The House at the Crossroads

Prologue: The Last Attack

SAM GILL WAS awakened by a noise in the downstairs hall. He checked his watch—the solid-gold mechanical timepiece his father, Emerson Gill, had carried for the past fifty years—and learned it was twenty-one minutes after four o'clock. The new day that was about to dawn in London would be the 24th of April in the year 1867, and a cold premonition told Sam Gill he would have reason to remember the date.

He reached for the box of sulfur matches on his bedside table, drew one, and paused. Something about this movement was familiar, too, but he couldn't remember exactly what. He struck the match, turned the tap on the lamp on the wall above his head, and lit the gas. Gill's father had plumbed the walls for town gas—something the old structure never had—when he rebuilt Crossroads House after the fire of 1833.

It should have been his father who woke in the middle of the night to watch over his family and the house's guests. In other circumstances, Emerson would have remained hale and hearty and able to discharge the duties of proprietor long into his third century. But in 1859 the elder Gill began experiencing stomach problems, abdominal bloating, darkened urine, and jaundice of his skin and the whites of his eyes. Other inhabitants of Victorian England might have dismissed these symptoms as the stigmata of a normal old age or a warning sign from the "Angel of Death." For the Gill family, the symptoms suggested something had gone wrong with the genetics of his endocrine system, through either toxic or radiologic insult. Emerson returned through the mirror-maze on the second floor to the family's original home in the eighth millennium and never came back. After his cure, Emerson said, he preferred to retire to "the other side of time." And then Sam Gill had held his breath, waiting for InterTime Systems to send through a new proprietor. But the next day a messenger arrived to an-

nounce that, with his father's recommendation, Sam had been confirmed in place.

So now he sat up in bed and considered the noise downstairs and what to do next. Travelers seldom came through the mirror after dark. Although time for them was an utterly fluid concept, the choice of when to emerge from the maze was still governed by good manners, which dictated a concern for those who lived in the diurnal present on the other side of the mirror. And those approaching the house from the outside, because they needed to exit this age through the mirror, would be confronted at the street entrance by locked doors and its posted business hours.

Since the noise that had awakened him was not likely to concern the house's normal business, and since the new gas light had not yet been made portable, Sam Gill reached into the drawer of his nightstand and took out his electric torch. After a moment's hesitation, he took the pulse pistol, too. Both items were forbidden under the protocols governing the operation of a temporal station in this time frame. But new dangers had emerged since those protocols were written.

As he descended the stairs from the family quarters, which he alone now occupied, Gill heard the noise once again and this time more clearly: the *rasp* and *snap!* of stout wooden panels, built to withstand rough inspection, being torn apart. He followed the noise down to the second floor, moving by feel so as not to alert the intruder to his approach. When he had reached the landing, crept out into the hallway, and finally shone his torch beam on the area before the built-in cabinet, Sam Gill suffered a moment of vertigo.

It was the same child-sized figure—the same blue suit, gray gloves and boots, the same helmet with lozenge shaped lenses for eyes—that he had seen thirty or more years earlier, in his own childhood. His father had called it the "Blue Demon." In the years since then, InterTime Systems had expanded and improved their intelligence. This was no phantom or enigma but a flesh-and-blood human being, small in stature, hairless in ap-

pearance, known to operate from several thousand years beyond the Gill family's distant future. It was an operative of an organization that, for reasons yet to be explained, had declared war on earlier forms of time travel—particularly those built and used by InterTime Systems. Like temporal cockroaches, these operatives appeared, did whatever damage they could manage, then flew away in a cloud of mist.

And now, for the second time in his life, Sam Gill had cornered one.

A name drifted up from memory and he said it aloud. "Rydin!"

The figure turned, the lenses staring back into the light.

The gloved hands continued tearing at the cabinet.

"I have a gun and will shoot you," Gill said.

The figure shrugged and kept working.

Rydin was probably right not to be afraid. The last time they met, Sam's father had shot the intruder dead-center with a pulse pistol. The charged particles had not penetrated the suit material, although the imparted energy made the small figure stagger. Gill did not think the helmet was made of any weaker stuff, and he wouldn't bet that Rydin was willing to take it off now.

"Can we talk about this?" Gill asked. "Whatever it is you want?"

"Nothing to talk about," came the electronically conveyed voice.

Gill noted that Rydin was speaking the panEuropan of his own millennium—not the English of the nineteenth century—but using softer vowels and smoother consonants.

The last panel of the twin doors covering the entry to the mirror-maze fell away, and the electric light above its focus came on automatically, powered from the same source that kept the mirror itself fixed in this part of the time stream. Rydin stood for one moment, obviously studying the three-part mirror. Then he stepped forward, detached something small

and dark from his utility belt, and thrust it through the central pane. When his hand came back, it was empty.

"You want to leave now," the voice said. "This event is not survivable."

"What is that thing?" Gill asked. He started forward to protect the node.

Rydin shrugged. "A medium-sized singularity. Fifty exagrams in mass. Cleaved and only temporarily patched. You have about thirty seconds."

"But that will—!" Sam gasped.

"—yes, it will." Rydin nodded.

The small figure pushed past him then, heading for the stairs. Gill could either stop him or try to find a way, as was his duty, to retrieve and neutralize the bomb. He decided—once again—to let the demon go.

Stepping into the central mirror, Gill found himself in the familiar first cell, as large as six of the external mirrors drawn around into a tight hexagon. He stooped to pick up the package, which wasn't all that heavy. But then, it wouldn't be, not with so much of its mass extending into another temporospatial dimension. Still, it was awkward to carry, with both hands already full with his torch and pistol. Because he was wearing only his nightgown and cap, like a proper Englishman at bedtime, he had no pockets to hold them. But he wouldn't need light or a weapon inside the maze, so he left them on the floor.

What he needed now was distance, in terms of both time and space. Like any station keeper, Sam Gill was familiar with the immediate surroundings of his own node, especially along the time stream that led back to its founding in the fifteenth century and forward to his own entry through the InterTime Systems node in the eighth millennium. Taking the bomb to any point along that stream and depositing it there would simply blow out access to the node in either the past or the future. Not a good solution.

Based on Rydin's estimate, he now had twenty seconds to act.

Gill had to find a side stream. He had to cross over into some parallel to his own Crossroads House in the Seven Dials rookery in nineteenth-century London—one that he did not know and would not care about destroying. According to temporal theory, such places existed all over the multiverse, generated by divergent events in the past that had created altered probabilities, sending that version of the house and that branch of the Gill family off into another temporal direction.

With the map of the maze—or at least as much of it as he knew—in mind, he stepped into the second mirrored panel to his right. To get away from his own time stream, he executed a drunkard's walk of 60- and 120-degree angles, keeping track of his turns while counting seconds inside his head. When he figured he was well off the stream in which his version of Sam Gill lived and slept and kept station, he put the package down and fled back the way he had come.

He could feel it when the bomb—the unleashed force of a quadrillion tons of collapsed matter, exiting into normal space—went off. The maze around him shivered in silence. The mirrored floor beneath his feet bounced. But space and time did not collapse.

Breathing a sigh, Sam Gill walked more slowly back along his route to the cell that existed just inside his own node's entry point. His pulse pistol and torch lay on the floor there, untouched. He picked them up and was about to step through the mirrored pane that would take him back into the second-floor hallway.

Instead of the white light of the overhead diode array, the pane glowed with a flickering red-and-yellow fire. Obviously, Rydin had decided to burn down Crossroads House—once again. Perhaps it was to cover the force of the explosion—although that, occurring in a maze cell immediately adjacent to an existing point in space, would itself have leveled the building and much of the neighborhood besides.

Sam Gill couldn't go out there now, not while the house was burning. He was safe enough inside the cell, on the other

side of the mirror. And then, when the house's structure had collapsed and the embers cooled, and preferably after dark, he could crawl out into empty space in his cap and nightgown, let himself drop into the littered basement, trying not to land with his bare feet on anything sharp, and prepare to rebuild his father's hotel one more time.

Part 1:
Escape Into the Past

1. The Ruffian

In the eleventh millennium, at the far end of human history and evolution, the treehouses of Lune stood tall along the bank of the River Temz.

Each tree had been grown for an individual family, with its limbs interlaced to make sturdy floors, their leaves overlapped and sealed with a mastic exuded from the undersides to create weathertight chambers. By rewriting the seed's genetic code, an owner could specify the number of levels and rooms, the placement of doors and windows, and other internal features. In ancient times, a twenty-meter-tall tree of the genus or *Quercus* or *Ulmus* might take four to six weeks to germinate and then grow at the rate of no more than thirty-five centimeters per year. But the biotechnologists of Lune had found that, with proper genetic manipulation, plus adequate water and nourishment, the growth rate could be accelerated fifty or sixty times. Still, a year or more was a long time to grow a house—even for humans who had genetically slowed their own growth rates and so extended their lifespans, such as the inhabitants of Lune.

So when Coel Rydin, who was only in his twenty-second year and had just reached technical maturity, was walking along the strand and saw two older and larger boys cutting a two-centimeter-wide ring around the trunk of the Pensah family's home tree, he became enraged.

"Stop that!" he called. "You're killing it! That tree will fall."

"Shut your mouth," Jarod Willbee said. "Only freaks live here."

"Yah, freak lover!" said Ponson Omsbee. "You're a freak yourself."

Rydin knew exactly whom the two boys meant: Dorya Pensah. She was half a dozen years younger than any of them, a child still not sexually mature, and yet she seemed to exert a strange influence on everyone around her. It was her eyes,

of course: golden yellow, lovely and almond shaped, with a delicately folded lid that was very rare for her phenotype. A geneticist might be fascinated by those eyes. Young bucks like Willbee and Omsbee instead pretended to be disgusted.

But whatever their motivation, they had no cause to destroy a work of genetic art and put the family out in the cold, dependent on the good will of the community, for the year it would take to grow them a new home. Something had to be done before these two boys and their plasma scalpel completed girdling the trunk.

"Stop it, I said," Rydin repeated. And then he put a hand on Willbee's shoulder.

Willbee shrugged him off and kept digging at the bark and layers underneath.

Rydin renewed and tightened his grip, pulling Willbee away from the tree.

Willbee spun around with the flame low and pointed at Rydin's stomach.

"Do it!" Omsbee hissed.

Rydin slapped the scalpel away.

It spun off to lie sputtering in the grass.

And that was the start of the boys' actual fight.

The fists that these untrained juveniles could make were small and inexpertly formed: thumb tucked inside fingers, joints sticking out at odd angles. But Willbee's first blow hurt terribly when it landed alongside Coel Rydin's left eye.

In response, Rydin made the best fist he could and landed it on the point of the Willbee's jaw. And that hurt terribly, too, bruising his knuckles—even if it did cause the other to step back and shake his head.

After that, they were trading feeble punches to the face and body. A lucky blow from Rydin caught Willbee in the larynx, and he backed away gurgling and clutching at his throat.

Ponson Omsbee dropped his head and charged, meaning to grapple with Rydin and bring him down that way. Rydin used his clenched fists to club the boy across his shoulders and

then brought a knee up into his face. Omsbee let go, fell back, and sat down hard on the grass.

Even though that was the end of the fight, a Proctor came up and touched Rydin's left arm with his electromagnetic stun stick, which gave off a soft buzz, and Rydin collapsed in a nerveless heap. In about a minute, when he regained feeling, the short, sharp spears of the genetically maintained grass blades were going to start hurting where they pricked at his neck, cheek, and exposed eyeball.

Rydin's face was turned away from his opponents, but he could tell when a second Proctor—or maybe the first one, with fast reflexes—had stunned Willbee. Rydin heard the buzz and then the *thump-whump* as the other boy's body hit the ground somewhere behind Rydin's awkwardly turned head.

Presumably, because he was already on the ground, Omsbee was not going to be stung. But Rydin was in no position to see for himself.

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The tribunal was held near the river in a grove of technically natural trees. "Natural" was a relative term in Lune: the species had been selected, and its genetics only minimally enhanced, to provide overhead shade from the ever-changing patterns of their leaves moving in the wind. The species was also designed to provide sweet fruits without pith or seeds, which were induced to sprout, ripen, and fall year round for the pleasure of passersby. Other than that, the riverside trees served no structural or agricultural purpose.

The tribunal consisted of ten citizens randomly selected from the dozens going about their business on the Strand at the moment the meeting was called to order. The only official with any stated authority was Elder Anton Pagonis. He was a minor member of the Council of Loving Parents, which constituted the civil government of the village of Lune. Five elders with the proper dispositions and clean genotypes were all the control required by a community of five thousand human souls, plus an uncounted number of Silicate intelligences. Of

course, the secretive and powerful Troupe des Jongleurs was another matter entirely.

"Our purpose today," Pagonis began, "is to discover why Coel Rydin, formerly a youth who has now obtained his majority, persists in attacking his fellow citizens without provocation."

By the standards of Lune, the chronological age of twenty years—representing the convergence of hormonal, emotional, and intellectual maturity, as defined by the Revised Human Genome version 4.61—was considered to be the age of discretion. It was the time when childish foibles were supposed to magically disappear and a new adult perspective govern in all of life's dimensions. Apparently, at two years and three months past his twentieth natal day, Rydin seemed to be failing at this, and the Council had been forced to take notice.

"But it was *not* without provocation," Rydin protested. "They were damaging a perfectly good house, cutting a circle around—"

"Be silent, Mir Rydin," Pagonis said. "You do not help your case by trying to justify your violence. The actions of the other parties will be evaluated and adjudicated in their own time and place. If actual damage were being done, the Proctors would have intervened in time—or assessed the amount of loss and awarded compensation. We have rules for personal interaction that exclude violent reprisals among citizens."

The Elder sighed. "You have a long life ahead of you, Mir Rydin. You must not spend it brawling among your cohort. By repaying violence with violence, you only increased the level of violence. This is not the way of loving kindness."

He turned to Rydin's mother. "Has the boy not been properly taught?"

Genaya Rydin cleared her throat. "We have taught him to value truth and loyalty, your honor. He may have … misunderstood us in the finer details and placed these values … above that of absolute kindness."

"Perhaps," Pagonis said with a smile that was more a recognition of her clever argument than agreement with it. "Many parents opt to remove the aggressive genes from their male embryos. Apparently, you chose otherwise. So be it." He turned to the Silicate intelligence which had been assigned to participate in this mostly human proceeding. "Does the boy have a clean genotype?"

The machine's six-legged carrier performed a small dip by flexing its knees, a sign that it acknowledged the question. Then the lenses of its eyestalks dilated out of focus, signifying that it was accessing non-visual information from one of the Silicates' wide-field databases—this one recording the biotelemetry sensors of Lune's human citizens. "We find no major mutations or dysfunctions. He has mildly elevated levels of acetylcholine, a modulator of neurologic pathways and neuromuscular junctions. This is probably due to a recessive in one copy of his genes for producing acetylcholinesterase, the enzyme that hydrolyzes this neurotransmitter. The result could be a heightened response to sensory stimuli and alteration of the neocortex's basic neurological functions for attention, plasticity, arousal, and reward."

"Would you say this dysfunction would lead to poor impulse control and inappropriate decision making?" the Elder asked.

"That would be a phenotypic evaluation," the machine replied. "We were not tasked with administering psychological tests."

"I understand," Pagonis said. "And yet the phenotype is the product of the genotype."

"Not accounting for environmental, social, and epigenetic effects … yes."

"Our concern is whether this tendency can be overcome by further education and training," the Elder said to the tribunal at large. "Or if it requires more direct means of repair."

Rydin understood the man's meaning: gene surgery, chromosomal suppression, or neural excision. They intended to

open his brain and make him into a different person—to think differently, feel differently, respond differently—if he couldn't resist the impulse to interfere with a pair of vandals who thought the child of a misfit family looked different.

The assembled members of the tribunal had been sitting quietly, some gazing out over the river, some covertly checking the screens of their wrist communicators, others simply enjoying a respite under the trees from their daily business. They were about as attentive to the proceedings as any collection of busy adults could be with what was, in truth, a fistfight among rambunctious youths. The obvious exception was Genaya Rydin, who looked scared for her son. Rydin was scared, too—but not enough for him to let bullies like Jarod Willbee and Ponson Omsbee terrorize the neighborhood.

One member of the tribunal, however, was staring at Rydin. The woman's face showed signs of hard and rough usage—an anomaly in an age where anyone could obtain genetic therapies to preserve muscle tone and skin elasticity right up to the point of corporeal dissolution. This woman had a gauntness about the eyes and creases around the mouth that, in centuries past, would have made her "old." And if her modified body type had still been able to grow that vestigial primate adaptation called "hair," hers would have been thin and gray—if not pure white. But for all that, Rydin did not sense any weakness about her. Instead, she radiated an enduring strength. Something in the way she was staring at him suggested she knew how to throw a punch and had absorbed a few herself over the years.

Now the old woman stood and raised two fingers.

The Elder turned to recognize her. "Mira Streng?"

"We will take the boy in his present condition."

Genaya Rydin put her hand to her mouth. "No!"

Rydin turned to his mother. "I don't understand."

Elder Pagonis bowed his head briefly. Then he looked up and scanned the other members of the tribunal. "Does this body support Mira Streng's offer? To accept this young

man in his wild state, without further genetic or neurological modification?"

The other adults evidently knew who this Streng woman was and what she represented. And they were now ready to go back about their routine business. Rydin's future was turned over to her through a simple majority of murmurs and nods without any voiced dissent.

"Very well," Pagonis said. "Coel Rydin, you are hereby released into Mira Streng's custody."

"Excuse me, mir," Rydin began, "but who—?"

The old woman was grinning. "You just joined the Troupe des Jongleurs,"

"Jongleur … juggler. That much I understand. But what is it that you *do?*"

"We juggle the laws of physics to manipulate space and time. Because you are a misfit in any age, we'll send you out of this time entirely—to someplace where your aggressive tendencies will do the most good."

Rydin turned to Genaya, who appeared to be still in shock. "Mother?"

"It's best you go along, Coel. The Council knows what's good for you."

"He's no longer the Council's business," the Streng woman replied dryly.

2. The Job Seekers

It was one thousand, two hundred, and twenty-four steps to the top of Vårberg Radio Tower, which was built down to bedrock above the highest point near the city of Österholm. Rolf Pohl could feel every one of those steps as he climbed, first shouldering, then clutching, and finally just bumping and lifting the heavy, Russian-made jetpack up to the top. The flying device was a technological antique—not just old by the standards of the late eighth millennium, but old for many of the civilizations that had come and gone before Rolf's. Under the circumstances, however, it was the best a panEuropan civilian could obtain.

Despite the cold east wind coming through the tower's lattice structure in the predawn darkness, he was sweating. That was because both he and his first-pair partner, Anja Varden, wore flight suits that combined layers woven from various aromatic polyamide fibers designed for flame, impact, and abrasion resistance, plus a layer of metal foil for direct heat deflection. All that, plus heavy jump boots, a full-face crash helmet, and the fifteen-kilogram jetpack, made climbing a lot of work.

"How you doing, sweetheart?" he called to Anja, climbing behind him.

"Better than you … Least I'm not … thumping my pack … up the stairs."

In fact, Anja probably *was* doing better than him. Although Rolf was taking the lead this morning, it was she who had introduced him to paravaning. The sport consisted of climbing to some high place, strapping on an illegal jetpack, jumping off, and with any luck soaring high over the landscape for as long as its liter of kerosene held out. It was the closest thing to flying free, like a bird—a noisy, heavy, clumsy bird with scorched legs—but still it was flying. Anja loved paravaning. Rolf loved Anja. So he tried to love it, too.

At the top of the stairs, standing on the four-meter-square platform, Rolf swung the pack up to his shoulders, looped and cinched the straps around his chest and between his legs, and then helped Anja with hers. They flipped out the stubby vanes, which gave their bodies some measure of stability and control in flight, toggled the pre-igniter switches on each other's packs, and then stepped aside so their wing tips would not clash together. Rolf adjusted the visor on his helmet, trying not to imagine how much he would need its protection if the Russian engine, which was one step above a ramjet—well, half a step, with an electric blower—failed to ignite.

"Ready on one," Rolf said. "Two."

"Three!" Anja shouted and leapt.

The first ten or fifteen meters were always straight down in free fall. Rolf desperately thumbed the igniter switch built into his left glove. He heard the long, central tube of the jet cough once, twice, and then burn with a pulsing roar behind him. At first he merely accelerated toward the ground, but he rolled the vane flaps around and up with the knurled knob built into his right glove. They caught the air sharply and yanked him out of his dive. In three seconds he was pointed toward the sky; the streetlights of the city with their dappled reflections in its canals dropped away beneath him.

"*Tack Gud!*" he whispered, although Anja wouldn't hear him over the roar of their engines. Then aloud, for her sake, as if she could hear, "*Hee-yah!*"

He glanced over and saw that she was soaring, too, five meters off to his right and three meters above him. But then, in the pearly dawn sky above and beyond her, Rolf could see two fast-moving shadows. They tracked the couple at a leisurely pace, moving silently through the air.

Rolf recognized members of the *Lokala Polisen*. They were hanging easily in the straps of their government-issue electrostatic packs. This was a separate and advanced technology, different from the jetpacks, and kept secret so that only the police

and armed forces of the panEuropan *respubliki* could fly like birds and catch criminals on the wing.

Because of the ramjet's warbling thunder, the flying patrol didn't bother using their loud hailers to tell Rolf and Anja they were caught and must land if they could. Instead, the nearer *polis* just smiled and made a pushing-down motion with his hand.

Rolf nodded and looked below to find a clear space where he could land.

Anja resisted and fed more power into her pack, trying for more altitude.

The *polis* let Rolf approach the intersection of two broad and empty avenues, hit the ground running on his feet, and kill his engine. Then he looked up, searching the sky for Anja.

The *polis* shot a wad of *klibbiga goo* into the throat of her ramjet, and when it stopped pulsing and she started tumbling, they expertly threw an expandable net, caught her with it, and lowered her to the ground half a block away.

Rolf's and Anja's packs were impounded and they were taken to Österholm Central Receiving, fingerprinted—again—and placed in a holding cell. At three in the afternoon, they appeared before a magistrate for determination of their fine and sentencing. By four o'clock, Bjorn and Katje Varden had come downtown to bail them out—again—and drive them to the little flat that Rolf and Anja shared just off the Strandvägen. Rolf tried to apologize to Anja's parents for the inconvenience, but Bjorn laughed at the episode, because he was rich and his daughter was, well … interesting. Anja simply frowned, totally unrepentant and eager to go paravaning again soon—or attempt some other high-risk, antisocial stunt. Katje just clucked, smoothed her daughter's hair, and tried to hold her hand.

That was the end to an almost perfect day. Or at least those first thirty-four seconds had qualified as perfect: soaring free, like a bird.

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Anja Varden sat hip-to-hip on the loveseat with Rolf, her first-pair, in their little flat in Österholm. Between them they held his writing tablet, displaying the *Catalog of First-Quarter Occupations*. These were job opportunities, along with each position's educational and vocational requirements, available to citizens of Europa Nord between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, living anywhere from Nord Italia to the Arctic Circle. Anja and Rolf were seeking actual, paid employment, first, because their twenty-fifth birthday was coming up—his on Sesto 27, hers on Septo 3—and second, because the magistrate who adjudicated their latest arrest for dangerous and disorderly conduct had sentenced them to either take full-time jobs or commit to two years of community service at the state's discretion. Being paid to work seemed the wiser course. The only trouble was, they wanted to find jobs that would let them stay together—and that was a problem.

In an age when modern medicine enabled the average person to live two or three centuries—multiple lifetimes in terms of the original human stock—no one was expected to do the same work, practice the same skills, meet the same challenges, and make the same decisions, over and over, for decade after decade after decade. So the full *Catalog* was segmented by age quadrants. Some occupations tracked to higher skill levels, requiring richer attainments and deeper commitments in the second, third, and fourth quarters of a person's working life. Others remained entry-level and allowed even an older worker to change tracks, learn new skills, and gain varied experiences. Since most First Occupations were beginner level, suitable for a young person with no established roots or deep personal commitments, they generally also required either a relocation, training at a regional facility, or extensive travel.

None of these positions was particularly designed for committed couples, because no one expected young people not even halfway into their first century to enter a first-pair bonding or stay together longer than a few months, certainly not more than a decade or two. But Anja and Rolf had bonded

early. They had been älsklingar, or sweethearts, and lovers since they met in sixth form. Most young moderns with an enhanced lifespan didn't join in their first formal pair-bonding until thirty-five years of age. And even then they understood it would not last without an official renewal at sixty years. But Anja and Rolf knew their own minds and hearts. And their parents—well, hers anyway, who had been young first-pairers themselves—had agreed to the match. Rolf's mother and father had not been so sure, although they did not oppose his choice.

So now they scrolled through the *Catalog*, looking for positions that would admit bonded pairs or at least were compatible in place and time.

"There," Anja said, pointing.

"*Konzert* violinist?" he said.

"You studied music in third, and you play the violin."

"I studied music *theory*. And I play the violin *badly*."

"Surely," she said, "you could practice and learn to play better."

"Maybe," he said. "But still not good enough to pass an audition."

"You'd be playing inside a big, warm concert hall and sitting down."

"True, that would be much nicer than getting conscripted as a soldier."

Military service was the basic choice open to both men and women, mostly for those without education or ambition: join the army for ten years, train in rough conditions somewhere above the frost line, get sent to some unstable hellhole in South America or Central Asia if war broke out, and then end up ten years behind their cohort, professionally, when they were demobilized. Besides, neither Anja nor Rolf cared all that much for forced discipline and rigid authority.

Most people chose serialized careers that could build a lifetime of work: musician to *konzert mästare* to composer; or actor

to play director to film producer; and even plumbers went on to become sanitation engineers and city planners.

"But that big, warm concert hall will not always be in Österholm," Rolf pointed out. "Musicians have to take bookings all over. So, while I would enjoy traveling with you, and I would like to see the capitals of Europa, unless you qualified for the same orchestra—"

"I flunked rhythm sticks in playschool," Anja said.

"—we would always be in different places. Besides, if I auditioned and failed, you know what that would mean."

"*Soldater*," she said glumly. "With the extension."

"Right. We can still find something to do together."

"We could teach. We both have adequate credits."

"But they might not send us to the same schools."

"Surely they would recognize our official pairing."

"They don't have to, not at this level. Besides, look at the postings," he said, tapping the screen. "Mathematics in Norrköping. Astronomy in Gothenburg. Economics in Tallinn. Even if we both qualified, and even with universal transit passes, we would still spend our free time traveling to meet each other someplace rather than being together."

"We could farm," she said. "They let you do that as a couple."

Rolf scrolled through the agricultural section of the *Catalog*. "There's an opening for a breeding pair at a commune in Boden and … one in Koryakino."

"Where's that?"

"Russia, I think."

"So, the Arctic Circle or Russia," she said.

"Could be nice in the summer. Short growing season."

"Farming is boring. And I don't want to raise a child in a commune."

"We could file to extend our educations and study archeology," he proposed. "If we took the same ancient language set, and specialized in the same period, then they'd have to send us together."

"But where?" Anja asked. "One of the old impact sites in the Far East?"

"The Chinese had a very advanced culture. We could learn a lot there."

"Mandarin is hard. Their script is worse. Too much like missionary work."

While they stared at the screen, it chimed. A gap appeared between *School Teacher* and *Surfactant Mechanic*. A new line appeared, *Station Keeper (Temporal)*.

"What's that?" Anja asked.

Rolf clicked on the posting.

" 'Exotic Climes, Exciting Times!' " he read aloud from the metadata that opened on the screen. " 'Manage a travelers' hostel in foreign lands. Arrange forward transit for interesting and important guests. Negotiate deeds and permits with local authorities. Perform light technical duties. Full housing allowance with all expenses paid. No previous hospitality experience required. Will train for position. Ideal situation for young pairings with adventurous spirits.' "

Anja liked the sound of that, especially the part about adventure—and the paid expenses. The position would leave all of their supplemental stipend for amenities, like a new set of paravanes and crash suits. "Sounds interesting, don't you think?"

"Sounds dangerous," he said. "Who posted it? Europa Tours?"

She reached over and scrolled down. "Just says, 'ITS' "

"Maybe it's 'International Travel Service?' "

"It could be something like that."

After Rolf and Anja had submitted their school transcripts and formal applications for the jobs in the hotel business—and hoped their local convictions for paravaning and other pranks wouldn't automatically show up in the online records—they heard nothing for three whole days. On the fourth day, they received acknowledgement and greetings from a Signore Sal-

vatore Pescatore at the still cryptically named ITS Centre in Genevra, along with two electronic passes on the noon hyperbolic to the Schweizisk Republic for the next day, and an address in the Malombré District with instructions to report at one in the afternoon.

The Swiss autotaxi spoke panEuropan but had some trouble with their Nordisk accents. The machine finally dropped them and their luggage at what it insisted was the right address. Malombré might once have been a fashionable—or even livable—place, part of Genevra's international urban center, but that was perhaps a hundred years ago. Now it was a ruin of abandoned residential blocks displaying cracked bricks, oxidized aluminum window frames, and broken and soot-streaked glass. The only intact building was right across from where the taxi left them, and it was more of a warehouse than a travel office. The exterior was a patchwork of weathered copper panels and sun-bleached ceramic tiles, with no signs, display windows, or other commercial features.

"Is this even a place of business?" Rolf asked.

"And does it have a front door?" Anja asked.

They walked along the outer edge of the building, which extended right to the curbside, until they found a rectangle of lighter gray metal which turned out to be painted steel. It had no handle and no comm pad. But in the upper left corner of the door frame Rolf detected a dull bulge that might have been a spider's abandoned egg case, except that the shiny oval of a lens at its center faced down toward the street. Rolf pointed and waved toward it, and Anja joined in his antics with a manic grin on her face.

The door clicked and swung inward.

"I guess we're expected," he said.

The light strips in a bare, white corridor, two meters wide and about fifteen meters long, came on as they entered. Along its length they discovered recessed doors on five-meter spacings, alternating each side of the corridor, but without any explanatory signage. Each door had a number, but the numbers

were maddeningly nonsequential and none of them started with "1." Rolf and Anja stopped moving after they passed the third door, and after twenty seconds—Rolf found he was counting subconsciously—the lights went out, leaving them in the dark.

"For Frigg's sake, what is this?" he asked.

"Halloo?" Anja called. "Anybody here?"

The lights came back on and the next door down the corridor opened inward. At last a human face appeared: that of a round little man with a bald head circled by a fringe of gray hair. He peered at them from under bushy eyebrows. Old-fashioned, metal-framed eyeglasses—worn instead of prosthetic surgeries—magnified his coolly intelligent eyes. His mouth was framed by a strange brush of unshaven hair along his upper lip. He was wearing a suit of clothing that came in three separate pieces: some kind of inner jacket with lots of buttons and doubly secured by a gold chain across his stomach, an outer jacket with wide folds at his breast that extended up around his neck, and pantaloons that reached down to his ankles over shiny black boots that Rolf suspected might be made of animal skin. The suit pieces were all of the same woven, patterned material that looked too heavy and hot for the summer's day outside—although the air inside the building was being mechanically cooled. Under all that clothing, the man wore a blouse of hard-finished white cloth with a curious neck sash of colored silk tied under two wide flaps that poked out below his chin. Rolf had only seen pictures of such clothing in books—old books, crumbling volumes in a museum, which had been retrieved from archeological digs in North America.

"You are Rolf Pohl and Anja Varden from Stockholm," the man said. "Right?"

"Österholm," Rolf corrected him. "It hasn't been called Stockholm for—"

"Yes, of course. Right!" The man blinked. "It is easy to get confused."

"Are you Salvatore Pescatore?" Anja asked. "We were supposed to meet—"

"Yes, that's a name you might as well use," he said. "Do come in … please."

He led them into a small square room with only one other door, on the opposite wall. The room, like the corridor outside, had bare white walls, but here someone had hung a pair of decorative paintings. At the room's center was a plain steel table and three steel chairs, two on the side where they entered, one on the side toward the second door. Signore Pescatore indicated they should take the two together and went around the table, seating himself in the third chair. It seemed to Rolf as if he was guarding that side of the room and the way leading further into the building.

"You two are what—married—is it?" the man asked, squinting at them.

"No, just a first-pairing," Anja said. "According to the Nordisk custom."

"Were you joined through a church service?" he asked. "By any chance?"

Rolf knew people—old people, mostly of rural origins—who still went to the Luterite Church in Österholm, although none of them could tell him how Luterism differed from Catolism or Presbysm, or even describe the doctrines they were supposed to be learning there. The churches were quiet places with high ceilings, beautiful colored glasswork, and soothing music. That was enough for some people.

"No," Rolf said. "It was a registered civil pairing."

"We can fix that," the man replied, "if anyone should ask."

"This *is* about the hotel job?" Anja said. "Booking guests? Arranging travel?"

"Well, running a hostel is part of it—the least part, actually," Signore Pescatore said. "Do you like to travel? Gain new experiences? An open, flexible attitude is most important in this position."

"We were just talking about that!" Rolf began excitedly.

"Rolf and I never had the chance to travel," Anja said more soberly. "As students, we worked hard at learning what we would need to know in life."

"So you look forward to seeing new places? Meeting new people? New ideas?"

"I've always wanted to see the capitals of Europe," Rolf put in. "Genevra's a first for me—"

"Excellent! Really excellent," the man said. "The capitals are what is planned for our first wave. Of course, we do have a rather limited selection right now. Rome is already taken, by the way."

"Rome?" Rolf said, utterly baffled.

That place, once the center of ancient Europa, back before the steam engine, during the time before the ending of the world, had taken a major impact in the Fire Strike. Although most of the continent had been resettled and rebuilt in the five millennia since then, no one had tried to reclaim Rome. The old city had disappeared into a crater two hundred kilometers wide that bisected central Italy, then filled with magma, and finally subsided into a shallow, glass-lined bay in the broken coastline.

"Is it some other place you're referring to?" Rolf asked. "A new Rome, perhaps? Somewhere else?"

"No, I mean the forum of the Caesars, the city where all roads meet, just—well, *before* the Fire Strike of twenty-six thirteen *anno Domini*."

"But you're saying," Anja interjected, "that Rome is … already … 'taken.' " Of the two of them, she was always the quick one with the good ear.

"That's right," the man replied. "I can offer you London, old London Town, in medieval England. That's—well, that's pretty much it. London is to be our next venture. We're branching out, you see. And the Board of Governors feels England is the next logical step. Old London, that is, also before the Fire Strike—although you would actually survive it there, if you should happen to live so long. We've chosen the fifteenth cen-

tury because the records that survive, as well as archeological digs in previous generations, suggest that England stops being a backwater then and becomes a really interesting part of old Europa—the Tudor family, the Reformation, Shakespeare, the Civil War—all sorts of good things follow."

" 'Venture,' " Anja repeated. " 'Branch out.' What are you talking about?"

"Why, it's our virtual network, of course. We are adding a new node."

"Then ITS doesn't really stand for 'International Travel Service'?"

"Oh, no!" Salvatore Pescatore laughed. "Well, pretty close."

"Oh, I've read about this!" Rolf Pohl suddenly realized.

"So! You represent InterTime Systems," Anja said.

"Didn't our ad say *temporal* station keeping?"

" 'A traveler's hostel in foreign lands.' "

"And in earlier times," he agreed.

Signore Pescatore then thanked Anja and Rolf for coming, bid them a pleasant journey, and walked out through the door at the back of the room. For a moment, Anja didn't know what to expect, until a severe young woman came into the room.

"Hello! My name is Silvestri," she said, making it neither a given nor a family name. "I will be your personnel counselor while you are here in Genevra."

She was dressed in more conventional clothing than Pescatore's—a gray parasilk jumpsuit belted at the waist. She seemed barely older than they were, implying that she, too, might be doing her First Occupation. However, now that everyone expected to live a healthy couple of centuries, and with readily available cosmetic therapies, a woman could stay young-looking forever. Silvestri, however, seemed to want to deny her natural beauty by wearing her black hair mannishly short, brushed high into a wave at the front, then lacquered back around her ears. Her eyes were agate-gray and hard.

"Will you please fill these out," she said, handing them writing tablets with preloaded forms. "And complete the psychological profiles." Then she also left through the rear door.

Anja saw that information from her application and school records had already been entered into appropriate blanks on her tablet. And, yes, in the space marked "Convictions" was a concise summary of her escapades. She finished entries in the other parts of the form, then turned to the psychology test.

"*Oj!*" Rolf said after he, too, had scrolled to that page.

"What is all this?" Anja asked as she silently read.

The first multiple-choice question was "I would rather: (A) solve a math puzzle, or (B) learn a foreign language." Followed by "I would rather: (A) eat an uncooked lizard, or (B) sleep outdoors in a rainstorm." The first of the questions to be answered on a sensitivity scale from "Always" to "Never" was "I like to know what's going to happen next." The second was "I like to know what's expected of me." From these innocent beginnings, the questions in each category only became more intimate and more personally daunting and … disgusting.

"I guess traveling into the past can be pretty gruesome."

"This sounds like going into the army," Rolf said darkly.

After they completed the last questions on the profile, the tablets went dark and that inner door opened. The Silvestri woman took Anja through and headed off in one direction down an inner corridor. A young man in a jumpsuit led Rolf the other way.

They arrived at another numbered but unsigned door to a room that was part medical facility, part gymnasium. First, Silvestri tested and recorded Anja's biometrics, including heart rate, body temperature, blood pressure, and oxygen content. Next, she drew a blood sample, and Anja hoped some enzyme or other wouldn't betray her secret. Then the woman had Anja run on a treadmill until her legs wobbled, after which she was made to perform tests of strength and agility, and finally—when she was too tired to see straight—solve mechanical puzzles involving perception, visual acuity, and manual dexterity.

At the end of the hour, Silvestri brought her back to the room, where Rolf was already waiting. He looked flushed and exhausted, too, and she guessed he had been put through similar tests. Then the ITS personnel withdrew and left them alone.

"I notice," Rolf said, "they haven't asked us questions about the hotel business, travel planning, accounting, or anything to do with the actual job."

"Right," Anja said. "And nothing about our knowledge of history or languages."

"Probably because the assignment's open-ended. We'll just plunk down in the middle of a primitive country, among virtual savages, and try to make do. So … whatever this is, it's going to be dangerous."

"Yeah, 'if we should live so long,' " she replied. "But do you *like* the idea …?"

Before he would answer Anja's question, Rolf was conscious that the room probably had listening points. Their private conversation would probably be monitored and become part of the interview process. He stood and walked around, studying the pictures on opposite walls, to see if either of them concealed microphones.

The first one was a cityscape centered on a building whose second floor was fronted with great, square windows—except for the middle one, which was larger and had been built out into a balcony. A crowd of a thousand or more people in drab clothing stood in the street, all looking up toward that balcony. And there a bald-headed man in a gray uniform with black flashes and gold shoulder boards spoke with his arm raised. The painting meant nothing to Rolf, but then he realized from the image's clarity and depth of field that it was not a painting at all but a photograph taken with a pixel-dense camera.

"It would be a lot like doing archeology," he said to Anja, thinking of the picture's implications, "but without all the dusty digging. We wouldn't just be studying the past. We'd be

living in it. Although maybe we could sign up here in Genevra and just, you know, *visit?*"

"That's not the job description," she replied. "They want 'station keepers.' Other people—probably real archeologists and historians—will do all the visiting."

The second picture showed a canal, like those separating the islands of Österholm. But here he saw white and pink stucco buildings, not their own city's familiar brick and granite. And these houses were built right out to the edge of the water, wall touching wall, with arches and balconies that overlooked the surface traffic. Floating on the water—instead of skimming over it like the jet-powered *vattenskalbaggar* on their canals—were long, slim black boats steered by a single oarsman. Something clicked in Rolf's memory, and he realized this, too, was a modern photograph, but of Venice, Italy. That city had been destroyed by a tsunami traveling the length of the Adriatic Sea during the Fire Strike.

"Maybe," Rolf went on, "we could get jobs coordinating *their* travels into the past. Or working on the technology involved. They must need engineers. I did take that survey course in architectural engineering."

"I don't know. Time travel probably involves a lot of mathematics."

"And I was never very good at that," Rolf said.

"Not my favorite subject, either."

"I suppose a lot of other couples have answered the posting," he said.

"That's probably why they gave us an afternoon appointment."

"Anyway, it's not like these people will actually *pick* us."

Anja shrugged. "Everyone else might back out."

"Then we could still do the farm thing …"

"But isn't that just, oh … *surviving?*"

"You think *this* will be *fun?*"

"It certainly *could* be."

———

Because it was almost evening, and because no decision had yet been made on their application, Silvestri called for a taxi to take Anja and Rolf to a hotel in Genevra Centrum for the night. The woman asked them to return at ten the following morning for the results of their interview. "But whatever ITS decides," she said, "you will be compensated for your time."

When they were alone again, Anja slumped. "That was good-bye."

"It didn't sound encouraging," Rolf agreed.

Anja became moderately more hopeful when they arrived at the hotel. In contrast to the dingy warehouse in a burned-out section of the city, the building's façade was built up, layer upon layer, of clean, white stone inset with narrow, clear-glass windows. The receptionist at the front desk was polite and, after only two tries, managed to speak to them in a fairly unaccented Nordisk dialect. "Enjoy your stay at Hotel Metropol," he called as the bellhop carried their bags toward the lift.

Their room was, by the standards of their flat off the Strandvägen, palatial. The windows—the room had two of them, one with a balcony—looked out from ten stories high on a pretty lake pulsing with a tall water spout. The lavatory and toilet facilities were actually in a separate room, not just hidden behind movable screens. The console offered a variety of electronic entertainments and, for a wonder, concealed a tiny icebox with sweet and salty snacks, including sour marshmallow and pickled herring, and two brands of the good German beers.

Anja decided she could live with the overnight suspense. But, despite whatever misgivings Rolf might be feeling, she knew what decision she wanted to hear.