

Threshold of a Dream

He stood on the small fishing pier and watched the sun set. The cool breeze brought the mild salt tang of the Mediterranean touched heavily with the days catch to his tongue. He shrugged deeper into the fleece-lined windbreaker, not so much from the chill, but more the action of a man drawing in on himself while he awaits a coming blow. Only when the sun was a crimson memory across the horizon did he turn and make his way back into town.

He walked through the deserted park and up the main street. Across from the entrance to the town's largest hotel he stopped, his red rimmed eyes riveted on the front doors. They opened and a young couple came down the steps arm in arm, laughing soundlessly at some lovers jest. Like a silent movie the scene unfolded. A dusty black Fiat pulled to the curb and the dark snout of a machine pistol appeared in the rear window. As it spat fire the young man tried to push the girl to the side but she twisted, her lithe body falling in front of the man. The bullets struck her, staining her white dress bright crimson as she jerked under the impact. She collapsed into her lover's arms and the pair crumpled to the marble steps. A second car, a limousine, pulled to a halt and two men jumped out. Their guns danced in the dreamy silence, perforating the Fiat. The deadly machine pistol fell silently to the pavement. As the pair from the limo raced for the steps, the scene faded like a morning fog under the warm rays of the sun.

But there was no cheering warmth, no redeeming light in the bleak quiet that covered the twilit street. He turned to make his way back to the pier. Suddenly his path was blocked by a dark figure. It stood in stark black and white relief with the street lamp at its back. The watcher stiffened, his gaunt face pulled tight in surprise. In all the replays there had been no one else except the translucent ghosts at the hotel steps. The new character stood in ominous silence, his face under a dark shadow.

"Who are you?"

"A friend."

The young man gave a derisive snort.

"If you're responsible for this, I don't need your kind of friendship. " The dark man slowly walked forward into the pool of light where the watcher stood. He appeared to be in his mid thirties, casually dressed with short coppery hair and beard.

"I'm not responsible for this. I'm not even sure what this is."

"Then who the hell are you?" The watcher demanded angrily.

The stranger gave him an odd look in response.

"More important, who are you?"

"I'm Periere Forbes."

This brought a nod.

"And this?" He asked his hand taking in the street scene.

Forbes looked at the newcomer with dead eyes.

"Hell. Does that make you Satan?"

"Not bloody likely, kid. This isn't hell. At least not the big one. Maybe it's your own personal version but that's all."

"What do you mean, personal?"

"I mean, your body is alive but your id, your consciousness, you are playing this game to keep from returning to reality. Come on, you've been here long enough. You know this isn't real. You can feel the ache in your gut that tells you this isn't death. You just don't want to face up to that, you'd rather face this."

Forbes felt the rush of anger that kicked in the adrenaline and brought his hands out of his pockets in fists.

"Who the hell are you?"

"The name isn't important. If you ever decide you've got more important things to do, like getting on with your life, we may meet. Otherwise, face it, kid, she's dead and you aren't. Not unless you chose to be. You chose that and you'll never know what happened on those steps. Dammit, you're a Forbes. That means something."

"It means we're fair game."

The stranger smiled darkly at the bitter response.

"But not sitting ducks. I heard you're a sharpie. Graduated summa cum laude Harvard at 19, ditto MIT two years later. You've got promise, Kid."

Forbes stepped closer to the stranger, his eyes searching the others face. The haunted guilt faded slightly in the face of curiosity. There was something familiar about the man's face.

"I'm alive."

"No shit."

"This is Prometheus."

The stranger pulled back in surprise then nodded.

"I was right. You are a sharpie. You know who I am?"

Forbes nodded absently as he tried to remember.

"Mike Kiedrowski. I've read Dad's files on the project. You're one of the original designers, one of the only ones who has actually been in the machine."

Mike nodded.

"Take me with you. Take me inside."

Kiedrowski shook his head. "So you can run further?"

The gaunt faced youth pulled back like he had been slapped. He glared at the designer as he realized what was happening.

"You can go back and tell them..."

Mike cut him off with an angry wave of his hand.

"I'm not telling anyone anything. You said you've read the files on Prometheus. Do you really think someone sent me, a damn engineer, in to pull you out of the swamps you call a mind? The brain butts would have a shit hemorrhage if someone even suggested playing with someone's mind like that."

"Then why are you here?"

"Your father has been instrumental in making the project what it is. His work in Congress as well as the private sector has gotten us the funding we needed to make this thing happen. The doctors have agreed they can find no physical reason for your condition and there is only one known way of reaching the mind of a human.

Prometheus. Your father figured they could find out why you won't wake up. The only drawback is that it takes your active participation for them to access your mind. They've been trying to sneak in but you've been blocking them. You see, Kid, the human mind has its own set of guards. Some are conscious, others are buried deep. Every other human who has been brought in for psychological treatment has been prepped before hand and is trying to help. If they weren't or didn't agree to the treatment, it was just a waste of time. Prometheus is impressive but it's not omnipotent. It can't open your brain up like a can of sardines."

"That isn't the impression I got from Dad's papers."

"Must have been some of the scenarios that came out of the Pentagon. They envisioned a machine that could go in and be used to reprogram people to whatever the programmer wanted. That was the main thing we wanted to avoid. No one has the right to that kind of power and Prometheus can't give it to them. So the medicos are out there trying to find the key that will let them in. You won't let them."

"Me? What am I doing, besides torturing myself?"

"Follow me."

They walked along the dim Italian street. In moments, it changed. It took him a moment before Forbes realized they were heading for downtown Annapolis, his hometown. They crossed the square and walked silently along the sidewalk fronting the harbor. His sailboat was tied to the last dock. Beyond it was a short expanse of water, then nothing.

"What is that?" He asked pointing at the blankness that hovered twenty yards out. Looking at it made him feel queasy but he continued to stare in horrified fascination.

"The end of your world. Its the barrier you've built to lock yourself in."

Forbes looked back at the twilit streets behind him. Beyond, he had no doubt, were the streets and harbor of La Spezia and another blank. They were the places he chose to remember and all the rest of himself and the outside world were beyond the darkness. Beyond him.

"How did you get in?"

"It wasn't easy."

Forbes sat down on a bollard, not quite able to assimilate the data.

"You came in just to save the funding for the project?"

Mike shook his head.

"Don't kid yourself, Kid. Prometheus will continue whether you come out or not."

"Then why?"

Kiedrowski regarded the younger man for long time. Nothing showed on his face. He started to speak several times but stopped himself the moment before the words formed. Finally he just shook his head.

"Let's just say I've been locked in a loop before and I know a little kick start is sometimes all you need. You've got to find your own answers."

And then, he was gone.

Forbes looked around the marina docks but Kiedrowski had vanished. It was eerie. There had been no transition, he just wasn't there. The fact that downtown Annapolis was deserted at midday didn't help matters any. Not only was it empty of human life, there was no indication of any life form of any type ever having existed here. The central square was like a back lot set in Hollywood, brand new and never been used. He grinned to himself. There wasn't so much as a moped parked in any of the spaces. It would have been a dream come true if not for the wall of blackness that hovered just at the edge of sight. He had no idea of what he was supposed to do. Kiedrowski had said find your own answers but as he walked along the silent deserted street he wondered if he was capable of figuring out the questions that needed answering. There were just too many unknowns for anything to make sense. Just what did he know?

He was somehow linked to the Prometheus dream computer. The mechanics of it didn't appear to be important but he was sure the blackness that sealed in his dream world was significant. His father was a staunch supporter of the project as well as very wealthy and influential. Those tools could have gotten him more response from the Project directors. The ability of the Prometheus machine to interface directly with the human mind had opened new inroads into teaching and learning. It had also opened a problem of ethics as to how this new influence should be used. It had been a surprise to learn of the minds resistance to outside influence but no one had pushed that resistance. Not that they hadn't wanted to. It had been the Board of Directors, which had voluntarily limited the boundaries of experimentation.

Tandem sessions in the dream machine with patient and therapist had been used with a fair degree of success. Beyond that was nothing. Attempts to force ideas into the subjects mind had met with absolute resistance. Periere had the feeling that was the case here. He was isolated, trapped between La Spezia and Annapolis with only Jaqline's ghost for company. Kiedrowski's was the first voice he had heard since...

When? Forbes tried to remember his last real world memory. Jaq's death was most vivid but was it the last. Or even real? The afternoon air chilled around him and the darkness seemed to tighten its grip on the square. Was that it? Was there something about her death that had driven him from reality? Or was there a threat in the whole scenario he had to unveil? He glared at the almost living emptiness that encroached on the square. It, whatever the hell it was, was the enemy. As he thought it, Forbes felt the black withdraw ever so slightly. It might have been wishful thinking but he somehow doubted it. All he had to do now was figure out what was causing the encroachment and he would be that much closer to the answer.

A glimmer of light off to his right caught his eye. He was in front of Murphy's Pub, one of his favorite hangouts. Cupping his hands to the glass, he looked inside. The place was empty yet the chairs and stools were down and in such positions as to suggest that all the customers had just stepped out for a moment. The bar was empty as were all the tables. Except one. His usual table along the back wall had a full mug of beer sitting on it. He reached down and tried the door. It swung open silently under his hand.

Inside the darkness was tempered by the garish illumination provided by a few beer signs. The eerie silence followed him as he walked back to the table. He stared in fascination as the frost on the outside of the glass slowly slid down to puddle on the coaster. He sat down and reached for the beer, half expecting it to disappear. It remained solid under his hand so he lifted it and drank. The bitter bite of hops pulled at his throat. It was delicious, better than any beer he had ever tasted.

He set the mug back down and looked around the deserted pub. The blackness had come up to the windows and seemed to be pressing on the fragile barrier as it tried to reach him. It had to be linked to Jaq's death. The two cheesy movie sets it had reduced his life to pretty much narrowed his choices. Was it guilt? Did he blame himself that she had taken the death meant for him? It didn't feel right. She had been sacrificed by the blind god of accident. Random chance. She had been playing to get his attention as they came out of the hotel and she had been blasted into the long night because her imp had chosen the wrong time to play.

He hoisted the beer to wash away his anger only to spray it back out as soon as it touched his tongue. It was like drinking vinegar. He looked at the half empty mug. Nothing had changed. Tentatively, he raised it to his nose and sniffed. Hops and malt. He took a small sip. It was beer again. Something or some one was definitely playing mind games. And they didn't like Jaqline.

Again the beer was like lye in his mouth. He choked and coughed, dropping the mug to the floor where it shattered. When he finally got the cough under control, he jumped to his feet, wild anger pushing the darkness back.

"Show yourself, you lousy sonofa...." Instantly the bar was crowded. There were people everywhere. Every chair and stool was filled and people stood three deep at the bar. Forbes stared in shock. Shock that quickly turned to horror as he realized all the women wore Jaq's face and all the men...were him. He reached for the nearest doppelgangers shoulder to spin him around but his hand passed through air. For an instant he felt a hand on his own shoulder and he turned, only to find himself staring at his empty table.

He headed for a group of four copies, puzzled at the absolute silence. He could see lips moving but there was no sound in the place but the soft scrape of his own shoes on the floor. As he reached the group he had the distinct impression someone was behind him. He looked over his shoulder at emptiness. He looked back at the others, still sharing some joke he couldn't hear. They talked on oblivious to his presence. This time he reached out for the Jaq clone closest to him, stopping as she suddenly turned her eyes on him. They held the look for a long pair of heartbeats. Her name came unbidden to his lips. No sooner was it free than the woman before him began to fade, shredding into a swirling vapor that was drawn up into the fans.

Periere stared after the mist then slowly walked out of Murphy's. He froze as the door swung shut behind him. He was standing in the deserted lobby of the hotel in La Spezia. He turned slowly and looked out through the glass doors. Beyond were the steps where Jaqline died. He walked over to a settee and sank woodenly onto it. What did they want from him? How many times would he have to watch her die? Did they think he didn't realize she was gone? Tears of frustration ran down his cheeks. He knew damn well she was gone. He had held her, felt the body he knew so well jerk under the impact of the bullets into her back. He had been drenched in her blood when she had tried to speak to him as her life flooded her shattered lungs. He had watched her eyes plead with him even as her soul had fled.

His head came up slowly. Plead with him? For what? Not to let her die? His head began to pound as he tried to remember. There had been no surprise in her eyes in those last moments. No pain. Just sorrow and a plea she hadn't been able to voice. She had wanted his forgiveness, his understanding. Like a blade of ice, another memory came, lancing into the agony in his heart as he stared at the parquet floor at his feet. The nondescript man at the little sidewalk cafe where he had waited for Jaq to finish shopping.

"We've discovered that your fiancé was once a member of the Children of the Earth. There is no definite proof she is still involved but your father felt you should be aware of it."

There had been more. A synopsis of the terrorist acts the benignly named group had claimed responsibility for. Kidnappings, bombings murders, all in the name of ecology. And his Jaqline had once been and was quite probably still a member. Groups like that didn't just let people walk away when they decided they'd had enough.

It had made for a hellish week. He had kept the meeting a secret and continued on with their holiday, trying ever so hard to keep the seed of doubt from germinating. Whenever his imagination would run loose, playing the game of possibilities, he would rein it back in and sternly tell himself there was no proof. Only suspicions.

Suspicions that crept into his eyes whenever she wasn't looking at him. Doubts he hid behind laughter whenever she caught him. Had she known? Had she read those brief looks for what they were? She hadn't shown it if she had.

Except for that last look.

He raised his head from his hands, wanting to howl his pain to the sky. 'You've walled yourself in.' Kiedrowski's words came back like a hammer blow across the stomach.

No one was torturing him. There was no mysterious them who forced him to relive hell. He was them.

She had known. She had read his looks and knew she was not trusted. She had known death had awaited them on the steps that night and she had willingly taken his place. She couldn't take the suspicions so she had proven herself and her love in the only way left.

Through tear-blurred eyes he checked the clock and knew the elevator doors would be opening in a moment. When they did, she stepped out. Alone. Not in the white frock she had worn to her sacrificial death but in the faded jeans and baggy T-shirt she usually wore in their apartment. Slowly she crossed the living room and knelt across the coffee table from him. Her black hair was cut gamin short accentuating her street urchin looks. He saw her green eyes were bright with tears.

"We could have talked." He said hoarsely. She smiled sadly and cocked her head.

"Maybe. And maybe you would have listened to them instead." He started to protest but his heart sank as he realized she was right.

"I'm sorry, Jaq. I was a fool."

She reached a hand over and held his cheek.

"But you were my fool." Then she was in his arms and they were both crying. They held each other through their grief and through their relief. Finally she pulled back and reached for the tissues on the coffee table. He watched her move, falling in love with her all over again. She saw it in his eyes as she dried her tears.

"You have to go back."

"No. I won't lose you again."

Her hand caressed his cheek and she kissed him lightly.

"You won't."

The ache in his stomach rose like a phoenix from the ashes.

"There isn't anything out there that I want as much as I want you."

"Perry, I'm not real. I died in your arms, remember?"

"What if that was the dream? As far as I'm concerned you are what is real and you are here so this is where I want to be."

"Even if it means that you die?"

Forbes turned at the new voice. They were on a nondescript plane with mist all around them. Jaq stood at his side and they faced Mike Kiedrowski. Forbes pulled Jaq closer and glared defiantly.

"Even if it means I die. It doesn't seem to have hurt Jaq any. Maybe it isn't real but its good enough for me."

"I doubt it."

"Why? I've got everything I've ever wanted right here."

Kiedrowski grinned wickedly and shook his head. Abruptly the scene changed to a classical interpretation of hell. Flames gouted from the rocks around them and the screams of the suffering rang in the stifling heat. Forbes looked around in surprise, then at Jaq. She stepped back from his side, a sadness in her eyes. Without warning she burst into flames. Forbes lunged for her but was driven back by the heat. He turned to scream at Kiedrowski to stop and they were back in the empty whiteness. Jaq stood where she had been, totally unmarked yet with the same sad smile.

"Illusion, Kid. Its all smoke and mirrors. Maybe someday you would learn to work it too but its still just play acting."

Forbes looked from one to the other. Finally he stepped over to Jaq and held her close.

"I've always loved you." He whispered into her hair.

"I'll always be here for you."

Slowly she faded from his arms and he was standing on the dock next to his old sailboat.

"This really sucks, you know that." He said without turning. Behind him Mike chuckled.

"Not as much as you think. Not many people get the chance you just had. That's got to be worth something."

Forbes smiled and turned around.

"It is. But what now? How do I get back?"

"Just stop fighting. You have no idea how much energy you're using just to keep you here."

Periere Forbes leaned against the windowsill and looked out over the peaceful countryside that surrounded the hospital. His head still ached a little, whether it was from the bullet graze or some internal hurt he wasn't sure. He was sure he wanted out. He felt a little lightheaded but forced himself to remain on his feet for a few more minutes. Five weeks in a coma had done nothing for his muscle tone but it was coming back. Another couple of weeks of exercise and he would be just about back to normal.

He grinned at his reflection in the glass. The doctors wanted to keep him longer but there was no real medical reason. Physically he was improving daily. Mentally he was as stable as their measurements could detect. What was baffling them was how he had bounced back when they hadn't even decided how to treat him. He had been hooked up to the Prometheus machine for a bit over an hour with the medical experts analyzing the information the monitors were feeding them. Their plan had been to use the monitor data to set up a treatment plan. All of that had gone out the window when Forbes had suddenly begun to show signs of responding. In a matter of minutes he had gone from comatose to awake. His father had been ecstatic and the doctors totally frustrated. He had told them he had no recollection of what had passed. While it had been a bald-faced lie on the surface, he really didn't have any idea of what had happened. He was watching the fall scenery when he realized he was no longer alone.

"Someday you are going to have to tell me how you do that." He said before turning. When he did turn he saw Kiedrowski standing by the door. He was dressed in a full-length duster with his hands in the pockets.

"It's pretty simple, Kid. You turn the handle and push. " He pulled his hands from his pockets. One had a bottle of Irish whiskey, the other a pair of tin cups. "Interested?"

"Why not? And you didn't. There's a little bell on that door that chimes whenever it opens. It also notifies the nurse's station down the hall. For some reason they don't want me wandering around just yet."

Forbes accepted the whiskey and took a sip.

“So how do you do it?”

Kiedrowski grinned slyly as he raised his cup in a toast.

“Smoke and mirrors, Kid.”

“That might have worked inside but this is the real world. Now give.”

“You haven’t told them about your sojourn. Why?”

Periere was about to call him on stalling when he realized Mike was serious. He thought back over his decision to keep quiet. He could not recall ever having made a conscious choice not to tell. It had just seemed right. Now he began to wonder if it had been his choice. His thoughts must have showed in his face as Mike raised the bottle and offered a refill. The look in the engineer’s eyes told him to wait. He accepted the whiskey and swirled in the cup before he drank. When he finished he had decided.

“I don’t really know. Not yet.”

Mike nodded.

“Could it be your subconscious is way ahead of the rest of your mind?”

“Maybe.”

“There is more to your reality, Horatio, than is dreamed by men. And there is more to you than you have realized.” Mike smiled and raised his cup, a smile on his lips and a promise in his eyes. “Would you really like to know how I do it?”

Forbes thought for a minute. It was such a simple question and yet...

“Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful relationship.”