

14. A Vital Contribution

Intimacy was not forbidden to the inhabitants of Paradise. However, it was made difficult by the almost complete lack of privacy within the compound. Sleeping quarters were small dormitories, usually housing six of either gender, so opportunities to be alone were never abundant. Public areas were just that, public areas, and they had evidently been designed so as not to harbor any nooks that could conceal private activities. In addition, cameras were in evidence throughout the work areas, corridors, and near the doorways and elevators. Lucinda Milne always had the feeling, as did most of the other people around her, that there were other cameras as well, hidden ones, probably in the recreation areas, perhaps even in the bedrooms, which watched everyone when they didn't know they were being watched.

During the past few weeks, since the cryptographic phase of the project—that is, verifying the decipherment of the sections of Roger Bacon's mysterious, last, great book that dealt with rejuvenation and life extension—had been definitively completed, Lucinda was no longer charged with any official duties. She spent much of her time reading books that she had been intending to read for months or even years, but had never found time for. Acquiring the books was as easy as requesting them. Lucinda quickly realized that the powers that controlled Paradise liked to make a big show of providing every possible comfort and convenience for their tenants, voluntary and involuntary; and, accordingly, the book list that she supplied was filled, expeditiously and completely. She saw no reason not to take advantage of the books once they had appeared, stacked on her bed stand.

Of course, reading was a kind of self-defense. It was a way of keeping thoughts at bay, thoughts about what was going to happen when the project was really finished. However, her

books, as helpful as they might be, couldn't take the place of a person in whom she could confide.

Accordingly, Lucinda continued to meet with Peter Stamos, whenever his work on the now very active genetics phase of the project permitted; and they continued, weather permitting, to get together in the small, enclosed, little frequented garden where they had first encountered one another weeks before.

Lucinda, immersed in a translation of The Brothers Karamazov that she held open in her lap, was waiting for Stamos, when Stamos stepped through the entrance break in the high hedges, breathing hard.

"Peter!" said Lucinda, sticking in a card to mark her place, snapping shut her book, placing the book down, and jumping out of her chair to greet him.

"Hi, sweetheart," said Stamos, coming close and putting his arms around her. "I just about ran all the way. I couldn't wait to see you!"

They embraced warmly, but also defiantly, because they could not even know if they were being observed and because their lives lay under an ominous cloud of impending doom. For, when work on the project came to an end, it seemed that they were fated to expire with it.

"I hear somebody's coming to Paradise," said Stamos, after they settled down on one of the garden seats for two, their knees pressed together, their hands intertwined, "somebody important. He's supposed to be in charge of the operational phase of the project. You understand what that means?"

"Not exactly," said Lucinda. "But I suppose you mean that he puts the completed research into operation. Which must mean that it's ready to go. Which must mean that the research—not only mine, but yours—is finished."

“Or almost finished,” Stammos said. “He seems to be arriving a little early. I can tell you that we’re not quite done. No, not quite. But,” he continued, looking into Lucinda’s eyes, “you can see that time is running out. We have to do something and do it soon.”

“What do you know about this man?” asked Lucinda.

“Nothing, really,” said Stammos. “Someone said he was German. And he’s coming soon. That’s all.”

Lucinda felt a chill. She couldn’t forget the cold-fish German connected with this operation whom she had met. The one who had kidnapped her! The one who had murdered Professor Englemeyer! But, of course, there were tens of millions of other German men in the world....

“Darling,” said Stammos, “are you all right?”

Like other men before him, enthralled by her looks, her sweet nature, and the feeling that she was charged with passion that lay ready to be released, Stammos had fallen in love with Lucinda. It distressed him to see her in distress.

“Yes,” Lucinda answered. “I was just—thinking of something. It’s nothing!” She had never told Stammos about the murder, never spoken about it to anyone. There seemed no reason to start now. “Well, what do you think? Do you think that his coming will give us any new opportunities?”

“Well!” Stammos said. “I hadn’t actually thought of it that way. But, now that you mention it, probably a party of people will arrive with him. And, probably, not all of them will stay. That means a strange vehicle with a few passengers will probably be leaving Paradise.”

“And what does that mean?” asked Lucinda.

“That means that maybe someone who shouldn't be could be aboard that vehicle,” answered Stamos. “And that someone could be me!”

“You?” asked Lucinda. “How about ‘us’? If there’s going to be an escape from this place, I’m going!”

Stamos disengaged his hands from Lucinda’s.

“Listen, the way I see it,” Stamos explained, gesturing with his hands, for emphasis, “I’ll be lucky to figure out a way for one person to sneak aboard that car or truck or whatever it is. It would be next to impossible to get two people on board. But look,” he went on, taking her hands in his once more, looking into her eyes, “don’t you see? If I get out, that’s all that matters? I’ll get help! I’ll bring people back with me! If I can get past the gate, everyone in Paradise will be free!”

Lucinda was silent. Yes, she reflected, Stamos was right. All it would take would be for one person to get out, and the nightmare would be over!

Stamos did his best to observe the garage entry points and discharge bays, hoping to contrive a strategy that would enable him to secret himself aboard a vehicle heading out of the compound. He was surprised that no one stopped him as he walked through the entry areas. He found them empty and silent. The massive outer doors that slid like mammoth shutters from the ceiling to the ground were closed. The reception areas, lit up behind glass—into which, presumably, new arrivals would pass, before entering the compound—were unoccupied, and the doors to them were locked. He left the area quickly, because he didn’t want to arouse suspicions, and he didn’t know if his activities were being monitored.

It now seemed to Stammos that his escape, if indeed he could make one, would have to be improvised. He just couldn't get any advance information that would enable him to make plans.

One morning, Stammos was told that the man whom they had been expecting was already at Paradise and had been there since the night before. Evidently, he had arrived by car, without fanfare, late in the evening, together with Dr. Lambert Schafhaussen, the assistant director of Paradise, and Dr. Barbara Leonides, Stammos' boss on the project. Dr. Leonides, Stammos was informed in a telephone call from her assistant, had called a meeting for ten o'clock, inviting four of the top genetics researchers, including Stammos, to meet with their new collaborator.

Stammos' three colleagues were already seated at the table in the small conference room when Stammos arrived. There were tiny metal bars marked "reserved" in front of the seat at the head of the table and in front of the seat to its right.

"Dr. Adams, Dr. Johanssen, Dr. Marx," Stammos said, greeting each of the three men. "Good morning, everyone!"

"Good morning, Dr. Stammos," said Dr. Adams, a small, balding man in his sixties, who had been a stem cell researcher at Stanford University, before being tapped to come to Paradise.

"Good morning," said Dr. Johanssen, a young Swedish researcher from a private genetic engineering institute in Stockholm.

"Curious, as are we all?" said Dr. Marx, a forty five year old biotechnology professor from Princeton University.

"Yes," answered Stammos, taking a seat, "I'm curious—"

At that moment, Dr. Leonides walked through the door accompanied by a tall, dark haired man, whose most striking features, thought Stamos, were his large burning, black eyes.

“Good morning, everyone,” said Dr. Leonides, with affable formality, walking to the head of the table with Lingarn. “I’d like to introduce Hermann Lingarn. Mr. Lingarn, I’d like you to meet some of our top genetics research staff members.”

Dr. Leonides made the rounds, naming the four men seated at the table.

Lingarn nodded to each man in turn but said nothing.

“Well, then,” said Dr. Leonides, “why don’t we sit down and get started?”

Lingarn drew back Dr. Leonides’ chair for her, then pulled out the chair on her right, and took his seat next to her.

I wouldn’t want to play poker against this guy, thought Stamos, reflecting on Lingarn’s impassive face, which betrayed neither pleasure nor displeasure, fear nor favor, interest nor ennui, and, indeed, seemed to convey no information at all except, from the intensity of his glaring eyes, the suggestion of the presence of a powerful mind.

Dr. Leonides explained to her four staff members that Lingarn had come to Paradise to devise methods of implementing the operational phase of the project on which they had been working. The four scientists knew, or thought they knew, what this meant. It had recently been disclosed that, for whatever reason, the directors of the Paradise project wanted to have the capability of widely disseminating STOP, the viral bolus that induced senescence, and GO, the viral bolus that induced rejuvenation, on a mass scale. It was difficult to imagine, thought Stamos, what they could do with such a capability once they had achieved it. Did they want to make some entire populations involuntarily young and other entire populations involuntarily old? What would be the profit in doing that? All he knew for sure was that he didn’t like any of it.

Unfortunately, Stamos, like the other captives of the compound, had learned of these peculiar objectives only after becoming a prisoner in Paradise, when it was too late for their reservations about these purposes to make any difference.

Dr. Leonides outlined the dimensions of the practical problem they faced and presented the ideas that she had thought of to approach a solution. She then solicited comments from her staff.

Stamos was amazed and, despite himself, amused, to see the scientific mind at work. Dr. Adams, Dr. Johanssen, and Dr. Marx seemed to forget the unpleasant context in which the discussion was taking place—they were, after all, captives, being forced to work on a project that almost certainly had criminal purposes—and to lose themselves in the abstract challenge of solving the problem at hand. Stamos could not be so dispassionate. Lucinda was in his mind and the thought that, when this work was complete, she faced the real possibility of a grim execution.

Lingarn, sitting upright in his chair, his arms on the table before him, looked from speaker to speaker, evidently listening with careful attention, but saying nothing.

“Dr. Stamos,” said Dr. Leonides, “do you have any ideas you’d like to share with us?”

“Not yet, Dr. Leonides,” answered Stamos. “I’d like to think about the problem for a while.”

“Very well,” said Dr. Leonides. “Thanks for coming, everyone. I’d like all of you, not just Dr. Stamos, to keep thinking about this problem. Our goal is to devise a workable methodology within the week. We’ll reconvene here again tomorrow, at the same time.”

Lucinda and Stamos sat together in Le Chapeau Rouge, an imitation French café, drinking cappuccinos. It was early evening and too cold for them to meet in the garden. This

was one of three tiny eateries in Paradise. Each of these establishments was decorated in the style of a characteristic national eating spot—the other two were modeled on an English pub and an Italian bistro—and was tastefully decorated and offered soft lighting, good taped music, intimate, comfortable seating, and excellent food. Naturally, service at these establishments was free of charge.

“Waiting to sneak out in the car that brought in the man who just arrived in Paradise is hopeless,” Stamos said. “For all I know, that car is already gone! But I have another idea. There’s another entrance, at least one more. They make deliveries there. Trucks arrive there, several times a day.”

“I never noticed any place like that,” said Lucinda.

“You’d have to go looking for it,” explained Stamos. “But if you go to the back of the complex and take the stairs down one flight, then follow one of the corridors and pass through some swinging doors, you come to the area I’m talking about.”

“But isn’t it locked?” asked Lucinda.

“It’s not locked,” Stamos told her. “I don’t know why. Listen, it’s a large area, with dozens of parking bays for large trucks. I went down there a few times to see what was going on. Sometimes, there was a lot of activity, men unloading trucks, driving forklifts, and stacking cartons and so on. Other times, it was dead. Nobody there at all. The exits were all blocked and locked up. But the loading areas were empty.”

Stamos sipped on his cappuccino. Then he reached over and took Lucinda’s hand.

“Here’s my plan,” Stamos told her. “I’ll go to the loading bays when they’re deserted and hide inside the compartment of a truck. Or, if I can’t get inside, I’ll climb under a truck and attach myself underneath and stay there until the truck leaves Paradise.”

“That sounds dangerous!” said Lucinda, grasping his hand tightly between both of hers. “I don’t know. Maybe we should forget the whole idea.”

“Dangerous?” asked Stammos. “You know those meetings I’ve been attending the last few mornings? Well, I’m not contributing anything—but Dr. Leonides is certainly doing her job! And those dimwits I work with don’t seem to realize that they’re only hastening the day when they become a liability! What I’m saying is that progress is being made. So our time to look for alternatives has just about expired.”

Lucinda looked down. She knew Stammos was right.

“Then,” she said, looking up at Stammos again, “when...?”

“It’s usually quiet at night,” Stammos said. “I’ll go tonight. With any luck,” he added, forcing a smile, “by late tomorrow morning, I’ll be in a police station telling them the damnedest story they ever heard!”

Stammos did just as he said he would do. But he was discovered as soon as the power was switched on in the loading bays. Infrared scanners, monitored in an adjacent room, revealed him curled behind some packing material in the back of a large van.

The lights suddenly came on in the back of the truck. Perhaps Stammos should have been surprised when six armed soldiers, wearing the strangely plain gray uniforms of Paradise guards, appeared to arrest him, but he wasn’t. These soldiers were an odd presence in the compound. They were often seen by the residents, coming and going, usually in pairs or, more rarely, in larger groups. But they never, or almost never, had any occasion to speak with anyone, and they were obviously under orders not to do so unless necessary.

All six had their automatics drawn and pointed at him where he sat, huddled on the floor.

“Come with us,” said the man standing nearest to him.

Stammos stood up, he was searched for weapons, his wrists were handcuffed behind his back, and he was escorted out of the truck, away from the loading bay, down a corridor, and into an elevator. To Stammos' surprise, the seven men rode down three floors. He had thought there were only two levels below the one he was on.

When they left the elevator, he was walked a short distance down another hallway, and they stopped in front of a closed door. One of his guards knocked and went inside. A minute later, the guard who had entered came out and instructed two of the other guards to unlock Stammos' handcuffs and bring Stammos into the room.

The room was small and nearly empty. Stammos was astounded to find Lingarn waiting for him, alone, sitting behind a wooden table. The guards shoved him into a chair opposite Lingarn and then left the room.

"Must I really believe," said Lingarn, when they were alone, "that you thought you could overcome all the security protections of Paradise by hiding in the back of a truck?"

"Obviously," admitted Stammos, "I was wrong."

Stammos wanted to add, "Now what? Are you going to kill me?" But he was afraid, afraid of putting ideas into the man's head—afraid of saying anything.

"Why did you do it?" asked Lingarn, in a flat voice. "You've broken your contract. You've forfeited your bonus money. That's most of what you came here for."

"My bonus money!" laughed Stammos, humorlessly. "I'm sorry. There are things going on here that just aren't right. Things that scare me, I mean really scare me. I know we agreed not to leave, when we came to Paradise. But it's gone beyond that now. We're prisoners here. And this project—making people old, making people young! And all this secrecy! We're almost

finished. What's going to become of your precious secrecy then? You can't keep us in Paradise forever!"

"Is that what's worrying you?" asked Lingarn. "You signed non-disclosure agreements before you came here. It's as simple as that."

Stammos stared back at Lingarn, whose eyes seemed on fire with black intensity. "As simple as that," Lingarn had said—but Stammos didn't believe it for a minute. The people behind Paradise weren't going to trust any non-disclosure agreements. Not in this lifetime, they weren't, Stammos thought.

"So, what happens to me now?" asked Stammos.

"As I told you," Lingarn answered, "you've forfeited your bonus. Dr. Leonides tells me that your work, within the area of your scientific specialty, has been exceptional. But that work is pretty much concluded now. And, frankly, you haven't been very much help in devising vectors for viral distribution. Accordingly, I've decided to isolate you from the general population. I'm not taking any chances on your contaminating the others with your suspicions and discontent." Lingarn picked up the cell phone that was sitting on the table in front of him and tapped a speed dial number.

"Yes," Lingarn said into the phone. "Claymore and Stannich, come in, now," and replaced the phone on the table beside him.

The door opened. Stammos turned his head and saw the two soldiers, who had escorted him to the room in which he was being questioned, enter together. One closed the door, and both stood at attention, evidently awaiting further instructions from Lingarn.

"Until further notice, you'll be placed in confinement," said Lingarn. "Claymore, Stannich," Lingarn said, addressing the guards, "take the prisoner to Station 17."

The guards stepped up to the table, pulled Stammos' chair out, and pulled him into a standing position by his upper arms. Then, one drew Stammos' arms behind him, and the other snapped the handcuffs into place.

Stammos' head was swimming. He was relieved to have escaped a more violent punishment. But he also felt an ominous sense of confusion over what was in store for him.

"I'm just going to be held," Stammos said, over his shoulder, as the guards began walking him towards the door. "My work is over? I'm just going to sit around and wait for the project to be wrapped up?"

"Not exactly," answered Lingarn, standing, and, Stammos thought, betraying the slightest grimace in his previously deadpan face. "You still have a vital contribution to make. Everyone in Paradise does."

At that moment, the guards whisked him out the door, and Stammos was to learn no more on that day about the nature of this "vital contribution." All he knew now, he brooded, as they walked him down the corridor, into the elevator, and down another corridor, entering another subterranean section of Paradise he had never seen before, was that whatever this "contribution" was, all the occupants of Paradise—presumably even those whose work had been finished weeks before—would be making it as well. The thought of this contribution had raised a wry expression on Lingarn's face. Stammos' heart was pounding. For anything, the anticipation of which could animate Lingarn's stony countenance, made him dizzy with fear!