

# Alone in His Chariot

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Vuner was shaking so much as he signed in at the laboratory that his signature was barely recognisable. A bullet graze on his upper arm was throbbing, reminding him of how close his escape had been. Normally he never took a hit at work, but today had to be an exception. He could not afford to call attention to himself by dropping glassware all day.

Schilden, the Senior Research Officer in the institute, was already in, and had just brewed some coffee in the staff room. Vuner slipped a capsule into his mouth as he sat down at the table, then accepted a mug from Schilden and gulped a mouthful of coffee.

"Young man, you look terrible, if you will pardon my saying," Schilden said in his thick Swiss-German accent.

"I was out in the park with my telescope last night," admitted Vuner sheepishly. "I just lost track of the time."

"But the sky was clouded last night."

"Most of the time," agreed Vuner, "but if you wait long enough there's always a few breaks to see through to the stars."

Schilden poured himself another mug of coffee, shaking his head and smiling. "Ach, you should have been in a bar, looking at girls."

Vuner had no telescope, but having a reputation as an amateur astronomer was a perfect cover for being up late on most nights. He fingered the graze that the bullet had left. It was level with his heart. If the Artery's hit man had been closer . . .

"Piss on the Artery," he muttered under his breath. He had put a dose of an experimental drug in with the last amphetamine batch that he had sold to them - just for a joke. Some user probably died of it. Users had neither identity nor humanity for Vuner and the thought of possible deaths from his experiments moved him very little. He would have to sell his drugs directly to the local pusher cells now, but that was not a problem.

Vuner always smuggled his own chemicals into the laboratory. Ever since he had been employed as a temporary technician he had taken it for granted that the place had chemical audits and hidden cameras, so he never dared to steal his supplies from there. He had a legally acquired supply of chemical precursors, and needed only the right equipment to turn them into something marketable.

Originally he had worked in the bedroom of his flat, with improvised equipment that could be quickly dismantled and hidden. Late one night he had been making methamphetamine, and was heating hydriotic acid, ephedrine and red phosphorous. He had heard the siren of an approaching police car, and by the time it reached his street he had the lights out and was dismantling his apparatus. While fumbling with hot glass, he dropped a beaker. The police drove past.

Presence of mind had saved his life. Holding his breath against the toxic fumes he switched on the fan above the stove and opened all the windows. For the next two hours he had cowered in the bathroom, toilet paper stuffed into the gap under the door. At 5am he went outside and collected a dozen dead birds in the street and carpark, the only victims of his toxic cloud. He flushed the bodies down his toilet, swearing that now he would work only in proper laboratories.

Vuner was curious about the drugs being tested where he worked, and followed the experiments with rats as closely as the scientists. Emily Cottak, Schilden's deputy, suspected him of being an agent for some animal liberation group. This suited Vuner, as she always explained to him what the rats were being treated with, and how it was safe and humane. In her latest experiment they ran a maze while trailing fine tubes that led from their heads to suspended bottles.

"They're not in any pain," she said as Vuner looked down at the maze. "The wires and tubes in their heads look terrible, but it's only to get the TEFG-7 directly to their brains."

"I suppose it wouldn't look so bad going into their backs or something," replied Vuner, who had in fact been wondering if the rats were getting any sort of high from the drug.

"Yes, we could do that, but by using intercranial dosing we can get measurable results from very small amounts of TEFG. The less drug that you use, the less side effects."

For a moment Vuner considered intercranial administration for himself, but there was the problem of having a hole bored in his skull. He wondered if an artery in the neck would be as good. "So what's it they're mainlining into their heads?" he asked, then cursed his choice of words.

Warming to her specialty, Cottak missed the expression. "They've had Trophic Enhancement Factor, Group 7. It's a type of memory enhancement and brain repair drug that affects the way neural pathways make new connections. Earlier today two control rats ran this maze in a minute. The rats here were given leupeptin, which degrades the activity of calpain in the neurons. A bit like amnesia."

"They're very slow," Vuner observed.

"But not as slow as the two rats in the maze on your left. They were given only leupeptin, no TEFG. After nine minutes they are still only three levels from the start, and will probably never make it. The two here are getting TEFG as well as the leupeptin, and they are right near the end - there goes one now. Nine minutes and fifty seconds. Almost ten times longer than the controls, but it should not have been able to get through at all."

Vuner helped as she clamped off the pipes and wrote down the times and dosages for each rat.

"Er, is TEFG-7 poisonous or anything?" he asked.

"Not any more than aspirin. People could take it."

"What's it like to take?"

Cottak laughed. "The rats have said nothing, but if it feels good someone will ban it," she joked. Vuner was very curious.

"You mean they get a bit high on it?" he ventured, unable to find more innocent words yet too interested to waste the opportunity.

"Once again, how do you ask a rat? If a rat has TEFG by itself it becomes less active, it 'ponders', as we call it. The level of brain activity is very high when they do that, so perhaps TEFG does give a pleasant feeling as a side effect."

She disconnected the feed tubes from the rats, then took the bottles down. Vuner was careful to help, and she gave him the tubes to wash while she took the bottles off to lock in the safe. With practiced sleight of hand he drained the TEFG into a sample phial while pretending to wash the tubes.

That evening Vuner lay on his bed turning over the phial of TEFG in his fingers. Normally he only used the laboratory facilities to make drugs for sale and to do his own experiments, yet here was a research drug that was tested and safe. There was so little of it that he would have to mix it with a sterile base to get a usable volume for his syringe. He thought about the rats with needles inserted directly to their brains, then felt for the carotid artery in his neck. The idea repelled him, yet it seemed the only way to get an effective dose. It hurt less than he had thought.

Vuner fancied himself as an explorer, and treated his trips on recreational drugs as exciting odysseys. He was careful not to let himself become addicted to anything, and always forced himself to dry out, no matter how bad the withdrawal symptoms were.

Minutes passed, then half an hour. Nothing seemed to have happened. He got up and went to the window. Wisps of cloud glowed scarlet in the light of the setting sun. A feeling of nostalgia caressed him like a puff of warm air. Sunset. Friends going out. Mum wants him to stay home and study. Become a doctor. She'll show her husband she can bring up kids. Run off, will he? Sunset. Time to go out to the

cinema, not study! That's what sunset is all about. He put on a jacket and walked outside to the bus stop.

The sound of a diesel engine approaching, diesel fumes as he boarded, counting out the right change, flimsy scrap of ticket, roll it up tight and clean your fingernails with it. Lurch as the bus starts, swing down into a seat using a handrail.

Big git in the seat behind. Know him. He'll be leaving school this year, thank God. Vuner had always been shorter than average, and very thin. Always got bullied. Glad to leave school. Choose your own company then. No more bullies crowding you. Sting, sharp and shocking as finger flicks earlobe from behind. Inevitable. Again.

"Don't act like you're two years old." Mistake. Should have got up and sat near the driver. Stinging slap over the ear. Arm twisted, face ground into dirty floor. Big kids laugh, nobody helps.

"Who's a two year old?" demands Jason Dodsworth.

"Not you. Leggo!"

"Where's your manners? Say please."

"Please. Please."

"Hey, don't you go killing anyone on my bus!" shouts the driver. Nobody helps. Sickeningly hard kick between the cheeks of the arse. Can't shit without crying for days.

Vuner stepped from the bus, but the memory of the old outrage remained, clean, raw and strong.

Jay-Dod. Big Jason Dodsworth. How he would like to meet up with him now. He would learn aikido or something, and beat Jay-Dod until he wished he had never been born.

He knew where his former tormentor lived. The man was prominent and successful, a member of the local council, and married to the mayor's daughter. The memory of that day on the bus burned bright and clear, though worse things had happened to Vuner at school, even at the hands of Jay-Dod.

Change buses. Walk. Hide in the garden. Nobody home. Have to wait. Waited so long, why not wait some more? Wait till he comes home in his Jaguar. Learned aikido, know how to fight. Use a fence picket, brain his pretty little wife, hit him in the guts to knock the noise out of him, then beat, beat, beat. Beat to hurt, beat to leave scars, beat to humiliate. Start on his wife. Make him watch.

Vuner awoke the next morning with his bedclothes tangled and drenched in perspiration. He sat bolt upright with the memory that he had committed two murders and a rape! He'd been there, he'd done it himself. His clock-radio delivered the morning news, but there was nothing about a local councillor being murdered.

He examined his hands. They were scratched and dirty. His clothes were muddy as well. There were roadworks down the street, and he remembered stumbling and falling on the rough ground. That might explain it, but he also remembered hiding in the Dodsworths' garden, and just as clearly. He showered thoroughly and washed his clothes. There was another newscast, but still nothing about any murders. Perhaps they had not been discovered.

On the way to work Vuner stopped at a public telephone and called Dodsworth's office. His secretary answered.

"Is, ah, Mr Dodsworth in this morning?" he asked.

"No, I'm afraid not," she answered. Vuner's knees buckled.

"Can I get him to return your call?"

"No! No, I'm driving around a lot today."

"Well, he's at a Council meeting until noon. Would you like to try then?"

"You - you've seen him?" gasped Vuner.

"Yes. He came in about ten minutes ago to check the mail. Now who shall I tell him to expect a call from?"

Vuner hung up, tears of relief streaming down his face. It was the TEFG-7. Christ, no wonder the rats were 'pondering', he said to himself as he got up. It turns dreams into real memories.

Vuner watched Cottak go into the Project Manager's office with a limp rat. He also noticed that she had left the TEFG drip line dangling. He waited for a minute. If anyone was watching a security monitor, they

would have seen the fluid dripping into the sawdust of the staging pen, and come out to stop it.

Deftly he took the TEFG bottle down and ran a little into the phial while pretending to fumble with the drip tube. By the time Cottak returned he had sealed the bottle and was washing the tube.

"You left the TEFG solution dripping into the sawdust," he said calmly. "I thought I'd better seal it up for you."

"Thanks, thanks," she replied, placing the rat in the staging pen and reconnecting the encephalograph wires to its head. A screen trace showed strong, clear brain activity.

"I thought it might be hard to make, or expensive," he said with a voice so carefully held in check that it sounded wooden.

"No, neither," she said without looking away from the screen.

So TEFG-7 was cheap, and easy to make, thought Vuner. A trace of hydrochloric acid on the air took him back to a school science lab many years before. Jay-Dod forcing him to drink from a bottle labelled 'poison' - which turned out to be distilled water. Fear, humiliation and rage boiled up in a livid flame.

Within the flame was Jay-Dod's broken, bleeding face, licking Vuner's shoe.

"You dream it real," he said to himself in wonder as the satisfaction of synthetic revenge soothed the old hurt.

Vuner knew that the police had caught a lot of illicit drug makers in legal laboratories by noting those who always worked back late at night. Thus he did his illicit chemistry during the day, but at times when people would be too busy to notice what he was doing.

Today it was good old PCP. Phencyclidine involved no more than pouring and stirring, and its manufacture could be disguised as any number of innocent jobs. Behind the glass of her office Cottak packed a sheaf of notes and printout into her desk and locked it. He could wait until the rest had gone and try the lock, but if the laboratory had a video recorder attached to the security camera he would be identified. Best to wait until Cottak decided to make more TEFG-7. He would make sure that he was there to help - and watch.

That night Vuner made the drop off of his PCP. The girl was a prostitute who worked for Hooker Cell. Her previous client had left the money, the next would take Vuner's package.

"Five hundred millis," he said as he put the wrapped bottle on a bedside table. The girl handed him an envelope.

"We could use a lot more," she told him. "Your stuff's ace."

"Couldn't risk it. You know my operation - small but safe."

"So make it small. Ever tried making fenetyl designers?"

"Might have something better. About a tenth milli per hit, but great. New stuff." To his disappointment she shook her head.

"Don't like it. Bad business if a few of our regulars become vegies on untried shit. Worse if they died."

"No sweat. I've watched how rats tripped it, then tried it myself." He pocketed the money.

"We're just being careful. Some big squire in the Artery tried what he thought was a 'phet cap - Slam! It was some strange shit that made his fingers and toes permanently numb. It even killed the nerves in his dick. The Artery keeps tabs on the batches with a computer, and they traced it to a guy who wears shades and a yellow coat. Calls himself Einstein. Right now he's also wearing a 20K tag for whoever delivers him in a sack."

"Stupid fart probably mixed his stuff while on a hit," said Vuner as calmly as he could. "See you next time."

She lay back on the bed, legs sprawled. They were shapely legs, and she wore a black bow at each ankle. "In a hurry?" she asked. "The next pickup's not due for an hour. Been on coke all day and I'm open house."

"Don't you get enough customers?" asked Vuner, beginning to tremble. The TEFG he had taken an hour before seemed to amplify the sensation of his own hormones.

"Not allowed any on a pickup night. Come on, I can give you a skin if you're worried about catching AIDS or something."

While returning home Vuner recalled reaching his climax with her a dozen times, each with the intensity as undiminished as if it was actually happening. It was the drug of the decade. Perhaps you could use it to remember a hit of something else as clearly as if you had taken it again. Once home he tried it with LSD, and confirmed his theory. Vuner lay on his bed dreaming - of bashing Jay-Dod, and reliving the most minute details of mounting the pickup girl earlier that evening. He drifted off to sleep, and the drug also fixed his REM dreams securely. There were nightmares, too, but these were not a problem unless he deliberately recalled them. It was perfect, and it was harmless. That worried him, and he decided to establish a demand quickly, then sell the formula for the best offer. Harmless drugs might be declared legal.

Schilden's visitor had an air of suspicion and authority that branded him as a detective at once, and he suspected that the man had come about a chemical audit of his laboratory. He decided to play the innocent scientist until the other stated his business. To his surprise the man introduced himself as Drake, a Homicide Branch detective, without a trace of deception.

"About a week ago a councillor and his wife were savagely bashed when they came home," Drake explained. "The woman died of a cerebral haemorrhage and the councillor is still on the critical list."

"Yes, I read about it, Mr Drake," said Schilden, relieved but puzzled. "Councillor Dodsworth, I think."

"That's right. He's big and strong, he used to play professional rugby. Our prime suspect is small and scrawny."

"Perhaps he studied karate."

"Our suspect denies that he has," said Drake, searching Schilden's face for a reaction. "His name is Albert Vuner."

Schilden sat up with a start. "Vuner? From here? The Assistant Technician Class, er . . ."

"Two," said Drake impassively. "A few nights after the attack Dodsworth's neighbours noticed someone loitering in the garden of the house. The police missed him that time, but decided to station an unmarked patrol car nearby. Last night he came back. Dr Schilden, did Vuner ever do any martial arts?"

"Not that I know of."

"That's what he told us, yet he threw one of our men around like a beanbag before his offsider shot him."

"Shot? You mean he's dead?"

"His blood pressure was zero when the ambulance arrived, but he pulled through. This morning he denied beating up the Dodsworth couple. He told us he was an old school friend, that he just went there to look around."

Schilden took off his glasses and began to clean them very slowly. The world became blurred, less threatening, it allowed him to retreat until a measure of confidence returned to him.

"A little morbid, of course," he said, "but some people do that sort of thing."

"He confessed to making illicit drugs in this laboratory."

"Impossible! I keep a video record from our security cameras for three days past. You may check it for yourself."

"I will. He also said he was using a drug called TEF7-7."

Schilden's glasses slipped from his fingers.

A detailed scan of the security videocassettes showed that Vuner was as deft as a magician as he mixed the jobs of washing laboratory apparatus and manufacturing illicit drugs. Schilden had only ever scanned the tapes quickly, and noticed nothing suspicious until it was pointed out to him.

Vuner was a prime suspect in the murder case. On the day that Jason Dodsworth died Drake paid him a visit at the prison hospital.

"We interviewed your teachers and classmates, Vuner," said the detective. "They say that Dodsworth gave you a really hard time at school." Vuner sneered.

"We were just kids," he said. "Who remembers kids' games?"

"Someone fooling about with a powerful new memory drug!" shouted Drake, slamming his fist down on Vuner's meal tray. "As you have admitted yourself, the drug allows you to live in pretty damn clear

fantasies, then remember them like they really happened."

Vuner laughed. "A dream's just a dream, even if it's on TEFG."

"No Vuner, on TEFG-7 it's not. Dr Cottak has a couple of rats that look dead, except that they still have a brain trace. She thinks that they dream of having plenty of food, and no mazes, pain or injections. They just turn off the outside world. TEFG-7 allows users to reprogram synapse connections in their brain. If you're in a deep enough daydream when it wears off, you lose the connection to your senses. You could have been locked inside your own head!"

"Well, I suppose I'm just lucky, Mr Drake, but so what?"

Drake took a deep breath. "Do you know what charges you face?"

"Hell, all I did was struggle with a couple of cops who jumped me and mix a little speed at the lab. If I mainlined some TEFG, then think of the advancement to science."

"I have a prima facie case that you sold the TEFG formula to a drug ring. A few weeks ago thirty thousand pounds turned up in a bank account that we traced to you."

"You can't prove a thing. I'm good with money -"

"Since then a crude form of TEFG-7 has been turning up on the drug scene under the name of Nostalgia. Users take another drug, say Ecstasy, then Nostalgia lets them remember how good it was whenever they want. The trouble is that some kids don't like coming back."

"You mean they, er, 'ponder', like Cottak's rats?"

"The users call it dreamout. Already we have twelve kids whose bodies are as limp as boiled spinach, yet their brains have a strong, healthy trace. It costs a fortune to keep them in hospital and feed them intravenously."

"The system screwed them long enough. It's about time they got something back from it."

"Vuner, we'll pin this and everything else on you. You're not ever going to see daylight again."

He waited until Drake had gone before he started laughing.

Cottak, Schilden and Drake were called to the coroner's inquest.

It was not an official inquest into Vuner's death, so much as an attempt to determine just what his legal status was.

"A person or persons unknown smuggled a dose of the substance known as Trophic Enhancement Factor, Group 7 into Vuner's cell," concluded the coroner in his opening address. "With the aid of a hollow needle and a length of plastic tube he was able to administer this drug to himself, then induce a state known as auto-neurosynaptic catalepsy, or dreamout. The following note was found in his hand: "Bye pigs, and take good care of my body. Jail it if you like, but I am free. You should keep all prisoners like this. I am going to where I can do anything, and will never die. There will always be hundreds of girls around, and I will always get it up. It was me who mashed Jay-Dod and his lady. Maybe I thought about doing it so often that I suddenly did it for real, but never knew. Piss on you all, Vudraken the God."

The coroner ceased reading and looked up. Drake cleared his throat and held up a report.

"We have never been able to keep the prison system totally free of drugs," he said, waving the folder.

"No matter how careful we are, even someone on death row can always get something smuggled in. With TEFG only one dose is needed for a prisoner to . . ."

"Yes?" prompted the coroner.

"I don't know! We may have their bodies behind bars, but are the prisoners being held? The law says they are, but . . . look, is Vuner an escapee, legally speaking?" He turned to the scientists. "Dr Cottak, have you got anywhere with the rats?"

Emily Cottak looked haggard, and had dark smudges under her eyes. Schilden, sitting beside her, was no better.

"I have been able to revive one rat, number AT-BETA-16," she said listlessly. "In simplified terms, I administered TEFG-7 to induce a plastic state in the synaptic cleft areas, then directly stimulated the sensory centres of the brain with electrodes, bypassing the usual nerve communication boundaries. The

rat felt something good, and wanted more. Being on TEFG-7, it could open up its sensory connections again. By manipulating electrode-induced pleasure I kept it out of dreamout until the TEFG-7 wore off." "You're saying you can bring them back?" asked Drake.

"I fooled one rat. I might do it with a human, too, but only once. If they get another dose of TEFG-7 and return to dreamout, they may ignore further stimulation."

"You could try hitting the pain centres," ventured Drake.

"Not so," Schilden interrupted. "There is evidence that subjects in this state can re-interpret the sensation - perceive pain as a colour, perhaps."

"I can't believe that medical science can do nothing."

Schilden snorted. "I thought the AIDS crisis showed what we can and cannot do. Why worry, though? If prisoners are in dreamout they need minimal security and care. No bars, no warders, just rows of boxes with tubes going in and out."

"But they're not being punished!" exclaimed Drake. "Chrissake, how will the community take to someone committing murder then spending the rest of his life in heaven? All we will be doing is putting the criminals where they can do no more harm."

"So what is wrong with that? The role of the law is to protect the innocent."

"It's not so simple," sighed the coroner. "Look at history. Early last century Britain had a penal colony in Australia, at Botany Bay. Did you know that Botany Bay was so good compared to Britain that people committed crimes just to be sentenced to transportation there? Once they were released food and drink was cheap, there was plenty of work, and wages were good."

"Our situation is similar. Nostalgia sells for about ninety pounds a dose on the drug network, though it costs only 1% of that to make. Any loser with nothing to look forward to but cheap rooms and junk food for the rest of his life only has to scrape up the cost of a dose, and one Conan movie. After that our taxes pay for the intravenous drip and nursing, while he 'lives' in palaces. He - or she - can have an improved body too."

"It would never become widespread," said Schilden uncertainly. "Dreamout is like death. You never come back."

"Dreamout is not like death," said the coroner. He looked to Drake, who nodded. "The addicts have been doing experiments that the law forbids to you scientists. A willing dreamouter can be brought back weeks later by another dose of TEFG-7. Undercover agents have seen it done. They beat you to it, Dr Cottak."

"But that's wonderful!" exclaimed Schilden. Cottak grimaced, either in anger or frustration.

"Not so," said Drake. "Their dreams blend into their long term memory, become indistinguishable from reality. Vuner's dream of beating up his old school enemy became so good that he could not tell when he was really doing it. People who have been revived often have very low violence thresholds. Spend a week as Conan or Rambo and that's who you come back as. We can't afford to have people running loose who have spent much time on TEFG-7."

Schilden sat back and folded his arms, shaking his head. "Not everyone is a psychopath," he said. "The problem only seems serious because criminals are currently the main users."

"No Rolf, remember the work of Hall and Nordby in the early Seventies?" said Cottak, her face a blank mask.

"Eh? Ach, the statistical work. I only glanced at their book. I am a neurochemist, after all."

"You should have read it more carefully. The work is *The Individual and His Dreams*, Mr Drake. I can lend you my copy. They took a sample of 1000 young Americans of both sexes and found that nearly half of their dreams contained aggression - fights, rapes, murders. The rate of murder among dream-characters was one in 150. That's about 100 times the real world average. The figures are similar for other nationalities and cultures."

"Dreams and reality have been separated in nature as a survival trait. If an Australopithecus dreamed that he could kill sabre-tooth tigers with his bare hands, then believed the dream . . . well, he got removed from the gene pool next time he met a real sabre-tooth tiger. REM dreams, and most daydreams, have

inefficient neurological access to long term memory. That's why we remember them best if we write them down or talk about them: the act of describing them 'fixes' them.

"The drug, my drug, frees us from nature, which forces us to live in the real world. We must isolate those who use TEFG. Once a person believes he has committed a murder, it is easier to do it again, but in real life. Worse, they will actually be stronger if it's part of their dream. Most people have greater muscular strength than they realise. Alter their self-image and they can use it all."

As she finished, Schilden took off his glasses to retreat. Drake scribbled something on the report in front of him, then flung the pen down. The coroner looked from face to face for a sign of hope.

"We may be forced to covertly deal with the drug networks, and keep files of those who have tried TEFG," he suggested.

"That may not be easy," said Drake. "This morning we found what the users call a 'time machine'. It was just a bed in a locked room, but the dreamouter had rigged a gallon of nutrient drip to hang from the ceiling and run a hose from his penis to a bucket. A timer was connected to his other arm, and set to deliver a second dose of Nostalgia after ten days. The man was middle aged and very successful. His wife said that he'd watched his 'Neighbours' videos for twelve hours before disappearing. She hired a detective to find him, she thought he'd run off with another woman. In a way, he had."

Cottak remained impassive. Schilden laughed without smiling.

"So they can get back by themselves," he observed. "We can never be sure if someone is secretly affected by dreamout."

The coroner nodded. "We could even impose the death penalty for TEFG-7 abuse, but that would only make more people closet users. Society may soon be in a shambles."

Vuner was creating a world. It was not to be merely an image of Earth, but totally new, condensed from a swirling dust cloud by the disembodied spirit of Vuner himself, so that he would literally be the soul of this world, its *gaia*. He revelled in the hot, fine dust, a young, vital god with eternity before him.

Over time, which had grown meaningless for him, he had learned a great deal about being divine, and had discovered that the worst problem was boredom. There had been too many enemies effortlessly blasted to cinders, too many ultimate orgasms, too many familiar images of Earth-like worlds that arose and dispersed at his will. He had realised that he had been acting like a deified mortal, rather than a true god. He would not merely control this new world and the laws that governed it, he would actually be those very laws. Vuner the Law moulded a great vortex of dust . . .

Suddenly he sprawled, powerless, and in a human body! The sand was cold beneath his naked skin, and a pale, scarlet sun lit up the desert around him. A shadowy form coalesced nearby. It had a vaguely human shape. Vuner gasped.

"My interface chip recognised a sound from your speech centre, Vuner," it said in a contralto voice. "Try to speak normally."

He burned it with beams of light from his eyes. Abruptly the ground heaved, and several suns began to dance in the sky. Then the world became livid, brilliant pain. As it faded the shadow returned.

"We've made a lot of advances in neural interface methods over the last thirty years," it explained.

"Dreamouters can no longer avoid the stimulation of pain centres."

"I'm your God!" shrieked Vuner. "In the name of Vudraken -"

"Vudraken, eh?" his tormentor laughed. "I'm your doctor. I suggest that you conjure up a short, blonde woman wearing a green smock." It was somehow easier for him to cope with the shadow.

"Are you a prison doctor?" he asked, suddenly mortal again.

"Hah, there have been no prisons for decades. Those who can be rehabilitated, are. Hopeless cases, like you, are forced to dreamout, and your bodies are put to better use. Your arms went to a shark attack victim from Bermuda, I believe."

Vuner looked down at his arms, then raised them easily.

"Very good, Vuner," said the shape. "I registered arm movement."

"What do you want? What the hell do you want?"



"Don't shout. It only flashes the overload light on the ALC. As to what I want . . . maybe I should tell you some history first. TEFG-7 really changed the place after you went into dreamout. Seems like half the country started using it. Some said it was the end of Western Democracy, that the Soviets would march in and take over. Hah. In two years there were so many Russians in partial or permanent dreamout that we had to go in and help them.

"Things settled down though. Dreamouters run factory processes now, in return for nutrient solution and a bed, but they spend their free time in fantasies very like yours. The rest of us live in quite a good world. It has to be, to stop people going dreamout."

"Go away!" he shouted. "You can't do this. The law -"

Second Jeremy Reston Illustration

He was paralysed. He could not move, speak, or even blink.

"Had to power you down," said the shadow. "Too much struggling for the automedic to finish working. Vudraken the God, what a laugh! Vuner, when the ancient Romans had a military victory they put a slave beside the general as his chariot was driven through the streets in triumph. Every so often the slave had to remind the general that they were both only mortal. I'm sure no slaves did that in your dreamout world, and that you were alone in your triumphal chariot . . . but you're still mortal."

The sun faded, the sky and landscape glowed with a grey that became concrete walls and ceiling. One wall had a barred door.

Behind it stood a blonde woman in a green smock. Vuner realised that his perspective was from only knee height. He swivelled his lenses to look at himself: his body was squat and cubic, resting on tractor treads. His arms were like robot manipulators. With a tinny scream he backed away from the door, his motor whining with the overload. Pain raked his back as he hit the wall.

"The unit I housed you in is covered with a type of inorganic skin, used mainly to give industrial robots a sense of touch," the woman explained. "I wired the sensor filaments right down into your brain.

Hardwired them. TEFG-7 cannot dissolve the link and let you dreamout. It took me five years."

"Why did you do this?" wailed Vuner through the voicebox. To his surprise tears welled from tubes on the rims of his lenses.

"Why? Who, Vuner, who! I'm thirty seven years old: orphaned at seven, but by hell I became such a good neurophysiologist that I'm even on first name terms with the great Professor Cottak. Mind you, she doesn't know that I was christened Jane Dodsworth -"

His terrified cry overloaded the automatic level control of the voicebox, and he rolled frantically in circles.

"Society is not vindictive any more, Vuner, but I am! I found my parents lying in their own blood and, and . . . putting your brain in a bottle but leaving your mind free to play God is not my idea of justice! I'm very rich, Vuner: I had this cell built under my estate especially for you, I falsified the records declaring you dead, I'll keep you here for the rest of your life, and I swear I'll outlive you through sheer spite!"

She turned and walked away from the cell. Vuner heard a large, heavy door boom shut and lugs thump into place, then there was silence. He gripped the bars, and they were cold and hard beneath the pads of his manipulators.