

The time for dreaming is over.

Jimmy Shade kills dreams. It's his job. As a member of the elite Dream Police, he defends the Collective against that poisonous nocturnal ooze.

But when Shade himself gets infected with a dream, he finds himself on the run from his former colleagues. He must choose between his love for the Collective—and the dream he cannot live without.

**DREAMS MUST DIE:
A Fable of the Far Future**

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CHAPTER ONE

THE TIME FOR DREAMING IS OVER, the Collective boomed inside Jimmy Shade's skull. *NOW WE ALL MUST WORK*.

Shade exchanged glances with his partner, Kann. The two men crouched over a sleeping dreamer. Her dreams had sent shock waves through the Collective, that mental union of all humanity. As a member of the elite Dream Police, it was Shade's job to kill dreams before they could infect anyone else.

What is your judgment? Shade closed his eyes and stood before the tribunal, ten billion minds in attendance. *ChemLob? Or unplug?*

The entire human race entered the dreamer's brain. Shade joined them.

The dream hit him like a foul stench, a poisonous cloud of unreality: hopes and longings and fears.

GUILTY, intoned the Collective. *SENTENCE IS CHEMLOB*.

Shade opened his eyes and returned to the garret of the abandoned building. Around them, crude sketches lined the walls. *The signs of a diseased mind*, Shade thought. *But don't worry. We'll cure you.*

He drew a jabber from his bandoleer. ChemLob—short for Chemical Lobotomy—killed the dream without harming the dreamer, allowing the afflicted node to be a useful member of society once more.

How much happier she'll be once we ChemLob her, Shade thought.

Kann nodded. *Happiness is to serve and obey the Collective.*

An image of Shade's wife passed through his mind, and he wondered if she was happy—

But he suppressed the thought. Memories, like dreams, were forbidden.

The dreamer stirred in her sleep. The two men froze. If she woke while dreaming, the dream would surface into her conscious mind and they'd probably have to unplug her. The more conscious a dreamer was of their condition, the stronger and more dangerous they were. Sometimes unplugging was the only way to kill a dream before it spread.

Shade took no pleasure from unplugging. The look of horror on their faces! To rub the sleep from their eyes, and discover they were no longer part of the Collective, permanently disconnected from humanity! Joined at birth by brain implant to every other human being in the world—to have that taken away from you!—it was the worst punishment the Collective possessed, far worse even than the death penalty. Being cut off from the Collective always sent the dreamer mad.

Is Linda mad? Shade wondered, unable to prevent the thought. *Is she happy, where she is? If it weren't for these dreamers...* A blast of fury hit

him. *How I hate them all!*

YOU MUST NOT HATE, the Collective boomed inside his skull.

Shade cringed. *I know*, he thought. *It's just I loved her so—*

YOU MUST NOT LOVE, the Collective replied, so loud this time his skull ached. *HATE IS IRRELEVANT. LOVE IS IRRELEVANT.*

Of course they're irrelevant, Shade thought. *What is love anyway? A criminal impulse.*

The reprimand disrupted his thoughts. *What was I thinking before?* He puzzled over this. He could not remember. He relaxed, felt contentment sweep over him. *I feel nothing at all. Completely numb.*

YOU ARE A GOOD NODE, JIMMY SHADE, the Collective said, in a whisper this time. *REMEMBER ALWAYS: I AM WE. WE ARE ALL. WE ARE THE COLLECTIVE.*

Kann interrupted. *Do it. Now!*

Shade refocused on the dreamer lying on the dirty mattress. She shifted under her blanket. Her eyes fluttered open.

He slid the jabber needle into her neck and depressed the plunger with his thumb. The medicine entered her veins. She stiffened, then with a sigh settled back to sleep, a look of bliss on her face.

Shade and Kann probed her mind once more. Her dream quivered, twitched and died.

Let the infection spread no further, Kann thought. *We've cured you. No one else shall suffer because of your disease.* He got to his feet and stretched. *One down, a hundred and forty-three to go.*

No time like the present, Shade thought.

But for some reason he felt ill at ease. What was he supposed to remember? Something important...

Shade and Kann worked hard until dawn, a standard eighteen-hour shift, until their thumbs ached and their bandoleers emptied of jabbers. The survival of the Collective depended on their efforts, and they knew it. A single dreamer—a single dream—had the power to destroy the Collective. And without the Collective, humanity, indeed all life on Earth, was doomed.

The final suspect of their shift was a self-aware dreamer sleeping in an alleyway. A dangerous one, alright. Shade and Kann approached the man with caution. Sentence had already been delivered: unplug. They paused, studied the motionless figure on the ground.

Shade was not looking forward to this. A gust of sub-Crust wind howled between the buildings. A rat squeaked. The dreamer shifted under the garbage he used as a blanket.

Kann motioned him forward. Shade moved toward the dreamer, but stepped on a crinkly food pill wrapper. The dreamer pushed himself up on one elbow, face obscured in darkness.

Shade swore inside his head.

He double-checked his dream shield. The skin-tight dream armor covered him from head to toe, and allowed him full mental contact with other nodes in the Collective, but prevented dreams from passing through.

Kann checked his shield too. *Unless you want to spend tomorrow night ChemLobbing the hundreds of nearby nodes this dreamer is going to infect, I suggest you unplug him, and now.*

Unaware dreamers oozed their mental poison, a low-frequency nocturnal emission with a narrow transmission radius. But a self-aware dreamer woken from his troubled slumber—that was dangerous stuff. His dream could explode like poisonous pus for a kilometer or more, infecting any node within that radius.

Shade reached for the unplugging on his hip, but hesitated for a millisecond.

Never mind, Kann thought. It's my turn anyway. After what happened to Linda... He left the thought unfinished.

The dreamer sat up and looked around.

Shade could not make out his face. Time for a double-team. He grabbed the man's ears, pulled his chin down to his chest, and Kann jammed the unplugging into the base of the dreamer's skull.

When the man realized what was about to happen, he howled, but Shade held him tight by the ears. The unplugging drilled a small hole in the skull, flicked the disc of bone aside and extracted the man's implant.

A pulsing silver blob oozed out of the man's head into the clear tube mounted atop the unplugging. The implant's tentacles clung to the man's brain, but the unplugging's suction was too strong, and with a splatting sound the silver implant flapped against the inside of the tube.

Shade slapped a med strip across the man's skull and stood up. In time the wound would heal.

The dreamer was another story.

The two Dream Police watched the man warily. Every dreamer was different. You could never be sure how they would react to being unplugged. Some begged to have their implant back—which was impossible, of course, removal was as permanent as death itself. Others curled up in a fetal ball and cried. Still others turned out to be violent.

Which kind of dreamer was this one? Shade wondered.

The man lurched to his feet, wild-eyed, and staggered toward them,

trying to speak. His vocal chords—never used, and unable to form the sounds he'd spent a lifetime hearing inside his head—struggled to do more than gargle and groan.

In the faint streetlight from the window the man's face became visible. Shade gasped.

It was Frank. A fellow member of the Dream Police. A colleague. Shade had never worked with the man, but he'd spent many a convivial hour inside the man's head, trading professional gossip.

Dream infection was a professional hazard all Dream Police faced. A tiny rip in a dream shield, and wham! Dreaming in the gutter. That's how it had happened to Linda. And now to yet another colleague.

Frank rushed at Kann, but Kann side-stepped, stuck out his foot and the dreamer went down.

A violent one, Kann tsk-tsked inside Shade's head. *Help me, will you?*

Unplugged dreamers had been known to gash out their eyes with their fingernails in an effort to claw their brains from their skulls, and so end the agony of a lifetime sentence of mental solitary confinement.

We cannot let you hurt yourself, Shade thought. *Every node is precious.*

He dropped a knee on the man's lower back, grabbed his wrists and cuffed him.

What is Good for All is Good for the One, his partner agreed.

Kann hopped into the mind of an ambulance driver a few blocks away, and within a few minutes paramedics arrived. They wrapped Frank in a dream jacket and strapped him to a stretcher. In the unlikely event his dream was still contagious, the dream jacket, which acted like a reverse dream shield, would keep any dream energy from infecting others.

Shade stared after the ambulance as it floated down the street, on its way to the Hall of Dreams, where Frank would spend the rest of his life in a padded cell. He had seen too many fellow officers carted off, raving, their implants still warm in an unplugged.

It could have been me, he thought.

Could have been any of us. Kann yawned again. *But it wasn't, was it?*

Kann pressed a button on the unplugged, and a small charge inside the implant exploded, turning it into a puddle of organic goo. He ejected the mass into a nearby drain.

I wish we didn't have to unplug dreamers, Shade thought.

We do the will of the Collective. Kann shrugged and holstered his unplugged.

THE TIME FOR DREAMING IS OVER, the Collective boomed once

more inside Shade's head. *NOW WE ALL MUST WORK.*

Shade and Kann summoned a passing moving box and rode down the dark, empty streets of the city. At the station, they summoned a flying train, and climbed the ladder up through the Crust and took a seat. They joined their mental energy to that of the other passengers and the train lifted into the air.

Since the War, physical energy had been replaced by mental energy. The Collective had discovered how to tap the previously inaccessible power of the human mind. Each node's implant connected to a worldwide power grid. Every moving box, every flying train, every light bulb was powered by this global network. Shade could direct his mental power in his immediate vicinity—to power a moving train, or illuminate a dark alley, but otherwise let the power flow freely into the Collective.

Shade missed having his own police cruiser. Since he and Kann got promoted from street patrol duty, they'd had to travel incognito. A cruiser, machine guns bristling, tended to alert suspects of police presence. Arriving on foot gave their targets little warning. On the plus side, ChemLobbing individual dreamers was a lot more challenging than gunning down mobs of infected dreamers. Anyone could pull the trigger on a machine gun. Surgically removing errant dreamers from the Collective required a fair bit more skill.

He gazed out the leaded window of the flying train. The Crust was black and flat as far as the eye could see. A kilometer thick, it covered the entire planet, from pole to pole and around the Equator. Every day the Collective added a thin layer of lead atoms, transmuting other elements to create yet more protection from dangers humanity faced both above and below. An acid rain storm lashed the surface around them, leaving fallout in its wake. Storm drains absorbed the water and sent the liquid below for processing.

How many thousands of years had it been since the War? Shade wondered. He wasn't sure, but felt it better not to ask—better to not even think the question.

The flying train was made of the same black material as the Crust—solid lead. Heavy stuff. Flying drained his mental energy. Shade was looking forward to his daily six. On the horizon, a dim haze glowed through the fluffy nuclear winter cloud.

Dawn.

If only mankind could go without sleep! he thought bitterly. *Without sleep, there would be no more dreams—and no more dreamers! Humanity stands on the brink of extinction. Just think what we could accomplish if*

we weren't forced to spend all day hunting dreamers. Imagine—a twenty-four hour workday. How great would that be?

You said it, buddy, Kann thought, and yawned. *Time for a well-earned six.*

At the city center, the train descended, landing amidst hundreds of other flying trains. Shade and Kann climbed down the hatchway into the station, and pushed through crowds of morning commuters. Shade wondered what it must be like to have an office job. Working in groundscrapers that protruded hundreds of stories beneath the Crust, and hung, windowless, over the barren land far below, long since abandoned as uninhabitable.

Shade and Kann parted, a brief farewell lingering in each other's minds, and each went to his own dormitory.

Shade got home tired but happy. He was always happy. And if he ever felt less than happy, the Collective soon corrected the fault.

What a joy to serve the Collective! he thought. *Such bliss! To be part of humanity in such an intimate and permanent way—how could he ever be dissatisfied?*

Sure, he lived in permanent darkness, sandwiched between a poisonous sky above and a radioactive wasteland far below. Sure, he worked eighteen-hour days, killing nodes whose only crime was to dream. Sure, the day would come when he could no longer serve the Collective, and they would recycle him.

But what did it matter?

He was a glass-half-full kind of node. Come to think of it, every node was a glass-half-full kind of node. That's what it meant to be a node!

Shade gave thanks every day to the Collective for allowing him to be part of something so much greater than himself.

Ten billion minds heard his thoughts and purred in approval.

I AM WE. WE ARE ALL. WE ARE THE COLLECTIVE.

Shade took an elevator to floor -157 and strode down row after row of bunk towers, until he came to his own. He climbed up past ten sleeping nodes to bunk 11, and squeezed himself in sideways. His nose scraped against the bottom of bunk 12. He popped a food pill and water pill, and luxuriated in the feeling as they expanded in his stomach. Nothing like a good meal after a hard day's work ChemLobbing dreamers.

Thousands of snores filled the room. The unconscious thoughts of the sleepers merged with his own. Empty. Not a dreamer among them. Shade smiled and closed his eyes. Fellow night shifters sleeping the day away. Get their beauty six. Again Shade thought, what a pity the Collective had never

found a substitute for sleep.

As it was, the human race was fighting for survival. Without ten billion nodes working full-time, the race was doomed.

ONLY BY WORK CAN MAN BE SAVED, the Collective whispered in the back of his skull.

When Shade was younger, he had once wondered what man needed to be saved from, but the Collective's reply had been so loud and furious the thought never again crossed his mind:

FROM HIMSELF.

His mind empty, his conscious clear, Shade sighed in contentment, and faded off to sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

An alarm blared.

Shade banged the bridge of his nose against the bottom of bunk twelve. He opened his eyes and stared into blackness. Around him, the noises of sleep. The alarm came from inside his own head.

It was not his usual wakeup call, the soft, drowsy *GET UP GET UP GET UP WE MUST WORK OR WE ARE DOOMED* the Collective normally used to revive sleepers at the appointed hour. This was more like a high-priority emergency siren.

A proximity alert, perhaps?

Unlike pure thought, which could link minds all around the world instantaneously, dreams had a limited broadcasting range—usually a couple hundred meters, a kilometer at most. Sometimes dreamers attacked, wandering through the streets, spreading their contagion. But willful attacks had been few and far between in recent years, and the snoring sleepers in the dorm had not awoken.

This alarm was for him alone.

Shade checked his internal clock. Early morning, still. He'd been asleep for less than half an hour. His limbs felt heavy, his mind sluggish. He needed to rest to better serve the Collective, to help save humanity before it was too late.

What in the name of the Collective was going on?

A chuckle boomed nearby, and Shade relaxed.

Boss sat behind a metal desk of great antiquity—pre-War, Shade supposed, no one had used desks since then—and puffed on one of those queer burning sticks. Smoke trickled from his nostrils. Metal containers called “filing cabinets” ringed the room. Some sort of archaic database involving information recorded on processed plant pulp. The stuff cluttered Boss's desk. Shade couldn't help but laugh every time he entered Boss's mental space. Paper! That's what it was called. He'd never seen a real piece of paper in his life. Trees had been extinct since the War. Just imagine—a plant-based database system!

Come in, Shade, Boss thought, without looking up.

Boss wasn't really the boss, of course. His position was the vestigial remnant of a primitive stage of human evolution. In the old days, an imperfect system of selecting leaders to represent the will of the people often produced disastrous results. Those leaders' failure to do the will of the people was what caused the War in the first place. Under the Collective, every decision was made by consensus accord by all ten billion nodes.

And Boss, in real life, lay in a hospital bed with his neck broken. He'd been chasing a rogue dreamer through a hydroponic garden some years back, and the glass floor had collapsed beneath their feet. Boss and the dreamer had fallen twenty-five stories. The dreamer died. Boss had survived, even volunteered to be recycled. But the Collective decided he could still be useful as an advisory node.

Shade entered Boss's mind and sat down on the opposite side of the desk. All the mental powers of mankind at the Collective's disposal for thousands of years, Shade mused, but still no cure for a broken neck. Really, come to think of it, there'd been no scientific or technological advances of any kind since the Collective arose. He wondered why that was—but stopped himself. That was not an approved thought.

Ceremonial or not, Boss got right to the point. *We've found a Prime.*

A what?

You heard me.

Shade tilted back until the chair squeaked. Primes were the source of all dreams. The dreamers he spent his nights ChemLobbing could all trace their infection back to a Prime. *But we haven't caught a Prime in...*

Like I said. We found him. Now we've got to go catch him. Boss blew a smoke ring and it hung in the air between them. *Preferably without anyone getting hurt.*

Where? Shade thought. *I mean, how? I mean—*

Information Factory 1Q79A5. The Prime's working undercover.

As an IF worker?

The Collective processed ten billion minds' worth of stimulation every day. A large portion of humanity was dedicated to the sole purpose of handling that information, categorizing it, grading it, and storing it. Nothing was ever thrown away, and the processed data was then warehoused in compressed chunks deep in the minds of the Collective's nodes.

This was the secret to the Collective's power: distributed decision-making coupled with distributed processing. By focusing lesser nodes on processing raw sensory input, more talented nodes—like Shade himself—were free to devote their complete energies to more specialized labor.

He may even now be aware of our surveillance, Boss thought. *Get moving.*

Without saying another word, he data-dumped the rest of the details into Shade's mind, and departed.

Shade eliminated his waste into a tube built into his bunk. No need to get dressed; he saved valuable time, as did all nodes, by never showering or taking off his clothes. Water was too precious. A new self-cleaning jumpsuit

was issued to him once a week.

He checked his weapons—a standard-issue automatic pistol on one hip, unplugging on the other—slung a bandoleer of ChemLab jabbers over one shoulder, and descended the bunk ladder to the floor. Across the city, two dozen other Dream Police, including Kann, were doing the same thing.

On the elevator ride back to the surface of the Crust, Shade wondered how long it had been since they last captured a Prime. Twenty years? More? He consulted the data Boss had given him, but it was not there.

THIRTY-THREE YEARS, the Collective replied.

What minds possessed that tidbit of data? he wondered. *It was odd, having your brain full of random pieces of information—other people’s memories, shreds of raw and processed data.*

WHAT IS ODD ABOUT IT? The Collective demanded. *WHY WOULD YOU THINK THAT?* Ten billion minds peered at Shade in suspicion. *HAVE YOU BEEN DREAMING, NODE SHADE?*

Without warning, the Collective formed a tribunal and entered Shade’s mind.

The hum of humanity filled his skull. But he had nothing to hide. He relaxed and let them poke around.

After a moment, the judgment: *NOT GUILTY*.

Shade closed his eyes, bowed his head. In the future I will be more careful what I think.

SEE THAT YOU DO.

Unshaken by this well-deserved trial, Shade exited the elevator, halted at the sub-Crust waiting area, and summoned a flying train. The train landed on the Crust above his head, the hatches popped open, and he climbed up into the cabin.

How did we find him? Shade asked, taking a seat. *And why are Primes so hard to find, anyway?*

A long pause. For a moment Shade wondered if the Collective had somehow not heard him.

WE HEARD YOU. WE DO NOT KNOW THE ANSWER.

This astonished Shade. *But the Collective is great!* he protested. *The Collective knows everything!*

DREAMERS PRIME REMAIN A MYSTERY. EVEN TO US. A slight pause, then: BE CAREFUL, NODE SHADE. PRIMES ARE DANGEROUS. THEY WILL DO ANYTHING TO DESTROY US.

But why? Shade asked. Why do dreamers hate us so much?

THE TIME FOR DREAMING IS OVER, the Collective boomed. *NOW WE ALL MUST WORK.*

Shade, Kann and the other Dream Police converged on the gates of the Information Factory. They all wore double dream shields set to maximum, as Boss had instructed in his data dump.

The factory stood at the end of a dark street just below the Crust surface. It was an immense structure, built to house the thousand of IF workers who labored daily to process the world's data. It was hard, sweaty work, sitting in an ergonomic recliner with your eyes shut, unmoving, wrangling data for eighteen hours at a stretch. They'd depart for home, bleary-eyed, the blue collars of their jumpsuits stained with sweat from the exertion, and caked with dust from lying still for such long periods of time.

Fresh-looking IF workers, lunch pails in hand and hard hats on their heads, lined up to one side of the street, and waited for the shift change. The lunch pails contained a week's supply of food, water and caffeine pills; in the event of an emergency, IF workers would be called on to work overtime for many days in a row. The hard hats were an essential protective feature—overworked IF workers' heads had been known to literally explode. The hard hats prevented the resulting shower of blood and bone from distracting other IF workers from the task at hand.

Of course, factories and offices were redundant. Thought connected every corner of the globe. In theory, IF workers could work just as well from their bunks at home.

In practice, however, the Collective had found that physical proximity encouraged higher productivity. Thoughts could and did travel instantaneously around the planet, but the signal was stronger the closer you got to your target. Even Shade reported to work every day down at Dream Police Headquarters.

Shade nodded to the other Dream Police as they arrived. When they were all in position, on either side of the factory gates, Boss called a meeting in his mind.

They crowded into that small room, banging their knees against the metal desk. Shade leaned back against the windows that looked out of Boss's eyes, the shuttered venetian blinds crackling and crunching against his weight. The acrid smoke from Boss's burning stick made him cough.

We all know why we're here, Boss said.

They nodded.

You don't need me to tell you this, Boss said, looking at them from under dropping eyebrows. You know already. But I'll say it because it's worth repeating.

He paused. They all knew the words before Boss thought them, but got

satisfaction in hearing him say it anyway.

Dreams are in decline. Few of us can remember the last time we caught a Prime. And in all that time, there have been no new dreams. This is without precedent.

Boss met their gaze one by one.

This could be the defining moment of human history. He jammed his finger down on his desk so hard the metal surface rang. When dreams are finally eradicated, the Collective will be free to devote its entire energy to the salvation of mankind.

A cop Shade didn't know raised his hand. But where do Primes come from, Boss?

Kann laughed. The City of Dreams, of course.

A myth to scare little nodes with, I'm afraid, Boss said. The truth is we don't know. But wherever they come from, this could be the last one.

Seems almost a shame to unplug him, thought another cop. Now we'll never know.

Boss nodded. Which is why we aren't going to unplug him. We're going to put him in a dream jacket and study him. Dissect him, if we have to. So we can understand his disease before it goes extinct.

He pushed back his chair, stood up and saluted them. Make me proud, boys. Make the Collective proud.

The factory whistle blew. Shift change. The IF workers streamed through the gates, hard hats askew, lunch pails limp in their tired hands.

Shade head-hopped among them, felt their weariness. They had earned their daily six. With a pang of regret, he realized he'd be seeing many of them soon. No doubt a large percentage had been unwittingly infected by the Dreamer Prime, and he and Kann would be ChemLobbing them soon.

At his side, Kann quivered with excitement. You understand what this means?

Another long night tomorrow.

Kann laughed inside his head. No, man! We could be heroes! The nodes that saved the Collective!

The waiting shift workers filed into the Information Factory, to take up the burden their departing colleagues had put down. The ergonomic chairs were probably still warm from the last shift. The workers walked with a sense of urgency. The fate of humanity depended on every node doing his part, and they knew it.

The workers noticed the police but thought nothing of their presence. The Collective had already informed all nearby nodes of the operation.

Every node except the Prime.

Primes, for reasons unknown, could broadcast their thoughts—and of course dreams—but not receive them. Their own minds remained a brick wall. Shade wondered how the Prime was able to fake it in the factory.

The departing workers thinned to a trickle. Soon the black lead-lined street was empty again.

Where's our guy? one of the other cops asked.

Here he comes! Boss replied, flitting through their heads, seeing with their eyes. Double check those dream shields, people!

Shade darted a hand to his skintight coverall. He checked both dials. Intensity? Maximum. Integrity? Unbreached. As long as the fabric did not tear, he would be immune to dream infection. The slightest scratch, though, and he could wind up in the Hall of Dreams. Like poor Frank. It was a grave occupational hazard.

A man appeared at the gates, whistling. Whistling! It was like he was announcing his guilt. Mouth and throat noises were forbidden, even in the case of upper respiratory tract infection, such as a cold or flu.

Human speech, of course, had been prohibited for thousands of years, ever since the Collective came into being. Aural data took ten times longer to process. Communication by pure thought—an ideal humanity had long ago achieved—allowed intimacy and compassion without the intermediary of spoken language.

Shade studied the man once more. He looked no different from the other workers. He sauntered toward them, one hand in his pocket, his hard hat cocked at a jaunty angle, the empty lunch pail slapping against his thigh.

The police tensed. They turned on their squawk boxes, square speakers strapped around their necks. Kann had picked up a couple dozen sets on his way to the factory, dusted them off. Shade had never used a squawk box before, but he knew they would translate his thoughts into spoken language, so that they could communicate with the Prime.

They could, of course, allow the man to head-hop into their minds. A dream shield filtered dreams, but allowed conscious thoughts to penetrate. But letting a Prime into your mind, even when wearing a dream shield, was risky. No one wanted to wind up in the Hall of Dreams with Frank.

Put your hands in the air, or we'll shoot! the Collective thought, and two dozen squawk boxes translated the words into speech.

The noise was harsh and grating in Shade's ears, and he flinched. He understood spoken language, of course—the words, after all, were the same the Collective used in pure thought, unchanged for thousands of years—but it was odd to hear the words spoken out loud.

In unison they pointed their guns at the slight figure.

The Prime seemed taken aback. i don't understand i'm tired i've had a long day must rest to better serve the collective you must have the wrong guy

“One more thought and you're a dead man!” the squawk boxes screeched.

The man shrugged and put his hands in the air. His lunch pail smacked against the side of his hard hat.

Not giving it away, Kann thought with a chuckle.

The Prime turned his head and looked straight at Kann, as though he had heard this thought, but said nothing.

Surround and capture, Boss said, repeating what they already knew.

They advanced, one foot in front of the other, a circle of Dream Police converging on the man. Kann held a dream jacket ready in one hand.

“One of you has been chosen,” the man said, out loud this time, and they paused, shaken by the unexpected sound of the man's voice. It was soft and sweet, the words of someone practiced in the ways of auditory communication. None of them had ever heard the sound of human speech before.

The man swiveled his head from side to side, studying the police in his field of vision.

The Collective examined the man from every set of eyes, from every possible angle. IF workers half a world away processed the sensory data, submitted their report to the Collective.

Is he armed?

A knife?

They saw none.

Any sharp objects?

CONCLUSION: NO DANGER. Dreams could not be transmitted by word of mouth, only by thought.

The police crept closer. The man remained motionless. He stood just out of arm's reach.

Now! Boss thought.

Twenty men tackled the Prime. But in the instant before they touched him, he turned, looked Shade in the eyes, and said, “Do you love her?”

And winked.

Shade jumped back, as though stung by acid rain. The reaction was instinctive; once out of the fray, the Collective kept him apart.

The melee wound down. The Prime offered no resistance, just lay there and let the police stomp on him. Soon he was stretched out on the ground, trussed from scalp to toes in the dream jacket.

A tribunal assembled, found the man guilty, and sentenced him to incarceration in the Hall of Dreams.

But Shade paid little attention to the proceedings. He was lost in his own disturbing thoughts.

Hey Shade, man, you alright? Kann stood at his side.

I dunno. I feel...funny.

Funny how? Kann stepped into Shade's mind and poked around. Looking good to me, bro.

I suppose. Shade touched a finger to his temple. What did he mean by that, do you think?

Mean by what?

What the Prime said. You know, out loud.

Kann replayed the memory in their minds.

"i don't understand i'm tired i've had a long day must rest to better serve the collective you must have the wrong man'."

No. After that.

"One of you has been chosen'? You mean that bit?"

No! Shade thought, in mounting frustration. "Do you love her?"

Kann gave him a strange look. He didn't say that.

Sure he did.

His partner lay a hand on his arm. Did you let him into your mind? Did he head-hop?

Of course not! Shade pulled away. He said—

Linda.

Do you love her?

Linda. Linda. Linda.

Gone. Taken from him. Infected by a dreamer. Unplugged. As good as dead. Worse.

Why wasn't the Collective suppressing this memory? Memories only cause pain. Why were they letting him suffer?

What's wrong? Kann asked.

You mean you don't know? You can't tell? My mind is your mind. We are One. We are All. We are the Collective.

Of course we are, Kann replied, as though he'd only heard half the thought. He fumbled with the dials on Shade's dream shields. Maximum strength. Unbreached.

Shade let out a shuddering sigh.

Scare me there, man, Kann thought. You're the last person in the world I'd want to have to unplug.

Shade mustered a smile. The feeling's mutual. I'm fine.

But as they waited for the Hall of Dreams ambulance to arrive, and take away the Prime, he realized that he was not fine.

Something was wrong. Shade could feel—everything. Think—anything. And the Collective did nothing to stop him.

I don't want this freedom! Take it from me! he cried.

But not even Kann heard this wild yell.

The wrongness feeling grew.

Why aren't you stopping me? he begged the Collective. But no answer came. Couldn't they hear him? What was going on?

Linda. Do you love her?

I-I do, he thought. Then, with more confidence, I do. I do love her.

I miss you, Linda. The dreamers got you and I can't forget you, can't forget what we had together.

I am We. We are All. We are the Collective, he chanted in his head, trying to summon those billions of minds. But the turmoil in Shade's head remained his and his alone.

He felt dizzy. His stomach hurt. Nausea twisted his guts. A growing pain stabbed at his skull.

Still no one noticed. He expected—wanted—hoped—that ten billion minds would crowd into his head at any moment and relieve him of the terrible burden of his own thoughts, his own feelings. For his own good. For the good of humanity.

The slightest fever or indigestion and the whole world knew about it. How can they not know this?

I am—I am We. We—We are... he thought again. But the words echoed hollow inside his head.

The ambulance arrived. Two burly paramedics in dream shields hefted the limp body into the back of their moving box and took the Prime away.

The last glimpse Shade had of the man, the dreamer peered out the window at him, a thin smile on his lips.

Four hours left to sleep, Kann thought. Reckon we've earned them, Boss?

A chuckle. You know you have. Take two more and get your six. After what you just did, you deserve a treat.

Boss entered their minds and slapped them on their backs. You boys are heroes, you know that?

Of course, the concept of a hero was antiquated. Individual bravery and judgment were irrelevant. All actions of a node were sanctioned by the Collective. Calling Shade a hero would be like calling your finger a hero, or your knee. The body acts as a whole. So also the Collective.

All the same, ten billion minds cheered inside Shade's skull, celebrating the elimination of the Dreamer Prime, possibly the last Prime on Earth. With no more Primes to originate dreams, dreams could be fully eradicated, and humanity freed from this scourge.

With this tantalizing thought in their minds, the two men summoned a moving box and rode together to the flying train station. There they parted, and Shade made his way home, alone.

The sun shone in through the leaded glass window on Shade's tired features. It was not often he saw the sun—that anyone saw the sun, for that matter. The nuclear winter cloud layers covered the entire globe. The other passengers gaped out the windows, startled at the burning orb's appearance.

The Collective became aware of the situation, reached a decision, and ordered them to look away. The others obeyed.

Shade did not. He continued to stare at the sun, unable, unwilling, even, to look away. If the glass was leaded, he wanted to know, why was it so wrong to look? Doesn't the window protect our eyes from any harmful rays?

The question dropped into a void. Nobody answered. Still he stared. The burning star seared his brain with light.

How could the Collective tolerate such...deviance? Please, he begged. Come back to me. Make me once more part of your unity.

I am We, he chanted. We are...All. We-we are...

But instead of a reply, all he could hear were the words of the Prime in his ears:

"Do you love her?"

Tormented by this question, he returned to his bunk and the dormitory snorers. Lying in bed, he tried to join his thoughts to those of the Collective, but the words of the Prime rang again and again in his head, severing him from humanity with each vicious word:

"Do you love her?"

He closed his eyes and tried to sleep. Love! Love who? Linda? Who else could he mean? But how did he know? Or was it just a lucky guess?

And what will the Collective do when they find out?

Still the Collective did not answer. They must be punishing him, Shade decided. It was the most frightening experience he'd ever had. He could hear the hum of humanity in the back of his head, but something barred him from taking part.

A horrible thought: was he infected? Had the Prime done something to him with his voice? But his dream shields had not been breached, not even a scratch.

He'd call for a doctor in the morning, he decided. As a member of the Dream Police, he was screened bi-annually for traces of dream infection. Maybe if they caught it quickly enough they wouldn't have to ChemLob or unplugg him.

The odds of that were slim, but then, Shade had never heard of a case like his before.

"Do you love her?"

In the silence of his brain, the words boomed, four monstrous syllables. His eyes flew open. Linda. Where are you? Will I ever see you again? Knowing the answer was no.

Unbidden, he found himself calling up a memory. Memory was dangerous, forbidden territory. Data was one thing. But memory? Almost as bad as dreaming.

Yet he summoned the memory, and no one complained. No one said a thing. He assembled the memory from the billions of minds where the pieces were stored. The Collective did not intervene, did not even seem to be aware of his actions.

When the memory was complete, Shade stepped into her mind—or rather, his memory of her mind—and there she was. Ravishing in a scarlet negligée.

She crooked a finger at him. *Hey lover*, she said. *It's been too long.*

As a married couple, they were allowed mental conjugal visits once a week. Physical union, of course, was permitted only for purposes of procreation. The Collective had not yet approved such contact at the time of her infection, and they had never laid eyes on each other in person.

The came together in the boudoir of her mind, Shade reliving the memory as though it were real and now. Their minds merged, their bodies came together, and when they were finished, Shade's body, back in his bunk, twitched and stained the inside of his jumpsuit.

Afterward, they snuggled together on the satin sheets. He stroked her back. She nuzzled his neck.

He said, *We caught a Prime today.*

Odd. That's not how it happened. This wasn't part of his memory.

But she replied, *Well that calls for a celebration, don't you think?*

That's not what she said! He sat up on his elbows, bumped his head. That's not how it happened!

Tell me how it happened then, lover, she cooed.

Her mouth was on him then, and he spoke, unable to stop the flow of words.

It was dangerous, he said. *The Prime almost got me.*

She continued her ministrations, and he groaned.

Dreamers, he panted. *Primes! To challenge the Collective! Only a fool would do such a thing.* He faltered. Her tongue slithered in circles. He let his head fall back.

He said something to me, he continued. *The Prime, I mean.*

A wet plop. *What'd he say?*

No, I mean he said something to me. Out loud. With his mouth.

She kissed him once, twice, three times more, and he writhed.

What'd he say?

"Do you love her."

She laughed. *I'm sorry?*

That's what he said. "Do you love her?"

She mounted him then, and asked the obvious question, the question Shade had been avoiding. *Why is it so wrong to love?*

BECAUSE LOVE, the Collective replied, *IS A STATE OF SELFISH PREFERMENT FOR ONE INDIVIDUAL OVER THE COLLECTIVE.*

Wait a minute, Shade thought. *This is a memory. How can the Collective be answering my question?*

The utter silence that came by way of reply terrified him.

"Do you love her?"

The Prime's voice echoed once more inside his head.

Yes, he panted, struggling toward mental union once more. *Yes, I do, I do, I do, I do, I do.*

She quivered, and they twitched together in spasms, and she lay still on his chest.

After a long moment, her hot breath panting on his neck, she lifted her head. *Gotta go to work, lover*, she said. *Got dreams to kill.*

The only way for us to save humanity, he agreed. *Go give 'em hell.*

But something about the words felt hollow.

He lay there in his bunk long after they had parted, feeling the self-cleaning jumpsuit dry his skin.

Do I love her? he asked the Collective. No answer. They heard him before, could they not hear him now? Or was his memory—not a memory? Was it, in fact, some kind of waking dream? If so, how could the Collective respond inside a dream? Or was that simply what dreaming meant—seeing and hearing things that weren't really there?

Do I love her?

He tried to form the words with his lips, the way the Prime had, to speak them out loud. Maybe they would make more sense that way.

"Blowawaowoawaowaowawowoawao."

The node in bunk twelve above him shifted in his sleep. And woke.

What's the big idea, pal? he asked Shade. *Humanity is on the brink of extinction. I've got work to do. A planet to save. That alright with you?*

Sorry, Shade said. *I am You. We are All. We are the Collective.*

Darn tootin' right, buddy. The man snorted, rolled over and went back to sleep.

Shade lay there for a moment in the ensuing silence, punctuated only by soft snores.

The insistent thought came again: *Do you love her?*

Ten billion minds either ignored him or simply did not hear him. Shade was not sure which option was worse.

It baffled him. Scared him, terrified him. It was like his connection with the Collective had been shaken loose. He could still hear the steady, comforting hum of billions of human beings in communion. But another force, sinister, painful, unwanted was talking now inside his head.

Who are you? he demanded. *Who's there? How did you get inside my head?*

Was it the Prime? But that was impossible. He was well-trussed in a dream jacket, and locked up in the Hall of Dreams, hundreds of kilometers away. The building itself was dream-proof. No way the Prime was somehow projecting into his head.

Shade turned over and covered his head with a pillow. Why couldn't he sleep? The pain in his head had not subsided, and the worry in his gut grew worse by the minute. It was beyond anything he'd ever known, had ever experienced.

He searched the Collective's data banks, all known human history for a similar experience. Again, he found nothing. He was part of the whole, but a damaged part, a severed arm dangling from a pulsing artery.

Again he confronted the presence in his mind: *Who are you? What do you want?*

This time the voice in his head answered. *I am You. You are Me. You are Alone.*

Alone?

An illegal, immoral word, long since outlawed, banned by the Collective since its inception.

An earthquake shook his brain. Something shifted, collapsed, and Shade felt himself break away from the continental shelf of humanity, onto an island not of his choosing. The gulf widened, and in his mind he cried out in wonder and fear.

But the Collective did not reply. The sleeping dreamers continued to

snore. And the comforting hum in the back of his skull faded and disappeared.

He gasped. *What does this mean?*

But Shade already knew the answer.

I am Me. I am All. I am Alone.

Alone!

CHAPTER THREE

Jimmy Shade didn't dare sleep.

The Dreamer Prime had done something to him, that much was clear. But what, exactly? Dreams could not spread by word of mouth. He knew that. Or...did he? What if he was wrong? What if—the Collective was wrong? Was that even possible?

If he slept now, he might dream. He might wake up in the morning, his frontal lobes destroyed by ChemLob, and not even know it. Or find himself crazed out of his mind from being unplugged, trussed in a dream jacket and hauled off to spend the rest of his days in a padded cell, cut off from the Collective.

Could he afford to take that chance?

No. The only solution was not to sleep. It was the only way to avoid dreaming.

But how long could he go without sleep?

When the regular morning alarm went off in his head, Shade's eyes were open and bloodshot. He sighed, and climbed down from his bunk. Around him, hundreds of other night workers did the same.

Go to work, he told himself. In work there is salvation. The only way to save the world.

The only way to save himself.

Maybe Kann would have some idea what was happening to him. It he dared tell his partner.

Shade found Kann down at Dream Police HQ, one elbow draped over the water pill cooler, the other resting on the butt of his gun.

What's new? Shade mumbled in greeting.

You have to ask? Kann's laugh echoed in Shade's mind. *Epidemic to clean up. That Prime infected most of the other factory workers. Just as we feared. Ready to go kick some dreamer butt?*

Shade grunted. *Dreamer butt like mine?* he thought. But Kann did not seem to hear. He sighed. *To live is to work. To serve the Collective. Who's first on our list?*

That's the spirit, partner. Kann pulled the dossier from distributed storage and flipped a copy into Shade's mind.

A pretty girl. Young. Nineteen, twenty.

What's she done? Shade thought.

Dangerous one, Kann thought. *Premeditated.*

Shade whistled inside his head. *A Helper?*

A Helper was one step below a Prime on the scale of evil. Like Primes, they knew they dreamed, and they dreamed on purpose. Unlike Primes, though, A Helper Dreamer did not originate new dreams. They just maliciously spread their dreams far and wide. Primes recruited Helpers, sometimes dozens of them. No doubt this one had been one of the Prime's deputies. Cleaning up after them was going to be a pain.

And check it out, Kann said. The Collective has caught her on multiple occasions. She managed to escape.

Shade frowned. *Escape? On multiple occasions? Is that even possible?*

First I've heard of it, Kann admitted. But she's not getting away from us. Not tonight. Ain't that right, partner?

No, Shade thought without enthusiasm. Not tonight.

He studied the image once more. She looked a lot like—like Linda, he admitted to himself. The kind of girl he could fall in love with.

If only he could figure out what love was.

They crept into the garret where the Helper slept. Dreamers on the run tended to hide out in alleyways, storm drains, and garrets of abandoned buildings. Although it puzzled Shade. The Collective used every free cubic centimeter of space inside the Crust. So why did it build—and abandon—houses, much less with garrets? It was almost as though the Collective wanted to create places where dreamers could hide.

Although that made no sense to him either.

They stood looking down at her unmoving body. Street light trickled in through a gap in the curtains. Her chest rose and fell. She lay on the bare floor, covered in garbage to protect her from the chill. Her hands were hidden under the trash.

Shade rested his palm on the butt of his gun. *It seems too easy.*

Agreed, Boss thought, riding in the back of Kann's mind. Check your dream shields and proceed with caution.

Maybe she's a suicide dreamer armed with a knife, Kann joked. Wants to infect us both.

Shade grimaced. *Not funny.*

Kann drew a jabber from his bandoleer, prepared the ChemLob. *You look beat, man, he thought. You want me to take this one?*

No, Shade thought. I'll do it.

He crouched beside the dreamer, squinted to find the vein in her neck. He pressed the jabber to her skin.

That's when the music began.

At first Shade wasn't sure what the noise was. He'd never heard music before. He didn't even know what the word "music" meant. It was only much later that he realized that's what it was.

The sound crashed over him in waves. It was the most glorious thing he had ever experienced! A kaleidoscope of color and sound burst inside his brain, and he swore.

Out loud.

What is it? Kann asked.

Can't you hear it?

Hear what?

Shade looked around wildly. *Where is it coming from?*

And then he knew. The Helper was somehow projecting the music—her dream—into his brain—despite the dream shield he wore.

But how was that possible?

He tried to resist, to shut his mind against the sound, but the melody drew him toward her. He pushed back the garbage and lay down beside her. She wiggled her backside against him, and he pressed in tighter.

What are you doing? Kann yelled in his head.

Shade! Boss shouted. *Get up! Get up now!*

A rough hand shook his shoulder, but Shade ignored it. The dreamer was warm next to him. The colors, the sounds, the—the music—and now smells—and the music! Such music as he had never known. He didn't have the words to describe it. The sensation was like he had been dead all his life, and now he was alive.

He wanted more of this, whatever it was. It seemed to him to be coming through a filter, muffled somehow, weakened, deadened by something between her mind and his.

The dream shield!

He reached for it, flicked it off, and the music surged in volume, overwhelming his senses. In his mind he danced, spun on his heels by the—

A loud blast crashed against his ears. The music stopped. The—the dream, if that's what it was—was gone. He opened his eyes. A neat hole through the dreamer's temple dribbled blood. As he watched, blood pooled on the pillow beneath her head. He jerked back. Cordite assaulted his nostrils. He sat upright.

Kann yanked Shade to his feet by the scruff of his jumpsuit, held him against the wall.

See this? His partner held up a pin.

What—what happened?

She breached your dream shield, partner. You know what that means.

Shade gulped. *Please. No.*

Do it, Boss ordered.

Kann drew his unpluggger, held it to the base of Shade's skull. *I convene a tribunal*, he thought, and ten billion minds answered the summons.

A tribunal? Shade thought. *This is me we're talking about here, Kann. Jimmy Shade? Your partner? Your favorite node? Your friend? Hello? Remember?*

Kann ignored him. *I call on all the Collective as witness.*

But a trial? Shade pleaded.

Do I have a choice?

Shade considered. What would I do if our positions were reversed?

Exactly, Kann thought. You understand.

So this was it. End of the line. First the Prime, and now the Helper...he was clearly infected. He hoped they wouldn't have to unplug him. He hoped ChemLob would be enough to kill the dream. He hoped it wouldn't hurt.

Kann cried out, Let the trial commence!

Ten billion minds waited.

Has Jimmy Shade been dreaming? Is he infected?

The Collective probed Jimmy Shade's mind then, penetrating and judging every last molecule, every last synapse in his skull. He had never before been subject to such detailed scrutiny.

Shade closed his eyes and trembled, waiting for the guilty verdict. Waiting for the unpluggger to suck the implant from his skull. Forever.

The minds withdrew. NO, boomed the Collective. JIMMY SHADE IS NOT A DREAMER. HE IS NOT INFECTED. VERDICT: NOT GUILY.

Boss let out a sigh. Well that's a relief.

Kann grabbed Shade in a bear hug. Thank the Collective I shot her in time! he said. Close one there, bro. For a moment I was sure I'd have to unplug you.

Yeah, Shade thought, in a daze. I thought so too.

Shade stumbled through the rest of the night, ChemLobbing and unplugging dreamers. No more Helpers, just hundreds of sleeping nodes who'd wake to find their frontal lobes missing. Yet each one proved more difficult than the last. It was like killing himself. He had been infected, that much was clear. Somehow, some way, he could hide his dream from the Collective.

This scared him even worse.

If he could hide his true thoughts from the Collective, how many more dreamers were out there, nodes just like him, poisoning humanity with their dreams, unknown to others around them, a menace to everyone they came in contact with?

Worse, he had no way of raising the issue with the Collective without exposing himself at the same time. And that assumed he'd even be able to communicate with the Collective—some thoughts of his, it seemed, they either simply couldn't hear, or chose to ignore.

Again he weighed the evidence, and the conclusion was inescapable. The Prime had done something to him. He, Jimmy Shade, Dream Police, hater of dreams and dreamers—and yes, he hated them, and the Collective could no longer stop him from hating them—had become a dreamer himself.

Yes. He knew what hate was now. Love remained a mystery...but hate? He was a master.

Each time he and Kann ran down another delinquent dreamer, he could taste their dying dreams. He'd replaced his dream shield with a new one, double-checked it for any sign of damage, but even at maximum strength it was unable to filter out the horror of a dream's dying breath.

Or was it just his imagination, his own dream imagining what it must feel like?

This doubt, this uncertainty, tormented him. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to do his job—any hesitation would attract attention.

When the night was over, he could barely keep his eyes open.

Kann massaged Shade's shoulder with a heavy hand. Good work today, man.

Yeah, thanks, he mumbled inside his friend's head. Save the world one dreamer at a time.

Close call there, Kann added. Glad it turned out alright.

Shade rubbed his forehead. Yeah, Kann. So am I. He looked up, forced a grin. So am I.

They parted, as always, at central station, flying trains and moving boxes taking them their separate ways.

Shade shuffled from train to box, from box to train again. His feet were taking him, not home to his bunk and the six hours in twenty-four he most dreaded, but back to Dream Police Central. To HQ.

To Boss.

Shade was afraid. No. Not afraid. Terrified. How could he go home? His bunk meant darkness, sleep—and dreams. And what then?

What then?

The only solution he could think of was to never sleep. But he knew that was impossible. There must be some other way. To cure himself of this infection without ChemLob or unplugging.

YOU MUST REST TO BETTER SERVE THE COLLECTIVE, the Collective gently scolded.

Shade made noises of agreement in his head, and the Collective went away, oblivious, apparently, to his suffering.

Before he could wonder how odd this was, he stood at Boss's bedside, and knocked on his superior officer's mental door.

Come in, Shade, Boss growled. He sat behind his desk as always, a burning stick between his lips.

Shade entered the small office and took a seat.

Boss regarded him for a long moment from under heavy eyelids. He blew smoke into the air.

Coupla tough days, Shade. You look beat. Why don't you go home, get your beauty six?

Shade cleared his throat. Bit of a scare today, Boss.

I was there, Boss said. I saw it through your eyes. Felt everything you felt.

Shade swallowed. Everything? Did he know? Could he guess? He hung his head. Dreamer almost got me, sir.

Be more careful next time, Shade. Never get too close to a dreamer. Not even for a moment. They will hurt you if you let them.

Boss picked up a thin yellow twig, sharpened the point, made some marks on a piece of paper.

Sir? Boss, that is... Shade stammered.

His vestigial remnant of a superior officer looked up at him. What is it, Shade? Something else bothering you?

Shade nodded. Yes, sir. The words tumbled from his head in a jumbled mass. Is there a way, he asked, a way—a way—to kill a dream without hurting the dreamer? That is, without using ChemLob or an unplugging?

Boss tapped the yellow twig against his blotter. Tap-tap. Tap-tap-tap. Tap-tap. The noise echoed in both their skulls.

You know, Boss said, as we all know, no third way exists. He leaned forward, propped his chin on his fist. This is about that dreamer. The Helper. It wasn't a question.

Shade looked down at his boots. I didn't like we had to kill her, sir.

Boss sighed. Your compassion is admirable, Shade. That's what the Collective is about, after all. Compassion. About loving our neighbor as ourselves. The Collective congratulates you on this outpouring of feeling for

the infected.

Shade shifted in his chair. It creaked. He could think of nothing to say in reply, so he just nodded.

Boss leaned forward across his desk. Smoke from the burning stick trickled toward the ceiling. I didn't like we had to kill her either, Shade.

He looked up. You—you mean—I mean, that is, you didn't?

Boss shook his head. No. Of course not. How could I like such a thing? But you know as well as I do, it's them or us. Dreams like hers could destroy us all. The Collective. Humanity. Everything we've built. Boss threw up his hands. What if a dream infected the Collective, Shade? he asked. Imagine the consequences!

Shade chewed his lip. What's so bad about dreams, anyway?

Boss's eyes flew open in his bed. In his mind, he pushed back from his desk. So bad about dreams? So bad about dreams???

I know, I know...

So bad about dreams? You, Shade. You, a Dream Policeman. And you stand here asking me, what's so bad about dreams?

I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—

But Boss's eyes burned with an intensity that Shade had never seen before, burned with the intensity of ten billion minds.

Dreams are false, Shade. Dreams are lies. Too easily they become nightmares. They tempt you with something you desire, but never give it to you. Dreams are a mirage in the desert to lure unwary travelers, leading them to their doom. Boss shook his head. So bad about dreams, Shade? Dreams make monsters of us all. If I hadn't been present at your trial, I'd think you were a dreamer yourself.

Shade opened his mouth and laughed, a short sharp bark. And stopped.

Boss stared at him. What in the name of the Collective was that, Shade?

I don't know, Boss. He massaged the bridge of his nose. I haven't been feeling too well lately. Maybe I'm coming down with a cold or something. Bad case of the NWB's going around. The Nuclear Winter Blues.

Well don't do it again. You know as well as I do that speech is forbidden. Mouth noises of any kind.

Shade wanted to go, to turn and flee, run from Boss's probing mind. But he had one more question he had to ask, and he could not go until he had asked it—how come the Collective couldn't detect his dream?

About... he said, and gulped. He tried again. About the Dreamer Prime, sir.

What about him?

How did he remain hidden for so long?

Boss nodded his head. That's a good question, Shade. And one, I might add, the Collective has spent a good deal of time considering. We've been hunting dreamers for—how many thousands of years now? But no matter what we do, we can never seem to exterminate the vermin. End the plague. Where do Primes come from? Why are they so hard to find? Have we really killed the last one? Boss shrugged. I don't know, Shade. We don't know. Nobody knows.

Shade straightened his jumpsuit. His errand, it seemed, had been futile.

Thank you, sir. He turned to go.

And Shade?

Sir?

Go home, Shade. Get some sleep. You'll feel better.

Sleep.

The last thing Shade wanted to do.

Five hours until it was time to go to work again. Five hours before it would be his duty to kill dreams and maim dreamers.

He crept into his dormitory and wedged himself into his bunk. What else could he do? Any other course of action would attract attention. They would probe his mind again, and maybe this time they would find his secret.

But sleep?

He folded his arms behind his head and opened his eyes as wide as he could. His head felt like a stone. This was what, his second night without sleep? His eyes felt dry, and he blinked.

Once.

Twice.

They stayed shut.

His breathing slowed, became regular.

Wake up! he screamed at himself. Splash a water pill on your face! Eat a handful of caffeine pills. Whatever you have to do to stay awake! Who knew what dreams might come?

But the other voice inside him spoke. I'm so tired. I don't care anymore.

What was this voice? Who was it? Where was it coming from?

Shade rolled over on his side, or tried to. His shoulder jammed against bunk 12. So...tired...

Why, if I don't get some sleep, the voice continued, I might as well be unplugged.

Unplugged!

No. Nothing worse than that. He struggled to wake up, fought to open his eyes, claw his way back to consciousness, but only felt himself falling

backward into darkness.

The music returned, swirling in his ears, and the kaleidoscope painted his eyelids with hot many-colored ecstasy.

As he fell, the music and the colors surged, the joy mingled with terror, and what remained of his conscious mind wanted to know, *What happens when you hit bottom? What dreams are waiting for us there?*

Jimmy Shade had no answer.

He fell for a long time.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shade woke, his jumpsuit drenched in sweat. An alarm blared in his head. The wake up call. He gulped for air.

The music faded in his ears, the colors dimmed and disappeared. He opened his eyes. The grey and dirty world greeted him once more, and the first thing he thought was:

Come back!

He had dreamed.

And he had dreamed, as he had feared, of Linda. For an eternity, it seemed to him, they had lived and loved, the music surrounding them at every step. To wake up—wrenched from that happiness—was torture.

The second thing he thought was: it wasn't really Linda. It was a noxious lie, a mirage, a diseased fantasy he could never have—like Boss said. Linda lived in a padded cell in the Hall of Dreams.

She is dead to the world. She is dead to you.

The third thing he thought was: I don't care. Visiting her in his dreams—living with her there—had been the most glorious experience of his life. He was already impatient for his next six-hour break.

What do I have to do to keep on dreaming?

The last thing he thought, as consciousness sank its hooks into him once more, was: *This dream is powerful.* Terror shook him. If he wasn't careful, it would overwhelm every aspect of his life. *I have to live in the real world. This dream will enslave me, beggar me, and, finally, kill me, if I let it.*

How can I get rid of this dream so it never comes back?

Terror turned to sorrow, a sadness unlike anything he had ever known. But to live without his dream! Without Linda! Why couldn't he be with her every night, and with the Collective every day? They couldn't tell. They might never even know.

But I would know.

And somehow they would find out. Of this he felt sure. The thought of hiding something from the Collective, of living always in fear of discovery, was more than he could bear.

They haven't found us so far, have they? The voice inside him reasoned. *And besides, what's so wrong with dreams, anyway?*

Weren't you paying attention yesterday when we talked to Boss?

The voice did not answer.

Shade rubbed his face with both hands. What had he just experienced? What was going on?

And what was he going to do about it?

The desire and longing and sorrow and joy and despair crashed over him again, and he groaned. These were dangerous and powerful emotions, he knew, long since outlawed. Feelings were irrelevant. Emotions were irrelevant—were what caused the War. What almost destroyed humanity, and could destroy humanity still.

Panic rose in Shade's throat. Because of him, the world could end!

That's ridiculous, the voice said. *Just because you have a dream, the world is going to end?*

Shade struggled for a long moment with the voice that now dwelt inside his skull. *Who's in charge here?* he demanded.

But the voice, again, said nothing.

That's right, he thought, with more confidence this time. *I'm in charge here, not you. And I'll thank you to remember it.*

Victorious, he considered his next step.

Somehow he had to kill the dream, get rid of it. Excise it from his brain. But how in the name of the Collective was he going to do that?

He needed more information. He formulated a query, and was about to submit it to the Collective, when the voice inside him said, *I wouldn't do that if I were you.*

You are me, Shade thought, and ground his teeth. *Who else would you be?*

But the voice, once more, said nothing.

He swore. The voice was right. Nothing would more surely convict him of dreaming than querying the entire Collective on how to excise an unwanted dream.

Especially since Boss had told him not six hours ago that there were no other ways to cure a dreamer other than ChemLob and unplugging.

Now what was he going to do?

Without knocking, Kann popped into Shade's mind. *Hey there, sleepyhead. We got dreams to kill!*

Shade forced a mental smile. He hoped Kann couldn't see the mess, the chaos that filled his mind.

On my way, bro. See you down at the station.

Bring your extra bandoleer, Kann said, as he faded away. *Big nest of dreamers to clean out today!*

Shade reached for his bandoleer, drew a ChemLob jabber. He felt its cool weight in his palm. He knew what he had to do now. Although that didn't make it any easier.

He uncapped the jabber and placed it against his neck. The needle

extended, pricked his skin, entered his vein. Then he closed his eyes, thumb on the plunger.

Ready.

He was a dreamer. He, Jimmy Shade, Dream Policeman, was a dreamer. And he had sworn an oath to kill dreams and capture dreamers—for the sake of humanity. It was time for him to do his duty. At least after the ChemLob kicked in and his frontal lobes were gone, he'd be a useful member of society once more.

He could only hope that would be enough for the Collective. That they didn't decide to unplug him as well.

Set.

His thumb pushed down.

But in that moment the dream returned, a tinkling of bells and swirls of color and Linda's bright laugh, her body, her warmth, her smell...he hesitated, the jabber at his neck.

He would do anything to keep dreaming of Linda, anything, even risk life itself. Even go against the will of the Collective. It was wrong, he knew it was wrong, but he couldn't help himself, and he loathed himself for his weakness.

These two opposite forces strove for mastery inside Jimmy Shade, neither gaining the upper hand. The jabber trembled at his neck, jammed tight against his throat, but Shade could not make his thumb depress the plunger.

Just when he thought he might go mad, the voice inside him said, *The Dreamer Prime.*

What about him?

The Dreamer Prime, the voice said. Go ask the Prime.

Shade reflected, thumb still at ready. He needed answers, but his questions were dangerous. The Collective couldn't answer them—or if they could, they weren't telling. Any further queries in that direction would be proof of his guilt.

The Prime will know what to do, the voice whispered.

The Prime. Locked away in the Hall of Dreams, trussed in a dream jacket, scheduled for unplugging once the Collective was done interrogating him...the man was mad himself, or soon would be.

Got a better idea, chum?

Shade sighed. He withdrew the jabber, recapped it, and put it away.

How could he get to the Hall of Dreams without attracting attention? That was, at least on the face of it, an insurmountable obstacle. The Collective knew where every node was at any given moment. Information

Factory workers processed his sensory data. They could see everything he saw. Feel everything he felt. Know everything he thought.

They don't know we're having this conversation, do they? the voice asked.

That's true, Shade thought, *or I'd be unplugged by now.*

But how long is that going to last? And even if he could somehow get to the Hall of Dreams without anyone noticing, his own eyes would record everything he did. The Collective had only to go back and examine that data. He'd wind up in the Hall of Dreams for sure.

Yo, Shade, Kann shouted in his head. *Shadey Boy...shift's about to start. Get a move on, buddy! Got a world to save here, can't do it by my lonesome!*

Coming! Shade called back.

It was a long shot, he realized. In fact, it was probably impossible. But what other choice did he have? He had to find a way to free himself from his dream. It was his only hope for remaining an undamaged part of the Collective.

But what excuse could he give for not going to work? If he was discovered, how would he explain his presence in the Hall of Dreams? He was not an interrogator. He had no business there.

His throat felt suddenly sore. Odd, he'd been fine until just—

Without warning, three Dream Police physicians dropped into his mind.

This won't take a moment, one said. He tapped into Shade's nervous system, while another explored Shade's throat and chest, and a third took his temperature.

I don't feel so good, Shade mumbled. And in that moment he felt genuinely ill.

Fever, commented the second physician. *Sore throat. Upper respiratory tract infection.* He clucked his tongue. *NWBs, most likely. More time in your tanning booth, plenty of water pills, stay off your feet.*

The doctor clicked on the tanning booth. A bank of lights in the bottom of bunk 12 glowed blue. A mask descended to cover Shade's eyes.

The three men bowed in unison.

But I've got to go to work! Shade croaked.

Boss chimed in. *Not with the NWBs, you don't. Get better. Then you can come back and help us kill dreams.*

Shadey Boy! Kann added, and laughed. *Double my workload, willya?*

Shade let out a sigh. He'd been holding his breath without realizing it. He nodded, and Boss and the three doctors departed.

What had just happened? He had fooled the Collective's physicians—

even Boss! The sore throat was gone now, as quickly as it had come. He felt fine. How in the name of the Collective had he done that?

Could he also, he wondered, convince the Collective he was lying in his bunk with the tanning booth on, when in reality he was in the Hall of Dreams?

Now that he was “sick,” his sensory input would be low priority. It would still be processed eventually, of course. But it only took one Information Factory worker to notice something was amiss...and Shade would never make it out of the Hall of Dreams with his brain intact.

Assuming he managed to get out of there at all.

Shade stepped out of his mind into the head of a passing node, and looked at himself: Jimmy Shade, Dream Policeman, lay sick in bed, tanning lights on. He popped back into his own head, climbed down from the bunk, then head-hopped into another passing node. Would he raise the alarm? But that node, too, saw only Shade in bed, sick—even though Shade was no longer there.

What was he doing? How was he doing it? He had never imagined such a thing was possible.

Whatever it was, the Collective accepted it without a murmur. Sick days happened. Three doctors had inspected him, after all. What more was there to think about? It was not worth the Collective’s valuable processing time to look more closely into the matter. They had the world to save, after all. The great mass of mankind would continue on its way until Shade could be useful to them once more.

And now?

Shade popped a food and water pill and armed himself. He strapped on the squawk box. He was surprised the Collective had not reminded him to return it to Dream Police HQ. Good to have, though. Without it he would be unable to communicate with the Prime.

Go to the Hall of Dreams, preferably without attracting attention. Gain entry, find the Dreamer Prime, interrogate him. Then figure out how to kill the dream, and get back under the tanning lights before anyone notices my absence.

Simple, really.

And, he knew, so impossible.

What choice did he have? He had to kill his dream, this disease—before it consumed him. Before he infected others. The future of the world was at stake. His dream could spell humanity’s doom. How could he live with that on his conscience?

He stepped quickly to the elevator. He had to hurry. He could not hide—

not for long. He could not run—there was nowhere on Earth the Collective would not find him, nowhere they would not go to kill his dream.

To kill his Linda.

Fury raged inside him, and the sadness ebbed. Killing Linda was a small price to pay. What was more important? His diseased fantasy? Or the entire Collective?

No. He had to kill his dream before they did it for him.

His only hope was to find the Prime. He chewed his lip. The only node in the world who could help him was his enemy.

Dreamer Prime it is, then.

Right.

CHAPTER FIVE

For all his time in the Dream Police, Jimmy Shade had never been to the Hall of Dreams. Why would he? Judgment by the Collective was immediate upon capture. Sentence was carried out on the spot, and the dreamer either ChemLobbed and released, or unplugged and interred in the Hall of Dreams for life. The Collective's decision to keep the Prime as a specimen, he mused, was unusual.

Shade took a flying train to the outskirts of the city, and transferred to a moving box. Across from him sat a ChemLobbed node, a farmer on his way to the hydroponic gardens outside the city. The man stared at Shade, drool trickling down his chin. With a start, Shade recognized him—a former Dream Policeman. *What was the man's name again?* He forced a smile and lifted a hand.

The man stared at Shade, but said nothing. The drool dribbled from his chin into his lap.

Shade shifted in his seat. He probed the man's mind.

Nothingness. Blackness. No—grey. A mush of goo, a walking brain-dread half-wit.

If your errand isn't successful, this could be you, he told himself.

The moving box continued away from the center, dropping passengers as it went. Here the groundscrapers sank only a floor or two beneath the kilometer-thick Crust, and the streets were wide black corridors.

Then he was there.

Without looking at the drooling farmer, Shade got down from the moving box and stood before the Hall of Dreams. The building, he knew, scraped the ground to more than four thousand floors, the only groundscraper for kilometers around—a security measure to prevent the remote possibility of escape. Dreamers went in, they didn't come out.

Shade took a deep breath, forced himself to relax. He waited for the moving box to trundle off, then went in.

No guard manned the door. No security camera tracked his progress across the lobby. What need? His own eyes and ears betrayed him.

No time to waste. With more confidence than he felt, he strode to the bank of elevators and pressed the call button.

Linda was here, he knew. His one true love, unplugged, infected, sentenced to suffer and die in a padded cell, forever cut off from the Collective. Should he look for her? He might never have another chance like this. He had never seen her face to face, never looked her in the eye in real life. What was she like? Would she recognize him? Or would she be so

crazed from solitary mental confinement that she would no longer even know her own name?

The elevator doors opened. He stepped inside. Four thousand buttons covered the walls.

Now what? There must be thousands—tens of thousands—of unplugged dreamers in this maze. How would he find Linda, even if he wanted to? How would he find the Prime?

He could hardly ask the Collective for the Prime's cell number without reporting his own activity.

Find the Prime, get what you need, get out of there. But how was he going to do that?

Panic bubbled up inside his chest. The elevator doors stood open. *If you go down there, he thought, you may never leave.*

Get in, a voice said.

Shade could recognize billions of different voices, but this one was—unique. That was the only word for it.

Unique.

It reminded him a little of the Prime. Although the man had said so little that day, it was hard to tell.

He looked around. He was alone. So far as he could tell, the Collective was unaware of his presence in the Hall of Dreams. So who was talking to him?

He shuddered in fear. This was a stupid idea. *Go back to your bunk and get some sun.* Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Shade turned to go.

I said, get in, the voice commanded. *We don't have much time.*

Shade's feet hesitated. He willed them to go back to the street, to summon a passing moving box, to get as far away from here as he could—but his feet would not obey him.

This isn't happening to me, Shade thought. *This isn't real. You're tired. You need more sleep. You're sick. That's it—you're sick. The doctors said so, didn't they? Go home and catch some rays. You'll feel better, then. This is all just a delusion, nothing more.*

Get in! Hurry!

Shade's feet turned and carried him into the elevator. *Whoa!* His limbs no longer obeyed him. He felt like a puppet on a string.

The buttons stared at him. The silence around him was total.

Now what?

Floor 3, the voice commanded.

So close to the surface? And why there? How do you know? And who

are you, anyway?

You know who I am, Jimmy Shade. A soft laugh inside his head. We met, you and I, the other day. Remember?

Shade stifled an intake of breath. *But that could only mean—?*

The voice did not fill in the blank. Shade's finger moved, not of its own volition, it seemed to him, and pressed the indicated floor number. The doors slid shut. The elevator dropped. For an instant, his feet felt light. His stomach floated near his chin.

Ping.

Gravity returned.

3.

He got out.

Still no guards. No police, no doctors, no interrogators—nobody. Strange, he thought. Didn't Boss say the Collective wanted to interrogate this specimen?

Shade felt cut off from humanity in that moment, worse than ever before. Apart. Separate. How he longed once more for the Collective's sweet embrace! How he hated the Prime for doing this to him, tormenting him with this false vision of Linda, a diseased fantasy that even now seemed to impel him onward to actions not of his own choosing.

He wanted to run, to go back, to do anything but go forward. But the only way back to the Collective, he knew, was to deal with this Prime, and solve his dreaming problem once and for all.

Shade walked down the hallway, glancing through window slits in the doors as he passed. The cells were empty. He came to a branch in the corridor.

To your left, the voice said.

He passed another fifty or so doors. Again, all the cells were empty. He probed the floor, then the building with his mind, tentatively at first, then with greater force, but found no one else there.

That didn't mean much, though. Maybe there weren't doctors on duty at the moment, for whatever reason, but there were surely thousands of floors packed with unplugged dreamers, rocking back and forth in their padded cells, devastated by the loss of their implants.

And the Prime...

The Prime still had an implant, he supposed. Shade would not be able to enter the man's diseased mind, thank the Collective, but would only hear what the Prime chose to say. And that was assuming he could find the man.

At the end of the hallway he came to a door.

In here.

Shade tried the door. It had no doorknob—in fact, none of the cell doors he'd passed had doorknobs. The door locked from the outside. Anyone could go in, but without a key they'd be stuck inside. The system made sense, actually. After all, who would ever open a door without the Collective's knowledge and consent? He pushed open the door in one swift movement and jammed it against a wall latch.

A man in a dream jacket sat on a bunk. He stared at Shade with curious grey eyes.

It was the Dreamer Prime.

CHAPTER SIX

Shade flicked on his squawk box. The crackle of his angry, incoherent thoughts startled them both.

“Are you the one inside my head?” Shade demanded.

The man smiled. *Yes. I am.*

Shade reeled. “But—but how are you thinking at me? You’re wearing a dream jacket!”

The Prime lifted an elbow. A shiny bit of metal caught the light. A nail protruded through the man’s restraining garment just below the armpit.

Inside his head, Shade clucked his tongue. How could the paramedics have missed that? Every dreamer who entered the Hall of Dreams received a thorough search.

“Then how did your thoughts escape the Hall of Dreams?”

Maybe the Collective made a mistake when they built it.

“The Collective doesn’t make mistakes.”

A shrug. *If you say so.*

“Fine,” he squawked. “I don’t care about that. I just need to know: What have you done to me? Is it a dream infection? Is that it?”

The man opened his mouth and spoke, and the sound of his voice was as shocking and obscene to Shade now as it was when he first apprehended the man.

“I’ve done nothing to you,” the Prime said. “Now please. Listen to me. I’ve got a message for you.”

The words grated in Shade’s ears. “Talk normal,” he complained. “With your mind. That’s what the nail was for, right?”

“The Collective struggles to process the spoken word,” the man replied. “They are of course listening to every word I say, through your own ears, but by speaking out loud we slow them down.” He laughed. “A little, anyway.”

Shade took a step backward, eyed the door. “You mean they know I’m here? They’re coming for me?”

“I told you, we don’t have much time. Will you listen?”

The panic returned. “I don’t want to hear your message, whatever it is,” Shade squawked. “Don’t poison me any further. All I want,” and his voice cracked high, “is for you to cure me of this dream infection!”

The Prime shook his head. “Dreams are not an infection, Jimmy Shade.”

“Save your breath.” He paced the room, one fist raised. “You infected me. Cure me, kill it, take it back—whatever, I don’t want it!”

The man laughed. “Your dream, Jimmy Shade, is not mine to give or

receive.”

Shade stopped his pacing. “What are you talking about? Of course it is. You gave it to me!”

“I gave you nothing that was not already yours.”

He stepped closer to the Prime, his fist raised, heart pounding with rage and fear, but the man just sat there, looking up at him.

“I’m Dream Police, you understand that?” Shade squawked. “I kill dreams. It’s my job. To protect and defend the Collective with my life. If it weren’t for people like me, the world would end.”

The Prime snorted. “The world isn’t going to end because you dream, Jimmy Shade.”

“Dreams are false,” Shade thundered. “They are lies.” He pounded his palm with his fist so hard it stung. “First you infect my wife. My Linda. Take her from me. Now you taunt me with her in my sleep.” Shade bent down over the man. “But that is *not* my Linda.” He shook his fist in the man’s face. It’s a mirage. A disease. A drug!”

The man took this abuse without a word.

Shade straightened up. “I reject that drug,” he said. “I love the Collective. I would never do anything to hurt them. They are my world. The only world that matters. The only world that should matter to you.”

The man shook his head and chuckled. “You really believe that, don’t you?”

“Our world stands in crisis—and you laugh?” Shade said. “We must work to save our planet or we will all die!”

Still the man chuckled.

Shade bit his lip. This was it, then. He was out of options. He had hesitated before, but now...he had no alternative. He drew a ChemLob jabber, held it to his own neck.

“In the name of the Collective and all humanity, I demand you take back this false dream, or I will be forced to kill it, no matter what the cost to me personally.”

But the man just looked at him, laughing and shaking his head.

Shade’s thumb felt the smooth, plastic plunger, readied himself for the final push. He didn’t want to wind up a drooling half-wit, but what other choice did he have?

He bent down, screamed in the man’s face, “Take it back!”

The laughter stopped. The man said, “I told you, your dream is not mine to receive. If you choose to kill it, that is your decision, not mine.”

“But you’re the one who gave it to me!”

“No,” the man said, and the word sounded sorrowful. “I keep telling you

but you won't listen."

"So tell me!"

The Prime's grey eyes studied Shade. "I returned to you what was rightfully yours. What had been stolen from you."

Shade pounced on the unfamiliar word. His neck muscles throbbed against the jabber. "Stolen?"

"An ancient concept. Meaning to take without permission."

"What are you talking about?" he demanded. "You've given me a dream. A disease. If you can't take it back, then at least give me the antidote. Surely you must have some idea how to kill a dream without destroying a dreamer." Shade went down on his knees, plucked at the man's dream jacket. "Please, I'm begging you!"

"Every man has a dream, Jimmy Shade," the man said. "A dream he lives for. A dream he is willing to die for."

"Well I don't."

"You do now," the man said. "The only question is, what are you going to do about it?"

An alarm blared inside Shade's head. The ceiling lights flashed red. The door behind him unlatched itself and began to close. He jumped and blocked it with his boot.

They've found me, he thought, and the squawk box translated the words. "They'll hunt me down and unplug me or ChemLob me for sure." He spun around to face the Dreamer Primer. "Now what do I do?"

The man's face betrayed no emotion. "I suggest you run."

Shade could not fit between the door and the frame. He braced himself against the wall and pushed with all his strength. The door gave a centimeter, then a few more, enough to squeeze by.

The man, to Shade's surprise, made no move to follow.

"Aren't you coming?" he panted, holding the door wide.

The man shook his head. "I have played my part. It is your turn, now."

The alarm blared louder than before.

"But why me?" Shade asked.

"Because you have a destiny, Jimmy Shade. Even as I do." He smiled. "That is my message for you. You are destined to dream great dreams. Even if you don't know it yet."

Shade turned and ran. The voice called after him, the vibrating sound waves bouncing off the spotless obsidian walls of the corridor.

"It was an honor and a privilege to meet you, Jimmy Shade. May we meet again in the City of Dreams."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The alarm blared louder inside his head. Ten billion voices shouted at him. *JIMMY SHADE! JIMMY SHADE! WHAT ARE YOU DOING, JIMMY SHADE?*

He ran down the black corridor, and the voices followed. Shade struggled to think beneath the din.

Trapped inside the Hall of Dreams, and every human being not locked in a padded cell was now looking for him.

Shade swung around the corner and came to the elevator. He thumbed the call button.

Go up? And then what? the Prime asked, amused. The Dreamer Prime hopped into Shade's head.

Shade ignored the man, tried to tune out the Collective's clamor, forced himself to think straight.

Go up? And be arrested, put on trial, sentenced to ChemLob or unplugg, maybe even spend the rest of his life right here in the Hall of Dreams, trussed in a dream jacket?

The elevator hummed. The door pinged open.

He hesitated. If he took the elevator, they'd just turn off the power, leave him trapped, ready for capture.

Of course, he thought, he could just turn himself in. It was the right thing to do. But his dream! He couldn't will himself to do the right thing, and he loathed himself as a result. Some uncontrollable part of himself was in control, and forced him to turn his thoughts once more to flight.

The stairs! Where were the stairs?

LIE DOWN! ten billion minds thundered at him, so loud his head throbbed. *YOU ARE UNDER ARREST! THE CHARGE IS DREAMING!* They entered his mind in a rush, and within a heartbeat pronounced judgment: *GUILTY AS CHARGED! SENTENCE IS CHEMLOB! STAY WHERE YOU ARE!*

Shade's body wanted to obey this summons. He felt the weight of humanity's condemnation on his shoulders, but that new, individual, irrational part of himself had gained mastery, and to both his own surprise and the Collective's, he ran.

He charged through the stairwell door. Noises clattered above him. He paused on the landing. Bootsteps!

By instinct, Shade reached for his service automatic. A dozen bullets, plus a couple of extra clips. But what good were bullets against the Collective? More to the point, was he prepared to kill another cop?

Forget the gun, the Prime thought. Drop it. Leave it here.

But I—

Do it! Or they'll kill you.

Shade let his gun clatter to the landing. *Now what?*

Go down. Go deep. Don't argue. Just go. Now!

Shade took the stairs two at a time. Four thousand floors. No other groundscrapers for kilometers around. What was the point of running? He was merely delaying the inevitable.

A few more minutes with his brain intact. *Enjoy them while you can,* he thought.

The Prime said nothing, and Shade threw himself down the stairs as fast as he could go. The bootsteps followed, drew nearer.

NO NODE MAY DISOBEY! the Collective thundered. NO NODE MAY THINK FOR HIMSELF! OR HUMANITY WILL BE DOOMED AND THE WORLD WILL END!

But still Shade ran.

You want to cut me off! he pleaded with them, leaping to the next landing. He spun around the corner and flung himself down the next flight of stairs. The bootsteps above did the same. Shade caught a flash of trouser leg behind him. *How can I let you cut me off?*

WHEN YOU DISOBEY, YOU CUT YOURSELF OFF! the Collective howled.

I want only to be part of the whole, Shade whispered. *Safe in the bosom of humanity.*

He skittered around another corner and slid down a banister. Half a dozen Dream Police followed on his heels.

THE TIME FOR DREAMING IS OVER, the Collective chanted, so loud Shade thought his brain would burst. ***NOW WE ALL MUST WORK.***

I agree! He thought. *So let me work! Is that so much to ask?*

He'd lost count of how many flights of stairs he'd gone down. Maybe thirty. Maybe forty, or fifty. Air rasped in his lungs. Twice he felt a hand grip his collar. Twice he twisted free.

Then he spun on a landing, jumped down half a flight of stairs, and found himself face to face with a wall. Another three thousand, nine hundred and fifty floors to go. How could the stairs just stop?

He turned and pressed his back against the cool metal wall, and waited for the end to come.

A platoon of Dream Police halted at the bottom of the stairs.

A door on the landing. Maybe he could—

Another platoon burst through the door and leveled their weapons at

him. The two platoons merged and took up a classic prepare-to-subdue-and-ChemLob position.

He knew the formation all too well. How many times had he himself performed the same maneuver?

A ripple in the ranks, and a cop stepped forward.

It was his partner, Kann.

Shade gasped for breath. *Kann. I can explain.*

His partner sighed. *Occupational hazard, Shade. You know that as well as I do.* A bitter laugh. *Could just as easily have been me.*

Let me go, Shade whispered inside Kann's head. But ten billion watchers heard it too.

Kann shook his head. *What would you do if you were me?*

Shade considered this. He had to admit he would do the same. He pressed himself tighter against the wall, wishing he could disappear, waiting for the end.

It's not your fault, Kann said. *I don't blame you. I want you to know that.* He motioned two policemen forward. They held their jabbers out, needles extended.

Please, Kann, he begged. *Not that. Anything but that. Kill me before you ChemLob me. Please!*

I am sorry, my friend. Kann reached out to squeeze Shade's bicep, but then thought the better of it, and drew back. The two policemen took another step forward.

So this was it. Shade closed his eyes. It was over. His life. Everything. From now on he would be a drooling hydroponic farmer or a garbage collector, just another ChemLobbed node.

The Prime spoke inside Shade's head once more. *There's an air duct at your feet. The screws have been removed. Wait until the two policemen are close enough to block the line of fire. Then kick backward. Knock the screen free and jump down the vent.*

Shade opened his eyes. *I'm sorry too, Kann.* He shrugged. *I guess this is goodbye.*

ChemLob, as they both knew, erases not only dreams, but also memories. When next they met, his partner would be just another node. If they succeeded in ChemLobbing him, that is.

Kann raised a hand in salute. *Goodbye, old friend.*

The two jabber-wielding policemen drew nearer, nearer.

Shade tensed.

Now! the Prime shouted.

Shade kicked backward, and just as the Prime had promised, his boot mashed against a loose air vent cover. It bounced free. He turned and leaped feet-first down the vent.

Hands grabbed at him, plucking at his jumpsuit, a ChemLob jabber grazed his scalp, but he shook himself loose.

Then he was falling.

Gunshots echoed in the narrow space, sparks flew around him, but he turned a corner and accelerated out of harm's way. His back scraped painfully against the dusty walls of the chute—better than a bullet wound, anyway—and the pain ended only when, without warning, the vent ended, and he fell into complete darkness.

And as he fell, he screamed.

The fall lasted an eternity, or so it seemed to Shade. A single streak of light flickered far above, and he caught a brief glimpse of a giant cavern with tunnels leading off in all directions.

Air became water, and he floundered in cold liquid. The fast-moving current took him he knew not where. For long minutes he struggled to stay afloat, splashing and flailing to keep his head above the turbulent waters.

The current slowed. He was caught in an eddy. His elbow banged against something solid. He reached up, found a handhold. He pulled himself out of the water.

He lay on some sort of smooth platform. He rested there for a moment, panting, catching his breath, retching up water.

Where was he?

A storm drain beneath the city, he supposed. The reservoirs extended hundreds and more floors beneath the surface of the Crust, surrounding the groundscrapers where they plunged toward the radioactive terrain below.

He peered around him in the dark, trying to get his bearings, and failed. Now what was he supposed to do? Hide out in the sewers until he starved to death? Where was he supposed to go?

To the City of Dreams, the Prime replied inside Shade's head.

The City of What? the Where?

Where all true dreamers must go. It's the—

But a mental scream of agony tore through the Prime's thoughts, and then the voice was gone.

THE PRIME IS DEAD, the Collective said, without emotion.

You—you killed him?

But they ignored this.

*NODE SHADE, YOU ARE GUILTY OF DREAMING AS CHARGED.
THE SENTENCE IS CHEMLOB. RETURN TO THE SURFACE, OR*

WITHIN THREE DAYS YOU WILL BE DELETED.

Deleted!

Every implant inside every node's head contained a small explosive charge. Shade had seen thousands of them. He routinely used them to destroy unplugged implants...but they had another purpose. Nodes who strayed below the Crust for more than three days would self-destruct, their brains turned to mush.

No! Not that! Please, no!

YOUR INFECTION COULD POISON US ALL. WE CANNOT ALLOW THAT TO HAPPEN. THREE DAYS, NODE SHADE.

A clock appeared inside Shade's head, a timer counting down.

71:59:59.

71:58:58.

71:58:57.

Please, not that! Please!!!

But the Collective said nothing more. No Prime, no Kann, no other voice intruded in his consciousness. Utter silence filled his skull.

Except for the sound of the clock:

tick

tick

tick.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Soaked to the skin by the radioactive acid rain he'd been swimming in, Jimmy Shade curled himself up against the wall and went to sleep.

Guilt haunted him. He knew he should go back to the surface and take his medicine, but he couldn't bring himself to do so.

He would sleep, he decided. A few hours of forbidden bliss dreaming of Linda, and he would be ready to die, alone in this interminable darkness.

Except this time his dream had become a nightmare.

Nightmare.

If dreams are our hopes and longings, he mused between screams of anguish, then nightmares are our fears.

Linda came to him, entered his mind, while his body shivered in that storm drain. But this was not the Linda he remembered, either from their marriage or from dreams. This was a monstrous Linda, covered in slimy purple and green scales, eyes yellow, fangs protruding over her lower lip.

"I don't love you," she said, globs of spittle splattering his face. "I never loved you. You're not worth loving."

You—you don't mean that, he stammered.

She laughed. "Why would anyone want to marry a diseased worm like you, anyway?"

She towered above him, and he groveled at her feet. No music enchanted him, no kaleidoscope of colors painted the world with delight. Only the harsh grating and clashing of her words filled his ears, and an ugliness beyond description painted his inner eyelids long after he squeezed them shut.

Love me, love me, love me, he begged.

But her curses continued in an unbroken stream for ages of the world.

She broke off her harangue, shook him by the shoulder. "We have to go," she said, her voice different, less grating, more masculine. It was the first time in the nightmare that she had touched him.

He blinked.

Her monstrous form had changed. A light illuminated her face from below. She had grown horns, the scales were now fur, and she looked like a—a—a—

"A goat?" a man's voice suggested.

Shade sat up in the dark, gulping air. He looked around him, then cowered once more on the ground. The thing was still there, a light held

under its chin, this monstrous form of Linda laughing at him deep inside his mind.

Won't this nightmare ever end?

The words echoed in his ears, and he winced.

Fingers—hairy fingers—patted Shade's cheek.

"You are awake, Jimmy Shade," the voice said. "Let not the phantoms of sleep torture you. This is no nightmare. Rejoice! You are on the road to the City of Dreams!"

Shade blinked again, leaned back against the wall. The "City of Dreams." Now he knew this was a nightmare.

The dim form, goat horns and all, hovered nearby. The new figure looked like a man who had grown horns and fur and hooves and a tail. *What a bizarre-looking monster*, he thought.

The squawk box translated all this.

The monster beamed. "Yes! I am a monster! Sharp of you to notice." He laughed, and stuck out a hairy hand. "Name's Buck, by the way. Pleased to meet you."

Shade looked at the hand in horror, and did not take it.

Buck laughed, a high-pitched cackle that rang in the darkness.

But you're a monster! Shade thought, *how can this be real?*

"All dreamers become monsters," Buck said. "As you will soon be, too." He turned to go. "Come along now. No time to waste."

Boss's words echoed in Shade's head: *Dreams make monsters of us all.*

Shade covered his face with his hands, squeezed his eyes shut. When would he wake up? When would this nightmare end? He had never understood what the word meant before. Now it was clear to him why the Collective was so opposed to dreams—so easily they turned into nightmares! So easily the dreamer became monster! He cried out in agony, and this Buck nightmare flinched at the sound.

He gritted his teeth: *Wake up. Wake up. Wake up!*

But the nightmare continued.

Hell was a real place, and he was in it, and it was infinite.

Shade giggled and twitched on the ground. In the course of forty-eight hours—his life destroyed! Infected by a Dreamer Prime, on the run from the Collective, lost and abandoned far beneath the surface of the Crust, to die alone in a radioactive storm drain!

The Buck goat-man-monster continued to blink at him. The waiting was the worst, Shade decided. Why couldn't this nightmare just get going already, torture him or whatever horror he was here to unleash, and be done

with it?

Buck sighed. "I'm a monster, yes. A nightmare? No. I'm real. And we need to get going. We aren't safe here."

Was that even possible? Mutant creatures who live in radioactive storm drains, and that somehow the Collective knew nothing about?

Unlikely. No, impossible. But what if...?

Shade checked the timer: 71:27:14. Had he really only slept for half an hour?

The doubt niggled, and the uncertainty was the worst form of torture so far. *Was this a nightmare? Or was this nightmare—real?*

"Look," Buck said. "Take my light stick. Alright? See for yourself. This is real. I am real."

Shade felt a light stick thrust into his hands. He fumbled it, then held it out at arm's length, darting the beam around the dark space.

The storm drain ran beside them at their feet, just as he remembered it. Tunnels branched off in every direction. He turned the light on Buck, and scuttled back against the wall.

The man had horns alright, and growing out of his forehead! Twisty little things, just like a—

"Goat. Yes. You said."

One of the ancient animals, he remembered, like a dinosaur. Long since extinct.

The thing had a face of leather. Tufts of patchy fur covered most of his face. A long, thin beard dangled from his chin. His body was covered in fur, and instead of feet, he had hooves.

Buck cackled. "I love meeting first-time dreamers, they are such a hoot!"

What? How often do you meet first-time dreamers? And what does that mean—"first time"?

The goat-man seized Shade by the wrist and pulled him to his feet. "More often than you think. Now we have to hurry. They are coming!"

Who are?

"The Collective! We must get you to safety."

Shade let himself be dragged along. If this was to be his nightmare, so be it. He preferred this goat-man to the Linda-monster any day.

Shade flicked the light stick around the cavern. The goat-man led him into a tunnel, and they began to descend.

Where are we going? he squawked.

"The City of Dreams, of course!"

Please. There's no such place. A myth to scare young nodes with,

nothing more.

Buck spun on his hooves, held Shade's hand aloft. The light stick cast dark shadows across his face.

"Every city has one," the monster said. "An under-city. A City of Dreams. What was here before, and still remains."

Here before? Before what?

"Before the War, of course. Before the Collective came into being."

If that's the case, Shade demanded, how come the Collective knows nothing about it?

Buck's countenance took on a solemn expression. "The Collective sees everything it wants to see, and nothing that it doesn't."

That's ridiculous, Shade replied. The Collective knows everything.

Far above them, a splash of water. Bootsteps.

The goat-man lowered his voice. "Come on, we have to go!"

Shade resisted. What does it matter? Let them find me.

"They are coming for you. Don't you get it? The Collective. You cannot stay here. They will kill your dream if you do."

Shade lifted his arms above his head. *Let them. My dream? You mean, my nightmare? Come and get it.* He let his arms fall, buried his face in his hands. *Bring on the ChemLab. Just let this nightmare end.*

Buck tugged at his elbow. "This isn't a nightmare. This is real, and we need to go. Now!"

Shade cackled. Where? The City of Dreams?

"Yes," Buck said. "There are many people there who want to meet you. Now come on!"

The goat-man grabbed Shade's wrist with both hands and dragged him down the tunnel. After a while Shade stopped resisting, and ran alongside the monster. What did it matter? What difference did anything make at this point? Fighting the nightmare would only make it worse.

They ventured deeper and deeper into the Crust. The bootsteps grew fainter, and stopped.

The goat-man halted after half an hour. They rested against the wall, panting for breath.

"We'll be safe soon," Buck said. "The Dream Police will not follow where we're going."

I've never heard of the Dream Police chasing a dreamer into the sewers before.

The goat-man's eyes swivelled to look at him. "You are special, Jimmy Shade. You have been chosen."

That's the same thing the Prime said.

“Indeed.” Buck got to his feet. “Not too much farther now. Then you can decide for yourself if the City of Dreams is a myth.”

So who lives in the City of Dreams? Shade asked. This was a strange nightmare, but no longer painful. Might as well see where it led.

“Why, other dreamers, of course.”

What? Shade laughed. *What other dreamers? Do they live here in the sewers?* He swept an arm at their surroundings. *Because I don’t see any.*

“We live below,” Buck said. “On the surface.”

But it’s radioactive down there! Shade said. *No one can live on the surface. Not since the War.*

The goat-man shrugged. “It’s the only way to keep our dreams alive.”

You’re serious? Shade asked. *A City of Dreams...you mean a City of Dreamers?*

A laugh. “Obviously. As you will soon see.”

Rage filled Shade’s soul. *A city of people who do no work? Lazy people who would let humanity die?* Fury overcame Shade, and he wrenched free of Buck’s grip. *The time for dreaming is over. Now we all must work.*

“And to dream is holy work,” the goat-man said.

More like unholy. Because of dreamers like you, the Collective could be destroyed, the world could end!

Buck tapped Shade’s chest. “You mean, dreamers like you?”

I didn’t ask to be infected!

“Neither did I. Neither did any of us.” The monster stepped back, lay a hand on Shade’s shoulder. “We don’t get to choose our dreams, Jimmy Shade. They choose us.”

And, saying nothing more, Buck ambled down the broadening slope of the tunnel, whistling.

Shade followed. After a few minutes, they came to a wide hole in the floor. A faint glow came up from below.

He peered over the edge. A spiral staircase dropped down from a dizzying height. Glass encircled the stairs. A metal pole, anchored to the cavern’s ceiling, descended through the center of the tall thin cylinder, the stairs spiraling around the outside. A small platform, next to the top steps, jutted out to the pole.

Buck motioned him onto the platform.

A City of Dreams, then, Shade said. He ignored the monster’s gesture. *Does that mean the Prime was not the last of his kind? That there’s an entire City of Primes?* He stared once more into the abyss. Lights twinkled below. *A City of Primes? A whole city of Primes the Collective could*

unplugg and put in the Hall of Dreams? The cop in him drooled at the thought.

Buck laughed. “They’d just wind up down here, anyway. Or what do you think the Hall of Dreams is for?”

For unplugged dreamers, of course, Shade said. What an odd thing for the monster to say. He squinted, trying to count the lights on the surface. *If this is a city, it must be big. How many dreamers are we talking about? Thousands? Millions?*

“Not that many,” Buck said. “There are never many dreamers. But we have more power than you would ever imagine.” He gestured again at the pole.

Shade stepped onto the platform. He reached out and took hold of the pole, looked down again. The pole ran straight to the ground. How high up was the bottom of the Crust? A kilometer? Two? More?

His jaw dropped open. He was going down to the surface. He was fleeing the Collective. Forever. Or until this nightmare ended, which might as well be forever. No. No. He stepped away from the pole, teetered on the platform.

Buck caught his sleeve.

“We must go, Jimmy Shade,” he said. “The king has asked me to bring you to him. We do not want to keep him waiting.”

The...king?

“The man who rules our world.” Buck pointed to the ground below. “This, right now, is the first of your choices. Do you return to the Collective and let them ChemLob you? Do you stay here in the sewers and die in three days’ time? Or do you travel below, with me, to the City of Dreams?”

Shade’s head throbbed. *I—I don’t know.*

“No one may come to the City of Dreams by force,” the goat-man continued. “I cannot choose for you. But you must choose, and choose now.”

Buck halted.

It wasn’t much of a choice, Shade reflected. Either he was having a nightmare, in which case nothing he did would make any difference.

Or...

This was really happening.

If this *was* real, then he had to kill his dream, end his nightmare. He just wanted things to go back the way they were—before. Before that damned Prime had infected him. To go back to being a Dream Policeman doing the will of the Collective.

He could return topside and submit, take his ChemLob...Before his nightmare, he’d have preferred death to the loss of his dream, but now...

better to be fry his lobes than be tortured by nightmares.

On the other hand...if he went below, maybe these dreamers, whoever they were, knew more about dreams than the Collective did. A ridiculous idea, true, but—what if? What if they knew of some way to surgically remove an unwanted dream? Maybe he could give them back his dream, or they could cure him, do something...

With a heavy heart, Shade wrapped his arms around the pole and leaped into the air.

And fell.

A breeze whirled around him. He was thousands of meters above the ground, and falling fast. He tightened his legs around the pole to slow his fall. His speed dropped. Below in the darkness the lights trembled, seemed to grow. He could make out the shapes of hundreds—no, thousands—of melted glass towers, steel jutting out like broken ribs.

And there—the groundscrapers of the Crust, enormous black inverted pyramids descending from above, filling the gaps between the glass towers, like black teeth descending to make a meal of the world.

The spiral staircase swirled around them, and as he plummeted earthward through that transparent vertical tunnel, monstrous shadows on the staircase waved, pickaxes and shovels resting on their shoulders as they climbed upward.

Buck squeaked along the pole above him, getting closer, and Shade was forced to loosen his grip to avoid a collision. He fell now with ever-increasing speed.

The ground got closer. A giant crater yawned open in the middle of the melted city. Buck was directly above him now. The pole ended in mid-air. Before he could scream, a blast of air pushed Shade to one side, and he landed in a pile of sand.

Buck landed a few meters away.

Without breaking stride, Buck offered Shade his hand, pulled him to his feet, and led him up the side of the crater. Stairs had been hewn out of the glass surface of the bowl, and doused with sand to improve the footing, but even so it was slippery going, and twice Shade lost his balance, and would have fallen, if Buck had not caught him.

From halfway up the side of the crater they could see to the edge of the blast radius, the bomb or explosion, whatever had destroyed the city. The ground was flattened for several kilometers in every direction, followed by stubble of twisted buildings, rising to towers that were merely melted, to glass and steel behemoths on the horizon that stood undamaged.

Lights twinkled in many of the more distant towers—those that were not

hidden by the looming black groundscrapers, anyway.

Just below the lip of the crater, Buck led them into a tunnel that had been punched through the glass. Shade took one last look behind him. The spindle of stairs hung like a needle in the sky, an impossibly thin column rising to the Crust, which hung, far above, like an inky, impenetrable sky.

“There will be time for exploring later,” Buck said. “Now we must go. The king wishes to see you. Come.”

Am I still dreaming? Shade asked. Is this real?

“More real than the world above,” Buck said. “Down here dreams flow like blood in our veins. In the world you left, death masquerades as life.”

But that makes no sense. You don't need dreams to live. In fact, dreams will kill you!

But Buck turned and set off down the tunnel.

Shade struggled to keep up. *And who is this 'king' we are going to go see?*

“He is the king of dreams,” Buck said. “Are you ready?”

I still don't understand the concept, Shade said. One man to rule over others? Or over dreams? Or both? How is that even possible?

Buck stopped, and Shade crashed into him. “I asked you, are you ready?”

Shade stared up at the hairy goat-monster. He took a step backward. “No,” he said. “I'm not.”

Buck clapped him on the shoulder. “An honest answer. Come. Many dreamers who want to meet you. Some of whom I think you know.”

Without another word, and ignoring all of Shade's questions, he led them through a maze of corridors away from the crater. After a long while, they climbed several flights of stairs and came to a high double door.

From inside came the sounds of laughter, and music...were those flashing colors coming through the crack, from under the door...?

Buck turned to him. “Prepare yourself to meet the king of dreams.”

Shade could not take his eyes off the door. The music, the lights...it was just like in his dream. He jerked his head, straightened his bandoleer. He still carried his unplucker and jabber, plus a hundred rounds of ChemLob. Maybe they would come in handy.

Buck pushed open the door, and they entered.

Shade stood in a huge chamber filled with people. Molten glass and steel rose to a towering height. Twisted girders marked where floors and roof had once been. Far above loomed the Crust, its blackness filling the entire sky.

Colorful rectangles hung on the walls, and he goggled. The Collective

permitted only black and white. Except in his dreams, Shade had never seen colors before.

What a strange nightmare, he thought. So different from the scaly Linda-monster from before.

Peculiar noises emanated from a corner, where oddly-dressed figures were banging, hitting and scraping funny-looking objects together. The giant vertical tunnel echoed with noise. In the empty space above their heads, a large mirrored sphere spun, reflecting colored lights on the people below, who whirled and jumped and flailed their limbs in a rhythmic pattern to the music. In the center of the mob a single figure whirled so fast, in such a chaotic yet regular pattern, that it seemed to Shade the man had four legs and four arms.

On a raised platform at the end of the room, a stool sat empty. The whirling figure slowed. The man did, indeed, have four arms and four legs. Panting, the many-limbed creature climbed up onto the pedestal and sat down on the stool, legs splayed to all corners of the compass. Shreds of a Collective-issued jumpsuit hung in rags from his chest. A circle of golden paper perched atop his head.

The lights and the music and the jumping ceased.

Buck led Shade through the crowd toward the man—the king, he supposed. A monster, by the looks of him. He studied the crowd as they passed. They were all monsters! Twisted into deformed shapes, some more than others...where did they come from? And worse—they were all pointing at Shade, and speaking to each other—out loud!

A couple of days ago, he thought he'd captured the last Dreamer Prime on Earth. And here were thousands of monsters, dreamers, all of them, and probably Primes as well. How could the Collective not know about this place? Why were they permitted to live?

The obvious answer, of course—they weren't alive. They were figments of Shade's diseased imagination. And the sooner he ChemLobbed himself, the sooner they would go away.

But what if the obvious answer was wrong?

Some, like Buck, had horns like a goat. Others sported three eyes, an extra arm or leg, or a hunched back.

Buck approached the pedestal and knelt. He pulled Shade down beside him.

"All hail the King of Dreams!" the goat-man cried.

"Hail the King of Dreams!" the others roared.

CHAPTER NINE

Shade stared at the monsters. He clutched his hair, tore it out in tufts. *Why won't this nightmare end?* he screamed inside his head, and the squawk box blasted the words at the crowd. They cringed at the noise, their many eyes wide. *Why can't you go away and let me die in peace?* he sobbed, and fell to his knees. He covered his face with his hands.

A gentle finger touched his shoulder. "You are not dreaming," the king said. "This is real. We are all real." He clapped his hands and laughed. "Welcome to the City of Dreams!"

Welcome to Hell, you mean. Rage took hold of Shade. *How could he make these monsters go away? This had to be a dream, a nightmare, and it was high time he ended it.*

He grabbed a jabber, raised it to his neck, but before he could depress the plunger Buck had stripped him of the weapon.

"Your bandoleer and unplugged too, if you please," the goat-man said.

Shade sighed. *Let the nightmare continue.* He shrugged the bandoleer over his shoulders and handed his unplugged to Buck.

"Not that your unplugged would do you much good down here, Jimmy Shade," the king said with a smile. "We are all of us unplugged."

What? Shade thought. *Did you unplug yourselves?*

The king nodded. "In some cases. Yes." He waved a hand at the crowd, who stood silent, listening to the conversation. "We seek out dreamers and help them escape. But most of us were unplugged by the Collective."

Now he knew he was dreaming. He sighed. *Might as well play along.*

But then what are you doing down here? Shade demanded. *Shouldn't you all be in the Hall of Dreams? And how is it that the Collective has no knowledge of this place?*

The king leaned back on his stool, inclined his head upward at the Crust so far above them. "The Collective, my dear Shade, sees everything it wants to see, and nothing that it does not."

No, Shade said, and shook his head. *This can't be real. I'm still dreaming. I'm having a nightmare.* He backed away from the monsters. *Oh why can't I wake up?*

"You are awake, Jimmy Shade," said a new voice at his elbow, female this time. "And this is all real, I assure you."

She had short brown hair, green eyes, and a third breast that bobbed just below her chin. Her voice sounded...familiar.

If this is real, he thought, *then how did you all get down here?*

"We have all been unplugged," the woman repeated. "In my case, I

escaped from the Hall of Dreams.”

Shade stared at her. *You escaped from the Hall of Dreams? But that’s impossible! It’s the most secure detention facility in the City!*

“Why do you think the doors have no locks?” Buck asked. “Why you saw no guards, no doctors? No one?”

But the locks prevent prisoners from leaving... He blinked. *You mean you send raiding parties topside to release dreamers?*

Buck nodded. “Bingo.”

Shade stared around him. *Could it be? Was it possible? Is that what happened to Linda?* he wondered. *Did she escape too?*

The woman blushed and touched his cheek. “You don’t recognize me, do you.”

He turned to her. *Should I?*

She leaned close to him, her third breast scraping his chest. “It’s nice to finally meet you,” she whispered, then added, “my Jimmy Shade.”

His eyes narrowed. *Do I know you?* he asked, pulling away. *Have we met?*

She laughed. “You should,” she said. “I’m your wife. Linda. Remember?”

Shade stared at her. Blinked. His mouth fell open. She lifted his chin and closed it for him, then kissed him on the lips.

The kiss sent electric shock trickling along every crevice of his body. He pulled away, stared at her in shock.

Was it possible? This woman?...his wife?

She squeezed his hand. “This is real, Jimmy,” she said. “This is happening. Me. Your Linda. Together at last.” Her smile was like the sun after a month of the nuclear winter blues.

But I— he thought. *I don’t understand. How is this possible?*

Buck cleared his throat. “My King,” he said, “perhaps we should let the two of them be alone for a while to get...reacquainted. There will be time for questions—and answers—later.”

The king plucked at his lower lip. “Not as much time, perhaps, as you think.” He studied Shade. “But let it be as you say. They may go. For now.”

“May we use the viewing platform?” Linda asked.

The king nodded his assent, and Buck led the two lovers—her hand now in his—across the ballroom, through the crowd of furry multiple-eyed things pressing tight against them, up some stairs and out a door.

Behind them, the king bellowed, “The time for work is over. Now we all must play!”

Behind Shade, the music and the lights and dancing resumed, even

louder this time, and the king moved once more in the center of the crowd, a blur of arms and legs and feet and hands, a frenzied painting in motion, enveloped in a fuzzy halo of madness.

Buck shut the door and led Shade and Linda up a second flight of stairs. The noise faded. Another door, and they stood on a wide terrace. In the distance, the crystal staircase shone like a burning white thread in the darkness.

It was so dark Shade could barely see her face. She whispered in his ear, "Let me show you something."

She flicked a switch, and the world blazed with light. On the platform, tables and chairs lined the walls. A bed lay in the middle of the floor. Far above them, on top of the golden spire Shade had seen before, a bright circle flared, brighter than the sun.

"Normally we turn it on for twelve hours a day," she said. "But the king made an exception for us."

Shade rubbed his eyes. He'd had a glimpse of this world on the pole coming down. Now he could see every detail.

All around them melted glass towers hulked skyward, the black, windowless groundscrapers of the Collective descending to fill the gaps, almost touching the ground.

What is this place? he asked.

She squeezed his hand. "This is the world from before," she said. "What is left is the City of Dreams."

Her fingers felt warm in his.

Do you love her?

Who said that? He spun around, but Buck had disappeared.

"Said what?" she asked, and lay her hands on his chest.

Shade pulled away. *Now I get it.* He shook his head. *Had me fooled there for a moment.*

"What do you mean?" she asked, leaning closer still.

The detail of this nightmare is extraordinary, he thought, studying her face. *And this?* He reached up and tweaked her third nipple.

She winced, and covered her chest with one hand. "The king said your transition would not be an easy one."

What are you talking about? he demanded. *What transition? I'm dreaming, for the Collective's sake. Soon you'll grow fifty meters tall and start spouting fire and torturing me again, telling me how much—how much...* He stuttered, turned away. *How much you hate me.*

"Oh Jimmy," she said, and stroked his cheek. "You've been having a nightmare. I'm so sorry."

He laughed despite himself. *A nightmare that knows it's a nightmare! That apologizes for hurting me!* He scraped his scalp with his fingernails. *Why can't I wake up already?*

The Linda-creature took a step backward and rubbed her chin. "You think you're asleep?" she said at last.

I know I am.

"Then where are you now? I mean, your body, in reality. Where are you sleeping?"

...In my bunk? ...In the storm drain? Until the storm drain everything had been real enough.

He shrugged. *Where else?*

"Tell me something, then," she said. "Is it possible to dream something you've never experienced?"

He flung an arm at the bizarre under-Crust landscape. *Obviously.*

"I mean," she said, and pressed herself against him, lifted a thigh until she rested firmly on his leg, "is it possible to dream this?"

He swallowed. Her body burned against him. He could feel every curve and fold of her skin.

Well... he said. *It's possible. I think so. Yes.*

She twined an arm around his neck, brought his lips down to hers. "Are you sure?"

Her warmth, her breath, her body...this was nothing like their mental conjugal visits. He gulped. *No. I'm not sure.*

"Well, then," she said. "Why don't we find out?"

CHAPTER TEN

When they were done, Linda nestled against him, her lips at his ear.

Wow, he said at last.

She giggled. “Yeah, I know.”

That was nothing like I ever imagined it.

“Me neither.”

“Still think you’re dreaming?”

No. No, I— he considered. *No. I don’t.*

“And if I’m real...and this is real... then—?”

He gulped air. *Then all this...must be real, too. The...the City of Dreams.* He gestured at the skyline. *All of this.*

Her warm breath tickled his neck. “I’m glad,” she said. “I’ve been waiting for you for a long time, my husband. I am so glad you’ve come for me.”

Shade trembled. *His wife...a dreamer. This new world. Where everyone was unplugged. Cut off from Collective, every man was an island in an ocean of loneliness.* He shuddered, unable to conceal his terror and loathing.

And desire.

He reached for her again. She responded to his touch.

Is this love? he asked her.

“What do you mean?”

The Prime asked me that. If I—I loved you.

She lifted her head up on her elbow. “Well, that depends.”

On what?

“What you mean by love.”

Shade tried to remember the definition the Collective had given him, but she silenced the thought with a kiss.

And then another.

And still another.

The world faded into darkness, and Shade slept. For ages of the world, a dreamless sleep this time, a blissful unconsciousness that ended with a soft kiss on his cheek.

He sat up in bed, panting. *Gotta go to work got dreamers to kill where am I what time is it?*

He checked his internal clock, but in its place blared the timer: 56:03:21. Then double-checked it. Twelve hours! How could he sleep so long? It was immoral, illegal—unthinkable to sleep for twice his daily six!

Linda was there, at his side. She pressed a gentle hand to his chest, laid him back down on the bed.

“It’s OK,” she said. “You’re here with me.”

This is real. Not a dream. I think.

She giggled. “I think so too.”

She snuggled against him, her third breast drilling a hole in his sternum.

But that means I’m going to die. My head’s going to explode. I can’t stay here!

“Sure you can. We have...ways.”

Unplugg myself, you mean.

“And become a monster. Yes.”

Why in the name of the Collective would I want that?

“All dreamers become monsters in the end. I’m becoming one too, you know.”

He caressed the unexpected mammary.

I can...see that.

“You will too,” she added.

He pulled away. *Me??? Why would I become a monster?*

“You’re a dreamer,” she said. “Dreamers all become monsters, in the end.”

But I don’t want to be a monster!

She smiled at him sadly. “It’s the price we pay to dream.”

Well I don’t want to dream, he said. *That’s why I came down here, to find out how to kill my dream without using ChemLob, without having to leave the Collective.* He sat up in bed. *Is there, do you know? A way?*

The air was suddenly chill. She shook her head, pulled the blanket closer around them. She traced his nose with a long, pale finger. “I wonder what form your dream will take,” she whispered. “I suppose it all depends on your gift.”

My—my gift? What gift? From who? What are you talking about?

“Your dream, silly. The stronger the dream, the more monstrous the physical form.”

But I don’t want to dream! I don’t want to be a monster! He got out of bed, went down on one knee and took her hand in his. *Come back with me,* he said. *Be a useful member of society again. Work to save the human race. What do you say?*

She scooted away from him, a look of horror and pity on her face. “I’ll never go back,” she said. “I’d rather die.”

But what if there were a way? To replugg you, kill your dream without the use of ChemLob?

“Unplugging is final, Jimmy Shade,” she said. “And even if I could go back, I wouldn’t. Ever.”

But why not? he insisted.

“Because they’d kill my dream.” She got out of bed, reached for her jumpsuit.

Of course they’ll kill your dream, he said. *Let them free us from the terrible burden of our dreams. The Collective needs us. Yes. And we—we need the Collective, too.*

She got dressed in sharp, jerky movements. She did not turn to look at him.

“You’re half-right,” she said. “The Collective needs us. They need us down here. Dreaming. But we do not need the Collective. And that infuriates them.”

I don’t understand. How on earth does the Collective need fugitive dreamers living in this radioactive wasteland?

She zipped up her jumpsuit. It was torn and stained, and had been patched in numerous places.

“The Collective needs to dream. Deep down the Collective knows this. That’s why they permit us to live down here.”

What are you talking about? Shade thought. *The Collective doesn’t dream. The Collective was created to prevent dreams. Dreams are what almost destroyed humanity in the first place!*

“Maybe,” she said. “Maybe not. How do we know that?”

He was flabbergasted. *Because the Collective told us!*

She tapped his nose with a long forefinger. “Without us, there’d be nowhere for dreamers to go. No vent, no safety valve. The world above would go insane and kill each other, wipe humanity from the face of the Earth, this time successfully.”

That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.

“Then answer me this,” she said, and lay a hand on his chest. “Why does the Collective unplug the most powerful dreamers and put them in the Hall of Dreams? Why do they look away when we raid the Hall and free dreamers to come down here?” She shrugged. “They could ChemLob all dreamers if they wanted to. But they don’t. And why,” she continued, “in all these thousands of years, has the Collective never once sent Dream Police down here? There are Cities of Dreams under every major city on the planet.”

That’s not the Collective’s fault, he retorted. *You dreamers are criminals. If you’ve found a place to hide, how you blame that on us?*

“You mean ‘We dreamers are the criminals.’ You are one now too.”

No, Shade thought. *Not for much longer.* He buckled his boots. *I've seen enough. I'm going home.*

She laughed. "Home? Where? You mean topside?"

Where else? He stood.

"But they'll ChemLob you for sure!"

Better to be ChemLobbed and a useful member of society than an unplugged dreamer trapped down here. He moved to the door.

She grabbed hold of his arm. "Forty-eight hours," she whispered. "Two days. Spend them with me."

Shade checked his timer again:

55:57:13.

He continued toward the door.

"It only takes a couple of hours to get back topside," she said. "You've got plenty of time to go back to the Collective, if you still want to. Let me show you the City of Dreams. Show you what this place is really like."

He stopped, and she let go.

"Then, if you still want to leave," she said, "that is your choice. I won't ask you to stay."

He shook his head. *Stay and let these monsters infect me with even worse dreams?*

"But they've been unplugged. They aren't Primes. They can't infect you."

But I thought—

"Primes are partially-unplugged dreamers. They can transmit but not receive."

Yes, he said. *I know.*

"Of course you do." She grinned. "But I assure you no Primes are here at the moment."

Even if that's true, he thought, and it might not be, I can't take the chance. He lifted a hand to indicate the Crust far above them, silent, foreboding. *If I come back with my mind diseased from too many dreams, the Collective might kill me.*

"No, they'd just put you in the Hall of Dreams and you'd wind up back down here again."

Now there's a nightmare.

He reached for the door, but she grabbed hold of his arm. "But what about your dream?" she asked.

The time for dreaming is over, he thought. Now we all must work.

"The time for dreaming is now, Jimmy," she said. "Now more than ever. And dreaming is more work than you think."

Shade kissed her forehead. *Goodbye, my love.*

He shook her free, flung open the door and nearly crashed into Buck. The goat-man stood there, arms crossed.

“Leaving so soon?” he asked.

Out of my way, Shade ordered. But Buck did not move.

Shade turned to Linda. *So I’m a prisoner here now, is that it? You won’t let me leave until I’m a monster like you? He pushed her away. Is that what you call love?*

Buck held up a hand. “Every dreamer has a choice,” he said. “If you wish to leave us, we won’t stop you. But first we ask you to take the tour, see our City for what it truly is.”

A nest of vipers? Shade snarled. *Just enough time for the infection to take hold, poison me, make sure I don’t want to leave?*

Buck’s face remained expressionless. “To stay. Or to return. We will respect your decision. But our law demands you make an informed decision.”

Your law? Shade turned to Linda. *Why didn’t you say that before?*

She bit her lip. “I didn’t want you to do it under obligation. I wanted you to do it for me.”

I won’t become a dreamer, for you or anybody! He raised his fist, caught himself, took an embarrassed step backward.

“If, after you’ve seen our City,” Buck said, “you insist on leaving, we will not stop you. We will even aid you in your return to the surface, if you wish.”

Shade scratched his nose. *How many dreamers actually go back?* he asked. *’Cause I can’t remember any such thing ever happening.*

“When they go back, the ChemLob erases their memories,” Linda explained.

How convenient, Shade thought.

Buck shifted his weight on his hooves. “More leave than we would like to see go,” he said. “Many are unable to cope with the power of their dreams. The experience can be overwhelming—as you yourself already know. They prefer the comforting senselessness of being ChemLobbed and living as part of the Collective.”

Shade looked at him sideways. *So it is a real choice, then.*

“Oh yes,” Linda said. “It is a real choice.” She caressed the back of his neck. “Just give me a chance,” she murmured. “Give us a chance. That’s all I ask.”

Shade stood rigid, cold to her touch. *If that is your law, he said, then I obey. Tomorrow I shall return to the surface and rejoin the Collective.*

Buck stood aside.

Linda tugged on Shade's sleeve. "Let me show you my world," she whispered.

Shade sighed. *As you wish.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Would you like to see my dream?” Linda asked him. She led him through warrens of tunnels beneath the ballroom.

What? he asked. *I’m not it?*

She chuckled and patted him on the cheek. “I love you, Jimmy Shade. Perhaps more than you will ever know. But you are not my dream. Any more than I am yours.”

But—but you are, he thought, as forcefully as he dared. *That’s why I have to leave. The feeling—it’s too strong. It scares me.*

Linda shook her head. “Other people aren’t dreams. True dreams come from within yourself.”

But dreams are a contagious disease!

“A seed needs fertile soil to take root.”

Shade considered this. *And if other people aren’t dreams—* He remembered the dream he’d had of Linda, then the nightmare.

“It’s a common mistake.” She grabbed his hand and pulled him along. “Perhaps we’ll find your dream today. Come on!”

They walked—almost ran—down a long passageway. Peculiar sounds emanated from behind various closed doors.

But I don’t want to find my dream! he said. *I don’t want a dream at all! I just want to get back to the surface.* An idea surfaced in his brain. *That’s it,* he added. *My dream is to return to the Collective and work to save humanity. See?*

Linda studied him. Her lips twitched in a smile. “We do not pick our dreams,” she said. “Our dreams pick us. It is not for you to reject that sacred trust.”

“And a dream,” Buck added, coming up behind them, “is a slave-driving taskmaster.”

Shade laughed inside his head, and the squawk box crackled. *Dreaming isn’t work,* he thought. *Dreams are for lazy people who don’t want to help save the world. Because of you good-for-nothing bums, humanity could go extinct.*

“On the contrary,” Buck said, “without us ‘lazy good-for-nothing bums,’ as you put it, the entire human race would go insane and kill each other.”

Yeah, yeah. Whatever. You said that before.

“More to the point,” Linda said, “Without your dream you could go insane and kill yourself.”

But that makes no sense! he thought. *You just said I can choose not to dream.*

“Sure.” Linda stopped, her hand on a doorknob. “It is possible. But there are only two ways to kill a dream.”

ChemLob and... Shade paused. *Not unplugging. Unplugg just sends a dreamer down here. So that means—*

“Death,” Linda said. “The other choice is death.”

Shade sighed.

Gloom settled on his shoulders, an oppressive cloud. He had no desire to die, not while he could still serve the Collective, anyway. Nor did he wish to be unplugged—what would the Collective do if they knew how ineffective unplugg was!

Which left ChemLob. To become instead a drooling halfwit who couldn’t even remember his own name, stumbling through life...serving the Collective, it’s true, being a useful member of society, but still...he remembered the glazed, dull look in the eyes of ChemLobbed dreamers, like drugged animals...

All his options were bad. ChemLob, death...

“There’s another option,” Linda said.

Yeah? he said. *What’s that?*

She touched his elbow. “To dream.”

Without waiting for a reply, she stopped before a pair of double doors and led the way inside.

The vast space, even bigger than the ballroom, swarmed with life—monsters in all stages of transformation, some still human-looking, others great hulks of once-human flesh, lumps and oozing pustules covering their bodies.

How ugly!

Linda laughed, and slid an arm through his. “Where you see a monster,” she said. “I see beauty.”

“Normal is all a matter of perspective,” Buck said, twitching his tail.

Shade studied the creatures. Some stood in front of big rectangles of white supported on wooden legs. They applied colors—and such colors!—to the rectangles, creating images that sometimes represented real objects—a caffeine pill, a flying train, a ChemLob jabber—and other shapes, real or imagined, that he did not recognize.

Graven images are forbidden by the Collective!

“Well,” Linda said, “it’s a good thing I’m no longer part of the Collective, then, isn’t it?”

She led him over to an unoccupied rectangle and removed a cloth. Shade stared into a mirror, and winced.

Or not a mirror. It was a graven image of himself, half-finished.

What—what is it? he asked.

Linda giggled. “It’s called painting, silly. Isn’t it marvelous?”

She picked up a brush and began filling in Shade’s cheekbones.

It was a remarkable likeness, he decided. But not like a mirror. More a reflection, perhaps, of how she saw him, how she remembered him, than how he actually was.

Another thought struck him. Linda looked nothing like he had imagined.

You’ve never seen me in person before today, he said. *How did you know what I look like?*

Linda exchanged glances with Buck. The goat-man nodded.

“I have crept into your dormitory and watched you while you slept,” she said.

What? Shade said. *And the Dream Police—I mean, no one caught you? No Information Factory workers raised the alarm?*

“I am unplugged,” she said. “To the Collective, I don’t exist.”

Shade thought of the way he had fooled the Collective, the vision of him sleeping in his bunk.

“Something like that,” Linda said. “We are able to prevent the Collective from seeing us.”

Shade gasped. *Like...you’re invisible?*

Buck shook his head. “The Collective can see us whenever they want to. All they have to do is open their eyes.”

But how can we not see you? Shade looked around. The twisted shapes of dreamers surrounded them on all sides. *Invisible monsters walking the streets, and we don’t know you’re there? How does that work, exactly?*

“Simple,” Linda said with a shrug. “The Collective sees what it wants to see, and nothing that it doesn’t.”

You keep saying that—

“Because it’s true!”

But they found me, Shade pointed out.

Buck shuffled his hooves. “Indeed. It’s dangerous because you can never be sure when the Collective will be ready to see what’s right in front of its face.” He frowned at Linda. “I discouraged her from visiting you. She could have been caught and ChemLobbed.”

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve wanted to wake you up,” she said. “I had to content myself with memorizing your face.” She gestured at the unfinished canvas.

Shade stared at her. *I thought you said other people couldn’t be your dream.*

“They can’t be,” she said quickly. “You were my...inspiration.”

Inspiration?

“It means—”

I don't know what it means and I don't care! How can you live with yourself?

“What—what are you talking about?”

The human race stands in crisis. The world is about to end if we don't all pitch in and work to save it. He flung an arm at the painting. And here you are, wasting your time with this frivolous nonsense?

She said, “It's not—”

He ripped the brush from her fingers.

His cheek stung. She drew back her arm to slap him again.

“Give me back the brush.” Her voice was cold.

Shade gripped it in his hand. *Because of you, the human race could go extinct!*

“Then good riddance to bad rubbish,” she said, and hit him, this time with her fist. Then again, so hard Shade tasted blood.

His grip on the brush loosened, and she snatched it back. She took a deep breath. Calm returned to her features.

“I do not ask you to understand my dream,” she said. “I ask only that you respect it.”

Buck stepped between them. “Perhaps,” he said, “we should continue the tour. Canvas clearly does not speak to Jimmy Shade.”

Linda pursed her lips, nodded. She put the brush away and covered the rectangle once more. Without a word, she turned and strode away.

Shade raised an eyebrow at Buck, but the goat-man merely gestured with a fur-covered hand. They followed Linda down a long row of monsters.

The painting section ended. They stood in the middle of thousands of monsters hunched over desks. The monsters clutched sharpened yellow twigs in their hands or claws and scratched the tips across white sheets of—paper? Was it really? Just like inside Boss's head, only for real! But wasn't paper made from trees? And didn't trees disappear thousands of years ago? Where did it all come from?

“Hydroponic forests,” Buck commented. “Dreamers salvaged some seeds, nursed the species back to life.”

The scritch-scratching monsters didn't look up at the three visitors, but continued scraping their yellow twigs across the sheets of paper, like they were in a hurry.

Shade looked on, puzzled. *What are they doing?*

“They are writers,” Linda whispered. “Writers write.”

Writers?

“Storytellers,” Buck explained. “They help us make sense of our world.”

Shade laughed inside his head. *But that’s what the Collective’s for!*

“Let’s move on,” Buck suggested.

They strolled past the writers, the painters now far behind them, and came to another section, this one elbow-to-elbow with monsters wearing white jackets. Strange smells filled the air. Tiny fires burned on black counter tops. Glass beakers emitted vapors. Other monsters puzzled over equipment Shade did not recognize.

And these? he asked. *What are they doing?*

“Scientists,” Buck said. “They seek to understand the world we live in. Its physical dimension.”

Shade smirked. *What’s the point of that?*

Buck shrugged. “I confess it is not a dream I understand. They seeking understanding outside themselves, rather than inside their own souls. Although they sometimes come up with useful stuff that helps the rest of us. Like the hydroponic forests, for instance.”

“That’s true,” Linda chimed in. “And a couple of scientists are doing interesting research into the Collective’s brain implants.” She pointed to a table, where a team of white-jacketed monsters sawed open the skull of a cadaver and proceeded to remove, tentacles by tentacle, an implant.

Yuck, Shade thought. *But why bother with—*

One of the scientists ran up to them, a pad of paper in his hand. His hair was white and stuck out a meter in every direction.

“Eureka!” he shouted. “I have found it!”

Buck welcomed the man with arms wide open. “Ennst. Always a pleasure. What esoteric mysteries are you plumbing today?”

“Esoteric to you!” he cackled. “Only the secrets of the universe being cracked down here, my boy!”

Shade wrinkled his nose. *Smells more like something rotten to me.*

“A new Dreamer, eh? Maybe you were born to be a scientist,” Ennst said. The little man blinked up at Shade. “We could always use a bright mind to help us in our labor.”

The Collective already knows everything. Why waste your time with all of this?

Ennst lay a hand on Shade’s arm. “If the Collective knows everything, then why is humanity in danger of extinction?”

For mistakes humanity made before becoming a Collective, Shade replied by rote.

“But what if we could innovate a solution?” Ennst quivered with

excitement. “Find a way to clean up the radiation, or a way to end the nuclear winter?”

If that were possible, Shade thought, the Collective would have thought of it long ago. Innovation is something that belongs to the past. It was innovation that almost killed humanity, I remind you. That age, thank the Collective, is over.

Ennst straightened. “You know,” he said, “over the last thousands of years, Dream Scientists in this lab have made discovery after discovery that would benefit humanity, amazing research that could improve the lives of billions of people. Time and time again we’ve sent Primes to the surface to spread our ideas, and what does—”

So you admit it! You send Primes topside to infect us all!

“The Collective needs to dream, Jimmy,” Buck said. “We send Primes topside to share the most important dreams with the Collective.”

“And what does the Collective do?” Ennst tapped Shade’s chest with a finger. “They hunt down our dreams and kill them. They refuse to hear what we have to say. Why do you think that is?”

The Collective is pure wisdom, Shade thought. He stiffened his spine, kept his eyes front. These distractions—he waved a hand at the white-jacketed monstrosities—are nothing more than unwanted chaos in a perfect world.

The scientist plucked a long white hair, let it flutter to the floor. He nodded at Shade. “Well,” he said, “It’s safe to say that science does not speak to this one.”

Linda nudged Shade. “Come. Let’s continue the tour.”

Ennst returned to his place in the smelly dream section, and Shade let himself be led to an even stranger spectacle:

Monsters wearing funny clothes meandered across a platform made of what looked like wood, all the while declaiming in a loud voice. Some even held what appeared to be primitive weapons and pretended to engage in some kind of sparring contest.

What in the name of the Collective are they doing? Shade asked. It was by far the most bizarre thing he’d seen so far.

“Zune!” Buck called out. “Take five?”

A monster with two mouths leaped from the stage and skipped toward them.

“Buck!” it cried with one mouth. “Linda!” it cried with the other. “And who is this?” both mouths said at the same time, pumping Shade’s hand.

Shade drew back. *You have two mouths.*

The Zune creature cackled. “From a rookie’s squawk box to your ears.”

He looked Shade up and down. “What have we got? Is he theater material?”

Shade furrowed his brows. ...*theater?*

Linda shook her head. “His gift remains elusive. So far nothing speaks to him.”

Zune flicked the badge number on Shade’s shoulder. “He’s Dream Police. Maybe he’s not a dreamer at all.”

“That seems unlikely,” Buck said. “Many Dream Police have become dreamers in the past.”

“But not impossible,” Zune said, baring both sets of teeth. “It has happened before. Dream Police who didn’t belong here.”

Do you see? Shade thought to Linda. *I’m not the only one telling you this. I’m not a dreamer. I never have been. I never will be. Whatever you’ve done to infect me, take it back, cure it, I don’t want it!*

Another actor, this one covered in feathers, called out, “Enough yack-yack, duckies, we’ve got a scene to rehearse here!”

With one mouth, Zune called over his shoulder, “Coming!” and with the other, said, “I must bid you all adieu. Best of luck, Mister Dream Policeman!”

Linda chewed a knuckle. “Keep going?”

Buck grunted, and they moved on.

Shade’s head hurt. If this wasn’t a nightmare, it was worse. The vast space of scientists and actors and writers and painters all merged together, a giant cacophony of noise and light and stench. Other regions he had not yet visited assaulted his senses—sculptors, woodworkers, metalworkers, instrument-makers.

Bordering the instrument-makers, musicians—like the ones in the king’s ballroom—scraped and banged and tapped at their curious implements. To one side, others danced and moved to the sounds, although not as expertly, or so it seemed to Shade, as the dancers he’d seen previously with the king.

The dancers and musicians ranged from almost human to extreme monstrosity. Here, for the first time, Shade noticed that what Linda had said was true—the more monstrous the dreamer, the more delightful and spectacular their creation.

Something stirred inside him. At first he thought it might be gas, but he tried to fart and nothing came out.

I don’t understand, he whispered.

But even as Shade spoke, his head began to hurt. The voice inside his head—the voice the Prime had awoken—responded to the noise, the—the music. His mind shuddered at the cavorting frenzy of this new thing inside him, as it danced to the noise.

Time check: 49:57:09.

Less than a day since he had been banished from the Collective, and so much had happened—his sleep in the storm drain, his journey with Buck, his sliding down that high pole, through the tunnel to meet the Dream King... making love to Linda—if love is what it was...it seemed like an eternity.

Without the comforting hum of the Collective in the back of his skull regulating his mental activity, his inner voice grew bold, and thoughts began to bubble up inside his brain, thoughts so alarming, so disturbing that he thrust them down, forced them down, did everything he could to silence these frightening impulses.

And failed.

Shade pulled at his hair, squeezed his eyes shut, but the illegal, immoral, anti-social impulses impelled him to do things he knew were wrong: he wanted to become one of them, to join the dreamers in their revelry.

The squawk box must have been translating all of this, because Linda pulled him close, stroked his face. “What you’re experiencing is normal,” she said. “It is always this way with new dreamers. All your life the Collective has drowned out the sound of your own voice. But now you can hear it for the first time.”

But what on earth do I want with my own voice? Shade cried out in agony. *The individual is poisonous to humanity. To the Collective. We must work together, and sacrifice our voices for the good of the planet, or the world will end!*

“The world is not going to end because we refuse to work,” Linda said gently.

“And this *is* our work,” Buck said, fingering a nearby potter’s wheel. The potter smiled, smacked his hand away.

This? Shade smashed a fist down on the potter’s wet clay, collapsing a vase. *This is madness! It is nonsense! Nothing more.*

The potter was on his feet, the smile gone.

Buck held out a hand. “He’s a new dreamer. Please forgive him this once.”

The potter glared at Shade, then bent down to pick up wet fragments of the unfinished vase, and molded the damaged form back onto his potter’s wheel.

Linda took Shade by the hand, led him away from the artisan. “A dream has seized their souls,” she said. “They have chosen to obey its summons, and live out their days here, beneath the Crust. They would rather become monsters, and live apart, than conform to the dictates of the Collective.”

How terrible! Shade said. *Without jobs? No work to give their lives*

meaning?

“This *is* work,” Buck said again, patiently.

It is not! Shade said. *It is—it is dreaming.* He reached for his ChemLob jabbers, found his bandoleer gone. Cursed. *The time for dreaming is over. Now we all—*

“—must work. Yes. We know,” Linda said.

Buck put a hand on Shade’s shoulder. “This is work, but it is also play.”

The king said the same thing. But what does this word mean? ‘Play’?

Buck regarded him gravely. “Man was built to work. But he was also made to play. We choose to play.”

But what does the word mean? Shade shouted.

Linda touched his lips with a finger, turned down the volume on his squawk box. “You must find that out on your own.”

Her cold fingers made him flinch. *I don’t understand.*

“Listen to your dream,” she said. “It will tell you your destiny.”

Shade’s head swam in confusion, assaulted by these incomprehensible, illegal thoughts. No wonder the Collective banned dreams.

At that moment, a voice filled the room, and the others fell silent—thousands of brushes paused in mid-air; pens poised, unmoving; scientists lifted their heads from their microscopes. The musicians stopped. The dancers froze.

The wordless sound was compelling. Sweet. The thing inside him moved and twitched again. What could it be? Not gas. Was one of his organs deformed, damaged or cancerous? He ought to see a doctor about that.

His feet carried him apart from his two guides, stumbling at first as he struggled to make sense of the sound, then, more sure of foot, he pushed his way through the throng of monsters to find a woman standing in a corner by herself.

Shade reeled when he saw her. It was Linda! Or looked like her. The nightmare Linda, the monster who had cursed him as he lay in the sewers, an eternity of suffering. A giant mass of green and purple flesh. Scales covered her body. Fangs jutted over her lower lip.

But the sound drew him to her once more. How could such a sweet sound come from such an ugly, monstrous form? And yet it fit with what Linda had told him. The more monstrous the dreamer, the sweeter the dream.

Her eyes were closed. With each breath she took, each exhalation that she made, a sound like nothing he had ever heard vibrated within every cell of his body—filling him with such sorrow, and joy, such laughter—and

despair—it seemed to him his heart would burst in that instant, and leave him dead on the floor.

Shade fell to his knees at her feet, his mind crippled, his body on fire, unable to move.

The sound lasted an eternity, as long or longer than his nightmare in the sewers.

When she finished, she opened her eyes and looked down at him. She wiped away his tears with a clumsy claw.

She whispered. “You too?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Shade stared up at the monstrous female shape. The claw brushed his cheek, fell to her side.

What was that? he whispered.

“That,” she said, “was my song.”

How do you— he asked, but could not stop the thought—*how do you do it? I want to do that too!*

She reached down and tapped his squawk box. “You must learn to walk before you can run. You must learn to talk before you can sing.”

So many unfamiliar words! ‘Song’? ‘Sing’?

Hooves tap-tapped behind him. Buck said, “Jimmy Shade here has just arrived.”

The monster-woman inclined her head. “Welcome, Jimmy Shade. To the City of Dreams.”

“If he should like to learn your gift,” Buck asked, “would you be willing to teach him? If he decides to stay, that is.”

“Oh, but you must stay!” the woman cried. “You have no idea what you’ve been missing.”

You mean—I could—that is—I mean—would I be able to—sing too?

The woman laid a rough claw on his shoulder. “If that is your dream. Then it would be my pleasure to teach you how to sing.”

Shade couldn’t believe what he said next. *When can we start?* he blurted out.

Linda squeezed his shoulder. “Tomorrow morning.”

Shade gaped at her. *Why not now?*

“We must finish your tour first, then you can study with Maude, if you wish.”

Maude! he thought. *Her name was Maude. A beautiful name for such an ugly creature.*

Maude looked him in the eye. “Once you learn to talk, you will also have to learn when to remain silent.” She patted his shoulder.

Shade blushed. *Sorry...I meant no offense.*

“None taken.” She straightened up and turned to go.

Wait! he said. *Screw the tour. I want to stay.*

He felt possessed. The words and actions were no longer his own, but this thing—this voice—growing in power inside him, held him in its grip.

“An eager one,” Maude said. She squeezed Shade’s arm. “Finish the tour. It is important you see and understand your new life here. Then tomorrow, if you still wish, I will teach you.”

Shade nodded, and climbed to his feet. He followed Linda and Buck. He looked back. Maude stared after him. Her mottled green-and-purple face turned red, and she twitched a claw at him.

Buck and Linda led him down a twisting passageway. He paid no attention to where he was going. They walked for a long time. The sound—the song—lingered in his soul, and rippled in ever-increasing waves, crashing against the shore of his brain.

They passed hulking monsters carrying pickaxes and shovels, and soon Shade found himself once more at the base of the gleaming crystal staircase, the thin spindle rising up to pierce the Crust far above. Two monsters dropped down the high pole, and puffs of air bumped them in opposite directions to land safely in the nearby dunes.

The spiral staircase widened here at the bottom to accommodate the landing pad. Cables emerged from the base of the stairs and disappeared under the dunes, to emerge once more at the mouths of the many tunnels that led out of the crater.

What are those? Shade asked, and pointed.

“Electricity,” Linda said.

Elec-what?

“We are unplugged,” she said. “We are unable to use our mental energy for light, for power. So we tap the Collective’s network.” She shrugged. “Otherwise we would live in complete darkness.”

Shade’s rational mind clicked back on, fought with the song that still thrilled his soul. *What, you’re all parasites? Sucking the life force from the Collective, and giving nothing in return?*

Linda took his hand and led him to the base of the stairs. “We are not parasites,” she said. “It is a symbiosis. We give our dreams in return, Jimmy.”

Dreams we don’t want, he argued, but she stopped him with a long kiss.

“Let’s finish the tour,” she whispered. “Then I’ll answer any questions you have, alright?”

Buck gestured at the stairs.

They began to climb.

When they were far above the surface, Shade asked, unable to stop himself, *Where are we going? I don’t understand. Are we going back topside? But I thought you wanted me to wait forty-eight hours. And what’s with the monsters carrying pickaxes?*

As he said this, half a dozen more monsters covered in black dust whizzed by on their way to the ground.

“Dream Miners,” Linda said, panting for breath. “Coming back from the

mines.”

Shade looked up at the Crust, still thousands of meters above them.

What mines? he asked. He vaguely understood the concept, but was pretty sure mines were something that happened in the earth, not high up in the air, part of the Crust. *You mean the sewers? The drainage pipes?*

“No,” Buck said. “The Collective has been thickening the Crust a layer of atoms at a time for thousands of years. The Crust is more than a kilometer thick. Most of it, as you know, is solid lead.”

And what, you dig holes in the Crust? What for? The lead is worthless. What precious commodity are you mining?

“Dreams,” Linda said.

What are you talking about? Shade demanded. You can't mine dreams. That's ridiculous!

Linda chuckled. “It is by working in the mines that we uncover our dreams. Do they literally come from the Crust?” She shrugged. “Of course not. All the same, dreamers must work in the Dream Mines. It's part of what it means to be a dreamer.”

But this isn't work. You said so yourself!

“The land between the World of Work and the World of Dreams is a special place,” Linda explained. “It is dangerous, powerful territory. A dream without work is worthless. Work without a dream is pointless.”

Oh yeah? Shade retorted. *You wouldn't call the Collective pointless, would you?*

She looked thoughtful. “No,” she said. “I wouldn't. We need the Collective just as the Collective needs us. But I also wouldn't say the Collective was worth working for, either.”

Shade ignored the insult. Better to expose this idiocy now, once and for all. *And how, exactly, does working in the Dream Mines help you dream?*

“Physical labor helps me find my dream.”

He snorted. *I didn't realize it was lost.*

Linda took hold of Shade's chin, turned his head toward the scene below. “Dreaming is a constant process of reaching into the unknown, Jimmy Shade. Of discovering and creating what wasn't there before.”

The lights of the melted towers flickered below, the great black jaws of the groundscrapers obscuring much of the city.

“After a day in the Dream Mines, I return to the surface with new ideas, new avenues to explore, new techniques to try.”

Monsters surged past them, leaping up the stairs two at a time.

“Excuse us!”

“Coming through!”

“Dream Mines, ahoy!”

Shade stared after them. Their enthusiasm for this ridiculous pursuit puzzled him.

“Shall we continue?” Linda said.

How far is it to the top, exactly? Shade asked.

“Exactly?” Buck said. “No idea. Several kilometers, anyway.”

The surface was already far below them, but the Crust seemed as high as the clouds on a windy nuclear winter day. Shade sighed. Together they resumed their climb, continuing long past exhaustion, until all Shade could think about was how tired he was.

Several hundred meters below the Crust he halted.

“It’s when you’re almost there it’s hardest to go on,” Buck said. “We must not stop. To turn back now would mean failure!”

For who? Shade asked, still panting. *For me? Or for you?* He waved a hand. *Besides, I plan on climbing these stairs again tomorrow. I might as well get used to it.*

He stood, leaned against the railing. Just a moment to catch his breath. That was all.

A score of dreamers slid down the pole, waving as they did so.

Pity the going up isn’t as easy as the going down.

Buck laughed. “Ain’t that the truth.”

Shade looked down again at the ruined city, far below now. The enormous groundscrapers dwarfed the puny towers, those glittering shards of ancient death. Many-colored glass dripped down the sides of the surviving buildings. The crater from which the staircase rose was wide and deep, many kilometers wide.

Linda slipped a trembling hand through his elbow, and he could sense her eagerness. He was not ready to go on, though.

What were they? he asked.

She pressed close to him, put her mouth to his ear. “Humans, even as we are.”

No, he said. *I meant the buildings. What were they?*

“Oh,” she laughed. “Those were called skyscrapers. The ancients built up, even as the Collective builds down. In these towers they lived and worked, competed with each other, struggling to achieve their dreams. You can still find ancient skeletons preserved in some of them.”

The landscape, the architecture—it was all so alien, Shade thought. Individuals who competed against each other instead of working together for the common good. Every tower—different. Every person—a world unto themselves!

He shuddered in horror and loathing.

Were they really people like us? he asked.

“Of course.” She looked at him sideways.

But to let this happen. To do this to themselves.

“The same people—or rather, the same race,” she said, “also created the Collective. I’m not sure which was worse. The nuclear holocaust or the reaction to it.”

Shade stared at her. *How can you say that?*

She shrugged. “Which is worse? Death and extinction of the species? Or the rise of the Collective and the end of dreams, human beings become no more than ‘nodes’?”

Nothing is worse than death, Shade said.

Linda smiled sadly. “You have much to learn.”

He puzzled over this. *How can anything be worse than death?*

She gestured at the lifeless city far below. “They were dreamers too,” she said. “And they preferred to kill each other rather than sacrifice their dreams.”

You see? Shade said. *Why dreams are so dangerous? The Collective is the best thing that ever happened to humanity!*

Linda pointed to the golden spire, its light burning just below the Crust. “They did not know how to manage their dreams.”

Without warning, Maude’s song rang once more inside his head, transfixing him.

Terrifying him.

But your dreams are your masters and you their slaves, Shade pointed out. He understood this now. *You said so yourself.*

She chewed her lip for a moment. “You’re right. I never thought of it that way before. But still,” she continued, wrapping her arms around his waist, “If global annihilation is the price to pay for dreaming, then maybe even then it is worth it.”

Shade pulled away. *Are you serious?*

“Worse things than death,” she said. “Remember?” She batted her eyelashes and reached for him, but he brushed her hands away.

So you would let dreamers destroy the Collective? Let them end the species as we know it?

“As we know it, yes,” she said, with a casual shrug of her shoulders. “It is better to suffer a second, final holocaust than to live as automatons, mere particles in the Collective Will. How horrible!” She shuddered. “There are conditions under which life becomes not worth living.”

What, he said, *just because you can’t dabble with paints you’d rather*

die?

“Yes,” she said. “I would.”

Again the song raged inside his head, and he winced, torn between temptation and doing what he knew was right. *I just don't understand*, he said. *How come the Collective doesn't know about this place?*

Buck replied, “The Collective knows everything it wants to know, and nothing that it doesn't.”

You keep telling me that, but how could they not want to know? Shade demanded. *Dreams threaten all of humanity. The Collective should have exterminated you vermin thousands of years ago!*

Linda stared at him. “You would wish that on your wife?”

You would wish the world to end?

Her mouth opened, closed again.

Shade knew he was right, but he could not meet her eye. *I am We*, he said at last. *We are All. We are the Collective.*

“Dreams are dangerous,” Linda said. “That is true. But they are the only thing that gives life meaning. I would rather live down here than be dead up there.”

Not waiting for an answer, she turned and continued to climb. She disappeared around the turn in the stairs.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Buck gestured for Shade to follow her. “She speaks the truth,” he said. “We vermin, as you put it, are a safety valve. Weak dreams get killed, their dreamers ChemLobbed. But some dreams are too powerful, too dangerous to confront.”

What do you mean?

“The Collective needs to dream or it would go insane. Deep down, some part of the Collective knows this. If they ChemLobbed or killed every dreamer, they would destroy part of themselves.”

Shade snorted. *If they ChemLobbed or killed every dreamer, the Collective would finally be safe.*

Buck shrugged. “Believe me or not, as you wish. But ask yourself: Why does the Collective go to all the trouble of unplugging dreamers if they know we’re going to rescue them?”

But they don’t know, Shade thought. I didn’t know. So how can the Collective know?

“There are two kinds of knowing,” Buck said. “The Collective is a conscious union of humanity. True. But it is also an *unconscious* union. Deep down the Collective knows, but refuses to acknowledge the truth.”

Shade made a face. He had no answer to that.

“Come. Please.” A goaty smile. A hairy hand insisted.

Shade massaged his temple. His head hurt. *I just want this nightmare to be over.*

He climbed the remaining stairs to the Crust, hoofsteps keeping pace behind him. Linda re-appeared around the bend. When she saw them, she turned and disappeared through the hole in the Crust.

Shade followed. One moment he was outside, practically floating in mid-air, high above the ground. The next he stood in complete blackness, and he teetered, nearly losing his balance. Buck nudged him forward.

A bright light shone in his eyes, and he squinted, held up a hand. His eyes adjusted.

Linda wore a hard hat, a light attached to the crown. She held out a similar hat to him. He took it and put it on. Together their head lamps darted around the space. Buck took a light stick from a shelf full of hard hats and flicked it on.

“Horns,” he grunted, by way of explanation.

Shade looked around again, and this time he whistled—out loud. Caught himself.

What he saw now he’d been too confused and frightened to see before:

The tunnels were carved not by water, but by man. Or monster, anyway. The soft lead was marked by thousands of pick-axes and shovels. As he watched, a group of a dozen tired-looking dreamers stepped into mid-air, grasped the pole and disappeared.

A miner passed close by, pushing a wheelbarrow.

You find your dream? Shade asked the man.

The man—or rather, monster, great red humps grew from his back—looked up, jarred from his reverie by the sound of Shade’s squawk box.

“No,” he replied. “It found me.”

And so saying, the man replaced his hard hat on the shelf, leaped into mid-air and, with a shout of joy, grabbed the pole, and slid one-handed out of sight.

Can’t you make up your mind? Shade demanded of Linda. *Do you find your dream, or do your dreams find you?*

“Both are true,” Linda said. “Living with a dream means dealing with paradox.”

Shade rolled his eyes. Crazy talk. And look at this place! The tunnels! And the miners! Hundreds of them. *Why weren’t any of these...people here before?* he asked. *When I first arrived?*

“The king has a dream,” Buck said. “A recurring dream. The most powerful dream any of us has ever had.”

Shade stamped his feet in frustration. *I still don’t understand this word. ‘King.’*

“He is our leader. Our ruler.”

Ruler?

“He makes decisions for the community.”

What? Shade said. *You mean one man rules the rest? Like in ancient times? How primitive!*

Linda touched his arm. “The dreamer with the most powerful dream rules in the City of Dreams. He is first among dreamers, and his dream rules the rest.”

Even yours?

She nodded. “Even mine.”

But what does that mean, exactly? he asked. *How does a dream rule over other dreams? That makes no sense!*

Buck grinned. “That just shows how little you know about dreams.”

”For thousands of years,” Linda said, “Dreamers have fled the Collective, here and elsewhere in the world, to hide themselves in the Cities of Dreams beneath the Crust.”

What! You mean there are cities like this all over the world?

Linda nodded. “Dreamer and Worker forever apart.”

Shade stumbled and nearly fell. *So what’s the king’s dream?*

“To unite the two worlds,” she said, taking hold of his jumpsuit, whispering in his ear. “That Workers will dream and dreamers will work.” She touched a finger to his lips. “To be allowed to work our dreams openly again, no longer in secret.”

But dreaming isn’t work! Shade protested. *Playing with oils? Engaging in illicit throat-based communication? Digging holes in the Crust?*

“Following your dream is work,” Buck said sternly. “It requires more dedication than slaving for the Collective.”

Work means serving the Collective, not yourself, Shade scolded him. *How does it contribute to the Collective? How does it help to save the world?*

“Remember Maude’s song?”

Shade’s face burned. *But that isn’t—that doesn’t—I mean...*

“Does that contribute nothing to the world?”

He gritted his teeth. The song rang once more inside his skull. Was it pleasure? Was it pain? The sound was so intense...

Linda tugged at his sleeve. “Come.”

He let himself be drawn away from the staircase. They walked amongst the miners, who marched back and forth, doing whatever they were doing with great urgency.

What do you do with all the lead you mine?

“What do you mean?”

Shade gestured at the tunnels. *Where do you put it all?*

“Oh,” she laughed. “I see what you mean. We leave some tunnels to the surface—the escape tunnels that lead to the Hall of Dreams, for instance—but mostly we just fill the holes up again.”

You dig a hole and then you fill it up again?

“Sure,” she said.

But what’s the point of that? he asked.

“Is it really so different from what goes on topside?”

Sure it is. We must work to save the world!

She crossed her arms. “Like in the Information Factories, for instance? The IF workers? What actually gets accomplished? Can you tell me?”

Shade flapped his hands. *The Collective processes vast amounts of data. IF workers manage that data.*

Linda pursed her lips. “Indeed. What kind of...data?”

Data data. Valuable data. Important data. You know what kind of

data.

“Sure I know. But tell me something.” A feminine forefinger drooped in mid-air. “What for?”

‘What for’ what?

“What’s the point of it all?”

To process the data.

“Yes,” she said. “But why?”

I—I couldn’t say, he said at last. What the Collective needs it for. The only thing I know is that the Collective needs it, and I trust the Collective. A thought. And who are you to talk about pointless work? he demanded. An IF Worker serves humanity. You and your dreams—he waved a hand at the miners around them—now this is pointless. When I get back topside, I am going to lead an army of Dream Police down here and kill every last one of you.

Linda’s face tightened. “That is not the king’s dream.”

The king’s dream, Shade thought, is to wave his arms and legs in the air.

“No,” she said. “A dream is an idea. Something not present on Earth. We long for this perfection, trying to create it in each moment, each brush stroke, each note or a song or movement of a dance. But it is also,” and here she paused, “in some rare individuals, a foretelling of the future.”

Shade made a rude noise inside his head. *No one can foretell the future.*

“Perhaps foretell is the wrong word,” Linda said. “The king does not see the future, but rather expends all his power to create the future, into bringing that future into being. We believe in that future. It is our destiny.”

Buck wagged a horn. “Of course, one must interpret a dream correctly.”

“What are you saying?” Linda asked.

The goat-man shrugged. “An invasion of Dream Police would be a union of the two worlds.”

“That’s not the king’s dream and you know it,” she said. “Don’t be such a cynic. Humanity could not survive such a holocaust. The Collective and dreamers need each other. Destruction of either would mean an end to humanity as we know it.”

“...as we know it,” Buck said.

What do you need the Collective for, anyway? Shade demanded. Your electric-whatzit?

“We depend on the Collective,” Linda said, “for everything.”

She led him through a wide tunnel into a large chamber with a hole in the floor. Pallets of food pills, water pills, caffeine pills lay stacked around

the loading bay.

You steal from the Collective!

“The Collective provides for our basic needs. Yes.”

You people are parasites destroying our world, he thought.

“I told you,” Linda said, “it’s symbiosis, we’re not—”

Lies, Shade snarled. *Killing parasites cures the host. It does not destroy it.*

Linda withdrew her arm from his, stood apart. “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

Without warning, a Dream Police cruiser rose up through the gap in the floor and settled next to them.

Oh thank the Collective! Shade thought. *They’ve come to rescue me!*

The door hissed open, and half a dozen monsters jumped out. They grabbed boxes of food and water pills, began loading them into the cruiser.

What the—? Shade’s eyes bulged. *You stole a Dream Police cruiser?*

Buck chuckled. “We did. Many years ago now.”

Shade looked again. It was an ancient police cruiser, a model not in use for hundreds of years. *But how did you get it down here? The Crust is how thick?*

“A kilometer, easy.” Buck shrugged. “We tunneled up topside, brought the moving box down here, filling in the tunnel behind us as we went.”

The monsters finished loading the moving box, and piled back inside.

But they’ve all been unplugged, Shade said. *How do they operate the moving box?*

A man stuck his head out the window. “Shade!” he called out. “What a surprise! Glad to see you could make it.”

It was Frank, the Dream Policeman he and Kann had unplugged just days ago.

How did you— Shade stammered. *You’re a dreamer? You? But how—?*

“I’ve got a sudden hankering for mosaic tile and macramé. Come by and I’ll show you my new project!”

So saying, he piloted the moving box down through the hole in the floor.

Shade turned to Linda and Buck. *But he’s been unplugged? How does he operate the cruiser? The only way to control a moving box is with your mind.*

Buck said, “Our scientists have developed manual controls.”

Manual?

“Instead of using your mind,” Linda said, “you use your hands. Levers and wheels and whatnot.”

Shade shook his head. *Unbelievable. The lengths you people go. It*

makes me sick. You suck the Collective dry, all the while infecting upstanding nodes like Frank and me with your disease. And you're not even people anymore—just look at you! He gestured at Buck's horns, Linda's chest. *Monsters. Not even human. Less than human.*

Linda raised her eyebrows. "And your song?"

The melody trilled inside his head, but he batted it down. *You took me there, to her, to Maude, on purpose,* he thought. *To infect me even further.*

"Did I force you to love Maude's song?" she asked. "was that my fault? Was that hers?" She lowered her voice, whispered in his ear. "Or was that yours?"

Shade's head spun. What was real and what was dream? Where was the Crust, and the sky he knew? He pushed her away.

I am infected by a disease. A contagion that could spell humanity's doom. And you are part of this! The woman I love!

She recovered her balance. "Do you?" she asked.

Do I—

The Prime's words echoed once more inside his head:

Do you love her?

The memory of their recent lovemaking came back to him. He hung his head.

Yes, he said. *I do.*

She patted his cheek. "That is not true, Jimmy Shade. But it is sweet of you to say so."

You are no longer part of the Collective, he thought. *How can you know what I think?*

"Because you are a dreamer," she said. "Dreamers are incapable of loving anything but their own dreams."

Buck tapped his hoof on the lead floor. "Let's continue the tour. It's a long way back to the surface. The king wishes Shade to be well-rested. Tomorrow is decision day."

The goat-man gestured to a nearby tunnel, but Shade did not move.

No, Shade thought. *I've had enough. I'm not waiting until tomorrow. I have made my decision.* He waved a hand at the warren of passageways that led off in every direction. *Just tell me how to get back topside and I will go take my medicine.*

Linda whirled on him. "You want to go? Then go."

Buck put a hand on her arm. "Linda...the king's dream."

"Maybe the king is wrong. Maybe he picked the wrong dreamer." She shook her arm free, turned back to Shade. "See that tunnel?"

Shade looked where she pointed. *Um...sure.*

“Half an hour climb takes you to a police station. HQ, in fact. Grate leads straight into a cell.” She crossed her arms. “Go ahead. Turn yourself in.”

You mean...I could just walk out of here? Right now? You aren't going to stop me?

“The only rule down here,” Buck said, “is that rules were made to be broken.” He shrugged. “If you must go, you must go. Only you know your destiny.”

Shade gaped at them. *You're serious?*

Linda turned her back on him. “Go.”

He went to her, to hold her in his arms one last time, but she pulled away.

I just want to go home, he said. Can't you understand that?

“Sure,” she said, without looking at him. “The only question is, where is home?”

Home is the Collective. Where else would it be?

But she made no reply.

Shade hung his head and sighed. *I will miss you.*

“After they ChemLob you, you won't even remember me.” She wiped her eyes. “Goodbye, Jimmy Shade.”

So this was it, then. She didn't want him. Well, that made things easier, anyway. He'd just have to—

But in a flash she threw herself into his arms. Her heart thudded against his chest.

After a long moment, she pushed him away.

“Go home,” she whispered. “Go home, you hear?”

Linda—

“Go!”

Without another word, Shade entered the tunnel she'd indicated and began to climb. He stumbled in the dark once or twice, his head lamp directed toward the distant curves and upward bends of the tunnel, eager to catch sight of the end of his journey. To feel the comforting hum of the Collective once more in his head, to take his medicine and be at peace...

How bad could it be? A drooling half-wit, doomed to clean the dust from the streets, or work in the hydroponic gardens. Better that than to spend the rest of his life below the Crust as a dreamer.

Shade rounded a turn and there, far above him, a light. He continued to climb, and soon stood beneath the grate. He peered up through the bars.

The water pill cooler stood in a corner, next to Boss's bed. Shade could just make out the rack of unpluggers, ChemLob jabbers and bandoleers on

the wall. A couple of cops shuffled past, slung freshly-loaded bandoleers over their shoulders, and departed.

He lifted the grate and poked his head above the surface. The timer in his head reversed and began counting upward:

44:49:53.

44:49:54.

44:49:55.

He could sense the Collective now, their comforting embrace. Could they sense him too? All he had to do was climb through the grate and into the cell—to freedom.

Hi Boss, he thought. Did you miss me?

But in the instant he thought this, a high clear voice sounded inside his head.

A song.

Maude.

Or was it his own voice?

Every note, every inflection...the music expanded to fill his brain.

Shade paused, hand on the grate. Go forward, he told himself. Go home. Do the right thing. Go back to the Collective. That dream—that song—was a mirage.

But how could it be false? A thing of such beauty? How could there be right or wrong—to a song with no words? He paused, terrified, unable to go forward, unable to go back. The song grew in force and power until he thought his heart would burst.

Who's there? Boss said. Where are you?

He could go back down to the surface, Shade thought. Just for one day. He'd already made up his mind to return to the Collective. That wasn't going to change.

Why not go and hear Maude's song one more time? That wouldn't hurt anything, would it? Maybe learn to sing himself. Twenty-four hours and he would be back, lifting the grate again, pushing himself up into the police station's cell, begging to be ChemLobbed.

Who's there? Boss demanded again. A sharp intake of mental breath. Shade? Is that you?

Shade commanded his limbs to climb out of that hole, but his arms and legs refused to obey. He had to hear Maude's song just one more time...

Hi Boss. Yeah, it's me, he thought. You would not believe where I've been! Did you know there's a city of dreamers living down on the surface? And they're all monsters!

What are you talking about?

And there's a king of the monsters who has four legs and has a dream that one day soon the worlds of Work and Play will be reunited.

Boss chuckled inside both their heads. *Don't be ridiculous, Shade. Those are bedtime stories to scare child nodes with.*

I'm serious, Boss. There are thousands of dreamers who threaten the Collective's very existence. We have got to go down and wipe out this nest of vipers before they destroy the Collective.

Shade, you've been down in the sewers too long. Come up and take your medicine like a good boy.

A pair of Dream Police trotted down the hall.

Panic seized Shade. If they ChemLobbed him now, they'd lose all of his knowledge of the Dream Cities below. They'd never be able to kill those dreamers.

Boss, here's my raw data. Check it out. Shade uploaded all of his experiences over the last day and a half into Boss's brain.

Boss cried out. No...it can't be...you must have been hallucinating. This isn't real. It can't be.

The Dream Police fumbled with the lock on the cell door.

I'm going to gather more intel, Boss. When I can prove what I've just told you, I'll come back. Tomorrow. We need to plan an invasion to kill off these dreamers!

The cell door opened. Shade dropped below the grate and climbed back down the ladder. As soon as his head went below ground, the timer resumed its countdown to zero.

Shade jogged back down the tunnel. Would they follow? He knew where he was going in the darkness, and they did not. The grate squealed open, and footsteps pranced behind him. Within minutes, however, the sound faded as he put distance between himself and his pursuers. He slowed to a walk.

Less than forty-eight hours to gather enough evidence to prove to the Collective that this was really happening, that their mortal enemy lay hidden beneath the Crust. He had to go back down to the City of Dreams—for the Collective's sake.

But part of him rebelled.

Why didn't you stick to your plan? Why didn't you turn yourself in?

He whimpered, then relaxed. He had not failed. He was collecting reconnaissance for the Collective. That was why he was going back to the surface. If he let them ChemLob him now, they would never know the truth. He would learn to sing and bring that knowledge back to the Collective. Prove he wasn't hallucinating. Then they could exterminate these Dreamers.

Shade strode down the tunnel now, head held high. He felt free. He had no more decisions to make. He would sleep well tonight. Come dream or nightmare, he was ready.

Buck and Linda were waiting for him at the tunnel mouth. Linda grinned when she saw him. Neither looked surprised.

“Well,” she said, “shall we go?”

On one condition.

“Shoot.”

Tomorrow I will be back here saying good-bye—forever.

Her face did not flinch. “Alright.”

On the condition, he continued, that the singing monster lady—

“Maude.”

—Maude teaches me how to sing.

“Once you return to the Collective, the ChemLob will erase the memory,” Buck said. “What’s the point of that?”

Understanding dreamers will help me hunt them down and kill them better.

“You won’t be working for the Dream Police after they ChemLob you,” Linda pointed out.

She was right. How could he deny it? *The work will go on without me.* He lifted his shoulders, let them fall.

Linda stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the nose. “You want to go see Maude?”

He nodded.

“I know just where to find her.” She took his hand, pulled him away from the tunnel mouth. “Come on!”

She led him back to the staircase, and with a whoop Linda and Buck leaped into the air, grabbed the pole and slid from view.

Shade almost didn’t follow them. *Get out of here while you still can!* he thought to himself. *All you have to do is walk back to the Collective right now.*

In thousands of years, the Collective had managed to ignore the City of Dreams. How likely was it that he, Jimmy Shade, was going to make the slightest bit of difference?

But he had to know. What it was like. To sing. He had to!

He sighed, leaped awkwardly into the air, took hold of the pole, and returned to the City of Dreams.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Linda led Shade from the landing pad up the slope of the great crater into the city itself. Before, he had seen only the tunnels beneath the ruins. Now he stared around in wonder.

They walked through a maze of ancient streets. A thick layer of dust covered everything, which puffed up in clouds with each step as they trudged along. Rusted shapes with what may have once been wheels littered the thoroughfares. In some, ancient skeletons still sat, preserved, no doubt, by the radiation. The skyscrapers bent away from the crater, once molten-glass frozen in mid-air.

Extraordinary, Shade thought. For so much to survive for so long, these monuments to man's folly. A shame the Collective had not arisen in time to prevent this holocaust. True utopia could have been achieved without paying such a high price—most of humanity wiped out, the planet poisoned for billions of years by radioactive fallout.

He wondered why the Collective had never cleaned up the radiation. If the Collective was able to transmute elements to create the lead Crust, why were they not able to transmute the radioactive elements into something innocuous?

"They are," Linda said quietly.

Shade flushed. He was beginning to feel awkward. Everyone could hear his thoughts, but he could hear no one else's.

How do you mean?

Linda squeezed his hand. "The Collective *wants* to live in fear. They *want* to live in the air, they *want* to build a crust between themselves and the real world."

I—I don't understand.

She sighed. "I don't either. But such is the way of the world."

They came to a large circular building without a roof. One side, unprotected by the skyscrapers, had collapsed from the ancient explosion. The other half—really more like two-thirds—remained standing, largely intact.

Shade gazed up at the building. *What is this place?*

"The ancients called it a stadium." She tugged on his sleeve. "Come."

They stepped across ancient chunks of broken concrete and entered the great oval. Far above them, the burning globe atop the golden spire illuminated the city. In the middle of the stadium, a groundscraper plummeted to the ground. Shade approached it, caressed the leaden surface. Amazing to think that fellow nodes worked, ate and slept on the other side,

he mused. They have no idea what's going on down here.

A sound rang out behind him, and he turned. The most beautiful sound he had ever heard, even more beautiful than before.

The woman-singer-monster Maude came into view, her mouth open, arms outstretched at her sides, singing as she approached, and Shade thought his heart would break. He clutched his chest. He was far too young for a heart attack. What could it mean?

Maude drew nearer. She looked Shade in the eye as she sang, and it seemed to him that she was singing for him and him alone. A cool breeze pricked his tongue. He shut his jaw.

Linda rested her chin on his shoulder. "Now do you understand?" she whispered. "Why I would rather die than leave here?"

He put his finger to his lips. *Sshh!*

Maude halted in front of Shade. She finished her song in a crescendo that made Shade's organs quiver, then she fell silent, and the silence rang in Shade's ears more painfully than anything he'd ever known or felt.

Shade and Maude stood there for a long moment, facing each other, saying nothing.

The words tumbled from his head in a confused jumble. *I wish I could sing like that.*

Maude reached out a green and purple claw and touched his arm. "I thought you wanted to go back topside?" She nodded at Linda. "That's what I hear, anyway."

I do, Shade thought. And I will.

"You still have a day or two to make your decision."

He checked his timer:

42:00:01.

He shook his head. *Tomorrow I return to the Collective. I have made my decision. ChemLob will cure me.*

Maude pursed her warty lips. "The ChemLob will kill your dream and erase these memories."

Yes. I know.

"Then why do you want to sing? What's the point?"

Before they ChemLob me, I intend to prove to the Collective the City of Dreams exists.

"By singing to them?"

Yes! Then they can come down here and exterminate you all.

She raised her eyebrows. "I might ask you, then," she said, "why should I teach you?"

Oh! Shade had not thought that far ahead. Because I can't help myself!

he burst out. *I have to sing. I'll go crazy if you don't show me how.*

He fell to the ground and clutched her scaly purple knees.

She stroked his head. "An honest answer."

Then—you'll teach me? Even though I might use what I learn to kill you?"

"Life is short," she said. "And we live it one day at a time. For this one day, at least, we shall sing together, you and I."

Orange flecks in her cheeks glowed.

If only she weren't so ugly, he thought, and the squawk box, as always, translated.

"Hey!" Linda said, and slapped the back of her hand against his bicep. "There's no need for that."

Shade kicked himself for this rudeness. *Where was the Collective to suppress his inappropriate thoughts?*

Maude blushed. "In the City of Dreams, you are free to think and say whatever you like." She darted a glance of rebuke at Linda. "However, we don't need to hear your innermost thoughts, either. You deserve some privacy."

...privacy? An unfamiliar word.

"Give me your squawk box and I'll show you."

Shade removed the collar from around his throat. He'd been wearing it for so long it seemed strange to take it off.

Maude held out her claw. He gave her the device.

"Now think whatever you like," she said. "No one can hear what's going on inside your head."

Of course you can't, Shade thought. *You've all been unplugged.*

But Maude just looked at him, as though waiting for him to say something. She held the squawk box in one hand.

What, you mean you really can't hear me?

Still nothing.

The truth began to dawn on him. *No one can hear what I'm thinking!* He knew this was so, of course he did, but to experience it firsthand...

He stumbled backward. Now he understood what it meant to be unplugged. Locked inside the cage of his own mind, forever unable to escape!

The two women watched him, but said nothing. Sweat drenched his skin. *The squawk box,* he thought. *I need it. Now.* He dashed at the singer and reached for the collar, but her monstrous bulk was many times his own size, and she held the squawk box over her head, out of his reach.

"Speak," she said. "Use your tongue. Your lips. Your teeth. That's what

they're there for. Like I'm doing. See?" She bared her fangs at him.

Shade lunged again, but still she held the squawk box out of reach.

"Mmmm! Mmmm! Mmmm! M!!! Mmmmmph! Mmmmmphh!

Mmmmmmmph!" he grunted.

She patted him on the cheek. "That's a start," she said. And tossed the collar to Linda.

Oh thank the Collective, he thought. He approached his wife. *She'll give it back to me for sure.*

"If you want to learn to sing," Linda said, "first you must learn to talk. Like Maude says."

Shade reached for the squawk box, but Linda flicked it back to Maude.

He stared at her in astonishment. *But you're my wife!*

She couldn't hear him. Of course she couldn't. He ran to Maude, to Linda and back again. They played keep-away with the squawk box until he fell panting to his knees and groaned.

"You want to sing?" Maude asked. "You must first talk. It's not hard." She lifted his chin with her claw. "Now tell me. What's your name?"

Shade opened his mouth. *Give me back the squawk box!* he thought. But only a barking sound came out.

Maude pushed her face close to his. "Not like that. Look at my lips and teeth and copy me. What I'm doing. See?"

Shade did so. "Arns...snarf...arf arf!"

"Shade'," the woman said, enunciating, one finger pointed at her open mouth. "'My name is Jimmy Shade.'"

"Inneeee...ade," Shade said. And stopped.

The singer raised her eyebrows.

He tried again. "Chade."

"My name is Jimmy Shade.'"

The lesson continued for hours. Shade, who had never used his tongue for anything but consuming food and water and caffeine pills, was astonished at how rapidly he learned to talk.

So was Maude.

"You have a talent, Jimmy Shade."

"What? For talking out loud?"

"You know how long it takes most dreamers to learn to speak? Months. Sometimes years. Some never learn, and are forced to use a squawk box for the rest of their lives."

"Will you teach me...to sing now?" he asked, and yawned.

"You've spent a lifetime without enough sleep, without dreams," Maude said. "You need to rest and let your mind process everything you've just

learned.”

“But I have so little time!” Shade protested, and, against his will, he yawned again. How long had it been since he last slept?

“You will learn nothing from me if you fall asleep on your feet.”

He turned to Linda. “Haven’t you got any caffeine pills?”

Linda climbed to her feet. “True dreams come to us in our sleep,” she said. “Caffeine pills interfere with that process.”

“I thought dreams came to you in the mines,” Shade objected.

“Dreams are...complicated.” She slid her arm through his, and whispered, “And if you don’t want to sleep, I can think of other things we can do.”

Shade stirred at the thought. His desire overwhelmed his objections.

“Tomorrow, then?” he said to Maude.

She tilted her bulbous green head at him. “Tomorrow.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Eighteen hours later, Shade was back at the stadium, looking for Maude. He cursed himself for a fool for sleeping so long. He'd asked Linda to wake him, but she had refused to do so. To sleep three times the allotted time! It was unthinkable. Even worse than the night before. He was a criminal to idle away his life asleep, when the Collective needed saving.

And he was convinced now that by learning to sing, he was helping the Collective exterminate dreamers. It was the only way to convince them the City of Dreams was real. True, other dreamers had visited the City of Dreams, but returned topside anyway. Buck said so. But this time he felt sure things would be different. This time the Collective would listen. This time they would take his experiences and use them to purify humanity.

24:01:03.

A day left.

No, less. He still had to climb the crystal staircase and get back topside before his head exploded. He had to allow at least four hours, preferably more. It did no one any good if his head exploded before he had a chance to communicate his knowledge to the Collective.

But where was Maude?

Linda escorted him to the stadium, but kissed him goodbye at the entrance.

"You and Maude don't need an audience. And I have my own dream to cultivate."

He watched her leave, her hips swinging from side to side. She looked back once, her third breast bobbing under her chin—and then she was gone.

Shade sighed. If only his wife wasn't a dreamer too, this would be a lot easier.

Something sharp tapped him on the shoulder. He whirled, reached for his service weapon, but of course his holster was empty.

Maude stood there, claw in mid-air, a frown on her face. "Are you ready to begin?"

"Yes," Shade said, "I'd like to—"

"You'd like to nothing. If you wish to learn to sing, then you submit to me as my student."

He shrugged. If that's what she wanted, why not? "Very well. You're the boss."

She smacked his stomach. "To start with, your posture is all wrong. Your voice is wrong. Everything you're doing now is wrong."

He swallowed. "Alright."

She lowered her great head until her nose touched his. “I can give you the tools to sing. How to hold your body. How to make the sounds. But...”

“But what?”

“But something far more important has to happen first.”

Her smell was overpowering—of cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves, and other spices. The first he’d noticed it. “Which is?”

“The beauty of a song is not its sound.”

“Then...what is it?”

She drove a claw between his ribs. “It is in your soul.”

“Soul...?”

“The thing that makes you, you.”

“I...don’t understand.”

She straightened up. “What makes you different from other people. The portion of you that is not part of the Collective.”

Shade laughed. “I have no such part. Nothing makes me different from other nodes,” he said. “That’s the whole point of the Collective. We are all the same.”

“No,” she said. “Not other nodes. Other *people*.”

“People, nodes—what does it matter?” he asked. “I am We. We are All. We are the Collective.”

Somehow saying it out loud had a very different effect to thinking it in his head.

“The Collective has suppressed your soul your whole life,” she said. “Censored your thoughts. Shouted down your individuality. Forced you to conform.”

“But I *want* to be part of the Collective!” he protested.

“If that’s what you want,” she said, “then there’s nothing more for me to say.” She turned to go.

“No, wait!”

The scales on her neck shifted as she turned her head. “Yes?”

“This ‘soul’ you talk about,” he said. “It sounds to me like a mental disorder. After all,” he continued, overriding her objection, “it’s not a question of conformity. No thoughts are worth thinking unless first approved by the Collective. Everyone knows that.”

“Sure,” she said. “And is it any wonder, then, that everyone thinks exactly the same?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing.” She shrugged. “If you have no soul. Tell you what,” she continued. “Remember what you learned yesterday? When you gave me your squawk box? Right now you can think whatever you want. No one will

know, not even the Collective. No one can stop you. Why not give it a try?"

"Because thinking unauthorized thoughts could destroy humanity!" he exploded. "I have no desire to think anything that has not been approved by the Collective."

"Then you have no desire to sing," she said. "Is not singing itself a betrayal of the Collective?"

"No! Singing is evidence. To prove the City of Dreams exists. To prove my loyalty to the Collective."

"Your first loyalty is to yourself—and to your dream. Not to humanity."

"You really believe that, don't you," he said, not looking at her.

"I too was once part of the Collective," Maude said. "Like yourself. I am a guest in the City of Dreams. But this is not my home. I have no home apart from the Collective."

"Then why don't you go back?" he asked.

She gestured at her monstrous frame. "I came here following my dream. And it has changed me. I am forever cut off from the rest of humanity. I can never go back—to that."

"And does that make you happy?" he asked.

She nodded. "And sad. And everything in between."

"But it's illegal to feel sad. It's illegal—not to mention morally wrong—to feel anything besides happiness and joy at being part of the Collective."

"Maybe," she said. "But I don't really care any more."

He stared at her, at the ruined stadium, the groundscraper meters away from him, and clutched his head.

"But that's—this—all of this—is crazy!"

She sighed. "No matter how much I might miss the Collective, I could never go back. It would kill me." She laughed, turned away to hide her face. "They would kill my soul. I can't let them do that. I won't let them do that."

"There's no such thing as a soul," Jimmy Shade said. "And I, for one, can't wait to get back to the Collective."

Maude wiped her eyes, tapped his chest with a purple claw. "But here you are now in the City of Dreams. Why is that?"

Shade scratched his chin. "I've been infected. Obviously."

"No," she said. "You are not just a node anymore, Jimmy Shade. You are a man with a soul and a song. Let the world hear that song."

"I don't have a soul," he said. "And I don't expect anyone will hear my song but you." He added, "And maybe Linda. In any event I wouldn't want to infect the Collective."

"How will you sing for them without infecting them?"

I—” He had not thought that far ahead.

“You see why I ask, why should I teach you?”

He had to taste that song before he went back topside. He had to! He couldn’t explain why, but if she refused to teach him... “Because if you don’t, I’ll die!”

She studied him in silence for a long moment. “Spoken like a true dreamer.” She nodded. “I will teach you what I can in the time that remains to you here.”

And so their lessons began.

It seemed to Shade to last a lifetime, each second a day, each minute a year. Their voices came together, flew apart, merged again.

Maude started him out on scales, rudimentary method and posture, but by some odd stroke of fortune, a clerical error, he supposed, on the part of an Information Factory Worker, an archive of all humanity’s musical knowledge had been tucked away in a corner of Shade’s memory, and he accessed it now.

“Pitch perfect,” she breathed, and nearly collapsed when he sang Beethoven’s Ode to Joy. She had no idea what it was. He explained, and she too marveled that the Collective would make such an error. He sang the song in a dead language neither of them understood, but which Shade knew had been called “German.” He taught her the words and the music, and they sang it together, their voices blending and twisting in the air.

“And to think I was going to start you off with ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’!” Maude said when they finished.

“A good song, too,” he agreed. “Shall we?”

But then Maude did something unexpected. She opened her mouth and sang a new song. A song Shade didn’t recognize. He checked and double-checked the archive—it *was* a complete record, wasn’t it?—but could find no trace of it. He tried to follow her melody, accompany her, but it kept changing, kept growing, mutating, until finally he fell silent, jaw slack in wonder.

When she had finished, he let the song dissipate into the dead air around him. Then he asked, “What was that?”

“That,” she said, “was my song.”

“I don’t understand,” he said. “It’s not in my memory banks.”

She laughed. “Of course it’s not. It’s my song.”

“*Your* song?”

“I created it. Before me, that song did not exist.”

“But people don’t create songs anymore.”

“I do,” she said. “That is what dreaming means. To create from nothing what did not exist before.”

“But that’s impossible!” he said. “Everything worth thinking or doing has already been thought or done. Thousands of years ago, too.”

“Every day needs a new song. The old songs no longer speak to us.”

Shade remembered the final chorus of “Ode to Joy.” “Do you really think so?”

“Some things are timeless, it is true. But songs are meant to help us make sense of our world.”

“Isn’t that what the Collective is for?”

She spread her claws wide. “Many things have changed since those songs were written.”

He pondered this.

She asked him then, “What is your song?”

“I’m sorry, *me*?”

“You have a dream. A song. Or you wouldn’t be here. Will you share your song with me?”

“I—” He halted. “I don’t have a song.”

“Perhaps you have not discovered it yet.”

Do I have a song? he wondered. But his head echoed, empty of music. He shook his head. “No.”

“Then let us sing something else, something new. Perhaps it will inspire you.”

The time flew by. Before he knew it, a familiar figure approached across the broken concrete. Linda! When Shade spotted her, she applauded.

“Is it time?” Maude asked her.

“Time for what?” Shade wanted to know.

He checked the timer. 12:45:37. Had he been singing with Maude for almost twelve hours?

“The play is about to begin,” Linda said. She kissed Shade on the cheek. “Then it’s Decision Time.”

Maude took a deep breath, let it out. “Then we had better go.”

“What is a ‘play’?” Shade asked.

“A dramatic performance.”

He puzzled over this, shook his head.

“You remember the actors you met the other day? Zune, and Zama, and the rest?”

“Ah, you mean the one with two mouths? And the one with the donkey head?”

A wry grin. “That’s them,” Linda said.

“I still don’t understand.”

“You’ll see. The play is in your honor, you know.”

“What? Why?”

“There is always a play before Decision Time. When dreamers decide to stay or to go.”

Linda led them out of the stadium, across the lifeless city and back underground. At the door to the ballroom, she halted.

“Will you do something for me?” she asked, pressing herself against him.

“Of course,” Shade said tenderly. “I’ll bring back enough ChemLob for everyone.”

“No,” she laughed. “Tonight. After the play. Before you...leave. Will you sing for the others?”

“...the others?”

“All the dreamers are here tonight. Thousands of them. That song you sang before—what was it called?”

“The Ode to Joy,” Maude said.

“That one,” Linda breathed. “Will you sing it for us before you go?”

Shade sang a few bars there in the tunnel. A passing potter dropped a vase, and stood there listening, ignoring the fragments at his feet. Maude glowed at Shade in awe.

He did not understand what the big deal was. He had been desperate for Maude to teach him, but now that he knew how to sing... He grimaced. A bauble, a plaything, these sounds you make with your mouth. Signifying nothing. It was fun, sure...but who cared? Was it worth sacrificing the Collective just so he could sing?

No. That was ridiculous. Anyone who’d do that ought to have his head examined.

Shade belted out the final chorus. The others applauded. It was so easy. He felt nothing but hope that this nightmare would soon be over and he would return to the welcoming bosom of the Collective once more.

He wondered at the insane passion that had seized him earlier. He had been curious. He had to know what singing was.

Now he knew. It was nothing special. He would not miss it.

Maude looked at him and raised her eyebrows. She wanted an answer. Would he sing for them? He opened his mouth, closed it again. He would need their cooperation to return to the surface. They could keep him here against his will, if he refused. Force him to unplug, or let his head explode. He would be wise to humor them. After all, with any luck he’d be leading

an army down here in a few days' time to exterminate them all.

The Collective might decide not to listen to him, as they obviously had in the past. But for the sake of humanity, he could only hope things would be different this time.

“And when I’m done,” he said, “you’ll give me back my ChemLob? Take me back to paradise?”

Maude wiped a tear from her scaly blue-green cheek. “If that is your wish.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The ballroom had been reconfigured. The king's pedestal had been replaced with a large platform. A stage, Maude called it. Like he had seen the actors using before.

Chairs filled the room, thousands of them, many oddly shaped to accommodate the monstrous bulks they supported.

Monsters mingled, gossiped. More than Shade had ever seen before. Many stared at Shade. Some waved. The scientists sat together in a group. Ernst held a black case over his head and gave him a thumbs up. Others dreamers sat in their seats, multiple pairs of arms folded across their chests, and waited for the—what was it called again?—the play—to begin.

Shade sat between Linda and Maude in the front row. He was uncomfortable with all the attention. Thank the Collective he'd be leaving here soon. Going home.

"Where do they all come from?" he whispered. "There's so many of them!"

"All dreamers must attend Decision Time," Linda said. "To welcome or farewell a new dreamer, as they choose. It is our law."

The king entered the ballroom, four legs creeping along the floor, his head thrown back, paper crown aloft, tattered rags trailing behind him.

The audience fell silent. The king stood over his seat, a stool in the front row. He caught Shade's eye. Nodded. Shade wondered again how one man's dream could rule others.

The king sat.

The lights dimmed. Dreamers wearing green costumes over their stained and torn jumpsuits climbed onto the stage. The actors. Shade recognized Zune, and Zama, and many of the other players he had met briefly before. They began to talk in loud voices. Shade did not understand the words.

"What's going on?" he asked Maude.

"I told you," she whispered, "it's a play."

"Yes. I know. But what is it?"

"A story. This one is by an ancient poet by the name of Shakespeare. It's called 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'."

The monsters continued to prattle on the stage, capering about. Shade turned in his chair. The other monsters sat, transfixed, their attention absorbed by the pantomime on stage. The king rested one hand on each knee, eyes not leaving the actors.

"But what is the point?" Shade asked.

"Of what?"

“The play.” He gestured at the stage. “This!”

Nearby monsters turned and glared at them. Maude touched a claw to her lips. “We come together to celebrate and to mourn.” She gestured at the actors. The monster with the donkey head put on a fake human head. “This is the way life is. And—”

“Life is about putting on costumes and pretending to be something you’re not?”

“Don’t be cute,” she said. “They’re telling a story. A metaphor that helps us understand the world. And we leave refreshed.”

“Refreshed...?”

“A chance to put down our burden, our sorrow, for a time. And then we can laugh. Then we can mourn. Then we can go home.”

Home! “You mean back to the Collective?”

She chuckled. “No. We come together and as an audience the many become one. One mind. One soul. One people. This is our substitute for the Collective.”

Shade watched the spectacle with growing frustration. This was their replacement for the Collective? This—this incomprehensible idiocy—was better than living in oneness with the rest of humanity?

How could he make them see? They could be so happy if only they would just find a way to rejoin the Collective, and conformed to society’s rules!

Impelled by a madness he had never before experienced, Shade got up from his chair, walked to the stage and leaped onto the platform. He turned to face the audience, held his hands above his head, and shouted:

“Stop!”

The actors stopped. Several swore. The audience murmured in surprise. The king coughed once, twice, as though expecting the sound to drive Shade from the stage, and when it failed to do so, the king got to his feet.

“Get down from there!” Linda hissed, grabbing his ankle.

“What are you doing?” Maude whispered.

What in the name of the Collective *was* he doing up there? He could not afford to offend these—monsters, people, former nodes, disgraced and banished dreamers, whatever they were. They held his life in their hands.

He opened his mouth to apologize—to the king, to Maude, to Linda, the actors, everyone—when much to his surprise, song sprang forth.

The song controlled him, as though he were merely the tool of a higher power, and the music unfurled from his lips unbidden.

The sound took shape and grew into words. He searched the archive of his mind—no such song had ever been sung before. This was his song, and

no one else's, and the audience listened.

He sang of the Collective, of humanity, of his sorrow and longing and loss. He sang of the great We, from which they had all been sundered. He sang of the glory of the world topside, and his loneliness down here in the deep, and it seemed to Shade the most glorious pain he had ever experienced. His chest burst with violent passions he had never known. An unknown composer worked him like an instrument and, when he was finished, left him a crumpled, empty shell upon the stage.

Jimmy Shade lay there, cheek against the rough wooden boards, panting for breath. A long moment passed. He fought for air, his breathing loud in his ears. The ballroom was silent.

What had he done? What would they say? They would be angry, he knew. He had interrupted their silly pantomime, they might even refuse to let him go back to the surface, and he would be trapped down here forever. But what else could he have done? He had to tell them what he saw, what he felt.

Shade pushed himself to his knees. He would have to apologize, and quick. He opened his mouth this time to form words, spoken words, words of regret, when a thunder unlike anything he had ever heard crashed against his ears.

The monsters hit their hands and claws and hooves together. They stood, in patches at first, then in waves, until not a single dreamer remained seated. Cheers and cries pierced the air. The actors clustered around Shade, and hands pounded his back so hard his chest rang.

What did it mean? Why were they making so much noise? It was not in his data banks. He had just insulted them, interrupted their celebration. Was this how they showed their disapproval?

The king held his four hands in the air. The noise subsided.

"Jimmy Shade," the king said, "that was the most beautiful thing I have ever heard. Thank you for sharing your song with us."

The crowd held its breath, waiting for Shade's reply. Linda and Maude glowed up at him.

"I don't understand," he stammered. "I sang of my love for the Collective."

The king nodded. "You shared your soul with us, Jimmy Shade," he said. "Your dream. And that is the greatest gift a man may give another."

Is that what 'soul' means?

Shade swallowed. "Then you won't stop me if I wish to return topside?"

The king lifted his broad shoulders, let them fall. "Your dream is powerful, Jimmy Shade. A gift such as yours comes along once in a

thousand years. If that. If ever. Would you ChemLob such a precious thing?”

“I would,” Shade said without hesitation.

The king hung his head. He scratched his cheek. “My dream was wrong, then,” he muttered. “Or perhaps he simply isn’t the one?”

No one responded to this odd statement. The king looked up at Shade. “You have the right to choose, and you have earned it.” He held out Shade’s ChemLob jabber in one hand, the unplugged in the other. “What is your choice?”

Time check: 6:06:06.

Just enough time to get back topside.

Shade drew himself up straight. His terror waned. He was going home.

Home.

Linda would not meet his eyes. *I’m sorry*, he thought, knowing she could not hear him. *I guess this is goodbye.*

He straightened his spine. In a loud clear voice he declared, “I choose ___”

But at that moment, a crash far above their heads made everyone look up. A dozen moving boxes erupted through the windows, sending shards of glass raining down on the gathering below. Shade ducked. Hundreds of dreamers cried out in pain, many impaled by meter-length spikes of glass. The moving boxes descended until they hovered just overhead. Machine guns bristled from every cruiser. On their sides were painted the words, “Dream Police.”

“You are all under arrest,” boomed a squawk box. “The charge: Dreaming. How say We, Collective?”

The briefest of pauses, then the verdict:

“Guilty as charged. The sentence is death.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ten billion minds swarmed into Shade's head, and he nearly collapsed with joy. Now this was what Beethoven was talking about, he thought.

A familiar voice spoke in the back of his head.

Don't worry, Kann thought. We'll save you from these monsters!

Monsters! Shade looked around the ballroom. Where?

But he saw only friendly faces. Maude. Linda. Buck. The king. He head-hopped into Kann's head, looked down at them through his old partner's eyes.

Well, yes. He supposed they were monsters. He scratched his head. How could his point of view have changed so much in just a few days?

Save me? he thought. But didn't you just sentence me to death?

Except for you, Kann thought. *You haven't been unplugged like the others. Just think—soon you'll be a useful member of society once again!*

This interaction had taken less than a millisecond.

Shade whispered, both out loud and in his head, "But...my song..."

It's cool! We'll kill it for you!"

"But my song is for the Collective!"

Kann chuckled inside Shade's head. *They've been fucking with you, man. Don't worry. We're here to cure you. ChemLob ought to do the trick. ChemLob? Why? Waking dreamers always get unplugged!*

The Collective made an exception in your case. What can I say? Get you out of here in a jiffy.

Bursts of flame bulged from the ends of the machine guns. The noise of gunfire shattered the air.

Dreamers screamed and died. The machine guns raked the crowd, and the moans of the wounded were quickly cut off. The king's head exploded, and his paper crown collapsed.

Why are you killing them? Shade screamed.

They are unplugged dreamers, Buck thought. You can still be part of society once you're ChemLobbed. But these? He made a rude noise inside Shade's head. Human cockroaches. Nothing more.

Shade looked around for Linda. Where was she? But before he could move, actors dragged him down to the stage. Bullets splattered around them, punching holes in the wood.

"Through here," an actor shouted.

A trap door beneath the stage opened, and Shade found himself on all fours beneath the boards. Maude and Buck appeared behind him, pushed him along. Ennst, the crazy-haired scientist, crowded after them, his black

case tucked under one arm.

“Wait!” Shade stopped and turned.

“For what?” Buck demanded. “They’re killing us!”

Two opposing forces twisted Shade’s insides. His rational being wanted to return topside, to return to the Collective, to return to the life he had known and worshipped for so long. But some unknown force, even more powerful than the Collective, one he had never known before—the same force that had impelled him to sing—now demanded that he flee.

What’s this unknown ‘force’ you’re talking about? Kann asked. You know there’s no force more powerful or beneficial or just plain good in this world than the Collective.

The comforting roar of humanity echoed inside his skull:

I AM WE. WE ARE ALL. WE ARE THE COLLECTIVE.

The stage above them collapsed in a shower of splinters.

The actors dashed for cover under the remaining portion of the platform. An arm snaked through Shade’s. A trio of breasts pressed against his bicep.

“Linda! You’re alright!”

“Come on,” she said, “we got to move!”

Shade found himself carried along in this tide of fleeing bodies.

Why am I running? he asked himself. I want to go home. The Collective is my home.

But his feet possessed a will of their own.

They brainwash you, buddy? Kann thought. Give you some kind of a drug? Or is it just the dream infection talking?

I—I’m not sure. Kann, I—

The platform above him collapsed once more. No more stage remained to protect them. An actor flung open a door. They jumped down half a dozen flights of stairs and emerged onto a concrete level with a low ceiling. In every direction Shade saw rusty moving boxes with wheels, like the ones in the street on the surface.

They came to a gaping hole in the floor. A jagged opening had been cut through the ancient concrete. A ladder led down into the darkness. Buck gestured Shade forward.

“No!” an actor said. Zune, the one with two mouths. “They can track us because of him. He has to unplug, and now!”

Shade backed away from the man in horror. “But if I unplug, they won’t be able to cure me, and I’ll never be able to go back to the Collective!”

“You can’t go back topside anyway,” Zune said. “The sentence was death. Remember?”

“No,” Shade said. “They talked to me. In my head.”

Both of Zune's mouths opened in surprise. "What did they say?"
Shade shrugged, looked at the ground. "The sentence for me was ChemLob."

"Odd," Buck mused. "For a self-aware dreamer? Sentence is always unplugg."

"Whatever," said another actor, Zama this time. "Unplugg or ChemLob. Pick one. Makes no difference to me."

"But why is this even happening?" Maude demanded. "They've never come down here before. Not in thousands of years. The Collective is forbidden to invade the Dream Space."

Apparently not, Kann thought inside Shade's head, and chuckled. A dangerous dream has arisen. It threatens the existence of the Collective. We must exterminate it at all costs.

I know, Shade thought.

Of course you know! Kann thought, and chuckled again. You're the one who told us. Told Boss. Remember?

"That was part of the king's dream," Buck said to Maude, oblivious to the conversation going on inside Shade's head. "A breaking and joining of worlds."

Bootsteps sounded on the stairs behind them.

"Go!" Buck shouted. "We can't discuss this here!"

They dropped down the crude ladder, one by one. Buck pulled it after them.

"That ought to slow them down for a little while," he said.

They continued deeper into the earth, down a long concrete tunnel. Shade counted heads. Around twenty or so dreamers had survived. Out of thousands of dreamers who had been alive not fifteen minutes ago. He felt sick to his stomach.

Unable to stop himself, he lurched away from the others and vomited against some exposed pipes.

Linda caressed his shoulder. "You alright?"

Shade wiped his lips. "Yeah," he said. "I'm fine."

"Just a little bit farther," she whispered. "Come on."

They jogged to catch up to the others. After many long minutes, they came to a juncture, where the tunnel branched off in three directions.

Buck turned and faced them.

"We can go no farther with the Collective watching everything we do." He held up Shade's tools, the jabber and the unplugg.

Maude laid a hand on Shade's shoulder. "It is time for you to choose."

Shade checked his internal clock: 5:30:32.

Barely enough time to get back topside...although he could always hitch a lift in a Dream Police cruiser. Just think—the Collective tunneled through a kilometer of Crust in less than forty-eight hours to get those cruisers down here!

The tools lay in Buck's open palm. Shade reached out a hand, stopped.

"If you don't choose now," Linda said, biting a fingernail, "you'll die."

"That's also a choice," Shade said, trying to delay the decision as long as possible.

Good work, partner! Kann shouted. Stall for time. We'll be there in just a few minutes.

"Any delay means we all die," Zune said. "Choose now or we'll decide for you."

Shade looked at the others in turn. He hung his head. He did not want to hurt them. His duty was to the Collective.

"Give me the ChemLob," he said quietly. "You can tie me up and leave me here, if you like. The Collective will find me, take me back topside."

Buck lifted his hairy shoulders, let them fall. "If that is your choice, so be it." He held the jabber out to Shade.

Maude leaned in close, her scales brushing his ear, and sang a lullaby so softly that no one else could hear. The hair stood up on the back of Shade's neck. She cupped a claw to her lips and the warts on her cheek drilled into his soft flesh.

"What about your song?" she whispered. "Your...gift?"

Kann rode inside Shade's head and heard the song, felt Maude's claw, her hot breath on his skin, the monstrous stench of her. It seemed comforting, almost normal, to Shade, but his partner recoiled in horror and loathing.

Get that ChemLob into you, my friend, he drawled. Then we can clean up this nest of dreamers, get you back to the Collective.

Great! Shade thought. It'll be good to see Boss again.

Boss, Kann thought, has been recycled.

Recycled! Why?

You infected him with your dream, Kann said.

I infected him?

When you visited him yesterday. The sentence was ChemLob.

But recycled...

A ChemLobbed quadriplegic is of no use to society. Kann cleared his throat. You, on the other hand, can still be useful to humanity. The hydroponic gardens can always use another worker. But not until you kill your dream—because if you don't, your dream will kill you.

THE TIME FOR DREAMING IS OVER, the Collective boomed.

Shade's lips moved silently: *Now we all must work.*

He took the jabber from Buck's outstretched hand, felt its comforting plastic surface in his palm. The principal tool of his trade. He uncapped it, lifted it, pressed it against his neck. The needle broke the skin, entered his vein. All he had to do was push the button, and this nightmare would be over. Then he would know who he was, would never again have to question or doubt himself.

Linda wrapped her arms around his waist. "Don't do this. Please," she said. "The world needs to hear your dream."

Shade pushed her gently away. "What Is Good For All Is Good For the One."

She nodded, hid her face in her hands.

Still, Shade hesitated.

"Come on!" Zune shouted. "We've got to go now!"

But...ChemLab...

It's the only way out of this alive, Kann reminded him. *Remember, without us, you are nothing. You are We. We are All. We are the Collective.*

His partner was right, of course.

I know I'm right.

Shade drew a breath. Held it. Pressed his thumb against the plunger.

And halted. A dozen pair of eyes stared at him. He gulped, felt the needle bury itself deeper into his flesh.

I choose... I choose to—

A blast came from far above. Rubble rained on their heads. Bootsteps echoed behind them.

"Do it now!" Buck screamed, "or we're all dead!"

The others turned to flee.

What happened next baffled Shade for the rest of his life. Why did he do it? What mysterious force took control of his body, and moved his arms as though he were a puppet? What impossible motive made him act as he did?

Because he threw the jabber on the ground, grabbed the unplunger from Buck's still outstretched hand, jammed it against the base of his own skull, and, without a word, pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Shade wandered in his dreams for an eternity, tormented by doubt. Had he done the right thing? Shadows engulfed him, accusing him with their silent menace: *You betrayed the Collective betrayed humanity because of you the world could end!*

The darkness suffocated him. When he could stand it no longer, when he felt madness creeping over him, when the only choice remaining to him seemed to be madness or death, he began to sing.

He sang. Gasping for air, he sang. Afraid to let a moment's silence pass inside his head, he sang.

Jimmy Shade sang, and the song lasted many lives of men. The song pushed him past the limits of endurance, until he was no longer sure what he feared most—a world destroyed because of him, or his song destroyed because of the world.

A rough palm caressed his cheek.

He opened his eyes. A goat-beast—like the one in his dreams—peered down at him. Shade screamed in his mind, but heard only a thin echo in reply. He screamed out loud, but a hairy hand pressed down over his lips and teeth.

“Not here,” Buck whispered. “They’re coming for us. We have to get out of here.”

It was real. It wasn't a dream after all.

Or was it?

“Can you walk?” the actor with two mouths asked. Then, louder, “Can he walk?”

Shade got to his feet. He stumbled, grabbed hold of Buck's arm. Something was missing. Something important. His brain felt—empty. What did that mean?

Then he spotted what Buck carried in one hand.

An unplugged.

Inside the clear tube, the tendrils of an implant twitched, groped the glass. As he watched, the charge exploded, turning the implant into frothy organic goo.

Shade stifled a sob. His implant, his connection to the world above. To the Collective. Cut. Forever.

Kann? he thought. *Are you there?*

No answer.

Another explosion shook the earth. “He's out of it!” Buck shouted. “We're going to have to carry him!” Two actors draped Shade's arms over

their shoulders and shuffled down the second of the three tunnels, Shade's toes scraping against the floor.

Kann? he thought. *Hello?* Panic rose in his chest. *Are you there? Is anyone there? Hello. Please answer. Please answer. Please answer. Please!*

But no one answered. No one would ever answer. The silence inside Jimmy Shade's head was final. He was alone, locked inside the solitary confinement of his own soul, and would be for the rest of his life.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

They stumbled through a maze of switchbacks and junctions for hours. Although Shade could no longer be sure. The clock inside his head was gone. The only thing he could be sure of was that Buck led them ever downward.

The overhead lighting ended, and they picked up a dozen head lamps from a hidden recess. Buck explained the late king had left them there for just such a contingency.

A couple of times they thought they heard footsteps, and halted, head lamps switched off, backs pressed against the wall in the darkness. An unnecessary precaution, Shade thought. In this maze the Dream Police would never find them. How could they?

I am running, Shade thought, *from everything I know and love*. But he had made his choice. Now he had to live with that decision. Either go ahead and live, or stay here and die. The Collective would kill him if they found him.

And who was he kidding? They would find him.

The emptiness inside him grew. These last few days he'd learned to live without the Collective—even learned to speak out loud. But the implant had always been there, ready to reconnect to humanity on a moment's notice.

But now...

He felt as though a limb had been cut off. An arm, or a leg. A major organ removed.

Well, a major organ had been removed, hadn't it? The implant was a major organ, and it was dead. He was no longer whole. He was maimed, damaged beyond repair, forever doomed to hobble through life on the crutches of—what exactly? Fellowship with these—monsters?

This was a superior alternative to the Collective?

Why did he do it? It was like committing suicide, only worse. He was a walking dead man. He could never go back to what he was before. He would live what little remained of his life, hunted like a rat in a hole, and die at the hands of the nodes he had called colleagues, friends, fellow members of the Dream Police, the Collective, humanity.

The tunnel widened. Something crunched underfoot. Bones littered the ground. Human bones—but distorted, misshapen. Monstrous. The actors lowered Shade to the ground with a sigh of relief.

What is this place? he thought. Then out loud, “Where are we?”

“Catacombs.” Buck indicated the tombs that lined the passageway. All manner of knives, axes and saws hung from the walls, many stained with blood. “Beneath the City of Dreams lies the City of the Dead. Where dreams go to die.”

“And here we are, ready to join them,” cackled an actor. Zune, still in his green costume.

“We’re not going to die,” Buck said.

Zune snapped his fingers in the goat-man’s face. “Now look who’s dreaming.”

Shade pushed himself up against a stone sarcophagus, took a few uneasy steps on his own. He picked up a femur bone, gnarled and twisted and old. He began to laugh. The laughter grew, became hysterical. The others turned to look at him.

I gave up the Collective—for this?

“What’s the matter with him?” another actor grunted. Zama, this time. The one with the donkey head.

He, Jimmy Shade, would never again be part of humanity. Barred from head-hopping, barred from knowing others’ true feelings, always wondering what other people really thought. Never again would he flit through a million minds a second, seeing the world through their eyes, walking in their shoes. He was marooned in his own head, and the loneliness was like a cold knife in his chest.

His laughter grew maniacal, shrieks of horror echoing in the catacombs.

The world spun. He closed his eyes. But that only made things worse, and he opened them again.

The monster-dreamers stared at him. *Go away*, he thought. He lay down and curled up amidst the ancient bones, rocked himself back and forth.

“He’s in shock,” the goat-man said.

“Since when do dreamers go into shock?” Zune demanded. “Remember when I got down here? The king unplugged me and I started prancing around, I was so happy to be free of the Collective.”

Linda sat cross-legged on the floor, lifted Shade’s head into her lap. She caressed his feverish scalp. “The greater the dream, the more it hurts to be severed from the Collective,” she said.

“So now you belittle my dream?” the actor snapped.

“I didn’t—”

“This great dreamer of yours,” Zune said, and spat on the floor, “caused this mess in the first place!”

“What are you talking about?” Linda asked.

“Thousands of years of stalemate and the Collective comes down here? Why now?” Zune pointed at Shade. “You think it’s just coincidence?”

“The Collective sees only what it wants to see, and nothing that it doesn’t.”

“Well they sure as hell can see us now. And I wonder who woke them up?”

“He’s right,” Shade sobbed, his head in his wife’s lap. “It’s my fault. I brought them down here.”

“You see?”

“What are you talking about?” Buck asked. “How was this your fault?”

Shade buried his head in Linda’s lap, wishing he could disappear.

“When I went back topside, when I left you in the mines,” he said, “I stuck my head through the grate. At Dream Police HQ. I talked to Boss. Another cop. I head-hopped, told him I had a dangerous dream, a dream that could destroy the Collective. Told him all about the City of Dreams, what I’d seen so far. Uploaded everything I’d seen and heard since coming here.”

“I told you it was his fault!”

“Oh why did I run,” Shade wailed. “Why didn’t I escape when I had the chance? Why didn’t I ChemLob myself just now? Then I’d be home with the Collective, not stuck down here with you monsters.” His shoulders heaved.

Linda stroked his forehead, but he pushed her hand away. “At every step I’ve made the wrong decision,” he whispered. “But the worst thing is—I don’t even know why!” He tore at his hair, pressed his nose between her knees. “It hurts...so...much!”

“I’ll give you hurt, you dream-killing cop!” Zune shouted, and attacked Shade with his fists.

The others pulled him off with difficulty. Shade wiped a bloody nose.

“I say we tie him up and leave him here as a peace offering for the Collective,” Zune said. “Then maybe they’ll go away and leave us alone.”

“You should,” Shade said. “I deserve it.”

Buck cleared his throat. “Shade is the only hope you have to continue dreaming. If you value your dream, I suggest you guard him with your life.”

“What are you talking about?” Zune demanded.

A gunshot tore through Buck’s shoulder and dropped him to the floor. Bootsteps clattered toward them.

“Come on!”

The actors grabbed Buck and Shade and fled. Dream Police in dream

shields raced toward them. Shade thought he recognized Kann, but it was impossible to tell in the dark catacombs. Bullets zinged off the walls, sparked at their toes. A sarcophagus lid shattered.

“How did they track us? How did they find us?” Zama shouted.

“It’s Shade, it has to be!” Zune said. “I say we leave him.”

“But he’s unplugged. You saw him do it yourself!”

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” Buck wheezed. “Just get us out of here!”

An actor stumbled and fell. His brains spattered on Shade’s boots.

“Leave him, he’s dead!” Zune shouted. “Move, move, move!”

“Can we fool them? Hide in plain sight?” Linda asked.

“Too late,” Buck gasped. “They want to see us. Run!”

The Collective sees everything it wants to see, and nothing that it doesn’t... Shade remembered how he had fooled the Collective with the vision of him asleep in his bunk. Could he do that now...? Perhaps it was too late, but worth a shot, anyway.

Shade projected a tableau on the tunnel floor: a score of dead dreamers, bleeding out from bullet wounds, himself in the center. Bones of dead dreamers piled up around them.

They fled into the blackness, panting for breath. The footsteps halted behind them.

“Why did they stop?” Zama panted. “What’s going on?”

“Count your blessings,” Maude said.

Shade opened his mouth, but thought the better of it. Did he do that? It worked! But why? And for how long? When they tried to pick up the bodies they’d realize their mistake.

And how did the Collective track them this far? Footprints in the dust? Or was it something he was doing...? He felt so strange. There was no way for the Collective to track an unplugged Dreamer...or was there?

They ran on for another fifteen minutes, twisting their way through that underground labyrinth at Buck’s direction, heading slightly upward, toward the surface.

“Where are we going?” Zune asked.

“Wire room,” the goat-man said.

“Of course!” Zune said. “I forgot. The other Dream Cities. Let ‘em know we’re coming. Book a stage for us!”

“Maybe,” Buck grunted. “Maybe not. Let’s wait and see what the others cities have to say.”

“‘Wire room’?” Shade asked.

“Primitive technology,” Linda explained. “It’s how we communicate

with the other cities.”

“For emergencies only,” Maude added.

“And now,” Buck said, “would appear to be an emergency.”

“Is it much farther?” Linda asked, struggling to catch her breath, Shade’s arm around her neck.

“We’re almost there,” Buck said. Blood streamed from the wound in his shoulder.

After five more minutes they came to a door.

Zune cackled, rubbed his hands together. “Dump Shade, grab some supplies, head for the nearest City of Dreams.” He high-fived with Zama. “We’ll be back on stage in a week’s time.”

Buck ripped a strip of fabric from his jumpsuit. “You aren’t listening to me,” he wheezed. “You need Shade. We all do.”

“But he’s the one who caused this in the first place!”

Buck draped the strip of fabric across his shoulder, struggled to bind the wound. “Because,” he said, “Shade here is the only hope you have to keep on dreaming.”

“You said that before. What are you talking about?”

Maude bent to help Buck. She tied the bandage around his shoulder. The goat-man winced, said, “How do you know there are any Cities left to go to?”

Zune’s eyes widened. “You think the Collective has invaded and destroyed every City of Dreams on the planet?”

“I don’t know,” Buck said. “That’s why we’re here. To find out.” He struggled to sit up. “But I ask you. If the Collective invaded our city, why wouldn’t they invade all the other cities?”

“That would mean...” Zama muttered, and sat down.

“And if that is the case,” Buck said, “if the Collective has destroyed every City of Dreams on the planet...” He turned his lidded gaze to Shade. “Without you, dreams will be exterminated. Forever.”

Zune went pale. “How do you know that?” he whispered.

“The king’s dream is that one man—one dreamer—the most powerful dreamer there has ever been—will unite the worlds.” He glanced at Shade. “I believe Shade is that dreamer.”

Zune glared. “And if he’s not?”

Buck shrugged. “Then we are all dead.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

They crowded through the Wire Room door, along a passageway, and up a flight of stairs.

“So this is the Wire Room,” Ennst breathed. He clutched his black case under one arm. Shade had almost forgotten about the man, who’d been silent until now. “I’ve always wanted to come down here.”

A desk made of ancient bones stood to one side. Next to it, a bone chair. In the center of the desk lay several pieces of carved bone with metal tips, connected by some kind of hinge. Shade could not identify the contraption.

Buck gestured to Ennst. “Will you do the honors?”

The scientist sat down. Papers rustled as he examined the setup.

“Now what?” Shade asked. “Where are these ‘wires’ you keep talking about?”

Ennst scooted the chair a few feet sideways, pointed behind the desk. Two thin strands of ancient, rusty metal led from the bits of bone on the desk through a gap in the wall.

“Now all I have to do is figure out how to use this thing,” Ennst murmured. He examined a paper at his elbow.

“What do you mean?” Shade asked. When he got no reply, he turned to Buck. “What does he mean? How can he not know how to use this?”

“Ennst is a scientist, not a Wire Room operator.”

“Well who is? Where is he, then?”

Maude touched Shade’s elbow. “All dreamers are required to attend Decision Time,” she said gently. “I fear he is no longer with us.”

Ennst picked up a strange apparatus and put it on his scalp. Two black circles covered his ears, and a loop over his head held the black circles in place.

“What does that do?” Shade asked, pointing at the metal-tipped bones on the desk.

“By pushing these two pieces of metal together,” Ennst explained, tapping at the hinged bits of bone, “I close an electrical circuit. That sends a signal along the wire.”

“So this requires energy to work?” Buck asked.

Ennst nodded. "Let's hope they haven't cut the power."

"Do it quick, then."

We need the Collective for energy, for everything, Shade thought. We are all parasites. Even me.

He asked, "How does this help us communicate with the other cities?"

Buck pointed to the sheet of paper. "The number, frequency and length of the clicks represent letters, words, ideas. It's primitive, I know," he said, "but it's all we have, I'm afraid."

Referring to the notes on the desk, Ennst tapped out a message. When he was finished, he sat back in his chair. Waited.

Silence.

"How long does it take for a reply?" Zama asked. "What if they're doing a show? Does it go to all of the other cities at once?"

"Ssh!" Ennst held a finger to his lips, pressed the circles tighter against his head.

"What?" They crowded around. "Did they reply?"

"I thought I heard something." He paused. Sat back. "Must have been static on the line."

They huddled around Ennst as he tapped out the message one more time. They could hear the beeps and clicks spilling out from around the ear contraption.

When he was finished, they waited.

Half an hour passed. An hour. Ennst repeated his message, varying the speed, the length and loudness of the clicks. They stood there, sweaty, hungry, thirsty, battered and bruised and, in Buck's case, shot, waiting for a word of reply.

After a long while, Ennst took off the circles and put them down on the desk. He sighed.

"Well?" Zune demanded.

Ennst scratched his wild hair, let his hand fall to his lap.

"No one?" Maude whispered.

Ennst hesitated. "No one."

"All gone?" Linda pressed herself against Shade.

"So it would appear. I—"

Without warning, a flurry of rapid clicks came from the apparatus. Ennst spun around, put the circles back on his head.

"What is it?" Shade asked. "What are they saying?"

"Ssh!"

With a sharpened yellow twig, Ennst wrote down the letters one at a time. They watched in growing horror. Finally, Ennst threw off the

earphones, the message unfinished, the clicking still going, and they ran from the room.

This is the message he wrote:

“JIMMY SHADE THE COLLECTIVE WANTS YOU JIMMY SHADE
YOU ARE UNPLUGGED JIMMY SHADE YOUR DREAM STILL LIVES
JIMMY SHADE WE ARE COMING TO KILL YOU AND YOUR DREAM
JIMMY SHADE WE COME TO KILL ALL WHO AID YOU JIMMY
SHADE ALL MUST DIE JIMM—”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Dreams exterminated. Forever.

For all of Shade's adult life, that had been his goal. He had fought hard, put in sixteen-hour days, seven days a week to end this menace.

And now?

He was a dreamer, on the run, unplugged, the very thing he hated. The Collective wanted to kill him. The right thing to do, it occurred to him, would be to commit suicide. He was Dream Police, was he not? His first loyalty was to the Collective. For the good of the humanity, he would be better off dead.

But then the song—his song—rose once more in his soul until his chest ached, and he knew that he would fight to keep on dreaming until his dying breath.

Bones crunched underfoot. They traipsed through the darkness, with only their head lamps to guide them. Few dreamers ever ventured this deep into the catacombs, Buck explained, and no electric lighting had ever been wired.

They had fled from the Wire Room, at every moment expecting to hear bootsteps behind them, a burst of gunfire that would kill them all.

Shade's strength returned, and he was able to walk again on his own, even help carry Buck. The goat-man's wound had stopped bleeding, but he was too weak to do more than limp by himself.

The deeper they travelled into the catacombs, the more monstrous the bones, the more ancient and intricate the sarcophagi.

"The great dreamers of past ages came deep to build their final resting places," Buck said, gesturing at a row of tombs. "Few of their caliber are alive today."

"Try none," Zune said. "Everyone else is dead."

They continued in silence.

After many hours of shuffling along in the near-dark, Zune called a halt. "Where are we going?" he demanded.

“Wherever we have to go to escape the Dream Police,” Linda pointed out. “Or would you rather they killed us?”

“Maybe we’d be better off if they did,” Zune said, and threw up his arms. “We’ve got no food pills. No water pills. And no way of getting any. What good does it do to escape the Collective only to die of thirst down here?”

Buck cleared his throat. “When dreamers enter the City of the Dead, they bring provisions.”

“What are you—?” Zune said, and gasped.

The goat-man nodded. “The king gives dreamers a month’s worth of supplies. Look!” He nudged an ancient set of bones.

Shade squatted. Half a dozen food pills and a couple of water pills spilled from a fraying jumpsuit pocket.

“I didn’t know that!” Maude said.

“It is a secret given only unto dreamers when they venture into the catacombs to die.”

Shade furrowed his brows. “I don’t understand.”

“When a dreamer feels himself weakening and is no longer able to fulfill his dream, he comes down here.”

“Then...why a month of food and water?”

At their feet, Zune was cramming pills into his mouth. The other actors raided nearby skeletons.

“To make their Death Dream,” Buck said. He panted for breath. His wound had begun to bleed again. “To sing their Death Song, or create a Death Painting or Death Sculpture, perform a Death Play. Whatever their dream was.”

“But what’s the point of that?” an actor called out. “A Death Play with no audience!” He made a rude noise.

“Dreams fade,” Buck said. “dreamers, too. We all lose our powers eventually.”

He gestured around them at the works of art on the walls, the carved sarcophagi. They were different from what Shade had seen above in the City of Dreams. Where every work of art on the surface was a delight, here the enchantment had, indeed, faded, the brush strokes clumsy, the work of an inferior standard.

“The purpose of a Death Dream is not the audience,” Buck said. “It’s to help the dreamer accept their failing powers and the ultimate blessing of death. A dreamer must make the decision to die without knowing they have a month’s grace down here. The king informs them only when they say goodbye.”

“What do they do when the month is up?” Shade asked.

Buck took down an axe from the wall. He struggled with the effort. The edge gleamed in the head lamp’s beam. “When they are ready—and many are ready before the month is up—they cut off that portion of themselves they used in service to their dream,” he said. “Fingers, or lips, or tongue, or feet.”

Shade gaped at him. “Doesn’t that hurt?”

“Of course it hurts. Death hurts. Death is meant to hurt.” Buck mimed drawing the axe across his throat. “And then, when they have felt their final pain, and endured as much as they can—sometimes days of agony, the longer the better—they end it with one swift stroke.” He tapped a loose skull with a hoof.

The actors returned from their scavenging with pockets full of provisions. Shade realized that he was hungry and thirsty, too, and he joined the others in an impromptu feast. Soon they all sat against a wall, luxuriating in full stomachs.

“Well,” Zune said. “It looks like we aren’t going to starve to death. But now what do we do?”

“Yeah,” Zama added. “The Collective has resources. They will find us eventually. It’s just a matter of time.”

“Shouldn’t we be glad that we’re still alive?” Linda suggested. She snuggled against Shade’s shoulder.

Zune’s double mouths grimaced. “Don’t you understand? Everyone is dead. We’ve got no audience!”

“Of course I understand,” Linda said. “I am a dreamer, same as you.”

Buck held up a quavering hand. “We go...to the King’s Chamber. It’s our only hope.”

“The king’s what?”

The goat-man’s head drooped. He clutched his wound. The bleeding had worsened. “So...tired...”

Zune slapped Buck across the face. “Don’t die on me now! What’s the King’s Chamber? Why would we want to go there?”

“Where kings...go to die. To create their Death Dream.”

“How does that help us?”

“The king feared this. An...invasion. It was part of his dream, too. He prepared the chamber...for us as a refuge.”

“Where is it? How do we get there?”

A forefinger pointed down. “The lowest level. At the bottom of the City of the Dead.”

“Is it far?”

Horns nodded. "A day and a half...non-stop from the surface."

"Convenient," Ernst said, and grinned.

"What do you mean?" Zune asked.

Shade had seen it too. "The Dream Police can only travel beneath the Crust for three days. After that their brains blow up. The implant. Remember?"

"So, in theory," Zune said, "we could stay there forever, out of the Collective's reach?"

Buck nodded again. "That's the idea, anyway."

"But if they really wanted to kill us," Zama pointed out, "couldn't they just send down a suicide squad of Dream Police?"

Shade clucked his tongue. "The Collective would never do that. Every node is precious. What Is Good For All Is Good For the One. Remember?"

Zune threw up his arms. "And the Collective is forbidden to come down here, yet here they are!"

Buck's face was ashen. "We'll just have to take that chance," he said. "The king's dream did not mention suicide police."

"And how do you know so much about the king's dream, anyway?" Zune demanded.

The goat-man closed his eyes, rested his head against the wall. "The king confided in a handful of other dreamers. He wanted to make sure his dream...came true, even if he did not live to see it himself."

"But how do we know you're not just making this all up?"

"Why would he make it up?" Maude asked. "Look, if you've got a better idea of where to go, I'm open to hearing it."

Zune opened his mouths, closed them again. He nodded. "Alright," he said. "Let's go."

"No," Linda said, stroking Buck's forehead. "We need a rest. The Collective may be searching for us, but I think we've lost them for now. We can chance it. And we all need rest."

They lay down amidst the bones, and slept.

Except for Shade, who felt alive and awake in a way he had never felt before. He agreed to take the first watch. While the others snored, he wandered about the catacombs, marking his path with rocks and shards of bone so he wouldn't get lost.

The City of the Dead was unlike anything he'd ever seen. For one thing, it wasn't a city at all, more like a maze of twisting tunnels, filled with tombs, the floor strewn with bones, even full skeletons, knee deep in some places.

How strange to die and leave behind a skeleton! In the world above, when a node was no longer able to fulfill his duty, he was euthanized and recycled, and his body ground into paste to fertilize the hydroponic gardens. In this way a node was useful, even in death.

Shade stepped over the skeletons, not wanting to disturb them. Flesh and hair still clung to the newer arrivals. They had traveled deep to die. In one instance, he found a dreamer who looked like Maude. As he watched, a stream of white maggots trickled from her mouth and latched onto the dreamer's glassy eyes.

He fought down an acid taste in the back of his throat.

"They lie where they fall," a voice wheezed behind him.

Shade spun, grabbed for his weapon, but his hand fell to his empty holster.

Buck leaned against a wall, panting for breath.

"Then what are the sarcophagi for?" Shade asked.

"So future dreamers will remember them." Buck said. He lifted a hand, waggled it from side to side. "It is foolishness, in my opinion. Who cares how you're remembered when you're dead? All dreams will be forgotten eventually."

Shade traced a finger across a dusty tomb. "So dreamers make them and lie down in them to die?"

"The stronger ones, yes," Buck said. "Those capable of leaving a physical mark in this world. But not all dreamers want to be remembered. Or can be remembered. Take the actors." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

The actors' snoring echoed in the tunnel.

"Their art is a temporal one. When it is over, it is over, and so are they. What point would there be? And even those who create more lasting art..." Buck shrugged, winced in pain. "We do not create for posterity. We create for now, for here, not for any other time and place."

"So why do they come down here? I mean, when do they decide it's time?"

Buck plucked at his bandage. "They have nothing more to say." The bleeding had stopped.

Shade thought of the many older nodes who'd gone to be recycled. "Just like with the Collective, then."

"No," Buck said. His nostrils flared. "Not like with the Collective. Here it is a voluntary decision. No one forces you to come down here."

"But you just said—"

"A dream must not be allowed to wither and fade," Buck said. "This

harms all dreams. Out of respect and love for the Dream World, dreamers come down here to die.”

Shade considered this. “And those who refuse?”

Buck leaned against the wall. “Who am I to judge another man’s dream? Who am I to tell him that he has nothing more to say?”

“Alright...” Shade said. “But why can’t they keep on living without their dreams?”

The goat-man chuckled. “What would be the point of that? Without a dream—or worse, a dream you can no longer pursue—life is no longer worth living. Thirsty?”

Buck rummaged through some bones and came up with a handful of water pills, handed one to Shade.

The pill expanded in Shade’s stomach, flooding his insides with cool, refreshing liquid. He studied the many skeletons that littered the floor, jumpsuits in tatters, names forgotten, dreams unremembered.

“Who were they?” he whispered.

“Death comes to both dream and dreamer alike,” Buck said. “A dream may outlive its dreamer, now and then, and the dreamer may die satisfied. Or a dreamer may outlive his dream, and die in sorrow. But in the end, both dream and dreamer must die.”

Music swelled in the back of Shade’s skull. He closed his eyes, rubbed his temple. “And *my* dream?” he said at last. “My...song?”

Buck straightened with effort. “In the end, all is dust and ashes, Jimmy Shade. But that doesn’t make the now any less urgent.” He put a hand on Shade’s shoulder. “Your song can change the world. If you let it.” His hand fell to his side. “This world is all we have.”

They stood in silence for a long moment. A rat gnawed on a bone at their feet. Shade kicked at the rodent. It squeaked and scampered away, resumed gnawing the bones of a different skeleton.

Without a word, they returned to the others. Buck lay down and was soon asleep. Shade woke Zama for watch duty.

Shade made a space amidst the bones, rested his head on a skull. Sleep did not come. After a while, he got up, offered to relieve the actor, but Zama declined. So they sat, back to back in the darkness, listening for the distant crunch of footsteps.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Get a move on,” Zune shouted in Shade’s ear.

Shade woke with a start. He must have fallen asleep. A dreamless sleep this time. A strange feeling of peace crept over him. All hope was lost. He knew that now. The Collective was hunting him, and he would die soon. Even if he managed to find refuge in the King’s Chamber—what then? Trapped in a hole like a rat. The Collective would find a way to get him. They always did. He stood up and stretched. He was no longer afraid. What will be, will be.

The others looked terrible—battered and bruised, clothes torn, Buck weak and clutching his bandaged shoulder. The back of Shade’s skull itched where he had unplugged himself, and when he scratched, his fingernails came away full of clotted blood.

“So. The King’s Chamber,” Zune said. “Is it far?”

Buck lifted a knee and stretched, winced in pain. “We can get there before we sleep again.” He gestured at the bones around them. “Scavenge what you need for the trip. The king has stockpiled food and water pills in the King’s Chamber, but I don’t know what we’ll find along the way. Few dreamers go that deep.” He left unspoken the last two words: “to die.”

They filled their pockets with supplies, and Buck led them through the maze of tunnels deeper into the catacombs. They limped along, stopping often for brief rests, but continued for hours, well past their endurance.

When Shade felt that his legs were about to give out, they reached a narrow tunnel, so narrow that only one could enter at a time. He wondered how long they’d been walking for. He’d needed to pop a food pill five times. On a regular day topside he’d only ever swallow three.

Buck lifted his head. “Let me go first. Wait ten seconds, then follow me. Clear?”

“What for?” Zune demanded. “Why do you have to go first?”

“Because the passage is booby trapped. I need to disarm them. All right with you?”

“The king booby-trapped the tunnel?”

“As a defensive measure. Yes.”

“But I thought you said we were out of reach down here,” Linda said.

“We are just at their maximum range,” Buck explained. “Dream Police travelling non-stop from the Crust could make it here in thirty-six hours. But there’s always a chance that a fast moving hit squad could get here faster. Booby traps seem like a reasonable defensive measure.” He shone his head lamp down the tunnel. “Now, if you’ll allow me?”

Zune gave a mock bow, swept a hand at the tunnel opening. The other actors did the same.

Buck entered the tunnel. They counted to ten, waited another few seconds, then followed.

In the darkness, far ahead, Buck cried out.

“What is it?” Linda shouted. “Are you alright?”

They halted, the sound of their breathing loud in their ears.

“Nothing,” came Buck’s voice. “I’m fine.”

They squeezed forward through the gap, peering ahead with their head lamps, but found nothing. Maude was barely able to fit her great bulk through the space. Once they trod on some hollow wooden boards. An axe glinted on the wall, attached to a long pole. Shade wondered what other kind of booby traps might be hidden there in the darkness.

A blaze of light blinded them. They entered a new room, a great chamber. Buck flicked a switch, and the light became almost unbearable.

Crates of supplies lined one wall. Statues and paintings filled the room, twisted skeletons littering the floor. A dozen tunnels exited the chamber from every point of the compass.

Linda massaged her lower back. “Won’t the Collective be able to track us here from our power consumption? Or just turn off our energy?” She indicated the lights above their heads.

“Relax,” Buck said. “There are massive storage batteries beneath the floor. Enough electricity to last a lifetime, and then some.”

Zune snorted. “Yeah, well, considering how short our lives are likely to be.”

“We aren’t going to die,” Buck snapped. “I told you, the Collective can’t make it down this far.”

“Yay.” Zune twirled his finger in the air.

“Why don’t you go practice a new play or something?”

“What for?” The actor swept a hand at the ancient bones that littered the cavernous space. “Who’s going to be our audience? A bunch of dead kings, by the looks of things?”

“He’s got a point, you know,” Maude said. All eyes turned to her.

Buck raised his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” she said, blushing at the attention, “We’re safe down here. Maybe. We hope.” She lifted her giant shoulders, let them fall. “That’s it? We’re buried alive. We might as well be dead.”

“While there is life, there is hope,” Buck said. He rested a hand on Shade’s shoulder. “And Jimmy Shade here is that hope.”

Shade jerked away. “Me? What are you talking about?”

Zune’s mouths opened in surprise. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“Saying what?” Shade asked.

Linda touched his cheek. “You have to go back topside,” she whispered. “You have to bring them your song. It’s our only chance.”

Shade glared at them. “You want me to...to infect the Collective? With my dream?”

Buck nodded. “The fate of the Dream World depends on you.”

Shade shook his head. “No. I won’t do it.”

Maude sang a few bars of the “Ode to Joy.”

The hairs on the back of Shade’s head stood up. *Imagine if the entire Collective could hear that music...*

“Remember how you felt?” she asked. “When you first heard that song?”

He shuddered. His mouth was dry. The others crowded around him.

“No,” he whispered.

Linda’s eyes widened. “No...what?”

“I won’t do it. I won’t go topside. I won’t destroy the Collective.”

“You wouldn’t destroy the Collective,” Buck said. “You would reunite two warring parts of humanity, long separated.”

Again Shade shook his head. “I don’t care what fancy words you come up with. It’s wrong. You know it’s wrong. I will not do it. You can kill me if you want to.” He threw up his arms to block a blow.

This last to Zune, who bared both sets of teeth and balled up his fists.

“You would let all of us die?” Linda asked.

“We’re safe down here. Remember?” Shade said. “Buck said so. Ask him. There he is. Ask him!”

She traced the line of his jaw with her fingertips. “A dream without an audience is living death. Can’t you feel that? Don’t you know that’s the truth?”

Shade pursed his lips. “Yes,” he said at last. “It is the truth.”

Linda kissed his chin. “Then you’ll do it?” she whispered. “You’ll go up there? Share your dream with the rest of humanity?”

“No. I will not. Sometimes we must sacrifice our dreams for the greater good.”

“Sacrifice?” Zama exclaimed. “What about *our* sacrifice? What about —”

“You kill the host, the parasites die too,” Shade said. “Besides,” he added, as her hand drew away, “I’m no Prime. I’m unplugged. Remember? How am I supposed to spread a dream to the whole Collective? I’d infect half a dozen nodes within hearing range and the rest would squash me flat.”

The others rocked back on their heels. “He’s right,” Zune said. “I hadn’t thought of that. Then I guess we—”

“Actually,” Ennst said, “it would work.”

“How’s that?” Buck asked.

The scientist plucked at his hair. “Simply put, we replugg Shade.”

Shade chuckled. “There is no such thing as replugging.”

Ennst cleared his throat, held up the black case he’d been carrying with him ever since the massacre.

“Which is...?”

“A new technology I’ve been working on. A replugger.”

They all gaped.

“A *what?*”

Ennst put the case on the ground. He opened it and took out a familiar tool.

“Officer Shade,” he said. “Recognize this?”

Shade took the offered weapon. He examined it. “Looks like a standard-issue Dream Police unpluggger.”

Ennst turned to the others. “Let’s remember, for a moment, how Primes are created. Anyone?”

“A partial unplugg,” Maude volunteered. “Remove the receiving tentacles so that the dreamer isn’t overwhelmed by the Collective when they go topside.”

“Plus Primes are always new arrivals,” added Buck. “dreamers who we’ve helped escape. They have to go back topside before three days are out. They don’t have time to develop their dreams. This limits their power.”

“But what if,” Ennst said, and his eyes glistened, “what if we could replugg a dreamer? Inject them once more into the Collective? How much more powerful would they be than a Prime? Especially,” and he turned back to Shade, “if the dream is as powerful as yours?”

Shade goggled at them. “You want to turn me into a Prime?”

“More than a Prime,” Ennst said. “Better than a Prime. The most powerful Prime who has ever existed.”

“But that’s crazy, I—”

“Wait!” Zune shouted with both mouths.

They all turned to look at him.

“You’re forgetting something,” he said, and crossed his arms.

“What’s that?” Buck asked.

“Where are you going to get an implant to replugg him with?” He gestured at the others. “Even if you had a volunteer, which I doubt you’d get, we’re all unplugged already. No implant to donate. So sorry.”

Ennst lowered his eyes. “We would have to...borrow one from an existing node.”

“But who is going to let us—” Shade said, and stopped.

“A node down here in the catacombs. A node coming to kill us. A Dream Police.” Zune rubbed his hands together. “I am going to enjoy this.”

“You’re serious?” Shade looked around at them. “And how do you plan to capture and unplug a member of the Dream Police?”

Buck fingered a horn, looked at him out of the corner of his eyes. “We can probably think of something.”

“The booby traps!” Zama exclaimed.

“A counterattack!” Zune said. “Turn the tables! Kill some Dream Police! Destroy the Collective!” He turned to Shade. “I love it! Let’s do it!”

Shade stepped away from the actor’s slobbering mouths. “I am not going to destroy the Collective, and that’s final.”

“Well why the hell not?”

“Because I love the Collective!” Shade said. “And I have a hard time understanding why you don’t!”

Zune grabbed Shade by his jumpsuit and shook him. “Because they want to kill my dream, you stupid cop!”

Shade lowered his head. He struggled to remain calm. “If I replugg,” he said, “and return to the Collective, my song could destroy humanity.”

Zune let go. “Not humanity. Just the Collective.”

The same thing. But instead Shade said, “Or I stay here, refuse to replugg, and by inaction dreams are exterminated forever.”

Ennst nodded. “That is a fair summary of the situation. Yes.”

“I’ll go,” Zune said.

They all turned. “I’m sorry?” Ennst said.

“If Shade won’t do it, replugg me.”

“I don’t think you understand,” Ennst began.

“Sure I do,” the actor said, and struck a pose, fists on his hips. “Replugg me and I’ll go back topside. Infect the Collective with my dream and destroy them all.”

Ennst said, “Your dream is a strong one, brother Zune. But is it enough to conquer the entire Collective?” He turned to the others. “I have heard

Shade's song. As have you all. His dream is greater than any I have ever seen. Or heard. Can any of you claim to equal him?" He looked at Zune. "Can you?"

"But what can it hurt?" Zune insisted. "Shade refuses to go. The alternative is we all die. One of us should at least try."

"That would only make things worse," Ennst said.

"How so?" Zama asked.

The scientist hefted the replugger in his hand. "We only get one shot at this. They don't know where we are. If we fail, the booby traps won't work a second time. Then where will we hide? Where will we go? How are we going to get ourselves a live implant to work with?"

Zune scowled, but said nothing.

A new thought occurred to Shade. Another way out. Could he—was it possible? He tried to conceal his excitement. "So I could—", he began, "that is, I could rejoin the Collective? What if I simply refused to sing? I could become a useful member of society once again!"

Zune groaned, but Buck cut him off with a hairy hand. To Ennst he said, "Can he do that?"

Ennst put a hand on Shade's shoulder. "What you want is no longer possible. Replugging creates a Prime. That has been the goal of my research all these years. I snip off the receiving tentacle as part of replugging. That's why you would never be a complete node."

"But why can't you give me a complete implant?" Shade asked. "Why do you have to maim the receiving tentacle?"

"For the same reason we always do that with Primes," Ennst said, "the Collective would shout you down. Prevent you from spreading your dream."

"But suppose that's what I want?" Shade asked. Held his breath.

Ennst shook his head. "I am dreamer, too. I will help you become a Prime, if you wish—and it must be your voluntary choice—but I will not allow you to replugg with a whole implant. That would be suicide for me and every other dreamer left on Earth." He swept a hand at Buck and Maude and the rest. "Assuming there are any other dreamers left."

Shade's hopes had been lifted only to be dashed. He hung his head, slumped down against the wall.

Ennst squatted beside him. "You can never go back to what you used to be. You can become something new—something different—something great—or," and he shrugged. "You can die."

Shade pushed Ennst away and curled up in a ball. "Then let me die," he said.

"Fucking cop! Can you believe this? He cares more for the Collective

than he does for his own dream!”

“That’s right,” Shade whispered. “I do.”

“Great,” said Zune. He picked up a femur bone and smashed it against the wall. “Just great. How do we know the Collective didn’t send him down here on purpose to kill us all?”

“That seems unlikely,” Ernst said.

“And what of the king’s dream?” Buck asked.

“What of it?” Zune said. “The king is dead.” He glared at Shade. “And so, apparently, is his dream.” He spat. “Plus the rest of us, too.”

Without another word, the actor stomped off.

“Now what?” Zama asked.

Buck shrugged. “We wait.”

“For what?”

“For Shade to change his mind.”

Maude and Linda glanced at each other. “And if he doesn’t?”

“Then we die.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Weeks passed.

Maude continued Shade's singing lessons. They had nothing else to do, and the soundproof room just off the King's Chamber allowed them to sing without fear of discovery.

"You have talent," Maude said, "but you still have much to learn."

Shade sang all that he felt, and she guided him as he groped forward into the unknown, searching for the words, the notes, the music to convey what they all felt and hoped and feared.

At times he wondered what the point was. They were going to die or be killed. He would be forgotten. No memory of his song would survive. It would be as though he had never existed.

But still he sang.

Linda painted dark figures on the wall, disturbing shapes Shade did not comprehend.

One night she said to him, "You love me more than your dream."

He thought about that. Then reached for her.

"You're right. I do."

She sighed. "I was afraid of that," she said, and padded off to sleep on the other side of the chamber.

Buck sculpted intricate monuments from the bones of the dead kings, only to knock them down again.

"What does it matter?" he grumbled. "What does any of it matter? Who will see my work when I am gone?"

Ennst worked in a corner with a sharpened yellow twig and a piece of paper. He covered the sheet with squiggles. "Looking for another solution," he told Shade. "Maybe Zune's right. Maybe there's a way to amplify a weaker dream. Maybe someone else could go."

But he found no solution.

The actors rehearsed a new play. To Shade it seemed they were only going through the motions, without gusto, or even any interest in the proceedings.

"What good is it?" Zune complained. "Who will see our performance?"

The five of you?”

Buck sighed. “We’re all you got.”

Zune scowled with both mouths, but said nothing.

Then one day, he was gone.

They woke to find him missing. Zune did not show for his breakfast food pill, and without him the actors could not continue their rehearsal. They slumped against the wall, speaking among themselves.

“Where would he go?” Maude asked.

“Maybe he fell down one of the booby traps,” Shade suggested.

Buck had shown him some of the booby traps. A regular feature in every entryway was a deep pit. Shade had tossed a knucklebone into one, waited for the echo of the bone hitting bottom, but no sound ever came.

“He’s not stupid,” Buck said. “And we all have head lamps.”

They checked the booby traps anyway. Nothing. They shone their lights down the pits. No sign of Zune. They returned to the King’s Chamber.

Zama stirred from his lethargy when he saw them. “I don’t think he fell down a booby trap.”

“Then...what?”

“Zune got up in the middle of the night. Said he had to go use the bathroom.”

A toilet had been installed over a deep pit, presumably by some ancient king of dreams.

Buck clucked his tongue. “You see him come back?”

The actor shook his head.

“Why didn’t you say something earlier?”

Zama bit his lip. “I think he went looking for an audience.”

Linda stared at him. “He wouldn’t!”

Zama shrugged. “I dunno. But it’s what I think. And you know as well as I do what that means.”

Maude said, “The Collective is coming.”

“But wait,” Shade said. “I don’t understand. Zune goes to the surface, finds some Dream Police. Tells them what? ‘You want to watch my play?’ They’d shoot him on sight!”

Buck stroked his goatee. “Not necessarily.”

“What do you mean?” Shade asked.

“He knows about the replugger. Maybe he wants to get back into the Collective.”

“Zune?” Zama cackled. “He hates the Collective!”

Buck furrowed his brows. “It’s like he said the other day. Remember?”

Zama scratched his donkey ears. “We can have a dream with no audience or an audience with no dream.”

“Which is worse?” another actor added. “Remember he said that? ‘Which is worse?’”

“The Collective is coming,” Shade repeated. “The only question left is, what are we going to do about it?”

“You mean, what kind of party decorations are we going to use?” Zama asked.

Shade flushed. “No, I mean do we run? Do we hide? What?”

Buck turned to face Shade. “Our options haven’t changed. But Zune’s departures forces our hand. Your hand.”

“To...force me to replugg?”

“He’s going to lure them down here. Of course he is. It’s the only thing he has to bargain with. And then?” He held his hairy arms out wide. “We’re going to have a bunch of dead Dream Police on our hands very soon, and a hot implant ready to be replugged.” Buck stopped, put a hand on Shade’s shoulder. “But only if you’re willing to be replugged.”

Shade shook his head. “I’m not.”

The goat-man’s face was grim. “No more second chances.” He breathed in Shade’s face. “Boom. Then we’re done. Got it?”

“Got it,” Shade said, without blinking. “I am ready to die.”

Buck threw up his arms.

“Like Shade said, where else can we go?” Maude asked. “If we run, they’ll find us. If we stay here, they’ll find us. Either way we’re dead. What do we do?”

“Let me go to them,” Shade said.

Linda gaped. “What for?”

Shade touched her cheek. “They want me, remember? You aren’t a threat to them. You said so yourself. Once I’m dead, maybe they’ll leave the rest of you alone.” He smiled. “I don’t want them to hurt you.”

“You forget one thing, Jimmy Shade,” Buck said, and grabbed hold of a sheet covering his latest sculpture.

“What’s that?”

“Dreams are contagious. And you have infected us all.” He yanked the sheet free.

Contrived in bone, two worlds collided. Two earths. Neither destroyed, but crushed together. They merged, fighting for unity.

“But that means...” Shade faltered.

Buck nodded. “We are all in this together. We live and die and dream, side by side.”

Bootsteps echoed far above.

“So soon?” Zama said. “But how did they—?”

“It’s a day and a half back to the surface,” Linda said. “How did they get here so quickly? Zune must have been in contact with the police for a while!”

“Doesn’t matter now,” Buck said. “But we need to hide, and fast. Follow me!”

He grabbed a crate of food and water pills, and raced toward the opposite end of the cavern, away from the sound of the echoing bootsteps.

“Where are we going?” Shade asked.

“To hide, where do you think?” an actor snarked.

They leaped over a booby-trapped pit, turned a corner, and hid. Panting, Shade peeked around the corner.

This was his chance. Some cops would have to die, and he didn’t like that, but...if he could convince Ennst to loan him the replugger, maybe he could find a way to grab an implant, become whole again. One with the Collective.

He might have to fight them off. The other dreamers. Might even have to kill Buck or Ennst. He hoped Linda wouldn’t try to stop him...he had weakened before at her smile, but he would not make the same mistake again. He would do whatever he had to do in order to return the Collective.

And not as a Prime, either.

How could they ask me to do that? he thought again. To become the one thing I hate most in the world? To destroy the Collective, whom I love above all else?

Then he remembered: YOU MUST NOT HATE. YOU MUST NOT LOVE. HATE IS IRRELEVANT. LOVE IS IRRELEVANT.

His emotions were out of control.

So Shade’s thoughts ran. Then Kann stepped into the King’s Chamber, his bandoleer of ChemLob darts replaced by one of bullets, his gun drawn—and Shade wondered how he could ever have been like his former partner. Killing other people’s dreams for a living.

But I love the Collective...don’t I? And dreams threaten the Collective’s existence...therefore dreams must die...Right?

“Now what do we do?” Maude whispered.

“We wait,” Buck said.

Behind Shade, Linda stifled an intake of breath.

“What?” Buck held a finger to his lips. “Ssh!”

She pointed. Three more Dream Police entered the cave. Between them walked Zune, a smile on his face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A score of Dream Police crowded into the King's Chamber, clad in triple dream shields, squawk boxes around their necks. They panted for breath. A good sign, Shade thought. If they were a suicide squad, they wouldn't be in such a hurry. He wondered what their internal timers read. How long before they had to turn around and head back to the Crust.

The police took up positions around the chamber. They spat on the works of art, knocked centuries-old death paintings to the ground. One smashed Buck's sculpture with his rifle butt, and kicked the remains against a wall.

Buck tensed at Shade's side, but said nothing.

Kann and Zune advanced to the center of the room.

"Well?" Kann's squawk box barked. "Where are they?"

"They were here," Zune said. "They can't be far away. Maybe down one of these tunnels."

Without a word, the cops spread out, charged down the nearby tunnels in pairs—but not the tunnel where Shade and the others were hidden.

Kann and half a dozen cops surrounded Zune in the center of the King's Chamber. The actor fidgeted.

What is he thinking? Shade wondered. *What is he going to do?*

Zune pointed at a tunnel Shade knew contained a particularly nasty booby trap—a tripwire that sent heavy spikes swinging down from the ceiling.

"Why don't we check that tunnel?" the actor asked.

Kann swivelled his head from side to side. "Is that where they are?"

Zune shrugged. "They could be in any one of these tunnels. I don't know. Let's go check."

Two of the cops moved toward the mouth of the tunnel.

"No really," Zune said, "We should check. I mean, you and me. Before they get away!"

Kann remained impassive. "Others will go."

"And that tunnel there. What about that one?" Zune pointed at the tunnel where Shade and the others were hidden.

Shade glanced at Buck. They had chosen this tunnel at random. How had Zune known? Or did he simply guess?

Kann nodded. Two more cops headed for Shade's position. The dreamers crept farther back, stepping around the pit and the other booby traps. Then they waited.

Bootsteps shuffled closer. Shade could hear two people breathing. A yell echoed nearby, trailed off, and vanished.

One down, Shade thought. Way, way down.

Then a sharp gasp, and a loud thunk.

The remaining cop hung upside down, his weapon dangling in one hand. He opened his mouth to scream, but an axe attached to a pole came out of the darkness, severing his neck. The cop's head dangled by a piece of gristle.

Ennst leaped over the traps and grabbed the head before it fell. Linda caught the gun as it slid from the man's hand.

In the chamber, a commotion. Squawk boxes cried out for help. Shade peeked around the corner again. Kann had his hand around the actor's throat.

"You did this on purpose," every squawk box in the room hissed. "Bring us down here for an ambush? Kill us all, is that it?"

"I didn't know the tunnels were booby-trapped!" Zune said. "I just wanted you to replugg me, like you promised!"

Kann let go. Zune fell to his knees, clutching his throat.

"We have little time," Kann said. "We must return to the surface soon." He drew his gun and pressed it to the actor's temple. "Where are they? Where is Shade?"

Zune looked around as though for help, but found none. The booby traps had clearly not killed as many police as he had hoped.

At Shade's side, Linda lifted the gun, but Buck held out a hand, shook his head.

"Take me with you! You promised!" Zune said. "I told you all I know!"

Kann's gun did not waver. "Then tell me where they are."

"They can't be far," Zune whispered. He was performing now every bit as much as when he was on stage. Burning bright, glowing with the energy and truth of his dream. "Hiding behind the booby traps," the actor said. "Probably eavesdropping on us right now."

Linda crouched behind Shade, gun at ready. "What do we do?" she whispered.

Buck sighed. "Nothing."

"You want to be replugged?" Kann asked. "Tell me quick. Time is running out."

“You promise?” the actor asked.

“I promise.”

Zune pointed at an empty tunnel. “There’s hiding in there.”

“Thank you,” Kann said, and pulled the trigger. The actor’s brains splashed onto the ground.

Kann lied. Shade thought. He lied! How could he lie? The Collective doesn’t lie! Doesn’t know how to lie! He gasped. Dreams were a corrupting force. Had Kann been corrupted by his short stay in the Dream World—and by extension, the Collective as well?

A pair of uninjured police crept into the tunnel Zune had indicated. They were gone for a long moment. A handful of bloodied cops staggered from the other tunnels. Their numbers had been reduced. Kann examined each Dream Police officer. Those too badly wounded to transport he shot in the head. The others he sent back to the surface.

Only a handful of Dream Police now remained.

The two cops returned from exploring the tunnel. “Lots of booby traps, alright, but no sign of Shade or the others,” their squawk boxes croaked.

“Prepare to return to the surface,” Kann ordered.

When they were ready, they came to attention, their backs to the tunnel in which Shade hid. In unison, their squawk boxes shouted:

JIMMY SHADE WE MISSED YOU THIS TIME JIMMY SHADE WE WILL NOT MISS THE NEXT TIME JIMMY SHADE YOU HAVE BEEN SENTENCED TO DEATH JIMMY SHADE WE WILL—

An elbow sent Shade sprawling. Linda pushed past him, gun in hand. He grabbed for her, but too late—she darted into the chamber. She tumbled across the room, firing as she did so. Several cops went down.

Kann did not flinch. He tracked her with his gun, fired once, and Linda collapsed in a pile of ancient bones.

Squawk boxes belched the same tune: “*DREAMER. UNPLUGGED. GUILTY AS CHARGED. SENTENCE: DEATH.*”

Kann fired again and she lay still.

“Anyone else?” Kann called out. “No? Well then. Pity there’s no time. Until next we meet.”

Kann bent over the three cops Linda had shot. One was dead, two were dying. He shot them all in the head, including the dead one.

“Double check the tunnels, quick, before we leave,” he barked. “Any dead Dream Police, put a pair of bullets in their skulls. Make sure no implants remain.” He stood up. “I’m coming for you, Shade!” he called out. “You hear me? The time for dreaming is over, Jimmy Shade. Now we all must work!”

Shade and the others crept deeper into the tunnel. Ennst cradled the dead cop's skull in his lap. Buck squeezed Shade's shoulder, but he brushed the hand away.

Kann killed Linda. *Kann killed Linda. The Collective killed Linda. Killed my Linda. Killed my wife. Killed my Linda.*

They killed my Linda!

He had only know her for how long? A few short weeks. He had hated dreamers for killing his wife. Vowed revenge on her murderer. Done everything he could to kill dreamers...

Only to find out that she was a dreamer.

And now...

Now the Collective had murdered his wife.

The Collective killed my Linda!

How could they do that? Why would they do that?

He knew the how and the why, of course. He'd done it himself hundreds of times—no, thousands of times. His whole career. His whole life.

Shade ground his teeth. Someone would pay. Kann would pay.

Two cops approached his hiding place. Their head lamps flickered off the headless body, the pit, the tunnel walls, then disappeared.

Kill.

Shade jumped up, seized the axe from the booby trap over their heads, and stepped around the pit.

Buck and Zama grabbed his elbows just as he reached the tunnel entrance. They clamped their hands over his mouth, dragged him back into the darkness.

Kann and the others departed, moving swiftly. Shade struggled, but they held him tight.

After few minutes, they let him go.

"Why didn't you let me go after them?" Shade exploded. "Why didn't you let me kill them?"

"What good is that going to do?" Buck demanded.

"Go after them! Harry them on their way topside. Kill as many as we can."

"Killing a handful of nodes does nothing," Buck said. "You know this. We must attack the heart of the Collective. Stab it with a dream. Your dream."

"But Kann—" Shade said. "He killed my wife."

"Your dream is more powerful than any weapon," said a weak voice amidst the bones.

"Linda!"

Shade went to her. Blood frothed at her lips, soaked her jumpsuit.

“Buck is right,” she said. “You cannot...out-violence...the Collective. If you try...they will crush you. Infecting them...with your dream...is the only way.”

He fumbled with her jumpsuit. Her wounds pulsed with each beat of her heart. “We’ve got to fix you,” he said. “We’ve got to—”

“You can’t...save me,” she said. “But...you can save...yourself. You can save...the world.”

“But they’ve killed you!”

“You must not hate.”

Shade choked back a sob. “You sound like the Collective now.”

“You must not...hate,” she repeated. “You must love. You must love your dream...more than me.”

He nodded.

“Hate will destroy your dream. Love...will give it power. You must...love your dream. Must...love your audience. Love...the Collective.”

Shade put a hand to her lips to silence her, but she pushed him away.

“Be true...to your dream. Share it...with the world,” she said. “That is all that matters.”

“Linda,” he said, cradling her head in his arms, “I—”

But her eyes rolled up in her head, she arched her back, and lay still.

Linda. Dead.

Dead!

He’d mourned her for years when she was unplugged. But now...she was really dead. He lay a hand over her heart. His fingers came away wet. Blood streaked his palm and trickled down his wrist.

Linda. Dead.

The love of his life. Taken from him—by the Collective!

Ennst stood before him now, the replugger in one hand, the bloody head in the other. The dead cop leered at them, upside down.

“It’s time,” the scientist said.

Shade looked around at their desperate faces. “You mean—?”

Ennst nodded. “It’s now or never, I’m afraid. The implant has already been without oxygen for five minutes. Any longer and we lose our only chance to challenge the Collective.”

“To—” Shade faltered.

Maude went down on her knees at his side. “To bring your song to the Collective.”

“Your only chance. Our only chance,” Buck said. “To live. To dream.”

The Collective killed Linda.

That was all he needed to know. He lifted his head.
“Let’s do it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Hold this,” Ennst said. He handed Shade the dead man’s head. A flap of bloody skin slapped against Shade’s wrist.

The scientist applied the replugger to the base of the bodiless skull. The saw chewed a circle of bone and spat it out sideways. Ennst pulled the suction trigger, and the gelatinous, many-tentacled implant oozed into the clear tube. The explosive charge pulsed red and angry in the middle of the writhing organ.

“Kneel.”

Shade lay the head on the ground, and knelt.

“This may hurt.”

Shade felt the barrel of the replugger against the base of his own skull, against the hole in the bone the unplugging had made, and before he could cry out, a writhing mass of furious flesh pushed into his head, tentacles curling and spiralling into the deepest recesses of his brain.

It was an extraordinary—and unpleasant—feeling. Like he was being violated. Mentally raped. How had this ever seemed normal to him?

Ennst withdrew the replugger and stepped back. The implant hugged Shade’s brain.

A voice thundered inside Shade’s head. *I AM WE. WE ARE ALL. WE ARE THE COLLECTIVE.*

Oh, shut up, Shade thought.

A brief pause, then, *WHAT WAS THAT?*

Ten billion voices boomed inside his head. Or so it seemed to him at first. But there could be no more than a couple dozen Dream Police below the Crust, and thus within broadcasting range. The Crust blocked mental transmission. And if so few could cause such pain...the truth was he had gotten used to being alone inside his head, and this massive intrusion into his thoughts made him angry.

Why are you hurting me? he whimpered. *I’ve done nothing to harm the Collective.*

JIMMY SHADE. YOU DARE TO DREAM. YOU MUST DIE.

Then...you will have to kill me.

You threaten the Collective, Kann thought inside Shade's head. *You give me no choice.*

Kann! Shade thought. *This is a surprise.*

For me as well, his partner thought.

Dreaming is amazing. Wait until you hear my song, it's—

The Collective exploded in a frenzy, their rage filling Shade's head with white noise, shouting him down, screaming at him in every register at once, the ugliest sound he'd ever heard.

Shade grovelled on his knees, clutched his head. It was the worst pain he had ever felt, worse than when he was first unplugged, worse than his worst nightmare, even worse than—

The pain stopped.

He sat there for a long moment, his face in his hands, body trembling. Ennst stood there, replugger at port arms. A single tentacle flopped about in the clear tube.

Shade groped for other minds and found them. Kann and the other cops, running toward the surface. He entered their minds, one by one, saw what they saw, listened to their chatter. They threw Shade out of their minds, and attempted to enter his own—but they could not.

He felt numb. Cut off. Alone in a crowd.

“What—” Shade said, and tried again. “What did you do?”

“I Primed you,” the scientist said. “Just as we planned.”

“You—”

“I cut the reception tentacle. They tried to shout you down, did they not?”

Shade swallowed. “I—”

Buck patted his shoulder. “It's alright. Without the reception tentacle, you can still share your dream with the Collective.”

“I'm—I'm a Prime?” The words escaped Shade's lips like some foul oath.

“Yes,” Ennst said. He lay the replugger on the ground. “And may I suggest you consult your internal clock?”

“What for?”

Ennst tapped his temple. “The explosive charge.”

Oh no.

The timer glowed red inside his skull.

35:43:17.

And ticking down.

“Less than thirty-six hours to get back topside.”

“This is the Dream World's last chance,” Buck said. He shouted to the

actors, who still cowered in the tunnel. “Let’s go, people!”

“Wait,” Shade said. He still knelt on the ground.

“What is it? Are you strong enough to walk? Do you want us to carry you? We’ll carry you.”

Buck snapped his fingers and two of the actors rushed to Shade’s side, lifted him to his feet.

“No,” he said, and shook himself free. “It’s not that. I—” He faltered. Something troubled him. What was it?

“What’s going on, Shade?” Buck whispered, gripping Shade’s bicep. “There’s no time. We’ve got to go. Now!”

The others stood there, waiting for him to speak. Shade clutched his head. The implant quivered inside his skull.

“I want to be whole.”

“We want to be whole,” Buck said. “*Humanity* wants to be whole. For the first time in thousands of years. And you’re the only one who can make that happen.”

“No,” Shade said. “I mean, I want to return to the Collective.”

“And sing for them, I know. We’re going to help you do that. Now come on!”

The Collective had killed his Linda. He hated them. He wanted revenge. He wanted to...but what had she said? Her body, still warm, lay at his feet. You must not hate. You must love... Hate will destroy your dream.

“Let’s go,” Buck said.

The others headed after the Dream Police.

“Wait. This isn’t what I want.” Shade turned to Ennst. “Can you reattach the tentacle? Is there any way?”

The scientist tapped the replugger with his foot. The tentacle had stopped twitching.

“No. And why would you want that?”

Zune’s body lay on the ground not far away. Shade remembered the actor’s words: “Without an audience, how can I sing?”

“Oh they will hear you,” Ennst said. “Trust me.”

“But *I* won’t hear *them*. You understand?”

Buck looked at him in surprise. “You could enter their minds one at a time, could you not?”

Shade shook his head. “It isn’t the same. You know it’s not.”

Ennst cleared his throat. “You just heard a couple dozen Dream Police shout you down. What’s it going to be like when ten billion voices are screaming inside your head?”

Shade struggled for words. “But without that pain, how can I love

them?” A couple of the actors nodded their heads. “How can I be whole if I can’t hear what the rest of humanity thinks?”

“You may have a point,” Ennst said. “But it is too late now. Besides, if you still had the reception tentacle, the Collective would be able to spy on us. If you were whole, as you put it, they could enter your mind and hear this conversation. They would know exactly where we are, and they’d kill us all long before we got to the surface.”

“So you see,” Buck added. “This is the only way.”

Sadness filled him, but he could not explain why. Shade nodded.

They filed out of the tunnel, the same tunnel by which they had arrived. Shade was surprised to find the booby traps disarmed. Come to think of it, why had no Dream Police been killed on their arrival? Zune must have disarmed the booby traps before meeting up with the Dream Police.

They began the long slog back to the surface.

“So what’s the plan?” Zama said. “Get him topside, let him loose to sing, and wait for the house of cards to fall?”

Ennst studied Shade’s face. “We must go topside. Yes. But what will happen then is anyone’s guess.”

“Why do you say that?” Buck asked.

The scientist pointed. “Just look at him.”

Buck stared open-mouthed.

“What is it?” Shade asked. “What’s wrong?”

Before Buck could reply, an explosion shook the earth.

A rock struck Zama’s shoulder, cutting open a jagged gash, and he cried out.

“What’s happening?” another actor cried.

Rubble rained down on their heads.

“Back to the chamber!” Buck shouted.

They returned to the King’s Chamber without additional casualties.

A pair of actors tore strips from their jumpsuits and bound Zama’s wound.

“The Dream Police know we’re coming,” Ennst said. “They know Shade has replugged. All they have to do is delay us long enough for the bomb inside his head to explode.”

Shade felt an unexpected relief. He wouldn’t have to go through with this plan after all. He fingered the hole at the base of his skull.

But neither, then, would he have his revenge.

They killed Linda. They killed Linda. They killed Linda!

He would never be whole again. Maybe it was better to die down here. Maybe it was for the best. He lay down on the ground and closed his eyes.

“Get up!” Buck shouted. “What are you doing?”

With a sigh, Shade got back to his feet. He looked for Ennst. “You can go ahead and unplug me now.”

The scientist shook his head. “Not possible, I’m afraid.”

“What are you talking about? If you can replug me, you can unplug me.”

Ennst clucked his tongue. “Replugging is a dangerous business. You are the first human being ever to undergo such a procedure. The human brain is not designed to have implants added and removed, back and forth like this. The implant is normally inserted at birth to give the organism time to adapt. Unplugging so soon after a replug...” Ennst trailed off. “It would kill you.”

“But I’ll die if you don’t!”

Ennst put a hand on Shade’s shoulder. “You will die if I do.”

“Your only chance of survival,” Buck said, “*our* only chance, is to get you back topside as planned.”

“But how?” Shade demanded. “The police blew up the tunnel!”

The goat-man gestured around the cavern. “There are dozens of ways to the surface. The Collective has blocked one path. We’ll take another. We’ll just have to be quick.”

Shade gulped. The others looked at him. They expected him to do this thing.

Linda.

His dream.

The Collective.

His song.

His song...

It welled within him now, growing in power until he thought his heart would burst.

“Alright,” he whispered. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

They ran.

Less than thirty-six hours to get back to the Crust, back to the Collective. No time for rest, no time for anything but running, as fast as their legs could carry them.

Reinforcements were coming, Shade knew. Kann had, no doubt, transmitted the news to the other Dream Police below the Crust. A messenger would bring down hundreds, if not thousands, of police to intercept them. The Collective understood as well as he did the significance of his replugging.

In the brief moment of mental intercourse Shade had with Kann, he'd felt a hate he had never before experienced—the Collective's hatred of him. This puzzled him. Was not hate forbidden? Yet their desire to destroy him was undeniable. They knew he was a Prime. The last Prime ever. A Prime with a dream powerful enough to end the Collective.

They would come after him with everything they had.

Another explosion shook the earth, more distant this time. At least he had the element of surprise. The Dream Police did not know these tunnels, would not know where to expect them to emerge from the catacombs—although they knew when Shade's head would explode. It was a race against time.

And when he got back to the surface, the Collective would expect him to make for the crystal staircase. As far as the Collective knew, it was a chokepoint, the only way topside. The Collective would defend it to the last man...meanwhile, he and the others would commandeer the moving box used for food transport, and be back in the Crust before the Dream Police knew what was happening.

He hoped.

They ran on, ever upward, forcing themselves beyond the limits of endurance. They stopped for a few minutes in every hour, just long enough to pop a food pill, a water pill, a caffeine pill. They trudged up the twisting maze, lifting their knees high to step over the skeletons of forgotten dreamers.

They had long since ceased to chatter. There was nothing to say. Hope and fear and desire—what did they matter? To do, or to die. Probably to die. Nothing else mattered.

The clock in Shade's head counted down, a constant reminder of how little time remained.

The last few hours to the surface they did not rest. Finally, they left the catacombs behind and found themselves surrounded by rusted wheeled boxes on the lowest level of a skyscraper.

They paused to catch their breath. Shade checked his timer: 2:03:45.

They crept up a flight of stairs. A faint wind tickled Shade's cheek. He stumbled forward, but Buck held out a hand.

A pair of Dream Police patrolled the far end of the tunnel, where it opened into the crater. Shade could just make out the crystal staircase in the distance. The cops faced the crater, backs to Shade.

As soon as he set eyes on the two cops, they spun and opened fire.

"They saw us!" Zama said.

"But how?" Maude asked.

"Doesn't matter," Buck said, "Come on!"

They turned and ran.

Buck led them back the way they had come. Bootsteps echoed behind them.

"Now what?" Shade asked, checking the timer for the umpteenth time.

"We've got to do some reconnaissance. See how many Dream Police there are, how they're placed." Buck fingered the tip of one horn. "Make doubly sure they're nowhere near the food transport."

"And if they are?" Zama asked. "We have no other choice."

"We need to be prepared."

"But we're in a hurry!" Shade said.

"Like Zama says, we have no choice," Buck said. "If they've laid a trap for us, we need to know now."

They found the nearest stairwell and climbed. On the twentieth floor of a three-hundred-story building, they left the stairs and slipped between two melted door frames into a desk-filled room. Ancient bones littered the room, fused into plastic chairs and twisted dividers, and preserved from decay by the radiation.

The floor-to-ceiling glass windows bent and twisted inward. Buck and Shade crept on all fours to the edge, and peeked out.

The crater lay below in the distance. Dream Police on foot patrolled the streets. More police cruisers than Shade could count flitted and darted beneath the Crust—all of them armed with machine guns.

The Collective must have bored a hole through the Crust, he thought. Then: did that mean an opening, a way for him to communicate directly with the Collective? He probed with his mind, but could find no one other than the Dream Police below the Crust. They must have plugged the hole as soon as the cruisers went through.

How would he ever get past those defenses? The rickety old food transport was no match for a modern police cruiser, and if he tried for the staircase, the cops on foot would get him.

All of a sudden the cops in the crater scrambled out.

“What’s going on?” Shade whimpered. He tried to head-hop into the minds of the Dream Police, but they threw him out before he could learn anything. “What are they doing? Have they seen us? Where are they going?”

Buck held his finger to his lips, continued to watch.

An explosion caused Shade to wince. Before he could open his mouth, the crystal staircase shivered. The angle was odd, he thought. The burning globe atop the golden spire flickered off, followed by the rest of the lights in the City of Dreams. The last thing he saw before the light disappeared was the crystal staircase.

It was falling.

Worse. It was falling toward them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The giant spiral staircase, kilometers tall, built by dreamers many thousands of years ago, had been severed from the Crust, the umbilical cord that linked the Worlds of Work and Play forever cut. Shade could only imagine that such a scene had already played out all over the world, every city on the planet severed from the City of Dreams beneath it.

Game over. The staircase would crash into the building where they hid. If the impact didn't kill them, if they managed to get to the food transport without getting shot, and if they even managed to take off—the swarm of police cruisers would shoot them down before they could make it to the Crust. On top of it all, the timer in his head now read:

1:43:58.

Not enough time. *No time. No time. No time!*

Buck grabbed Shade, dragged him to his feet. “Come on!”

“What for?” Shade yelled. “We’re all going to die!”

“We aren’t dead yet. And we’ve got to get to the food transport. It’s the only chance we’ve got left!”

They scampered back to the stairwell, flicked on their head lamps. A crashing noise of shattering glass roared in their ears. The steps juddered under foot.

“How did they know we were here?” Zama panted.

The ground stopped quaking, and they raced down the stairs once more.

“I don’t know,” Maude said. “Could be a coincidence!”

“With the Collective?” Buck snorted. “No such thing as a coincidence.”

When they reached the underground level once more, Buck called a halt.

“Jimmy,” he said, laying a hand on Shade’s shoulder, “are you broadcasting? Are you telling them where we are?”

“Of course not! Why do you ask that?”

“No head-hopping at all?”

“Well, sure,” Shade said. “I’ve tried to enter their minds, but they throw me out as soon as they see me.”

“And they haven’t entered yours?”

“You know that’s not possible,” Shade said. “After what Ennst did to

me?” He gestured at the scientist.

“It is true they cannot enter your mind,” Ennst said. “But *you* can enter *theirs*. And you can show them whatever you want to show them, no?”

“But why would I do such a thing?”

“You tell me,” Buck said. He lowered his horns and looked Shade in the eye. “That’s the only way they could know.”

“But I’m not broadcasting!”

“Do you want them to come for us?” Zama demanded. “Do you want them to kill us? Destroy your dream? Is that what you want?”

“Of course not!” Shade said. “How many times do I have to tell you?”

Bootsteps clattered toward them.

“Come on!” Zama shouted.

“Where are we going?” Shade asked.

“Somebody blindfold him!” Ennst called out.

“What? Why?”

A sound of tearing fabric, and Shade’s world went black. He clawed at his face, but hands twisted his arms behind his back. They picked him up and carried him.

The bootsteps faded.

When they were safe once more, they set Shade down but held his arms tight.

Buck’s voice whispered hot in Shade’s ear. “I don’t think you’re doing it on purpose. But somehow they can track us. Somehow they know where we are. The only explanation.”

“If that’s so,” Shade said, “how come Kann and the others didn’t find us in the catacombs on the way to the surface? Why now?”

“Probably because if they took the time, they’d all die. They’re in a race back topside as well as us. Plenty of Dream Police now to hunt us down.”

“The new arrivals could have entered the tunnels and intercepted us there,” Shade pointed out.

Buck shook his head. “The Collective has no knowledge, no map of these tunnels. Their only real option until now has been to wait for us to reach the surface. And now’s their chance to kill us all.”

Was he broadcasting? Shade asked himself. It made no sense. If it were true, that meant the Collective could hear all his thoughts.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Why would I broadcast our location? That would be suicide.”

“Maybe not willingly,” Ennst said. “But perhaps without realizing it...”

“What are you talking about?”

“You say you want to destroy the Collective, infect it with your dream.”

“Of course!”

“And I believe you. But,” the scientist said, and laid a finger on Shade’s chest, “unconsciously you still love the Collective. You’re former Dream Police, after all. You could be broadcasting everything you see and hear—*without realizing it.*”

“But if that’s the case, how do I stop?”

Ennst coughed. “You need to resolve that internal conflict. Decide what you really want.”

“And in the meanwhile, he stays blindfolded,” Buck said.

“Precisely.”

They hefted Shade onto their shoulders.

“Time check?” Buck said.

“1:21:10.”

The goat-man clucked his tongue. “Follow me,” he said. “Be careful what you say out loud. The Collective will hear it.”

They advanced through many different rooms and corridors. Shade was disoriented, the echoes of each room blending together. In other places he felt a breeze on his cheek. After a while he stopped trying to guess, and relaxed in their arms. *For the best*, he decided. *If he didn’t know where he was, how could the Collective?*

Hands covered Shade’s ears, lifted him onto a hairy shoulder. He bounced into the air, dropped into what, by the sound of the echo, Shade guessed was a small room. The floor boomed beneath their feet.

“Get moving before he figures out where we are,” Buck hissed.

The ground shuddered, and Shade’s stomach dropped. A moving box, that’s where they were. Oops. Did the Collective hear that?

“They’ve seen us,” Ennst called out.

Buck pulled off the blindfold. “We’ve got about thirty seconds left to live,” he said. “Think of something. Fast!”

Shade peered out the leaded glass window. The food transport lifted off the ground and manoeuvred through the forest of skyscrapers. Its spotlight picked out hundreds of Dream Police cruisers swarming toward them through the groundscrapers of the Crust.

He gulped. Machine guns protruded from every cruiser. “They’re going to shoot us down.”

“You’re the only one who can stop them,” Buck said.

“Me? But how?”

“Sing to them,” Buck said. “You’re a Prime. Remember? Infect them with your dream.”

“But that’s—” *Infect his fellow officers?*

Bullets thunked into the outer lead surface of the food transport.
They killed Linda.

I know.

Don't you want revenge?

Shade gritted his teeth. *I do.*

Well, then. What are you waiting for?

"Closing fast," Ennst called out.

"Sing!" Buck said. He shook Shade by the shoulders. "Sing! You have to sing!"

"But—"

To become what he had always hated. Was there no way out of this? No way at all?

"Sing!" Maude cooed in his ear.

Shade's throat tightened. "But what shall I sing?"

Bullets thunked against the transport once more. One tore through a far corner, exited the other side.

"Sing for Linda," she cooed. "Sing of your love for her. But sing!"

A new thought came to Shade, and he knew the situation was hopeless.

"The Dream Police are wearing dream shields," he explained. "Of course they are. Probably double and triple layers. No dream can penetrate that."

"The Prime got to you topside, remember?" Buck said.

"Because he sang out loud, not just in my mind."

More bullets thunked into the outside of the transport.

"But how are they going to hear me?" Shade shouted.

"Try!" Maude said. "If you don't sing, we're all going to die, and songs will be extinguished for all eternity!"

I love Linda. I hate the Collective. I love the Collective. I hate dreams. I am a dreamer. I have a song.

A song burst forth from his lips.

He sang out loud, belting the song from every fiber of his being. Bullets hailed against the side of the moving box. Buck kicked a window out, and Shade stood to one side, projecting his voice into the open air.

If only the Collective understood his dream, surely they would not want to kill him? He had to make them understand. He had to.

The transport shook from repeated impact. Bullets penetrated the heavy leaden skin.

Maude cried out in pain. A bullet had pierced the webbing between her blue-green claws.

The monster-woman was in danger. Maude. His mentor. Who had taught

him to sing. He loved and mourned Linda with all his heart, but Maude had helped him develop his voice. That too was love, was it not?

He sang again, this time of his love for Maude. He sang out loud, all that he felt, hoping they could hear him somehow over the raging nightmare of gunfire, wondering what she would think. He sang, his eyes squeezed shut, and all that existed in that moment was his song, and if he died right then—which seemed a surety—he could die content.

When he was done, he darted a glance out the window. The Dream Police surrounded them now, a hollow sphere of moving boxes bristling with machine guns. Bullets dented and smashed through the leaden skin. One actor was hurt, another killed. A bullet grazed Shade's bicep. He cried out in pain, sang one last note, and was still.

He had failed.

He would die now.

But he had sung his song, and he was ready.

So be it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The gunfire stopped. The sphere of police cruisers came no closer. The cruisers' spotlights surrounded them in a halo of glaring white light.

"What—what happened?" Shade asked. "What's going on?"

Buck peeked out the window. "I don't know, but I suggest we get out of here."

Ennst guided the food transport away from the skyscrapers and into the jaws of the groundscrapers descending from the Crust.

The sphere of Dream Police followed.

The upper layers of the sphere parted to reveal the loading bay entrance to the Crust. The scientist took them through the gap into the loading bay, turned the transport perpendicular to the opening, blocking it. The box settled with a thud.

Ennst opened the transport door, and Buck galloped out. Shade and the others followed.

"Come on!"

Through the gap in the Crust, Shade could make out the swarm of police cruisers. One broke away from the pack. The others opened fire, and the errant cruiser exploded in mid-air. Two more broke away, and these two were attacked and destroyed by the others. Dozens more left the sphere and headed down toward the surface. Soon a massive firefight was underway, hundreds of Dream Police cruisers firing on each other.

Maude peered over Shade's shoulder. "It worked."

"You mean, I—?"

She nodded. "You infected them with your dream. Some of them, anyway."

Did she like his song? Did she...did she love him too?

Her face remained stony. Her gaze did not leave the window.

Dream Police cruisers exploded in bursts of flame, and all thoughts of love fled. "But all those fellow nodes...dead...because of me..."

Half a dozen police cruisers zoomed toward the loading bay, firing as they approached. Bullets punctured so many holes in the transport that it became almost transparent, before collapsing and sliding out of the loading

bay. A police cruiser rose part way into the loading bay, but took a direct hit, and disappeared from view.

“It was them or us,” Buck said. “Now come on, we’ve got to go before your head explodes!”

35:16.

Shade grimaced and stood. “Lead the way.”

Up the Dream Mines they sped.

Shade was exhausted, and knew the others must feel the same. He was so tired he felt he might collapse. But he knew he had no choice but to go on. To sit down now, to rest against a tunnel wall—even just to catch his breath—and he would lose everything.

He would lose his song.

What would he do when he got back topside? Confront the Collective? Share with them his song, his joy, his dream... What other choice did he have?

And then he would die. He knew that, somehow. The Collective could not let him live. Well, he would die, then. Die unafraid, with his song on his lips, his dream in his heart, and so would end the brief unhappy life of Jimmy Shade.

On several occasions they encountered squads of Dream Police in the tunnels. They took one look at Shade, stuck their fingers in their ears and ran back to the surface.

Maybe I have a chance after all.

Buoyed by this thought, Shade began to whistle.

The sound was infectious, and soon they were all whistling, and they continued their upward climb in the darkness.

Another thought disturbed him, though, and he fell silent. How *had* the Collective known where he was? Had they been able to tap into his brain? Or *was* he unconsciously broadcasting, as Ennst suggested?

Was it possible that he *wanted* to fail? That he was somehow—sabotaging his own efforts?

Shade thought back to the Prime he’d captured when this whole thing started. He’d probed the man’s mind, but found nothing there, just a blank wall.

Now he, Jimmy Shade, Dream Police Officer, was the Prime. And he needed to be sure he wasn’t broadcasting. He had to figure it out, and soon.

The Dream Police were running from him now...but how long would it take for the cops to figure out how to put earplugs in their ears? Then what was he going to do?

The sooner he got to back topside, the better.
The time for working is over, he thought. Now we all must dream.
Dream. Or die.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Shade raced against time, against the clock inside his head, and the bomb that would soon shred his brain to pulp.

“If we can just get you topside, there is hope,” Maude panted.

He squeezed her claw in reply, but her pincers felt cold and limp.

“Your dream is more powerful than I thought,” Zama said, and slapped him on the back. “I’m sorry I doubted you before.”

Shade nodded, but said nothing. He scrambled through a drainage pipe, crossed a platform and waded a deep trench of radioactive rainwater that left him soaked and tingling from the waist down.

The end was in sight. 7:06 left on the clock. If only he could just get there in time.

That was all that mattered.

2:43.

Shade panted for breath. They crawled up a steep incline, and Buck called a halt.

They paused, catching their breath.

“Here we say goodbye,” Buck said, and pointed with a hairy hand. A street grate floated over head, just out of reach.

“How do we know the Collective isn’t waiting for me?” Shade asked. “They’ve got the manpower. They could post nodes at every possible exit point.”

Buck nodded. “Every pair of eyes in the city will be looking for you. Every IF worker on the planet will be processing that data.”

Shade gulped. “So what am I going to?”

The goat-man shrugged. “Sing before they shoot you.”

Weak light shone down from the grating. He was going back. Up there—the Collective. His family, his people, his home—

Were they his home?

“I don’t know I can do this,” Shade said, and covered his head with his arms.

“Stage fright,” Zama said. “It’s normal. Get out there. What’s the worst

thing that can happen?”

Shade blinked. “They can kill me, and dreams will die forever.”

The actor shrugged. “Like I said. Don’t take it too seriously. If you let the pressure get to you, you’re doomed. Have some fun with it, you know?”

The timer inside Shade’s head began to blare. *TWO MINUTES TO SELF-DESTRUCT.*

The numbers 1:59 appeared superimposed over his eyeballs, and counted down.

“Time to go,” Shade said. “Only two minutes left.”

The others backed away from him.

“What?” he stammered. “You’re coming with me, aren’t you?”

“Look at us,” Zama said. He stroked his donkey ears. “Dreams have made monsters of us all.” He raised a hand in salute. “We have been a long time in the City of Dreams, Jimmy Shade. There is no place for us in the World of Work.”

“But I thought you could walk the streets without them seeing you,” Shade said. “Linda said you could. Said you did it all the time.”

“We were invisible,” Buck said, “because the Collective did not want to see us. But now they *want* to see us. They want to destroy us. We can no longer go topside, Jimmy Shade. Our place is here.”

“So what makes you think I can do anything you can’t?”

“Your dream is powerful,” Buck said, “and it has not yet begun to twist and change you, as it twists and changes all those who dream.” He linked his hands together. “No time to waste. I’ll boost you up.”

“But wait!” Shade said. “Can’t I just go topside, reset the clock and come back down here again?”

Ennst pulled his hair. “Did you, by any chance, pop your head topside several weeks ago? When you spoke to Boss?”

Shade closed his eyes. *Of course.* He could run the clock back, but it would take three days to do so. At which point he would either be dead or—less likely—successful.

Buck gestured with his hands. “You’ve got to go, and go now!”

“But what—” Shade said, and took a step toward Maude. “What will happen to you?”

She smiled. “We’ll be fine,” she said, and clutched her wounded claw.

“Give us a minute, will you?” Shade asked.

“How much time do you have left?”

He checked. 1:34. “Thirty seconds, then!”

Buck looked at the two of them. He nodded. “For your own good,” he said, and laid a hairy hand on Shade’s elbow, “make it quick.”

The others drew off to one side, leaving Shade and Maude alone together.

He opened his mouth. Closed it again. He couldn't look her in the eye. He took her injured claw in his.

"I wonder," he said.

"Wonder what?"

"What might have been."

Their eyes met, and something inside Shade's head quivered.

The words tumbled out of him. "I love—" he began, but she lay a blue-green pincer to his lips.

"You don't have to say it," she said. "You already put it in song."

"Yes," he said. "I do have to say it."

She nodded and sighed. "Alright then."

The clock was ticking down inside Shade's head. A minute to go. "I love you," he said. He stepped closer to her, but paused, noting the alarm in her eyes. "I thought I loved Linda but now I see I was mistaken. When you were in danger I realized I've never loved anyone like I love you."

"Jimmy Shade," she said, and stroked his face, "your love is strong, but not for me."

"What do you mean?" he said. "How can you—"

"You think you love me, but you don't."

He pulled away. "I know what love is," he said, "it's—"

But he stopped, unsure of himself. What was the Collective's definition again? He could not remember.

"You love your dream," she said. "You love your song. I merely helped you give voice to that dream."

"But how can you say that?"

Her lips twitched. "I love nothing and no one more than my dream, my art, my song," she said. "It is the same with you. For all dreamers. Your song will consume you until it is all you have left. In time, you too will become a monster." She shrugged. "You confused Linda, and now me, for the true object of your desire." She batted her eyelashes at him. "I am flattered, of course," she said, and kissed him on the cheek.

Impulsively he slid his hands around her scale-covered neck and pulled her green lips down to his. But they were cold and wet and unresponsive.

Maude pulled away. "Remember," she said. "Pitch perfect."

Shade nodded. An immense sadness welled inside him.

"Alright," he said.

YOUR BRAIN WILL SELF-DESTRUCT IN TEN SECONDS, said a voice inside Shade's head. *Ten. Nine.*

He raced to the wall beneath the grate. “About to blow!” he shouted.
“Help me up!”

Eight. Seven.

Buck boosted him up, but Shade still couldn’t reach the grate. *Damn.* He should have planned more time for this.

Six. Five. Four.

Two actors grabbed Shade by the legs and threw him into the air.

Three. Two.

Shade grabbed the bottom rung of a short ladder on the wall, pulled himself up hand over hand, punched his other palm up against the grate. It shot open.

One.

He grabbed the ledge and pulled himself up. His head rose above ground level, and the voice inside his head disappeared. The timer reversed.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Panting for breath, he sat on the edge of the grate opening.

No welcoming committee, so far as he could see. Buck had chosen the entry point well. The grate opened into a dark alley. Ten meters away, foot traffic passed, plus the occasional moving box. Compared to the street, the light here was weak. No one looked his way—and even if they did, what would they see? Darkness, that was all.

That is, assuming they couldn't hear his thoughts. He would have to focus on not broadcasting, not betraying himself. At least, not until he was ready.

But would he ever be ready?

How would the Collective receive him? Would they run from him screaming, like the Dream Police in the sewers, with their fingers in their ears? Would they gun him down on sight, like the police cruisers had tried to do? How was he going to get a word or thought in edgewise—much less a song—before they ran or killed him?

Shade swung his legs out of the hole. He peered down at the others, to wave, to bid them a final farewell—but they had vanished, like they had never been there.

He replaced the grate as silently as he could, and got to his feet. He must look filthy. Covered in lead dust from the mines, soaked in radioactive sewage, and splattered with blood from his dead and wounded companions. Self-cleaning jumpsuits were not built for this kind of abuse.

Shade pressed himself against the wall, crept toward the street, then stopped, still in darkness. What the hell was he going to do? Dressed like this, he would be spotted as soon as he stepped into the street. Was he ready for a final confrontation? Right now? He gulped. What was he going to sing? Would it be enough to resist the power of the Collective?

If only he could get some clean clothes. Then maybe he could blend in with his surroundings, have a chance to think things through. But how? Every Dream Police officer on the planet was looking for him. And there was a limited radius in which he could have emerged from below. A cordon would form. So his next task was to get as far away from his entry point as

possible.

But that meant a moving box or flying train, perhaps both—and dressed like this? He shook his head in the darkness. Maybe he had no choice but to step into the street and burst into song. Better to be the aggressor than the hunted. Better to—

Something twitched against his shin, and he jerked away. A wild-eyed Information Factory worker lay on the ground, curled into a fetal ball.

A dreamer.

A dreamer on the run.

Shade targetted his thoughts at the man, hoping no one else could hear. He began to sing in the dreamer's mind.

He sang a song of joy and truth, of the world to come, when slavery to Work was at an end, the Crust dismantled, and all dreamers roamed freely about the earth.

The man's jaw sagged. His white teeth glittered in the darkness.

The song was getting through, then. Good.

Shade sang of his own dream, and of the world below, of the City of Dreams. Of his need to flee from the Dream Police, his need for fresh clothing, a place to hide.

The man made eye contact, a question on his face.

Shade shook his head. *I am a Dreamer Prime. I cannot hear you.*

The man stood and stripped off his blue jumpsuit. He stood there, naked, and held out the garment to Shade.

Shade removed his own soiled garment and swapped it with the worker. He zipped up the IF uniform, and it shrank to fit him, skintight. The head lamp he left in a nearby recycling receptacle.

He asked the man one more question. The worker indicated the ground in reply, then finished putting on Shade's stained and tattered jumpsuit.

Shade picked up the hard hat and put it on. The lunch pail dangled from his fingertips, bounced against his thigh. He lay a hand on the dreamer's shoulder.

Dream, my friend, he thought. Even though it be the last think you ever do—dream!

The man nodded, tears coursing down his cheeks.

Shade considered directing the man to the grate. He would be safe below. Ennst could even unplugg him.

But his friends were long gone. They would not have waited around for him. This dreamer, once below, could wander down there for days, only to have his brain explode, leaving a skeleton behind in the sewers.

No. Shade would either be successful—and soon—and this man and his

dream would be free, or all would be lost, and nothing he could do for the man would make any difference.

The two men smiled at each other.

Goodbye, Shade thought, and strode into the street.

Shade kept his eyes to the ground, his mind blank, and walked along the sidewalk like he belonged there. A couple of Information Factory workers straggled out of a factory at the end of the street. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a pair of Dream Police cruisers turn the corner, machine guns at ready.

Shade kept his head down, did his best to look tired. As tired as he felt. Thirty-six hours on the run—when did he last sleep?

Just another IF worker on his way back to bunk. No one special. Not worth looking at.

The cruisers floated down the street, lights flashing.

They weren't running away. They weren't attacking, either. Was his disguise working? Shade hoped so. If he ran, he'd give himself away. The cruisers slowed alongside him.

Oh shit. They must be trying to head-hop into his mind right now.

Quick, you have to reply! Show them some kind of facade. But how? There was no way to actually let them into his mind. Would they recognize him as a Prime?

Shade assembled a fake mental dossier, pretending to be a local IF worker—a made-up name polished with confident veneer. He head-hopped into their minds and gave them the details.

Much to Shade's surprise, the cops continued down the street. It worked! Then another thought: *If it were me in that patrol car, looking for the most wanted man on the planet, I'd be checking every dossier with IF Central...*

And when IF Central realized the dossier was fake? There'd be a lot of dossiers to process, but with every IF Factory Worker tasked with finding him... He didn't want to be here when that happened.

A moving box trundled by. He hailed it with his mind. The box halted, the doors slid open, and he got in and took a seat.

Two tired-looking IF workers sat across from Shade. Beside him sat a woman in a Euthenasia & Recycling uniform. Shade painted a mental veneer of physical exhaustion and slumped back into his seat. He hoped it would be enough to deter any idle chatter. He closed his eyes and rested his chin on his chest.

At the interchange, the others got out. Shade followed. He waited for them to board. Then he hailed another, heading he had no idea where.

Unable to invite others into his mind, unable to be fully part of the Collective, he felt like a cripple. What was the ancient word? Deaf.

Yes. He felt deaf.

He boarded the second train. It was full. Fifty pairs of eyes recording everything they saw. Shade hunched in a corner, hard hat low over his face, arms bent forward over his lunch pail.

Where *was* the train going? A glance out the window told him nothing. The Crust stretched black and barren as far as the eye could see.

They descended. The others made slight, unconscious moves to gather their things. They were all getting off. And that meant—

No. Central Station? The last place he wanted to go. Thousands of eyes recording his every move.

How much longer did he have? he wondered. And what was he going to do when they found him? Confront the Collective? Burst into song in Central Station?

It sounded idiotic. He was supposed to sing—and somehow the world was going to change?

Why had he ever agreed to do this? He couldn't transform the entire Collective, somehow merge the worlds of Work and Play, whatever the king's dream had been. Who did he think he was, anyway? Sure, the Dream Police in the sewers had run away with their fingers in their ears. The Collective wasn't stupid. They'd be designing and manufacturing earplugs at that very moment. Then what was he going to do?

Your dream is strong, a voice said inside his head.

The voice! It had come back! What did it mean? Who was talking to him?

I am your song, the voice said. *Your voice. What you truly are.*

Shade chuckled to himself. *And what am I? A fool?*

No, the voice said. *You are a messenger. A dreamer. Now abandon your fear and let your voice sing free!*

I'm not ready. I don't feel in control.

That's the point, the voice said. *Control is an illusion. You must let go. The song will sing itself. You are merely the instrument. Only then will the song be true.*

The voice fell silent, and Shade mulled this over. It made no sense.

The train settled onto the Crust in the midst of hundreds of other trains, and the doors in the floor hissed open.

Shade followed the other commuters down onto the platform. He knew this corner of the station. The adjacent train would take him home.

Home.

Well, what had once been home. His bunk. He could never go back there. Now home was—what, exactly?

Your dream, the voice said. I am your home.

And Shade knew this to be true.

Still, it felt natural to let his feet carry him across the platform and up the boarding ladder onto the adjacent train. He could roam the station, pick a different train, of course, but he had to weigh the risk of being identified by a trainful of dozens of commuters or a stationful of thousands of eyes. He preferred the former.

Shade slumped once more into his seat, and did his best to project quiet confidence and a desire for nothing more than his daily six.

The train filled, the doors closed, and they took off. It was not long, though, before a ripple ran through the carriage. Heads turned, passengers glared at each other. Shade did the same.

In unison, their gaze came to rest on him. They stared at him not with the hate he'd been expecting, hoping for, even, but with the clinical dispassion of a man about to kill a nine-legged cockroach.

Maybe they didn't hate him after all, Shade thought. Maybe the hatred was his own, and he was projecting that onto the Collective.

The train changed course.

Heading for Dream Police HQ, most likely. Where hundreds of armed police would do everything within their power to silence him forever.

They've found me. They're going to kill me. Worse, they're going to kill my dream—I'll never sing again!

Without thinking, Shade screamed, both with his lungs and inside his head.

The scream radiated throughout the carriage. The others covered their ears with their hands, shut their eyes and winced in pain. Shade leaped up, seized the emergency brake with his mind and pulled.

The train dropped straight down. The other passengers clutched their seats, nearby poles. A few flailed against the ceiling.

The Crust approached fast. A parachute opened above them, flinging everyone back to their seats, or to the ground. The injured writhed and grimaced, but did not dare moan.

Shade took another breath and screamed again, concentrating all his mental energy on broadcasting that terrible sound.

But the others straggled to their feet, threw him out of their minds, stuck their fingers in their ears and lurched toward him.

His only hope was to escape across the Crust, find some way back beneath the surface undetected. The others stumbled toward him, and Shade

screamed again, but this time it had no effect.

Shade disconnected one of the train's parachute lines with his mind, overriding the safety catch. The train tilted, sending the others sprawling backward.

Twenty meters to the ground.

Ten.

Five.

He took a deep breath, braced himself and disconnected the parachute completely. The train plummeted. He popped open the emergency exit in the back window with his mind and leaped from the train.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Shade landed on his feet, tumbling forward to shake off the blow. Behind him, the train slammed into the Crust.

He had never been out on the Crust before. Who had? Few nodes had reason to come out here, after all. Ancient dead things crunched under foot. The grey clouds of eternal nuclear winter glowered down at him, almost daring him to linger. The radiation here was many times worse than below, in the City of Dreams. The fallout could kill a man after only a day or two of exposure.

The train lay bent and broken behind him. In every direction, blankness. Emptiness.

Wait. There.

A drainage ditch flared open a couple hundred meters away. Once inside, there would be thousands of points of egress on hundreds of levels, where sewer and other branch lines intersected with the main pipe. It would be difficult—although not impossible—for the Collective to track him. They could position nodes at every exit, but if he was quick he might get there first. And if not, it was unlikely any nearby nodes would be police—or armed.

Shade jogged toward the ditch. A shadow flickered above him, and by instinct he leaped sideways. The flying train crunched down where he had stood.

He clenched his fists and screamed again, but the train lifted once more into the air. The Collective as a whole must be controlling the train now. His puny scream would have no effect.

Shade ran.

The train came down again, missing him by centimeters. He jumped as randomly as he dared, left and right, even backward to keep the Collective guessing.

Only a few more meters and he'd be in the drainage ditch.

The shadow loomed once more above him. He leaped head first into the drain opening, felt the train smack against the soles of his feet.

The blow sent him sprawling. Shade paused, panting. Behind him, the

train crunched down on the drain opening. It did not move. He'd disposed of his head lamp in the alley to be less conspicuous, and now crouched in complete blackness. He would have to hurry.

He scuttled down the drain pipe, and found himself splashing in puddles of water.

What if—?

Suppressing his fear, he leaped feet first down the pipe, and rode for ten minutes, at ever-increasing speeds, until he hit a dry patch.

A light illuminated this kink in the pipe. A watertight hatch stood to one side.

Shade considered. He'd made good time from the surface. He was probably fifty or so levels below ground. He'd also no doubt passed many unlit exit points without realizing it. He wondered why this hatch was lit and the others weren't. Perhaps it was a major entry/exit point. That meant it was more likely to be defended. He could keep going. But who knew when he'd next find a chance like this? He might even wind up back in the Dream Mines if he wasn't careful, and find his timer ticking down again. He peered at the hatch.

Keep going? Or stay here?

No time, Shade thought. And decided.

First he checked his appearance. He was soaked to the skin in radioactive sludge. He'd lost his hard hat and lunch pail. No longer the tired commuter, he looked more like a dirty drain worker called upon to clear a blockage.

It happened occasionally, he knew. The story would have to do.

Here's hoping there's no one on the other side of that door.

He spun the hatch, took a deep breath. And pushed it open.

No one there. No greeting party. *Yes!* He had beaten the Collective this time. Good.

Shade stepped through, closed the hatch door behind him, and spun the wheel.

Something cold and hard pressed against the back of his skull.

A gun.

"Turn around," a squawk box barked. "Slowly."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Shade turned, hands in the air.

Two young Dream Police stood there, guns pointed at his belly. Rookies. Shade didn't recognize either of them. They both wore double dream shields. Squawk boxes clung to their throats.

Shade projected himself into their minds. *hi how's it's going nice weather we've been having lately huh just cleaning out the drains uh what's with the guns?*

They threw him out.

"Nice try," the squawk boxes crackled. "We know who you are. One more thought and you're dead."

They both checked their dream shields. Maximum power, Shade noted. Integrity complete.

But...they weren't wearing earplugs.

"Dreamer Prime," squawked a rookie. "Previously found guilty. Sentence was ChemLob. Execute sentence?"

A pause. The guns both pointed at Shade's head. He had only a second or two and he would be dead—or ChemLobbed. He wasn't sure which was worse.

He sighed. It was time to die. For his dream to die.

Or... said the voice in his head.

Or sing.

That's what you came here for. Remember?

But I'm not ready!

You'll never be ready. What have you got to lose?

The squawk boxes crackled in unison. "Node Shade, you are guilty of crimes against humanity. Sentence is death."

The two cops cocked their guns.

Song welled inside of Shade. He had no other choice. That made it easy. He opened his mouth and let his song pour forth.

"What—what are you doing?" screamed the squawk boxes. The guns shook in the cops' hands. Bullets splattered around Shade, missing him.

The song soared in power, silencing the cops' complaint. They dropped

their guns, covered their ears with their hands, but it was too late. They slumped to their knees.

Time to go.

His song bridled at this, but obeyed—although Shade could tell this obedience would not last much longer.

The song faded. Shade closed his lips. The men stared up at him, eyes wide, hands together, guns at their feet. He waved a hand in front of their faces.

Nothing.

He stepped around them, strode down the corridor. He checked behind him. The men had not moved.

Shade fled into the World of Work.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The garret was dark, and filthy from the refuse of a thousand fleeing dreamers. Shade reexamined the place. Only a few weeks ago he had confronted that premeditated dreamer—the Helper, the one Kann had shot. Her blood still stained the floor.

He left the lights off. Little traffic filled the street. Once his eyes adjusted, he found the bed and sprawled on the dusty sheets.

The bed was dirty and uncomfortable. But it was all he had left.

After fleeing the awe-struck rookies, Shade had taken to the shadows. Even a single pair of eyes would be enough to bring down the wrath of the Collective.

He had made it to the garret unobserved, and popped the last of the food and water pills in his jumpsuit pocket. He wondered what Maude and Buck and Ennst were doing right now. If they were safe. Waiting, perhaps, to hear news of him.

Now what? he wondered. He stared at the darkened ceiling. A spider with sixteen legs crept along a web, where a fly buzzed, entangling itself further with each desperate attempt to free itself.

The reaction of the rookies had surprised him. That awe. Of what—of him? Was that even possible? He had expected to die at that moment. He'd sung in desperation—and won!

What if he could do the same to the whole Collective? Was his dream really that powerful? Could he bring the entire mass of humanity, ten billion nodes, to their knees?

But he was tired. So tired. How many days had it been since he last slept? It seemed like a lifetime ago. His eyes flickered shut. If only he could rest, if only he could think clearly, then he would know what to do.

Sleep, his song said. Let us dream.

His eyes flew open. To dream! How many dreamers had he caught and ChemLobbed while they slept, the jabber in their veins before they knew what had happened? If he slept...if he dreamed...now...and they found him...

Sleep, his song crooned again. You must drink from the wellspring each

night for your dreams to remain strong.

But he was wide awake now. He folded his hands under the back of his head. Would they be able to track him, find him? Would he betray himself like before, broadcast his location without even realizing it? Some kind of subconscious desire to be caught and punished?

He bit his lip. What options did he have left?

To confront the Collective now, when he was tired, unready.

You will never be ready, his dream whispered.

But I thought you wanted me to go to sleep.

I am your song, the voice said. *I am the What and the Why, but you are the Who and the When and the How.*

But I'll never be ready! he protested. Not now, not ever! How can I infect the entire Collective? Who am I to do this thing?

The voice did not reply.

Break it down, he thought. The question was: What was his maximum broadcast radius? How far could he head-hop and still be contagious? For most dreamers, a couple of kilometers. For a Prime, maybe a score of clicks. In order for him to be successful, he'd have to broadcast to the entire world at the same time.

Was that even possible? To infect ten billion nodes at once?

What a thought. Humanity awe-struck at his song.

That assumed they all reacted the same way, of course. And ten billion people was a lot of people—if even a small fraction of that number remained uninfected, the Collective would find a way to fight back, to destroy him, and, failing that, destroy the entire world rather than relinquish control.

What insanity had made him think this would work?

Look at all he had lost—his love for the Collective, for his wife, his friendship with Kann, even his love for Maude. All that he had left was this stupid song.

Stupid.

All of it.

The song hummed inside his head once more. It was—it was a lullaby. Like the one Maude had sung to him. An ancient song to put a troubled child to sleep.

Sleep!

The song caressed his soul, soothed his shattered nerves. He would live or he would die. He would win or he would lose.

But not right now. Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would confront the Collective. Once he'd had a chance to rest.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

A hand caressed Shade's cheek. He woke with a start.

A familiar face peered down at him. He straggled up onto his elbows and blinked, squinting to focus.

Linda?

She sat back on her heels. "Hi, Jimmy."

"But—what are you—I mean, I saw you, you died—"

Her bright laugh tinkled in his ears. "You mean the shootout. In the King's Chamber."

"I saw you," he said again. "You died in my arms."

She nodded, her smile unwavering. "They fixed me up."

A faint glow of light seeped in through the curtains. He jumped to the window and peered out. They were alone.

"Who did?" he whispered. "When? Where? How?"

"The Collective." Still that unceasing plastic smile. "A second Dream Police unit went down there with Kann. They had a portable med unit with them. They fixed me up, made me as good as new." She giggled. "They even replugged me. It's fabulous!"

Shade scrambled to his feet. He peeked out the window. The streets were empty.

"Replugged you? How?"

"With Ennst's replugger," she said. "He left it in the King's Chamber. Don't you remember?"

He did remember. "But where did they get a spare implant?"

"They brought it with them," she said. "And can I just say—wow! It is so good to be part of the Collective once more."

He looked at her in growing horror. "But what about your dream?" he said at last.

She laughed again. But the sound seemed mechanical to him, a shadow cast by a lifeless statue.

"Oh *that*," she said. "Playing with paints, how stupid could I be? Ever since the ChemLob—"

He grabbed her arms. "They ChemLobbed you?"

Her laugh was like a death rattle in his ear. “Of course they did, silly!” An expression of ecstasy contorted her face. “To be a useful member of society once more...” She took his face in her hands and kissed the tip of his nose. “You too can have that joy.”

Shade nodded, and pulled away. He flung himself back onto the bed. “This is a dream, isn’t it?” he said. “A nightmare. I’ll just close my eyes, go back to sleep, and you and all this will go away.”

“You don’t think I’m—I’m a nightmare?” She looked like she about to cry.

“I saw you die,” Shade said. “There’s no way you could still be alive. A second team? That I didn’t know about? A portable med kit? An implant they just happened to have with them?” He shook his head. “I don’t believe it. Any of it. This has to be a dream.”

Linda cocked her head, as though listening to something, or someone. She went to the window.

“Are *they* part of your nightmare?” she asked.

Shade closed his eyes, made himself comfortable on the bed. “I’m sure they are,” he said wearily.

“I didn’t even know there *were* that many Dream Police,” she breathed. *Ignore her. She’s a figment of your imagination. A nightmare. Don’t let her get you riled.*

But his curiosity got the better of him. He heaved himself from the bed with a sigh and went to the window.

“Let’s see what my nightmare looks like,” he said. He pushed the curtains aside and leaned forward, both hands on the window sill.

Shade stifled an intake of breath. He had never seen so many Dream Police before. Officers must have flown in from all over the planet.

The streets, empty only moments before, were now full—shoulder-to-shoulder with Dream Police in double, triple, even quadruple dream shields. They stood on the rooftops opposite, they hovered in police cruisers, their searchlights turning the scene into one blazing patch of light.

Linda ran a palm up the base of his spine. “They’d like a word with you,” she said. “But I asked them to let me talk to you first.”

Shade drew back. The Dream Police were heavily armed, bandoleers of bullets and ChemLob jabbers over their shoulders, rifles all aimed at him.

A lot of hardware to take out one dreamer, he thought, even if he was the world’s last Dreamer Prime.

“What do they want?” he asked. “What are they waiting for? Why haven’t the killed me already?”

She turned to face him. “They want you to come home,” she said. “They

want you to be happy.”

She placed her hands on his chest, but he grabbed them, held them still.

“Happy?” He cackled. “Is that what you call it?”

“Don’t you want to be a useful member of society again?” she whispered. “To be part of something greater than yourself?”

How tiresome, Shade thought.

But, nightmare or no nightmare, he had to deal with this as best he could. Or things could get ugly.

He pushed her away. “Not if it means killing my song,” he said. “I have a dream. And that dream is more important than anything else in the world.”

“To you,” she pointed out.

He considered this, then nodded. “To me.”

“Even if that dream threatens to destroy the world?”

“Especially then,” he said. “A world run by the Collective? Where my dream is not welcome? That is not a world I want to live in.”

“Then die,” she said, and caressed his cheek. “But do not harm the Collective. Please?”

Her eyes pleaded with him. Ten billion minds stared out from those beautiful orbs. Was the Collective afraid of him? He spoke slowly to make sure they all could hear.

“I will bring my dream to every member of the Collective, or I will die trying. There can be no third way.” He clasped her hand in his. “I guess this is goodbye.”

“Don’t say goodbye to me, Jimmy Shade,” she said. In her voice he heard the monotone of ten billion voices. “Say goodbye—to them.” She turned back to the window.

In the center of the street a series of cages had appeared. Inside, flashes of color, irregular anatomy. Shade squinted.

His friends! Maude, Ennst, Buck, Zama, and the other actors.

Maude clutched the bars of her cage. Their eyes met.

Sing! Shade begged her silently. *Let me hear your voice. Your dream. Give me the courage to sing too.*

She opened her mouth, and Shade winced. Someone had cut out her tongue. Buck’s horns and hands and hooves were missing. The actors lay flat in their cages, arms and legs removed at the shoulder and thigh.

Linda came up behind him, breathed in his ear. “Will you suffer as they do?” she asked. “Pointlessly?” She rested her chin on his shoulder. “Or will you take your medicine and be a good boy?”

Shade pushed open the window and stepped out onto the roof.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “Jimmy? Talk to me, Jimmy.”

The police tracked his movement with their weapons. Thousands of safeties clicked off.

I can't do this! Shade thought. *Don't make me, please!*

Just open your mouth, his song whispered. *I'll do the rest.*

Open his mouth. That he could do. So, hands at his sides, the police tense, guns unwavering, Shade took a deep breath and opened his mouth as wide as he could.

Song poured forth.

Shade expected bullets to pepper his body, thousands of rounds of ammunition churning his flesh to pulp. But they let him sing, and the music that poured from his lungs was the most beautiful and most powerful of his life, and he wondered where it all came from, what it meant.

When he was finished, he stood there, panting. The Dream Police had not moved, had not changed position, had not reacted in any way.

After a long moment, a cop in the street stepped forward. Kann. His squawk box sounded.

"Hi, Jimmy."

"Kann." Shade managed a weak smile. "How you doing?"

"Jimmy," Kann said, "I can't hear you. We're all wearing earplugs."

Earplugs! Shade cursed himself. If only he had acted sooner...now all was lost. He hung his head.

Kann's squawk box screeched again. "Come down here now or we'll be forced to shoot you." A pause. "Don't make me shoot you, Jimmy."

Shade nodded. He had no hope left.

You forget, his song said. What about the rest of the Collective? Are they all wearing earplugs and dream shields?

But they are outside of my broadcast radius, Shade objected. *No dreamer can infect the entire planet.*

The voice chuckled. Have you tried?

If it worked... An outflanking manoeuvre, Shade thought. *Interesting.*

No! the voice said. *Don't overthink this. Just open your mouth. That's all you have to do.*

Kann lifted his rifle back to his shoulder, aimed it at Shade. "You coming down or aren't you?"

Shade did not reply. He closed his mouth and sang again—this time in his mind. His implant thrilled inside his skull at the unexpected power coursing through it. Shade reached out to the nodes a few blocks away, two streets away, until he was head-hopping, a million nodes a second, spreading his dream to every node in the city.

He had never known what he was doing was even possible. To

broadcast a dream at such great distances! Thoughts spread around the world at the speed of light, but dreams oozed their path from mind to mind...what he was doing was extraordinary, and he knew it.

Quit patting yourself on the back and sing some more, the voice inside his head commanded.

So he did. With every last gram of strength he possessed, he sang. He sang of the Collective, of his love for the Collective, and the voice swelled inside him to encompass nearby cities, the entire continent, the hemisphere.

The world.

In less than a fraction of a second, Shade entered the minds of ten billion people, skipping and jumping through their heads, and he sang for them, sang of his love and his hope and all that being human meant.

The Collective realized what was happening an instant too late—it takes time to pull a trigger, an eternity compared to the speed of thought—and ten billion newly-anointed dreamers invaded the minds of the Dream Police, their thoughts passing through their dream shields, overwhelming them, shouting them down—

Then it happened. The police froze. They threw their guns on the ground, ripped off their dream shields and pulled out their earplugs. The police began to dance.

Kann danced too. He waved up at Shade, then turned and unlocked the cages.

Maude held her scaly arms above her head in triumph. With time and a med unit, she would be whole again. They would all be whole again.

And not just the other dreamers. The world could now heal, the worlds of Work and Play united once more, forever, Worker and dreamer living together side by side, hand in hand, happy together.

Shade's song encompassed the Earth and reached out to the hidden sky, to the universe itself, and it seemed to him the stars themselves began to dance.

A dance of joy.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Kann spat on the dusty floor of the garrett. *Is he dead?*

Blood pooled on the dirty mattress.

Bark, his new partner, checked the dreamer's pulse, then holstered his weapon. *His dream no longer threatens the Collective.*

Kann laughed, clapped Bark on the back. *You realize this makes us heroes?*

Bark gazed down at the corpse in awe. *Was he really the last Dreamer Prime?*

Kann spat again, this time on Jimmy Shade's cooling body. *The time for dreaming is over. Now we all must work.*

They about-faced and left the garrett. The same day, the Collective disbanded the Dream Police and re-assigned the two nodes to Information Factory work.

And it seemed to Kann, when he was allowed to think about it—which wasn't often—that the Earth sighed with relief at the extermination of dreams. The Collective could now devote all its energy to the salvation of mankind.

THE TIME FOR DREAMING IS OVER, boomed the Collective, NOW WE ALL MUST WORK.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

On the other side of the planet, in another city, far beneath the Crust, at the bottom tip a groundscraper that plummeted to the surface, a node was born.

The child was plugged with an implant at birth. The Collective cared for the child as it would any other node. Untouched by Shade's dream—or any other dream for that matter—the child's many gifts indicated a bright future in Information Factory work.

But this child was different. Deep inside his brain, in a lobe untouched by the Collective, his thoughts were strange and disturbing.

He had a dream...

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

hi there!

Did you enjoy *Dreams Must Die*? If you did, why not leave a review?
Reviews help other readers discover my work.

Thanks!

J.M. Porup

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Former *Lonely Planet* author J.M. Porup now spins a tale or two for his daily crust. He has lived on three continents, speaks six languages, and has worked as a kelp harvester, apple tree pruner, goatherd, cowherd, computer programmer, copywriter and journalist. American by birth, Australian by choice, Colombian by marriage and Canadian by accident, he now lives in the Oriental Republic of Uruguay. His first editor—way back in the mid-90s—called him a loose cannon. Ever since, Porup has done his best to live up to that high standard.

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Dreams Must Die

A Fable of the Far Future

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