

18. Passage

Dr. Barbara Leonides' "fix" for the rejuvenation formula, dubbed preGO-77, developed at the suggestion of Dr. Albert Theodore Knapp, seemed to be a success, and it was officially regarded as one. Alone in his office, immediately after dismissing Dr. Leonides with his thanks, Dr. Knapp, as director of operations at Paradise, telephoned to report directly to Cardinal Donnelly that nine of twelve senescent subject rats had demonstrated significant rejuvenation, either attaining regression to early adulthood or to nearly that stage. Two had shown no response. One had developed a malignant tumor; but, it was believed that, with the information they had learned about genetic markers for these tumors, screening would enable avoiding the use of the treatment in animals or people that were vulnerable to developing them. Accordingly, to signify these attainments, preGO-77 had been rechristened, "GO."

"Congratulations, Dr. Knapp," said Cardinal Donnelly, speaking from the atrium in his Boston mansion, draped in a shantung silk robe, and leaning back in his lawn chair, with his feet propped on the ottoman, looking up to the heavens. It was four o'clock in the morning in Boston, and, through the glass ceiling six stories above him, shone the glittering dome of the clear night sky.

"Initiate Passage at once," Donnelly continued. "I knew this was coming, so I already stationed reserve troops in the bunker behind the compound. The Seraphim," Donnelly used his official name for the reorganized Paradise guards, "have been shaking down the lock down procedures since last week. You remain in charge of the scientific study, obviously. But Lingarn is assuming operational control of the station. You're under his orders, now, doctor. You understand that, I assume?"

“Yes, Cardinal Donnelly,” answered Director Knapp. “Frankly, I’m glad to be turning over control of this place to someone else. I’m a scientist, after all, not an administrator! So long as Lingarn lets me study the outcomes, he can do what he likes. I won’t get in his way.”

“See that you don’t,” said Donnelly. “Paradise will be under martial law, and Lingarn won’t have much patience for interference. I don’t know what your impression of Lingarn is so far; but, believe me, he’s not a man you want to cross. And don’t be concerned about your work. You’ll be free to pursue it. After all, your project is the whole reason that Paradise was built! And Lingarn knows that, as well.”

Director Knapp hung up the receiver, put his arms out on the arms of his desk chair, and leaned back to think.

So Passage was about to begin! Perhaps it shouldn’t have, considering that he had been expecting it for months, but the fact that the time had finally come made him nervous. Director Knapp wasn’t actually afraid of the risk to himself. After all, he, Dr. Shesseribourne, and Dr. Leonides, classified as essential personnel, were slated to receive GO. In fact, although he hadn’t taken the time to think about it, taking GO would be a fabulous adventure. Was it really possible that, in a matter of weeks, he would have the body he had when he was at the height of his young manhood, when he was twenty one years old? It was not only possible, he mused, it seemed inevitable, whether he liked the idea or not. But, the more he considered it, the more he did like the idea! And why not? Why not become young again? He saw himself taking Dr. Leonides in his arms, kissing her passionately, and his heart began to pound.

As for worn out, old Dr. Shesseribourne—it would be amusing to see him change, move backward in time, lose those deep furrows in his drawn face, stand up straight, and even actually crack a smile! And, as for Dr. Leonides, he envisioned her excitedly again, she was already

young and beautiful—but even she should benefit from having the weight of a few years rolled from her shoulders. How delightful that would be to watch!

No, what was making him edgy weren't worries over his personal prospects. It was more the fear of what was going to happen in Paradise when half the inhabitants began to realize that they were senescing rapidly and that they were speeding toward death from old age! This was murder, after all—slow murder, but murder nonetheless,—and on a mass scale. Would even the soldiers be able to keep order, when people started seeing their bodies falling to pieces and recognized that they had only weeks to live?

Unbeknownst to the population of Paradise, an intensive lock down had been proceeding since early the preceding morning. Just beyond the trees closest to the exterior of the compound, heavy, electrified steel fences had been unloaded from tractor beds, set upright, rolled into place, attached to sunken concrete pylons, and linked together, adding a solid wall of metal twelve feet high, which completely encircled the property. This was added to a structure that was, in itself, a staunch fortress and an effective high-security installation.

The Seraphim, as the soldier-guards were now called, who had begun filing into the corridors and common areas of Paradise in unprecedented numbers, had turned in their old uniforms. Their gray, inconspicuous work clothes were replaced with snappy, black uniforms, studded with brass buttons and embroidered with the insignia of a red crucifix, crested by four fiery Seraphim's wings, emblazoned over their hearts. The Seraphim's guns were no longer concealed. Instead, they carried holstered .357 magnums, with a full line of ammunition strung along their black gun belts. Each also wore, clipped to his belt, an eight inch gray metal rod with a black ribbed rubber hand piece, which could deliver a temporarily disabling, but non-lethal, electric charge.

Other important, if less colorful, changes were also being effected. Stairwells had been bolted shut, and most elevators would no longer operate without the use of a key. Knives had been removed from the kitchen cutlery. Even the darts had disappeared from the recreational lounges.

The people in Paradise were watching and wondering. What could these alterations signify? Obviously, something was happening! The general opinion was divided. Many thought that operations were, at long last, being wound down, and that, therefore, Paradise was finally being closed up. According to this notion, the residents would be given notice that their bonus money had been deposited to their Swiss accounts, they would be debriefed, and they would be set free. Others thought that something more sinister was going on, although they had no suggestion as to what it might be.

Director Knapp swiveled his chair around, rose, and walked to the window. From this privileged prospect, he could just see the ugly gray line of the electrified fence that had been erected over the last couple of days, showing, here and there, through the trees. Suddenly, he had the feeling of being trapped. Had he really trusted Donnelly to raise him up to a position of eminence in the world scientific community when this was all over? In any case, he thought, shuddering slightly, there was no turning back now. Paradise had always been a high security installation, with no easy way in or out. Now, it had become a high security prison, and, as Director Knapp knew, it was about to become a death house, with no escape for anyone, at least until the released retroviruses had run their course.

He was still immersed in these grim thoughts when Lingarn burst into his office, throwing open the door without knocking.

“Hello, Director,” Lingarn said, approaching Dr. Knapp’s desk, as Dr. Knapp turned from the window to face him.

“Hello, Mr. Lingarn,” Director Knapp answered, trying not to betray his disturbance over the abruptness of Lingarn’s entry. “I just spoke with the Cardinal,” he continued, adding hastily, “and I’m turning over responsibility for and control of Paradise to you.”

“Yes,” answered Lingarn, his face and affect as flat as they invariably were, “I am aware of this. There are two hundred and thirty seven staff members in Paradise. We’ll need two hundred and fifty viral boluses to start with, half STOP, half GO. You’ll have them cultured and ready for airborne transmission by tomorrow morning. Do you foresee a problem meeting this delivery schedule?”

“By tomorrow morning?” answered Director Knapp, swallowing hard. “Well, no. Not really. I’ll tell Dr. Leonides and Dr. Shesseribourne to start production at once. They only take a matter of hours to culture.”

“I know that, over the next few weeks, you’ll be concentrating on observing the outcome of the Passage trials,” continued Lingarn. “But, remember, you still have to complete work on the vectors. I’ll expect you to have final results for us by the time the Passage is over.”

“Yes, sir,” answered Director Knapp. Without having made a conscious decision to do so, he realized, he had already begun to address Lingarn as his superior.

“Oh,” added Lingarn, “of course we’ll require randomized distribution, in general. But I’ll have one or two names for you, people who will receive either STOP or GO, according to my instructions.”

Director Knapp raised his white, bushy eyebrows in surprise. Could Lingarn have some personal interest in the outcome of these trials? Well, it was none of Director Knapp's business. And it wouldn't pay for him to ask any questions now.

"As you say, Mr. Lingarn," answered Director Knapp. "Such minor modifications won't affect the integrity of our results."

Lingarn nodded, raised his right hand slightly in farewell, turned, and left the office, as was his habit, without adding another word to what had been spoken.

Lucinda had kept to her room as much as possible since her encounter with Lingarn two days before. When Peter Stamos told her that a German was coming to Paradise, she had immediately thought of Lingarn and tried to put his horrible, frozen face out of her mind. Of course, she could never forget him, never forget the sight of Lingarn putting a knife into the heart of Professor Englemeyer, calmly wiping off his blade on the professor's jacket, and, then, turning and striding towards her, his black eyes blazing, with a drawn automatic pistol in his hand. But she had convinced herself that the German who was coming to Paradise was almost certainly somebody else. Now, she knew that not only was Lingarn in Paradise, but that he knew that she was there, too, and, far worse, that he had apparently developed a sudden erotic interest in her—an insane interest, it sickened her to realize, because, although he had murdered her teacher and best friend in cold blood before her eyes not weeks before, Lingarn seemed to think this peccadillo ought not to constitute an obstacle to their future romance!

"Peter! Peter!" she said his name softly to herself, half crying out in despair for his fate and half calling on him to rescue her from her own. But she knew that, whatever he was suffering, he was as much beyond the reach of her help, as she was beyond the reach of his.

Lucinda's roommates were two young, junior scientists from the genetic research project and two middle aged secretaries, who worked for the administrative office. She had little in common with them, and they shared little conversation beyond ordinary pleasantries. She also felt the same reluctance to trust or confide in them as she felt about everyone else she had met at Paradise. Formerly, Lucinda had resented the almost invariable presence of one or another of these roommates when she was in the room, wishing that she could be alone with her thoughts and her books. Since encountering Lingarn, however, she was pleased indeed to have any company on hand, in case, God forbid, Lingarn should decide to come calling!

Lucinda lay in her bed, day dreaming, as evening slowly became the night. She changed into her nightgown, tied her robe over it, then climbed back into bed. She had been thinking again, as she often did, about the man of her imagination, the perfect man, powerful, brilliant, handsome, gifted in a hundred ways, and pure in his heart. That's what she needed now, she thought, sleepily. A knight to ride in and save the day! And to have me as his prize, of course, she added to herself, as she drifted off to sleep.

An unprecedented event had been scheduled for nine o'clock the next morning. Every resident of Paradise, except Lingarn, Director Knapp, Dr. Barbra Leonides and Dr. Shesseribourne, had received a memo instructing them to assemble in one of two assembly halls on the third sublevel. Few of the residents had ever visited the third sublevel, which was generally assumed to house utilities, such as air-conditioning units and storage facilities. As nine o'clock approached, four working elevators carried thronging groups down in shifts, curious about what they would find when they reached their appointed destinations.

Those leaving the elevators were stunned to see the brand new black uniformed, visibly armed Seraphim guards lining the halls. The Seraphim stood at attention against both walls,

facing outward, at six foot intervals, from the elevator to the end of the corridor, in the far distance. The residents headed for the assembly halls passed by these guards, eyeing them nervously, but, of course, not speaking to them, nor, really to each other, until they reached an open assembly area, populated with many soldiers, in which there stood two tables, each in front of a doorway. And, at each table, sat a single soldier with a clipboard, holding a pen.

The doors were clearly marked “A” and “B,” and everyone had been told to report either to room A or to room B and to bring their memo of invitation with them. The crowd milled around, looking at the soldiers uncomfortably. But there was nowhere to go but forward. So, one by one, they approached the tables, presented their invitations, their names were checked against a list, their photo identity cards were checked, and they were passed along into one assembly room or the other. Those entering either room found themselves in a small hall, suitable for seating about 150 persons, with tiered rows of cushioned chairs, as in an opera house. In front, were a stage and a projection screen. As they found seats, many of them thought that, though their absence seemed peculiar, it was certainly a relief not to see a single soldier within the hall.

Outside, in the assembly area, the tables were still doing business, sorting through the crowds, making certain each person was sent into the room to which he had been invited.

Lucinda stood among the others, her invitation clutched in her right hand, trying to hang back in the crowd. To her it seemed as if there had been a revolution and that some alien power, backed by hundreds of black uniformed soldiers, had seized control of Paradise during the night. She recognized most of the people in the crowd. And most of them probably recognized her. But, as often as not, they gave no sign of noticing one another. They were too absorbed by the

urgency of the instructions they had to follow and too stunned by the surreal surroundings to say much of anything.

“Lucinda!” a man’s voice called to her from behind, and she turned to see who was speaking.

Lingarn! What was he doing here now? What did he want?

She backed away, pushing into other people as she went.

“Lucinda,” Lingarn said again, reaching out to take her hand, “this is not for you. You must come with me. Come with me now!”

“No!” shouted Lucinda, pulling back from him, whirling around, and starting to shove her way through the crowd.

“Take her,” Lingarn said to two soldiers who were standing by his side.

Immediately, the soldiers swept aside the intervening people, knocking two of them to the ground, as they advanced on Lucinda and seized her, each of them grasping one of her forearms with both his hands, lifting her struggling body off the ground.

The onlookers watched in shock and amazement, but there was nothing they could do against the more than a dozen armed troops that immediately concentrated around Lucinda.

“Bring her to interrogation room 301,” said Lingarn to the soldiers who held Lucinda pinned. “Watch the door.”

“You’ll see, Lucinda,” said Lingarn as the soldiers towed her past him. “This is for your own good.” He raised his arm, pointing his finger to the door, “Go!” he called to the soldiers, and they took her quickly away, firmly gripping her arms, half carrying her, half dragging her out the door.

“About your business!” Lingarn turned and shouted to the crowd. “Nothing here concerns you. Move along! Present your credentials! Move!”

With Lucinda gone, the crowd, agitated but cowed, closed ranks, and, soon, it was as if she had never been present. Within minutes, as Lingarn stood by, his hands on his hips, watching, people were again filing up to the tables, and, once again, showing their papers and entering the assembly halls.

When the last of the crowd had been shunted into his assigned room, the doors to the halls were bolted from the outside, and the assembly area was occupied by dozens of soldiers, who formed themselves into small, orderly groups, clustering near the doors, as if waiting, although it was not obvious for what.

Lingarn, satisfied that everyone had been locked inside his designated station, headed for interrogation room 301, where Lucinda was being held for him. He had at least fifteen minutes until he had to return to this area, to supervise the egress of the population, and he was eager to make the most of this time.

Entering the small interrogation room and closing the door behind him, Lingarn found Lucinda seated at the table in the room’s center, her head in her hands.

“I regret it was necessary to use force to remove you from the assembly area,” Lingarn told her. “But I was trying to save your life.”

Lucinda looked up at him without comprehension. All she knew was that her upper arms were sore and probably black and blue and that she was alone with a maniac and a murderer and entirely at his mercy.

Lucinda watched as Lingarn went to a heavy metal cabinet at the side of the room, unlocked it, and took out a small device that looked like a mouthpiece attached to a tiny pouch. He then walked to the table where Lucinda sat and put the device on the table in front of her.

“This is an inhaler,” Lingarn told her. “Hold it up to your face and cover your mouth. Then press the red button, there,” he pointed to a button on the side of the device, “and breathe in, deeply. Then, hold your breath as long as you can.” He paused for a moment. “That’s all there is to it. Then, you’re done, and, soon, you’ll be free to go.”

“What is it?” asked Lucinda, weakly, finding her voice for the first time.

“I can’t tell you that,” said Lingarn. “We’re doing an experiment on the population of Paradise. Everyone is being exposed to one or another—agent. I discovered that you were slated to being exposed to something that, let’s just say, would have put you at considerable risk. So I arranged for a substitution to be made.”

Lingarn paused, as if struggling to find words.

“I—like you,” Lingarn continued, finally. “The contents of this inhaler won’t hurt you. With any luck at all, it should have a very favorable effect!”

“What if I don’t want to take your drugs?” said Lucinda.

“You have no choice,” Lingarn told her.

Lucinda knew that Lingarn was in earnest and that, in fact, if she refused to cooperate, she would be forced to comply. She went limp in her chair. What was the point of fighting? She could only hope that Lingarn was telling her the truth about the benign effects of the unknown substance to which she was about to be exposed. If not, well, it seemed as if everyone in Paradise was going to be sacrificed anyway. As to what they were being sacrificed for or to, she had no idea.

Lucinda leaned forward, picked up the inhaler and covered her mouth with it. As she had been instructed to do, she pressed the red button, inhaled, and held her breath. She tasted nothing and felt no sensation, except for the gentle rush of gas into her lungs. In about thirty seconds, she exhaled, put the device back on the table, and leaned back in her chair.

“Good,” said Lingarn, picking up the inhaler, impassive, as always. “Now, I have business to attend to.” He walked back to the cabinet, replaced the spent inhaler, and locked the front panel.

“You’ll be taken back to your room, shortly,” Lingarn told Lucinda, before turning his back, opening the door, and closing it behind him.

Meanwhile, in the two assembly rooms, the lights had been dimmed and video presentations had begun on the large screens in the front of the halls.

A tall man, his face was artfully concealed in shadows, who was wearing clerical robes and a red cap, and who was seated on a large, ornate, high backed wooden chair, began speaking.

“Welcome!” the man’s voice said. “As you know, Paradise was constructed to pursue research into life extension technology. I am very pleased to report to you today that our initial work has been successfully completed. Every scientific discovery requires confirmation, however, and that’s why I’ve asked you to come here this morning. When you agreed to participate in our work at Paradise, you signed a pact accepting the risks, if any, that would be involved. Accordingly, you—every man and woman in Paradise—is being enlisted to serve as a subject in the final trial of our results. These trials will last approximately three weeks, during which time you will be carefully observed and monitored. When the trials are concluded, your bonus money will be deposited in your numbered Swiss accounts and you will be given a plane ticket to the destination of your choice.”

The man stood, his face still unseen in the shadows, and extended his hands in valediction.

“Godspeed, my children!” the man said, in a booming voice. “And now, enter the Passage—the passage to a new life and a new world! My prayers go with you!”

The screen fell dark in each room, the lights came on, and, at the same moment, invisible gas was released from nozzles distributed around the walls, floorboards, and ceilings. The people turned to look at one another, confused, even baffled, but, generally, feeling a slight sense of relief. They hadn't known what to expect. But, somehow, they had feared something worse than what they had heard. Of course, the pressing and disturbing question, for which none of them had an answer, was, what did the speaker mean when he said that each of them was going to “serve as a subject” in a trial of the experimental results?

In minutes, the seated crowds began standing and shuffling out toward the aisles, murmuring their questions, comments, and curses to one another. As the people nearest the back tried the doors, they were first surprised, then alarmed, to find them bolted. Finally, the entire crowd massed against the back of the hall, unable to get out through the doors and yet unwilling to return to their seats.

Panic was about to break out. What was the meaning of this imprisonment? Surely, after being delivered of that heartening, if somewhat quizzical, talk, they weren't to be buried alive in a small theater in a subterranean level of Paradise?

Then, as someone tried the doors again, he found they had been unlocked, and he pushed them open and burst outside into the assembly area. The other doors opened as well, and, within minutes, the entire crowd from both halls had poured out and was milling about in a state of confused relief.

Lingarn, having returned to the assembly area, stood by the side, attended by a half dozen soldiers, observing the people streaming out the doors. When he was satisfied that the lecture rooms had been emptied, he signaled to the guards, who began herding members of the crowd back toward the elevators, which would carry them upstairs to the main floor. Passage, he noted to himself dispassionately, reaching for his cell phone to call Cardinal Donnelly with a brief report of the news, had successfully begun.