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Introduction

Few people would argue with the proposition that Robert Silverberg stands among the greatest science fiction writers of the twentieth (and now twenty-first) century. His career spans over forty years, and continues in full force today. Indeed, many critics feel Silverberg's recent work is among the most compelling of his entire career.

This collection presents a sample of Robert Silverberg's short works. They span many different segments of his career, and include some of his most acclaimed stories, such as the Nebula Award winning and Hugo nominated story “Passengers,” the Nebula Award winning “Sailing to Byzantium,” and the Nebula Award nominated “Pope of the Chimps.” Four more excellent short works, spanning from 1957 to 1995, round out this diverse collection.

We hope you find it as interesting as we did to compare these stories. They follow Silverberg's progression from a promising young writer in the 1950s to a clear master of the form in the 60s, to his ascension through the 70s and 80s, to a towering figure in the field of science fiction in the 90s and today.

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In the Clone Zone

THE AIRPORT was very new. It had a bright, shiny, major-world-capital feel, and for a moment Mondschein thought the plane had landed in Rio or Buenos Aires by mistake. But then he noticed the subtle signs of deception, the tackiness around the edges, the spongy junk behind the gleaming facades, and knew that he must indeed be in Tierra Alvarado.

“Senor Mondschein?” a deep male voice said, while he was still marching down the corridors that led to the immigration lounge. He turned and saw a short, wide-shouldered man in a beribboned green-and-red comic-opera uniform which he remembered after a moment was that of the Guardia de la Patria, the Maximum Leader's elite security corps. “I am Colonel Aristegui,” he said. “You may come with me, please. It was a good journey? You are not overly fatigued?”

Aristegui didn't bother with passport formalities. He led Mondschein through a steel doorway marked SEGURIDAD, INGRESO PROHIBIDO which admitted them to a series of bewildering passageways and catwalks and spiral staircases. There was no veneer back here: everything was severely functional, gunmetal-gray walls, exposed rivets and struts, harsh unshielded light-fixtures that looked a century old. Here it comes, Mondschein thought: this man will take me to some deserted corner of the airstrip and touch his laser pistol to my temple and they will bury me in an unmarked grave, and that will be that, five minutes back in the country and I am out of the way forever.

The final visa approval had come through only the day before, the fifth of June, and just hours later Mondschein had boarded the Aero Alvarado flight that would take him in a single soaring supersonic arc nonstop from Zurich to his long-lost homeland on the west coast of South America. Mondschein hadn't set foot there in twenty-five years, not since the Maximum Leader had expelled him for life as a sort of upside-down reward for his extraordinary technological achievements: for it was Mondschein, at the turn of the century, who had turned his impoverished little country into the unchallenged world leader in the field of human cloning.

In those days it had been called the Republic of the Central Andes. The Maximum Leader had put it together out of parts of the shattered nations which in an earlier time, when things were very different in the world, had been known as Peru, Chile, and Bolivia. During his years of exile in Europe Mondschein had always preferred to speak of himself as a Peruvian, whenever he spoke of himself at all. But now the name of the country was Tierra Alvarado and its airline was Aero Alvarado and its capital was Ciudad Alvarado, Alvarado this and Alvarado that wherever you looked. That was all right, a fine old South American tradition. You expected a Maximum Leader to clap his own name on everything, to hang his portrait everywhere, to glorify himself in every imaginable way.

Alvarado had carried things a little further than most, though, by having two dozen living replicas of himself created, the better to serve his people. That had been Mondschein's final task as a citizen of the Republic, the supreme accomplishment of his art: to produce two dozen AAA Class clones of the Maximum Leader. which could function as doubles for Alvarado at the dreary meetings of the Popular Assembly, stand in for him at the interminable National Day of Liberation parades, and keep would-be assassins in a constant state of befuddlement. They were masterpieces, those two dozen Alvarados—all but indistinguishable from the original, the only AAA Class clones ever made. With their aid the Maximum Leader was able to maintain unblinking vigilance over the citizens of Tierra Alvarado—twenty-four hours a day.

But Mondschein didn't care how many Alvarados he might be coming home to. Twenty, fifty, a hundred,

what did that matter? Singular or plural, Alvarado still held the entire country in his pocket, as he had for the past generation and a half. That was the essential situation. Everything else was beside the point, a mere detail. To Mondschein the clones made no real difference at all.

In fact there was very little that did make a difference to Mondschein these days. He was getting old and slept badly most of the time and his days were an agony of acute homesickness. He wanted to speak his native language again, Spanish as it had been spoken in Peru and not the furry Spanish of Spain, and he wanted to breathe the sharp air of the high mountains and eat papas a la huancaina and anticuchos and a proper ceviche and maybe see the ancient walls of Cuzco once more and the clear dark water of Lake Titicaca. It didn't seem likely to him that Alvarado had granted him a pardon after all this time simply for the sake of luring him back to face a firing squad. The safe conduct, which Mondschein hadn't in any way solicited but had been overjoyed to receive, was probably sincere: a sign that the old tyrant had mellowed at last. And if not, well, at least he would die on his native soil, which somehow seemed better than dying in Bern, Toulon, Madrid, Stockholm, Prague, wherever, any of the innumerable cities in which he had lived during his long years of exile.

* * * *

They emerged from the building into a bleak, deserted rear yard where empty baggage carts were strewn around like the fossil carcasses of ancient beasts, a perfect place for a quiet execution. The dry cool wind of early winter was sweeping a dark line of dust across the bare pavement. But to Mondschein's astonishment an immense sleek black limousine materialized from somewhere almost at once and two more Guardia men hopped out, saluting madly. Aristegui beckoned him into the rear of the vast car. "Your villa has been prepared for you, Dr. Mondschein. You are the guest of the nation, you understand. When you are refreshed the Minister of Scientific Development requests your attendance at the Palace of Government, perhaps this afternoon." He flicked a finger and a mahogany panel swung open, revealing a well-stocked bar. "You will have a cognac? It is the rare old. Or champagne, perhaps? A whiskey? Everything imported, the best quality."

"I don't drink," said Mondschein.

"Ah," said Aristegui uncertainly, as though that were a fact that should have been on his prep-sheet and unaccountably hadn't been. Or perhaps he had simply been looking forward to nipping into the rare old himself, which now would be inappropriate. "Well, then. You are comfortable? Not too warm, not too cool?" Mondschein nodded and peered out the window. They were on an imposing-looking highway now, with a city of pastel-hued high-rise buildings visible off to the side. He didn't recognize a thing. Alvarado had built this city from scratch in the empty highland plains midway between the coast and the lake and it had been only a few years old when Mondschein had last seen it, a place of raw gouged hillsides and open culverts and half-paved avenues with stacks of girders and sewer pipes and cable reels piled up everywhere. From a distance, at least, it looked quite splendid now. But as they left the beautifully landscaped road that had carried them from the airport to the city and turned off into the urban residential district he saw that the splendor was, unsurprisingly, a fraud of the usual Alvarado kind: the avenues had been paved, all right, but they were reverting to nature again, cracking and upheaving as the swelling roots of the bombacho trees and the candelero palms that had been planted down the central dividers ripped them apart. The grand houses of pink and green and azure stucco were weather-stained and crumbling, and Mondschein observed ugly random outcroppings of tin-roofed squatter-shacks sprouting like mushrooms in the open fields behind them, where elegant gardens briefly had been. And this was the place he had longed so desperately to behold one last time before he died. He thought of his comfortable little apartment in Bern and felt a pang.

But then the car swung off onto a different road, into the hills to the east which even in the city's earliest days had been the magnificently appointed enclave of the privileged and powerful. Here there was no

sign of decay. The gardens were impeccable, the villas spacious and well kept. Mondschein remembered this district well. He had lived in it himself before Alvarado had found it expedient to give him a one-way ticket abroad. Names he hadn't thought of in decades came to the surface of his mind: this was the Avenida de las Flores, this was Calle del Sol, this was Camino de los Toros, this was Calle de los Indios, and this—this—

He gasped. "Your villa has been prepared for you," Aristegui had told him at the airport. Guest of the nation, yes. But Mondschein hadn't thought to interpret Aristegui's words literally. They'd be giving him *a* villa, *some* villa. But the handsome two-story building with the white facade and the red tile roof in front of which the limousine had halted was in fact *his* villa, the actual and literal and much-beloved one he had lived in long ago, until the night when the swarthy little frog-faced officer of the Guardia had come to him to tell him that he was expelled from the country. He had had to leave everything behind then, his books, his collection of ancient scientific instruments, his pre-Columbian ceramics, his rack of Italian-made suits and fine vicuna coats, his pipes, his cello, his family albums, his greenhouse full of orchids, even his dogs. One small suitcase was all they had let him take with him on the morning flight to Madrid, and from that day on he had never permitted himself to acquire possessions, but had lived in a simple way, staying easily within the very modest allowance that the Maximum Leader in his great kindness sent him each month wherever he might be. And now they had given him back his actual villa. Mondschein wondered who had been evicted, on how much notice and for what trumped-up cause, to make this building available to him again after all this time.

All that he had wanted, certainly all that he had expected, was some ordinary little flat in the center of the city. The thought of returning to the old villa sickened him. There would be too many ghosts roaming in it. For the first time he wondered whether his impulsive decision to accept Alvarado's astonishing invitation to return to the country had been a mistake.

"You recognize this house?" Aristegui asked. "You are surprised, are you not? You are amazed with joy?"

* * * *

They had made no attempt to restore his lost possessions or to undo the changes that had come to the house since he had lived there. Perhaps such a refinement of cruelty was beyond the Maximum Leader's imagination, or, more probably, no one had any recollection of what had become of his things after so many years. It was just as well. He had long since managed to put his collections of antiquities out of his mind and he had no interest in playing the cello any more, or in smoking pipes. The villa now was furnished in standard upper-class Peruvian-style comfort of the early years of the century, everything very safe, very unexceptionable, very familiar, very dull. He was provided with a staff of four, a housekeeper, a cook, a driver, a gardener. Wandering through the airy rambling house, he felt less pain than he had anticipated. His spirit was long gone from it; it was just a house. There were caged parrots in the garden and a white-and-gray cat was slinking about outside as if it belonged there; perhaps it was the cat of the former resident and had found its way back in the night.

He bathed and rested and had a light lunch. In the afternoon the driver came to him and said, "May I take you to the Palace of Government now, Senor Dr. Mondschein? The Minister is eager." The driver must be a Guardia man also, Mondschein realized. But that was all right. All of it was all right, whatever they did now.

The Palace of Government hadn't been finished in Mondschein's time. It was a huge sprawling thing made of blocks of black stone, fitted together dry-wall fashion to give it a massive pseudo-Inca look, and it was big enough to have housed the entire bureaucracy of the Roman Empire at its peak. Relays of functionaries, some in Guardia uniform, some not, led him through gloomy high-vaulted corridors, across

walled courtyards, and up grand and ponderous stone staircases until at last an officious florid-faced aide-de-camp conducted him into the wing that was the domain of the Ministry of Scientific Development. Here he passed through a procession of outer offices and finally was admitted to a brightly lit reception hall lined with somber portraits in oils. He recognized Einstein and Leonardo da Vinci and guessed that the others were Aristotle, Darwin, Galileo, perhaps Isaac Newton. And in the place of honor, of course, a grand representation of the Maximum Leader himself, looking down with brooding intensity.

"His Excellency the Minister," said the florid aide-de-camp, waving him into an office paneled with dark exotic woods at the far end of the reception hall. A tall man in an ornately brocaded costume worthy of a bullfighter rose from a glistening desk to greet him. And unexpectedly Mondschein found himself staring yet again at the unforgettable face of Diego Alvarado.

One of the clones, Mondschein thought. It had to be.

All the same it felt like being clubbed in the teeth. The Minister of Scientific Development had Alvarado's hard icy blue eyes, his thin lips, his broad brow, his jutting cleft chin. His smile was Alvarado's cold smile, his teeth were Alvarado's perfect glistening teeth. He had the coarse curling bangs—graying now—that gave the Maximum Leader the look of a youthful indomitable Caesar. His lanky body was lean and gaunt, a dancer's body, and his movements were a dancer's movements, graceful and precise. Seeing him awoke long-forgotten terrors in Mondschein. And yet he knew that this must be one of the clones. After that first shock of recognition, something told Mondschein subliminally that he was looking at an example of his own fine handiwork.

"President Alvarado asks me to convey his warmest greetings," the clone said. It was Alvarado's voice, cool and dry. "He will welcome you personally when his schedule permits, but he wishes you to know that he is honored in the deepest way by your decision to accept his hospitality."

The aging had worked very well, Mondschein thought. Alvarado would be about seventy now, still vigorous, still in his prime. There were lines on this man's face in the right places, changes in the lines of his cheekbones and jaw, exactly as should have happened in twenty-five years.

"It wasn't any decision at all," Mondschein said. He tried to sound casual. "I was ready and eager to come back. Your homeland, your native soil, the place where your ancestors lived and died for three hundred years—as you get older you realize that nothing can ever take its place."

"I quite understand," said the clone.

Do you? Mondschein wondered. Your only ancestor is a scrap of cellular material. You were born in a tissue-culture vat. And yet you quite understand.

I made you, Mondschein thought. I made you.

He said, "Of course the invitation to return came as an immense surprise."

"Yes. No doubt it did. But the Maximum Leader is a man of great compassion. He felt you had suffered in exile long enough. One day he said, We have done a great injustice to that man, and now it must be remedied. So long as Rafael Mondschein y Gonzalez dwells in foreign lands, our soul can never rest. And so the word went forth to you that all is forgiven, that you were pardoned."

"Only a man of true greatness could have done such a thing," said Mondschein.

"Indeed. Indeed."

Mondschein's crime had been the crime of overachievement. He had built Alvarado's cloning laboratories to such a level of technical skill that they were the envy of all the world; and when eventually the anti-cloning zealots in North America and Europe had grown so strident that there was talk of trade sanctions and the laboratories had to be shut down, Mondschein had become the scapegoat. Alvarado had proposed to find him guilty of creating vile unnatural abominations, but Mondschein had not been willing to let them hang such an absurdity around his neck, and in the end he had allowed them to manufacture supposed embezzlements in his name instead. In return for a waiver of trial he accepted exile for life. Of course the laboratories had reopened after a while, this time secretly and illicitly, and before long ten or eleven other countries had started to turn out A and even AA Class clones also and the industry had become too important to the world economy to allow zealotry to interfere with it any longer; but Mondschein remained overseas, rotting in oblivion, purposelessly wandering like a wraith from Madrid to Prague, from Prague to Stockholm, from Stockholm to Marseilles. And now at last the Maximum Leader in his great compassion had relented.

The Minister said, “You know we have made vast strides in the biological sciences since you last were here. Once you have had some time to settle in, we will want you to visit our laboratories, which as you may be aware are once again in legal operation.”

Mondschein was aware of that, yes. Throughout the world Tierra Alvarado was known informally as the Clone Zone, the place where anyone could go to have a reasonable facsimile manufactured at a reasonable price. But that was no longer any concern of his.

“I'm afraid that I have very little interest in cloning technology these days,” he said.

The Minister's chilly Alvarado-eyes blazed with sudden heat. “A visit to our laboratories may serve to reawaken that interest, Dr. Mondschein.”

“I doubt that very much.”

The Minister looked unhappy. “We had hoped quite strongly that you would be willing to share the benefits of your scientific wisdom with us, doctor. Your response greatly disappoints us.”

Ah. It was all very clear, now, and very obvious. Strange that he hadn't foreseen it.

“I have no scientific wisdom, really,” said Mondschein evenly. “None that would be of any use. I haven't kept up with the state of the art.”

“There are those who would be pleased to refresh your—”

“I'd much rather prefer to remain in retirement. I'm too old to make any worthwhile contributions.”

Now the thin lips were quirking. “The national interest is in jeopardy, Dr. Mondschein. For the first time we are challenged by competition from other countries. Genetic technology, you understand, is our primary source of hard currency. We are not a prosperous land, doctor. Our cloning industry is our one great asset, which you created for us virtually singlehandedly. Now that it faces these new threats, surely we may speak to your sense of patriotism, if not your one-time passion for scientific achievement, in asking you—” The Minister broke off abruptly, as though seeing his answer in Mondschein's expression. In a different tone he said, “No doubt you are tired after your long journey, doctor. I should have allowed you more time to rest. We'll continue these discussions at a later date, perhaps.”

He turned away. The florid aide-de-camp appeared as though from the air and showed Mondschein out. His driver was waiting in the courtyard.

Mondschein spent most of the night trying to sleep, but it was difficult for him, as it usually was. And there was a special problem this night, for his mind was still on Swiss time, and what was the night in Tierra Alvarado was in Switzerland the beginning of a new day. His thoughts went ticking ceaselessly on, hour after hour. Sleep finally took him toward dawn, like a curtain falling, like the blade of a guillotine.

* * * *

Colonel Aristegui of the Guardia de la Patria came to him, phoning first for an appointment, saying the matter was urgent. Mondschein assumed that this would be the next attempt to put pressure on him to take charge of the cloning labs, but that did not appear to be what was on Aristegui's mind. The wide-shouldered little man looked remarkably ill at ease; he paced, he fidgeted, he mopped his sweating forehead with a lace handkerchief. Then he said, as if forcing the words out, "This is extremely delicate."

"Is it?"

Aristegui studied him with care. "You control yourself extremely well, doctor. In particular I mark your restraint in regard to the President. You speak of your gratitude to him for allowing you to return. But inwardly you must hate him very much."

"No," Mondschein said. "It's all ancient history. I'm an old man now. What does any of it matter any more?"

"He took away the scientific work that was your life. He forced you to leave the land of your birth."

"If you think you're going to get me to launch into an attack on him, you're totally mistaken. What's past is past and I'm happy to be home again and that's all there is to it."

Aristegui stared at his brilliantly gleaming patent-leather shoes. Then he sighed and raised his head like a diver coming up to the surface and said, "The country is dying, doctor."

"Is it?"

"Of the Latin American disease. The strong man comes, he sees the evils and injustices and remedies them, and then he stays and stays and stays until *he* is the evils and the injustices. President Alvarado has ruled here for thirty-five years. He drains the treasury for his palaces; he ignores what must be done to preserve and sustain. He is our great burden, our great curse. It is time for him to step aside. Or else be thrust aside."

Mondschein's eyes widened. "You're trying to draw me into some sort of conspiracy? You must be out of your mind."

"I risk my life telling you this."

"Yes. You do. And I risk my life listening."

"You are essential to our success. *Essential.* You must help us."

"Look," said Mondschein, "if Alvarado simply wants to do away with me, he doesn't have to bother with anything as elaborate as this. Nobody in the world cares whether I live or die. It isn't necessary to inveigle me into a fantastic nonexistent plot on his life. He can just have me shot. All right? All right?"

"This is not a trap. As God is my witness, I am not here as part of a scheme to ensnare you. I beg for your assistance. If you wish, report me to the authorities, and I will be tortured and the truth will come out and I will be executed, and then you will know that I was honest with you."

Wearily Mondschein said, “What is all this about?”

“You possess the ability to distinguish between the brothers of Alvarado and Alvarado himself.”

“The brothers?”

“The clones. There is a secret method, known only to you, that allows you to tell the true Alvarado from the false.”

“Don't be silly.”

“It is so. You need not pretend. I have access to very high sources.”

Mondschein shrugged. “For the sake of argument let's say that it's so. What then?”

“When we aim our blow at Alvarado, we want to be certain we are assassinating the real one.”

“Yes. Of course you do.”

“You can guide our hand. He often appears in public, but no one knows whether it is really he, or one of the brothers. And if we strike down one of the brothers, thinking we have killed the true Alvarado—”

“Yes,” Mondschein said. “I see the problem. But assuming that I'm able to tell the difference, and I'm not conceding that I can, what makes you think I'd want to get mixed up in your plot? What do I stand to gain from it, other than useless revenge on a man who did me harm a very long time ago? Will his death give me back my life? No, I simply want to live out my last few years in peace. Kill Alvarado without me, if you want to kill him. If you're not sure whether you're killing the right one, kill them all. Kill them one by one until there are none at all left.”

“I could kill you,” Aristegui said. “Right now. I should. After what I have told you, you own my life.”

Again Mondschein shrugged. “Then kill me. For whatever good it'll do you. I'm not going to inform on you.”

“Nor cooperate with me.”

“Neither one nor the other.”

“All you want is to live in peace,” said Aristegui savagely. “But how do you know you will? Alvarado has asked you to work for him again, and you have refused.” He held up a hand. “Yes, yes, I know that. I will not kill you, though I should. But he might, though he has no reason to. Think about that, Senor Doctor.”

He rose and glared at Mondschein a moment, and left without another word.

Mondschein's body clock had caught up with Tierra Alvarado time by this time. But that night, once again, he lay until dawn in utterly lucid wakefulness before exhaustion at last brought him some rest. It was as though sleep were a concept he had never quite managed to understand.

* * * *

The next summons came from Alvarado himself.

The Presidential Palace, which Mondschein remembered as a compact, somewhat austere building in vaguely Roman style, had expanded in the course of a quarter of a century into an incomprehensible mazelike edifice that seemed consciously intended to rival Versailles in ostentatious grandeur. The Hall of

Audience was a good sixty meters long, with rich burgundy draperies along the walls and thick blood-red carpeting. There was a marble dais at the far end where the Maximum Leader sat enthroned like an emperor. Dazzling sunlight flooded down on him through a dome of shimmering glass set in the ceiling. Mondschein wondered if he was supposed to offer a genuflection.

There were no guards in the room, only the two of them. But security screens in the floor created an invisible air-wall around the dais. Mondschein found himself forced to halt by subtle pressure when he was still at least fifteen meters short of the throne. Alvarado came stiffly to his feet and they stood facing each other in silence for a long moment.

It seemed anticlimactic, this confrontation at last. Mondschein was surprised to discover that he felt none of the teeth-on-edge uneasiness that the man had always been able to engender in him. Perhaps having seen the clone-Alvarado earlier had taken the edge off the impact.

Alvarado said, “You have found all the arrangements satisfactory so far, I hope, doctor?”

“In the old days you called me Rafael.”

“Rafael, yes. It was so long ago. How good it is to see you again, Rafael. You look well.”

“As do you.”

“Yes. Thank you. Your villa is satisfactory, Rafael?”

“Quite satisfactory,” said Mondschein. “I look forward to a few last years of quiet retirement in my native country.”

“So I am told,” Alvarado said.

He seemed overly formal, weirdly remote, hardly even human. In the huge hall his crisp, cool voice had a buzzing androidal undertone that Mondschein found unfamiliar. Possibly that was an atmospheric diffraction effect caused by the security screens. But then it occurred to Mondschein that this too might be one of the clones. He stared hard, trying to tell, trying to call on the intuitive sense that once had made it possible for him to tell quite easily, even without running the alpha-wave test. The AAA Class clones had been intended to be indistinguishable from the original to nine decimal places, but nevertheless when you collapsed the first twenty or thirty years of a man's life into the three-year accelerated-development period of the cloning process you inevitably lost something, and Mondschein had always been able to detect the difference purely subjectively, at a single glance. Now, though, he wasn't sure. It had been simple enough to see that the Alvarado who had greeted him in the Ministry of Scientific Development was a replica, but here, at this distance, in this room that resonated with the presence of the Maximum Leader, there were too many ambiguities and uncertainties.

He said, “The Minister explained to me that the national genetic laboratories are facing heavy competition from abroad, that you want me to step in and pull things together. But I can't do it. My technical knowledge is hopelessly out of date. I'm simply not familiar with current work in the field. If I had known ahead of time that the reason you had decided to let me come home was to that you wanted me to go back into the labs, I never would have—”

“Forget about the labs,” Alvarado said. “That isn't why I invited you to return.”

“But the Minister of Scientific Development said—”

“Let the Minister of Scientific Development say anything he wishes. The Minister has his agenda and I have mine, doctor.” He had dropped the first-name talk, Mondschein noticed. “Is it true that there is a

method of determining whether a given individual is an authentic human or merely a highly accurate clone?"

Mondschein hesitated. Something was definitely wrong here.

"Yes," he said finally. "There is. You know that there is."

"You are too certain of what I know and what I do not know. Tell me about this method, doctor."

He was more and more certain that he was talking to one of the clones. Alvarado must be staging one of his elaborate charades.

"It involves matching brain rhythms. When I created the AAA Class Alvarado clones, I built a recognition key into them that would enable me, using a simple EEG hookup, to distinguish their brain-wave patterns from yours. I did this at your request, so that in the case of a possible coup d-'etat attempt by one of the clones you'd be able to unmask the pretender. The method uses my own brain waves as the baseline. If you jack my EEG output into a comparator circuit and overlay it with yours, the two patterns will conflict, the way any two patterns from different human beings will. But if my EEG gets matched against one of your clones, the pattern will drop immediately into alpha rhythms, as if we're both under deep hypnosis. It amazes me that you've forgotten this." He paused. "Unless, of course, you're not Alvarado at all, but simply one of his—what's the word?—one of his brothers."

"Very good, doctor."

"Am I right?"

"Come closer and see for yourself."

"I can't. The security screens—"

"I have switched them off."

Mondschein approached. There was no air resistance. When he was five meters away he felt the unmistakable click of recognition.

"Yes, I am right. Even without an EEG test. You're a clone, aren't you?"

"That is so."

"Is the real Alvarado too busy for me today, or is it that he doesn't have the courage to look me in the eye?"

"I will tell you something very strange, which is a great secret," said the clone. "The real Alvarado is no longer in command here. For the past several months I have run the government of Tierra Alvarado. No one here is aware of this, no one at all. No one except you, now."

For a moment Mondschein was unable to speak.

"You seriously expect me to believe that?" he said at last.

The clone managed a glacial smile. "During the years of your absence there have been several internal upheavals in Tierra Alvarado. On three occasions assassination plots resulted in the deaths of Alvarado clones who were playing the role of the Maximum Leader at public ceremonies. Each time, the death of the clone was successfully covered up. The conspirators were apprehended and things continued as if nothing had occurred. On the fourth such occasion, an implosion grenade was thrown toward the

Maximum Leader's car while he was en route to Iquique for a ceremony of rededication. I happened to be accompanying him on that journey so that I could double for him in the riskier parts of the ceremony, when the general public would be present. The impact of the grenade was tremendous. There were many fatalities and serious injuries. In the confusion afterward I was mistaken for the true Maximum Leader. I quickly understood the situation and began to act accordingly. And so it has been ever since."

Mondschein realized that he was trembling.

"So Alvarado's dead?"

The clone looked smug. "His reign is over. His time is finished."

What a strange concept that was. Alvarado dead! His old enemy was really dead! Mondschein felt a flash of satisfaction and surprise—and then a curious sense of loss.

"Why are you telling me all this?" he asked, after a moment. "Assuming that it's true, and not just some game that your master is playing with me, why do you want to take chances this way? What if I tried to expose you and bring the whole crazy system down?"

"You would not do that," said the clone.

"Why not?"

"You have said it yourself: you want only to live out your remaining years in peaceful retirement. If you denounced me, who would believe you? And even if you were believed, would things be better in Tierra Alvarado in the wake of my overthrow? No, doctor, the status quo is your only hope. And I am the status quo."

Mondschein nodded. "Even so, why confide in me at all?"

"So that you may protect me."

"How could I do that?"

"You hold the key to identification, this alpha-rhythm thing. I did know that you had such a thing, though not the details of it. Others know it also. Your possession of it gives you great power here. If there were a challenge to my legitimacy, you would be the only arbiter of the truth, do you see?"

"Yes," said Mondschein. "Yes, I do."

"There are twenty-one other surviving clones. One of them might take it into his head to overthrow me, thinking that he could rule the country at least as well. It is quite a comfortable existence, being a clone of the Maximum Leader, but it is not pleasant to serve as his double, exposed to all the risks of public appearances. It is a much better life, believe me, to be Maximum Leader and have others double for you, than to be a double yourself, never knowing when the bullet will come. Besides which, there is the wielding of authority for its own sake. That is a highly desirable thing, if you are of the sort who desires such things, and we are. After all, we are all of us Alvarados to the core, as you know better than anyone else."

"So you think that if one of your vat-brothers suddenly tries to say that *he's* the real Alvarado, not you, then I'd be willing to come forward and test him and expose him as a clone for you?"

"So I hope and trust."

“Why would I want to take the side of one clone against another? It's of no importance to me which one of you calls himself President here.”

“But I am the one who calls himself President just now. I might kill you if you didn't cooperate.”

“And if I don't care whether I live or die?”

“You probably care *how* you die,” the Alvarado-clone said. “You would not die in an easy or a gentle way, that I could promise you. On the other hand, if you pledge that you will aid me, when and if the need arises, I will see to it that you live out the remaining years of your life in the most complete happiness that I can make available. It seems to me a very reasonable offer.”

“It is,” Mondschein said. “I see that it is.”

“You protect me, and I will protect you. Do we have a deal?”

“If I say no, what are my chances of leaving this building alive today?”

The clone smiled. It was the pure Alvarado-smile. “They would be quite poor.”

“Then we have a deal,” Mondschein said.

* * * *

The weeks went by. June gave way to July and the year descended toward its winter depths. Often there was fog; some nights there was frost; always the dry harsh wind blew from the west. Mondschein slept poorly. He heard nothing from the Maximum Leader or any of his minions. Evidently all was tranquil in the ruling circles.

He rarely left the villa. His meals were prepared for him according to his wishes, which were uncomplicated. He had a few books. No one came to see him. Sometimes during the day he went out with his driver to explore the city. It was larger than he expected, spreading long, thin tentacles of slum toward the north and south—as in any impoverished country, everyone from the villages was moving to the capital, God only knew what for—and very shoddy everywhere except in its grand governmental district.

On two of these excursions Mondschein was granted a glimpse of the supposed President Alvarado. The first time, his car was halted at a police roadblock and he waited for half an hour in an immense tie-up until at last the President passed by in a motorcade coming from the airport, with the Director-General of the Republic of the Orinoco, here on a state visit, riding beside him in the armored bubble-roof car while the spectators who lined the boulevard offered sullen acclaim. On the second occasion, far in the outskirts, Mondschein stumbled upon the ceremonial dedication of what he was told was the Grand Sanitation Facility of the Northeast, and there was the familiar figure of the Maximum Leader on high in the reviewing stand, surrounded by fierce-eyed, heavily armed bodyguards and orating bravely into the biting wind.

At other times while traversing the city Mondschein caught sight of various of the clones going about some business of their own. It was not at all unusual to encounter one. Doubtless the populace was quite used to it. Wherever you looked you could find one or two of the Maximum Leader's “brothers.” Five or six of them headed government ministries—a meeting of the Cabinet must have been like a hall of mirrors—and the others, apparently, simply stood by to serve as presidential doubles when needed, and lived as private citizens the rest of the time. The real Alvarado, if there still was one, could probably have passed in the streets without causing a stir, everyone assuming he was just a clone: a fine kind of shell game that could keep the whole population fooled all the time.

Colonel Aristegui came to the villa again, eventually.

“We are ready to make our move, doctor.”

“Move, then. I don't want to know anything about it.”

Aristegui looked tense, grim, right at the breaking point. “We need very little from you. Station yourself in the crowd, and when our man asks you, is this one the real one, simply nod or shake your head. We want no more from you than that. Later, when he is dead, we'll ask you to examine the body and confirm that it is the body of the dictator and not one of the imitations. A small service, and you will live forever in the hearts of your countrymen.”

“There's no way I can give you the kind of information you want just by looking at him from a distance.”

“It can be done, and you are the one who can do it. This much I know.”

“No,” Mondschein said. “What you think you know is wrong. I can't help you. And in any case I don't want to. I told you that before, Colonel. I'm not interested in joining your conspiracy. It isn't any affair of mine.”

“It is an affair of every loyal citizen of this country.”

Mondschein looked at him sadly. He could at least warn Aristegui, he thought, that there was no real Alvarado there to shoot, that they were all clones. But would the Colonel believe him? In any case what Aristegui was trying to do was fundamentally futile. Kill one Alvarado, another would move into his place and announce that he was the authentic article. Aristegui could bring down one or two, maybe, but he couldn't get them all. This country was going to be ruled by Alvarados for a long time to come.

“They took my citizenship away twenty-five years ago,” Mondschein said, after a pause. “I'm here now purely as a guest of the nation, remember? Good guests don't conspire against their hosts. Please go away, Colonel. I haven't heard a thing you've said to me today. I'm already beginning to forget even that you were here.”

Aristegui glowered at him in a way that seemed to mingle anguish and fury. For a moment Mondschein thought the man was going to strike him. But then, with a visible effort, the Colonel brought himself under control.

“I thank you for your continued silence, at least,” said Aristegui bitterly. “Good day, Senor Doctor Mondschein.”

* * * *

Late that afternoon Mondschein heard loud voices from below, shouts and outcries in the servants’ quarters. He rang up on the housekeeper's intercom and said, “What's going on?”

“There has been an attack on the President, Senor Doctor. At the Palace of Government. We have just seen it on the television.”

So Aristegui had been telling the truth, it seemed, when he said that they were ready to make their move. Or else they had decided it was too risky to wait any longer, now that Mondschein had been told that an assassination attempt was impending.

“And?” Mondschein said.

“By the mercy of the Virgin he is safe, senor. Order has been restored and the criminals have been

captured. One of the others was slain, one of the brothers, but the President was not harmed."

He thanked her and switched on his television set.

They were in the midst of showing a replay of it now. The President arriving at the Palace of Government for the regular midweek meeting of the ministers; the adoring populace obediently waiting behind the barricades to hail him as he emerged from his car; the sudden scuffle in the crowd, evidently a deliberate distraction, and then the shot, the screams, the slim long-legged figure beginning to sag into the arms of his bodyguards, the policemen rushing forward.

And then a cut to the Hall of Audience, the grim-faced Maximum Leader addressing the nation from his throne in broken phrases, in a voice choked with emotion: "This despicable act . . . This bestial attempt to overrule the will of the people as expressed through their chosen President . . . We must root out the forces of chaos that are loose among us . . . We proclaim a week of national mourning for our fallen brother . . .

Followed by an explanation from a sleek, unruffled-looking official spokesman. The Guardia de la Patria, he said, had received advance word of a possible plot. One of the President's "brothers" had courageously agreed to bear the risk of entering the Palace of Government in the usual way; the Maximum Leader himself had gone into the building through a secret entrance. The identity of the main conspirators was known; arrests had already been made; others would follow. Return to your homes, remain calm, all is well.

All is well.

* * * *

The executions took place a few weeks later. They were shown on huge television screens set up before great throngs of spectators in the main plazas of the city, and relayed to home viewers everywhere. Mondschein, despite earlier resolutions to the contrary, watched along with everyone else in a kind of horrified fascination as Colonel Aristegui and five other officers of the elite guard, along with three other men and four women, all of them members of the Popular Assembly, were led to the wall one by one, faces expressionless, bodies rigid. They were not offered the opportunty to utter last words, even of carefully rehearsed contrition. Their names were spoken and they were blindfolded and shot, and the body taken away, and the next conspirator brought forth.

Mondschein felt an obscure sense of guilt, as though he had been the one who had informed on them. But of course he had said nothing to anyone. The country was full of governmental agents and spies and provocateurs; the Maximum Leader had not needed Mondschein's help in protecting himself against Colonel Aristegui. The guilt that he felt, Mondschein realized, was that of having let Aristegui go to his death without trying to make him see that he was attempting something impossible, that there was no way, with or without Mondschein's help, that Aristegui could ever rid the country of Alvarado. But the Colonel wouldn't have listened to him in any case, Mondschein told himself.

The days went by. The season brightened toward spring. Mondschein's driver took him up the mountain roads to see Lake Titicaca, and north from there to Cuzco and its grand old Inca relics, and up beyond that to the splendors of Machu Picchu. On another journey he went down to the fogswept coast, to Nazca where it never rains, where in a landscape as barren as the Moon's he inspected the huge drawings of monkeys and birds and geometrical figures that prehistoric artists had inscribed in the bone-dry soil of the plateaus.

On a brilliant September day that felt like midsummer a car bearing the insignia of the Guardia came to his villa and a brisk young officer with thick hair that was like spun gold told him that he was requested to

go at once to the Palace of Justice.

“Have I done something wrong?” Mondschein asked mildly.

“It is by order of the President,” said the blond young officer, and that was all the explanation he gave.

Mondschein had been in the Palace of Justice only once before, during the weeks just prior to the agreement that led to his being exiled, when they had briefly imprisoned him on the supposed charge of creating abominations and monsters. Like most of the other governmental buildings it was a massive, brutal-looking stone structure, two long parallel wings with a smaller one set between them at their head, so that it crouched on its plaza like a ponderous sphinx. There were courtrooms in the upper levels of the two large wings, prison cells below; the small central wing was the headquarters of the Supreme Court, whose chief justice, Mondschein had recently discovered, was another of the clones.

His Guardia escort led him into the building on the lower level, and they descended even below that, to the dreaded highsecurity area in the basement. Was he to be interrogated, then? For what?

The Maximum Leader, in full uniform and decorations, was waiting for him in a cold, clammy-walled interrogation cell, under a single bare incandescent bulb of a kind that Mondschein thought had been obsolete for a hundred years. He offered Mondschein a benign smile, as benign as that sharp-edged face was capable of showing.

“Our second meeting is in rather less grand surroundings than the first, eh, doctor?”

Mondschein peered closely. This seemed to be the same clone who had spoken with him in the Hall of Audience. He felt quite sure of that. Only intuition, of course. But he trusted it.

“You remember the agreement we reached that day?” the clone asked.

“Of course.”

“Today I need to invoke it. Your special expertise is now essential to the stability of the nation.”

The clone gestured to an aide-de-camp, who signalled to an figure in the shadows behind him that Mondschein had not noticed before. A door opened at the rear of the cell and a gurney bearing electronic equipment was wheeled in. Mondschein recognized the familiar intricacies of an electroencephalograph.

“This is the proper machinery for your brain-wave test, is it not?” the Alvarado clone asked.

Mondschein nodded.

“Good,” the clone said. “Bring in the prisoner.”

The door opened again and two guards dragged in the ragged, disheveled-looking figure of an Alvarado. His hands were shackled behind his back. His face was bruised and sweaty and smeared with dirt. His clothes, rough peasant clothes, were torn. His eyes were blazing with fury of astonishing intensity. Mondschein felt a tremor of the old fear at the sight of him.

The prisoner shot a fiery look at the Alvarado clone and said, “You bastard, let me out of here right now. You know who I am. You know who you are, too. *What* you are.”

Mondschein turned to the clone. “But you told me he was dead!” he said.

“Dead? Who? What do you mean?” the Alvarado clone said calmly. “This clone was gravely injured in

an attempt on my life and has hovered close to death for many weeks, despite the finest care we could give him. Now that he has begun to recover he is exhibiting delusional behavior. He insists that he is the true Maximum Leader and I am nothing but an artificial genetic duplicate. I ask you to test the authenticity of his claim, Senor Doctor."

"Mondschein! Rafael Mondschein!" the ragged Alvarado cried. A convulsive quiver of amazement ran through his shoulders and chest. "You here? They've brought you back?"

Mondschein said nothing. He stared at the ragged man.

The prisoner's eyes gleamed. "All right, go on! Test me, Rafael. Do your mumbo-jumbo and tell this fraud who I am! And then we'll see if he dares keep up the masquerade. Go on, Rafael! Plug in your damned machine! Stick the electrodes on me!"

"Go ahead, Senor Doctor," the Alvarado clone said.

Mondschein stepped forward and began the preparations for the test, wondering whether he would remember the procedure after so many years.

The prisoner looked toward the Alvarado clone and said, "He'll prove that I am who I say I am. And you won't have the guts to carry the pretense any further, will you, you test-tube fraud? Because half the staff in the hospital knows the real story already, and somehow the truth will get out. Somehow, no matter how you try to suppress it. And it'll bring you down. Once the country finds out that you're a fake, that you simply seized power when the motorcade bomb went off. Once word gets around that I didn't die, that you've had me hidden away in the hospital all this time with people thinking I was you and you were me, what do you think will happen to your regime? Will anyone want to take orders from a clone?"

"You mustn't speak now," Mondschein told him. "It'll distort the test results."

"All right. Yes. Listen, Rafael, no matter what you tell him he'll say that you identified me as a clone, but you know that it's a lie. When you get back outside, you tell people the true story. You hear me? And afterward I'll see to it that you get whatever you want. Anything. No reward would be too great. Money, women, country estates, your own laboratory, whatever."

"Please," Mondschein said. "I ask you not to speak."

He attached the electrodes to himself. He touched the dials.

He remembered, now. The whole technique. He had written these personality-organization algorithms himself. He closed his eyes and felt the data come flooding in. The prisoner's brain-waves met his own—collided—clashed—clashed violently—

To the Alvarado clone Mondschein said, "The alpha match is perfect, Senor Presidente. What we have here is a clone."

"No, Rafael!" the prisoner roared. "You filthy lying bastard, no! You know it isn't so!"

"Take him away," the Alvarado clone said.

"No. You won't do anything to me. I'm the only legitimate President of Tierra Alvarado."

"You are nothing," the clone told him. "You are a mere creature. We have scientific proof that you are simply one of the artificial brothers. Dr. Mondschein has just demonstrated that."

“Balls,” the prisoner said. “Listen, Mondschein, I know he has you intimidated. But when you get out of here, spread the word. Tell everyone what your real reading was. That there's a usurper in the presidential palace, that he must be overthrown. You'll be a national hero, you'll be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams—”

Mondschein smiled. “Ah, but I already have everything that I want.”

He looked toward the Alvarado clone. “I'll prepare a formal report and sign it, Senor Presidente. And I will be willing to attest to it at the public trial.”

“This has been the trial, doctor,” the clone said smoothly, indicating an opening in the ceiling of the cell, where Mondschein now saw an opening through which the snout of a television camera protruded. “All the information that we need has been recorded. But I am grateful for your offer. You have been extremely helpful. Extremely helpful, Senor Doctor.”

* * * *

That night, in the safety and comfort of his beloved villa, Mondschein slept soundly for the first time since his return to Tierra Alvarado—more soundly than he had slept in years.

Looking for the Fountain

My name is Francisco de Ortega and by the grace of God I am 89 years old and I have seen many a strange thing in my time, but nothing so strange as the Indian folk of the island called Florida, whose great dream it is to free the Holy Land from the Saracen conquerors that profane it.

It was fifty years ago that I encountered these marvelous people, when I sailed with his excellency the illustrious Don Juan Ponce de Leon on his famous and disastrous voyage in quest of what is wrongly called the Fountain of Youth. It was not a Fountain of Youth at all that he sought, but a Fountain of Manly Strength, which is somewhat a different thing. Trust me: I was there, I saw and heard everything, I was by Don Juan Ponce's side when his fate overtook him. I know the complete truth of this endeavor and I mean to set it all down now so there will be no doubt; for I alone survive to tell the tale, and as God is my witness I will tell it truthfully now, here in my ninetieth year, all praises be to Him and to the Mother who bore Him.

* * * *

The matter of the Fountain, first.

Commonly, I know, it is called the Fountain of Youth. You will read that in many places, such as in the book about the New World which that Italian wrote who lived at Seville, Peter Martyr of Anghiera, where he says, “The governor of the Island of Boriquena, Juan Ponce de Leon, sent forth two caravels to seek the Islands of Boyuca in which the Indians affirmed there to be a fountain or spring whose water is of such marvelous virtue, that when it is drunk it makes old men young again.”

This is true, so far as it goes. But when Peter Martyr talks of “making old men young again,” his words must be interpreted in a poetic way.

Perhaps long life is truly what that Fountain really provides, along with its other and more special virtue—who knows? For I have tasted of that Fountain's waters myself, and here I am nearly 90 years of age and still full of vigor, I who was born in the year of our Lord 1473, and how many others are still alive today who came into the world then, when Castile and Aragon still were separate kingdoms? But I tell you that what Don Juan Ponce was seeking was not strictly speaking a Fountain of Youth at all, but

rather a Fountain that offered a benefit of a very much more intimate kind. For I was there, I saw and heard everything. And they have cowardly tongues, those who say it was a Fountain of Youth, for it would seem that out of shame they choose not to speak honestly of the actual nature of the powers that the Fountain which we sought was supposed to confer.

It was when we were in the island of Hispaniola that we first heard of this wonderful Fountain, Don Juan Ponce and I. This was, I think, in the year 1504. Don Juan Ponce, a true nobleman and a man of high and elegant thoughts, was governor then in the province of Higuey of that island, which was ruled at that time by Don Nicolas de ovando, successor to the great Admiral Cristobal Colon. There was in Higuey then a certain Indian cacique or chieftain of remarkable strength and force, who was reputed to keep seven wives and to satisfy each and every one of them each night of the week. Don Juan Ponce was curious about the great virility of this cacique, and one day he sent a certain Aurelio Herrera to visit him in his village.

"He does indeed have many wives," said Herrera, "though whether there were five or seven or fifty-nine I could not say, for there were women surrounding all the time I was there, coming and going in such multitudes that I was unable to make a clear count, and swarms of children also, and from the looks of it the women were his wives and the children were his children."

"And what sort of manner of man is this cacique?" asked Don Juan Ponce.

"Why," said Herrera, "he is a very ordinary man, narrow of shoulders and shallow of chest, whom you would never think capable of such marvels of manhood, and he is past middle age besides. I remarked on this to him, and he said that when he was young he was easily exhausted and found the manly exercises a heavy burden. But then he journeyed to Boyuca, which is an island to the north of Cuba that is also called Bimini, and there he drank of a spring that cures the debility of sex. Since then, he asserts, he has been able to give pleasure to any number of women in a night without the slightest fatigue."

I was there. I saw and heard everything.*El enflaquecimiento del sexo* was the phrase that Aurelio Herrera used, "the debility of sex." The eyes of Don Juan Ponce de Leon opened wide at this tale, and he turned to me and said, "We must go in search of this miraculous fountain some day, Francisco, for there will be great profit in the selling of its waters."

Do you see? Not a word had been spoken about long life, but "only about the curing of*el enflaquecimiento del sexo.* Nor was Don Juan Ponce in need of any such cure for himself, I assure you, for in the year 1504 he was just thirty years old, a lusty and aggressive man of fiery and restless spirit, and red-haired as well, and you know what is said about the virility of red-haired men. As for me, I will not boast, but I will say only that since the age of thirteen I have rarely gone a single night without a woman's company, and have been married four times, on the fourth occasion to a woman fifty years younger than myself. And if you find yourself in the province of Valladolid where I live and come to pay a call on me I can show you young Diego Antonio de Ortega whom you would think was my great-grandson, and little Juana Maria de Ortega who could be my great-granddaughter, for the boy is seven and the girl is five, but in truth they are my own children, conceived when I was past eighty years of age; and I have had many other sons and daughters too, some of whom are old people now and some are dead.

So it was not to heal our own debilities that Don Juan Ponce and I longed to find this wonderful Fountain, for of such shameful debilities we had none at all, he and I. No, we yearned for the Fountain purely for the sake of the riches we might derive from it: for each year saw hundreds or perhaps thousands of men come from Spain to the New World to seek their fortunes, and some of these were older men who no doubt suffered from a certain*enflaquecimiento.* In Spain I understand they use the powdered horn of the unicorn to cure this malady, or the crushed shells of a certain insect, though I have never had need of

such things myself. But those commodities are not to be found in the New World, and it was Don Juan Ponce's hope that great profit might be made by taking possession of Bimini and selling the waters of the Fountain to those who had need of such a remedy. This is the truth, whatever others may claim.

* * * *

But the pursuit of gold comes before everything, even the pursuit of miraculous Fountains of Manly Strength. We did not go at once in search of the Fountain because word came to Don Juan Ponce in Hispaniola that the neighboring island of Borinquen was rich in gold, and thereupon he applied to Governor Ovando for permission to go there and conquer it. Don Juan Ponce already somewhat knew that island, having seen its western coast briefly in 1493 when he was a gentleman volunteer in the fleet of Cristobal Colon, and its beauty had so moved him that he had resolved someday to return and make himself master of the place.

With one hundred men, he sailed over to this Borinquen in a small caravel, landing there on Midsummer Day, 1506, at the same bay he had visited earlier aboard the ship of the great Admiral. Seeing us arrive with such force, the cacique of the region was wise enough to yield to the inevitable and we took possession with very little fighting.

So rich did the island prove to be that we put the marvelous Fountain of which we had previously heard completely out of our minds. Don Juan Ponce was made governor of Borinquen by royal appointment and for several years the natives remained peaceful and we were able to obtain a great quantity of gold indeed. This is the same island that Cristobal Colon called San Juan Bautista and which people today call Puerto Rico.

All would have been well for us there but for the stupidity of a certain captain of our forces, Cristobal de Sotomayor, who treated the natives so badly that they rose in rebellion against us. This was in the year of our Lord 1511. So we found ourselves at war; and Don Juan Ponce fought with all the great valor for which he was renowned, doing tremendous destruction against our pagan enemies. We had among us at that time a certain dog, called Bercerillo, of red pelt and black eyes, who could tell simply by smell alone whether an Indian was friendly to us or hostile, and could understand the native speech as well; and the Indians were more afraid of ten Spaniards with this dog, than of one hundred without him. Don Juan Ponce rewarded Bercerillo's bravery and cleverness by giving the dog a full share of all the gold and slaves we captured, as though he were a crossbowman; but in the end the Indians killed him. I understand that a valiant pup of this Bercerillo, Leoncillo by name, went with Nunez de Balboa when he crossed the Isthmus of Panama and discovered the great ocean beyond.

During this time of our difficulties with the savages of Puerto Rico, Don Diego Colon, the son of the great Admiral, was able to take advantage of the trouble and make himself governor of the island in the place of Don Juan Ponce. Don Juan Ponce thereupon returned to Spain and presented himself before King Ferdinand, and told him the tale of the fabulous Fountain that restores manly power. King Ferdinand, who was greatly impressed by Don Juan Ponce's lordly bearing and noble appearance, at once granted him a royal permit to seek and conquer the isle of Bimini where this Fountain was said to be. Whether this signifies that His Most Catholic Majesty was troubled by debilities of a sexual sort, I would not dare to say. But the king was at that time a man of sixty years and it would not be unimaginable that some difficulty of that kind had begun to perplex him.

Swiftly Don Juan Ponce returned to Puerto Rico with the good news of his royal appointment, and on the third day of March of the year of our Lord 1513 we set forth from the Port of San German in three caravels to search for Bimini and its extraordinary Fountain.

I should say at this point that it was a matter of course that Don Juan Ponce should have asked me to take part in the quest for this Fountain. I am a man of Tervas de San Campos in the province of

Valladolid, where Don Juan Ponce de Leon also was born less than one year after I was, and he and I played together as children and were friends all through our youth. As I have said, he first went to the New World in 1493, when he was nineteen years of age, as a gentleman aboard the ship of Admiral Cristobal Colon, and after settling in Hispaniola he wrote to me and told me of the great wealth of the New World and urged me to join him there. Which I did forthwith; and we were rarely separated from then until the day of his death.

Our flagship was the *Santiago* , with Diego Bermudez as its master—the brother to the man who discovered the isle of Bermuda—and the famous Anton de Alaminos as its pilot. We had two Indian pilots too, who knew the islands of that sea. Our second ship was the *Santa Maria de Consolacion* , with Juan Bono de Quexo as its captain, and the third was the *San Cristobal* . All of these vessels were purchased by Don Juan Ponce himself out of the riches he had laid by in the time when he was governor of Puerto Rico.

I have to tell you that there was not one priest in our company, not that we were ungodly men but only that it was not our commander's purpose on this voyage to bring the word of Jesus to the natives of Bimini. We did have some few women among us, including my own wife Beatriz, who had come out from Spain to be with me, and grateful I was to have her by my side; and my wife's young sister Juana was aboard the ship also, that I could better look after her among these rough Spaniards of the New World.

Northward we went. After ten days we halted at the isle of San Salvador to scrape weeds from the bottom of one of our ships. Then we journeyed west-northwest, passing the isle of Ciguateo on Easter Sunday, and, continuing onward into waters that ran ever shallower, we caught sight on the second day of April of a large delightful island of great and surpassing beauty, all blooming and burgeoning with a great host of wildflowers whose delectable odors came wafting to us on the warm gentle breeze. We named this isle La Florida, because Easter is the season when things flower and so we call that time of year in our language Pascua Florida. And we said to one another at once, seeing so beautiful a place, that this island of Florida must surely be the home of the wondrous Fountain that restores men to their fleshly powers and grants all their carnal desires to the fullest.

* * * *

Of the loveliness of Florida I could speak for a day and a night and a night and a day, and not exhaust its marvels. The shallowing green waters give way to white crests of foam that fall upon beaches paved hard with tiny shells; and when you look beyond the beach you see dunes and marshes, and beyond those a land altogether level, not so much as a hillock upon it, where glistening sluggish lagoons bordered brilliantly with rushes and sedges show the way to the mysterious forests of the interior.

Those forests! Palms and pines, and gnarled gray trees whose names are known only to God! Trees covered with snowy beards! Trees whose leaves are like swords! Flowers everywhere, dizzying us with their perfume! We were stunned by the fragrance of jasmine and honeyflower. We heard the enchanting songs of a myriad of birds. We stared in wonder at the bright blooms. We doffed our helmets and dropped to our knees to give thanks to God for having led us to this most beautiful of shores.

Don Juan Ponce was the first of us to make his way to land, carrying with him the banner of Castile and Leon. He thrust the royal standard into the soft sandy soil and in the name of God and Spain took possession of the place. This was at the mouth of a river which he named in honor of his patron, the blessed San Juan. Then, since there were no Indians thereabouts who might lead us to the Fountain, we returned to our vessels and continued along the coast of that place.

Though the sea looked gentle we found the currents unexpectedly strong, carrying us northward so swiftly that we feared we would never see Puerto Rico again. Therefore did Don Juan Ponce give orders

for us to turn south; but although we had a fair following wind the current was so strong against us that we could make no headway, and at last we were compelled to anchor in a cove. Here we spent some days, with the ships straining against their cables; and during that time the little *San Cristobal* was swept out to sea and we lost sight of her altogether, though the day was bright and the weather fair. But within two days by God's grace she returned to us.

At this time we saw our first Indians, but they were far from friendly. Indeed they set upon us at once and two of our men were wounded by their little darts and arrows, which were tipped with sharp points made of bone. When night came we were able to withdraw and sail on to another place that we called the Rio de la Cruz, where we collected wood and water; and here we were attacked again, by sixty Indians, but they were driven off. And so we continued for many days, until in latitude 28 degrees 15 minutes we did round a cape, which we called Cabo de los Corrientes on account of the powerful currents, which were stronger than the wind.

Here it was that we had the strangest part of our voyage, indeed the strangest thing I have ever seen in all my ninety years. Which is to say that we encountered at this time in this remote and hitherto unknown land the defenders of the Christian Faith, the sworn foes of the Saracens, the last sons of the Crusades, whose great dream it was, even now, to wrest the Holy Land of our Savior's birth from those infidel followers of Muhammad who seized it long ago and rule it today.

We suspected nothing of any of what awaited us when we dropped our anchors near an Indian town on the far side of Cabo de los Corrientes. Cautiously, for we had received such a hostile reception farther up the coast, we made our landfall a little way below the village and set about the task of filling our water casks and cutting firewood. While this work was being carried out we became aware that the Indians had left their village and had set out down the shore to encounter us, for we heard them singing and chanting even before we could see them; and we halted in our labors and made ourselves ready to deal with another attack.

After a short while the Indians appeared, still singing as they approached. Wonder of wonders, they were clothed, though all the previous natives that we had seen were naked, or nearly so, as these savages usually are. Even more marvelous was the nature of their clothing, which was of a kind not very different from that which Christians wear, jerkins and doublets and tunics, and such things. And—marvel of marvel—every man of them wore upon his chest a white garment that bore the holy cross of Jesus painted brightly in red! We could not believe our eyes. But if we had any doubt that these were Christian men, it was eradicated altogether when we saw that in the midst of the procession came certain men wearing the dark robes of priests, who carried great wooden crosses held high aloft.

Were these indeed Indians? Surely not! Surely they must be Spaniards like ourselves! We might almost have been in Toledo, or Madrid, or Seville, and not on the shore of some strange land of the Indies! But indeed we saw without doubt now that the marchers were men of the sort that is native to the New World, with the ruddy skins and black hair and sharp features of their kind, Christian though they might be in dress, and carrying the cross itself in their midst.

When they were close enough so that we could hear distinctly the words of their song, it sounded to some of us that they might be Latin words, though Latin of a somewhat barbarous kind. Could that be possible? We doubted the evidence of our ears. But then Pedro de Plasencia, who had studied for the priesthood before entering the military, crossed himself most vigorously and said to us in wonder, “Do you hear that? They are singing the *Gloria in excelsis Deo!* ” And in truth we could tell that hymn was what they sang, now that Pedro de Plasencia had picked out the words of it for us. Does that sound strange to you, that Indians of an unknown isle should be singing in Latin? Yes, it is strange indeed. But doubt me at your peril. I was there; I saw and heard everything myself

“Surely,” said Diego Bermudez, “there must have been Spaniards here before us, who have instructed these people in the way of God.”

“That cannot be,” said our pilot, Anton de Alaminos. “For I was with Cristobal Colon on his second voyage and have been on every voyage since of any note that has been made in these waters, and I can tell you that no white man has set foot on this shore before us.”

“Then how came these Indians by their crosses and their holy hymns?” asked Diego Bermudez. “Is it a pure miracle of the saints, do you think?”

“Perhaps it is,” said Don Juan Ponce de Leon, with some heat, for it looked as if there might be a quarrel between the master and the pilot. “Who can say? Be thankful that these folk are our Christian friends and not our enemy, and leave off your useless speculations.”

And in the courageous way that was his nature, Don Juan Ponce went forward and raised his arms to the Indians, and made the sign of the cross in the air, and called out to them, saying, “I am Don Juan Ponce de Leon of Valladolid in the land of Spain, and I greet you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” All of which he said clearly and loudly in his fine and beautiful Castilian, which he spoke with the greatest purity. But the Indians, who by now had halted in a straight line before us, showed no understanding in their eyes. Don Juan Ponce spoke again, once more in Spanish, saying that he greeted them also in the name of His Most Catholic Majesty King Ferdinand of Aragon and Castile. This too produced no sign that it had been understood.

One of the Indians then spoke. He was a man of great presence and bearing, who wore chains of gold about his chest and carried a sword of strange design at his side, the first sword I had ever seen a native of these islands to have. From these indications it was apparent that he was the cacique.

He spoke long and eloquently in a language that I suppose was his own, for none of us had ever heard it before, not even the two Indian pilots we had brought with us. Then he said a few words that had the sound and the ring of French or perhaps Catalan, though we had a few men of Barcelona among us who leaned close toward him and put their hands to their ears and even they could make no sense out of what they heard.

But then finally this grand cacique spoke words which we all could understand plainly, garbled and thick-tongued though his speaking of them was: for what he said was, and there could be no doubt of it however barbarous his accent, “*In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti*,” and he made the sign of the cross over his chest as any good Christian man would do. To which Don Juan replied, “Amen. *Dominus vobiscum* .” Whereupon the cacique, exclaiming, “*Et cum spiritu tuo*,” went forthrightly to the side of Don Juan Ponce, and they embraced with great love, likewise as any Christian men might do, here on this remote beach in this strange and lovely land of Florida.

* * * *

They brought us then to their village and offered a great feast for us, with roasted fish and the meat of tortoises and sweet fruits of many mysterious kinds, and made us presents of the skins of animals. For our part we gave them such trinkets as we had carried with us, beads and bracelets and little copper daggers and the like, but of all the things we gave them they were most eager to receive the simple figurines of Jesus on the cross that we offered them, and passed them around amongst themselves in wonder, showing such love for them as if they were made of the finest gold and studded with emeralds and rubies. And we said privately to each other that we must be dreaming, to have met with Indians in this land who were of such great devotion to the faith.

We tried to speak with them again in Spanish, but it was useless, and so too was speaking in any of the native tongues of Hispaniola or Puerto Rico that we knew. In their turn they addressed us in their own

language, which might just as well have been the language of the people of the Moon for all we comprehended it, and also in that tantalizing other tongue which seemed almost to be French or Catalan. We could not make anything of that, try though we did. But Pedro de Plasencia, who was the only one of us who could speak Latin out loud like a priest, sat down with the cacique after the meal and addressed him in that language. I mean not simply saying things like the Pater Noster and the Ave Maria, which any child can say, but speaking to him as if Latin was a real language with words and sentences of common meaning, the way it was long ago. To which the cacique answered, though he seemed to be framing his words with much difficulty; and Pedro answered him again, just as hesitatingly; and so they went on, talking to each other in a slow and halting way, far into the night, nodding and smiling most jubilantly whenever one of them reached some understanding of the other's words, while we looked on in astonishment, unable to fathom a word of what they were saying.

At last Pedro rose, looking pale and exhausted like a man who has carried a bull on his back for half a league, and came over to us where we were sitting in a circle.

“Well?” Don Juan Ponce demanded at once.

Pedro de Plasencia shook his head wearily. “It was all nonsense, what the cacique said. I understood nothing. Nothing at all! It was mere incomprehensible babble and no more than that.” And he picked up a leather sack of wine that lay near his feet and drank from it as though he had a thirst that no amount of drinking ever could quench.

“You appeared to comprehend, at times,” said Don Juan Ponce. “Or so it seemed to me as I watched you.”

“Nothing. Not a word. Let me sleep on it, and perhaps it will come clear to me in the morning.”

I thought Don Juan Ponce would pursue him on the matter. But Don Juan Ponce, though he was an impatient and high-tempered man, was also a man of great sagacity, and he knew better than to press Pedro further at a time when he seemed so troubled and fatigued. So he dismissed the company and we settled down in the huts that the Indians had given us for lodging, all except those of us who were posted as sentries during the night to guard against treachery.

I rose before dawn. But I saw that Don Juan Ponce and Pedro de Plasencia were already awake and had drawn apart from the rest of us and were talking most earnestly. After a time they returned, and Don Juan Ponce beckoned to me.

“Pedro has told me something of his conversation with the cacique,” he said.

“And what is it that you have learned?”

“That these Indians are indeed Christians.”

“Yes, that seems to be the plain truth, strange though it seems,” I said. “For they do carry the cross about, and sing the Gloria, and honor the Father and the Son.”

“There is more.” I waited.

He continued, “Unless Pedro much mistook what the cacique told him, the greatest hope in which these people live is that of wresting the Holy Land from the Saracen, and restoring it to good Christian pilgrims.”

At that I burst out into such hearty laughter that Don Juan Ponce, for all his love of me, looked at me with eyes flashing with reproof. Yet I could not withhold my mirth, which poured from me like a river.

I said at last, when I had mastered myself, “But tell me, Don Juan, what would these savages know of the Holy Land, or of Saracens, or any such thing? The Holy Land is thousands of leagues away, and has never been spoken of so much as once in this New World by any man, I think; nor does anyone speak of the Crusade any longer in this age, neither here nor at home.”

“It is very strange, I agree,” replied Don Juan Ponce. “Nevertheless, so Pedro swears, the cacique spoke to him of *Terra Sancta, Terra Sancta* , and of infidels, and the liberation of the city of Jerusalem.”

“And how does it come to pass,” I asked, “that they can know of such things, in this remote isle, where no white man has ever visited before?”

“Ah,” said Don Juan Ponce, “that is the great mystery, is it not?”

* * * *

In time we came to understand the solution to this mystery, though the tale was muddled and confused, and emerged only after much travail, and long discussions between Pedro de Plasencia and the cacique of the Indians. I will tell you the essence of it, which was this:

Some three hundred years ago, or perhaps it was four hundred, while much of our beloved Spain still lay under the Moorish hand, a shipload of Frankish warriors set sail from the port of Genoa, or perhaps it was Marseilles, or some other city along the coast of Provence. This was in the time when men still went crusading, to make war for Jesus’ sake in the Holy Land against the followers of Muhammad who occupied that place.

But the voyage of these Crusaders miscarried; for when they entered the great Mar Mediterraneo, thinking to go east they were forced west by terrible storms and contrary winds, and swept helpless past our Spanish shores, past Almeria and Malaga and Tarifa, and through the narrow waist of the Estrecho de Gibraltar and out into the vastness of the Ocean Sea.

Here, having no sound knowledge as we in our time do of the size and shape of the African continent, they thought to turn south and then east below Egypt and make their voyage yet to the Holy Land. Of course this would be impossible, except by rounding the Buena Fortuna cape and traveling up past Arabia, a journey almost beyond our means to this day. But being unaware of that, these bold but hapless men made the attempt, coasting southerly and southerly and southerly, and the land of course not only not ending but indeed carrying them farther and farther outward into the Ocean Sea, until at last, no doubt weary and half dead of famine, they realized that they had traveled so far to the west that there was no hope of returning eastward again, nor of turning north and making their way back into the Mediterraneo. So they yielded to the westerly winds that prevail near the Canary Isles, and allowed themselves to be blown clear across the sea to the Indies. And so after long arduous voyaging they made landfall in this isle we call Florida. Thus these men of three hundred years ago were the first discoverers of the New World, although I doubt very greatly that they comprehended what it was that they had achieved.

You must understand that we received few of these details from our Indian hosts: only the tale that men bound to Terra Sancta departing from a land in the east were blown off course some hundreds of years previous and were brought after arduous sailing to the isle of Florida and to this very village where our three caravals had made their landfall. All the rest did we conclude for ourselves, that they were Crusaders and so forth, after much discussing of the matter and recourse to the scholarship that the finest men among us possessed.

And what befell these men of the Crusade, when they came to this Florida? Why, they offered themselves to the mercies of the villagers, who greeted them right honorably and took them to dwell amongst them, and married them to their daughters! And for their part the seafarers offered the word of

Jesus to the people of the village and thereby gave them hope of Heaven; and taught these kindly savages the Latin tongue so well that it remained with them after a fashion hundreds of years afterward, and also some vestiges of the common speech that the seafaring men had had in their own native land.

But most of all did the strangers from the sea imbue in the villagers the holy desire to rid the birthplace of Jesus of the dread hand of the Mussulman; and ever, in years after, did the Christian Indians of this Florida village long to put to sea, and cross the great ocean, and wield their bows and spears valiantly amidst the paynim enemy in the defense of the True Faith. Truly, how strange are the workings of God Almighty, how far beyond our comprehension, that He should make Crusaders out of the naked Indians in this far-off place!

You may ask what became of those European men who landed there, and whether we saw anyone who plainly might mark his descent from them. And I will tell you that those ancient Crusaders, who intermarried with the native women since they had brought none of their own, were wholly swallowed up by such intermarrying and were engulfed by the fullness of time. For they were only forty or fifty men among hundreds, and the passing centuries so diluted the strain of their race that not the least trace of it remained, and we saw no pale skin or fair hair or blue eyes or other marks of European men here. But the ideas that they had fetched to this place did survive, that is, the practicing of the Catholic faith and the speaking of a debased and corrupt sort of Latin and the wearing of a kind of European clothes, and such. And I tell you it was passing strange to see these red savages in their surplices and cassocks, and in their white tunics bearing the great emblem of our creed, and other such ancient marks of our civilization, and to hear them chanting the *Kyrie eleison* and the *Confiteor* and the *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth* in that curious garbled way of theirs, like words spoken in a dream.

Nay, I have spoken untruthfully, for the men of that lost voyage did leave other remnants of themselves among the villagers beside our holy faith, which I have neglected to mention here, but which I will tell you of now.

For after we had been in that village several days, the cacique led us through the close humid forest along a tangled trail to a clearing nearby just to the north of the village, and here we saw certain tangible remains of the voyagers: a graveyard with grave markers of white limestone, and the rotting ribs and strakes and some of the keel of a seafaring vessel of an ancient design, and the foundation walls of a little wooden church. All of which things were as sad a sight as could be imagined, for the gravestones were so weathered and worn that although we could see the faint marks of names we could not read the names themselves, and ‘the vessel was but a mere sorry remnant, a few miserable decaying timbers, and the church was only a pitiful fragment of a thing.

We stood amidst these sorry ruins and our hearts were struck into pieces by pity and grief for these brave men, so far from home and lonely, who in this strange place had nevertheless contrived to plant the sacred tree of Christianity. And the noble Don Juan Ponce de Leon went down on his knees before the church and bowed his head and said, “Let us pray, my friends, for the souls of these men, as we hope that someday people will pray for ours.”

* * * *

We spent some days amongst these people in feasting and prayer, and replenishing our stock of firewood and water. And then Don Juan Ponce gave new thought to the primary purpose of our voyage, which was, to find the miraculous Fountain that renews a man's energies. He called Pedro de Plasencia to his side and said, “Ask of the cacique, whether he knows such a Fountain.”

“It will not be easy, describing such things in my poor Latin,” answered Pedro. “I had my Latin from the Church, Don Juan, and what I learned there is of little use here, and it was all so very long ago.”

"You must try, my friend. For only you of all our company has the power to speak with him and be understood."

Whereupon Pedro went to the cacique; but I could see even at a distance that he was having great difficulties. For he would speak a few halting words, and then he would act out his meaning with gestures, like a clown upon a stage, and then he would speak again. There would be silence; and then the cacique would reply, and I would see Pedro leaning forward most intently, trying to catch the meaning of the curious Latin that the cacique spoke. They did draw pictures for each other also in the sand, and point to the sky and sweep their arms to and fro, and do many another thing to convey to each other the sense of their words, and so it went, hour after hour.

At length Pedro de Plasencia returned to where we stood, and said, "There does appear to be a source of precious water that they cherish on this island, which they call the Blue Spring."

"And is this Blue Spring the Fountain for which we search?" Don Juan Ponce asked, all eagerness.

"Ah, of that I am not certain."

"Did you tell him that the water of it would allow a man to take his pleasure with women all day and all night, and never tire of it?"

"So I attempted to say."

"With many women, one after another?"

"These are Christian folk, Don Juan!"

"Yes, so they are. But they are Indians also. They would understand such a thing, just as any man of Estramadura or Galicia or Andalusia would understand such a thing, Christian though he be."

Pedro de Plasencia nodded. "I told him what I could, about the nature of the Fountain for which we search. And he listened, very close, and he said, Yes, yes, you are speaking of the Blue Spring."

"So he understood you, then?"

"He understood something of what I said, Don Juan, so I do firmly believe. But whether he understood it all, that is only for God to know."

I saw the color rise in Don Juan Ponce's face, and I knew that that restless choleric nature of his was coming to the fore, which had always been his great driving force and also his most perilous failing.

He said to Pedro de Plasencia, "And will he take us to this Blue Spring of his, do you think?"

"I think he will," said Pedro. "But first he wishes to enact a treaty with us, as the price of transporting us thither."

"A treaty."

"A treaty, yes. He wants our aid and assistance."

"Ah," said Don Juan Ponce. "And how can we be of help to these people, do you think?"

"They want us to show them how to build seafaring ships," said Pedro. "So that they can sail across the Ocean Sea, and go to the rescue of the Holy Land, and free it from the paynim hordes."

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There was much more of back and forth, and forth and back, in these negotiations, until Pedro de Plasencia grew weary indeed, and there was not enough wine in our sacks to give him the rest he needed, so that we had to send a boat out to fetch more from one of our ships at anchor in the harbor. For it was a great burden upon him to conduct these conversations, he remembering only little patches of Church Latin from his boyhood, and the cacique speaking a language that could be called Latin only by great courtesy. I sat with them as they talked, on several occasions, and not for all my soul could I understand a thing that they said to each other. From time to time Pedro would lose his patience and speak out in Spanish, or the cacique would begin to speak in his savage tongue or else in that other language, somewhat like Provencal, which must have been what the seafaring Crusaders spoke amongst themselves. But none of that added to the understanding between the two men, which I think was a very poor understanding indeed.

It became apparent after a time that Pedro had misheard the cacique's terms of treaty: what he wished us to do was not to teach them how to build ships but to gave them one of ours in which to undertake their Crusade.

“It cannot be,” replied Don Juan Ponce, when he had heard. “But tell him this, that I will undertake to purchase ships for him with my own funds, in Spain. Which I will surely do, after we have received the proceeds from the sale of the water from the Fountain.”

“He wishes to know how many ships you will provide,” said Pedro de Plasencia, after another conference.

“Two,” said Don Juan Ponce. “No: three. Three fine caravels.”

Which Pedro duly told the cacique; but his way of telling him was to point to our three ships in the harbor, which led the cacique into thinking that Don Juan Ponce meant to give him those three actual ships then and now, and that required more hours of conferring to repair. But at length all was agreed on both sides, and our journey toward the Blue Spring was begun.

The cacique himself accompanied us, and the three priests of the tribe, carrying the heavy wooden crosses that were their staffs of office, and perhaps two dozen of the young men and girls of the village. In our party there were ten men, Don Juan Ponce and Pedro and I, and seven ordinary seamen carrying barrels in which we meant to store the waters of the Fountain. My wife Beatriz and her sister Juana accompanied us also, for I never would let them be far from me.

Some of the ordinary seamen among us were rough men of Estramadura, who spoke jestingly and with great licentiousness of how often they would embrace the girls of the native village after they had drunk of the Fountain. I had to silence them, reminding them that my wife and her sister could overhear their words. Yet I wondered privately what effects the waters would have on my own manhood: not that it had ever been lacking in any aspect, but I, could not help asking myself if I would find it enhanced beyond its usual virtue, for such curiosity is but a natural thing to any man, as you must know.

We journeyed for two days, through hot close terrain where insects of great size buzzed among the flowers and birds of a thousand colors astounded our eyes. And at last we came to a place of bare white stone, flat like all other places in this isle of Florida, where clear cool blue water gushed up out of the ground with wondrous force.

The cacique gestured grandly, with a great sweep of his arms.

“It is the Blue Spring,” said Pedro de Plasencia.

Our men would have rushed forward at once to lap up its waters like greedy dogs at a pond; but the

cacique cried out, and Don Juan Ponce also in that moment ordered them to halt. There would be no unseemly haste here, he said. And it was just as well he did, for we very soon came to see that this spring was a holy place to the people of the village, and it would have been profaned by such an assault on it, to our possible detriment and peril.

The cacique came forward, with his priests beside him, and gestured to Don Juan Ponce to kneel and remove his helmet. Don Juan Ponce obeyed; and the cacique took his helmet from him, and passed it to one of the priests, who filled it with water from the spring and poured it down over Don Juan Ponce's face and neck, so that Don Juan Ponce laughed out loud. The which laughter seemed to offend the Indians, for they showed looks of disapproval, and Don Juan Ponce at once grew silent.

The Indians spoke words which might almost have been Latin words, and there was much elevating of their crosses as the water was poured down over Don Juan Ponce, after which he was given the order to rise.

And then one by one we stepped forth, and the Indians did the same to each of us.

“It is very like a rite of holy baptism, is it not?” said Aurelio Herrera to me.

“Yes, very much like a baptism,” I said to him.

And I began to wonder: How well have we been understood here? Is it a new access of manly strength that these Indians are conferring upon us, or rather the embrace of the Church? For surely there is nothing about this rite that speaks of anything else than a religious enterprise. But I kept silent, since it was not my place to speak.

When the villagers were done dousing us with water, and speaking words over us and elevating their crosses, which made me more sure than ever that we were being taken into the congregation of their faith, we were allowed to drink of the spring—they did the same—and to fill our barrels. Don Juan Ponce turned to me after we had drunk, and winked at me and said, “Well, old friend, this will serve us well in later years, will it not? For though we have no need of such invigoration now, you and I, nevertheless time will have its work with us as it does with all men.”

“If it does,” I said, “why, then, we are fortified against it now indeed.”

But in truth I felt no change within. The water was pure and cool and good, but it had seemed merely to be water to me, with no great magical qualities about it; and when I turned and looked upon my wife Beatriz, she seemed pleasing to me as she always had, but no more than that. Well, so be it, I thought; this may be the true Fountain or maybe it is not, and only time will tell; and we began our return to the village, carrying the casks of water with us; and the day of our return, Pedro de Plasencia drew up a grand treaty on a piece of bark from a tree, in which we pledged our sacred honor and our souls to do all in our power to supply this village with good Spanish ships so that the villagers would be able to fulfill their pledge to liberate the Holy Land.

“Which we will surely do for them,” said Don Juan Ponce with great conviction. “For I mean to come back to this place as soon as I am able, with many ships of our own as well as the vessels I have promised them from Spain; and we will fill our holds with cask upon cask of this virtuous water from the Fountain, and replenish our fortunes anew by selling that water to those who need its miraculous power. Moreover we ourselves will benefit from its use in our declining days. And also we will bring this cacique some priests, who will correct him in his manner of practicing our faith, and guide him in his journey to Jerusalem. All of which I will swear by a great oath upon the Cross itself, in the presence of the cacique, so that he may have no doubt whatsover of our kindly Christian purposes.”

* * * *

And so we departed, filled with great joy and no little wonder at all that we had seen and heard.

Well, and none of the brave intentions of Don Juan Ponce were fulfilled, as you surely must know, inasmuch as the valiant Don Juan Ponce de Leon never saw Spain again, nor did he live to enjoy the rejuvenations of his body that he hoped the water of the Fountain would bring him in his later years. For when we left the village of the Indian Crusaders, we continued on our way along the coast of the isle of Florida a little further in a southerly direction, seeking to catch favorable winds and currents that would carry us swiftly back to Puerto Rico; and on the 23rd of May we halted in a pleasing bay to gather wood and water—for we would not touch the water of our casks from the Fountain!—and to careen the *San Cristobal* , the hull of which was fouled with barnacles. And as we did our work there, a party of Indians came forth out of the woods.

“Hail, brothers in Christ!” Don Juan Ponce called to them with great cheer, for the cacique had told him that his people had done wonderful things in bringing their neighbors into the embrace of Jesus, and he thought now that surely all the Indians of this isle had been converted to the True Faith by those Crusading men of long ago.

But he was wrong in that; for these Indians were no Christians at all, but only pagan savages like most of their kind, and they replied instantly to Don Juan Ponce's halloos with a volley of darts and arrows that struck five of us dead then and there before we were able to drive them off. And among those who took his mortal wound that day was the valiant and noble Don Juan Ponce de Leon of Valladolid, in the thirty-ninth year of his life.

I knelt beside him on the beach in his last moments, and said the last words with him. And he looked up at me and smiled—for death had never been frightening to him—and he said to me, almost with his last breath, “There is only one thing that I regret, Francisco. And that is that I will never know, now, what powers the water of that Fountain would have conferred upon me, when I was old and greatly stricken with the frailty of my years.” With that he perished.

What more can I say? We made our doleful way back to Puerto Rico, and told our tale of Crusaders and Indians and cool blue waters. But we were met with laughter, and there were no purchasers for the contents of our casks, and our fortunes were greatly depleted. All praise be to God, I survived that dark time and went on afterward to join the magnificent Hernando Cortes in his conquest of the land of Mexico, which today is called New Spain, and in the fullness of time I returned to my native province of Valladolid with much gold in my possession, and here I live in health and vigor to this day.

Often do I think of the isle of Florida and those Christian Indians we found there. It is fifty years since that time. In those fifty years the cacique and his people have rendered most of Florida into Christians by now, as we now know, and I tell you what is not generally known, that this expansion of their nation was brought about the better to support their Crusade against the Mussulman once the ships that Don Juan Ponce promised them had arrived.

So there is a great warlike Christian kingdom in Florida today, filling all that land and spreading over into adjacent isles, against which we men of Spain so far have struggled in vain as we attempt to extend our sway to those regions. I think it was poor Don Juan Ponce de Leon, in his innocent quest for a miraculous Fountain, who without intending it caused them to become so fierce, by making them a promise which he could not fulfill, and leaving them thinking that they had been betrayed by false Christians. Better that they had remained forever in the isolation in which they lived when we found them, singing the *Gloria* and the *Credo* and the *Sanctus* , and waiting with Christian patience for the promised ships that are to take them to the reconquest of the Holy Land. But those ships did not come; and they see us now as traitors and enemies.

I often think also of the valiant Don Juan Ponce, and his quest for the wondrous Fountain. Was the Blue Spring indeed the Fountain of legend? I am not sure of that. It may be that those Indians misunderstood what Pedro de Plasencia was requesting of them, and that they were simply offering us baptism—us, good Christians all our lives!—when what we sought was something quite different from that.

But if the Fountain was truly the one we sought, I feel great sorrow and pity for Don Juan Ponce. For though he drank of its waters, he died too soon to know of its effects. Whereas here I am, soon to be ninety years old, and the father of a boy of seven and a girl of five.

Was it the Fountain's virtue that has given me so long and robust a life, or have I simply enjoyed the favor of God? How can I say? Whichever it is, I am grateful; and if ever there is peace between us and the people of the isle of Florida, and you should find yourself in the vicinity of that place, you could do worse, I think, than to drink of that Blue Spring, which will do you no harm and may perhaps bring you great benefit. If by chance you go to that place, seek out the Indians of the village nearby, and tell them that old Francisco de Ortega remembers them, and cherishes the memory, and more than once has said a Mass in their praise despite all the troubles they have caused his countrymen, for he knows that they are the last defenders of the Holy Land against the paynim infidels.

This is my story, and the story of Don Juan Ponce de Leon and the miraculous Fountain, which the ignorant call the Fountain of Youth, and of the Christian Indians of Florida who yearn to free the Holy Land. You may wonder about the veracity of these things, but I beg you, have no doubt on that score. All that I have told you is true. For I was there. I saw and heard everything.

World of a Thousand Colours

When Jolvar Hollinrede discovered that the slim, pale young man opposite him was journeying to the World of a Thousand Colours to undergo the Test, he spied a glittering opportunity for, himself. And in that moment was the slim, pale young man's fate set.

Hollinrede's lean fingers closed on the spun-fiber drink flask. He peered across the burnished tabletop. ‘The*Test* , you say?’

The young man smiled diffidently. ‘Yes. I think I'm ready. I've waited years—and now's my big chance.’ He had had a little too much of the cloying liqueur he had been drinking; his eyes shone glassily, and his tongue was looser than it had any right to be.

'Few are called and fewer are chosen,’ Hollinrede mused. ‘Let me buy you another drink.’

'No, I—’

'It will be an honor. Really. It's not every day I have a chance to buy a Testee a drink.’

Hollinrede waved a jeweled hand and the servomech brought them two more drink flasks. Lightly Hollinrede punctured one, slid it along the tabletop, and kept the other in his hand unopened. ‘I don't believe I know your name,’ he said.

'Derveran Marti. I'm from Earth. You?’

'Jolvar Hollinrede. Likewise. I travel from world to world on business, which is what brings me to Niprion this day.’

'What sort of business?’

'I trade in jewels,' Hollinrede said, displaying the bright collection studding his fingers. They were all morphosims, not the originals, but only careful chemical analysis would reveal that. Hollinrede did not believe in exposing millions of credits' worth of merchandize to anyone who cared to lop off his hand.

'I was a clerk,' Marti said. 'But that's all far behind me. I'm on to the World of a Thousand Colours to take the Test! The Test!'

'The Test!' Hollinrede echoed. He lifted his unpunctured drink—flask in a gesture of salute, raised it to his lips, pretended to drain it. Across the table Derveran Marti coughed as the liqueur coursed down his throat. He looked up, smiling dizzily, and smacked his lips.

'When does your ship leave?' Hollinrede asked.

'Tomorrow midday. It's the Star Climber. I can't wait. This stopover at Niprion is making me fume with impatience.'

'No doubt,' Hollinrede agreed. 'What say you to an afternoon of whist, to while away the time?'

* * * *

An hour later Derveran Marti lay slumped over the inlaid card table in Hollinrede's hotel suite, still clutching a handful of waxy cards. Arms folded, Hollinrede surveyed the body.

They were about of a height, he and the dead man, and a chemotherm mask would alter Hollinrede's face sufficiently to allow him to pass as Marti. He switched on the playback of the room's recorder to pick up the final fragments of their conversation.

' ... care for another drink, Marti?'

'I guess I'd better not, old fellow. I'm getting kind of muzzy, you know. No, please don't pour it for me. I said I didn't want it, and—well, all right. Just a little one. There, that's enough. Thanks.'

The tape was silent for a moment, then recorded the soft thump of Marti's body falling to the table as the quick-action poison unlatched his synapses. Smiling, Hollinrede switched the recorder to record and said, mimicking Marti, '*I guess I'd better not, old fellow. I'm getting kind of muzzy, you know.*'

He activated the playback, listened critically to the sound of his voice, then listened to Marti's again for comparison. He was approaching the light, flexible quality of the dead man's voice. Several more attempts and he had it almost perfect. Producing a vocal homologizer, he ran off first Marti's voice, then his own pronouncing the same words.

The voices were alike to three decimal places. That would be good enough to fool the most sensitive detector; three places was the normal range of variation in any man's voice from day to day.

In terms of mass there was a trifling matter of some few grams which could easily be sweated off in the gymnasium the following morning. As for the dead man's gesture—complex, Hollinrede thought he could manage a fairly accurate imitation of Marti's manner of moving; he had studied the young clerk carefully for nearly four hours, and Hollinrede was a clever man.

When the preparations were finished, he stepped away and glanced at the mirror, taking a last look at his own face—the face he would not see again until he had taken the Test. He donned the mask. Jolvar Hollinrede became Derveran Marti.

Hollinrede extracted a length of cotton bulking from a drawer and wrapped it around Marti's body. He weighed the corpse, and added four milligrams more of cotton so that Marti would have precisely the

mass Jolvar Hollinrede had had. He donned Marti's clothes finally, dressed the body in his own, and, smiling sadly at the convincing but worthless morphosim jewels on his fingers, transferred the rings to Marti's already-stiffening hands.

'Up with you,' he grunted, and bundled the body across the room to the disposal.

'Farewell, old friend,' he exclaimed feelingly, and hoisted Marti feet-first to the lip of the chute. He shoved, and the dead man vanished, slowly, gracefully, heading downward towards the omnivorous maw of the atomic converter buried in the deep levels of Stopover Planet Niprion.

Reflectively Hollinrede turned away from the disposal unit. He gathered up the cards, put away the liqueur, poured the remnant of the poisoned drink in the disposal chute.

An atomic converter was a wonderful thing, he thought pleasantly. By now the body of Marti had been efficiently reduced to its component molecules, and those were due for separation into atoms shortly after, and from atoms into subatomic particles. Within an hour the prime evidence to the crime would be nothing but so many protons, electrons, and neutrons—and there would be no way of telling which of the two men in the room had entered the chute, and which had remained alive.

Hollinrede activated the tape once more, rehearsed for the final time his version of Marti's voice, and checked it with the homologizer. Still three decimal places; that was good enough. He erased the tape.

Then, depressing the communicator stud, he said, 'I wish to report a death.'

A cold robot face appeared on the screen. 'Yes?'

'Several minutes ago my host, Jolvar Hollinrede, passed on of an acute embolism. He requested immediate dissolution upon death and I wish to report that this has been carried out.'

'Your name?'

'Derveran Marti. Testee.'

'A Testee? You were the last to see the late Hollinrede alive?'

'That's right.'

'Do you swear that all information you might give will be accurate and fully honest?'

'I so swear,' Hollinrede said.

The inquest was brief and smooth. The word of a Testee goes without question; Hollinrede had reported the details of the meeting exactly as if he had been Marti, and after a check of the converter records revealed that a mass exactly equal to the late Hollinrede's had indeed been disposed of at precisely the instant witness claimed, the inquest was at its end. The verdict was natural death. Hollinrede told the officials that he had not known the late jewel trader before that day, and had no interest in his property, whereupon they permitted him to depart.

Having died intestate, Hollinrede knew his property became that of the Galactic Government. But, as he pressed his hand, clad in its skintight chemotherm, against the doorplate of Derveran Marti's room, he told himself that it did not matter. Now he was Derveran Marti, Testee. And once he had taken and passed the Test, what would the loss of a few million credits in baubles matter to him?

Therefore it was with a light heart that the pseudo-Derveran Marti quitted his lodgings the next day and

prepared to board the *Star Climber* for the voyage to the World of a Thousand Colours.

The clerk at the desk peered at him sympathetically as he pressed his fingers into the checkout plate, thereby erasing the impress from the doorplate upstairs.

'It was too bad about that old fellow dying on you yesterday, wasn't it, sir? I do hope it won't affect your Test result.'

Hollinrede smiled blankly. 'It was quite a shock to me when he died so suddenly. But my system has already recovered; I'm ready for the Test.'

'Good luck to you, sir,' the clerk said as Hollinrede left the hotel and stepped out on the flaring skyramp that led to the waiting ship.

The steward at the passenger hatch was collecting identiplates. Hollinrede handed his over casually. The steward inserted it tip—first in the computer near the door, and motioned for Hollinrede to step within the beam while his specifications were being automatically compared with those on the identiplate.

He waited, tensely. Finally the chattering of the machine stopped and a dry voice said, 'Your identity is in order, Testee Derveran Marti. Proceed within.'

'That means you're okay,' the steward told him. 'Yours is Compartment Eleven. It's a luxury job, you know. But you Testees deserve it. Best of luck, sir.'

'Thanks,' Hollinrede grinned. 'I don't doubt I'll need it.'

He moved up the ramp and into the ship. Compartment Eleven was a luxury job; Hollinrede, who had been a frugal man, whistled in amazement when he saw it. It was nearly eight feet high and almost twelve broad, totally private with an opaquer attached to the doorscope. Clinging curtains of ebony synthoid foam from Ravens-musk VIII had been draped lovingly over the walls, and the acceleration couch was trimmed in golden bryozone. The rank of Testee carried with it privileges that the late Derveran Marti certainly would never have mustered in private life—nor Jolvar Hollinrede either.

At 1143 the doorscope chimed; Hollinrede leaped from the soft couch a little too nervously and transluced the door. A crewman stood outside.

'Everything all right, sir? We blast in seventeen minutes.'

'I'm fine,' Hollinrede said. 'Can't wait to get there. How long do you think it'll take?'

'Sorry, sir. Not at liberty to reveal. But I wish you a pleasant trip, and should you lack for aught hesitate not to call on me.'

Hollinrede smiled at the curiously archaic way the man had of expressing himself. 'Never fear; I'll not hesitate. Many thanks.' He opaqued the doorscope and resumed his seat.

* * * *

At precisely 1200 the drive-engines of the Star Climber throbbed heavily; the pale green light over the door of Hollinrede's compartment glowed brightly for an instant, signaling the approaching blastoff. He sank down on the acceleration couch to wait.

A moment later came the push of acceleration, and then, as the gravshields took effect, the 7g escape force dwindled until Hollinrede felt comfortable again. He increased the angle of the couch in order to peer out the port.

The world of Niprion was vanishing rapidly in the background: already it was nothing but a mottled grey-and-gold ball swimming hazily in a puff of atmosphere. The sprawling metal structure that was the stopover hotel was invisible.

Somewhere back on Niprion, Hollinrede thought, the atoms that once had been Testee Derveran Marti were now feeding the plasma intake of a turbine or heating the inner shell of a reactor.

He let his mind dwell on the forthcoming Test. He knew little about it, really, considering he had been willing to take a man's life for a chance to compete. He knew the Test was administered once every five years to candidates chosen by Galaxy wide search. The world where the Test was given was known only as the World of a Thousand Colours, and precisely where this world was no member of the general public was permitted to know.

As for the Test itself, by its very nature it was unknown to the Galaxy. For no winning Testee had ever returned from the World of a Thousand Colours. Some losers returned, their minds carefully wiped clean of any memories of the planet—but the winners never came back.

The Test's nature was unknown; the prize, inconceivable. All anyone knew was that the winners were granted the soul's utmost dream. Upon winning, one neither returned to his home world nor desired to return.

Naturally many men ignored the Test—it was something for other people to take part in. But millions, billions throughout the Galaxy competed in the preliminaries. And every five years, six or seven were chosen.

Jolvar Hollinrede was convinced he would succeed in the Test—but he had failed three times hand running in the preliminaries, and was thus permanently disqualified. The preliminaries were simple; they consisted merely of an intensive mental scanning. A flipflop circuit would flash YES or NO after that.

If YES, there were further scannings, until word was beamed through the Galaxy that the competitors for the year had been chosen.

Hollinrede stared moodily at the blackness of space. He had been eliminated unfairly, he felt; he coveted the unknown prize the Test offered, and felt bitter at having it denied him. When chance had thrown Testee Derveran Marti in his path, Hollinrede had leaped to take advantage of the opportunity.

And now he was on his way.

Surely, he thought, they would allow him to take the Test, even if he were discovered to be an impostor. And once he took it, he knew he would succeed. He had always succeeded in his endeavours. There was no reason for failure now.

Beneath the false mask of Derveran Marti, Hollinrede's face was tensely set. He dreamed of the Test and its winning—and of the end to the long years of wandering and toil.

* * * *

The voice at the door said, ‘We're here, Testee Derveran. Please open up.’

Hollinrede grunted, pulled himself up from the couch, threw open the door. Three dark-faced spacemen waited there for him.

'Where are we?’ he asked nervously. ‘Is the trip over?’

'We have come to pilot you to the Test planet, sir,’ one of the spacemen told him. ‘The *Star Climber* is in

orbit around it, but will not make a landing itself. Will you follow us?'

'Very well,' Hollinrede said.

They entered a lifeship, a slim grey tube barely thirty meters long, and fastened acceleration cradles. There were no ports. Hollinrede felt enclosed, hemmed in.

The lifeship began to slide noiselessly along the ejection channel, glided the entire length of the *Star Climber* , and burst out into space. A preset orbit was operating. Hollinrede clung to the acceleration cradle as the lifeship spun tightly inward towards a powerful gravitational field not far away.

The ship came to rest. Hollinrede lay motionless, flesh cold with nervousness, teeth chattering.

'Easy does it, sir. Up and out.'

They lifted him and gently nudged him through a manifold compression lock. He moved forward on numb feet.

'Best of luck, sir!' an envious voice called behind him.

Then the lock clanged shut, and Hollinrede was on his own.

A riotous blaze of colour swept down at him from every point of the compass.

He stood in the midst of what looked like a lunar crater; far in the distance on all sides was the massive upraised fissured surface of a ringwall, and the ground beneath him was barren red-brown rock, crumbling to pumice here and there but bare of vegetation.

In the sky was a solitary sun, a blazing Type A blue-white star. That sun alone was incapable of accounting for this flood of colour.

Streamers of every hue seemed to sprout from the rocks, staining the ringwall olive-grey and brilliant cerise and dark, lustrous green. Pigments of every sort bathed the air; now it seemed to glow with currents of luminous pink, now a flaming red, now a pulsing pure white.

His eyes adjusted slowly to the torrent of colour. World of a Thousand Colours, they called this place? That was an underestimate. *Hundred thousand. Million. Billion* . Shades and near-shades mingled to form new colours.

'Are you Derveran Marti?' a voice asked.

Startled, Hollinrede looked around. It seemed as if a band of colour had spoken: a swirling band of rich brown that spun tirelessly before him.

'Are you Derveran Marti?' the voice repeated, and Hollinrede saw that it had indeed come from the band of brown.

It seemed a desecration to utter the lie here on this world of awesome beauty, and he felt the temptation to claim his true identity. But the time for that was later.

'Yes,' he said loudly. 'I am Derveran Marti.'

'Welcome, Derveran Marti. The Test will soon begin.'

'Where?'

'Here.'

'Right out here? Just like this?'

'Yes,' the band of colour replied. 'Your fellow competitors are gathering.'

Hollinrede narrowed his eyes and peered towards the far reaches of the ringwall. Yes—, he saw tiny figures located at great distances from each other along the edge of the crater. One, two, three ... there were seven all told, including himself. Seven, out of the whole Galaxy!

Each of the other six was attended by a dipping, bobbing blotch of colour. Hollinrede noticed a square shouldered giant from one of the Inner Worlds surrounded by a circlet of violent orange; to his immediate left was a sylphlike female, probably from one of the worlds of Dubhe, wearing only the revealing token garment of her people but shielded from inquisitive eyes by a robe of purest blue light. There were others; Hollinrede wished them well. He knew it was possible for all competitors to win, and now that he was about to attain his long-sought goal he held no malice for anyone. His mind was suffused with pity for the dead Derveran Marti, sacrificed that Jolvar Hollinrede might be in this place at this time.

'Derveran Marti,' the voice said, 'you have been chosen from among your fellow men to take part in the Test. This is an honor that comes to few, we of this world hope you appreciate the grace that has fallen upon you.'

'I do,' Hollinrede said humbly.

'We ourselves are winners of the prize you seek,' the voice went on. 'Some of us are members of the first expedition that found this world, eleven hundred years ago. As you see, life has unlimited duration in our present state of matter. Others of us have come more recently. The bank of pale purple moving above you to the left was a winner in the previous competition to this.

'We of the World of a Thousand Colours have a rare gift to offer: total harmony of mind. We exist divorced of body, as a stream of photons only. We live in perfect freedom and eternal delight. Once every five years we find it possible to increase our numbers by adding to our midst such throughout the Galaxy as we feel would desire to share our way of life—and whom we would feel happy to welcome to us.'

'You mean,' Hollinrede said shakily, 'that all these beams of light—were once*people* ?'

'They were that—until welcomed into us. Now they are men no more. This is the prize you have come to win.'

'I see.'

'You are not required to compete. Those who, after reaching our world, decide to remain in the material state, are returned to their home worlds with their memories cleared of what they have been told here and their minds free and happy to the end of their lives. Is this what you wish?'

Hollinrede was silent, letting his dazzled eyes take in the flamboyant sweep of colour that illuminated the harsh, rocky world. Finally he said: 'I will stay.'

'Good. The Test will shortly begin.'

* * * *

Hollinrede saw the band of brown swoop away from him upward to rejoin its never-still comrades in the sky. He waited, standing stiffly, for something to happen.

Then this is what I killed a man for, he thought. His mind dwelled on the words of the band of brown.

Evidently many hundreds of years ago an exploratory expedition had come upon some unique natural phenomenon here at a far end of the universe. Perhaps it had been an accident, a stumbling into a pool of light perhaps, that had dematerialized them, turned them into bobbing immortal streaks of colour. But that had been the beginning.

The entire Test system had been developed to allow others to enter this unique society, to leave the flesh behind and live on as pure energy. Hollinrede's fingers trembled; this was, he saw, something worth killing for!

He could see why some people might turn down the offer—those would be the few who cautiously would prefer to remain corporeal and so returned to their home worlds to live out their span.

But not me!

He faced upward and waited for the Test to begin. His shrewd mind was at the peak of its agility; he was prepared for anything they might throw at him. He wondered if anyone yet had come to the World of a Thousand Colours so determined to succeed.

Probably not. For most, the accolade was the result of luck—a mental scanning that turned up whatever mysterious qualities were acceptable to the people of this world. They did not have to work for their nomination. They did not have to kill for it.

But Hollinrede had clawed his way here—and he was determined to succeed.

He waited.

Finally the brown band descended from the mass of lambent colour overhead and curled into a tight bowknot before him.

'The Test is about to begin, Jolvar Hollinrede.'

Use of his own name startled him. In the past week he had so thoroughly associated his identity with that of Derveran Marti that he had scarcely let his actual name drift through his mind.

'So you know,' he said.

'We have known since the moment you came. It is unfortunate; we would have wanted Derveran Marti among us. But now that you are here, we will test you on your own merits, Jolvar Hollinrede.'

It was just as well that way, he thought. The pretence had to end sooner or later, and he was willing to stand or fall as himself rather than under an assumed identity.

'Advance to the centre of the crater, Jolvar Hollinrede,' came the command from the brown band.

Leadenly Hollinrede walked forward. Squinting through the mist of colour that hazed the view, he saw the other six competitors were doing the same. They would meet at the centre.

'The Test is now under way,' a new and deeper voice said.

Seven of them. Hollinrede looked around. There was the giant from the Inner World—Fondelfor, he saw now. Next to him, the near-nude sylph of Dubhe, and standing by her side, one diamond-faceted eye glittering in his forehead, a man of Alpheraz VII.

The selectors had cast their nets wide. Hollinrede saw another Terran, dark of skin and bright of eye; a being of Deneb IX, squat and muscular. The sixth Testee was a squirming globule from Spica's tenth world; the seventh was Jolvar Hollinrede, itinerant; home world, Terra.

Overhead hung a circular diadem of violet light. It explained the terms of the Test.

'Each of you will be awarded a characteristic colour. It will project before you into the area you ring. Your object will be to blend your seven colours into one; when you have achieved this, you will be admitted into us.'

'May I ask what the purpose of this is?' Hollinrede said coldly.

'The essence of our society is harmony—total harmony among us all, and inner harmony within those groups which, at the same temporal juncture. Naturally if you seven are incapable even of this inner harmony, you will be incapable of the greator harmony of us all—and will be rejected.'

Despite the impatient frowns of a few of his fellow contestants, Hollinrede said, 'Therefore we're to be judged as a unit. An entity?'

'Yes and no,' the voice replied. 'And now the Test.'

Hollinrede saw to his astonishment a colour spurt from his arm and hang hovering before him—a pool of inky black hue than the dark of space. His first reaction was one of shock; then he realized that he could control the colour, make it move.

He glanced around. Each of his companions similarly faced a hovering mass of colour. The giant of Fondelfor controlled red; the girl of Dubhe, orange. The Alpherazian stared into a whirling bowl of deep yellow, the Terran green, the Spican radiant Violet, Denebian pearly grey.

Hollinrede stared at his globe of black. A voice above him seemed to whisper, '*Marti's colour would have been blue. The spectrum has been violated.*'

He shrugged away the words and sent his globe of spinning into the area between the seven contestants ringed in a circle. At the same time each of the others directed his particular colour inward.

The colours met. They clashed, pinwheeled, seemed to throw off sparks. They began to swirl in a hovering arc of radiance.

Hollinrede waited breathlessly, watching the others. black seemed to stand in opposition to the other six. yellow, green, violet. The pearl-grey of the Denebian seemed to enfold the other colours warmly—all but Hollinrede's. The black hung apart.

To his surprise he saw the Dubhian girl's orange change hue. The girl herself stood stiffly, eyes closed, her body now bare. Sweat poured down her skin. And her orange hue began to shift towards the grey of the Denebian.

The others were following. One by one, as they achieved control over their Test colour. First to follow was the Spican, then the Alpherazian.

Why can't I do that? Hollinrede thought wildly.

He strained to alter the colour of his black, but it remained unchanged. The others were blending, now, swirling around; there was a predominantly grey cast, but it was not the grey of the Denebian but a different grey tending towards white. Impatiently he redoubled his efforts; it was necessary for the

success of the group that he get his obstinate black to blend with the rest.

'The black remains aloof,' someone said near him.

'We will fail if the black does not join us.'

His streak of colour now stood out boldly against the increasing milkiness of the others. None of the original colours were left now but his. Perspiration streamed down him; he realized that his was the only obstacle preventing the seven from passing the Test.

'The black still will not join us,' a tense voice said.

Another said, 'The black is a colour of evil.'

A third said, 'Black is not a colour at all. Black is the absence of colour; white is the totality of colour.'

A fourth said, 'Black is holding us from the white.'

Hollinrede looked from one to the other in mute appeal. Veins stood out on his forehead from the effort, but the black remained unchanging. He could not blend it with the others.

From above came the voice of their examiner, suddenly accusing: 'Black is the colour of*murder* .'

The girl from Dubhe, lilting the ugly words lightly, repeated it. 'Black is the colour of murder.'

'Can we permit a murderer among us?' asked the Denebian.

'The answer is self-evident,' said the Spican, indicating the recalcitrant spear of black that marred the otherwise flawless globe of near-white in their midst.

'The murderer must be cast out ere the Test be passed,' muttered the giant of Fondelfor. He broke from his position and moved menacingly towards Hollinrede.

'Look!' Hollinrede yelled desperately. 'Look at the red!'

The giant's colour had split from the grey and now darted wildly towards Hollinrede's black.

'This is the wrong way, then,' the giant said, halting. 'We must all join in it or we all fail.'

'Keep away from me,' Hollinrede said. 'It's not my fault if—'

Then they were on him—four pairs of hands, two rough claws, two slick tentacles. Hollinrede felt himself being lifted aloft. He squirmed, tried to break from their grasp, but they held him up—

And dashed him down against the harsh rock floor.

He lay there, feeling his life seep out, knowing he had failed—and watched as they returned to form their circle once again. The black winked out of being.

As his eyes started to close, Hollinrede saw the six colours again blend into one. Now that the murderer had been cast from their midst, nothing barred the path of their harmony. Pearly grey shifted to purest white—the totality of colour—and as the six merged into one, Hollinrede, with his dying glance, bitterly saw them take leave forever of their bodies and slip upward to join their brothers hovering brightly above.

Sailing to Byzantium

At dawn he arose and stepped out on to the patio for his first look at Alexandria, the one city he had not yet seen. That year the five cities were Chang-an, Asgard, New Chicago, Timbuctoo, Alexandria: the usual mix of eras, cultures, realities. He and Gioia, making the long flight from Asgard in the distant north the night before, had arrived late, well after sundown, and had gone straight to bed. Now, by the gentle apricot-hued morning light, the fierce spires and battlements of Asgard seemed merely something he had dreamed.

The rumour was that Asgard's moment was finished, anyway. In a little while, he had heard, they were going to tear it down and replace it, elsewhere, with Mohenjo-daro. Though there were never more than five cities, they changed constantly. He could remember a time when they had had Rome of the Caesars instead of Chang-an, and Rio de Janeiro rather than Alexandria. These people saw no point in keeping anything very long.

It was not easy for him to adjust to the sultry intensity of Alexandria after the frozen splendours of Asgard. The wind, coming off the water, was brisk and torrid both at once. Soft turquoise wavelets lapped at the jetties. Strong presences assailed his senses: the hot heavy sky, the stinging scent of the red lowland sand borne on the breeze, the sullen swampy aroma of the nearby sea. Everything trembled and glimmered in the early light. Their hotel was beautifully situated, high on the northern slope of the huge artificial mound known as the Paneium that was sacred to the goat-footed god. From here they had a total view of the city: the wide noble boulevards, the soaring obelisks and monuments, the palace of Hadrian just below the hill, the stately and awesome Library, the temple of Poseidon, the teeming marketplace, the royal lodge that Mark Antony had built after his defeat at Actium. And of course the Lighthouse, the wondrous many-windowed Lighthouse, the seventh wonder of the world, that immense pile of marble and limestone and reddish-purple Aswan granite rising in majesty at the end of its mile-long causeway. Black smoke from the beacon-fire at its summit curled lazily into the sky. The city was awakening. Some temporaries in short white kilts appeared and began to trim the dense dark hedges that bordered the great public buildings. A few citizens wearing loose robes of vaguely Grecian style were strolling in the streets.

There were ghosts and chimeras and phantasies everywhere about. Two slim elegant centaurs, a male and a female, grazed on the hillside. A burly thick-thighed swordsman appeared on the porch of the temple of Poseidon holding a Gorgon's severed head and waved it in a wide arc, grinning broadly. In the street below the hotel gate three small pink sphinxes, no bigger than house cats, stretched and yawned and began to prowl the kerbside. A larger one, lion-sized, watched warily from an alleyway: their mother, surely. Even at this distance he could hear her loud purring.

Shading his eyes, he peered far out past the Lighthouse and across the water. He hoped to see the dim shores of Crete or Cyprus to the north, or perhaps the great dark curve of Anatolia. *Carry me towards that great Byzantium*, he thought. *Where all is ancient, singing at the oars* . But he beheld only the endless empty sea, sun-bright and blinding though the morning was just beginning. Nothing was ever where he expected it to be. The continents did not seem to be in their proper places any longer. Gioia, taking him aloft long ago in her little flitterflitter, had shown him that. The tip of South America was canted far out into the Pacific; Africa was weirdly foreshortened; a broad tongue of ocean separated Europe and Asia. Australia did not appear to exist at all. Perhaps they had dug it up and used it for other things. There was no trace of the world he once had known. This was the fiftieth century. ‘The fiftieth century after *what?* ’ he had asked several times, but no-one seemed to know, or else they did not care to say.

'Is Alexandria very beautiful?’ Gioia called from within.

'Come out and see.'

Naked and sleepy-looking, she padded out on to the white-tiled patio and nestled up beside him. She fitted neatly under his arm. ‘Oh, yes, yes!’ she said softly. ‘So very beautiful, isn't it? Look, there, the palaces, the Library, the Lighthouse! Where will we go first? The Lighthouse, I think. Yes? And then the market place—I want to see the Egyptian magicians—and the stadium, the races—will they be having races today, do you think? Oh, Charles, I want to see everything!'

'Everything? All on the first day?'

'All on the first day, yes,’ she said. ‘Everything.'

'But we have plenty of time, Gioia.'

'Do we?'

He smiled and drew her tight against his side.

'Time enough,’ he said gently.

He loved her for her impatience, for her bright bubbling eagerness. Gioia was not much like the rest in that regard, though she seemed identical in all other ways. She was short, supple, slender, dark-eyed, olive-skinned, narrow-hipped, with wide shoulders and flat muscles. They were all like that, each one indistinguishable from the rest, like a horde of millions of brothers and sisters—a world of small lithe childlike Mediterraneans, built for juggling, for bull-dancing, for sweet white wine at midday and rough red wine at night. They had the same slim bodies, the same broad mouths, the same great glossy eyes. He had never seen anyone who appeared to be younger than twelve or older than twenty. Gioia was somehow a little different, although he did not quite know how; but he knew that it was for that imperceptible but significant difference that he loved her. And probably that was why she loved him also.

He let his gaze drift from west to east, from the Gate of the Moon down broad Canopus Street and out to the harbour, and off to the tomb of Cleopatra at the tip of long slender Cape Lochias. Everything was here and all of it perfect, the obelisks, the statues and marble colonnades, the courtyards and shrines and groves, great Alexander himself in his coffin of crystal and gold: a splendid gleaming pagan city. But there were oddities—an unmistakable mosque near the public gardens, and what seemed to be a Christian church not far from the Library. And those ships in the harbour, with all those red sails and bristling masts—surely they were medieval, and late medieval at that. He had seen such anachronisms in other places before. Doubtless these people found them amusing. Life was a game for them. They played at it unceasingly. Rome, Alexandria, Timbuctoo—why not? Create an Asgard of translucent bridges and shimmering ice-girt palaces, then grow weary of it and take it away? Replace it with Mohenjo-daro? Why not? It seemed to him a great pity to destroy those lofty Nordic feasting-halls for the sake of building a squat brutal sun-baked city of brown brick; but these people did not took at things the way he did. Their cities were only temporary. Someone in Asgard had said that Timbuctoo would be the next to go, with Byzantium rising in its place. Well, why not? Why not? They could have anything they liked. This was the fiftieth century, after all. The only rule was that there could be no more than five cities at once. ‘Limits,’ Gioia had informed him solemnly when they first began to travel together, ‘are very important.’ But she did not know why, or did not care to say.

He stared out once more towards the sea.

He imagined a newborn city congealing suddenly out of mists, far across the water: shining towers, great domed palaces, golden mosaics. That would be no great effort for them. They could just summon it forth whole out of time, the Emperor on his throne and the Emperor's drunken soldiery roistering in the streets,

the brazen clangour of the cathedral gong rolling through the Grand Bazaar, dolphins leaping beyond the shoreside pavilions. Why not? They had Timbuctoo. They had Alexandria. Do you crave Constantinople? Then behold Constantinople! Or Avalon, or Lyonesse, or Atlantis. They could have anything they liked. It is pure Schopenhauer here: the world as will and imagination. Yes! These slender dark-eyed people journeying tirelessly from miracle to miracle. Why not Byzantium next? Yes! Why not? *That is no country for old men* , he thought.*The young in one another's arms, the birds in the trees* —yes! Yes! Anything they liked. They even had him. Suddenly he felt frightened. Questions he had not asked for a long time burst through into his consciousness.*Who am I? Why am I here? Who is this woman beside me?*

'You're so quiet all of a sudden, Charles,' said Gioia, who could not abide silence for very long. 'Will you talk to me? I want you to talk to me. Tell me what you're looking for out there.'

He shrugged. 'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'Nothing in particular.'

'I could see you seeing something.'

'Byzantium,' he said. 'I was imagining that I could look straight across the water to Byzantium. I was trying to get a glimpse of the walls of Constantinople.'

'Oh, but you wouldn't be able to see as far as that from here. Not really.'

'I know.'

'And anyway Byzantium doesn't exist.'

'Not yet. But it will. Its time comes later on.'

'Does it?' she said. 'Do you know that for a fact?'

'On good authority. I heard it in Asgard,' he told her. 'But even if I hadn't, Byzantium would be inevitable, don't you think? Its time would have to come. How could we not do Byzantium, Gioia? We certainly will do Byzantium, sooner or later. I know we will. It's only a matter of time. And we have all the time in the world.'

A shadow crossed her face. 'Do we? Do we?'

* * * *

He knew very little about himself, but he knew that he was not one of them. That he knew. He knew that his name was Charles Phillips and that before he had come to live among these people he had lived in the year 1984, when there had been such things as computers and television sets and baseball and jet planes, and the world was full of cities, not merely five but thousands of them, New York and London and Johannesburg and Paris and Liverpool and Bangkok and San Francisco and Buenos Aires and a multitude of others, all at the same time. There had been four and a half billion people in the world then; now he doubted that there were as many as four and a half million. Nearly everything had changed beyond comprehension. The moon still seemed the same, and the sun; but at night he searched in vain for familiar constellations. He had no idea how they had brought him from then to now, or why. It did no good to ask. No-one had any answers for him; no-one so much as appeared to understand what it was that he was trying to learn. After a time he had stopped asking; after a time he had almost entirely ceased wanting to know.

He and Gioia were climbing the Lighthouse. She scampered ahead, in a hurry as always, and he came along behind her in his more stolid fashion. Scores of other tourists, mostly in groups of two or three, were making their way up the wide flagstone ramps, laughing, calling to one another. Some of them, seeing him, stopped a moment, stared, pointed. He was used to that. He was so much taller than any of them; he was plainly not one of them. When they pointed at him he smiled. Sometimes he nodded a little acknowledgement.

He could not find much of interest in the lowest level, a massive square structure two hundred feet high built of huge marble blocks: within its cool musty arcades were hundreds of small dark rooms, the offices of the Lighthouse's keepers and mechanics, the barracks of the garrison, the stables for the three hundred donkeys that carried the fuel to the lantern far above. None of that appeared inviting to him. He forged onwards without halting until he emerged on the balcony that led to the next level. Here the Lighthouse grew narrower and became octagonal: its face, granite now and handsomely fluted, rose in a stunning sweep above him.

Gioia was waiting for him there. ‘This is for you,’ she said, holding out a nugget of meat on a wooden skewer. ‘Roast lamb. Absolutely delicious. I had one while I was waiting for you.’ She gave him a cup of some cool green sherbet also, and darted off to buy a pomegranate. Dozens of temporaries were roaming the balcony, selling refreshments of all kinds.

He nibbled at the meat. It was charred outside, nicely pink and moist within. While he ate, one of the temporaries came up to him and peered blandly into his face. It was a stocky swarthy mate wearing nothing but a strip of red and yellow cloth about its waist. ‘I sell meat,’ it said. ‘Very fine roast lamb, only five drachmas.'

Phillips indicated the piece he was eating. ‘I already have some,’ he said.

'It is excellent meat, very tender. It has been soaked for three days in the juices of—'

'Please,’ Phillips said. ‘I don't want to buy any meat. Do you mind moving along?'

The temporaries had confused and baffled him at first, and there was still much about them that was unclear to him. They were not machines—they looked like creatures of flesh and blood—but they did not seem to be human beings, either, and no-one treated them as if they were. He supposed they were artificial constructs, products of a technology so consummate that it was invisible. Some appeared to be more intelligent than others, but all of them behaved as if they had no more autonomy than characters in a play, which was essentially what they were. There were untold numbers of them in each of the five cities, playing all manner of roles: shepherds and swineherds, street-sweepers, merchants, boatmen, vendors of grilled meats and cool drinks, hagglers in the marketplace, schoolchildren, charioteers, policemen, grooms, gladiators, monks, artisans, whores and cutpurses, sailors—whatever was needed to sustain the illusion of a thriving, populous urban centre. The dark-eyed people, Gioia's people, never performed work. There were not enough of them to keep a city's functions going, and in any case they were strictly tourists, wandering with the wind, moving from city to city as the whim took them, Chang-an to New Chicago, New Chicago to Timbuctoo, Timbuctoo to Asgard, Asgard to Alexandria, onwards, ever onwards.

The temporary would not leave him alone. Phillips walked away and it followed him, cornering him against the balcony wall. When Gioia returned a few minutes later, lips prettily stained with pomegranate juice, the temporary was still hovering about him, trying with lunatic persistence to sell him a skewer of lamb. It stood much too close to him, almost nose to nose, great sad cowlike eyes peering intently into his as it extolled with mournful mooing urgency the quality of its wares. It seemed to him that he had had trouble like this with temporaries on one or two earlier occasions. Gioia touched the creature's elbow

lightly and said, in a short sharp tone Phillips had never heard her use before, ‘He isn't interested. Get away from him.’ It went at once. To Phillips she said, ‘You have to be firm with them.'

'I was trying. It wouldn't listen to me.'

'You ordered it to go away, and it refused?'

'I asked it to go away. Politely. Too politely, maybe.'

'Even so,’ she said. ‘It should have obeyed a human, regardless.'

'Maybe it didn't think I was human,’ Phillips suggested. ‘Because of the way I look. My height, the colour of my eyes. It might have thought I was some kind of temporary myself.'

'No,’ Gioia said, frowning. ‘A temporary won't solicit another temporary. But it won't ever disobey a citizen, either. There's a very clear boundary. There isn't ever any confusion. I can't understand why it went on bothering you.’ He was surprised at how troubled she seemed: far more so, he thought, than the incident warranted. A stupid device, perhaps miscalibrated in some way, overenthusiastically pushing its wares—what of it? What of it? Gioia, after a moment, appeared to come to the same conclusion. Shrugging, she said, ‘It's defective, I suppose. Probably such things are more common than we suspect, don't you think?’ There was something forced about her tone that bothered him. She smiled and handed him her pomegranate. ‘Here. Have a bite, Charles. It's wonderfully sweet. They used to be extinct, you know. Shall we go on upwards?'

* * * *

The octagonal midsection of the Lighthouse must have been several hundred feet in height, a grim claustrophobic tube almost entirely filled by the two broad spiralling ramps that wound around the huge building's central well. The ascent was slow: a donkey team was a little way ahead of them on the ramp, plodding along laden with bundles of kindling for the lantern. But at last, just as Phillips was growing winded and dizzy, he and Gioia came out on to the second balcony, the one marking the transition between the octagonal section and the Lighthouse's uppermost storey, which was cylindrical and very slender.

She leaned far out over the balustrade. ‘Oh, Charles, look at the view! Look at it!'

It was amazing. From one side they could see the entire city, and swampy Lake Mareotis and the dusty Egyptian plain beyond it, and from the other they peered far out into the grey and choppy Mediterranean. He gestured towards the innumerable reefs and shallows that infested the waters leading to the harbour entrance. ‘No wonder they needed a lighthouse here,’ he said. ‘Without some kind of gigantic landmark they'd never have found their way in from the open sea.'

A blast of sound, a ferocious snort, erupted just above him. He looked up, startled. Immense statues of trumpet-wielding Tritons jutted from the corners of the Lighthouse at this level; that great blurting sound had come from the nearest of them. A signal, he thought. A warning to the ships negotiating that troubled passage. The sound was produced by some kind of steam-powered mechanism, he realized, operated by teams of sweating temporaries clustered about bonfires at the base of each Triton.

Once again he found himself swept by admiration for the clever way these people carried out their reproductions of antiquity. Or *were* they reproductions, he wondered? He still did not understand how they brought their cities into being. For all he knew, this place was the authentic Alexandria itself, pulled forward out of its proper time just as he himself had been. Perhaps this was the true and original Lighthouse, and not a copy. He had no idea which was the case, nor which would be the greater miracle.'

'How do we get to the top?' Gioia asked.

'Over there, I think. That doorway.'

The spiralling donkey-ramps ended here. The loads of lantern fuel went higher via a dumb-waiter in the central shaft. Visitors continued by way of a cramped staircase, so narrow at its upper end that it was impossible to turn around while climbing. Gioia, tireless, sprinted ahead. He clung to the rail and laboured up and up, keeping count of the tiny window-slits to ease the boredom of the ascent. The count was nearing a hundred when finally he stumbled into the vestibule of the beacon chamber. A dozen or so visitors were crowded into it. Gioia was at the far side, by the wall that was open to the sea.

It seemed to him he could feel the building swaying in the winds, up here. How high were they? Five hundred feet, six hundred, seven? The beacon chamber was tall and narrow, divided by a catwalk into upper and lower sections. Down below, relays of temporaries carried wood from the dumb-waiter and tossed it on the blazing fire. He felt its intense heat from where he stood, at the rim of the platform on which the giant mirror of polished metal was hung. Tongues of flame leaped upwards and danced before the mirror, which hurled its dazzling beam far out to sea. Smoke rose through a vent. At the very top was a colossal statue of Poseidon, austere, ferocious, looming above the lantern.

Gioia sidled gong the catwalk until she was at his side. 'The guide was talking before you came,' she said, pointing. 'Do you see that place over there, under the mirror? Someone standing there and looking into the mirror gets a view of ships at sea that can't be seen from here by the naked eye. The mirror magnifies things.'

'Do you believe that?'

She nodded towards the guide. 'It said so. And it also told us that if you look in a certain way, you can see right across the water into the city of Constantinople.'

She is like a child, he thought. They all are. He said, 'You told me yourself this very morning that it isn't possible to see that far. Besides, Constantinople doesn't exist right now.'

'It will,' she replied. '*You* said that to me, this very morning. And when it does, it'll be reflected in the Lighthouse mirror. That's the truth. I'm absolutely certain of it.' She swung about abruptly towards the entrance of the beacon chamber. 'Oh, took, Charles! Here come Nissandra and Aramayne! And there's Hawk! There's Stengard!' Gioia laughed and waved and called out names. 'Oh, everyone's here! *Everyone!* '

They came jostling into the room, so many newcomers that some of those who had been there were forced to scramble down the steps on the far side. Gioia moved among them, hugging, kissing. Phillips could scarcely tell one from another—it was hard for him even to tell which were the men and which the women, dressed as they all were in the same sort of loose robes—but he recognized some of the names. These were her special friends, her set, with whom she had journeyed from city to city on an endless round of gaiety in the old days before he had come into her life. He had met a few of them before, in Asgard, in Rio, in Rome. The beacon-chamber guide, a squat wide-shouldered old temporary wearing a laurel wreath on its bald head, reappeared and began its potted speech, but no-one listened to it; they were all too busy greeting one another, embracing, giggling. Some of them edged their way over to Phillips and reached up, standing on tiptoes, to touch their fingertips to his cheek in that odd hello of theirs. 'Charles,' they said gravely, making two syllables out of the name, as these people often did. 'So good to see you again. Such a pleasure. You and Gioia—such a handsome couple. So well suited to each other.'

Was that so? He supposed it was.

The chamber hummed with chatter. The guide could not be heard at all. Stengard and Nissandra had visited New Chicago for the water-dancing—Aramayne bore tales of a feast in Chang-an that had gone on for*days* —Hawk and Hekna had been to Timbuctoo to see the arrival of the salt caravan, and were going back there soon—a final party soon to celebrate the end of Asgard that absolutely should not be missed—the plans for the new city, Mohenjo-daro—we have reservations for the opening, we wouldn't pass it up for anything—and, yes, they were definitely going to do Constantinople after that, the planners were already deep into their Byzantium research—so good to see you, you look so beautiful all the time—have you been to the Library yet? The zoo? To the temple of Serapis?—

To Phillips they said, 'What do you think of our Alexandria, Charles? Of course you must have known it well in your day. Does it look the way you remember it?' They were always asking things like that. They did not seem to comprehend that the Alexandria of the Lighthouse and the Library was long lost and legendary by the time his twentieth century had been. To them, he suspected, all the places they had brought back into existence were more or less contemporary. Rome of the Caesars, Alexandria of the Ptolemies, Venice of the Doges, Chang-an of the T'angs, Asgard of the Aesir, none any less real than the next nor any less unreal, each one simply a facet of the distant past, the fantastic immemorial past, a plum plucked from that dark backward abysm of time. They had no contexts for separating one era from another. To them all the past was one borderless timeless realm. Why then should he not have seen the Lighthouse before, he who had leaped into this era from the New York of 1984? He had never been able to explain it to them. Julius Caesar and Hannibal, Helen of Troy and Charlemagne, Rome of the gladiators and New York of the Yankees and Mets, Gilgamesh and Tristan and Othello and Robin Hood and George Washington and Queen Victoria—to them, all equally real and unreal, none of them any more than bright figures moving about on a painted canvas. The past, the past, the elusive and fluid past—to them it was a single place of infinite accessibility and infinite connectivity. Of course they would think he had seen the Lighthouse before. He knew better than to try again to explain things. 'No,' he said simply. 'This is my first time in Alexandria.'

* * * *

They stayed there all winter long, and possibly some of the spring. Alexandria was not a place where one was sharply aware of the change of seasons, nor did the passage of time itself make itself very evident when one was living one's entire life as a tourist.

During the day there was always something new to see. The zoological garden, for instance: a wondrous park, miraculously green and lush in this hot dry climate, where astounding animals roamed in enclosures so generous that they did not seem like enclosures at all. Here were camels, rhinoceroses, gazelles, ostriches, lions, wild asses; and here too, casually adjacent to those familiar African beasts, were hippogriffs, unicorns, basilisks and fire-snorting dragons with rainbow scales. Had the original zoo of Alexandria had dragons and unicorns? Phillips doubted it. But this one did; evidently it was no harder for the backstage craftsmen to manufacture mythic beasts than it was for them to turn out camels and gazelles. To Gioia and her friends all of them were equally mythical, anyway. They were just as awed by the rhinoceros as by the hippogriff . One was no more strange—nor any less—than the other. So far as Phillips had been able to discover, none of the mammals or birds of his era had survived into this one except for a few cats and dogs, though many had been reconstructed.

And then the Library! All those lost treasures, reclaimed from the jaws of time! Stupendous columned marble walls, airy high-vaulted reading-rooms, dark coiling stacks stretching away to infinity. The ivory handles of seven hundred thousand papyrus scrolls bristling on the shelves. Scholars and librarians gliding quietly about, smiling faint scholarly smiles but plainly preoccupied with serious matters of the mind. They were all temporaries, Phillips realized. Mere props, part of the illusion. But were the scrolls illusions too? 'Here we have the complete dramas of Sophocles,' said the guide with a blithe wave of its hand, indicating shelf upon shelf of texts. Only seven of his hundred and twenty-three plays had survived the

successive burnings of the Library in ancient times by Romans, Christians, Arabs: were the lost ones here, the *Triptolemus* , the *Nausicaa* , the *Jason* and all the rest? And would he find here too, miraculously restored to being, the other vanished treasures of ancient literature—the memoirs of Odysseus, Cato's history of Rome, Thucydides' life of Pericles, the missing volumes of Livy? But when he asked if he might explore the stacks, the guide smiled apologetically and said that all the librarians were busy just now. Another time, perhaps? Perhaps, said the guide. It made no difference, Phillips decided. Even if these people somehow had brought back those lost masterpieces of antiquity, how would he read them? He knew no Greek.

The life of the city buzzed and throbbed about him. It was a dazzlingly beautiful place: the vast bay thick with sails, the great avenues running rigidly east-west, north-south, the sunlight rebounding almost audibly from the bright walls of the palaces of kings and gods. They have done this very well, Phillips thought: very well indeed. In the marketplace hard-eyed traders squabbled in half a dozen mysterious languages over the price of ebony, Arabian incense, jade, panther-skins. Gioia bought a dram of pale musky Egyptian perfume in a delicate tapering glass flask. Magicians and jugglers and scribes called out stridently to passersby, begging for a few moments of attention and a handful of coins for their labour. Strapping slaves, black and tawny and some that might have been Chinese, were put up for auction, made to flex their muscles, to bare their teeth, to bare their breasts and thighs to prospective buyers. In the gymnasium naked athletes hurled javelins and discuses, and wrestled with terrifying zeal. Gioia's friend Stengard came rushing up with a gift for her, a golden necklace that would not have embarrassed Cleopatra. An hour later she had lost it, or perhaps had given it away while Phillips was looking elsewhere. She bought another, even finer, the next day. Anyone could have all the money he wanted, simply by asking: it was as easy to come by as air, for these people.

Being here was much like going to the movies, Phillips told himself. A different show every day: not much plot, but the special effects were magnificent and the detail-work could hardly have been surpassed. A megamovie, a vast entertainment that went on all the time and was being played out by the whole population of Earth. And it was all so effortless, so spontaneous: just as when he had gone to a movie he had never troubled to think about the myriad technicians behind the scenes, the cameramen and the costume designers and the set-builders and the electricians and the model-makers and the boom operators, so too here he chose not to question the means by which Alexandria had been set before him. It felt real. It *was* real. When he drank the strong red wine it gave him a pleasant buzz. If he leaped from the beacon chamber of the Lighthouse he suspected he would die, though perhaps he would not stay dead for long: doubtless they had some way of restoring him as often as was necessary. Death did not seem to be a factor in these people's lives.

By day they saw sights. By night he and Gioia went to parties, in their hotel, in seaside villas, in the palaces of the high nobility. The usual people were there all the time: Hawk and Hekna, Aramayne, Stengard and Shelimir, Nissandra, Asoka, Afonso, Protay. At the parties there were five or ten temporaries for every citizen, some as mere servants, others as entertainers or even surrogate guests, mingling freely and a little daringly. But everyone knew, all the time, who was a citizen and who just a temporary. Phillips began to think his own status lay somewhere between. Certainly they treated him with a courtesy that no-one ever would give a temporary, and yet there was a condescension to their manner that told him not simply that he was not one of them but that he was someone or something of an altogether different order of existence. That he was Gioia's lover gave him some standing in their eyes, but not a great deal: obviously he was always going to be an outsider, a primitive, ancient and quaint. For that matter he noticed that Gioia herself, though unquestionably a member of the set, seemed to be regarded as something of an outsider, like a tradesman's great-granddaughter in a gathering of Plantagenets. She did not always find out about the best parties in time to attend; her friends did not always reciprocate her effusive greetings with the same degree of warmth; sometimes he noticed her straining to hear some bit of gossip that was not quite being shared with her. Was it because she had

taken him for her lover? Or was it the other way around: that she had chosen to be his lover precisely because she was *not* a full member of their caste?

Being a primitive gave him, at least, something to talk about at their parties. 'Tell us about war,' they said. 'Tell us about elections. About money. About disease.' They wanted to know everything, though they did not seem to pay close attention: their eyes were quick to glaze. Still, they asked. He described traffic jams to them, and politics, and deodorants, and vitamin pills. He told them about cigarettes, newspapers, subways, telephone directories, credit cards and basketball. 'Which was your city?' they asked. New York, he told them. 'And when was it? The seventh century, did you say?' The twentieth, he told them. They exchanged glances and nodded. 'We will have to do it,' they said. 'The World Trade Center, the Empire State Building, the Citicorp Center, the Cathedral of St John the Divine: how fascinating! Yankee Stadium. The Verrazzano Bridge. We will do it all. But first must come Mohenjo-daro. And then, I think, Constantinople. Did your city have many people?' Seven million, he said. Just in the five boroughs alone. They nodded, smiling amiably, unfazed by the number. Seven million, seventy million—it was all the same to them, he sensed. They would just bring forth the temporaries in whatever quantity was required. He wondered how well they would carry the job off. He was no real judge of Atexandrias and Asgards, after all. Here they could have unicorns and hippogriffs in the zoo, and live sphinxes prowling in the gutters, and it did not trouble him. Their fanciful Alexandria was as good as history's, or better. But how sad, how disillusioning it would be, if the New York that they conjured up had Greenwich Village uptown and Times Square in the Bronx, and the New Yorkers, gentle and polite, spoke with the honeyed accents of Savannah or New Orleans. Well, that was nothing he needed to brood about just now. Very likely they were only being courteous when they spoke of doing his New York. They had all the vastness of the past to choose from: Nineveh, Memphis of the Pharaohs, the London of Victoria or Shakespeare or Richard III, Florence of the Medici, the Paris of Abelard and Héoïse or the Paris of Louis XIV, Montezuma's Tenochtitlan and Atahualpa's Cuzco; Damascus, St Petersburg, Babylon, Troy. And then there were all the cities like New Chicago, out of time that was time yet unborn to him but ancient history to them. In such richness, such an infinity of choices, even mighty New York might have to wait a long while for its turn. Would he still be among them by the time they got around to it? By then, perhaps, they might have become bored with him and returned him to his own proper era. Or possibly he would simply have grown old and died. Even here, he supposed, he would eventually die, though no-one else ever seemed to. He did not know. He realized that in fact he did not know anything.

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The north wind blew all day long. Vast flocks of ibises appeared over the city, fleeing the heat of the interior, and screeched across the sky with their black necks and scrawny legs extended. The sacred birds, descending by the thousand, scuttered about in every crossroad, pouncing on spiders and beetles, on mice, on the debris of the meat shops and the bakeries. They were beautiful but annoyingly ubiquitous, and they splashed their dung over the marble buildings; each morning squadrons of temporaries carefully washed it off. Gioia said little to him now. She seemed cool, withdrawn, depressed; and there was something almost intangible about her, as though she were gradually becoming transparent. He felt it would be an intrusion upon her privacy to ask her what was wrong. Perhaps it was only restlessness. She became religious, and presented costly offerings at the temples of Serapis, Isis, Poseidon, Pan. She went to the necropolis west of the city to lay wreaths on the tombs in the catacombs. In a single day she climbed the Lighthouse three times without any sign of fatigue. One afternoon he returned from a visit to the Library and found her naked on the patio; she had anointed herself all over with some aromatic green salve. Abruptly she said, 'I think it's time to leave Alexandria, don't you?'

* * * *

She wanted to go to Mohenjo-daro, but Mohenjo-daro was not yet ready for visitors. Instead they flew eastwards to Chang-an, which they had not seen in years. It was Phillips's suggestion: he hoped that the cosmopolitan gaudiness of the old T'ang capital would lift her mood.

They were to be guests of the Emperor this time: an unusual privilege, which ordinarily had to be applied for far in advance, but Phillips had told some of Gioia's highly-placed friends that she was unhappy, and they had quickly arranged everything. Three endlessly bowing functionaries in flowing yellow robes and purple sashes met them at the Gate of Brilliant Virtue in the city's south wall and conducted them to their pavilion, close by the imperial palace and the Forbidden Garden. It was a light, airy place, thin walls of plastered brick braced by graceful columns of some dark, aromatic wood. Fountains played on the roof of green and yellow tiles, creating an unending cool rainfall of recirculating water. The balustrades were of carved marble, the door-fittings were of gold.

There was a suite of private rooms for him, and another for her, though they would share the handsome damask-draped bedroom at the heart of the pavilion. As soon as they arrived Gioia announced that she must go to her rooms to bathe and dress. ‘There will be a formal reception for us at the palace tonight,’ she said. ‘They say the imperial receptions are splendid beyond anything you could imagine. I want to be at my best.’ The Emperor and all his ministers, she told him, would receive them in the Hall of the Supreme Ultimate; there would be a banquet for a thousand people; Persian dancers would perform, and the celebrated jugglers of Chung-nan. Afterwards everyone would be conducted into the fantastic landscape of the Forbidden Garden to view the dragon-races and the fireworks.

He went to his own rooms. Two delicate little maidservants undressed him and bathed him with fragrant sponges. The pavilion came equipped with eleven temporaries who were to be their servants: soft-voiced unobtrusive catlike Chinese, done with perfect verisimilitude, straight black hair, glowing skin, epicanthic folds. Phillips often wondered what happened to a city's temporaries when the city's time was over. Were the towering Norse heroes of Asgard being recycled at this moment into wiry dark-skinned Dravidians for Mohenjo-daro? When Timbuctoo's day was done, would its brightly-robed black warriors be converted into supple Byzantines to stock the arcades of Constantinople? Or did they simply discard the old temporaries like so many excess props, stash them in warehouses somewhere, and turn out the appropriate quantities of the new model? He did not know; and once when he had asked Gioia about it she had grown uncomfortable and vague. She did not like him to probe for information, and he suspected it was because she had very little to give. These people did not seem to question the workings of their own world; his curiosities were very twentieth-century of him, he was frequently told, in that gently patronizing way of theirs. As his two little maids patted him with their sponges he thought of asking them where they had served before Chang-an. Rio? Rome? Haroun al-Raschid's Baghdad? But these fragile girls, he knew, would only giggle and retreat if he tried to question them. Interrogating temporaries was not only improper but pointless: it was like interrogating one's luggage.

When he was bathed and robed in rich red silks he wandered the pavilion for a little while, admiring the tinkling pendants of green jade dangling on the portico, the lustrous auburn pillars, the rainbow hues of the intricately interwoven girders and brackets that supported the roof. Then, wearying of his solitude, he approached the bamboo curtain at the entrance to Gioia's suite. A porter and one of the maids stood just within. They indicated that he should not enter; but he scowled at them and they melted from him like snowflakes. A trail of incense led him through the pavilion to Gioia's innermost dressing-room. There he halted, just outside the door.

Gioia sat naked with her back to him at an ornate dressing table of some rare flame-coloured wood inlaid with bands of orange and green porcelain. She was studying herself intently in a mirror of polished bronze held by one of her maids: picking through her scalp with her fingernails, as a woman might do who was searching out her grey hairs.

But that seemed strange. Grey hair, on Gioia? On a citizen? A temporary might display some appearance of ageing, perhaps, but surely not a citizen. Citizens remained forever young. Gioia looked like a girl. Her face was smooth and unlined, her flesh was firm, her hair was dark: that was true of all of them, every

citizen he had ever seen. And yet there was no mistaking what Gioia was doing. She found a hair, frowned, drew it taut, nodded, plucked it. Another. Another. She pressed the tip of her finger to her cheek as if testing it for resilience. She tugged at the skin below her eyes, pulling it downwards. Such familiar little gestures of vanity; but so odd here, he thought, in this world of the perpetually young. Gioia, worried about growing old? Had he simply failed to notice the signs of age on her? Or was it that she worked hard behind his back at concealing them? Perhaps that was it. Was he wrong about the citizens, then? Did they age even as the people of less blessed eras had always done, but simply have better ways of hiding it? How old was she, anyway? Thirty? Sixty? Three hundred?

Gioia appeared satisfied now. She waved the mirror away; she rose; she beckoned for her banquet robes. Phillips, still standing unnoticed by the door, studied her with admiration: the small round buttocks, almost but not quite boyish, the elegant line of her spine, the surprising breadth of her shoulders. No, he thought, she is not ageing at all. Her body is still like a girl's. She looks as young as on the day they first had met, however long ago that was—he could not say; it was hard to keep track of time here; but he was sure some years had passed since they had come together. Those grey hairs, those wrinkles and sags for which she had searched just now with such desperate intensity, must all be imaginary, mere artefacts of vanity. Even in this remote future epoch, then, vanity was not extinct. He wondered why she was so concerned with the fear of ageing. An affectation? Did all these timeless people take some perverse pleasure in fretting over the possibility that they might be growing old? Or was it some private fear of Gioia's, another symptom of the mysterious depression that had come over her in Alexandria?

Not wanting her to think that he had been spying on her, when all he had really intended was to pay her a visit, he slipped silently away to dress for the evening. She came to him an hour later, gorgeously robed, swaddled from chin to ankles in a brocade of brilliant colours shot through with threads of gold, face painted, hair drawn up tightly and fastened with ivory combs: very much the lady of the court. His servants had made him splendid also, a lustrous black surplice embroidered with golden dragons over a sweeping floor-length gown of shining white silk, a necklace and pendant of red coral, a five-cornered grey felt hat that rose in tower upon tower like a ziggurat. Gioia, grinning, touched her fingertips to his cheek. ‘You look marvellous!’ she told him. ‘Like a grand mandarin!'

'And you like an empress,’ he said. ‘Of some distant land: Persia, India. Here to pay a ceremonial visit on the Son of Heaven.’ An access of love suffused his spirit, and, catching her lightly by the wrist, he drew her towards him, as close as he could manage it considering how elaborate their costumes were. But as he bent forward and downwards, meaning to brush his lips lightly and affectionately against the tip of her nose, he perceived an unexpected strangeness, an anomaly: the coating of white paint that was her make-up seemed oddly to magnify rather than mask the contours of her skin, highlighting and revealing details he had never observed before. He saw a pattern of fine lines radiating from the corners of her eyes, and the unmistakable beginning of a quirk-mark in her cheek just to the left of her mouth, and perhaps the faint indentation of frown-lines in her flawless forehead. A shiver travelled along the nape of his neck. So it was not affectation, then, that had had her studying her mirror so fiercely. Age was in truth beginning to stake its claim on her, despite all that he had come to believe about these people's agelessness. But a moment later he was not so sure. Gioia turned and slid gently half a step back from him—she must have found his stare disturbing—and the lines he had thought he had seen were gone. He searched for them and saw only girlish smoothness once again. A trick of the light? A figment of an overwrought imagination? He was baffled.

'Come,’ she said. ‘We mustn't keep the Emperor waiting.'

Five moustachioed warriors in armour of white quilting and seven musicians playing cymbals and pipes escorted them to the Hall of the Supreme Ultimate. There they found the full court arrayed: princes and ministers, high officials, yellow-robed monks, a swarm of imperial concubines. In a place of honour to the

right of the royal thrones, which rose like gilded scaffolds high above all else, was a little group of stern-faced men in foreign costumes, the ambassadors of Rome and Byzantium, of Arabia and Syria, of Korea, Japan, Tibet, Turkestan. Incense smouldered in enamelled braziers. A poet sang a delicate twanging melody, accompanying himself on a small harp. Then the Emperor and Empress entered: two tiny aged people, like waxen images, moving with infinite slowness, taking steps no greater than a child's. There was the sound of trumpets as they ascended their thrones. When the little Emperor was seated—he looked like a doll up there, ancient, faded, shrunken, yet still somehow a figure of extraordinary power—he stretched forth both his hands, and enormous gongs began to sound. It was a scene of astonishing splendour, grand and overpowering.

These are all temporaries, Phillips realized suddenly. He saw only a handful of citizens—eight, ten, possibly as many as a dozen—scattered here and there about the vast room. He knew them by their eyes, dark, liquid, knowing. They were watching not only the imperial spectacle but also Gioia and him; and Gioia, smiling secretly, nodding almost imperceptibly to them, was acknowledging their presence and their interest. But those few were the only ones in here who were autonomous living beings. All the rest—the entire splendid court, the great mandarins and paladins, the officials, the giggling concubines, the haughty and resplendent ambassadors, the aged Emperor and Empress themselves, were simply part of the scenery. Had the world ever seen entertainment on so grand a scale before? All this pomp, all this pageantry, conjured up each night for the amusement of a dozen or so viewers?

At the banquet the little group of citizens sat together at a table apart, a round onyx slab draped with translucent green silk. There turned out to be seventeen of them in all, including Gioia; Gioia appeared to know all of them, though none, so far as he could tell, was a member of her set that he had met before. She did not attempt introductions. Nor was conversation at all possible during the meal: there was a constant astounding roaring din in the room. Three orchestras played at once and there were troupes of strolling musicians also, and a steady stream of monks and their attendants marched back and forth between the tables loudly chanting sutras and waving censers to the deafening accompaniment of drums and gongs. The Emperor did not descend from his throne to join the banquet; he seemed to be asleep, though now and then he waved his hand in time to the music. Gigantic half-naked brown slaves with broad cheekbones and mouths like gaping pockets brought forth the food, peacock tongues and breast of phoenix heaped on mounds of glowing saffron-coloured rice, served on frail alabaster plates. For chopsticks they were given slender rods of dark jade. The wine, served in glistening crystal beakers, was thick and sweet, with an aftertaste of raisins, and no beaker was allowed to remain empty for more than a moment. Phillips felt himself growing dizzy: when the Persian dancers emerged he could not tell whether there were five of them or fifty, and as they performed their intricate whirling routines it seemed to him that their slender muslin-veiled forms were blurring and merging one into another. He felt frightened by their proficiency, and wanted to look away, but he could not. The Chung-nan jugglers that followed them were equally skilful, equally alarming, filling the air with scythes, flaming torches, live animals, rare porcelain vases, pink jade hatchets, silver bells, gilded cups, wagon-wheels, bronze vessels, and never missing a catch. The citizens applauded politely but did not seem impressed. After the jugglers, the dancers returned, performing this time on stilts; the waiters brought platters of steaming meat of a pale lavender colour, unfamiliar in taste and texture: filet of camel, perhaps, or haunch of hippopotamus, or possibly some choice chop from a young dragon. There was more wine. Feebly Phillips tried to wave it away, but the servitors were implacable. This was a drier sort, greenish-gold, austere, sharp on the tongue. With it came a silver dish, chilled to a polar coldness, that held shaved ice flavoured with some potent smoky-flavoured brandy. The jugglers were doing a second turn, he noticed. He thought he was going to be ill. He looked helplessly towards Gioia, who seemed sober but fiercely animated, almost manic, her eyes blazing like rubies. She touched his cheek fondly. A cool draught blew through the hall: they had opened one entire wall, revealing the garden, the night, the stars. Just outside was a colossal wheel of oiled paper stretched on wooden struts. They must have erected it in the past hour: it stood a

hundred and fifty feet high or even more, and on it hung lanterns by the thousands, glimmering like giant fireflies. The guests began to leave the hall. Phillips let himself be swept along into the garden, where under a yellow moon strange crook-armed trees with dense black needles loomed ominously. Gioia slipped her arm through his. They went down to a lake of bubbling crimson fluid and watched scarlet flamingo-like birds ten feet tall fastidiously spearing angry-eyed turquoise eels. They stood in awe before a fat-bellied Buddha of gleaming blue tilework, seventy feet high. A horse with a golden mane came prancing by, striking showers of brilliant red sparks wherever its hooves touched the ground. In a grove of lemon trees that seemed to have the power to wave their slender limbs about, Phillips came upon the Emperor, standing by himself and rocking gently back and forth. The old man seized Phillips by the hand and pressed something into his palm, closing his fingers tight about it; when he opened his fist a few moments later he found his palm full of grey irregular pearls. Gioia took them from him and cast them into the air, and they burst like exploding firecrackers, giving off splashes of coloured light. A little later, Phillips realized that he was no longer wearing his surplice or his white silken undergown. Gioia was naked too, and she drew him gently down into a carpet of moist blue moss, where they made love until dawn, fiercely at first, then slowly, languidly, dreamily. At sunrise he looked at her tenderly and saw that something was wrong.

'Gioia?' he said doubtfully.

She smiled. 'Ah, no. Gioia is with Fenimon tonight. I am Belilala.

'With—Fenimon?'

'They are old friends. She had not seen him in years.'

'Ah. I see. And you are—?'

'Belilala,' she said again, touching her fingertips to his cheek.

* * * *

It was not unusual, Belilala said. It happened all the time; the only unusual thing was that it had not happened to him before now. Couples formed, travelled together for a while, drifted apart, eventually reunited. It did not mean that Gioia had left him for ever. It meant only that just now she chose to be with Fenimon. Gioia would return. In the meanwhile he would not be alone. 'You and I met in New Chicago,' Belilala told him. 'And then we saw each other again in Timbuctoo. Have you forgotten? Oh, yes, I see that you have forgotten!' She laughed prettily; she did not seem at all offended.

She looked enough like Gioia to be her sister. But, then, all the citizens looked more or less alike to him. And apart from their physical resemblance, so he quickly came to realize, Belilala and Gioia were not really very similar. There was a calmness, a deep reservoir of serenity, in Belilala, that Gioia, eager and volatile and ever impatient, did not seem to have. Strolling the swarming streets of Chang-an with Belilala, he did not perceive in her any of Gioia's restless feverish need always to know what lay beyond, and beyond, and beyond even that. When they toured the Hsing-ch'ing Palace, Belilala did not after five minutes begin—as Gioia surely would have done—to seek directions to the Fountain of Hsuan-tsung or the Wild Goose Pagoda. Curiosity did not consume Belilala as it did Gioia. Plainly she believed that there would always be enough time for her to see everything she cared to see. There were some days when Belilala chose not to go out at all, but was content merely to remain at their pavilion playing a solitary game with flat porcelain counters, or viewing the flowers of the garden.

He found, oddly, that he enjoyed the respite from Gioia's intense world-swallowing appetites; and yet he longed for her to return. Belilala—beautiful, gentle, tranquil, patient—was too perfect for him. She seemed unreal in her gleaming impeccability, much like one of those Sung celadon vases that appear too

flawless to have been thrown and glazed by human hands. There was something a little soulless about her: an immaculate finish outside, emptiness within. Belilala might almost have been a temporary, he thought, though he knew she was not. He could explore the pavilions and palaces of Chang-an with her, he could make graceful conversation with her while they dined, he could certainly enjoy coupling with her; but he could not love her or even contemplate the possibility. It was hard to imagine Belilala worriedly studying herself in a mirror for wrinkles and grey hairs. Belilala would never be any older than she was at this moment; nor could Belilala ever have been any younger. Perfection does not move along an axis of time. But the perfection of Belilala's glossy surface made her inner being impenetrable to him. Gioia was more vulnerable, more obviously flawed—her restlessness, her moodiness, her vanity, her fears—and therefore she was more accessible to his own highly imperfect twentieth-century sensibility.

Occasionally he saw Gioia as he roamed the city, or thought he did. He had a glimpse of her among the miracle-vendors in the Persian Bazaar, and outside the Zoroastrian temple, and again by the goldfish pond in the Serpentine Park. But he was never quite sure that the woman he saw was really Gioia, and he never could get close enough to her to be certain: she had a way of vanishing as he approached, like some mysterious Lorelei luring him onwards and onwards in a hopeless chase. After a while he came to realize that he was not going to find her until she was ready to be found.

He lost track of time. Weeks, months, years? He had no idea. In this city of exotic luxury, mystery and magic, all was in constant flux and transition and the days had a fitful, unstable quality. Buildings and even whole streets were torn down of an afternoon and re-erected, within days, far away. Grand new pagodas sprouted like toadstools in the night. Citizens came in from Asgard, Alexandria, Timbuctoo, New Chicago, stayed for a time, disappeared, returned. There was a constant round of court receptions, banquets, theatrical events, each one much like the one before. The festivals in honour of past emperors and empresses might have given some form to the year, but they seemed to occur in a random way, the ceremony marking the death of T'ai Tsung coming around twice the same year, so it seemed to him, once in a season of snow and again in high summer, and the one honouring the ascension of the Empress Wu being held twice in a single season. Perhaps he had misunderstood something. But he knew it was no use asking anyone.

* * * *

One day Belilala said unexpectedly, ‘Shall we go to Mohenjo-daro?'

'I didn't know it was ready for visitors,’ he replied.

'Oh, yes. For quite some time now.'

He hesitated. This had caught him unprepared. Cautiously he said, ‘Gioia and I were going to go there together, you know.'

Belilala smiled amiably, as though the topic under discussion were nothing more than the choice of that evening's restaurant.

'Were you?’ she asked.

'It was all arranged while we were still in Alexandria. To go with you instead—I don't know what to tell you, Belilala.’ Phillips sensed that he was growing terribly flustered. ‘You know that I'd like to go. With you. But on the other hand I can't help feeling that I shouldn't go there until I'm back with Gioia again. If I ever am.’ How foolish this sounds, he thought. How clumsy, how adolescent. He found that he was having trouble looking straight at her. Uneasily he said, with a kind of desperation in his voice, ‘I did promise her—there was a commitment, you understand—a firm agreement that we would go to Mohenjo-daro together—'

'Oh, but Gioia's already there!' said Belilala in the most casual way.

He gaped as though she had punched him.

'*What?*'

'She was one of the first to go, after it opened. Months and months ago. You didn't know?' she asked, sounding surprised, but not very. 'You really didn't know?'

That astonished him. He felt bewildered, betrayed, furious. His cheeks grew hot, his mouth gaped. He shook his head again and again, trying to clear it of confusion. It was a moment before he could speak. 'Already there?' he said at last. 'Without waiting for me? After we had talked about going there together—after we had agreed—'

Belilala laughed. 'But how could she resist seeing the newest city? You know how impatient Gioia is!'

'Yes. Yes.'

He was stunned. He could barely think.

'Just like all short-timers,' Belilala said. 'She rushes here, she rushes there. She must have it all, now, now, right away, at once, instantly. You ought never to expect her to wait for you for anything for very long: the fit seizes her, and off she goes. Surely you must know that about her by now.'

'A short-timer?' He had not heard that term before.

'Yes. You knew that. You must have known that.' Belilala flashed her sweetest smile. She showed no sign of comprehending his distress. With a brisk wave of her hand she said, 'Well, then, shall we go, you and I? To Mohenjo-daro?'

'Of course,' Phillips said bleakly.

'When would you like to leave?'

'Tonight,' he said. He paused a moment. 'What's a short-timer, Belilala?'

Colour came to her cheeks. 'Isn't it obvious?' she asked.

* * * *

Had there ever been a more hideous place on the face of the earth than the city of Mohenjo-daro? Phillips found it difficult to imagine one. Nor could he understand why, out of all the cities that had ever been, these people had chosen to restore this one to existence. More than ever they seemed alien to him, unfathomable, incomprehensible.

From the terrace atop the many-towered citadel he peered down into grim claustrophobic Mohenjo-daro and shivered. The stark, bleak city looked like nothing so much as some prehistoric prison colony. In the manner of an uneasy tortoise it huddled, squat and compact, against the grey monotonous Indus River plain: miles of dark burnt-brick walls enclosing miles of terrifyingly orderly streets, laid out in an awesome, monstrous gridiron pattern of maniacal rigidity. The houses themselves were dismal and forbidding too, clusters of brick cells gathered about small airless courtyards. There were no windows, only small doors that opened not on to the main boulevards but on to the tiny mysterious lanes that ran between the buildings. Who had designed this horrifying metropolis? What harsh sour souls they must have had, these frightening and frightened folk, creating for themselves in the lush fertile plains of India such a Supreme Soviet of a city!

'How lovely it is,' Belilala murmured. 'How fascinating!'

He stared at her in amazement.

'Fascinating? Yes,' he said. 'I suppose so. The same way that the smile of a cobra is fascinating.'

'What's a cobra?'

'Poisonous predatory serpent,' Phillips told her. 'Probably extinct. Or formerly extinct, more likely. It wouldn't surprise me if you people had re-created a few and turned them loose in Mohenjo to make things livelier.'

'You sound angry, Charles.'

'Do I? That's not how I feel.'

'How do you feel, then?'

'I don't know,' he said after a long moment's pause. He shrugged. 'Lost, I suppose. Very far from home.'

'Poor Charles.'

'Standing here in this ghastly barracks of a city, listening to you tell me how beautiful it is, I've never felt more alone in my life.'

'You miss Gioia very much, don't you?'

He gave her another startled look.

'Gioia has nothing to do with it. She's probably been having ecstasies over the loveliness of Mohenjo just like you. Just like all of you. I suppose I'm the only one who can't find the beauty, the charm. I'm the only one who looks out there and sees only horror, and then wonders why nobody else sees it, why in fact people would set up a place like this for*entertainment* , for*pleasure* —'

Her eyes were gleaming. 'Oh, you are angry! You really are!'

'Does that fascinate you too?' he snapped. 'A demonstration of genuine primitive emotion? A typical quaint twentieth-century outburst?' He paced the rampart in short quick anguished steps. 'Ah. Ah. I think I understand it now, Belilala. Of course: I'm part of your circus, the star of the sideshow. I'm the first experiment in setting up the next stage of it, in fact.' Her eyes were wide. The sudden harshness and violence in his voice seemed to be alarming and exciting her at the same time. That angered him even more. Fiercely he went on, 'Bringing whole cities back out of time was fun for a while, but it lacks a certain authenticity, eh? For some reason you couldn't bring the inhabitants too; you couldn't just grab a few million prehistorics out of Egypt or Greece or India and dump them down in this era, I suppose because you might have too much trouble controlling them, or because you'd have the problem of disposing of them once you were bored with them. So you had to settle for creating temporaries to populate your ancient cities. But now you've got me. I'm something more real than a temporary, and that's a terrific novelty for you, and novelty is the thing you people crave more than anything else: maybe the*only* thing you crave. And here I am, complicated, unpredictable, edgy, capable of anger, fear, sadness, love and all those other formerly extinct things. Why settle for picturesque architecture when you can observe picturesque emotion, too? What fun I must be for all of you! And if you decide that I was really interesting, maybe you'll ship me back where I came from and check out a few other ancient types—a Roman gladiator, maybe, or a Renaissance pope, or even a Neanderthal or two—'

'Charles,' she said tenderly. 'Oh, Charles, Charles, Charles, how lonely you must be, how lost, how troubled! Will you ever forgive me? Will you ever forgive us all?'

Once more he was astounded by her. She sounded entirely sincere, altogether sympathetic. Was she? Was she, really? He was not sure he had ever had a sign of genuine caring from any of them before, not even Gioia. Nor could he bring himself to trust Belilala now. He was afraid of her, afraid of all of them, of their brittleness, their slyness, their elegance. He wished he could go to her and have her take him in her arms; but he felt too much the shaggy prehistoric just now to be able to risk asking that comfort of her.

He turned away and began to walk around the rim of the citadel's massive wall.

'Charles?'

'Let me alone for a little while,' he said.

He walked on. His forehead throbbed and there was a pounding in his chest. All stress systems going full blast, he thought: secret glands dumping gallons of inflammatory substances into his bloodstream. The heat, the inner confusion, the repellent look of this place—

Try to understand, he thought. Relax. Look about you. Try to enjoy your holiday in Mohenjo-daro.

He leaned warily outwards over the edge of the wall. He had never seen a wall like this; it must be forty feet thick at the base, he guessed, perhaps even more, and every brick perfectly shaped, meticulously set. Beyond the great rampart, marshes ran almost to the edge of the city, although close by the wall the swamps had been dammed and drained for agriculture. He saw lithe brown farmers down there, busy with their wheat and barley and peas. Cattle and buffaloes grazed a little farther out. The air was heavy, dank, humid. All was still. From somewhere close at hand came the sound of a droning, whining stringed instrument and a steady insistent chanting.

Gradually a sort of peace pervaded him. His anger subsided. He felt himself beginning to grow calm again. He looked back at the city, the rigid interlocking streets, the maze of inner lanes, the millions of courses of precise brickwork.

It is a miracle, he told himself, that this city is here in this place and at this time. And it is a miracle that I am here to see it.

Caught for a moment by the magic within the bleakness, he thought he began to understand Belilala's awe and delight, and he wished now that he had not spoken to her so sharply. The city was alive. Whether it was the actual Mohenjo-daro of thousands upon thousands of years ago, ripped from the past by some wondrous hook, or simply a cunning reproduction, did not matter at all. Real or not, this was the true Mohenjo-daro. It had been dead and now, for the moment, it was alive again. These people, these *citizens* , might be trivial, but reconstructing Mohenjo-daro was no trivial achievement. And that the city that had been reconstructed was oppressive and sinister-looking was unimportant. No-one was compelled to live in Mohenjo-daro any more. Its time had come and gone, long ago; those little dark-skinned peasants and craftsmen and merchants down there were mere temporaries, mere inanimate things, conjured up like zombies to enhance the illusion. They did not need his pity. Nor did he need to pity himself. He knew that he should be grateful for the chance to behold these things. Some day, when this dream had ended and his hosts had returned him to the world of subways and computers and income tax and television networks, he would think of Mohenjo-daro as he had once beheld it, lofty walls of tightly woven dark brick under a heavy sky, and he would remember only its beauty.

Glancing back, he searched for Belilala and could not for a moment find her. Then he caught sight of her carefully descending a narrow staircase that angled down the inner face of the citadel wall.

'Belilala!' he called.

She paused and looked his way, shading her eyes from the sun with her hand. 'Are you all right?'

'Where are you going?'

'To the baths,' she said. 'Do you want to come?'

He nodded. 'Yes. Wait for me, will you? I'll be right there.'

He began to run towards her along the top of the wall.

* * * *

The baths were attached to the citadel: a great open tank the size of a large swimming pool, lined with bricks set on edge in gypsum mortar and waterproofed with asphalt, and eight smaller tanks just north of it in a kind of covered arcade. He supposed that in ancient times the whole complex had had some ritual purpose, the large tank used by common folk and the small chambers set aside for the private ablutions of priests or nobles. Now the baths were maintained, it seemed, entirely for the pleasure of visiting citizens. As Phillips came up the passageway that led to the main bath he saw fifteen or twenty of them lolling in the water or padding languidly about, while temporaries of the dark-skinned Mohenjo-daro type served them drinks and pungent little morsels of spiced meat as though this were some sort of luxury resort. Which was, he realized, exactly what it was. The temporaries wore white cotton loincloths; the citizens were naked. In his former life he had encountered that sort of casual public nudity a few times on visits to California and the south of France, and it had made him mildly uneasy. But he was growing accustomed to it here.

The changing-rooms were tiny brick cubicles connected by rows of closely placed steps to the courtyard that surrounded the central tank. They entered one and Belilala swiftly slipped out of the loose cotton robe that she had worn since their arrival that morning. With arms folded she stood leaning against the wall, waiting for him. After a moment he dropped his own robe and followed her outside. He felt a little giddy, sauntering around naked in the open like this.

On the way to the main bathing area they passed the private baths. None of them seemed to be occupied. They were elegantly constructed chambers, with finely jointed brick floors and carefully designed runnels to drain excess water into the passageway that led to the primary drain. Phillips was struck with admiration for the cleverness of the prehistoric engineers. He peered into this chamber and that to see how the conduits and ventilating ducts were arranged, and when he came to the last room in the sequence he was surprised and embarrassed to discover that it was in use. A brawny grinning man, big-muscled, deep-chested, with exuberantly flowing shoulder-length red hair and a flamboyant, sharply tapering beard was thrashing about merrily with two women in the small tank. Phillips had a quick glimpse of a lively tangle of arms, legs, breasts, buttocks.

'Sorry,'he muttered. His cheeks reddened. Quickly he ducked out, blurting apologies as he went. 'Didn't realize the room was occupied—no wish to intrude—'

Belilala had proceeded on down the passageway. Phillips hurried after her. From behind him came peals of cheerful raucous booming laughter and high-pitched giggling and the sound of splashing water. Probably they had not even noticed him.

He paused a moment, puzzled, playing back in his mind that one startling glimpse. Something was not right. Those women, he was fairly sure, were citizens: little slender elfin dark-haired girlish creatures, the standard model. But the man? That great curling sweep of red hair? Not a citizen. Citizens did not affect shoulder-length hair. And *red* ? Nor had he ever seen a citizen so burly, so powerfully muscular. Or one

with a beard. But he could hardly be a temporary, either. Phillips could conceive no reason why there would be so Anglo-Saxon-looking a temporary at Mohenjo-daro; and it was unthinkable for a temporary to be frolicking like that with citizens, anyway.

'Charles?'

He looked up ahead. Belilala stood at the end of the passageway, outlined in a nimbus of brilliant sunlight. ‘Charles?’ she said again. ‘Did you lose your way?'

'I'm right here behind you,’ he said. ‘I'm coming.'

'Who did you meet in there?'

'A man with a beard.'

'With a what?'

'A beard,’ he said. ‘Red hair growing on his face. I wonder who he is.'

'Nobody I know,’ said Belilala. ‘The only one I know with hair on his face is you. And yours is black, and you shave it off every day.’ She laughed. ‘Come along, now! I see some friends by the pool!'

He caught up with her and they went hand in hand out into the courtyard. Immediately a waiter glided up to them, an obsequious little temporary with a tray of drinks. Phillips waved it away and headed for the pool. He felt terribly exposed: he imagined that the citizens disporting themselves here were staring intently at him, studying his hairy primitive body as though he were some mythical creature, a Minotaur, a werewolf, summoned up for their amusement. Belilala drifted off to talk to someone and he slipped into the water, grateful for the concealment it offered. It was deep, warm, comforting. With swift powerful strokes he breast-stroked from one end to the other.

A citizen perched elegantly on the pool's rim smiled at him. ‘Ah, so you've come at last, Charles!’ Char-less. Two syllables. Someone from Gioia's set: Stengard, Hawk, Aramayne? He could not remember which one. They were all so much alike. Phillips returned the man's smile in a half-hearted, tentative way. He searched for something to say and finally asked, ‘Have you been here long?'

'Weeks. Perhaps months. What a splendid achievement this city is, eh, Charles? Such utter unity of mood—such a total statement of a uniquely single-minded aesthetic—'

'Yes. Single-minded is the word,’ Phillips said drily.

'Gioia's word, actually. Gioia's phrase. I was merely quoting.'

Gioia. He felt as if he had been stabbed.

'You've spoken to Gioia lately?’ he said.

'Actually, no. It was Hekna who saw her. You do remember Hekna, eh?’ He nodded towards two naked women standing on the brick platform that bordered the pool, chatting, delicately nibbling morsels of meat. They could have been twins. ‘There is Hekna, with your Belilala.’ Hekna, yes. So this must be Hawk, Phillips thought, unless there has been some recent shift of couples. ‘How sweet she is, your Belilala,’ Hawk said. ‘Gioia chose very wisely when she picked her for you.'

Another stab: a much deeper one. ‘Is that how it was?’ he said. ‘Gioia*picked* Belilala for me?'

'Why, of course!’ Hawk seemed surprised. It went without saying, evidently. ‘What did you think? That

Gioia would merely go off and leave you to fend for yourself?'

'Hardly. Not Gioia.'

'She's very tender, very gentle, isn't she?'

'You mean Belilala? Yes, very,' said Phillips carefully. 'A dear woman, a wonderful woman. But of course I hope to get together with Gioia again soon.' He paused. 'They say she's been in Mohenjo-daro almost since it opened.'

'She was here, yes.'

'Was?

'Oh, you know Gioia,' Hawk said lightly. 'She's moved along by now, naturally.'

Phillips leaned forward. 'Naturally,' he said. Tension thickened his voice. 'Where has she gone this time?'

'Timbuctoo, I think. Or New Chicago. I forget which one it was. She was telling us that she hoped to be in Timbuctoo for the closing-down party. But then Fenimon had some pressing reason for going to New Chicago. I can't remember what they decided to do.' Hawk gestured sadly. 'Either way, a pity that she left Mohenjo before the new visitor came. She had such a rewarding time with you, after all: I'm sure she'd have found much to learn from him also.'

The unfamiliar term twanged an alarm deep in Phillips's consciousness. '*Visitor?*' he said, angling his head sharply towards Hawk. 'What visitor do you mean?'

'You haven't met him yet? Oh, of course, you've only just arrived.'

Phillips moistened his lips. 'I think I may have seen him. Long red hair? Beard like this?'

'That's the one! Willoughby, he's called. He's—what?—a Viking, a pirate, something like that. Tremendous vigour and force. Remarkable person. We should have many more visitors, I think. They're far superior to temporaries, everyone agrees. Talking with a temporary is a little like talking to one's self, wouldn't you say? They give you no significant illumination. But a visitor—someone like this Willoughby—or like you, Charles—a visitor can be truly enlightening, a visitor can transform one's view of reality—'

'Excuse me,' Phillips said. A throbbing began behind his forehead. 'Perhaps we can continue this conversation later, yes?' He put the flats of his hands against the hot brick of the platform and hoisted himself swiftly from the pool. 'At dinner, maybe—or afterwards—yes? All right?' He set off at a quick half-trot back towards the passageway that led to the private baths.

* * * *

As he entered the roofed part of the structure his throat grew dry, his breath suddenly came short. He padded quickly up the hall and peered into the little bath-chamber. The bearded man was still there, sitting up in the tank, breast-high above the water, with one arm around each of the women. His eyes gleamed with fiery intensity in the dimness. He was grinning in marvellous self-satisfaction; he seemed to brim with intensity, confidence, gusto.

Let him be what I think he is, Phillips prayed. I have been alone among these people long enough.

'May I come in?' he asked.

'Aye, fellow!' cried the man in the tub thunderously. 'By my troth, come ye in, and bring your lass as well! God's teeth, I wot there's room aplenty for more folk in this tub than we!'

At that great uproarious outcry Phillips felt a powerful surge of joy. What a joyous rowdy voice! How rich, how lusty, how totally uncitizen-like!

And those oddly archaic words! *God's teeth? By my troth?* What sort of talk was that? What else but the good pure sonorous Elizabethan diction! Certainly it had something of the roll and fervour of Shakespeare about it. And spoken with—an Irish brogue, was it? No, not quite: it was English, but English spoken in no manner Phillips had ever heard.

Citizens did not speak that way. But a *visitor* might.

So it was true. Relief flooded Phillips's soul. Not alone, then! Another relict of a former age—another wanderer—a companion in chaos, a brother in adversity—a fellow voyager, tossed even farther than he had been by the tempests of time—

The bearded man grinned heartily and beckoned to Phillips with a toss of his head. 'Well, join us, join us, man! 'Tis good to see an English face again, amidst all these Moors and rogue Portugals! But what have ye done with thy lass? One can never have enough wenches, d'ye not agree?'

The force and vigour of him were extraordinary: almost too much so. He roared, he bellowed, he boomed. He was so very much what he ought to be that he seemed more a character out of some old pirate movie than anything else, so blustering, so real, that he seemed unreal. A stage-Elizabethan, larger than life, a boisterous young Falstaff without the belly.

Hoarsely Phillips said, 'Who are you?'

'Why, Ned Willoughby's son Francis am I, of Plymouth. Late of the service of Her Most Protestant Majesty, but most foully abducted by the powers of darkness and cast away among these blackamoor Hindus, or whatever they be. And thyself?'

'Charles Phillips.' After a moment's uncertainty he added, 'I'm from New York.'

'*New* York? What place is that? In faith, man, I know it not!'

'A city in America.'

'A city in America, forsooth! What a fine fancy that is! In America, you say, and not on the Moon, or perchance underneath the sea?' To the women Willoughby said, 'D'ye hear him? He comes from a city in America! With the face of an Englishman, though not the manner of one, and not quite the proper sort of speech. A city in America! A *city* . God's blood, what will I hear next?'

Phillips trembled. Awe was beginning to take hold of him. This man had walked the streets of Shakespeare's London, perhaps. He had clinked canisters with Marlowe or Essex or Walter Raleigh; he had watched the ships of the Armada wallowing in the Channel. It strained Phillips's spirit to think of it. This strange dream in which he found himself was compounding its strangeness now. He felt like a weary swimmer assailed by heavy surf, winded, dazed. The hot close atmosphere of the baths was driving him towards vertigo. There could be no doubt of it any longer. He was not the only primitive—the only *visitor* —who was wandering loose in this fiftieth century. They were conducting other experiments as well. He gripped the sides of the door to steady himself and said, 'When you speak of Her Most Protestant Majesty, it's Elizabeth the First you mean, is that not so?'

'Elizabeth, aye! As to the First, that is true enough, but why trouble to name her thus? There is but one.

First and Last, I do trow, and God save her, there is no other!'

Phillips studied the other man warily. He knew that he must proceed with care. A misstep at this point and he would forfeit any chance that Willoughby would take him seriously. How much metaphysical bewilderment, after all, could this man absorb? What did he know, what had anyone of his time known, of past and present and future and the notion that one might somehow move from one to the other as readily as one would go from Surrey to Kent? That was a twentieth-century idea, late-nineteenth at best, a fantastical speculation that very likely no one had even considered before Wells had sent his time traveller off to stare at the reddened sun of the Earth's last twilight. Willoughby's world was a world of Protestants and Catholics, of kings and queens, of tiny sailing vessels, of swords at the hip and ox-carts on the road: that world seemed to Phillips far more alien and distant than was this world of citizens and temporaries. The risk that Willoughby would not begin to understand him was great.

But this man and he were natural allies against a world they had never made. Phillips chose to take the risk.

'Elizabeth the First is the queen you serve,' he said. 'There will be another of her name in England, in due time. Has already been, in fact.'

Willoughby shook his head like a puzzled lion. 'Another Elizabeth, d'ye say?'

'A second one, and not much like the first. Long after your Virgin Queen, this one. She will reign in what you think of as the days to come. That I know without doubt.'

The Englishman peered at him and frowned. 'You see the future? Are you a soothsayer, then? A necromancer, mayhap? Or one of the very demons that brought me to this place?'

'Not at all,' Phillips said gently. 'Only a lost soul, like yourself.' He stepped into the little room and crouched by the side of the tank. The two citizen-women were staring at him in bland fascination. He ignored them. To Willoughby he said, 'Do you have any idea where you are?'

* * * *

The Englishman had guessed, rightly enough, that he was in India: 'I do believe these little brown Moorish folk are of the Hindy sort,' he said. But that was as far as his comprehension of what had befallen him could go.

It had not occurred to him that he was no longer living in the sixteenth century. And of course he did not begin to suspect that this strange and sombre brick city in which he found himself was a wanderer out of an era even more remote than his own. Was there any way, Phillips wondered, of explaining that to him?

He had been here only three days. He thought it was devils that had carried him off. 'While I slept did they come for me,' he said. 'Mephistophilis Sathanas his henchmen seized me—God alone can say why—and swept me in a moment out to this torrid realm from England, where I had reposed among friends and family. For I was between one voyage and the next, you must understand, awaiting Drake and his ship—you know Drake, the glorious Francis? God's blood, there's a mariner for ye! We were to go to the Main again, he and I, but instead here I be in this other place—' Willoughby leaned close and said, 'I ask you, soothsayer, how can it be, that a man go to sleep in Plymouth and wake up in India? It is passing strange, is it not?'

'That it is,' Phillips said.

'But he that is in the dance must needs dance on, though he do but hop, eh? So do I believe.' He gestured towards the two citizen-women. 'And therefore to console myself in this pagan land I have

found me some sport among these little Portugal women—'

'Portugal?' said Phillips.

'Why, what else can they be, but Portugals? Is it not the Portugals who control all these coasts of India? See, the people are of two sorts here, the blackamoors and the others, the fair-skinned ones, the lords and masters who lie here in these baths. If they be not Hindus, and I think they are not, then Portugals is what they must be.' He laughed and pulled the women against himself and rubbed his hands over their breasts as though they were fruits on a vine. 'is that not what you are, you little naked shameless Papist wenches? A pair of Portugals, eh?'

They giggled, but did not answer.

'No,' Phillips said. 'This is India, but not the India you think you know. And these women are not Portuguese.'

'Not Portuguese?' Willoughby said, baffled.

'No more so than you. I'm quite certain of that.'

Willoughby stroked his beard. 'I do admit I found them very odd, for Portugals. I have heard not a syllable of their Portugee speech on their lips. And it is strange also that they run naked as Adam and Eve in these baths, and allow me free plunder of their women, which is not the way of Portugals at home, God wot. But I thought me, this is India, they choose to live in another fashion here—'

'No,' Phillips said. 'I tell you, these are not Portuguese, nor any other people of Europe who are known to you.'

'Prithee, who are they, then?'

Do it delicately, now, Phillips warned himself.*Delicately* .

He said, 'It is not far wrong to think of them as spirits of some kind—demons, even. Or sorcerers who have magicked us out of our proper places in the world.' He paused, groping for some means to share with Willoughby, in a way that Willoughby might grasp, this mystery that had enfolded them. He drew a deep breath. 'They've taken us not only across the sea,' he said, 'but across the years as well. We have both been hauled, you and I, far into the days that are to come.'

Willoughby gave him a look of blank bewilderment.

'Days that are to come? Times yet unborn, d'ye mean? Why, I comprehend none of that!'

'Try to understand. We're both castaways in the same boat, man! But there's no way we can help each other if I can't make you see—'

Shaking his head, Willoughby muttered, 'In faith, good friend, I find your words the merest folly. Today is today, and tomorrow is tomorrow, and how can a man step from one to t'other until tomorrow be turned into today?'

'I have no idea,' said Phillips. Struggle was apparent on Willoughby's face; but plainly he could perceive no more than the haziest outline of what Phillips was driving at, if that much. 'But this I know,' he went on. 'That your world and all that was in it is dead and gone. And so is mine, though I was born four hundred years after you, in the time of the second Elizabeth.'

Willoughby snorted scornfully. ‘Four hundred—'

'You must believe me!'

'Nay! Nay!'

'It's the truth. Your time is only history to me. And mine and yours are history to*them* —ancient history. They call us visitors, but what we are is captives.’ Phillips felt himself quivering in the intensity of his effort. He was aware how insane this must sound to Willoughby. It was beginning to sound insane to him. ‘They've stolen us out of our proper times—seizing us like gypsies in the night—'

'Fie, man! You rave with lunacy!'

Phillips shook his head. He reached out and seized Willoughby tightly by the wrist. ‘I beg you, listen to me!’ The citizen-women were watching closely, whispering to one another behind their hands, laughing. ‘Ask them!’ Phillips cried. ‘Make them tell you what century this is! The sixteenth, do you think? Ask them!'

'What century could it be, but the sixteenth of Our Lord!'

'They will tell you it is the fiftieth.'

Willoughby looked at him pityingly. ‘Man, man, what a sorry thing thou art! The fiftieth, indeed!’ He laughed. ‘Fellow, listen to me, now. There is but one Elizabeth, safe upon her throne in Westminster. This is India. The year is Anno 1591. Come, let us you and I steal a ship from these Portugals, and make our way back to England, and peradventure you may get from there to your America—'

'There is no England.'

'Ah, can you say that and not be mad?'

'The cities and nations we knew are gone. These people live like magicians, Francis.’ There was no use holding anything back now, Phillips thought leadenly. He knew that he had lost. ‘They conjure up places of long ago, and build them here and there to suit their fancy, and when they are bored with them they destroy them, and start anew. There is no England. Europe is empty, featureless, void. Do you know what cities there are? There are only five in all the world. There is Alexandria of Egypt. There is Timbuctoo in Africa. There is New Chicago in America. There is a great city in China—in Cathay, I suppose you would say. And there is this place, which they call Mohenjo-daro, and which is far more ancient than Greece, than Rome, than Babylon.'

Quietly Willoughby said, ‘Nay. This is mere absurdity. You say we are in some far tomorrow, and then you tell me we are dwelling in some city of long ago.'

'A conjuration, only,’ Phillips said in desperation. ‘A likeness of that city. Which these folk have fashioned somehow for their own amusement. Just as we are here, you and I: to amuse them. Only to amuse them.'

'You are completely mad.'

'Come with me, then. Talk with the citizens by the great pool. Ask them what year this is; ask them about England; ask them how you come to be here.’ Once again Phillips grasped Willoughby's wrist. ‘We should be allies. If we work together, perhaps we can discover some way to get ourselves out of this place, and—'

'Let me be, fellow.'

'Please—'

'Let me be!' roared Willoughby, and pulled his arm free. His eyes were stark with rage. Rising in the tank, he looked about furiously as though searching for a weapon. The citizen-women shrank back away from him, though at the same time they seemed captivated by the big man's fierce outburst. 'Go to, get you to Bedlam! Let me be, madman! Let me be!'

* * * *

Dismally Phillips roamed the dusty unpaved streets of Mohenjo-daro alone for hours. His failure with Willoughby had left him bleak-spirited and sombre: he had hoped to stand back to back with the Elizabethan against the citizens, but he saw now that that was not to be. He had bungled things; or, more likely, it had been impossible ever to bring Willoughby to see the truth of their predicament.

In the stifling heat he went at random through the confusing congested lanes of flat-roofed windowless houses and blank featureless walls until he emerged into a broad marketplace. The life of the city swirled madly around him: the pseudo-life, rather, the intricate interactions of the thousands of temporaries who were nothing more than wind-up dolls set in motion to provide the illusion that pre-Vedic India was still a going concern. Here vendors sold beautiful little carved stone seals portraying tigers and monkeys and strange humped cattle, and women bargained vociferously with craftsmen for ornaments of ivory, gold, copper and bronze. Weary-looking women squatted behind immense mounds of newly-made pottery, pinkish-red with black designs. No-one paid any attention to him. He was the outsider here, neither citizen nor temporary. They belonged.

He went on, passing the huge granaries where workmen ceaselessly unloaded carts of wheat and others pounded grain on great circular brick platforms. He drifted into a public restaurant thronging with joyless silent people standing elbow to elbow at small brick counters, and was given a flat round piece of bread, a sort of tortilla or chapatti, in which was stuffed some spiced mincemeat that stung his lips like fire. Then he moved onwards down a wide shallow timbered staircase into the lower part of the city, where the peasantry lived in cell-like rooms packed together as though in hives.

It was an oppressive city, but not a squalid one. The intensity of the concern with sanitation amazed him: wells and fountains and public privies everywhere, and brick drains running from each building, leading to covered cesspools. There was none of the open sewage and pestilent gutters that he knew still could be found in the India of his own time. He wondered whether ancient Mohenjo-daro had in truth been so fastidious. Perhaps the citizens had redesigned the city to suit their own ideals of cleanliness. No: most likely what he saw was authentic, he decided, a function of the same obsessive discipline that had given the city its rigidity of form. If Mohenjo-daro had been a verminous filthy hole, the citizens probably would have re-created it in just that way, and loved it for its fascinating reeking filth.

Not that he had ever noticed an excessive concern with authenticity on the part of the citizens; and Mohenjo-daro, like all the other restored cities he had visited, was full of the usual casual anachronisms. Phillips saw images of Shiva and Krishna here and there on the walls of buildings he took to be temples, and the benign face of the mother-goddess Kali loomed in the plazas. Surely those deities had arisen in India long after the collapse of the Mohenjo-daro civilization. Or did they take a certain naughty pleasure in mixing the eras—a mosque and a church in Greek Alexandria, Hindu gods in prehistoric Mohenjo-daro? Perhaps their records of the past had become contaminated with errors over the thousands of years. He would not have been surprised to see banners bearing portraits of Gandhi and Nehru being carried in procession through the streets. And there were phantasms and chimeras at large here again too, as if the citizens were untroubled by the boundary between history and myth: little fat elephant-headed Ganeshas blithely plunging their trunks into water-fountains, a six-armed three-headed

woman sunning herself on a brick terrace. Why not? Surely that was the motto of these people: *Why not, why not, why not?* They could do as they pleased, and they did. Yet Gioia had said to him, long ago, 'Limits are very important.' In what, Phillips wondered, did they limit themselves, other than the number of their cities? Was there a quota, perhaps, on the number of 'visitors' they allowed themselves to kidnap from the past? Until today he had thought he was the only one; now he knew there was at least one other; possibly there were more elsewhere, a step or two ahead or behind him, making the circuit with the citizens who travelled endlessly from New Chicago to Chang-an to Alexandria. We should join forces, he thought, and compel them to send us back to our rightful eras. *Compel?* How? File a class-action suit, maybe? Demonstrate in the streets? Sadly he thought of his failure to make common cause with Willoughby. We are natural allies, he thought. Together perhaps we might have won some compassion from these people. But to Willoughby it must be literally unthinkable that Good Queen Bess and her subjects were sealed away on the far side of a barrier hundreds of centuries thick. He would prefer to believe that England was just a few months' voyage away around the Cape of Good Hope, and that all he need do was commandeer a ship and set sail for home. Poor Willoughby: probably he would never see his home again.

The thought came to Phillips suddenly:

Neither will you.

And then, after it:

If you could go home, would you really want to?

One of the first things he had realized here was that he knew almost nothing substantial about his former existence. His mind was well stocked with details on life in twentieth-century New York, to be sure; but of himself he could say not much more than that he was Charles Phillips and had come from 1984. Profession? Age? Parents' names? Did he have a wife? Children? A cat, a dog, hobbies? No data: none. Possibly the citizens had stripped such things from him when they brought him here, to spare him from the pain of separation. They might be capable of that kindness. Knowing so little of what he had lost, could he truly say that he yearned for it? Willoughby seemed to remember much more of his former life, and longed somehow for it all the more intensely. He was spared that. Why not stay here, and go on and on from city to city, sightseeing all of time past as the citizens conjured it back into being? Why not? Why not? The chances were that he had no choice about it, anyway.

He made his way back up towards the citadel and to the baths once more. He felt a little like a ghost, haunting a city of ghosts.

Belilala seemed unaware that he had been gone for most of the day. She sat by herself on the terrace of the baths, placidly sipping some thick milky beverage that had been sprinkled with a dark spice. He shook his head when she offered him some.

'Do you remember I mentioned that I saw a man with red hair and a beard this morning?' Phillips said. 'He's a visitor. Hawk told me that.'

'Is he?' Belilala asked.

'From a time about four hundred years before mine. I talked with him. He thinks he was brought here by demons.' Phillips gave her a searching look. 'I'm a visitor too, isn't that so?'

'Of course, love.'

'And how was *I* brought here? By demons also?'

Belilala smiled indifferently. ‘You'd have to ask someone else. Hawk, perhaps. I haven't looked into these things very deeply.'

'I see. Are there many visitors here, do you know?'

A languid shrug. ‘Not many, no, not really. I've only heard of three of four besides you. There may be others by now, I suppose.’ She rested her hand lightly on his. ‘Are you having a good time in Mohenjo, Charles?'

He let her question pass as though he had not heard it.

'I asked Hawk about Gioia,’ he said.

'Oh?'

'He told me that she's no longer here, that she's gone on to Timbuctoo or New Chicago, he wasn't sure which.'

'That's quite likely. As everybody knows, Gioia rarely stays in the same place very long.'

Phillips nodded. ‘You said the other day that Gioia is a short-timer. That means she's going to grow old and die, doesn't it?'

'I thought you understood that, Charles.'

'Whereas you will not age? Nor Hawk, nor Stengard, nor any of the rest of your set?'

'We will live as long as we wish,’ she said. ‘But we will not age, no.'

'What makes a person a short-timer?’

'They're born that way, I think. Some missing gene, some extra gene—I don't actually know. It's extremely uncommon. Nothing can be done to help them. It's very slow, the ageing. But it can't be halted.'

Phillips nodded. ‘That must be very disagreeable,’ he said. ‘To find yourself one of the few people growing old in a world where everyone stays young. No wonder Gioia is so impatient. No wonder she runs around from place to place. No wonder she attached herself so quickly to the barbaric hairy visitor from the twentieth century, who comes from a time when *everybody* was a short-timer. She and I have something in common, wouldn't you say?'

'In a manner of speaking, yes.'

'We understand ageing. We understand death. Tell me: is Gioia likely to die very soon, Belilala?'

'Soon? soon?’ She gave him a wide-eyed childlike stare. ‘What is soon? How can I say? What you think of as soon and what I think of as soon are not the same things, Charles.’ Then her manner changed: she seemed to be hearing what he was saying for the first time. Softly she said, ‘No, no, Charles. I don't think she will die very soon.'

'When she left me in Chang-an, was it because she had become bored with me?'

Belilala shook her head. ‘She was simply restless. It had nothing to do with you. She was never bored with you.'

'Then I'm going to go looking for her. Wherever she may be, Timbuctoo, New Chicago, I'll find her. Gioia and I belong together.'

'Perhaps you do,' said Belilala. 'Yes. Yes, I think you really do.' She sounded altogether unperturbed, unrejected, unbereft. 'By all means, Charles. Go to her. Follow her. Find her. Wherever she may be.'

* * * *

They had already begun dismantling Timbuctoo when Phillips got there. While he was still high overhead, his ffitterflitter hovering above the dusty tawny plain where the River Niger met the sands of the Sahara, a surge of keen excitement rose in him as he looked down at the square grey flat-roofed mud-brick buildings of the great desert capital. But when he landed he found gleaming metal-skinned robots swarming everywhere, a horde of them scuttling about like giant shining insects, pulling the place apart.

He had not known about the robots before. So that was how all these miracles were carried out, Phillips realized: an army of obliging machines. He imagined them bustling up out of the earth whenever their services were needed, emerging from some sterile subterranean storehouse to put together Venice or Thebes or Knossos or Houston or whatever place was required, down to the finest detail, and then at some later time returning to undo everything that they had fashioned. He watched them now, diligently pulling down the adobe walls, demolishing the heavy metal-studded gates, bulldozing the amazing labyrinth of alleyways and thoroughfares, sweeping away the market. On his last visit to Timbuctoo that market had been crowded with a horde of veiled Tuaregs and swaggering Moors, black Sudanese, shrewd-faced Syrian traders, all of them busily dickering for camels, horses, donkeys, slabs of salt, huge green melons, silver bracelets, splendid vellum Korans. They were all gone now, that picturesque crowd of swarthy temporaries. Nor were there any citizens to be seen. The dust of destruction choked the air. One of the robots came up to Phillips and said in a dry crackling insect-voice, 'You ought not to be here. This city is closed.'

He stared at the flashing, buzzing band of scanners and sensors across the creature's glittering tapered snout. 'I'm trying to find someone, a citizen who may have been here recently. Her name is—'

'This city is closed,' the robot repeated inexorably.

They would not let him stay as much as an hour. There is no food here, the robot said, no water, no shelter. This is not a place any longer. You may not stay. You may not stay. You may not stay.

This is not a place any longer.

Perhaps he could find her in New Chicago, then. He took to the air again, soaring northwards and westwards over the vast emptiness. The land below him curved away into the hazy horizon, bare, sterile. What had they done with the vestiges of the world that had gone before? Had they turned their gleaming metal beetles loose to clean everything away? Were there no ruins of genuine antiquity anywhere? No scrap of Rome, no shard of Jerusalem, no stump of Fifth Avenue? It was all so barren down there: an empty stage, waiting for its next set to be built. He flew on a great arc across the jutting hump of Africa and on into what he supposed was southern Europe: the little vehicle did all the work, leaving him to doze or stare as he wished. Now and again he saw another flitterflitter pass by, far away, a dark distant winged teardrop outlined against the hard clarity of the sky. He wished there was some way of making radio contact with them, but he had no idea how to go about it. Not that he had anything he wanted to say; he wanted only to hear a human voice. He was utterly isolated. He might just as well have been the last living man on Earth. He closed his eyes and thought of Gioia.

* * * *

'Like this?' Phillips asked. In an ivory-panelled oval room sixty storeys above the softly glowing streets

of New Chicago he touched a small cool plastic canister to his upper lip and pressed the stud at its base. He heard a foaming sound; and then blue vapour rose to his nostrils.

'Yes,' Cantilena said. 'That's right.'

He detected a faint aroma of cinnamon, cloves and something that might almost have been broiled lobster. Then a spasm of dizziness hit him and visions rushed through his head: Gothic cathedrals, the Pyramids, Central Park under fresh snow, the harsh brick warrens of Mohenjo-daro, and fifty thousand other places all at once, a wild roller-coaster ride through space and time. It seemed to go on for centuries. But finally his head cleared and he looked about, blinking, realizing that the whole thing had taken only a moment. Cantilena still stood at his elbow. The other citizens in the room—fifteen, twenty of them—had scarcely moved. The strange little man with the celadon skin over by the far wall continued to stare at him.

'Well?' Cantilena asked. 'What did you think?'

'Incredible.'

'And very authentic. It's an actual New Chicagoan drug. The exact formula. Would you like another?'

'Not just yet,' Phillips said uneasily. He swayed and had to struggle for his balance. Sniffing that stuff might not have been such a wise idea, he thought.

He had been in New Chicago a week, or perhaps it was two, and he was still suffering from the peculiar disorientation that that city always aroused in him. This was the fourth time that he had come here, and it had been the same every time. New Chicago was the only one of the reconstructed cities of this world that in its original incarnation had existed*after* his own era. To him it was an outpost of the incomprehensible future; to the citizens it was a quaint simulacrum of the archaeological past. That paradox left him aswirl with impossible confusions and tensions.

What had happened to*old* Chicago was of course impossible for him to discover. Vanished without a trace, that was clear: no Water Tower, no Marina City, no Hancock Centre, no Tribune building, not a fragment, not an atom. But it was hopeless to ask any of the million-plus inhabitants of New Chicago about their city's predecessor. They were only temporaries; they knew no more than they had to know, and all that they had to know was how to go through the motions of whatever it was that they did by way of creating the illusion that this was a real city. They had no need of knowing ancient history.

Nor was he likely to find out anything from a citizen, of course. Citizens did not seem to bother much about scholarly matters. Phillips had no reason to think that the world was anything other than an amusement park to them. Somewhere, certainly, there had to be those who specialized in the serious study of the lost civilizations of the past—for how, otherwise, would these uncanny reconstructed cities be brought into being? 'The planners,' he had once heard Nissandra or Aramayne say, ,are already deep into their Byzantium research.' But who were the planners? He had no idea. For all he knew, they were the robots. Perhaps the robots were the real masters of this whole era, who created the cities not primarily for the sake of amusing the citizens but in their own diligent attempt to comprehend the life of the world that had passed away. A wild speculation, yes; but not without some plausibility, he thought.

He felt oppressed by the party gaiety all about him. 'I need some air,' he said to Cantilena, and headed towards the window. It was the merest crescent, but a breeze came through. He looked out at the strange city below.

New Chicago had nothing in common with the old one but its name. They had built it, at least, along the western shore of a large inland lake that might even be Lake Michigan, although when he had flown over

it had seemed broader and less elongated than the lake he remembered. The city itself was a lacy fantasy of slender pastel-hued buildings rising at odd angles and linked by a webwork of gently undulating aerial bridges. The streets were long parentheses that touched the lake at their northern and southern ends and arched gracefully westwards in the middle. Between each of the great boulevards ran a track for public transportation—sleek aquamarine bubble-vehicles gliding on soundless wheels—and flanking each of the tracks were lush strips of park. It was beautiful, astonishingly so, but insubstantial. The whole thing seemed to have been contrived from sunbeams and silk.

A soft voice beside him said, ‘Are you becoming ill?'

Phillips glanced around. The celadon man stood beside him: a compact, precise person, vaguely Oriental in appearance. His skin was of a curious grey-green hue like no skin Phillips had ever seen, and it was extraordinarily smooth in texture, as though he were made of fine porcelain.

He shook his head. ‘Just a little queasy,’ he said. ‘This city always scrambles me.'

'I suppose it can be disconcerting,’ the little man replied. His tone was furry and veiled, the inflection strange. There was something feline about him. He seemed sinewy, unyielding, almost menacing. ‘Visitor, are you?'

Phillips studied him a moment. ‘Yes,’ he said.

'So am I, of course.’

'Are you?'

'Indeed.’ The little man smiled. ‘What's your locus? Twentieth century? Twenty-first at the latest, I'd say.'

'I'm from 1984. AD 1984.'

Another smile, a self-satisfied one. ‘Not a bad guess, then.’ A brisk tilt of the head. ‘Y'ang-Yeovil.'

'Pardon me?’ Phillips said.

'Y'ang-Yeovil. It is my name. Formerly Colonel Y'ang-Yeovil of the Third Septentriad.'

'Is that on some other planet?’ asked Phillips, feeling a bit dazed.

'Oh, no, not at all,’ Y'ang-Yeovil said pleasantly. ‘This very world, I assure you. I am quite of human origin. Citizen of the Republic of Upper Han, native of the city of Port Ssu. And you—forgive me—your name—?'

'I'm sorry. Phillips. Charles Phillips. From New York City, once upon a time.'

'Ah, New York!’ Y'ang-Yeovil's face lit with a glimmer of recognition that quickly faded. ‘New York—New York—it was very famous, that I know—'

This is very strange, Phillips thought. He felt greater compassion for poor bewildered Francis Willoughby now. This man comes from a time so far beyond my own that he barely knows of New York—he must be a contemporary of the real New Chicago, in fact; I wonder whether he finds this version authentic—and yet to the citizens this Y'ang-Yeovil too is just a primitive, a curio out of antiquity—

'New York was the largest city of the United States of America,’ Phillips said.

'Of course. Yes. Very famous.'

'But virtually forgotten by the time the Republic of Upper Han came into existence, I gather.'

Y'ang-Yeovil said, looking uncomfortable, ‘There were disturbances between your time and mine. But by no means should you take from my words the impression that your city was—'

Sudden laughter resounded across the room. Five or six newcomers had arrived at the party. Phillips stared, gasped, gaped. Surely that was Stengard—and Armayne beside him—and that other woman, half-hidden behind them—

'If you'll pardon me a moment—’ Phillips said, turning abruptly away from Y'ang-Yeovil. ‘Please excuse me. Someone just coming in—a person I've been trying to find ever since—'

He hurried towards her.

* * * *

‘Gioia?’ he called. ‘Gioia, it's me! Wait! Wait!'

Stengard was in the way. Aramayne, turning to take a handful of the little vapour-sniffers from Cantilena, blocked him also. Phillips pushed through them as though they were not there. Gioia, halfway out the door, halted and looked towards him like a frightened deer.

'Don't go,’ he said. He took her hand in his.

He was startled by her appearance. How long had their strange parting on that night of mysteries in Chang-an? A year? A year and a half? So he believed. Or had he lost all track of time? Were his perceptions of the passing of the months in this world that unreliable? She seemed at least ten or fifteen years older. Maybe she really was; maybe the years had been passing for him here as in a dream, and he had never known it. She looked strained, faded, worn. Out of a thinner and strangely altered face her eyes blazed at him almost defiantly, as though saying,*See? See how ugly I have become?*

He said, ‘I've been hunting for you for—I don't know how long it's been, Gioia. In Mohenjo, in Timbuctoo, now here. I want to be with you again.'

'It isn't possible.'

'Belilala explained everything to me in Mohenjo. I know that you're a short-timer—I know what that means, Gioia. But what of it? So you're beginning to age a little. So what? So you'll only have three or four hundred years, instead of forever. Don't you think I know what it means to be a short-timer? I'm just a simple ancient man of the twentieth century, remember? Sixty, seventy, eighty years is all we would get. You and I suffer from the same malady, Gioia. That's what drew you to me in the first place. I'm certain of that. That's why we belong with each other now. However much time we have, we can spend the rest of it together, don't you see?'

'You're the one who doesn't see, Charles,’ she said softly.

'Maybe. Maybe I still don't understand a damned thing about this place. Except that you and I—that I love you—that I think you love me—'

'I love you, yes. But you don't understand. It's precisely because I love you that you and I—you and I can't—'

With a despairing sigh she slid her hand free of his grasp. He reached for her again, but she shook him off and backed up quickly into the corridor.

'Gioia?'

'Please,' she said. 'No. I would never have come here if I knew you were here. Don't come after me. Please. Please.'

She turned and fled.

He stood looking after her for a long moment. Cantilena and Aramayne appeared, and smiled at him as if nothing at all had happened. Cantilena offered him a vial of some sparkling amber fluid. He refused with a brusque gesture. Where do I go now, he wondered? What do I do? He wandered back into the party.

Y'ang-Yeovil glided to his side. 'You are in great distress,' the little man murmured.

Phillips glared. 'Let me be.'

'Perhaps I could be of some help.'

'There's no help possible,' said Phillips. He swung about and plucked one of the vials from a tray and gulped its contents. It made him feel as if there were two of him, standing on either side of Y'ang-Yeovil. He gulped another. Now there were four of him. 'I'm in love with a citizen,' he blurted. It seemed to him that he was speaking in chorus.

'Love. Ah. And does she love you?'

'So I thought. So I think. But she's a short-timer. Do you know what that means? She's not immortal like the others. She ages. She's beginning to look old. And so she's been running away from me. She doesn't want me to see her changing. She thinks it'll disgust me, I suppose. I tried to remind her just now that I'm not immortal either, that she and I could grow old together, but she—'

'Oh, no,' Y'ang-Yeovil said quietly. 'Why do you think you will age? Have you grown any older in all the time you have been here?'

Phillips was nonplussed. 'Of course I have. I—I—'

'Have you?' Y'ang-Yeovil smiled. 'Here. Look at yourself.' He did something intricate with his fingers and a shimmering zone of mirror-like light appeared between them. Phillips stared at his reflection. A youthful face stared back at him. It was true, then. He had simply not thought about it. How many years had he spent in this world? The time had simply slipped by: a great deal of time, though he could not calculate how much. They did not seem to keep close count of it here, nor had he. But it must have been many years, he thought. All that endless travel up and down the globe—so many cities had come and gone—Rio, Rome, Asgard, those were the first three that came to mind—and there were others; he could hardly remember every one. Years. His face had not changed at all. Time had worked its harshness on Gioia, yes, but not on him.

'I don't understand,' he said. 'Why am I not ageing?'

'Because you are not real,' said Y'ang-Yeovil. 'Are you unaware of that?'

Phillips blinked. 'Not—real?'

'Did you think you were lifted bodily out of your own time?' the little man asked. 'Ah, no, no, there is no way for them to do such a thing. We are not actual time travellers: not you, not I, not any of the visitors. I thought you were aware of that. But perhaps your era is too early for a proper understanding of these things. We are very cleverly done, my friend. We are ingenious constructs, marvellously stuffed with the

thoughts and attitudes and events of our own times. We are their finest achievement, you know: far more complex even than one of these cities: We are a step beyond the temporaries—more than a step, a great deal more. They do only what they are instructed to do, and their range is very narrow. They are nothing but machines, really. Whereas we are autonomous. We move about by our own will; we think, we talk, we even, so it seems, fall in love. But we will not age. How could we age? We are not real. We are mere artificial webworks of mental responses. We are mere illusions, done so well that we deceive even ourselves. You did not know that? Indeed, you did not know?'

* * * *

He was airborne, touching destination buttons at random. Somehow he found himself heading back towards Timbuctoo. *This city is closed. This is not a place any longer.* It did not matter to him. Why should anything matter?

Fury and a choking sense of despair rose within him. I am software, Phillips thought. I am nothing but software.

Not real. Very cleverly done. An ingenious construct. A mere illusion.

No trace of Timbuctoo was visible from the air. He landed anyway. The grey sandy earth was smooth, unturned, as though there had never been anything there. A few robots were still about, handling whatever final chores were required in the shutting-down of a city. Two of them scuttled up to him. Huge bland gleaming silver-skinned insects, not friendly.

'There is no city here,' they said. 'This is not a permissible place.'

'Permissible by whom?'

'There is no reason for you to be here.'

'There's no reason for me to be anywhere,' Phillips said. The robots stirred, made uneasy humming sounds and ominous clicks, waved their antennae about. They seem troubled, he thought. They seem to dislike my attitude. Perhaps I run some risk of being taken off to the home for unruly software for debugging. 'I'm leaving now,' he told them. 'Thank you. Thank you very much.' He backed away from them and climbed into his flitterflitter. He touched more destination buttons.

We move about by our own will. We think, we talk, we even fall in love.

He landed in Chang-an. This time there was no reception committee waiting for him at the Gate of Brilliant Virtue. The city seemed larger and more resplendent: new pagodas, new palaces. It felt like winter: a chilly cutting wind was blowing. The sky was cloudless and dazzlingly bright. At the steps of the Silver Terrace he encountered Francis Willoughby, a great hulking figure in magnificent brocaded robes, with two dainty little temporaries, pretty as jade statuettes, engulfed in his arms. 'Miracles and wonders! The silly lunatic fellow is here too!' Willoughby roared. 'Look, look, we are come to far Cathay, you and I!'

We are nowhere, Phillips thought. *We are mere illusions, done so well that we deceive even ourselves.*

To Willoughby he said, 'You look like an emperor in those robes, Francis.'

'Aye, like Prester John!' Willoughby cried. 'Like Tamburlaine himself! Aye, am I not majestic?' He slapped Phillips gaily on the shoulder, a rough playful poke that spun him halfway about, coughing and wheezing. 'We flew in the air, as the eagles do, as the demons do, as the angels do! Soared like angels!

Like angels!' He came close, looming over Phillips. 'I would have gone to England, but the wench Belilala said there was an enchantment on me that would keep me from England just now; and so we voyaged to Cathay. Tell me this, fellow, will you go witness for me when we see England again? Swear that all that has befallen us did in truth befall? For I fear they will say I am as mad as Marco Polo, when I tell them of flying to Cathay.'

'One madman backing another?' Phillips asked. 'What can I tell you? You still think you'll reach England, do you?' Rage rose to the surface in him, bubbling hot. 'Ah, Francis, Francis, do you know your Shakespeare? Did you go to the plays? We aren't real. *We aren't real.* We are such stuff as dreams are made on, the two of us. That's all we are. O brave new world! What England? Where? There's no England. There's no Francis Willoughby. There's no Charles Phillips. What we are is—'

'Let him be, Charles,' a cool voice cut in.

He turned. Belilala, in the robes of an empress, coming down the steps of the Silver Terrace.

'I know the truth,' he said bitterly. 'Y'ang-Yeovil told me. The visitor from the twenty-fifth century. I saw him in New Chicago.'

'Did you see Gioia there too?' Belilala asked.

'Briefly. She looks much older.'

'Yes. I know. She was here recently.'

'And has gone on, I suppose?'

'To Mohenjo again, yes. Go after her, Charles. Leave poor Francis alone. I told her to wait for you. I told her that she needs you, and you need her.'

'Very kind of you. But what good is it, Belilala? I don't even exist. And she's going to die.'

'You exist. How can you doubt that you exist? You feel, don't you? You suffer. You love. You love Gioia: is that not so? And you are loved by Gioia. Would Gioia love what is not real?'

'You think she loves me?'

'I know she does. Go to her, Charles. Go. I told her to wait for you in Mohenjo.'

Phillips nodded numbly. What was there to lose?

'Go to her,' said Belilala again. 'Now.'

'Yes,' Phillips said. 'I'll go now.' He turned to Willoughby. 'If ever we meet in London, friend, I'll testify for you. Fear nothing. All will be well, Francis.'

He left them and set his course for Mohenjo-daro, half expecting to find the robots already tearing it down. Mohenjo-daro was still there, no lovelier than before. He went to the baths, thinking he might find Gioia there. She was not; but he came upon Nissandra, Stengard, Fenimon. 'She has gone to Alexandria,' Fenimon told him. 'She wants to see it one last time, before they close it.'

'They're almost ready to open Constantinople,' Stengard explained. 'The capital of Byzantium, you know, the great city by the Golden Horn. They'll take Alexandria away, you understand, when Byzantium opens. They say it's going to be marvellous. We'll see you there for the opening, naturally?'

'Naturally,' Phillips said.

He flew to Alexandria. He felt lost and weary. All this is hopeless folly, he told himself. I am nothing but a puppet jerking about on its strings. But somewhere above the shining breast of the Arabian Sea the deeper implications of something that Belilala had said to him started to sink in, and he felt his bitterness, his rage, his despair, all suddenly beginning to leave him. *You exist. How can you doubt that you exist? Would Gioia love what is not real?* Of course. Of course. Y'ang-Yeovil had been wrong: visitors were something more than mere illusions. Indeed Y'ang-Yeovil had voiced the truth of their condition without understanding what he was really saying: *We think, we talk, we fall in love.* Yes. That was the heart of the situation. The visitors might be artificial, but they were not unreal. Belilala had been trying to tell him that just the other night. *You suffer. You love. You love Gioia. Would Gioia love what is not real?* Surely he was real, or at any rate real enough. What he was was something strange, something that would probably have been all but incomprehensible to the twentieth-century people whom he had been designed to simulate. But that did not mean that he was unreal. Did one have to be of woman born to be real? No. No. No. His kind of reality was a sufficient reality. He had no need to be ashamed of it. And, understanding that, he understood that Gioia did not need to grow old and die. There was a way by which she could be saved, if only she would embrace it. If only she would.

When he landed in Alexandria he went immediately to the hotel on the slopes of the Paneium where they had stayed on their first visit, so very long ago; and there she was, sitting quietly on a patio with a view of the harbour and the Lighthouse. There was something calm and resigned about the way she sat. She had given up. She did not even have the strength to flee from him any longer.

'Gioia,' he said gently.

* * * *

She looked older than she had in New Chicago. Her face was drawn and sallow and her eyes seemed sunken; and she was not even bothering these days to deal with the white strands that stood out in stark contrast against the darkness of her hair. He sat down beside her and put his hand over hers, and looked out towards the obelisks, the palaces, the temples, the Lighthouse. At length he said, 'I know what I really am, now.'

'Do you, Charles?' She sounded very far away.

'In my era we called it software. All I am is a set of commands, responses, cross-references, operating some sort of artificial body. It's infinitely better software than we could have imagined. But we were only just beginning to learn how, after all. They pumped me full of twentieth-century reflexes. The right moods, the right appetites, the right irrationalities, the right sort of combativeness. Somebody knows a lot about what it was like to be a twentieth-century man. They did a good job with Willoughby, too, all that Elizabethan rhetoric and swagger. And I suppose they got Y'ang-Yeovil right. He seems to think so: who better to judge? The twenty-fifth century, the Republic of Upper Han, people with grey-green skin, half Chinese and half Martian for all I know. *Somebody* knows. Somebody here is very good at programming, Gioia.'

She was not looking at him.

'I feel frightened, Charles,' she said in that same distant way.

'Of me? Of the things I'm saying?'

'No, not of you. Don't you see what has happened to me?'

'I see you. There are changes.'

'I lived a long time wondering when the changes would begin. I thought maybe they wouldn't, not really. Who wants to believe they'll get old? But it started when we were in Alexandria that first time. In Chang-an it got much worse. And now—now—'

He said abruptly, ‘Stengard tells me they'll be opening Constantinople very soon.'

'So?'

'Don't you want to be there when it opens?'

'I'm becoming old and ugly, Charles.'

'We'll go to Constantinople together. We'll leave tomorrow, eh? What do you say? We'll charter a boat. It's a quick little hop, right across the Mediterranean. Sailing to Byzantium! There was a poem, you know, in my time. Not forgotten, I guess, because they've programmed it into me. All these thousands of years, and someone still remembers old Yeats. *The young in one another's arms, birds in the trees* . Come with me to Byzantium, Gioia.'

She shrugged. ‘Looking like this? Getting more hideous every hour? While *they* stay young for ever? While *you* —She faltered; her voice cracked; she fell silent.

'Finish the sentence, Gioia.'

'Please. Let me alone.'

'You were going to say, “While *you* stay young for ever too, Charles,” isn't that it? You knew all along that I was never going to change. I didn't know that, but you did.'

'Yes. I knew. I pretended that it wasn't true—that as I aged, you'd age too. It was very foolish of me. In Chang-an, when I first began to see the real signs of it—that was when I realized I couldn't stay with you any longer. Because I'd look at you, always young, always remaining the same age, and I'd took at myself, and—’ She gestured, palms upward. ‘So I gave you to Belilala and ran away.'

'All so unnecessary, Gioia.'

'I didn't think it was.'

'But you don't have to grow old. Not if you don't want to!'

'Don't be cruel, Charles,’ she said tonelessly. ‘There's no way of escaping what I have.'

'But there is,’ he said.

'You know nothing about these things.'

'Not very much, no,’ he said. ‘But I see how it can be done. Maybe it's a primitive simple-minded twentieth-century sort of solution, but I think it ought to work. I've been playing with the idea ever since I left Mohenjo. Tell me this, Gioia: why can't you go to them, to the programmers, to the artificers, the planners, whoever they are, the ones who create the cities and the temporaries and the visitors. And have yourself made into something like me!'

She looked up, startled. ‘What are you saying?'

'They can cobble up a twentieth-century man out of nothing more than fragmentary records and make him plausible, can't they? Or an Elizabethan, or anyone else of any era at all, and he's authentic, he's

convincing. So why couldn't they do an even better job with you? Produce a Gioia so real that even Gioia can't tell the difference? But a Gioia that will never age—a Gioia-construct, a Gioia-program, a visitor-Gioia! Why not? Tell me why not, Gioia.'

She was trembling. ‘I've never heard of doing any such thing!'

'But don't you think it's possible?'

'How would I know?'

'Of course it's possible. If they can create visitors, they can take a citizen and duplicate her in such a way that—'

'It's never been done. I'm sure of it. I can't imagine any citizen agreeing to any such thing. To give up the body—to let yourself be turned into—into—'

She shook her head, but it seemed to be a gesture of astonishment as much as of negation.

He said. ‘Sure. To give up the body. Your natural body, your ageing, shrinking, deteriorating short-timer body. What's so awful about that?'

She was very pale. ‘This is craziness, Charles. I don't want to talk about it any more.'

'It doesn't sound crazy to me.'

'You can't possibly understand.'

'Can't I? I can certainly understand being afraid to die. I don't have a lot of trouble understanding what it's like to be one of the few ageing people in a world where nobody grows old. What I can't understand is why you aren't even willing to consider the possibility that—'

'No,’ she said. ‘I tell you, it's crazy. They'd laugh at me.'

'Who?'

'All of my friends. Hawk, Stengard, Aramayne—’ Once again she would not look at him. ‘They can be very cruel, without even realizing it. They despise anything that seems ungraceful to them, anything sweaty and desperate and cowardly. Citizens don't do sweaty things, Charles. And that's how this will seem. Assuming it can be done at all. They'll be terribly patronizing. Oh, they'll be sweet to me, yes, dear Gioia, how wonderful for you, Gioia, but when I turn my back they'll laugh. They'll say the most wicked things about me. I couldn't bear that.'

'They can afford to laugh,’ Phillips said. ‘It's easy to be brave and coot about dying when you know you're going to live for ever. How very fine for them: but why should you be the only one to grow old and die? And they won't laugh, anyway. They're not as cruel as you think. Shallow, maybe, but not cruel. They'll be glad that you've found a way to save yourself. At the very least, they won't have to feel guilty about you any longer, and that's bound to please them. You can—'

'Stop it,’ she said.

She rose, walked to the railing of the patio, stared out towards the sea. He came up behind her. Red sails in the harbour, sunlight glittering along the sides of the Lighthouse, the palaces of the Ptolemies stark white against the sky. Lightly he rested his hand on her shoulder. She twitched as if to pull away from him, but remained where she was.

'Then I have another idea,' he said quietly. 'if you won't go to the planners, *I* will. Reprogram me, I'll say. Fix things so that I start to age at the same rate you do. It'll be more authentic, anyway, if I'm supposed to be playing the part of a twentieth-century man. Over the years I'll very gradually get some lines in my face, my hair will turn grey, I'll walk a little more slowly—we'll grow old together, Gioia. To hell with your lovely immortal friends. We'll have each other. We won't need them.'

She swung around. Her eyes were wide with horror.

'Are you serious, Charles?'

'Of course.'

'No,' she murmured. 'No. Everything you've said to me today is monstrous nonsense. Don't you realize that?'

He reached for her hand and enclosed her fingertips in his. 'All I'm trying to do is find some way for you and me to—'

'Don't say any more,' she said. 'Please.' Quickly, as though drawing back from a suddenly flaring flame, she tugged her fingers free of his and put her hand behind her. Though his face was just inches from hers he felt an immense chasm opening between them. They stared at one another for a moment; then she moved deftly to his left, darted around him, and ran from the patio.

Stunned, he watched her go, down the long marble corridor and out of sight. It was folly to give pursuit, he thought. She was lost to him: that was clear, that was beyond any question. She was terrified of him. Why cause her even more anguish? But somehow he found himself running through the halls of the hotel, along the winding garden path, into the cool green groves of the Paneium. He thought he saw her on the portico of Hadrian's palace, but when he got there the echoing stone halls were empty. To a temporary that was sweeping the steps he said, 'Did you see a woman come this way?' A blank sullen stare was his only answer.

Phillips cursed and turned away.

'Gioia?' he called. 'Wait! Come back!'

Was that her, going into the Library? He rushed past the startled mumbling librarians and sped through the stacks, peering beyond the mounds of double-handled scrolls into the shadowy corridor. 'Gioia? *Gioia!* ' It was a desecration, bellowing like that in this quiet place. He scarcely cared.

Emerging by a side door, he loped down to the harbour. The Lighthouse! Terror enfolded him. She might already be a hundred steps up that ramp, heading for the parapet from which she meant to fling herself into the sea. Scattering citizens and temporaries as if they were straws, he ran within. Up he went, never pausing for breath, though his synthetic lungs were screaming for respite, his ingeniously designed heart was desperately pounding. On the first balcony he imagined he caught a glimpse of her, but he circled it without finding her. Onwards, upwards. He went to the top, to the beacon chamber itself: no Gioia. Had she jumped? Had she gone down one ramp while he was ascending the other? He clung to the rim and looked out, down, searching the base of the Lighthouse, the rocks offshore, the causeway. No Gioia. I will find her somewhere, he thought. I will keep going until I find her. He went running down the ramp, calling her name. He reached ground level and sprinted back towards the centre of town. Where next? The temple of Poseidon? The tomb of Cleopatra?

He paused in the middle of Canopus Street, groggy and dazed.

'Charles?' she said.

'Where are you?'

'Right here. Beside you.' She seemed to materialize from the air. Her face was unflushed, her robe bore no trace of perspiration. Had he been chasing a phantom through the city? She came to him and took his hand, and said, softly, tenderly, 'Were you really serious, about having them make you age?'

'If there's no other way, yes.'

'The other way is so frightening, Charles.'

'Is it?'

'You can't understand how much.'

'More frightening than growing old? Than dying?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I suppose not. The only thing I'm sure of is that I don't want you to get old, Charles.'

'But I won't have to. Will I?'

He stared at her.

'No,' she said. 'You won't have to. Neither of us will.'

Phillips smiled. 'We should get away from here,' he said after a while. 'Let's go across to Byzantium, yes, Gioia? We'll show up in Constantinople for the opening. Your friends will be there. We'll tell them what you've decided to do. They'll know how to arrange it. Someone will.'

'It sounds so strange,' said Gioia. 'To turn myself into—into a visitor? A visitor in my own world?'

'That's what you've always been, though.'

'I suppose. In a way. But at least I've been*real* up to now.'

'Whereas I'm not?'

'Are you, Charles?'

'Yes. Just as real as you. I was angry at first, when I found out the truth about myself. But I came to accept it. Somewhere between Mohenjo and here, I came to see that it was all right to be what I am: that I perceive things, I form ideas, I draw conclusions. I am very well designed, Gioia. I can't tell the difference between being what I am and being completely alive, and to me that's being real enough. I think, I feel, I experience joy and pain. I'm as real as I need to be. And you will be too. You'll never stop being Gioia, you know. It's only your body that you'll cast away, the body that played such a terrible joke on you anyway.' He brushed her cheek with his hand. 'It was all said for us before, long ago:

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake—

'Is that the same poem?' she asked.

'The same poem, yes. The ancient poem that isn't quite forgotten yet.'

'Finish it, Charles.'

—'Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.'

'How beautiful. What does it mean?'

'That it isn't necessary to be mortal. That we can allow ourselves to be gathered into the artifice of eternity, that we can be transformed, that we can move on beyond the flesh. Yeats didn't mean it in quite the way I do—he wouldn't have begun to comprehend what we're talking about, not a word of it—and yet, and yet—the underlying truth is the same. Live, Gioia! With me!' He turned to her and saw colour coming into her pallid cheeks. 'It does make sense, what I'm suggesting, doesn't it? You'll attempt it, won't you? Whoever makes the visitors can be induced to remake you. Right? What do you think: can they, Gioia?'

She nodded in a barely perceptible way. 'I think so,' she said faintly. 'It's very strange. But I think it ought to be possible. Why not, Charles? Why not?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Why not?'

* * * *

In the morning they hired a vessel in the harbour, a low sleek pirogue with a blood-red sad, skippered by a rascally-looking temporary whose smile was irresistible. Phillips shaded his eyes and peered northwards across the sea. He thought he could almost make out the shape of the great city sprawling on its seven hills, Constantine's New Rome beside the Golden Horn, the mighty dome of Hagia Sophia, the sombre walls of the citadel, the palaces and churches, the Hippodrome, Christ in glory rising above all else in brilliant mosaic streaming with light.

'Byzantium,' Phillips said. 'Take us there the shortest and quickest way.'

'It is my pleasure,' said the boatman with unexpected grace. Gioia smiled. He had not seen her looking so vibrantly alive since the night of the imperial feast in Chang-an. He reached for her hand—her slender fingers were quivering lightly—and helped her into the boat.

The Pardoner's Tale

"Key Sixteen, Housing Omicron Kappa, aleph sub-one," I said to the software on duty at the Alhambra gate of the Los Angeles Wall.

Software isn't generally suspicious. This wasn't even very smart software. It was working off some great biochips—I could feel them jigging and pulsing as the electron stream flowed through them—but the software itself was just a kludge. Typical gatekeeper stuff.

I stood waiting as the picoseconds went ticking away by the millions.

"Name, please," the gatekeeper said finally.

"John Doe. Beta Pi Upsilon 104324x."

The gate opened. I walked into Los Angeles.

As easy as Beta Pi.

* * * *

The wall that encircles L.A. is a hundred, a hundred fifty feet thick. Its gates are more like tunnels. When you consider that the wall runs completely around the L.A. basin from the San Gabriel Valley to the San Fernando Valley and then over the mountains and down the coast and back the far side past Long Beach, and that it's at least sixty feet high and all that distance deep, you can begin to appreciate the mass of it. Think of the phenomenal expenditure of human energy that went into building it—muscle and sweat, sweat and muscle. I think about that a lot.

I suppose the walls around our cities were put there mostly as symbols. They highlight the distinction between city and country-side, between citizen and uncitizen, between control and chaos, just as city walls did five thousand years ago. But mainly they serve to remind us that we are all slaves nowadays. You can't ignore the walls. You can't pretend they aren't there.*We made you build them, is what they say, and don't you ever forget that* . All the same, Chicago doesn't have a wall sixty feet high and a hundred fifty feet deep. Houston doesn't. Phoenix doesn't. They make do with less. But L.A. is the main city. I suppose the Los Angeles wall is a statement:*I am the Big Cheese. I am the Ham What Am* .

The walls aren't there because the Entities are afraid of attack. They know how invulnerable they are. We know it too. They just wanted to decorate their capital with something a little special. What the hell, it isn't*their* sweat that goes into building the walls. It's ours. Not mine personally, of course. But ours.

I saw a few Entities walking around just inside the wall, preoccupied as usual with God knows what and paying no attention to the humans in the vicinity. These were low-caste ones, the kind with the luminous orange spots along their sides. I gave them plenty of room. They have a way sometimes of picking a human up with those long elastic tongues, like a frog snapping up a fly, and letting him dangle in mid-air while they study him with those saucer-sized yellow eyes. I don't care for that. You don't get hurt, but it isn't agreeable to be dangled in mid-air by something that looks like a fifteen-foot-high purple squid standing on the tips of its tentacles. Happened to me once in St. Louis, long ago, and I'm in no hurry to have it happen again.

The first thing I did when I was inside L.A. was find me a car. On Valley Boulevard about two blocks in from the wall I saw a ‘31 Toshiba El Dorado that looked good to me, and I matched frequencies with its lock and slipped inside and took about ninety seconds to reprogram its drive control to my personal metabolic cues. The previous owner must have been fat as a hippo and probably diabetic: her glycogen index was absurd and her phosphines were wild.

Not a bad car, a little slow in the shift but what can you expect, considering the last time any cars were manufactured on this planet was the year 2034.

“Pershing Square,” I told it.

It had nice capacity, maybe 60 megabytes. It turned south right away and found the old freeway and drove off toward downtown. I figured I'd set up shop in the middle of things, work two or three pardons to keep my edge sharp, get myself a hotel room, a meal, maybe hire some companionship. And then think about the next move. It was winter, a nice time to be in L.A. That golden sun, those warm breezes coming down the canyons.

I hadn't been out on the Coast in years. Working Florida mainly, Texas, sometimes Arizona. I hate the cold. I hadn't been in L.A. since ‘36. A long time to stay away, but maybe I'd been staying away deliberately. I wasn't sure. That last L.A. trip had left bad-tasting memories. There had been a woman who wanted a pardon and I sold her a stiff. You have to stiff the customers now and then or else you

start looking too good, which can be dangerous; but she was young and pretty and full of hope and I could have stiffed the next one instead of her, only I didn't. Sometimes I've felt bad, thinking back over that. Maybe that's what had kept me away from L.A. all this time

A couple of miles east of the big downtown interchange traffic began backing up. Maybe an accident ahead, maybe a roadblock. I told the Toshiba to get off the freeway.

Slipping through roadblocks is scary and calls for a lot of hard work. I knew that I probably could fool any kind of software at a roadblock and certainly any human cop, but why bother if you don't have to?

I asked the car where I was.

The screen lit up. Alameda near Banning, it said. A long walk to Pershing Square, looked like. I had the car drop me at Spring Street and went the rest of the way on foot. “Pick me up at 1830 hours,” I told it. “Corner of—umm—Sixth and Hill.” It went away to park itself and I headed for the Square to peddle some pardons.

* * * *

It isn't hard for a good pardoner to find buyers. You can see it in their eyes: the tightly controlled anger, the smoldering resentment. And something else, something intangible, a certain sense of having a shred or two of inner integrity left, that tells you right away, Here's somebody willing to risk a lot to regain some measure of freedom. I was in business within fifteen minutes.

The first one was an aging surfer sort, barrel chest and that sun-bleached look. The Entities haven't allowed surfing for ten, fifteen years—they've got their plankton seines just off shore from Santa Barbara to San Diego, gulping in the marine nutrients they have to have, and any beach boy who tried to take a whack at the waves out there would be chewed right up. But this guy must have been one hell of a performer in his day. The way he moved through the park, making little balancing moves as if he needed to compensate for the irregularities of the earth's rotation, you could see how he would have been in the water. Sat down next to me, began working on his lunch. Thick forearms, gnarled hands. A wall-laborer. Muscles knotting in his cheeks: the anger, forever simmering just below boil.

I got him talking, after a while. A surfer, yes. Lost in the far-away and gone. He began sighing to me about legendary beaches where the waves were tubes and they came pumping end to end. “Trestle Beach,” he murmured. “That's north of San Onofre. You had to sneak through Camp Pendleton. Sometimes the Marines would open fire, just warning shots. Or Hollister Ranch, up by Santa Barbara.” His blue eyes got misty. “Huntington Beach. Oxnard. I got everywhere, man.” He flexed his huge fingers. “Now these fucking Entity hodads own the shore. Can you believe it? They*own* it. And I'm pulling wall, my second time around, seven days a week next ten years.”

“Ten?” I said. “That's a shitty deal.”

“You know anyone who doesn't have a shitty deal?”

“Some,” I said. “They buy out.”

“Yeah.”

“It can be done.”

A careful look. You never know who might be a borgmann. Those stinking collaborators are everywhere.

“Can it?”

“All it takes is money,” I said.

“And a pardoner.”

“That's right.”

“One you can trust.”

I shrugged. “You've got to go on faith, man.”

“Yeah,” he said. Then, after a while: “I heard of a guy, he bought a three-year pardon and wall passage thrown in. Went up north, caught a krill trawler, wound up in Australia, on the Reef. Nobody's ever going to find him there. He's out of the system. Right out of the fucking system. What do you think that cost?”

“About twenty grand,” I said.

“Hey, that's a sharp guess!”

“No guess.”

“Oh?” Another careful look. “You don't sound local.”

“I'm not. Just visiting.”

“That's still the price? Twenty grand?”

“I can't do anything about supplying krill trawlers. You'd be on your own once you were outside the wall.”

“Twenty grand just to get through the wall?”

“And a seven-year labor exemption.”

“I pulled ten,” he said.

“I can't get you ten. It's not in the configuration, you follow? But seven would work. You could get so far, in seven, that they'd lose you. You could goddamned*swim* to Australia. Come in low, below Sydney, no seines there.”

“You know a hell of a lot.”

“My business to know,” I said. “You want me to run an asset check on you?”

“I'm worth seventeen five. Fifteen hundred real, the rest collat. What can I get for seventeen five?”

“Just what I said. Through the wall, and seven years’ exemption.”

“A bargain rate, hey?”

“I take what I can get,” I said. “Give me your wrist. And don't worry. This part is read-only.”

I keyed his data implant and patched mine in. He had fifteen hundred in the bank and a collateral rating of sixteen thou, exactly as he claimed. We eyed each other very carefully now. As I said, you never know who the borgmanns are.

“You can do it right here in the park?” he asked.

“You bet. Lean back, close your eyes, make like you're snoozing in the sun. The deal is that I take a thousand of the cash now and you transfer five thou of the collateral bucks to me, straight labor-debenture deal. When you get through the wall I get the other five hundred cash and five thou more on sweat security. The rest you pay off at three thou a year plus interest, wherever you are, quarterly key-ins. I'll program the whole thing, including beep reminders on payment dates. It's up to you to make your travel arrangements, remember. I can do pardons and wall transits but I'm not a goddamned travel agent. Are we on?”

He put his head back and closed his eyes.

“Go ahead,” he said.

It was fingertip stuff, straight circuit emulation, my standard hack. I picked up all his identification codes, carried them into central, found his records. He seemed real, nothing more or less than he had claimed. Sure enough, he had drawn a lulu of a labor tax, ten years on the wall. I wrote him a pardon good for the first seven of that. Had to leave the final three on the books, purely technical reasons, but the computers weren't going to be able to find him by then. I gave him a wall-transit pass, too, which meant writing in a new skills class for him, programmer third grade. He didn't think like a programmer and he didn't look like a programmer but the wall software wasn't going to figure that out. Now I had made him a member of the human elite, the relative handful of us who are free to go in and out of the walled cities as we wish. In return for these little favors I signed over his entire life savings to various accounts of mine, payable as arranged, part now, part later. He wasn't worth a nickel any more, but he was a free man. That's not such a terrible trade-off.

Oh, and the pardon was a valid one. I had decided not to write any stiffs while I was in Los Angeles. A kind of sentimental atonement, you might say, for the job I had done on that woman all those years back.

You absolutely have to write stiffs once in a while, you understand. So that you don't look too good, so that you don't give the Entities reason to hunt you down. Just as you have to ration the number of pardons you do. I didn't have to be writing pardons at all, of course. I could have just authorized the system to pay me so much a year, fifty thou, a hundred, and taken it easy forever. But where's the challenge in that?

So I write pardons, but no more than I need to cover my expenses, and I deliberately fudge some of them up, making myself look as incompetent as the rest so the Entities don't have a reason to begin trying to track the identifying marks of my work. My conscience hasn't been too sore about that. It's a matter of survival, after all. And most other pardoners are out-and-out frauds, you know. At least with me you stand a better than even chance of getting what you're paying for.

* * * *

The next one was a tiny Japanese woman, the classic style, sleek, fragile, doll-like. Crying in big wild gulps that I thought might break her in half, while a gray-haired older man in a shabby business suit—her grandfather, you'd guess—was trying to comfort her. Public crying is a good indicator of Entity trouble. “Maybe I can help,” I said, and they were both so distraught that they didn't even bother to be suspicious.

He was her father-in-law, not her grandfather. The husband was dead, killed by burglars the year before. There were two small kids. Now she had received her new labor-tax ticket. She had been afraid they were going to send her out to work on the wall, which of course wasn't likely to happen: the assignments are pretty random, but they usually aren't crazy, and what use would a 90-pound girl be in hauling stone blocks around? The father-in-law had some friends who were in the know, and they managed to bring up the hidden encoding on her ticket. The computers hadn't sent her to the wall, no. They had sent her to

Area Five. And they had given her a TTD classification.

“The wall would have been better,” the old man said. “They'd see, right away, she wasn't strong enough for heavy work, and they'd find something else, something she could do. But Area Five? Who ever comes back from that?”

“You know what Area Five is?” I said.

“The medical experiment place. And this mark here, TTD. I know what that stands for too.”

She began to moan again. I couldn't blame her. TTD means Test To Destruction. The Entities want to find out how much work we can really do, and they feel that the only reliable way to discover that is to put us through tests that show where the physical limits are.

“I will die,” she wailed. “My babies! My babies!”

“Do you know what a pardoner is?” I asked the father-in-law.

A quick excited response: sharp intake of breath, eyes going bright, head nodding vehemently. Just as quickly the excitement faded, giving way to bleakness, helplessness, despair.

“They all cheat you,” he said.

“Not all.”

“Who can say? They take your money, they give you nothing.”

“You know that isn't true. Everybody can tell you stories of pardons that came through.”

“Maybe. Maybe,” the old man said. The woman sobbed quietly. “You know of such a person?”

“For three thousand dollars,” I said, “I can take the TTD off her ticket. For five I can write an exemption from service good until her children are in high school.”

Sentimental me. A fifty percent discount, and I hadn't even run an asset check. For all I knew the father-in-law was a millionaire. But no, he'd have been off cutting a pardon for her, then, and not sitting around like this in Pershing Square.

He gave me a long, deep, appraising look. Peasant shrewdness coming to the surface.

“How can we be sure of that?” he asked.

I might have told him that I was the king of my profession, the best of all pardoners, a genius hacker with the truly magic touch, who could slip into any computer ever designed and make it dance to my tune. Which would have been nothing more than the truth. But all I said was that he'd have to make up his own mind, that I couldn't offer any affidavits or guarantees, that I was available if he wanted me and otherwise it was all the same to me if she preferred to stick with her TTD ticket. They went off and conferred for a couple of minutes. When they came back, he silently rolled up his sleeve and presented his implant to me. I keyed his credit balance: thirty thou or so, not bad. I transferred eight of it to my accounts, half to Seattle, the rest to Los Angeles. Then I took her wrist, which was about two of my fingers thick, and got into her implant and wrote her the pardon that would save her life. Just to be certain, I ran a double validation check on it. It's always possible to stiff a customer unintentionally, though I've never done it. But I didn't want this particular one to be my first.

“Go on,” I said. “Home. Your kids are waiting for their lunch.”

Her eyes glowed. “If I could only thank you somehow—”

“I've already banked my fee. Go. If you ever see me again, don't say hello.”

“This will work?” the old man asked.

“You say you have friends who know things. Wait seven days, then tell the data bank that she's lost her ticket. When you get the new one, ask your pals to decode it for you. You'll see. It'll be all right.”

I don't think he believed me. I think he was more than half sure I had swindled him out of one fourth of his life's savings, and I could see the hatred in his eyes. But that was his problem. In a week he'd find out that I really had saved his daughter-in-law's life, and then he'd rush down to the Square to tell me how sorry he was that he had had such terrible feelings toward me. Only by then I'd be somewhere else, far away.

They shuffled out the east side of the park, pausing a couple of times to peer over their shoulders at me as if they thought I was going to transform them into pillars of salt the moment their backs were turned. Then they were gone.

I'd earned enough now to get me through the week I planned to spend in L.A. But I stuck around anyway, hoping for a little more. My mistake.

This one was Mr. Invisible, the sort of man you'd never notice in a crowd, gray on gray, thinning hair, mild bland apologetic smile. But his eyes had a shine. I forget whether he started talking first to me, or me to him, but pretty soon we were jockeying around trying to find out things about each other. He told me he was from Silver Lake. I gave him a blank look. How in hell am I supposed to know all the zillion L.A. neighborhoods? Said that he had come down here to see someone at the big government HQ on Figueroa Street. All right: probably an appeals case. I sensed a customer.

Then he wanted to know where I was from. Santa Monica? West L.A.? Something in my accent, I guess. “I'm a traveling man,” I said. “Hate to stay in one place.” True enough. I need to hack or I go crazy; if I did all my hacking in just one city I'd be virtually begging them to slap a trace on me sooner or later and that would be the end. I didn't tell him any of that. “Came in from Utah last night. Wyoming before that.” Not true, either one. “Maybe on to New York, next.” He looked at me as if I'd said I was planning a voyage to the moon. People out here, they don't go east a lot. These days most people don't go anywhere.

Now he knew that I had wall-transit clearance, or else that I had some way of getting it when I wanted it. That was what he was looking to find out. In no time at all we were down to basics.

He said he had drawn a new ticket, six years at the salt-field reclamation site out back of Mono Lake. People die like mayflies out there. What he wanted was a transfer to something softer, like Operations & Maintenance, and it had to be within the walls, preferably in one of the districts out by the ocean where the air is cool and clear. I quoted him a price and he accepted without a quiver.

“Let's have your wrist,” I said.

* * * *

He held out his right hand, palm upward. His implant access was a pale yellow plaque, mounted in the usual place but rounder than the standard kind and of a slightly smoother texture. I didn't see any great significance in that. As I had done maybe a thousand times before, I put my own arm over his, wrist to wrist, access to access. Our biocomputers made contact and instantly I knew that I was in trouble.

Human beings have been carrying biochip-based computers in their bodies for the last forty or fifty years or so—long before the Entity invasion, anyway—but for most people it's just something they take for granted, like the vaccination mark on their thighs. They use them for the things they're meant to be used for, and don't give them a thought beyond that. The biocomputer's just a commonplace tool for them, like a fork, like a shovel. You have to have the hacker sort of mentality to be willing to turn your biocomputer into something more. That's why, when the Entities came and took us over and made us build walls around our cities, most people reacted just like sheep, letting themselves be herded inside and politely staying there. The only ones who can move around freely now—because we know how to manipulate the mainframes through which the Entities rule us—are the hackers. And there aren't many of us. I could tell right away that I had hooked myself on to one now.

The moment we were in contact, he came at me like a storm.

The strength of his signal let me know I was up against something special, and that I'd been hustled. He hadn't been trying to buy a pardon at all. What he was looking for was a duel. Mr. Macho behind the bland smile, out to show the new boy in town a few of his tricks.

No hacker had ever mastered me in a one-on-one anywhere. Not ever. I felt sorry for him, but not much.

He shot me a bunch of stuff, cryptic but easy, just by way of finding out my parameters. I caught it and stored it and laid an interrupt on him and took over the dialog. My turn to test him. I wanted him to begin to see who he was fooling around with. But just as I began to execute he put an interrupt on me. That was a new experience. I stared at him with some respect.

Usually any hacker anywhere will recognize my signal in the first thirty seconds, and that'll be enough to finish the interchange. He'll know that there's no point in continuing. But this guy either wasn't able to identify me or just didn't care, and he came right back with his interrupt. Amazing. So was the stuff he began laying on me next.

He went right to work, really trying to scramble my architecture. Reams of stuff came flying at me up in the heavy megabyte zone.

—*jspike. dbltag. nslice. dzcnt.*

I gave it right back to him, twice as hard.

—*maxfrq. minpau. spktot. jspike.*

He didn't mind at all.

—*maxdz. spktim. falter. nslice.*

—*frqsum. eburst.*

—*iburst.*

—*prebst.*

—*nobrst.*

Mexican standoff. He was still smiling. Not even a trace of sweat on his forehead. Something eerie about him, something new and strange. This is some kind of borgmann hacker, I realized suddenly. He must be working for the Entities, roving the city, looking to make trouble for freelancers like me. Good as he was,

and he was plenty good, I despised him. A hacker who had become a borgmann—now, that was truly disgusting. I wanted to short him. I wanted to burn him out, now. I had never hated anyone so much in my life.

I couldn't do a thing with him.

I was baffled. I was the Data King, I was the Megabyte Monster. All my life I had floated back and forth across a world in chains, picking every lock I came across. And now this nobody was tying me in knots. Whatever I gave him, he parried; and what came back from him was getting increasingly bizarre. He was working with an algorithm I had never seen before and was having serious trouble solving. After a little while I couldn't even figure out what he was doing to me, let alone what I was going to do to cancel it. It was getting so I could barely execute. He was forcing me inexorably toward a wetware crash.

“Who are you?” I yelled.

He laughed in my face.

And kept pouring it on. He was threatening the integrity of my implant, going at me down on the microcosmic level, attacking the molecules themselves. Fiddling around with electron shells, reversing charges and mucking up valences, clogging my gates, turning my circuits to soup. The computer that is implanted in my brain is nothing but a lot of organic chemistry, after all. So is my brain. If he kept this up the computer would go and the brain would follow, and I'd spend the rest of my life in the bibble-bibble academy.

This wasn't a sporting contest. This was murder.

I reached for the reserves, throwing up all the defensive blockages I could invent. Things I had never had to use in my life, but they were there when I needed them, and they did slow him down. For a moment I was able to halt his ballbreaking onslaught and even push him back. And give myself the breathing space to set up a few offensive combinations of my own. But before I could get them running, he shut me down once more and started to drive me toward crashville all over again. He was unbelievable.

I blocked him. He came back again. I hit him hard and he threw the punch into some other neural channel altogether and it went fizzling away.

I hit him again. Again he blocked it.

Then he hit me and I went reeling and staggering, and managed to get myself together when I was about three nanoseconds from the edge of the abyss.

I began to set up a new combination. But even as I did it, I was reading the tone of his data, and what I was getting was absolute cool confidence. He was waiting for me. He was ready for anything I could throw. He was in that realm beyond mere self-confidence into utter certainty.

What it was coming down to was this. I was able to keep him from ruining me, but only just barely, and I wasn't able to lay a glove on him at all. And he seemed to have infinite resources behind him. I didn't worry him. He was tireless. He didn't appear to degrade at all. He just took all I could give and kept throwing new stuff at me, coming at me from six sides at once.

Now I understood for the first time what it must have felt like for all the hackers I had beaten. Some of them must have felt pretty cocky, I suppose, until they ran into me. It costs more to lose when you think you're good. When you know you're good. People like that, when they lose, they have to reprogram their whole sense of their relation to the universe.

I had two choices. I could go on fighting until he wore me down and crashed me. Or I could give up right now. In the end everything comes down to yes or no, on or off, one or zero, doesn't it?

I took a deep breath. I was staring straight into chaos.

“All right,” I said. “I'm beaten. I quit.”

I wrenched my wrist free of his, trembled, swayed, went toppling down on the ground.

A minute later five cops jumped me and trussed me up like a turkey and hauled me away, with my implant arm sticking out of the package and a security lock wrapped around my wrist, as if they were afraid I was going to start pulling data right out of the air.

* * * *

Where they took me was Figueroa Street, the big black marble ninety-story job that is the home of the puppet city government. I didn't give a damn. I was numb. They could have put me in the sewer and I wouldn't have cared. I wasn't damaged—the automatic circuit check was still running and it came up green—but the humiliation was so intense that I felt crashed. I felt destroyed. The only thing I wanted to know was the name of the hacker who had done it to me.

The Figueroa Street building has ceilings about twenty feet high everywhere, so that there'll be room for Entities to move around. Voices reverberate in those vast open spaces like echoes in a cavern. The cops sat me down in a hallway, still all wrapped up, and kept me there for a long time. Blurred sounds went lalloping up and down the passage. I wanted to hide from them. My brain felt raw. I had taken one hell of a pounding.

Now and then a couple of towering Entities would come rumbling through the hall, tiptoeing on their tentacles in that weirdly dainty way of theirs. With them came a little entourage of humans whom they ignored entirely, as they always do. They know that we're intelligent but they just don't care to talk to us. They let their computers do that, via the Borgmann interface, and may his signal degrade forever for having sold us out. Not that they wouldn't have conquered us anyway, but Borgmann made it ever so much easier for them to push us around by showing them how to connect our little biocomputers to their huge mainframes. I bet he was very proud of himself, too: just wanted to see if his gadget would work, and to hell with the fact that he was selling us into eternal bondage.

Nobody has ever figured out why the Entities are here or what they want from us. They simply came, that's all. Saw. Conquered. Rearranged us. Put us to work doing godawful unfathomable tasks, Like a bad dream.

And there wasn't any way we could defend ourselves against them. Didn't seem that way to us at first—we were cocky, we were going to wage guerilla war and wipe them out—but we learned fast how wrong we were, and we are theirs for keeps. There's nobody left with anything close to freedom except the handful of hackers like me; and, as I've explained, we're not dopey enough to try any serious sort of counterattack. It's a big enough triumph for us just to be able to dodge around from one city to another without having to get authorization.

Looked like all that was finished for me, now. Right then I didn't give a damn. I was still trying to integrate the notion that I had been beaten; I didn't have capacity left over to work on a program for the new life I would be leading now.

“Is this the pardoner, over here?” someone said.

“That one, yeah.”

“She wants to see him now.”

“You think we should fix him up a little first?”

“She said now.”

A hand at my shoulder, rocking me gently. “Up, fellow. It's interview time. Don't make a mess or you'll get hurt.”

I let them shuffle me down the hall and through a gigantic doorway and into an immense office with a ceiling high enough to give an Entity all the room it would want. I didn't say a word. There weren't any Entities in the office, just a woman in a black robe, sitting behind a wide desk at the far end. It looked like a toy desk in that colossal room. She looked like a toy woman. The cops left me alone with her. Trussed up like that, I wasn't any risk.

“Are you John Doe?” she asked.

I was halfway across the room, studying my shoes. “What do you think?” I said.

“That's the name you gave upon entry to the city.”

“I give lots of names. John Smith, Richard Roe, Joe Blow. It doesn't matter much to the gate software what name I give.”

“Because you've gimmicked the gate?” She paused. “I should tell you, this is a court of inquiry.”

“You already know everything I could tell you. Your borgmann hacker's been swimming around in my brain.”

“Please,” she said. “This'll be easier if you cooperate. The accusation is illegal entry, illegal seizure of a vehicle, and illegal interfacing activity, specifically, selling pardons. Do you have a statement?”

“No.”

“You deny that you're a pardoner?”

“I don't deny, I don't affirm. What's the goddamned use.”

“Look up at me,” she said.

“That's a lot of effort.”

“Look up,” she said. There was an odd edge on her voice. “Whether you're a pardoner or not isn't the issue. We know you're a pardoner. I know you're a pardoner.” And she called me by a name I hadn't used in a very long time. Not since ‘36, as a matter of fact.

I looked at her. Stared. Had trouble believing I was seeing what I saw. Felt a rush of memories come flooding up. Did some mental editing work on her face, taking out some lines here, subtracting a little flesh in a few places, adding some in others. Stripping away the years.

“Yes,” she said. “I'm who you think I am.”

I gaped. This was worse than what the hacker had done to me. But there was no way to run from it.

“You work for them?” I asked.

“The pardon you sold me wasn't any good. You knew that, didn't you? I had someone waiting for me in San Diego, but when I tried to get through the wall they stopped me just like that, and dragged me away screaming. I could have killed you. I would have gone to San Diego and then we would have tried to make it to Hawaii in his boat.”

“I didn't know about the guy in San Diego,” I said.

“Why should you? It wasn't your business. You took my money, you were supposed to get me my pardon. That was the deal.”

Her eyes were gray with golden sparkles in them. I had trouble looking into them.

“You still want to kill me?” I asked. “Are you planning to kill me now?”

“No and no.” She used my old name again. “I can't tell you how astounded I was, when they brought you in here. A pardoner, they said. John Doe. Pardoners, that's my department. They bring all of them to me. I used to wonder years ago if they'd ever bring you in, but after a while I figured, no, not a chance, he's probably a million miles away, he'll never come back this way again. And then they brought in this John Doe, and I saw your face.”

“Do you think you could manage to believe,” I said, “that I've felt guilty for what I did to you ever since? You don't have to believe it. But it's the truth.”

“I'm sure it's been unending agony for you.”

“I mean it. Please. I've stiffed a lot of people, yes, and sometimes I've regretted it and sometimes I haven't, but you were one that I regretted. You're the one I've regretted most. This is the absolute truth.”

She considered that. I couldn't tell whether she believed it even for a fraction of a second, but I could see that she was considering it.

“Why did you do it?” she asked after a bit.

“I stiff people because I don't want to seem too perfect,” I told her. “You deliver a pardon every single time, word gets around, people start talking, you start to become legendary. And then you're known everywhere and sooner or later the Entities get hold of you, and that's that. So I always make sure to write a lot of stiffs. I tell people I'll do my best, but there aren't any guarantees, and sometimes it doesn't work.”

“You deliberately cheated me.”

“Yes.”

“I thought you did. You seemed so cool, so professional. So perfect. I was sure the pardon would be valid. I couldn't see how it would miss. And then I got to the wall and they grabbed me. So I thought, that bastard sold me out. He was too good just to have flubbed it up.” Her tone was calm but the anger was still in her eyes. “Couldn't you have stiffed the next one? Why did it have to be me?”

I looked at her for a long time.

“Because I loved you,” I said.

“Shit,” she said. “You didn't even know me. I was just some stranger who had hired you.”

“That's just it. There I was full of all kinds of crazy instant lunatic fantasies about you, all of a sudden

ready to turn my nice orderly life upside down for you, and all you could see was somebody you had hired to do a job. I didn't know about the guy from San Diego. All I knew was I saw you and I wanted you. You don't think that's love? Well, call it something else, then, whatever you want. I never let myself feel it before. It isn't smart, I thought, it ties you down, the risks are too big. And then I saw you and I talked to you a little and I thought something could be happening between us and things started to change inside me, and I thought, Yeah, yeah, go with it this time, let it happen, this may make everything different. And you stood there not seeing it, not even beginning to notice, just jabbering on and on about how important the pardon was for you. So I stiffed you. And afterwards I thought, Jesus, I ruined that girl's life and it was just because I got myself into a snit, and that was a fucking petty thing to have done. So I've been sorry ever since. You don't have to believe that. I didn't know about San Diego. That makes it even worse for me." She didn't say anything all this time, and the silence felt enormous. So after a moment I said, "Tell me one thing, at least. That guy who wrecked me in Pershing Square: who was he?"

"He wasn't anybody," she said.

"What does that mean?"

"He isn't a who. He's a*what* . It's an android, a mobile anti-pardoner unit, plugged right into the big Entity mainframe in Culver City. Something new that we have going around town."

"Oh," I said. "Oh."

"The report is that you gave it one hell of a workout."

"It gave me one too. Turned my brain half to mush."

"You were trying to drink the sea through a straw. For a while it looked like you were really going to do it, too. You're one goddamned hacker, you know that?"

"Why did you go to work for them?" I said.

She shrugged. "Everybody works for them. Except people like you. You took everything I had and didn't give me my pardon. So what was I supposed to do?"

"I see."

"It's not such a bad job. At least I'm not out there on the wall. Or being sent off for TTD."

"No," I said. "It's probably not so bad. If you don't mind working in a room with such a high ceiling. Is that what's going to happen to me? Sent off for TTD?"

"Don't be stupid. You're too valuable."

"To whom?"

"The system always needs upgrading. You know it better than anyone alive. You'll work for us."

"You think I'm going to turn borgmann?" I said, amazed.

"It beats TTD," she said.

I fell silent again. I was thinking that she couldn't possibly be serious, that they'd be fools to trust me in any kind of responsible position. And even bigger fools to let me near their computer.

“All right,” I said. “I'll do it. On one condition.”

“You really have balls, don't you?”

“Let me have a rematch with that android of yours. I need to check something out. And afterward we can discuss what kind of work I'd be best suited for here. Okay?”

“You know you aren't in any position to lay down conditions.”

“Sure I am. What I do with computers is a unique art. You can't make me do it against my will. You can't make me do anything against my will.”

She thought about that. “What good is a rematch?”

“Nobody ever beat me before. I want a second try.”

“You know it'll be worse for you than before.”

“Let me find that out.”

“But what's the point?”

“Get me your android and I'll show you the point,” I said.

* * * *

She went along with it. Maybe it was curiosity, maybe it was something else, but she patched herself into the computer net and pretty soon they brought in the android I had encountered in the park, or maybe another one with the same face. It looked me over pleasantly, without the slightest sign of interest.

Someone came in and took the security lock off my wrist and left again. She gave the android its instructions and it held out its wrist to me and we made contact. And I jumped right in.

I was raw and wobbly and pretty damned battered, still, but I knew what I needed to do and I knew I had to do it fast. The thing was to ignore the android completely—it was just a terminal, it was just a unit—and go for what lay behind it. So I bypassed the android's own identity program, which was clever but shallow. I went right around it while the android was still setting up its combinations, dived underneath, got myself instantly from the unit level to the mainframe level and gave the master Culver City computer a hearty handshake.

Jesus, that felt good!

All that power, all those millions of megabytes squatting there, and I was plugged right into it. Of course I felt like a mouse hitchhiking on the back of an elephant. That was all right. I might be a mouse but that mouse was getting a tremendous ride. I hung on tight and went soaring along on the hurricane winds of that colossal machine.

And as I soared, I ripped out chunks of it by the double handful and tossed them to the breeze.

It didn't even notice for a good tenth of a second. That's how big it was. There I was, tearing great blocks of data out of its gut, joyously ripping and rending. And it didn't even know it, because even the most magnificent computer ever assembled is still stuck with operating at the speed of light, and when the best you can do is 186,000 miles a second it can take quite a while for the alarm to travel the full distance down all your neural channels. That thing was*huge* . Mouse riding on elephant, did I say? Amoeba piggybacking on brontosaurus, was more like it.

God knows how much damage I was able to do. But of course the alarm circuitry did cut in eventually. Internal gates came clanging down and all sensitive areas were sealed away and I was shrugged off with the greatest of ease. There was no sense staying around waiting to get trapped, so I pulled myself free.

I had found out what I needed to know. Where the defenses were, how they worked. This time the computer had kicked me out, but it wouldn't be able to, the next. Whenever I wanted, I could go in there and smash whatever I felt like.

The android crumpled to the carpet. It was nothing but an empty husk now.

Lights were flashing on the office wall.

She looked at me, appalled. “What did you do?”

“I beat your android,” I said. “It wasn't all that hard, once I knew the scoop.”

“You damaged the main computer.”

“Not really. Not much. I just gave it a little tickle. It was surprised, seeing me get access in there, that's all.”

“I think you really damaged it.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“The question ought to be why you haven't done it already. Why you haven't gone in there and crashed the hell out of their programs.”

“You think I could do something like that?”

She studied me. “I think maybe you could, yes.”

“Well, maybe so. Or maybe not. But I'm not a crusader, you know. I like my life the way it is. I move around, I do as I please. It's a quiet life. I don't start revolutions. When I need to gimmick things, I gimmick them just enough, and no more. And the Entities don't even know I exist. If I stick my finger in their eye, they'll cut my finger off. So I haven't done it.”

“But now you might,” she said.

I began to get uncomfortable. “I don't follow you,” I said, although I was beginning to think that I did.

“You don't like risk. You don't like being conspicuous. But if we take your freedom away, if we tie you down in L.A. and put you to work, what the hell would you have to lose? You'd go right in there. You'd gimmick things but good.” She was silent for a time. “Yes,” she said. “You really would. I see it now, that you have the capability and that you could be put in a position where you'd be willing to use it. And then you'd screw everything up for all of us, wouldn't you?”

“What?”

“You'd fix the Entities, sure. You'd do such a job on their computer that they'd have to scrap it and start all over again. Isn't that so?”

She was on to me, all right.

“But I'm not going to give you the chance. I'm not crazy. There isn't going to be any revolution and I'm

not going to be its heroine and you aren't the type to be a hero. I understand you now. It isn't safe to fool around with you. Because if anybody did, you'd take your little revenge, and you wouldn't care what you brought down on everybody else's head. You could ruin their computer but then they'd come down on us and they'd make things twice as hard for us as they already are, and you wouldn't care. We'd all suffer, but you wouldn't care. No. My life isn't so terrible that I need you to turn it upside down for me. You've already done it to me once. I don't need it again."

She looked at me steadily and all the anger seemed to be gone from her and there was only contempt left.

After a little she said, "Can you go in there again and gimmick things so that there's no record of your arrest today?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I could do that."

"Do it, then. And then get going. Get the hell out of here, fast."

"Are you serious?"

"You think I'm not?"

I shook my head. I understood. And I knew that I had won and I had lost, both at the same time.

She made an impatient gesture, a shoo-fly gesture.

I nodded. I felt very very small.

"I just want to say—all that stuff about how much I regretted the thing I did to you back then—it was true. Every word of it."

"It probably was," she said. "Look, do your gimmicking and edit yourself out and then I want you to start moving. Out of the building. Out of the city. Okay? Do it real fast."

I hunted around for something else to say and couldn't find it. Quit while you're ahead, I thought. She gave me her wrist and I did the interface with her. As my implant access touched hers she shuddered a little. It wasn't much of a shudder but I noticed it. I felt it, all right. I think I'm going to feel it every time I stiff anyone, ever again. Any time I even think of stiffing anyone.

I went in and found the John Doe arrest entry and got rid of it, and then I searched out her civil service file and promoted her up two grades and doubled her pay. Not much of an atonement. But what the hell, there wasn't much I could do. Then I cleaned up my traces behind me and exited the program.

"All right," I said. "It's done."

"Fine," she said, and rang for her cops.

* * * *

They apologized for the case of mistaken identity and let me out of the building and turned me loose on Figueroa Street. It was late afternoon and the street was getting dark and the air was cool. Even in Los Angeles winter is winter, of a sort. I went to a street access and summoned the Toshiba from wherever it had parked itself and it came driving up, five or ten minutes later, and I told it to take me north. The going was slow, rush-hour stuff, but that was okay. We came to the wall at the Sylmar gate, fifty miles or so out of town. The gate asked me my name. "Richard Roe," I said. "Beta Pi Upsilon 104324x. Destination San Francisco."

It rains a lot in San Francisco in the winter. Still, it's a pretty town. I would have preferred Los Angeles that time of year, but what the hell. Nobody gets all his first choices all the time.

Passengers

There are only fragments of me left now. Chunks of memory have broken free and drifted away like calved glaciers. It is always like that when a Passenger leaves us. We can never be sure of all the things our borrowed bodies did. We have only the lingering traces, the imprints.

Like sand clinging to an ocean-tossed bottle. Like the throbbings of amputated legs.

I rise. I collect myself. My hair is rumpled; I comb it. My face is creased from too little sleep. There is sourness in my mouth. Has my Passenger been eating dung with my mouth? They do that. They do anything.

It is morning.

A gray, uncertain morning. I stare at it awhile, and then, shuddering, I opaque the window and confront instead the gray, uncertain surface of the inner panel. My room looks untidy. Did I have a woman here? There are ashes in the trays. Searching for butts, I find several with lipstick stains. Yes, a woman was here.

I touch the bedsheets. Still warm with shared warmth. Both pillows tousled. She has gone, though, and the Passenger is gone, and I am alone.

How long did it last, this time?

I pick up the phone and ring Central. “What is the date?”

The computer's bland feminine voice replies, “Friday December fourth, nineteen eighty-seven.”

“The time?”

“Nine fifty-one, Eastern Standard Time.”

“The weather forecast?”

“Predicted temperature range for today thirty to thirty-eight. Current temperature, thirty-one. Wind, from the north, sixteen miles an hour. Chances of precipitation slight.”

“What do you recommend for a hangover?”

“Food or medication?”

“Anything you like,” I say.

The computer mulls that one over for a while. Then it decides on both and activates my kitchen. The spigot yields cold tomato juice. Eggs begin to fry. From the medicine slot comes a purplish liquid. The Central Computer is always so thoughtful. Do the Passengers ever ride it, I wonder? What thrills could that hold for them? Surely it must be more exciting to borrow the million minds of Central than to live awhile in the faulty, short-circuited soul of a corroding human being!

December fourth, Central said. Friday. So the Passenger had me for three nights.

I drink the purplish stuff and probe my memories in a gingerly way, as one might probe a festering sore.

I remember Tuesday morning. A bad time at work. None of the charts will come out right. The section manager irritable; he has been taken by Passengers three times in five weeks, and his section is in disarray as a result, and his Christmas bonus is jeopardized. Even though it is customary not to penalize a person for lapses due to Passengers, according to the system, the section manager seems to feel he will be treated unfairly. We have a hard time. Revise the charts, fiddle with the program, check the fundamentals ten times over. Out they come: the detailed forecasts for price variations of public utility securities, February-April 1988. That afternoon we are to meet and discuss the charts and what they tell us.

I do not remember Tuesday afternoon.

That must have been when the Passenger took me. Perhaps at work; perhaps in the mahogany-paneled boardroom itself, during the conference. Pink concerned faces all about me; I cough, I lurch, I stumble from my seat. They shake their heads sadly. No one reaches for me. No one stops me. It is too dangerous to interfere with one who has a Passenger. The chances are great that a second Passenger lurks nearby in the discorporate state, looking for a mount. So I am avoided. I leave the building.

After that, what?

Sitting in my room on bleak Friday morning, I eat my scrambled eggs and try to reconstruct the three lost nights.

Of course it is impossible. The conscious mind functions during the period of captivity, but upon withdrawal of the Passenger nearly every recollection goes too. There is only a slight residue, a gritty film of faint and ghostly memories. The mount is never precisely the same person afterwards; though he cannot recall the details of his experience, he is subtly changed by it.

I try to recall.

A girl? Yes: lipstick on the butts. Sex, then, here in my room. Young? Old? Blonde? Dark? Everything is hazy. How did my borrowed body behave? Was I a good lover? I try to be, when I am myself. I keep in shape. At thirty-eight, I can handle three sets of tennis on a summer afternoon without collapsing. I can make a woman glow as a woman is meant to glow. Not boasting; just categorizing. We have our skills. These are mine.

But Passengers, I am told, take wry amusement in controverting our skills. So would it have given my rider a kind of delight to find me a woman and force me to fail repeatedly with her?

I dislike that thought.

The fog is going from my mind now. The medicine prescribed by Central works rapidly. I eat, I shave, I stand under the vibrator until my skin is clean. I do my exercises. Did the Passenger exercise my body Wednesday and Thursday mornings? Probably not. I must make up for that. I am close to middle age, now; tonus lost is not easily regained.

I touch my toes twenty times, knees stiff.

I kick my legs in the air.

I lie flat and lift myself on pumping elbows.

The body responds, maltreated though it has been. It is the first bright moment of my awakening: to feel

the inner tingling, to know that I still have vigor.

Fresh air is what I want next. Quickly I slip into my clothes and leave. There is no need for me to report to work today. They are aware that since Tuesday afternoon I have had a Passenger; they need not be aware that before dawn on Friday the Passenger departed. I will have a free day. I will walk the city's streets, stretching my limbs, repaying my body for the abuse it has suffered.

I enter the elevator. I drop fifty stories to the ground. I step out into the December dreariness.

The towers of New York rise about me.

In the street the cars stream forward. Drivers sit edgily at their wheels. One never knows when the driver of a nearby car will be borrowed, and there is always a moment of lapsed coordination as the Passenger takes over. Many lives are lost that way on our streets and highways; but never the life of a Passenger.

I began to walk without purpose. I cross Fourteenth Street, heading north, listening to the soft violent purr of the electric engines. I see a boy jigging in the street and know he is being ridden. At Fifth and Twenty-second a prosperous-looking paunchy man approaches, his necktie askew, this morning's *Wall Street Journal* jutting from an overcoat pocket. He giggles. He thrusts out his tongue. Ridden. Ridden. I avoid him. Moving briskly, I come to the underpass that carries traffic below Thirty-fourth Street toward Queens, and pause for a moment to watch two adolescent girls quarreling at the rim of the pedestrian walk. One is a Negro. Her eyes are rolling in terror. The other pushes her closer to the railing. Ridden. But the Passenger does not have murder on its mind, merely pleasure. The Negro girl is released and falls in a huddled heap, trembling. Then she rises and runs. The other girl draws a long strand of gleaming hair into her mouth, chews on it, seems to awaken. She look dazed.

I avert my eyes. One does not watch while a fellow sufferer is awakening. There is a morality of the ridden; we have so many new tribal mores in these dark days.

I hurry on.

Where am I going so hurriedly? Already I have walked more than a mile. I seem to be moving toward some goal, as though my Passenger still hunches in my skull, urging me about. But I know that is not so. For the moment, at least, I am free.

Can I be sure of that?

Cogito ergo sum no longer applies. We go on thinking even while we are ridden, and we live in quiet desperation, unable to halt our course no matter how ghastly, no matter how self-destructive. I am certain that I can distinguish between the condition of bearing a Passenger and the condition being free. But perhaps not. Perhaps I bear a particularly devilish Passenger which has not quitted me at all, but which merely has receded to the cerebellum, leaving me the illusion of freedom while all the time surreptitiously driving me onward to some purpose of its own.

Did we ever have more than that: the illusion of freedom?

But this is disturbing, the thought that I may be ridden without realizing it. I burst out in heavy perspiration, not merely from the exertion of walking. Stop. Stop here. Why must you walk? You are at Forty-second Street. There is the library. Nothing forces you onward. Stop a while, I tell myself. Rest on the library steps.

I sit on the cold stone and tell myself that I have made this decision for myself.

Have I? It is the old problem, free will versus determinism, translated into the foulest of forms.

Determinism is no longer a philosopher's abstraction; it is cold alien tendrils sliding between the cranial sutures. The Passengers arrived three years ago. I have been ridden five times since then. Our world is quite different now. But we have adjusted even to this. We have adjusted. We have our mores. Life goes on. Our governments rule, our legislatures meet, our stock exchanges transact business as usual, and we have methods for compensating for the random havoc. It is the only way. What else can we do? Shrivel in defeat? We have an enemy we cannot fight; at best we can resist through endurance. So we endure.

The stone steps are cold against my body. In December few people sit here.

I tell myself that I made this long walk of my own free will, that I halted of my own free will, that no Passenger rides my brain now. Perhaps. Perhaps. I cannot let myself believe that I am not free.

Can it be, I wonder, that the Passenger left some lingering command in me? Walk to this place, halt at this place? That is possible too.

I look about me at the others on the library steps.

An old man, eyes vacant, sitting on newspaper. A boy of thirteen or so with flaring nostrils. A plump woman. Are all of them ridden? Passengers seem to cluster about me today. The more I study the ridden ones, the more convinced I become that I am, for the moment, free. The last time, I had three months of freedom between rides. Some people, they say, are scarcely ever free. Their bodies are in great demand, and they know only scattered bursts of freedom, a day here, a week there, an hour. We have never been able to determine how many Passengers infest our world. Millions, maybe. Or maybe five. Who can tell?

A wisp of snow curls down out of the gray sky. Central had said the chance of precipitation was slight. Are they riding Central this morning too?

I see the girl.

She sits diagonally across from me, five steps up and a hundred feet away, her black skirt pulled up on her knees to reveal handsome legs. She is young. Her hair is deep, rich auburn. Her eyes are pale; at this distance, I cannot make out the precise color. She is dressed simply. She is younger than thirty. She wears a dark green coat and her lipstick has a purplish tinge. Her lips are full, her nose slender, high-bridged, her eyebrows carefully plucked.

I know her.

I have spent the past three nights with her in my room. She is the one. Ridden, she came to me, and ridden, I slept with her. I am certain of this. The veil of memory opens; I see her slim body naked on my bed.

How can it be that I remember this?

It is too strong to be an illusion. Clearly this is something that I have been*permitted* to remember for reasons I cannot comprehend. And I remember more. I remember her soft gasping sounds of pleasure. I know that my own body did not betray me those three nights, nor did I fail her need.

And there is more. A memory of sinuous music; a scent of youth in her hair; the rustle of winter trees. Somehow she brings back to me a time of innocence, a time when I am young and girls are mysterious, a time of parties and dances and warmth and secrets.

I am drawn to her now.

There is an etiquette about such things, too. It is in poor taste to approach someone you have met while

being ridden. Such an encounter gives you no privilege; a stranger remains a stranger, no matter what you and she may have done and said during your involuntary time together.

Yet I am drawn to her.

Why this violation of taboo? Why this raw breach of etiquette? I have never done this before. I have been scrupulous.

But I get to my feet and walk along the step on which I have been sitting until I am below her, and I look up, and automatically she folds her ankles together and angles her knees as if in awareness that her position is not a modest one. I know from that gesture that she is not ridden now. My eyes meet hers. Her eyes are hazy green. She is beautiful, and I rack my memory for more details of our passion.

I climb step by step until I stand before her.

“Hello,” I say.

She gives me a neutral look. She does not seem to recognize me. Her eyes are veiled, as one's eyes often are, just after the Passenger has gone. She purses her lips and appraises me in a distant way.

“Hello,” she replies coolly. “I don't think I know you.”

“No. You don't. But I have the feeling you don't want to be alone just now. And I know I don't.” I try to persuade her with my eyes that my motives are decent. “There's snow in the air,” I say. “We can find a warmer place. I'd like to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“Let's go elsewhere, and I'll tell you. I'm Charles Roth.”

“Helen Martin.”

She gets to her feet. She still has not cast aside her cool neutrality; she is suspicious, ill at ease. But at least she is willing to go with me. A good sign.

“Is it too early in the day for a drink?” I ask.

“I'm not sure. I hardly know what time it is.”

“Before noon.”

“Let's have a drink anyway,” she says, and we both smile.

We go to a cocktail lounge across the street. Sitting face to face in the darkness, we sip drinks, daiquiri for her, bloody mary for me. She relaxes a little. I ask myself what it is I want from her. The pleasure of her company, yes. Her company in bed? But I have already had that pleasure, three nights of it, though she does not know that. I want something more. Something more. What?

Her eyes are bloodshot. She has had little sleep these past three nights.

I say, “Was it very unpleasant for you?”

“What?”

“The Passenger.”

A whiplash of reaction crosses her face. “How did you know I've had a Passenger?”

“I know.”

“We aren't supposed to talk about it.”

“I'm broadminded,” I tell her. “My Passenger left me some time during the night. I was ridden since Tuesday afternoon.”

“Mine left me about two hours ago, I think.” Her cheeks color. She is doing something daring, talking like this. “I was ridden since Monday night. This was my fifth time.”

“Mine also.”

We toy with our drinks. Rapport is growing, almost without the need of words. Our recent experiences with Passengers gives us something in common, although Helen does not realize how intimately we shared those experiences.

We talk. She is a designer of display windows. She has a small apartment several blocks from here. She lives alone. She asks me what I do. “Securities analyst,” I tell her. She smiles. Her teeth are flawless. We have a second round of drinks. I am positive, now, that this is the girl who was in my room while I was ridden.

A seed of hope grows in me. It was a happy chance that brought us together again so soon after we parted as dreamers. A happy chance, too, that some vestige of the dream lingered in my mind.

We have shared something, who knows what, and it must have been good to leave such a vivid imprint on me, and now I want to come to her conscious, aware, my own master, and renew that relationship, making it a real one this time. It is not proper, for I am trespassing on a privilege that is not mine except by virtue of our Passengers’ brief presence in us. Yet I need her. I want her.

She seems to need me, too, without realizing who I am. But fear holds her back.

I am frightened of frightening her, and I do not try to press my advantage too quickly. Perhaps she would take me to her apartment with her now, perhaps not, but I do not ask. We finish our drinks. We arrange to meet by the library steps again tomorrow. My hand momentarily brushes hers. Then she is gone.

I fill three ashtrays that night. Over and over I debate the wisdom of what I am doing. But why not leave her alone? I have no right to follow her. In the place our world has become, we are wisest to remain apart.

And yet—there is that stab of half-memory when I think of her. The blurred lights of lost chances behind the stairs, of girlish laughter in second-floor corridors, of stolen kisses, of tea and cake. I remember the girl with the orchid in her hair, and the one in the spangled dress, and the one with the child's face and the woman's eyes, so long ago, all lost, all gone, and I tell myself at this one I will not lose, I will not permit her to be taken from me.

Morning comes, a quiet Saturday. I return to the library, hardly expecting to find her there, but she is there, on the steps, and the sight of her is like a reprieve. She looks wary, troubled; obviously she has done much thinking, little sleeping. Together we walk along Fifth Avenue. She is quite close to me, but she does not take my arm. Her steps are brisk, short, nervous.

I want to suggest that we go to her apartment instead of to the cocktail lounge. In these days we must move swiftly while we are free. But I know it would be a mistake to think of this as a matter of tactics.

Coarse haste would be fatal, bringing me perhaps an ordinary victory, numbing defeat within it. In any event her mood hardly seems promising. I look at her, thinking of string music and new snowfalls, and she looks toward the gray sky.

She says, “I can feel them watching me all the time. Like vultures swooping overhead, waiting, waiting. Ready to pounce.”

“But there's a way of beating them. We can grab little scraps of life when they're not looking.”

“They're*always* looking.”

“No,” I tell her. “There can't be enough them for that. Sometimes they're looking the other way. And while they are, two people can come together and try to share warmth.”

“But what's the use?”

“You're too pessimistic, Helen. They ignore us for months at a time. We have a chance. We have a chance.”

But I cannot break through her shell of fear. She is paralyzed by the nearness of the Passengers, unwilling to begin anything for fear it will be snatched away by our tormentors. We reach the building where she lives, and I hope she will relent and invite me in. For an instant she wavers, but only for an instant: she takes my hand in both of hers, and smiles, and the smile fades, and she is gone, leaving me only with the words, “Let's meet at the library again tomorrow. Noon.”

I make the long chilling walk home alone.

Some of her pessimism seeps into me that night. It seems futile for us to try to salvage anything. More than that: wicked for me to seek her out, shameful to offer a hesitant love when I am not free. In this world, I tell myself, we should keep well clear of others, so that we do not harm anyone when we are seized and ridden.

I do not go to meet her in the morning.

It is best this way, I insist. I have no business trifling with her. I imagine her at the library, wondering why I am late, growing tense, impatient, then annoyed. She will be angry with me for breaking our date, but her anger will ebb, and she will forget me quickly enough.

Monday comes. I return to work.

Naturally, no one discusses my absence. It is as though I have never been away. The market is strong that morning. The work is challenging; it is mid-morning before I think of Helen at all. But once I think of her, I can think of nothing else. My cowardice in standing her up. The childishness of Saturday night's dark thoughts. Why accept fate so passively? Why give in? I want to fight, now, to carve out a pocket of security despite the odds. I feel a deep conviction that it can be done. The Passengers may never bother the two of us again, after all. And that flickering smile of hers outside her building Saturday, that momentary glow—it should have told me that behind her wall of fear she felt the same hopes. She was waiting for me to lead the way. And I stayed home instead.

At lunchtime I go to the library, convinced it is futile.

But she is there. She paces along the steps; the wind slices at her slender figure. I go to her.

She is silent a moment. “Hello,” she says finally.

“I'm sorry about yesterday.”

“I waited a long time for you.”

I shrug. “I made up my mind that it was no use to come. But then I changed my mind again.”

She tries to look angry. But I know she is pleased to see me again—else why did she come here today? She cannot hide her inner pleasure. Nor can I. I point across the street to the cocktail lounge.

“A daiquiri?” I say. “As a peace offering?”

“All right.”

Today the lounge is crowded, but we find a booth somehow. There is a brightness in her eyes that I have not seen before. I sense that a barrier is crumbling within her.

“You're less afraid of me, Helen,” I say.

“I've never been afraid of you. I'm afraid of what could happen if we take the risks.”

“Don't be. Don't be.”

“I'm trying not to be afraid. But sometimes it seems so hopeless. Since *they* came here—”

“We can still try to live our own lives.”

“Maybe.”

“We have to. Let's make pact, Helen. No more gloom. No more worrying about the terrible things that might just happen. All right?”

A pause. Then a cool hand against mine. “All right.”

We finish our drinks and I present my Credit Central to pay for them, and we go outside. I want her to tell me to forget about this afternoon's work and come home with her. It is inevitable, now, that she will ask me, and better sooner than later.

We walk a block. She does not offer the invitation. I sense the struggle inside her, and I wait, letting that struggle reach its own resolution without interference from me. We walk a second block. Her arm is through mine, but she talks only of her work, of the weather, and it is a remote, arm's-length conversation. At the next corner she swings around, away from her apartment, back toward the cocktail lounge. I try to be patient with her.

I have no need to rush things now, I tell myself. Her body is not a secret to me. We have begun our relationship topsy-turvy, with the physical part first; now it will take time to work backward to the more difficult part that some people call love.

But of course she is not aware that we have known each other that way. The wind blows swirling snowflakes in our faces, and somehow the cold sting awakens honesty in me. I know what I must say. I must relinquish my unfair advantage.

I tell her, “While I was ridden last week, Helen, I had a girl in my room.”

“Why talk of such things now?”

“I have to, Helen. You were the girl.”

She halts. She turns to me. People hurry past us in the street. Her face is very pale, with dark red spots growing in her cheeks.

“That's not funny, Charles.”

“It wasn't meant to be. You were with me from Tuesday night to early Friday morning.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“I do. I do. The memory is clear. Somehow it remains, Helen. I see your whole body.”

“Stop it, Charles.”

“We were very good together,” I say. “We must have pleased our Passengers because we were so good. To see you again—it was like waking from a dream, and finding that the dream was real, the girl right there—”

“No!”

“Let's go to your apartment and begin again.”

She says, “You're being deliberately filthy, and I don't know why, but there wasn't any reason for you to spoil things. Maybe I was with you and maybe I wasn't, but you wouldn't know it, and if you did know it you should keep your mouth shut about it, and—”

“You have a birthmark the size of a dime,” I say, “about three inches below your left breast.”

She sobs and hurls herself at me, there in the street. Her long silvery nails rake my cheeks. She pummels me. I seize her. Her knees assail me. No one pays attention; those who pass by assume we are ridden, and turn their heads. She is all fury, but I have my arms around hers like metal bands, so that she can only stamp and snort, and her body is close against mine. She is rigid, anguished.

In a low, urgent voice I say, “We'll defeat them, Helen. We'll finish what they started. Don't fight me. There's no reason to fight me. I know, it's a fluke that I remember you, but let me go with you and I'll prove that we belong together.”

“Let—go—”

“Please. Please. Why should we be enemies? I don't mean you any harm. I love you, Helen. Do you remember, when we were kids, we could play at being in love? I did; you must have done it too. Sixteen, seventeen years old. The whispers, the conspiracies—all a big game, and we knew it. But the game's over. We can't afford to tease and run. We have so little time, when we're free—we have to trust, to open ourselves—”

“It's wrong.”

“No. Just because it's the stupid custom for two people brought together by Passengers to avoid one another, that doesn't mean we have to follow it. Helen—Helen—”

Something in my tone registers with her. She ceases to struggle. Her rigid body softens. She looks up at me, her tearstreaked face thawing, her eyes blurred.

“Trust me,” I say. “Trust me, Helen!”

She hesitates. Then she smiles.

* * * *

In that moment I feel the chill at the back of my skull, the sensation as of a steel needle driven deep through bone. I stiffen. My arms drop away from her. For an instant I lose touch, and when the mists clear all is different.

“Charles?” she says. “*Charles?*”

Her knuckles are against her teeth. I turn, ignoring her, and go back into the cocktail lounge. A young man sits in one of the front booths. His dark hair gleams with pomade; his cheeks are smooth. His eyes meet mine.

I sit down. He orders drinks. We do not talk.

My hand falls on his wrist, and remains there. The bartender, serving the drinks, scowls but says nothing. We sip our cocktails and put the drained glasses down.

“Let's go,” the young man says.

I follow him out.

The Pope of the Chimps

Early last month Vendelmans and I were alone with the chimps in the compound when suddenly he said, “I'm going to faint.” It was a sizzling May morning, but Vendelmans had never shown any sign of noticing unusual heat, let alone suffering from it. I was busy talking to Leo and Mimsy and Mimsy's daughter Muffin, and I registered Vendelmans's remark without doing anything about it. When you're intensely into talking by sign language, as we are in the project, you sometimes tend not to pay a lot of attention to spoken words.

But then Leo began to sign the trouble sign at me, and I turned around and saw Vendelmans down on his knees in the grass, white-faced, gasping, covered with sweat. A few of the chimpanzees who aren't as sensitive to humans as Leo is thought it was a game and began to pantomime him, knuckles to the ground and bodies going limp. “Sick—” Vendelmans said. “Feel—terrible—”

I called for help, and Gonzo took his left arm and Kong took his right and somehow, big as he was, we managed to get him out of the compound and up the hill to headquarters. By then he was complaining about sharp pains in his back and under his arms, and I realized that it wasn't just heat prostration. Within a week the diagnosis was in.

Leukemia.

They put him on chemotherapy and hormones, and after ten days he was back with the project, looking cocky. “They've stabilized it,” he told everyone. “It's in remission and I might have ten or twenty years left, or even more. I'm going to carry on with my work.”

But he was gaunt and pale, with a tremor in his hands, and it was a frightful thing to have him among us. He might have been fooling himself, though I doubted it, but he wasn't fooling any of us: to us he was a memento mori, a walking death's-head-and-crossbones. That laymen think scientists are any more casual about such things than anyone else is something I blame Hollywood for. It is not easy to go about your daily work with a dying man at your side—or a dying man's wife, for Judy Vendelmans showed in her

frightened eyes all the grief that Hal Vendelmans himself was repressing. She was going to lose a beloved husband unexpectedly soon and she hadn't had time to adjust to it and her pain was impossible to ignore. Besides, the nature of Vendelmans's dyingness was particularly unsettling because he had been so big and robust and outgoing, a true Rabelaisian figure, and somehow between one moment and the next he was transformed into a wraith. "The finger of God," Dave Yost said. "A quick flick of Zeus's pinkie and Hal shrivels like cellophane in a fireplace." Vendelmans was not yet forty.

The chimps suspected something, too.

Some of them, such as Leo and Ramona, are fifth-generation signers, bred for alpha intelligence, and they pick up subtleties and nuances very well. "Almost human," visitors like to say of them. We dislike that tag, because the important thing about chimpanzees is that they *aren't* human, that they are an alien intelligent species; but yet I know what people mean. The brightest of the chimps saw right away that something was amiss with Vendelmans, and started making odd remarks. "Big one rotten banana," said Ramona to Mimsy while I was nearby. "He getting empty," Leo said to me as Vendelmans stumbled past us. Chimp metaphors never cease to amaze me. And Gonzo asked him outright: "You go away soon?"

* * * *

"Go away" is not the chimp euphemism for death. So far as our animals know, no human being has ever died. Chimps die. Human beings go away. We have kept things on that basis from the beginning, not intentionally at first, but such arrangements have a way of institutionalizing themselves. The first member of the group to die was Roger Nixon, in an automobile accident in the early years of the project long before my time here, and apparently no one wanted to confuse or disturb the animals by explaining what had happened to him, so no explanations were offered. My second or third year here, Tim Lippinger was killed in a ski-lift failure, and again it seemed easier not to go into details with them. And by the time of Will Bechstein's death in that helicopter crack-up four years ago the policy was explicit: we chose not to regard his disappearance from the group as death, but mere going away, as if he had only retired. The chimps do understand death, of course. They may even equate it with going away, as Gonzo's question suggests. But if they do, they surely see human death as something quite different from chimpanzee death—a translation to another state of being, an ascent on a chariot of fire. Yost believes that they have no comprehension of human death at all, that they think we are immortal, that they think we are gods.

* * * *

Vendelmans now no longer pretends that he isn't dying. The leukemia is plainly acute, and he deteriorates physically from day to day. His original this-isn't-actually-happening attitude has been replaced by a kind of sullen, angry acceptance. It is only the fourth week since the onset of the ailment and soon he'll have to enter the hospital.

And he wants to tell the chimps that he's going to die.

"They don't know that human beings can die," Yost said.

"Then it's time they found out," Vendelmans snapped. "Why perpetuate a load of mythological bullshit about us? Why let them think we're gods? Tell them outright that I'm going to die, the way old Egbert died and Salami and Mortimer."

"But they all died naturally," Jan Morton said.

"And I'm not dying naturally?"

She became terribly flustered. "Of old age, I mean. Their life cycles clearly and understandably came to an end and they died and the chimps understood it. Whereas you—" She faltered.

"—am dying a monstrous and terrible death midway through my life," Vendelmans said, and started to break down and recovered with a fierce effort, and Jan began to cry, and it was generally a bad scene from which Vendelmans saved us by going on, "It should be of philosophical importance to the project to discover how the chimps react to a revaluation of the human metaphysic. We've ducked every chance we've had to help them understand the nature of mortality. Now I propose we use me to teach them that humans are subject to the same laws they are. That we are not gods."

"And that gods exist," said Yost, "who are capricious and unfathomable and to whom we ourselves are as less than chimps."

Vendelmans shrugged. "They don't need to hear all that now. But it's time they understood what we are. Or rather, it's time that we learned how much they already understand. Use my death as a way of finding out. It's the first time they've been in the presence of a human who's actually in the process of dying. The other times one of us has died, it's always been in some sort of accident."

Burt Christensen said, "Hal, have you already told them anything about—"

"No," Vendelmans said. "Of course not. Not a word. But I see them talking to each other. They know."

* * * *

We discussed it far into the night. The question needed careful examination because of the far-reaching consequences of any change we might make in the metaphysical givens of our animals. These chimps have lived in a closed environment here for decades, and the culture they have evolved is a product of what we have chosen to teach them, compounded by their own innate chimpness plus whatever we have unknowingly transmitted to them about ourselves or them. Any radical conceptual material we offer them must be weighed thoughtfully, because its effects will be irreversible, and those who succeed us in this community will be unforgiving if we do anything stupidly premature. If the plan is to observe a community of intelligent primates over a period of many human generations, studying the changes in their intellectual capacity as their linguistic skills increase, then we must at all times take care to let them find things out for themselves, rather than skewing our data by giving the chimps more than their current concept-processing abilities may be able to handle.

On the other hand, Vendelmans was dying right now, allowing us a dramatic opportunity to convey the concept of human mortality. We had at best a week or two to make use of that opportunity: then it might be years before the next chance.

"What are you worried about?" Vendelmans demanded.

Yost said, "Do you fear dying, Hal?"

"Dying makes me angry. I don't fear it; but I still have things to do, and I won't be able to do them. Why do you ask?"

"Because so far as we know the chimps see death—chimp death—as simply part of the great cycle of events, like the darkness that comes after the daylight. But human death is going to come as a revelation to them, a shock. And if they pick up from you any sense of fear or even anger over your dying, who knows what impact that will have on their way of thought?"

"Exactly. *Who knows?* I offer you a chance to find out!"

By a narrow margin, finally we voted to let Hal Vendelmans share his death with the chimpanzees. Nearly all of us had reservations about that. But plainly Vendelmans was determined to have a useful death, a meaningful death; the only way he could face his fate at all was by contributing it like this to the project.

And in the end I think most of us cast our votes his way purely out of our love for him.

* * * *

We rearranged the schedules to give Vendelmans more contact with the animals. There are ten of us, fifty of them; each of us has a special field of inquiry—number theory, syntactical innovation, metaphysical exploration, semiotics, tool use, and so on—and we work with chimps of our own choice, subject, naturally, to the shifting patterns of subtribal bonding within the chimp community. But we agreed that Vendelmans would have to offer his revelations to the alpha intelligences—Leo, Ramona, Grimsky, Alice and Attila—regardless of the current structure of the chimp-human dialogues. Leo, for instance, was involved in an ongoing interchange with Beth Rankin on the notion of the change of seasons. Beth more or less willingly gave up her time with Leo to Vendelmans, for Leo was essential in this. We learned long ago that anything important had to be imparted to the alphas first, and they will impart it to the others. A bright chimp knows more about teaching things to his duller cousins than the brightest human being.

The next morning Hal and Judy Vendelmans took Leo, Ramona and Attila aside and held a long conversation with them. I was busy in a different part of the compound with Gonzo, Mimsy, Muffin, and Chump, but I glanced over occasionally to see what was going on. Hal looked radiant—like Moses just down from the mountain after talking with God. Judy was trying to look radiant too, working at it, but her grief kept breaking through: once I saw her turn away from the chimps and press her knuckles to her teeth to hold it back.

Afterward Leo and Grimsky had a conference out by the oak grove. Yost and Charley Damiano watched it with binoculars, but they couldn't make much sense out of it. The chimps, when they sign to each other, use modified gestures much less precise than the ones they use with us; whether this marks the evolution of a special chimp-to-chimp argot designed not to be understood by us, or is simply a factor of chimp reliance on supplementary nonverbal ways of communicating, is something we still don't know, but the fact remains that we have trouble comprehending the sign language they use with each other, particularly the form the alphas use. Then, too, Leo and Grimsky kept wandering in and out of the trees, as if perhaps they knew we were watching them and didn't want us to eavesdrop. A little later in the day, Ramona and Alice had the same sort of meeting. Now all five of our alphas must have been in on the revelation.

Somehow the news began to filter down to the rest of them.

We weren't able to observe actual concept transmission. We did notice that Vendelmans, the next day, began to get rather more attention than normal. Little troops of chimpanzees formed about him as he moved—slowly, and in obvious difficulty—about the compound. Gonzo and Chump, who had been bickering for months, suddenly were standing side by side staring intently at Vendelmans. Chicory, normally shy, went out of her way to engage him in a conversation—about the ripeness of the apples on the tree, Vendelmans reported. Anna Livia's young twins, Shem and Shaun, climbed up and sat on Vendelmans's shoulders.

“They want to find out what a dying god is really like,” Yost said quietly.

“But look there,” Jan Morton said.

Judy Vendelmans had an entourage too: Mimsy, Muffin, Claudius, Buster, and Kong. Staring in fascination, eyes wide, lips extended, some of them blowing little bubbles of saliva.

“Do they think she's dying too?” Beth wondered.

Yost shook his head. “Probably not. They can see there's nothing physically wrong with her. But they're picking up the sorrow vibes, the death vibes.”

“Is there any reason to think they're aware that Hal is Judy's mate?” Christensen asked.

“It doesn't matter,” Yost said. “They can see that she's upset. That interests them, even if they have no way of knowing why Judy would be more upset than any of the rest of us.”

“More mysteries out yonder,” I said, pointing into the meadow. Grimsky was standing by himself out there, contemplating something. He is the oldest of the chimps, gray-haired, going bald, a deep thinker. He has been here almost from the beginning, more than thirty years, and very little has escaped his attention in that time.

Far off to the left, in the shade of the big beech tree, Leo stood similarly in solitary meditation. He is twenty, the alpha male of the community, the strongest and by far the most intelligent. It was eerie to see the two of them in their individual zones of isolation, like distant sentinels, like Easter Island statues, lost in private reveries.

“Philosophers,” Yost murmured.

* * * *

Yesterday Vendelmans returned to the hospital for good. Before he went, he made his farewells to each of the fifty chimpanzees, even the infants. In the past week he has altered markedly: he is only a shadow of himself, feeble, wasted. Judy says he'll live only another few weeks.

She has gone on leave and probably won't come back until after Hal's death. I wonder what the chimps will make of her “going away,” and of her eventual return.

She said that Leo had asked her if she was dying, too.

Perhaps things will get back to normal here now.

* * * *

Christensen asked me this morning, “Have you noticed the way they seem to drag the notion of death into whatever conversation you're having with them these days?”

I nodded. “Mimsy asked me the other day if the moon dies when the sun comes up and the sun dies when the moon is out. It seemed like such a standard primitive metaphor that I didn't pick up on it at first. But Mimsy's too young for using metaphor that easily and she isn't particularly clever. The older ones must be talking about dying a lot, and it's filtering down.”

“Chicory was doing subtraction with me,” Christensen said. “She signed, ‘*You take five, two die, you have three*.’ Later she turned it into a verb: ‘*Three die one equals two*.’”

Others reported similar things. Yet none of the animals were talking about Vendelmans and what was about to happen to him, nor were they asking any overt questions about death or dying. So far as we were able to perceive, they had displaced the whole thing into metaphorical diversions. That in itself indicated a powerful obsession. Like most obsessives, they were trying to hide the thing that most concerned them, and they probably thought they were doing a good job of it. It isn't their fault that we're able to guess what's going on in their minds. They are, after all—and we sometimes have to keep reminding ourselves of this—only chimpanzees.

* * * *

They are holding meetings on the far side of the oak grove, where the little stream runs. Leo and Grimsky seem to do most of the talking, and the others gather around and sit very quietly as the speeches are made. The groups run from ten to thirty chimps at a time. We are unable to discover what they're

discussing, though of course we have an idea. Whenever one on us approaches such a gathering, the chimps very casually drift off into three or four separate groups and look exceedingly innocent—"We just out for some fresh air, boss."

Charley Damiano wants to plant a bug in the grove. But how do you spy on a group that converses only in sign language? Cameras aren't as easily hidden as microphones.

We do our best with binoculars. But what little we've been able to observe has been mystifying. The chimp-to-chimp signs they use at these meetings are even more oblique and confusing than the ones we had seen earlier. It's as if they're holding their meetings in pig-Latin, or double-talk or in some entirely new and private language.

Two technicians will come tomorrow to help us mount cameras in the grove.

* * * *

Hal Vendelmans died last night. According to Judy, who phoned Dave Yost, it was very peaceful right at the end, an easy release. Yost and I broke the news to the alpha chimps just after breakfast. No euphemisms, just the straight news. Ramona made a few hooting sounds and looked as if she might cry, but she was the only one who seemed emotionally upset. Leo gave me a long deep look of what was almost certainly compassion, and then he hugged me very hard. Grimsky wandered away and seemed to be signing to himself in the new system. Now a meeting seems to be assembling in the oak grove, the first one in more than a week.

The cameras are in place. Even if we can't decipher the new signs, we can at least tape them and subject them to computer analysis until we begin to understand.

* * * *

Now we've watched the first tapes of a grove meeting, but I can't say we know a lot more than we did before.

For one thing, they disabled two of the cameras right at the outset. Attila spotted them and sent Gonzo and Claudius up into the trees to yank them out. I suppose the remaining cameras went unnoticed; but by accident or deliberate diabolical craftiness, the chimps positioned themselves in such a way that none of the cameras had a clear angle. We did record a few statements from Leo and some give-and-take between Alice and Anna Livia. They spoke in a mixture of standard signs and the new ones, but, without a sense of the context, we've found it impossible to generate any sequence of meanings. Stray signs such as “shirt,” “hat,” “human,” “change” and “banana fly,” interspersed with undecipherable stuff,*seem* to be adding up to something, but no one is sure what. We observed no mention of Hal Vendelmans nor any direct references to death. We may be misleading ourselves entirely about the significance of all this.

Or perhaps not. We codified some of the new signs, and this afternoon I asked Ramona what one of them meant. She fidgeted and hooted and looked uncomfortable—and not simply because I was asking her to do a tough abstract thing like giving a definition. She was worried. She looked around for Leo, and when she saw him she made that sign at him. He came bounding over and shoved Ramona away. Then he began to tell me how wise and good and gentle I am. He may be a genius, but even a genius chimp is still a chimp, and I told him I wasn't fooled by all his flattery. Then I asked*him* what the new sign meant.

“Jump high come again,” Leo signed.

A simple chimpy phrase referring to fun and frolic? So I thought at first, and so did many of my colleagues. But Dave Yost said, “Then why was Ramona so evasive about defining it?”

“Defining isn't easy for them,” Beth Rankin said.

“Ramona's one of the five brightest. She's capable of it. Especially since the sign can be defined by use of four other established signs, as Leo proceeded to do.”

“What are you getting at, Dave?” I asked.

Yost said, “‘*Jump high come again*’ might be about a game they like to play, but it could also be an eschatological reference, sacred talk, a concise metaphorical way to speak of death and resurrection, no?”

Mick Falkenburg snorted. “Jesus, Dave, of all the nutty Jesuitical bullshit—”

“Is it?”

“It's possible sometimes to be too subtle in your analysis,” Falkenburg said. “You're suggesting that these chimpanzees have a theology?”

“I'm suggesting that they may be in the process of evolving a religion,” Yost replied.

Can it be?

Sometimes we lose our perspective with these animals, as Mick indicated, and we overestimate their intelligence; but just as often, I think, we underestimate them.

Jump high come again.

I wonder. Secret sacred talk? A chimpanzee theology? Belief in life after death? A religion?

* * * *

They know that human beings have a body of ritual and belief that they call religion, though how much they really comprehend about it is hard to tell. Dave Yost, in his metaphysical discussions with Leo and some of the other alphas, introduced the concept long ago. He drew a hierarchy that began with God and ran downward through human beings and chimpanzees to dogs and cats and onward to insects and frogs, by way of giving the chimps some sense of the great chain of life. They had seen bugs and frogs and cats and dogs, but they wanted Dave to show them God, and he was forced to tell them that God is not actually tangible and accessible, but lives high overhead although His essence penetrates all things. I doubt that they grasped much of that. Leo, whose nimble and probing intelligence is a constant illumination to us, wanted Yost to explain how we talked to God and how God talked to us if He wasn't around to make signs, and Yost said that we had a thing called religion, which was a system of communicating with God. And that was where he left it, a long while back.

Now we are on guard for any indications of a developing religious consciousness among our troop. Even the scoffers—Mick Falkenburg, Beth, to some degree, Charley Damiano—are paying close heed. After all, one of the underlying purposes of this project is to reach an understanding of how the first hominids managed to cross the intellectual boundary that we like to think separates the animals from humanity. We can't reconstruct a bunch of Australopithecines and study them; but we *can* watch chimpanzees who have been given the gift of language build a quasi-protohuman society, and it is the closest thing to traveling back in time that we are apt to achieve. Yost thinks, I think, Burt Christensen is beginning to think, that we have inadvertently kindled an awareness of the divine, of the numinous force that must be worshipped, by allowing them to see that their gods—us—can be struck down and slain by an even higher power.

The evidence so far is slim. The attention given Vendelmans and Judy; the solitary meditations of Leo and Grimsky; the large gatherings in the grove; the greatly accelerated use of modified sign language in

chimp-to-chimp talk at those gatherings; the potentially eschatological reference we think we see in the sign that Leo translated as “jump high come again.” That's it. To those of us who want to interpret that as the foundations of religion, it seems indicative of what we want to see; to the rest, it all looks like coincidence and fantasy. The problem is that we are dealing with nonhuman intelligence and we must take care not to impose our own thought constructs. We can never be certain if we are operating from a value system anything like that of the chimps. The built-in ambiguities of the sign-language grammar we must use with them complicate the issue. Consider the phrase “banana fly” that Leo used in a speech—sermon?—in the oak grove, and remember Ramona's reference to the sick Vendelmans as “rotten banana.” If we take *fly* to be a verb, “banana fly” might be considered a metaphorical description of Vendelmans's ascent to heaven. If we take it to be a noun, Leo might have been talking about the *Drosophila* flies that feed on decaying fruit, a metaphor for the corruption of the flesh after death. On the other hand, he may simply have been making a comment about the current state of our garbage dump.

We have agreed for the moment not to engage the chimpanzees in any direct interrogation about any of this. The Heisenberg principle is eternally our rule here: the observer can too easily perturb the thing observed, so we must make only the most delicate of measurements. Even so, of course, our presence among the chimps is bound to have its impact, but we do what we can to minimize it by avoiding leading questions and watching in silence.

* * * *

Two unusual things today. Taken each by each, they would be interesting without being significant; but if we use each to illuminate the other, we begin to see things in a strange new light, perhaps.

One thing is an increase in vocalizing, noticed by nearly everyone, among the chimps. We know that chimpanzees in the wild have a kind of rudimentary spoken language—a greeting call, a defiance call, the grunts that mean “I like the taste of this,” the male chimp's territorial hoot, and such—nothing very complex, really not qualitatively much beyond the language of birds or dogs. They also have a fairly rich nonverbal language, a vocabulary of gestures and facial expressions. But it was not until the first experiments decades ago in teaching chimpanzees human sign-language that any important linguistic capacity became apparent in them. Here at the research station the chimps communicate almost wholly in signs, as they have been trained to do for generations and as they have taught their young ones to do; they revert to hoots and grunts only in the most elemental situations. We ourselves communicate mainly in signs when we are talking to each other while working with the chimps, and even in our humans-only conferences, we use signs as much as speech, from long habit. But suddenly the chimps are making sounds at each other. Odd sounds, unfamiliar sounds, weird, clumsy imitations, one might say, of human speech. Nothing that we can understand, naturally: the chimpanzee larynx is simply incapable of duplicating the phonemes humans use. But these new grunts, these tortured blurts of sound, seem intended to mimic our speech. It was Damiano who showed us, as we were watching a tape of a grove session, how Attila was twisting his lips with his hands in what appeared unmistakably to be an attempt to make human sounds come out.

Why?

The second thing is that Leo has started wearing a shirt and a hat. There is nothing remarkable about a chimp in clothing; although we have never encouraged such anthropomorphization here, various animals have taken a fancy from time to time to some item of clothing, have begged it from its owner and have worn it for a few days or even weeks. The novelty here is that the shirt and the hat belonged to Hal Vendelmans, and that Leo wears them only when the chimps are gathered in the oak grove, which Dave Yost has lately begun calling the “holy grove.” Leo found them in the toolshed beyond the vegetable garden. The shirt is ten sizes too big, Vendelmans having been so brawny, but Leo ties the sleeves across his chest and lets the rest dangle down over his back almost like a cloak.

What shall we make of this?

Jan is the specialist in chimp verbal processes. At the meeting tonight she said, “It sounds to me as if they're trying to duplicate the rhythms of human speech even though they can't reproduce the actual sounds. They're playing at being human.”

“Talking the god-talk,” said Dave Yost.

“What do you mean?” Jan asked.

“Chimps talk with their hands. Humans do, too, when speaking with chimps, but when humans talk to humans, they use their voices. Humans are gods to chimps, remember. Talking in the way the gods talk is one way of remaking yourself in the image of the gods, of putting on divine attributes.”

“But that's nonsense,” Jan said. “I can't possibly—”

“Wearing human clothing,” I broke in excitedly, “would also be a kind of putting on divine attributes, in the most literal sense of the phrase. Especially if the clothes—”

“—had belonged to Hal Vendelmans,” said Christensen.

“The dead god,” Yost said.

We looked at each other in amazement.

Charley Damiano said, not in his usual skeptical way, but in a kind of wonder, “Dave, are you hypothesizing that Leo functions as some sort of priest, that those are his sacred garments?”

“More than just a priest,” Yost said. “A high priest, I think. A pope. The pope of the chimps.”

* * * *

Grimsky is suddenly looking very feeble. Yesterday we saw him moving slowly through the meadow by himself, making a long circuit of the grounds as far out as the pond and the little waterfall, then solemnly and ponderously staggering back to the meeting place at the far side of the grove. Today he has been sitting quietly by the stream, occasionally rocking slowly back and forth, now and then dipping his feet in. I checked the records: he is forty-three years old, well along for a chimp, although some have been known to live fifty years and more. Mick wanted to take him to the infirmary, but we decided against it; if he is dying, and by all appearances he is, we ought to let him do it with dignity in his own way. Jan went down to the grove to visit him and reported that he shows no apparent signs of disease. His eyes are clear; his face feels cool. Age has withered him and his time is at hand. I feel an enormous sense of loss, for he has a keen intelligence, a long memory, a shrewd and thoughtful nature. He was the alpha male of the troop for many years, but a decade ago, when Leo came of age, Grimsky abdicated in his favor with no sign of a struggle. Behind Grimsky's grizzled forehead there must lie a wealth of subtle and mysterious perceptions, concepts and insights about which we know practically nothing, and very soon all that will be lost. Let us hope he's managed to teach his wisdom to Leo and Attila and Alice and Ramona.

* * * *

Today's oddity: a ritual distribution of meat.

Meat is not very important in the diet of chimps, but they do like to have some, and as far back as I can remember, Wednesday has been meat-day here, when we give them a side of beef or some slabs of mutton or something of that sort. The procedure for dividing up the meat betrays the chimps’ wild heritage, for the alpha males eat their fill first while the others watch, and then the weaker males beg for a share and are allowed to move in to grab, and finally the females and young ones get the scraps. Today

was meat-day. Leo, as usual, helped himself first, but what happened after that was astounding. He let Attila feed, and then told Attila to offer some meat to Grimsky, who is even weaker today and brushed it aside. *Then Leo put on Vendelmans's hat* and began to parcel out scraps of meat to the others. One by one they came up to him in the current order of ranking and went through the standard begging maneuver, hand beneath chin, palm upward, and Leo gave each one a strip of meat.

"Like taking communion," Charley Damiano muttered. "With Leo the celebrant at the Mass."

Unless our assumptions are totally off base, there is a real religion going on here, perhaps created by Grimsky and under Leo's governance. And Hal Vendelmans's faded old blue work hat is the tiara of the pope.

* * * *

Beth Rankin woke me at dawn and said, "Come fast. They're doing something strange with old Grimsky."

I was up and dressed and awake in a hurry. We have a closed-circuit system now that pipes the events in the grove back to us, and we paused at the screen so that I could see what was going on. Grimsky sat on his knees at the edge of the stream, eyes closed, barely moving. Leon, wearing the hat, was beside him, elaborately tying Vendelmans's shirt over Grimsky's shoulders. A dozen or more of the other adult chimps were squatting in a semicircle in front of them.

Burt Christensen said, "What's going on? Is Leo making Grimsky the assistant pope?"

"I think Leo is giving Grimsky the last rites," I said.

What else could it have been? Leo wore the sacred headdress. He spoke at length using the new signs—the ecclesiastical language, the chimpanzee equivalent of Latin or Hebrew or Sanskrit—and as his oration went on and on, the congregation replied periodically with outbursts of—I suppose—response and approval, some in signs, some with grunting garbled pseudohuman sounds that Dave Yost thought was their version of god-talk. Throughout it all Grimsky was silent and remote, though occasionally he nodded or murmured or tapped both his shoulders in a gesture whose meaning was unknown to us. The ceremony went on for more than an hour. Then Grimsky leaned forward, and Kong and Chump took him by the arms and eased him down until he was lying with his cheek against the ground.

For two, three, five minutes all the chimpanzees were still. At last Leo came forward and removed his hat, setting it on the ground beside Grimsky, and with great delicacy he untied the shirt Grimsky wore. Grimsky did not move. Leo draped the shirt over his own shoulders and donned the hat again.

He turned to the watching chimps and signed, using the old signs that were completely intelligible to us, "Grimsky now be human being."

We stared at each other in awe and astonishment. A couple of us were sobbing. No one could speak.

The funeral ceremony seemed to be over. The chimps were dispersing. We saw Leo sauntering away, hat casually dangling from one hand, the shirt in the other, trailing over the ground. Grimsky alone remained by the stream. We waited ten minutes and went down to the grove. Grimsky seemed to be sleeping very peacefully, but he was dead, and we gathered him up—Burt and I carried him; he seemed to weigh almost nothing—and took him back to the lab for the autopsy.

In mid-morning the sky darkened and lightning leaped across the hills to the north. There was a tremendous crack of thunder almost instantly and sudden tempestuous rain. Jan pointed to the meadow. The male chimps were doing a bizarre dance, roaring, swaying, slapping their feet against the ground,

hammering their hands against the trunks of the trees, ripping off branches and flailing the earth with them. Grief? Terror? Joy at the translation of Grimsky to a divine state? Who could tell? I had never been frightened by our animals before—I knew them too well, I regarded them as little hairy cousins—but now they were terrifying creatures and this was a scene out of time's dawn, as Gonzo and Kong and Attila and Chump and Buster and Claudius and even Pope Leo himself went thrashing about in that horrendous rain, pounding out the steps of some unfathomable rite.

The lightning ceased and the rain moved southward as quickly as it had come, and the dancers went slinking away, each to his favorite tree. By noon the day was bright and warm and it was as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

* * * *

Two days after Grimsky's death I was awakened again at dawn, this time by Mick Falkenburg. He shook my shoulder and yelled at me to wake up, and as I sat there blinking he said, “Chicory's dead! I was out for an early walk and I found her near the place where Grimsky died.”

“Chicory? But she's only—”

“Eleven, twelve, something like that. I know.”

I put my clothes on while Mick woke the others, and we went down to the stream. Chicory was sprawled out, but not peacefully—there was a dribble of blood at the corner of her mouth, her eyes were wide and horrified, her hands were curled into frozen talons. All about her in the moist soil of the stream bank were footprints. I searched my memory for an instance of murder in the chimp community and could find nothing remotely like it—quarrels, yes, and lengthy feuds and some ugly ambushes and battles, fairly violent, serious injuries now and then. But this had no precedent.

“Ritual murder,” Yost murmured.

“Or a sacrifice, perhaps?” suggested Beth Rankin.

“Whatever it is,” I said, “they're learning too fast. Recapitulating the whole evolution of religion, including the worst parts of it. We'll have to talk to Leo.”

“Is that wise?” Yost asked.

“Why not?”

“We've kept hands off so far. If we want to see how this thing unfolds—”

“During the night,” I said, “the pope and the college of cardinals ganged up on a gentle young female chimp and killed her. Right now they may be off somewhere sending Alice or Ramona or Anna Livia's twins to chimp heaven. I think we have to weigh the value of observing the evolution of chimp religion against the cost of losing irreplaceable members of a unique community. I say we call in Leo and tell him that it's wrong to kill.”

“He knows that,” said Yost. “He must. Chimps aren't murderous animals.”

“Chicory's dead.”

“And if they see it as a holy deed?” Yost demanded.

“Then one by one we'll lose our animals, and at the end we'll just have a couple of very saintly survivors. Do you want that?”

* * * *

We spoke with Leo. Chimps can be sly and they can be manipulative, but even the best of them, and Leo is the Einstein of chimpanzees, does not seem to know how to lie. We asked him where Chicory was and Leo told us that Chicory was now a human being. I felt a chill at that. Grimsky was also a human being, said Leo. We asked him how he knew that they had become human and he said, "They go where Vendelmans go. When human go away, he become god. When chimpanzee go away, he become human. Right?"

"No," we said.

The logic of the ape is not easy to refute. We told him that death comes to all living creatures, that it is natural and holy, but that only God could decide when it was going to happen. God, we said, calls His creatures to Himself one at a time. God had called Hal Vendelmans, God had called Grimsky, God would someday call Leo and all the rest here. But God had not yet called Chicory. Leo wanted to know what was wrong with sending Chicory to Him ahead of time. Did that not improve Chicory's condition? No, we replied. No, it only did harm to Chicory. Chicory would have been much happier living here with us than going to God so soon. Leo did not seem convinced. Chicory, he said, now could talk words with her mouth and wore shoes on her feet. He envied Chicory very much.

We told him that God would be angry if any more chimpanzees died. We told him that*we* would be angry. Killing chimpanzees was wrong, we said. It was not what God wanted Leo to be doing.

"Me talk to God, find out what God wants," Leo said.

* * * *

We found Buster dead by the edge of the pond this morning, with indications of another ritual murder. Leo coolly stared us down and explained that God had given orders that all chimpanzees were to become human beings as quickly as possible, and this could only be achieved by the means employed on Chicory and Buster.

Leo is confined now in the punishment tank and we have suspended this week's meat distribution. Yost voted against both of those decisions, saying we ran the risk of giving Leo the aura of a religious martyr, which would enhance his already considerable power. But these killings have to stop. Leo knows, of course, that we are upset about them. But if he believes his path is the path of righteousness, nothing we say or do is going to change his mind.

* * * *

Judy Vendelmans called today. She has put Hal's death fairly well behind her, misses the project, misses the chimps. As gently as I could, I told her what has been going on here. She was silent a very long time—Chicory was one of her favorites, and Judy has had enough grief already to handle for one summer—but finally she said, "I think I know what can be done. I'll be on the noon flight tomorrow."

We found Mimsy dead in the usual way late this afternoon. Leo is still in the punishment tank—the third day. The congregation has found a way to carry out its rites without its leader. Mimsy's death left me stunned, but we are all deeply affected, virtually unable proceed with our work. It may be necessary to break up the community entirely to save the animals. Perhaps we can send them to other research centers for a few months, three of them here, five there, until this thing subsides. But what if it doesn't subside? What if the dispersed animals convert others elsewhere to the creed of Leo?

* * * *

The first thing Judy said when she arrived was, "Let Leo out. I want to talk with him."

We opened the tank. Leo stepped forth, uneasy, abashed, shading his eyes against the strong light. He

glanced at me, at Yost, at Jan, as if wondering which one of us was going to scold him; and then he saw Judy and it was as though he had seen a ghost. He made a hollow rasping sound deep in his throat and backed away. Judy signed hello and stretched out her arms to him. Leo trembled. He was terrified. There was nothing unusual about one of us going on leave and returning after a month or two, but Leo must not have expected Judy ever to return, must in fact have imagined her gone to the same place her husband had gone, and the sight of her shook him. Judy understood all that, obviously, for she quickly made powerful use of it, signing to Leo, "I bring you message from Vendelmans."

"Tell tell tell!"

"Come walk with me," said Judy.

She took him by the hand and led him gently out of the punishment area and into the compound and down the hill toward the meadow. We watched from the top of the hill, the tall, slender woman and the compact, muscular chimpanzee close together, side by side, hand in hand, pausing now to talk, Judy signing and Leo replying in a flurry of gestures, then Judy again for a long time, a brief response from Leo, another cascade of signs from Judy, then Leo squatting, tugging blades of grass, shaking his head, clapping hand to elbow in his expression of confusion, then to his chin, then taking Judy's hand. They were gone for nearly an hour. The other chimps did not dare approach them. Finally Judy and Leo, hand in hand, came quietly up the hill to headquarters again. Leo's eyes were shining and so were Judy's.

She said, "Everything will be all right now. That's so, isn't it, Leo?"

Leo said, "God is always right."

She made a dismissal sign and Leo went slowly down the hill. The moment he was out of sight, Judy turned away from us and cried a little, just a little; then she asked for a drink; and then she said, "It isn't easy, being God's messenger."

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

"That I had been in heaven visiting Hal. That Hal was looking down all the time and he was very proud of Leo, except for one thing, that Leo was sending too many chimpanzees to God too soon. I told him that God was not yet ready to receive Chicory and Buster and Mimsy, that they would have to be kept in storage cells for a long time until their true time came, and that was not good for them. I told him that Hal wanted Leo to know that God hoped he would stop sending him chimpanzees. Then I gave Leo Hal's old wristwatch to wear when he conducts services, and Leo promised he would obey Hal's wishes. That was all. I suspect I've added a whole new layer of mythology to what's developing here, and I trust you won't be angry with me for doing it. I don't believe any more chimps will be killed. And I think I'd like another drink."

Later in the day we saw the chimps assembled by the stream. Leo held his arm aloft and sunlight blazed from the band of gold on his slim hairy wrist, and a great outcry of grunts in god-talk went up from the congregation and they danced before him, and then he donned the sacred hat and the sacred shirt and moved his arms eloquently in the secret sacred gestures of the holy sign language.

There have been no more killings. I think no more will occur. Perhaps after a time our chimps will lose interest in being religious, and go on to other pastimes. But not yet, not yet. The ceremonies continue, and grow ever more elaborate, and we are compiling volumes of extraordinary observations, and God looks down and is pleased. And Leo proudly wears the emblems of his papacy as he bestows his blessing on the worshipers in the holy grove.

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