

Time stopped. For a single drawn-out heartbeat, nothing moved, and in the whole world there was no sound. Like thin paint running out of an open bucket, all the color drained from the earth. Only a black and white landscape and the silence remained. Then, all at once, the world vibrated, exploded, screamed, blazed—and turned upside down.

Clouds sifted slowly in the powder-blue sky. The clouds touched the mountains and frosted them with a fine white covering of snow. Trees: pine and laurel and European oak marched like towering gods up the rocky slopes. They formed tongues of verdant fire filled with chirping songbirds.

The world swam. It gave a solid lurch, and with a sickening thud, Alan came to rest amid the trees. He lay sick and dazed for a moment. Then, unconsciously, he reached up and grabbed his head. The movement nauseated him, and pain shot through his skull. For a while, he couldn't think clearly. He lay still again, and allowed his mind a chance to catch up with his whirling thoughts.

Without moving, Alan examined his surroundings. His head lay against a hard knotty surface. His neck bent almost double and his chin nearly touched his chest. Slowly, moving only his hand, Alan felt back along the top of his head. His head rested on a hard misshapen root. The fragrance of pine filled his nostrils. He tried to open his eyes but the light was too

bright. He shielded his face with one hand and finally squeezed open one eye. Above him, a huge pine stretched arrow-straight into the sky. Cautiously, he opened both eyes and eased himself up. He gingerly rubbed the back of his head. He couldn't feel the bump he was sure should be there. Invisible birds sang in the branches high above him. Still groggy, Alan leaned back against the thick cushion of fragrant pine needles. Small flowers and a shrub clung to the ground at the base of the tree. Around him, like an ancient temple, similar forest giants formed pillars, and their canopies almost completely covered the sky above.

The clarity of the air and the brilliance of the sunshine exhilarated him. Both characteristics, though filtered and muted through the depths of the thick pines, seemed enhanced by some unique quality of the forest. Remarkable, he thought. At his right hand, tiny blue and white flowers walked up the heavy loam to the thick root of the tree. In his dazzled state of mind, their delicacy and perseverance amazed him.

His head still felt heavy and dull. Alan took a couple of deep breaths to clear the unusual lethargy, then he stood up. He swayed, immediately dizzy, and grasped the tree to steady himself. The feel of the bark was rough and unfamiliar under his hands.

How did I get here, he thought. In his last memory, he stood on the gantry of the antenna tower at the research station. The next thing he knew, he was here. But where was here? Alan took a moment to collect his disordered thoughts. He had been in the desert near Alamagordo—at the research station. Trees like this grew in the mountains, but he had never seen one in the flat desert. He remembered; he could see the mountains from the station; they stood behind him almost 50 miles away, but he shouldn't be in them. And, this place didn't look anything like the mountains around Alamagordo. The foliage and undergrowth appeared nothing like the high mountain forest meadows he remembered.

How did he get here? Only moments ago, Alan had been gazing out over the peaceful morning desert. The day was clear and, just at the edge of his vision, he noted the atomic bomb tower—it was the old marker that showed where the first nuclear bomb was successfully tested. He rested on the rail, leaning on his forearms. He remembered glancing far below toward the desert floor. A strange swirling movement stirred up the dust. The motion drew his attention because the day was uncharacteristically calm. Like a mirage, the rising dust moved across the midwinter desert and suddenly enveloped him. He closed his eyes against the grit, and that was the last he remembered until now.

This place didn't feel like the dry cold of the high desert winter. The air here was warm—at least spring or maybe early fall. The sun stood high overhead. Alan couldn't make heads or tails of what happened to him. Thinking about it made his head hurt. He gave up for a moment and took a closer look at the forest.

Alan turned around once, then he made up his mind and stepped around the big pine toward the open part of the forest. What he found on the other side surprised him. There, a wide, well-beaten path ran beside the tree and meandered through the trees. He looked left and right. In both directions, he quickly lost sight of the trail among the thick boles.

Alan turned to the left—for now, one direction was as good as another, and he started out along the path.

Alan had strolled less than a hundred feet when, as the trail turned around a stand of brush, he came face-to-face with an oddly dressed young woman. She looked as startled as he, and leaped away from him as if she were about to flee.

Alan stopped stock-still and stared open-mouthed. The woman was dressed in a white woolen gown, he would have described as classically Greek. The gown was long and flowing—

long enough to brush the tops of her feet. He thought her clothing was completely inappropriate for a trek in the forest. The cloth formed gathered straps across her shoulders, and she wore a ropelike belt for a girdle. A fine red border decorated the sides and hem of the gown. A homespun quality, and simplicity uncharacteristic of any clothing Alan had ever seen before, emanated from the dress.

“Hello,” said Alan, “I seem to have lost my way.”

The woman stared incomprehensibly at him. She was reasonably well featured and looked as if she were at least thirty, but the bloom of youth still filled her face. She had a warm olive complexion touched gently with a blush of pink. Her mouth was wide, and her eyes evenly set. She had high cheekbones and a prominent, but not large, nose. Her elaborately braided dark brown hair was wound carefully at the top of her head and fixed in position with a black metal comb.

With the embarrassed feeling she couldn't understand him, Alan continued, “I'm not sure where I am. Could you please help me?”

As he spoke the woman's face went through an incredible array of emotions, starting at first with amazement and ending in obvious fear. She mumbled something in a language that sounded to Alan like Greek, then said in clear, but strangely accented English, “Who are you, and how did you get here?”

Surprised at her response, Alan exclaimed, “I have no idea how I got here. I don't even know where here is.” He joked, “If I didn't know better, I would say aliens abducted me.”

“Aliens,” she said, still startled, “of course not.” She watched him warily and, at the same time, mouthed her thoughts out loud, “Your clothing—it's late twentieth century. Your speech—American English, same period.”

“Why are you so nervous?” Alan asked.

“Nervous?” she almost jumped, “Completely amazed is more like it, but how did you get here?”

“I told you. I have no idea how I got here. I don’t know where I am.”

She said almost to herself, “You have no idea?”

“Why are you so incredulous. Do you know where this place is?”

“Who are you?” she demanded again.

“That I do know. I’m Alan Fisher from the Los Alamos nuclear lab. I’m a research engineer there.” He almost immediately regretted having given her so much information.

“Do you have any proof?”

“Proof? I’ve an ID card and a license, but what’s the big idea? Who are you?” Alan took an angry step toward her.

The woman leaped back, “Stop! Don’t come any closer.” When he stood still, she went on under her breath, “Dear God! This is impossible. This could mean a total failure of the mission.” She clenched her fists, “How could there be such a screw-up?” Then, she spoke more loudly to him, “Wait. Let me see your ID.”

“Look, can you tell me what’s going on?”

The woman almost yelled at him, “Let me see your identification.”

Reluctantly, Alan pulled the wallet from his pocket. He took out his license and held it at arm’s length.

“I want to look at your...” she searched for the word, “your wallet.”

“No way. Here’s the license.”

She tried to snatch it from his hand, but Alan held firmly onto it.

As he lifted the card at arm's length, the woman watched him warily, and she squinted to read the small card. "Dear God," she said again, "What year are you from?"

"What year?"

"Yes, quickly, what year?"

"1991."

She wrung her hands, "You have no idea who I am?"

"I've never seen you before in my life. How could I?"

"Yes, how could you?" She appeared frightened again. Her face brightened for a moment then was colored by a look of disgust as though she discovered an unacceptable solution to her problem and discarded it. She suddenly made up her mind, "You must come with me, now. You are not safe here."

"Here?" said Alan, "Where is here? I'm not going anywhere until I get some answers."

"Mr. Fisher, you must come with me. Now! Your life depends on it. I will explain everything in good time." As an afterthought, she said, "and I hope you can handle the answers." The woman seemed to have regained some of her composure. "Follow me down the path. If you see or hear anyone but me, for God's sake, hide in the trees. You can't let yourself be seen. Do I make myself clear—you can't be seen."

"Very well. I'll play along, for now, but where are you taking me?"

She ignored him and looked around uneasily, "Follow me, but stay back and keep me just in sight. My house lies at the edge of the forest. Go through the trees around to the back. And whatever you do, stay out of sight. I'll talk to you again there."

After delivering these words, the woman turned abruptly and walked down the trail away from Alan. Only a few feet away, she turned toward him again, “I’m sorry this happened to you. You mustn’t try to speak to me again until I tell you it’s safe. Do you understand?”

“No, I don’t understand anything.”

Anger flitted across her features, “Do not speak to me again. This is the last time I’ll warn you. Mr. Fisher, you are in grave danger.” She turned and strode away from him.

Alan tucked his wallet back into his pocket. He waited until the woman was almost out of sight, then he followed with a step almost as angry as hers.

The path through the wood wound on quite a way. Alan followed discreetly, but kept the woman in sight. He definitely would not let her get too far from his view. She might be crazy, but right now, she was the only one he could count on for answers. Crazy answers maybe, he thought, but at least she seemed to know something about what was going on.

The forest ended abruptly. A large flat plain, clear except for scabs of rock and a deep-green covering of grass stretched as far as Alan could see. This large pasture ended at the horizon with mountains and hills to the left. To the right, almost at the edge of sight, the ground fell away abruptly to scree and granite. Below that, shimmered deep-blue water—an ocean or sea. From the water, the steep slope rose up to meet the mountainside. The slope turned quickly into sharp rocks and cliffs that rose up to high snow-dusted peaks. The meadow was almost an anomaly stuck just about evenly between the peaks and the sparkling blue water.

By this time, the sky had become almost cloudless and, now, through the trees behind Alan, a cool breeze filled with a slight salt tang began to blow continuously.

He stopped short of the grassy expanse. At his feet, the trail suddenly fanned out into the meadowlike plain. The grass here was beaten down as if the trail were well used.

Just to his left, at the edge of the trees stood a low house built of stone. The building was like nothing Alan ever had seen before. The walls were made entirely of unfinished granite, and the stones appeared as though they were laid by hand, without mortar. The sides of the building angled gently toward one another, allowing the flat sharp stones to support themselves with their own weight. The building was a little longer than it was wide, and its roof was covered with thick thatch. The front side of the house angled slightly toward the trail. Its entrance was at the front on the right side. The doorway was framed with the only wood Alan saw on the building—a simple lintel and side posts. A cloth, thick and coarse enough it didn't move in the breeze, covered this opening.

Alan was almost tempted to walk straight up to the door, but he didn't want to antagonize the woman any more than he already had.

He retraced his steps a few yards, back down the trail, and entered the trees. There, he made his way between the large boles to the back of the house. The loam here was as thick as it was in the deep woods. He worked his way slowly through the low scrub between the trees until the back of the house came into sight. As Alan got closer, he noticed moss and mud filled the cracks in the stone. Smoke wafted gently from the end of the roof nearest the door.

At the back of the house, chest high off the ground was a window about three-feet wide and two-feet tall. The opening wasn't framed and ended abruptly at the line of the roof. A thick piece of cloth, similar to the one covering the door, shuttered it on the inside.

The house backed almost entirely into the trees. A small half moon of cleared ground formed a narrow space between the building and the forest. At either end, large pines crowded the corners of the building. Alan moved silently right up against the stone wall at the back of the house and, mindful of the woman's warning, he waited just under the window.

After a few minutes, Alan heard the cloth pulled aside. The woman scanned the trees for a moment then glanced down and saw him. Her look of recognition was, at the same time, relieved and annoyed. She beckoned him with her hand, and Alan half-climbed, half-crawled through the window.

“Quickly,” she ordered in a hoarse whisper.

The woman stood on a wooden chest under the window. She jumped down to let Alan swing onto it, and then he stepped down to the floor. The floor was dug almost two feet lower than the walls. The small house was much larger inside than it looked from the outside. As soon as Alan stepped off the chest, the woman quickly climbed back onto it. She replaced the cloth window shutter and firmly tied it down by its bottom edges.

Alan found himself standing in the center of a dark room that had two walls made of stone and two walls made of a coarse heavy cloth similar to the covering of the window. The room was furnished with a raised sleeping pallet, a low table, a coarse cushion, and the chest. The room was unlighted, and it turned to an even deeper dusk when the woman pulled shut and fixed the window covering.

Without speaking, the woman motioned Alan to the corner of the curtained wall of the room. She drew this aside and glanced warily out into the room beyond. Then she gestured for him to follow. Alan walked behind the woman and stepped into the main room of the house. This room was twice the size of the chamber he just left. In back of them, to the right, Alan noticed another curtained room.

A simple hearth almost filled the front room. Like the rest of the house, the hearth was built of flat granite stones. A half chimney rose from the back of the hearth, and the smoke from a

small, banked fire ascended unfettered into the top part of the building and exited through a hole in the highest point of the thatch.

This part of the house was more Spartanly furnished than the windowed room. A couple of bronze cooking pots sat beside the hearth. In front of the small fire, on an uneven semicircle of flat stones rested three rough cushions similar to the one in the other room. Against the back wall stood a low table and another boxlike chest. Wood was stacked at the right side of the hearth, and in this corner stood a walking stick and a handmade broom. The door was also on the right of the hearth. Like the back window, its curtain was tied in place, but stones held down the bottom of the door's covering and two wooden bars crossed it from corner to corner.

The woman gathered her dress and sat down on one of the cushions. She motioned for Alan to do likewise.

He sat down cautiously and faced her. Alan could barely contain himself; he was so full of questions. Warned by the woman's silence and her previous words, he waited for her to speak.

After a moment, the woman stood up again and walked to the side of the door. Here, she pulled out a loose stone and stared through the small opening in the wall. After a moment, with a sigh, she replaced the stone, "I don't think you were spotted."

"Spotted, by whom?" he asked.

She turned toward him, "You really don't know, do you?"

"Know what? I don't have the slightest idea what happened to me. But, I think you do. What's going on?"

She looked toward the door, "Your presence here jeopardizes the entire program."

"What program? I didn't ask to come here. I don't even know where here is."

"Yes. I am just fully realizing that."

“What is this—some kind of secret government project? I know they’re working on all kinds of ‘black’ programs. Did I stumble into one?”

“In a way you did. I don’t know how much I should tell you—how much you can accept.”

“Look, just send me to the debriefing or whatever you do for this project, and let me go back to work.”

She laughed suddenly, “Dear Lord, you think it’s as easy as that? Don’t I just wish I could send you back? I can’t, Mr. Fisher. You are a sudden and permanent liability to me. I should just. . . . No, I couldn’t. I can’t.” Like her fleeting expression back on the trail, she seemed ashamed of her thoughts, “You are lucky this is the second mission. If this were the first. . . .” She stepped over to the hearth and stared down at the fire.

“Did you mean that as a threat?”

“No!” she gazed directly at him, “I don’t want you to be afraid. You must be clearheaded. In time, you may come to understand everything. I . . . you are just not ready to accept all of it yet.”

“Then, you can start now. First, where are we?”

“Very well,” she hesitated, “I dreaded this since the first moment I saw you in the woods.”

“Go on.”

She started to say something, then she looked away with a pained expression, “It isn’t that easy. You must trust me first.”

“I’ll trust you when you tell me what the hell this is all about. I didn’t ask to come here.”

“Keep your voice down. The herdsman will be coming down the path soon. You have no need for anger.” She added as an afterthought, “It’s too late for anger.”

“Okay, okay. But, you’re not giving me any reason to trust you. You keep going on and on about this secret project or whatever it is. Give me some idea of what I’m up against.”

“All right,” the woman kneaded her temples with her thumbs, “All right. Mr. Fisher, when I tell you what you want to know, you must promise me you will not try to leave this building.”

“Are you willing and able to stop me?”

“Maybe. Yes, damn it. . . .” she bit off her curse and held her head in her hands. “No. I can, but I will not. You are making this intolerably difficult.”

“It is difficult for me already. You still have told me nothing.”

“Listen to me,” she gesticulated with both hands and paced slowly back and forth as she spoke, “How you react will determine whether you live or die. My mission now definitely depends on your trust and obedience. My life hangs in the balance with yours. This was already a risky undertaking,” she threw down her hands, “It has suddenly become a suicide mission.”

“What do you want from me?”

The woman brightened considerably and stood looking down at him, “When I tell you what you want to know, you must not try to leave this house. I know, at first, you will not believe me. I realize this, but you must try to accept what I tell you as absolute fact. You must not try to prove it for yourself.”

“Does that mean you can prove what you are going to say?”

“No, I cannot. That is what I have been trying to tell you. I can’t prove it immediately. If you . . . if we survive, everything I am going to tell you will become obvious.”

“Very well. I guess you want me to make some kind of promise. I promise: I’ll give you a hearing, and I won’t leave—not right away.”

“Is that the best you can do?”

“What would you do if you were me?”

“If I were in your shoes, I would not believe me either.”

“Then go ahead.”

She took a deep breath and began, “Mr. Fisher, you are in Greece.”

“You mean the Balkan peninsula in the Mediterranean Sea?”

“Yes.”

“Some kind of matter-transport experiment? That’s amazing,” Alan said with real surprise, “I had no idea we had come that far with our technology.” He turned to the woman, “So what’s the problem? I’ve been to Greece before. Can you transport me back?”

The woman slowly shook her head.

“Then get me to the American Embassy. They can get me home. Are we close to Athens?”

“We are very close. Athinai—Athens in English, is just down the path we took to this house.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“You’ve been to Greece? These clothes I wear. Did you see anyone there dressed like this? Or this house—we are less than ten miles from the city center.”

“We would be in the city if we were that close,” said Alan.

“Don’t scoff. I told you, you must accept this. You must believe me.”

“I’m trying,” Alan held up his hand.

“In 1991, the city of Athens was as large as you remember it. Mr. Fisher this is roughly the year 400 B.C.”

Startled, he stared up into her face. The woman was trembling.

“Say that again.”

“I said,” her voice shook, “this is the year 400 B.C.”

“Are you certain you are sane?”

Her face turned deathly white, “I am sane.”

They were both silent for a long while, then Alan said, “If this is Athens in 400 B.C., then who the hell are you?”

“I’m sorry. I haven’t told you my name. In this time, I am Sophia. My real name means nothing here. I am an agent for an experiment in time exploration.” She paused.

“Incredible,” his lips pursed in thought, “Go on.”

“Do you believe me?”

“I don’t know what to believe.”

Her words rushed out, “I don’t know how you came here with me. I can only guess.”

“Go ahead, I’m listening.”

“Sometimes when we open up a time portal—a temporal wormhole—things from other times get sucked through with us. That’s one of the reasons we do not travel much. We’ve seen small animals, plants, insects caught before—never anything as large as a man. Just to prevent such an accident, our lab is located deep in a desert.”

“In the desert of New Mexico?” asked Alan.

“I don’t know where that is.”

“Southwestern United States.”

“Yes, in the part of North America that used to be called the United States.”

“Near the city of Alamagordo?” Alan pressed her.

“Yes, near where the first atomic bomb was tested.”

“Ten miles from the monument?”

“You can see the monument from the top of our lab. The time-travel point is about 100 feet off the ground.”

“I was standing on an antenna array 100 feet from the ground. You built your damn time lab right on the spot we use for advanced electromagnetic pulse experiments.”

“You were standing near, maybe on the location of the time portal,” said Sophia.

“You need to tell them to move their facility,” Alan mumbled.

“The temporal wormhole causes waves that travel through time and space. By some unfortunate coincidence, you were standing at that very location and time when the portal opened. For that very reason, we placed the portal in a restricted area, 100 feet above the desert floor. We didn’t expect anyone to be in that location at one of the wave’s time nodes.”

“Like I said, when we get back, you need to tell them to move it.”

“There’s no hurry. No one will be traveling for at least a year. You were caught in, perhaps, a once-in-a-millennium occurrence.”

“What do you mean no one will be traveling for at least a year? Aren’t you going back?”

Sophia’s face took on a guarded expression.

“You will take me back?” he said forcefully.

“I . . . I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

“Please, please keep your voice down,” Sophia appeared close to tears, “A man isn’t supposed to be in this house.”

“All right, I’m lowering my voice. What do you mean, you can’t?”

She spoke in a rush, “We prepared for this mission for ten years. It’s mission number two. I trained for that entire time. I was handpicked for this mission. The groundwork was put together, the location prepared. No contact has been made with these people. We worked ten

years to put this mission together, and I am here for one year,” Sophia’s voice died away to a whisper.

“What did you say?”

She spoke a little louder, “This is a one-year trip. I cannot return until this time, one year from today. No one can return for one year,” she put her hands over her eyes and tears dropped between her fingers.

“If you expected this, then why are you crying?”

She put down her hands. Tears streaked her face. Sophia stared at him with incredulity, “This is the mission, my mission. You have no part to play in this. You are a dependent, forced upon me. None of my training took anything like this into account.” She crossed her arms, “If you don’t believe me, if you don’t trust me and obey me, you and I will likely die here. I will have failed completely. Ten years of planning and training will go for nothing.”

“What’s the danger? Why are you so afraid?”

“This is not the modern world, Mr. Fisher. This is a dangerous time. There is little rule of law. In this time, might largely determines right. Because of that, people are more suspicious and dangerous than you can imagine. People here rarely travel from their own city-state. They kill strangers indiscriminately. If you cannot speak the language, and if you do not know their customs, they will likely kill you outright. If we infringe law or custom, we could both be put to death. I am already suspect because I supposedly returned from another city.”

“How could you come from the future and fit into this ancient society?”

A noise outside the house caught them both by surprise. Sophia half stood and clasped her hands over her heart. The sound of a bleating goat came to them, and she relaxed suddenly. Her face took on an unbelievable calm. To Alan, the change appeared as though she took on an

entirely different persona. A voice called from outside the house. Alan could not understand the words, though, he thought, they sounded Greek.

Sophia responded almost cheerfully. The voice outside called back, and to Alan, it seemed like a farewell.

Sophia turned back to him. Her shoulders sagged suddenly, and she breathed raggedly for a moment. “I must calm myself,” she said under her breath. Her face quickly took on the aspect of peace it had only a moment before, then she said to him, “You must change your clothes, now.” She tapped her teeth, “I must have time to build an identity for you.”

Sophia went to the chest and opened it. The smell of spices and musty clothing wafted across the room to Alan. Many different items filled the chest: bread, cloth-wrapped lumps that looked like cheese, bags of dried fruits and herbs. Sophia pulled out each of these things. Finally, at the bottom, she clucked as she found what she was looking for. She pulled a white garment out of the chest, “This was a piece of Alexander’s clothing when he was a youth. It will make a good slave’s tunic.”

“A slave?”

Sophia spoke blandly, “What else could you portray? Your genotype is, obviously, not Grecian, and even with your tan, your coloring is too light. Your face has a foreign cast.” She shrugged her shoulders, “A slave you must be.” Sophia shook out the clothing. The cloth was stained and much mended, “A perfect slave’s garment.” She tossed it to him, “Put it on.”

“How?” Alan held it at arm’s length and tried to make sense of the folds.

“Let me show you.” Sophia took back the garment and draped it over her own, “You put your head through here, and then belt the sides like this.” She handed it back to Alan, “Now go

into the storage room and put it on. She pointed to the curtained area next to the windowed room. You must take off all your clothing and bring it to me.”

“All of it?”

“Every stitch. I will have to destroy every trace of it—now!”

Alan stepped through the curtain Sophia motioned toward. The sun was already going down and the storeroom was dark. Unlike the window room, it was filled with hanging strings of onions, garlic, and peppers. Alan barked his knees on another large wooden chest and bumped his head on racks of cloth hanging from the roof.

Aware Sophia’s story fit with everything he had seen so far, Alan stripped off his clothes. He felt foolish to believe her; yet, foolish not to believe her. He stood naked for only a moment; the room was already uncomfortably cool. Alan drew the tunic over his head and tied the rope belt around his waist. In the clothing, he felt exposed and underdressed. Again, he fought the desire to reject the unbelievable he was amazingly ready to accept. Sophia had to be right. How else could he have come so remarkably to this place? What other explanation could there be?

Sheepishly, still unsure, he stepped back through the curtain.

“Come here,” Sophia ordered. She took the belt and untied it. As he stood modestly holding the sides of his tunic together—twice, she showed him the proper way to tie it, “You must tie the tunic this way. This is the custom. You cannot forget it.”

Sophia stood back and scrutinized him from head to toe, “Turn around.”

Ruefully, he turned.

“Your hands and feet are too soft. You cannot appear much in public until they are more callused. And, your hair is wrong. In this century, nothing could cut it like that.”

“What do you propose?”

“I could hack it up a bit and shave part of it. Or I could shave it all off.”

“If this Greek thing is a delusion, I’m going to look very silly.”

“This is no delusion, Mr. Fisher. You are unwittingly participating with me in the second most important study in the history of humankind. I must succeed, and for me to succeed, you must succeed.”

“You could leave me to my fate. Even if they questioned and tortured me, according to what you say, no one here can speak my language.”

“I cannot leave you on your own. First, you *must* depart this time. The effect of your death here is an unknown. Second, you will probably *need* to be returned to your own time. I cannot even begin to predict the effect of taking you from your proper place in history. Third, I have a mission. I cannot afford the threat of discovery. Your presence puts ten years and billions of dollars at risk. Fourth,” Sophia looked down at her feet, “I have a moral obligation to you. I cannot leave you on your own, that would be wrong.”

Suddenly, there was nothing Alan could say.

“Sit down,” Sophia continued with a sigh, “I’m hungry. I will start your education with how to fix a dinner of ancient Greece.”

Sophia gathered some food from her chest and repacked the rest. Then, she took some things from the bag that hung on the back of the door. She handed Alan a flat, slightly leavened loaf of bread, a chunk of goat’s cheese, and a handful of fresh olives. While they dipped the bread into a shallow bowl filled with flavored olive oil, Sophia boiled water and combined it with thick strong wine. The mixture made a light transparent red liquid flavored with just a taste of grape. Without even thinking, Sophia poured out a practiced libation to the gods.

The sun fell behind the trees at the back of the house. Shortly, the only light left in the house was the gentle glow of the fire. The firelight illuminated half of Sophia's face. Her dark eyes faded into blackness so only her chin and lips were visible.

“Sophia,” said Alan, “Whose clothes are these and how do you have a place in this time?”

Like reciting an old lesson, she said, “I am the widow of Timathus. I was born in the city of Mantinea in the shadow of Mount Alesion. My mother and father are long dead. When I was 15-years old, I was married to Timathus, and he took me to live with him at his home in Athinai. Only two years later, the city of Mantinea fell to the Spartans. Because I am an Athenian now, I can never return to the city of my birth.

“We had no children together, Timathus and I, but he had a child, Alexander, whom I raised from the age of ten. I was Timathus' second wife. Death during childbirth is common in this time. Childhood mortality is even more common. My husband died during the battle of Aegospotami against the Spartans. That was only four years ago.

“My stepson, Alexander married a girl from the city of Piraievs. My husband, Timathus, was a trader, and after his father's death, Alexander continued in the family business. Alexander moved easily between the cities of Greece and had many friends. In Piraievs, he was acquainted with an important family. The patriarch offered Alexander his daughter, Melitia, in marriage. Their union was considered a favored one. I, though still young, went to live in my son's home.

“My daughter-in-law, Melitia, was never happy with me. I was too patrician for her tastes. When my stepson died last year, she sold his property and went back to her father's house. I returned to Athinai.

“Here, I was welcomed guardedly yet without suspicion. Because of my widowed status and lack of family, I took this house. I made friends with the herdsmen. I visited the marketplace.”

Sophia’s voice became as still as a whisper, “The original Sophia died today in a rock slide in the mountains. No one will find her body. I am Sophia.” She looked at Alan, a puzzled expression in her eyes, “I never lived these memories, yet every one of them is mine. . . .”

Alan stared in astonishment, “She died today?”

Sophia glanced uneasily at him, “Today.”

They both sat in silence for a time, then Alan repeated part of his original question, “These clothes?”

“They were my stepson’s. That reminds me. Bring me your original clothing. All of the pieces.”

Alan went back into the storeroom. He brought all his clothing and placed them in front of the hearth. Sophia had already stoked the fire.

Starting the tear with a bronze knife, she took each piece and ripped it into strips. These pieces she fed slowly, one by one into the flames.

Alan watched in mute silence. His mind warred with his emotions. He had not fully accepted her view of existence—not yet, but he allowed her to destroy his only association with normalcy.

Finally, Sophia handed him the knife, “I am tired. Could you tear some of these?”

Alan gingerly took the knife and began ripping his pants to shreds. Perhaps she felt his ambivalence. His participation didn’t fully settle his thoughts, but it busied his mind and turned his contemplation from destructive introspection. Mechanically, he began feeding the pieces into the fire.

“Slowly, Mr. Fisher, slowly. They must have time to burn completely.”

“The name is Alan.”

“Alan. Yes, you will need another name. I should not get into the habit of calling you anything until I find you a new name.”

He hunched his shoulders even more over his work.

“Have you ever acted, Mr. . . . Alan?”

“I was in some plays in school.”

“That’s good, but this role is different. It must become your life. I had ten years to prepare, to practice for the role I play. I lived this mission five times . . . five whole years.”

Alan turned his face from his work in incredulity.

Without looking at him, Sophia continued speaking, “To a certain extent, this is my world, and it must become yours.”

At last, the final strip of clothing burned fiercely in the small fire.

“Do you have anything else from your time?” said Sophia.

“My shoes, watch, wallet—and belt. My pocket change. This small knife.”

“The leather items will burn.” She took his belt and shoes and began feeding them slowly into the fire. “The watch, knife, buckle, and change will not. We must hide them deep under the ground and hope we survive to return them to their proper time.” Sophia began to feed all the items from his wallet into the fire.

“Wait,” he said. Alan grabbed the wallet from her hands.

She protested, “This especially must go to the flames.”

“Why can’t it be buried with the other things?”

“If we die here, they and it will likely not be retrieved. Future peoples might find them, and that could affect history.”

“A lot of probabilities,” he argued.

“Any one of them critical to the survival of mankind. You are here by just such a miracle.”

Angrily, he tossed the wallet back to her, “All right.”

She handed it right back to him, “Better if you take care of it yourself.”

Alan listened for any tone of mockery in her voice, found none and was satisfied for the moment. “These bits of paper define my life and livelihood in my time,” he said as he carefully placed them each separately and deliberately into the small blaze.

“They can be replaced—you cannot.”

“They can be replaced,” he repeated automatically.

While Alan reluctantly fed the fire, Sophia pried up a hearthstone and dug out a deep cavity under it. She wrapped Alan’s watch, knife, buckle, and change in a scrap of leather and placed them at the very bottom. Furtively, she slipped a couple of small leather pouches in the same space and covered everything with a layer of sand and the stone. After she was done, the hearth looked untouched.

When all the pieces of his past were gone and the wallet was a memory of ash, Alan leaned back on his hands. He felt almost purged of his previous existence.

Sophia seemed to discern his thoughts, “Don’t let yourself believe that because you look like a person of this time you have become a person of this time. You must imbue your mind with a whole different culture and an unfamiliar method of thought. It was a difficult undertaking for me.”

“I’ll try,” he promised.

She glanced over him, “Your physical transformation is not yet complete. The hair is next.” Sophia took up the bronze knife again and sharpened it on a piece of leather. She hacked away at his crisp, even locks and then shaved the back of his head and part of the side. When she was

done, she said, “This will pass, especially for a slave. Next, I must cover your wristwatch tan line.”

Sophia cut a cloth armband four inches long and sewed it onto his left arm. “Commonly, men, including slaves, cover their left arm with some sort of band. The wealthy use a fine metal or bronze, the poor leather, slaves cloth. It simulates a bowstring guard.”

Afterward, Sophia put everything away in the chest. She yawned, “It’s late. I must sleep. We wake with the sun. Tomorrow, we will take care of the rest of your artifacts. Tomorrow, you must take on a new personality. You may sleep here, by the fire.”

Sophia banked the ashes in a particular fashion, spoke reverently in Greek, then she drew a symbol on the hearth—an “Ω”. “This will keep the fire alive until the morrow. It must not go out.”

Sophia turned and pushed through the curtain into the window room.

Alan lay down facing what was left of the glowing fire. The stones were cool and the cushions coarse and flat. The coals provided insufficient heat. His tunic seemed to barely cover him. It reached only to his knees and left his shoulders and arms bare. He heard the curtain rustle again.

Sophia called out in the darkness, “Your name shall be Caliban. In time, I will develop your history in this place.” Then almost as an afterthought, she said, “If your arms are cold, you can pull down the shoulder folds of the tunic.” Alan heard the curtain fall back into place.

Caliban, Alan thought. I shall be Caliban? In spite of her dour impression, Sophia obviously has a sense of humor: Wasn’t Caliban the slave of the magician, Prospero, in *The Tempest*. Alan pulled the folds of the tunic at his shoulders over his arms. After that, his upper body was much

warmer, but his legs were still cold. He drew himself into a ball and squeezed as close to the hearth as he dared.

In Greece, the ancient city-state of Athens in the year 400 B.C. Alan Fisher, now Caliban, the slave, fell fitfully to sleep.

