

15. Strange Reunion

Lucinda had never felt more alone in her life. She was sick with worry over Stammos' fate. Presumably, the night before, he had secreted himself aboard one of the trucks that had left Paradise earlier that morning. But had he succeeded in hiding from and fooling their captors? Had he actually broken free of their enchanted prison? Had he, by now, discovered the location of Paradise, and was he, even now, making his way across some foreign countryside, searching out a police station to get the help that would save them all?

Lucinda couldn't know. And she couldn't ask anyone, obviously—not that anyone in Paradise would know any more than she! All she could do was wait. She tried reading but couldn't concentrate. She returned to the garden where she and Stammos had met so often. But, instead of providing consolation, its vacancy seemed only to underscore her isolation and deepen her despondency.

Thoughts of her past life came flooding in on her. She found it odd that they were mainly images of men—handsome, intelligent men—who had courted her frail, blonde beauty, all to no avail. What had she been waiting for? Her delays seemed so foolish now! And, yet, if she were honest with herself, she must admit she had felt nothing for these men. Was there something wrong with her? Was she waiting for the perfect man? Or not waiting for any man?

She walked the corridors of Paradise, entering and sitting for a while in one of the lounges where people killed time by playing cards, throwing darts, shooting pool, talking, or watching close-circuit television that was piped in for them. The television programming included an excellent selection of movies and documentaries and current broadcast television from markets around the world, but carefully excluded, for reasons she could not imagine, any news broadcasts or discussions of current events.

Lucinda watched her colleagues amusing themselves and wondered over their ability to do so, despite the now general recognition that their lucrative employment contracts, which they had always known were unusual and had always suspected involved purposes of questionable legality, had made them de facto prisoners in circumstances that appeared increasingly sinister and menacing. Except for top officers, none of the residents had left Paradise since their work began, and none had been permitted to send any messages to or receive any messages or news from the outside world. In light of the fact that the project was nearly completed, the requirement for oppressive secrecy—which presumably would not end when the project did—cast a deep, threatening shadow. Lucinda and all the others were captives in an unknown location, surrounded by armed soldiers with an allegiance to no country they could identify, awaiting the expiration of their term of employment. Were they really to believe that, when the job was over, millions of dollars in bonus money would be paid into Swiss bank accounts, and each of the dozens of scholars and scientists would be set free, to simply go his own way?

“My dear,” a man’s voice came from above, and, looking up, she saw that it was Dr. Nostran Shesseribourne, her former supervisor on the cryptographic phase of the project. “We haven’t spoken in some time. How have you been? Do you mind if I sit down with you for a minute?”

“Hello, doctor!” Lucinda answered. “No, I don’t mind! Please, have a seat.”

As the tall man pulled up a chair next to her, Lucinda noticed that there were new lines in Dr. Shesseribourne’s long face. He looked haggard, as if, perhaps, he had not been sleeping well.

“Still reading the great Russian novels?” Dr. Shesseribourne asked, smiling weakly.

Lucinda was surprised he remembered her campaign to complete those big books.

“Yes,” answered Lucinda. “Well, no, actually. In the last couple of days, somehow, I haven’t been able to concentrate.”

“No?” said Dr. Shesseribourne. “I’m not surprised.” He paused, looked around, as if to make sure no one was nearby, pulled his chair closer to hers, leaned towards her, and continued in a soft voice, “In my position, I hear things. I’m not supposed to be talking to you like this, so, please, don’t tell anyone where you heard this.”

Lucinda’s eyes widened, and she automatically leaned toward Dr. Shesseribourne in turn.

“No,” Lucinda responded, “I won’t say anything. But what—?”

“Peter Stamos has been arrested,” said Dr. Shesseribourne, *sotto voce*. “He was captured in the loading dock and is being held in a retention cell on the third level. I thought you’d want to know.”

Lucinda gripped the arms of her chair. She had an incongruous memory of herself gripping the arms of another chair, then, as now, to steady herself, as she sat helpless in the “way station” in England, before being transported to Paradise. Peter had failed! He had been arrested! But what did that mean? And why was Dr. Shesseribourne telling her about the arrest? Her eyes narrowed as she studied his face. Could Shesseribourne be trusted? Could anyone be trusted in this infernal place?

“You know?” Lucinda asked, “You know that Peter and I have been seeing each other?”

“It’s hardly a secret,” answered Dr. Shesseribourne. “This place isn’t big enough to hide affairs of the heart for long!”

“I guess not,” admitted Lucinda, envisioning Stamos and herself walking together through the halls and sitting together in the cafes, always in plain sight of everyone. “I just didn’t think anyone paid any attention to us.”

“You’d be amazed how preoccupied people become with other people’s lives,” Dr. Shesseribourne said, “especially when they have no lives of their own.”

“But what about Peter?” Lucinda exclaimed, her restraint finally crumbling. “What are they doing to him? What’s going to happen to him?”

“Softly, my dear!” cautioned Dr. Shesseribourne. “He’s OK right now, just under confinement. I can’t tell you much more. But I can tell you that something big is going to happen in Paradise, and it’s going to happen soon.”

“Something big?” echoed Lucinda. “What do you mean?”

“They’re launching something they’ve code named, the ‘Passage,’” Dr. Shesseribourne answered. “I can’t find out anything about it—except one thing.”

“What’s that?” Lucinda asked.

“It involves all of us,” Dr. Shesseribourne told her, “everyone in Paradise!”

Dr. Albert Theodore Knapp, director of operations at Paradise, sat behind his desk in his office, his abundant snowy white hair scattered, his spectacles pushed up on his forehead, his hands clasped behind his head, leaning back in his swivel chair and listening to Dr. Barbra Leonides deliver her report on GO.

“The latest series of animal tests has been both encouraging and troubling,” Dr. Leonides told him. “Six of the twelve senescent rats exposed to preGO-76, the most advanced rat formulation we’ve prepared so far, showed evidence of rejuvenation. In terms of the standard parameters we’ve defined to measure virtual age, including, as you know, heart rate, lung capacity, brain activity, skin elasticity, and so on, two of the rats appear to have attained the functionality of early adulthood. This is as young as the process can make them. The process

cannot effect regression into the developmental years. Therefore, we regard these transformations as optimal successes.”

“So?” said Dr. Knapp, sitting forward and putting his hands on the desk. “This is great news. This is the first time—except for that anomaly with the pigeon—that we’ve seen Bacon’s ancient ideas actually working!”

Donnelly had ordered a crash exposure of several thousand senescent white doves to an early version of preGO. Nearly all of them had died and only a handful showed even a small favorable response. But one had been restored to its youth. Dr. Knapp never found out what became of it.

“You know, Barbara, Professor Kinmore is a genius!” Dr. Knapp went on. “How he spotted the clues to this process in Bacon’s manuscript is something I’ll never understand. Sure, once it’s pointed out to you, you can see what he was talking about. But seeing it in the first place—now that’s what I call insight! And, then, don’t forget the brilliant research he did to use those primitive ideas as the basis for the embryonic stem cell transformations that we’ve been playing with. It’s no wonder that that man has been nominated for the Nobel Prize.”

“Unfortunately,” said Dr. Leonides, “we don’t have him on our team. Which brings me to the problems I was about to talk about.”

Dr. Leonides repeated that two of the six rats had shown maximal rejuvenation and added that four others had demonstrated varying degrees of rejuvenation, ranging from significant to scarcely measurable. Two of the other six rats had shown no response whatever to the complex of viruses. The remaining four rats had developed malignant tumors that resisted treatment, grew at tremendous speed, and killed them in a matter of days.

Dr. Knapp bent his head and looked at the floor.

“You did postmortems, of course?” Dr. Knapp asked, looking back at Dr. Leonides.

“You searched for common factors—I’m sure?”

“Of course,” answered Dr. Leonides. “We used every means of differential comparison we could come up with. Obviously, if we could identify some common factor, either one that is shared by the successful rats, or one that is shared by the cancerous rats, we’d be a long way towards understanding what’s going on. But there’s nothing! It appears random! We really could use Professor Kinmore now.”

“Well, as you said, he’s not here,” said Dr. Knapp, sullenly, looking up, almost as if in a trance, sitting back in his chair again and turning it rhythmically from side to side.

Suddenly, Dr. Knapp sat forward and came to life.

“Try another series,” Dr. Knapp told Dr. Leonides. “Increase the rejuvenation threshold. I know that, at this point, this adjustment isn’t exactly trivial. But you can handle it! We’ll still bring them back to early adulthood, but not quite so early. I have a feeling that, as we approach puberty, we start interfering with developmental processes that go wrong too easily. So, don’t make them so young.” He paused, looking to Dr. Leonides for a reaction to his plan.

“It could work,” Dr. Leonides acknowledged. “It’s worth trying.”

Dr. Leonides stood up.

“I’m getting back to the lab,” Dr. Leonides said. “If you want me to redesign that bolus, even just tinker with it, there’s no time to waste!”

Lingarn stood at the third floor window in his stateroom, at evening twilight, looking over the forested area that surrounded Paradise, watching the spectacular red and gray clouds that covered the setting sun. There were only four rooms with prospects offering a vista above ground level. Two were reserved for Dr. Knapp and Dr. Shesseribourne; one had been assigned,

on his arrival, to Lingarn; and one stood empty, readied for any other dignitary who might come to call.

Of all the people in Paradise, Lingarn mused, I'm the only one who knows where in the world we are! The private airstrip, purchased from a defunct commercial aviation academy, where incoming flights were landed, was about twenty-five miles to the southwest. The pilots, who knew nothing about the ultimate destination of their passengers, returned to their points of origin as soon as they had discharged everyone. The handful of chauffeurs, who were responsible for driving arrivals at the airport to Paradise itself, were no mere hired hands. They were among Donnelly's most trusted, inner circle of crack soldiers. And they only knew the location of Paradise and the appearance of its outer gate. They had no idea as to its extent or the nature or size of its population, much less any notion of its purpose.

Lingarn was a driven man. Unlike Brandon Schmidt, his partner and second in command, he had not been lead into the strange life of a mercenary by a need for money. His father, Baron Heinrich Von Velkley, was a minor aristocrat with roots in the brooding city of Vienna and the owner of remote, magisterial Alpine estates. Von Velkley had died in a hunting accident when Lingarn was ten years old, and Alex, his brother, seven years his senior—a nasty, stupid boy, resentful of Lingarn's penetrating intelligence—prepared to inherit control of the family fortune and estates at his majority. Lingarn swore to himself that he wouldn't live his life owing his brother anything. Alex, always their mother's favorite, persuaded their mother to packed Lingarn off to boarding school; an arrangement, which, as it happened, suited Lingarn well, for he had no more wish to see his brother's face, than Alex had to ever encounter him at home.

Fortunately, Lingarn, who took a new last name to divorce himself from any association with his brother's house, had not been entirely disinherited. His father had left him a substantial amount of cash, if not quite enough to make him independent, and a small chateau in the Austrian alps, some distance from his family estate. Lingarn always felt as if he were the bastard son, even though he knew that was not the literally the case. And he felt he had a score to settle with his family, even though he had no idea what it would even mean for him to do so. He always tried to imagine what his father, a hardened military man, whom he had hardly known, would have done had he faced the challenges that Lingarn faced. He always tried to imagine, but he never really could.

While still a teenager, he discovered something strange about himself. He had had an accident, had run into a dog with his car. When he got out of the car, he saw the dog was injured beyond hope and would have to be destroyed. He invariably carried a combat knife, even in those days, and he drew it and stabbed the dog in the heart, killing it instantly. The blood spurted out, startling him, and he drew back. But he noticed that he felt nothing, nothing except a momentary peace. What was missing in him was any regret over or compunction for having taken this life. It was as if he had crumpled up a sheet of paper and tossed it away.

But Lingarn was not only indifferent to violence and death. He found he was drawn to it. Everything about combat and techniques of killing fascinated him. After two years in the military, which he found interesting but limiting, he quit the service and began an intense study of the martial arts, finding himself a gifted pupil. He also devoured books on firearms, military strategy, making bombs, concocting poisons, and even ranged into reading about more exotic weaponry like crossbows and bolas.

Lingarn's baptism under fire was a two year stint as a mercenary officer, taking one side of an African tribal conflict. He was hired to train and lead a rag-tag battalion of native draftees in an internecine struggle in which fatalities were bound to be high. During this war, Lingarn learned he could kill men without hesitation, without flinching, without sentiment or concern and sleep well the same night.

Darkness was falling fast as Lingarn, tearing himself from his recollections, looked out of the window once more, over the darkening tops of the crowded trees.

Realizing the time, Lingarn walked to the bedside table and picked up the telephone, dialing a direct call to Donnelly. The man had to be told the score.

"I'm no scientist," Lingarn told Donnelly. "But I can tell you they've hit a snag. GO causes cancer, at least in a third of the subjects—it's as simple as that! Dr. Leonides is adjusting the virus to try to correct the problem."

"Let me think about this," said Donnelly. "Maybe she can fix it. If not, maybe it doesn't have to hold things up, after all."

Lingarn hung up the telephone, and an image of Dr. Leonides, her blonde hair, her finely chiseled face, her cool, severe expression, swam before him, and an alien thought came into his mind.

Why should he spend every night alone in his room? Of course, Dr. Leonides was off limits to him. It wouldn't do to muck around with the lead scientist at a critical time like this. But, he said to himself, walking towards his door, there were plenty of women at Paradise. What would it hurt if he went downstairs and had a look?

In addition to the three little eateries, there were two bars in Paradise. Lingarn headed straight for one of them, called "The Cloisters," that was decorated like a section of a medieval

cloister, complete with stone arches and a tiny central quad. There were three unescorted women, two of whom, at least in the dim light, appeared reasonably good looking, talking together at the bar. Lingarn sat down a few feet away from them and ordered a scotch, neat.

He didn't have to wait long to get noticed.

"Hey," said a small brunette, standing next to the bar in a sleeveless red dress, turning from her friends, whirling to face Lingarn and raising her glass, as if to command attention, "who are you?"

Even in the soft lighting, Lingarn could see her eyes were heavy with liquor. She was one of the women he had considered attractive.

"I'm Hermann Lingarn," Lingarn answered, swiveling his stool to face her.

"I haven't seen you before, Hermann!" answered the woman, looking at her friends, then looking back at Lingarn. "Don't tell me they've had you hidden away in some secret laboratory, somewhere!"

"There is no 'secret laboratory,' dummy!" interposed a blonde woman in a black sweater and skirt, half sliding off of her stool as she spoke. She was the other woman whom Lingarn had spotted as good looking.

"I just arrived a couple of days ago," Lingarn explained. "That's why you don't know me."

The three women looked at him with amazement. No one left or arrived at Paradise.

"You're kidding?" said the blonde. "You're not kidding? You really did just arrive!"

The brunette who was standing walked towards him and the other two left their stools and followed.

“Are you here to let us go?” asked the short, plump woman with very short light brown hair, who hadn’t yet spoken.

“Yes!” the blonde piped in, raising her voice. “Are you here to let us go?”

“No,” answered Lingarn. “I’m here to help get the work done. That’s all.”

The women looked stricken, and Lingarn thought, it was as if they wilted, their shoulders drooping, their arms falling to their sides. It was as though someone had suddenly turned off happy music and it was replaced by nothing but empty silence.

Well, they were certainly disappointed, Lingarn considered. And I certainly don’t care! And, at that moment, he downed what was left of his drink, stood up, nodded to the women, and walked out of the bar, the door swinging closed behind him, without saying another word.

Lingarn walked the halls of Paradise, passing people without really noticing them. Women, they looked good, he thought. But when you got close, there was always something unpleasant about them, something that drove him away. Lingarn only really felt alive when he was on a mission. That was his problem. Would he ever, could he ever, find a woman who would make him feel alive as well?

Lingarn came to a sign reading, “Le Chapeau Rouge.” The Red Hat, he thought, the Cardinal’s having a little joke, even if no one gets it but me. He turned and went inside.

Lingarn noted, without approval or disapproval, that the establishment resembled a diminutive French café, right down to the candles in glass bulbs on the table tops. There were two men at a table in one corner, and a young couple at a table in another corner. By herself, at a table on the side of the room, sat a young woman, her face turned away from the door.

The woman—there was something familiar about her. It seemed absurd to think so, just seeing her from behind, but he thought he recognized her radiant blonde hair and her exquisitely

slender, straight body. It was Lucinda Milne! He knew her now! This was the girl he had kidnapped at Oxford for delivery to Paradise. Of course, where else would she be? Starting from the unaccustomed emotion, he suddenly experienced a feeling of tenderness for the girl. He never saw his victims again! He never encountered them once his work had been done. This was a first for Lingarn. He found himself walking, perfunctorily, tropically, toward her table.

“Ms. Milne?” Lingarn said, once he stood beside her.

“Yes?” Lucinda answered, looking up and smiling. “Have we met?”

Her eyes locked on his black staring eyes—and she knew! But she seemed not be able to take in what she was seeing. Could this be the man who had murdered Professor Englemeyer and kidnapped her from his office at gunpoint?

Without thinking, Lucinda jumped from her chair and stepped back from her table, regarding Lingarn with fear and horror.

“No, no!” said Lingarn. “You don’t understand! I’m not here to hurt you! Please! I—I only saw you sitting here—”

“Keep away from me!” said Lucinda, backing away from him still further. “You’re the man who murdered Professor Englemeyer!”

“That was my job,” Lingarn explained, as if that excused everything. “That’s all over with now. We’re here, together. Let’s make the best of it. What do you say?”

“You’re—,” Lucinda stammered, “you’re insane!”

She turned and ran from the café, looking over her shoulder once to make sure Lingarn wasn’t following.

The other occupants of the café had stopped speaking, to observe what they assumed was a lovers’ quarrel. Now that Lucinda had left, they returned to their conversations.

Lingarn stood alone. He felt an unusual emptiness, a kind of yearning. Lingarn was unaccustomed to such feelings; but he recognized that these feelings were for Lucinda only! It had been a strange reunion, Lingarn thought. Stranger still might be the pleasure, Lingarn imagined feverishly, when he took her for his own!