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The Mask of the Sun by Fred Saberhagen

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Chapter 1. The Raising

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Key West, 1975

It didn't pay to reach too fast for gold.

Better to savor the still-possible dream for a few moments longer...

At low tide in this part of the Gulf, the white sand bottom was nowhere more than about ten feet below the surface. A snorkeler could let his finned feet trail and for a moment imagine himself a soaring bird, looking down on an unpeopled world and letting his thoughts roam as wild and fantastic as he liked. When Tom Gabrieli's eye caught a single faint golden gleam from the trough of one winding sand-ripple, hardly more than arm's length below, old habit made him slow his gliding progress to a halt, savoring the dream still possible, before it turned out to be a yellow metal beer can dropped last Tuesday.

Then he reached down—the water was little more than four feet deep just here, and you could hardly call the requisite maneuver a dive—and brushed away the sand. His fingers touched smooth, rounded hardness that somehow, before he even tried to move the thing, gave an impression of substantial weight. Throat muscles spasmed on his held breath when the first golden surface, broad and curved as a cheekbone, came into view.

A moment later, he was standing chest deep in water, his snorkeling mask already pulled off and tossed into the nearby boat. What he held in his shaking hands was a different kind of mask, of thick, solid gold, with inlaid squares of ceramic decoration here and there. Realistic enough to be a life-sized portrait, with the cheekbones broad and high, and the mouth curved in a subtle, lordly smile that might have been meant to express hauteur and hatred instead of joy. The nose was hooked and decidedly masculine; the nostrils, like the mouth, were closed as solidly as a statue's. The inlaid eyes, of some white stone or glass, were a little more prominent than life beneath the heavy ridge of brow. At each temple, and again in the center of the upper forehead, were golden flanges pierced with holes, through which straps or thongs might have been strung—With a surging splash, Sally came up on the other side of the boat, and clung there to the gunwale. Her own snorkeling mask was held in one hand, her blond hair coming out from under its cap, strong sunbrowned arms and shoulders agleam with water above a yellow bikini top. Tom

glanced at her, then brought his eyes back to scan the golden mask held in his hands. His senses registered that Sally was calling something to him, but he could not really hear a single word... the mask he held would not be wearable, not with those opaque eyes. Why, then, the places to secure a strap? Of course it might be funerary; meant to cover eyes no longer seeing, a face no longer fit for others' sight.

On impulse, he lifted the gold face to his own and found his chin fitting neatly into an interior hollow while the side flanges gently clasped his temples. And at once he discovered that the eyes were not truly opaque. Darkly translucent, they transmitted a shimmer of faint rainbow light. He vaguely supposed this must be some result of the sun on the miles of little waves that danced around him out to the horizon...

"Tom? What in *thehell*? Tom—?"

This time he heard her plainly. And at the same moment it flashed on him that someone else, in some distant boat or aircraft, might be able to see him too—might just possibly be scanning with binoculars or telephoto lens. He snatched the mask down from his face and plunged it into concealing water. Holding it submerged, he turned to scan the horizon.

There were some clouds, and sun-hazed sky, and a million gentle waves upon the shallow waters. To the east, the nearest of the Keys made a green smear along the boundary of sea and sky. Green would be the mangroves along the water's edge, screening the buildings and other vegetation behind them.

"I found this, Sal." Reluctantly he brought it up again, held it above the water long enough for her to see.

"Oh, my God!" Sal had climbed into the boat, and was now leaning out of it on his side to look. Her blue eyes were wide, and she had pulled off her cap, making her head a blond explosion. "Is it gold?"

"Just like that... ten times as much as I ever found when I was in the business. A hundred times. Sure it's gold. Unless they're buried deep in the bottom, damn few things '1! last submerged in sea water for any length of time. Pure gold is one."

He kept turning and turning it over in his hands, held just below the water's surface. Almost unconsciously, he had turned his body so that the mask would be between him and the boat, thus providing the maximum degree of shelter from any prying eyes. Of course he knew it was unlikely that anyone was really watching him with a telescope. But still.

Tom said, "There'll be a couple of pounds of gold in this. A few thousand bucks just for the metal. But the thing itself... it'll be worth a fortune."

"What're you going to do with it?" Sal's voice was quieter than before.

"Right now, put it away." He moved against the boat, snatched up a towel lying inside, wrapped the mask quickly, and shoved it under a thwart. Again he looked around, unable to shake the feeling that the state tax agents—or somebody—were already cruising toward him to take away his treasure. But there was no one. No vehicle approached.

He quickly put his snorkeling mask back on and began to swim around the boat in an everwidening search pattern, scanning the bottom as he had never scanned before. Nothing. Back at the very spot where he had found the mask, he tore into the sand with hands and feet. Nothing.

At last he gave up and clung to the side of the boat. He said, "You look as if we just lost a fortune overboard instead of bringing one up."

"Tom. If it's real, wouldn't there be a... a chest, or something? The wreckage of a ship?"

"No. No, not likely." He levered himself up into the boat, felt once of the hardness wrapped in the towel below the thwart, and then started to take off his fins. "That's got to be from some Spanish treasure ship. And it was four hundred years ago when they came up this way from Mexico and Peru. By now, any wood is gone, completely rotted away."

"Peru's on the Pacific."

He got the impression that she wanted his find to be unreal. "Sure it is. But they brought the stuff in ships up to the isthmus of Panama and lugged it across, then put it in different ships on the Atlantic side. Then up this way, hugging the coast all around the Gulf. That was the easiest route men. But what with war and pirates and storms, a good pan of their loot never made it back to Spain." Black-haired, black-bearded, "his chest hair a dark mat slow-drying even in the sun, he worked with practiced hands at getting the boat ready to head home.

Meanwhile the girl sat there holding her bathing cap and looking under the thwart.

He paused. "Look, Sal, I'm gonna split this right down the middle with you. And it can be worth a fortune. For your pan, what you've got to do is keep this *absolutely* quiet. I know how these things work. If we're good little citizens and tell everybody what we've found, the state government steps in, and they'll rip us off for more than half. And it might be years before we get what little we're allowed to keep."

Sal had nothing to say, and she maintained her silence until the boat was moving and the Keys were noticeably closer. Then she suddenly said: "I don't know if I want half."

Tom looked at her. "Sure you do. Later you will, if not right now. Look, I'm going to handle all the business. All you have to do is keep quiet. If anyone should ever ask you, all we did today was swim and snorkel and mess around. The subject of treasure never came up."

He swept his eyes hurriedly once more round the horizon, then bent and with one hand unrolled the towel and lifted out his find. His fingers held it. Incredible. Wanting to get Sal more involved in this thing, he asked, "You want to try it on?"

She had pulled her sunburned feet back as if to keep them away from the towel when it was being opened. She didn't answer. But her body was tilting forward slightly, as if being drawn; her eyes were fascinated.

Before handing it over, he raised it to his own face once again, seeing the watery light-ripples float in through its eyes. Seeing—

He jerked the mask down from his face and sat there blinking at it in his lap. He rubbed his eyes.

"What's wrong, Tom?"

"Nothing." He gave the yellow weight to her. "It was like I thought I could see through the eyes. And there was..."

"What?"

"Like a couple of men." He cut short his answer abruptly. When he looked up again from tending the boat, Sal was sitting there holding the thing in both hands, her eyes wide and face solemn, a little pale around the lips. He wasn't sure whether she had tried it on or not.

"Tom."

"What?"

"You're gonna want to kill me, but I wish you'd throw it overboard again."

"What?"

"All right, all right. But at least don't wear it anymore. I don't like the way it looks. And I don't care if I get any money or not."

He reached for the thing, smiling with one side of his mouth and repeated. "You will, later on." He wrapped the golden weight and tucked it far back under the thwart; a casual glance would not even notice the towel.

Now some detail could be seen in the rim of vegetation ahead on the horizon. A couple of other islands in the staggering chain were visible, along with the white tracery of the connecting highway bridges. On an island to the south he could see a high-rise going up, looking as out of place as it would have at the North Pole.

He had to say something about it, thought he really didn't want to: "I thought I saw my brother Mike, as if he was sitting right there beside you..." He let his voice trail off. It had been too crazy. A white-haired man's figure near Mike, and somewhere in the air behind them a huge golden sun-disc, and stylized red daggers or lightning bolts in a circular pattern.

Sal took his revelation with surprising—no, disturbing—calm. She said, "I saw—myself, throwing the thing overboard." She wasn't joking in the least, or even smiling. "Maybe that's just what I should have done. You could have found it again if you'd tried hard enough. And that way you'd have believed me—that I don't want the money. And you'd have kept me out of all of it from here on."

Tom shook his head. He had read somewhere that certain psychic disturbances could be contagious. There had been epidemics of people thinking themselves possessed by demons. He said aloud, "Out of all what? There's not gonna be any trouble, just some money. The light must come through in some funny way, and you saw what you were thinking about anyway, something like looking into a fire. You'll take money when the time comes, kid. You'll be willing."

After that they were quiet for what seemed a long time, riding the light chop between infinite sky and sea. Only when they were actually coming into the harbor did he speak again.

"I'm going to find a good place to hide it, to begin with. And I damn sure don't mean to give it away."

"Why don't you call your brother about it?" Sal suggested after a moment's silence, sending prickles down his spine through the July heat. He was certain he had said nothing to her about Mike's holding a telephone in his vision.

"Why do you say that?" he asked. "You haven't even met him."

"Just the way you talk about him sometimes. He sounds—I don't know. Smart. Competent." She still hadn't found the exact word for what she meant.

Tom smiled faintly. "He's lucky, is what he is. And if you think I have a mean streak, you should see him sometimes."

"He doesn't sound *mean*, the way you talk about him."

"All right, he's not mean. Basically." And with that he had to get busy docking. As he worked, he could catch glimpses of the masts of the treasure-hunting company's vessels, moored not far away. If *they* ever learned of his find, they would think it was something he had located while working for them and had somehow managed to keep for himself till now. They would be putting in a claim. If that happened, Sally could testify...but once the legal wrangling started, most of the money would be lost to him, one way or another.

No, he was going to think positive. This time, for a change, he was going to screw the world. Maybe in a secret sale he could get fifty thousand dollars for this thing. Then, even allowing for a split with Sal—say he gave her fifteen, twenty thousand, that would be enough, more might scare her too much—he would have a stake big enough to give him a fighting chance against the world. To get somewhere and be somebody.

But maybe he could sell a thing like this for as much as a hundred thousand. To do that would for damn sure take some hard bargaining. Nobody gave away that kind of bread. But he knew for a fact, from stories heard when he worked for the treasure hunters, there were wealthy art dealers and collectors willing to pay such sums and ask no questions beyond authenticating whatever they bought.

In silence he and Sal left the rented boat at the dock and went to unchain their bicycles from the uncrowded rack. One thing about the Keys in summer—you rarely had to wait in line for anything. And once you got through the bottleneck of the single connecting highway, heavy traffic was six cars coming along without a break.

Tom had stuffed the wrapped mask along with other odds and ends into his habitual backpack. Sal still in her bikini, himself in trunks and T-shirt—sweat-soaked the moment he put it on—they pedaled through the humid heat, past weather-beaten houses, oleander, cheap bars, breadfruit, old and new motels, palm trees, uncrowded beaches, bougainvillea, tourist-trade shops, royal poinciana, open-air laundromats. An active little city, you could usually find what you wanted in it. The trouble was, despite all the underground stories and rumors he heard when he was in the diving game, he had no names of any of these wealthy and unscrupulous collectors, nor any way of getting in contact with them, in New York or Chicago or wherever in hell they lived.

He could start trying to make contact by talking to some shady people he knew. He had in mind one sometime drug dealer that he thought he could find, here on the Keys or in Miami Beach. Of course he wouldn't trust that cat for a moment. And meanwhile, where was he going to hide the thing?

Following Sal, Tom climbed the narrow stair to her small apartment over a Spanish grocery store. As expected, her roommate was out at work. Tom slipped off his backpack and stood there swinging the promising weight of it by a strap while she closed the door and peeled off her bra and stood luxuriating in the cool wash from a window air conditioner that had been left running.

Maybe two pounds of gold. He had to get it stowed away somewhere, then do some thinking. "I'll see you later, Sal."

Today was not the day to change his routine, and Tom went as usual to the book-and-record store, in the new shopping center, where for a couple of months now he had been working evenings as a clerk. He would call Mike, he thought. After work tonight...

Business was slow. The Chevrolet crowd of summer tourists didn't buy as much as the Cadillac people who came in winter, so he had time this evening to sit behind his counter and think. The break was welcome. From a display table he picked up a gift volume, *Central American Art*. It proved to be full of beautiful color plates, though short on the hard information he was seeking.

He felt sure the mask was Indian—pre-Columbian— though he wasn't an expert and couldn't begin to pin it down any closer than that without help. He wanted to identify it before he went to anyone. If he didn't sound stupid, they wouldn't try to cheat him so badly. Tomorrow he would try the library.

... Jesus, it had been weird. In the background, red daggers and a great golden disc. Up front, apparently right in the boat, Mike, holding a phone, plain as day. Certainly Mike, though near as Tom could remember, the face had looked sort of like a drawing rather than an image from memory. Some psychologist could explain it, sure. But meanwhile he wasn't going to put that thing on again—

The shop's door chime signaled a customer. Tom looked up at the approaching white-haired man, whose face might be taken for young or old—a strange face that would be hard to forget.

Tom had never met the man before. But he had seen him. Just today.

Chapter 2. The First Giving

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Lake Texcoco, Mexico, 1325

Amid tall shoreline reeds, under a blaze of stars that spanned a moonless midnight sky, Cimatl waited, standing almost motionless on a small flat rock at the lake's very edge. He shivered slightly and continuously in the chill that had come with night in this tropical high valley. To his ears that listened persistently for the strange sounds of certain gods, there came now only the cries of nightbirds, croaking of amphibians, an occasional splash of a jumping fish. But Cimatl did not falter on this third night of his vigil. Last night at midnight, when the Sun's great jealous eye was farthest from the world, he had been briefly, tantalizingly rewarded by the rush of great wings overhead, and for one moment he had seen a shape far larger than any bird pass swift against the stars.

This vigil by night was necessary because their age-long and faithful worship of the Sun had not saved Cimatl's people from the terrible dangers that now seemed certain to overwhelm them. Two generations past, their long flight from the north had ended in this land—ended in sheer exhaustion, not success. Except for this stretch of swampy lakeshore, disdained by other nearby tribes, they were still landless. New persecutions threatened, as terrible as those that had driven their grandfathers from the north, and there seemed no place left to flee. The Tenocha had been unable even to attach themselves as vassals to a stronger tribe, and thus gain some measure of protection.

By day, Cimatl and the other priests of the Tenocha continued to beseech the Sun for help; but by night Cimatl, fasting and desperate, had as a last resort begun this other, secret worship.

Here amid tall reeds, the darkness of midnight seemed the deepest. And now, as on the two previous nights, Cimatl began to chant a litany to the gods of darkness whose names were terrible to speak. As his voice rose up, he heard, as on the preceding midnight, wings that could not be those of any ordinary bird, beating at some great distance—beating so fast they made a steady roaring, like the wind in great tree branches.

Cimatl threw back his head and saw a looming shape too large for any bird. Amid a sudden rush of air that rattled reeds about him on all sides, he stumbled in his chant. When unexpected light stabbed down, it was so violent against the entrenched darkness that Cimatl was completely blinded at first. The terrible idea smote him that this might be the very eye of the Sun, returned in midnight anger at his servant's faithlessness, and his heart failed him momentarily. But even as he cowered against the burning wrath to come, the light dimmed. His eyes could start to see again, and no, this small light was not the Sun. It seemed to issue from the belly of some hovering god of eagles, from whose belly also there was being let down some kind of a large burden on a string or cord.

Around Cimatl, a mad pattern of reed shadows danced. His vision gradually gained strength against the artificial glare. The light was strongest directly, beneath the hovering eagle-god, where it shone full upon another flat rock. On this a huge snake coiled, drawn perhaps from mud and water by some faint sun-warmth still lingering in the stone.

Cimatl saw that the burden being lowered on a cord, directly above the snake, was of the size and shape of man, but garbed like no man he had ever seen, in a peculiar suit that covered nearly all the skin. In one gloved hand of the suspended figure, a short lance flared once with orange fire. On the rock below, the snake's head vanished with a puff of steam and stringy splattering. The serpent's body, thick as an arm, writhed there until the man-shape stood beside it and with one booted foot shoved it away into the reeds and water.

In the air above, the roar of wings held steady. The man-shape raised its face and looked toward the medicine man. Long hair of black, with golden ornaments. Red daggers drawn on its chest. "Cimatl!"

The priest bent down and hid his eyes in awe.

"Cimatl, the favor you have asked the gods of night is granted you. Greatness shall be your people's lot, from this night forward."

After the voice had been silent for a few moments, Cimatl dared to squint timidly toward the speaker. In one gloved hand, the god was holding something out to him. Cimatl eagerly plunged off his own rock into the shallows. A stump of broken reed stabbed into his foot, but he did not yet feel the wound. Something dying thrashed in mud; the Snake of Time was still alive, but with its head had gone its power to strike. Meanwhile, in droning triumph, the Eagle of the Night maintained its place above. In his exaltation, Cimatl strove to miss not a symbol, not a nuance, of this mighty vision. One quick glance upward against the light showed him a symbolic dagger, red as blood, limned on a smooth gray flank.

Then he held his eyes downcast, for he was standing now before the man-shaped god, who still held something out for him to take. Groping at the edge of his averted vision, the priest carefully received in both hands a small weight of metal.

The son of the Night-Eagle was speaking to him again: "With this gift you shall become a mighty nation. See that you keep it hidden. Let only your First Speaker dare to put it on his face, and that in secrecy. Do not mention it in your songs, when you shall come to sing them, or show it in your sculptures when you come to carve. Let no one know of it except your inner priesthood."

Cimatl wanted to speak his transcendent gratitude, but could not find his voice. He managed to make a violent gesture of assent, both his hands locked on the gods' gift as if they might crush it in their zeal. Abruptly, then, the almost-blinding lights were gone. A few words were spoken nearby, in some inhuman-sounding tongue, as if the visiting deities exchanged banal comments between themselves. Then suddenly the wings were beating louder, casting down a gale. Cimatl was left in darkness, temporarily blind again, able only to listen until the rush of wings had receded, vanished into the sky.

Cimatl turned away then from the lake. Trying to chant his gratitude, he staggered amid unseen obstacles toward the distant fire-specks marking the Tenocha camp. His eyes gradually retuned themselves once more to starlight and he began to see his way. He felt pain now from his injured foot, but pain did not matter. Nothing mattered, save the gift he held in his hands.

He could see now that it was of metal and crystal, a leather thong strung through holes in its outer flanges. *Let only your First Speaker dare to put it on his face... with this gift you shall become a mighty nation ...* Not a word of that solemn charge would Cimatl ever forget.

The Mask now in his hands had no high cheekbones, nor mouth or chin, nor was it gold. It was not much more than a large pair of goggles. A century would pass before the Mixtec slaves encased it in a gold model of a smiling face. They were to work for the secret pleasure of Cimatl's successor as First Speaker of the Aztec-Tenocha, who by then had become the lords of most of Mexico.

Chapter 3. The Finding

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After a morning flight down from Atlanta, Mike Gabrieli spent the middle part of his day in Miami Beach, talking fruitlessly to police and to people at the hotel where Tom had been registered when he disappeared, leaving a suitcase, some clothes, and an unpaid bill. Then Mike got on the late-afternoon flight from Miami to Key West.

He had never been south of Miami before, and found the look of the Keys pleasantly surprising. Unwalled by hotels, and stitched by the slender thread of U. S. One, an immensity of blue-green water embraced near-tropic islands. Near the end of the brief flight he tried to catch a glimpse of Cuba, which was now closer than Miami, but he could see only August clouds massed on the south horizon.

From the air, Key West looked more built up than he had expected. Still, the airport was far from busy. Actually it seemed almost deserted. The next flight back to Miami—there were apparently no scheduled flights at all to anywhere else—might be planned for next month instead of tomorrow morning.

One cab was still waiting after his few fellow passengers had vanished into the sullen heat. Mike got into it without hurrying, sport shirt already sticking to his ribs, and dropped his little traveling bag at his feet. He gave the driver the address of Aunt Tessie's house, and hoped silently that the air conditioners there were working as well as the cab's was.

The cab left him on a corner in what might have been a lower-middle-class suburb, except that at least two of Aunt Tessie's neighbors were building large boats in their back yards. A dog barked someplace, and another answered. The vegetation looked tropical, all of it different from what was common anywhere north of Florida.

Feeling in his pocket for the key, Mike hefted his little bag and strode down the narrow walk toward the little white stucco house. Palms in the front yard, and in the back what looked like a tall banana tree. He had seen family snapshots of the place; a number of relatives had stayed here at one time or another. Tessie also let the house out frequently through a temporary rental service, so the utilities were kept turned on. He had heard there were two bedrooms.

Looking into a screened-in front porch, he saw some heavy wooden lawn chairs, stained redwood not long ago. He walked on. His key was for the side door, which he entered from the carport.

The carport was empty—completely empty—and Mike stood there for a moment making a teeth-baring grimace. The Humphrey Bogart look, Tom used to say. It was no doubt the dumb little bastard's own fault, whatever had happened to him. Mike could only pray that he was still in one piece, somewhere...

A four-inch green lizard sat on a boundary wall of open-work masonry and looked impassively back at Mike. Tom had lived in this house for a while when he first came down to the Keys, a year and a half ago, to work as a diver for the treasure hunters and to try to get his head together, as he had put it. Then came the Great Pot Party, infamous in the annals of the Gabrieli family. Police cars right here in Aunt Jessie's driveway, and all hell broken loose with the old folks. Although the cops had never convicted him formally of anything, Tom had been firmly requested to move out. Now, since his disappearance, Tessie seemed to be having guilt feelings, as if her eviction notice had contributed to some ultimate downfall.

Mike unlocked the side door and went in, to find all serene. Inside was no hotter than outside—it was evidently impossible to close the louvered doors and windows tightly. After he got the three window air-conditioners going, Mike looked around.

Inside the doors of kitchen cabinets were notes, informing all tenants where the household goods and fuses could be found, when they could pick the two kinds of limes from the trees in the back yard, how to obtain good plumbers, electricians, babysitters. Tessie had renting down to a science. She admonished tenants to keep their foodstuffs tightly sealed against tropical insects and to bring all lawn furniture indoors if they left during hurricane season, August through November.

The phone, like everything else, was working. But the first time Mike tried the number that he had brought along, there was no answer. After ten rings, he hung up and went to inspect the refrigerator. Two cans of beer and a bottle and a half of pop. He again consulted the kitchen-cabinet notes, then found the key to the tool shed just where it was supposed to be, on a small brass hook just inside the door leading to the carport. He went outside.

The grass was only a couple of inches long; somebody must be mowing it regularly. The tool shed was a small metal structure set against the back wall of the house. When he took off the padlock and swung the creaking door, he was observed by a solemn frog who looked up blinking like a long-term prisoner, but made no break for freedom. Maybe he could squeeze in and out under the loose door. Maybe enough bugs came in to keep him happy

As Aunt Jessie had said, there was a bicycle in the shed, amid a miscellany of tools and junk. He dragged the power mower aside and got it out.

After a quick trip to a nearby grocery, Mike popped open a soft-drink can and tried Sally Zimmerman's number again.

"Hello?" The tone of the girl's voice answering told him nothing.

"Sally?"

"Yes, who's this?"

"I'm Mike Gabrieli. Tom's brother." He let silence grow for a few seconds before he went on. "I'm in town right now, and I'd like very much to talk to you."

It took a few moments before she said, "All right. Is there any word yet on Tom?"

"No, that's why I'm down here. Listen, it's six o'clock. Have you made any arrangements for dinner? If not, I'll take you out somewhere—your choice, I don't know my way around."

"All right—thank you, that would be fine." Yet something in her voice was holding back. "Where are you staying?"

They traded information. Sally volunteered to borrow her roommate's car and pick him up. It sounded as if she hadn't been to the house before.

By dusk, the two of them were seated in a cool restaurant, looking out through a wide, sealed window at sunset gulls, and a moored rank of what Mike supposed were commercial fishing boats.

"...so when your father called me, I felt so sorry. I wished I could do something to help him. He sounded like such a nice old man."

"He is." Mike considered. "See, he and Mom are both getting up there. Tom's being what they call a little bit wild has just gotten to them more and more of late. He was arrested last year in some marijuana-smoking deal down here. Probably you heard about that."

Her tanned fingers broke a dinner roll and started to butter it. She was wearing a pink top that left her midriff bare, and it wasn't hard to see why Tom had kept a more-or-less steady thing going with her. She said, "I heard about that incident from Tom—I wasn't there. I gather it was at your aunt's house."

"Yeah. So. I want to ask if you have some clue to what's happened to him. Maybe there's something you didn't want to worry nice old Dad Gabrieli with, but you wouldn't mind telling me."

"Like I say, I wish I could." Sal took a neat but good-sized bite of roll. "The police were asking, too. But I couldn't help them out."

"He told you he was going up to Miami Beach?"

"Yes, but not why. You and he look quite a bit alike." She studied his face almost impersonally. "He used to say you were a little bigger and meaner. Enough alike so I have no doubt you're really his brother."

"Why should you have any doubt about that? I mean, why would I say so if I wasn't?"

It looked as if she hadn't heard the question. Very much in control right now, this girl.

Mike asked, "Excuse me if I get personal. Tom talked as if you and he were—very close. Is that the way it was?"

She gave him a harder look than any yet. "If you mean did we live in the same room and fight over closet space, no. Neither of us wanted that. If you mean did we spend a lot of time in bed together, yes."

"So he just said, I'm going up to Miami Beach and never gave you a reason, and you never asked him why."

"That's right. Well, here comes the real food at last." But when the red snapper was put in front of her, she didn't really attack it seriously.

Mike let her nibble a little before he said, "You know, Tom phoned me in Atlanta, a couple of nights before he went up to Miami Beach."

"Your father said."

"But there's a thing or two my father doesn't know because I've never told him. Things Tom told me on the phone. I was the only one at home that night he called." He took a mouthful of his own fish and chewed it stolidly. Delicious. Well, he thought, here goes. "About the whereabouts of a certain object."

He had been wondering if she might drop her fork, but it just stayed there in her hand. She looked across at Mike, then down at her plate, then out the window. She put the fork down finally, picked up a roll and looked at that, and settled at last for a cigarette, which she took from a metal case like one a soldier might carry.

"Oh, damn it," she said. Her voice sounded softer and younger than before. "Just damn it all anyway."

"Now, I'm going to have to dig into that, Sally. Maybe I'll have to get the cops to help me. See, I don't care one way or the other about this package itself, or who else might get into trouble or might not. All I care about is finding Tom— finding what's happened to him."

She fidgeted with the metal case. "You smoke?"

"No. Not even tobacco."

"He wasn't into the—drug thing, anymore, if he ever was. I told you, that famous pot-smoking party was a couple of months before I knew him."

"Good." Mike waited.

Sal glared at him a while and finally had to speak. "Is this—thing—wherever he said it would be?"

"It's supposed to be somewhere around Aunt Tessie's house. I figure Tom kept a key to the place even after she officially threw him out. . . as soon as we finish dinner, I'm going back and do a thorough search. You want to be there when I find it?"

A violent headshake. "I want nothing whatever to do with it."

"If you're so sure as all that, you must know exactly what it is."

She wouldn't answer. Puffed out smoke. Wished with all her power (he was certain) that the airplane that brought him down had crashed on landing, killing all aboard.

"Things are getting awfully goddamned serious, Sally." His voice was low and slow. "My brother might be dead. If you're really his friend, I want what's good for you as well as him. If not..." She closed her eyes. "I'll drive you over there."

Night had come down fast. The Datsun's headlights pulling into the carport lit up the red metal cabinet like a warning barricade. It sat right at the carport's rear, just next to where the back yard's grass began, where nothing had been before. Sally parked a yard from the cabinet, and Mike got out of the car and stood there looking down at it. Its doors were hooked closed with a small unlocked padlock. The cabinet was about a foot deep, two feet wide, three high.

"Evenin'."

The southern accent came from just beyond the nearby wall of openwork masonry that edged the yard and carport. In the next yard, the lights from the next house filtering through shrubbery behind him, a tallish man, gray-haired but hale, stood leaning on the wall.

"Hello," said Mike.

The neighbor smiled. "Saw y'all were stayin' here now, so I brought the little cabinet back. Miz Gabrieli keeps the gasoline in there for the power mower—I figured you might be wantin' it. Last tenants just left it sittin' out in the carport when they left. Then a couple weeks ago we had a hurricane watch, kinda early for the season. So I took it in. Back in '62 when she blew, I got a picnic table from the yard on't other side right through the wall o' my house. Don't pay't leave stuff sittin' round the yard if she's gonna blow."

"Thank you," said Mike.

"Hope y'all don't mind my takin' it in. But it's safer when she's gonna blow."

"Quite all right."

Mike unlocked the side door and ushered Sally inside. After turning on a light in the living room, he stationed himself beside a kitchen window where he could look out into the carport and keep an eye on the red cabinet and also on the yard next door. He said, "Whyn't you get us two beers out of the refrigerator? Or if you'd like something else, I think there's bourbon and vodka above the sink."

"You said you were going to search for—something."

He got a beer for himself, tasted it, continued looking out.

"Where's it supposed to be hidden?"

"Right in that little cabinet the kindly neighbor just brought back."

"Tom said he put it *there* ? Do you suppose it's still—? "

"I don't know. I'm waiting for that man to go inside before I go out again to take a look. He's still goofing around in his yard. What is it, Sally? What did Tom hide?"

"You mean he didn't tell you that?"

"The way you say that means he did tell you." Mike sipped his beer again. "Whyn't you tell me about it

now?" She was quiet and he shrugged. "I'd mix you a drink, but I don't want to leave my post just now. Why don't you help yourself?"

After a while, she did.

At last a porch light went out, over on the other side of the masonry wall, and a screen door swung and banged. Dogs barked peevishly, as if bored with their own routine. Eventually all was quiet.

"All right," said Mike. On the kitchen floor he spread old newspapers someone had left beneath the sink. Then he went out into the dark carport, picked up the little cabinet—it felt promisingly heavy—and carried it in. He closed the blinds on the kitchen windows. Half an eye on Sally, who was hovering a few feet away, he lifted the padlock from the metal doors and opened them.

Inside was about what he might expect—flammables that good safety practice forbade storing inside a house or even in an attached shed. First a red safety can marked GASOLINE, on the cabinet's top shelf. Mike sniffed at it, shook it, and put it aside. No doubt it was mixed with a little motor oil to fuel the mower's tiny engine.

On the bottom shelf were a roachlike thing that scuttled away rapidly into the woodwork, a small can of paint thinner, a mined brush, and a large paint can, its cover pressed down solidly upon a hardened rim of redwood stain that would match the chairs on the front porch. Mike got out a pocket knife and with its stubbiest blade pried up the lid. Paint filled the can nearly to the top.

Sally let out breath almost explosively and relaxed into a chair. Mike sat back on his heels and bared his teeth. "Get me an empty jar," he said. "I think there's a big one in the cabinet under the sink." There shouldn't be so much paint left in the damn can—not with all those drippings down its sides.

Sal hesitated, but in a moment brought the glass jar. He took off its lid, and carefully started pouring paint. With most of the liquid out of the way, he looked into the can, grunted with satisfaction, and used more newspaper as a crude glove to extract from it something heavy and crinkly that occupied most of its remaining space. A plastic bag, bound tight with rubber bands around something irregular and hard. Heavy enough to be a gun, but the shape seemed wrong. He had been half-expecting, fearing, dope, which he visualized as small packets of white powder. But this...

Mike worked methodically, getting only a little paint on his fingers. And then, feeling emptied by astonishment, he was holding in his hands the golden face. A little paint had gotten on its chin, and he wiped it off mechanically.

Sally waited in her chair. Her face showed fear, he thought, but no surprise.

"Stolen?" he asked.

She sighed and got out another cigarette. "No. Tom just found it, snorkeling, one day... I was along. He was determined he was going to keep it, not tell any authorities. Some crazy tax laws or something they have here—the state winds up owning most of the treasure if you just tell what you've got. Anyway. He wanted to sell it secretly and keep the money for himself. That's all I know."

"So. And he went up to Miami Beach trying to make some kind of deal?"

"I suppose so. Yes, yes, it was that."

A length of plastic clothesline, which looked as if it would match that strung in the back yard, had been tied into the holes in the mask's flanges.

"Did Tom walk around wearing this? Don't tell me he found it in the ocean with this cord in place."

"No, it had no cords tied on it then. I told him not to wear it—I don't know. It had no cord, the one time that I saw it."

He started to reach for his beer, and then forgot about it. In a way, he could almost wish he had found heroin. That could have been flushed down the toilet, and no one the wiser. No one would know that Tom had been mixed up in such a thing, and there would have been no evidence left to hang a rap on him if he was still alive. But this. You couldn't simply throw away a thing like this.

Mike asked, "You told him not to wear it? Why?"

It was a few seconds before she answered. "I just told him not to get me involved in anything. I didn't want any share. Mike, just keep me out of this. That's all I ask."

He stood up, holding the mask carefully. "Is my brother still alive?"

"How should I know?" Real-sounding anguish in the " voice. Ragged draw on the cigarette. "Oh, God, I hope he is... now you know as much as I do about it all."

"Who was he going to see? Who was he talking to, to make this deal?"

"Mike, I'll tell you absolutely the last thing I know about it, and then you can do what you like. I'm finished—I've had it—call in the cops or not."

"All right, all right, what's this last thing?"

Sally choked on smoke, then seemed to pull herself together. "Tom was seeing a man called Esperanza about something, I suppose about the mask. I heard Tom talking to him on the phone one day. Then several times he asked if Esperanza had called for him. One night when I was staying at Tom's place. And then a day or two after that, I saw Tom meeting this old man out on the street, and they ducked in like they were trying to hide. Rather a big old guy—I say old, because his hair was white, you know? But he might have been, what do you call it—platinum blond, except his complexion was darker than Tom's or yours... Indian-looking, or maybe Bahamian. You see a lot of people from the Bahamas here in the Keys. And he had kind of a big hooked nose."

The sinister foreigner. It sounded just a little peculiar. Nursing suspicious thoughts about Sally, Mike raised the gold weight in his hands and started to fit his chin into the accommodating hollow—

"Don't!" She rose from her chair, gesticulating.

He jerked his hands down, the thought half-formed that she must have seen some poisonous tropical vermin on the mask. Or there was something about the thing itself... "What?"

She stood there awkwardly, as if frightened despite being ashamed to be frightened over something so foolish. She blurted out: "You can see funny things that way."

"Huh?" His vague suspicions of some kind of drugs involved came back. Scowling, he sniffed at the

mask, looked at it closely from every angle. Then, while Sally remained silent, he slowly pulled it on, this time all the way, setting the clothesline strap around his head. He would hear Sally if she moved, though now he couldn't see what she was doing. He could see *something*, though. Just some kind of light-specks, racing in the translucent white stones that made the eyes.

The light that did come through seemed to form patterns, hinting at the familiar. It was probably like holding a seashell to your ear, and hearing patterns—in that case voices—in the random rushing of the molecules of air.

But he had no time now to play. He pulled the mask off, and holding it in one hand, went to the phone in the living room. He looked up a number in the thin local book and started dialing.

"Mike, please. I don't want the police on me again." Her tone seemed to imply that something could be given in exchange. She stood in the kitchen doorway, smiling hopefully.

He bared his teeth at her briefly and said into the phone, "What times does the next plane for Miami leave? Thank you." He hung up. "Not until morning."

Sally leaned against the wall, relieved.

Now he was sure there were going to be legal complications. The only dependable legal help he felt sure of was back home in Atlanta. Maybe he would be committing some kind of technical crime by taking this thing across a state line, but Tom had left it for him—left it in his trust, though vaguely—and now it looked like something finally had happened to the crazy little bastard.

He should have come down weeks ago, maybe. But he hadn't. You always expected that Tom would stay out of any real trouble, would turn up smiling somehow... Thinking dark thoughts, Mike went into the bedroom he had been going to occupy, picked up his still-packed bag, came out, and dropped it on a kitchen chair. He started stuffing paint-smearred newspapers into a plastic garbage bag. "What's chances of driving me up to Miami?" he asked.

A complex of emotions danced across Sal's face. "It's about a hundred and fifty miles. My girlfriend will be wondering about her car."

"See if you can call her, arrange to borrow it."

She hesitated for a moment, then went into the living room, where he could hear her dialing. He kept on cleaning up the mess of paint and papers. The mask was on the table where he could keep an eye on it. Now Sal was talking on the phone; he couldn't quite hear what she was saying, but she seemed to be making no effort to keep her voice low, so he didn't try very hard.

He had finished the hasty clean-up job before she got through with her call. Standing in the kitchen, he heard her quick footsteps coming back. She started to say, "She doesn't—" and then her voice broke off with a quick catch of breath when she saw what he was doing. The small sound seemed to modulate the storm of light-flecks that the mask's translucent eyes were passing on to his.

He started to ask, "Did you ever try this—" He let the question die, with the discovery that he could now see her, the kitchen around, the living room behind her. The eyepieces were growing quite transparent. Did the warmth of the wearer's body somehow—

Through what might have been glass, he beheld Sally standing in the doorway leading to the living room,

one hand raised to protest what he was doing, her blue eyes wider than he had seen them yet. And simultaneously and without confusion, he saw something else. The new scene occupied the same space, as if it were superimposed by half-reflection on a glass window. He could see the outside of the front of the house in which he stood. It was dark night out there, yet he could see it clearly. A car was just easing to a stop before the house, its movement and its braking done with the utter soundlessness of silent film.

"The eyes have gone transparent," he reported steadily to Sally, meanwhile watching three dark-haired men in sports shirts get out of the car.

"It works that way," she said unsteadily. She still held one hand up, a warding-off of something. "From the outside they still look white, but you can see—oh, take it off. Oh, I should have thrown it away, the way it warned me that first day."

Two of the phantom men were coming down the front walk with rapid strides, entering the enclosed porch where the redwood chairs were stacked. The third was moving even more quickly to take up a position in the carport. Except, of course, none of them were really there. No screen door, no footsteps could be heard.

"It warned you?"

"To throw it back into the ocean. Why? What are you seeing?"

His point of vision was now abruptly back at his true location. He watched while his image, ghost, something, looking like a line drawing of himself done by computer, separated itself from his body and moved to the front door, as if to answer the knocking that had not sounded. In its right hand, his image swung an image of the mask.

His image turned the knob, and abruptly an image of the door—not the real door, he could be quite sanely sure of that—swung in, so violently that his ghostly double recoiled. The two men who had come down the walk burst in, strange-looking weapons flaring in their hands. Mike's doppelganger fell; one of the two men snatched the image of the mask from his imaged hand. The whole incredible scene was frozen at that point—at the instant at which the telephone began to ring.

Mike took the mask off while it rang again. Sally looked at his face, muttered something frightened, and sat down.

He moved to the phone, while his ears kept listening for the sound of that car coming to a stop outside.

"Mike Gabrieli?" * It might be an actor's voice, so resonant and precise.

"Yes."

"This is Esperanza. Quickest way I could get in touch with you was by phone. Tell me what you are going to do with the Mask." Somehow the capitalization seemed audible. There was no doubt about which mask he meant.

Mike held the phone in one hand, Mask in the other, looking back and forth between them. Then he put the receiver to his ear again. "What in hell you talking about?"

A hissing, rapid chuckle. "Tough guy, huh? Good, that'll be needed. Look, I don't want to get it away from you. I'd rather you wore it. If it warns you about something, better pay attention. Your brother wore

it some, but not enough to save his skin. But tell me your plans. What do you want?"

"What do you know about my brother?" For a moment, he thought Esperanza had hung up, but then he realized that the phone had gone dead. He hung it up and instinctively raised the gold face to fit his own once more. Sally was saying something that he ignored.

The eyes were still clear, and he could see the same sequence starting over. The car stopped and the same three men got out of it and approached the house, one at the side, two from the front. But this time the brakes and doors and feet were audible. This time the pounding on the door boomed loudly.

"Police officers! Open up!" The voice was vibrant with authority. Again Mike's image separated from himself. But this time it darted across the living room, moved a floor lamp two feet west, a coffee table one foot north, and came back to stand at his side, facing the door, which now an image of Sally moved to open. This time the Mike-image wore its Mask. As Sal's spectral hand touched the doorknob, the scene faded, though the Mask's eyes remained transparent for its wearer.

"Open the door or we're gonna break it down!"

Mike drew a breath, and moved. People said he was lucky, but it was really a lifelong feeling for when to move, when not. He quickly shifted the floor lamp two feet, coffee table one, and came back to where he had been standing. "Sally, get the door."

Her eyes kept marveling at his Masked face. "Hadn't you better take that thing—?" She was puzzled by his shuffling the furniture, and she was scared, though a long way from hysterical; she thought they really were policemen at the door.

"Just open it," he said from inside gold, as he pulled the strap a little tighter above his ears. He knew they had the side door to the carport covered. With metal louvers on all the windows, there was no way of getting out.

Chapter 4. The Second Giving

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Tenochtitlan, Mexico,

It was broad day when the high priest arrived at the First Speaker's palace, but the fine cotton shades that had been drawn at all the windows made it quite dim and almost cool inside, in the inner room where Montezuma waited alone, seated on a low chair.

"Lord, lord my great lord!" growled the high priest in deep reverence, entering barefoot and crouching. His gaze was lowered to the floor. The article he had brought—a small oaken chest—he carried as a symbolic burden upon his back.

"Get up and open the *petaca*," ordered Montezuma. From an arrow's flight outside the room's white, dim walls came priestly voices chanting. They were preparing human sacrifice at the great altar of Huichilobos, god of death and war.

The high priest set down the chest and opened it. What it contained he handed to the First Speaker, who sat upon his little stool and looked steadily for some time upon that familiar and yet, to him,

enigmatic golden smile.

Thongs of leather made from human skin were tied now between the flange-holes. A great drum boomed outside. Montezuma suddenly hooked his thumbs inside the straps and raised the Mask and put it on. The high priest, who had dared to rise halfway, once more shrank down.

The Mask's eyes cleared for Montezuma, and he could see a small lizard looking down at him from a high corner of the room. Then the vision came.

Today the vision did not last long, and the First Speaker soon took off the Mask again. He said: "Quetzalcoatl and the other white-skinned, bearded gods are coming, as has been long foretold. The Gift of the Dark Gods we will no longer need." And he held out the Mask.

The priest took it back, restored its wrapping of soft cloth, and stowed it back in the small chest and closed the lid. He said nothing. There was subtle disapproval in his bearing.

"Is it in your mind," Montezuma asked him, "that this stranger from the sea is not Quetzalcoatl after all? That he and his companions, who come in floating houses from the direction of the sunrise, are only men? I tell you, I see through the Mask their leader's face, and I know in my heart who he is—Quetzalcoatl the divine. The god for whose return I long have yearned with all my strength. Of course he is a man. A god may be a man too, may he not? Even as it is with the First Speaker who now sits before you?"

The high priest had fallen to his lowest crouch. A verbal answer was now required. "It must be as my great lord says."

Montezuma rose to his feet. "I tell you, Quetzalcoatl returns from the sea to rule his people, as the Gift of the Dark Gods long ago foretold. So take it to him now, along with the rest of the gold that we are sending him—what further need will I have of its help, when he for whom we yearn is here? But see that the Mask is given to him secretly, for his use alone; that he may know that I have recognized him from afar."

The high priest did not speak again, but trembled as he backed away.

Chapter 5. The Wearing

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The door seemed to burst inward at Sally's mere touch upon the knob, and two sport-shirted men, solidly real this time, bulled in. Both had straight, dark hair. Their faces looked vaguely Indian or Oriental. At sight of the handguns they were leveling, Sally cried out and backed away, arms wrapped about herself as if for protection.

The men paid her no attention; their eyes froze on Mike's Masked face the moment they beheld him. For a long instant he had the feeling that he was the armed man, and his two enemies, despite their pistols, all but defenseless.

Still backing away, Sally bumped into a chair and then into the coffee table. She tripped and started an awkward fall. The two men did not turn. It was Mike that they were after. Their weapons were aiming at him, and he could see his death in the peculiar, off-round holes that marked the ends of the blunt barrels. The Mask forgotten, along with the momentary feeling of power that it had brought, he turned and ran.

Even as he did so, he saw his own Mask-projected image, running on ahead.

And from the corner of his eye he saw the floor lamp, now toppling in some chain reaction set off by Sally's accident. The metal shaft of it was swinging down with what seemed glacial slowness toward one gunman's outstretched arm. In danger's terrible time-elongation, Mike heard gunfire crackle behind him, saw something almost invisible—no ordinary bullet, he had time to realize—drill into the wall beside his moving head. The impact left no mark upon the wall.

His image ran before him into the kitchen, where it grabbed up, in passing, an image of his traveling bag. Half a second later, his own hand took the real bag from the kitchen chair. Guidance was being given him, and he was following it on instinct. Thought could come later.

With his free hand, Mike straight-armed open the door leading to the carport. Outside, he caught one passing glimpse of a man sprawling on the concrete beside the Datsun, gun lying near his open fingers. If the shot fired back in the living room had passed clear through the house wall, it would have emerged in just this direction. . .

Two running strides behind the uncatchable image of himself, Mike continued his unthinking imitation of its movements, tossed his bag over the masonry wall, and followed it with a lunging climb and a broad jump from the wall's top into darkness. The air around him sang as again gunfire crackled—no common pops or bangs—somewhere behind. He landed on his feet and running.

Another fence to climb, and then another. Amid an uproar of awakened dogs, Mike crashed his way through neighbors' yards. Racing always ahead through the deep gloom, his own likeness in the form of a luminous line-drawing led him through another carport, crossed a deserted street, then dove once more into shadow amid the rough trunks of tall palms.

Just beyond the palms, his doppelganger stopped abruptly, crouching amid bushes. When Mike dropped down beside it, it blinked out like a light.

What now? Back in the direction of Aunt Tessie's house, men's voices sounded, low and purposeful. Now he should run and get the cops, of course. And then explain to them about the Mask. . . At the moment, the Mask was giving him no help, though its eyes remained perfectly transparent, and a quick test showed that his night vision was as good with it on as with it off.

What about Sally? Well, it was too bad if something had happened to her. But the men hadn't been out to do her harm. They had been after him.

And they still were. About ten yards away, the two of them were coming with guns drawn, openly prowling the middle of the otherwise deserted street. As boldly as if in the middle of a desert, they brandished their weapons and looked about. In the distance, a dog was going frantic. Here at hand, there was no sound or sight of any human being other than his pursuers. Houses showed lights, but no one was looking out to see what was going on. And the silence, from the houses, when he noticed it, seemed hardly natural. . .

Call for the cops. But he had the irrational feeling that it might not be that simple.

The two men in the street exchanged carelessly loud comments in some unknown language. Then they separated, one going back toward Aunt Tessie's while the other continued to stand there, boldly as before, holding his strange pistol but otherwise with an air of carelessness. After a minute, this man also walked on, poking into the bushes on the other side of the street. He approached a house and opened a

door, peered in. Peering past him from a distance, Mike could see in the lighted interior two children at a table, blond heads slumped down amid stacked books as if they napped. Shortly the armed hunter let the door close, walked away from the house, and around a corner.

As soon as he was out of sight, Mike's doppelganger reappeared, to lead him across more fences and then across another street. Sometimes, for no reason he could see, the course he was set doubled back. Sometimes the image he followed moved on at a run. Again, it crouched immobile in deep shadows for long moments.

Despite the numerous detours, delays, and switchbacks, as if invisible hunters were to be avoided, Mike was being led gradually east. The one automobile he saw on any of the streets he crossed was sitting lightless and motionless, its engine dead, right in the middle of its traffic lane. But of course there was no traffic. None at all. No more than there were any people walking, or people's voices to be heard from any of the houses where the lights still burned. Only the dogs, one in this block, another in the next, more of them farther off, were active. Their voices grew more and more frantic as they realized that things in their portion of the world had gone unprecedentedly wrong...

There were a man and woman in the car, both in the front seat. Both with their heads slumped unmoving on their chests, though the man's hands still gripped the driver's wheel. The car windows were open and Mike could hear them breathe, as if they slept. He wanted to touch them, try to rouse them, but the spectral figure that led him paced on without a pause, looking like something from the dream of an electronics engineer.

Suddenly from a block ahead there came a familiar hiss of tires. A street light there shone with joyful banality upon a trickle of live traffic; first one car and then another traversed the intersection, crossing the street of silence on which Mike walked. From a house on the corner ahead, a man's voice burst into laughter. Mike's throat formed small sounds of relief.

Standing under that corner light, trying to make himself believe that he was back in a sanely human world again, Mike lifted his Mask momentarily from his face—partly to wipe away sweat, partly with the idea of getting the treasure back into hiding, partly, good God, not to look foolish in the eyes of normal people when he wore it. And when he looked back without the Mask along the way that he had come, the stopped car he had just passed disappeared, and normal traffic seemed to come into existence at the next intersection back. Mask on, the zone of silence and strange sleep, in which some awful interdiction had effectively closed down human activity, was perceptible. Mask off, he saw instead a semblance of normality.

Mask on, he trotted quickly after his guiding image, which was getting away from him toward the east. The idea of looking for a police car, that had returned once more, departed. He did not know what powers were ranged against him, but to look for normal human help seemed certain to be futile.

Moving now within a normal region of the city, he passed people who turned to stare after his Mask. He would take it off as soon as he dared. But not just yet.

Adjust the lamp's position by a foot, so it will stand where Sal will cause it to fall down across the gunman's arm and deflect his shot into the carport, felling his accomplice there and leaving the way open for escape—God, he didn't know what powers were *helping* him, either, but in some ways they seemed almost more frightening.

The voice on the phone, calling itself Esperanza, had said that Tom didn't wear the Mask enough to save his skin. That sounded bad. He had to find Tom somewhere, or find out just what had happened to him.

Then, get this Mask back wherever it belonged. Meanwhile he would help Sal if he could. But first—right now—survival.

Mike walked east, with now and then a passerby turning to look after him. A block ahead, the street he was on sprouted a stop sign and ended in a transverse highway where traffic was comparatively heavy. Beyond the highway, a dim palm or two, then darkness that must hide the ocean.

His guide led him in a brisk trot across the highway, inviting him to take what looked like a dangerous chance in front of a fast-moving sedan whose driver was fortunately alert enough to use both brakes and steering wheel adroitly. A roared obscenity came hard after the passing sound of rending rubber; but with that recent crackling gunfire still fresh on the eardrums, a few bad words made no impact at all.

On the ocean side of the highway, overlooking a warm but unpopulated beach, his image stopped, and turned to face the northeast-bound traffic—as if waiting to be picked up, not hitchhiking, for he wasn't directed by example to gesture with his thumb.

Then, after a score of cars had been allowed to pass unchallenged, his transparent mentor surprised him after all by raising a hitching arm, with thumb neatly pointed as if the technique were one long practiced. Mike imitated the motion, while some part of his brain thought madly: Have you room for two? See, my friend here is invisible—maybe he can sit on my lap—

He had hardly raised his arm before brakes squealed again. A large, middle-aged white convertible, driven with its, top down, dragged to a halt a few yards from where he stood. A woman alone in the car turned her face back, smiling gleefully. As he trotted closer, he saw she was a well-worn forty-plus. Her lean cheeks looked somewhat overrouged, though her dress and makeup otherwise were conservative. His Mask, far from intimidating her, evidently provoked an arch enthusiasm.

"Going to a masquerade?" Her voice was ready to join in the fun if he could offer any. She had the door open for him before he could reach the handle. His image hopped in and vanished to his sight even as he landed right in its unsubstantial lap.

"Something like that. Thanks for stopping."

She slid back to the controls—none of your nonsense about seat belts—and blasted the car fatalistically out into traffic. "Well, here I am." Giggle. "If you're going to attack me, get it over with. My friends are always haranguing me not to take the chances that I do, picking up strangers."

"Oh, you're safe with me. Don't worry." His fingers went up to ease the weight on forehead and cheekbones. How did the wearer know when it was safe to take the damn thing off? Or was it ever, once he had put it on?

"Knew I would be." The woman was speaking loudly now, over a noisy muffler, and driving rather fast. "I've never had any really bad experiences, all the people I've picked up. There was that stranded circus act I picked up one time in Alabama. That was the trip when I met the Saucer-tans ." (The what?)"Yes, I 'm one of the few people who've ever really ridden on a flying saucer. And I had a witch once. Said she was one, anyway. On her way to a science fiction convention in Washington, D. C."

"I guess you do carry some strange riders."

"Yes, and it was a strange ride that the Saucerians gave me in their craft. Flew low over my car in Tennessee and stalled all its electrical systems completely... but the strangermy prospective riders look,

the safer I think I am. No clean-cut young men holding up neat lettered signs, no sir. Them I won't touch. How far are you traveling for your masquerade?"

Through the Mask's eyes Mike suddenly saw the image of a highway sign, flying a few feet above the shoulder of the road on his side, keeping pace with the car. "Marathon," he read aloud, and wondered if he was asking for somewhere off in Greece.

"Well, I can drop you there. I'm going up to Key Largo." They took the bridge out of Key West, going north and east on U. S. One. They had been going half an hour or so, driving, it seemed, more on bridges than on solid land, Mike mostly listening and trying to make sense, when he saw the solid sign his latest vision had foreshadowed: MARATHON. Followed in a moment by broken railing, tow trucks and police cars blocking half the narrow bridge. Bystanders in shorts and beach attire gathered, gaping down. The woman driving, silent in the required concentration, slowed down and followed police arm-signals through the jam around the accident. Looking out on his side, Mike whipped off the Mask while the police seemed to be looking. He caught one glimpse of a white car, open-topped, being raised dripping within a spiderweb of winch-connected cables and the stare of emergency spotlights. The car was badly smashed.

Gapers and constriction left behind, they picked up speed again. Mike eased his Mask back on. At once a new image was before him—that of the very car in which he rode. This image moved on steadily ahead, in the same lane. He might have taken it for a real car outlined in reflective tape, were it not for certain unnerving moments when real cars passed briefly through the same space.

"You can turn off here, if you would," he told his chauffeur suddenly. Ahead, the convertible's phantasm had begun to flash its turn-signal on the right. The driver of the real vehicle eschewed such frills, but made the turn. Her conversation was picking up speed again, reviewing some masquerade that she had once attended in New Orleans. The next passenger would hear the incredible story of the man with the golden head.

"Right down this lane," he instructed. Now some kind of a canal had appeared, running parallel to the dimly lighted residential street they had got onto. The houses here were big and expensive, with large lots abutting on the channel. Step out your back door into your luxurious cabin cruiser—that was the idea.

Ahead, the image-car stopped right in the semicircular driveway of a large house in which no lights were showing. The image-Mike got out, glowing against the night.

"This house right here."

"Looks like nobody's home."

"I might be just a little early, but that's all right. Thanks a lot for the lift."

When he had got out and the car was gone, the quiet, near-tropic night closed down. The street lights here appeared to be two blocks apart. There was a racketing as of exotic creepy-crawlies on all sides.

His silent, computer-drawn guide was standing waiting for him, looking at the house where they had stopped. For the first time, he paused to take a calm look at the details of the image. The face was not only recognizably, but indisputably his own: a portrait—not a caricature—done by a drawing-master.

Now suddenly it moved before him, toward the front door of the house. He followed it, his feet crunching on the short walk of crumbled shells.

There was a large, open porch, roofed, but like the rest of the house, unlighted. Mike let his own hand follow the ghostly one, and was guided to touch the doorbell. Now if only he knew what he was going to say when someone—

With horror he realized that his doppelganger had taken off its Mask and was stowing it inside its traveling bag. Mike had only just time to do the same before the house door opened, into darkness.

"You're late." It was a youngish woman's voice; it took him a moment or two to see her figure even in outline. "We expected you a couple of hours ago."

"There was a traffic tie-up on the bridge," he improvised after an awkward moment.

"Any sign of enemy action?" Then, as if she noticed his hesitancy, she added: "All right, don't talk to us about anything if they've briefed you not to. Let's get going."

The woman locked the front door up when he was in the house, then moved ahead to lead. From somewhere upstairs, enough light filtered down to let him find his way through the large rooms that they traversed from front to rear. In one there was a man—a thin, vague figure in the gloom, who seemed to be gathering up things as he moved about.

The woman brought Mike straight through the house to a rear door, and out again onto a patio. Three more steps and he was on a dock where a large boat was moored. He followed her aboard, feeling the unfamiliar slow shifting of a deck beneath his feet. Then down through a cramped companion-way and into a darkened little cabin. When she flicked on lights, he saw that the port was covered with a shade. There was one little bunk.

Leaving the cabin door ajar, the woman went above again. There were jumbled footsteps overhead, and her voice saying something to the man, his answering. Soon the boat's engine coughed loudly into life. And shortly after that, Mike could feel that they were getting under way.

He closed his cabin door and leaned his back against it to block any surprise entry. Then he unzipped his bag and looked into the Mask again. Its eyes were now opaque, just barely flecked with sparks. He put it away.

When waves began to come beneath the hull with solid impact, he judged that they had found the ocean. No one had told him to stay below, so he decided to go up. After a brief hesitation, he left his bag there on the cabin floor, went out and up the short companionway.

In a glow from the instruments, dim and indirect, he could see the man's and woman's faces, both young and intense. The man glanced up at Mike but then turned back, preoccupied, to navigate. On the nocturnal ocean all around, a few small lights looked lost in starlike distances.

The woman now looked up. "Why don't you just go down and rest? I'll bring you some food in a while. It'll be a long night." Her tone was friendly but impersonal, that of a stewardess.

After a moment, Mike turned and went below, entered the small head next to his cabin. He knew next to nothing about ships or boats, but he thought the pace of the regular hammering of waves beneath the hull indicated an unusual speed. Still, the ride was not uncomfortably rough.

Traveling bag clutched in one hand, he was starting to doze off in his cabin's chair when the woman

came tapping at the door. She handed him a couple of sandwiches wrapped in plastic bags and a small Thermos full of what proved to be hot tea.

Left alone, he discovered that he was in fact hungry. And after he had eaten, sleepiness returned. It had been a day... of madness, of course. He should have gone to the police in Marathon, if not in Key West. He wondered if the citizens back there had all revived, with none the wiser. But no way to do a thing like that, unless you could play tricks with time... should have gone to someone... he woke up with a small psychic jolt, wondering if they had drugged his tea. But that would have been superfluous, Watson, after a day like this one... he was going to have to stretch out in the bunk, or sleep sitting in the chair...

He awoke to the unchanging hammering of waves beneath the flying hull, and gray daylight coming in around the shade. The bag had fallen away from him, but a quick inspection showed that the Mask was still inside. A brief trial showed that it had no visions for him at the moment. And a look out through the port showed him nothing but ocean, vast tree-trunks of sunlight marching on it in the distance, reaching to the broken clouds.

His watch, with calm irrelevance, showed a little after seven o'clock. He guessed that the boat had been traveling at a constant speed all through the night. He would guess, also, from the angle of those slanting shafts of sunlight in the distance, that they were heading approximately east. To the Bahamas? But he had the feeling in his gut that land was far away.

A tap came at his door. He stowed the Mask away and zipped the bag, and called out to come in.

The woman entered, with her impersonal smile, a stewardess in slacks and denim shirt. Last night she had been wearing something different. "Good morning. Here's some coffee and donuts. I've got a box lunch up there, too, for you to take along."

Take along? "Thank you."

She went right out and closed the door. All was business around here. What business, he was getting afraid to try to think. But the coffee in this second Thermos proved to be hot and tasty; there were six donuts left, reasonably fresh, in a slightly crumpled bag that might once have held a dozen.

Mike finished his breakfast, visited the head, thought about trying to shave, but didn't. He was wondering what to do next when the man called down the companionway: "You can come up anytime now. Pickup should be in ten or fifteen minutes."

That sounded like he was going to switch boats. He got his bag and went abovedecks. Something about his appearance must have struck the man, who looked at him closely and inquired: "They briefed you well enough on the pickup?"

Mike managed a grin, or maybe it was only a baring of his teeth. "If not, I expect it's too late now."

"Actually I suppose it hardly matters." The man scanned the empty horizon, then looked round him at his instruments, of which it seemed to Mike he had an inordinate number. "Things are pretty automatic, I understand, from here on in."

The woman reached over to hand Mike a small lunchbox. It was something he might have carried to the third grade, with a painted clown on one side and an elephant on the other. "This has a handle," she offered, somewhat apologetically. "I thought it might be easier for you to hold on to."

"Thanks. Anyway, maybe I can put it in here." And with a little squeezing he managed to get it into his bag, along with the spare shoes and the clean shirts and socks and underwear. And something else.

Ahead, clouds seemed to have sunk onto the ocean, and in the form of billows of fog were coming on to cut the visibility. The man throttled back his engines. The craft began to bob and wallow in the sea, rather than merely slapping and skimming over it.

From the low clouds ahead and close above, there came a muffled, whirring roar. The man and woman looked up tensely, then relaxed when the helicopter appeared. Maybe they hadn't come so far from land as Mike had thought.

There was a clammy touch of fog upon his skin through his light shirt. Now here came down a sort of chair, descending from the hovering aircraft on a cable. There was something almost eerie in the way it came down straight to him, without much sway, as if he were pulling on a cord to guide it. The chair, complex of wood and metal, had a big hook under each arm, and he slung his bag from one of these. With a sort of Disneyland feeling, Mike swung himself in and fastened the obvious safety belt. As the catch snapped, he was at once hauled aloft. The chair whirled as it rose, and he got only one more quick look at the boat, now tiny and already blurred by fog, before the thick clouds took him in. The roar from above had deepened, and he thought the helicopter must be climbing even as it reeled him in.

Now metal loomed right above him. A hatch gaped open, and in a moment he was swallowed, as metal jaws snapped shut beneath his feet. His chair had lurched to a stop inside a cabin that was half metal, half plastic or glass, with gray cloud showing on every side and clear blue sky above, beyond a blur of rotor. The apparatus that had hoisted his chair now held it silently in place.

The cabin was very quiet. There were no other passengers in sight, nor any crew. Beside the hoisting-chair, there were three others, in spartan-airline style, that took up most of the space. Solid bulkheads and closed doors sealed off the cabin front and rear.

The clouds were falling rapidly below, though another layer was mobilized above and well ahead. These higher clouds were coming on at what seemed a fantastic speed for a mere copter to achieve. Not that he was any great expert on aircraft, but...

Despite its evident speed, this craft felt even steadier than the boat, and Mike was grateful. There seemed to be no need to remain strapped into his chair, and after a while, he got out of it and went to gently try the forward door. Locked. Through the inset of a small glass panel, he could glimpse what looked like smooth machinery and another spot of sky. Nothing that might be the back of a pilot's head.

Behind the door in the rear bulkhead were a washbasin with a prosaic rack of plastic cups, a somewhat peculiar-looking toilet, and what must be a waste-disposal bin or chute. To try and establish some control of the environment, he had a drink. The water tasted a little strange, but not bad. In tiny lettering on the bottom of his plastic cup was what might be a trademark notice. It was not in English, and he could not identify the language.

After he had tapped in vain on the door to the forward compartment, and studied it as well as he could through the little transparent panel, he began to think it probable that there was no one in there. He was alone on board. There came to mind the automated-airline joke: Passengers file into a cabin and take seats, obey flashed signs to fasten up their belts, and listen to recorded announcements. Only after they are airborne does the recorded shocker come:

"... historic event in which you are privileged to take part. The plane is fully automated and needs no

human pilot or other crew. You are absolutely safe, because nothing can go wrong—go wrong—go wrong—go wrong—"

The glass and metal pill in which he rode was swallowed suddenly by a dense cloud. The flight went on unperturbedly. Mike sat down in one of the chairs, got out his Mask, and looked into its eyes. There were a few sparks there, nothing more.

The growing need to try to do something drove him to looking out of all the available windows at every possible angle. Forcing his vision down as closely as he could along the slight bulge of hull below the starboard glass, he could just make out an insignia of some sort—what seemed to be a golden sunburst. He hadn't noticed it from the boat. There was some large lettering there, too, though the extreme angle at which he saw the letters made them impossible to read. He strained to see more, cheek against the clear glass or plastic, which now felt freezing cold, though the cabin temperature had not altered from comfort. At what altitude was he now flying? With nothing but ocean to be seen below, it was impossible to guess... nothing can go wrong, go wrong, go wrong...

He sat in a chair again, not knowing whether to laugh, or beat on the doors and scream. One would probably be about as helpful as the other. The conviction was growing that he was in fact alone on board. Did they brief you well enough? Things were pretty much automatic from here on in.

The chair was comfortable. Later on he would open his lunch box with the clown and elephant, and then he would give the Mask another try. He looked at the hands of his watch, but could extract no meaning from them. "What are your plans?" the voice on the telephone had asked him.

The muted drone of flight machinery began to overcome him. His sleep aboard the boat had not been deep or restful. The helicopter lurched once, though not enough to make him open his eyes fully. Soon he must try again to see...

A golden lance of sun woke him, striking down into his face from a high purple sky. Mike raised his head on a stiff neck and tried to organize his thoughts.

At first he thought there was still nothing to be seen outside but sky and clouds. The clouds were mostly far below. And far ahead—

He slid from his chair to press his face incredulously against the glass. Clouds at his own level—great rolls of ragged cotton—ripped past before he could see plainly.

An awesome range of jagged, snowcapped, barren mountains marched toward him, beyond a few miles of flatland bordering the shore of a great, calm sea. Even the highest peaks ahead fell short of his present altitude, but already he could feel that the vast curve of his flight was tending down.

Chapter 6. The Third Giving

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Seville, Spain,

On an upper floor of the Alcazar, not a gem's throw from the apartments recently occupied by His Catholic Majesty Charles the Fifth, Most Holy Roman Emperor and also King of Spain, a soldier was following a priest through chamber after chamber of candlelight and tapestried elegance. The priest, a

Mercedarian friar, was practically anonymous in his plain robe. The soldier, Francisco Pizarro, fifty-three years old, wearing faded clothing barely adequate as court finery, had the look of Toledo steel inside a leather sheath of skin. His spare body had been toughened and worn and wounded in campaigns from Italy to Colombia.

In the yellow bloom of candles, his face was set, gray beard jutting, thin lips compressed. He was not a man to be easily awed, but his audience with the Emperor, scheduled in a few days, worried him. So much was going to depend on it. So it was with gratitude, anticipating an offer of some kind of help, that Pizarro was responding tonight to the message just brought him from his cousin, Hernando Cortes.

The Mercedarian tapped on a door, then opened it and eased himself away discreetly. Pizarro went in, to firelight and more candles, and the door closed tight behind him with the good sound of solid oak. Cortes, who was nine years younger than his cousin and somewhat fuller of face, but otherwise bore him a good resemblance, arose from behind a writing table. He greeted Pizarro warmly and offered him wine. This drink Cortes poured himself. It seemed they were to be unattended.

When the two men were seated, however, cups in hand, and had exchanged the expected courtesies, Cortes seemed momentarily at a loss at getting to whatever point this meeting had.

Pizarro offered: "I am glad that you were successful with the Emperor: created Marques de Valle and confirmed as Captain General of Mexico! I expect to catch up with him at Toledo, and I admit that I would rather face a rank of charging savages alone. But there is nothing to be done but see him, if I am to have the men and money I need to reach Peru with an effective force. There is vast wealth to be won there—I know it. . . Have you any advice for me, cousin?" ^

Cortes nodded. "I know how you feel. Advice? Well, as for matters of soldiering, you must know all that as well as I. Better, perhaps."

Pizarro muttered a pro forma protest.

Cortes's gaze wandered to the fire. "As for how to best approach the Emperor. . . and other difficult matters. . ."

There was a pause that seemed long to Pizarro. " Yes ? " he at last prompted gently.

The eyes of the conqueror of Mexico flicked at him and away. Cortes seemed to be nerving himself for something. "There is the necessary help of prayer, of course. And. . ."

And? Pizarro waited, wondering.

Tension built visibly in Cortes until it burst out in a handslap on the table. "To conquer an empire, cousin, as I have done and you may hope to do, it is necessary to take help where and when one can find it. To win a million souls for Christ*cannot* be an evil work. And when effective help is given toward that end, there is no need to fear that help comes from the Devil."

Pizarro leaned forward in his chair and uttered a short laugh. "I am quite willing to take help. So long as I am in command. As for the Evil One, with the Virgin and St. James to help me, I will look him in the eye and even twist his beard if necessary. I pray you, cousin, if you can offer me any effective help, or point out where I may obtain it, do so. My gratitude will be undying."

"Very well. There is—something." But still Cortes, with surprising indecision, dallied a few moments

more. Then, signing, he reached down for a large leather bag beside his chair. From it he raised an oaken chest, small and finely wrought, of a size that might have held a crown. With a key that hung around his neck inside his clothes, he opened up the chest and took out as its entire contents a weighty velvet bag

Balancing the bag in one hand, he told Pizarro: "I had this as a private gift from Montezuma—our Blessed Lord alone knows why. Later I was encouraged to turn it to matters treasonous. But I refused."

Encouraged by whom? Pizarro pondered. But he was not about to ask.

"Also I have considered making a present of this to the Emperor. But right now he and I are on good terms anyway. And I do not wish to stay in Spain, at court, however high my place might be. Rather would I leave well enough alone here and go back peacefully to New Spain, to enjoy the harvest that my sword has cut. This in the bag is a gift of power, not of peace. Where should it be, but in the hands of an honest, simple soldier, who will use it to win souls for God, gold for his Emperor, and estates and riches for himself and all his worthy men?"

Out of the soft bag he slid the heavy golden Mask. A cord of braided silver wire now ran between the flange-holes at the temples and the crown.

Silently impressed, Pizarro understood only that he did not yet understand.

"Yes, cousin, it is gold." Cortes slid it toward him with a finger. "But do not take it as mere wealth and melt it down. Look through the eyes."

"The eyes?" He took the weight into his hands.

"Yes, and follow what it shows you. As I have, many times, beginning before I had even entered the City of Mexico. Without this, I doubt that I could have won its wealth." Pizarro was still turning it cautiously in his fingers, and Cortes went on: "Oh, fear not; I have had it immersed in holy water and prayed over much by a priest who is just sensibly cautious in such matters. Though of course I should not mention the existence of this object to the Inquisitors, or even let my own men know that it exists. Such secrecy out in the field may not be easy, but the results are worth a hundred times the trouble. And the Mask itself can help you find ways to keep it hidden."

"My gratitude, cousin." Pizarro's uncertain hands still held it on the table. "... look through the eyes?"

"At first you will probably see nothing much. But wait."

Chapter 7. The Four Quarters of the World

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His flight was going to end, it seemed, somewhere among the sharp and icy summits that grew higher and more forbidding with every moment that he hurtled toward them. Far down their great slopes, green hills tumbled. Mike could see a single river twisting between the mountains' feet, escaping them to reach the sea. On the horizon to the left, well inland, a tall plume of smoke trailed motionlessly into the upper air. Beneath the plume sat a white mountain cone with a truncated top.

With fumbling fingers, he got out the Mask again. Its eyes were still opaquely dead. He pushed it down again into the bottom of his bag and crouched by one of the windows, marveling.

Where in the hell *was* he? The Rockies? The Andes? Another planet? How could he have traveled in a single night, by boat and helicopter, from the Florida Keys to this? He tried to map the hemisphere in his mind, but got no help from the exercise. Had he really been drugged, and hours or days thus taken from him? Who would expend such effort on him, and why? This, he thought, is what paranoia feels like.

The mountains were closing at something more than jetliner speed, and he had to fight down the helpless fear that he would necessarily be smashed flat on one of them. Now the ocean and the strip of flatland were already miles behind, and on both sides some of the taller peaks were at his level and rising. One way or another, he decided, he would soon be down. He began strapping himself into a seat, bag tucked underneath it.

Craning his neck to see ahead as well as possible, Mike finally, and with considerable relief, caught sight of what might be a reasonable landing place. Almost at the peak of a tall mountain, a natural craterlike depression cupped a small round pillbox of a building. The curving, gray-white wall blended with the trackless snow and roadless rock surrounding it on all sides. Held like a dull jewel in a rough setting, the building must be completely invisible from any inhabited portions of the land below, hard to see even from the surrounding summits. Mike might easily have missed it from the air were it not right at the end of his apparent trajectory.

Deceleration came, pressing him hard forward in his seat's harness, and confirming the happy prospect of a normal landing. The building was already much closer, and he could see that it was larger than he had thought at first. As his vehicle slowed steadily until it was merely hovering above the structure, he judged that it was perhaps forty yards in diameter and three or four stories high. Its topmost level was only a circular rim, some six or seven yards wide, around the flat roof of the next level down, that evidently served as landing deck. Several other helicopters—their rotors at rest, looked like those of no other copters Mike had ever seen, but what else could you call them?—were already parked there. On their flanks, the golden sunburst was also visible.

From the broad rim made by the building's upper story there rose several gray, featureless turrets. No doors or windows broke the surface of the building's outer wall, but from the upper story a good many faced inward on the deck. A powdering of dry snow on the deck exploded outward in the rotor-blast as his aircraft lowered itself, then set him down without a jar. The muted noises of machinery ceased, and he could begin to hear the whine of wind that rocked the landed craft beneath its slowing rotor.

All around, the doors and windows stared at him. Then there came movement to his left. A door had opened there and a figure hooded in a gray parka was trudging across the deck toward his copter. The man—the figure looked big, and its walk was masculine—reached up a gloved hand when he arrived. There came a clack of mechanism, and a simultaneous hiss of air. Mike's ears felt pressure drop, and almost in the same instant bone-chilling cold came eddying in.

Still almost completely masked inside his fur-trimmed hood, the man below was looking up expectantly. Mike drew in what his lungs could still find of warm air, dropped his bag down through the hatch, then swung himself down to the concrete deck. Almost before his upper body had cleared the hatch, his legs in their thin trousers felt numbed by arctic wind.

From inside the parka's hood, words in a Middle Western accent fought out through the gusts. "Boy, they sure didn't dress you for this job. Better get inside before you freeze your ass."

The danger to all parts of the anatomy seemed real enough, and Mike was already running toward the door from which the man had emerged. Its heavy glass swung wide at his gasping approach—lungs

seemed to be working on nothing here—and closed again as soon as he and the other, who trotted after him, were both inside. At once another door, a couple of paces inside the first, swung back. The air that flowed from inside was healingly warm, and dense enough to make Mike's ears twinge in reverse.

The room inside the double doors suggested a waiting lounge at some small airport, with lockers and chairs set about in it, and a window looking out onto the flight deck.

His escort pulled back his hood and started to take off his parka, showing a youngish face, roughly rimmed by dark hair and beard, above a thickly muscled neck. "Welcome aboard. M' name's Gunner—not the Swedish kind, the shootin' kind. Don't tell me your name until they pick out a new one for you here. Hell, they prob'ly briefed you on all that back Stateside."

Mike shook the offered hand. "Glad to meet you."

Gunner began to throw parka, fur-lined flight boots, and gloves into a locker, retaining a turtleneck shirt and trousers in different shades of gray, and black military-looking boots. "C'mon along. I'll show you your room and you can get measured for some clothes. Then you've gotta see Boss."

Boss? All right. There had to come a showdown sometime. Bag in hand, Mike followed, through another door beyond which the air pressure was greater yet.

Hotel? Military installation? Deluxe prison, maybe, if such were built. Soft light came from glowing panels in the ceiling, and an occasional lamp. Chairs and tables, as in a modern hotel lobby. Now and then a window looked out, but only onto the flight deck with its lashing snow and ranked machines. Then Gunner led him down a stair, and windows disappeared altogether, though the lighting remained cheerful and the furnishings offered comfort. The floors, brown or gray, were everywhere as smooth as tile, yet sank in slightly underfoot. Walls varied in color and texture, and there were panels of translucent colored glass. They traveled a hallway along which most of the doors were closed.

Mike heard male voices debating once behind a door, but otherwise the place was quiet. The room whose door Gunner finally pushed open fit the expensive-hotel hypothesis, except it had no windows.

"Here y 'are. That rubber suit thing over there on the chair is what measures you for clothes. Directions on the box. I'll be back in fifteen, twenty minutes, and we'll go see Boss." Gunner had the door pulled almost shut before he paused. "'Scuse me for lockin' you in, but it's orders for all new arrivals, until Boss has a chance to brief you."

For half a minute after being left alone, Mike stood still in the center of the floor. The walls were patterned and colored to make the room seem bigger than it was. The lighting was bright but indirect. He tossed his bag onto the bed and tried exploring.

The door to the hallway was indeed locked. Another door led to an ordinary closet, empty and capacious; after a brief hesitation, he put his bag inside. The last available door led to a bathroom, almost disappointingly ordinary.

He was supposed to be somehow measuring himself for clothes, so he read the directions on the indicated box, then pulled out the gray rubbery suit that it contained. With the feeling that a fraternity initiation was well under way, with himself as victim, he followed instructions and stripped to the skin. The suit resembled long underwear with attached head and gloves, and was surprisingly easy to pull on. The main frontal zipper ended in a heavy catch at the throat. As the printed directions indicated, he walked about with the suit on, lay down, rolled over, got up, tried a somersault, feeling completely foolish all the

while. The nagging sensation that someone was spying on his performance kept him from chucking it and trying the Mask again.

Gunner was back a little sooner than promised, entering without a knock to dump a fat armload of clothing onto the bed. "Put on some o' this here stuff. Any clothes you brought have gotta stay put away." In the pile on the bed were knit trousers and pullovers like Gunner's, along with boots, low-cut black shoes, sandals, and a fair assortment of other accessories including socks and underwear. As Mike changed again, he realized that everything was a perfect fit.

"I put your parka and boots and stuff in a locker topside, next to the flight deck." Gunner leaned against a wall, arms folded. "You'll need 'em every time you go out. Never gets any warmer at this altitude, so they tell me."

Just where in hell am I? But the simple question was not one he dared to ask. He must be expected to know that much.

He was dressed in a minute, and Gunner led him out again and down the hallway. His room was left unlocked this time. Well, if anyone was going to come in and search his room, they were going to—that's all. Then what? He hadn't the faintest idea.

Back on the upper level, Gunner tapped at a door and pushed it open when a man's voice within called out something. "See you later," said Gunner cheerfully, standing aside for Mike to enter.

The big room—office or study—struck Mike at once as military, probably because of the maps that dominated its walls. And there was a vaguely military look about the sturdy, middle-sized man with the clipped dark moustache, who came forward saying heartily, "Welcome aboard!" and holding out his hand. He was wearing the same issue of gray pullover and knit trousers, and three people in that garb made it undoubtedly some kind of uniform.

Mike clasped a firm and energetic hand. "Thank you— Boss? That's what I'm supposed to call you? Glad to be here." And he was, since the main alternatives perhaps were to be found shot dead by mysterious weaponry in Key West, or spattered all over one of these mountains during the trip on Automated Airways.

"Yes, 'Boss' is right. You'll get used to the cover names quickly. Come, have a chair. How would you like 'Rocky' as your own name? Unless you have some strenuous objections—? Good, then I think we'll use it." He made a notation inside a folder on his desk. "And now, with your arrival, we "re up to full strength here—eight people—and we can get on with the job of serious training."

On the verge of beaming, Boss had seated himself behind his vast and ultramodern desk, after waving Mike/Rocky to one of the visitors' chairs in front of it. This room, too, was windowless, though on the flight deck's level. Besides humdrum cabinets and tables it contained other devices that did not look like standard office machinery. And that vast map that spread across the widest wall...

"Well, then, Rocky, there are a few simple rules we must insist on here, beyond the normal military or quasi-military rules of discipline. Violation of any of these extra rules must be considered extremely serious and will mean automatic termination of your employment here, and also revocation of the benefits you hope to derive from it, with respect to those you left at home." Boss was suddenly almost embarrassed. "Don't like to have to threaten such a thing, but it's life or death for all of us, and for uncounted others, too."

"Um."

Boss brightened. "I'm glad you understand. These extra rules really boil down to one, and it can be put very simply: we never under any circumstances talk to one another about our backgrounds in the States. Of course the Directors in Cuzco have all our personal information on file, and I as field commander know a good part of the background of everyone who's here. Clear?"

Mike cleared his throat. "I'm not to tell anyone where I come from. Or my real name."

"Right. But it goes a little further than that. We're all eight of us twentieth-century Americans—in the jargon, people from US-20. The Directors recruited that way believing we'd work better together if we shared a common cultural background. The temptation may sometimes be strong to reminisce about the sidewalks of New York, or growing up on the prairies of Nebraska, or whatever. Forget it. Don't mention anything from your home life, don't mention any twentieth-century events at all. Strictly forbidden. The reason is this: Suppose you come from the 1990s and Lola, say, is from 1910. You mention that home electronic computers, for example, are quite prevalent in your time, and she takes that knowledge with her when she goes home. The disruptive results could be incalculable. A gross example, of course, but it gives you the idea." Boss paused expectantly.

"Good to know we're all Americans," Mike finally got out, baring his teeth. He was getting the idea, all right. The only question was, how had the inmates here managed to lock up the keepers? Unless there was more to the fraternity-initiation theory than seemed reasonable.

"Actually the things we must especially watch for are much more subtle. None of us are really as far apart as 1910 and 1990."

"Oh." That sounded like good news, though why it should... Mike tried to draw some comfort from the fact that Gunner had seemed quite happy and healthy enough to be pumping gas somewhere on the prairies of Nebraska.

"... you may detect a British flavor in my own speech now and then, but I'm an American for all that. Also, Americans of our period are reputedly good at improvising, overcoming unexpected obstacles, getting things done. On this job there'll be plenty that's new and unexpected. Look over here."

Boss had got up from behind his desk and was now standing beside the largest map, which showed the northern two-thirds of South America. The continent's shape was unmistakable. And there were the Andes, modeled in exaggerated relief; and there, drawn in blue lines, the great tree of the Amazon with its uncounted branches.

But the political boundaries—if such they were supposed to be—and the names of the cities, if that was what the named spots were, looked totally wrong. Mike would not have been able to draw many of them in properly—his preference in history and geography had always been Europe—but these seemed completely unfamiliar.

Wait, not quite. There was Cuzco, where he had just heard that the Directors dwelt, whoever in hell they were. Cuzco perched in the Andes just about where he thought it should be, and was named in letters larger than those of any other city on the map. But where was Lima? Wrong, too, was the language, both in the place names and in the legend printed at eye level. It wasn't English, as might have been expected for the convenience of an all-American crew, and it didn't look properly Spanish or Portuguese. Where were all the Sans and Saos?

Brazil was not even named or outlined. Most of the eastern part of the continent was pretty barren of any kind of symbol, whereas the west was thick with them. The Pacific coast was almost entirely occupied by a solid block of light tan shading, whose irregular border defined a territory that extended inland for hundreds of miles, engulfing the entire Andes and spilling over into the Amazon basin. Where were Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia? What had he forgotten, Venezuela? It, too, should be here somewhere... and what was this tan territory?

He saw its meaningless name at last, stretched out in the large letters that were sometimes the most easily missed on maps. Its name was Tawantinsuyu.

"Now herewe are, where it says *spokara* ." Boss had picked up a pointer and now tapped with it in the midst of Tawantinsuyu, near Cuzco, where the Andean highlands rose in a central topographic node. "Means 'fort' in Quechua. In the next three months, Rocky, you're going to learn that language pretty well, along with a lot of other things. Tell me, what do you know about the Spanish conquest of the empire of the Incas?"

Mike shook his head.

Boss smiled pleasantly. "Like most of the rest of us when we arrived here. Well, as I said, we have about three months to train before the action starts, and the history of this part of the world, especially those branches where the Conquest happens, is one of the things we have to study."

Maybe these could be crazed revolutionaries of some kind, utterly freaked out on the dialectics of struggle against colonial repression. On the other hand, suppose it to be no more than some incredibly complex and expensive game...

Boss looked at his wristwatch—all right, normal enough—but then like a lunatic he accompanied the gesture with the remark: "It's now August first, 1532. Francisco Pizarro and about a hundred and sixty men are now up here"—tap with the pointer—"making their way slowly down the northwest coast. This invasion displays an incredibly perfect timing—I'll go into the explanation for that in a moment. At present they're about twelve hundred kilometers from where we stand; that's roughly seven hundred fifty miles. If you're like most of us in the Fort, you'll have to learn the metric system. Not difficult."

Francisco Pizarro. Of course, he was the one who extorted from the Indians the famous roomful of gold. The Inca's ransom that the Spaniards had got out of the poor bastard before they killed him anyway.

"Okay." Mike nodded agreeably. He had entered the room ready for a showdown, but not looking forward to it by any means. He clung to the thought, or hope, that he had just been invited to *suppose* that today really was August first of 1532, and that Pizarro was really on his way... it was just vaguely unsettling, and somehow not at all funny, that Boss had looked at his watch as if checking a real date.

"... on 16 November, Pizarro and his tiny invasion force will ambush and capture the Inca Atahualpa *here*, at the town of Cajamarca. From that moment Pizarro will have a grip on the whole empire of Tawantinsuyu—the Four Quarters of the World, as it translates. As many people as his own Spain, more land than Italy, France, Switzerland, and the Low Countries all put together. Four times as big as ancient Egypt in its days of greatest glory." Boss shot him a keen look. "Of course Pizarro could never have done it without help. I mean, an invasion force of a mere hundred and sixty men, against an empire!"

Mike seemed to remember that Cortes had done something comparable in Mexico, without help—indeed, in the face of active opposition from other Spaniards. Why not argue a little and see what happened? "What about Cortes?" he offered.

Boss only flashed his pleasant smile. "He had the same help. By help, I mean of course some very advanced technology from another epoch. Which we must nullify. You see, if Pizarro wins in this branch of history, then modern Tawantinsuyu must fall. By the twentieth century, in this branch, it has become one of the major powers of the earth, and continues as such for some time beyond the twenty-third century where the Directors have their base—how far into the future I don't know. Now the Directors are prevented by some of the inherent paradoxes of time travel from going back in time to mend their own history themselves. They can't even feed information back here directly. So they have recruited us from another branch to fight for them. Follow?"

"I..." The trouble was, the man was so damn straight-faced and earnest. No, the trouble really wasn't that at all.

"Well, don't fret if you don't grasp all the details now. Our job is to preserve the Inca empire from the Spaniards. Sounds like a terribly large order for eight foreign mercenaries, I know, but it comes down to simply frustrating Pizarro's attempt to kidnap Atahualpa."

Sooner or later, Mike thought, he was going to have to decide whether to play this game wholeheartedly or not. All right, he would. They hadn't even asked him who he was, but told him. "Well. In our branch of history, as you put it, Pizarro *issupposed* to win, isn't he?"

Boss nodded energetically. "Of course. He does. He always will. In our branch, the enemy were stopped at a later point, and nothing done in this branch is going to upset things for you and me at home. When we return Stateside, it'll be to the same world—the same people—that we left. As I say, don't worry if you don't understand it all. Like trying to make common sense out of the theory of relativity. Waste of time for most of us to even try." Boss's face now wore a little self-deprecating grimace, and he gave a snorty laugh showing that he understood perfectly how crazy it all sounded. Mike felt a chill. *This* was the trouble, really. The voice of the woman who had given him the ride to Marathon had been unshakably calm, had carried total conviction, while discussing her ride on a flying saucer.

Putting down his pointer, Boss came back to his desk. "I know they try to start explaining these things to you when you're originally recruited. But somehow it never really sinks in. I suppose it can't. The last lingering doubts didn't leave *me*, I suppose, until the Directors took me to twenty-third-century Cuzco. Capital of a great nation. And even then there's still an Inca, and he's more than a figurehead, though the government's basically parliamentary.

"Anyway. In Cuzco I had time to look around, visit the universities, talk with people pretty much as I wished. I think the twenty-third-century Inca society is one well worth fighting for, if one values human freedom. Especially when you consider the alternative—I mean the world their enemies are trying to stretch across all the branches. Bah, twentieth-century English isn't designed for discussing any kind of time travel or branching. Anyway, I had the horror films all ready here to show you, but I don't know that I'll bother. They're so bad they look like something faked." Boss sighed lightly. "Well, we'd better do just one, anyway."

He moved a hand at the side of his desk, and the wall opposite the enormous map abruptly dissolved its collection of charts and diagrams and blurred into a blankness that was in turn replaced by a three-dimensional-looking color picture of—the surface of the Moon? No. From cratered and fissured flatlands there protruded stumps of what might once have been modern buildings.

"New York City." Boss's voice was flat.

"Good God!" said Mike, in banal reaction. But Boss was right—the scene did look fake, like something from a disaster movie of a year or so ago. Play the game, he reminded himself. "Atomic bombing? And is that the New York *inthis* branch, or—?"

"It's not in ours. But it could be, if the war's lost." Boss's voice for the first time took on homiletic tones. "There's a war raging, Rocky, a world war the like of which you and I have never seen or imagined. Through branch after branch of human history, and up and down tile centuries. In the far future, they're fighting it in ways we can't begin to understand. This scene on the wall is not the result of anything as simple as nuclear bombing. Plate tectonics engineering, rather. Controlling the movement of the great plates of rock on which the continents float. Earthquakes, volcanoes can be brought about." His expression properly keen and grim, Boss gazed a moment longer at the scene of devastation, then switched it off.

"What... why is this world war being fought?"

"For survival, on our side. For conquest, I suppose, on the part of the enemy. The Tenocha—or sometimes we call them Aztecs, though neither name is strictly accurate—*intheir* twenty-third-century territory, maintain a ritual cannibalism of captured enemies, along with a very advanced technology—"

He was looking at Mike closely. "Too much here for you to take in all at once, of course. I'll let you go for the time being, after touching on one more essential subject. I told you Pizarro has help, in the form of very advanced technology. The weapon in question is potentially more dangerous even than plate tectonics engineering."

Boss reached out a hand, spun a small pivoted wire cage that contained a pair of dice. Mike had been vaguely aware of the cage as an oddity on the big desk. The dice came up seven, and Boss frowned at them thoughtfully. He said, "You're probably not conversant with the theory of seriality? Few Americans of our branch and century have ever heard of it."

Mike shook his head.

"Today let me just say, oversimplifying, that it has to do with what are called coincidences. Actually with laws of nature that work rather at right angles to the laws—gravity and so forth, that you've already heard about."

"You mean laws of statistics or probability?"

"Not exactly. Statisticians can give you the number of traffic accidents to be expected next week, or they can tell you the odds against one man's being in three accidents on three consecutive days. The laws of seriality might let you discover just which man, if any, was going to have such lousy luck, and where and when the accidents would be. In effect, Pizarro's weapon does this. It's the product of a technology so advanced that even the twenty-third century can hardly think of it as anything but magic. It was conceived and built at some great distance in the future and carried back through time to be dropped in the fourteenth century and eventually find its way into Pizarro's hands. It's very easy to use—it plots out coincidences, chance events of all kinds going on around its operator, and lets him take advantage of them—sometimes helps create them—to get exactly what he wants."

Someone was tapping at the door, but Boss chose to ignore the distraction for the moment. He was bending over to rummage in one of his desk's lower drawers. "Here's a copy—fortunately not a working model. If you should ever see Pizarro, or anyone else, with a thing like this in his possession, shoot the son of a bitch on sight. If possible. Ask questions later. Come in!"

Boss's hand made a casual tossing motion. With a thud whose heaviness seemed to define finality, an object landed on the desktop, to regard Mike with a familiar and suddenly terrible golden smile.

A girl's voice came from the direction of the door, and at last he was able to pay heed. He saw dark hair drawn smoothly back from a high forehead, blue eyes, a mouth a little too big to be pretty but still too smilingly mobile to be unattractive. She, too, was wearing the uniform.

Boss was saying to her, "Well, come in, Doc, meet the new man. Rocky, this is Doc, our local medic. Of course, like the rest of us, she pitches in to do chores outside her specialty; so I'm going to let her take you along now, and give you the tour. After that you'll be pretty much on your own for the rest of the day. There'll be a copy of tomorrow's schedule in your room by this time, I should think."

"Hi." Tall Doc offered her hand as Mike got up. Her eye-corners crinkled nicely when her large mouth smiled. Was she thirty? Probably not quite.

"Hi."

Her gaze fell momentarily to the golden Mask. In this version, the flanges were laced with braided golden cord. "Pretty. I always think I'd like to have one. The real one naturally."

Boss was not amused. "Shouldn't advise any joking, even, along those lines."

Some of the liveliness left Doc's face. "All right. C'mon, Rocky. I'll show you what you've gotten yourself into."

The first stop on the tour, a couple of levels below the flight deck, was a dining room just the right size for its massive table and eight modern chairs. Around three of the windowless walls ran a mural of what suggested the New York skyline circa 1930. A serving counter and cabinets lined the fourth wall, where passthroughs gave glimpses of a supermodern kitchen.

Doc paused. "I suppose Boss told you, we take turns on what little KP there is. Except for him. Rank has its privileges, as Gunner says. Anyway, with all these automated kitchen gizmos, the duty amounts to little more than pressing buttons... see, you're already down for the day after tomorrow."

She went on, showing him the kitchen machines and how they worked, and all the while his mind was chewing away on: Shoot the son of a bitch on sight, ask questions later. God.

He wasn't going to pursue the subject of the Mask just yet—with anyone. Instead, while their heads were stuck side by side into a cavernous locker nearly filled with frozen food, he asked, "How do people here make small talk if there's no discussing backgrounds?"

Her smile returned. "Can't talk much about the weather, either, since it seldom changes up here on the mountain. Oh, we do the best we can. No mention of home, though. Boss and the Directors are very serious about that."

"Oh, yeah, the Directors. Where are they, anyway?"

"In Cuzco, usually. And usually six or seven hundred years in the future, though only about a hundred kilometers off in space." Her manner was matter-of-fact. "So we don't see much of them. They've visited the Fort just once in the few weeks I've been here. Three of them came. Indian-type men, as you might

imagine."

He let the game go for the time being and concentrated on what he could see. Shortly they were spiraling down a narrow stair to what must be the lowest level of the Fort. Down here it looked less like a luxury hotel and more like what Mike imagined the hold of a ship should be, with functional lights, hard surfaces, steel structural members constricting passage space, and a background hum of power.

"Generators for heat and light, they tell me." Doc indicated some devices behind a glass partition, looking not much like any generators Mike had ever seen. "And the Fort has defensive weapons that are driven from down here, too, or so Boss says."

"Then someone is likely to attack it?"

"It's a war." She gave him a doubtful look. "They didn't bring us here just to play around."

"No, I suppose not."

She pulled her eyes away from his. "They say the Fort draws its power somehow from the internal movements of the earth. Now down this way's our shooting gallery."

He could see no weapons in it yet, but quite possibly it was intended as some kind of firing range: a long, barren room with devices that might be spotlights or projectors mounted in the rear corners, and a rough blank wall at the far end.

Doc shook her head. "Don't ask me what kind of guns we're supposed to shoot. That'll be your department, I expect. Once fighting starts, I expect I'll be busy taking care of casualties."

"My department? I'm a lover, not a fighter." He tried a mild leer.

Doc smiled, with a touch of wickedness. "Not a whole lot of loving goes on here, in the sexual sense. It seems inhibitors are put into our food and water."

It sounded like the hoary old army rumor about saltpeter. He didn't know how serious she was, and was still mulling the subject over when Doc left him at the door of his own room. Her parting injunction was to come to the dining room a little early for the evening meal.

"It's the best chance to catch the whole company together. You'll get to meet all the rest of them at once."

"I'll do that."

Once inside his room, with the door latched, Mike made straight for the closet and got the Mask out of his bag. He might as well use it for all it was worth, if they were going to shoot him on sight for just having the bloody thing. After what had happened on Key West, he trusted its powers far more than he had begun to trust either Boss or the unknown Directors.

Why had it brought him here?

... only darkness at first, then his eyes were sprayed with light-quanta in a hundred colors. *A technology so advanced that even the twenty-third century can hardly think of it as anything but magic*. And now the eyes of the Mask were suddenly turning clear...

Against the blank background of his room's wall there suddenly appeared a circular mandala-like design, abstract and intricate. The shape of its violent colors suggested nothing so much as several green snakes being shredded by crimson lightning-bolts. The pattern held steady for perhaps a quarter of a minute before being replaced by the realistic vision of a green metallic-looking door, standing ajar in a vague hallway, with a blur of light spilling out into the hall from the room behind the door. In a matter of seconds, this picture, too, had faded, and Mike was looking at an unfamiliar sort of instrument panel. One small projecting stud or button on this panel rapidly grew larger, while the rest of it faded into an obscure background. Again, the vision briefly held, then vanished.

The eyes of the Mask had gone opaque again. Mike waited for a moment, and the show started over with the mandala. Was it showing him things here inside the Fort? But no part of the vision matched anything he could remember from his tour with Doc.

After seeing the show start for the third time, Mike took off the Mask. It hadn't offered him any better idea on its own hiding place, so he simply put it into the bag again and shoved the bag to the rear of his closet, where he now began to dispose his issue of new clothing.

So there were two Masks, one in his hands, one out there with Pizarro. If Pizarro—

Oh, come on, goddamn it... in Pizarro's hands. Francisco Pizarro, sure, and this no doubt was really 1532.

At dinner, surrounded by the painted towers of old New York, Mike got to meet the other members of the company, as Doc had promised. Of the two girls he hadn't seen before, Lola was heavy and pleasant, and Rusty was really something to look at. It wasn't Rusty's face or figure, really, it was the fact that her curly red hair was showing straight and black for about an inch of its latest growth above her scalp.

She smiled, being determinedly a good sport about his stare. "The bright part's the real me," she said, and curled some copper round her finger. "But Boss says that in three months we've all got to have black hair or bust, so I get these little pills to take every day. My eyes are darkening, too, but the change there doesn't show up so plainly."

Which made Mike look around him, and realize for the first time that everyone in the company was white, or Caucasian, or whatever the hell the type should be called these days, and everyone but Rusty had hair of very dark brown or black.

Sparks, the smaller of the two men he met for the first time at dinner, was quiet and plain-faced and not very big, a man who would be easy to lose in a crowd. Samson was the biggest man present, though he didn't look to be the athletic type, as Gunner did and Mike himself did to a lesser degree. Samson had thin legs and small feet beneath a massive torso. His hands were uncalloused and his manner retiring; like most of the others, he looked about thirty. Boss might be ten years older.

Somehow the atmosphere at table seemed to Mike more relaxed than it ought to be, everyone at ease but himself. There was quality in the food, whether or not it was dosed with anaphrodisiacs. Along the wall next to the kitchen, a serving table held corn, potatoes, fowl the size of Rock Cornish hens, and some fresh green vegetable that Mike could not at once identify, along with miscellaneous condiments and utensils.

"Chicha?" Boss was offering him a drink, holding a carafe filled with what looked like slightly cloudy

water. "Good, idea to start getting used to it."

"In that case." Mike held out a glass.

"One o' th' harder requirements of this job," Gunner joked, swirling his own glass. "Naw, hell, it ain't that bad."

Chitchat at the table went on about some card game adjourned on the previous evening. Gunner possibly excepted, the company gave no impression of being hard-bitten professional adventurers.

The grayish stuff in his glass tasted like slightly stale beer, which meant it tasted better than it looked. Now conversation had switched to some kind of model that most of the people had evidently been working on building for most of the day. It must be the model of a town, if it contained all the different walls and buildings that they mentioned. The voices in their only-slightly-varied accents were all so damned cheerful. These people were obviously here willingly.

Something about the scene was naggingly familiar, and on his second glass of chicha Mike made the identification: those war movies of the 1940s, where the clean-cut white American cast tended to bear names like Sparks and Gunner, and they all just got on great together even if one came from Brooklyn and there were misunderstandings, the team working like clockwork to destroy the lousy Japs or Nazis.

The comparison wasn't particularly reassuring. The Mask in his baggage represented more than a little misunderstanding, and what in hell *did* make these people so content in this peculiar place?

...also revocation of the benefits you expect to derive from it, with respect to those you left at home. Don't like to have to threaten such a thing ...

Honestly pleading tiredness, Mike went back to his room without waiting for dessert. He latched his door and sat through the Mask-show once again: red-slashed mandala, green door, stud rising from a complex panel. He was sure he would know the real objects when fate brought them before him... as he was sure it would. Meanwhile, he was indeed fantastically tired...

A musically insistent chiming roused him, and to his fogged brain the notes seemed to have been sounding for a year before he got his hand over to the communicator at bedside and managed to shut it off. Some kind of centrally controlled alarm-clock function, evidently. He looked at his newly issued calendar watch (0702 hours, 2 Aug 1532; God, even the millennium number looked capable of changing) and at the day's schedule in printout form, which had emerged from a slot in the top of his bedside table. He gradually got himself collected, shaking off the dreamy feeling that he was about to be late for his first day of high school.

As matters turned out, the feeling was not far wrong. After a brisk breakfast in communal style, Boss repaired to his office, and the seven trainees went docilely to sit in a small room equipped with desk-armed chairs, where the printed schedule called for them to start the workday by hearing a formal orientation lecture.

Precisely timed, a three-dimensional image turned itself on behind a lectern. It was of an Indian-looking man with a professorial manner.

"Welcome to Tawantinsuyu. You have come to play a vital role in a great struggle on behalf of all humanity... we are fighting not against a race or nation, but against a way of thought and a way of life, the creed that the individual exists chiefly if not entirely to serve the state..."

The mercenaries were listening intently at the start, but in five minutes, most of them had begun to doodle on the pads provided. The abrupt cutoff of the lecture in midsentence, its deliverer disappearing like a djinn, snapped their attention back. They were just beginning to ask each other questions when another voice, this one faceless, came into the room.

"Attention, please. This is Boss. I'd like you all up on the operations deck right away. This is not a combat emergency, but something's come up that I think is of greater importance than those lectures."

On the stairs they trotted along joking, like kids elated to be let out of class. In a machine-filled room just off the flight deck, Boss sat before a huge television screen, showing a mountainside that looked like one of those nearby, all sharp gray rocks lashed by thin whips of snow. Near the center of the screen, six spots of varicolored brightness made a small, nearly vertical string; it took Mike a moment to realize that the spots were climbers in bright garments.

"They're on the next mountain to the west," Boss informed his assembled crew. "Our defense system picked up motion there."

"Who are they?" Samson asked.

Boss fiddled with some adjustment. "There's a shrine to the sun-god, Inti, on that peak, and probably those people are -paying it a visit... Gunner, are our flyers ready to go?"

"Sure. I finished that checkout you wanted yesterday."

"Good. Why don't you warm up Number Three, then. That's best equipped for a rescue operation."

"Yessir." As if he knew what it was all about—maybe he did—Gunner went out. Through the doorway Mike could see him at his locker, getting his heavy outer clothing on.

On the screen the distant figures, like ants about to be blown off the side of a building, were proceeding upward with infinitesimal struggling steps. Mike remembered his own brief gasping dash of yesterday across the level deck outside. "How high is that mountain?" he asked the company in general.

Boss glanced back at him. "About the same as the one we're on. Around 18,000 feet, say 6,000 meters, at the peak. At that height, a lot of people need supplementary oxygen just to be able to sit up straight. Whereas the Incas built some of their stone walls and shrines above 22,000 feet. At one shrine they backpacked about a hundred tons of earth up to 20,000 feet from a deep valley. They're rather well adapted to altitude, the Andean natives. Lola, you already know how to work this console; come take over for a while, will you?" As she replaced him, Boss stood up, smiling and rubbing his hands together briskly. "One more thing we're doing over the next three months is gradually lowering the air pressure here inside the Fort. It's kept at about 2,700 meters effective pressure now, and we're going to adjust to about 3,500 or even higher; so if and when we have to take the field at that level we'll be able to function. The Spaniards had to get used to it, you know; so can we."

"The shrine's on the eastern face, isn't it?" Lola asked. "Yes, I can see it now. I'm sure that's where they must be heading."

"Good!" A figure of controlled energy, Boss turned for a quick look at the screen, then spun away again. "I see Gunner's getting our flyer ready. Doc, I want you... and you, Rocky, to get on your outdoor gear. We're going to assume that's a sacrificial delegation going to the shrine, and that one of their number is

going to be left there as a sacrifice to the sun. If so, we can pick that person up and bring him or her in here without interfering at all with the normal flow of history here; that person's life will already be over in this branch and century. We'll save a life, and we might just tap into a gold mine of information. The Directors have sent us a lot of data, of course, on the current local language and customs, but an independent native source could be invaluable."

Doc went to gather a medical kit, and Mike to his locker, to get into his parka, boots, and gloves. Then he trotted out into the frigid, thin air of the deck, to join Gunner in the warmed and pressurized cabin of the flyer. It was a smaller and less complex vehicle than the one he had arrived in yesterday.

Gunner at once began to show him the workings of some of the machinery aboard, including a small hoist used in rescue operations.

"How d' ya like the job here so far, Gunner?"

"Hell, man, I'd do more than this for these people, after all they done for me. Shit, no need't talk about it. I guess we were all of us signed up more or less the same way."

Mike doubted that enormously. He was still wondering how to fish for more information when Doc and Boss, in outdoor clothing, came out. Mike opened the hatch and took Doc's bag, then gave her a hand up. Boss came right after her, tugging the hatch shut energetically, then settling himself into the pilot's seat. Doc took the other forward place, while Mike and Gunner got their seat belts fastened in the rear.

"The climbers have reached the shrine," Boss remarked and switched on a small-screen color monitor inset among controls in front of him. The picture now showed a trapezoidal doorway, in a wall of gray, regularly coursed stones. There didn't seem to be quite room enough inside the little structure for all six Andeans at once; various backs and legs, wrapped in bright garments, kept protruding into the blasting wind. "I want to be able to hop in there and extract the victim as soon as the others start down. Here we go."

Liftoff was quiet. As in yesterday's flight, some superb system of stabilization made the machine actually feel steadier after it had mounted into the air than when it rested, swaying in the wind, upon the deck.

"They're coming out now, Boss," Lola's radio voice reported excitedly. "Only five of them, I think... yes, now they're starting down. Only five."

"Great! With that big screen you can see better than we can, so keep the commentary coming." The flyer shot forward, barely clearing first a gray turret on the wheel-rim of the building's upper story, and then the surrounding gray rocks. Boss evidently meant to keep the aircraft low, as if to minimize the chance that anyone on the ground might see it.

Either he was a superb pilot, or a reckless one—or there were safety systems built into the controls that made the trip less hazardous than it appeared. Mike's fingers dug hard into his plastic seat-arms as the flyer skimmed vertiginously down the gray flank of the Fort's mountain.

A mile below their starting point, they scraped through a barren high-altitude valley. Boss flew steadily within a man's height of the ground, and fast. Mike saw Gunner laughing at him silently and was reassured enough to make himself relax a little. Now abruptly the landscape beneath the flyer fell utterly away, into a gorge still sheltered by its depth from morning sun. Down there a river that looked small wound tortuously between banks thick with greenery. Now Boss pulled back on a control and the flyer climbed, almost sliding its way up another mountainside of jagged rock and wind-lashed snow.

The peak was near when Boss eased the aircraft to a hovering stop. After a moment Mike saw the shrine, a little stone building stuck there almost as if clinging to a wall.

"Inca party's still going down," said Lola over the radio. "They're out of line-of-sight with the shrine right now, but moving fast. They may be back in view of it again in a few minutes."

"We'll risk that," Boss announced. "Whoever they left inside is not going to have very long." As he spoke, he kept easing the flyer a little closer to the rocks, almost at the very summit. A tiny level ledge, whose clearing and partial leveling with masonry must have taken unimaginable labor, supported the small roofless shrine against the mountain. The remaining open area of the ledge would be okay to land on. No, it wouldn't. There was not quite enough room for the overhead blur of rotor to avoid the mountainside above the ledge.

Boss gained a little altitude. Now he could get right over the ledge, and did so, meanwhile motioning Mike to open the hatch. Following Gunner's earlier instructions, Mike first secured himself with a safety line, then released the door. Swallowing with the sudden decompression in his ears, he let the ladder down.

Gunner gulped a little oxygen from a tube, then started down the swinging steps. Mike noticed now that he wore a sidearm strapped on one hip. Next Doc, her medical kit now in a small backpack, reached for the ladder. Gunner steadied it from below until she was down. Then both of them were moving toward the shrine and into it. Boss tuned his controls and held position, the rotor blurring within inches of a rocky face.

Less than a minute passed before Doc was back in sight, following Gunner. He bore in his arms a sizable burden: a human shape wrapped in a survival blanket with gray camouflage side turned outward. Mike had the hoist line lowered before they got back to the ladder. The line carried a hammock-like attachment into which Gunner quickly slung his burden, then gave the lifting signal with a wave. Mike started the hoist, then moved a step down the ladder to grab the rising load and swing it safely inboard.

Then, breathing like a tired runner, Mike leaned down to grasp Doc by her gloved hand as she came up the ladder and help her through the hatch. Gunner was right behind her and pulled the hatch shut as he got in. Boss gave them barely time to strap in before they were swooping once more down the mountainside.

Doc quickly began to unwrap her patient, who was lying in the narrow space between the seats. Framed in the bright inner orange of the opened blanket appeared silver ornaments and feathers patterned in black and white, all entwined in the intricately braided hair of a brown-faced child who seemed to be in peaceful sleep.

"Get her arm out of the blanket for me," Doc ordered Mike, while she prepared a hypodermic. "That's it. They had stones piled over her already. Drugged and entombed and left to freeze. But I've got a heartbeat."

Boss was concentrating on his flying. Gunner watched the medical efforts, twisting his head around.

"They probably gave her coca," Doc muttered, needling the little girl's bared arm. "What 'sin that little pouch beside her there?"

Mike dug into a small white woolen bag attached to a leather belt. "Looks like... teeth? Baby teeth, I

guess. And this. Crumbs or flakes of something."

Boss took a moment from his harrowing exploits to glance back at their work. "Teeth and fingernail parings, sent along so the kid wouldn't miss them in the next world. Little girl, hey? Looks very much upper class—fine hands and fancy clothes."

"They sacrificed their own kids?" Gunner was quietly outraged.

"On special occasions." Boss had faced forward again. "Weren't very big on human sacrifice in general. Not like the Aztecs."

Still searching about the girl, Mike came up with another woolen pouch. In this was a whitish powder. For a moment he saw in memory a small kitchen, red cabinet, red paint.

Doc sniffed at a little of the powder held out in his hand. "That's it, coca. You know, what cocaine comes from. She's doped up to feel no pain or cold. All right, we're going to take care of that." She started to get another needle ready.

Looking out of the flyer, Mike caught a glimpse of distant western ocean, right opposite the morning sun. Then the bit of flat blue horizon was gone behind a peak. He brought his eyes back to the peaceful child's face. She might have been twelve.

The trouble with her face was that it wasn't born yet. Didn't exist. Couldn't. Not in the same world with Mike Gabrieli. About four hundred years before he was born, this kid had died. . . my God, they'd really left her there to die!

The timelessness of the scenery here on this ridgepole of the world had somewhat masked the truth. But now it was beginning to sink in. In Europe, Henry VIE, no joke at all, would be replacing Chancellor Thomas More with Thomas Cromwell about this time—perhaps this very day of northern summer. Leonardo da Vinci was dead only a few years, Copernicus still very much alive. In Rome, young Michelangelo was preparing *his Last Judgment*. Galileo and Shakespeare were not yet born.

The year of 1532. Now it was sinking in, and his hands began to shake with it, as if truth were the cold of the high Andes, penetrating to settle in his bones.

Chapter 8. The Branching of the World

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On a September morning—September here was Coya Raymi, the month named for the Festival of the Queen—Mike was working alone in the model shop, correcting some details of the toy-sized walls of Cajamarca, to fit photographs of the town made on the latest high-altitude recon flights. He heard the door behind him open, but then no one spoke or entered. He turned to see little Cori standing there.

In the weeks since they had pulled her from her tomb, the Inca girl had made a complete physical recovery. Mike had grown used to seeing her, in gray sweater and trousers, sitting at a ninth chair squeezed in at the dining table, or walking quietly through the Fort's endless circular hallways. She would cast timid eyes about her at the magical technology, then sometimes stop to stare for long minutes across the windswept flight deck toward the unchanged peaks that she must have known all her short lifetime. Her face was sometimes troubled, more often solemn and unreadable, rarely and only fleetingly showed a

smile. She answered all the mercenaries' well-meant, gentle, but persistent questions with a nod or a word, very rarely with more words than three or four.

The questions stayed within limits. No one yet pushed Cori to tell how she had come to be given to the Sun, or how it had felt to wake up here in an alien bed instead of the expected house of Inti. The Fort must be unlike any heaven or earth she could ever have imagined. She was being altered rapidly to fit into her new world. The women had stripped her black hair of its feathers, cleansed it of the oil and urine used to set it in its braids. It now fell about her shoulders, free but for a single one of her silver ornaments. Her name meant "gold," though copper would have been closer to the color of her skin.

Looking across the model, which filled a mammoth tablet op, Mike winked and smiled at the girl, and practiced a Quechua greeting. Cori didn't answer right away, but something in her face suggested that she was ready for communication.

He set down the detail he happened to have in his hand—a scale figure of a mounted Conquistador, ready to ride *la jineta* with the lance—and waved a hand in a gesture that included the whole model.

"Cajamarca," he said. If she had been there she should recognize the place, and in any case she ought to know the name. The town was bigger than most others of the vast Inca empire, but otherwise not untypical. The recon photos showed stone and clay walls, thatched roofs, and a small stone fortress on a small elevation near the town's western edge. The place had a few thousand population. The central square of Cajamarca, in the fateful November of 1532, would impress the soldiers from Castilian cities with its size, as well as offering them a providentially suitable place in which to spring their ambush on the Inca. Pizarro's Mask, of course, would guide the conqueror to the perfect place for that, upon the perfect day.

"Yes!" Cori agreed suddenly, in Quechua, looking at the model. She came to stand beside Mike at the table. "And what is this?" she asked, one slender finger almost touching the little horseman with his lance.

"*Wirakoka*, creator god," Mike answered, bilingually. He wanted to see her reaction to the name some Indians would give to the Conquistadors—not for long thinking them truly gods, but still crediting their noble mounts and bright strong metal and their mysterious firepower.

Cori laughed at him, with him, as silently as Gunner sometimes did. She had taken his answer for a joke, and was still waiting for an honest one.

"*Suncasapa*, Bearded One," he said, pointing again to the small mounted figure. This was the name by which most of Cori's people would first know the Spaniards. And to an Indian hearing it for the first time the name must suggest a 'man contemptible, ridiculous, a clown or jester maybe. What warrior would cultivate a beard?

Still smiling, Cori shook her head, a gesture she had picked up from the others at the Fort. No, Mike, stop teasing me, it seemed to mean. But she was obviously still interested in going on with the conversation.

"*Concha*," Mike said, using one finger to outline a walled space in the model. He wanted to see if he had the pronunciation right.

"*Concha*." She nodded, but the word for "enclosure" sounded a little different in her mouth. He tried again with *cancha*, and then with *llama* and with the words for "house" and "town" and "street."

From the corner of his eye, he noted someone else coming into the open doorway, and glanced up to see Doc's pleased face. The woman was standing there silently observing the girl, evidently happy that her youngest patient was starting to communicate. Doc was a good-looking woman, and after some weeks in the Fort, Mike felt as fond of her as he might of a newly discovered sister. She hadn't been joking a bit when she told him that aphrodisiacs were being put into their food. Which, he had to admit, was probably all for the best.

"*Pokara*," said Mike to Cori, meanwhile gesturing at the small fortress that overlooked the model town.

"Yes," Cori said in English, and nodded her head, black tresses jiggling. Her curious eyes kept coming back to the little Spaniard, and now with a glance at Mike she picked him up and set him on her palm. He wore a silvery breastplate and silvery morion helmet, and paint suggested a black bush of beard upon his chin. The human portion of the figure was melded with that of an animal having four towering hooped legs. The Andeans had never seen a horse before the Spaniards came, and their llama were too small for practical riding. The toy Conquistador must be the most intriguing monster that young Cori had ever seen. "But what?" she persisted. "Who? Notw irakoka."

Abruptly all the fun went out of the game for Mike. "No, not a god. Only a man. A man who is coming to Tawantinsuyu."

And this time Cori's laughter struck out golden chimes, for that was the funniest thing she had heard since coming to the Fort.

November here was Ayamarka, the month named for its Procession of the Dead, and among the more minor things nagging Mike was a gloomy sense of aptness in the name. The month brought such spring as came to the Andean highlands, mainly a foretaste of the seasonal rains that would begin next month in earnest. At 18,000 feet there was no noticeable change in weather, but clouds were thicker on the lower slopes, where summer greening would soon follow.

By November the mercenaries all looked like Indians, or at least a good deal more like Indians than they had upon arrival. Pills had altered skin color to hues that ranged from coppery to chocolate. Gunner's beard was gone, and Rusty's hair had grown straight and black to an acceptable length. Operating in a surgery that looked more convincingly ultramodern than anything else about the Fort, Doc had pierced all the men's earlobes, stretching the holes enough to accommodate the weighty golden ornaments of the *pakoyoc*—men of the Inca nobility—those whom the Spaniards would come to call the Big Ears, *orejones*.

On the night the troops shipped out, Doc stayed behind in the Fort, getting her marvelous surgery quietly set up to handle casualties. Cori, a noticeably bigger girl than she had been three months ago in August, stood by, a nurses' aide in training. Rusty was in the pilot's seat of a troop-carrying flyer, and Lola took off alone in a faster craft laden with missiles and beam-weapons, flying cover for the coming operation on the ground.

In the middle of the night, the five men of the Fort boarded Rusty's flyer. Over long shirts of plastic chain-mail, presumably proof against Castilian sword or lance, they wore capes and tunics of soft llama wool. On their feet were sandals of fine leather. Radios nestled in their golden ear-ornaments. Their axes and maces of bronze, too small to be anything but ceremonial, concealed weaponry enormously more advanced.

The two aircraft left the Fort sometime after midnight. Their flight beneath the incredible spread of morning stars was planned to take them 600 miles to the northwest in about an hour.

Mike rode in a rear seat, looking out at darkness that concealed far below some of the roughest and most spectacular landscape in the world. Before his eyes imagination and memory painted a mandala, and a green door, and a complex control panel with one button emphasized—the only things that his Mask had shown him in the last three months of almost daily secret viewings. Still he would have tried to bring the Mask along tonight, if he had been able to think of any way to conceal it from Boss's careful final inspections of clothing and equipment. In fact, it still rested in the bottom of his bag in the back of his closet.

They were going to frustrate Pizarro, to save the Inca power. In a few months, the unthinkable, incredible, became not only routine but almost boring except for the danger— now around him in the flyer the others were telling feeble jokes, making small talk, little bursts of technical conversation as afterthoughts about details of the job came up. Mike, too, would say something if an idea occurred to him. Most of the time, it now seemed to him that he really did belong here, that sometime, somewhere, he had really signed on the dotted line for some mysterious recruiting sergeant. His name was Rocky, now, and that was it. At times he nursed the fantasy that all the other mercenaries, maybe even Boss, were all here as a result of surprising journeys as unintended as his had been, that in the closets of all their rooms were hidden Masks, like secret vices... that this fantasy might be anything more than fantasy he had not the smallest shred of evidence.

The flyer bore on through the night. He had his eyes shut now, as if he were dozing, but his mouth was dry and he was frightened. All the mercenaries knew that they were going to have to fight against Pizarro's Mask, and their training and indoctrination had included numerous vague assurances that its powers could be overcome. But it seemed to Mike that only he among them could understand how hard that fight was likely to be. Were his own Mask's repeated cryptic visions somehow to guide him through it? At this late date he couldn't see what connection there might be...

His three months of training had brought him a little more information on Pizarro's Mask. Through a chain of events that probably sounded incredible to his fellow trainees, who had not seen in their own lives what a Mask could do, it had come to Pizarro from Cortes, who had it directly from Montezuma of the Aztecs. In that tribe it had been for some centuries the secret property of a series of their First Speakers, and as such it had enabled them to extend their dominion across Mexico. It had come to the Aztecs of the fourteenth century probably from their own far future, in some way that even the twenty-third-century Directors seemed to find mysterious, and which Mike could not begin to really grasp.

There was of course one aspect of the matter that he dared not discuss with his fellow trainees, on which he could not formulate questions, for the Fort's sophisticated teaching machines. Privately he theorized that Pizarro, in at least one branch of history, had decided for some reason to ship his Mask back to Spain; then the ship bringing it north from Panama had gone down in the Gulf. Tides and currents and the slow movements of the sea bottom had had their way, and then four hundred years later Tom Gabrieli just happened to come by snorkeling. If anything just happened...

Mike's mouth was drier than ever. "Got Cajamarca on the radar now," Rusty remarked to her passengers, and Mike opened his eyes to note with great surprise that almost an hour had gone by since takeoff. Looking over Rusty's square shoulder at the pilot's panel, he could see on her screen the unusually flat valley, almost 9,000 feet above sea level, in which the familiar shape of the town's walls made their bright green reflected lines.

"Look there," said Samson, his face turned out to the speeding night. Orange sparks as numerous as stars were coming into view upon the otherwise invisible mountain slopes surrounding Cajamarca.

Everyone in the flyer knew what they were—the campfires of the Inca Atahualpa's army, just victorious over that of his brother, Huascar, after five years of bloody civil war. On the way to reclaim his capita] of Cuzco after monumental struggles, Atahualpa was pausing here where hot springs made a royal spa, to rest and luxuriate in triumph before he faced the great task of welding a riven empire back together. Also, the Inca wished to amuse himself by taking a quick look at the handful of peculiar strangers who had evidently washed up somehow on a beach, and had somehow managed to bring their strange, huge, silver-footed animals this far inland and over the mountain passes, treading the fine pavements of the royal roads uninvited. These bearded, white-skinned aliens had already in passing abused some of the Inca's secluded holy women, and had stolen gold. For these misdeeds they would have to answer. But first it should prove interesting to talk to them in their unspoiled state, and observe something of their oddities.

Atahualpa's veteran army, tens of thousands strong, surrounded the town where Pizarro waited with his hundred and sixty men. Looking at the cookfires, Gunner shook his head. "If I was one o' them Spaniards, I'da shit my iron britches long ago."

"Their morale is certainly sagging somewhat at this point," Boss commented dryly. He chronically disapproved of what he called Gunner's strong language in mixed company, but made no issue of it because the Directors had laid down no regulations on the point and none of the women seemed to pay much attention anyway. "But consider their situation. They really have nowhere to go but forward, no choice but some kind of aggressive action. If Pizarro should try to retreat to the coast now, the Inca could raise a finger and destroy him—catch the Spaniards strung out and all but helpless in the passes. Some of those roads there are nothing but narrow stairways—sheer cliff going up on one side, down on the other. And Atahualpa would probably do just that. You know he says later, or he's quoted as saying, that he thought to save only a few of the invaders as castrated helpers in his harem."

Sparks spoke up, expressing doubt that the Inca had ever said any such thing—not that the brutality of it would have been out of character for him, who was like his ancestors a ruthless conqueror. After three months' schooling, all the mercenaries had their opinions on the subject, and a desultory argument began. Mike took no part. He only stared at the innumerable campfires and wondered at his fate, while Rusty slowed the flyer and began a cautious descent toward the chosen landing place in some high barren hills.

Circling and observing in her escort ship above, keeping guard against any unexpected Tenocha interference, Lola reported on radio now that she had nothing extraordinary to report, and it seemed the Directors had been right: probably the twenty-third-century Aztec-Tenocha were aware of this move by the mercenaries of the twenty-third-century Incas, but the Aztecs had elected not to try to interfere directly. Perhaps, as the Directors said, because such interference would let the Directors send their modern Inca legions into their own past to fight for it; perhaps, Mike thought, because the Aztecs knew a Mask was on Pizarro's side and no help would be needed.

... so Tom had quote just happened unquote to find the Mask, but then had rejected the warning visions it must have given him. Maybe he had enough experience with drugs—or with drug users—to make him very suspicious of visions of any kind. Anyway, he had simply planned and tried to sell the thing, without for a moment coming near to understanding just what kind of business he had been plunged into. Maybe the same gunmen who had come to Aunt Tessie's house for Mike had come there earlier for his brother. Then maybe they had come back to get the Mask, when they knew where he had hidden it, but meanwhile the neighbor with his hurricane precautions had moved it, hiding place and all. Then the neighbor brought it back, just in time for Mike...

It was chilling to suspect that maybe the Mask made its own plans, chose its own masters, let them think that they were using it, while it or its ultimate controller used them...

And Mike wondered, from time to time, what had happened to the girl. Sally, yes, that was her name. He hoped she had waked up safely on the morning after, tucked in her own bed. The rest of the town had, maybe, but in her case he wouldn't want to bet on it.

There was no end of questions fit for fruitless pondering. If the gunmen at the door were of the Aztec-Tenocha faction, as seemed likely, who then was Esperanza? If he was of the Inca faction, then why didn't the Directors know who Mike Gabrieli was when he arrived at the Fort? And if...

Landing skids crunched down on sandy soil, and Gunner opened the hatch to matching air pressure outside. Mike was the second man to tumble out, and as in the numerous rehearsals, he scrambled at once to take up his proper defensive position. His small bronze ceremonial mace with its concealed stun-maser was in his hands. His mouth was dry as long-dead bones.

Anyway, there was no-need for defensive action. The hillside around the landed flyer was all serene, and very dark.

A rack of clouds was beginning to shut off the marvelous Andean stars. Tomorrow here would be wet, and tomorrow night would be foggy, hard to find one's way about in. Sparks was already burying the small radio beacon that would allow the infantry to find their way back to this precise spot for recovery rendezvous.

After exchanging a few final words with Boss, Rusty wound up her rotor and took off. She and Lola would now head back to the Fort until time for rendezvous; if all went well, their ability to pass as Indians would never be tested; but Boss, if not the Directors, seemed to hold it as an article of faith that in matters of this kind all could never go well.

The sound of the flyer dwindled and was gone. Eyes grown accustomed to the darkness, the five men assembled and then set off downhill in single file. Gunner led; Mike came second; Boss brought up the rear. Their progress down the rugged slope was slow, involving much doubling back and subdued cursing. Before they came in sight of the town and the encampments surrounding it, a drizzle had set in, and most of the army's fires were out. Invisible in the darkness were the small buildings where the Inca and his personal escort rested: a stone complex at some hot springs two or three miles from the town.

Despite the drizzle, the air was gradually growing brighter, by a clouded process too indefinite to give the feel of dawn. Where the hills flattened down into the valley floor enough to let them begin walking freely, the five men found their way crossed by a level, stone-paved road, twenty feet broad and smooth as a modern street. From this point on, they would probably be under frequent observation by the Inca's soldiers, and Boss signaled to change the order of march from single file to a loose, informal grouping. Then they moved on, at a moderate walk, toward the center of the valley.

The hard and mostly barren ground crunched and scraped beneath Mike's sandals. Now, in the growing light, he could make out a vast number of pottery shards that were mixed in with the soil. These must be relics of a people far older than the Inca. And following that insight came a vision of the immensity of even human time, a vision lasting only a moment, but clear and intense enough so that he almost stumbled, almost forgot what he was doing here.

Gunner had an arm raised, pointing silently off to their right. Another road looped there, and on it there moved a supply train of llamas, gray and ghostly in the early light. There might be a hundred of the long-necked animals in the caravan, each no doubt bearing sixty or seventy pounds of food for the enormous army. The Inca supply system was functioning with the smoothness needed by successful empire-builders. At intervals along the train walked half a dozen herders in tight-fitting caps, clucking and

tugging at the animals from time to time.

Ahead, the miles of valley floor, still vague and dim. Mike looked off to the left, where water tumbled from the hills to rush between high banks. Where the land broke again in a small shelf, a little waterfall fell. At a greater distance in that direction, a company of ghosts marched through a patch of fog—Inca soldiery in short white tunics, marching in loose order.

Mike's mouth was still dry. On impulse, he turned away from the four he traveled with and walked toward the stream. Below the waterfall its banks were gently sloped. He slowed his pace for a moment, as he caught sight of another lone figure, crouching at the water's edge on the far bank, but then he went on. A confrontation was going to have to come sooner or later, and he preferred to test his acceptability as an Indian on one man rather than a company.

Just as Mike reached the water the young man on the far side finished drinking, raised his head, and gave him an appraising look. By his dress and ornaments, Mike knew him for a junior officer, whose insignia of distinguished service; in the form of a bronze disc, swung against the chest of his cotton tunic.

"*Ama sua*," the young man said. His eyes, not to mention his big nose, gave him something of the look of an eagle. "*Ama llulla, ama cheklla*." Don't steal, don't lie, don't waste your time. It was something of a standard greeting among the Inca's subjects.

"*Kampas hinalatak*." The same to you. Cori had at last approved his accent when he spoke the words, and now the young soldier accepted their sounds without any sign of suspicion. In Quechua, Mike went on: "And what do you expect the orders of the day will be?"

"Who can say?" The soldier shook cold water from his fingers. "The Lord Inca still warms his bones at the hot baths." With a little gesture, he stood up and went on his way; no doubt it was time that he saw how his men were doing.

Mike bent to drink. The men had been immunized against any infection or parasites they could pick up. The cold river seemed to flow into his blood, and he could feel it still with him when he stood up again. A connection with this high valley, with this whole world around him, had been sealed.

The others of his company were waiting for him in silence.

Among these Indians, the morning meal was often the biggest one of the day. With the sun well up though still invisible, the mercenaries stopped halfway across the valley to build a fire. They were somewhat away from the places where the smoke of others' cooking rose thickest. For fuel they selected the driest llama dung available along a nearby road. *Chuno* . dried potatoes, and *charqui* —jerky, or dried meat—came to life in the stewpot and made good food for Inca warriors.

As the five of them stood or squatted, munching food scooped up in fingers, Boss chose to attempt a final peptalk in low-voiced English: "I don't have to tell you men what we—each one of us—will be fighting for when we go in there today. At home, waiting for each one of us, is someone who... but I'd best say no more of that, even now." Deep emotions were threatening to come out in Boss's new Indian face. And one of his crew, at least, would have felt better if he had said more of that, even now; any information could be helpful. But no such luck. "Gunner, Rocky, you two as well as myself, of course, are the combat veterans here. The burden will be on us in a special way to make sure..."

Mike tuned out, having just heard convincing proof, if any were still needed, that Boss *didn't* know who Mike-Rocky was, had him irretrievably confused with someone else. Mike had been in the army, sure.

Drafted, and then spent his hitch in California, punching a typewriter. But *who* did they think they had recruited as a desperado to help lead the charge? Tom? No, no combat for him either, except in bars.

Gunner had probably tuned out the speech also, though he kept his Indian face impassively turned toward Boss. Sparks and Samson fidgeted. No one was eating very much. Boss soon ran out of attempted inspiration. The meal was concluded, or abandoned. Boss gave the final signal, and the men, as often rehearsed, turned to move off in their separate ways.

For a little distance, Gunner kept pace at Mike's elbow. "Was afraid there for a while he was gonna say 'Good huntin'!' or 'Bring back their scalps!' or somethin'. Had a sumbitch of a lieutenant once who... well, never mind. See y' around." He strolled away on a slowly diverging course.

Mike waved to wish him well. All five men were to make their separate ways to the area of the Inca's lodgings. Around the royal headquarters, men from all parts of the empire would be mingling, coming and going on all sorts of business. There amid diversity, small oddities of speech or clothing seemed least likely to be noticed.

As expected, the population of *pakoyoc*, warriors, camp-following women, servants, and llamas grew ever denser around the stone buildings clustered where hot springs sent steam into the air. Messengers—*chasquichuna*—sped to and fro on foot, the knotted *quipus*, message cords, in hand or at their belts. Panpipes were tootling somewhere, and from inside a house there came a laugh as of a tickled concubine.

Mike approached the spa unhurriedly. He tried to look as if he were early for an appointment with some official—if the officials here had appointments—and was meanwhile pondering whatever weighty but not urgent business he had come upon. All this method acting seemed wasted. No one challenged him. People scarcely seemed to notice that he was around. All had enough business of their own.

The town whose white walls were visible a couple of miles away had been temporarily evacuated of its inhabitants by Atahualpa's order, and reserved for the Conquistadors' sole occupancy. For a full day now, the Spaniards in the town and the Inca encamped outside had been exchanging messages and small gifts. But not until late on this rainy afternoon was Atahualpa to decide to accept an earlier invitation and visit his treacherous enemies inside Cajamarca's walls. Lounging close outside the bathhouse, Mike saw the explosive flurry of activity that accompanied the announcement of this decision, and knew what it signified; he exchanged glances with Samson, who he had seen conversing casually with some Indians in the middle distance, and who now had to get himself out of the way as the litter-bearers of the greatest lords came scrambling to lift their poles, the various teams jostling one another as if to win a more favored position for their masters in the line of march now forming.

Mike also backed away slightly. He kept watching, in an effort to see the Inca himself emerge from one of the buildings. But his view was blocked by a horde of menials in checkered livery who began to form squads in between. Chanting already in a thousand voices, they were beginning to sweep the ground free of debris before the Inca's progress. All the way to town they would precede the great mass of the Inca's ceremonial escort, none of whom bore any weapon much more formidable than a broom. That personal danger for him existed here, in the seat of his strength, was apparently too absurd an idea to have ever crossed Atahualpa's mind.

Once ordered, the royal progress formed and began to flow with practiced speed. Amid the wild profusion of costumes and insignias of the nobility and ranking soldiers, Mike attracted no particular attention. Beamed into his earplug radio came some unnecessary order from Boss, who sounded nervous. Mike caught sight first of Sparks, then Gunner, at a little distance in the milling crowd.

Now the crowd made way for the passage of the first of the great nobles' litters, several of which would follow Atahualpa's to the town square. And now, suddenly and almost unexpectedly, Mike caught sight of the Inca himself, borne aloft by scores of lords in livery of blue, in an enormous feather-roofed litter whose poles were covered in silver. Rattles whirled, the shrilling chanting of the royal sweepers rose, and Atahualpa passed. Mike got a perfectly clear look; the Inca was about thirty, stocky and well-made. The tassled *borla*—his unique sign of rank—hung on his forehead, and a thick rope of emeralds about his neck. Overhung by roofs of gaudy plumes, he sat on a small cushioned stool. Heads were bowed across the throng, like grass before the wind; the Inca was not to be stared at, any more than was the sun. Perhaps no more than ten eyes were watching closely as he passed.

The men around Mike now began to move; the march was underway. Five or six thousand strong, its ranks overflowed on both sides the broad roadway leading to the town. Rain spattered from the low racing rack of cloud, as it had off and on during the day, and was ignored by all.

To Mike, the march toward the fateful square seemed very swift. The column entered the town through a simple, wide-open gate, from which a street led between walls of stone and hardened clay to the broad central plaza. Now he could see the small fort on its elevated ground just at the west side of the town. His mouth was dry again, the mountain water long since drained away. He knew Pizarro had four arquebuses atop the fort, and eight or nine primitive muskets.

The square spread its paved acres out beneath the rainy sky. Only narrow ways led out of it. The first thousands of the Inca's escort, filing in from the constricted street, moved on to the far sides of the plaza to make room for those who pressed behind.

Mike, marching in folded-arm dignity like those about him, had yet to see a Spaniard, but he knew where they were—for the most part, concealed in three buildings, old Inca barracks, low and enormously long, that occupied one full side of the square. Their wide, trapezoidal doors were closed and silent. Behind them, men on horseback sweated in their armor, weapons ready, animals prayerfully held silent.

Though he had tried to watch for it, Mike missed the entrance into the square of the gray-robed friar Valverde, who accompanied Pizarro's expedition as spokesman of the Church. When Mike first caught sight of the priest, he was already standing before Atahualpa, whose litter had just been lowered to the ground from the shoulders of its sixty or so high-ranking bearers. Valverde was speaking animatedly, while an interpreter, an Indian from some northern coastal tribe who had lived some years with the Spaniards, stood by. Mike, some forty or fifty meters away, could not catch the words, but he knew that Valverde was passing on Pizarro's invitation to the Inca to enter one of the buildings there to dine with "governor" Pizarro amid a roomful of Spaniards. Then, through the interpreter, Atahualpa declined, saying that he would not enter with Pizarro until the Spaniards returned all the goods that they had stolen since entering his empire.

"Remember," said Boss's tinny radio whisper, speaking into Mike's ear, "don't mow them down in the doorways. We've got to let them make a real attack." * The Directors had reportedly considered and rejected the idea that simply warning Atahualpa of Spanish perfidy might be enough to save his land for him. Even if a warning could be made certainly convincing, it would not be sufficiently galvanic. Swords must be allowed to bite, the power of Spanish arms must be displayed, the Inca's person must be brought into danger, in order to produce a full mobilization of the Andean world that would be capable of resisting European pressure throughout the sixteenth century and afterward.

Valverde had been rebuffed. Now, his voice rising angrily, he was launching into the "Requirement": a

peculiar document imposed on Conquistadors by the authorities in Spain. It amounted to an outline of the Faith, and a testimony to the noble intentions of its proselytizers; and it was required to be read aloud by them to the benighted whom they had come to govern before the Spaniards could begin to shed blood in quelling Indian resistance. Meanwhile Mike was thinking that he was going to shoot the charging horsemen in the doorways, pile them up there before they could get out and start the slaughtering, whether Boss wanted it done just that way or not. It was not just a matter of defending the Inca. He—Mike—was out here in this bloody square himself, and his plastic armor was feeling more and more thin and insubstantial with each passing moment.

Now Atahualpa, questioning, had taken into his hands the holy book Valverde had been waving at him. The Inca, who had never before seen writing, much less a bound volume, could not get it open. The friar reached out and would have helped him. Annoyed, the Inca shoved the robed arm away, and a moment later got the book open by himself. There fluttered before him pages of incomprehensible markings. It may have seemed to him a joke, a trick, something as rude as the insulting message just stammered out by the interpreter, whose unintelligible meaning seemed to be that the Child of the Sun should at once hand over lordship of all his lands to some distant white-skinned ruler that he had never seen or heard of. The Inca threw the Bible to the ground.

The interpreter hastily picked up the volume and handed it to the friar. Valverde took it and turned away. Harshly shouting something which Mike could not quite make out, he strode toward the building in which Pizarro and his cavalry were hiding.

Looking toward its roof, Mike now saw the expected white scarf wave, a signal toward the fort. He shifted his grip upon his ceremonial mace, and with a nervous thumb turned off the safety catch. Without in the least understanding it, he heard some final admonition from Boss come through his concealed radio.

Matchlocks needed time to work, time for priming to ignite and pass fire on to the chambers. The scattered volley from the fort erupted a full two or three seconds after the waving of the scarf. The missiles blasted from the primitive guns were not vastly more dangerous than a volley of rocks from Inca slings; but for men who had not heard or seen the like before, the thunder-weapons were terrible in their psychological shock.

Around Mike, the ruling class of the Four Quarters of the World were turning, gaping at the low sky in search of lightning bolts, and calling upon their gods. Jostled in the press, he sidestepped, raising his mace, trying to get a clear field of fire toward the trapezoidal doors...

"Santiago and at them!" The war cry boomed forth in Spanish near at hand, was echoed from the fort, and from the square again. The big wooden doors burst open onto the square. In converging columns from three doorways, the horsemen thundered forth, driving hard for Atahualpa's grounded Utter.

Mike aimed his mace and squeezed the hidden trigger, knowing but not caring that he was firing too soon. He swept the rough column of oncoming cavalry from front to rear with invisible force.

There was no immediate effect.

"Hold your fire, hold your fire," Boss kept repeating, with insane calm, in Mike's left ear. At the same time, Mike saw the first weapons thrust and cut, heard the screams of the day's first slain and wounded.

Still no Spaniard had fallen. He was squeezing the trigger, wasn't he? And the safety had been taken off. But nothing worked. He might as well be snapping photographs. The mounted men came on, oblivious.

To Indians who had never seen or imagined such a charge before, who indeed had never before seen a horse, the cavalry onslaught must have brought terror as of monsters from an alien world. But yet the need to defend the Inca was still overriding. As fast as the men of Atahualpa's escort could be knocked down by horses, run through by lances, hacked out of the way by swords, others threw themselves into the Spaniards' path. The great litter had been heaved aloft again by loyal arms, its bearers trying to retreat through a great press of men.

Blades flashed, steel and crimson. War-horses screamed like anguished men and reared, struck with their hooves at feathered men who ran beneath their bellies and tried to push them back. In every frame of vision, Indians were going down. Thousands would die today inside this town. Blood splattered on fine plumage and vicuna wool. The voices of fear and rage and triumph rose up deafeningly.

"Fire!" The order from Boss was piercing plain when it did come. Oh, fire, you bastards, Mike pleaded with his comrades. I'm going to have to sit this one out, guys, don't know what's wrong with this damned hunk of junk...for perhaps the seventh or eighth time, his finger checked over as best they could the mechanism of the stun-maser built into his bronze mace. He could check it blindfolded, after all the time they'd spent in practice. In practice everything had always worked. And it all checked out now. Each time he pressed the trigger, the unit responded with a faint vibration, the designed signal that the beam was operating. Any complex nervous system, a man's or horse's, say, caught by that beam within a hundred meters' range, should be disorganized for seconds or even minutes. Repeated jolts could kill, or so they'd taught him. All the Castilians and their horses should now be staggering and weakened, or sprawled convulsing on the pavement. Then the Indians should rally, no doubt to slaughter the Spaniards before they could recover. Then Tawantinsuyu would be saved, warned, inoculated and immunized against European power and perfidy. The empire of the Incas, within this branch of history, should continue to exist, and its existence should change the world.

Mike tried again. What else could he do? He sighted this time at an unmounted killer, a greybeard on foot who might well be Pizarro the poor horseman, preferring to trust to his own two legs in the melee. The man's eyes flashed blue beneath a morion helmet; his sword was leveled toward the Inca's swaying litter; his whiskered cheeks were stretched to roar a command or a war cry. Mike hosed the man—or tried to hose him—with radiation that should have dropped him in his tracks. He steadied his aim and held the trigger down. The man gave his head a fierce shake, as if something had stung or distracted him in the midst of battle. But then he moved forward again, striking vigorously left and right.

Where was Pizarro's Mask? Not on his face. But still...

"Boss, my weapon's jammed somehow..." That was Gunner's voice.

"—not getting any output from this—" That sounded like Sparks.

"Negative here, too. Malfunction..." Might have been Samson.

"Get closer!" Boss was ordering them all. "Everyone, , keep firing! Move on in..."

The Inca's litter was still borne high on scores of sturdy arms and shoulders. So far his attackers had not been able to get within a lance-length of it. They were kept back not by battle but by slaughter—human flesh forcing itself forward by the ton, clogging the Toledo steel blades of the meat grinder. In the background somewhere, the muskets and the cannon kept up a slow erratic barking. Meanwhile, in the confused press of bodies, the men who carried Atahualpa could not maneuver to carry him away. Whenever they began to find the space to move, some horsemen managed to come at them from a new direction.

Whether under some hypnotic compulsion to follow Boss's order, or infected by the fanaticism of those around him, Mike found himself trying to get closer to the great litter. A few yards off he could see Gunner, also pushing his way forward. Mike aimed and fired, aimed and fired. Totally ineffective, as before, but what else was there to do?

A Spaniard spurred his horse, the animal's half-ton of driving weight forcing its way close to the liner, while its rider thrust and cut at the bearers to bring the Emperor down alive. Mike saw one of the blue-clad noblemen lose an arm; the man leaned his red shoulder-stump under the pole, continuing to bear a portion of the load.

All around the roaring struggle went on, endless, mad, hypnotic. Horses tripped on the piling bodies of unarmed men. Men and horses slid and fell in puddling blood.

Pizarro—that graybeard climbing over bodies had to be him—and where, where, was his Mask? Hidden somewhere in his baggage, if only someone could—Pizarro roared curses at his own men, some of whom seemed to have given up the attempt to capture the Inca and to be threatening to kill him if they could hurl themselves close enough. On his swaying litter, the Inca himself sat as impassive as a mummy; there was nothing he could do unless his men could first get him away.

Still, incredibly, the Spaniards could not quite manage to get close enough to kill or capture him. No sooner had one of his litter-bearers been cut out of the way than two more climbed upon the bodies of their fellows, happy to die for their great lord. And wounded bearers still upheld the poles, until their strength had bled too low to let them stand.

Jammed in by struggling bodies, Mike could do no more than any of the men immediately about him. The narrow gates of the square were all clogged with humanity—masses of Indian men striving to get out, perhaps to arm themselves—while others tried to push in to reach the Emperor's side.

Mike saw, within a few yards of the Emperor's litter, Sparks' head almost severed by a swordcut that struck just above his concealed body armor. A moment later, another Spaniard seemed about to strike at Atahualpa with a dagger. Pizarro was on the spot in time to intervene, shooting an arm forward and taking the blow on his own hand; it was the only wound that he or any of his men were to receive during the day. Around their leader now the horsemen surged forward together, yelling.

At last the gay-plumed liner overbalanced. The remaining bearers, stumbling over corpses, felt the blood-wet poles slide through their helpless hands. The litter toppled, spilling its contents sideways. Dismounted Spaniards, contending with their own horses in a perilous scramble, seized the fallen Inca's arms.

It was as if a switch had closed; a core of gravity dissolved in an explosion that sent shock waves across the square. The thousands of Indian men still alive within its walls were left with only one instinctive purpose: flight. Mike was swept with them, away from the spot where Atahualpa's arms were being bound. He could do nothing but struggle to avoid being trampled in the rush.

Again a cannon or a musket fired. Spanish voices screamed: "Santiago and at them!" Mike knew the killing was far from over. When the crowd about him loosened enough to give him room, he ran, rain whipping into his face from the sky that seemed to have been steadily darkening forever. Before him, one of the long white walls of the square of Cajamarca crashed down, broken outward beneath the impact of a thousand running, climbing bodies. Not far beyond lay open country—and a chance.

Mike ran. There came hooves hammering behind him, now closing right on his heels in a terrible avalanche of sound that brought blind panic. Something smashed with a giant's power at his left shoulder blade. He was lifted and hurled forward into another running man, the two of them rolling together on the pavement as horse and rider thundered gigantically by.

Dazed, unsure of anything but being still alive, Mike rolled to his feet and staggered on, beginning to run again when he found that his legs still worked. The pain that had been beaten into his back persisted, but he had no sense of broken bones or bleeding. Blindly following a horde of moccasined and sandaled feet that flowed around him on both sides, he clambered over pieces of the fallen wall, and kept on going. If only he had his Mask... why hadn't it warned him of this ahead of time, shown him the right way to avoid it?

There was a street to run, among a few more buildings, and then the open countryside ahead, the almost barren plain.

Men ran through fields, shouting in cracked voices of the fallen Inca, a shock in their voices as if the sky had broken like a pottery bowl above their heads. A thousand nobles, some of whom might have managed to stop a rout, lay dead, back in the square. Demoralized at one blow, the vast Inca army scattered into leaderless confusion.

Behind Mike there came again the sound of hooves, and he forced his aching, pleading lungs to grab him air to let him run. At last his lungs could do no more, and he must either stop or fall. He turned, aiming and firing as he had been trained, with the mace that somehow still stuck in his hand. He sighted at the dark-bearded face, high atop the horse that from this peasant's angle looked unstoppable as a tank. The red sword lifted, and Mike turned and threw himself down... something sang in the air above him as he rolled away. The rider galloped on without a pause, charging after other game. Mike scrambled to his feet and found that after all he could still run.

At last he had to fall, and fell, and lay there gasping, very near a faint. The thin air... of course the Spaniards had to breathe it, too. But they were not compelled to run, and run, and run...

When enough breath and control had come back to let him raise his head, he found himself alone except for one man who sat nearby, his head and shoulders outlined against a dismal, gloomy sunset. The walls of Cajamarca might be half a mile distant across the plain. It was a white-haired man but maybe not an old one who sat there with his elbows on his knees, twiddling his thumbs in an un-Indian-looking way.

Mike grunted something that might have been in Quechua, and got up to a sitting position himself. In the distance, in the dusk, he still could hear screams and war cries.

"My name is Esperanza," the white-haired man said in English, turning to look at Mike. He had a huge nose, almost broken-looking. "I talked to you once on the telephone." It was the same resonant actor's voice. Esperanza was wearing some kind of cape.

"Good God," Mike said without much vehemence, or reverence either. "I'm not sure what world I'm in."

"Well, it is hard to tell sometimes. But at the moment you're in Tawantinsuyu-16 as the Directors' jargon has it. Sixteenth-century Peru, and if one of those Spaniards stabs you, you'll be dead. Never doubt that for a moment."

Mike felt no doubts at all on that matter. He sat there breathing hard, gripping his mace, developing a fierce anger that the other seemed so sure that he, himself, was in no danger of being stabbed. Esperanza

looked too relaxed for that.

Mike said, "You're doing this to me. What're you going to do next? Whadda you want?"

"It's probably useless for you to question me." Esperanza shook his head, and Mike could see his big nose briefly in silhouette. Cyrano as a prizefighter. "Tell me, Gabrieli, what are your plans? Beyond mere survival, I mean. This is an awkward time to talk to you, I know, but I have to get in this visit when I can."

"If you're such a goddamn friendly visitor, give me a hand. Get me out of this."

"I can't. Literally. Can't even tell you anything very useful. If I tried, I'd be gone in a paradox loop before could find out anything from *you*."

"Where's Tom?"

"Finding your brother is still a high-priority matter for you. That's very—"

Esperanza was gone. No fuss or fanciness, just gone. If he had ever been there. If he were not merely some result of a concussion.

"Report in." It was a tinny and tiny, but reassuring, Boss's voice, coming through the left ear-ornament. "Gunner. Rocky. Sparks. Report in, please, and head for rendezvous." The call was repeated, with slight variations and an enormous weariness of tone, as if Boss had been sending it for some time. If so, Mike hadn't heard it until just now.

"This is Rocky," he answered, low-voiced. "I'm "" Where was he? Out in the valley somewhere, "I'm on my way to rendezvous. Sparks isn't, though. I saw him get killed, back in the square."

"Rocky." Boss sounded relieved to get an answer. "You're quite sure he's dead?"

"Quite." With a shudder that turned into a shiver of Andean chill, Mike got to his feet. He started walking away from Cajamarca into the moonless, starless night.

Boss asked, "Any sign of Gunner?" Evidently Boss knew the fate of Samson, whatever that might be.

"No."

"Wait. . . I think I may have a bearing on him here." Boss was evidently carrying some special gear to help him keep track of his troops. "Proceed to rendezvous, Rocky. We'll try to meet you there."

"Understand." Radio silence fell. He stumbled along, in gusts of rainy wind. As he got onto higher ground, it required some effort to keep from falling over a rock or into a ravine. He had turned on the homing device in his right ear-ornament, and the beeping tone kept strengthening. Its pattern varied depending on whether the transmitter was to his right or left. He was shivering uncontrollably now with bitter cold.

He still had the bronze mace in his hand. A weighted stick. He stuck it in his belt. Probably not as effective as policeman's billy, but if the cavalry came after him again, he was going to turn around and try to smash their heads in with it. No, he wasn't. He knew damn well the cavalry was not going to come out in these hills after dark. Right now the Spaniards were behind walls in Cajamarca, fearing the Indian

counterattack-by-night that was never going to come, taking turns guarding their royal prisoner, snatching sleep in their armor while their horses stood by bridled and ready to go. He was carrying his mace for another reason—to bring it back to the Fort and find out why it hadn't worked.

At last the modulation in his right earplug altered to a pattern that meant he was within a hundred meters of the rendezvous point. And still no one else in sight.

He was getting the ten-meter signal before a figure ahead of him detached itself from deeper darkness, stirring and scraping among the rocks. It looked quite tall and heavy-shouldered.

"Samson?"

"Rocky." The big man pushed away from the rock he had been leaning on, came closer by a few steps, then sat down all in a heap. "Did you see—?" The dazed question trailed off into silence. There seemed no need to try to answer it.

"Hello, up at rendezvous." It was Boss's voice again. •"I'm coming uphill from the south—need a bit of assistance."

Going to give help would be no more unpleasant than standing around here shivering. "All right, I'll be down." Somehow Mike got his exhausted body moving. Pain radiated through him from his back. His lungs and his whole chest ached.

"Boss?" This sounded like Lola's voice on radio. "We're coming in fast. I've got the whole valley on radar now. No sign of Tenocha interference. Let me go in with some of this good hardware I've got on board and try to break the Inca free."

"No." Boss's voice was weary and inflexible as a ghost's. "There's no such contingency plan. You must simply stand by, and not use your 23-weapons unless the Tenocha use theirs first. In this case, the side that strikes first is at a disadvantage. And what if you killed Atahualpa? The problems are incalculable, at least by us here in the field. We're pulling out, back to the Fort. . . we're not in shape for anything else."

Mike could hear the last low-spoken words from right in front of him. Climbing down a few more steps, he reached Boss, who proved to have Gunner draped against him; Boss was half-carrying the wounded man along. Gunner was clutching their two weapons.

"Careful, Rocky, don't grab his arm."

"Ah."

Between the two of them, they somehow manhandled

Gunner up the hill, getting back to rendezvous just as the muted whistle of rotor blades was coming down. The warmth and air in the cabin of Rusty's flyer somewhat revived them all, except for Gunner, whose arm was nearly severed. Boss had a pressure bandage on him, but Gunner's face was gray with shock under his phony Indian tan. He kept on shivering, and his slow-blinking eyes were empty. The flight back to the Fort took less than half an hour, under a rotor that screamed like police sirens through the night. No one had even cared if the Tenocha were looking in on the operation. Maybe all armies in all wars were inevitably fouled up in their own blunders. . .

It was Mike who carried Gunner in across the flight deck. Doc, with Cori standing by a steadily as an

experienced nurse, had a cart ready for the wounded man, and a bottle that they plugged into his arm even before they wheeled him off.

The three men who had managed to come back on their own feet slumped into chairs before their lockers. They had all put on parkas in the aircraft, and still wore them, open, over bloodstained Inca finery. Samson, who had hardly said a word since rendezvous, gazed into space. Boss and Mike stared at each other for a while. It seemed as if perhaps they shared a secret.

Cori came back, very businesslike in her white smock that now was also marked with blood. "Are any of you wounded?" she asked in English. "Doc wants to know."

Mike reached his right hand back to feel his aching shoulder blade. He shook his head, and tried to raise a smile for the girl. It would be something—some kind of achievement, salvage, whatever—if they could get her out of this to some sort of decent life.

Before Boss could give his delayed answer—if he was planning one—*Lola* appeared in the doorway of the operations room. "We had an alert signal on the panel earlier," she informed Boss. "It went away. But now I've got a signal for friendly aircraft coming in."

Boss nodded, not surprised. Looking gray and shrunken as he slumped there in his parka. "Rocky..."

"What?"

Boss grimaced. "Ah, this foot is giving me hell." It was the first time he had mentioned trouble with a foot. "Will you step out and greet them?" It was a request, not an order.

New and bigger rotors were audible by the time he got out onto the flight deck again. A flyer bigger than any he had seen before, shining its own lights down onto the darkened deck, descended from broken clouds. The golden sunburst on its metal flank was more elaborate than those on the craft Mike had seen seeing. He had a momentary impulse to turn and run, as if from before a Spaniard's lance. But he was all run out.

As he crossed the deck toward the landed flyer, he was confronted by two Inca men in modern gray uniforms, who had evidently just dropped from the ship's belly. Between them there suddenly appeared a taller third man, who wore a woven sunburst on his parka's breast, and came forward with his hood thrown back as if this were a sunny day at some spring altitude.

"Where's Boss?" The demand came in understandable Quechua, though with an intonation quite different from the language Mike had learned.

"In there."

"Alive?"

"His foot's hurt."

The tall man started to push past Mike, then paused momentarily. "You're—Rocky." It came out *almost Roca*, as in the name of mighty Inca Roca, Atahualpa's ancestor.

"That's right, sir."

"Call me Tupac. Let's go inside."

Inside, Tupac kept his parka on, though the heat and air pressure had been turned up for the benefit of the wounded. He towered over Boss, ignoring Boss's one tentative effort toward getting up. "What went wrong?"

Boss met his eyes for a moment, then blinked and looked away and made a gesture. "The guns wouldn't work. None of them."

"Stun-masers wouldn't work?" Tupac shifted into English, which came from his mouth strangely accented. "Were they not all tested?"

"On the firing range downstairs." Boss still sounded ghostly. "We followed all the tests you people gave us, and the guns met all the specs. Then out in the field, nothing. I'd get a firing indication, but no effect on target. At least I saw no effect on any man or animal I shot at."

Tupac looked at Mike, who nodded, and said, "I thought I got a small effect one time, but it was minimal. Man just shook his head and went on." He gestured the wielding of a sword.

Tupac looked at Samson, who said, "I might as well have been taking their pictures."

The tall Inca rounded on one of his escort who had come in with him. "Collect whatever of these suspect weapons you can find We'll take them back to Cuzco." Suddenly he swung back to Boss. "Did any of the people flying cover report Tenocha action?"

"I didn't," said Lola, still looking out from the operations room. "There was nothing detectable." Boss also signed a negative.

Tupac paused for thought, puffing out a long breath. Then he spoke decisively. "Roca. You go out and get into my flyer. Don't waste time packing. I want you to come with me. I'll be along as soon as I get a few more details straightened out in here."

Mike's eye caught Cori's worried one before he reached the door to the flight deck. He found energy enough to wink.

Chapter 9. Mictlan

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Aboard Tupac's flyer they told him little or nothing, beyond repeating that they were taking him to twenty-third-century Cuzco. Inside this craft the furnishings were superior to anything that he had seen in Tawantinsuyu so far. But he spent most of the flight sitting alone in a small alcove of the main cabin that made almost a private cubicle. He had no way of seeing out, and the flight ended with a landing directly into a vast hangar whose doors were shut overhead before Mike got out of the flyer, so he saw nothing of the outside world. From the hangar he was escorted directly into a connected officers' quarters or hotel or whatever, a maze of corridors and doors, where his assigned room turned out to be much like his old quarters back at the Fort—even to the lack of windows. He slept at once, exhaustedly.

The first time he awoke there, he wasn't sure if it was a good day's or a good night's rest he had just enjoyed. The only timeframe he felt at all sure of was the century—he believed he was somewhere in the

2200s, because they had told him so, as casually as he might have believed a distance marker on a highway. After what he had been through recently, the idea of a jaunt into the future hardly seemed shocking.

The little he had seen of Tupac on the flight had left Mike with the impression of a man fretting, unable to act effectively at the moment, but still desperately pressed for time. At first this assessment didn't seem to make sense, applied to a man who had time travel at his command. But all indications were that the ability to move from century to century was strictly limited, that the past could be reentered and remolded only in certain places, and with difficulty. Besides evidently severe natural limitations, Mike supposed there might be whole years or decades held impregnably by the enemy. Maybe there were months or days of peril, natural or man-made, that jutted up like dangerous reefs to snag the unwary spacetime voyager. More helpful was another analogy that occurred to him; that of two twentieth-century men in his own branch of the world. One rode a supersonic airliner, eyes fixed in a hungry stare at his quartz-crystal wrist watch; the other walked a dirt road at an easy pace, squinting up at the sun to gauge the passage of the day. Which was most at the mercy of time?

After awakening in Cuzco for the first time, Mike lay in bed beginning to wonder whether yesterday's interview with Esperanza had been as unreal as it now seemed, the product of some delirium. He had of course mentioned it to no one, and reacted with a guilty start to a melodious ringing from an instrument at bedside, much like one of the communicators at the Fort.

He gave English a try. "Hello."

"Tupac here. I want to see you. Someone will come to get you in about ten minutes."

And that was that. Maybe in the days when Boss was touring Cuzco they had had time—there was the seeming paradox again—to show him the sights, provide philosophical interludes to convince him of the lightness of their cause, let him mingle with people great and small. Now things were moving at a quicker tempo.

Laid out on a carved chest at the foot of his bed, Mike found a new uniform—he couldn't remember if it had been there when he tumbled in last night. Naturally it was a perfect fit. Its shade of brownish gray was a little different from that worn at the Fort, and it was still without insignia of any kind. He had turned in his malfunctioning mace to Tupac's aide last night, but the ruins of his Inca garb were still where he had tossed them when undressing, along with his plastic-mail shirt. Mike looked briefly but reverently at the scarring on the links that had protected his left shoulder blade against a trefoil lancehead, and went to inspect his back in the bathroom mirror—a discolored lump had arisen, but he wasn't maimed.

Washed, clothed—since the pills had given him an Andean complexion, shaving was practically unnecessary—and feeling well on the road to normalcy, he answered the door just eight minutes later. A girl in brown-gray, wearing meaningless insignia, beckoned him to follow her and led him on a long, entirely indoor walk.

Some of the ways they passed along were wide as city streets, and crowded like rush hour. The people were mostly Indians, in a myriad variations of the familiar uniform, but whites and blacks were present in a small admixture, and he saw side by side two faces that he took to be definitely Asiatic. Nowhere could he catch a glimpse of the outside... and nowhere a green door, strange mandala, or studded panel of a kind to fit his visions given by the Mask. He was beginning to doubt that those visions would ever be fulfilled. The damned thing had brought him here and then had blown a transistor or something. It was broken and feeding him repetitious nonsense. Had it, like the stun-masers at Cajamarca, fallen under the influence of Pizarro's Mask? Had the Conquistador a somehow superior model that could produce

coincidental breakdowns even in another Mask? Tupac had been so certain that there was only one...

The black-haired girl he followed was attractive, but only in a remote, impersonal, abstract way. He wondered if chemicals would be put in his food here, as at the Fort...

He followed her through a silvery, circular doorway that blinked its iris sharply shut behind them. In a vast room, Tupac sat behind a desk on which two trays of food were laid. The fragrance of coffee wafted from large cups, and a spouted pot stood by. On the plates were fat pancakes and sausages that Tupac was already attacking with his fork. The girl gestured Mike forward and then left.

On second glance, the place was not quite a room, but rather an area within some larger enclosure. The ceiling was quite high enough for basketball. From beyond translucent partitions voices drifted, speaking Quechua, sometimes faintly echoing as if they came from really cavernous regions. Maybe it was the hangar where timeflight had ended last night. There came also sounds suggesting tools and machinery.

"Come. Sit down. Eat." Tupac was still practicing his English, which needed work but still might be better than Mike's Quechua. On the wall closest to his desk there towered a bigger version of Boss's map of Tawantinsuyu-16. On this map, what must be Tawantinsuyu-23 extended clear across the continent, marked with a thousand varied symbols, standing for cities or God-knew-what. Brazil still seemed to be nonexistent. On an adjacent wall, a flat picture of a globe of the world spun slowly in a good illusion of three dimensions. Mike took the time to notice that the nations of Europe, at least, looked about the way he remembered them—and there, the good old U.S.A. right where it ought to be.

On Tupac's desktop there were no papers to get mixed up with the food, but rather a flat translucent and segmented screen which occupied most of the horizontal area and upon which passed a steady parade of images. Sharing out the space in orderly fashion were graphs, columns of figures, headlines, color photographs, and charts indecipherable by the savage mercenary from three hundred years in the past. At intervals one thing or another vanished, to be replaced by new displays. As he ate, Tupac scanned his desktop with an expert eye, sometimes reaching out to a series of controls mounted in proximity to his right hand, with which he temporarily altered or froze the flow of information.

Mike sat down. With what had become almost involuntary reflex, he scanned his surroundings for a crimson-slashed mandala, or a green door that stood ajar, etcetera.

"Try the corncakes, Arnie."

Arnie? There was no one else visible in range of conversation, so Mike picked up a fork, and cut into one of the fat pancakes on the plate before him. It was very good and made him realize his hunger.

His plate almost cleaned off, Tupac swallowed coffee and put his mug down with a small but unconcealed belch expressive of enjoyment. "Ahh. Well, to business. I have your background record here." In one corner of the desktop, a thousand words or so of small print sat immobile; with it the image of a man's head that revolved in the flat screen as solid-looking as that flat globe upon the wall. Was that supposed to be Mike Gabrieli's face? Looking at it upside-down, Mike supposed there was some resemblance, maybe a close one.

Tupac was reading the dossier. "Arnold Francis Dearborn. Born Kansas City, 1948. In trouble for juvenile delinquency, as you people call it, in the sixties. Then infantry service in Vietnam. Somewhat over-enthusiastic service, as your own superiors thought. Let's just say that timidity and tenderheartedness were not your problems. Still, you were basically amenable to discipline. Yes, you went on our lists away back, along with thousands of others... Then, when your little sister of whom you

are so fond acquired leukemia, our computers really zeroed in. By the way, I can now give you a good report on her. The remission continued, as we promised. Two days after you were recruited officially and left for the Keys, she was discharged from Michael

Reese Hospital, Chicago Complete remission, which as usual has the doctors puzzled; so you see, we've kept our part of the bargain."

The desk coughed faintly, and from somewhere spat a photograph into Tupac's hand. Girl with traveling bag in hand, big smile plain on her face, approaching a car whose Illinois license showed plainly, and whose door was being held open for her. A smiling older couple were at her sides. No one was looking at the camera. Photo taken how and by whom? Our spies are everywhere. So that was how they handled the recruiting. Save a loved one from cancer or the equivalent, and you've hired yourself a loyal worker; it fit in with everything he'd heard.

The only problem was, the man they'd hired for one job was evidently an experienced killer named Arnold Dearborn. He had started for the Keys, for that house in Marathon where the couple owned the cabin cruiser. But the man who had actually come to their door in the middle of the night was a former clerk-typist named Mike Gabrieli

Tupac was still speaking, words that demanded much more than half an ear. "... so, according to this dossier, and a creditable performance in the field so far under difficult conditions, you're now our first choice to take over Boss's job. The pace of operations is going to pick up." Tupac probably did not realize just how that last bland announcement sounded, right after Cajamarca. "If you accept the job, there'll be additional compensation involved. In the form of—what do you call it?—a rain check for future medical treatment. A limited additional number of times you'll be able to call on us, after you get home, for yourself or a family member."

It hadn't occurred to Mike that he was going to be offered a promotion. He'd vaguely thought he was being called in to give some kind of testimony in an investigation of the failure at Cajamarca. The prospect of being promoted didn't elate him, either. It felt like being made captain of the ship when it was on the verge of sinking. What if he turned down the promotion, though? Then they might not send him back to the Fort at all, and what would happen to the Mask he had left there? Whereas, if he went back as commander...

"I'll take it," he replied, and then asked, "What's happening to Boss?"

"He is finished there, whatever you decide. I'm not blaming the defeat on him, but we want to make a change. We'll bring him here to Cuzco-23, get him out of your way. Give him some kind of a staff job—I believe that is the proper term—until the issues are decided and you can all go home." Tupac's abrupt smile indicated that there were no problems with tooth decay in Cuzco-23. "Good enough?"

"Good enough." Mike took another bite of the excellent sausage, demonstrating to himself how calm he was. Then, yielding to a sudden impulse that skidded wildly close to self-destruction, he asked, "But suppose I wasn't Arnie Dearborn?"

Tupac blinked, but then his eyes held on to Mike's. "What do you mean? Who else could you be?"

"Well..." Surely, his subconscious had some retreat prepared, to let him blurt out a thing like that. Yes, here it was. "That trouble with the guns. Suppose that was some kind of sabotage. Someone at the Fort deliberately screwing things up. Maybe someone who's not what he or she seems to be."

Tupac shook his head once. Once was enough. "We know who you all are. Believe me, we very carefully recruited you and checked you out and brought you to the Fort." The way he said it made it almost believable even to Mike. "Have you any reason to suspect anyone at the Fort of—what do you call it? Sabotage?"

"No. Except I don't understand why the guns suddenly didn't work."

"All of their beam generators had been accidentally mis-set. There was an exactly corresponding mistake made in calibrating the test equipment you used at the Fort, so it showed the guns were putting out the proper power when in fact they weren't." The Inca smiled humorlessly. "The Tenocha test their weapons on live targets and don't have comparable trouble. Of course we are not so incompetent that blunders like this could normally happen. Nor was it sabotage in any ordinary sense. This coincidence of mistakes was an effect of the weapon that Pizarro bears against us, whom he does not even realize that he is fighting."

Mike, hunger suddenly gone, pushed back his tray. "The Mask."

"The Mask." Tupac's arm swept trays, dishes, and leftover food all together into a wide chute that yawned suddenly at one side of his desk and then closed again. The coffeepot had survived. "One of the things your new job will require is that you learn some more about the enemy we're fighting... hm. Where to begin?"

"Do you know where the Mask comes from?"

"We don't know who made it. It comes from the far future; it first appears in our segment of lime among the fourteenth-century Tenocha."

"I understand that. Tupac, you know for some time it's struck me as peculiar that the Aztec-Tenocha and the Conquistadors should be allies."

Tupac poured more coffee into two fresh cups that popped from somewhere. "It shouldn't. The history of warfare is full of strange allies. And Cortez in Mexico and Pizarro here did often ally themselves with one Indian tribe or faction against others. And this war that we are fighting ramifies into so many regions of space and time that—well, from your viewpoint or even mine, it no longer makes much sense to ask who all of our enemies are, or all our allies either. Don't think that the grand headquarters for our side are here in Cuzco-23. In twentieth-century terms, this building we are sitting in is maybe like an army corps headquarters, no more. And the Fort, of course, is only an outpost." Tupac rubbed his head and added, seemingly more to himself than to Mike, "Though it seems to have become a damned important one."

"All right." Mike waited, thinking. So how do we know our side is any better than theirs?

Tupac paused as if he sensed the question and wanted to take his time and set it right. "In the branches of history where our enemies rule, people exist chiefly if not solely for the service of the State. For the State's chief servants, all others must be always ready to offer up their labor and their wealth, their freedom and their blood. I am not speaking of special sacrifices required at moments of great peril for society. Here in Cuzco-23 we ask those sometimes; so does any government. I am speaking of a routine mode of life and thought. Of daily rites that include the cutting out of living hearts, the cannibalism of limbs from living human beings. Both old Aztec-Tenocha habits, and not just in the sixteenth century. They are practiced in the twenty-third, and later. I can show you filmed records of these rites, if you have doubts—?"

"I saw enough blood and guts at Cajamarca."

"That was only war. Well, never mind. You had a better view of that man I can ever have, and obviously it shook you, even after Vietnam. Personally, I find all scenes of slaughter monotonously alike."

"Sir, is there any more you can tell me about this Mask Pizarro has?"

"Call me Tupac. In a real sense, Pizarro doesn't 'have' the Mask; it has him. Does a man who jumps onto an avalanche possess real power because his mount sweeps villages and forts out of his way?"

"Well." Mike felt a shiver as of Andean cold. "But suppose instead of him, someone else was carrying it—or another Mask like it—around."

Tupac gave a short laugh and studied his big brown hands, spread out on the shifting patterns of his desktop. "I suppose if today's Inca announced he had one, Parliament would immediately insist he give it up. And they would have good reason. It might bring him to any goal he wanted, but it might be devastatingly rough on his friends and associates as well as on his enemies." He shook his head. "I tell you frankly, we will probably never be able to kill Pizarro as long as he heeds his Mask's advice. Assuming he wishes to remain alive."

"That powerful?"

"That powerful. From how far in the future it comes, I do not know."

"Tupac—forgive me if I keep pushing at this point, but if I'm to be the commander out there, I've got to know just what I'm up against. If someone walked in here and offered you another Mask, just like Pizarro's, would you take it? What would you do?"

Tupac's smile was sardonic. "If I were strong, I would accept that Mask, and then try to have it destroyed at once. I say 'try' because it would not be as simple as melting down a mere lump of gold... Do you know what a black hole is? "

"Some kind of astronomical thing? An infinite mass...?"

"Not infinite, just very concentrated. Of absolutely crushing gravity. As a power source, orders of magnitude better than nuclear energy. The only black holes now left in nature are those of astronomical mass, because thanks to the blessings of quantum mechanics, the little ones, of which there were a great many when the universe was made, decay in finite time. Our scientists think that the Mask may contain one of those early little black holes as its power source, one brought for that purpose from billions of years in the past.

"Anyway, if someone brought it to me and caught me in a weak moment, I think I might put it on my face and look through the eyes. Then we would see which way the world would bend, for me... but no one will bring a Mask. I am sure that there is only one."

Mike opened his mouth and let it close again. He slumped down in his chair.

"Speaking practically now," Tupac went on, "if you or anyone else in the field should get the chance, Pizarro's Mask should be melted down on sight, along with anyone who happens to be holding it, wearing it, or just standing in the way. And from now on you are going to be using some weapons that can melt things."

"I thought we weren't able to use that kind of force in the sixteenth century."

"Our wisest computers assure us that from now on we should try." Tupac got up briskly and went to stand beside his vast map. "On 26 July, 1533, some eight months after his capture, the Inca Atahualpa was—is—will be—executed by Francisco Pizarro, despite his full payment of the ransom demanded by the Spaniards. For you to rescue Atahualpa now would involve too many paradoxes, we think. But, shortly after the execution, Pizarro and his small force begin a three-month march to Cuzco, fighting several battles along the way against unpacified generals of Atahualpa's army. You people at the Fort are going to interfere in some of these battles—this time using weapons that work."

Tupac spoke on, his eloquence making this new scheme sound not too difficult, just exciting enough to maybe produce a pleasant tingle. Mike felt a fading of his sudden new hope that he might now be granted an understanding of just what was going on. Damn Tupac!

Not that Tupac seemed like a robbing, murdering Conquistador. He was no Aztec-Tenocha either, cutting out a bloody heart or two each day to please his gods, savoring human flesh. Here was celebrated only the more subtle sacrifice to Inti, and only on occasions of special need. But unfortunately for the victim, he was left just as dead. Come, climb this exciting mountain with us, Sonny, enjoy the marvelous view. Now we've reached the top, we'll give you a big mouthful of delicious coca, so you won't notice the cold a bit, and now how about a nice cozy nap? Don't mind us while we pile these few small rocks upon your head. They'll help to keep the wind off... and the condors, too.

Mike found himself briefly distracted from his own situation, thinking of Cori, wondering what the future or futures in all their unguessable complications might hold for her.

A minute later, he was getting to his feet. The interview was over, Tupac was shaking his hand to congratulate him on his promotion, and his escort had come to lead him out.

Before they sent Mike back to the Fort, they taught him something about chronophysics. Shortly after leaving Tupac, he was conducted to a lady mathematician, who lectured him in strangely accented English.

Fifteen minutes after they started, she was saying to Mike, "Any time travel would entangle the universe in hopeless paradox, were it not that changes introduced by a time traveler can literally split the world, causing a real branching of physical reality. If you go back and try to murder your grandfather before he can sire your parent, you might conceivably succeed. The universe can divide itself to accommodate such an act. A new branch, in which you were never born, comes into being."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. A whole new universe, stars and galaxies and all, just because I pull one little trigger? Where does the energy come from for such a creation?"

"From the same sources whence came the energy to make the universe that you already know. Does its existence seem incredible?" Formidably patient, his teacher was prepared, as he had already begun to discover, to snow him blind with mathematical support of every word she said. She would write out the proofs electronically on a wall-sized screen if he preferred; it wasn't her fault if he could scarcely begin to understand a symbol of them.

"Okay," he gave in, with a small sigh.

"Okay." Her broad Andean face creased with a smile. "However, though your objection is not

theoretically accurate, it does have a certain practical validity. Consider an analogy. When you walk across this room, your motion has a undeniable, though of course not measurable, perturbing effect on all the bodies of the solar system. 'Thou canst not stir a flower without the troubling of a star.' Hey?"

"Um."

"Similarly, a small act—the pulling of a trigger—may produce an actual new physical universe and earth. Practically speaking, the new creation will almost everywhere diverge from the old by only an immeasurably small amount. That is, from the physicist's point of view. Societal effects, of course, are something else again."

"I think... I don't know. Maybe I begin to see."

"Of course you do." She began to explain that while the gulfs between the different historical branches of the world might be very narrow, they remained unbridgeable. To get from one to another, you had to go back in time to where the branches diverged, then forward again at a different angle, as it were.

Mike kept reminding himself that a lot of smart people didn't understand relativity, either.

One could sometimes draw power, though, from this branched quality of the world. So the Fort was powered, and so was the enemy's comparable installation, known to be somewhere in Tawantisuyu-16. It was code-named Mictlan, from an Aztec-Tenocha word for hell, and before they sent him back to the Fort they taught him something about Mictlan...

He was in Cuzco nine days altogether, if the count he tried to keep was accurate, and he might almost have been in Atlanta for all he found out about the place. He spent almost all his time on cram courses in chronophysics, in the nature of the enemy, and in a few other subjects, and he emerged feeling not much wiser than before.

After nine days or so, they flew him back to the Fort. Tupac came along. This time Mike was able to look out a window shortly after takeoff and when the timejump came he could appreciate its weird visual effect, sun and bright sky shifting instantaneously their quality of light, as if a quick cut had been made in a movie. Timejumping was never done on the ground, they'd told him; large solid objects in the locus of a rematerializing traveler presented too great a hazard.

On the flight deck at the Fort the surviving garrison were lined up in cold-weather gear to meet him—Doc, Gunner (with two functional arms), Lola, Samson, Rusty. And there was Con, no longer identifiable among the others at first glance, so tall had she grown. In time, as measured at the Fort, Mike had been gone for several months. At the reunion, no one mentioned Boss; Tupac had remarked casually en route that the former commander was already back in Cuzco, awaiting reassignment.

Tupac kept them all standing on the deck while he gave Mike his official blessing. A short pep talk, snappier than Boss's used to be, a few words that rang clear in the thin air while the great rotors behind and above the speaker never stopped completely. In about one minute, the Inca and his escort were gone.

Mike smiled, uncomfortably, at the twelve intent eyes that watched him, the new commander. "Let's get inside."

One of the first things he did after getting in was to go to the commander's quarters. He opened the doors of the office and adjoining bedroom with a key that Tupac had handed him a little while ago.

Samson asked him, "Want some help bringing stuff over from your old room?"

"No thanks, I'll pick it up myself. There isn't much."

Alone with the Mask, he was encouraged—almost elated—when it promptly showed him something new: a picture of himself putting it, still in his humble traveling bag, on the floor of his new closet. After that it went back to monotonous showings of the red-slashed mandala, the green door, the studded panel.

Cori was Mike's first visitor in his new office. "Welcome home, Roca Yupanqui," she offered from the doorway. After putting the Mask away, he had left the door open, in a sudden mood of something like loneliness. Cori's dark eyes were sparkling, really glad to see him. Home, hey? He realized vaguely that the women must have been helping her fix her hair again.

The Honored Roca smiled back. "Thank you. And how are you?"

"I do well."

"You're certainly learning English."

They talked a little about the other things that both of them were learning: about machinery and customs and the awesome history of the world. Then she took herself away, saying he must be busy.

He just sat there for a while, staring at the door that she had closed behind her. He had mentioned her to Tupac, who had explained there was some complex kind of paradox-danger that forbade moving her to Cuzco-23, at least for the time being. Tupac had also thought, and Mike agreed, that the girl's knowledge would probably prove useful to them in Tawantinsuyu-16.

Problems seemingly more urgent were at hand, and Mike soon brought his gaze back to his new desk-chronometer, a gift from the Directors, as Tupac had put it. It was 27 July, 1533. The Inca Atahualpa was dead, strangled yesterday by his Spanish captors after a sham trial. Having squeezed what wealth he could out of his royal hostage, Pizarro was now free of Atahualpa's embarrassing and potentially dangerous presence. Soon the pliable youth Tupac Huallpa, half-brother of the slain monarch, would be crowned as the first puppet-Inca, reigning at Pizarro's pleasure; and soon after that the conqueror would be on the march to gain the gold and souls of Cuzco.

Gunner flying solo in one heavily armed aircraft, Mike in another, were at a sunny 2,000 meters above the mountain town of Jauja. Let the inhabitants of Tawantinsuyu-16 now see, if they cared to look, great birds thundering in the sky; they were shortly going to see sights even more marvelous than that.

On the land below, Pizarro's hundred and thirty or so effective fighters—a small garrison of the less healthy troops had been left behind—had now progressed more than half the distance from Cajamarca to Cuzco, a march of some weeks along the Inca's royal roads in this region where a road was likely to turn suddenly into a stairway, or abruptly leap an abyss on a swaying fiber bridge. Almost a year had passed in Tawantinsuyu since Mike had first arrived there.

Today Pizarro had run into his first serious military opposition, an army of several thousand under the general Yucra-Huallpa. On a small height overlooking Jauja, Pizarro was just sending his steel-armed and -armored horsemen to smash like a mechanized column into the dense ranks of Indian infantry, men armed with woolen slings, and clubs and blades of bronze and wood and copper, and protected with

quilted cloth.

The outcome of this first shock of battle was as expected by the observers in the sky. "There they go," Gunner commented shortly on the radio. Like an organism shattered into its component cells, the Inca forces were torn open by the impact, fast disintegrating into a fleeing mob. Later their leaders would rally them, and they would try again. And again after that, with fresh troops brought in by the thousands, conscripts from the land, and veteran professionals from the far corners of the empire. And yet again after mat... but courage and determination were going to avail them nothing, unless they got some help.

"Hold position up here, Gunner. Watch for a Tenocha counterstrike. I'm going down." Handling these craft, fast though they were, was easier than driving a car.

"You're the chief." No one had yet said "You're the boss."

Mike aimed his ship's nose at the Spanish column. He switched his target screen to change ranges automatically and set his thumb ready on the trigger in his steering column. Stun-masers would fire from that trigger, with a rapid automatic cannon cutting in if the trigger were held down for three consecutive seconds. Should cannon fail, the rocket-launchers were cut in. So the Directors thought to circumvent Pizarro's Mask. Mike expected it might not be that easy, but his own Mask had given him no warnings against making this effort.

He went down fast. Horses grew in his screen, and silent yelling fighting faces, and then one gray-bearded face beneath a morion helm, its whiskered cheeks stretched out to shout commands. Pizarro was mounted today. Where would he have hidden *it* ? Inside that bundle tied behind his saddle?

Hurling closer—

The world went blank and empty for a timeless interval, and then refilled itself with sound and light that seemed to take a year receding to levels that were no worse than intolerable. Pain wrenched at his head, the panel before him only a red-hazed blur. He thought it was some internal sense rather than sight or hearing that let him know his flyer was in a dive and that its speed was very high.

"Gunner—what—"

There was no answer. Vision cleared, and Mike saw from the panel indicators that his flyer's defensive missiles had been launched. Something modern had come after him, but so far he was surviving. His machine was pulling itself out of the dive. Far below, the ants in steel armor and those in quilted padding played out their savage battle, too busy to notice the giants' blows being exchanged across their sky.

The flyer gave back control when his hands reached for it. But response was sluggish, and damage lights were showing.

"Gunner, come in. Where are you?" Then at last he saw the other flyer, lying broken on a high rocky slope. There was no sign now of the Tenocha, in the sky or on his panel, but they might strike again with as little warning as before.

As usual, flat space was at a premium. It took Mike a couple of minutes to set his flyer down within climbing distance of Gunner's wreckage. He had to try, though, the cabin of the wrecked flyer looked reasonably intact, and mere seemed grounds for hope. Getting out of his own ship, he clambered across a rock face where in some cooler moments the risk of falling would have frozen him. He wrenched at a door, and at last got it open enough to look inside.

Gunner hadn't made it this time.

Teeth bared, Mike turned and started back for his own flyer, pondering his next move as he climbed. Pizarro was protected, as by steel walls... but so, apparently, was he, Mike Gabrieli. Together they could probably rule the world.

But after Cajamarca, Mike would as readily have formed a partnership with a cancer virus.

So he was going on playing with Tupac's team. Would the Inca legions of the twenty-third century now be able to move in, with advantage? So far, there was no help in sight; only the Spaniards far below still intent on chasing and slaughtering the fleeing Indians.

Getting airborne, Mike found it at once problematical whether he was going to stay that way. The shuddering of the airframe was more pronounced than before, and the Fort was hundreds of kilometers to the southeast

Again, something struck at him out of the sky. Not an explosion this time, but an invisible wave of power that left him sick and paralyzed, hands sliding from the controls. Before unconsciousness closed down, he had time to think that this must be what the stun-masers were supposed to feel like. His last sight was of a huge aircraft bearing insignia like blood-red lightning bolts.

There were recurrent dreams—or rather, recurrent awakenings to a state as terrible as the worst dreams could ever be. Perceptions of blood-dripping limbs, intermittent giggling laughter, questions he forgot as soon as he had answered them, all imbued with that utter inner terror that bubbles out in nightmare.

The next clear scene was of himself, propped up in a soft chair. At first he saw his own body as if from outside, from a locus suspended in the air a few feet off. Only gradually did things arranged themselves so he inhabited this slumped figure, garbed in a white gown as if for a hospital or the tortures of the Inquisition.

Looming over the low chair in which he rested was the figure of a brown-uniformed man, who sat on the edge of a long table, below bright lights.

"Arnold. Arnold. Arnold." The man was speaking to him, speaking with monotonous patience, and Mike knew that it had been so for some time. "Arnold, you are awake now." The man's English was peculiar in a different way from Con's or Tupac's.

"Yes." The only emotion he felt was a kind of pride in having managed to wake up.

"That is fine. That is just fine." Satisfied, the man got off the table and walked around it to take a chair on its far side. He made a tent of his fingers and looked across them. Dark Indian face. On his arms, red daggers crossing.

"How long have you been working for the Incas, Arnold?" The tone was bright; the question sounded as if it might be prompted by nothing stronger than polite curiosity.

I must be in Mictlan, Mike thought, without urgency. "How long?" he echoed aloud, involuntarily. He felt no fear, but only curiosity to see what happened next.

"Yes, Arnold. Ar-nay? Ar-nee, I should say to you. How long."

"I don't know. Who can keep track, with all this funny time-travel business going on?"

"Let me put it this way. How many days of your life have you actually spend at it, do you suppose?"

"Lessee—before Cajamarca, about three months. Since then, I was nine days in Cuzco... Cuzco... Cuzco " He seemed to be stuck.

"Who did you talk to there, in Cuzco-23?"

"Tupac. Others."

"What others?"

"Professors. Teachers." He just answered, without thinking. He had no choice about answering or not.

"Which of them was an old man—no, let me say a white-haired man, with a big nose?"

"Uh."

"Whose name perhaps began with '£'?"

"Not there."

"All right, let that go for now. Now I want you to think back, Ar-nee, very carefully. What was the date, in your own calendar, when you were first approached by a recruiter for the Incas? Think, now."

All Mike could do was look back at his questioner hopelessly. Very sad that he wasn't going to be able to answer the question. It had no answer, but that wasn't something he was allowed to say. How awful. Now he felt sadness, and his eyes began to brim with tears.

"Very well, if you can't say, you can't." And the interrogator gave an obscene, incredible little giggle, as in those nightmare intervals before awakening. His red-marked sleeve moved as he adjusted something. "You will have use later for all your tears. He—ee—ha. Now what name did their recruiter use who first approached you? In Chee-ca-go, wasn't it? Right after your sister, Joanna, contracted leu-kee-mee-a?"

His tears had stopped. Names and names went rattling in his head. A horde of foreign file clerks had tramped into his brain, were rummaging in all the dusty drawers. But Mike Gabrieli had never been approached by an Inca recruiter, and there was no answer to be found. If the man once asked Mike a sensible question, like "What's your name?" Mike would have to answer it. But this Tenocha was bent on questioning Arnold Dearborn, doubting his identity no more man Tupac ever had. Mike could only grunt and shake his head.

" Ar—nee, Ar-nee." Gloomily. "I wish you could tell me who put these blocks into your brain. They present a really formidable barrier. But we, of course, shall persevere, and in good time we shall prevail. Do you doubt that?"

"No." The truth came automatically when it could.

"Have you heard the name 'Tom Gabrieli'?"

"Yes."

"You have met a white-haired man with a big nose."

"Yes."

The interrogator almost got to his feet, settled for leaning forward on the table. "It is possible you still don't think of him as an agent for the Incas. But you have seen him, several times, since your involvement began."

"Yes."

"And his name is?"

"He told me Esperanza."

"Ha!" A hurried sort of triumph. "The Spanish word for 'hope,' of course. How hopelessly, stupidly coy these friends of yours can be. But now you have seen for yourself just how incompetent they are. First at Cajamarca... and then they sent two of you out in those little aircraft, into a zone we had so well covered that... Tupac knew he was sending you to be killed. Do you realize that now?"

"Uhh. Yes."

"It is only by the wildest chance that you are here alive. And the Inca plan for which you were sacrificed has come to nothing also. Do you understand?"

"Uhh."

"Well, you at least realize the possibility — even the likelihood — that I am telling you the truth. "

Mike had to nod. It made his head ache briefly.

"Your whole operation there at what you call the Fort has been a failure, is it necessary to add? Now there are only four people left there alive — for a little while."

Mike managed to count it up. Himself and Gunner subtracted, there should be five. Probably the Tenocha didn't know about Cori.

His questioner's interest lay elsewhere. "How often did Esperanza come to see you at the Fort?"

"Never."

"In Cuzco, then?"

"No."

"What other names did Epseranza use, when you knew him back in the United States?"

And so it went for some time. They knew they had him fixed somehow so that he was incapable of lying to them. But they also knew with the same unquestioning certainty that he was Arnie Dearborn, which made hash of all their results, as it might have made of many fine Inca calculations back in Cuzco-23. It

looked as if only the old man with the big nose might be ahead of the game so far— whatever he might be playing for. At least he must be these bastards ' enemy . Three cheers for Esperanza. But there was no emotion in the thought.

After a while, Mike began to undergo blackouts in his chair, periods of nothingness that were at first isolated and momentary but grew more frequent and lasted longer. Finally someone came up behind him, and there was a wrench of pain that felt as if they had torn a hole in the top of his skull and pulled his spine up through it.

Lolling in his chair like a dead man, he was rolled out of the interrogation room, while the pain in his head subsided to a mere blinding throb. He raised a hand and found a shaven scalp with a few drops of blood. It would seem that they had pushed something down into his brain.

So the Tenocha and their pawns, the Conquistadors, were the victors in Tawantinsuyu-16, which would soon become Peru in this branch of history as it had in others. So it seemed. But the Tenocha wanted something more, or they would not be questioning him. Nine out of ten of their questions had to do with Esperanza, but they never mentioned the Mask—any Mask.

Ahead of Mike's rolling chair, a door slid open by itself, and hands reached from behind him to grip him by the arms and dump him forward like a load of laundry, into a small cell. His brown-uniformed keeper turned the chair away, and the door slid closed. Mike was alone, as if inside a giant egg; the cell was lighted from no visible source, and lined in smooth curves of what felt like tough plastic. He stood up in his white gown. He wasn't physically weakened, but felt as if he ought to be, and he was somehow abnormally relaxed. Holding his mildly aching and fevered head, he thought that inhabiting this cell was almost like being inside a giant tooth through which some sadistic dentist was about to thrust a drill.

The second interrogation session (the second one he could remember—there might well have been others somewhere along the line) was much like the first, save that this time he was fully conscious when they pushed their hair-thin probes down into the top of his skull. This time two interrogators, a man and a woman, were seated across the table from him, and they raised their heads momentarily in reaction to his scream, then went back to studying some paper work spread out before them.

As soon as the probe was fully in place, the whole procedure became quite painless and not even frightening. He tended to drift off, though.

"...get around these inner barriers of yours." The woman was talking to him. She had come around to sit on his side of the table. "You understand now, Arnie, don't you, that there is no point in trying to fight us? No reason for you to adhere to Tupac and that bunch?"

Her voice was almost kind and he would have liked to agree with her, but truth was enforced upon him. "No."

She sighed. "Well, we are going to have to overcome your subconscious reluctance to face facts." She motioned to someone behind Mike and spoke a few words in some language he had never before heard. It occurred to Mike that the next time they pulled out the probe, he would probably faint or die. Emotionlessly, he wondered how dying was going to feel?

Into his field of vision some men now wheeled his brother, lying on a kind of cart. Tom was in a white gown, too, a short one, and both his legs and one of his arms had been cut off. All the stumps were swathed in precise bandages. His remaining arm—his left—was strapped down. Their eyes met, and Tom's face, already badly altered, wrinkled horribly, as if there might be something he was trying to do or

say. Tom's head had been shaved, too, but some time ago, for now stubble like a new beard had a good start on growing back. The woman put a hand on the cart. "Now this gentleman was another protege of Senor Esperanza. His name is Tom Gabrieli, and you have heard of him; whether you have met him before or not is immaterial now. You can see how much good his service to the Incas has done him. He has been dwelling in a food locker lately, and when his last limb goes, he goes."

At least those were the words he thought he heard the woman saying calmly. Maybe if he didn't think about them, the sounds could make some other meaning.

...the cannibalism of limbs from living human beings... not just in the sixteenth century, but in the twenty-third and later. I can show you filmed records ... That was Tupac's remembered voice. Hey, Tupac, you were right. I must admit it.

"... family grieving for this man, at home in the United States. And for his brother, whom we had to put out of the way in Flor-i-da. On those highways, not hard at all to make an accident. No one takes much notice..."

At Marathon in the Keys, the car like the one he, Mike, had been riding in, gone smash through the rail and into the water. They were fishing it out when Mike rode by. Some mix-up by the Tenocha field teams, coincidental of course, and they'd killed Arnie Dearborn in that car and never guessed it. Now Mike could no longer follow his own thoughts, for he was being questioned again and his attention was compelled.

"Was Esperanza on hand when you left Flor-i-da?"

He blacked out.

And came to. Tom and the cart were gone, the torturers conferring in their own language.

What had he, Mike, been concentrating on, the first time he wore the Mask? On finding his brother. Amazing, absolutely amazing results, all across the centuries as well as miles. And his second wish had been...

When the probe was pulled out this time, he screamed and fainted but he did not die.

Mike came out of his faint again while being wheeled back to his cell. He had the feeling that the foundations of Mictlan might be moving beneath his chair, hell ready to launch itself like a giant space ship. Tom on the cart. Not Tom. What once had been Tom.

When he saw the brown hand descending on his shoulder he hallucinated for an instant that it was holding a laser-cleaver like the one in the kitchen back at the Fort, and was going to lop off his arm. But it was only gripping his white sleeve, tilting him forward. The featureless door of his featureless cell was sliding open as before, and he was dumped limply inside.

Looking out before the door slid shut again, he saw his escort already turned and wheeling the chair away. On the wall beyond the man were the red daggers of the Tenocha sigil, red daggers like...

... like those in the endlessly repeated visions shown him by his Mask.

Nursing, with a finger, a droplet of blood from his abused scalp, he sat back on the floor and tried to think. Anything to keep Tom out of his mind. The door had closed now, cutting off his view of the insignia

outside, which had been similar to the mandala of the vision, but not identical. Still, the man-data must be somewhere inside Mictlan. In his recently befogged mental state, Mike might have had it before his eyes without really seeing it. Yes, the snakes in it curled .so—

His cell door slid open, and he involuntarily cowered back. But the narrow corridor outside was empty.

He had been thinking of the—

The instant his imagination formed the picture correctly, the door slid shut smoothly.

Months ago, the Mask had given him this cell's key. It was a secret key that no jailer need fear to lose, no prisoner could hope to steal. But it had not been out of reach of the Mask's powers.

He stood up. He had almost forgotten that he was riding on the avalanche. He might be carried through hell, but hell's gates could not hold him if he kept his footing. The Mask' would take him where he had asked to go. To find his brother, then to put the Mask itself back where it belonged. Those had been his original wishes when he put it on. One accomplished. Two more now added: for his own survival, and for the destruction of Mictlan and all that stood behind it.

Out in the corridor, Mike remembered to think his cell door closed behind him. Without any real surprise, he saw the green door standing ajar to his right, a dozen strides away along the slightly curving passage. He walked there silently and pulled it fully open.

It was a chill storeroom of some kind, with other passages leading off at its far end, and smooth drums and cubical sealed containers piled about, some on tall shelves. At a table half a dozen steps into the room, a working figure had its brown-uniformed back turned to Mike. A Tenocha man, busy wrapping something on the table—some bundle about the size and shape of a man's arm. A surgeon's or a butcher's tools were laid out on the work surface, where a drop or two of fresh blood marred the room's pastels.

The worker had heard someone come in, and he started to turn, calmly and unalarmed. Some paces beyond him, Tom's upturned face showed sightless eyes above the rim of a huge metal bin.

The table made a light sound, skidding back; the uniformed man had pushed against it as Mike's fingers clamped his throat. The Tenocha's eyes bulged; trying to pull away, he staggered back and back, stopped at last by a tall metal rack laden with anonymous plastic drums. The butcher was not big or heavy. Mike hammered his head again and again against the metal rack, but when he released the throat, the man fell only to his hands and knees. A sharp metal implement that had fallen from the table came up into Mike's hand, and with it he struck downward. Struck again. And bent to make the job quite thorough.

He stepped away from reddish streamlets on the floor and went to look into the bin. Tom was naked, his chest ruined. His heart must have been cut out at the end.

Tears were running on Mike's face. Mandala and green door were behind him, studded panel next. But it was nowhere in this room. Outside in the corridor there were loud voices getting nearer, speaking Tenocha.

Mike chose at random among the passages in back, and followed a narrow way amid piled crates and boxes. Air hissed somewhere, bringing first a change of pressure and then a breeze flavored with open snow and mountain rocks. Unhurried but unhesitating, he went on.

He came abruptly onto a loading dock, its glass doors now closed against the glare of sun upon a gray, snow-blasted slope. What land and century? He didn't know or care. Parked right against the outer hull of hell, its open hatch latched to a docking port, a flyer waited, rotors motionless.

The cabin was warm and pressurized when he stumbled into it, still wearing his hospital gown. This was not an Inca flyer, of course, but still the constellations of controls were half-familiar. Among them the expected panel of the vision waited. Mike's hand reached out, and as he brought it down, he hoped the stud would detonate the mountain underneath Mictlan and raise it to crash down upon them all.

Chapter 10. The Royal Road

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Peru, 1533

The stud he slammed down produced not cataclysm, but instant engine power and quiet rotor movement overhead. With a series of soft noises, the hatch undocked from Mictlan and folded itself inboard. Mike let himself slump into the pilot's chair. The ship was going straight up, fast, in what was obviously a programmed takeoff sequence. Airborne over the geodesic shape of Mictlan, he could see that it was somewhat bigger than the Fort, and placed in a landscape generally similar to the Fort's setting, mainly upthrust and splintered arctic emptiness. The sun was low in the sky behind a rank of distant clouds.

Only when the craft had borne him a little higher did Mike realize that the enormous mountain upon whose slope hell perched was a volcano. First he saw the thin smoke-plume, reaching into the upper atmosphere, zigzagged at various levels by disagreeing air currents. With another gain in height there came into view the crater itself, a mile or more in width. Now Mictlan was shrunken to a mere wart on the mountain's side. Mike looked down into a different kind of hell, its fissures glowing vaguely even in daylight with their internal fires.

A thousand meters or so above the volcano's rim, the flyer came to a hovering halt. Now he was evidently going to have to take over the controls, or at least feed in some instructions. If the instrument panel before him was arranged at all like that of the Inca craft that he had learned to fly, then maybe *this* would get him a map to show his position

A screen on the panel sprang into colored life. In its center was the sharp green dot he had expected—that must represent the position of his flyer; and right next to the dot there appeared a round formation that was surely the volcano crater. But the coordinates and even the alphabet of the words marked on the map were alien and unreadable. Well, switching scales on the map should now be possible with *this* .

On the second try, he got it. The largest scale let him see in outline enough of South America to give him a rough idea of where he was. His green dot was up near the equator, hundreds of miles north of the region where he had been captured, and almost at the northern limits of the Inca empire.

Geography lessons absorbed at the Fort came into use. The towering cone below him was almost certainly Cotopaxi, near the city called Quito in the country known in most branches as Ecuador. In 1534 an expedition of Spaniards striking out from Peru into these northern provinces was to be pelted with ash by Cotopaxi, at a distance of a good many miles. But evidently the Tenocha had no fear of an eruption.

With a minor false start or two, Mike established himself in control of the flyer. He aimed it south and stepped on the gas, relaxing a little when he had the ominous egg of Mictlan well out of sight behind him. The top of mighty Cotopaxi would take a longer time to lose, but it was dwindling fast. He saw no other traffic in the air. Was his escape already discovered, his craft being automatically tracked? He couldn't guess. No blasting missiles came, no paralysis struck out of the high air. For all he knew, it might be hours before they realized that they were short a prisoner.

He set his course as straight as he could for the Fort, aiming for the middle of the natural mountainous redoubt in which it lay, a little north of the town of Abancay, and only 60 kilometers or so, as the condor flew, from Cuzco. What Mike could see of the ground below revealed no modern roads, cities, or signs of mechanized cultivation; he found no reason to believe that the Tenocha had timejumped him out of the sixteenth century.

Coming in alone toward the Fort in a strange craft reminded him of his first arrival, on that morning that now seemed so long ago. But today he faced the pressing practical problem of the Fort's automated defenses, which seemed likely to shoot down an incoming Tenocha vehicle before a friendly occupant could convincingly identify himself. Still, trusting to the Mask, and fearing the pursuit that might already be closing in, he dared to press straight on at high speed.

At about 30 kilometers' distance he prudently veered off and began to fly a slowly constricting spiral, meanwhile continuously calling in. Trying to call in, rather—he couldn't be sure that any signals from this Tenocha equipment would really be listened to by anyone on duty in Operations.

"Doc, Samson, anybody—don't shoot! This is Rocky, in the Tenocha aircraft." It was going to be a job, explaining his escape from Mictlan, but give him the chance, and he would think of something. If all else failed he might even tell the truth. "I'm coming in peacefully. This is Rocky, the chief, remember me? Landing instructions, please."

He was answered by an ominous radio silence. He was within 10 kilometers of the Fort before he got a good look at it through a telescopic lens. A moment later he had left his spiral course, and was driving toward the building, low and fast.

The Fort was a ruin, scorched and battle-blasted. Not only had the domes and antennas been blown clean away, but much of the doughnut-shaped upper story as well. The few remaining windows were all shattered. Explosions had torn through concrete walls that were more than a meter thick; the whole structure was now tilted within its broad, natural rocky cup, and looked like a ship about to sink. Four or five flyers had slid together in a jumble on the slanted deck. Some of their rotors were bent up at broken angles.

A break in the deck's slab had left a portion of it nearly horizontal, and Mike set his flyer down there. In a locker on board he found a pair of boots, some leggings, and a gray parka that fit well enough to get into. He shut off his flyer's power, released the cabin air pressure, and climbed out into an intense silence, troubled only by a whine of wind around the jagged ruins.

How long ago had the Tenocha struck? The metal of the wrecked and tangled flyers was already showing heavy rust, but that was no reliable sign. Mike had been taught that all modern materials used in Tawantinsuyu-16 were designed to disintegrate rapidly after sustaining heavy damage, so their debris would not trouble future generations with any paradox. Within a decade after the attack, the entire Fort would probably have disappeared.

Freezing wind rushed past him into an open doorway, tilted and irregularly enlarged. He stuck his head

inside. "Rusty? Doc?" All light and warmth were gone from the interior. Upon undamaged carpet, snow was piling up in little untracked drifts. "Cori? Samson?"

He had no flashlight, and finding his way amid the slanted ruins was difficult until his eyes began to get used to the gloom. Then he discovered Lola, dead, and apparently well on the way to mummification by freeze-drying. At least he thought it was Lola. The body, in the usual pullover and slacks, was badly shot up, and the face had been damaged.

Now he stopped calling people's names, went to his locker, and got into some cold-weather gear that fit him properly. By the time he had finished changing, he was staggering and had to sit down for a few moments' rest. He couldn't take much of this cold and altitude, not today. And now, before he did another thing, he had to find the Mask—

There came a little noise, which spun Mike round to face a figure that leaned against a ruined wall, holding a heavy shoulder weapon leveled at him. A slight figure, inside the bulky garments and the boots.

Mike said in Quechua, "Little one, it's me."

She set the firearm down carefully before she came to him across the tilted floor. Ten seconds later, she was crying like a helpless child. Hugging him, holding him desperately, all the while sobbing on his shoulder.

"They came... they came... Roca, we could do nothing... all the others are dead, all hunted down. Me they didn't know about, and I could hide."

"I know, I know. But it's all right now. It's going to be all right."

He led her into the violent disorder of what had been the commander's quarters, and there found an emergency lantern to turn on. In a choked voice, she told him of how she had been managing to survive since the attack. Field stoves had provided her with some warmth in a hideout she had established on a lower level, and food had been available from emergency stores. For days she had been keeping herself alive with the desperate hope that he or Gunner might come back, or that the Directors might send some kind of rescue party. This mountain was steeper than the one on which she had been given to the Sun, and from here there was no hope of getting down on foot.

His desk chronometer, buried in debris but still working, announced 13 November 1533. Coincidence once again. From the history that had been drilled into him, Mike remembered that on this day Pizarro was disposing of another eminent prisoner, in this case by burning alive—the recalcitrant Inca general Chalcuchima. This man was accused—perhaps correctly—of poisoning the first puppet Inca, who had died recently in the Spaniards' camp at Jauja. And on this day also the next applicant for the vacant post of Emperor was freely presenting himself to the European invaders—this was Manco, a younger brother of Atahualpa. Manco, one of Atahualpa's opponents in the recent civil war, and therefore on its losing side, had just emerged from hiding. Today, like many of his kinsmen, he viewed Pizarro as a timely savior.

In the commander's apartment the closet door stood open. His humble bag, still zipped, ignored by friend and enemy, lay on its side, secure as a bank vault or maybe more secure. The golden weight came out into his hands, and with some-thing like reverence he lifted it to his face. There was a gasp from Cori.

At once, he beheld a scene of himself and Cori, throwing blurred objects into backpacks, then climbing

into the Tenocha flyer and taking off. All right. Gripping the Mask, he led the way to where the packs should be available, and good things to go into them.

First he selected medical items. Then a little high explosive—you never knew, and Mask or not, he had no intention of being taken alive again. He gnawed through two bars of field rations while packing up some more.

Cori helped him pack. But once, her hands holding his arm, she interrupted his busy movements. "Roca Yupanqui, you came back for me. As you brought me from the other mountain where I was freezing, so from this." There was something like worship in her eyes.

He gave her a brief hug, almost impersonal through the thickness of two parkas. "We'll get down from this one, too. Now help me pack."

He clipped a high-powered stunner on a handgun mount to his belt. Twice before they were ready to go he had to stop and rest, seeing the world bleach gray around him. Cori hovered in concern until he motioned her to keep on working. No, he wasn't going to last long at 18,000 feet. The surge of strength that had seen him through his escape was ebbing, despite the nourishment he had taken. At last, Cori now doing most of the work, the two of them got their packs aboard the flyer, and he fired its engines up.

Before he reached for the controls, he donned the Mask. Right away, to his surprise, it showed him that he should carry his sidearm on the left, ready for a cross-draw. Then, as he had expected, it projected for him an airborne image of the Tenocha flyer, which he need only follow.

The course set by the Mask led at first straight down the mountainside, at a level almost as low as Boss's flight when he had flown to pluck Cori from the shrine. Then, off across some relatively flat barrens to the south. The flight took only a few minutes. In a small, steep-sided canyon, innocent of any sign of man, the imaged flyer ahead of Mike set itself down upon a tiny mesa. He followed, and cut power. Here the Tenocha craft would be invisible to anyone approaching on foot until they had climbed almost within arm's length of it.

Here the altimeter indicated a mere 10,000 feet above sea level, almost a balmy altitude. His own Mask-projected image and Cori's were already climbing down from the mesa, and he guided her quickly after them. Daylight was already failing, the sun well behind the tall peaks to the west, and the sky clouding over.

When they had made their way down the first steep upper slopes of the mesa, the Mask bombarded his eyes with a burst of colored noise and then abruptly made its own eyes opaque. Mike stopped to take it off and put it into his pack. Seeing the wide-eyed look on Cori's face, he managed a smile and wink for her. "Secret," he said. She nodded solemnly.

Beneath his parka's hood, his shaven scalp was hot and tender. Even at 10,000 feet, down from 18,000, he didn't feel too good. The sons of bitches with their probes had naturally done some damage, and he wondered if now he was getting an infection. He stopped walking again, this time to choose an antibiotic pill and pop it down.

Where he was going he did not know, but he supposed that a goal would eventually become obvious. The wrinkled land in its descent changed gradually from barren rocks to hardly more fruitful soil. Soon after he took off the Mask, terraced fields came into view a little below the level where they walked, fields girdling mountain after mountain, into the distance. And now, abruptly, there appeared a switchback loop of Inca road, a pebble's roll ahead. Half a kilometer away, Mike could see some

villagers moving about, near their huts of stone or mud and thatch. He guessed they might have spread potatoes in the sun to dry and were now getting them into a shed, in expectation of rain.

When they had reached the road Cori stood still beside it, looking first one way then the other. "I know this place." She pointed to her left. "That way the road goes to Cuzco. Back the other way, to Abancay, then Vilcashuaman, then on to the provinces of the north."

He consulted the Mask again; it gave him only faint traceries of light. Probably common sense was all he needed here. "We must go to Cuzco," Mike said thoughtfully, packing the golden weight away again. Pizarro would not be many miles ahead in the direction of the capital; the Spaniards must have passed over this very road only a few days ago, with Manco their new puppet, and his entourage of Indian supporters. For a long time now, Cuzco would be the stage for the central scenes of the Conquest.

While getting clear of the Fort he hadn't really thought of where he and Cori were going, but now it was obviously time to take stock. There wasn't going to be another Fort for them to live in, or another flyer in which to travel. Wherever the Mask was leading them, they must live now as Andeans. He looked at his and Cori's modern clothing, which would have to go, and at the packs they carried. He seemed to recall that the Mask had advised packing, but he had probably overdone it.

Cori had walked out onto the road, and was looking east along its descending curves, toward Cuzco. She said: "There is *atambo* near, where we will be able to spend the night."

The road was mainly downhill, but to Mike it felt as difficult as a climb, and he could sense his fever rising. Night had fallen, full and sudden, before they reached the *tambo*; so far, a moonless night, with stars a prolonged white explosion from one sawtooth horizon to another. The air was like fresh ice, and despite cold-weather gear Mike shivered violently.

The *tambo*, a combination inn and storehouse, was a low stone building that looked deserted when they reached it. In normal times, supply clerks would probably have been on duty, dispensing needed goods under a system of careful control, and innkeepers, operating a kind of motel for the upper classes. Common Indians under the Inca's rule did not journey, except to some nearby village to trade on market day or festival, or when herding animals or marching in the army. Tonight the wooden doors to the storerooms, all ranged around an interior court, were standing open and unwatched. One or two of them had been chopped from their hinges.

"I will serve the Honored Roca," Cori murmured in her own language, and bent down in the disused corral to scratch up some dried llama dung in preparation for a fire. Mike mumbled something feverish and went to rummage through the storerooms. Other liberators had recently been there before him. The great wooden bins were pulled open; some had all their contents strewn about. He got out a small flashlight; there were several bits of technology it would really hurt to give up when he went Indian.

The Spaniards in their monomaniacal search for treasure had scattered many things but taken few. There were still tons of Inca clothing, sandals, unwoven fibers, and stacks of pottery. Great granary jars still brimmed with maize and ground cornmeal. Huge baskets waited, filled with dried fish and *charqui*. Every storable necessity of life was hoarded in the *tambos* by a paternalistic government against a time of need for any of its people.

So far even civil war and invasion had not broken down the sturdy mechanism of the moneyless economy; but in three or four years matters would be different. The stored goods would be wasted wantonly, or used up without provision for replacement. The people would be dying en masse of disease, and of starvation previously almost unknown. Those who survived would be broken free of the rocklike

mold of their old lives, but reenslaved as Spanish chattels under a new dictatorship as harsh as the old and far less concerned with their material welfare.

Mike buried parka, trousers, and boots inside an ancient dungheap. With his teeth chattering, for the time being he retained a T-shirt of his thermal underwear. He quickly put on an Inca loincloth, a fine sleeveless tunic, and a woolen cloak, choosing his new garments from the smaller bins evidently reserved for the nobility. There were no gold ornaments in stock to put into his pierced ears, but ornaments were not vital. Pulling a cap of llama wool over his shaved and punctured scalp, he rejoined Con at the smoky fire that she had undoubtedly started by means of some quick modern technology. She seemed far from deft tonight at juggling stewpots and hot stones and food; at home, before the Fort, there had undoubtedly been servants to do these tasks for her. Suddenly he realized that the chance of Con's seeing her family again was no longer astronomically small. He wondered how the thought of it affected her.

"•You had better change your clothes, too," he told her, speaking Quechua. "I will watch the fire."

She came back shortly in dress and mantle of red and white, with a kerchief folded over her head, and soft, beaded moccasins on her feet. After eating they moved the fire, or some of its brands, inside one of the hostel rooms. In the little white-walled chamber, a ceiling hole let some of the smoke out, and a hide curtain at the doorway held in some of the heat. Creature comforts were not the strong point of the Inca culture. What was? In his present fevered state he couldn't think of anything. Let the damned Spaniards have it all. No, that was the fever talking. After Cajamarca, he would let them have nothing. And after Mictlan... he had not yet disposed of the packs, and he gave himself another dose of medicine.

It was true, though, in Tawantinsuyu people had to be practically of royal blood to merit as much as a low stool in the way of solid furniture. And the Inca himself often had no better illumination at night than one of these damned flaring dung-fires. Of course he didn't have to try to read by it, having never heard of reading, and for watching a dancer or grabbing at a concubine, it should be light enough...

Mike fell asleep before he realized that sleep was near. In the middle of the night he awoke, fevered, shivering like an old man, and enjoying as an old man would the warmth of the young girl's body rolled against his own under the woolen blankets. Straw matting held them above the earth floor, and tiny life moved in the straw. Maybe the same cooties that had here feasted on royal Inca blood during some imperial progress of the past. If the Inca spat or took off a garment or picked his nose, the object separated from his person remained sacred. Therefore why not these lice? Anyway, Mike could feel no bites. At the Fort they might have given him some immunity to vermin, sacred or profane.

Lying against him, Cori kept twitching in her sleep. Bugs or bad dreams? He meant to open a pack and take more medicine, but before he could do so, he slept again.

In the morning Mike felt a little better, but still swallowed another dose. Cori went out to see if they were still alone in the *tambo*, and he fitted the Mask onto his aching head. It gave him nothing but visual noise, and he stowed it away again, this time in his Inca belt-pouch, which it nearly filled.

While Cori worked to make dried corn and dried fish palatable for breakfast, Mike winnowed through the backpacks. What could not be carried in their pouches or under their clothing somewhere must be discarded. The handgun he retained, after the Mask's earlier warning on how it must be carried. He abandoned the high explosive, breaking gelatinous capsules and scattering the contents as harmless powder. Cori stuffed her own belt-pouch and an extra one with the Fort's emergency rations and medicines; when he suggested they might not need it all, she looked at him as if he were mad. He also found room in his pouch and hers for a tiny set of two-way radios, capable of recording incoming

messages electronically or as printouts.

Continuing toward Cuzco, they struck out on an empty road. Near midmorning they passed a deserted-looking village, its guinea pigs still rooting about in the house yards. About midday they reached what Cori said was the town of Curahuasi. There Mike sat on a stone at roadside, letting his fever appear somewhat greater than it now was, while Cori, with her much greater facility in language and custom did some talking. The townsmen gestured their respect for her aristocratic accent and bearing, and expressed their willingness to serve as litter-bearers for her and her father—or it might be she was presenting him as an uncle, the word in this context was the same—but there were no Utters to be had.

In these troublous days, no one apparently thought it very strange that two of the nobility should be stranded without vehicles or attendants. Mike gave the local men to believe, when he finally spoke to them, that he and his daughter/ niece had suffered robbery and assault at the hands of passing Spaniards. No doubt his lack of golden earplugs made this convincing. The tale won him no great sympathy, however. This close to Cuzco, the faction of nobility at odds with Manco, and therefore presently subject to Spanish attack, was looked upon somewhat as imperialist Yankee carpetbaggers had been in the vanquished South. Against this northern faction the Spaniards were proving—so far—to be very valuable allies. The village leader of Curahuasi, inviting the travelers into his mud hut for a noontime snack, spoke of how he had yesterday himself seen Manco greeting the Bearded Ones and forming an alliance with them.

Emboldened perhaps by Mike's bedraggled looks, the headman went on to verge on insolence, remarking that the days of the great Huayna-Capac (who would have tolerated no such nonsense as a civil war) were coming back. The Quitan armies—he meant the northern, anti-Manco armies, who a few months ago under Atahualpa had believed themselves the virtual rulers of the world—were going to be driven out of this part of the empire. Their general Quisquis, while retreating a few days ago toward Cuzco—which, as the headman correctly foresaw, he was not going to be able to hold—had destroyed the long suspension bridge that carried the highway over the Apurimac, but this very day the people of the riverside villages had started to rebuild it.

Yankees and rebels? No, the Incas' internal politics was more complex than that. More like the Wars of the Roses, with great houses and branches of nobility contending for the crown, in tangles of family relationships and loyalties and intrigues too intricate for any outsider to really comprehend. Not wishing to seem too passive in his guise of ailing noble, Mike looked a little sternly at the headman, who cut short his almost insubordinate news commentary. Mike signed to Con that they should not tarry here for long, and after a brief meal, they were soon out on the road again.

Apurimac translated as "Great Speaker," and the voice was audible well before they came in sight of the river's gorge, into which the retreating Quitans had dropped the remnants of the highway bridge. The echoing roar was impressive, even though the rains had not yet come in earnest, and the river was still drought-shrunken in its canyon. Score one more incredible stroke of good luck for Pizarro's version of the Mask. At any other season of the year, the cutting of this bridge would have stopped the Spaniards cold—at least until Manco could have conscripted labor to rebuild it for them. As it was, horses and men had been able to ford the river in the gorge and were as close as ever on Quisquis's heels.

Other traffic had been backed up, however. Trains of llamas looked with forlorn dignity for forage along the barren roadside, while their drivers crooned to them and fed them now and then from their own cargoes. And near where the road was broken at the gorge, the hillsides were a swarm of human activity—the populations of several villages, who serves *aschaca camayoc*, the keepers of the bridge, were hard at work. Normally the bridge had to be replaced every two or three years, as its fibers decayed, and this was a routine job.

As the first clouds of the afternoon formed above, numbers of children beat piles of grass with sticks, turning stiff blades to supple strings of fiber. Women, sitting down and gossiping a mile a minute as they worked, handspun these strings into twine, and the twine into slender yellow rope. Men, chanting as the women talked, twisted what looked like miles of rope into thick and progressively thicker cables, ending with a product nearly a foot in diameter and long enough to span the gorge—Mike guessed something more than a hundred feet.

Meanwhile, young men on opposite banks of the river far below appeared to be playing at a game. They tossed out into the river lightly weighted strings woven of straw, and tried to tangle the strings from the two banks together in midstream. Soon after Mike had let himself down, with a sigh, on a handy boulder that offered a good seat from which to watch proceedings, the tangling was accomplished. A compound line of straw was pulled up, taut and dripping, from the Great Speaker's sullen-mumbling throat. Against that endless voice a higher, more fragile yell of success went up from a hundred or so human tongues.

"Now they can pull a rope across." The English words came from close at Mike's side, in tones as resonant as the Apurimac's.

Mike turned his head and glared at Esperanza, who stood there dressed as a llama-driver. His white hair and a newly seamed face made him appear to be on the brink of retirement to the Inca equivalent of Social Security in some peaceful village. His bare brown legs were hairless and gnarled as weathered wood beneath his simple tunic's folds. Con, Mike saw, had gone a little distance off to join a small gathering of momentarily idle women. Maybe she was trying to get some information. Probably she'd said to him where she was going, and with the roaring of the river and the pressure of his own thoughts, he hadn't heard.

Mike continued to give Esperanza a long stare. The other, his white hair sticking out from under his woolen cap, imperturbably watched the stringing of the ropes.

"You bastard," Mike said at last. "If I thought you had anything to do with what happened to Tom."

"I tried to help. As I told you on the telephone, I warned him but he wouldn't listen; don't blame me for any of his troubles. And now the Mask is yours."

"One of them is."

Esperanza ignored the comment. "You want to hand it over to me, Gabrieli? It's meant a rough time for your brother and for you. I can probably get you home safe if you hand it over now. If you bang onto it and stick around, there're going to be more rough times ahead." The head turned, aiming the big nose at Mike.

Looking Esperanza in the eye, Mike shook his head very slowly.

The other smiled a little. "Good. I was just checking. Don't really want the thing."

"You just want to know what I'm going to do with it. That's what you usually ask when we have these seances."

Esperanza nodded; it was almost a bow. Down below, the young men had got a real rope of straw across the river, and were pulling a thicker rope over with it. Next, Mike supposed, they would string one of the big cables.

He turned back to the man beside him. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do with it. I'm going to stick it to the Tenocha as much as I possibly can. That includes you especially, if you're on their team after all—if all that in the interrogation was somehow just for show

"All*what* in the interrogation?"

"Well, they made it sound like you're really on their shit list, you know? I think they overdid it. Nine-tenths of the questions they asked me were regarding you."

Esperanza didn't pretend to be ignorant of what Mike was talking about. "That's of interest. Thank you." The words seemed genuine.

Now one end of the first huge cable was being made fast to a massive stone bollard wedged in place against the living rock of the gorge. Nearby, coca leaves smoldered on a ritual fire, propitiating spirits. The tang of the smoke when it blew toward Mike was really something else.

"You know," said Esperanza, "after this bridge has been re woven a few more times, it will be named for San Luis, the good King of France. Then, after the *chaca camayoc* have learned to neglect repairs, and it falls down with people on it, someone will write a book about the accident."

Mike shook his head. "Now you are speaking of Peru." he said, in his best Quechua yet. "This is Tawantinsuyu, here."

"And you are beginning to boast like an Indian as well as look like one. This Indianization gives me hope for whatever plan you may be trying to effect. Did you tell them anything of me, when they interrogated?"

"I would've told them all I could, which wasn't much, if they'd had sense enough to ask the right questions. You knew I was getting into that, I suppose, you bastard."

"Want to tell me what your plans are, Mike? Or do you prefer the name of Roca, now? How can I persuade you, how can I influence you to tell me? More depends on your decisions than you can realize."

Mike still couldn't trust this character. "Tell me first something that *you're* going to do. Or even what you've already done. Did you make the Masks?"

Esperanza gave a weary, discouraged headshake. "My time is up," he said, and turned and stumped away. Mike started to call after him, but did not. He watched Esperanza's figure blend with those of three or four other llama-herders along the road. Then there were still only three or four of them, and he could no longer be picked out. Cori came back toward Mike. She took no notice of an old man passing, going the other way.

Her report was cheerful. "Roca, the women are sure that soon the bridge will be complete, and we can go on. They also say the road is clear to Cuzco from here on."

"Come sit here with me. Watch them work."

Soon four big cables were across, two side by side to form the basis of a floor, two more cables higher for the handrails. Men ventured out on the new bridge, weaving thin ropes thickly to make a floor and barrier networks on the sides, dense enough to keep the smallest child safely enclosed. The last step was a layer of twigs, woven in among the floor ropes so that feet—human or llama—could not poke through.

The sun was almost down before the work was done. The llama-drivers had been contending for some time to be the first to get their caravans across.

"It should be our right to go before them," Cori complained.

"Let us wait, if waiting in silence will make us less noticeable."

The wait was brief, but night had come before they crossed the swaying bridge above the roar. Downhill to the middle and then climb; it trembled like a nervous animal beneath them.

He asked her, "Is there another *tambo* near?"

"I don't remember. We can follow the llama-drivers, and there will be some shelter." After a little while, she added, "Back at the town I told them that the Spaniards had shaved your head and tortured you, trying to find more gold. I also told them that we lived near Cuzco, that they might not think you of the Quitan faction. But the truth is I do not know where you are from."

The thin air was chilling rapidly, but he didn't feel the cold nearly as much as he had last night. "My home is very distant, Cori."

"I know that. And your wife must be sad that you are gone from it."

He took a dozen steps or so in silent thought before he answered. "In my land many things are different. There it is common for a man to be a bachelor after he is twenty years old. And so I have no wife."

"Oh." It was a soft monosyllable which told him little.

"Cori, I don't know exactly where your home is, either."

She hesitated. "My family that gave me to the Sun are dead to me now, and I to them. I have thought much about it, and it must be so. Inti, the Sun, did not want my life and so he passed me on to you, the Fort people, *pokara-runa*. You are the chief of the Fort people now, and so my life is yours, *apu*."

Apu. Lord. Probably not half a dozen men in the empire would commonly be so addressed. Awed, he groped for words, but could not find them.

"I hear llamas ahead, Roca Yupanqui. I think there is *atambo* near."

In the *tambo*, Cori went to borrow fire from the llama-drivers who camped in an outer courtyard, as an excuse to talk to them. Coming back to the small room she and Mike had taken, she relayed their gossip, none of it new, about politics and road conditions. "All my uncles are quite old," she added, as if in afterthought. "So tonight I did not say you were my uncle."

"But what?"

"My husband." Looking away, voice very low.

Mike was a long way from smiling. Suddenly he felt like a young teen-ager himself, both in mind and body. It had been many days now since he was dosed with aphrodisiacs, and maybe there was some rebound effect. Cori was about fourteen, not at all young for an Inca girl to become a bride; and chastity

before marriage was not considered a matter of importance among her people.

A long time seemed to pass. He cared—he cared a hell of a lot—what happened to her. Then he whispered, almost choking, "Come here." And with enormous tenderness he pulled her in between the blankets in the dark. . .

In the morning he woke looking at her face, and marveling.

Chapter 11. The Square of Joy

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For some reason this morning, Mike felt almost afraid to don the Mask, but when he put it on it showed him nothing but noise. Dressing and packing were the work of a minute, and after Cori and he had eaten, they were quickly on the road. All this while Cori was cheerful, talking more than he had ever known her to do. But after they had been walking an hour or so, she grew silent, and he sensed that something was bothering her. It took some persistent questioning to get an informative answer.

"I . . . I now miss some of my family."

"Well, if any of your relatives are in Cuzco, we may see them there." He looked at her thoughtfully. "They may not recognize you, you know." He was wondering what they would make of her returning from the Sun.

Cori was silent, walking. He took her hand. At last she said, "It is my parents that I miss. Even though—they did what they did, they are not cruel. They meant me to be happy with Inti. But we will not meet them in Cuzco, for they live in the Collasoyo. In Cuzco there is only the house of one of my uncles. He is an important man, and often traveling on military affairs."

"Will this uncle know that you were given to the Sun? What is his name?"

"I do not know what he will know. Quizo Yupanqui is his name. . . Roca, what is wrong?"

He had stopped in his tracks for a moment, staring at her. Now he walked on. "Only that I have heard his name." In the standard histories of the earliest years of the Conquest, it could not be found. But in 1536 . . . Patience. That was three years from now.

Some 40 miles of road lay between them and Cuzco, and to walk it took them two more days. Small *tambos* along the way all gave evidence of having been ransacked by the invaders, but retained supplies in plenty, and offered shelter during the cold nights. On the way, Mike and Cori made the swaying passage of four more suspension bridges; the fleeing Quitans had not bothered to cut these, which crossed no barriers as formidable as the Great Speaker's gorge. At neither bridges nor *tambos* were there authorities to take note of and perhaps question travelers; war had swept all such guardians aside, blinding the eyes of the Inca to vagrancy and laziness throughout his realm. Not that either was widespread as yet. Peasants tending llamas or working in the fields were often to be seen. Sometimes these folk looked up at the travelers and sometimes not. Let those who walked the roads in terror or triumph come and go; the land remained and held their lives rooted fast.

From time to time Mike and Cori met, or were overtaken by, other parties of displaced persons on the road. Men and women with bewildered faces, come in search of tools or food or clothing that had not

arrived at their home villages on schedule. Others, whole families, leaving destroyed homes and ruined fields, wandering they knew not where. Once Mike on impulse dosed a sick baby from his small medical kit, the mother pleased that an evident sorcerer should show an interest. He didn't wait to see what effect his efforts had.

The place was called *theurcoscalla*, where with a last dramatic twist the *Capac Nan*, the Royal Road, showed to the traveler Cuzco, the Navel of the World, fitted into its valley at 11,000 feet above the sea. At home Mike had heard Cuzco called the oldest continuously inhabited city of the western hemisphere. And he knew that during his visit to Cuzco-23 he had passed, almost without being able to see it, through one of the great metropolises of another branch of history.

At *theurcoscalla* Cori stopped to offer fervent prayer, plucking her own eyelashes and blowing them, together with little feathers from the trim on her fine cape, toward the local *waka*, a grimly weather-beaten shrine of natural rock that seemed to stand beside the road as a sentry. Mike made a motion or two in the same direction, and turned to watch the town.

Cuzco of Tawantinsuyu-16, he estimated, might hold a hundred thousand people if the populations of its satellite towns were counted in. In general, he knew, the upper class lived in the city itself, amid its palaces, storehouses, and shrines, while servants and other workers dwelt in the adjoining suburbs. Across the valley ran rows and rows of houses of mud or stone, painted red or yellow or white beneath their roofs, the new thatch yellow, the old straw weathered gray.

Two small rivers crossed the valley and the city, to join near the far side of both. And upon its hill to the northwest brooded the Fortress of the Speckled Hawk, Sacsahuaman. Within the gargantuan masonry of its walls the city's entire population might have found shelter. Far on the opposite side of town, close to the confluence of the streams, the Temple of the Sun reared white walls high above the narrow streets and crowded roofs. The living sun winked pure gold from the frieze on that high cornice, now in its last days of glory before systematic despoliation by the Spaniards stripped it bare. Pizarro was already within the city, of course, but still too intent on consolidating his position to divert any of his men's energies to serious looting.

"It is more than a year since I have stood here, Roca Yupanqui." Con had turned from her thanksgiving prayers and was enjoying the prospect with him. With the coming into view of the city before them she had brightened, like some fresh reflection of the sun, or like a flower turned to its light. "Then I was but a child. Have you seen this before?"

"No. It is a marvelous sight."

They descended into Cuzco's valley, to find themselves quickly surrounded by llama corrals- and suburban hovels. On the right the stench of a tannery drifted from a side road, and on the left appeared extensive barracks, long, low buildings like those that had concealed the attackers at Cajamarca. Meanwhile traffic on the road around them had of course increased, with business as usual the order of the day despite political upheaval.

Servants in plain garb hurried by, not being lazy, not wasting time—the penalty could be death for repeated offenses of that kind. Eminent visitors from outlying provinces, in distinctive headgear and multicolored finery, were borne past in their litters and hammocks. Masons clanked bronze tools on stone, with movements incredibly quick and adroit, and hoisted dressed ashlar in great slings of the ubiquitous grass-fiber rope. Messengers with *quipus* in hand were sometimes forced by the density of traffic to walk rather than trot. Sweepers were busy, darting onto the road and off; the pavement was remarkably clean, considering the numbers of people and animals that passed.

Now the city proper enfolded the Royal Road within its anonymous walls, behind which lay the low, sprawling town houses of the ruling class. The dozen palaces of the past emperors were ahead, Mike saw now. Halfway between the fortress Sacsahuaman and the Temple of the Sun, they bordered the central square of the city, massive structures rising to twenty-five or thirty feet, looming above the surrounding ranch-style houses of the lesser nobility.

The highway ended abruptly, debouching into that vast, sand-surfaced central plaza. "*Waykapata*," Mike muttered, distracted in a certain awe. He doubted that anything in Cuzco-23 could have produced a comparable feeling in him.

Cori had stopped by his side. "Yes, the Square of Joy. I remember when I was a child, coming here for the great festivals. The workers put all work away for a few days, and the nobility all their planning and their quarreling. All were happy, drinking and singing, for a few days..." She turned aside and with a prayerful gesture blew kisses toward another shrine, erected precisely where the highway entered the square. At the four corners of the Square of Joy terminated the four great Royal Roads. Tribute and hostages came in along them from the Four Quarters of the World, and conquering armies looking for more tribute and hostages, devoutly spreading the worship of the Sun, went out—so it had been for more than a hundred years of Inca rule in Cuzco.

Until this year, when invasion as from another planet had turned the whole world upside down.

Overlooked by the stone palaces of a dozen former Incas, the enormous acreage of the Square of Joy was bisected by the paved-over channel of the Huatanay, icy supplier of clean mountain water to the city, and efficient remover of its sewage. Now a small horde of young men were sitting along the masonry that held the river, and in the nearby sand, chatting and laughing among themselves. Many had woolen slings wound round their heads, and clubs and shields lay all about. Mike supposed they were some part of the army of four thousand that Manco now was raising, at Pizarro's request, to help harry the Quitans under Quisquis completely out of this central portion of the empire.

From one of the distant sides of the Square there came a sound so familiar that Mike was starting unconsciously to ignore it. But he caught the sharp turn of Cori's head and beheld her wondering stare, and looked around himself. Horses, of course, picketed before the palace of the legendary Pachacuti, that Pizarro had taken for his own. The sun glinted on morion helmets there, and a rank of campaign tents was visible through a gateway in the outer palace wall. No doubt a sizable proportion of Pizarro's small cavalry force was always armed and ready, day or night, for instant action.

The house of Con's uncle was a short walk beyond the Square of Joy, through narrow streets shadowed by constricting walls, in the direction of the Temple. Like those of the other nobility in this sector, the house proved to be a two-story structure with a peaked, thatched roof. Like the wall around its grounds, it was made of finely fitted stones laid in regular courses. A gray, stooped doorkeeper, his staff of authority in hand, stood vigilantly at the main gateway open to the street. The sight of two well-dressed folk approaching moved him a little aside, enough to allow them to step inside to state their business. The interior walls of the courtyard were plastered in red and yellow; three empty litters waited under an awning at one side. A few guinea pigs trotted about. Great pottery vessels, which Mike guessed were full of grain or other foodstuffs, stood in another section of the yard. There, between a stone grinding mill and a clay outdoor oven, a doorway led into what was doubtless a kitchen, wherein two women could be heard arguing.

"We have come to see Quizo Yupanqui," Mike announced to the gatekeeper. Cori had been coaching him somewhat on etiquette and grammar. "His niece is now my wife."

The old man took a limping step sideways, his eyes widening. Mike thought: What hideous mistake have I committed? Only a half-second later did he realize that the man's surprise had nothing to do with him.

Wrapped in a blood-spotted cloak, a young warrior lounged against the gatepost; he had evidently entered almost on Mike's and Con's heels. No, not lounged—he was leaning against the wood from weakness. His eyes, looking back at Mike, were those of an animal nearly cornered, who must decide instantly which way to run. His gasping breath was that of a runner at the top of a long climb.

Weakness made the warrior's decision for him. He started to fall, and Mike stepped forward instinctively to catch and hold him up. The gatekeeper was just reaching to lend a hand when two more figures appeared in the open entrance. Steel flashed about their heads and bodies, and long steel in their hands.

"There he is, Gonzalo!" one Castilian voice roared out. "Almost found another den here, looks like."

"By the saints, we'll get a good tail-hold and pluck him out." Gonzalo, the larger of the two, with black and bush sideburns, took a confident step forward.

Mike reached across his body for the stunner, stuck in his belt precisely where the Mask had told him it should be carried, and the weapon came out smoothly into his hand. It was nearly leveled at Gonzalo's navel, when the arm of the exhausted warrior, thrashing in some last desperate attempt to do his own fighting, knocked Mike's wrist a light blow at what seemed to be the precisely disastrous angle. The little stunner flew from his fingers and skidded neatly across the paving of the yard toward Cori.

The gatekeeper had fallen down, whether through accident or design; and, whether through age or prudence, he stayed there. The blood-stained warrior was in no better shape, though he had drawn a bronze dagger from his belt and waved it feebly. Mike let him slide down to the ground, and snatched up the doorkeeper's staff. It was of stout wood, and had a lot more length than any dagger, but it was not Toledo steel, nor was he D'Artagnan. No choice, however. Big Gonzalo with his bushy sideburns had already started across the yard after Mike. The other Spaniard had turned partly away, his alert eyes probing the doors and windows of the house for any sign of more resistance. Inside the kitchen door a flurry, as of retreating feet.

Mike backed slowly away, holding the big wooden stick as he thought a man might be supposed to hold a quarterstaff. Robin Hood... how had Errol Flynn... The sword leveling toward his midsection looked enormous, and very real. The armored figure brought back Cajamarca, brought back the urge to scream and run. Mike fought it down. Now the sword feinted a quick thrust, stopped, and then—

It fell down ringing on the flagstones of the yard. From the corner of his eye, Mike saw Con aiming, unorthodoxly, the silent gun clenched in her two small fists down at her midsection.

The Spaniard whose sword had fallen from his suddenly deadened fingers looked in utter bewilderment at Mike for just a moment. Then Mike's crude but heartfelt swing of the staff caught him alongside the head, tipping up his helm. It was a clean knockout.

The second intruder had been hit by the stunner too, and his legs were tangling themselves so he could hardly stand. But he still held his sword and was therefore still very dangerous. Mike switched his hold on the club to the more familiar grip used on a baseball bat, and tried a little fancy footwork, dancing in and out. The sword took off the end of the staff in the first brisk passage, but the swordsman overbalanced with his efforts and fell down.

"Santiago!" he roared out in an impressively loud voice as he toppled. Mike clouted his swordarm, gave him the butt of the staff as close to the solar plexus as he could aim, then laid a finisher right on the bearded jaw.

The winner stepped back, breathing hard. Then he spun round. Dashing into the courtyard from one of the doorways of the house came an enthusiastic-looking warrior, his short-cut hair still raven black although his face was deeply lined. Short and sinewy, he brandished *amakana*, the standard Inca sword-shaped club of wood. This man halted, seemingly in mid-bound, to goggle at the scene before him. Armed retainers, pouring right after him into the courtyard, froze there in the same surprise.

At this moment there came a hammering on the street gate, which its keeper, just recently back on his fee, had had the wit to close and bar. "Santiago!" a Castilian voice bawled from the street. "Fight on, we are coming!"

Mike turned, swallowed, tried out his Fort-learned Spanish. "*Par Dios*, I am only struggling with a wench. I thank you for the offered help, but in this fight I hope to win without it."

Brief silence outside, and then guffaws. Mike looked at Cori, who had also taken some Spanish lessons at the Fort; she understood what he wanted, and managed a sound between a laugh and a whimper. More laughter echoed from outside, and heavy footsteps crunched away.

Throwing down the shortened staff, Mike turned to the old warrior, who by now was leaning on his *makana*. "Honored Quizo, I thought that these two men in metal meant harm to some of your household. As your nephew by marriage, and your guest, I thought it would be well to act without waiting for your permission."

A silence began to stretch. Leaning on their implements of war, Quizo and his men stared almost blankly back at Mike, alternating the direction of their gazes toward the two men he had felled. Aspects of the comical had come into sight when the man the Spaniards had been pursuing broke the spell by stirring feebly and letting out a groan. Cori, who had long since put the gun quietly away, bent down at his side at once, then looked up quickly. "Uncle. Let me direct your servants and see to it that this one's wounds are cared for. He bleeds."

Quizo emitted a single, expressive, Hollywood-Indian grunt. His servants hurried to tend their fallen countryman. Shortly Cori rose to her feet, and began some formal introductions.

"Husband of my niece," Quizo said when these were finished, "it would seem that these two *suncasapa* are your prisoners." Vast respect was in his voice. More than likely, Mike thought, Quizo had already seen on the field of battle what Spaniards' swords could do.

He thought over his response carefully before he spoke. "If that is so, uncle of my wife, then I think I will release them, that they may tell the other Bearded Ones to be careful how they offend the men of Cuzco."

Quizo's eyes narrowed, then brightened a little. "And will you throw them into the gutter?"

"With your agreement, Honored Uncle, I will first take them somewhere far from your house." He didn't want to bring the Spaniards down on Quizo's house in force; the scrambling of short-term memory was a common effect of the stunbeam, and if he gave Gonzalo and his friend a little further treatment with it before they were dumped, the chances were small that they could ever remember in which house or

street they had been clobbered, or by whom.

Quizo doubtless understood that the idea was to avoid massive Spanish retaliation. He signed agreement. Mike promptly bent to pick up the Spaniards' fallen swords, and offered a present of one of them. "Take this, Uncle." Quizo grunted again, and accepted the keen blade reverently.

In the end the job of disposing of the fallen was left to some of Quizo's retainers. The two Conquistadors, relieved of their weapons, departed the house inside two curtained litters. Meanwhile the wounded Indian, still no more than semiconscious, was put to bed, his bleeding stanching, and a physician summoned.

Cori was taken off by one of Quizo's senior wives who claimed to remember her from a small girl, and who, in some natural confusion, evidently believed it was one of Cori's sisters who had been sacrificed to Inti something more than a year ago. Disappearing into the friendly woman's clutches, Cori cast back a glance that Mike hoped was meant to be reassuring.

The general took Mike into another room, and offered a fine little silver box filled with coca, of which Mike accepted a small pinch. It was another custom of the nobility that everyone had tried at the Fort.

Sitting, Quizo dealt coca sparingly to himself. Mike, sitting on a mat opposite, could see from his new vantage point that this house was not far short of being a palace. Within an inner atrium garden, a listless Amazon monkey crouched on a sunbathed branch, not requiring the restraint of the fine silver chain and collar that bound it to its tree. It languished here, far above its wet, low-altitude jungle, ignoring the rare birds chirping and cackling round it in their cages of delicate silver wire. Mike could quite appreciate the monkey's feelings; after that one brisk bit of sparring, he had been more than ready to sit down. How did the Spaniards do it? The more he learned about them, the more their toughness demanded his respect.

As if sharing this thought at the same moment, Quizo commented: "The army of Quisquis slung ten thousand stones and javelins against *the suncasapa*, and swung at them with ten thousand maces, *makana*, daggers, clubs. The enemy numbered only a few score, and yet Quisquis, who is a valiant warrior, was driven from the field."

And so, thought Mike, you naturally want to know how in hell I ever clouted two of them down with something like an old hoe handle. Knowing that modesty would not be expected or understood, he began some moderate brag about how this was not the first time that enemies had fallen before him; that he had been known to deal with more than two opponents at one time, et cetera, et cetera. Which recitation of course really explained nothing. Quizo was undoubtedly going to put his victory down to some kind of sorcery, no matter what he said. All right. Something close to sorcery had been required—let it go at that. The odds were enormous that neither the gatekeeper nor the fallen Inca had noticed Cori's action with the handgun, nor could they have connected her silent gesturing with the Spaniards' fall.

Waiting for Quizo's deliberate reply, Mike found himself still unable to keep from marveling at the almost unbelievable toughness of those few score Spaniards who had routed thousands of strong armed men. Think what you might of their morals, you had to give them that.

Cori's little jolts with the stunner, though only grazing, partial hits, would likely have sent ordinary men of US-20 on their way to the emergency room of the nearest hospital. And yet Gonzalo and his friend had continued to think of nothing but fighting, and one of them had come close to getting at Mike with a sword.

The Conquistadors were burned by day in the Andean sun, frostbitten by night, malnourished by any good dietary standard, often half-starved for oxygen. They battled sometimes for days on end, usually greatly outnumbered by their enemies, who were tough men fighting fanatically to save their hearths and families and gods. Isolated beyond hope of help in this alien world, they depended only upon God, the saints, and their own comrades. These last stood by them in combat to the point of death, treated their open wounds with crude stitching and the application of hot oil or melted fat, and might sometimes try to swindle them out of a fair share of the spoils. In the face of all this, the more successful Spaniards not only survived, not only conquered, but maintained multiple mistresses, sired bastards by the score, and ruled estates, cities, and a nation, with energy enough left over for bloody hair-trigger quarrels among themselves. Francisco Pizarro himself led the field in most of these events, and he had been in his mid-fifties when the adventure started.

Quizo put his silver snuffbox of coca aside, on the shelf of a perfect trapezoidal niche built right into the masonry of the wall. Mike had thought such elegant construction reserved for the Inca's own buildings. Of course Quizo, or one of his ancestors, might have been given this house by an emperor. In a moneyless society, such rewards were common.

Fine weavings hung on Quizo's walls, and others equally good were jumbled carelessly amid the straw mats of the floor. A ceramic brazier held real wood ashes from last night's fire. Between great chests carved from some Amazonian hardwood Quizo sat chewing on his quid of coca; now and then, great golden earplugs swinging, he turned and spat into a small Mochica bowl. Bring the furnishings of your living room to US-20, Quizo, and I'll guarantee a fortune for both of us...

In the world as redecorated by coca, time seemed to drift. Maybe altitude, mental strain, release from danger, and recent physical exertion also had something to do with this disconnected mental state, which was dangerous now when he should have all his wits about him. Quizo offered more of the drug, but Mike declined, thinking he could now do so without being impolite. He was not really hungry when women came to serve food to him and the general, but he began to eat and developed an appetite as he did so. Ordinarily, Mike supposed, the ladies would have joined them for dinner. But today he was being especially honored.

Roast guinea pig, squash, beans, and sweet potatoes. Shy maids served the dishes silently and flashed away. For dessert, popcorn—Mike couldn't remember if it was grown near Cuzco or had to be brought from some far corner of the empire.

Quizo belched, rubbed his stomach. "Has the Honored Roca traveled far with his bride?"

"It has not been a long march, Honored Quizo, but a hard one. Today's encounter with the *uncasapa* was not my first." Let his wounded, shaven scalp and missing earplugs speak for themselves.

Quizo peered at him, scowled as if at his own forgetful-ness, then clapped his hands to summon servants. Quickly several matched pairs of golden ear-ornaments were brought in, all of which the general pressed upon his guest. No more than fair compensation, Mike supposed, for a Toledo sword. He chose a pair for wearing, and at once a comely concubine approached to help him put them on. Half-stoned as he was, all he could think of when her fingers touched his skin was Cori. So it looked like this thing he had started with his little teen-ager was something serious. Good God, it certainly seemed to be, for her. Be careful of her, man, don't ever leave her on another mountain. He tried to imagine himself and Cori coming home to Atlanta, the tall old house, the black yardman next door looking up from trimming the hedges. Good God. As far away as Mars.

When the chosen earplugs had been installed, and servants waved away, Quizo spoke to him again.

"The man the Bearded Ones were chasing is a distant relative of mine. He is also from the north, and perhaps you know him. His name is Chuqui Huaman. Swift Hawk was in the army of Quisquis, and fell wounded in the fighting on the heights above this city. He was sheltered in another house in Cuzco, but some of those who would have Manco as Inca lived there, and betrayed him. And so he fled the *suncasapa* through the streets."

Mike had not actually said that he himself was from the north; but let Quizo assume it if he chose. "No, I had not met Swift Hawk before. But I knew him for a valiant man when, wounded, he turned on the two sword-carriers and tried to fight them with a small knife. I was glad that I could give him help. Will he live or die?"

"My women tell me that he has stopped bleeding and is sleeping now. Tomorrow he may come and eat with us."

The sun was gone now from the atrium, and a servant came, to take the monkey in, maybe to where it could find some warmth beside a fire.

Quizo made it plain that his house was Roca's, however long the victor over the two Spaniards cared to stay there with his bride. A few days passed in welcome rest. As Mike had expected, no repercussions developed from the brawl. He could picture the two Castilians coming to themselves, slowly and painfully, in an alien gutter. Its burbling stream, fresh from the Huatanay, might at least be cleaner than most European water supplies of the time, but he had arranged to have some chicha poured about them when they were dumped. When they rejoined their comrades, stinky with stale booze and weaponless, half-dead with blows and the aftereffects of an invisible radiation about which they could know nothing, unable to tell where they had been or what had happened, Pizarro would probably order them a dozen lashes each, as a reminder to keep out of trouble in the future, and lose no more steel weapons. Of necessity, the Governor ruled his men with a taut and sometimes ferocious discipline.

Mike's host did not go abroad wearing his sword. But Quizo brought it out to show, in the evenings when other men, *all pakoyoc* loaded about the ears with yellow metal, dropped in to dine, to drink, to sniff a little dope, above all to talk. Mike very soon confirmed what had already begun to seem distinctly probable: Quizo's house was a potential center of rebellion, against both the Spaniards and Manco's collaborationist faction of the native aristocracy. Once Quizo had described to his other guests the incident of the two

Conquistadors, and had shown them the gatekeeper's old staff, whittled like a wooden butt for sword practice—Mike looking at it now experienced a certain queasy sensation in his gut—once Quizo had done this the other men all spoke freely in front of Mike, and much of their speech showed their disaffection. These grumbling magnates represented only a minority. Most of their peers in Cuzco were, at the moment, solidly behind Manco, whose time of official coronation was fast approaching.

Anyway, Quizo's cronies did not expect immediate renewal of civil war in Cuzco, or fear midnight arrests, though such things might come. The present situation among the Incas was, Mike thought, more like a vast and deadly family quarrel than anything else. Almost any two of *the pakoyoc* . if they looked back a few generations, could discover some blood relationship. The ruling class or tribe of Tawantinsuyu, whom he thought of as Incas though that name strictly belonged only to the ruler, formed in effect a single family of several thousand members. Each successive ruler might have scores of wives, and several times that many children, though not all considered legitimate. His chief wife was most likely his own full sister, and almost every one of the nobility shared to some extent in the blood royal.

"Roca Yupanqui has not said of which lineage he comes," one distinguished guest remarked one evening,

glancing down the room in Mike's direction. Like so many distinguished beggars, these lords of Cuzco were all sitting on the floor, fingering chunks of meat out of little stewpots and drinking gravy.

Mike had given this expected question some advance thought. It was a point on which the Mask had been no help. In fact he had noticed that the Mask never seemed to care what its wearer said, but only what he did.

Now he paused for a sip of chicha. "When my head was injured by the enemy," he began, "much of my life before that time was taken from my memory. But to replace old things, new things were given. A vision, in which I struck down men in shining armor, and in which it was given to me to speak and understand their language. And more things were given, also, of which I may not yet speak. That I must serve the Inca faithfully was told me in the vision; and it was told me also that the details of my lineage and family no longer mattered, for the world of Tawantinsuyu is to be born anew."

The men looked closely at Mike and were impressed. The evening was rather quiet after that, until the time came for the visitors to take their leave.

It was now the middle of December, 1533. A couple of days after his remarks about his visions, another, smaller gathering took place in Quizo's house. This time besides Mike there was but a single guest, to whom Quizo himself deferred. Willak Umu, Servant of the Sun and high priest of Inti's Temple, who dwelt in its Golden Enclosure, *Coricancha*. The night before, Mike's Mask had shown him the visage of an unknown Indian man, stern and ascetic, who seemed to be beckoning him forward through a great golden doorway—and this man, Mike saw as he joined Quizo in welcoming their distinguished visitor, was Willak Umu.

When the social preliminaries had been disposed of, and the time for serious discussion was at hand, the high priest announced: "The Bearded Ones are insane with their craving for gold. And He-who-is-to-be-Inca indulges them in it. I fear that once his coronation is over, the most sacred treasures will not be spared."

"Quisquis may yet defeat Manco and the Spaniards," Quizo asserted doggedly. "They have not yet returned from pursuing him."

"Quisquis and his army have fought them time and again," the high priest pointed out. "At best they manage to break off battle before great numbers of our men are killed. At worst they are badly beaten. I do not think this time will be different."

Quizo was gloomily silent.

"I have decided," Willak Umu went on, "that there is some gold that must be saved. Already many gold plates have been pried from the walls of the Temple, to help make up

Atahualpa's ransom. All will be taken in the end, down to the last speck, for the *suncasapa* are madmen in this regard."

There was a pause, the other men both waiting in silence for the high priest to continue. Mike suspected he knew what was coming, and the suspicion made a prickling down his neck.

"The great *punchao*," the high priest breathed. "The Sun at Dawn. At least we must save that, at any cost."

Quizo at once made a solemn sign of agreement. "I know a good place to hide the Sun," he offered quickly, as if he had already been making plans along that line. "How and when might it best be removed from the Temple?"

Mike had a thought on that subject, and when no one else seemed anxious to offer a plan, he put his into words. "Perhaps it could best be done on the day when Manco accepts the *maskapaycha* from the hand of the white man called Pizarro. AH of the Bearded Ones, and all of the men of Tawantinsuyu who are now their allies, will be present at the ceremony."

"On that day I must be in the Square of Joy myself," said Willak Umu. "The Inca will require it."

"I also," Quizo put in.

"But not I," said Mike. "The Inca will not remember me, nor note my absence. And those of my lineage think that I am dead."

By the time the great day of coronation came, Mike had lost count of the exact date, but he thought it might be Christmas. Early in the morning Willak Umu sent to Quizo's house a half a dozen anonymously garbed men. Mike thought them probably some of the Temple's more fanatically trustworthy priests. They showed him to a litter emblazoned with the sun-signs of the Temple, hoisted him to their shoulders, and trotted off in its direction. Using the smaller streets, they moved against the flow of the crowds glimpsed on the main thoroughfares, who were headed from every outlying portion of the city and its suburbs toward the Square of Joy.

The outer Temple walls showed raw holes, where the mounting bolts for its gold-sheathing plates had been torn out some months ago, in the futile garnering of Atahualpa's ransom. A small gate opened quickly when a bearer tapped. Mike was carried in and set down in a narrow space between the outer wall and the rear of one of the Temple buildings, while the low, trapezoidal gate was quickly barred again.

Another, larger doorway stood open to the interior of a building, a single vast and nearly empty chamber. Here too the stone walls were raw where gold plate had but recently been stripped away. Mike's escort walked ahead, he followed. Without warning, Coricancha burst upon his eyes.

The Enclosure of Gold was a courtyard within the Temple precincts, forming their heart, wide enough to be a park, completely open to the Sun. In the first shock of seeing it, all that was within it seemed to be brightly aflame with yellow light. Here for generations had labored the great artists and metalworkers of an empire. Into Coricancha now for a hundred years had come the Inca, to offer to Inti, upon the greatest occasions, the blood of snow-white llamas.

Twenty golden llamas, life-size, now made a motionless caravan across the court of Coricancha. Six large buildings fronted inward on the court, all but their rear roofs invisible from the streets outside. On all the rooftops facing toward the court, thatch of straw drawn from pure gold caught at the Sun and hurled it glinting downward. Below, the herders of the llamas, also full-sized, were golden too, down to their slings and staves, each figure of them a Midas dream of wealth.

In the center of this square of miracles, a massive golden fountain gushed with living water, not the molten yellow metal that the eye now half-expected. Pure liquid gold would seem no more than what was required, to nourish the long straight rows of maize, all silver, gold, electrum, no two plants quite alike, all life-sized and perfectly wrought down to the tiniest kernel. Gaping as he walked between the rows, Mike stumbled on a clod of earth... too hard for earth. He looked down. Pure gold, the size of his two fists, the

outline of a golden weed hand-modeled on one side.

There came to him the thought of Tom, whose lifelong wish had been to get within reach of wealth like this, and who for a single golden Mask had thrown his life away. But even Tom in his worst fit of avarice would have seen more here than the mere weight of metal. Unlike the Spaniards, who like so many dragons would have as their first thought the idea of melting this down to make the handling easier, then sitting on it, hiding it away out of the reach of other thieves...

His chain of thought went glimmering. He was standing in front of what he had come here to see. Above the singing fountain in the center of Coricancha, fixed to a wall above an altar that was worth an emperor's ransom in itself, was that which could obliterate even the thought of golden life-sized llamas... *punchao* .

The word might mean simply daylight, or the appearance of the sun. Here it meant the face of Inti, shown as he came in majesty in the Andean dawn to wipe away the dark, the cold, to blind the stars and deny with his own immortality the fact of death. Round as the great sky-disc that now sent down its flame to share, and surrounded by long, radiant streaks all of pure gold, it was everywhere sparkled and patterned with what must be sapphires, emeralds, diamonds. A Biscayan braggart, Manico Sierra de Leguizamo, was to claim that he had had this *punchao* in his possession one night in Cajamarca, and in a night of dissipation had gambled it away before the real sun could rise—his boast created a Spanish proverb, but few of his contemporaries believed him. Pizarro would never have suffered *this* to fall into any common soldier's hands. But no historian, in Mike's branch of history or Tupac's, would be able to say with any certainty where this *punchao* had really gone.

Coricancha numbed the mind of the newcomer, but to the priests who made up Mike's working crew it was their workaday world. Already one of them had brought out bronze and wooden tools from somewhere, and others were standing audaciously upon the altar, getting ready to detach the *punchao* from its mountings. Before laying tools to metal, however, they were pausing, looking at Mike. He must have been represented to them as a sorcerer of great power, whose orders were to be strictly followed in this enterprise. "To work," he told them, as decisively as he was able, and leaned back with folded arms against a llama worth no more (he guessed) than the New York State budget for a year.

The sun of noon was burning down, solsticially almost straight overhead. Soft bells—golden, no doubt—tinkled somewhere inside the Temple complex, and a procession of holy women filed into view, bearing gifts of food and drink to place before the Sun. Naturally, Mike thought, no one had remembered to tell the *mamacona* to keep out of the way today.

White-robed, demure, and graceful, the Chosen Women of the God passed one by one before the altar, the priests hopping awkwardly out of their way. There was one woman taller than the rest, with hair that looked almost blond where it escaped her veil. She couldn't be a native here, of course; some hostage or captive, then, from...

Where in the western hemisphere could she have come from?

Not only the hair. She looked like—

Mike took three steps, stood where she must almost run into him as she filed with the other gift-bearers back toward the women's cloister.

"Sal. Sally Zimmerman."

Her face was no more tanned than it had been at Key West, but it was vastly less prettified and harder and more real. It looked at him blankly for a moment, an *Incamamacona's* face startled by an exclamation in a foreign language; and then Sally Zimmerman inside it breached the surface, as if ascending from a long, breath-holding dive.

She didn't know him right away; he must have been changed far more than she. "Who?" she croaked, in somehow rusty-sounding English. "What did you say?"

"I said your name, Sal. It's me—Mike. Mike Gabrieli." Maidens were piling up in confusion behind Sal where she had stalled, while the front half of the procession went on away from her with measured dignity.

"Mike. Oh, God help me. I thought that you were dead."

He took her by one loose sleeve and pulled her gently from the line, indicating with a nod to the women behind her that they should move along. "And I had some doubts about you." He was hissing at her almost angrily. "How did you get out of that house? Aunt... Aunt Whatsername's house?" At the moment he couldn't recall his own relatives properly. Of what lineage were they? "And what happened to the town?"

"Esperanza came for me. You know, the white-haired man—"

"I know."

From, the distant Square of Joy, ten thousand voices roared; Manco Inca had perhaps just received the royal fringe from the invader's hand.

"Anyway, Esperanza got me out while those men were hunting you. He said Key West would be back to normal in a few hours, and nobody there would realize that anything weird had happened."

Some more priests were coming out of another building now, halfway across Coricancha; it was a busy day in the Temple, for what he had thought would be a secret mission.

Sally went on: "Esperanza said I had to come here for a time, for reasons of paradoxes and whatnot. I don't understand, but I've been going along." Her voice, growing anxiety and all, was becoming almost as he remembered it. "What else can we do?"

"I know the feeling."

Sal held his hand now, as if he might vanish otherwise. She said, "Tom wound up in this world, too."

"I know. I've... seen him."

"Have you?" Sal nodded past Mike's shoulder. "Here he comes now."

He started to turn, then tried to say something, then did turn. The priests who had just emerged from a building had separated. One of them was now coming toward Mike at a trot. The sun on a thousand fortunes of pure gold was transmuted into a strange kind of fire that burned out sense and reason from the brain. The metal maize stalks seemed to topple, the molten figures of llamas melted, wavering toward pure light.

"Mike! You ugly sonovabitch, you're still alive!" And even as he heard the words in the familiar voice, he knew that he was fainting.

Chapter 12. Old Peak

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As he sat in his and Cori's room in Quizo's house, the Mask was showing him another room inside another house of polygonal stone, wherein there stood another Masked figure, looking back at him. It was no mirror image; the other man's clothing was European-16, and a wisp of gray beard escaped incongruously from under the enigmatic smile of his Mask.

These last few days, Mike's Mask had brought him nothing but noise, and these apparently pointless visions of Pizarro. The Governor, too, was always Masked when Mike saw him, always alone and indoors. No doubt he was somewhere in the Casana, the palace of the mighty Inca Pachacuti, that Pizarro had commandeered for himself as the most magnificent on the Square. No doubt Pizarro also saw Mike; at least Mike was hoping and assuming that this apparent interference of the Masks was mutual, and that the Spaniard was as stymied by it as himself. Also Pizarro, thank heaven, probably had no means of guessing from which house or even which city his enigmatically Masked opponent was gazing back at him.

Mike heard a small noise and took his Mask off, trusting it to continue to block Pizarro's vision. He saw that Quizo had pushed the door curtain aside and come into the bedroom. The air was gray and chill with-early dawn. Cori, who tended to be a slow morning starter except in conditions of emergency, stirred sleepily, bundled in a woolen blanket.

By now Quizo had seen the Mask several times and accepted it almost as Cori did, as nothing very surprising for a sorcerer to possess.

When he was sure that Mike was through with the Mask for the time being, Quizo said to him, "You and Cori, get up now. It is time to go."

This was a surprise. "Go where?"

Quizo only smiled, perhaps pleased that he could still surprise the visionary, and took himself away.

"Damn." It irritated Mike when people cutely refused to answer. But the general's directions were not given lightly, and he stirred Cori with a foot, found her already half-awake. They both began to dress quickly. Not knowing what sort of journey Quizo had in mind, they packed their few valuable possessions about their persons.

Bowls of oatmeal like *quinoa* were waiting for them in a common room on the ground floor, and out in a courtyard three litters stood with bearers ready. As he began on his hot cereal, Mike saw Quizo himself appear out there, obviously ready to board the first vehicle in line; Mike took Cori by the arm, and out they went.

He wished he could send a word to Tom, over in the Temple, before setting out on whatever expedition Quizo had planned. But someone would let Tom know. Mike got into the second litter in line, and looked back to see Cori step into the third. With a slight start, he now recognized that third one as the Temple litter with the false bottom, in which the *punchao*, disassembled, had been carried from the Temple here

to Quizo's house. Eight sturdy-looking bearers grunted now as they heaved the vehicle to their shoulders. Obviously they were burdened with much more than Con's slender weight.

Mike thought of Con's curvy little bottom, bouncing an inch above the lordly staring eye of Inti. Well, if the priests saw no sacrilege implied, he was not the one to suggest it to them. Actually, the more he thought about it, the less likely it seemed that Inti would object.

The house gate opened just before the litter train, and closed again immediately it was through. The bearers moved at a quick pace, almost trotting. Avoiding the Square of Joy where Spaniards were ever-present, and the eyes of the *yanacona*, most active collaborators, were the busiest, they traversed side streets to intercept the Royal Road that led out of the city to the west, the same road that Mike and Cori had entered Cuzco by.

As they departed the city, Mike closed the side curtains on his litter and tried on the Mask again, hoping to learn what this sudden journey might portend. Nothing but noise in his eyes, a color TV gone mad. Damn. Well, Pizarro was no doubt doing some damning of his own just now.

Mike put the Mask away but left the curtains drawn. He felt a sudden guilt at being carried about like an invalid on the backs of other men; never mind that the other men thought nothing of it, and would have been surprised to know his feelings. Guilt had not assailed him on his ride to Coricancha and back the other day; he supposed his mind had been too busy then.

Damn again. It nagged him that he had not been able to talk to his brother today before leaving Cuzco.

Recovering from his faint in Coricancha a few days earlier, Mike had soon made sure that it was really Tom who stood before him. Only—and this doubt seemed to occur to both of them simultaneously—there was no immediately obvious way of making sure that they were Tom and Mike from the same branch of history.

"Tom, I tell you, goddamn it, I saw you lying there dead.

All hacked up. Arms gone, legs gone, chest cut open." Mike recited it in an under-breath monotone, as if confessing some terrible fault. He drew a deep breath. "I got out of Mictlan with the Mask, no other way I could have made it. Of course if it wasn't for the Mask..."

"We'd neither of us be into this. Yeah." Tom nodded. "Yeah, that Mictlan sure sounds like hell. But I was never there."

They stood there talking English in their city-Georgia accents, and the folks at home would have thought them both made up for the minstrel show, if minstrel shows were still being given anywhere. Tom looked dark and Indian, too, though he hadn't been changed as much as Mike. All around them the absurd golden wealth of Tawantinsuyu shimmered, as from a sun gone mad.

Tom said, "Look, that must have been—well, me, from another branch."

"I guess." Mike shook his head and wondered if he should try to laugh.

"Look, Mike, *Idon't know* of anything bad that happened to you in my branch, I just assumed... look, I left you that Mask in that red paint can, just like you found it. Then I went up to Miami Beach, like a real numbskull, didn't know what I was getting into. The Tenocha showed up, and I had a second or two to think, my God, what have I done to Mike, getting him involved? 'Course I didn't know then who in hell

the Tenocha were, but I could see they were some bad onions. Just starting to give me a real rough time, when here comes the cavalry. Like John Wayne with all the trumpets blowing, let me tell you.

"Let me guess. Esperanza."

"That's him. How'd you know? Anyway, he got me out of that fight and dragged me off here, in what I first thought was only a helicopter. Here I discover he's already brought Sal. The priests here seem to think he's a ship captain, you know, one of those balsa-raft deals the Incas have. I guess they never get farther than a little bit up and down the coast. Believe me, I didn't know *what* was going on at first. You think you were confused, inside that Fort you told me about? I didn't have the advantages you did—of any orientation classes, or being given a regular course in the language.

"Anyway, I figured first that he was somehow peddling me and Sal as freaks, to Willak Umu, who I know now is the high priest of this establishment. At least I figured it was better than being murdered, which I was on the point of back home."

"I'll have to go along with that."

"Except now I'm realizing there must be more to it. He didn't bring Sal and me here just to help us out, the way he tells it. You know what I think?"

"What?"

Tom swept his arm about them. It took Mike a moment to understand. "Oh. The gold."

"Of course!" Tom glared at him for being stupid.. "Sonovabitch! *Nobody's* going to let someone else carry off all this loot and melt it down, if he can prevent it. Esperanza wants it, just like the Spaniards do, but some of these paradox-problems that he talks about prevent his just carting it away. We're here to play some part in helping him."

"Yeah." Mike nodded, then shook his head. "But we're all having a few greater problems than getting gold, in case you haven't noticed."

"Like what?"

Mike sighed. "Like people getting raped and murdered right and left."

"Oh, yeah, this war that Esperanza keeps mentioning, but he can't or won't explain it. War and politics go on. Hey, buddy, they've really changed you around. Look at your ears. With me it's basically just some dirt and sunburn. Hey, listen, have you got a razor? It's a hell of a job trying to keep shaved. Bronze butter-knives and old broken seashells, they use. Hey, you get yourself a little *coya* yet? One nice thing about bein' a priest here is there's none of this celibate nonsense. Poor Sal—I guess things are different for the girls."

"I guess. Listen, junior, if Esperanza wants you to be a priest and Sal a nun for a while, you just better stick with it. That's my advice."

Before Cuzco was many kilometers behind, the litter-bearers turned north, leaving the Cincasoyo Road that Mike and Cori had traveled earlier. Now they were on a branching road, equally well paved but not quite as broad. At the first *tambo* stop, near midday, where the bearers were replaced by waiting relief teams, Mike asked again: "Where are we going, Honored Quizo?"

Quizo's eyes almost twinkled. "Where the *suncasapa* will not come." Mike decided he was not going to repeat the question.

Shortly they were under way once more, Cori indicating with a helpless little shrug that this was a new part of the world to her also. Still going north, they made a long climb through a valley, where lakes were visible on either side of the road. Then they passed a town. Mike leaned from his litter to ask a bearer, "Where are we now?"

"Chincheru."

If he had ever heard the name, it now meant nothing to him.

Making frequent rest stops, and now moving at a deliberate walk, the bearers by dusk came out on the bank of a large river that Mike, consulting hazy mental maps, tentatively identified as the Wilcanota. Gradually during the day he had shed most of his feeling of disgust at being carried, and by night had even stopped trying to lift his own litter by gripping at the side poles during difficult ascents.

That night they stayed at a large *tambo* . near where the road began to run northwest along the river. Quizo camped in one small room and Mike and Cori in another, while their taciturn bearers tried to get along with some more convivial llama-drivers out in a common barracks. Talking privately with Mike, Cori confirmed that she had not seen this road before, and had no idea where they were going. They estimated that they had come 12 or 15 miles during the day.

In the morning, Quizo roused bearers and passengers early, and they were on the road before the mists were gone. In a few hours they met a group of men trotting toward them; these turned out to be a relief crew of bearers arriving for a prearranged rendezvous. After all had shared a morning meal, the newcomers bore the litters on northwest, while those relieved hiked back toward Cuzco.

During the rest of the day the scenery grew ever more savage and spectacular, the climbs and descents steeper. The road branched again, left the Wilcanota behind and far below, shrank drastically in width, in places to a mere three feet, and burrowed twice in constricting rock-carved tunnels through jutting mountain shoulders. And once the wingtip feathers of a condor, soaring over an abyss, came so close to Mike's litter that he could have reached out to touch them, except that reaching out would have involved the risk of looking down. He gripped the sidepoles of his litter and tried to think of something else.

Out of nowhere, seemingly, appeared a military checkpoint, sheltered behind a low stone wall on a place of vantage where it seemed a half dozen men should be able to throw back an army. A young officer wearing checkered tunic and bronze *canipu* , with feathered magic trailing from the rim of his dress shield, dropped to the road and halted the bearers with an upraised arm. Quizo stuck his head out through his curtains and spoke, and the officer bowed aside.

Past the checkpoint the road went down, to a nearby *tambo* , where the travelers spent the night. Mike and Cori were both lost, though he estimated they might be no more than 30 miles from Cuzco.

Sometime near midafternoon of the third day's travel, Quizo suddenly and unexpectedly called a halt. There seemed no human habitation near, and today they had seen no other traffic on the road. The only arable land in sight was forested, not planted.

Upon alighting, Quizo at once sent the bearers back whence they had come, taking his empty litter and Mike's with them. Cori's remained; she stood patiently beside it. Scarcely had the two empty litters

vanished around a bend in the road, than down the mountainside above the travelers came six men in what Mike took to be a variation on priestly garb. These sturdy newcomers greeted Quizo with deference. Then they took up Con's litter, without her, but still laden with its hidden burden of the Sun.

Leaving the road behind, Quizo led the way up the trackless hillside. In a fold of the land, one more small village waited—a couple of huts, rather, looking misplaced here in the wild. Then on up, into raw wilderness. Mike and Quizo several times had to give a hand in heaving the litter upward. If it were an honor for the nobility to bear the Inca, it could hardly be less of one to help Inti himself to a hiding place in time of peril.

There was timber ahead, and a hard climb brought them into it, Mike gasping, and the others showing some signs of strain. Shortly they emerged from the belt of trees. They had gone up and down so much since leaving Cuzco that Mike felt as uncertain about altitude as about location, but the timber indicated they were not at any extreme height.

Around them forbidding rocks grew steep, and steeper still. Quizo marched on like some patriarchal mountain goat. The muscles in his lean calves looked like the granite that they spurned behind. The rainy-season clouds had been gathering close above their heads when they started upward from the last huts, and now the climbers were going in among the clouds. The world closed down to small inclined planes of damp and slippery rock. White radiance brightened slowly and fitfully ahead as they climbed on.

There were flashes of blue and gold ahead, from the sun's lashing of the clouds' tops. Now brief glimpses of purged sky and hard-edged rock appeared in that clean light.

Mike came out atop a ridge, into a radiant world, where he found Quizo already standing with his arms outspread. The lowering sun, behind them as they reached the ridgetop, made Brocken specters of their shadows falling on the cloud-bank at their feet—seemingly gigantic images of themselves, shadowing vast clouds and whole mountains dimly glimpsed beyond. Round Mike's own shadow's head he saw the glory—meteorologists' jargon for a rainbow halo. He heard a suppressed little cry from Cori standing at his left, and saw Quizo at his right pull hairs from his eyebrows and blow them like kisses to the Sun. Quizo and Cori, Mike knew, must each have seen themselves, and no one else, honored by the glory, and must each have taken it as a great sign. Meanwhile the litter-bearers, perhaps in some humble wisdom born of greater experience on these heights, disregarded the meteorological phenomena and stuck with their job.

From the ridge on which they stood, a mountain went on even higher, and around it went the narrowest path yet. Mike thought at first that the litter was not going to make it, but those who carried it knew better. They shifted grips and bore it on without a pause.

At a point that Mike took to be about halfway round the mountain, the path broadened enough to give them all a place to rest. Here was posted a single sentry, who, unsurprised at their appearance, saluted Quizo casually with his javelin.

There was something that had begun to trouble Mike as he looked about him at these mountains, something less obvious than altitude or fear of falling. The great peaks, wooded and rocky jumbled together as far as the eye could see, with glimpses of jungle lapping at their bases, and the voice of a great river somewhere far below—it was all oddly like a scene remembered. *Deja-vu* taunted his mind and danced away. What name might this river bear?

His earlier resolve against asking questions was momentarily forgotten. Almost without thinking he

tapped the nearest bearer on the shoulder. "Where are we going?"

"*Wayna Picchu*," the cheerful answer came, the man meanwhile pointing straight ahead.

New Peak? The panting refugee from the lowlands cautiously edged a few inches forward. He saw a smooth mountain, standing up to its waist in clouds. Something very familiar... but certainly not part of the scenery around the Fort.

Mike edged on, past the resting men, where there was barely room. The mountain that he stood on, he now saw, was connected to New Peak by a high saddle of land, and on that saddle an Inca city rode amid a herd of clouds. Below the crowding of its thatched roofs and walls of polygonal stones, vertiginous terraces of varied crops made stairsteps down the mountain for a hundred meters or so, before its sides steepened too much for even Andeans to carve their farmland from it.

It hit him. Small wonder that this place looked familiar. He had seen it in a hundred photographs, before he ever heard of Tawantinsuyu. 'If that was New Peak over there, this mountain that he clung to here would be, of course, Old Peak. In Quechua—

"Machu Picchu," said the bearer, and smiled a little to see how much the warrior-sorcerer was impressed.

That was all in early January, when the terraces of Machu Picchu were thick with crops, its cisterns brimming from the chill rains that came each afternoon. It was not until May that Mike climbed the same trail again, returning from his first journey out, he and Quizo and Chuqui Huaman and a few others hiking up to the secret city in the clouds. In May 1534 the dry season had arrived, water was being husbanded, the land resting. It was the month for Inca armies to march forth to war. Quisquis was still in the field, somewhere. But around Cuzco and Machu Picchu, all the land was held in a troubled and unsettled peace.

Mike was impatient on the last leg of his journey back, urging the others on. He was suddenly fearful that something bad had happened to Cori during the weeks he had been gone on business of politics and the hunt. It was not a particularly rational fear—the Spaniards, in every branch of history that Mike knew about, had failed to discover Machu Picchu at all. In Mike's home branch, the very name—though not that of the homonymic mountain—had been forgotten, and the ruins of the lost city were rediscovered only in 1911, by an explorer from the United States.

In Machu Picchu the great Inca Huayna Capac, father of Atahualpa, Huascar, and Manco Inca, had rested sometimes from his long work of conquest. Here scores of cloistered holy women had worshiped at the shrines he had established. In 1534 there were still priests and Chosen Women here to serve those shrines, and there were artisans and physicians in residence. Mike thought of the latter and drew some comfort; when he had left Machu Picchu in April with Quizo, to attend the Inca at the Royal Hunt, Cori had suspected she was pregnant.

As he came round the ledge on New Peak, Mike saw that the terraces had not yet dried out; tropical vegetation still sprawled over the granite bones protruding here from ancient compound fractures of the earth. Now Quizo's elevated quarters came into view; somewhat less luxurious than those of his house in town, but usually well staffed with servitors and concubines. The general's windows loomed from a crag on the eastern side of the mountain, overlooking a mere sketch of a path below, that seemed to lead nowhere at all. At the end of that path *the punchao* had been hidden, in a crevice among gigantic shards of granite, almost impossible to reach by climbing. The face of the Sun had been swathed in heavy wrappings so no glint of it could shine forth, but otherwise left open to the sky.

And now his friends said good-bye with a few ribald jokes and let him hurry on ahead. Now he was on the final stairway leading up to the apartment that he and Cori shared, like garret-dwellers in the old-time Paris of any of a dozen known branches...

Cori must have been watching from a window, for here she came, barefoot and with her hair blowing wild. His heart jumped to see her safe, and he guessed she was not pregnant after all, for here she came running like an Olympic athlete down the stairs to greet him with an almost savage embrace.

"I missed you."

"I, too, oh so much."

He held her at arm's length, looked around. There was no one. In English he said, "You know something I've just realized, while we've been separated? You're my wife."

Cori started some kind of answer, giggled, started another, then half-collapsed, contending with a mixture of emotions. "The women..." she got out finally, "the women here have been asking me... when and where we were married... and I have had to put them off."

"That first night in the *tambo* together; give them that date. And tell them anything you like about where. Tell them in Coricancha if you want to. Willak Umu himself will say that is so, if I request it."

Later, with Inca night-life going on in the city round them, dancers' bells and flute and pipes announcing a mild celebration of the return of the men who had walked out into a changing world and come back safely, Mike leaned on a high windowsill, feeling like a peer of the Moon, and looked out across Machu Picchu in the night. Mike drew in a chestful of the air. He no longer minded the cold of the high mountains, though at great elevations his breathing still troubled him and he knew there could be bad long-term effects from the altitude. But this was not the night for worrying. Below him was spread a world of sugarloaf mountains, enchanted waterfalls in moonlight, the endless rumble of the Urubamba far below—fantastic land and plants and clouds and sky.

Now he was telling Cori of his journey. "So Quisquis was driven clear back into the north, and the Inca returned to Jauja, to rest from the campaign, and entertain his Spanish guests. Therefore the hunt... Quizo and I met Swift Hawk there—remember him?"

"Of course. Has Chuqui Huaman recovered from his wounds?"

"Oh, yes. In fact he was just back from Teocajas, where another great battle was fought not long ago. That place is—how shall we measure it?—about a hundred miles south of Quito. One of Pizarro's chief men, Sebastian de Benalcazar, was leading about two hundred *suncasapa*, chasing rumors of gold in that direction. They shattered an army of some tens of thousands, under Ruminavi, old Stony Eyes. From what I hear about Ruminavi, he must be a man a lot like Quizo.

"Anyway, when Quizo heard about this fighting, ending in another bloody defeat, he bit his tongue—I mean he really bit it, I think deliberately *ingrief and anger*, so I could see the blood running from his mouth. Then Quizo spoke of joining Quisquis in the field, but Willak Umu and I persuaded him he should stay loyal to the Inca, and wait for the time when Manco's mind can be changed about the Spaniards.

"Then of course we had the great hunt. I suppose you know what they are like, if you haven't seen one. Ten thousand beaters make a circle, whoop it up with lots of noise, drive all the game into closer and

closer confinement. When the animals are almost on top of each other, all in a panic, *the pakoyoc* grab up their favorite weapons and jump in, killing or trying to kill whatever they like, from *puma* and bear to ground squirrel."

"And did you enjoy the hunt, brave husband?"

"I... yes, I guess I did. It was exciting. The Spaniards I believe really thought it was pretty tame stuff. Mostly they watched, though they were polite about it and took part to some extent. It was in Pizarro's honor, after all, that Manco ordered the hunt to be held."

"Then did you meet the *sapa* Inca?"

"Yeah." Alone together, he and Con still mixed English into their speech. "I got to crawl up before his throne, barefoot, with this little pack they put on your back as a symbol of subservience. Manco said something like 'How are you?' and I answered 'Fine, Your Majesty,' or words to that effect. I was a little worried that he might ask what province I was supposed to be from, or how my job was coming along, but Willak Umu and Quizo were there to back me up in case of awkward questions. Hell, there must be hundreds of the nobility around that Manco can't recognize on sight, or know what branch of the tribe they're from, or what their job is supposed to be. He talks more to the Spaniards than to us." The "us" came out quite naturally, and only afterward did he have a peculiar feeling about it.

Con sat curled up, leaning against the wall, a woolen blanket round her legs. "Tell me more about the Inca. What does he look like?"

"Oh. Handsome, I guess. In his very early twenties, looks even younger. He seems flattered by having a man like Pizarro bowing to him, listening closely, asking his opinions on everything. Pizarro's quite a diplomat, along with his other talents... wait, though. As I kept telling Quizo and the other—wait."

"Mike." She hesitated. "You know the things that are to come. Is it not so?"

"Not quite. I have a—call it a special knowledge of what *ought* to happen, sometimes." He had carried the Mask with him to Jauja, but had not used it there, fearing that Pizarro in one of their Mask-to-Mask confrontations would see from the background that his mysterious opponent was nearby. He wondered if Pizarro had given up trying to use his Mask also; watching the man at Jauja, Mike had been unable to get any hint of his plans.

"Anyway, Con, one thing I'm anxious to tell you, something I'm excited about. At the battle of Teocajas, Chuqui Huaman captured a Spanish horse, alive, and he's still got it. He brought back one of those mummified horse-hooves, too, that Willak Umu and the other priests all crave. But the live animal is what interests me, and it's near here now, grazing in one of those meadows down by the river. Under a strong guard, of course."

"What do you want of Swift Hawk's horse? Not just a chance to ride on it, I don't suppose."

"No. I've played with the idea of getting other horses, breeding them, equipping cavalry of our own. But that would take too many years—years we don't have. Still, the horse is in my plans—at least indirectly."

Cori got up and came to join him at the window, kissed him, then moodily paced away. "Roca, how many *suncasapa* are there in Tawantinsuyu now?"

"There must be about a thousand." He grimaced. "The newcomers are no doubt the greediest of the

bunch, kicking themselves for not having got here in the first wave, when they imagine they would have been able to plunge in right away, up to their armpits in loose gold. Some of 'em wouldn't have enjoyed that first march over the mountains with Pizarro, though, or the sight of Atahualpa's army outside Cajamarca. Nor will they enjoy what's coming in a year or two."

"What is coming?" Cori had an entrancing way of liking to listen to him, even when it seemed she must know what he was going to say.

He moved away from the window. "We must fight the *suncasapa*. Drive them out. That was really my job at the Fort, and it still is. And it is the job of all the Inca people, too."

"But if the Fort has fallen, and our armies could not kill the Bearded Ones when they were but a hundred and sixty..." Cori clenched small fists. "How shall we kill them when they are a thousand? And when half the empire's subject tribes are anxious to make cause with them?"

"Their own cruelty will cost them allies. It's more than cruelty. Through sheer indifference they will starve whole peoples and tribes. Make life impossible for whole nations, something no Inca ever did as supreme ruler. As for how to fight the Spaniards—it can be done. I feel sure that we can find ways. But the time is not yet ripe. The Inca himself must lead his people back to war."

Next day Mike met in conference with Chuqui Huaman, Quizo Yupanqui, Willak Umu, and others. The theme was the war yet to come, the rebellion which must rid Tawantinsuyu of its conquerors. After some flowery rhetoric had been disposed of, tactics, strategy, and weapons were all on the agenda.

Mike had some thoughts he had been developing on all of these. Take weaponry, for example. He had to face the fact that he was no Connecticut Yankee master of all trades, able to teach the metalworkers of Tawantinsuyu how to improve their bronze until it might compete, edge against edge, with Spanish steel. No, whatever improvements he could achieve in the way of hardware would have to be put into effect by native craftsmen using the skills and materials already at hand; and the improved weapons would have to be usable by infantry, preferably with only a minimum of special training.

What were the world's master war technologists of the sixteenth century, the Europeans, doing on their home battlefields to offset the inherent advantage of cavalry? Not using firearms, or anyway not yet using firearms with any convincing success. Gunpowder was on the verge of transforming warfare, but only on the verge. If Pizarro had relied on the best arquebuses and cannon available as his chief weapons, he would not likely have survived his first battle in Tawantinsuyu. Anyway, the technological difficulties in the way of his, Mike's, trying to arm the Indians with machine guns or even muskets were of course insurmountable.

Then there were the famed English yeomen, who with their longbows at Agincourt a little over a hundred years ago had mowed down the charging, armored flower of French chivalry. But Mike suspected he wouldn't be able to make a good longbow if he tried, and was certain that he wouldn't be able to use it properly; he had read somewhere that years of practice had been required. The Inca armies already included companies of archers, tribesmen from the Antisuyo where trees grew plentifully, and choice wood for bows or anything else was readily available. But the men who could use those bows did not thrive here in the high country where the key battles must be fought; and Mike doubted also that their weapons were as powerful as the English yew was said to be, capable of driving a slender wooden shaft right through a metal breastplate at close range.

And, now that he thought about it, the defensive armor of the Conquistadors was no doubt better than that of the French more than a century earlier. With a sigh, Mike gave up all thought of archery.

Try again. In this fourth decade of the sixteenth century, just who were the best infantry in Europe, and why? Once he had put the problem in that form to himself, a sunburst like

Inti's face seemed to explode above his mental landscape. Of course!

To the leaders who had assembled grimly today to hear him, Mike said, "In the part of the world from which the *suncasapa* come, there is one land with many high, steep—" mountains, even such as stand herein the center of Tawantinsuyu. Few men of that mountainous land own horses. They go to war on foot, as do the Incas. Yet never is their country successfully invaded by the surrounding tribes of men in armor. And the fighting men of that land are even in great demand as soldiers elsewhere."

Not one voice was raised to ask him how he knew all this. It was accepted as a sorcerer's vision; whether it was accepted as true was another question.

Swift Hawk tasted his tobacco, a delicacy esteemed and used as snuff among the aristocracy. In a voice that held both real interest and polite doubt, he asked, "And can these men who fight on foot beat equal numbers mounted on horses?" He viewed his captured horse—and rightly—as a great prize.

Mike took thought. "Yes, they sometimes can. They cannot outrun the men who ride. But they can stand against them."

Quizo asked, "In open fields?"

Memory presented the untimely suspicion that Agincourt's field had been a bog. But that was irrelevant to the capabilities of the Swiss. "It is so. If the Honored Quizo will place at my disposal a blademaker and a good carpenter who has worked on weapons, I will soon have something to show him."

"It will be done."

The talk moved on to strategy and tactics. Reading history with a few hundred years' hindsight had enabled Mike to come up with some thoughts on those subjects, too. But he kept quiet for the time being, not wishing to be cast as the upstart who knew all things better than his elders. First, to get the weapons working.

The longest piece of wood readily available within the walls of Machu Picchu was a spare roof beam, about three meters from end to end. Mike conferred with Quizo, and the two of them searched various buildings for longer timbers that might conveniently be taken out and used. Nothing more satisfactory was located, and messengers were dispatched to the forested Antisuyo, their knotted *quipus* jiggling as they ran.

Meanwhile Mike set the artisans in metal and wood to work upon the nine-foot roofing beam, supervising them closely at every step. The result, which he could show to Quizo and the others two days later, was quite close to his memory of what an eight-foot halberd ought to look like. The tough shaft had been trimmed of excess weight, and a long bronze head bound on with metal straps and riveted securely. On one of its sides the head was an ax-shaped blade, and on the opposite side a pick-point curved into a hook. In the middle, it rose as a short spearhead, in a straight continuation of the shaft.

The bronze points and edge were not going to penetrate steel armor. But they could certainly damage any exposed limbs of the rider or his horse, while the man who wielded the halberd stayed out of range at least of the horseman's sword, though not his lance. Therefore the new weapon was already an

improvement over the *makana*, or the bronze-studded mace. But the hook, of course, was the real key to the halberd's effectiveness. It could catch on armor that it could not pierce, or dig into exposed flesh or clothing, and give the man on foot a fighting chance to pull a rider from his horse.

Maybe nine times out of ten, thought Mike, the halberdier on foot would lose against the mounted knight; when evenly matched, maybe nineteen times out of twenty. Still, even those odds when translated into casualty statistics would mean a great improvement over the Incas' record thus far against the Spaniards. And the combats to come would not often be simply even. Numbers remained one of the chief Inca advantages.

Quizo and the others looked thoughtfully at what the workmen had wrought, but they had little comment yet to make. A real test was going to have to be arranged; how else could a man know anything about a weapon?

It took a few days for the timbers to be brought from a hundred miles or so away, and a mile or two less altitude. Borne most of the way on human backs, they came as ordered, twenty feet long and perfect. Another Inca strong point, probably more valuable than mere numerical superiority, was a genius for logistics, for getting men and material to where they were needed at the proper time, and with a surprising degree of secrecy when it was called for. Again Mike and his mechanics went to work, this time with Quizo and other anxious warriors frequently hovering near.

The trial was held some thousands of feet below the high saddle of Machu Picchu, in a broad meadow beside the Urubamba. Here for some days now, Swift Hawk's captured horse had fattened with its grazing. Two peasant worker-soldiers came along, draftees sent into war as needed and then replanted in the soil. Mike had put in several hours' practice with them, putting them through a drill he had devised as he went along. The pikes were about five meters, or some sixteen feet, in length. Their business ends, normally to be long, bronze spearpoints, had been left blunt for this trial and were padded with quilted cotton armor bound on tightly. At Mike's suggestion, Chuqui Huaman's horse had also been well quilted, as if for a bullfight.

Swift Hawk leaped onto the animal's bare back with a skill and confidence that showed he, too, had been practicing, probably for more than a few hours. He waved aside the blunt imitation of a Spanish lance that Mike had had prepared, and instead grabbed from an aide what he proclaimed to be his own favorite weapon, a wood-bladed *makana*, much like the one Quizo had been prepared to wield in his courtyard in Cuzco.

Mike and his two pikemen took their places at one end of the meadow; Swift Hawk urged his animal to the other end, then turned it round. The trial was to be one against three, if they counted only the number of human contestants; if instead they went by weight and strength, the odds swung sharply to the other side. No one was trying to kill today, but Mike fully expected that this was going to be a damn sight rougher than any football game that he had ever seen.

Once again, with mouth dry and hands sweating, he knew the feeling of the little man on foot awaiting the centaur-monster's onrush. But this time, with the stout wooden shaft of the halberd in his hands, and flanked by pikemen who—he hoped—were not going to turn and run, the feeling remained endurable.

Chuqui Huaman kicked his animal in the ribs, urging it forward.

"Ground your weapons," Mike growled in Quechua to his troops, and saw to his relief that they remembered what the command meant. As he had taught them, hoping he was teaching correctly what seemed the only sensible tactic to repel a charge, they squatted to dig the butts of their weapons deep

into the turf, meanwhile holding their points at the height of the horse's chest. They swiveled their pikeshafts steadily to keep them aimed at their charging opponent.

Swift Hawk came on, letting out wild yells. Mike raised his halberd, looking for the chance to use it, remembering coldly that the Mask had shown him nothing one way or another about this game, and hoping that he would neither be trampled to death nor make an utter ass of himself.

At the last moment the nerve of one of the pikemen failed, or else he lost a good grip upon his weapon. The long shaft was knocked twisting from his hands by a blow from the *themakana*; but Swift Hawk, confronted by those leveled shafts, had also turned at the last moment, or else his horse had simply shied away from impact. Now the horse skidded sideways, its flank being punished by the other pike, whose owner wrestled gamely to hold control of it. The triangle of forces overcame brute weight and strength; the animal cried out and reared, nearly throwing its self-taught, unsaddled rider.

Now, thought Mike, moving to step in. But he was too unpracticed and too slow. Tugging on the horse's mane,

Swift Hawk wheeled his mount and raced away. At the other end of the meadow he turned again. The man whooped out another war cry, and man and horse, both savagely tough, came back for another charge. Swift Hawk's face was contorted, as if for real war, and he had his own deadly weapon upraised to strike. He couldn't be intending to kill. Could he? The cotton helmet on Mike's head felt suddenly as thin as tissue paper.

This time Chuqui Huaman veered his animal completely around the pikes, then curved back toward Mike. But the momentum of the charge was broken, and the horse ready now to shy away. Mike managed to parry the *themakana* when it swung at him. He made an effort to snag the rider with his bronze hook, but missed wildly. He was reminded—not that he needed reminding—that in this business of using hand weapons he was an utter beginner playing with professionals. By this time Swift Hawk was halfway down the meadow, turning his horse. And now here he came again.

The rider faked right, faked left, then tried to go between the pikes. Whether through cleverness or luck, one of the novice pikemen raised his point at the last moment. The horseman took the padded impact full in the chest and went off neatly over his horse's rump. The riderless horse shied off; Mike stepped forward, a little late but going through the motions, and brought his halberd down. He meant to pull the punch, but the weapon was too topheavy to be perfectly controlled. Swift Hawk, trying impulsively to jump up, got enough of a knock on the head to stretch him flat and motionless.

In a moment Quizo, Willak Umu, and the other warriors were swarming about the combatants, gabbling as excitedly as boys in a playground. Swift Hawk's head was prodded and pronounced unbroken, and his knockout dismissed as nothing more than a good joke. Quizo and the pikemen, all differences in rank and dignity forgotten for the moment, got into a spirited argument as to how the weapons must be gripped. Meanwhile the high priest was declaring that he wanted to try the halberd himself.

As predicted, Swift Hawk began to come around in a few moments. Shortly he was on his feet, frowning when he heard a laugh or two, and claiming loudly that his horse had tripped beneath him. In a few minutes the game was on again, this time with the Honored Quizo swinging the halberd, at some peril to his pikemen. Mike took a turn with one of the long weapons, wanting to get the feel of how it must be held.

Again, on the first try, Swift Hawk got around the pikes—although had there been an entire rank of pikemen for him to try to outflank, it would obviously have been a different story. His weapon and

Quizo's clashed, clashed again—and then, as the horse ran past the man on foot, the halberd's hook snared Chuqui Huaman neatly by the tunic. A moment later he was once more stretched out on the grass.

The workout went on a little longer, but nothing happened to seriously change the results of the test thus far. The horseman was unable to simply run over his adversaries, or drive them from their chosen positions. On the other hand, Chuqui Huaman lacked Spanish arms and armor, and he had had no chance to develop methods of attack. Climbing their slow way home toward Machu Picchu, the Incas were still doubtful. Quizo was obviously intrigued and pleased by pikes and halberds, but Willak Umu noted that there was more than the tactical effectiveness of the new weapons to be considered.

Said the high priest: "It will take many tall trees to thus equip an army."

"Trees can be cut and carried," Quizo answered doggedly.

Willak Umu sighed. "And even if the weapons were all at hand to be distributed, the Inca would not hear of it. He still embraces the *suncasapa* as his friends."

"We must wait until the right time comes," said Mike. "But we must be ready when it does."

The high priest was returning at once to Cuzco, and the bearers waiting to carry his chair away were lounging, squatting, beside the place where the trail started. Except for one who waited standing, a little apart from the others. An old man for a bearer. Also his nose looked rather large. Mike walked closer.

"You," he said in English.

"You can get a lot of meaning into a monosyllable, Mike. I see you're doing well."

"A raft captain last year and a porter now; you are really managing all this, aren't you? Including me."

"Because I drop in for a word of conversation now and then, you think I'm running the show? If you only knew the effort these simple visits cost me. If I were really managing all this, as you put it, I'd force you to tell me what I want to know instead of asking for information like a beggar."

"You always want to know something. I'm always supposed to give answers, but I never get any."

"Mike, if I try to tell you anything, put an idea into your head that's not already there, chances are I'll have to leave abruptly. It's the way paradoxes work. Now I can tell you *that*, because it seems you already know it. But no more than the Incas of Tupac's time can I drop information into this past, for it is my past, too."

"Sure, you just come to get information. What do you want to know this time?"

"As always, your intentions as Mask-wearer. And I believe I have already discovered them, thanks to being able to watch the demonstration today."

Mike looked around. Everyone else was busy chatting; no one seemed to be paying any attention to his conversation with a porter. He looked back. "You arranged for the Mask to fall into my hands, didn't you?"

Esperanza shrugged. "I'll try to answer that. If I should vanish suddenly in midsentence—well. What I did was to drop the Mask into your branch of history. It then—selected—you. Much as a

computer—which the Mask is, among other things—comes up with a particular number in answer to a particular problem.

"Pizarro's Mask and yours are of course in a sense the same, though our enemies have selected him much as I have chosen you. In a year or two, when you and he come into direct opposition, only one of you will be able to—"

And that was it. Willak Umu's crew was starting back for Cuzco a man short, but Mike was willing to bet that no one would ever notice it.

Chapter 13. Manco

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Cuzco, Peru, *1535-36*

"It's the ladycoya that we want, Senor Inca. All this silver is fine, but she's the one we're after!"

Gonzalo Pizarro speaking, one of Francisco's much younger brothers, surrounded by half a dozen of his compatriots, all heavily armed. Not the Gonzalo whom Mike had knocked out, but resembling that one. And speaking now to Manco Inca, all of them standing in the Square of Joy in front of Manco's just-completed house. "Palace" would have seemed too grand a word for this edifice; it was dwarfed by Pachacuti's old palace next to it, the Casana that had been taken over by the Governor.

Manco looked noticeably older than he had at the Royal Hunt a year and a half ago, the last time Mike had seen him. Manco in the gateway of his new house also looked half-paralyzed, like a man who did not know which way to turn. Not, after three years of occupation, so much incredulous that this foreign gangster should be demanding his—the Inca's—principal and most beautiful wife. But incredulous that such an offense could have become not only conceivable but something to be expected. So Mike put it to himself.

It was December again, and the afternoon summer rains were threatening. Cori and the baby were doing well, but she wasn't ready for any arduous trips yet, and Mike had left her in Machu Picchu while he made this first journey into Cuzco for more than a year. He had not needed the sputtering Mask to tell him that the time was ripe for eventful change in the capital; his studies of history had told him that. All the histories spoke of this scene that was now before him.

Quizo had come into the city with Mike, the two of them intending to go straight to the Temple and talk with Willak Umu, but before they had crossed the Square they had been distracted by the confrontation going on in front of Manco's house. Mike and Quizo stopped at a few meters' distance from the scene, watching and listening. Here they had also found the man they were looking for. Willak Umu stood at Manco's side, scowling toward Gonzalo Pizarro and his crew of bullyboys.

At the Spaniards' feet in the sand of the Square were bags and boxes spilling silver. There were *canipu*, necklaces with gems, ornaments for limbs and hair, small boxes, combs, and mirrors. No gold was visible in this offering; probably Manco had none left to give, or at least none that he was going to sacrifice in an effort to retain a wife.

"I can find no more gold, Senor Gonzalo." In the last couple of years, Manco had learned passable

Spanish. "These presents are yours; my wives are mine. Now bother me no more."

Francisco would never have bothered him in this way. He preferred to keep the Conquest on friendly terms as long as possible. Nor would Hernando de Soto or many of the other leaders. But Francisco was far off on the coast, overseeing the construction of Ciudad de los Reyes, the city that would one day be called Lima; and as *hiscorregidores* in Cuzco he had named his brothers Gonzalo and Juan.

So now Gonzalo only grinned. "Ah, Senor Inca, I really can't stand it anymore, this waiting. We know *thecoya*'s in your house—now bring her out. I have heard marvelous things about her beauty, and I want to get a good look."

Juan Pizarro, a younger and handsomer version of Gonzalo, had become aware of Mike and Quizo standing nearby. He turned halfway toward them, one eyebrow faintly questioning, one hand moving with slow assurance toward his swordhilt. Manco now turned to the newcomers also; he stepped forward out of his gateway, and with a gesture of his head, indicated that they should go through it into his house. Meanwhile the high priest stood unmoving, confronting the Spaniards with a fixed glare.

Inside the gate, Mike paused at the door of the house itself, turning back and trying to see what was going on out in the Square. He had the stunmasher in his belt, but he wanted to let the day's events run out their normal course, of great importance for the future.

"What's up?" The words were English. Tom, his priestly garments hung on him carelessly, had come out of the house to stand with Mike. Meanwhile Quizo had gone on inside, perhaps finding the Inca's degradation too much to watch.

"Trouble," Mike whispered. "But according to plan." Then he looked more closely at his brother. "Last I heard, you were still living at the Temple."

"Dominicans ran all of us priests out, and Manco is putting some of us up here." Tom found it funny enough to grin about. "Spaniards are getting ready to build a church over there, I think. Thought I might try out my altar-boy Latin on 'em, but I decided not."

"Good thinking," said Mike dryly. Then he pulled his brother back into the house, for here came Manco stalking in through the gate, Willak Umu a step and a half behind him.

Mike and Tom, with Quizo and various members of the household, all bowed aside from the doorway as the Inca swept in. Only one faced him—a lovely woman who must be Cura Ocllo, his sister, wife, and queen. As she came out of an inner room, Manco seemed to have a little trouble looking her straight in the eye. Instead he swept a sharp glance round him at the others. "Where is Inguill?" he demanded.

Cura Ocllo took a step forward, and as if there were no one else around, addressed her husband familiarly. "What do you want with her?"

This time he did not drop his eyes, but blustered. He barked at his queen to be quiet and snatched the royal shawl from her head. "I tell you, send me the woman you have named Inguill. It must be her or you, and *they* do not know your face. What other comely women have I left? In all Cuzco there is hardly one that they have not already raped."

Bowing her bare head, a hand to her face, *thecoya* retreated into the room from which she had emerged. The witnesses were standing with bowed heads, hearing and seeing no evil, and Mike made haste to drop his own eyes when Manco again swept an angry glance around. But Mike looked up a

moment later, in time to see Sally Zimmerman coming out of the *coya*'s quarters.

Her relief was evident when she saw him and his brother. "Tom? Mike?" Manco had turned away. "What is this? I don't understand what they want me to do."

Tom said, in English, "Nothing you haven't done before, the way it looks."

Manco had been gathering queenly garments from fluttering servant girls, and now he turned on Sal and thrust them at her. "You will go to the men outside, and you will say to them that you are the *coya*."

"You'd better do it," Mike advised, when Sally turned her puzzled face to him.

Tom took her arm and spoke in English. "It's some of the Spaniards. Look, Sal, your going with them could mean a hell of a big chance."

Sal said nothing, but kept on looking fearfully at Tom, while the maidservants started to gown her as the queen.

"What I mean, try to find out where the gold is stashed." This whispered in English.

Meanwhile, Willak Umu could no longer hold his peace. Giving Manco a look that verged on the rebellious, he stalked outside. Mike slid over to resume his former station at the door, where by looking out through the open gate he could observe a large part of the Square. He could not hear exactly what the high priest was saying-out there to the Conquistadors, but Gonzalo Pizarro's answer came back loud and clear.

"Who said you could talk that way to the King's *corregidor*? Don't you know what kind of men we Spaniards are? By the King's life, if you don't shut up, I'll play such games with you and your friends that you will never forget them. I'll cut you up alive!" The words were no figure of speech; they were uttered by a man with his hand on the meat cutter at his side.

Willak Umu did not condescend to retort, apparently, but neither did his erect figure retreat a centimeter. Tension in the Square remained drawn, like a steel cable near the breaking point, until the women had finished their hasty work on Sally and had thrust her out the door.

Her face was partly covered now, but her eyes flashed, bluer than any Indian's should be, and her figure was tall and voluptuous under the shawl.

There was a moment of silence, and then a joyous shout went up from the Spaniards. "Senor Inca!" Gonzalo bellowed, "let me have her right away! I can't stand waiting any longer."

Manco had come out just behind Sal, shoving her impersonally forward. "Yes, congratulations. I give her to you. Do what you like."

Gonzalo had never thought of doing otherwise. He grabbed Sal by an arm and pulled her close, then used both hands to grapple. He put aside her shawl and kissed her full on the mouth, employing vast energy if no finesse. Manco, and even Willak Umu, whose brow had been ready to hurl lightning, were suddenly laughing in sheer amazement. That a man should act so in public, with a woman whose face he had not even seen before!

Sally took it quite differently, cried out, and fought herself halfway free. "What is this?" she burst out,

mixing Quechua and English. "I will run away rather than face such people!"

"You will go with them!" Manco roared. Her eyes passed quickly over other faces, from which she might once have expected help. Then she ceased to struggle.

Gonzalo loaded her with his share of the silver to carry, bags and boxes, before he and his party left the Square of Joy.

It was tough on Sally, but then there were other people in this war who had things even tougher. And Mike hadn't dared to try to change that scene. The woman Inguill, sent off with the rapists in place of the queen, was in the history books already. That Inguill could be Sally... he reminded himself there was more to time travel and branching history than he was prepared to try to understand.

Quizo had gone off somewhere on his own, too bitter, perhaps, to speak to anyone. Mike, Tom, and Willak Umu walked now toward the Temple through the changed streets of the city. Mike had expected the city to be changed, but still the reality was shocking. Random rubbish was strewn about, and animal droppings splotched the pavement. Here and there Spaniards' graffiti marked the superb masonry of the walls.

But the worst changes of course were in the people. Inca beggars had begun to lounge in front of the Casana and elsewhere, asking for food when a Spaniard *orpakoyoc* passed. Idlers not quite beggars sat at gates and sills along the streets. The children passing were often dull-eyed and fat with the starchy obesity of the ill-fed.

Mike found the golden straw all vanished from the roofs of Coricancha. Nothing had replaced it; many of the roofbeams had fallen in. Gone, of course, were the golden llamas, with their herders, the rows of maize, the altar—the treasure all gone, like stuff that dreams are made of.

At the edge of a pile of rubble where a wall had recently been knocked down, a young priest of Christ, in a brown habit, stood arguing with a minor priest of the Sun.

"When your high priest returns," the Dominican was saying, in slow and careful Spanish, "tell him that I was here, wishing to talk to him. He will remember me, Cristobal de Molina, from Almagro's expedition to the south last winter. We often walked together, he and I, and talked..."

Molina's eyes followed the shifting attention of the man that he was talking to. "Ah," he said then. "Willak Umu." His pronunciation was bad but he was trying; Quechua didn't fit easily on a Spanish tongue. He picked his way across the rubble to stand before the taller Inca. "My friend—I do think of you as my friend. I am relieved to see that you came back in good health from the south."

Willak Umu looked at him, as if from atop a mountain peak, or riding on a cloud.

"I have just been speaking to Bishop Valverde about you, Willak Umu," the priest went on. "It is his hope and mine that you will come to know the One True God."

"His name is gold?" the Indian asked.

The priest flushed, looked down, tried to look back, then burst out at last in heartfelt emotion. "High priest, I am sorry!" he cried. "I know what you must think, for few of the Indians that Almagro took south as porters and bearers are still alive, and fewer still of those whom we met along the way. After you—departed, escaped, what you will—I saw things that I do not want to remember, but I cannot

forget. Spaniards having their horses' newborn colts born in litters by Indian women, who themselves were weak with starvation. Cruelties without cause..."

Willak Umu was looking at him. Through him, rather.

"I am sorry!" Molina cried again. "But you—you must not judge the Church of Christ by the wrong that men do, who claim it as their own."

In his agitation he would have paced about, but the broken stones about him made him stumble. Then, as if changing the subject, the Christian priest began to explain that the Church of Santo Domingo was soon to be built on this site of Coricancha. Already some Indians who seemed to have nothing else to do had been set to work removing the old buildings...

Mike had turned away, and was the first to see—without surprise—Manco come pacing toward them, unattended in the street. Mike reached out to touch Willak Umu on the arm.

The rubble of the Temple about his feet, Manco faced them all, and again, something about him had been changed. "Gonzalo Pizarro has taken my wife, after all."

The deception had not worked—at least not for more than a matter of minutes. Sally had got away from the Spaniards, but not before a couple of them had abused her. But they had the *realcoya* now, had carried her off almost under Manco's nose.

At a meeting held in his house that day as the shadows of the western hills lengthened over the city, Manco declared: 'I have decided. I am no longer Inca, if I am willing to remain in this city now, swallowing the insults I have suffered. Time and again these men have offered me outrages. One night I was forced to flee this house, when looters and vandals came into my very bedroom...'

It was all going right on schedule, thought Mike, with a mixture of anxiety and grim fatalism. Tonight the Inca was going to sneak out of the city. And tomorrow...

Mike had made sure not to be chosen as part of the escaping monarch's retinue, by announcing ahead of time that he was compelled to work some special sorcery that very night. He would rejoin *thesapa Inca* later, wherever Manco might be; so he pledged in fealty, and was sent on his way.

Others at the meeting were not so loyal. Manco's litter had not got far beyond the city limits when the sounds of mounted pursuit echoed along the narrow streets and out onto the Royal Road. Mike listened from inside Quizo's house. He put a calming hand on the old general's arm. The time was not yet; these scenes still had to be allowed to play. Manco was petulant, Manco was hurt, Manco was angry—but not yet enough.

Presently a drawn-out scream came through the night. The

Spaniards had caught one of the Inca's party; caught him and twisted a rope around his genitals, trying to force him to tell which way the Inca had gone. But they learned nothing and had to press the chase in several directions. This, with mounted speed, they could do successfully. Manco was overtaken, mouthing weak excuses for his sudden departure from Cuzco, while all the others of his entourage fled. Manco was bound and dragged back to his capital like a taken thief. Gonzalo Pizarro chained him up, tossed the keys to some of his less civilized underlings, and went back to bed. For a few days following, other problems and activities claimed most of the *corregidores* attention, and Manco was left helpless in the charge of Francisco de Solares, Alonso de Mesa, Alonso de Toro, Pedro Pizarro (an adolescent

cousin of the Governor), and Gregorio Setiel. They stole what silver remained in Manco's house and amused themselves by raping his remaining wives before his eyes. For sport one night they burned his eyelashes with a lighted candle, and on a wager tried to push the candle up his nose without extinguishing the flame. Another night, three-quarters drunk, some of them urinated on the Inca.

Mike did not see Manco again until January, on the day that Juan Pizarro ordered his release. This was after the Inca had been chained to a wall for the better part of two weeks. Rumors of his maltreatment had reached the ears of Juan, who had forebodings that in the court of the Emperor Charles it would not be thought fitting that any monarch, even the veriest heathen puppet, be so abused. Charles had been royally displeased by the execution of Atahualpa a few years ago. No king liked to see another king badly treated at the hands of a mere viceroy or governor; there was something about *lese majesty* that kings found offensive.

Meanwhile, Francisco Pizarro had still not returned, and was not expected soon. Juan was very brave and handsome, and smarter than Gonzalo, certainly, but still he was not among the most perceptive and intelligent of men.

"Senor Inca," he stated, having just seen the chains unlocked and cast aside, "if all the things that you allege are true, it is very, very—*annoying* that you have been so treated. This I understand, and you have my sympathy. On the other hand, this is a province governed under the Emperor Charles, and you must conform to the wishes of the Governor sent by His Majesty, and to the orders of that Governor's *corregidores* when he himself is absent. Your duties require that you remain in Cuzco."

"I see now that I must." Manco's voice was ordinary. He had not rubbed his wrists when the chains fell off.

"Good. I hear that you have been studying your letters, and have read in Christian books. Have you learned much, Senor Inca?"

"*Si*. I have learned much."

A bone-chilling drizzle was falling when they walked outside, Manco, Willak Umu, Mike.

Manco, looking ten years older than when he had tried to flee the city, pulled his cloak about him. "We will wait for the end of the rains," he said simply, almost absently, looking around the Square. Then he drew a deep breath.

He was quiet, too, at the start of the meeting convened that night inside his Cuzco house. But in the middle of the first tentative discussion of future policy, he rose and stalked from the room. He came back gripping in one hand the wooden foot-plow that he had been forced to use, for want of the old sacred golden implement, in breaking ground at the festival of Inti Raymi almost a year ago. He gripped the foot-plow in one hand, as if it were a straw, though he was not large of frame; and the foot-plow and his whole frame were shaking.

Most of the men assembled cowered down and raised their cloaks to hide their eyes when they beheld their Inca coming back. Manco raised the foot-plow at arm's length and swung it down amidst them, smashing furniture and pottery.

"*Haylli!*" He roared out in a voice suddenly terrible; even Mike, cowering with the others, closed his eyes under his raised cloak.

"*Haylli!*" The farmer's word for plowing, spading, subjugation of the land. And also his war cry, yelled out when smashing skulls and bones in battle.

Pretending to be going to conduct some religious ceremonies and to gather more hidden gold—which latter suggestion worked on his captors' monomania to rob them of their senses—Manco Inca left Cuzco with Willak Umu, free as a bird, on 18 April 1536. It was Wednesday of Holy Week. The end of the rainy season was almost at hand.

Chapter 14. The Last Giving

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Peru/Tawantinsuyu, 1536

The ten thousand thatched roofs of Cuzco were on fire, and the smoke of their burning-rolled up in a great pall across the glaring face of Inti. Would that Quisquis, slain by his own rebellious captains in the north, had lived to see this day—and also Ruminavi, executed at last by the invaders when they had taken Quito.

Now, out on the northern hillsides above the capital, the massed legions of Quizo Yupanqui, Tiso, other generals of every faction, had diverted most of the rivers' water, making swampy ground to hamper the city's horsemen if they should sally out, and also cutting down on the water available in the city for fighting fire.

Thus far none of the Spaniards in Cuzco had tried either to sally out or to fight the holocaust of flame. There were fewer than two hundred of them, busily fortifying themselves in a few buildings around the Square. The rebellion had struck them with stunning surprise. Before the Conquistadors were even sure that the departed Manco planned to strike at them, Inca logistic genius had invested Cuzco with an army of a hundred thousand men, mainly peasants freed for the season from the land.

Francisco Pizarro, not to learn for a few more days the full story of what was happening in the interior, was at Ciudad de los Reyes, the city that was to be Lima, with a few hundred more of his compatriots; and an equal number of Spaniards were scattered about on more or less isolated estates, *encomiendas*; many of these were dying today, in simultaneously-timed isolated ambushes and skirmishes.

Manco's men had succeeded in occupying Sacsahuaman before the Spaniards in Cuzco were alerted, and now along one of its vast terraces the Inca rode upon a captured horse, bellowing war cries at an unending column of his troops who marched toward the city itself. Trotting to keep near his emperor's side, Willak Umu also shouted.

Riding a general's litter amid a phalanx of two hundred pikemen, Mike answered them with a salute, bowing his head and stretching out his arms. He then felt reflexively at his side, making sure the Mask was in his belt-pouch, though it had been totally useless now for months.

It was near midmorning of a clear day, except for smoke, as Mike led the troops that he had armed and trained into the first attack on Cuzco. Again he felt at his belt, this time making sure that his unit of the two-way radios was where he could get at it handily. Con had the other unit with her at Machu Picchu, where she still nursed their firstborn son; if it hadn't been for the baby, he would have had a devil of a time trying to keep her out of the combat zone, where thousands of other women had come to share the risks of battle with their men.

As the encircling army launched its first general attack, inside Cuzco were those who had been too inert, too apathetic, or too terrified of Manco to flee; the last category included a few thousand active allies and collaborators of the Spaniards, most from tribes with old, unhealed enmities against the Inca.

The roofs of the city's houses nearest to the Fortress of the Speckled Hawk had been set afire early this morning by red-hot stones, hurled from slings that smoked and burned in half after at toss or two. The straw of the roofs was dry and the wind favorable, and fire had leaped into the city from house to house, almost as fast as a man might walk.

Through twisting streets, between scorched walls whose roof timbers had already burned away, Mike's specially trained hundreds pressed into the city, with thousands of the Inca host advancing on their right and left. The smell of burning choked; the streets were almost impassable in places with hot debris from the buildings. Three ranks in front marched in close order, pikes ready; the bronze spearpoints of the second rank bristled three feet behind those of the first, and those of the third rank were an equal distance behind. Let the Spaniards charge if they dare, and hurl themselves upon this porcupine.

So Mike bragged in his own mind, until the horsemen did appear, a score of them at an intersection some fifty meters ahead. Then he turned his head, calling to his reserves to close up ranks behind him.

Ahead, the cavalry turned off on the side street, and vanished in a roaring column. Maybe they had seen the pikes and were going back to headquarters to report this innovative weaponry. But here, as his men advanced, was the side street now coming onto his flank. He shouted to move some of his men into a defensive guard there.

Barely had three short ranks maneuvered into position, then from around the curve of the street the horsemen came. The toothed hedge of pike-points frustrated their charge, and Mike heard cries of Castilian outrage. The Spaniards were too professional to obligingly impale themselves or their mounts. Jockeying their horses near the pikes, they used their swords to lop off some of the bronze heads.

But now a swarm of the Inca's forces came howling, leaping, dancing on the bare walls that lined the streets, where for once they stood higher than their mounted adversaries. A hail of slung stones struck the Spaniards at close range, denting helmets, bruising horses, thudding into padded armor and ricocheting harmlessly from steel. The men on the walls flung javelins, and when the cavalry came in reach, swung down at them with halberd, mace, and *makana*.

The leader of the cavalry—was it Juan Pizarro? Mike could not be sure—cried out orders, and his men's horses wheeled in orderly retreat. Mike also had to shout, to keep his own ranks from dissolving in a disorganized pursuit. He took all the time he needed to get his men re-formed in perfect order; only then did he order the advance cautiously resumed.

When at last he could climb a broken wall and look out upon the Square of Joy, he beheld it swept by such a rain of slung stones that he did not dare order his men out into the open to try the cavalry again. From positions among the denuded, blackened remnants of buildings on this side of the Square, thousands of slingers were sending a continuous spray of missiles across at the Casana, whose roof had somehow miraculously escaped burning. Those wide, trapezoidal doorways over there, behind which the enemy must have gone to earth, were beginning to fill up, as if the hurled stones were drifting snow. No man standing in those doorways could have survived for a second.

Fierce as the barrage was, it conferred no great military advantage when it could not be followed up with a charge across the Square. Mike spent some time sending messages to his neighboring commanders,

trying to coordinate a plan of action. But communications were poor, and the native discipline too loose. As the slingers ran out of ammunition or decided that they had performed heroically enough for one day, they simply retired, usually as stragglers.

Meanwhile, incoming messages to Mike's command post consisted mainly of rumors that the cavalry was outside the city, ravaging Indians in the open and threatening to retake Sacsahuaman. Not knowing what to believe, but playing it safe, Mike marched his troops back through the city, looking for action. When he finally returned to it, the fortress was quite secure. Still on his horse and in a fever of excitement,

Manco rode up and demanded a full report from the front lines.

Again in midafternoon Mike marched his pikemen out, toward rumored heavy fighting in the area of Quizo's house. Buildings were still burning there, and Andean bodies littered the streets for a couple of blocks, but all was quiet. Coming back wearily to Sacsahuaman near sunset, he found Tom waiting for him.

"How'd it go out there?" his brother asked, coming up to his litter before it was set down. "You look about half-dead."

"I am. And we didn't accomplish much." With darkness, the day's fighting would be over—unless the Spaniards came out on some desperate midnight sally. They might try that, but not tonight. They must be utterly exhausted and would need the time to tend their wounds, try to strengthen their defenses, and grab some rest. If Manco and Willak Umu could only be persuaded to launch a night attack of their own... but that did not seem likely; the Moon was not in the right phase. Mike was going to try again to argue the point; he had requested an audience with Manco.

"Talk to you, Mike."

"Come along. I've got to sit down somewhere, get some rest." He had been carried back and forth all day in a litter, but yet his throat and lungs and even his arms and legs felt worn, as if he had been fighting for hours with every muscle. Casual horror scenes from the day kept belching up into his memory; he had yet to see a dead Spaniard, though a few reportedly had been killed. Their bodies were evidently torn to pieces at once, or dragged quickly to the rear so the embalmers could quickly begin the process of making their skins into ritual drums. But the day's dead Indians would not march quietly out of his awareness. One little, two little...

In a quiet upper room of the fortress, Mike let himself sink down to rest. "What is it?"

"You know what, Mike? This ain't your war, now, is it, really?"

"It ain't your gold, either. How's Sal?"

Tom sat back, looking almost hurt. "All right the last I saw of her. She's camping here too—there's a lot of DPs here from the upper classes. Look, what's with you—all this volunteering for the front lines? What're you gonna get out of it?"

"Try and take Sal out of here. If events run true to historical form, the Spaniards are going to be doing some bad things to the women that they capture as the siege goes on."

"Take her where? Anyway, I guess they already did a few bad things to Sal. She gives bad reports of Gonzalo Pizarro's friends."

"All right." Mike sighed. "I'll talk to someone, get you two shipped out to Machu Picchu. When I say 'bad things' I mean like cutting their hands off. It's called terrorism, and sometimes it works."

"Oh." Tom was squelched for the time being.

... guiltily Mike caught himself up from slumber. He must have dozed off, trying to talk to Tom.

It was a day since he had looked into the Mask, and now he pulled it from the pouch at his side. It showed him Pizarro, looking back at him from inside whitewashed walls. This time the Conquistador held a small flask in his hands, and as soon as visual contact was made he sprayed and sprinkled what it held in Mike's direction.

Holy water, no doubt. Mike made an insulting Inca gesture back at the Governor, followed by one that he had seen some Spaniards use. Pizarro must be getting really worried; he must have learned by now of Manco's getaway, if not of the general revolt. He would not take that first piece of intelligence as lightly as his brothers had at first.

Now Mike put the Mask away, got his small radio out, checked for recorded messages and found none. He had to call three or four times before Cori answered, but she was still safe in Machu Picchu and in good health, as was the baby. She had been changing a diaper.

"Little mother, have you decided yet what we should call him?"

"Father Roca, as I keep telling you, it is too early for a real name. Right now he is only *wawa*."

He and Cori had talked for a little while, when he looked up to see Chuqui Huaman standing near, waiting politely for the sorcerer's attention; the Inca was now willing to give Roca the audience he had asked for. Mike hastily signed off and followed Swift Hawk.

He found Manco now in an exalted state, almost as if the triumph were already won. Evidently Manco had just finished confession, for Mike caught a glimpse of the high priest dropping into a sewer a small bag with woven symbols on it that might well contain the royal sins.

This time there was no crawling before Manco with a symbolic burden; this was an army headquarters in the field, and anyway Mike had the feeling that a lot of protocol had been left in the Casana's prison cell. He shook off his tiredness as best he could, and delivered his arguments on tactics and strategy, which were mainly these:

The scattered skirmishes around the country could be allowed to take care of themselves, provided decisive battles could be won at two places. First, here at Cuzco, the Inca's sacred heartland. Second, on the coast at Ciudad de los Reyes, where Pizarro now had his back against the sea but still retained a solid beachhead and could eventually receive strong reinforcement.

Mike pleaded that the battle at Cuzco, against a surrounded and vastly outnumbered garrison, could surely be won even without new weapons, if attacks were pressed day and night without a pause. Willak Umu must dispense for the duration with all religious ceremonies and taboos regarding the phases of the Moon. Also, Manco should commit no more than ten thousand of his troops to the attack at one time, recalling them after an hour or so and sending in ten thousand fresh. Another ten thousand should be kept in resting reserve, ready for emergency, and ten thousand more set working on such construction projects related to the siege as might seem useful. The remaining thousands should rest and eat and sleep;

in a few hours, their time to fight or work would come.

The Spaniards' discipline and equipment might make them, man for man, a vastly superior military machine; but not even supermen could fight around the clock and around the calendar without rest.

It had already begun to grow on Mike, however, and the conviction was strengthened in him even as he spoke, that the key to victory was really not here, but at the coast. Pizarro and his Mask were there for one thing; and if the Spaniards' beachhead were wiped out, none of their forces trapped in the interior could reasonably hope for victory.

When Mike asked to be allowed to lead his pikemen to the coast, the Child of the Sun gave permission. He would march with Quizo Yupanqui, who had been put in command of the army attacking there.

Mike's litter rode behind Quizo's through the mountain country that defended Cuzco from the sea. In a narrow defile on the upper Pampas, amid landscape that made that around Machu Picchu seem merely hilly, Quizo's picked legions caught Gonzalo de Tapia's force of seventy cavalry in the neck of a difficult pass. Tapia had been sent inland by Francisco Pizarro to try to relieve Cuzco. Tons of rock were toppled onto his men, confined on a narrow road where they could neither defend themselves nor flee. They were wiped out except for a pair of wounded prisoners.

Quizo mourned that all the horses had been killed. The two prisoners, their hands impartially bound, through one of them seemed to have a broken arm, the flesh of their shoulders threaded with ropes to lead them by, were sent stumbling along on the way back to Cuzco, a gift to Manco Inca from his most successful general. Seventy *uncasapa* wiped out at a blow!

That night Mike lay awake, wrapped in wool beneath Andean stars, seeing the faces of the two tortured Europeans. If he had seen Inca cruelty before that of Cajamarca or Mictlan, which side would be now be on? With a little effort he could argue himself free of the troubling question—or ninety percent free, anyway.

The next morning, a *chusqui* came gasping over the mountains from the east, to report that the Spaniards in Cuzco had succeeded in making a foray out of the city, getting far enough to massacre a thousand Inca troops in the plain behind Sacsahuaman. The pikes had stood against them fairly well, but still the enemy had been able to outmaneuver the plodding infantry and strike where conventionally armed troops could be thrown into a rout.

"And has the fortress fallen to them?" Mike asked.

"No." The messenger was surprised by the question.

Mike relaxed a little. The siege of Cuzco was progressing somewhat better than it would have if he had not laid violent hands upon its history.

A day or two later, and miles closer to the coast, Quizo fought another victorious battle, this time in the high country near Parcos, his forces wiping out another thirty mounted men. This time the pikes played a part, blocking the Spaniards' egress from a tight spot, but the day could have been won without them, such a powerful ally was geography when it could be used to best advantage. The acceleration of gravity on boulders weighing tons provided a weapon that even tanks could not have resisted. But Mike and his special corps of pike and halberd played a larger role in the next fight, near Jauja. There Quizo took a score or two of Spaniards by surprise in their encampment, and after a struggle of several hours, exterminated them to the last man.

The marching and fighting through the mountains took weeks. Quizo was very careful and methodical. All passes must be blocked and held, while reinforcements and supplies were fed into Quizo's army, and he maneuvered it toward the city by the sea.

It was the month of Purification and Sacrifice—Mike had to stop and think to recall that it was also August. He radioed Con to leave the baby with a nursemaid and go to the town of Abancay.

She quickly agreed, and added: "Mike, there is good news. Tom and his wife are here."

"His wife? A tall woman with fair hair?"

"Has he more than one wife? I thought one wife only was the custom in your land. Yes, that is she. He calls her Sal."

"Okay, I was expecting they'd show up." Thinking, Mike bared his teeth. Of course he didn't want Tom getting slaughtered at Cuzco, but it also might be touchy to have him poking around at Machu Picchu, where the *punchao* was hidden. "Tell him to come with you to Abancay, and the woman, too. If they argue, put them on the radio to talk with me."

"I will do it."

From the radio he shifted to the Mask, in which he caught Pizarro. The Governor was also wearing his golden smile, as he always was when the two of them made their tenuous contacts in this way. Mike's opponent sat on the doorsill of a house in tropic sunshine, lush low-altitude flowers growing profusely around him. And there was such grim weariness in the lean figure's pose under that face of serene and ageless metal that Mike was reminded of Marceau on stage, miming the maskmaker who cannot tear off the smiling false face from his own. . . in the background Mike saw a girl he thought must be the teen-aged Ines, as the Spaniards had christened her. She was Pizarro's favorite concubine, playing now with their two tiny children.

A great and sudden shout went up in Quizo's camp. Mike stripped off his own Mask, put it away, and stuck his head out of the tiny tent he had acquired for purposes of sorcery. Around him was the vast bivouac of the Inca army, filling a broad draw between two rows of gentle hills. When he climbed the line of hills to the west, he could see in the distance the city that would one day be Lima—or instead, depending on how the fighting went, would soon revert to being part of a coastal desert. The new buildings shimmered with the heat and distance, and just beyond them lay the incredible sea, to whom all centuries were almost one. From

Quizo's encampment the land generally sloped and smoothed toward that sea and city, in the last mile or so becoming practically level. On that flat solid ground, ideal for cavalry, Pizarro was going to have to be finally beaten. If history flowed on in its unaltered course, Quizo's army would be shattered in the attempt, the back of the rebellion broken.

Around Mike now, men and women leaped and whooped and danced in jubilation. Before he could reach Quizo's swarming tent, he had the news from a dozen voices: Cuzco had fallen after three months of bloody, deadly struggle. Mike let out an Indian whoop and leaped himself, then paused for a moment of more private satisfaction. The chains of history had been broken!

When Quizo had a chance, he greeted Mike and reported the details. Juan Pizarro had died in battle. Gonzalo had been captured, had lived a day with feet and hands cut off, and then his skin had been

stretched and made into a drum, the mouth left open so that when the belly was beaten puffs of sound would come from between those glossy-bearded cheeks. It would be a prize exhibit in the Inca archives of conquered enemies. Only a few Spanish prisoners remained alive. Their fate was still uncertain.

Quizo's face turned grim, as he reported a second item of news that had come with the same runner. The Inca sent orders that Ciudad de los Reyes be attacked and destroyed at all costs. Francisco Pizarro was to be taken alive if possible.

There was a third important piece of information, told by the messenger on his own initiative. He and the men before him who had sped the news through the mountains had seen and heard Illyapa the Thunderer preparing to enter combat. It was not yet the season of rain, and the sky remained cloudless, yet they had seen lightning flash from horizon to horizon among the peaks, and had heard the reverberations of its sound.

On hearing this, Mike hurried back to his own tent, where he found that his radio had just produced a printout: THIS

TIME THEY WERE THE ONES WHO HAD TO STICK THEIR NECKS OUT, AND WE WERE READY. KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK. TUPAC.

But Tupac's legions could not come down to help on the plain before Ciudad de los Reyes. Because of omens witnessed, Quizo had decided that he and other leaders must march and fight on foot this day. The general exposed himself in the front rank for the attack on the city, his chief lieutenants marching at his side except for Mike, who insisted on staying within his square of pikemen. Mike also wished for the better view of the field that a litter would have given him, but that he could not have. When the hills had been left behind the marching host, and cries from ahead announced the coming of the Spanish cavalry, Mike put on his Mask and wore it openly.

Pizarro must have seen the gold face flash from afar and certainly understood its importance, for he diverted the full weight of his cavalry in Mike's direction, bypassing the exact Inca center where Quizo walked. And this time the Governor himself was mounted, leading the charge with leveled lance.

Mike gripped his halberd in two hands and shouted orders at his men. Around them rose the whining of ten thousand slings, with war chants, whoops, and yodels. The thundering of hooves built up to drown out all other sounds.

Through a sleet of stones the cavalry hurtled against the massed pikemen and halberdiers. The Inca line bent backward in the center, but it did not break. Mike saw Quizo and the other marching generals vanish behind a cloud of dust. But there was no sudden rout, no slaughter of the Indians as the historians had recorded for this day. The mass of men on foot resisted the disciplined, concentrated pressure of horse and steel, and then surged back in counterattack.

Through whorls of violence and dust Mike could see the Spaniards, having to fight like madmen now to try to extricate themselves. Many were surrounded by masses of foot soldiers who could not be simply brushed aside. He had a good view of one horse, hooked by a dozen halberds, pulled screaming off its feet, its rider vanishing beneath a mass of Indians.

The neat ranks of pikemen had dissolved now, but not before achieving their purpose. Most of the Spaniards were entangled, either as individuals or small groups within the great mass of their enemies. There was savage fighting on every hand, men being dragged from their horses screaming, horses screaming, too. As at Cajamarca, the bang of musket and arquebus sounded, but almost unheeded now.

And horses once more lost their footing on piles of Indian dead.

From somewhere a horse came to knock him down. Senses reeling for the moment, Mike had one clear thought: I knew I'd never get through this alive. He had lost his halberd and groped for his stun-maser. The Mask was still on his face, and its eyes were clear, though it projected no useful images.

He had been knocked down among Indian dead men, still warm of course, one still twitching, another quiet, gray-haired, too old for this nonsense...

... gray-haired, and with a big nose, and an awful lance-wound that had gone right through his throat...

For some endless time, Mike stayed there on hands and knees, staring down at Esperanza. Maybe this death was no more real than Tom's had been. Maybe...

Something warned him to get up. Here came Pizarro on his mount, cutting and thrusting right and left, his bare face contorted into a theatrical mask of murderous fury, driving straight toward the Indian man on foot who wore the Mask of gold.

Feeling numb, Mike brought the stun-maser up. But before he squeezed the trigger, Pizarro had gone down, pulled from his horse by a bronze hook.

He used the maser, though, stunning three Indians in order to be himself the first to reach the fallen Governor's saddlebags. Even as he rummaged in them, he kept looking right and left for the effort the other Spaniards must make to rescue their fallen leader. There was none, no last charge to glory. Mike realized then that the battle was over.

No time, though, to savor victory. Now in his hands he held Pizarro's Mask, unmistakable though wrapped in layers of padding. Mike tore the wrappers away and at once raised the thing, strung with a silver cord, to his own face.

While it attuned itself to him, presenting first opacity, then noise, then spotty visions, he could hear Pizarro somewhere nearby, still alive, profaning, praying, snarling at the brown hands that held him down, perhaps hoping to be killed quickly. Then Mike, following firm new visions, ignored the Governor and headed for the city as fast as he could trot. His legs drove hard, his lungs drank in the rich, thick air.

Some buildings in the city were already burning; some of the victors already claiming loot, bickering above the noise of scattered fights still going on. In the streets, some of the Indian women who had attached themselves to the Conquistadors were behaving hysterically. Mike yelled at them to follow him.

He strode boldly into the *casa* that had been the Governor's, moved furniture, raised boards, and shouted into a secret cellar for Ines, telling her to bring her children out, to follow him and they would not be harmed.

Carrying one baby part of the way himself, he saw her and other dependents to the harbor, where in the name of Quizo he barked out orders that one of the Spanish ships captured in moorings be preserved, her crew held safe on shore. Aboard her he placed the women and children he had managed to rescue, and then, with the Mask's help, he picked out men to post as guards. This accomplished, with Pizarro's Mask still on his face and his own at his belt, he hiked back to confer with Quizo.

As he strode amid howling looters, smoke, and flame, Mike checked his radio and found a new printout: ROCA, WHERE ARE YOU? REPORT IN. STAND BY FOR FURTHER ORDERS. TUPAC.

"A few things to get done first," he said aloud in English, without turning on the transmitter. The device was vibrating faintly in his hand, though; another communication coming.

REPORT IMMEDIATELY ON PIZARRO'S STATUS.

STAND CLEAR OF THE MASK. WE ARE GOING TO DESTROY IT BY REMOTE CONTROL.

Mike bared his teeth, this time in what was really a smile. Of course Tupac's destroying the thing at a distance was easily conceivable. But Tupac's taking the trouble to warn a now-useless mercenary first was a little harder to believe. And this power of destruction must have been magically acquired just today, or it would have been used long ago. Evidently Tupac had a good idea of where Mike was, knew that Ciudad de los Reyes had just been taken, and therefore that the Mask-wearer Pizarro had somehow been brought down to defeat.

There was Quizo, not far ahead, blowing kiss after kiss of thanksgiving toward the sun at zenith. Waiting to approach the general, Mike raised his radio to his lips. No need to choose a channel; Tupac would be listening to them all.

"Roca reporting. Francisco Pizarro is now Quizo Yupanqui's prisoner; I hope and expect that he'll be brought before Manco essentially undamaged."

While delivering this message, Mike received more instructions from the Mask he wore. He thought a moment or two, then switched to the radio channel on which Cori should be standing by

"Cori, we've won here. I'm all right, but it's not all over yet. There's something you and I put on a shelf once, that second time I helped you get down from a mountain. Get that thing for me now—it's going to be needed. I hope to see you soon."

His wife acknowledged briskly and signed off. The wording of his instructions might have been obscure enough to put any listening enemies off a little. But mainly he was relying on the Mask that had ordered her mission to help her through with it.

Turning his back on the burning city that would never become Lima, and on the victory celebration of Quizo's thousands, Mike started to walk back to the deserted hills. Going alone up one of their barren slopes, he could feel the radio vibrating faintly, and smiled a little. Sorry, Tupac. Now I do things my way.

But why not talk back to him now? Mike pulled out the communicator, took one look at the last printout and almost dropped it. MIKE, THIS IS ESPERANZA.

He switched quickly to audio, and heard:

"... recording before the battle for Ciudad de los Reyes, but it's only going to be sent to you afterwards, if I don't get back here and turn off the transmitter." It was the unmistakable resonant voice, speaking English.

"Now for once I'm not asking you anything, Mike, and can tell one or two things at least. Because if you ever hear this, the chances are overwhelming that I will be dead, and out of reach of any paradox.

"I'm going into the fighting today, carrying one of your pikes—there are good scientific reasons why I can now do this much, but can do nothing more than this, to help the cause. So this much I must do, because the cause is so important.

"Keep up the good fight, Mike. Human civilization, way down the line, depends on it. Of course that's true most of the time, for all of us, though we may not think of it till we start doubling back in time. There are more pivotal moments in each branch of history than you'd guess.

"Anyway, good luck to you, and your wife and child, and to your brother and Sal. Get them all home if you can. People of my time will be standing by to help, if you can win in Tawantinsuyu-16."

Distracted by Esperanza's words, Mike jumped when he saw the red sigil on the descending flyer's side. Then he remembered. Cori set it down on a small rise, and ran to embrace him as he came running toward her. Behind her, Tom, awkwardly carrying a bronze-tipped mace, and Sally, a dagger at her waist.

The first greetings over, Tom stepped back, staring at his brother's still-covered face. "You're wearing it all the time now?"

"For a little while longer."

At this indication, Cori got back into the pilot's seat. "Where are we going, my husband?"

"Fly north." The imaged flyer projected for him by the Mask was tearing a hole in the air in that direction. "I may take over the controls later."

For several minutes Mike closely watched the next series of pictures presented by the Mask. Then he took it off.

"What's the matter?" asked Sal, getting the first good look at his face.

He gave them all a brief smile. "If all goes well, we'll soon be on our way home—all of us." He tried to show Cori some reassurance. "The*wawa* too."

"What're you doing now?" This was Tom. "M'God, you got two of 'em now."

Mike had pulled some cord from a locker, and was now binding the two Masks tightly together, back to back, making a Janus-head, as one of them had shown him how to do it. "Just getting ready."

"For what?" Sal's voice was taut.

"The end of the war." If he started trying to explain now, Tom would argue and maybe even fight. Mike still had the pistol, but he wanted to avoid that route.

"Bear about five degrees east, Cori." Of course he no longer had an image in the sky for guidance, but he was looking over her shoulder at the panel, and he knew their destination.

"Five east it is."

THIS IS TUPAC. REPORT IN. EMERGENCY. It was coming in on the flyer's communicator as well as the little belt-worn ones.

"Oh, all right. What the hell." He answered while looking forward past Cori's shoulder, to where the wild, deserted-looking mountain country around Cotopaxi was illuminated with irregular flashes, bright as Inti's face, sudden as Illyapa's thunderclaps. "Rocky here, Tupac. Looks like you're having a little action now around Cotopaxi. What was the name of that place you once told me about? Mictlan?" From the corner of his eye, Mike saw Tom's startled face turn in his direction. The Mask had shown Mike what was happening in the north. As Manco had assailed Cuzco in the south, there,, too, an Inca host surrounded entrenched enemies.

THIS IS TUPAC INCA, ORDERING YOU TO REPORT IN FULL. HAVE YOU PIZARRO'S MASK?

Tupac didn't say *the* Mask, this time. Maybe at headquarters they were catching on at last.

"Yessir, I do. And my own Mask as well. Relax. You've been trusting me with one for four years now, though you didn't know it. I'm not a politician. You can trust me a little longer."

WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS?

"Now you sound like someone else I used to know. I'm not discussing secrets on the radio." Probably it would make no difference at this stage if he did, but let them stew a little longer.

Without warning, advanced weaponry from Cuzco-23 began swatting at the flyer. A couple of near-misses were deafening. Sal cowered, Tom grabbed at Mike's arm, mouthing "What the hell is this?", his voice inaudible beneath the noise. Looking back, Mike saw two fast Inca flyers that had risen in pursuit, colliding with each other now, by accident, of course, one disintegrating in a brief flash after their wings had brushed.

As the noise diminished, he could hear Tupac raging on open channels, chewing out the commanders amid whose cragged emplacements the flyer passed unharmed. It was passing through the siege-ring around Cotopaxi, and Tupac wanted to get his forces out of the Way of the double Mask-bearer, the augmented avalanche.

Even as the Inca barrage fell silent, the Tenochas opened up, their fury obscuring the cone of Cotopaxi, still distant but now swelling rapidly. They were not impressed with the red insignia, but their efforts were futile, too. Aztec missiles blew up in the wrong places, or went wildly off course. Death-beams aimed from different angles blended fortuitously, heterodyning each other into a cone of harmlessness through which the flyer bore its passengers unharmed. Inside Mictlan, equipment must be failing, men toppling with unforeseen heart attacks, a thousand years of luck converging into a minute.

Now Cotopaxi loomed gigantic, through fumes and blasts of weaponry—and there was Mictlan, its geodesic shape monstrously enlarged by what must be layers of defensive forces or material. On orders, Cori drove straight toward it, Mike watching, reading to himself the range, and waiting—

"Turn right!" he cried out suddenly.

She swerved, in hair-trigger reaction, just as the space ahead along their previous flight path was filled by a chain of awesome explosions.

"Around the mountain, Cori—right around it."

She obeyed, rock-skimming at great speed. Now most of the heat and roar of battle had been left behind. They flew in something like the eye of the storm.

"Now fly up over the rim. Circle inside the crater." As she followed his orders, Mike dropped to his knees, pulling at the bottom hatch to open it. Clutched in his right hand were the two Masks bound together.

He had an eye out, and was ready when Tom came jumping at him, yelling "No!" Mike dropped the Masks and yanked the pistol out and jammed its muzzle under his brother's chin. It would be very rough at contact range, but still it wouldn't kill, and Tom must have known that he would use it.

Mike said, "Listen, stupid, I'm doing this my way. The Masks have to go." And when Tom tried to talk, to move, he jammed the pistol in harder. "Listen, I know where the *punchao* is! Understand me? Know what I'm saying? The *punchao* !"

That did the trick, and Tom slid out of the way, eyeing Mike respectfully, rubbing a little at his throat. He let Sal pull him to a seat.

Without a pause for second thoughts, Mike dragged the hatch open, caught a scorching breath from bubbling magma that flew past at some unguessable short distance below. He dropped the Masks together into it, letting the stun-maser fall out too, so he could slam the hatch again a fraction of a second quicker.

"Cori, straight on north! Pour on the coal. Let's get us out of here!" He scrambled to get himself strapped into a seat.

They were out of the crater in the blink of an eye, the bulk of Cotopaxi already dwindling behind them, the sounds and sights of battle fading.

Then it came. A glare that made the world a photographic negative, a wave of shock that flung their flyer like a scrap of film.

Cori fought for control and got it back. Then she was limply ready to move over for Mike. He circled slowly back toward the south. The weapons flashes from both sides were stilled. He could not see anything of the volcano at first; a sullen, humpbacked cloud dwelt there, with chunks of debris still falling through it and around it, their speed reheating some of them to incandescence on the long drop back to earth.

Mike circled, looking, listening. Inca voices, that had been stunned, were coming back now on the radio. When he flew back near where Mictlan had been, half of Cotopaxi's slope was gone. Thick lava flowed over it toward the distant sea.

Mike was standing in the open air, on a vast landing deck, with the solid and fantastic shapes of Cuzco-23 spread out before him and below.

"But now," Tom beside him was protesting to the Inca Tupac, "there's no Mask to go on a ship for Spain and be lost in the Gulf. It won't be there for anyone in the twentieth century to find. Hell, I suppose there's not even any treasure-hunting company."

"And you might suppose correctly," said Tupac with a kind of enforced patience, "that even Florida is now known by another name. *But your* branch has not been so affected. The same home world that you

left is now open to you—as much as any home can ever be the same, for any returning traveler. And your way to it lies open." Tupac spoke the last sentence as if he found it something to be marveled at.

He turned to Mike. "We will provide you with some help there, of course. Some may be needed, I imagine, as you are returning to your family with a sixteen-year-old Indian bride and a child."

"Thanks." Mike smiled at Cori, who was smiling back. She had already faced wonders greater than those of US-20, or at least their equal. "We'll manage, as long as you don't just drop us out of the blue on Peachtree Street."

"Oh, of course not. I understand arrangements are made to offer you a choice of cover stories, and you will have time to decide; your trip home will take a day or two, subjective time." He shook his head, as if again he marveled. "You have some powerful friends."

"I guess I do."

The Inca came a step closer. "In Cuzco-16 we are still faced with some difficult problems of reconstruction. So I would like to ask before you go: have you any final advice for Manco?"

"A little. Yes, I guess quite a bit. First, that he send ambassadors to the Emperor Charles—go over the heads of all the Conquistadors to try to keep them off his neck. Being converted to Christianity might give Manco some political advantage, but I doubt there's much chance of that. As a gesture of goodwill, he might send Pizarro home alive, after a few lashes for infringing against the laws of the Inca kingdom."

"Whom did you suggest he might send as ambassadors?"

"He has a lot of smart Indians around. And as interpreter, maybe one of the sympathetic priests, like Molina—I hear he survived. And of course Charles would love to get some presents of gold, if there's any left to scrape together."

Tom's head turned to look across Tupac at Mike.

Mike went on: "Manco should establish relations with other European powers as well. Trade for their technology, but allow no settlers. Massacre on sight any Europeans bearing arms. Make firearms. Raise horses... establish a written language."

"All right, all right." Tupac made gestures. "All good advice. You might have written the plan as we would like to see it. I believe your ride is coming."

Esperanza's friends. Con sucked in her breath and clutched the baby. Sal squinted upward, as if at a holy vision, and moved away from Tom, who had just come to stand beside her. In the cloudless sky a ship from a thousand years in Tupac's future had materialized and was descending, slowly and with no visible support, glowing like a mild, beneficent sun.

... the sun. And I know, Mike thought silently, where lies the *greatpunchao*. In a crevice on the eastern flank of Machu Picchu, where the rays of the first light can sometimes find it, and light its golden fire, now that the wrappings must have rotted and fallen off. When I get home, no eyes will have seen that fire for four hundred years and more. To hide it there was Willak Umu's idea, not mine, and so it should be there in my branch, too. But it will stay there till the mountains fall, for all of me.

Cori moved a little closer, brushing his arm, and he looked down.

It didn't pay to reach too fast for gold.