

The Courts of Xanadu

by Charles Sheffield

The eagle's way is easy. Strike north-north-west from Calcutta, to meet the international border close to the little Indian town of Darbhanga. Fly on into Nepal, passing east of Kathmandu. After another hundred miles you encounter the foothills and then the peaks of the Himalayan range. Keep going -- easy enough when you fly with the wings of imagination. You traverse silent, white-capped mountains, the tallest in the world, float on across the high plateau country of Tibet, and come at last to the Kunlun Mountains. Cross them. You are now in China proper, at the southern edge of the _Takla Makan Shamo_, one of the world's fiercest deserts, a thousand miles from east to west, five hundred from north to south.

If you are driving, or walking on real feet, you have to do things rather differently. The Himalayas are impassable. The Tibetan border is patrolled. Travel in the Tibetan interior is restricted.

Gerald Sebastian made the trip to the Takla Makan in two different ways. The first time he was alone, traveling light. He sailed from Calcutta to Hong Kong, flew to Beijing, and then took the train west all the way to Xinjiang Province. He was a celebrity, and his presence was permitted, even encouraged. However, his trip south from Urumqi, into the fiery heart of the Takla Makan desert, was not permitted. It was difficult to arrange, and it took a good deal of bribery.

Today's Chinese, you will be told by their government, do not accept tips or bribes. Just so.

Sebastian's second visit to the _Takla Makan Shamo_ had to be very different. His three-week disappearance on the first trip had left the Chinese authorities uneasy; they did not want him back. For his part, he did not want anyone in China to know of his presence. This time he also had four people with him, and he needed a mass of equipment, including two large, balloon-wheel trucks.

The trucks were the obvious problem; the four people -- five, if one includes Sebastian himself -- would prove a worse one. The group consisted of the following: one world-famous explorer and antiquarian, Gerald Sebastian; one wealthy, decorative, and determined woman, Jackie Sands; one NASA scientist, Dr. Will Reynolds, as out of place on the expedition as a catfish on the moon; one China expert, Paddy Elphinstone, fluent in the _Turkic_ language spoken in Xinjiang Province, and in everything else; and one professional cynic, con-man, and four-time loser, convinced in his heart that this expedition would be his fifth failure.

How is it possible to know what a man believes in his heart?

It is time for me to step out of the shadows and introduce myself. I am Sam Nevis. I was along on this expedition because I knew more about treasure-hunting, wilderness excavation, and survival in the rough than the rest of Sebastian's helpers put together -- which was not saying much. And by the time that we were assembled in Sebastian's hotel room in Rawalpindi, ready to head north-east out of Pakistan, I already knew that the expedition was going to be a disaster.

It was not a question of funds, which is where three of my own efforts had failed. Gerald Sebastian had enough silver-tongued persuasiveness for a dozen people. How else could a man raise half a million dollars for an expedition, without telling his backers what they would get out of it?

I had seen him cast his spell in New York, three months earlier, and knew I had met my master. He was a bantamweight, silver-haired and hawk-nosed, with a clear-eyed innocence of manner I could never match.

"_Atlantis_," he had said, and the word glowed in the air in front of him. "Not in the middle of the Atlantic

Ocean, as Colonel Churchward would have you believe. Not at Thera, or Crete, in the Mediterranean, as Skipios claims. Not among the Mayans, as Doctor Augustus Le Plongeon asserts. But here, where the world has never thought to look." He whipped out the map, placed it on the table, and set his right index finger in the middle of the great bowl of Xinjiang Province. "Right here!"

There were half a dozen well-dressed men and two women sitting at the long conference room table. They all craned forward to stare at the map. "Takla -- Makan -- Shamo," read one of them slowly. He was Henry Hoffman, a New York real estate multimillionaire who also happened to be Mr. Jackie Sands. He was seventy-five years old, and she was his third wife. He leaned closer to the map, peering through strong bifocals. "But it's marked as a desert."

"Exactly what it is." Gerald Sebastian had paused, waiting for the faces to turn back up to meet his eyes. "That's what the word shamo means, a sand desert -- as distinguished from a pebble desert, which is a gobi. This is desert, extreme, wild, and uninhabited. But it wasn't always a desert, any more than there were always skyscrapers here on Manhattan. You have to look under the dunes, a hundred feet down. And then you will see the cities. Cities drowned by sandstorms, not by water."

He reached into his case and pulled out another rabbit: the images taken by the Shuttle Imaging Radar experiments. He slapped them onto the table, and turned to Will Reynolds. "Doctor Reynolds, if you would be kind enough to explain how these images are interpreted..."

Reynolds coughed, genuinely uncomfortable at explaining his work to a group of laymen. "Well -- uh -- see, this is a strip taken by a synthetic aperture radar, the Shuttle Imaging Radar, on board the Shuttle Orbiter." He worked his hands together and cracked the knobby finger joints. Will Reynolds was a stork of a man, with a long neck, great ungainly limbs and a mop of black hair. "It's sort of like a photograph, but it uses much longer wavelengths, microwaves rather than visible light. Centimeters, rather than micrometers. So it doesn't just see what's on the surface. Where the ground is dry, it sees under the surface, too. And in a real desert, where there's been no rain for years or decades, it can see a long way down. Tens of meters. Here's some earlier SEASAT and SIR-A shots of the Sahara Desert, where it hasn't rained and you can clearly see the old river courses, far below the surface sand dunes..."

His hesitancy disappeared as he slipped into his special subject, and he was off and running.

Gerald Sebastian did not interrupt. He would not dream of interrupting. It was pure flummery, the oldest and best con-man style, with the right amount of technical and authentic detail to make it persuasive. Will Reynolds could not be bought, that was obvious. But he could be sold, and Sebastian had sold him on the project. Now he was showing the radar images of the Takla Makan, pointing out what seemed to be regular geometric figures under the sand dunes, where no such figures could be expected.

Those shapes looked like the natural cracking patterns of drying clay to me, but no one around the table suggested that. What do investment bankers, art museum patrons, and the rest of the New York glitterati know about clay cracks? And what do they care, when it's only half a million dollars at stake, and you might be part of the team that finds Atlantis? Nothing could beat that as cocktail party conversation. Sebastian knew his pigeons.

Very well; but what was I doing, following Sebastian on his wild chase to the world's most bleak and barren desert? I was a professional, a fund-raiser and a treasure-hunter myself.

To understand that, you have to remember an old gold-miners' story. Two prospectors were out in the American West, late in the nineteenth century; they had looked for gold unsuccessfully for forty years. They had dug and panned and surveyed one particular valley from end to end, and found not an ounce of gold anywhere in it. Finally, they decided that there were better ways to get rich. They left the valley they

had explored so carefully and so unproductively, and headed for the nearest big town. There they put every cent they had into buying provisions, horses, and wagons, and they both set up stores.

Then they started spreading the story: the world's biggest gold find had just been made, back in the valley they had come from. If you went for a stroll there, you would stumble over fist-sized nuggets of twenty-four carat.

The run on horses, wagons, and supplies was incredible. Everybody in town wanted to dash off to the wilderness and stake a claim. The two old prospectors had cornered the market for transportation and supplies, and they could name their price. They sold, and sold, and sold, until at last one of them found he had only one horse and one wagon left. He jumped into the wagon, whipped up the horse, and started to drive out of town. As he did so, he found he was running side by side with his old friend, also with horse and wagon.

"Where you heading?"

"Back to the valley -- to get the gold."

"Yeah!"

So I was along on Sebastian's ride. And I was sure that the same ghosts of golden discovery must fill and dominate the fine, phantasmagoric mind of Gerald Sebastian. He and I were cut from the same bolt of cloth. As the poet laureate of all confidence tricksters and treasure-seekers puts it, we were "given to strong delusion, wholly believing a lie."

In my own defense, let me point out that the full insanity of the enterprise was not obvious at once. It became apparent to me only when we assembled in Hong Kong, prior to flying to Pakistan.

There, in the Regent Hotel in Kowloon, looking out over Hong Kong Harbor with its crowded water traffic, I tried to buy Jackie Sands a drink. A dry martini, perhaps, which is what I was having. Paddy Elphinstone, our China expert, had warned me that it would be my last chance at a decent alcoholic cocktail for quite a while.

Jackie smiled and ordered an orange juice. It was predictable. She was dark-haired, clear-skinned, and somewhere between thirty-eight and forty-four. Her hair stood out in a black cloud around her head, her eyes were bright, and she was so healthy-looking it was disgusting. She seemed to glow. If she had ever tried alcohol, it must have been as a long-ago experiment.

"Gerald is entitled to his opinion," she was saying. "But I have my own. I didn't come here expecting to find Atlantis. And I'm sure we won't find Atlantis."

"Then what will we find?" I asked the question, but young Paddy Elphinstone seemed even more interested in the answer. He had been drinking before we arrived, then accepted the drink that Jackie refused and quadrupled it. As the waiters went by, he gabbled at them in their own tongues, Tamil and Malay and Thai and Mandarin and Cantonese. Now he was leaning forward, his chin low down towards the table-top, staring at Jackie.

"Visitors," she said. "Old visitors."

Paddy laughed. "Plenty of those, to the Takla Makan. Marco Polo wandered through there, and the Great Silk Road ran north and south of it. The technology for horizontal well drilling in Turpan was imported all the way from Persia."

"I mean older than that. And farther away than that." Jackie reached out and put a carefully manicured,

red-nailed hand on Paddy's arm. Wasn't she the woman I had imagined for twenty years, wandering the world at my side, the competent, level-headed companion that I had never managed to attract?

Her next words destroyed the fancy. "Visitors," she said. "Long, long ago. Aliens, from other stars. Beings who found the desert like home to them. They came, and then they left."

"Pretty neat trick," said Paddy. He was leaning back now, too drunk to pretend to sobriety. "Sure that they left, are you? Damn neat trick, if they did. D'yer know what Takla Makan means, in the local Turkic?"

I was sure that Jackie didn't. I didn't, either. I knew that Paddy had that incredible gift for languages, learning them as easily and idiomatically as a baby learns to talk. But I didn't know until that moment that Paddy Elphinstone was also an alcoholic.

"Takla Makan," he said again, and closed his eyes. His thin, straw-colored hair sagged in a cowlick over a pale forehead. "_Takla Makan_" means this, Jackie Sands: 'Go in, and you don't come out.'"

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At its western edge China meets three other countries: Tadjikistan, part of the old Soviet Union, to the north; Pakistan to the south; and a thin strip of Afghanistan between. That east-stretching tongue of Afghanistan would provide the easiest travel route, but it and Tadjikistan are both politically impossible. With no real choice, and a need for secrecy above all, Gerald Sebastian had arranged that we would move into China through Pakistan.

We drove from Rawalpindi to Gilgit, skirting the heights of the Karakoram Range. At Gilgit we made our final refuelling stop, six hundred gallons for the trucks' enlarged tanks. Then we took the old path into Xinjiang, just as though we were heading for Kashi, on the western edge of the Takla Makan desert. Five miles short of the Chinese border we left the road and veered right.

I probably took more notice of our path than the others, because I was driving the first truck with Will Reynolds as companion and navigator. He was following our progress carefully, tousled dark head bent over maps and a terminal that hooked him into the Global Positioning System satellites. He called the turns to me for more than seven hours. Then, as the sun of early May began to set and the first sand dunes came into sight to the northeast, he nodded and folded the map.

"We're two hundred miles from the border, and we ought to be out of the danger area for patrols. Sebastian said he wants to stop early tonight. Keep your eyes open for a little lake ahead, we're going to stay by it."

I nodded, while Will put the map away and pulled out one of his precious radar images. Every spare moment went into them. Now he was trying to pinpoint our position on the picture and muttering to himself about "layover" location problems.

The lake, thirty yards across and fed by a thin trickle in a bed of white gravel, appeared in less than a mile. While the other truck caught up with us, I hopped out and bent down by the soda-crust-ed lakeside. The water was shallow, briny, and heavy with bitter alkalines.

I spat it out. "Undrinkable," I said to Sebastian, as he moved to join me.

He didn't argue, didn't want to taste it for himself to make sure. He knew why he had hired me, and he trusted his own judgment. "I'll get the desalinization unit," he said. "Tell the others. A gallon per person, to do what you like with."

"Washing?"

He gave me a remote smile and gestured at the pool's still surface.

Dinner -- my job and Paddy's, we were the hired help -- took another hour, cooking with the same diesel fuel that ran the motors and would power the hoist derrick. By the time we were finished eating, the first stars were showing. Fifteen minutes later the tents were inflated and moored. The trucks, packed with supplies and equipment, were emergency accommodation only.

We sat on tiny camp stools arranged in a circle on the rocky ground. Not around the romantic fire of Sebastian's movies -- the nearest tree was probably three hundred miles away -- but around a shielded oil lamp, hanging on a light tripod. Gerald Sebastian was in an ebullient mood. He had wandered around the camp, putting everything that appealed to his eye onto videotape, and now he was ready to relax. He was a rarity among explorers, one who did all his own camera work and final program composition. He would add his commentaries back in America.

"The hard part?" he said, in answer to a question from Jackie. "Love, we're done with the hard part. We know where we're going, we know what we'll find there, we're all equipped to get it."

"What is it, d'you think?" said Paddy in a blurry voice. His words to me in Hong Kong concerning access to alcoholic drinks in China applied, I now realized, only to others. Paddy had brought along his own bottled supply, and from the way he was acting it had to be a generous one.

Instead of replying, Sebastian stood up and walked off to the trucks. He was back in a couple of minutes carrying a big yellow envelope. Without a word he slipped out half a dozen photo prints and passed them around the group. I felt the excitement goose-pimpling the hair on my forearms. Sebastian had shown me pictures when we first talked, and I gathered he had shown others to Jackie Sands and Will Reynolds. But like a showman shining the spotlight on a different part of the stage for each different audience, he showed each set of listeners what it wanted to hear -- and only that. I had asked a dozen times for more details, and always he had said, "Soon enough you'll see -- when we get to Xinjiang." I had no doubt that even now there was another folder somewhere, one that none of us would see.

Back in the United States, Sebastian had produced for me only two photographs, of a ruby ring set in thick gold, and of a flat golden tablet the length of a man's hand, inscribed with unfamiliar ideographs. I couldn't relate either of those to Atlantis, but of course I didn't care. Atlantis was somebody else's part of the elephant.

The picture in my left hand was not one I had seen before. It was clear, with excellent detail and color balance, good enough to be used on one of Gerald Sebastian's TV documentaries. Some day it might be. For I was staring at a green statue, with a meter ruler propped alongside to show the scale, and although in fourteen years of wasted wandering I had seen the artifacts of every civilization on Earth, this, whatever it might be, was unlike any of them.

It was man-sized, and must weigh a quarter of a ton. The plumed helmet and tunic might be Greek or Cretan, the sandals Roman. The face had the Egyptian styling, while the sword on the heavy buckled belt was vaguely central Asian. And if I stretched my imagination, I could see in the composed attitude of the limbs the influence of Indonesia and of Buddhism. Put the pieces together, and the sum was totally strange.

Strange, but not enough to excite me. The picture in my right hand did that. It was an enlargement of the statue's ornate belt. The buckle looked like the front of a modern hand calculator, with miniature numerals, function keys, and display screen. Next to it, attached to the belt but ready to be detached from it, was a bulbous weapon with sights, trigger, and a flared barrel. It was not a revolver, but it looked

a lot like a power laser.

First things first. "Do you have the statue?" I asked, before anyone else could speak.

He had assumed his old seat in the circle. "If I did, I would not be here." He was sitting as immobile as a statue himself. "And if I thought I could obtain it alone, none of you would be here. Let me tell you a story. It concerns my earlier trip into the Takla Makan, and how I came to make it."

The lamp caught the keen profile and the dreamer's brow. The moon was rising. Far away to the northeast, the first desert dunes were a smoky blur on the horizon.

"I thought I knew it all," he said. "And then, three years ago, I was called in to help the executor of an estate in Dresden. Dull stuff, I thought, but an old friend called in a favor. You may ask, as I did, why me? It turned out that the old lady who died was a relative of Sir Aurel Stein, and she mentioned my name in her will." Paddy Elphinstone started, and Sebastian caught the movement. "That's right, Paddy, there's only one of him." He turned to the rest of us. "Aurel Stein was the greatest Oriental explorer of his time. And this was his stamping-ground" -- he gestured around us -- "for forty years, in the early part of this century. He covered China, Mongolia, and Xinjiang -- Sinkiang, the maps called it in his day -- like nobody else in the world. He lived in India and he died in Kabul, but he left relatives in Germany. It was more than a pleasure to look at that house in Dresden. It was an _honor_.

"Before I'd been in that place for an hour, I knew something unusual had been thrown my way. But it was a couple more days before I realized how exciting it was." He tapped the photographs on his knee. "Stein drew the statue, and described its dimensions. The pen-and-ink drawing was in the old lady's collection. Sir Aurel told in his journal exactly where he had found it, in a dry valley surrounded by dunes. He gave the location -- or to be more accurate, he described how to reach the spot from Urumqi and the Turpan Depression. He knew it was an oddity and he couldn't identify its maker, but it was far too heavy to carry. Sixty years ago, that statue's belt didn't send its own message. Electronic calculators and power lasers didn't exist. So he left it there. He was content with the drawing, and he didn't set any great value on that. It could take an inconspicuous place in his works, and end up in the possession of an old German lady, dying in her late eighties in a Dresden row house."

It was hard to be specific, but there was something different about Gerald Sebastian. I felt an openness, an eagerness in him since we had entered China, something that was quite different from his usual public persona. Evaluating his performance now, I decided that he would be a little too obsessive to appeal to his own backers. He and Will Reynolds were brothers under the skin.

"I went there," he said. "Three hundred miles south of Urumqi, just as Sir Aurel Stein said, to the middle of the worst part of the desert. Of course, I didn't _expect_ to find the statue. Chances were, if it were ever there, it was long gone. I knew that, so I went inadequately prepared and I didn't think through what I would do if I found it. But I had to look. Sam will understand that, even if the rest of you don't." He nodded his head at me, eyes unreadable in the lamplight. "Well, the valley was there, half filled with drifting sand. And I didn't have equipment with me. I spent one week digging -- scrabbling, that's a better word -- then I was running short of water." He slipped the photographs back into their envelope and stood up abruptly. "The statue was there. I found it on my last day. There was a gold tablet and a ruby ring, attached to the belt, and I took those. Then I photographed it, and I covered it with sand. It will be there still. We're going to lift it out this time and put it on the truck. And when we get it, we'll take it back for radioactive dating. My guess is that it is more than seven thousand years old."

He walked away, outside the circle of lamplight, over behind the two balloon-wheeled trucks. After a few seconds Jackie Sands followed him. Paddy was off in an alcoholic world of his own, eyes closed and mouth open. I looked at Will Reynolds, sitting hunched forward and tugging at his finger joints.

"Give me a hand to get Paddy to his tent, would you? It's getting cold, and I don't think he'll manage it on his own."

Will nodded and moved to the other side of Paddy. "I've seen it, you know," he said, as we lifted one to each arm.

I paused. "The statue?"

"Naw." He gave a snuffling laugh. "How the hell would I see the statue? The _valley_. It shows on the radar images, clear as day. And there's structure underneath it -- buildings, a whole town, buried deep in the sand. I saw 'em, before I'd ever met Gerald Sebastian."

"He contacted you?"

"No. I wrote to him. You see, after I interpreted the images and realized what I might be seeing, I asked the Applications office at Headquarters for field trip funding, to collect some ground truth. And they _bounced_ it -- as though it was some dumb boondoggle to get me a trip to China!" Between us, we stuffed Paddy Elphinstone into his tent and zipped the flap. If he wanted to undress that was his own affair. "That made me so mad," said Will, "I thought, damn you bureaucrats. If you don't want this, there's others might. I'd seen one of Sebastian's travel programs about China, and I wrote to him. The hell with NASA! We'll find that city without 'em."

Will turned and lurched off towards his own tent. He had the height of a basketball player and none of the coordination.

Well, I thought, that's another piece of the elephant accounted for. So far as Will Reynolds was concerned, this illegal journey to China's western desert was just a field trip, a way to gather the data that justified his own interpretation of satellite images. I wondered, had Gerald Sebastian talked of Sir Aurel Stein's legacy in Dresden, and the follow-up trip to the Takla Makan desert _before_ Will Reynolds had shown him those radar images? My skeptical soul assured me that he had not.

And yet I couldn't quite accept my own logic. While Sebastian had been speaking about Aurel Stein, a disquieting thought had been creeping up on me. From the day I was recruited by him, I had been sure that he and I had the same motives. Sure, he was smoother than I was, but inside we were the same. Now I wasn't sure. He was so terribly convincing, so filled with burning curiosity. Either his interest in exploration was powerful and genuine, or he was better at the bait-and-catch funding game than anyone in history. Was it somehow possible that _both_ were true?

I lit a black Poona cheroot and stood there in the lamplit circle, noticing the temperature dropping fast around me. In this area it would be well below freezing before dawn, and then back up to a hundred degrees by the next afternoon. I zipped up my jacket and started to put away the cooking equipment. With Paddy gone for the night, the number of hired help on the party was down to one.

The evening was not yet over. Before I had time to finish tidying up, Jackie Sands reappeared from the direction of the trucks. She was wearing a fluffy wool sweater, as dark, tangled and luxuriant as her hair. She made no attempt to help -- I wondered if she had ever in her whole life cleared up after dinner -- but sat down on one of the camp stools.

"Destroying your lungs," she said.

"Do you tell that to your hubby, too?"

There was a flash of teeth, but I couldn't see her facial expression. "It's not worth telling things to Henry.

He stopped accepting inputs years ago on everything except stocks and bonds."

"Does he smoke?"

"Not any more. Doctor's orders."

"So he does accept other inputs."

This time a chuckle accompanied the gleam of teeth. "I suppose he does. But not from me."

I flicked the cigar stub away and watched its orange-red spark cartwheel across the dusty surface. "That's one nice thing about deserts. No fire hazard." I sat down on a camp stool opposite her. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Hoffman?"

"Miss Sands. I don't use my husband's name. Do you have to be so direct?"

"It's nearly ten-thirty."

"That's not late."

"Not for Manhattan. But social functions end early in the Takla Makan. I have to be up at five. And it's getting cold."

"It is." She snuggled deeper into her sweater. "I thought this was supposed to be a hot desert. All right, straight to business. I know why Gerald Sebastian organized this expedition. He did it for fame and fortune, equal parts. I know why Will Reynolds came along; he wants to protect his scientific reputation. And I understand Paddy. He's a born explorer, along for the sheer love of it, and if he doesn't drink himself to death he'll be world famous before he's forty. But what about you, Sam? You sit and listen to everybody else, and you hardly say a word. What's your motive for being here?"

"Why do you want to know? And if it comes to that, what's your motive?"

"Mm. You show me yours and I'll show you mine, eh?" She stared straight into the lamp and pursed her lips. "You know, being on an expedition like this is a bit like being on a small cruise ship. After a few days, you start to tell near-strangers things you wouldn't admit to your family."

"I don't have a family."

"No?" Her eyebrows arched. "All right, then, I'll do it. I'll play your game. A swap. Who first?"

"You."

"You're a hard man, Sam-I-Am. Lordie. Where should I begin? Do you know what SETI is?"

"Settee? Like couch?"

"No. SETI, like S-E-T-I -- the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence. Heard of it?"

"No. I'm still looking for signs of intelligence on Earth. What is it, some sort of game?"

"Not to me. Just think what it will mean if we ever find evidence that there are other intelligent beings in the universe. It will change everything we do. Change the basic way we think, maybe stop us all blowing ourselves up. I believe the work is enormously important, and for nearly five years I've been giving money to promote SETI research."

"Henry's money?"

She sat up a little straighter. "My allowance. But most of the research work is highly technical, with radio receivers and electronics and signal analysis. I can't even understand how my money is spent."

"Which makes it sound like a classic rip-off."

"It does sound like that, I admit. But it's not."

Her voice was totally earnest. Unfortunately, that's one prime qualification to be a total sucker. "You think it's not," I said.

"Put it that way if you want to. I've never regretted giving the money. But then I heard about this expedition, and it really made me think. Sebastian says he has found Atlantis, with a technological civilization as advanced as ours. But I say, it's just as likely he found evidence of visitors to the earth, ones who came long ago."

"And just happened to look exactly like humans? That's too implausible."

"Not if they were truly advanced. Beings like that would be able to look just as they wanted to look. Anyway, Sam, you're on the wrong side of the argument. Suppose there's only a one-in-a-thousand chance that what we are looking for is evidence of aliens. I'm still better off spending my money coming here, to do something myself, rather than being a little bit of something I don't even understand. Don't you agree?"

"Oddly enough, I do. It's one of the golden rules: stay close to the place your money is spent."

"But you don't accept the idea of visitors to this planet?"

"I don't reject it. I just say it's improbable."

"Right. But it's possible." She sounded short of breath. "And that's what I think, too. So that's me, and that's why I'm here, and the only reason I'm here. Now how about you?"

I didn't want to talk, but now I seemed committed to it. I lit another cigar and blew smoke towards the half-moon. "I'm going to be a big disappointment to you," I said, with my face averted. "You're on an expedition with a world-famous traveler and television celebrity, a NASA scientist, and a born explorer. I'm the bad apple in the barrel. You see, I'm a treasure hunter. I came with Gerald Sebastian for one simple reason: there's a chance -- an outside chance, but a hell of a lot better than the odds that you'll find your extraterrestrials -- that I'm going to walk away from this holding a whole basket of money. That's why I'm here."

"I don't believe you."

I shrugged. "I knew you wouldn't. I didn't think you'd like it, and you don't. But it's true."

"You may have convinced yourself that it's true, but it isn't." She sounded outraged. "My God, if all you wanted was money, there are a hundred easier ways to get it. Play the Stock Market, work in a casino, go into the insurance business. You don't have to come to the ends of the earth to make money. I don't think you know your own motivation, or you want to hide it from me."

I threw away my second cigar -- this one much less than half-smoked.

"Miss Sands, how long have you been married?"

"Why, four years, I suppose. Five years in August. Not that I see why -- "

"Do you love Henry Hoffman?"

"What! I -- of course I do. I do. And it's no damned business of yours."

"But you left him for months to come on this expedition."

"I told you why."

"Right. Do you enjoy sleeping with him? Never mind, ignore that, and let's assume you do. You're quite right, it is no business of mine. All I'm trying to say is that people do a lot of different things to make money, and it's no one else's concern why they do it. And sometimes the obvious assumptions about why people do things are right, and sometimes they are quite wrong. So why won't you believe me, when I tell you that I'm here for the simplest possible reason, to make my fortune?"

But she was on her feet, swiveling around and heading fast for the dark bulk of the trucks. "Damn you," she said as she walked away. "My marriage is fine, and anyway it's none of your bloody business. Keep your big nose out of it."

She was gone, leaving me still with the clearing-up to take care of. Before I did that I picked up the lamp and went off to look for the cigar I had thrown away. The way things were going, before the end of this expedition I might be craving a half-smoked cigar.

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I slept poorly and woke at dawn. When I emerged from my tent Paddy already had the stove going and water heated for coffee. Apparently he was one of those unfortunates who never suffer a hangover, which made his long-term prospects for full alcoholism all too good. One good hangover will keep me sober for months. He nodded at me cheerfully while he shaved. "Sleep well?"

"Lousy. I thought I could hear noises outside the tent -- like people talking. I guess I was dreaming."

"No. You were listening to them." Paddy pointed his razor at the sand dunes to the north. "It's called mingsha -- singing sand. It will get worse when we move deeper into the Takla Makan."

"I'm not talking about sand dunes, Paddy. I'm talking about people. Conversations, whistling, calling to animals. I even heard somebody playing the flute."

"That's right." He was intolerably perky for the early morning. "Hold on a minute." He put his razor down on the little folding table that held his coffee, towel, soap, and a cheese sandwich, and ran off to dive into his tent. A second later he reappeared with a paperback book in his hand.

"We're not the first people to visit this place, not by a long shot. It was a big obstacle for two thousand years on the Great Silk Road, and all the travelers skirted it either north or south. Marco Polo came by the Takla Makan seven hundred years ago, when he was traveling around on Kubla Khan's business. He called it the Desert of Lop. Here's what he says about the desert."

While I poured sweetened black coffee for myself, Paddy found his place in the book and began to read aloud. "In this tract neither beasts nor birds are met with, because there is no kind of food for them. It is asserted as a well-known fact that this desert is the abode of many evil spirits, which lure travelers to their destruction with extraordinary illusions ... they unexpectedly hear themselves called by their own names, and in a tone of voice to which they are accustomed. Supposing the call to proceed from their companions, they are led away from the direct road and left to perish. At night, they seem to hear the

march of a large cavalcade.' And here's another choice bit. 'The spirits of the desert are said at times to fill the air with the sounds of all kinds of musical instruments' -- there's your flute, Sam -- 'and also of drums and the clash of arms.' And it wasn't only Marco Polo. A Chinese monk, Fa Xian, passed this way in the fifth century, and he wrote that there were 'evil spirits and hot winds that kill every man who encounters them, and as far as the eye can see no road is visible, only the skeletons of those who have perished serve to mark the way.'"

Paddy closed his book and grinned happily. "Good stuff, eh? And nothing has changed. At least we know what we're in for over the next few weeks." He went to put the book back in his tent.

The dust-red sun was well above the horizon now, and the other three team members emerged from their tents within a couple of minutes of each other. Between cooking breakfast and striking camp, Paddy and I had no more chance for talk.

Gerald filmed our activities and the scenery around us, then disappeared into the second truck. But Jackie Sands gave me an extra nice smile and even helped collect the breakfast plates. Whatever had annoyed her so last night was apparently all forgotten or forgiven.

She had discarded yesterday's shirt and jeans in favor of a long, loose-fitting dress of white cotton and thick-soled leather sandals. The clothes made good hot-weather sense. So did the different hair styling, smoothing the viper's nest of tangles to long dark curls. But she had also applied heavy makeup and bright lipstick, and that was not so smart. I wondered if she would keep it up when we melted in the heart of the desert and the truck's inside temperature soared over a hundred and ten.

And then I noticed the dark rings under her eyes, which makeup could not quite hide. Like me, Jackie had apparently suffered a disturbed night.

We were on our way by six. We planned to drive only in the early morning and late afternoon, resting through the worst heat of midday. Today we would be penetrating the true dune country of the desert. I thought that in spite of Gerald Sebastian's optimism, the tough part of the expedition was just beginning.

We drove almost due north, while the land ahead turned to rolling sand hills, enormous, lifeless, seemingly endless. Dun-colored, distinct, and sun-shadowed, each dune rose five or six hundred feet above the dead plain. By nine o'clock their profiles smoked and shimmered in dust and heat haze. It was easy to see why travelers regarded this desert as featureless and impassable. The dunes moved constantly, shaped by wind, creeping across the arid landscape. Nothing could grow here, nothing provided permanence.

And Will Reynolds, seated at my side, was in his element. His space images revealed the contour of every dune. He had known, before he left Washington, their extent, their shape, and their steepness. Months ago he had sat at his desk and plotted an optimum route, weaving us north to Gerald Sebastian's destination on an efficient and sinuous path that took advantage of every break in the dune pattern.

Now he was finally able to apply his knowledge. As I drove, and the thermometer above the truck's dashboard climbed implacably through the nineties, Will chuckled to himself and called out compass headings. At a steady twenty-five miles an hour, we snaked our way forward without a hitch.

Other than an occasional tamarisk bush, we saw nothing and no one. A billion Chinese people lived far to the east, on the alluvial plains and along the fertile river valleys, but no one lived here. This land made Tibet's high plateau appear lush and fertile, even to China's central development committee. According to Gerald Sebastian, the danger of our discovery was too small to worry about.

By ten-thirty, there was no scrap of shade from even the steepest of the dunes. We halted, raised the

parasol over both trucks, and settled down to wait. That gave me my first chance to talk to Sebastian alone since we had stopped for dinner last night.

I followed him as he prowled outside the shady zone with his video camera. He spoke with his eye still to the viewfinder. "All right, Sam. Say it."

"You're the one who has to say it."

He turned to face me, squinting up at me in the strong sun. "I don't understand. What do you want?"

"An explanation." We automatically walked on up the dune, farther out of earshot of the others. The heat of the sand burned through our shoes. "Last night, you told us all that you took the ruby ring and the gold tablet from the statue on your last trip."

"Quite right, I said that. And it's quite true."

"So why didn't Sir Aurel Stein do the same thing, when he found and drew a picture of the statue?"

He looked me in the eye, the honest stare that was part of his stock-in-trade. "I don't know, Sam. All I can tell you is that he didn't take them. Naturally, I asked myself the same question."

"And how did you answer it?"

"First, I thought that maybe he planned to return for the statue itself, and so he left everything else behind, too. Then when Xinjiang was closed to foreigners, in 1930, he couldn't go back. It's a weak argument, I know, because we all carry what we can, and only leave behind what we can't haul with us. My second explanation is not much better. Aurel Stein didn't show the tablet and ring in his drawing; therefore, they were not there when he explored the valley. Someone else was there between his visit and mine. I'm sure you see what's wrong with that idea."

"People take things from archeological sites. They don't leave them there."

"Exactly." There was a furious, frenzied energy to Gerald Sebastian now, an effervescence that had not been there before we reached the Takla Makan. But he was not worried, only excited. "So what is the explanation? Sam, that's what we're going to find out. And this time, we didn't come lacking equipment."

He was not referring to the pulleys, hoist, and derrick on the truck. So what was it? I knew the complete inventory of the truck I was driving. Maybe Paddy Elphinstone could tell me about the other one.

"Don't worry, Sam," Sebastian was saying. "If I knew what had happened, I would have told you." He was interrupted by a cry from the camp. Jackie Sands was standing out from under the parasol, calling and waving her arms at us. We ran back to her.

"It's Will Reynolds," she said as soon as we were close enough. "He was sitting next to me, and suddenly he started to speak. He sounded all slurred, as though he was drunk. Then he tried to stand up and fell off his chair. I think he had a stroke. He's unconscious."

He wasn't, not quite. When we got to him his eyes were rolling from side to side under half-open lids and he was muttering to himself. I sniffed his breath, felt his pulse, then touched my fingers to his forehead.

"Not a stroke. And not drunk. He's overheated -- get his shirt open and bring some water. Where the devil is Paddy?"

Before I had an answer to that question, Will Reynolds was sitting up and looking about him. We had

damp cloths on his wrists, temples, and throat.

"What happened?" he said.

"What do you remember?" I wanted to be sure that he was functioning normally.

"Over there." He pointed up at the brow of a dune, into the eye of the sun. "I saw them marching over the top of it and I stood up to shout to you and Gerald. Then I woke up here."

"Saw who?" said Jackie. She looked at me. "I was sitting there, and I didn't see a thing."

"The patrol, or whatever it was. A line of men and pack-horses and camels, one after another, parading across the top of the dune. There must have been fifty of them." He turned to Gerald. "That's one idea of yours out of the window. You said there was a negligible chance that we'd have trouble with Chinese patrols, and we run into one the first day. I guess they didn't see us down here." He tried to stand, then swayed and leaned back against me. "What's happened to me?"

"Just rest there," I said. "You're all right, Will. You've got a slight case of heatstroke. Take it easy today, and tomorrow you'll be back to normal."

The nature of his overheated fancy worried me. Had he, half-asleep, somehow overheard Paddy reading to me this morning, and built the idea of desert caravans into his subconscious? Now Paddy himself was returning from almost the direction that Will had pointed, shuffling along between two dunes and wearing a coolie hat that covered his head and shielded his shoulders. His walk told me that he was not sober.

"Where have you been?" Sebastian's voice was more than excited. It was demented.

Paddy's face had a blurry, unfocused look. "I thought I saw something." He made a vague gesture behind him. "Out there, between the dunes. Some _body_," he corrected, with the precision of the drunkard.

Add that to Will Reynolds' statement, and you had something to catch Sebastian's full attention.

"Who was it?"

Paddy shook his head, but before the gesture was complete Sebastian was running off between the dunes, following the weaving line of Paddy's footsteps.

Then he went scrambling up the steepest slope of the nearest mountain of sand. Three minutes later he was back, slithering down amid a great cloud of dust.

"Of all the bloody bad luck." When he got too agitated his upper-class accent began to fall apart. "One patrol per thousand square miles, and we run smack into it."

"You saw it?" I asked.

"I saw their dust, and that was enough." He ran to the camp and began to throw things anyhow into the trucks. "Come on, we're getting out of here. If we head north we can run clear of them."

I folded down the parasol. "What about Reynolds? He's not fit to navigate."

"He can travel in the second truck." Sebastian hesitated for a moment, staring first at Paddy and then at Jackie. I could read his thoughts. Who was going to drive that one, if he navigated for me?

"Will Reynolds has the track through the dunes clearly marked on his radar images," I said. "I'm pretty sure Miss Sands could call the turns for me."

"Do it." The trucks were loaded, and already he was hustling dazed Will and drunk Paddy into the second one. "And don't stop unless you need to consult with us. We'll be right behind you."

I swung up into the driver's seat and put my hand on the dashboard. We were in the hottest part of the afternoon. The gray exposed metal would blister skin. As Jackie moved to the seat beside me, and muttered her protest at the heat of the leather, I leaned out again. "What time do you want to make camp?" I called to Sebastian. "Sunset?"

"No. There should be a decent moon tonight. Keep going as long as you can see and stay awake." The engine behind me started, growling into low gear. His voice rang out above it. "There may be other patrols. We have to reach that valley -- _soon_."

* * * *

For the first hour it was the silence of people with too much to say. Jackie kept her head down, pored over the images, and called off the turns clearly and correctly. I stared at the land ahead, drove, sweated, and wondered why I had such a terrible headache.

"Will you do me a disgusting favor?" I asked at last.

"What? While you're driving?"

"Dig down into the knapsack behind you, and give me a cigar."

"Yuck."

When she reached out to put the lit cheroot in my mouth I turned to nod my thanks. She had wiped the makeup off her face with paper towels, and patches of sweat discolored the armpits and back of her white cotton dress. The dress itself had become dust-gray. Trickle of perspiration were running down her brow and cheeks.

"It will start to cool off in about two hours," I said.

"Two more hours of this. God." While I was still looking at her, she reached up with both hands and pushed the mass of dark hair deliberately off her head.

"You wear a wig," I said brainlessly.

"No. I wear six of them. A look for all occasions. Or almost all." She sighed and ran her hands through her hair. "My God, that feels good."

Her hair was short, almost boyish, a light blond showing the first lines of gray. Without the wig her face had a different shape, and oddly enough she looked younger.

She stared back at me with only a trace of embarrassment. "Well, Sam-I-Am, there's the dreadful truth. Next comes the glass eye and the wooden leg."

"Slipping down the ladder rung by rung. Have a cigar."

"I've not come to that yet. But I'd sell my best friend for a glass of chilled orange juice." She laughed. "You know, it's hard on Will, but I'm glad that I'm not riding in that other truck. Paddy's sloshed all the time, and I think Gerald is going crazy."

Her cheerful manner didn't quite convince.

"You had a fight with Gerald," I said.

"Why do you say that?"

"Guessing. You were both too keen for you to ride with me. And you looked exhausted this morning. You had a fight with him last night, after you left me."

"No. After dinner, and before I sat with you by the lamp. I suppose that's why I came to you -- I wanted to avoid more contact with him."

"Thanks."

"It worked. He didn't try to come to my tent. But I had a terrible night anyway. I'm normally a great sleeper. Head on pillow, and I'm gone. Only last night..."

With most people I'd have suggested a sleeping pill. Jackie would no doubt have given me a lecture on drug abuse.

"Horrible dreams," she went on. "I got up feeling like a wet kleenex."

"Me too. Did you hear things outside?"

"Yes!"

"People talking, and animals, and music?" I slowed the truck and stared at her.

She frowned back at me. "No. Nothing like that. I heard storm noises, and rushing water, and horrible sounds like buildings falling over. In fact, in the middle of the night I was so scared I opened my tent and looked out to see what was happening. I thought there must be flash floods or something. But everything outside was quiet. I decided I must have been asleep without knowing it. And yet I still couldn't sleep. What's happening, Sam? Is it all nerves?"

Before I would accept that, I'd believe something more mundane, like bad food or water. Or even -- I couldn't stop the thought -- deliberate drugging or poisoning. Gerald Sebastian controlled all the water supply from the distillation unit. _Was_ it no more than alcohol with Paddy, and heat stroke with Will Reynolds?

"You said Gerald was going crazy. What did you mean by that, Jackie?"

And now she did seem embarrassed. Her eyes moved to stare at the truck's radiator emblem. "I wish I hadn't said that, even though it's true enough. I don't think you have a very good opinion of me. So it probably won't surprise you to find out that Gerald and I are lovers."

"Surprise me, no. Upset me, maybe."

A quick sideways flash of her eyes in my direction. "Thanks, Sam. That's kind when I'm not looking my best. You know, that's the first nice thing you've said to me. You pretend to be a human icicle, but you're not. I'm glad. But I want you to know that Gerald wasn't the reason I'm on this expedition. I'm serious about the SETI work, and I wanted to come here long before he and I started anything."

"I believe you. Henry doesn't know?"

"Know, or care. He's fascinated by Gerald, thinks he's brilliant."

"So do I. He is."

"The Gerald Sebastian that I met in New York certainly was. He knew where he was going, how to get there, just what he wanted."

"Present company included?"

"I guess so. But once we reached Pakistan he changed completely. He's a monomaniac now. All day yesterday in the truck, while he drove, he talked and talked and talked."

"Of course he did. Jackie, this is his baby."

"You don't understand. He didn't talk about the expedition, the way he had in Hong Kong. Or rather he did, but not in a sensible way. He went on and on about Atlantis -- about the rivers and lakes there, and the flower gardens, and fruit trees, and white sailboats moving along streets like Venetian canals. Sam, he was totally dippy. As though he thought he had been there himself, and knew just what it was like. I tried to tell him, he had to get hold of himself, but it was useless. He couldn't stop. And Paddy was no help at all. He just sat there in the truck with a dreamy look on his face."

I remembered my discussion with Gerald Sebastian regarding Aurel Stein's failure to take the ring and gold tablet from the statue. He had seemed wildly excited, but as rational as you could ask. "I'm sorry, Jackie. I can't see Sebastian that way."

"Nor could I, three days back. Sam, he's your colleague and your boss. But Gerald and I were lovers, for Heaven's sake. Less than a week ago we couldn't get enough of each other. But last night after dinner, when we went to his tent..."

I could complete that thought, and also the whole proposition. Gerald hadn't wanted to make love to Jackie; Jackie needed her self-esteem; therefore, something must be seriously wrong with Gerald.

"Oh, don't be an idiot, Sam." And I hadn't said a word. "It's not that he's tired of me, or got other things on his mind. Anyway, I wouldn't get bent out of shape about Gerald and sex. I'm telling you, he's gone crazy."

It was her inconsistency that convinced me. She had wanted Sebastian in her tent right after dinner, but later she wanted to avoid him altogether.

Perfect, I thought. I'm on an expedition with a crazy leader, a drunk interpreter, a brain-fried navigator, and a wild lady who thinks we will find little green men in the middle of the Takla Makan. Disaster on wheels.

And with all that to worry about, what thought poked its way again and again into my forebrain? Of course. It was Jackie's comment that I was a human icicle.

We had stopped talking. Maybe she thought I didn't believe a word she'd said, and was waiting for a chance to talk about her with Sebastian. Maybe she felt as exhausted as I did. My head was still aching and I drove by instinct, following the route that Jackie gave me without thinking or caring where it led. The sun set, the moon came up, and we were able to cruise on without stopping.

The temperature went from hot to cool to cold. About eight-thirty, Jackie stirred in her seat.

"I can go without dinner, Sam, but I have to have warm clothes. My legs are beginning to freeze. You have to stop."

I emerged from my reverie. The dunes were all around us. At night they became frozen ocean breakers, looming high and dark above the moving truck. Sometimes my tired eyes could see long shapes scudding

across their flanks. Was this the illusion that had fueled Gerald Sebastian's sea-fantasies?

"How much farther to go?"

Jackie had put her wig on again and sat hugging herself. "No more than forty miles. Two hours, at the rate we've been going. But I don't care. I want to stop and rest."

I let us coast to a halt. "Gerald will never agree to it. When he's this close he'll want to get there tonight. In less than two hours the moon will set and it will be too dark to drive."

"We'll be there in the morning."

Jackie didn't understand treasure-hunters.

The idea of camping here, when we were so close to the valley...

Gerald popped out of the cabin of the other truck almost before it had stopped moving. "What's the problem?" His voice echoed off the dunes and he ran to peer in at us. "Why are you stopping?"

"My eyes," I said. "They're so tired I'm seeing double. And I'm cold and hungry. We have to take a break."

Jackie said nothing, but her hand touched my arm in appreciation.

"But we're almost there," said Sebastian. "It's a straight run from here, a child could drive it."

"I know, but I need rest -- and so do you."

He turned to stare at the moon. I could see his face, and although it was tired and lined his expression was perfectly sane. "Twenty minutes," he said after a moment. "That will give us time to eat. Then -- "

"No." Jackie did not raise her voice. "You can do what you like, Gerald, but I'm not going any farther tonight. And Will Reynolds should be asleep in his tent, not jolting around in a truck. If you want to go on, you'll do it without Will and me."

There was a moment when I thought Sebastian would explode at her. Then he nodded, lowered his head, and marched without a word to the other truck.

* * * *

I could never earn a living as a fortune-teller. My premonition had told me that we were in for a grim evening. Instead it proved to be the most peaceful few hours since we had left Hong Kong.

Will Reynolds was fully recovered. Paddy was semi-sober. And Gerald Sebastian hid any angry feelings he had toward Jackie under icy politeness. Only his eyes betrayed him. They turned, at every gap in the conversation, to the north. On the other side of those moonlit dunes, less than forty miles away, lay his obsession. I could share his feelings.

We had halted at about eight forty-five. At nine-fifteen, when we had finished a meal of hot tinned beef and biscuits, Sebastian wandered away from the lamplight and stood looking wistfully up at the haloed moon. It was setting, and a northern breeze veiled its face with fine sand.

Abruptly he swung around and walked back to us. "I'm going on, Sam," he said to me. "I have to go on. You follow me tomorrow morning."

His voice carried the command of the expedition's leader. Jackie looked at me to raise an objection. I could not. I knew the desire too well. All I could do was wish that I could go with him.

"You have only one more hour of moonlight," I said.

"I know." He picked up a gallon container of water and climbed into the truck that I had been driving. "You're in charge here. See you tomorrow."

The truck rumbled away between the mountains of sand. We watched it leave in silence, following it with our ears for what felt like minutes. When the last faint mutter of the engine was lost, I was able to pick up in the new silence the sounds of the cooling landscape around us. It was the *_mingsha_* again, the song of the dunes as they lost their heat to the stars. There were faint, crystalline chimes of surface slidings, broken by lower moans of movement deep within the sandhills. It was easy to imagine voices there, the whistle and call of far-off sentinels.

"_The dragon-green, the luminous, the dark, the serpent-haunted sea_" said Paddy suddenly. He was gazing out beyond the circle of lamplight, and his eyes were wide. Without another word he stood up, turned, and went off to his own tent.

We stared after him. Within a couple of minutes Will Reynolds rose to his feet. He shivered, snorted, and glared at the fading moon. "Seen that in New Mexico," he said. "Dust halo. Sandstorm on the way. It'll be a bugger. Gotta get some sleep." He lurched away.

And then there were two. Jackie and I sat without speaking while the night grew colder and the sands murmured into sleep. "Did you understand what Paddy said?" she said at last.

I shook my head. Our thoughts had been running along in parallel. "He seemed to be talking about the sea, too, but we're in one of the driest places in the world. Will Reynolds made a lot more sense. I've seen that haloed moon myself in desert country. It's caused by a high dust layer. If there's a sandstorm on the way we have to start early tomorrow, or Sebastian may be in trouble. We have all the food and the water distillation unit on this truck."

We left the camp just as it stood, the lamp still burning, and walked across to Jackie's tent. There we hesitated. "Goodnight, Sam," she said at last. "I don't know if I'll be able to sleep, but sweet dreams."

"And you, Jackie." Then, as she was putting her dark head into the tent, I said, "I have some Ambien here. Sleeping tablets. If you'd like one."

She paused and pulled her head out of the tent. Then she held out her hand. "Just this once. Don't get me into bad habits."

"Tomorrow, your first cigar." I watched as she closed the tent, then walked back to turn out the lamp. The moon was on the horizon, a smoky, gray blur. Overhead no stars were visible. By the time that I stepped into my tent and climbed into my sleeping bag the night was totally dark.

* * * *

Sleep is mystery, a force beyond control. The previous night, with nothing to worry about, I had been restless. Tonight, hours away from what could be the greatest event of my life, I put my head down and enjoyed the dreamless, uninvaded slumber that we mistakenly assign to small children. I did not stir until Paddy unzipped my tent and announced that I would miss coffee and eggs if I didn't get a move on. Then I woke from a sleep so deep that for a moment I had no idea where I was.

Neither Paddy nor Will seemed to remember anything strange about their last night's behavior. We were

in the truck before six-thirty, facing north into a cold, grit-filled wind. Visibility was down to less than two hundred yards and we would be reduced to map and compass. It promised to be slow work, and I intended to drive carefully. This truck contained a hundred pounds of plastic explosive, and no one knew why Gerald Sebastian had brought it. Plastic is safe enough without a detonator, everyone tells you so, but it makes an uncomfortable travel companion.

I asked Will, bent over his image, for a first direction. And it was then, as I slipped into first gear and looked beyond the closest dunes to a red-brown sky, that I learned my mistake.

Sleep had not been without dreams, and Gerald Sebastian's vision was a strong one -- strong enough to infect others. Night memories came flooding back to me.

It was evening, with sunset clouds of red and gold. I stood next to the green statue, but it was no longer a lonely monolith half-buried in gray sand. Now it formed part of a great line of identical statues, flanking an avenue beside a broad canal. Laden pack animals walked the embankment, camels and donkeys and heavy-set horses, and I heard the jingle of metal on carved leather harnesses. A flat-bottomed boat eased along past me. The crew were tall, fair-skinned women with braided amber hair, singing to the music of a dreamy flute player cross-legged in the dragon's-head bow. Beyond the embankment, as far as I could see, buildings of white limestone rose eighty to a hundred feet above the water. They were spired and windowless, mellow in the late sunlight. The wind was at my back. I could smell apple blossom and pear blossom from the dwarf trees that grew between the statues.

I moved forward along the pebbled embankment. In half a mile the canal broadened to a lake bordered by lotus plants and water-lilies. Although the waters stretched to the purple haze of the horizon, I knew that they were fresh, not salt.

On the quiet lake, their sails dipping rose-red in the evening sun, moved dozens of small boats. It was obvious that they were pleasure craft, sailing the calm lacustrine waters for pure enjoyment.

As I watched, there was a sudden shivering of the landscape. The sky darkened, there was the sound of thunder. The buildings trembled, the road cracked, lake waters gathered and divided. The dream shattered.

"Sam!" The shout came from Jackie and Paddy in the back seat. I found we were heading at a thirty degree angle up the side of a dune, four-wheel drive scrabbling to give purchase on the shifting sands. A second before we tipped over I brought us around to head down again.

"Sorry." I raised a hand in apology and fought back to level ground, horribly aware of our explosive cargo. "Lost concentration. It won't happen again."

Will had just got round to looking up. "North-west, not north," he said calmly. "Look, there's his tracks. Follow them where you can."

To our left, almost hidden by blown sand, I saw the ghostly imprints of balloon tires. New sand was already drifting in to fill them. I followed their line and increased our speed. In full day, the temperature in the truck began to inch higher.

After another ten miles the tire tracks faded to invisibility. But by that time we were on the final stretch, a long, north-running ridge that led straight to the valley. Less than an hour later we were coasting down a shallow grade of powdery white sand that blew up like smoke behind us.

"Half a mile," said Will Reynolds. "Look, all the contours are right. There's a whole city underneath us, deep in the sand." He thrust an image under my nose. It showed a broad pattern of streets, picked out as

dark lines on a light background. I thought I recognized the curving avenues and sweep of a broad embankment, and saw again in my mind the white sails and the laden animals. But I had no time for more than a moment's glance. Then my attention moved to the valley ahead of us.

He was there. So was the truck. And so was the statue. When we turned the final lip of the valley I could see the green warrior standing waist-deep in a great pit. Sebastian must have been working all night to dig it clear. Now he was leaning over the back of the truck, so uniformly covered in white dust that he was himself like a stone statue. The derrick had already been swung out over the rear of the truck. Chains were cinched around the statue's broad belly and hooked to iron cables over the pulley. Red sticks of explosive stood near it on the sand, with detonators already in place.

Our diesel made plenty of noise but Sebastian did not seem to hear us. He was working the engine on the back of his truck. As Will Reynolds and I jumped down from the front seat there was a chattering of gears and the scrape and clatter of chains. The statue moved a little, altering its angle. The sound of the engine growled to a deeper tone. The chains groaned, the statue tilted and began to lift.

I understood the plastic explosive now, but it would be unnecessary. The statue was not anchored at its base. It moved infinitely slowly, but it moved, inching up from the depths. Sand fell away from it, and after a few more seconds the ponderous torso was totally visible.

Will and I slowed our pace down the slope. There was every sign that Sebastian had matters under full control. At the same time, I marvelled that he could have done so much, alone, in such a short time. The valley was perhaps a quarter of a mile long and a hundred yards across. And the white sand was everywhere, a uniform layer of unguessable depth. Judging from its general level, no more than the top of the statue's head would have peered above it when the truck first arrived. To reach the point where the chains and tackle could be attached, Gerald Sebastian must have moved many tons of dry sand.

When we were still twenty yards away, and while Paddy behind me was calling out to the unheeding Sebastian, I looked along the line of the valley. In my mind I saw a hundred companion statues beneath the lonely desert surface. As I stared, some final load of sand was shed at the figure's base. There was a faster whirring of gears, the cable moved quickly, and the whole statue was suddenly hanging in midair. Suspended on the flexible cable, the body turned. The blind, angry gaze swung to meet me, then on to survey the whole valley.

I did not think it then, but I thought of it later. And I understood it for the first time, that simple epitaph of Tamburlaine the Great: "If I were alive, you would tremble."

As the swinging statue completed its turn, to look full on Gerald Sebastian, many things happened at once.

The sky darkened and the air filled with a perfume of apple and pear blossom, one moment before the plastic explosive by the pit blew up. A flash of white fire came from it, brighter than the sun. It blinded me. When I could see again, the statue was no longer hanging from the chains. It stood on the ground, eight and a half feet high, and towered into a leaden sky. As I watched, it moved. It turned, and took one ponderous, creaking step toward Gerald Sebastian.

He screamed and backed away, lifting his hands in front of his face. But he no longer stood on powdery desert sand. He stood on a broad avenue, at the brink of a great lake bordered by apple groves. The statue took another lumbering step forward. Gerald Sebastian seemed unable to turn and run. He backed into the lake, among the lotus flowers and lilies, until the water was to his knees. Then he himself became a statue, frozen, mouth agape.

The face of his pursuer was hidden from me, but as it bent forward to stare into Sebastian's eyes I heard

a cruel, rumbling laugh. I ran forward across the avenue to the edge of the lake, as a great green hand reached out and down. Sebastian was lifted, slowly and effortlessly. He hung writhing in midair, the grip around his throat cutting off his new screams.

The other hand reached forward. Sebastian's jacket was ripped from his body. Carved jade fingers stripped from beneath his shirt a ruby ring and an engraved gold tablet, and tucked them into the statue's buckled belt.

"Xe ho chi!" growled a deep voice. The meaning was unmistakable: "Mine!"

There was a roar of triumph. "Ang ke-hi!" Then the statue was wading into the water, still holding Gerald Sebastian in its remorseless grip. I ran after them, splashing through the blooming water-lilies. Soon I was waist-deep in the cool lake. I halted. The green colossus strode on into deepening waters, still carrying Sebastian. As his head dipped toward the surface he gave one last cry of terror and despair. The statue raised him high in the air, then plunged him under with terrible violence. He did not reappear.

The head swung to face the shore. The blind gaze focused, found me. The wide mouth grinned in challenge.

I turned and fled from the lake, blundering up onto the embankment with its line of fruit trees. The statue was out of the water now, striding back towards me. I ran on, to cower against the shelter of a squat gray obelisk. As my soaked clothing touched its stone base there was a second burst of white light. I became blind again, blind and terror-stricken. The statue was stalking the embankment. I could hear the clanking tread of its progress.

Where could I hide, where could I run to? Again I tried to flee. Something was clutching me, holding me at thigh level.

Sight returned, and with it the beginnings of sanity.

I saw a stone statue before me, but it stood silent and motionless. On its belt sat a ring of ruby fire and an engraved gold tablet.

Beyond the silent effigy I saw for one moment the faint outlines of white buildings, cool green water, and a hundred tiny sails. A freshwater wind blew on my face, filled with lotus blossoms. But in moments, that vision also faded. Superimposed on its dying image appeared once more the dry, dusty valley, deep in the sterile desert. Another few seconds, and the ghostly outline of a truck flickered back into existence, then steadied and solidified. Its chains and tackle hung free, unconnected to the ancient statue beneath the derrick.

I stared all around me. Will Reynolds had fallen supine on the sand, face staring up at the overcast sky. Paddy was on his knees in front of me (but when had he run past me?), hands clapped over his ears. And it was Jackie, also on her knees, who was clutching me around the legs. She crouched with her face hidden against my thigh.

I began to stagger forward, pulling free of Jackie's grip. For Gerald Sebastian had reappeared. He was thirty yards away, face-down on the loose sand. But unlike Will he was not lying motionless. He was swimming, propelling himself toward me across the level surface with laborious strokes of arms and legs, striking out for an unseen shore. His breath came in great, shuddering spasms, as though he had long been deprived of air. Perhaps he had. His mouth was below the surface and he was choking on sand.

A few yards from him -- unexploded and untouched -- lay the sticks of red plastic.

I knelt by his side, turning his head so that he could breathe, and found that the eyes looking into mine were empty, devoid of all thought or awareness. And as I knelt there, clearing sand from his gaping mouth, sudden bright marks touched his upturned face. I heard a pattering on the dusty desert floor.

I stared up into the sky. In that valley, in the fiercest depths of the _Takla Makan Shamo_, a hundred-year event was taking place. It was raining.

* * * *

Paddy Elphinstone had seen an army of warriors, swords unsheathed, sweeping down on us from across the valley. He had known that he was about to die. Jackie saw a city, perhaps the same one I had seen, but it was writhing and collapsing in the grip of a huge earthquake, while she was sliding forward into a great abyss that opened in the surface.

Will Reynolds, God help him, could not tell what vision had gripped him. Like Gerald Sebastian, he was _elsewhere_, in a mental state that permitted no communication with other humans.

When the rain shower was over I searched that valley from end to end, looking for anything out of place. There was the quiet, dusty slope, merging into the dunes in all directions. There was the truck, just where Gerald Sebastian had left it. There was the pit with the statue at its center, rapidly filling with new sand. A ruby ring and an engraved gold tablet were attached to the buckled belt. I took two steps that way, then halted. As I watched, the sand steadily covered them. In the whole valley, nothing moved but the trickling sands.

With two terribly sick men in my charge, I had no time for more exploration. We had to leave, and I had to make a decision: would we drive north or south? In other words, would Will and Gerald receive treatment in China, or would we try to get them home through Pakistan to the United States?

Maybe I made the wrong choice, maybe it was the cowardly choice. I elected to run for home. With me driving one truck and Paddy, shocked to sobriety, the other, we set off southwest as fast as we could go. We drove night and day, cutting our sleep down as far as we dared and keeping ourselves going on strong coffee that Jackie and I brewed by the gallon.

Sixty hours later we were in Rawalpindi, and I was buying airline tickets for the long flight home.

New York again. I told the backers of the expedition the unpleasant truth: that we had taken nothing from the valley, and they had nothing to show for all their investment. They were perhaps a little upset by that, but they were far more upset when they heard what had happened to Will and Gerald, and read the medical prognoses. Either might recover, but no one could predict how or when. Henry Hoffman showed what a gentleman he was by arranging perpetual medical care at his expense for as long as the two might need it.

I went home. And it was then that I discovered I had lied -- accidentally -- to our financial backers. While we were still traveling I had looked at the videotapes made by Sebastian on the trip, including one taken in the valley itself. It showed the same bleak desert that I remembered so well, dry sand and barren rock.

In addition to the videotapes Gerald Sebastian had also shot four or five rolls of film, but I had no way of developing those until we returned home and I could get to a photolab. The films, with whatever latent images might be on their exposed surfaces, did not seem to me a high-priority item. I left them in the bottom of my luggage. At last, four days after I returned to my apartment in Albuquerque, I went to my modest photolab and developed them.

Five rolls showed Hong Kong and Pakistan, and our entry to western China. The sixth was different. I stared at the pictures for half an hour. And then I went to the telephone and placed a call to Jackie Sands in Manhattan. We talked for four hours, and all the time I realized how much I had been missing her.

"I know," she said at last. "We could talk forever, but I'm going to hang up now. Don't do anything silly, Sam. I have to see you, and I have to see it. I'll be on the next plane out."

She had to see what I had hardly been able to describe: the sixth film. There were just three exposures on it. The first was of the green statue, with only its head showing above the sand. In the other two, the statue was uncovered to waist level. It filled most of the frame, with an expression on its face that I could only now read (_If I were alive, you would tremble_). But there was enough space at the edges for something else to show: not the dry gray of desert sands, but the cool green of water; and on the surface of that water, dwarfed by distance and slightly out of focus, a score of tiny white sails, delicate as butterfly wings. At the very edge of the frame was a hint of a broad embankment, curving away out of sight.

Jackie's plane would not arrive for another five hours, but I drove at once to the airport. I thought about her while I waited, and about one other thing. Gerald Sebastian had expected to find Atlantis. Jackie had sought aliens. Had they in one sense both been right?

There is nothing more alien to a modern American than yesterday's empires, with their arbitrary imperial powers, their cruelty, and their casual control over life and death. Humans make progress culturally as well as technologically. Progress in one field may be quite separate from advances in the other. Suppose, then, the advanced civilization of an Atlantis; it might have technology far beyond our own, but it would have the bloody ways of a younger race. What would you expect from its emperors?

In ancient Egypt, Cheops had his Great Pyramid; Emperor Qin had his terracotta army of ten thousand at Xian. But their technology was simple, and their monuments limited to stone and clay. Imagine a great khan, king of Atlantis, with powerful technology wedded to absolute rule. How would he assure his own memory, down through the ages?

I can suggest one answer. Imagine a technology that can imprint a series of images; not just on film, or a length of tape, but on an entire land, with every molecule carrying part of the message. The countryside is saturated with signal. But like a picture on an undeveloped film, the imprint can lie latent for years or thousands of years, surviving the change from fertile land to bleak desert, until the right external stimulus comes along; and then it bursts forth. Atlantis, or Xanadu, or whatever world is summoned, appears in its old glory. To some, that vision may be beautiful; to others, it is intolerable. The great khan, indifferent to suffering, laughs across the centuries and inflicts his legacy.

An idea, no more; but it fills my mind. And how can I ever test it? Only by going back to that lonely valley in the Takla Makan, providing again the stimulus of disturbance, and waiting for the result.

I would love to do it, whatever the risk. The opportunity exists. Jackie told me on the phone that Henry Hoffman, indulgent as ever, was not disappointed by the last expedition. He would be willing to finance another trip to the Takla Makan; and he will let me lead it.

An attractive offer, since to raise that much money myself would take years. To search for Xanadu. How can I say no? And yet it is not simple; for Jackie and I know the rules, even though we have never discussed them. We must begin right, or not at all. I am not Gerald Sebastian. If I let myself take Henry's money, I cannot also take his wife.

* * * *

I make the decision sound difficult, but it is actually very easy. I learned the answer in the Takla Makan, and it is the only answer: for access to its rarest treasures, life offers but a single opportunity.

Xanadu has waited for thousands of years; it must wait a few years longer.