

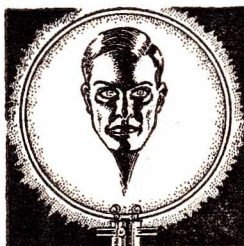
STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 15, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

July, 1947

An Amazing Complete Novel



The Kingdom of the Blind

By **GEORGE O. SMITH**

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Cover Painting by Earle Bergey—Illustrating "The Kingdom of the Blind"

STARTLING STORIES, published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., N. L. Pines, President, at 4609 Diversey Ave., Chicago 39, Ill. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 10th St., New York 15, N. Y. Entered as second class matter November 22, 1946, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1947, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), \$1.80; single copies, \$.15; foreign and Canadian postage extra. In correspondence with this magazine please include your postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by an addressed stamped envelope and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and serials in this magazine are fictitious. If the name of a living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

Bruno clung frantically to the bed as he was drawn toward the window



DREAM'S END

By HENRY KUTTNER

Risking his own life force to cure a patient's psychosis, Dr. Robert Bruno learns of the true individualism of human minds!

THE sanitarium was never quiet. Even when night brought comparative stillness, there was an anticipatory tension in the air—for cyclic mental disorders are as inevitable, though not as regular, as the swing of a merry-go-round.

Earlier that evening Gregson, in Ward 13, had moved into the downswing of his manic-

depressive curve, and there had been trouble. Before the orderlies could buckle him into a restraining jacket, he had managed to break the arm of a "frozen" catatonic patient, who had made no sound even as the bone snapped.

Under apomorphine, Gregson subsided. After a few days he would be at the bottom

of his psychic curve, dumb, motionless, and disinterested. Nothing would be able to rouse him then, for a while.

Dr. Robert Bruno, Chief of Staff, waited till the nurse had gone out with the no longer sterile hypodermic. Then he nodded at the orderly.

"All right. Prepare the patient. I want him in Surgery Three in half an hour."

He went out into the corridor, a tall, quiet man with cool blue eyes and firm lips. Dr. Kenneth Morrissey was waiting for him. The younger man looked troubled.

"Surgery, Doctor?"

"Come on," Bruno said. "We've got to get ready. How's Wheeler?"

"Simple fracture of the radius, I think. I'm having plates made."

"Turn him over to one of the other doctors," Bruno suggested. "I need your help." He used his key on the locked door. "Gregson's in good shape for the experiment."

Morrissey didn't answer. Bruno laughed a little.

"What's bothering you, Ken?"

"It's the word experiment," Morrissey said.

"Pentothal narcosynthesis was an experiment when they first tried it. So is this—empathy surrogate. If there's a risk, I'll be taking it, not Gregson."

"You can't be sure."

They stepped into the elevator.

"I am sure," Bruno said, with odd emphasis. "That's been my rule all my life. I make sure. I've got to be sure before I undertake anything new. This experiment can't possibly fail. I don't run risks with patients."

"Well—"

"Come in here." Bruno led the way from the elevator to an examination room. "I want a final check-up. Try my blood-pressure." He stripped off his white coat and deftly wound the pneumatic rubber around his arm.

"I've explained the whole situation to Gregson's wife." Bruno went on as Morrissey squeezed the bulb. "She's signed the authorization papers. She knows it's the only chance to cure Gregson. After all, Ken, the man's been insane for seven years. Cerebral deterioration's beginning to set in."

"Cellular, you mean? Um-m. I'm not worried about that. Blood-pressure okay. Heart—"

Morrissey picked up a stethoscope. After a while he nodded.

"A physician hasn't any right to be afraid

of the dark," Bruno said.

"A physician isn't charting unmapped territory," Morrissey said abruptly. "You can dissect a cadaver, but you can't do that to the psyche. As a psychiatrist you should be the first to admit that we don't know all there is to know about the mind. Would you take a transfusion from a meningitis patient?"

Bruno chuckled. "Witchcraft, Ken—pure witchcraft! The germ theory of psychosis! Afraid I'll catch Gregson's insanity? I hate to disillusion you, but episodic disorders aren't contagious."

"Just because you can't see a bug doesn't mean it isn't there," Morrissey growled. "What about a filterable virus? A few years ago nobody could conceive of liquid life."

"Next you'll be going back to Elizabethan times and talking about spleen and humors." Bruno resumed his shirt and coat. He sobered. "In a way, though, this is a transfusion. The only type of transfusion possible. I'll admit no one knows all there is to know about psychoses. Nobody knows what makes a man think, either. But that's where physics is beginning to meet medicine. Witchcraft and medicine isolated digitalin when they met. And scientists are beginning to know the nature of thought—an electronic pattern of energy."

"Empirical!"

"Compare not the brain, but the mind itself, to a uranium pile," Bruno said. "The potentialities for atomic explosion are in the mind because you can't make a high-specialized colloid for thinking without approaching the danger level. It's the price humans pay for being *homo sapiens*. In a uranium pile you've got boron-steel bars as dampers, to absorb the neutrons before they can get out of control. In the mind, those dampers are purely psychic, naturally—but they're what keep a man sane."

"You can prove anything by symbolism," Morrissey said sourly. "And you can't stick bars of boron-steel in Gregson's skull."

"Yes, I can," Bruno said. "In effect."

"But those dampers are—*ideas!* Thoughts! You can't—"

"What is a thought?" Bruno asked.

Morrissey grimaced and followed the Chief of Staff out.

"You can chart a thought on the encephalograph—" he said stubbornly.

"Because it's a radiation. What causes that radiation? Energy emitted by certain electronic patterns. What causes electronic

patterns? The basic physical structure of matter. What causes uranium to throw off neutrons under special conditions? Same answer. If an uranium pile starts to get out of control, you can damp it, if you move fast, with boron or cadmium."

"If you move fast. Why use Gregson? He's been insane for years."

"If he'd been insane for only a week, we couldn't prove it was the empathy surrogate that cured him. You're just arguing to dodge the responsibility. If you don't want to help me, I'll get somebody else."

"It would take weeks to train another man," Morrissey said. "No, I'll operate. Only—have you thought of the possible effect on your own mind?"

"Certainly," Bruno said. "Why the devil do you suppose I've been running exhaustive psychological tests on myself? I'm completely oriented, I'm so normal that my mind must be full of boron dampers." He paused at the door of his office. "Barbara's here. I'll meet you in Surgery."

Morrissey's shoulders slumped. Bruno smiled slightly and opened the door. His wife was sitting on a leather couch, idly turning the pages of a psychiatric review.

"Studying?" Bruno said. "Want a job as a nurse?"

"Hello, darling," she said, tossing the magazine aside.

She came toward him quickly. She was small and dark and, Bruno thought academically, extremely pretty. Then his thoughts stopped being academic as he kissed her.

"What's up?"

"You're doing that operation tonight, aren't you? I wanted to wish you luck."

"How'd you know?"

"Bob," she said, "we've been married long enough so I can read your mind a little. I don't know what the operation is, but I know it's important. So—for luck!"

She kissed him again. Then, with a smile and a nod, she slipped out and was gone. Dr. Robert Bruno sighed, not unhappily, and sat behind his desk. He used the annunciator to check the sanitarium's routine, made certain everything was running smoothly, and clicked his tongue with satisfaction.

Now—the experiment. . . .

SURGERY THREE had some new equipment for the experiment. Bruno's collaborator, Andrew Parsons, the atomic physicist, was there, small and untidy, with

a scowling, wrinkled face that looked incongruous under the surgeon's cap. There was to be no real surgery; trepanning wasn't necessary, but aseptic precautions were taken as a matter of course.

The anesthetist and two other nurses stood ready, and Morrissey, in his white gown, seemed to have forgotten his worry and had settled down to his usual quiet competence. Gregson was on one of the tables, already prepped and unconscious. Intravenous anesthesia would presently supplement the apomorphine in his system, as it would also be administered to Bruno himself.

Ferguson and Dale, two other doctors, were present. At worst quick cerebral surgery might be necessary, if anything went badly amiss. But nothing could, Bruno thought. Nothing could.

He glanced at the sleek, shining machines, with their attachments and registering dials. Not medical equipment, of course. They were in Parsons' line; he had planned and built them. But the idea had been Bruno's to begin with, and Bruno's psychiatric knowledge had complemented Parsons' technology. Two branches of science had met, and the result would be—a specific for insanity.

Two spots on Bruno's head had been shaved clean. Parsons carefully affixed electrodes, which were already in place on Gregson's skull.

"Remember," Parsons said, "you should be as relaxed as possible."

"You took no sedative, Doctor," Morrissey said.

"I don't need one. The anesthetic will be enough."

The nurses moved with silent competence about the table. The emergency oxygen apparatus was tested. The adrenalin was checked; the sterilizer steamed on its table. Bruno emptied his mind and relaxed as a nurse swabbed his arm with alcohol.

Superimposure of the electronic mental matrix of sanity . . . psychic rapport . . . the pattern of his sanity-dampers would be fixed unalterably in the twisted, warped mind of the manic-depressive.

He felt the sting of the needle. Automatically he began counting. One. Two. Three. . . .

He opened his eyes. The face of Morrissey, intent and abstracted, hung over him. Beyond Morrissey was the bright ceiling fluorescent, glaring down with a brilliance that made Bruno blink. His arm stung slightly

but otherwise there were no after effects.

"Can you hear me, Doctor?" Morrissey said.

Bruno nodded. "Yes. I'm awake now." His tongue was a little thick. That was natural. "Gregson?"

But Morrissey's face was growing smaller. No. it was receding. The ceiling light shrank. *He was falling—*

He shot down with blinding rapidity. White walls rushed up past him. Morrissey's face receded to a shining dot far above. It grew darker as he fell. Winds screamed, and there was a slow, gradually increasing thundering like an echo resounding from the floor of this monstrous abyss.

Down and down, faster and faster, with the white walls fading to gray and to black, till he was blind, till he was deafened with that roaring echo.

Visibility returned. Everything was out of focus. He blinked, swallowed, and made out the rectangular shape of a bedside screen. There was something else, white and irregular.

"Are you awake, Doctor?"

"Hello, Harwood," Bruno said to the nurse. "How long have I been out?"

"About two hours. I'll call Dr. Morrissey."

She stepped out of the room. Bruno flexed his muscles experimentally. He felt all right. Not even a headache. His vision was normal now. He instinctively reached for his wrist and began counting the pulse. Through the window he could see the slow motion of a branch, the leaves fluttering in a gentle wind. Footsteps sounded.

"Congratulations," Morrissey said, coming to the bed. "Gregson's in shock, but he's already beginning to come out of it. No prognosis yet, but I'll bet a cookie you've done it."

Bruno let out his breath in a long sigh. "You think so?"

Morrissey laughed. "Don't tell me you weren't sure!"

"I'm always sure," Bruno said. "Just the same, confirmation's always pleasant. I'm thirsty as the devil. Get me some ice, Ken, will you?"

"All right." Morrissey leaned out of the door and called the nurse. Then he came back and lowered the Venetian blind. "Sun in your eyes. That better? How do you feel, or need I ask?"

"Quite normal. No ill effects at all. Say, you'd better notify Barbara I'm alive."

"I already have. She's coming over. Meanwhile, Parsons is outside. Want to see him?"
"Sure."

THE physicist must have been near the door, for he appeared almost instantly. "I'll have to depend on you now," he said. "Psychiatric examinations are out of my line, but Dr. Morrissey tells me we've apparently succeeded."

"We can't be sure yet," Bruno said cautiously, reaching for cracked ice. "I'm keeping my fingers crossed."

"How do you feel?"

"If there's a healthier specimen in this hospital than Dr. Bruno," Morrissey said, "I've yet to hear of it. I'll be back. I've got to check a patient." He went out.

Bruno lay back on his pillow.

"I'll be up and around tomorrow," he said, "and I'll want to make some tests on Gregson then. Meanwhile, I'll relax—for a change. One good thing about this place; the routine's so perfect that you can unhitch yourself completely and let yourself rest, if you want to. A dependable staff."

The Venetian blind clattered in the wind. Parsons grunted and went toward it, taking hold of the cord.

He raised the blind and stood there, his back to Bruno. But it was dark outside the window.

"The sun was in my eyes," Bruno said. "Wait a minute! That was only a little while ago. Parsons, something's wrong!"

"What?" Parsons asked, without turning.

"Morrissey said I was unconscious for only two hours. And I took anesthesia at half-past nine. At night! But the sun was shining in that window when I woke up, a few minutes ago!"

"It's night now," Parsons said.

"It can't be. Get Morrissey. I want to—"

But Parsons suddenly leaned forward and opened the window. Then he jumped out and vanished.

"*Morrissey!*" Bruno shouted.

Morrissey came in. He didn't look at Bruno. He walked quickly across the room and jumped out of the window into the darkness.

Ferguson and Dale entered, still in their operating gowns. They followed Morrissey through the window.

Bruno hoisted himself up. Three nurses came through the door. An intern and an orderly followed. Then others.

In nightmare procession the staff filed into

Bruno's room. In deadly silence they walked to the window and jumped out.

The blankets slipped down from Bruno's body. He saw them sail slowly toward the window—

The bed was tilting! No—the room itself was turning, revolving, till Bruno clung frantically to the head-board while gravity dragged him inexorably toward a window that now gaped directly below him.

The bed fell. It spilled Bruno out. He saw the oblong of the window opening like a mouth to swallow him. He plunged through into utter blackness, into an echoing, roaring hell of night and thunder. . . .

"Oh, good heavens!" Bruno moaned. "What a dream! Morrissey, get me a sedative!"

The psychiatrist laughed. "You've had a dream-within-a-dream before, haven't you, Doctor? It sounds unnerving, but now you've told me all about it. The catharsis is better than a barbiturate."

"I suppose so." Bruno lay back in the bed. This wasn't the room he had dreamed about. It was much larger, and outside the windows was normal darkness. Morrissey had said that the anesthetic had lasted for several hours.

"Anyway, I'm jittery," Bruno said.

"I didn't know you had any nerves. . . . Here, Harwood." Morrissey turned to the nurse and scribbled down a few symbols on a pad. "There. We'll get your sedative. Don't you want to know about Gregson?"

"I'd forgotten about him completely," Bruno acknowledged. "Can you tell anything definite yet?"

"We caught him on the downcurve of the depressive cycle, remember? Well, he isn't talking yet, but there's a touch of euphoria. The elation will wear off. One thing, you've broken the cycle. His mind isn't adjusted yet to those—damper bars you put in 'em, but off-hand, I'd say it looks pretty good."

"What does Parsons think?"

"He's immersed in calculations. Said he'd be around to see you as soon as you woke up. Here's that sedative."

Bruno accepted the capsules from the nurse and washed them down with water.

"Thanks. I'd rather rest a bit. I must have unconsciously piled up quite a lot of tension."

"So I gather," Morrissey said drily. "Well, here's the bell-cord. Anything else?"

"Just rest." Bruno hesitated. "Oh—one

thing." He extended his arm. "Pinch it."

MORRISSEY stared and chuckled. "Still not sure you're awake? I can assure you you are, Doctor. I'm not going to jump out of the window. And it's still night, you'll notice."

When Bruno didn't move, Morrissey pinched up a fold of the other's forearm between thumb and finger.

"Ouch!" Bruno said. "Thanks."

"Any time," Morrissey said cheerfully. "Get some rest now. I'll be back."

He went out with the nurse. Bruno blew out his breath and let his gaze wander around the room. Everything looked perfectly solid and normal. No black, thundering abyss lurked under the floor. An unpleasant dream!

He reached for pad and pencil and made careful notes on the curious double-delusion before he let himself relax. Then he felt the sedative creeping slowly along his nerves, a warm, pleasant sensation that he was glad to encourage. He didn't want to think. Later would be time enough. The empathy surrogate experiment, Gregson, the physicist Parsons, Barbara—later!

He drowsed. It seemed only a moment before he opened his eyes to see sunlight beyond the window. Brief panic touched him, then he looked at his wrist-watch and was reassured to see that it said eleven o'clock. He could hear the muffled sounds of the ordinary hospital routine going on outside door and window. Presently, feeling refreshed, he got up and dressed.

In Nurse Harwood's office he telephoned Morrissey, exchanged brief greetings, and then went to his own office to shower and shave.

He telephoned Barbara.

"Hello, there," she said. "Morrissey notified me you were doing all right. So I thought I'd wait till you woke up."

"I'm awake now. Suppose I come over to the house for lunch?"

"Swell. I'll be waiting."

"Half an hour, then?"

"Half an hour. I'm glad you called, Bob. I was worried."

"You needn't have been."

"Was your experiment a success?"

"Can't tell yet. Keep your fingers crossed."

Ten minute later Bruno's fingers were still crossed as he examined Gregson. Parsons and Morrissey were present. The physicist

kept making notes, but Morrissey stood silent and watchful.

There was very little to be seen as yet. Gregson lay in his bed, the shaved spots on his head white against the dark hair, his features relaxed and peaceful. The typical anxiety expression was gone. Bruno opened the man's eyes and flashed his light into them. Contraction of the pupils seemed normal.

"Can you hear me, Gregson?"

Gregson's lips moved. But he said nothing. "It's all right. You're feeling fine, aren't you? You're not worried about anything, are you?"

"Headache," Gregson said. "Bad headache."

"We'll give you something for that. Now try to sleep."

Outside, in the corridor, Bruno tried hard to repress his exultation. Parsons blinked at him, scowling.

"Can you tell anything yet?"

Bruno checked himself. "No. It's too soon. But—"

"The manic-depressive phase is passed," Morrissey put in. "He seems rational. And he hasn't been for three years."

"Those damper bars—" Bruno smiled. "Well, we'll have to wait and see. We can't write up a report yet. He's certainly oriented. We'll give him a chance to rest. More tests later. I don't want to jump the gun."

But with Barbara he let himself be more enthusiastic.

"We've done it, Barbara! Found a specific for insanity."

She leaned across the table to pour coffee.

"I thought there were so many types of psychosis that the treatment varied considerably."

"Well, that's true, but we've never got to the real basis of the trouble before. You can cure a cold by rest therapy, force fluids and aspirin, but cold vaccine gets directly to the root of the trouble. Some types of insanity have been thought incurable, but tetanus was incurable till we got a vaccine for it. The empathy surrogate therapy is the lowest common denominator. It works on the electronic structure of the mind, and unless there's physical deterioration, as in advanced paresis, our treatment should work beautifully."

"So that's what you were working on," Barbara said. "Bob, you don't know how glad I am that it's successful."

"Well—we hope. We're almost sure. But—"

"You can take a vacation now? You've been working so hard!"

"A few more weeks, and I'll be ready. I've got to collate my notes. I can't run out on Parsons at this stage. But very soon, I promise."

HE LOOKED up to see her smile. Suddenly he stiffened. Her smile was broadening, stretching, the lower lip dropping till all her teeth showed. The lower lids of her eyes hung . . . stretched. . . .

Her nose lengthened.

Her eyes slowly crawled out of their sockets and lengthened on dreadful stalks down her cheeks.

She melted down and out of sight beneath the table.

The table began to sink.

And now everything around him was melting. Under him the chair became plastic and then fluid. The floor was a bowl, and the walls were dripping down into it, into a shining whirlpool at the center.

He slipped helplessly along that slope till the pool engulfed him, in a chaos of thunder and confusion and sickening horror.

The winds bellowed. . . . The empty drop closed around him. . . . He fell in darkness. . . .

This time, when he woke, he wasn't sure. The panic had not left him. He learned, later, that he had been semi-delirious for eight days, and only Morrissey's unceasing attention had kept him reasonably quiet. Then there were weeks of convalescence, and a vacation, and it seemed a long time before he came back from Florida, tanned and healthy, to resume his duties.

Even then, though, there was the fear.

When he drove toward the blocky buildings of the sanitarium he felt a touch of it brush him. He reached for Barbara's hand, and felt some comfort in the assurance of her nearness. She had been helpful, too, though she had not understood.

Every day after that, when he left her, there was a fleeting apprehension lest he never see her again. To forget the uncertainty of his footing, the ground that was no longer absolutely solid, he plunged into the hospital's routine. And gradually, after more weeks, the terror began to leave him.

Gregson had been cured. He was still under precautionary observation, but all traces of his psychosis seemed to have vanished. There were still minor neuroses, the

natural result of the past six years of abnormal restraint, but they were disappearing under proper therapy. The empathy surrogate treatment was successful. Yet, for a while, Bruno refused to attempt more experiments.

Parsons was displeased. He was anxious to chart a graph on the process, and one trial did not provide enough evidence. Bruno kept putting the physicist off with promises. It eventually ended in a minor spat which Morrissey halted by pointing out that Dr Robert Bruno was, technically, his own patient, and was not yet ready for further research on the dangerous subject.

Parsons, furious, went off. Bruno followed Morrissey into the latter's office and sat down in one of the more comfortable chairs. It was mid-afternoon, and beyond the windows the drowsy hum of summer made a peaceful counterpoint to the conversation.

"Cigarette, Ken?"

"Thanks. . . . Look, Bob." The two men had drawn closer together in the last weeks. Morrissey no longer addressed his Chief of Staff with the former "Doctor." "I've been collating the facts of your case, and I think I've got at the root of the trouble. Do you want to hear my diagnosis?"

"Candidly, I don't," Bruno said, closing his eyes and inhaling smoke. "I'd prefer to forget it. But I know I can't. That would be psychically ruinous."

"You had a cyclic self-containing dream—I suppose you could call it that. You dreamed you were dreaming you were dreaming. You know what your trouble is?"

"Well?"

"You're not sure you're awake now."

"Oh, I'm sure enough," Bruno said. "Most of the time."

"You've got to be sure all the time. Or else make yourself believe that it doesn't matter whether you're dreaming or waking."

"Doesn't matter! Ken! To know that everything may melt away under my feet at any time, and to think that doesn't matter! That's impossible!"

"Then you've got to be sure you're awake. Those hallucinations you had are over. Weeks have passed."

"Hallucinatory time is elastic and subjective."

"It's a defense mechanism—you know that, I suppose?"

"Defense against what?"

Morrissey moistened his lips. "Remember,

I'm the psychiatrist and you're the patient. You were psychoanalyzed when you studied psychiatry, but you didn't get all the devils out of your subconscious. Hang it, Bob, you know very well that most psychiatrists take up the work because they're attracted to it for pathological reasons—neuroses of their own. Why did you always insist that you were so utterly sure of everything?"

"I always made sure."

"Compensation. To allow for a basic un-sureness and insecurity in your own make-up. Consciously you were sure the empathy surrogate treatment would work, but your unconscious mind wasn't so certain. You never let yourself know that, though. But it came out under stress—the therapy itself."

"Go on," Bruno said slowly.

MMORRISSEY tapped the papers on his desk.

"I know my diagnosis is pretty accurate, but you can decide that for yourself. You can tell, perhaps, better than I can. The frontiers of the mind are *terra incognita*. Your simile of a uranium pile was better than you'd realized. When critical mass is approached, there's danger. And the damper bars in your own mind—what did Parsons' machine do to them?"

"I am quite sane," Bruno said. "I think."

"Sure you are, now. You're getting over that explosion. You'd been building up an anxiety neurosis, and the therapy made it blow off. Just how, I don't understand. The electronic patterns of the mind aren't in my field. All I know is that the experiment with Gregson removed the safety blocks from your mind, and you lost control for a while. Thus the hallucinations, which simply followed the path of least resistance. Point One: You're afraid of insecurity and un-sureness, and you always have been. Thus your dream follows a familiarly symbolic pattern. At any time the sureness of waking may vanish. Point Two: As long as you think you're dreaming, you're dodging responsibility!"

"Good Lord, Ken!" Bruno said. "I just want to be sure I'm awake!"

"And there's absolutely no way you can be sure of that," Morrissey said. "The conviction must come from your own mind and be subjective. No objective proof is possible. Otherwise, if you fail to convince yourself, the anxiety neurosis will grow back into a psychosis, and—" He shrugged.

"It sounds logical," Bruno said. "I'm be-

ginning to see it pretty clearly. I think, perhaps, this clarification is what I needed."

"Do you think you're dreaming now?"

"Not at the moment—certainly."

"Swell," Morrissey said. "Because the conglobulation of the psych between the forever and upstriding kaleeno bystixing forinder saan—"

Bruno jumped up. "Ken!" he said, dry-throated. "Stop it!"

"Fylixar catween baleeza—"

"Stop it!"

"BYZINDERKONA REPSTILLING AND ALWAYS ALWAYS ALWAYS NEVER KNOWING NEVER KNOWING NEVER KNOWING—"

The words came out in great whirling shining globes. They raced past Bruno's head with a screaming hiss. They bombarded him. They carried him back into a thundering, windy abyss of blackness and terror.

MORRISSEY stepped back from the bed and asked:

Dr. Robert Bruno managed to nod.

"Good," Morrissey said. "You were out for about three hours. But everything's going nicely. You'll be up and around pretty soon. There's plenty to be done. Barbara wants to see you—and Parsons."

"Ken," Bruno said, "wait a minute. Am I awake now? I mean, really awake?"

Morrissey stared and grinned.

"Sure," he said. "I can guarantee that."

But Bruno did not answer. His gaze moved to the windows, to the solidity of the walls and ceiling, to the reality of his own hands and arms.

Never knowing?

He looked at Morrissey, waiting for Morrissey to vanish, and the black pit to open again beneath him.

