

FICTION

Jim Harmon

No Substitutions



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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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*If it was happening to him, all right, he could
take that ... but what if he was happening to it?*

Putting people painlessly to sleep is really a depressing job. It keeps me awake at night thinking of all those bodies I have sent to the vaults, and it interferes to a marked extent with my digestion. I thought before Councilman Coleman came to see me that there wasn't much that could bother me worse.

Coleman came in the morning before I was really ready to face the day. My nerves were fairly well shot from the kind of work I did as superintendent of Dreamland. I chewed up my pill to calm me down, the one to pep me up, the capsule to strengthen my qualities as a relentless perfectionist. I washed them down with gin and orange juice and sat back, building up my fortitude to do business over the polished deck of my desk.

But instead of the usual morning run of hysterical relatives and masochistic mystics, I had to face one of my superiors from the Committee itself.

Councilman Coleman was an impressive figure in a tailored black tunic. His olive features were set off by bristling black eyes and a mobile mustache. He probably scared most people, but not me. Authority doesn't frighten me any more. I've put to sleep too many megalomaniacs, dictators, and civil servants.

"Warden Walker, I've been following your career with considerable interest," Coleman said.

"My career hasn't been very long, sir," I said modestly. I didn't mention that *nobody* could last that long in my job. At least, none had yet.

"I've followed it from the first. I know every step you've made."

I didn't know whether to be flattered or apprehensive. "That's fine," I said. It didn't sound right.

"Tell me," Coleman said, crossing his legs, "what do you think of Dreamland in principle?"

"Why, it's the logical step forward in penal servitude. Man has been heading toward this since he first started civilizing himself. After all, some criminals *can't* be helped psychiatrically. We can't execute them or turn them free; we have to imprison them."

I waited for Coleman's reaction. He merely nodded.

"Of course, it's barbaric to think of a prison as a place of punishment," I continued. "A prison is a place to keep a criminal away from society for a specific time so he can't harm that society for that time. Punishment, rehabilitation, all of it is secondary to that. The purpose of confinement is confinement."

The councilman edged forward an inch. "And you really think Dreamland is the most humane confinement possible?"

"Well," I hedged, "it's the most humane we've found yet. I suppose living through a--uh--movie with full sensory participation for year after year can get boring."

"I should think so," Coleman said emphatically. "Warden, don't you sometimes feel the old system where the prisoners had the diversions of riots, solitary confinement, television, and jailbreaks may have made time easier to serve? Do these men ever think they are *actually* living these vicarious adventures?"

That was a question that made all of us in the Dreamland service uneasy. "No, Councilman, they don't. They know they aren't really Alexander of Macedonia, Tarzan, Casanova, or Buffalo Bill. They are conscious of all the time that is being spent out of their real lives; they know they have relatives and friends outside the dream. They know, unless--"

Coleman lifted a dark eyebrow above a black iris. "Unless?"

I cleared my throat. "Unless they go mad and really believe the dream they are living. But as you know, sir, the rate of madness among Dreamland inmates is only slightly above the norm for the population as a whole."

"How do prisoners like that adjust to reality?"

Was he deliberately trying to ask tough questions? "They don't. They think they are having some kind of delusion. Many of them become schizoid and pretend to go along with reality while secretly 'knowing' it to be a lie."

Coleman removed a pocket secretary and broke it open. "About these new free-choice models--do you think they genuinely are an improvement over the old fixed-image machines?"

"Yes, sir," I replied. "By letting the prisoner project his own imagination onto the sense tapes and giving him a limited amount of alternatives to a situation, we can observe whether he is conforming to society to a larger extent."

"I'm glad you said that, Walker," Councilman Coleman told me warmly. "As I said, I've been following your career closely, and if you get through the next twenty-four-hour period as you have through the foregoing part of your Dream, you will be awakened at this time tomorrow. Congratulations!"

I sat there and took it.

He was telling *me*, the superintendent of Dreamland, that my own life here was only a Dream such as I fed to my own prisoners. It was unbelievably absurd, a queasy little joke of some kind. But I didn't deny it.

If it *were* true, if I had forgotten that everything that happened was only a Dream, and if I admitted it, the councilman would know I was mad. *It couldn't be true*. Yet--

Hadn't I thought about it ever since I had been appointed warden and transferred from my personnel job at the plant?

Whenever I had come upon two people talking, and it seemed as if I had come upon those same two people talking the same talk before, hadn't I wondered for an instant if it couldn't be a Dream, not reality at all?

Once I had experienced a Dream for five or ten minutes. I was driving a ground car down a spidery road made into a dismal tunnel by weeping trees, a dank, lavender maze. I had known at the time it was a Dream, but still, as the moments passed, I became more intent on the difficult road before me, my blocky hands on the steering wheel, thick fingers typing out the pattern of motion on the drive buttons.

I could remember that. Maybe I couldn't remember being shoved into the prison vault for so many years for such and such a crime.

I didn't really believe this, not then, but I couldn't afford to make a mistake, even if it were only some sort of intemperate test--as I was confident it was, with a sweet, throbbing fury against the man who would employ such a jagged broadsword for prying in his bureaucratic majesty.

"I've always thought," I said, "that it would be a good idea to show a prisoner what the modern penal system was all about by giving him a Dream in which he dreamed about Dreamland itself."

"Yes, indeed," Coleman concurred. Just that and no more.

I leaned intimately across my beautiful oak desk. "I've thought that projecting officials into the Dream and letting them talk with the prisoners might be a more effective form of investigation than mere observation."

"I should say so," Coleman remarked, and got up.

I *had* to get more out of him, some proof, some clue beyond the preposterous announcement he had made.

"I'll see you tomorrow at this time then, Walker." The councilman nodded curtly and turned to leave my office.

I held onto the sides of my desk to keep from diving over and teaching him to change his concept of humor.

The day was starting. If I got through it, giving a good show, I would be released from my Dream, he had said smugly.

But if this was a dream, did I want probation to reality?

Horbit was a twitchy little man whose business tunic was the same rodent color as his hair. He had a pronounced tic in his left cheek. "I have to get back," he told me with compelling earnestness.

"Mr. Horbit--Eddie--" I said, glancing at his file projected on my desk pad, "I can't put you back into a Dream. You served your full time for your crime. The maximum."

"But I haven't adjusted to society!"

"Eddie, I can shorten sentences, but I can't expand them beyond the limit set by the courts."

A tear of frustration spilled out of his left eye with the next twitch. "But Warden, sir, my psychiatrist said that I was unable to cope with reality. Come on now, Warden, you don't want a guy who can't cope with reality running around loose." He paused, puzzled. "Hell, I don't know why I can't express myself like I used to."

He could express himself much better in his Dream. He had been Abraham Lincoln in his Dream, I saw. He had lived the life right up to the night when he was taking in *An American Cousin* at the Ford Theater. Horbit couldn't accept history that he had no more life to live. He only knew that if in his delirium he could gain Dreamland once more, he could get back to the hard realities of dealing with the problems of Reconstruction.

"Please," he begged.

I looked up from the file. "I'm sorry, Eddie."

His eyes narrowed, both of them, on the next twitch. "Warden, I can always go out and commit another anti-social act."

"I'm afraid not, Eddie. The file shows you are capable of only one crime. And you don't have a wife any more, and she doesn't have a lover."

Horbit laughed. "Your files aren't infallible, Warden."

With one gesture, he ripped open his tunic and tore into his own flesh. No, not his own flesh. Pseudo-flesh. He took out the gun that was underneath.

"The beamer is made of X-ray-transparent plastic, Warden, but it works as well as one made of steel and lead."

"Now that you've got it in here," I said in time with the pulse in my throat, "what are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to make you go down to the vaults and put me back to sleep, Warden."

I nodded. "I suppose you can do that. But what's to prevent me from waking you up as soon as I've taken away your gun?"

"This!" He tossed a sheet of paper onto my desk.

"What's this?" I asked unnecessarily. I could read it.

"A confession that you accepted a bribe to put me back to sleep," Horbit said, his tic beating out a feverish tempo. "As soon as you've signed it, I'll use your phone to have it telefaxed to the Registrar of Private Documents."

I had to admire the thought behind the idea. Horbit was convinced that I was only a figment of his unfocused imagination, but he was playing the game with uncompromising logic, trusting that even madness had hard and tight rules behind it.

There was also something else I admired about the plan.

It could work.

Once he fed that document to the archives, I would be obligated to help him even without the gun. My word would probably be taken that I had been forced to do it at gunpoint, but there would always be doubts, enough to wreck my career when it came time for promotion.

Nothing like this had ever happened in my years as warden.

Suddenly, Coleman's words hit me in the back of the neck. *If I got through the next twenty-four hours.* This had to be some kind of test.

But a test for what?

Had I been deliberately told that I was living only a Dream to see if my ethics would hold up even when I thought I wasn't dealing with reality?

Or if this *was* only a Dream, was it a test to see if I was morally ready to return to the real, the earnest world?

But if it was a test to see if I was ready for reality, did I want to pass it? My life was nerve-racking and mind-wrecking, but I liked the challenge--it was the only life I knew or could believe in.

What was I going to do?

The only thing I knew was that I couldn't tune in tomorrow and find out.

The time was *now*.

Horbit motioned the gun to my desk set. "Sign that paper."

I reached out and took hold of his wrist. I squeezed.

Horbit's screams brought in the guards.

I picked up the gun from where he had dropped it and handed it to Captain Keller, my head guard, a tough old bird who wore his uniform like armor.

"Trying to force his way back to the sleep tanks," I told Keller.

He nodded. "Happened before. Back when old man Preston lost his grip."

Preston had been my predecessor. He had lost his hold on reality like all the others before him who had served long as warden of Dreamland. A few had quit while they were still ahead and spent the rest of their lives recuperating. Our society didn't produce individuals tough enough to stand the strain of putting their fellow human beings to sleep for long.

One of Keller's men had stabbed Horbit's arm with a hypospray to blanket the pain from his broken wrist, and the man was quieter.

"I couldn't have done it, Warden," Horbit mumbled drowsily. "I couldn't kill anybody. Unless it was like that other time."

"Of course, Eddie," I said.

I had banked on that, hadn't I, when I made my move?

Or did I?

Wasn't it perhaps a matter of knowing that all of it wasn't real and that the safety cutoffs in even a free-choice model of a Dream Machine couldn't let me come to any real harm? I had been suspiciously brave, disarming a dedicated maniac. With only an hour to spare for gym a day, I could barely press 350 pounds. I was hardly in shape for personal combat.

On the other hand, maybe I actually wanted something to go wrong so my sleep sentence would be extended. Or was it that, in some sane part of my mind, I wanted release from unreality badly enough to take any risk to prove that I was morally capable of returning to the real world?

It was a carousel and I couldn't catch the brass ring no matter how many turns I went spinning through.

I hardly heard Horbit when he half-shouted at me as my men led him from the room. Glancing up sharply, I saw him straining purposefully against the bonds of muscle and narcotic that held him.





"You have to send me back now, Warden," he was shrilling. "You have to! I tried to coerce you with a gun. That's a crime, Warden--you *know* that's a crime! I have to be put to sleep!"

Keller flicked his mustache with a thick thumbnail. "How about that? You won't let a guy back into the sleepy-bye pads, so he pulls a gun on you to make you, and *that* makes him eligible. He couldn't lose, Warden. No, sir, he had it made."

My answer to Keller was forming, building up in my jaw muscles, but I took a pill and it went away.

"Hold him in the detention quarters," I said finally. "I'm going to make a study of this."

Keller winked knowingly and sauntered out of the office, his left hand swinging the blackjack the Committee had taken away from him a decade before.

The problem of what to do with Keller wasn't particularly atypical of the ones I had to solve daily and I wasn't going to let that worry me. Much.

I pressed my button to let Mrs. Engle know I was ready for the next interview.

They came. There were the hysterical relatives, the wives and mothers and brothers who demanded that their kin be Awakened because they were special cases, not really guilty, or needed at home, or possessed of such awesome talents and qualities as to be exempt from the laws of lesser men.

Once in a while I granted a parole for a prisoner to see a dying mother or if some important project was falling apart without his help, but most of the time I just sat with my eyes propped open, letting a sea of vindictive screeching and beseeching wailings wash around me.

The relatives and legal talent were spaced with hungry-eyed mystics who were convinced they could contemplate God and their navels both conscientiously as an incarnation of Gautama. To risk sounding religiously intolerant, I usually kicked these out pretty swiftly.

The onetime inmate who wanted back in after a reprieve was fairly rare. Few of them ever got *that* crazy.

But it was my luck to get another the same day, *the* day for me, as Horbit.

Paulson was a tall, lean man with sad eyes. The clock above his sharp shoulder bone said five till noon. I didn't expect him to take much out of my lunch hour.

"Warden," Paulson said, "I've decided to give myself up. I murdered a blind beggar the other night."

"For his pencils?" I asked.

Paulson shifted uneasily. "No, sir. For his money. I needed some extra cash and I was stronger than he was, so why shouldn't I take it?"

I examined the projection of his file. He was an embezzler, not a violent man. He had served his time and been released. Conceivably he might embezzle again, but the Committee saw to it that temptation was never again placed in his path. He would not commit a crime of violence.

"Look, Paulson," I said, a trifle testily, "if you have so little conscience as to kill a blind old man for a few dollars, where do you suddenly get enough guilt feelings to cause you to give yourself up?"

Paulson tried his insufficient best to smile evilly. "It wasn't conscience, Warden. I never lie awake a minute whenever I kill anybody. It's just--well, Dreaming isn't so bad. Last time I was Allen Pinkerton, the detective. It was exciting. A lot more exciting than the kind of life I lead."

I nodded solemnly. "Yes, no doubt strangling old men in the streets can be pretty dull for a red-blooded man of action."

"Yes," Paulson said earnestly, "it does get to be a humdrum routine. I've been experimenting with all sorts of murders, but I just don't seem to get much of a kick out of them now. I'd like to try it from the other end as Pinkerton again. Of course, if you can't arrange it, I guess I'll have to go out and see what I can do with, say, an ax." His eye glittered almost convincingly.

"Paulson, you know I could have you watched night and day if I thought you really were a murderer. But I can't send you back to the sleep vaults without proof and conviction for a crime."

"That doesn't sound very reasonable," Paulson objected. "Turning loose a homicidal maniac who is offering to go back to the vaults of his own free will just because you lack a little trifling proof of his guilt."

"Sure," I told him, "but I don't want to share the same noose with you. My job is to keep the innocent out and the convicted in. And I do my job, Paulson."

"But you have to! If you don't, I'll have to go out and establish my guilt with another crime. Do you want a crime on your hands, Warden?"

I studied his record. There was a chance, just a chance....

"Do you want to wait voluntarily in the detention quarters?" I asked him.

He agreed readily enough.

I watched him out of the office and rang for lunch.

The news on the wall video was dull as usual. A man got tired of hearing peace, safety, prosperity and brotherly love all the time. I dug into my strained spinach, raw hamburger, and chewed up my white pill, my red pill, my ebony pill, and my second white pill. The gin and tomato juice took the taste away.

I was ready for the afternoon session.

Matrons were finishing the messy job of dragging a hysterical woman out of the office when Keller came back. He had a stubborn look on his flattened, red face.

"New prisoner asking to see you personal," Keller reported. "Told him no. Okay?"

"No," I said. "He can see me. That's the law and you know it. He isn't violent, is he?" I asked in some concern. The room was still in disarray.

"Naw, he ain't violent, Warden. He just thinks he's somebody important."

"Sounds like a case for therapy, not Dreamland. Who does he think he is?"

"One of the Committee--Councilman Coleman."

"Mm-hmm. And who is he really, Captain?"

"Councilman Coleman."

I whistled. "What did they nail him on?"

"Misuse of authority."

"And he didn't get a suspended for that?"

"Wasn't his first offense. Still want to see him?"

I gave a lateral wave of my hand. "Of course."

My pattern of living--call it my office routine--had been re-established through the day. I hadn't had a chance to brood much over the bombshell Coleman had tossed in my lap in the morning, but now I could think.

Coleman entered wearing the same black tunic, the same superior attitude. His black eyes fastened on me.

"Sit down, Councilman," I directed.

He deigned to comply.

I studied the files flashed before me. Several times before, Coleman had been guilty of slight misuses of his authority: helping his friends, harming his enemies. Not enough to make him be impeached from the Committee. His job was so hypersensitive that if every transgression earned dismissal, no one could hold the position more than a day. Even with the best intentions, mistakes can be taken for deliberate errors. Not to mention the converse. For his earlier errors, Coleman had first received a suspended sentence, then two terminal sentences to be fixed by the warden. My predecessors had given him first a few weeks, then a few months of sleep in Dreamland.

Coleman's eyes didn't frighten me; I focused right on the pupils. "That was a pretty foul trick, Councilman. Did you hope to somehow frighten me out of executing this sentence by what you told me this morning?"

I couldn't follow his reasoning. Just how making me think my life was only a Dream such as I imposed on my own prisoners could help him, I couldn't see.

"Warden Walker," Coleman intoned in his magnificent voice, "I'm shocked. *I* am not personally monitoring your Dream. The Committee as a whole will decide whether you are capable of returning to the real world. Moreover, please don't get carried away. I'm not concerned with what you do to this sensory projection of myself, beyond how it helps to establish your moral capabilities."

"I suppose," I said heavily, "that I could best establish my high moral character by excusing you from this penal sentence?"

"Not at all," Councilman Coleman asserted. "According to the facts as you know them, I am 'guilty' and must be confined."

I was stymied for an instant. I had expected him to say that I must know that he was incapable of committing such an error and I must pardon him despite the misguided rulings of the courts. Then I thought of something else.

"You show symptoms of being a habitual criminal, Coleman. I think you deserve *life*."

Coleman cocked his head thoughtfully, concerned. "That seems rather extreme, Warden."

"You would suggest a shorter sentence?"

"If it were my place to choose, yes. A few years, perhaps. But life--no, I think not."

I threw up my hands. You don't often see somebody do that, but I did. I couldn't figure him. Coleman had wealth and power as a councilman in the real world, but I had thought somehow he wanted to escape to a Dream world. Yet he didn't want to be in for life, the way Paulson and Horbit did.

There seemed to be no point or profit in what he had told me that morning, nothing in it for him.

Unless--

Unless what he said was literally true.

I stood up. My knees wanted to quit halfway up, but I made it. "This," I said, "is a difficult decision for me, sir. Would you make yourself comfortable here for a time, Councilman?"

Coleman smiled benignly. "Certainly, Warden."

I walked out of my office, slowly and carefully.

Horbit was sitting in his detention quarters idly flicking through a book tape on the Civil War when I found him. The tic in his cheek marked time with every new page.

"President Lincoln," I said reverently.

Horbit looked up, his eyes set in a clever new way. "*You* call me that. Does it mean I am recovering? You don't mean now that I'm getting back my right senses?"

"Mr. President, the situation you find yourself in now is something stranger and more evil than any madness. I am not a phantom of your mind--I am a *real* man. This wild, distorted place is a *real* place."

"Do you think you can pull the wool over my eyes, you scamp? Mine eyes have seen the glory."

"Yes, sir." I sat down beside him and looked earnestly into his twitching face. "But I know you have always believed in the occult."

He nodded slowly. "I *have* often suspected this was hell."

"Not quite, sir. The occult has its own rigid laws. It is perfectly scientific. This world is in another dimension--one that is not length, breadth or thickness--but a real one nevertheless."

"An interesting theory. Go ahead."

"This world is more scientifically advanced than the one you come from--and this advanced science has fallen into the hands of a well-meaning despot."

Horbit nodded again. "The Jefferson Davis type."

He didn't understand Lincoln's beliefs very well, but I pretended to go along with him. "Yes, sir. He--our leader--doubts your abilities as President. He is not above meddling in the affairs of an alien world if he believes he is doing good. He has convicted you to this world in that belief."

He chuckled. "Many of my countrymen share his convictions."

"Maybe," I said. "But many here do not. I don't. I know you must return to guide the Reconstruction. But first you must convince our leader of your worth."

"How am I going to accomplish that?" Horbit asked worriedly.

"You are going to have a companion from now on, an agent of the leader, who will pretend to be something he isn't. You must pretend to believe in what he claims to be, and convince him of your high intelligence, moral responsibilities, and qualities of leadership."

"Yes," Horbit said thoughtfully, "yes. I must try to curb my tendency for telling off-color jokes. My wife is always nagging me about that."

Paulson was only a few doors away from Horbit. I found him with his long, thin legs stretched out in front of him, staring dismally into the gloom of the room. No wonder he found reality so boring and depressing with so downbeat a mood cycle. I wondered why they hadn't been able to do something about adjusting his metabolism.

"Paulson," I said gently, "I want to speak with you."

He bolted upright in his chair. "You're going to put me back to sleep."

"I came to talk to you about that," I admitted.

I pulled up a seat and adjusted the lighting so only his face and mine seemed to float bodiless in a sea of night, two moons of flesh.

"Paulson--or should I call you Pinkerton?--this will come as a shock, a shock I know only a fine analytical mind like yours could stand. You think your life as the great detective was only a Dream induced by some miraculous machine. But, sir, believe me: that life was *real*."

Paulson's eyes rolled slightly back into his head and changed their luster. "Then *this* is the Dream. I've thought--"

"No!" I snapped. "This world is also real."

I went through the same Fourth Dimension waltz as I had auditioned for Horbit. At the end of it, Paulson was nodding just as eagerly.

"I could be destroyed for telling you this, but our leader is planning the most gigantic conquest known to any intelligent race in the Universe. He is going to conquer Earth in all its possible futures and all its possible pasts. After that, there are other planets."

"He must be stopped!" Paulson shouted.

I laid my palm on his arm. "Armies can't stop him, nor can fantastic secret weapons. Only one thing can stop him: the greatest detective who ever lived. Pinkerton!"

"Yes," Paulson said. "I suppose I could."

"He knows that. But he's a fiend. He wants a battle of wits with you, his only possible foe, for the satisfaction of making a fool of you."

"Easier said than done, my friend," Paulson said crisply.

"True," I agreed, "but he is devious, the devil! He plans to convince you that he also has been removed to this world from his own, even as you have. He will claim to be Abraham Lincoln."

"No!"

"Yes, and he will pretend to find you accidentally and get you to help him find a way back to his own world, glorying in making a fool of you. But you can use every moment to learn his every weakness."

"But wait. I know President Lincoln well. I guarded him on his first inauguration trip. How could this leader of yours fool me? Does he look like the President?"

"Not at all. But remember, the dimensional shift changes physical appearance. You've noticed that in yourself."

"Yes, of course," Paulson muttered. "But he couldn't hoax me. My keen powers of deduction would have seen through him in an instant!"



I saw Horbit and Paulson happily off in each other's company. Paulson was no longer bored by a reality in which he was matching wits with the first master criminal of the paratime universe, and Horbit was no longer hopeless in his quest to gain another reality because he knew he was not merely insane now.

It was a pair of fantastic stories that no man in his right mind would believe--but that didn't make them invalid to a brace of ex-Sleepers. They *wanted* to believe them. The stories gave them what they were after--without me having to break the law and put them to sleep for crimes they hadn't committed.

They would find out some day that I had lied to them, but maybe by that time they would have realized this world wasn't so bad.

Fortunately, I was confident from their psych records that they were both incapable of ending their little game by homicide, no matter how justified they might think it was.

"Hey, Warden," Captain Keller bellowed as I approached my office door, "when are you going to let me throw that stiff Coleman into the sleepy-by-vaults? He's still sitting in there on your furniture as smug as you please."

"You don't sound as if you like our distinguished visitor very well," I remarked.

"It's not that. I just don't think he deserves any special privileges. Besides, it was guys like him that took away our nightsticks. My boys didn't like that. Look at me--I'm defenseless!"

I looked at his square figure. "Not quite, Captain, not quite."

Now was the time.

I stretched out my wet palm toward the door.

Was or was not Coleman telling the truth when he said this life of mine was itself only a Dream? If it was, did I want to finish my last day with the right decision so I could return to some alien reality? Or did I deliberately want to make a mistake so I could continue living the opiate of my Dream?

Then, as I touched the door, I knew the only decision that could have any meaning for me.

Councilman Coleman didn't look as if he had moved since I had left him. He was unwrinkled, unspiring, his eyes and mustache crisp as ever. He smiled at me briefly in supreme confidence.

I changed my decision then, in that moment. And, in the next, changed it back to my original choice.

"Coleman," I said, "you can get out of here. As warden, I'm granting you a five-year probation."

The councilman stood up swiftly, his eyes catching little sparks of yellow light. "I don't approve of your decision, Warden. Not at all. Unless you alter it, I'll be forced to convince the rest of the Committee that your decisions are becoming faulty, that you are losing your grip just as all your predecessors did."

My muscles relaxed in a spasm and it took the fresh flow of adrenalin to get me to the chair behind my desk. I took a pill. I took two pills.

"Tell me, Councilman, what happened to the offer to release me from this phony Dream? Now you are talking as if *this* world was the *real* one."

Coleman parted his lips, but then the planes of his face shifted into another pattern. "You never believed me."

"Almost, but not quite. You knew I was on the narrow edge in this kind of job, but I'm not as far out as you seemed to have thought."

"I can still wreck your career, you know."

"I don't think so. That would constitute a misuse of authority, and the next time you turn up before me, I'm going to give you *life* in Dreamland."

Coleman sat back down suddenly.

"You don't want life as a Sleeper, do you?" I pursued. "You did want a relatively *short* sentence of a few months or a few years. I can think of two reasons why. The answer is probably a combination of both. In the first place, you are a joy-popper with Dreams--you don't want to live out your life in one, but you like a brief Dream every few years like an occasional dose of a narcotic. In the second place, you probably have political reasons for wanting to hide out somewhere in safety for the next few years. The world isn't as placid as the newscasts sometimes make it seem."

He didn't say anything. I didn't think he had to.

"You wanted to make sure I made a painfully scrupulous decision in your case," I went on. "You didn't want me to pardon you completely because of your high position, but at the same time you didn't want too long a sentence. But I'm doing you no favors. You get no time from me, Coleman."

"How did you decide to do this?" he asked. "Don't tell me you never doubted. We've all doubted since we found out about the machines: which was real and which was the Dream? How did you decide to risk this?"

"I acted the only way I could act," I said. "I decided I had to act as if my life was real and that you were lying. I decided that because, if all this were false, if I could have no more confidence in my own mind and my own senses than that, I didn't give a damn if it *were* all a Dream."

Coleman stood up and walked out of my office.

The clock told me it was after five. I began clearing my desk.

Captain Keller stuck his head in, unannounced. "Hey, Warden, there's an active one out here. He claims that Dreamland compromises His plan for the Free Will of the Universe."

"Well, escort him inside, Captain," I said.

I put away my pills. Solving simple problems such as the new visitor presented always helped me to relax.