought in naked? He was a Nighthawk. We already had most of ‘em in on burglary. That guy and one other were picked up drugged out of their minds last night. They won’t be trashing any cars or homes for quite a while. Hey, I got a prisoner transport. I’m late, sorry I gotta get going. I owe you a beer, right.”

“No, but I could use one.”

“Okay. You take care, partner.” Parish skipped down the stairs and ducked around a corner.

Markman returned to his disrupted dwelling filled with even more doubts than ever. He made a halfhearted effort to straighten up, but gave up without finishing. He showered, changed, and with misgivings set course back to the home of the madcap Professor. The place, he thought, where there was a secret hole in the world.

The evening ride back was mercifully uneventful. No need to pick the lock on the front door this time. He had been privileged a key. The lights were on, but

the house was quiet. Cassiopia had not yet returned from her own necessary outings. He went down to the SCIP lab and sat, tapping a drum beat on the counter of the Drack station, staring at the imposing figure of the silent Tel.

“I think your master is going to get me in a lot of trouble, robot.” he said idly, not expecting a response.

The robot did not offer one.

He leaned back thoughtfully. “You know, I like her a little too much, trust her way too much, and barely know her. How do you get to know a person whose IQ is through the roof?” he said, more to himself than to Tel.

“What information do you require, Mr. Markman?” Tel replied, causing him to flinch. He sat up straight in his chair and with a keen interest addressed his steel companion.

“What would you know about Ms. Cassell, robot?”

“I have an extensive personality file as inputted by Dr. Cassell. It is not restricted.”

“You mean I can ask you things about her, and you’ll tell what you know?”

“That is correct.”

Markman’s eyes lit up. “Does she know about this?”

“Cassiopia has not made any inquiries relative to the respective files. The answer is unknown.”

Markman pondered his unorthodox good fortune. “What do you think; would it be...improper for me to ask you about her?”

“I am not capable of ethical analysis, Mr. Markman.”

“Well then, what is she really like, I mean personally?”

“Please indicate request parameters.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“Your inquiry must be more specific.”

“Okay-okay, what does she like?”

“Her favorite music is jazz and classical. She occasionally attends opera. Her favorite spectator sport is auto racing. Her favorite participant sport is racquetball. Her favorite foods are roast duck, pizza, Chinese, and seafood. Her favorite movie category is old science fiction. Her favorite colors are violet and blue. She likes animals of all types. Her-”

“Hold it! Hold it a second. I can’t keep up with that. You said she likes racquetball?”

“Her specific statement was that she enjoyed the geometry of it.”

Markman locked his hands behind his head and leaned back. “Has she ever been married?”

“No.”

“Engaged?”

“No.”

“Gone steady?”

“No data available.”

Markman paused again with a look of frustration on his face, then resumed the same abrupt cadence of questioning.

“Has she ever been arrested?”

“There is one reference on file.”

“What were the charges?”

“The charge against Miss Cassell and her associate was criminal mischief. A subsequent settlement deferred charges.”

“What did she do?”

“Miss Cassell and an associate were accused of installing an electrical circuit in a vehicle owned by a mathematics teacher during her second year tenure. The installation provided interface between the vehicle’s coil emissions and the conductive springs in the driver’s seat.”

“Are you saying she hot-wired the car’s high voltage coil to the driver’s seat?”

“Affirmative.”

“What happened?”

“The official report states that the plaintiff attempted to start the vehicle several times and received mild shocks to the buttocks area on each attempt. The loud verbal responses attracted a small group of bystanders and a security officer, and later resulted in the arrests.”

Markman squinted in disbelief. “Well that’s it. Now I have heard it all. How did she get out of it?”

“The effects of the circuit were shown not to be harmful, however statements by the plaintiff indicated a clear displeasure with the event. Unspecified compensation was arranged.”

After taking a moment to digest the unexpectedly diabolical incident masterminded by the seemingly innocent Cassiopia, Markman resumed his impersonal interrogation.

“So anyway, can you provide more personal information on her?”

“Please specify inquiry parameters.”

“What?”

“You must be more specific.”

“Well, for instance, what are her measurements?”

“Please specify exact dimensions required.”

“Chest, hips, and waist.”

“Requested data is not on file. A simple physiological scan would provide the requested data.”

Markman rubbed his chin with one hand and decided that electronic eavesdropping on Cassiopia was more interesting than he had expected. “What I’d really like to know is; Would someone like me have any chance with someone like her?”

“Please rephrase the inquiry.”

“You know-does she like me?”

“Voice stress comparisons suggest a definitive and progressive pattern of stress reduction.”

“Wait a minute, voice stress analysis? You can do that sort of thing?”

“It is a secondary function of pattern recognition programming. Identification of false voice-access inputs and recognition of urgency is an I/O subroutine.”

“Are you saying that you’re a damn lie detector in addition to everything else?”

“That function is available.”

“Then that means if the three of us were in this room and I asked Ms. Cassell a question, later on you could tell me whether or not she had been truthful, right?”

“Accuracy of voice stress analysis varies with subject and environment. Probability of correct appraisal in such a case would be ninety-five percent.”

“Wow! What I’d give to have you around when I’m trying to get the truth out of someone. Tel, you never forget anything at all, do you?”

“That is correct, Mr. Markman.”

“I think it would be best if you kept this conversation to yourself.”

“I am designed to make all data available to Cassiopia and Dr. Cassell.”

“But you would not discuss what we’ve said unless you were asked about it, is that correct?”

“The information would be provided only if specifically requested.”

Before Markman could continue the conversation, the robot turned its head in the direction of the lab entrance. “Mr. Markman, someone has entered the upstairs area.”

“That would be her wouldn’t you say?”

“Highly probable.”

“I must say, you’re one of the strangest friends I’ve ever had, Tel.”

“Referenced to current definitions it is a qualified description,” replied the robot amiably.

In silence they awaited Cassiopia’s appearance in the corridor, but she did not come. Markman quickly became curious.

“Perhaps I’d better check on things,” he said, and he headed upstairs.

## Chapter 18

The house seemed too quiet. The front door was locked. In the living room, the sitting area around the red brick fireplace was unoccupied. On the mantle, gold pendulum orbs in an old wind-up clock turned silently within their dusty glass dome.

Markman quietly searched the hallway. He began to hear muffled sounds coming from one of the bedrooms. It was someone crying. He forced himself to peer around the corner of Cassiopia's open bedroom doorway.

She had changed into a silky, soft, white dress with a high collar. White high heels lay kicked off on the floor nearby. She sat on the side of the single bed on a thick, patchwork quilt, sobbing softly into a large white bath towel.

He stopped and stared in surprise. A flush of sympathy and concern surged through him, though he was uncertain how to proceed. He thought to rush to her and embrace her but found himself feeble and unprepared. He stood motionless, torn between the desire to retreat like a coward to the safe company of the robot, or attempt some kind of inept effort to comfort her.

She looked up red-faced and saw him standing by the door. She quickly looked away, embarrassed by her makeup-streaked face. Her hopeless expression suddenly made him forget his own inadequacy. Without speaking she buried her face back in the limited seclusion provided by the dampened towel and continued to cry.

He approached her slowly and sat beside her, taking one of her small, soft hands in his. "What in the world happened?"

She could only shake her head and continue to cry.

"I don't get it. The last time I saw you, you were going great guns. What happened?"

With a fleeting glance she attempted to dry her face. She spoke in a broken tone, without looking up. "I'll never see my father again, will I?"

“I don’t know that, do you?”

“He’s gone.”

“Why do you think that?”

For a moment she lost control and began to sob again. She spoke between gulps of breath. “The riddle, the fortune teller’s riddle.”

“What about it?”

Struggling to regain some semblance of composure, she took a deep breath and continued. “In the pharmacy I ran into Reverend Lewis. He’s an old friend of our family. He was joking around with me and asked me a funny riddle, so I asked him the fortune teller’s riddle and he knew the answer.” She looked up fearfully. “When does a man wake but not wake? ...When he dies.”

Taking a few more breaths for strength, she continued sadly. “He said it’s from an old scripture that was removed from the bible. It says that when a man dies he wakes up to all that he is, but at the same time he never wakes up again. He wanted to know why I asked such a grim riddle.”

Markman considered the distasteful prophecy for a moment and then squeezed her hand with reassurance. “Why are you taking that kind of thing so seriously,” he scolded.

“It just ...caught me off guard. When Reverend Lewis’ told me the story in the scripture, it seemed so familiar. It was the story of this battle between good and evil. It said that a daughter of the sons of light would journey through a portal of dreams and return a holy coffer to the guardians of time-the elohim. When he mentioned the portal of dreams it gave me goose bumps. It seemed like such a coincidence. How could a Dreamland fortuneteller reference a bible scripture I’ve never heard of? Where did she get that? Have you ever heard of it?”

“No, but you said yourself nothing in Dreamland has any substance; surely that must include the weird stories of a strange old lady who isn’t even real.”

She again wiped her eyes. “I know, I know. But it scared me.”

“Well it’s not time to give up yet. Look at me. If anyone should be a doubter, it’s



me, and I'm not going anywhere. You're not alone."

She pressed at her face with a fresh corner of the towel and nodded to him. "I guess it all just caught up with me. I just hadn't really stopped to think about it until now."

"We have some rough road ahead of us. You need to be on top of things."

She nodded. "I'm okay. I'll be all right now. You're right, of course." She stared back at him with puffy eyes that reflected appreciation.

"Thank you-Scott."

"That's okay-Cass."

Cassiopia wiped the last of the tears from her flushed cheek and smiled at him. She pushed off of the bed and headed for the bath.

At the old, brown, roll-top desk in his borrowed room, Markman used the remainder of the evening to begrudgingly attack his own personal nemesis-paperwork. Using Cassiopia's laptop, and the first finger of each hand, he painstakingly typed a skeleton chronology of the search for the missing Professor. Carefully he created a factual and pointed outline for the university that said nothing and did so in such a way as to provide no potential whatsoever for further inquiry.

When the report was complete, he leaned back in the rickety desk chair and looked around the small spare bedroom that had been so casually provided by her just a few days earlier. It still smelled stuffy and unused, though he had spent more time here recently than anywhere else. There would be no sense in returning home tonight. The hour was already late and the unexplained ransacking of the Cassell place made him fearful to leave.

Cassiopia appeared by the open door holding a glass of water in one hand, and something concealed in the other.

"When do you want to do this?" she asked calmly.

Markman sat back in his chair. "What do I have to

do...exactly?"

"Take this to start with." She opened her hand to reveal a small, light green capsule. "It's a mild but very effective hypnotic."

"It will make me sleep?"

"Almost certainly."

"How'd you learn this stuff?"

"From a project I worked on for my Master's degree. Our research group used hypnosis on a few selected individuals to work up different robotic psychology profiles. I'll also use a less effective self-hypnosis technique on myself to reinforce the target environment."

"So as I understand it, my job is to take this pill and fall asleep?"

"That's about it. I'll be talking to you, though."

"Finally, something I'm sure to excel at—sleeping." Markman took the tablet and swallowed it with the water.

"Now what?"

"Lie down."

"Well, if you insist..."

He moved over to the bed and laid back on the springy, quilted mattress, his hands folded in front of him. As instructed, he chose a small spot on the ceiling for focus, and concentrated on it, relaxing to the pleasant monotones from Cassiopia. Her gentle soothing voice filled his mind like soft music. Falling asleep had never been quite so pleasant.

Morning was immediate and strictly business. Cassiopia, clad in one of her father's white laboratory smocks, delved relentlessly into the Drack programming station, creating a new monitoring routine for the SCIP door, one she hoped would show her the physical mechanics of change taking place as Markman stepped into Dreamland. She paused from her work only long enough

to greet him as he joined her in the lab.

“Tell me something. Do you sleep at all actually?” he asked dryly.

“I’m an early riser, Scott. Especially when I think I’m onto something.”

“Wow, my first name. So, what are you getting us into today?”

“Your visit to Dreamland this morning. It will tell me a lot, regardless of how it turns out.”

“What do I do?”

“We’ll keep it simple. I need you to spend just a short time on the other side; just long enough to establish what kind of environment forms. If you can find and retrieve the homing device we left behind on the last trip that would be important too. Just don’t take too long. Thirty minutes tops, okay?”

“Care to tell me what you expect to find in there?”

“No, this is a controlled experiment. It’s better if you don’t know.”

“You call this a controlled experiment?”

Cassiopia rolled her eyes and returned her attention to the computer console. Markman sat at the desk and tried to reassure himself that he was not completely out of his mind. At least I’ve broken her ice-barrier, he thought. At least I’m more than just another research tool for a mathematical maiden. He sought consolation in that as he slumped back in his chair and noticed the Tel. It had no particular duties to perform this morning, but instead of standing idly at rest, it motored about the lab, scrutinizing various objects as it went. Such unusual behavior finally caught Cassiopia’s attention. She stopped to question the meandering machine more than once, but each time it responded only with technical double talk about area monitoring requirements. Though perplexed by it, she seemed delighted that her attempts at robotic personality enhancement were apparently evolving.

As Markman sat smirking at the odd exchanges between the two, the robot chose that particular moment to begin a detailed survey of Cassiopia’s figure. So apparent was the intense, physical assessment, that it caused her to wonder at the

piercing mechanical eyes so preoccupied with her posture. Finally, she felt forced to ask.

“Tel, now what are you doing?”

“Acquisition of physiological dimensions for data file records.”

“You’re measuring me? Why are you doing that?”

Horried, Markman quickly realized the undesirable potential of her questions. He stood, and from his position behind her, waved a threatening finger at Tel, making cut throat hand signals in such a way that Cassiopia could not see. When she turned to look, he quickly jerked his hands behind his back and stared at the ceiling in exaggerated indifference.

“Tel,” said Cassiopia, returning her attention to the robot. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“The information is lacking in the personal medical logs.”

Markman put one hand on his chest and quietly sat back down with a huge sigh of relief, considering himself narrowly extricated from a serious social near-miss.

“Also Mr. Markman requested that specific data,” blurted the robot after an uncommonly long pause.

Markman buried his face in an open hand and shook his head as Cassiopia glared at him. “I’ll kill him. I’m just going to kill him,” he mumbled.

“Really, Scott, how gauche.”

“It was the robot’s idea!”

Before she could continue, a strange, bland sound came from Tel. “Neeck, Nck, Nck, Nck Nck...”

“See? Now the thing’s laughing at me.”

“That’s not possible,” she replied irately. “Computers

cannot comprehend humor. It's a quality possessed mainly by man, you in particular." Her perturbed expression gave way to one of intellectual interest. She addressed the robot with in a demanding tone, "Tel, summarize last audio response."

The robot paused. "Last transmission related to inquiry concerning physiological data acquisition."

"No, I mean after that."

"Subsequent transmission related to inquiry concerning data acquisition inquiry."

With a look of frustration, she gave up, promising herself she would take up the matter later. "Wow, that was a real live glitch. That bothers me. Tel, initiate self-checks."

Again the robot paused. "Self-checks complete, all systems nominal. Ambulatory checks complete, all systems nominal."

With a last look of uncertainty, she returned to her previous tasks. She tapped in a few final commands and stretched in her chair, still staring down the monitor. "Well, that's it, we should be ready," she said and spun around to look at Markman who was bent over tying one of the laces on his athletic shoes. "Let's go over it again then."

Markman sat up and stared spitefully at Tel as it motored back to the Drack main station.

"This time we countdown to your transition through the door so that I can watch the monitors and gather data as you pass into Dreamland."

"Check," said Markman as he went about tying the other shoe.

"You make a good appraisal of the alternate environment, try to locate the homing beacon and then come right out. No more than thirty minutes your time, inside, okay?"

"Check," said Markman again in a less than serious way. He started the zipper on his jacket. "Like thirty minutes in there means anything at all."

She looked back with concern. “I did learn something more about the time disruption in Dreamland.”

“Do I want to know?”

“It is not a progressive element with respect to our time keeping.”

“Oh please. Speak English.”

“Okay, it’s like this; Let’s say you and I enter Dreamland together. After five minutes I come out. After twenty minutes you come out. It is possible that you could arrive before me.”

“You’re joking.”

“No, I’m not. Any given moment you choose to leave Dreamland can place you ahead or behind in time. There’s no progressive relationship. Believe me, I certainly don’t understand it either.”

“So I can stay in there ten minutes and have been gone two hours, or stay in there two hours and have possibly been gone only ten minutes?”

“Exactly. And there’s no formula that I can find to predict what will happen at any given moment. So, for now we keep our time limits short, but only because that’s worked okay so far.”

“Oh, I feel much better now...” He rose, and looked on as she entered the start-up information at her terminal. The SCIP door crackled and glowed as lightning flash gave way to silver glass once more. The mirror beckoned to Markman as if in challenge. He strode up the blue ramp and turned to face her.

“Be careful Scott, no swordplay okay?”

“At least this time I’ll know it can’t hurt me.”

“Be careful,” she repeated sternly.

“Ready when you are.”

“Scott....”

“Yeah?”

“Sweet dreams.”

With a momentary look of apprehension, Cassiopia turned back to her panel. “Tel, monitor display number three.” With her attention fixed on the busy, color-filled displays, she raised her voice slightly. “Okay-three-two-one-now!”

At the exact moment, Markman pushed through the passageway, across the void, and past the secondary mirror.

## Chapter 19

A banner across a dusty dirt street read, “Welcome to Dodge City.” In every direction Markman saw horses, people and weathered, old wooden buildings. To the right he could see the full length of main street, most of which was bordered on either side by worn, gray, planked boardwalks. The air was filled with the smell of horses, hay and leather, and the clang of a blacksmith’s hammer echoed in the distance.

Halfway down, on the opposite side of the rutted roadway was a saloon with horses tied to a hitching post out front. Occasionally men with guns would enter or leave through the short swinging doors. There was an undertaker’s office, a supply store, and a telegraph office nearby. A group of ranch hands stood outside the telegraph office, arguing about something and pointing at the saloon.

To the left was a livery stable and a blacksmith’s lean-to, and when he turned to look for the SCIP door, Markman discovered he had stepped out of the glass window of a dress shop. The reflection of the SCIP passageway was obtrusively apparent and as usual no one else seemed to notice.

Overall the vision was a thing of awesome beauty and meaning. It was rustic and picturesque. Markman had dreamed of such a place many times and now felt strangely at home. In fact, growing up his favorite fantasy had been to be a sheriff in the old west—a fast gun in the way of lawlessness. Draw and fire shooting range contests back in the real world were the closest he had been able to come, though he had never done particularly well in them. Suddenly, here was the dream, in full splendor before him.

“Sheriff, boy am Ah glad to see you, get in here a second.”

Startled, he looked around, and to his amazement found the gunsmith from the Dreamland carnival motioning furiously at him.

“Me?”

“Of course you, who the hell else is sheriff around here? This ain’t no time to lose yer wits. Come in here will ya, before he sees us.”



Markman smiled, shrugged, and followed the scraggly-looking craftsman into his place of business. The small creaky wooden salesroom smelled like gun oil. A large oak counter separated customers from a rough-shelved wall of various types of handguns. Higher up, racks displayed a dozen different rifles, some notched, most well-used. The gunsmith waited nervously against the counter facing him.

“He got back early this mornin’ and it ain’t no secret he’s gunnin’ fer you and me. Ah’m bettin’ it’s me first, thet wey you got ta go lookin’ fer em and thet’s what he’s a wantin’.” The short little man fidgeted nervously with his hands, while frequently staring over Markman’s shoulder.

“Who are you talking about?”

“Are you batty er somethin’? Ah’m talkin’ bout Slaton. He said soon as he got out, he was comin’ back here ta get even. Both his brothers been braggin’ to the whole town ‘bout him bein’ back. He’s over in the saloon right now. Don’t be standin’ out on the street with no six-gun like that.”

Markman found himself thoroughly enjoying the role Cassiopia had apparently handed him. He could not help humoring the fearful merchant. “So, what’d you do to this guy, anyway?”

“Yer loosin’ yer mind, Sheriff. I sold ‘em the gun that misfired. Weren’t my fault. The fool lost his fordin’ the Yanks river, and he never dried out his powder so he loaded up some old, spent shells, and they weren’t werth a salt. But he blamed it on me. That gun Ah sold ‘em was grade-A. But Ah don’t expect ta get a chance ta tell ‘em thet.”

“Guess we’d both better stay clear of the saloon, eh?”

“Ain’t gonna matter none. He’ll find us fer sure.”

“Well you just stay out of sight, and I’ll try to get done what I came to do and maybe we’ll both be just fine.”

Markman started to leave but was cut short. “Wait a minute, wait a minute. I got somethin’ fer ya. Been workin’ on it all night.” He reached under the counter and drew out a black Colt forty-five in a black leather holster attached to a wide bullet-vested belt. “This thing’s set up real fast. There ain’t no better.”

Markman held back a laugh but took the beautiful piece of weaponry from the worried gun salesman. Once more he tried to leave and was stopped.

“Well, put it on. Ah’m tellin’ ya don’t be goin’ outside without a gun on ya. He’ll kill ya on sight, garunteed.”

Markman laughed at himself for wanting to try it on. With a sheepish grin, he strapped on the Colt and shifted it into place. It hung low and felt right.

“Tie it off now, tie it off, go ahead. Lord, Ah’m havin’ to baby someone who’s gonna be facin’ off one of the fastest guns around and my hide depends on it. If Ah hadn’t seen ya use one them things Ah’d probably just shoot myself an get it over with.”

This time Markman laughed out loud. He leaned over and tied the leather strap above his knee. The Colt drew fast and easy. It felt good in his hand. The belt was well oiled and out of the way of his concealed Berretta. Except for the modern day sneakers he wore, he now appeared quite appropriate for the times, in his worn jeans and leather jacket.

“Can I go now?” he asked jokingly as he drew and spun the handgun.

“Promise me ya’ll get ‘em ‘fore he finds me, Sheriff. The guns yers if’n ya do.”

“Well, Ah’ll do my best, pilgrim,” Markman quipped. The gunsmith stared back worriedly.

As he turned to leave, the sounds of arguing voices came from outside. With a childish smirk still on his face, he opened the shopkeeper’s door and stepped out onto the boardwalk. The fidgety gunsmith crept along behind him, staring over his shoulder while keeping the door ajar in case a fast exit became necessary.

In the street, two dusty-looking men, wearing tattered overalls and knee-high brown leather boots were shoving a young man in blue jeans and a plaid shirt back and forth between them. The nervous gun maker explained in a hushed tone, “There ya’ go, Sheriff. Them two Slaton boys think they kin get away with anthin’ now that their damned brother’s back in town. That’s one a’ the new ranch hands from the Circle Y they’re workin’ over. They’re a mean-spirited bunch. What’a ya gonna do ‘bout it?”

Markman stifled another laugh and stepped off the boardwalk onto the dirt street. Immediately the two badly groomed bullies stopped their abuse of the younger man and turned their attention to the Sheriff.

Enjoying his Dreamland role to the fullest, Markman tucked his thumbs into the belt buckle of his newly acquired leather holster and casually strolled up to the waiting pair. The bruised ranch hand collected himself and without speaking made a dash for the nearest building.

The Slaton brother on Markman's left appeared to be the youngest. His unfriendly smile lacked a number of front teeth and his sandy brown hair was long and uncombed. He spoke with insolence. "Hey, Sheriff. Guess you heard ole' Amos is back in town. I 'speck he'll be payin' you a visit here shortly."

The Slatons laughed together as though the mere mention of their older brother was enough to protect them from any sensible person. To their dismay, Markman ignored the threat.

"You boys are disturbing the peace and harassing a local citizen. That's a night in jail in my book. There is a jail around here somewhere, isn't there?" In jest, Markman looked up and down the street for the Sheriff's office.

Both brothers spit up a laugh and slapped at their legs. Markman almost gagged on the smelled of cheap whiskey when they got too close.

"That's real funny, Sheriff. There's just one thing. Who the hell's gonna take us in-you? Hell, you're already dead. You just ain't figured it out yet!"

With that they stumbled around the street laughing and pointing at each other. It was such a comical sight Markman had to struggle to keep from laughing himself. As the display continued however, the Slaton brother on the right became aware of Markman's indifference. His expression became sober and he quickly lost his enjoyment of demonstrating contempt for the law. He straightened up and with an insolent stare on his face slowly began stepping backwards in short, calculated steps.

Both the Slatons were wearing guns; beat-up calvary issue Colts. Markman quickly decided they were of no concern. This was Dreamland. Bullets could not harm him. A sword strike to the forehead had not produced the slightest scratch. A mere bullet was even less intimidating. Markman continued to smile at his ill-

tempered opponent.

The bold laughter from both men had stopped. The older Slaton continued backing away, flexing his gun hand as he went. An air of irritated determination had come over him. "Sheriff, this ain't no joke. You ain't quick enough to take me, never mind my brother."

Abruptly he stopped backing and tensed. His younger brother suddenly became fearful. "Now wait a minute, Zeke. Don't go flyin' off the handle. This here's brother Amos' hog-meat Sheriff. It ain't fer you to be takin' him on."

"You just shut up. You hear me, Jake. Ah'm settlin' this here an' now. Don't need Amos none."

Markman continued to be spellbound by the completeness of the newest Dreamland scenario. He could smell manure in the dust of the street. Sweat had broken out on the forehead of the Slaton who was trying to get up the nerve to draw. A few people were now looking out doors and windows at what was happening. Farther down the street, others had not yet noticed. So taken in by the vision, he failed to notice the younger Slaton inching closer on his left.

From out of the blur of peripheral vision, a clenched fist came rocketing toward Markman's face as Jake Slaton lunged forward. Markman's instincts kicked in. His left arm shot up and wiped away the well-aimed punch. With a quick side step, he hooked a foot behind the surprised man's leg and swept him to the ground.

Simultaneously a shot rang out. Molten lead tore through Markman's jacket sleeve, just below the shoulder. Instinctively, his right hand went for the nearest weapon—the colt resting in its holster. In a quick jerk he drew, spun, and fired. With the second explosion of gunfire a sickening thump of lead struck Zeke Slaton in the left upper thigh. A spray of red spurted from behind his leg. He cried out in pain, dropped his revolver to the dirt, and clutched at his leg. Stunned, Markman stood with his smoking gun pointed at the dirt and watched the frightened man limp hurriedly away, moaning in pain. Still on the ground, Jake Slaton began to back-peddle away, as though he feared he too would be shot. He scrambled to his feet and ran between two buildings yelling, "Don't shoot me, don't shoot!"

In shock, Markman holstered his Colt and stared at the narrow tear near the

shoulder of his leather jacket. He pulled at it with his other hand and found the red streak of burned flesh underneath. It not only looked real, it burned like fire. His mind struggled to reject the idea that he had actually been wounded—something that should not have been possible. This place was supposed to be nothing more than fantasy. He rubbed at his graze wound and looked in disbelief at the mysterious town around him.

The exchange of gunfire had started a mad exodus up and down Main street. Horses had been untied and were being hustled away. The street was already nearly barren of people. Doors were being shut and locked; window curtains haphazardly drawn. In the distance, Markman heard a low voice calling out, “The Sheriff’s comin’, the Sheriff’s comin’!” Markman ignored them and again inspected the painful wound on his shoulder. With conviction he decided that it was time to leave.

He turned and started back toward the dress shop display window. He wondered how Cassiopia would explain his torn jacket and injured arm. It was a minor injury. The bullet had barely touched him, but it hurt like hell. This place called Dreamland was something more than she had promised.

He had barely taken two steps through the powdery dirt when a rude, dull voice called out to him.

“That’s good, right about there, Sheriff, but I’m hopin’ you’ll fall to the left so as to keep the street open.”

A man with an air of death about him stood outside the still-swinging doors of the barroom. He was removing a tight leather glove from his left hand and smiling a dirty smile. The string from his round-rimmed hat joined just under the chin. He was dressed completely in black and wore leather boots that ran almost up to the knee.

Markman held his ground in the middle of the street and began to have more serious doubts. He could no longer be sure the bullets here wouldn’t kill him. And even if they did not, would he be thrust into a different environment and lost from the SCIP door again if he was mortally wounded? He debated making a run for the dress shop but decided it was too late for that. Suddenly the best fantasy imaginable had become slightly too real.

“We didn’t have a chance to face off before, seein’ how you brought me in at gun

point, Sheriff. So Ah'm really enjoying these few moments we're havin' together now."

"I don't supposed you'd give me just a minute to step through that dress shop window, would you, Slaton?"

"Sheriff, you gotta be either one dumb son-of-a-bitch or the bravest man I ever met. You know'd I was comin' fer you and still you gone and shot my brother right here in the street. I always said you was shy a full deck. You ain't got a minute left to live, never mind buy a dress, Sheriff."

The pearl-handled gun on the man's left hip glinted in the sunlight as he stepped off the boardwalk and into the street. He stopped and faced Markman from about fifty feet away. "And weren't ya wantin' to apologize for turning me into that Texas Ranger like ya did, Sheriff? I'll give ya enough time to do that."

"You know I've met a lot of 'em like you in my time, Slaton. It's always the same," said Markman as took a more solid stance facing his opponent.

"Well then, ya won't have to be meetin' any more like me after today," replied the killer. "'Cause you'll be dead."

The left hand of the gunman tensed alongside his weapon. A moment of heavy silence passed. With lightning speed, the gunman twisted his six-gun back and out of the holster.

To Markman it seemed like a flash in time passing in slow motion. There was an explosion of shots from both ends of the street. As Markman's drawn Colt finished kicking in his hand, dirt flew up in a dry spray at his feet from Slaton's shallow shot. At the same instant, Slaton spun sideways, staggered, and fell hard to the ground, Dreamland dead.

## Chapter 20

Markman looked down at the smoking barrel of the gun in his hand and came out of the moment. Dazed, he slowly tucked it back in its holster and looked around. Faces stared from the curtained windows, and a crowd had formed at the gates to the saloon. The SCIP doorway was now easily available for a retreat but something had changed. Markman no longer felt the need to leave. Instead, he drew the direction finder from his jacket pocket, switched it on, and took a bearing. The indicator pointed straight for the saloon. He crossed quickly over to the boardwalk and headed for the crowded emporium, ignoring the prone body in the street.

An undertaker came out and began to creep toward the body. The old, dark suited gentleman carried a prodding stick with him and kept himself very ready to run. A long, heavy silence continued to hang over the town.

“He’s dead all right,” yelled the undertaker as though he was the only soul brave enough to approach the lifeless body. A low muffled cheer erupted from inside the bar as the black suited man continued to poke and prod. As Markman approached the crowded saloon doors, he was given wide berth to enter.

Calls of support came from around the tavern as the newly adopted sheriff made his way to the bar. Most of the ranch hand patrons had returned to their seats at the hardwood tables. They stared respectfully as he passed. He could feel the air of electricity that still filled the room. The place smelled like whiskey and sweat. Yet, he felt so at home. A thin, balding man dressed in a dirty vest and worn pants crossed the room and wound up a mean-looking old player piano in the corner. The intrusive, off-key music blared on, helping force things back to normal.

“Drinks are on the house for you, Sheriff. It’s not every day a man takes on all three a’ the Slaton brothers single-handed and walks away from it. That’s one outlaw gang we’ll be glad not to see again,” said the gray-haired old bartender over the noise. He pushed with both hands on the bar opposite Markman. “What’ll you have?”

Markman leaned with his hip against the hard wood counter and surveyed the room. Beyond the poker tables, which were now all in use, a set of stairs led up

to a balcony that overlooked the gamblers. It serviced several darkwood doors, all of which were conspicuously closed.

Markman glanced at the smiling bartender. “Nothing thanks, I’m looking for something.” He drew the direction finder from his pocket and took a bearing. “What’s upstairs?”

The bartender looked confused. “You been up there a hundred times, why you askin’ that, Sheriff? Miss Ann went up a while ago. I’d bet she’s waitin’ for you to go up and tell ‘er yer okay.”

With an unnecessary nod to a man who didn’t really exist, Markman wove his way through the grateful denizens of the poker parlor, to the worn wooden stairs across the room. They creaked and bowed slightly as he climbed them. The single piece of pine that provided a handrail was smooth, and uneven from wear.

At the top of the stairs the homing device pointed left of the first door. Markman thumbed the wrought iron latch and looked inside anyway. It was a run-down, unoccupied bedroom, probably intended to provide rendezvous for the ladies of the evening that entertained there. A double bed with no headboard and a bare mattress was pushed against a stained, wallpapered wall. A small table with an oil lamp was set by a narrow window bordered by lace curtains, brown with age.

The second door was the one. Markman again did not bother to knock. He pushed open the ill-fitting wood slab and peered curiously inside. A similar arrangement as the first, except that in this room a slender young woman, with ivory-blond hair, stood looking out a yellowed window, her back to him. She wore a plaid work shirt and jeans that ended at leather-stringed moccasins. She turned in anticipation that someone had entered, revealing the soft features that Markman had so recently grown to care for. It was Cassiopia, but it was not.

“Well it’s about time you showed up,” she teased. He entered without speaking and shut the door behind him. The aura of the impostor, combined with the smells and sight of the old west was a powerfully hypnotic mixture. So much so, that Markman completely forgot his shoulder wound. The beautiful creature standing before him was a mere imitation, but it lacked no sensitivity or detail to the eye. He found himself unconsciously tucking the tracker away in his jacket as he came to the duplicate Cassiopia and stood close to her.

“It’s hard to believe you’re not real.”



She responded only with a prudish face.

“That’s okay. I’m not sure I could trust myself standing this close to the real thing.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Well, if you were real, and I had the guts, know what I’d do?” he said in a low, provocative tone.

“And what might that be, cowboy?” she replied snobbishly, but with a tremor in her voice.

Markman slowly touched the splash of hair at her shoulders. It felt as lifelike as it looked. Mesmerized, he slipped his hand behind her neck, leaned slowly forward, and kissed her softly on the mouth.

It seemed too real. The smell of her perfume was intoxicating. His mind became flooded with thoughts of desire for her. He kissed the image of Cassiopia once more, longer this time, and then once again.

Her arms slid around his waist and pulled against him. Her heart was beating rapidly, and she gasped for breath. Harmony of movement bonded them. Markman’s mind was spinning. He pulled obsessively at the snaps on her blouse and peeled it away, then lifted her to the bed and wrestled off the remaining barriers that separated them.

Their passion was heated and deliberate, and lasted.

On a soft bed of subconsciousness, Markman felt himself fall backwards into an emotional dead-end. He looked at the sensuous, sleeping form beside him and then closed his eyes and tried to make sense of what had happened. He had made love to a beautiful and complex woman who had seemed well out of reach, and still was. Could there have been anything of the real Cassiopia in her? Had he touched her, if only subconsciously? The answer was quite simple. This was his world-his subconscious. There was no part of the real woman here, only the one in his own mind. She had, of course, been too perfect. Dreams always filled in the unknowns with the best of answers. He had made love to his own imagination, though it had seemed as real as anything could ever have. It left him feeling soulfully empty. “I might as well have just stolen something,” he

mumbled.

“Why’s that, honey,” whispered the impostor.

“What’s your name?”

“They call me Miss Ann.”

“It’s really too bad you’re not real.”

“What do you mean by that, cowboy?”

“What I mean is, I feel like I just cheated myself. It’s better to have nothing at all than something that’s a lie.”

Markman leaned over and propped himself up on one elbow. “See this ring?” he said, holding open his right hand. “I should find the nearest river and throw it in.”

“Now why would you want to do that, honey?”

“It’s a long story. Want to hear it?”

“Sure.”

“This was given to me by an old man . I did a good part of my growing up in a place called Thasa. My father was an Air Force officer in charge of a listening post. My mother passed away when I was six. We had no other family, and my father wouldn’t consider foster parents. We shuttled back and forth every year between the states and his job, but most of the time was spent overseas. He made sure I got a real education from tutors okay, but there were no street corner basketball types in those mountains. Buddhism was a science and a way of life there. And there wasn’t much law either. The priests and monks are the policemen-the martial arts are a part of their jobs. Since there was nothing to do, most of my free time was spent watching and learning in the courtyard of the temple.”

“On the day of my eleventh birthday, the old priest who had sort of adopted me came to me and said that I was ready to become a probationary disciple. He said I was a man.”

“There was this waterfall in the forest that we all had been warned to stay away from. The monks said that the basin beneath the falls was bottomless, and that many people had disappeared there over the years. They said a prehistoric serpent lived in the deep water.”

“The old man explained that not everyone could advance to the higher levels of teaching, and that to be worthy, each had to risk his life to conquer a seemingly impossible task.”

“He showed me this ring,” said Markman, and he removed the intricately-carved band and turned it in his hand. It was surrounded with complex oriental designs, snakes, dragons, and serpents, intertwined in rosary.

“He let me hold it and study it for a few moments and then took it back. He said all that was needed for me to enter the higher levels was to wear that ring.”

“He threw it out into the middle of the deep basin and told me not to come back to him unless I was wearing it. I, of course, reminded him about the people who had disappeared. He said that no one was sure the monster really existed and that if I was killed, it would serve as a great warning to many others that a true danger did exist, and so my death would be meaningful and honorable.”

Miss Ann rested her chin in one palm and smiled. “So what did you do?”

“I sat by the pool for two days watching for the serpent. Once or twice I thought I saw it in the white water, and I actually ran away, afraid. Finally an idea struck me. I went to the local jewelry craftsman. I had plenty of money by Thasa’s standards. The ring I needed had been made by the monks, but its designs were embedded in my mind. I spent a whole day with the jeweler, gagging on the smell of rancid butter. They have these large religious carvings made out of pure butter all over the place. It’s considered a valuable commodity there. But most of the carvings get old and...whew!”

“Anyway, after a day of coaxing him along I had a ring which I thought was identical to the one deep under the falls, so I returned to my teacher. I thought I had it made.”

“The monks received me like a hero. They bragged about me to everyone. They said I had been the first one brave enough to prove no monster existed under the falls, and that the whole community was indebted to me. I was treated like a

celebrity.”

“The charade went on for three days and that was it, I couldn’t take it any more. I couldn’t even sleep at night. I left the courtyard at the end of the day and took off the phony ring and threw it into a pile of Yak dung that was fuel for the village ovens.”

“The next morning I went to the falls. I’ll never forget that day. I took off my clothes and waded into the water. It was freezing. I hated myself so badly that the threat of the bottomless pool didn’t matter. I dove in just not caring.”

Markman looked at Miss Ann. “Damned if the place wasn’t any more than ten feet deep. I dove over and over for about four hours. You couldn’t see much. You had to feel around the rocks. If there had been a serpent I sure would have found it, I know that much.”

“The ring was in a hole. I had to stick my hand in up to the elbow at the bottom of the pool’s deepest spot. But I found it.”

“The next day I went back to the teachers, wearing the real thing but said nothing about what had happened. But something was very different. The monks were much quieter than they had been and they seemed to be—you know, like laughing at me. I felt freed, but I was still disgusted with myself.”

“At the end of the day, the old man came to me and said that I was truly a worthy disciple, and that he had known he was right about me. He said there was just one more small test and asked me for the ring back. He took it and held it behind his back for a moment and then opened both hands, palms up in front of me. Each hand had a ring in it. One was the real one, the other my counterfeit copy. He asked me which ring I valued the most.”

“I knew then they had never been fooled. I took back the real one and put it on without saying a thing. He handed me the bogus ring and told me to go to the falls and throw it in. He said it would mean as much to the next student who found it.”

“As he was leaving he said—the next time you think to betray yourself, cast your ring into the river, it will remind you—.”

Miss Ann smiled thoughtfully and climbed from the bed, her smooth body still

seemingly too perfect. She began pulling on clothes hurriedly, finally sucking in her stomach to snap the tight, wrinkled jeans closed.

“Got to get back to work,” she said with a provocative wink. She stopped in the doorway and looked back. “See you around, cowboy,” she said coyly and disappeared out the door.

Two hours had passed by the time Markman found his way back to the dress shop. Fortunately the SCIP door was still illuminated in the window. He had not yet transgressed its inflexible time limit. He checked to see that the homing beacon was still in his jacket pocket. It had been easy to find. It had been on the floor beneath the bed in Miss Ann’s room. He had also brought the feelings of guilt with him. Though his indiscretion had been too sincere to be perverse, he knew the struggle within would continue for some time to come.

A closed sign hung on the entrance to the gunsmith’s shop. Despite the necessity of returning quickly, Markman could not resist looking in on his excitable friend. He went to the door and thumbed the latch. It was unlocked. The shop seemed deserted. He entered slowly and began to look around when a shaking shotgun barrel crept up from behind the counter.

“Hold it right there or I’ll blow yer head off,” cried a trembling voice. Wide eyes peered over the counter top.

“Sheriff, it’s you! Ah’m saved!” The joyful merchant plunked down the rifle and raced around the barrier to shake Markman’s hand vigorously.

“Ah heard the shots but Ah wasn’t stickin’ my head out there fer nothin’. That is ‘cept you. The Colt was okay, weren’t it?”

Markman smiled and nodded, “That it was.”

“It’s yers now, partner, garunteed fer life,...seein’ how it saved mine and all!”

“Well, I’m leaving town for a while, guess I’ll take it with me then,” said Markman.

“Where ya headin’ to, sheriff?”

“Oh just a short trip through the dress shop window,” said Markman dryly.

The gunsmith stared back in puzzlement.

Markman left the store and stopped in front of the SCIP door for a long, last look around. The town had returned to normal. The air chimed with the sound of the blacksmith's hammer. A horse-drawn carriage carrying a pretty lady with an umbrella coasted by, and he could still faintly hear the uneven sounds of the player piano coming from the bar. A person could be happy here forever, he thought. Perhaps the sorceress waiting beyond the mirror-door would bring him back someday.

With the black holster and Colt forty-five still hanging by his leg, Markman lurched through dimensions and crossed back over to the lab.

## Chapter 21

Standing in the familiarity of the SCIP lab, Markman quickly realized that some significant changes had occurred. There was no tear now in the right shoulder of his leather jacket, and no flesh wound stinging at his upper arm. The slick, black handgun and holster had disappeared from his waist. Cassiopia sat wide-eyed in anticipation at the Drack.

“How long was I gone?”

“Two hours. How long did you stay?”

Markman checked his watch. “Slightly more than two hours.”

“Two hours? It was supposed to be thirty minutes, what happened-oh never mind. Hurry, tell me everything. Where were you?”

Drained, Markman collapsed into a chair and recounted the surreal tale of Dodge City, Dreamland. He was carefully evasive about his affair with Cassiopia’s double. The nagging feeling of self-betrayal persisted. And when he had finished the narrative, he began to ask his own questions. “And so Dodge City was your idea?”

“Yes, it was,” she answered excitedly. “Under hypnosis you said it was your favorite fantasy so it seemed like an idea that might have more of a chance to work. But I didn’t suggest any conflicts like the gunfight. That must have come from you.”

“And the gunshot wound I thought I sustained?”

“You’ve answered your own question, Scott. You thought you were hit by a bullet, so Dreamland made it happen. In reality, there was no injury at all.”

“And how about Miss Ann, your duplicate?”

“No, I never suggested anything like her while you were under.”

It was all she could do to stay in her seat. “You realize how fantastic this is, don’t you? It’s more than I could have hoped for. We controlled Dreamland and we recovered something left behind from a previous trip. We’re really getting somewhere.”

“Where exactly are we getting?” Markman asked skeptically.

“I want to make another trip in right away, tonight.”

“What? Already? What about the thing needing cool-down time or whatever?”

“It was only in use for two hours. If we shut it down now, we can get another four hours of use starting at midnight.” With a determined stare, she added, “My father has been in there for days, Scott.”

Markman found himself in reluctant agreement once again, just as he had so many times in the past few days. “Every trip inside is more dangerous, if you ask me. We’re playing Russian roulette with time.”

“Now we can create an environment in Dreamland that is optimum for a search. We could even generate an army of Dreamland soldiers to help find my father, or an air force to sweep the terrain, but those things would be too dynamic to control. It would be more likely they would locate an imitation of him rather than the real person. I’m not sure what the perfect scenario would be yet, but I’ll decide on one by tonight. We’ll start with something simple and see how that works, but I can’t do it without you.”

Markman rolled his eyes and nodded.

“This time Tel will come with us. We’ll set the Drack to run autonomously. Tel will be handicapped by the physics of Dreamland, but he’ll still be able to detect my father.”

“Tell me something. Why don’t you just create a Dreamland that’s a ten foot by ten foot room? Ta-da, your searching is over.”

Cassiopia smiled. “That’s pretty good Scott, very ingenious. But what we would have is a ten foot by ten foot room inside of Dreamland. We can control somewhat the things that manifest in there, but we don’t control the dimension itself. Dreamland is a balanced by-product of our own environment, the two are



directly interrelated in many ways.”

Markman gazed at Cassiopia, remembering the softness of her. His thoughts drifted back to their make-believe rendezvous. He hadn't actually been with her, but it felt as if he had.

“Scott? Are you okay?”

“What? Oh! Yeah, I was just thinking. You know we could still end up trapped in there forever. If we do, I hope it's something like the last trip.”

Cassiopia looked as though she had no answer. Awkwardly, she turned away and began typing into the Drack command station. The silence became uncomfortable. “We could find him on the next trip in.”

They looked at each as though neither believed it.

## Chapter 22

Hoping to clear his thoughts, Markman went for a drive. There was no easy access to open road, so a slow cruise through the neighborhood would have to do. He needed to stay close by, anyway.

Now that he had talked with Parrish, it was easier to think that the breakins had been a street gang. That meant the biggest worry now was Cassiopia's trips into the weird zone. So why was there still this nagging feeling of danger from the outside? The faces gazing out of the back of the school bus he was following all looked like little Jimmy Vasal. The little boy who had explored where he should not have, disregarding the danger all around him. Danger had its incentives. The world around seemed to have brightened a touch of its color over the past few days. Markman worried about Cassiopia. She had locked herself away in the well-hidden SCIP lab. The robot was there also. She had insisted it could harm no human and had no understanding of violence, but its size alone would be threatening enough to fend off most common criminals. If the people behind the breakins somehow found their way to the SCIP lab, they would have to deal with TEL. Markman strongly suspected it would not stand idly by if Cassiopia was in danger.

Darkness seemed to arrive early. Markman gave up driving nowhere and finally turned back onto the Cassell's street. He slowed to a crawl, the white light from his high beams scouring the shadowy roadway. There was no sign of anything unusual.

In the driveway, he pulled off onto the overgrown lawn and circled around to the rear of the house, parking in close behind it. Immediately he went down to the open trunk entrance and listened. Cassiopia was in the lab going over data with the Tel. Without disturbing them, he returned to the living room and sat on the brown, antique couch to sort things out.

The Tao Chane disciplines he had mastered so well were testing him. What if the worst had befallen her father and he was actually deceased. What if they ventured into that unknown world only to eventually find his body? How would he comfort her then? What would happen to the volatile environment they would find themselves within? Markman exhaled deeply.

All things that happen must happen, he thought. There is no death, only withdrawal from the physical plane-and within Tao there is no change, only life. The truths he had so earnestly chosen to live by were of less comfort than usual, and yet they had served him so well in the past.

“Why are you sitting here all alone?”

He looked up to see Cassiopia staring inquisitively from the hallway. He smiled faintly, hoping not to give away his volatile mood. “I’m going over some things in my mind. Come and sit down a minute, will you?”

“What’s going on?” she asked lightly, and sat next to him.

“Listen, from now on, promise me you won’t answer the door for anyone. Don’t even let them know you’re here. And keep the doors locked all the time. The breakins that happened here and at my place. I spoke to a friend. They were probably done by some local punks who are in jail now, but I can’t kick the feeling that there’s more to it-something we don’t know.”

Cassiopia paused and looked at him affectionately. Gently, she placed a hand on his shoulder. He was afraid to look her in the eye. A far away stare was locked into his face.

He regained his composure. “We’re getting pressed for time. We’d better find your father. As soon as things settle down, the university will be wanting answers. They’ll probably bring the police in on this.”

Cassiopia stared at him thoughtfully “We can repeat the hypnotherapy procedure anytime you feel ready. It’s possible we could learn something about him tonight.”

“I hope it works.”

“It’s our best chance, but from the looks of you, I’d say you’re not the best candidate for hypnotic suggestion right now. We’d better wait as long as we can. Maybe you’ll feel better later.”

“Is this really the right thing? I mean you do the self-hypnosis too, and you plan on going with me this time, right?”

She nodded. “But you’re the dominant personality. I can make a subconscious suggestion to you with much more effectiveness than I can myself. Self-hypnosis is somewhat shallow. You will form the Dreamland environment. I will simply not interfere as a part of it.”

Markman looked drained. He rubbed his face with one hand. “I’ll meditate. Do you have a candle and maybe some incense around here?”

She thought for a moment. “As a matter of fact, there is—in the hall cabinet.”

“It would help.”

On the top shelf, she found the ceramic incense burner and wildwood that had been a Christmas gift for her father long ago. In one of the drawers there was a single aromatic candle. She made sure he was settled in the bedroom and left him.

Back in the lab she began sifting through her stacks of computer printouts. Her attention was fixed on a perplexing mystery that had surfaced. There had been some strange data recorded by her monitoring experiments during Markman’s last excursion through the SCIP mirror—things she did not understand at all. She selected a handful of computer printouts and spread them out on every available surface area in the lab. With half a dozen highlighters, she began blocking out categories of data that seemed out of place. It wasn’t that any anomalies had shown up during his passage, quite the contrary. Though the physical properties of the door were far from understood, to her an almost melodic pattern had evolved in the data from previous passages. Of course, it bothered her that they were acquiring this knowledge by experimenting on themselves. But there really was no other option available. It reminded her of the early Navy frogmen who had risked great peril to test the limits of decompression time when scuba was first being researched. Many had returned to the surface in great agony, and some had not returned at all.

She paused to look over a specific data sheet. With each journey into Dreamland, the data base had grown broader and more reliable, and the risks, by simple logic, had become greater. The graphs and readouts from the earliest entries made by her father, overlaid very nicely with her own records. But one fact remained obtrusively disturbing; her father had never returned from his last exploration.

Had it not been for her insatiable appetite for nice, orderly data, the strange set of printouts that she now held in her hand might have gone unnoticed forever. There it was though, plain as day-starting at line 87. A nagging, little grouping of zeros and ones that showed there had been activity in the primary mirror after Markman had passed into Dreamland. Since nothing had been interrupting the mirror plane, there should have been only a flat, baseline readout.

She scanned the data before and after the anomaly once more. No indications of malfunction were suggested anywhere on the sheet, but a ghostlike activity had, nevertheless, distorted the subatomic structure of the mirror plane. It was a peculiar phenomenon that did not easily lend itself to explanation, and it annoyed her.

One hour before midnight, she finally forced herself to put the puzzle aside. She went to Markman's room and found him still resting on the bed. He accepted the tiny pill from her with a look of childish despondence, and took it without speaking. When he had relaxed, she once again attempted the hypnotherapy that had previously worked so well. But this time Markman's subconscious was less cooperative. She patiently counted him down into deeper sleep, but at times he would not acknowledge her commands, and other times would not repeat instructions. When she had finished, she commanded him to awaken, and sat back to breathe a sigh of relief-hoping the procedure had been successful.

At midnight, they headed down to the lab. The robot was already waiting at the Drack command station. Cassiopia went busily from station to station, checking the system setup. As she worked, she secretly studied him out of the corner of her eye. He seemed alright. A little too quiet perhaps. When she had satisfied herself that the equipment was ready, she paused and looked at him with concern. "Are you okay?"

"How would I tell?"

"Well, at least you haven't lost your sense of humor."

"If that ever happens, you should check my pulse."

Her voice became stern. "You and I will go through first to effect the environment. Tel will follow after us." She turned and picked something up from the floor behind her. "Here's one for you." She handed him a well-packed knapsack.

“God, how much stuff are we taking?”

“Food and water among other things, just in case. We won’t be staying any longer than usual, but if everything goes as planned, we will travel a good distance.”

“Starting to sound interesting.”

Cassiopia answered with an exaggerated smile as she marched up the ramp, Markman following close behind.

With a few last instructions to Tel, they left reality behind, and disappeared into their own reflections.

## Chapter 23

Cassiopia stared with surprise at the unfriendly world she had created. The landscape was flat and open, and a wide, straight, paved road originated near the SCIP door and ran off into the empty distance. A bright red, open-air vehicle was parked nearby. It had fat, off-road tires and a fold-down front windshield. These things were as she had intended, but very little else was.

The sky was gloomy and storm-darkened. Low wisps of threatening clouds drifted quickly by overhead. Far in the distance, thick bolts of white lightning arced to the ground explosively, though no sound of thunder could be heard. What should have been healthy green fields bore only dead, brown grass. A steady, temperate wind that had the smell of impending storm, pushed persistently at everything in its path.

Cassiopia wrestled to tie back her hair as the silver body of TEL emerged from the dark reflections in the secondary mirror. She had to raise her voice to be heard above the tempest. “Not exactly what I asked for, Scott.”

Markman shrugged and continued to look around.

“I wanted something simple. It’s supposed to be clear blue skies and calm.”

“What’s wrong? What is all this?”

Cassiopia paused. “It’s you, it’s how you feel.”

“What do we do?”

“I say we go on. Nothing can hurt us here anyway.”

There suddenly came a low roll of thunder, causing them both to jump and look off in the distance. Markman did not seem overjoyed at their prospects.

“I don’t know, this is pretty bad,” he said, almost having to yell to be heard.

“We’re here, let’s do it,” she insisted. “You said yourself there’s not much time left.” She turned to the robot who appeared completely unaffected by the harsh climate. “Tel, mask Mr. Markman, myself and the SCIP. Evaluate remaining

environment.”

Tel rotated in a jerky three hundred and sixty degree turn, and then spoke, its voice raised in volume. “Standard Dreamland composition with reference to previous data. Current visuals are, clouds, flat landscape, one land vehicle. Intermittent weather inconsistencies indicate unstable environment. Mass and volume of solids in violation of standards. Audio spectrum normal, infrared null, no other radiations present. End of environmental synopsis.”

“What was that about unstable?” he asked above the furry.

“He must mean some of the weather is not making sense.”

“That’s an understatement, and you still want to go on?”

“Let’s hurry up. Attach the homing beacon to the mirror, and let’s see if the rover works.”

He gave a bothered look as she handed him the necessary supplies. When he had finished, they went to the rover. Markman made sure he reached the driver’s side before anyone else. They threw their packs in the rear compartment and climbed in. The seats had no cushions, and resembled hard, formed plastic.

“I guess you don’t believe in options!” he said smugly.

Tel, without waiting for instruction, clamored directly into the back of the vehicle, tossing it harshly around. It sat upright in the ill-fitting back seat looking completely out of place.

Cassiopia looked down at the barren instrument panel. “Well, will it start?”

Markman looked for the ignition. There was none. Behind the oversized steering wheel was a blank dashboard; no gages, no shifter, no pedals. The driver’s area looked like a nonfunctional mock up of a prototype vehicle. “Look, there’s not even a key switch!” he complained and pointed to where it should have been.

But when he looked again, it was there. He searched the rest of the instrument panel. There was now a speedometer and a fuel gauge, and a shifter protruded from the steering column. And, of course, there are now pedals, he thought sarcastically, and when he looked, there were.



Cassiopia looked the other way and pretended it had not happened.

He shook his head at her. “We’re crazy, you know. Just plain crazy!” He turned the phantom ignition key. The Dreamland engine started immediately and ran smoothly. The fuel gauge now read full. He pointed at it and looked to his passengers. “Full of what?” he asked, not expecting an answer.

Cassiopia raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

Markman turned to the robot. “You’re going to tell us if you see anything, right?”

“As instructed I will report any sensor deflections, Mr. Markman. I will amend instructions to report directly to you, if you wish.”

Markman twisted his hands on the unusually fat, brown steering wheel and shook his head. “Fine, just fine. I’m in a place that doesn’t exist, driving my imaginary jeep, with a beautiful woman and a robot in the back. Guess I’m all set now, all right,” he said, and dropped the rover into drive. To their amazement, it took off. Cassiopia shifted in her seat and tried to appear satisfied.

They drove the isolated, blacktop highway toward the dark, flat horizon. The ride was smooth, though the distant flashes of storm left them unsettled. The tires hummed and clicked on the uneven roadway. Markman held to a safe speed, uncertain of what to expect.

Though the thick black clouds continued to eclipse the countryside, the storm seemed to lack further development. Perhaps it has matured and might even begin to subside, thought Cassiopia. Nothing would have pleased her more as she studied the barren acres that raced by on their flight down a road into the unknown.

Tel sat silently. It scanned one hundred and eighty degrees ahead continuously, moving only its head. The SCIP door disappeared into the emptiness behind them. It had served as their only real landmark. Now there was nothing, but an endless ocean of empty, flat fields, edged by hazy gray darkness.

They soon covered nearly fifty Dreamland miles, without incident. Nothing had changed. The same terrain, the same sullen clouds, the same unreachable horizon. Markman began to think that the place might go on forever, and now to

his further displeasure, the fuel gauge appeared to be actually working. They had consumed one fourth of the phantom tank already. Time would not be the only potential problem on this journey.

But even with the distraction of the alien landscape, he found himself stealing glimpses out of the corner of his eye at the beautiful woman beside him. The lightning bursts, rough wind and murky visibility, made this a place of intrigue, an impression that was intensified by her mere presence. She was not aware of him. She struggled with her long tangled hair and tried to stay below the protection of the rickety windshield. Her soft face seemed so like that of the imposter he had recently made love to. With the familiar pang of guilt returning, he wondered if the finely shaped curves concealed beneath her tan jumpsuit could possibly be as irresistible.

Suddenly the robot interrupted. "Mr. Markman, visual protrusion on the horizon. No Doppler available."

They exchanged uneasy glances.

Cassiopeia shook her head and leaned over to be heard. "There shouldn't be anything."

Markman looked over his shoulder at the robot. "Do you see anyone at all?"

"No anthropomorphic contact."

"What'd it say?"

"He said no sign of anything resembling humans."

Markman looked over at her and spoke hesitantly. "Go on?"

"Absolutely."

They searched ahead earnestly for the mystery that awaited them. Ten more minutes passed before there was any sign. The first visible evidence was a brightening line in the unfriendly overcast. Soon there were holes in it, and not far ahead blue sky was becoming predominant. As the rover carried them further, they began to see the dark, indefinable spot, waiting on the horizon.

The robot spoke once more, “Large, residential dwelling. No anthropomorphic contact.”

“Can’t you just say ‘humans’ or something,” complained Markman. The robot ignored him and continued its scan of the unexpected structure. “A house where there should be none. Can you explain it?” he asked loudly.

“I can only think it’s originated from one of us,” she replied. “There’s no other explanation.” She squinted, tried for a better look, and added, “If one of us recognizes it, we’ll know.”

The silhouette of a large mansion on the right side of the highway was becoming clearer. It was surrounded by green grass and lush vegetation. Now only a few wisps of storm clouds passed overhead. In the distance, big billows of cumulus clouds sculpted strange, animal-like shapes against an endless blue sky. It was a lavish estate, existing in the middle of nowhere. Markman stopped at the entrance to the horseshoe-shaped, cobblestone driveway, and looked to Cassiopia for direction. She promptly waved him on.

They pulled around neatly trimmed hedges and stopped beside a corridor of cone-shaped evergreen trees that led to the front entrance. A large, square tower with a high pointed peak, and four smaller peaks at each corner rose from the above the entryway. The building was of gray brick supported by large cut stone. Two story cathedral windows lined its front, decorated by climbing ivy. The double front door was intricately carved with snakelike patterns. Large stone lions sat on either side of it. Beyond the well-kept grounds there was thick fog. Markman asked Tel for a scan of it. “Visibility inhibited,” was the only reply.

“Well, do you recognize this place?” he asked.

“No, do you?” she replied.

“Nope.”

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone here, let’s look around.” She jumped from the rover and headed for the front door.

“Wait a minute, wait,” Markman called with annoyance. “Shouldn’t we blow the horn first or something?” But to his dismay, he found there was none. He climbed from the rover and caught up to her at the grand entryway. A few

smooth marble steps slowed TEL. “We’d better at least knock, don’t you think?”

“This is Dreamland, Scott. We can do anything we want.” Without waiting, she tested the door latch and proceeded to push open the right side of the huge double door. She barged in as though she owned the place. Markman followed warily with the robot close behind.

## Chapter 24

Inside the mansion, they found themselves in a large chamber that resembled a ballroom. A giant red heart was embedded in the white tiled floor, and a wide stairway to their right curved gently upward. Though the size and architecture of the immense structure suggested elegance, it was nearly bare. There were no pictures decorating the walls and no dividing lines of elaborate woodwork punctuating the room's mono-color decor. A chandelier should have hung from the high ceiling, but none did.

Though the wasted gallery was unoccupied, the distorted sounds of heavy metal rock music blared through an open double door near the bottom of the staircase. A sitting room lay beyond. Cassiopia stepped down the three marbled steps that ran the breadth of the receiving area, and moved to a position that provided a better view of the adjoining room. Several men in black tuxedos were milling about, some talking among themselves despite the loud music, others watching a large screen television. Most had drinks in their hands, and a few were smoking. Occasionally one of them would look over at the uninvited group of intruders, but paid them no special attention. Markman began to take a step in their direction when he was suddenly distracted by a cry from Cassiopia. "Oh-my-God?"

In unison he and the robot turned to see what had caused her outcry. From a hallway annex to their left, a completely naked and quite beautiful young woman emerged into the room. Her smooth, tanned skin contrasted sharply against the gloss white surroundings. In her left hand she balanced an oversized, strawberry-whipped cream dessert, and in her right, a tall Pina Colada, complete with umbrella and straw. Her long, straight black hair divided at the right shoulder, half falling to the front, the rest behind. Her exposed body bordered on perfection; large, firm breasts that shifted slightly as she walked, tiny hips that kicked back and forth, and long, smoothly contoured legs that seemed to almost glow at the thigh.

The carefree lady strolled directly in front of them as she proceeded toward the busy sitting room, oblivious to their presence. Cassiopia, aghast with her mouth open, followed the woman's progress, but seemed at a loss for an appropriate remark.

Finally, Tel turned dutifully to Markman and said, “Woman-naked.”

Markman made an annoyed face and replied indignantly, “I know that,” and returned to his appreciative stare.

The barefooted woman sauntered into the crowd of malingering men, and plunked down in a soft, green recliner located in the midst of them. She began to eat her dessert and drink her drink as the handsome attaches looked devotedly on.

Cassiopia became irate. She looked at Markman accusingly and asked, “How do you know my roommate from college?”

“Me? I’ve never seen the woman before in my life, and believe me I’d remember if I had.”

“It’s Brenda, she’s my closest friend.”

Markman gestured with his hands. “Well, there you go, it’s your daydream, not mine!”

Since Tel was directly between the two, its motor driven head whirred back and forth as it attempted to keep up with the argument.

“I’ll have you know that my roommate is full figured, and flat-chested. I never would have given her a body such as that, not in my wildest imagination.”

“She’s your roommate from college? Well, if I was going to have an erotic dream, I sure wouldn’t include a bunch of other guys in tuxedos as part of it.”

They stared silently into the adjacent chamber, both worrying that their own subconscious desires were responsible for some of the more embarrassing segments of what was transpiring. Finally Markman began to smirk. “Did you want me to go interview her?”

Anger flared in Cassiopia’s eyes. “That’s it. “We’re leaving, There’s nothing meaningful here.” With that she turned and stormed up the steps that led to the exit. Halfway to the door, she stopped suddenly and looked back at the room, her eyes wide with realization. “Wait a minute,” she said, half under her breath. “I do know this place. It’s her dream house!” She turned toward Markman with an

astonished stare. “Brenda’s Castle, that’s what she used to call it. Her greatest fantasy was to inherit a place just like this. She’s mentioned it dozens of times.”

There were a few seconds of silence as understanding seeped into Cassiopia’s stunned conscious. “Oh my God, I know what this place is! We’re in someone else’s dream!”

Markman stood with a “please don’t tell me this” simper on his face. The astounded trio looked back at the adjoining room. The loud music had faded, and the tuxedoed gentlemen were now busily gathered around Brenda’s chair in such a way that she was no longer visible. The enthusiastic activity that was now going on was obscured by some of them, but clearly was erotic.

“Okay, that’s it, let’s go,” Cassiopia stammered. She marched indignantly to the door and lunged for the large, decorative handle. In shock, she watched as her hand and arm passed completely through the solid oak door. Quickly, she yanked back away with a short, involuntary cry.

Markman came up alongside her, having seen what had transpired. He shook his head with aggravation. “Tel, come here and try the damn door.”

The robot understood. It motored past them and reached for the door handle, only to find that its complex, mechanical hand and arm also pierced the dark, stained wood effortlessly. Without further command, it stepped completely through and disappeared—returning a moment later. “Penetrable barrier, no analysis available,” it said matter-of-factly.

Markman took a deep breath and went next. His body vanished into the door panel without hindrance. An instant later they heard his slightly muffled voice. “Come on, it’s okay. We should be getting used to this sort of insanity by now, don’t you think?”

The others followed in turn; first Cassiopia, then the robot. They regrouped on the steps outside. In the time it had taken to exit, the building had become slightly translucent and the effect was escalating. As it did so, the outlines of the interior gradually became visible, including the intimacy of the sitting room where Brenda’s fantasy was still underway, and which had progressed to a far more crude display of eroticism.

They fled the disappearing dream house and climbed back into the waiting

cruiser, relieved to find it was still intact. As Markman pulled out onto the blacktop highway, they peered back to find a calm ocean forming in the fog where just moments before the mansion had been. Waves were beginning to swell and splash onto a long strip of white, sandy beach. Some of the foamy water crept up far enough to reach the dead brown grass that bordered the roadway. Markman hit the gas, and quickly put distance between them and the expanding ocean.

They drove the purgatory world between dreams. The robot continued to scan for life, but reported none. Cassiopia's irritation became focused on their apparent lack of progress. She looked around at the desolate landscape. "This place is as barren as the moon," she said, half to herself.

"What?" Markman asked over the drone of the engine.

"I said, this place is as barren as the moon."

"The moon's not that barren. It's a former Earth, you know."

"What?"

"The Moon. It's much older than the Earth. It was here before the Earth. It was called Luna. That was millions of years ago."

"Oh brother. And I suppose now you're going to tell me it was inhabited?"

"Yes, by a civilization much less evolved than ours."

"Please tell me you're not going to suggest that we lived on the Moon."

"Have you ever visited a place where you lived many, many years before, and when you first see it again, it gives you that strange feeling like you lived there in another life?"

"Okay, I have."

"That's the same feeling you get when you look at the Moon. The dark areas you see on it were the last of its continents. The rest was ocean."

"Scott, where do you come up with these absurd ideas. They are original, I'll



give you that.”

“It’s not me. It’s recorded history.”

“What?”

“There are records kept in the Himalayas that go back farther than that. They’ve never been kept secret.”

“So you believe we here on Earth came here from the Moon.”

“Not exactly.”

“On no, I’m afraid to ask.”

“Most of us here on Earth came from Mars.”

“I’m so disappointed in myself. I should have guessed that was coming.”

“I know it sounds absurd to someone from the west, but this stuff is common knowledge where I grew up. Children are raised and taught differently there. A great man once said, ‘knowledge not lived becomes sin.’ The eastern religions would be corrupt if they denied what they know to be true.”

“So we’re talking about reincarnation now, is that right?”

“Is it so hard to believe?”

“From a scientist’s viewpoint, very much so. It is a wild speculation with no evidence to support it.”

“But you do believe in incarnation, right?”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“Well, when a man here on earth dies, he leaves his physical body behind, right? I mean, it’s either that or he ceases to exist altogether, right?”

“He leaves his body behind. Yes I’ll agree to that. I don’t believe he ceases to exist.”

“So then, the man had adopted and used that body while he was on Earth. So he was incarnated into that body, right? I mean, either he was incarnated into that body, or he never existed at all until his body was born.”

“It could be that the man did not exist until his birth.”

“If that were true, then every single thing you’ve learned, every instinct you have, all the wisdom you have within you, has been acquired in this one single life. In a universe billions of years old, you only get one short life to learn everything.”

“I’ll admit that does not seem logical.”

“Well if you agree that the soul existed before birth, then you are agreeing with the idea of incarnation. My masters used to laugh at the question ‘does the body really have a soul?’ They used to say, ‘There is a soul, and it has a body.’ If you agree with the idea of incarnation, that is, the soul using a physical body to visit the physical world, then reincarnation could follow pretty easily.”

Cassiopia stared at Markman as he continued to guide the cruiser. “You learned all of this growing up.?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, but if there were previous civilizations on the Moon and on Mars, there would still be evidence of that even after all this time.”

Markman turned to Cassiopia with a strange look in his eye. “Yes, there would be, wouldn’t there.”

In the distance the black storm clouds had dissipated into a gray overcast. The air felt static charged and began to grow cool. The fuel gauge now worried Markman most of all. It was well below one half and did not seem to be behaving in a consistent way. He tapped at the little glass window until something farther down the road took his attention away. He slowed the vehicle and stopped. No explanation was necessary, Tel spoke for him. “Heavy precipitation imminent.”

“Look,” he said and he pointed ahead. “It just started.”

A clearly defined, and very intense wall of rain soaked the ground ahead of them. The stiff wind that had been present before was now gone, but the heavy curtain of water awaited them.

“Things are starting to stack up against us,” he warned. “We’re using more fuel on the way back than we did going in. We probably won’t make it.”

“Try to think positively, Scott. This is all coming from you.”

“Think us some more fuel? I’ve been praying we’d make it since we left the wild party back there. Sorry to tell you, it’s not working. If it was, my wish for headlights and windshield wipers would have come true by now. How come it’s blue skies back there and hell up ahead, anyway?”

Cassiopia looked back in the direction of the castle. “If I’m right, Brenda’s subconscious was dominant back there. Visitors through the SCIP door probably don’t have as much influence here as everyone else. Brenda’s dream probably ended, and now we’re back in your subconscious world. Try thinking happy thoughts, will you please!”

Markman rolled his eyes. “Oh, right!”

“How far would you guess we have to go?”

“At least another twenty minutes, except that downpour is going to slow us. I don’t know really.” Markman looked back at the Tel. “And what about you? Are you weatherproof?”

“My systems are functional to a depth of one hundred meters, Mr. Markman. Additionally, Dreamland fluid compositions are non-inhibiting.”

“What’d he say?”

“He said Dreamland water can’t hurt him,” answered Cassiopia.

“Oh,” replied Markman, nodding his head. “That’s what I thought.” He stomped on the accelerator and headed for the line of rain, calling out, “Get ready, here it comes!”

A moment later they hit the pounding rainstorm. In seconds, everyone and

everything that was within the confines of the cab was soaked through. Markman and Cassiopia were forced to lean forward as close as possible to the windshield, in search of any added protection it might provide. Tel, meanwhile, remained seated upright in the back, completely undisturbed.

The Dreamland monsoon quickly hindered their pace. The steady decline of the fuel indicator continued. Markman pushed the rover blindly ahead, faster than seemed safe for such conditions, hoping that an increase in speed might not mean an increase in fuel consumption. The torrential rain did not let up, but a short time later, the rover did.

With the fuel gauge bottomed out, they coasted helplessly to a stop. The reassuring hum of the thought-matter engine was gone. Now only the sound of the unrelenting storm remained. Markman stared over at Cassiopia through the deluge. It was time to walk.

As they trudged through the downpour, she wiped the water from the face of her wristwatch and stared fretfully at it. Over three hours had been spent in Dreamland, well beyond the limits she had intended. No one will ever come looking, she thought. We will make it on our own, or not at all.

The steady rain pounded them. Cassiopia had packed a hooded wind breaker that she held in place over her head with one hand, though the brutal strength of the downpour left the thin material more a psychological reinforcement than anything else. Surprisingly, she found greater comfort in Markman. Despite the harshness of the weather, he seemed to have found a kind of serenity within it and appeared to need nothing else. He walked deliberately, water streaming down his face, one arm around her to reassure her. Tel, indifferent to the weather, led the way, adjusting its tractored speed to accommodate the soaked humans it so devotedly guarded.

Finally the dull voice of Tel gave reason for hope. “Visual object ahead. Solid matter. Two-point-two-five-two kilometers. Stationary. Mass and volume conform to SCIP dimensions”

The foul weather countered by intensifying further. The remaining stretch of terrain took more than thirty minutes to cover. The unyielding rain had become so fierce that they would have passed completely by their target had it not been for the continuous monitoring performed by the robot.

When the door was finally reached Markman seemed to awaken from his trance and stood staring in wonderment at the way water neither penetrated nor streaked the smooth silver mirror surface, but instead disappeared completely on contact.

No one spoke as they prepared to evacuate. The Dreamland effects were illusory, but the fatigue that now taxed them was very real. They remained only long enough to peel away the soaked transmitter from the side of the doorway and adjust the dripping knapsacks on their backs. Without hesitation, they jumped back into the dry atmosphere of the SCIP laboratory.

## Chapter 25

They stood on the reality side of the mirror gawking at the perfectly dry apparel that adorned their tired bodies. Their hair, clothes, backpacks-everything, including the robot, bore not the slightest sign of dampness. Their appearance was tattered and disheveled, but other than that, there was no evidence of the storm.

Markman was the first to recover. “We made it,” he said, and he trotted down the ramp, trying to appear untested by the ordeal. “I swear, I’ll never get used to that place. I keep thinking I’m soaked, but it’s like we were never there.”

Cassiopeia dropped her pack on the floor by the ramp and stared at the elapsed time display above the Drack station. It read one hour, twenty minutes. “God, we’ve been gone for less than an hour and a half, but by my watch we were inside almost five hours,” she said as she came down from the door, followed by Tel. They went to the Drack station where Cassiopeia plunked down in the control chair and began to manually disengage the mirror.

“Well that was a big waste of time, wouldn’t you say?” said Markman as he came over to stand by them. He made an awkward attempt to straighten his hair with the palm of one hand as he watched the mirror of the SCIP door fade to white.

Cassiopeia answered without looking up. “Not at all. We covered a big area. The Tel’s summary may have something. We learned some incredible things.” Looking physically drained, she swiveled in her seat to face him. “We may have actually entered someone else’s dream, and if that’s true, then Dreamland is even more profound than I could have imagined. It must go on literally forever. If I call Brenda tomorrow and she remembers any of it, that will be all the proof I need.”

Markman shook his head wearily. “It’s way beyond me, but I don’t see how any of what we just did will help much. I still say we’re lucky not to be lost in there.”

“All this means is that we need to originate in the right place to find my father. Somehow I need to figure out how to do that, and I will. Just give me some time.”

“You don’t have time. Tomorrow, that is later this morning actually, I’ve got a nine o’clock meeting at the university, and I hate to tell you this, but you need to be there.”

“Me? I need to stay here and work. I can’t leave. Why should I have to go?”

“Because it’s not safe for you to be left alone here, even hidden away in this lab. It’s just not safe until we find out for sure what’s going on.”

Cassiopia looked angry.

Markman attempted consolation. “Look, the briefing will take maybe forty-five minutes. We’ll make them happy somehow. Give them a good story. Having you there will reassure them. Then we’ll get you back here with a little more breathing room.”

“I don’t like this. We’ll be misleading them. But we’ve got to conceal what we’re doing until”

“And we will. I promise. We will.”

Markman escaped the hostility by retreating upstairs. Though physically exhausted, he managed a thorough tour of the Cassell home, checking the doors and windows, peering cautiously outside from time to time in search of the unusual. Finally he found his way to his borrowed bedroom, but refused to allow himself to collapse onto the bed while still dressed. He poked through the drawers of the small dresser at the foot of the bed and managed to come up with a set of mismatched, silk pajamas that were two sizes too small. He stripped off his dirty clothes and forced the borrowed garments on. The bed felt especially accommodating, even with the Berretta tucked under the pillow.

In the lab below, an equally exhausted Cassiopia, had already fallen asleep, her head resting in her arms on the still-running Drack console, her loyal robot standing guard.

Cassiopia dreamt. In the cloudy dream vision of her childhood room, she sat among the many stuffed animals on the thick, soft comforter that covered her small bed, banging unmercifully at the game controller of her battered personal computer. Phantom math problems streamed down relentlessly from the top of the monitor screen, programmed by the enemy warlord within the binary reality

of Spacemath, to destroy little Cass's hard-earned city of points.

But it was another bad day for computer generated enemies. The endless barrage of fourth grade math missiles was being mercilessly cut to shreds by a mere five-year old. Unless some miraculous act from user heaven was to intervene quickly, the fearful young competitor would soon break through the virgin barriers that guarded the territories of the fifth level.

A soft tap at the door partially distracted the devilish concentration of the young girl. The door pushed gently open, and a familiar face peered inside. It did not matter that the wrinkled countenance bore a gray beard and gray hair though it should not have. Such things were of little concern in times of imaginary war.

"Hi, little one," the gruff voice of Professor Cassell called.

"Oh father, just three thousand more points and I'm in the fifth grade level!"

"Wonderful, dear, but your Dad needs to tell you something, okay?"

"Oh, no!" cried the distracted five-year old, "there goes the Empire State Building, you darn missiles—!"

"Sorry to mess up your game, lil' Cass, but I need you to keep the door open. Do you understand?" the Professor said calmly, swinging the door slightly to and fro for emphasis.

"Ah, ha! Two problems with one answer, take that. I'm ahead again!" screamed the little girl in delight.

"Keep the door open for me, Cass. Keep the door open." The voice echoed away into oblivion.

Cassiopia sat up wide-eyed at the Drack station, which had finished running its assigned tasks and was now idle with dark display screens. She placed one hand on her heart and fought to shake herself awake amid the realization of what had just happened, but as her focus and vision returned, a shocking scene emerged before her. For at the adjacent Drack terminal, her father stood in plain view, staring down at a controller keyboard.

So much was happening so fast, Cassiopia sat uncontrollably stunned for a



moment before she could react properly. “Father, are you all right?” she cried in the broken voice of half sleep, and reached out to take his arm.

But her hand passed through it. Nor did the very realistic apparition seem aware of her presence. It looked up as though staring into infinity and a moment later was gone. Cassiopia gasped and put her hand to her mouth. She felt cold and empty. Tel stood by, alert and aware, though it had made no gestures of warning.

Markman rolled himself awake to the persistent push of a frightened woman. He clutched the handle of the Berretta under his pillow and stared blindly up at the light. A hurried, nervous voice slowly focused in his mind.

“Scott, wake up, something just happened and it scared me.”

He pushed up on one elbow and surveyed the room. “Breakin?” he asked, and stiffened at the thought.

“No, come downstairs with me, please.”

Embarrassed greatly by the ill-fitting night clothes, Markman groggily followed her down to the lab, and listened as she recounted the hazy episode of her father’s appearance.

“You probably were dreaming the whole thing,” he suggested, with a sleepy kindness.

“I think he was in my dream, I really do. It was him.”

“But you can’t even say for sure that’s possible. Oh God, listen to me, I sound as crazy as you. I mean think about it; it only makes sense. You think we went into someone’s dream while we were in Dreamland, and then a few hours later, that very thing happens to you. Subconscious suggestion, you’re the expert.”

Cassiopia became quiet with doubt.

“Tel, you saw nothing, right?” asked Markman.

“No visual anomalies in the lab.”

Cassiopia began to argue, “Yes, but, —oh I don’t know. I am exhausted.”

“Well, look-from my point of view-later today you call your roommate, if she says she had such a dream, then you know it’s at least possible, right?”

“It would mean a lot if it were him. It would mean he’s alive.”

“Maybe so, but it’s five-thirty in the morning. Try to get some more rest if you can, tomorrow will be a rough day.”

“Thanks, you’re right, I’ll go upstairs and sort this out in the morning,” she agreed, seeming much more composed.

The pair began to leave the lab when Tel spoke unexpectedly of its own accord. “Mr. Markman, disproportionate sleepware.”

Markman stopped and frowned. He opened his arms at Cassiopia. “Now it’s making fun of my pajamas!”

Cassiopia could not keep from blurting out a laugh, but managed to catch herself quickly. “No-no, Scott, he’s not. Humor can’t be programmed. He’s just adapting the personality enhancements a little unsuccessfully, that’s all. He means that he really does like your pajamas,” and at the sound of her own voice, she again broke out in open laughter, covering her mouth with one hand in a vain attempt to contain herself.

Markman put his hands on his hips, made a “Hmff” sound, and marched indignantly out, his bare ankles terribly exposed by the shortness of the ill-fitting silk trousers.

Later that morning, Cassiopia begrudgingly accompanied Markman to the impersonal, gray, building that housed the university’s main offices. They took the bare, worn, metallic elevator to the third floor, where Cassiopia was politely escorted to a waiting room lounge, one not available to the general public.

A beat-up looking black telephone sat on a small table by the room’s large observation window. With assistance from a secretary who had been cursing a defective coffee machine, she managed to get an outside line and anxiously made her long distance call to Brenda.

“Hey! Best buddy, where have ya been? I’ve been calling you for a week. You never returned my calls,” complained an affectionate voice on the other end of

the line.

“Returned your calls?”

“Your answering machine, dummy. It’s all I could get.”

“Oh, the answerer, yes, I haven’t been back to my apartment for days, it must be overloaded by now.”

“Well, where the heck are you, girl? You got some scandalous affair going on that I should know about or something? Please, tell me.”

“No, no, nothing like that. I’ve been staying at my father’s, I’m working on one of his projects.”

“Oh dull. And I thought it just might be passion.”

“Nope, I was just calling to check in on you, see if you needed bail posted or anything.”

Laughter distorted the already poor connection. “Oh, you devil. I’m fine, but I miss your company, Cassy. We’ve got to rendezvous and get into some kind of trouble, before we lose the touch. There’s a couple of irresistibles that just moved into the apartment across from mine. One for you, and one for me. Why don’t you fly on out here?”

“Can’t right now, Bren, maybe later. Hey, I wanted to ask you something. Did you dream about Brenda’s Castle last night by any chance?”

There came a silent interlude from the other end of the receiver. Cassiopia closed her eyes and kept her fingers crossed.

“God, Cassiopia, what are you, psychic now? How could you know that?”

“I um...believe it or not, I saw it in a dream. You were eating some kind of desert and drinking a margarita.”

“This is too unbelievable. We both had the same dream? It’s an actual psychic event. You know I’ve always said that I was..., psychic, I mean. That’s just too much! We could probably get on TV or something.”

“It is amazing,” replied Cassiopia with a wince.

“Hey, that was a hot dream too, I mean there was these handsome guys in tuxedos and they..”

Cassiopia interrupted, “I get the picture, Bren, no need to elaborate, okay?”

But it was no use.

## Chapter 26

Markman sat to one side of the very large oak desk, facing the overstressed chancellor behind it. To his right sat a third person, someone unexpected. The university had called in the FBI.

Agent Ann Rogers wore a dark, very well-fitting suit that could almost have been worn by a man. Not a hair was out of place. It was kept short, and perfectly captured. Her makeup was light and precisely applied. She was thin-lipped and had a narrow, terse stare. Markman knew he was dealing with a perfectionist.

To his relief, the meeting was kept short. Agent Rogers was devoting her efforts to the computer breach, and only needed an overview of Dr. Cassell's absence. Markman reassured them that foul play was very unlikely. Dr. Cassell's daughter was across the hall in the waiting room, and she agreed that some extraordinary opportunity had probably popped up and her father had taken off on a spur of the moment hoping to capitalize on it. They listened patiently and expressed reassurance at that. But, Markman had felt Agent Rogers studying him out of the corner of her eye. It would not be long before she was between him and the case of the missing Doctor.

The ride home was moody. Cassiopia stared quietly out the passenger window as though she were in deep thought about something. Markman draped one hand over the steering wheel and tried to relax. When the convenience store near the house came into view, he decided to stop to replenish the Cassell supply of coffee, an item that had been in frequent demand lately. They parked directly in front of the glass store front, next to a beat-up old pickup truck. Inside the store, a heated argument was going on between the lone clerk and a grumpy-looking male customer. The two were at odds across the checkout counter and the situation appeared to be worsening.

Markman cast an annoyed look at his passenger. "Everywhere I go lately," he said.

"You don't have to go in," she retorted sarcastically.

He climbed from the car, keeping a watchful eye on the escalating dispute, while Cassiopia waited and observed. The muted voices quickly changed from

insistent to cutting as he pushed his way inside. He recognized the cashier as the older gentleman who had mistaken him for someone else just a few days earlier. The gray-haired man eyed Markman with a worried look while trying to maintain his posture in the volatile exchange.

“Listen, by law I cannot sell you this. If you go back out on the road and kill somebody they’d hang me too,” the merchant insisted while tapping the cap of the bottle that sat on the counter top.

“I ain’t drunk and you’re gonna sell me this or you’re goin’ through that plate glass winda’, head first,” slurred the red-faced customer.

Markman glanced out the window at Cassiopia and rolled his eyes in disgust. He came up beside the two men. “Excuse me, can you tell me where the coffee is?”

The intoxicated patron turned abruptly and snarled, “Now who the hell asked you to butt in, asshole?”

Markman quietly shook his head, “No, I just need some coffee, that’s all. It’s cool.”

The glassy-eyed customer swayed slightly, keeping one hand on the counter for balance. He tilted his head as though to belch, but nothing happened. He turned back to the clerk. “Ring it up, right now or I’ll beat your ass.”

Markman interrupted. “Sir, are you driving that pickup parked out there?”

“I told you to bug off.”

“Did he just drive up in that?” asked Markman of the old man behind the counter. He had taken a step back and folded his arms in front of him.

“Yes, he did.”

“Hey, you know that thing qualifies for classic tags? That thing’s probably worth some money. Mister, why don’t you step outside with me and let me take a look at it. I might be interested.”

Markman’s body had already tightened up.

“For the last time,” answered the unsteady man. “Get out of my face. I about had it with you.”

Markman had only to touch the man’s left shoulder, and the melee began. The drunk’s right fist shot up at Markman’s face but was slow and uncoordinated, hardly even a challenge. Markman leaned back almost casually without taking his eyes off him, and let the misguided punch sail harmlessly past. The off-balance motion caused the drunk to spin around and fall forward on the counter, wiping out a display rack of CDs and the colorful cardboard signs that urged their sale. The displaced entourage crashed to the floor and scattered everywhere on the slick tile.

Markman braced his right hand and body weight against the man’s back and pinned him to the counter. He got control of the dirty, flailing left arm and wrenched it up behind, capturing him in an arm lock, but being careful not to harm him. This man was probably a decent person when sober, and who was to say his reasons for drinking weren’t painfully severe, thought Markman.

“If you’ll open the door, I’ll take him outside,” he said to the storekeeper, who quickly responded by racing around from behind the protective counter and pushing open one of the heavy glass doors.

“Damn-son-a-bitch ain’t got nothin’ better to do but harass innocent citizens—.” The drunk continued to mumble incoherently, all the way out of the store. Markman carefully guided him to the front fender of the Mustang, directly in front of a wide-eyed Cassiopia, and bent him part way over the hood.

“Cass, under the driver’s seat, there’s a big tie-wrap.”

Cassiopia looked back blankly with an expression that said, “Who, me?” but then finally regained enough composure to fumble around under the seat and hand two long plastic tie-wraps out the partly open passenger window. Markman quickly cinched up the man’s hands behind his back. To everyone’s dismay, he had begun to sing.

Subdued, the drunk began slobbering on the car and looked back at Cassiopia. His eyes immediately widened. He grinned a wretched grin and struggled to speak, though it took several seconds for his mouth to form the words.

“Casey, you livin’ doll, where ya been all my life.? I coulda’ watched you all

night. What a body on that girl,” he said, twisting back to look back at Markman.

“Cass, I don’t want to let go. You have your cell?”

Cassiopia nodded.

“911 for the Sheriff’s department, will you, please?” said Markman in a tone that begged tolerance.

Though she felt more like hiding, Cassiopia scrambled to comply. On her phone, she waited for a dispatcher and then stammered her way through the request. “Yes, we’re at the convenience store on-ah-Amber Ave. There’s an intoxicated man here. We need a police officer right away.” Cassiopia finally stuttered a thanks to the dispatcher, clicked off the phone, and scowled at Markman as though she should not have had to do that.

The drunk started up again. “You’re the best, baby, where ya dancin’ at next? I mean to be there, I’ll tell you that—.”

Markman guided the wobbly soul to the back of the car in an attempt to save his companion further embarrassment. “You got the wrong girl, buddy.”

“The hell I have,” replied the man almost coherently, “She was at the Forum, dancin’ center stage, more than an hour last night. I may be drunk but I wouldn’t forget that. Come to think of it, that’s how I got this drunk-watchin’ her!”

Within two minutes, a patrol car entered the parking lot and two uniformed officers got out to survey the situation. They came to the car and the younger of the two took possession of the half-conscious offender. Markman stepped off to the side with the senior man and recounted the story.

“So you think he really would’ve popped the clerk?” asked the officer.

“The old man was looking for a chance to call for you guys. I think he was afraid to pull out the phone.”

“What’re you, some king of security guard or something?”

“I was an auxiliary a while back, but I don’t do that any more. I’m sure you know Parrish. He’s a close friend.”



“Yeah, Parrish is a good man. We’ve worked together. He’s an old battleaxe, ain’t he?”

“I wouldn’t say that to his face.”

The officer laughed. “You do know Parrish, don’t you. Hey, wait a minute! I heard a story about a part-timer taking a bullet for Parrish once. You wouldn’t be”

“That story’s a little exaggerated. I wouldn’t take too much stock in it.”

“Son of a bitch, that was you wasn’t it? No wonder you didn’t go full time.”

“Hey listen, can you see that they take it easy on this guy. I got a feeling he’s having some kind of really bad time. He was drunk out of his mind in that store, but he was trying to buy more. Must be something really pulling him down.”

“Sure, I’ll see what I can do.” They watched as the younger officer pushed down on the drunk’s head to get him into the back seat of the patrol car.

“One other thing, I know this is a lot to ask. Could you keep my name off of your report? You know, just say local citizens restrained the guy until you got there, or something. I’d prefer this guy never see my name in print, if you know what I mean.”

“I guess I can do that for you, Scott. I’ll bounce that off Parrish though.”

“That’s all I could ask. Thanks for coming out.”

“Thank you,” replied the officer. Markman shook his hand and they parted ways.

Markman stopped at Cassiopia’s open window. “I’ll spend the rest of the day trying to figure out how I could have avoided all that.”

“Well your first mistake was being you,” she replied comically.

They watched the patrol car pull away. Markman hoped the prisoner inside would spend a peaceful twenty four hours in the city drunk tank, and forget they had ever met.

## Chapter 27

“I’d better go back in and get that coffee,” said Markman. He made a forced smile and pointed inside. “Coffee—that’s all,” he said. Cassiopia did not answer except to drum her fingers in a baneful manner on the dashboard.

The relieved cashier was down on one knee collecting some of the small plastic CD cases that were strewn across the floor of the well-stocked market. He stood as Markman entered and returned to the register, balancing an armload of recordings as he went.

“Did I mention how glad I was you showed up?” he called out.

Markman approached with a large can of drip coffee, stopping to pick up a few of the fallen CDs on his way. He placed them in the makeshift pile by the grateful proprietor, and as he did, something on one of the labels caught his attention. It was an old familiar album title he had not seen in some time.

“I cringe to think of where that little discussion was headed,” said the storekeeper.

“That guy’s probably the nicest person in the world when he’s sober.”

“Probably right. That was wine he was drinkin’. He’ll pay his dues tomorrow I’d bet. That’ll be one good hangover.”

Markman pulled out his wallet expecting the cashier to ring up a charge.

“Why don’t we say that’s on the house, officer. It’s the least I can do.”

Markman smiled. “I’m not a cop, and I can’t do that, my friend. First it’d be you; then the next thing you know everybody in the world would be wanting to give me everything free...”

The storekeeper laughed and took the money reluctantly. “Well, you’re welcome to come in here for those crunch bars, free, any time.”

Markman had already started to leave the store. He stopped and looked back at the clerk. “What’d you say?”

“Crunch bars free. I know they’re your favorite.”

“How do you know that?”

“Remember you bought a whole box of ‘em a few days ago?”

Markman could not conceal a confused expression. He nodded amiably and left the store.

The atmosphere in the car was even more unsettled than it had been in the store. He climbed into the driver’s seat and felt almost afraid to look in Cassiopia’s direction. Finally, he dared a glimpse out of the corner of his eye and then tried his best consolatory tone. “Sorry about all that. I couldn’t let that guy drive.”

“You really know how to show a girl a good time, Scott.”

“Well, it wasn’t fun, I mean the guy drooled on my car and everything.”

She began to drum her fingers again, and stared out the passenger side window.

“Hey, that guy really thought he knew you.”

She shot back a threatening glare. “Oh, right, you mean he thought I was a stripper—of all things!”

“Oh don’t worry. I know it couldn’t have been you. After all, I was with you last night.”

“Keep digging, Markman. You’re going to get yours.”

“Oh, yeah, by the way, I saw something in the store just now that made me think.”

“Well let’s make a note of it on the calendar, by all means.”

“No, really, listen to this. There was a song on a CD case in there, the name of it was ‘A Dream Within a Dream’. I mean that fits perfectly doesn’t it? When does a man wake but not wake? When it’s a dream within a dream. Right?”

Cassiopia seemed stunned. She immediately lost her combativeness. She pondered the idea for a long, quiet period as Markman twisted the ignition key

and brought the rumble of the car's engine to life. They were on the road before she again spoke. "It's a better answer, a much better answer."

Markman smiled immodestly, though she paid him no attention.

"This whole thing is so incredible. The parallels between our world and Dreamland keep getting more and more intriguing. I almost feel as though I should be watching for the coffer of truth the Reverend told me about."

"The what?"

"Remember the bible prophecy I told you about?"

"Oh right. Sorry, but that one's a little bit too far out even for me."

"Too far out? You think so? Well, I haven't told you this, but I spoke to Brenda. It is a fact. We were in her dream last night, as crazy as that sounds. There is no other explanation."

"Nothing sounds crazy to me anymore. I like everything to make sense and have an explanation. Therefore, I'm in my own compulsive disorder version of hell."

They pulled into the driveway of the Cassell home, this time not bothering to park in the back. Markman got out and stood by the open driver's window.

"I've got to check the place out before you go in," he said, drawing the extra tie-wrap from his back pocket and handing it to her. "Would you put this in the glove compartment for me, please?" She responded by grasping it disdainfully with only two fingers as though it was poisoned.

The house seemed undisturbed. Markman made a methodical sweep, covering inside and out. When he had convinced himself the place was safe, he returned to the car and leaned back into the driver's window.

"It's okay," he said resting his hands on the top of the door, expecting her to vault from the vehicle and make a dash for the lab.

"What's this, Scott?" She held up the small, silver box in her left hand. "It was in the glove box."

Instantly Markman had a pained look. “Oh bother, Aunt Margret. I forgot all about that thing. Bring it in with you.”

Cassiopia headed for the lab, her attention absorbed completely by the shiny container. She charged on ahead, staring intently at it, ignoring Markman’s appreciative appraisal of her figure.

Inside, Markman put away the coffee, and then went to the living room window. He split back the curtain enough to scan the neighborhood. Far down, on the right side of the busy street was a very nondescript, tan auto with two individuals in it. One was reading a newspaper, the other staring blandly out the passenger window. He flipped the curtain shut and headed downstairs.

In the lab, Cassiopia stood facing the robot by the cluttered desk near its base station. Tel was holding the strange box up near its visor, rotating it smoothly in the upright position. From time to time the robot would pause, change the object’s position and then continue the meticulous process of scanning.

Cassiopia glimpsed Markman as he entered, but quickly returned her full attention to the robot’s work. He took a position next to them and stood with his hands in his hip pockets, feeling inadequate, and awaiting what he hoped would be a layman’s explanation of the box.

“Metallic container, 20.0000 centimeters by, 10.0000 centimeters by, 5.0000 centimeters. Hollow. Alloy unknown. Mass inconsistent with current data base. Weight disproportionate to mass. Seamless, uni-body construction indicated. Indentation at 2.0000 centimeters from one edge, encompassing circumference. Dimensions of internal compartment unreliable,” Tel reported briskly.

“Man, that thing is a walking laboratory,” said Markman.

“Scott, please, be quiet a second. Tel, describe contents of internal compartment.”

“Scanning of interior inconclusive. Reflective distortion of scanning radiation equal to or greater than .5000.”

“Wow! Someone went to a lot of trouble to make a hollow container with no way to open it!” said Cassiopia. “Where did you get this?”

“A little boy found it in a house that burned down mysteriously. Why?”

“Because if the Tel can’t ID it, it must be something quite rare.”

“Man, maybe I should turn that thing in to the police. It’s probably more important than I thought.”

Cassiopia raised an eyebrow and spoke in her most musically persuasive tone, “Let me have it for just a while longer, and I might be able to tell you more.”

Markman balked. “How long—would you want?”

“Just a few hours. That wouldn’t change anything, would it?”

Markman paused, thinking he should protest. “Okay, but before you become completely lost in that thing, there’s something else we need to talk about. Something that’s been bothering the hell out of me.”

“Deal. What do you want to talk about?” she said as she took a seat at the paper-strewn desk.

“The drunk, who thought he knew you.”

“As a stripper? Really, Scott—.”

“You say you saw your father here last night, right?”

“As plain as day.”

“And I thought you were dreaming. What if you weren’t?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What I’m talking about is that people keep seeing us in places we can’t have been. Not only you and your father, but me too. On at least two occasions someone has told me they personally saw me somewhere I haven’t ever been. Believe me, it’s way beyond coincidental.”

Cassiopia hesitated. “What are you saying, that somehow duplicates of us are being generated by the SCIP, and we haven’t realized it? I mean I know everything that’s happened has been beyond crazy, but isn’t that idea really too

much?”

“Well just think about it a minute—. We were in Dreamland last night and you were seen at the Forum, of all places, about the same time. Before that, some kind of ghost went through your bedroom and spilled ice cream all over the kitchen. If I tried to pin down my own sightings, I have a hunch they would coincide with Dreamland trips also. So you tell me, is it possible?”

There was a shared moment of apprehension. Cassiopia blinked. “People who look like us, coming out of Dreamland, like our subconscious selves exchanging places with us?”

“Have you ever watched the door when I went through, I mean did you ever see anything—unexpected?”

“No, not that I recall. I was always preoccupied with other things. There was some strange data from the tests I ran on the SCIP door. I thought it was some product of the time distortion.” Suddenly she looked up with reassurance. “Wait, Tel! He’s monitored almost everything we’ve done, and he’s never indicated anything like that.”

Markman turned to the robot. “Tel, during Cassiopia’s sleep period last night here in the lab, did you see anyone else at all or detect movement of any kind, other than hers?”

The robot answered, “No other visual motion detected.”

“Okay, did you hear anything at all while she slept?”

“Random environmental function noise from upper areas, laboratory ventilation noise, normal Drack automatic systems noise, standard keyboard entry patterns. End of requested file search.”

Markman’s attention perked. He looked to Cassiopia with curiosity and then back to the Tel. “Tel, I said only those sounds that occurred during Cassiopia’s sleep period.”

The robot did not understand, though it recognized the vaguely-worded address. “Last verbalization acknowledged, no inquiry derived.”

Markman quickly rephrased the question. “Tel, did you say there were keyboard sounds while Cassiopia was asleep?”

“Affirmative.”

“Tel, who made those entries?”

A pause followed in which it seemed the robot itself was unable to justify the data. “No data is available,” was the chilling response.

Cassiopia stood from her seated position, a shocked expression on her small face. She exchanged an intense stare with Markman.

“That can’t be—.”

Markman walked over to the Drack columns and stood over one of the operator positions. “Where did you see your father, exactly?”

“Right there, the Bstation. It had finished running its tasks and was idle.”

“And so could you tell if anyone had actually typed at this keyboard then?”

Cassiopia became almost breathless. “Why, yes, it hasn’t been used. Any entries would still be in the keyboard buffers.” She lurched over to the station and furiously began entering commands. A moment later there was a gasp as she looked up at Markman, stunned. They stared at the impossible tell-tale message that had appeared on the screen:

- CASS KEEP THE DOOR OPEN -



## Chapter 28

“He’s alive. There’s no question about it,” Cassiopia cried. “He’s managed to leave us a message, first in my dream and then on the Drack.”

Markman shook his head wearily and sat down at the station. “It does seem, ... possible. What am I saying? Nothing that has happened since I met you has seemed possible...”

Cassiopia began to mumble to herself. “I should never have interfered with the SCIP door operational periods. No, that’s not true, I shouldn’t have reduced any of the operating times. It should have been kept on as much as possible. I’ll need to work out a schedule.”

“Cass, this is real trouble. Don’t you get it? You did actually see your father! Doesn’t that mean people have been seeing us somewhere else while we’re in there? Doesn’t it?”

Cassiopia looked spellbound, staring right through him.

“Cass?”

She came out of her trance. “What? I don’t know about that. I mean I’ll have to think about it.”

Markman placed an elbow on the work station, covered his eyes and shook his head. Finally he squinted up at her. “Listen, I need to tell you what I know about Dreamland, or at least the place you seem to be calling Dreamland.”

“What are you talking about?”

Markman sighed. “Brother, how do I go about this?” He looked at her thoughtfully. “Okay, what I have been taught, by the eastern masters. These guys can do things you can’t imagine. They know things. They don’t have to keep secrets. Most people in the modern world don’t want to know about the spiritual side of life. It just interrupts their preoccupation with worldly desires. These guys know all about life and death. They can go places you and I can’t.”

“Scott, are you going to try to start telling me about magic carpets, or something.”

“Funny you should mention magic carpets. You know how that legend came about? Not because Gurus were flying around on magic carpets. What really happens is they meditate in the lotus position sitting on a carpet, and are able to mentally appear somewhere else. People see them and think that the carpet they’re sitting on has somehow carried them there, when the truth was they had simply willed themselves there. They really can do that. I’ve seen it myself.”

“All debate potential aside, what has that got to do with Dreamland.”

“These guys know things. They have ancient knowledge. I’ve seen the scrolls passed down from thousands of years ago. They taught us about Heaven. They visit Heaven.”

“What!”

Markman shook his head once more. “How do I tell this without looking like I’m crazy. Okay here goes. What you call Heaven is the place most people go when they die, right?”

Cassiopeia tried to look supportive.

“Well, when you sleep at night, you go to the same place.”

“What!”

Markman raised one hand in defense. “Hold on now, just stay with me on this a minute. The way it has been taught to me is this; we do not live here on Earth-I mean the physical Earth, the physical world. Our real lives take place in that realm you call Heaven. Heaven has several different levels. We visit the physical Earth every day to learn, and evolve, and improve ourselves, but we withdraw to our real lives every night when we sleep. When our lives on the physical Earth are over, we withdraw again to our real lives in that place you call Heaven, bringing with us all we have gained from our experiences visiting the physical Earth.”

“Wow. That takes a leap of faith!”

“And it’s like this; the place you call Heaven, its lowest level, exists in the same space as the physical Earth. But, all the stuff in Heaven is made up of a much higher frequency or higher vibration than the stuff in the physical Earth. And because the things in Heaven are so much finer or higher in vibration, we cannot see or feel them even when they are right next to us. Ever felt like someone was looking over your shoulder, but no one was there? In fact, a person or object in Heaven can occupy the very same space as something on the physical Earth, but they don’t bother each other in any way because the stuff in Heaven is on such a higher plane. Just like when you said you saw your father, but when you reached out to him, your hand went right through him. Occasionally the circumstances are just right that we can see people or objects in Heaven, that’s why you hear about ghosts and things like that. It’s kind of like infrared goggles. Our eyes can’t see infrared. So does that mean infrared images are not real? You look out into the darkness and there’s nothing there. You put on a pair of infrared goggles and suddenly you see someone standing in the distance. It’s the same with the realm we call Heaven. Our five simple senses do not see or feel things in the Heavenly realm. They are not made to.”

“So you are suggesting that when someone dies, he goes into the dream state indefinitely?”

“No one dies. They withdraw to their real life. Heaven is not like the places we see in our dreams, at least usually. It’s an incredibly beautiful place. I’ve seen just a tiny bit of it from the influence of the masters. Everything there kind of glimmers like gold. But, our physical brains can’t store memories of what happens in the realm of Heaven. Memories are made of vibration also, and the physical brain is not designed to process them. What we get from our nighttime visits to Heaven is a mish-mash of symbols from what may have happened there, altered by the emotional state we’re in, along with effects from our daily lives and memories on Earth. That’s why dreams usually seem so erratic.”

“And are you saying that when we lose a loved one, we can rejoin them at night when we sleep.”

“Yes, but of course we don’t remember it, although our souls do, but that doesn’t lessen how much we miss having them here on the physical Earth. Most family and friends usually stay together here and there. They stay together from life to life as well. Their rolls change from life to life, but their love for each other doesn’t.”

“Scott, how can anyone possibly know such things.”

“Because life is eternal. The masters I spoke of can visit the realm we call Heaven. They have developed their higher senses that they can bring this knowledge back to us. There are advanced people, not very many actually, who have evolved ahead of everyone else. They’ve reached the realm of Heaven with their waking consciousness and don’t need to return to the physical Earth except for special purposes. Most people worship and respect Christ. Do you think he ran off and left us, or is he still around, watching and caring for his flock?”

“What about the people who don’t make it to Heaven?”

“Everybody makes it, eventually. God’s plan is perfect. God is perfect. But, there are different levels in Heaven. You’ve heard stories about angels earning their wings in Heaven? If someone lives a bad life on Earth, they can be heavily burdened by it in the lower realm of Heaven. And that can make it a long wait until their next visits to the physical Earth where they can redeem themselves much more quickly than in Heaven. As we move into the future, the idea is that we build better and better civilizations to live within. We become a more spiritual people. And, there comes a point where persistently bad people must be held back so that they do not hinder the good people and their desire to make a more spiritual world. So when a society reaches a certain point, the bad people are not allowed to continue on with the good people. The bad have to stay behind and repeat in the less evolved societies before they can go on to a better world. Some people call that damnation; others call it the aeonian condemnation.”

“When does that happen?”

“It supposedly happens around when a civilization has reached its halfway point in development, which is roughly where Earth is now. That’s part of the reason Christ came to Earth-to prepare for that.”

“Well that’s scary enough. And do you believe you’ve visited these higher places through meditation yourself?”

“When you are in close physical proximity to a true master, their aura is so strong it lifts you up. It gives you a boost. I’ve seen a tiny bit during the few meditation exercises I’ve been allowed in with the high masters. But I can’t do much, really. You see, I’m not so good at the spiritual stuff. I’m pretty good at

the physical disciplines, but when it comes to trying to focus my inner self, I can't get there too good. That's why the masters sent me to the outer world. They said my physical abilities were too far ahead of my inner development. They said I needed to learn from life."

Markman leaned against the console beside him. He looked at Cassiopia with affection. "I've only told you a small piece of the real truth. There's so much more. We don't get to speak to the average person about these things. Most aren't interested. Others don't want their view of the universe messed with, and scientists, they want hard physical-world proof of these things that are not of the physical world."

Cassiopia folded her arms. "I must say, you've taken me aback somewhat."

"Why?"

"There is some late science that might fit what you are describing. I'm sure you've heard of dark matter."

"Yes."

"They say we see only 20% of the actual universe. We still don't understand where the unaccounted mass we call dark matter fits it. But lately some even more disruptive theorems have come forth. Have you heard of string theory?"

"No."

"We've been racing neutrons around in our accelerators and smashing them into photographic plates for years. They break up into these wonderfully curious little particles. At least we thought they were particles. We thought we were seeing the smallest particulate matter in existence. We even gave them names like 'up-ness', and 'down-ness' and strangeness, based on their characteristics. And just about the time we were all getting really comfortable with these little particle friends of ours, we found out they weren't particles at all. They were kind of like bands of energy, or better yet, strings of energy, vibrating in this wonderful concert to create matter. Now here's the part you might like; the math for this 'string theory' wasn't working out at all. It was very upsetting. Then one day out came this beautiful formula that showed just how wonderful string theory actually was, except for one thing. The formula demanded that a whole bunch of unknown dimensions must exist for it to work. Dimensions we can't see, or

touch, or measure from the confinement of the few dimensions we ourselves exist in.”

“God, that’s incredible.”

“The scientific community thinks so.”

“So what do we do now?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure. By your description of the ancient knowledge you speak of, you’re suggesting we could possibly enter Dreamland and run into someone who is actually deceased, are you not?”

“That’s the problem, I don’t get any of this. From what I was taught, no physical matter could interact on that plane of existence. So if we were in your friend’s dream like you said, how could we be there?”

“Well, you said that both physical matter and dream matter occupy the same space. It seemed like Brenda was not aware of us when we were in the mansion. Maybe the SCIP is somehow just allowing us to see that world, but we can only actually participate with our own thought-creations, like your friends the Cardoni brothers. Let’s face it, we are exploring the unknown. We don’t understand what’s going on here. But, I have no choice. I want my father back. I’ll consider everything you’ve said. Very often ancient knowledge turns out to be fact, though often embellished by time. I know enough not to dismiss it out of hand. I need to organize all the data we’ve gathered and collect my thoughts. We’ve learned so much, but I still believe my father’s alive.” She turned and began walking around the room, picking up computer printouts and sifting through them. “I’m going to work at my desk upstairs. Just give me a little time. It won’t take long.” From a drawer in the Drack station, she withdrew a laptop computer. With a nod of reassurance to Markman, she retreated upstairs to her bedroom, an armload of printouts under one arm, and the laptop computer under the other.

The robot returned to its analytical duties on the mysterious box, leaving Markman to stalk impatiently around the house, drinking coffee and peering out windows. Markman wandered aimlessly, making repeated trips to the lab to check on the robot’s progress, unnecessary intrusions which it paid no attention to.

When he finally could no longer stand the monotony, he went to Cassiopia's bedroom and stuck his head in the door. She appeared much more collected and her mood had become upbeat. He leaned against the door frame and tried to appear casual. "So, do you plan to turn that thing on again any time soon?"

"At eight o'clock this evening. That will cover a new time frame. Then, I'll rotate each power up to a new time so that all parts of the day get covered—to give my father every possible chance to find his way out—at least until I come up with a better plan." She turned in her seat to face him. "There is something else. Something I think we should do when the SCIP door is powered up. That is, if you're willing."

Markman folded his arms in front of him. "You want me to go through the mirror alone so you can watch to see if anything is coming out of it, right?"

"If you could go through for just a moment. This is really starting to worry me. If there are by-products from Dreamland appearing on our side of the SCIP door, that would be very dangerous. We'd have to stop using it immediately. I can't explain how the vision of my father could actually have used a computer keyboard to leave me a message. It's spooky and it implies that whatever these apparitions are, they are probably some part of us!"

"And if that's the case then it means some part of me has been visiting the men's club across town and some part of you has been dancing at the Forum."

"Not a thought I find comforting," she replied with a strained look.

"And it would also mean a part of your father somehow embarrassed the hell out of the university, or at least some of the faculty there."

"It does suggest some completely uninhibited part of us goes off doing just whatever it pleases. But the fact that there are effected results means the situation is very dangerous. I mean there's more danger to our world here, than to us when we're in there."

"Obviously."

"So will you do it?"

"Yes, and I will hope we are wrong about this."

“I, more than you,” she said.

“So, you want to go at eight. Will the robot be done with my little silver box by then?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Markman said half jokingly, “You know I still say that blasted contraption makes fun of me.”

Cassiopia laughed loudly, as though she needed to. “Trust me on this, Scott. There’s no such thing as a machine that understands humor. Think about it, there’s quite a few people who can’t even grasp it! There’s been some pretty good programs written to emulate laughter, but even they are lacking. There’s no way Tel could be laughing at you.”

“You wait, he’ll wind up saying that box is my powder pack or something, I’ll bet you.”

Cassiopia continued to giggle. “I’ll talk to him about it and by the way, that’s great, Scott”

“What?”

“That’s the first time I’ve heard you address Tel as ‘he’ instead of ‘it’!”

“He, it, whatever, it can make fun of me all it wants to if it comes up with something good on that box. That box should have been turned in a long time ago. I’m starting to feel guilty about having that thing.”

Markman waved his hand in a gesture of frustration and started to leave. Cassiopia was still laughing to herself at his social distrust of the robot. She called to him teasingly, “Well, don’t get feeling too guilty now. I don’t want you throwing your nice ring in the river or anythi—.”

Markman froze in his tracks. So revealing was the statement he had just heard that for a second his mind was unable to grasp its full meaning. He turned slowly in astonishment and went back to the open bedroom door. Cassiopia was leaning over her paperwork motionless, as though she wished dearly that she could cover herself in it, or at least take refuge somewhere out of sight.



Markman's tone was pointed. "What did you just say?"

She did not respond, nor did she look up at him. She stared silently downward.

"I've never told anyone the story of the ring," he added sharply. He paused for an answer and got none.

"Why you little high IQ brat," he said sternly and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her roughly from her seat so that she stood facing him, just inches away. She kept her hands raised as though afraid he would strike her, and stared down and away still unable to look him in the eye.

"That was you in that saloon, wasn't it? You let me think I made love to a ghost, when it was you all the time."

Silence.

"What a little genius you really are," he continued, "but let me tell you what I know about Cassiopia Cassell. I'm quite good about figuring people you know; it's part of my job."

"Ms. Cassell is a bit faster than everyone else at picking things up. So fast, in fact, that she's never had the time to learn about the less important things, like people, for instance. People have always been a blur alongside the learning curve to her. We hide from things that scare us, Ms. Cassell, and that's what you've been doing, haven't you?"

Markman held her firmly by her raised wrists so that she was forced to listen. "Wow, not only were you able to use me to prove your theory about Dreamland control, you were simultaneously able to be at the right place at the right time to make love to someone without any responsibility for it, and even without him knowing it was you!"

"It's incredible—let me guess. You wore a lab smock to cover the western-style clothes, and you went right in after me, using the direction finder to find your way to the saloon before I got there. But you knew I'd be coming, of course. And then you conveniently became Miss Ann."

"Ms. Cassell, I am so glad you're not a criminal. I would not relish trying to second guess someone like you. I concede, you're too much for me."

And with that he turned her face toward him and kissed her without seeking consent. She stood without moving, wanting terribly to tell him that their erotic rendezvous in a musty old bedroom above a make-believe saloon had not been planned. She had intended only to test his ability to distinguish real people from Dreamland imposters. The passionate touching had been inadvertent—and heatedly irresistible. But he had been more right than not, for when it was over, she had run away.

He released his hold on her wrists but there was no escape for her this time. She had been found out. Someone who knew her, now held the real Cassiopia, and it was too late to find excuses. Her mind became dizzy with sensuality and suddenly the old spell was broken. They grabbed at each other and found the bed—all bad dreams left behind.

## Chapter 29

Markman sprung awake. He scanned the small bedroom. There was no one. Something was wrong. The hair on his arms was standing and his pulse was racing. He groped on the floor for his clothes and managed quickly to pull on the wrinkled jeans and shirt, stuffing his bare feet roughly into his athletic shoes as he did so.

The house was quiet. He went softly to the adjacent bedroom and retrieved his Berretta. The upstairs was deserted. Little was visible out the living room window. The glare of streetlights obscured most of his view.

The basement door was blocked open, as it had been the past few days, and the lights were still on downstairs. The cellar was vacant, and the trunk lid entrance stood open. He stared down into the bottomless trunk. Lights came from the SCIP lab and the sounds of the operational mirror-door were droning upward. She had said it would be turned on at eight o'clock. Why was there this feeling of panic? Was he overreacting from all that had happened? He tucked the handgun in behind his back and climbed gently down the rungs of the ladder into the well that serviced the lab, and peered around the cramped corridor.

The SCIP mirror shone. No one was in sight but the present view was narrow. She would not have gone into Dreamland alone, he thought—not now of all times. He eased carefully down the short, rough hallway, and became aware of his own reflection in the SCIP mirror too late.

“Ah—good of you to join us. We were just about to come up and get you,” said an unfamiliar male voice. The greeting was followed by an ugly laugh from a second, also unfamiliar source.

Markman entered the lab. Two sinister-looking men stood on his right. Both had dark hair and very dark eyes, and their skin looked naturally tan. One of them, the one who had spoken, was dressed in a very expensive black suit, with a plain, black tie that was too narrow. A bodyguard stood next to him in a European-styled trench coat that hung open. In his right hand, he held a semiautomatic pistol with a silencer attached. It was pointed at Markman's chest.

“See, boss, there he is. I swear I shot him twice back at his place, but here he is,

an' he don't have a scratch."

"Shut up, please, Mr. Kurn. Come in, Mr. Markman. It's quite amazing we haven't met sooner, although my associates seem to think they have previously had some dealings with you."

Across the room, near the Drack columns, Cassiopia, dressed in a soft pink robe that could have passed for an evening gown, was held captive next to the robot. Clutching her from behind, was a third, ominous figure, a tall man, with shaggy, dark hair and dirty-brown skin. His face was scarred and his large nose had been broken but had healed improperly. He wore an open trench coat, identical to his counterpart. Cassiopia's face was locked in horror, tilted slightly upward, away from the shiny blade that was being held against her delicate throat. Markman's thoughts ran quickly to the bulge of the Berretta pressing against his back.

"Mr. Markman, how impressed I am by the efforts of your novice police organization here. It is surprising how difficult they have made it for us these past few days. One would not expect our simple disposals to have caused such—interest."

A change came over Markman. His eyes narrowed slightly and a stillness formed around him. He said nothing. His inner resolve went unnoticed by everyone in the room, except Cassiopia. She had seen the change one other time, at the carnival in Dreamland.

The man continued haughtily. "My name is Zebib, Mr. Markman. I am a collector of sorts. Before you and I begin negotiations, would it not be fair to assume that you might be carrying a weapon of sorts about you. I'm sure you don't mean to be rude. We can, after all, still be considered guests can we not?" He waited for an answer. None came.

"Tsk, ts, ts, Mr. Markman, where are your manners? Certainly you wouldn't want the young lady's most attractive evening-wear to be stained, would you? My associate Mr. Ahmed has been known to slip unnecessarily when he should not have, much to my own regret, mind you."

Markman clenched his teeth and considered the odds. They had called each other by name. It confirmed their intentions to most certainly kill both him and Cassiopia sooner or later. But now was not the right time to move. The chance had not yet come, but it would. He slowly began to reach behind to surrender the

Berretta.

“Please, Mr. Markman, the left hand, that is, since you chose the right. And place it on the floor carefully. Such a small room. We mustn’t have any ricochet. We wouldn’t want anyone to be killed by accident.”

Once again Ahmed laughed a dirty laugh, fidgeting with the knife as it rested against Cassiopia’s throat.

Markman slowly drew the Berretta and bent at the knees to place it gently on the floor, never taking his eyes off the enemy.

“That’s much better, now please slide it over here so that Mr. Kurn can put it in a safe place.”

“How did you get in here so easily?”

“Really, Mr. Markman I would not have expected such a question from you. You disappoint me. Surely you know that mere locks are only intended to keep honest people out. And let me mention that we will not be bothered by anyone. No one saw us arrive, no one will see us leave. I have an aircraft waiting to leave in one hour, so we have almost that much time left to complete our transactions here. Which brings us to the point, Mr. Markman. You have something that belongs to me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. What is it that you think we have that is so important to you bastards?”

Zebib did not take offense. “It’s nothing really. Just a small, silver box, important only to me. I have been pursuing it for some time, and hopefully, you will consider my personal presence here a somewhat special favor. Rarely do I involve myself in these types of matters. Actually, I hired one of your own local citizens here to retrieve this particular item, but somehow he met with an unfortunate circumstance. You may have heard of him. His name was Smith, Beauford Smith. Such a tacky southern American name, don’t you think?” Zebib paused to light a cigarette he had removed from a gold case inside his jacket pocket.

“Mr. Smith was supposed to obtain the artifact from a local antiques woman who had resisted our most generous offers. It was my mistake. My initial offer was

too generous. She became suspicious that the item was more valuable than first thought. She grew resistant at letting it go. Not wanting to involve myself further, I sent Mr. Beauford Smith to use other means at securing the item. Unfortunately there were complications. Both Mr. Smith and the antiques woman became unexpectedly unavailable.”

Markman sneered. “Dead you mean.”

Zebib ignored him. “Some sort of mix up occurred, and we completely lost track of the item. Believe me, I’m sure you can appreciate what we had to go through to finally track it down. We questioned the woman’s only brother quite thoroughly, and he convinced us he knew nothing. You could ask him yourself, by the way. He’s at the bottom of the river near a railroad trestle just outside of town. Honestly, were it not for the luxuries of diplomatic courtesy we might never have caught up to you. When the local police eventually spoke to Mr. Smith’s neighbors about his unusual demise, they visited your Aunt. To our good fortune she mentioned that an item matching the description of ours had been found in what remained of Mr. Smith’s residence, and that she had given it to you. Through my personnel diplomatic channels, we acquired permission to see that report, otherwise we might never have found our way here.”

“So, Mr. Markman, if you will kindly turn over what I have requested, my associates here will simply tape you and the lovely lady together and we’ll be on our way, no further harm necessary. Diplomatic immunity has many advantages, you understand.”

Markman eyed Cassiopia, then looked back at Zebib. “First tell your dog to get away from her.”

Zebib paused, then made an artificially compassionate gesture to his accomplice. The man smiled and nuzzled his ugly face in Cassiopia’s hair. He shoved her away and went to Markman, pushing him roughly against the wall near the entrance, pressing the point of the stiletto to his chest. Markman felt a sudden, cold, rush of pleasure. His captor had made a classic mistake, and was obviously not as adept with a knife as he should have been. The man was much too close to his intended victim. The knife could be removed now at any time, with little chance of physical harm. Were it not for the handgun pointed at Cassiopia, Markman would not have been able to resist the temptation.

Markman looked at Cassiopia and spoke to her reassuringly. “Give it to them, Cass.” She stared back tearfully and went to the Drack control console, opened a small compartment within it and drew out the reflective box.

Zebib’s eyes lit up immediately, and he commanded sternly, “Just toss it here, dear lady—right now.”

Cassiopia rubbed at the front of her sore neck with one hand and made a barely adequate underhand throw with the other. Zebib grabbed frantically, caught the box to his chest, and held it there, his eyes closed in blissful gratification.

From the corner of his eye, Markman suddenly noticed a slight split had opened in the seam of the artifact. A soft, thin glow was escaping from within, but there was no time to consider it. He watched patiently for a chance to catch his captors off-guard. Zebib reopened his eyes. Death was in them.

“Mr. Markman,” he said with a tainted smile. “I regret to say that it would actually be somewhat of a miscalculation on our part to leave you to identify us.”

The man holding Markman immediately broke in to a wide grin, showing his brown, broken teeth. He pressed Markman harder against the wall, expecting any moment the approval needed to bloody his blade.

Zebib again looked down at the silver box, and this time noticed the strange amber light accenting his open hands. He gasped and slowly turned up the small lid, gazing hungrily into the glowing, exposed interior.

A deathly silence fell over the room as he continued to stare down. Slowly, he looked up. A lifeless expression had come over his face. He began a soft musical chant, “no—no—no—no—no—no.” It grew steadily louder and louder and soon became a desperate shout. His accomplices looked in astonishment, unable to understand what was taking place.

Zebib’s hands and arms began to shake violently. The shaking grew more and more intense, until his body was in convulsion. The box slipped from his grasp and bounced across the floor, skidding and spinning on its side with the cover still open. His eyes became bulged and bloodshot. Lost from the power of reason, he exploded into a state of mindless violence, knocking the gun from his bodyguard’s hand—grabbing the bewildered man and shaking him as the room

filled with insane screaming.

In the midst of the confusion, Markman's hands moved like lightning in a clapping motion to the wrist of his captor. The knife ejected from Ahmed's hand, slid across the smooth floor, bounced off the nearby wall and spun away. In the same motion, Markman grabbed the empty hand with both of his and bent it over at the wrist, breaking it. He side-skipped to the left and grabbed Ahmed's face with his right hand, hooking one leg behind and pushing him hard into the floor. His head made a deep thud against the tile, and his eyes winced and closed.

With ear-piercing screams, Zebib continued his rampage. He ran headlong into walls, knocking over anything in his path, seemingly blind in his fury.

Markman looked up and exchanged stares with Kurn, the stunned bodyguard who had dropped his gun. Both looked immediately to the weapon on the floor between them. With a frantic leap, Kurn went for it.

Markman dove and rolled forward, coming upright in unison with him. Kurn stared in wide-eyed shock that his intended victim had appeared so quickly. He jerked the gun up to fire. Markman caught it like a snake striking its prey. He twisted the weapon around, using Kurn's own trigger finger to click off a shot through his shoulder. The erupting gunfire, was chilling and fast, and echoed through the small chamber at a painful volume that blended hideously with Zebib's screams. Kurn looked with disbelief at the wound in his chest and slumped to the floor still holding his weapon. Markman kicked it free of his grasp and let it go. It was of no further concern to the wild-eyed Markman.

Markman spun to look for Cassiopia and collided with Zebib, who bounced off and headed screaming for the mirror-door. Markman lunged after him. The groaning, crazed assassin tripped on the elevated ramp and fell through the surface of the mirror. Markman dove forward, catching him by one shoe, and was dragged partly through the mirror and into the void. There was a quick ripping sound and he found himself left with only a piece of torn shoelace. He watched Zebib fall backward deep into the void, kicking and waving mouth wide open, no sound to be heard. The contorted figure grew smaller and smaller, finally disappearing into oblivion.

Markman backed slowly out from the SCIP mirror and pushed himself wearily upright. The box lay open on the lab floor nearby.



A harsh, unexpected voice spoke, “What happened to him? Where’s the boss?”

Markman looked up in disbelief. Ahmed had somehow gotten back up and again held Cassiopia. He stood behind her, one arm around her neck, the broken wrist dangling painfully at the end of it. With his other hand he had leveled the point of the switchblade to the side of her throat.

“I asked you, where’s the boss?”

Markman stared with contempt. “In hell about now, I’d guess.”

“I won’t underestimate you again, you son of a bitch. Pick up the gun.”

“Why?”

“Just pick it up now, asshole.”

Markman looked numbly at the weapon by the bloody body, and then looked again at the killer holding Cassiopia. The man made a quick, threatening gesture.

Markman took the necessary two steps, bent over reluctantly and picked up the gun. He stared back blankly.

“Now, put it to your head.”

“What?”

“Put it to your head, pig.”

Markman eyes met Cassiopia’s, and in that moment, he realized he would indeed do anything for her, even this. He raised the gun to his temple. Cassiopia screamed, “No!”

“Pull the trigger, asshole.”

Markman considered his options. He had no intention of dying just yet. Were he to do as instructed, Cassiopia would just as certainly die, and probably suffer greatly before she did. The only real question now was; in the second and a half it would take to cross the room and break the man’s neck, would her wound be fatal?

“Pull the trigger, asshole, or I bury this knife in her.”

The standoff continued.

“You think I’m kiddin’? Take a look.”

A small stream of blood began to run down Cassiopia’s soft white skin.

In a desperate attempt to save her, Markman lunged forward, keeping his eyes fixed on the glittering blade. Ahmed’s hand clenched at the knife and he jerked his arm upright, intending to drive the blade into her neck. Markman strained forward with all his might, but the distance was too great. He knew he could not make it in time.

From out of nowhere, a silver hand shot out and caught the razor sharp blade, peeling it back, wrenching the killer’s good hand and stripping him away from Cassiopia, throwing her harshly to the floor. Stunned, Ahmed stared wide-eyed at the robot as Markman arrived beside him. He ripped his hand free and immediately turned his attention to Markman, swiping his blade furiously. With animal agility, Markman avoided the blade’s edge, twisting and spinning in time with the cuts.

Ahmed made a desperate lung forward, thrusting straight for the heart, but Markman again sidestepped, blocked with the heel of one hand, and brought the other arm up and over, catching his attacker squarely in the face, ramming him over backwards. His feet sailed up into the air and the back of his head bounced on the floor as he fell.

Dazed, he clutched at his stiletto, and rolled awkwardly onto his hands and knees. He tried to stand but was flipped sideways off his feet by a sweeping kick.

This time he stayed down. Markman tensed and prepared for the next assault, but nothing happened. A small puddle of blood formed slowly from underneath the face. The tip of the man’s own knife jutted from the back of his neck.

Markman stepped back and looked around. Tel stood motionless nearby, as though nothing at all had happened. His thoughts immediately returned to Cassiopia. He spun around to find her lying on her stomach on the floor, staring with a frozen stare into the open box, the amber light from it glowing on her gentle face, a twitch of wonder fixed there. From his vantage point Markman

could see only the side of the strange box.

“Cass?”

There was neither movement, nor response.

More loudly, “Cassiopea—?”

Hypnotized, she pushed up on one elbow, clutching the open container with her free hand, continuing to stare devotedly into it.

“Cass, are you all right?”

Markman was ignored. He started toward her, but stopped when she climbed to her feet, still grasping the mystical box tightly, unwilling to ignore it. In a child-like tone she said, “This is so beautiful—”

Markman thought to take her gently by the arm, but before he could she spoke again, this time in a voice more pleading and resolved, “This has got to go back, right now.”

Without warning, she made a dash toward the SCIP mirror.

“Cass, no, stop.”

Before there was any chance to intervene, she

plunged through the mirror. He raced up the ramp in time to touch the back hem of her robe as it disappeared into the silver. He stopped abruptly at the shimmering surface and yelled to the robot. “Tel, come.”

The robot obeyed, though Markman did not take the time to wait for it. He shot through the mirror, and once more found himself in the unpredictable world of Dreamland.

## Chapter 30

Markman stared in awe at the spectacle that surrounded him. The landscape was rustic and rugged and glowed brightly from within. The night sky was black and densely splattered with stars. Grand, sharply cut mountain ranges, barren of green, decorated the distant horizon. Deep, massive canyons carved their way through them. Course, granular sand of multi-toned ash coloring covered the immediate plateau on which he had emerged.

But most striking of all, was the receding line of moon-size planets that were suspended above the horizon. Vibrant with color, they were alive with accelerated motion. Their gravity-enslaved possessions paid worship as they turned in orbit. The red, canal-laced surface of Mars seemed close enough to touch. Its moon, Phobos, cast a dark shadow on the face as it drifted by. Above and behind Mars, massive orange-yellow storms swirled combatively on the giant Jupiter, as its own satellites hung in suspension like diamonds in the sky. Farther out, the water ice rings of Saturn churned steadily, back dropped by the light of Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. Together the planets formed a line of conjunction that pointed outward to the endlessness of the universe. The living solar system hummed with power.

Markman breathed the electric air. It was light, clean, and rich. Colored shadows quickly came and went. A few feet away, Cassiopia stood with her back to him, staring intently at something in the distance. The little box was still in her right hand—its cover now closed. As the robot came clamoring through the SCIP door, Markman spotted the faintly visible image that held her attention. It was no more than an indefinable speck, but clearly was moving toward them.

Markman regained his composure. “Cass?”

She looked back at him, smiled faintly, and nodded. “It’s okay. Just wait. Look!” She pointed to the approaching figure.

The image continued to advance and soon became definable. It was a man, still only a vague silhouette of one—but clearly, a man. Markman noticed that the wound on Cassiopia’s neck had disappeared and there were no signs of blood on her or her clothes. He began to suspect that Dreamland was up to its old tricks. He was seeing what he wanted to see.

The approaching figure grew near and recognizable. A gray beard and gray uncut hair that was at least as long as Markman's. Brown khaki shirt and pants, and low cut brown leather boots. A utility bag was slung low over his shoulder. Professor Cassell held up one hand and smiled in a greeting to his daughter. Cassiopia began to walk toward him. The two stared silently at each other, and the pace quickened.

Markman and the robot began to follow. As the distance between them evaporated, the Professor opened his arms wide to embrace his daughter. They hugged and swayed together, exchanging heartfelt greetings that Markman was not close enough to hear. He stopped a few feet short of the reunion. Cassiopia pulled away and turned to face them.

"This is Scott Markman, Father. He's been helping me look for you."

The Professor offered his hand and smiled. He appeared unkempt and travel-worn, but lacked the weak and malnourished look that should have profiled someone in his situation. Markman again doubted what he was seeing.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Markman. You must be one of my daughter's roboticist friends. I see the TEL has taken a shine to you."

"No sir," he replied, shaking the hand of a man who had always been little more than a ghost, and considering the current evidence, probably still was. "I was assigned by the university."

"Oh, I see. Oh my, this is rather embarrassing you know, getting lost in my own experimentation, quite literally this time. I imagine my absence has unfortunately caused quite a stir of publicity. I had so hoped to avoid that."

"We kept the SCIP lab concealed, Father. Only Scott and I know."

The Professor raised an eyebrow in surprise. "The police did not become involved?" He looked at Markman with reappraisal. "How long have I been gone?"

"More than a week, Professor. And there have been serious complications. Your hidden laboratory will have to be exposed now. Things have happened—"

"A week? I've been gone more than a week? It's been like a month to me. There

is a certain random time effect here, you understand. I had become lost in an exotic jungle terrain, hopelessly it seemed. I wandered for days in search of the SCIP transformer. My supplies were nearly exhausted. I was stopped at a pool of water when it turned to sand before my eyes. I looked up and discovered I was on a ledge overlooking these canyons. The environment had changed completely right in front of me. Was this somehow your doing, Cassiopia?”

Cassiopia looked down at the box in her hand and shook her head. “I don’t know how to explain it. I only know that this is what brought us here.”

“What sort of device is it? It seems familiar to me.”

“It is difficult to explain. I know that someone is coming for it. I don’t know who.”

“But how do you know these things, daughter?”

“I just looked into it, and I knew many things!”

Suddenly the drone of Tel interrupted, “Professor, object approaching. Inclination fifteen degrees, directly behind you.”

In unison the group turned to look. At first there was nothing. They stared off into the black sky, to the right of the majestic, planetary line. A small, golden star emerged against the night. It was far-off and began to grow in size, though it seemed no closer and it made no sound. It became tubular and brown, then cigar-shaped with sparse detail, a dull, muddy brown. It hung in the inky sky, sometimes seeming to vibrate, the massive size of it making its distance difficult to estimate.

The robot offered data without being asked. “Object two point two kilometers, elevation one hundred, fifty two meters. Currently stationary.”

Markman became even more skeptical and broke the spell that had come over them. “Whose Dreamland is this, anyway?”

The Professor answered, “Something has changed, Mr. Markman. This environment is solid matter. That’s why the TEL can track objects here. Wherever we are, this is not the place I nicknamed Dreamland.”

“How do we know the robot is even real?” suggested Markman.

The Professor smiled knowingly, “You mean how do you know if any of us are real, don’t you? A question we might all well ask, I should say. You are more familiar with Dreamland effects than I expected, aren’t you?”

“I am, Professor. And I really don’t understand how someone such as yourself could have gone for so long and yet appear so unaffected.”

“I agree with your confusion, sir. My supplies were all but gone. I was forced to sleep several times in Dreamland, and often when I awoke the environment was merely a continuation of what I had been dreaming. You could say I was trapped in a dream within a dream!

Cassiopeia looked wide-eyed at Markman. He shook his head in disbelief. Before the Professor could continue, Cassiopeia pointed excitedly at the terrain behind him and cried, “Look, look at that!”

On the plain beneath the floating craft, a small star appeared and collapsed into a soft white, ovoid form. Colors swirled within it. The vague figure began a slow, deliberate approach toward them. Oddly, the robot gave no alert, though clearly it was tracking the movement.

The radiant visitor continued to walk, but gained great leaps of distance in disproportionate skips. As it approached, it morphed into human form. In less than a minute, it stood before them. No words were spoken. Its greeting came as a shared feeling of well being and peace. Its arms were soft, long and thin. The hands were molded without fingers except for the semblance of a thumb. That too was completely fluid and lacked detail. There were deep, dark, compassionate eyes within the face, but no facial features to define them, and no other features to characterize the resplendent head. The legs, evenly proportioned, had no visible joints and ended in feet that were smoothly contoured in a fashion similar to the hands. On the left side of the chest an aqua blue emblem stood out, bearing a yin-yang-like swirl. The visitor did not seem to require clothing of any kind.

No words were necessary. Eddies of emotion and thought, swirled among the silent gathering, finally settling into a stable, common pool.

Markman felt uncomfortable and out of place. He asked blankly, “What is

happening?”

The visitor answered without speaking. Each of them heard the reply in his own mind. “This place changes not, it is within and without you. It is apart from time.” The creature drew a gentle line across the horizon with one hand as it spoke.

The Professor wondered to himself, why is he here? And everyone heard him. The creature looked affectionately at Cassiopia, and a message again formed in their minds. “your humble emissary. That which you possess came not by chance. It had been stolen and hidden in time. A long journey it has made. Only here and now might it return.”

Markman thought, he wants the box! How can this be happening? I got my hands on it purely by luck. This can't be real.

The emissary looked fondly upon him. “Not one heartbeat is by chance. Not one suffering unnoticed. Not one step along the way random. All things that happen, must happen.”

They all looked at the small shiny box in Cassiopia's hand, and in unison wondered what it really was.

The emissary answered, “It is truth. It is the before and after. It is all things, and it is no thing.”

Cassiopia felt unexpected regret at the thought of relinquishing the strange possession. How could she know it would be going to its rightful place?

The emissary seemed to become even more brilliant. It felt knowing affection to her and replied, “That which you hold will not be taken from you, only that it be freely given. No will be done that is not of the One.”

Cassiopia's doubts vanished. She held out the shiny box, and it gently disappeared from her hand, reappearing momentarily in the possession of the emissary, then vanishing for good.

Markman had become convinced. He experienced a powerful flush of guilt and found himself wondering if there was blood on his shirt from the recent hellish melee in which he had acted so brutally and instinctively. I should try to explain,



he thought.

The emissary turned to him with friendship and familiarity. It spoke silently once more, and Markman thought he heard the voice of his long-deceased Tibetan master. “And so we see, all things that happen, must happen. And when in the Oneness, we are but tools for the One. That which you seek, has been and always will be.”

Professor Cassell looked bewildered. He wanted to ask how his SCIP creation had come to play a role in what was happening, but doubted that technical science was an appropriate subject under such circumstances.

The visitor understood. “Ah, the empty door. A wonder it is, though one be enlightened. The prophet Cayce, answers for you lie there.”

The ethereal visitor looked again to Cassiopia, searching for a question within her. She thought to him, “How can I bring more love into our violent world?”

Suddenly she and the emissary conversed alone in mind, though the others appeared not to realize it. And the answer came. “That which you seek, stands next to you.”

Cassiopia looked beside her at Markman who, like the others, had heard nothing. She smiled back with a look of wonder, and was happier than she could ever remember.

Of all of them, Markman understood the most. He drank in the radiant sight of their host and found himself wondering if the frequently harsh world in which he lived could ever hope to find such tranquillity and harmony. It did not seem so.

They all heard his doubt. The omniscient being replied passionately, “As one sins in a dream, does such destroy the waking life? This place is not the dream, that lies beyond the empty door.” And all turned to stare back at the SCIP mirror.

When they looked around, the emissary once again had become a colorful ovoid standing in the distance beneath the hovering craft. A feeling of gratitude and love bridged the gap between them.

One last message found its way to their hearts. “Seek your answers in the poor and the suffering, for the One leaves gifts for his children, where he knows only

they will find them.”

With that, a star formed at the base of the ship. A moment later, the hovering object shrunk slowly and silently from sight, and disappeared behind the stars.

## Chapter 31

The atmosphere in the SCIP lab was a harsh contrast to the one from which the Dreamlanders had just returned. The room was in violent disarray. A bloody body lay on the floor near the robot's base station, and another by the Drack. There hadn't been time to fully prepare Professor Cassell for the dreadful sight, and he stared in shock from the top of the ramp, as he waited for the robot to emerge through the overheated door.

They moved down amid the displaced chairs scattered around the bloody, paper-strewn floor as blue arcs began to burn into the SCIP door's fluctuating mirror. Cassiopia was the first to check the time-elapsed clock: four hours, fifty minutes. She yelled to the robot for an emergency power down, but smoke was already clouding the blinding flashes within the door's frame. Loud popping and grinding noises punctuated the hot transformer's self-destruction.

The fumes became toxic. The vulnerable humans were forced to retreat to the exit corridor, leaving the robot to continue the shutdown task. When power was finally cut off, the inert, chalky white door rose proudly from its base, charred and cracked and steaming. It no longer looked like a surrealistic portal to another dimension. It looked like an experiment gone bad. The Professor watched from the corridor and shook his head in sad approval.

They climbed the stairs to the house, where Markman called the police. Markman put down the old fashioned receiver and was confronted by a very sober Dr. Cassell, who took him by the arm and led him to the small study where Cassiopia was waiting. They took seats close to one another, and the Professor spoke with a tension-filled urgency in his voice. "Mr. Markman, there are some very serious matters we must discuss before the police arrive, I think."

Markman returned a cautious gaze, sensing that he was about to be asked to do something less than legal.

The Professor continued, "The question is my young friend, can you imagine drug dealers, or terrorists, or some of the less ethical world governments, having access to your dreams? Or to the dreams of a President? Or those who run the Pentagon?"

“I can imagine quite a bit since I became involved with the Cassell family, Professor.”

“I put it to you, Mr. Markman, that disclosure of the SCIP technology to anyone outside this room would be a tragic mistake. Don’t you agree?”

“Professor, innocent citizens were murdered in cold blood. Two of the killers are downstairs in your hidden lab. The third was swallowed by your mysterious invention. How will you keep any of this a secret?”

“I understand that, and perhaps swallowed is a good choice of words, since it implies, ‘never to return’.”

Markman paused and eye’d the Professor with distrust. “The man who fell in can never return? You know that for certain?”

“It is a long way to the other side of the universe and back, Mr. Markman!”

“You want us to lie about what happened, Professor?”

“Change the truth would be a better way of putting it, I think.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“Mr. Markman, the only two criminals on earth who are responsible for the crimes you mentioned have been apprehended. They are downstairs in my laboratory as you have said.”

“There were three.”

“No, there are two.”

“What about the motive, Professor? The little silver box. How will you explain that it was given away on the other side of an electronic mirror in a place you call Dreamland?”

“No silver box exists. I’m not certain one ever did.”

“And the SCIP doorway? How will you explain it?”

“An advanced weapon detection system for airport and government security. A

failed experiment that may be perfected someday. I've been working on it in secret to protect the patent."

Markman exhaled in exasperation. He looked at Cassiopia. She nodded her approval. "You are that afraid your invention would be misused, Professor?"

"The governments of our world consistently demonstrate a need to experiment with something before they believe it to be harmful. Did you know that when the first atom bomb was tested, they weren't absolutely certain that it wouldn't start a chain reaction that would destroy the Earth's atmosphere? Have you ever read Orwell, Mr. Markman?"

"So Dreamland should be for your exclusive use, because you are above temptation, is that it, Professor?"

Professor Cassell paused thoughtfully. He shook his head and smiled. "I'll never rebuild the door, never. If I did, I would do many things very differently. But no, I'll never rebuild it."

Markman became quiet. The Professor sat back and bit down on his unlit pipe. The sounds of police cars pulling up in front of the house interrupted the moment and made them all look away.

The besieged group spent most of the night at police headquarters. Cassiopia and her father were detained in the same waiting room. Periodically one of them would be escorted away to give an individual account of what had happened, and occasionally both were taken. Markman was kept in a separate interrogation room while police management representatives looked on through the one way glass and periodically asked for clarifications. Lab teams went through every inch of the Cassell home, missing nothing, except for the multitude of hidden, encrypted files contained in the Drack and Tel—a concealment prearranged and easily initiated before their arrival, by Professor Cassell.

Shortly after dawn they were brought together in the office of the Chief of Police, who had satisfied himself that he was dealing with honest people—people lucky to be alive. But though their story had been thoroughly tested for agreement, he did not appear convinced.

"Sorry to keep you folks here so long. It's been a long night for all of us. Professor, I guess you and your daughter can go, the lab people and coroner are

finished at your place. It's been cleaned up some, but there's still quite a mess. You may want to stay at a hotel." The Chief paused for a reply but got none.

"We're going to accept your story of what happened, of course. It's hard to believe so much bloodshed could have happened over an antique box that you say never existed. Maybe it does exist, and we just haven't found it yet. I think that's much more likely. Anyway you two are free to go, and Professor, if you must lock yourself away in hidden laboratories, would you at least advise your daughter or someone else so that we don't end up getting called in on a bogus missing person report. We have better things to do as I'm sure you're now well aware."

The Professor nodded with appropriate embarrassment. "My sincere promise, Chief Wandell. I shall not become unnecessarily lost again. I truly regret the inconvenience."

"Well, good luck with your x-ray panel or whatever it is, Professor. I imagine the airline security people would love to have one. We certainly could use it in the court room screening process, though I doubt budget would ever allow it."

"Sonascreen, Chief Wandell, much safer than x-ray. Yes, I look forward to getting back to my work. I fear it will take some time to recover, however."

The Chief rose from his seat and shook hands with the Professor. Cassiopia eyed Markman with tired passion.

"Anything at all we can do for the police department, please let us know. We'd be glad to support your office anytime, sir," added the Professor. He nodded to Markman as Cassiopia smiled and shook the Chief's hand. They left through the open office door, looking greatly relieved.

"Close it please, Mr. Markman, if you would," he grumbled as he returned to his seat.

Markman leaned over without getting up, and shoved the worn wooden door gently shut.

The Chief pivoted around and gazed out his office window at the rising sun, his back to Markman. "Been doin' this work a long time. Sure have got to know people. Comes with the territory." The overweight man turned back to face

Markman. “They pulled the black Mercedes out of the river a little while ago. The body of the antiques woman’s brother was in the trunk. You said we’d find the body. You never said anything about the car.”

“I didn’t know.”

“The plates were missing, ...boy, that was stupid. Diplomatic immunity, my ass. You know, the way I see it, three suspects sure would fit this whole damn thing a lot better. That car was registered to the embassy, but was assigned to some guy named Zebib. We haven’t been able to track him down. He’s probably involved and left the country already but I don’t see how he had time to do that. Those guys you took down don’t fit being smart enough to be actin’ on their own. But, if you say there was only two, I guess I’ll have to go with that. They sure as hell didn’t find what they were lookin’ for, or they wouldn’t have come after you.”

“You got friends here in the department, Markman. They say you got integrity. But you know what? I don’t trust you all that much. You took down two professional killers and you haven’t got a scratch on you? How’s that happen? Oh yeah, I heard the famous story of the vest Parrish keeps. but for all I know, you were just duckin’ and runnin’ and got in the way that day. And, sending two goons out like they did just don’t make me feel right. There’s usually a smart guy along for the ride. That’s what bothers me. I’d be really pissed if any of these guys got away on my watch. So I guess there’s just one more thing I need to hear from you to close out this God forsaken mess in my own mind.”

“Name it.”

The Chief leaned forward at his desk and looked Markman squarely in the eye. “I need to know straight out. Did we really get them all, and did they all pay?”

Markman nodded reassuringly. “Sir, you got them all, and they all paid.”

Wandell put his hands behind his head, leaned back in the creaky desk chair and breathed a long sigh. “You shouldn’t go anywhere until this investigation is closed out, Markman. I do not want to see you back in this office for so much as a parking ticket, ever! If I was you, I’d take a vacation and stay out of trouble. You got somethin’ goin’ with the Professor’s daughter, or somethin’?”

“Who knows, maybe I do.”

“Well, get your butt out of here, and take my advice, you really ought to find out.”



## Chapter 32

Publicity was not something Professor Cassell could now avoid. He spent the days following the investigation mulling around the house, halfheartedly cleaning up, and muttering to himself about the unfortunate way his plans had turned out. He anticipated the impending publicity to be immensely distasteful, and felt certain he would find both his and Cassiopia's personal lives crudely portrayed in the forthcoming print of the day. The successful conclusion of the antique collector's case had to be made public. The worried populace deserved to know that the threat to their community had been removed. But for the Professor, the unwanted exposure was certain to be a terrible nuisance.

But the Professor's luck held. On the morning of the press release he sat at his desk wearing his frayed, dull blue cotton robe, reading the morning edition with controlled jubilation. The front page of the city's leading newspaper read:

—HOSTAGES RESCUED FROM MID-EAST TERRORISTS—

The late-breaking national story nearly filled the front page of the newspaper, leaving the antiques dealer's murder case as a bottom-of-the-page article, most of which was continued inside. The report contained no reference to the Cassell family directly, saying only that the murderers had been apprehended after breaking-in to a local residence. The suspects had been overpowered by local residents. Markman's name was conspicuously absent from the report.

The Professor leafed quickly through the paper, elated to find most pages devoted to reactions to the hostage rescue, along with other stories detailing the different aspects of it. The military's unexpected and well-planned liberation of the American prisoners had been surgical and swift. A uniquely prepared Special Forces unit had been dropped into the desert on a moonless night. They had compromised the terrorist hideout in almost total darkness, recovered the missing hostages, neutralized the hostiles, then returned to the drop site to escape by helicopter.

The operation was considered an unqualified success by everyone except the People's Right terrorism group who, to save face, claimed almost immediately that they had repulsed aggression by Satan's forces and would do so again whenever necessary. But, their statements to the press were disorganized and

confused, and were easily discredited by pictures of the elated hostages reunited with their families.

Professor Cassell leaned back in his leather chair and considered the secret details he knew had been omitted from the pentagon's press release—details he had learned through the same invisible military channels that had provided him with a multimillion dollar Drack computer. The U.S. intelligence agencies did not want the world to know that the special forces unit that had out-maneuvered the terrorists was in reality three carefully prepared TEL 100D robots that had broken through solid walls to locate their human objectives. In the near total darkness that had followed the robots' assault on the encampment's portable power station, chaos had resulted. The fearsome sight of the huge, reflective Tels, their visors glowing in the black night, had caused more than half of the guards to throw down their weapons and run screaming that they were being attacked by demons from hell. The few that remained fired wildly at anything that moved and had emptied their weapons uselessly. The armor plating on the relentless machines had barely been scratched.

The newspaper article concluded by reporting that the religious extremists actually considered the infiltration to be one of their most embarrassing and critically damaging defeats. It had left them feeling even more vulnerable than the civilian targets they had selected for attacks. It had left them desperate.

One week later, sitting in the same chair, wearing the same favorite robe, Professor Cassell opened his morning edition to find that the ingenious hostage rescue that had so conveniently shielded him from the tempest of the public eye, also carried with it the worst of consequences. In retaliation for the raid, a well-prepared suicide bomber had driven his counterfeit company van into the basement parking area of the TEL factory and detonated the several hundred pounds of explosives carried within it. The blast was heard for several miles, and leveled the five-story building. It left a pile of twisted steel and melted glass, and killed the unfortunate executives that had been inside working late.

The TEL corporation, in its legendary endeavor to consolidate toward near perfect efficiency, had integrated nearly all of its operations into the single, computer-regulated complex. Its data files, financial records, and research had been largely destroyed in the colossus blast.

The Professor removed his glasses and cleaned them. Warily, he realized that he

had escaped the glare of the public eye, but it had cost him his dearest friend. The body of the TEL executive who had been willing to provide him with a priceless 100D robot had been found in the debris. Computer records, stipulating the lease of the seldom-used prototype to be temporary, were now nothing more than melted silicone. The TEL 100D would remain his possession now, indefinitely—a small piece of a friendship, preserved forever. The only real consolation was that TEL science was certain to live on, and evolve. The robotic units that had already been distributed carried all the necessary technology needed to continue the ground-breaking work that had already been achieved.

The Professor thought of friends lost and of the shiny silver biped machine that now waited in the smoke-blackened underground laboratory. The damage to the SCIP door was irreparable, but the Drack computer had emerged unscathed. To Cassiopia's dismay, it remained an unexplained possession. "Military surplus, loaned by a group of friends," he had told her, and to that story he held.

When their obligations had been met, and the turmoil of the past weeks had settled down, Cassiopia and Markman drove to the Professor's home to reflect and relax for the first time since the SCIP door had been opened.

"You know, Scott, after everything that has happened, I actually find many of the things you've told me about to be very interesting. I'd like to hear more about your religion."

"Cass, it is not my religion. It has nothing to do with religion. The things I've told you about are the science of life. They apply to almost every religion. The evolutionists, the atheists, and others want to believe that this life we know here on Earth is a random chance, a one-time thing that has no order to it. What I've been telling you is that life here in our solar system is anything but random. It is carefully structured and managed by God and his disciples."

"But there's so much suffering, and such terrible things happen."

"We come here to learn about free will. How could anyone learn about free will if they were not allowed to make bad choices, and see the effects of others who make bad choices."

"But there shouldn't have to be such suffering. If God can do anything, why can't he just wave a magic wand and declare that we can gain that wisdom without the suffering?"

Markman shook his head and smiled. “That’s called the ‘irresolvable tragedy loop’ in some meditation circles. It goes like this; ‘tragedies must happen for God’s plan to be realized. But, if God is all powerful, why can’t he just wish away the tragedies. Well, tragedies must happen for God’s plan to be realized. But, if God is all powerful, why can’t he just wish away the tragedies’ and the loop goes on and on endlessly.”

Markman gently turned into the Professor’s driveway and looked at Cassiopia. “That irresolvable question is one that everyone eventually comes upon in their journey through life. It sidetracks many people and hinders them on their journey. The answer is this; You can’t understand God’s plan until your mind and his are one, or better said, you can’t understand God’s plan until you and he are one. Remember Christ saying, ‘I and the Father are one.’ So, in this life, when you reach that impossible-to-solve question, you must bridge that gap in your life’s journey with faith. And remember, you are not waiting for God to give you the answer, you are waiting for yourself to be smart enough to understand it.”

“Scott, you are truly a paradox. One minute you are slaying bad men and the next you’re a step away from the pulpit.”

Markman sneered. “I’m a long way from the pulpit.”

They found the Professor in his study. He nodded his greetings and sat back in his chair, drawing fire from a wooden match into the bed of tobacco that filled his briarwood pipe. He eyed his beautiful daughter, who sat across from him sipping wine, smiling, and pushing playfully at Markman. The mood was one of relief and intimacy.

“No, I’ll never remake the SCIP door. If I did though, I’d create an independent time base and dedicate it to the secondary transformer. That way, it might be possible to time track the Dreamland environment. I’d also design the door to be arched instead of rectangular. Analysis equipment could be transferred in there then. But, no, I won’t ever rebuild it, ever.”

“So we’ll never know how people were seeing us in places we’ve never been,” said Markman

“Perhaps that’s just as well,” replied the Professor.

“Father, the robot should be brought up from the lab since you won’t be using him there.”

“A fair suggestion, dear daughter, but that’s not possible, at least for the time being.”

“Why?”

“Well, because the above-ground loading entrance was sealed off right after delivery of the Drack. It will take some time to reopen, I would imagine.”

“Then let’s bring him up through the trunk entrance.”

“Impossible.”

“Why?”

“Darling, you’re far more experienced with robotic mobility than I. Surely you realize the rigid upper body of the thing will never allow it to get even one of those seventy-five pound legs over the trunk compartment.”

“Can we not remove the trunk?” she persisted.

“My dear, it too was intended for security. What you ask is not a simple matter.”

“Have you tried to bring Tel up?”

“No, it did not seem a likely prospect.”

“Well, let’s at least try it then.”

“My dear Cassiopia—.”

“Daddy, please let’s try.”

“Daddy? You haven’t called me that in years.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean I don’t think it. Won’t you at least try?”

“She has a real way with persuasion, don’t you think, Professor?” joked Markman.

“My boy, you don’t know the half of it.”

“We must let Tel decide,” Cassiopia insisted.

The Professor threw up his hands in defeat.

The trio regrouped in the SCIP lab and presented the problem in Tel terms to the amiable robot, who promptly replied, “objective attainable,” at which time the Professor regressed into his rambling argument that the laws of physics would without a doubt prove everyone but him wrong. The fact that the gray-haired old man seemed to be intensely enjoying the debate, robbed him of the credibility he might otherwise have commanded, though he did not seem to care.

With anticipation, they climbed up to the basement and stood staring down into the open trunk, watching the heavy robot easily climb the welded ladder. Its head and body emerged up through the trunk as it stopped at the top rung. From the waist down, Tel found itself still within the large, custom built trunk. The persistent robot scanned around itself and paused as though not knowing what to do next.

The Professor looked affectionately at Cassiopia and shook his head. He thought to find something to console her but she had obviously not yet given up hope. She stared at the robot with expectancy, though its analytical processes seemed all but thwarted.

Finally, rather than attempt to raise one of its bulky legs out and over the restrictive side panels, Tel simply threw itself over the side, crashing loudly onto its back, banging roughly against the solid, wooden container and floor as it went.

Everyone jumped back, startled. Cassiopia placed her hand on her heart and gasped in surprised delight.

Unscathed, the invincible machine climbed to its feet and collected itself. It stood idle, facing the three aghast onlookers in a moment of interlude that seemed to ask, “Anything else?”

The Professor was beside himself. “Well that is just not possible. That cannot be considered a logical solution to the problem. You have tricked me, Cassiopia. This has all been prearranged.”

“No father. It’s what I’ve been telling you all along. You underestimate the possibilities of artificial intelligence, especially in the case of Tel. It was a splendid solution to the problem.”

“Cassiopia, calculating that one should throw oneself down onto the floor is not logical. There is something strange about that machine I tell you.”

“I agree with you, Professor,” blurted Markman. “Did you know that thing has made fun of me on several occasions? Once it even laughed at me!”

Professor Cassell cast a skeptical glance. “My boy, that is completely absurd. Machines cannot comprehend humor. Many humans are not even able to. What you have just suggested is preposterous!”

Markman slapped his forehead with one hand, shook his head, and looked to Cassiopia for support. With a smirk, she turned her nose up at him and stuck out her tongue.

They returned to the study, each recovering the vice of their choice, the robot standing attentively in its preferred idle position in an empty corner of the small room.

Markman sipped at his drink and leaned back comfortably. “One thing I’ve got to know, Cass. What did you see in the little silver box?”

“You’ll think I’m out of my mind.”

“After the stuff I’ve seen. No way.”

“What I saw was life-changing. Beyond description. At first I saw myself, and all that I am. There are some things about me that are pretty good, but there are some things that I need to improve upon. And, when I wondered to myself about what I was looking at, there was suddenly this kind of spontaneous understanding. I understood where it came from, but believe me, that’s going to sound beyond crazy.”

Markman leaned back. “This I’ve got to hear.”

“Okay, but I warned you. Father, would you like to know what the big bang really was.”

“My dear, I think you are starting to scare even me.”

“The big bang was the firing of a single neuron in the mind of God.”

The Professor and Markman sat silently dumbfounded.

“The silver box contained a sample of God’s primordial thought-matter.”  
Cassiopia looked around as though she expected someone to laugh at her.  
Everyone stared silently.

“Someone from the distant future, someone we might describe as a son of God who was misbehaving, sent a robotic device back into the past to a point in the cosmos where a big bang was about to occur. They arranged this device to arrive a nanosecond before the explosion happened. It was exactly the point in time and space where the center of this big bang would occur, except that at that moment there actually was no time and space, yet. This autonomous robotic unit sampled the sphere that would produce the bang just before it occurred, and immediately returned to the future. That sample was in the silver box. The box contained a fundamental sample of God’s thought-energy.”

Markman spoke, “Are you trying to say the box contained a piece of God?”

Cassiopia smiled. “You know better than I, Scott, that what was in the box was made of God, and of course the box itself was made of God, just as the ground we are standing on is made of God, just as we ourselves are made of God. It would be more accurate perhaps, to say that what was inside the box was a transmitter to God, or a direct line to God.”

“Well, was there anything visual in there at all?”

“There were colors I’ve never seen before. There is no name for them.”

The Professor interjected, “Daughter, you’re saying you saw colors outside the known spectrum?”

“It’s crazy father. I know what I saw but I have no way to describe it. There’s nothing to compare it to.”

“I think I understand, dear Cassiopia. It’s quite explainable.”



Markman looked wryly at the Professor, who was smiling knowingly. “Would you consider explaining it then?”

The Professor nodded. “I have no idea what she saw within the box itself, but I understand her dilemma quite clearly. Imagine that you yourself were asked to explain the feelings within you, to some creature who had no knowledge whatsoever of humankind. I dare say you would find yourself at a loss for appropriate descriptives. You would undoubtedly come up with several words or phrases with appropriate meanings, but a cogent explanation of human nature would be frustratingly difficult. In the same sense, Cassiopia is unable to tell us what she saw, since it also is too far beyond our experience for her to relate it.”

“It is very much like that,” Cassiopia added. “I kind of understand what I saw, but only vaguely. It was like actually seeing feelings or something.”

Markman shook his head. “You know, that part about the box being a transmitter to God is really ironic.”

Cassiopia responded, “Why do you say that?”

“Well, all that underhandedness and violence to acquire a transmitter to God, when my understanding is that we each already have one within ourselves.”

A moment of reflection followed, until Markman’s insatiable curiosity took over once more. “So Professor, do you still believe the creature that we spoke to in Dreamland was real and not a creation of our own imaginations?”

“Quite certainly. One thing none of us could create in Dreamland is an intelligence greater than our own.”

“And did I understand him to suggest that we are all actually living in a dream world here on Earth?”

“Certainly a fair analogy I would say,” replied the Professor. “I must admit I can’t grasp it myself. He inferred that we actually exist in an alternate reality in which our lives here on Earth are but a dream state. Quite a profound concept, I would say.”

Markman paused to smile at Cassiopia. “And so that would also mean that even the worst of criminals eventually wake up from this life and have to face what he

has done, but even for him there is a chance to make up for it.”

The Professor nodded thoughtfully. “Perhaps.”

“What amazes me the most, is that he implied that the little silver box did not come to us by chance, as though everything that happened was part of a purpose!” said Cassiopia.

“Some of us believe that’s true in all of life,” replied Markman.

The group paused in thoughtful silence.

Cassiopia wondered aloud. “I guess he did say that all things that happen, must happen.”

“That’s a direct quote from the Book of Tao Chane,” Markman interjected.

“There is a story attached to it. One day this student goes to his master and tells him, ‘Master, if only I could go back and live my life over. I would do so many things differently.’ His master replies, ‘No, if you could go back, it would be the same.’ But the student disagrees. Finally the Master explains, ‘Do you not see? If you could go back, the very first change you made would set your life on a new course. You would be confronted by a whole new set of circumstances in which you again would make many mistakes. You would come to be the age you are now, and look back and again think of all the things you wished you had done differently. You would again wish you could go back and live your life differently. So, it would be the same. Each mistake you made was necessary in order to teach you a lesson you needed to learn. The worse the mistake; the greater the lesson. Even today you have made mistakes which you someday may look back on and wish you could change. Tomorrow you will make more. All things that happen, must happen. The fact that they did happen, is proof of that. The moral of the story is this; If you truly regret the mistakes you have made, and don’t wish to repeat them—then your whole life has been worthwhile.’ Markman paused, and then spoke as though he were making a confession. “I had forgotten that story until now.”

“I will reflect on the visitor for a very long time,” said Professor Cassell. “I only regret that we will never see him again. I would have liked to pose a few hundred more questions.”

“Oh, we’ll see him again,” interrupted Cassiopia.

“How do you know that?” asked Markman.

“Know what?”

“You just said we would someday see the emissary again.”

“I said no such thing.”

“You did,” insisted Markman who looked to the Professor for support. The old man nodded curiously.

“I said that we would see him again?”

The baffled trio sat silently in wonder for a few moments, considering the strange and unexpected message. Finally Markman’s familiar humor began to well up inside him. He locked his hands behind his head and leaned back. “Well, personally, my only real regret is that I missed Cassiopia dancing at the Forum.”

Sparks flew from Cassiopia’s eyes. “Father, I did no such thing.”

The Professor frowned. Cassiopia shifted in her seat and looked wryly at Markman. “You know, Scott, I guess if there was anything in the world that could make a machine laugh, it would be the sight of you in my father’s pajamas!”

Markman stiffened and raised one finger, hoping to offer some witty comeback when he was abruptly interrupted by a vaguely familiar sound from the robot.

“Neeeeeck, Nck, Nck, Nck, Nck!”