

## Forty-Two

The next morning David studied his face in the mirror afterward and winced at his swollen, flushed cheek; he was usually a fast healer, but he'd obviously infected the paper cut while dabbing away at it the day before.

When he found Marianne in the kitchen, she regarded him with the same opaque disinterest as the morning before and asked what he wanted for breakfast.

"Have the others already eaten?"

She nodded.

"Gone out?"

She nodded again.

"Look, Marianne, you really don't have to make breakfast just for me."

She lowered her eyes, and for a moment her mouth worked with something like disgust. Then she looked at him and said, "I do, you know. That's my job."

"All right. Two eggs, scrambled. No toast. Bacon or sausage."

"Which?"

David sighed. "Sausage."

After breakfast he went into the living room and paused as he was passing the still figure of the automaton in its wheel chair. Curious, he ran his fingers lightly over its shoulders, feeling a battery of buttons under the cloth of the black coat. He was bending over to look for the controls on the chair when a rattle of pans from the kitchen stopped him. He didn't want Marianne to catch him playing with Andrea's toy.

He drifted over to the pool table and racked up the balls for a game. Playing against himself—'himself' being the one who broke first—he'd won three games out of five by the time Marianne passed through to attend to the bedrooms on the floor below. He finished the sixth game, evening the score, racked his cue, and returned to the automaton.

Half an hour's experimentation discovered all the controls Andrea had displayed the afternoon before, plus a whole series she hadn't. There were six buttons that activated the thing's voice—presumably recorded on six separate cylinders. The first cylinder was the one Andrea had played in part yesterday, and the second was similar—containing general-purpose responses for what must have been a standard performance. The next three were much different, obviously intended for individual consultations. They were cleverly scripted. Samson's questions were worded so as to elicit predictable replies that laid the basis for his own prerecorded responses (which could be delayed for the long-winded at the touch of a pause button). As a safeguard against the client slipping in a question where only a reply was expected, his responses were routinely prefaced with a vague aphorism that would serve as an excuse for not answering it:

"Ah, soon perhaps all will be known."

"The universe is filled with mysteries hidden from my eyes, I fear."

"I know there must be many questions that trouble you."

After a while the ear accepted it as simply part of Samson's rather pompous conversational style.

The subjects covered on these three cylinders were so specific that there must at one time have been many others, if Samson pretended to any versatility as a fortune-teller. The three in place when he was packed away David mentally dubbed "Recently Bereaved Widow," "Young Woman Searching for a Husband," and "Difficult Decision (Investment)." The last in the series was entirely different, although David didn't know it when he punched the button and sat down beside Samson to listen. To enhance the conversational effect, he had turned the mannequin's head so that it seemed to be speaking to him.

After the usual clank, whir, and hiss, Samson gazed at him with his glassy eyes and said: "We must talk seriously now." The voice that issued from the automaton's chest was recognizably the same hollow squawk as on the other cylinders, but the speaker had abandoned his customary histrionic manner; his tone now was casual, intimate.

David smiled and said, "All right."

"You are very ill."

"Am I?"

"Yes. You must believe me in this."

"All right. I hope it's not *too* serious."

David blinked at Samson's reply: "It is serious indeed. If you don't attend to it, it will be fatal."

A question on the nature of this illness seemed in order at this point and David asked it.

"It's difficult to explain," Samson replied. "You understand that I am not a physician but rather a seer, and what I see would appear under no microscope, would in fact be laughed to scorn by any traditional medical practitioner."

Smiling, David asked what it was he saw. "A glass rod," Samson answered simply.

"A glass rod?"

"Yes, a glass rod. Cold, clear, and pure."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"It stands at the center of your being. I can say little more than that. Frankly, its mechanism puzzles me. I don't know why a glass rod should endanger your life, but it plainly does."

"Where did it come from?"

"I see nothing beyond what I've told you. It must be shattered if you're to live."

"How do I go about that?"

"I can only speak a moment more. You must shatter it. I don't see where you are, who is around you. Seek help. Accept help. Tell them about the glass rod."

Smiling, David shook his head. "A fat lot of help *you* are."

"Tell your friends about the glass rod. They may understand better than I what it is and what can be done to shatter it."

"Thanks a lot."

There was a hissing pause and David, wondering what conceivable occasion the interview had ever served, assumed it was over. But Samson had a final, almost pathetic, comment to make:

"I'm not entirely a charlatan, you know."

For an area consisting almost exclusively of rocks, it didn't produce many that were smooth, nicely rounded, and of a size to fit comfortably in the hand. After half an hour's search under the mid-afternoon sun, David had found just enough of them to cover the bottom of the woven basket Andrea had given him to fill. He went on, eyes to the ground, selecting and rejecting.

Looking fresh and crisp in town clothes, Andrea had made her first appearance of the day in the lower living room, where David had been napping under the benignly inscrutable gaze of the old Aztec god. Not in a chatty mood, she seemed preoccupied, troubled. She frowningly examined the cut on his cheek and laid a hand on his forehead to check for fever. Then she lit a cigarette and paced the room, wrapped in an air of abstraction. Apparently coming to a decision, she went upstairs and returned with a basket, which she asked to David to fill with stones. She described the kind she wanted.

David had thought of asking if this was another "project," but decided to leave well enough alone.

When he returned, he saw that she'd changed into jeans and shirt. She was waiting on a sofa just in front of the stairway to the upper levels, about midway between the stone head and the mirrored back wall of the room. She looked up, smiled, and said *Ah*, as if David were bringing her a treasure.

Feeling slightly ridiculous, he set the basket down on the table in front of her, and she leaned over at once to examine its contents.

"Yes," she breathed. She picked up a rock, hefted it thoughtfully, and set it aside on the table. She tested a second and a third and discarded them. The fourth she cradled in her hands for half a minute. After nodding her acceptance of it, she got up, moved away from the sofa, and turned to face the back wall. She stood for a moment studying herself in that immense expanse of glass soaring up sixteen feet into the air.

Then she hurled the rock into the middle of it, and David involuntarily leaped six inches off the floor.

There was more than a shattering of glass; there was an explosion. In the exposed plaster wall behind the mirror was a smoking hole that looked like it had been made by an artillery shell. The lights in that half of the room blinked out; evidently Andrea's stone had smashed its way into the wiring.

She was gazing up at the damage, nodding with tranquil satisfaction.

"Jesus Christ," David whispered.

Marianne appeared on the staircase. Halfway down, she stopped and stared open-mouthed at the hole gaping in the wall. Then she looked around, took in Andrea, David, and the basket of stones, and came down the rest of the way.

Andrea calmly resumed her place on the sofa.

Marianne walked to the table and stood looking down at the stones, her face alive with interest.

"Where did these come from?" she asked.

"David found them."

Marianne gave him a look of astonished respect and began sorting through them just as Andrea

had done. When she found one that satisfied her, she straightened up, and began to search the room for a target. Her eyes stopped at the stone head of the god, still glowing under its spotlight, and David said, "No!"

Ignoring him, she drew back her arm, and he lunged at her. They wrestled in grim silence for a moment, and then she shoved him away with surprising strength. As he staggered back, she set herself, took aim, and let fly.

The rock impacted the giant head like a contact grenade, completely shattering its left temple.

Dumbfounded, David turned to Andrea, expecting to see her leaping off the couch in outrage at this sacrilege, but she was still sitting there, nodding placidly, as if appraising the merits of the throw. After a moment both women turned and gazed up at him expectantly.

He looked from one to the other and said: "Are you *crazy*?"

They went on staring at him in hopeful silence.

"What's the matter with you, for God's sake?"

With an air of defeat, Andrea sighed, leaned back, and lit a cigarette. She gestured with it toward the stones on the table.

"You can take these away, Marianne." The girl nodded and began to return the rejected stones to the basket.

"And, while I think of it, ask John if he can do something about these lights when he comes in the morning."

Marianne nodded again.

Completely forgotten, David left to go up to his room. He felt a headache coming on.

David's headaches, mercifully rare, were devastating. He'd learned from experience that a handful of aspirin taken early could abort one. Ignored, it soon swelled up into a monster that couldn't be shaken off, its claws probing every crevice of his brain, shutting off every sense except pain; at that point there was nothing to do but crawl into bed and wait. The monster never survived a night's sleep.

After checking the medicine cabinet in his bathroom (which he already knew to be empty), he lay down on the bed and covered his eyes, hoping to find he was mistaken, that it was simply a momentary reaction of stress. He sent an exploratory tendril of sensory awareness up toward the crown of his head and knew it was no mistake. The monster was there, half an inch below the skull, still an infant but already restless and quickly learning how to coordinate its limbs for the attack.

As much as he hated the idea of asking either Andrea or Marianne for anything right now, he was going to have to get some aspirin. But perhaps he could find it on his own. He got up and went upstairs. There was a bathroom off the living room, but there was no aspirin in it. He went into the kitchen and began to go through the cabinets there. He was still at it ten minutes later when Marianne arrived and asked him what he was looking for. She went promptly to a closet filled with medical supplies and handed him a bottle. Then she drew a glass of water for him.

He swallowed a handful, knowing it was already too late. The monster was out of its cradle and on the move.

David explained about his headaches and told Marianne he wouldn't be at the dinner table.

"I'll bring you a tray," she told him.

"Thanks, but don't bother. I wouldn't be able to eat anything. Truly."

Then he went back to bed to begin the ordeal.

Around ten o'clock there was a knock on the door and David groaned an invitation. Andrea came to his bed, sat beside him, and laid a cool hand on his forehead. He squinted up at her, his face twisted with pain.

"This is all so unnecessary, David. You could be well."

He shook his head feebly. "Not now, Andrea. Please."

"All right."

She stroked his head until he was asleep.

## Forty-Three

David slept till ten—and would have gone on sleeping if Marianne hadn't come in to wake him. He peered up at her blearily, feeling battered and weak, as if he'd spent the night being tumbled in a washing machine. But the headache, at least, was gone.

"What is it?" he asked her.

"John's going to try to fix the wiring downstairs."

David's answering laugh was tinged with hysteria. "I wish him well, Marianne. I really do. Give him my regards."

She stared at him, waiting, as if he hadn't spoken.

"Am I supposed to be there? Am I supposed to witness this startling event?"

She continued to stare at him indifferently.

"Oh, all right, all right. I'll be there. Fifteen minutes."

She turned and left.

Getting out of bed, David fell down. It puzzled him; his legs had just buckled under him, as if they hadn't gotten the message that he was going to be using them now. On his next try they paid attention, and he made his way to the bathroom feeling wobbly and strangely lightheaded. He couldn't recall ever being this way after a headache, but it didn't surprise him. He wouldn't have been surprised if his head had literally exploded during the night. He took a shower but didn't bother to shave; he didn't feel up to it, and being a witness to electrical work didn't seem to warrant it.

The scene downstairs was macabre—and slightly comical just because it was macabre. Andrea and Marianne stood on either side of a twelve-foot ladder, each directing a flashlight beam up into the hole blasted in the back wall. The man at the top of the ladder looked like a surgeon probing a giant, bloodless wound. Working with his own flashlight, his head actually inside the hole, he seemed in danger of being swallowed up in it.

"I'm afraid, my dears," he said after a while, his voice echoing from within the wall, "that this is far beyond my feeble skills in the electrical arts."

Nevertheless, he went on working for a few minutes before withdrawing his head and descending the ladder. The three of them turned off their flashlights and headed out into the brighter part of the room, where David was waiting beside the ruined stone head.

"Ah, David!" the man said, beaming with pleasure.

David's legs once again seemed to forget their business, buckling momentarily so that he nearly collapsed.

Pretending not to notice, the man held out his hand in greeting.

"I don't believe I introduced myself when we met at the Dead Man's Saloon," he said. "I am John Dee."

Not knowing what else to do, David weakly shook his hand.

"Come and sit down, my boy," the old man said, leading him to a sofa.

When David was seated, Dee gently tilted his head up to examine the cut on his cheek. He shook his head over it and put a hand to David's forehead.

"You're running a fever."

David said, "I know," though he hadn't.

The old man sat down beside him. David looked around for Andrea and Marianne, but they were gone.

"Andrea tells me you've had many adventures since we met."

"Yes."

"And what do you make of it all?"

"I don't know," David said mechanically, feeling as empty as poor old Samson.

"You really must *try*, you know."

David suddenly felt a dark cloud of depression settle over him. It seemed to isolate him from Dee—from all living things. He felt frozen and very lonely.

"David always tries," he said. "David is a man who tries real hard and worries a lot."

The old man paused, puzzled by the oddness of this locution. Then, giving up on it, he said, "Perhaps you should stop worrying entirely and try something else."

"Something else?"

"Yes. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Wanted?"

Dee sighed. "It's time now for you to think very, very seriously about what it is you want. You really must do that."

"All right."

The old man shook his head. "You're not listening, David. You haven't listened to any of us."

David's head turned woodenly from side to side in disagreement. "David listens well. David tries real hard and worries a lot."

Dee frowned for a long moment, then suddenly nodded in comprehension. "Yes, I see. I understand what you're telling me now." David looked at him blankly. "You don't understand?" David shook his head. "You're telling me you're like that pathetic mannequin upstairs. You will can only

respond to a set of messages you yourself recorded in your mind long ago. Isn't that it? You can no more *try* something different than Samson can *say* something different."

David nodded thoughtfully. He'd known, of course, that he'd been imitating Samson's style of speech; but he hadn't consciously meant anything by it.

"You mustn't accept that, my child. But now at least you understand what the problem is, don't you?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"Then you must use this understanding to break free. Now. At once. We'll help you."

"All right."

The old man breathed a sigh, his long sheep's face heavy with concern, and stood up to leave. Then he paused for a few moments, staring into the distance as if considering a fresh idea.

"Remember this, David," he said at last. "You are ultimately not like Samson. Samson is only metal and wires and old recording cylinders."

David nodded absently.

"No. You're not listening to me. Samson is only metal and wires and old recording cylinders."

"I know that."

The old man shook his head impatiently. "Perhaps from the beginning you've *known* too much that you should have been trying to *learn*."

David was still trying to sort out this dark saying when Dee turned away to mount the stairs. After a few minutes he decided to follow him, at least to the second floor, where he intended to return to his room and his bed.

He was halfway up the stairs when he became aware that someone was descending in the semi-darkness overhead. He didn't know who it was, but he seemed to be making heavy work of it, clinging to the handrail, his legs splaying out awkwardly like those of a vaudeville drunk. But when he began to speak, with a whir and a clank and a crackling hiss, David knew.

"David!" Samson squawked, lurching down a step. "Look!"

His heart constricted as if in the grip of a powerful hand, David backed down a step.

"Look, David! I'm *walking*!" The familiar muffled voice trembled with joy and pride. The mannequin stumbled down another step and would have fallen if it hadn't been grappling the rail. David retreated in front of it.

"I never *walked*! Never!" It flung out a hand. "Here! Take my hand!"

David charged past it, knocking it off its feet and sending it tumbling down the stairs in a muddle of twisted limbs.

"David, wait!" it groaned. "Listen to me—"

But David was already halfway down the hall to his room. When he had the door closed behind him, he leaned on it, his breath raw in his throat, until he was sure no one was coming after him. Then he quickly struggled out of his clothes, climbed into bed, covered his head with a pillow, and let the roar of the fever drown out his thoughts.