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Passing the Arboli Test  
by Rajnar Vajra  
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Science Fiction

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"Lady, you must think I'm the poster sim for stupidity," I said with more feeling than originality.

"Not at all, Dr. Carter, not one bit. We simply believe that this is your best option, your only reasonable alternative. Wouldn't passing the Arboli Test be nicer than, say, living behind bars for the next twenty-five to forty years?"

"\_Passing\_ the test, sure. What are the odds of that happening? So far -- let's see ... five? Yeah, \_five\_ goddamn geniuses have tried for the Reward. Where are they today? As I recall, three are in some new breed of coma; one gibbers and drools. Oh yeah. Number five lucked out: she died."

"According to our information, you're a genius yourself, Doctor."

"If you worship tests. Me, I don't trust tests, IQ or the Arboli version. Even if I did, I don't bat in the same league as those five brilliant imbeciles who've already flushed their superior brains down the toilet."

Beth Robinson's image on my monitor flickered, an annoying and persistent problem in using secured cybergrid channels. A \_bloodlink\_ was supposed to guarantee privacy, but what it really guaranteed was aggravation. I snatched a pencil and slid it under the light-cuff on my left wrist. Couldn't reach quite far enough to reach the itch, but I did manage to break off the sharpened lead at the tip. Wonderful. The tiny chunk of graphite was improbably uncomfortable and I couldn't remove it without breaking the connection.

"You're forgetting something, Doctor." For a few disconcerting seconds, I was seeing two Beth Robinson's, two thin women in their late thirties with ebony skin, large brown eyes, carmine lipstick, and auburn business wigs. The pencil lead was screwing with the signal. Some checksum cop kicked in, the images coalesced, and only one Executive Director of HIMSA remained, her face as patient as a meditating cow.

Robinson was following the latest fad in executive offices: nudity. I suppose the idea is to visually demonstrate that Really Important People running major corporations have nothing to hide. Look! Nothing up my sleeve, nothing down my shirt....

I didn't give one damn. She wasn't pretty enough to interest me or ugly enough to scare me. Clothes or not, I wasn't buying what she was selling.

"Just what am I forgetting, Ms. Robinson?" Not that I cared.

"Your Arboli Profile."

"That load of superstitious crap?" The Tree-people look everywhere for portents. \_Everywhere\_. I'd heard rumors that they were busy learning such

important human sciences as reading tealeaves, interpreting tarot cards, and phrenology.

"You may consider the Profile superstition and perhaps I agree. The point is that the Arboli believe it. Your Profile is among the highest on record. Do you realize how few people are ranked in your category? Not even a handful. As a result, you'll only have to pass two tests to claim the Reward, not five or six like we lesser mortals."

The Tree-people would analyze a photograph of a person's face by making thousands of careful and meaningless measurements of facial features. Supposedly, they created an elaborate graph based on such telling information as nose-size to mouth-width ratio. The bogus graph was the Profile.

The Tree-people had requested and received pictures of practically every living human on our primitive little planet. If the World Census Bureau reported someone's existence and couldn't dig up a current photo, the Arboli would try to find the individual and take their own picture. This lunacy was serious business among the Tree-people. It's sad, but a lot of humans are beginning to take it seriously as well.

"The Profile is a crock."

"But yours is so high -- "

"Yeah, I'm the damn clapper at the far end of the bell-curve. So what?"

"Dr. Carter, I'm authorized to offer you a carrot in addition to the stick -- I wish I could see you better. Are you aware that your scanner is aimed too high?"

"Sorry about that. Mine's built into my monitor and I'll have to take the monitor apart to realign it." Right now, she should be looking at some un-brushed dark-blond hair and perhaps the very top of my forehead. I hoped my forehead wasn't giving away my grin.

"Well, you should get it fixed. I like to see the person I'm dealing with."

\_I bet you do. \_

"As I was saying, doctor, we can offer you a positive incentive." And a redundancy. "How would you like HIMSA to pay off all your debts and support Virtualife's research for five full years?"

Five years? I'd have enough time to get my major projects off the ground! Hell, in six months I could complete Paravision, the project that had gotten me into financial boiling water....

"Tell me more."

She spelled out the details of an arrangement that would solve my current and many potential future problems. The best part was that I didn't have to pass the Arboli Test, just survive and stay sane. The temptation was strong enough to make me forget my itching wrist.

Paravision was such a simple idea.

The technology for putting television images in a virtual reality headpiece was already available. My idea was to turn these images into a truly 3D picture using standard HDTV transmissions.

First, a computer would identify the important elements of a scene. Then it would apply a "hierarchy of obstruction" algorithm to determine element placement. Finally, two separate images would be generated. The one sent to the left eye would be skewed one way; the right eye would see a picture skewed the opposite way. Presto: a three-dimensional image taking up the entire visual field.

Obviously, the major challenge was finding a way to isolate and identify specific shapes in the visually complex original transmission. Five years ago, this would've been about two microns short of impossible. Lately, however, computer pattern-recognition has advanced spectacularly, mostly due to military applications. I hadn't anticipated much of a problem.

Now, I was almost two and a half million dollars in the red. I'd borrowed against real properties that were already secretly secured by other loans. I'd sold phony stock. I'd turned profit reports to my investors into works of pure fiction. I'd embezzled from my software company, Germ, to feed

my firmware company, Virtualife. I'd kept the value of Germ up with ... imaginative bookkeeping.

I'd been a bad, bad boy, busy with plenty of interesting activities -- each one illegal, unethical, and ultimately futile. I still believed in Paravision and other inventions my company was developing, but I had to admit that I had a problem.

Ironically, if I'd succeeded by now, I could've paid everyone off without hurting anyone and no one the wiser. Hell, my investors stood to make a fortune off Paravision alone. Too bad I'd forgotten the basic inventor's rule: Everything takes twice as long as it should and costs four times as much.

I was now staring down the barrel of a long involuntary vacation with a minimum of freedom, comfort, and privacy.

None of my acts were particularly heinous, but in the USA, incarceration time is based partly on the "count" system. The more counts, the more time. I'd get enough counts in at least three of my felonies to lose two boxing matches.

I can't imagine how the good folks at HIMSA had uncovered my extracurricular activities; I thought I'd hidden my crimes quite cleverly. It didn't matter. Too much time had passed and I knew it was only a matter of days before the cops showed up with long warrants and short handcuffs. No, that wasn't right. Many of my best felonies were interstate; the good old FBI would be here, not the cops, with the same warrants but shinier handcuffs.

I studied the Poker face in my monitor. HIMSA had money and power. Serious money. The Human International Mobile Society Association had been formed eight years ago when the Arboli made themselves known on Earth. HIMSA was dedicated to finding a means for humans to travel the galaxy as the Tree-people did. This meant learning the secrets of Arboli Rootcraft.

I knew exactly what Ms. Robinson and the other HIMSA members were hoping: the big Reward promised to the first human who passed the Arboli Test would be nothing less than complete instructions on building a Rootcraft.

If I earned such a thing, I wouldn't need HIMSA. On the other hand, if I failed the Test but remained alive, conscious, and non-drooling, I'd get pulled out of trouble.

Robinson was right: this was a tasty carrot indeed. The well-oiled wheels of rationalization began turning and I came to a quick decision. After all, I'd only have to attempt two tests. How bad could they be?

\* \* \* \*

The Tree House was set into the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains just out of Los Gatos, California. It wasn't a long journey from Sunnyvale, but long enough to give me second, third, and fourth thoughts.

Getting up at three-thirty in the morning to make sure I arrived at the appointed hour hadn't helped my mood. The Arboli would have surely seen any tardiness as some kind of sign; I'd probably have failed the Test right there. The damn Tree-people start their day too damn early.

Even at four thirty-five a few sightseers were gaping at the Tree House, trying to beat the crowds. The San Jose hills, yellow from summer dryness, were still invisible this close to sunrise. Smog. I parked my Porsche in the visitor's lot and walked slowly toward the main gate. My appointment wasn't for another ten minutes. Smog blotted out the stars, but I knew they were shining on the Santa Cruz mountain peaks a short drive away.

Three young men were emitting machine-gun Spanish and making obscure gestures as they stood on the sidewalk before the low gate. As I pulled the wrought iron doorway aside, one man turned toward me and gently grabbed my arm. An Arboli lamp placed on a tall post cast a greenish glow that illuminated his face, but made it look eerie, not quite human.

"Pardon, but are you going in to talk with the Saps? Mira! Look at the second floor! Is this place on fire? Should we warn someone?"

I glanced up at the thin green smoke oozing from a window and turned back to reassure the visitor.

"Don't worry about it, amigo. One of the Arboli must be smoking itself. I've read about it. It's how they get rid of parasites." The man released my arm but still looked so nervous I continued, "Tell you what, I'll mention it. Just in case."

"Gracias. We weren't sure what to do."

I knew how they felt. Dealing with extraterrestrials was a tricky business at best. Taking an alien test was going to be more than tricky. The day was still cool, but I was already sweating.

I looked at my watch, stepped through the gateway, and let the gate swing shut behind me. Not a hint of squeak. Reluctantly, I walked up to the front door following my own purple shadow cast by the bizarre lamp behind me. My shadow and I both had the jitters.

Tree House was a vine-shrouded, Spanish-style three story mansion with a Spanish tile roof modified for the Arboli's special needs. As instructed, I didn't bother to knock but just opened the solid redwood door and stepped inside.

The smell was thick, but not unpleasant -- an old forest in a warm mist. The air was steamy and a very tall figure was standing patiently at the end of a long hallway.

I'd been told to expect a Tree-person to be waiting for me, but I hadn't expected to step onto soft paper that crushed under my feet. I froze in place.

"Do not hesitate," Dr. Carter," came a wheezy voice from a talk\_branch, an organic Arboli translator affixed to the high ceiling. "Do not fear to erode track-carpet."

I shrugged and stepped gingerly across the paper to get my first close look at a living Arboli.

The thing looked just like the pictures: ten feet high, brown, wrinkled skin glistening with varicolored sap. Dozens of branching tentacles like tree-limbs. Long, mobile roots for legs and clusters of knots that served as eyes, ears, noses, and God-knows-what. The "speaking" mouth -- a long opening in the trunk filled with semi-flexible strips of cellulose -- constantly creaked and squeaked like my old sailboat.

Nothing unexpected. So why was I shaking?

I tried to invent something to say, but the Arboli stepped past me without another word. The alien lowered itself by splaying out its roots and reached down to gingerly roll up the paper mat I'd walked across.

"We will examine with precision. We promise you a full report. Water-Holder I am."

Figured. They were going to look for portents in my tracks. Suddenly, I felt more relaxed. These guys were nuts -- hell, they probably grew nuts. Why should I be afraid of them?"

Half the Tree-people on Earth called themselves "Water-Holder" or "Water-Carrier." The other half gestured two wavy lines: the astrological sign for Aquarius. It amounted to the same thing. The real Arboli names were unpronounceable without a severe case of arthritis.

"I'm here to take your test," I said with all the calmness I could muster. I'd overcompensated, sounding arrogant. Big deal, I thought, they wouldn't know.

"Assh! You sound sure of self! Test will commence after breakfast. Come with this self."

Confidence shaken, I numbly followed the Tree-person.

I was led into a dining room with a polished teak floor and a long glass-topped dining table beneath a crystal-dangling chandelier. An elegant room. Another talk-branch rested on the etched-glass tabletop. A single place setting waited on a surface designed to comfortably hold a dozen. I stared suspiciously at two forks, two spoons, a knife, an elaborately folded napkin, and a delicate white china plate.

"Please sit on chair. We do abhor the chair so this self will join you in the Arboli manner."

The mahogany high-backed chair squeaked on the floor as I pulled it out -- probably saying something insulting in Arboli. I sat gingerly, fighting an immediate tendency to squirm. The chair wasn't any more comfortable than it looked. Neither was I. Then I had something else to think about. Breakfast was served.

Another alien had entered the room bearing a large silver tray. The tray held a huge bowl filled with some muddy liquid. That wasn't what made my eyes bug out. Near the bowl, sat a gallon sized plastic bucket filled with water. Next to that was a family-sized box of Wheaties.

At least they offered me the "Breakfast of Champions," rather than what resembled a "Breakfast for Champignons."

Wonderful. Which spoon or perhaps fork was the proper one for Wheaties? Where was Emily Post when I needed her? Was I supposed to cut the cereal with a knife before conveying them from plate to mouth? This was weird.

The meal was a bad joke, but I got through it. My companion fed itself by putting a few roots in the bowl of goo, which had been placed on the floor. As I watched, the level of liquid slowly went down. As for me, I decided to forgo the pleasure of pouring water on my cereal and ate it dry with a spoon. Scrumptious and crunchy.

"You are no longer ingesting. Are you satisfied?"

"Thanks. Couldn't manage another bite."

"Superb. This self will now tell you of the first test. Because of your fine Profile you will only need two tests -- this you know?"

"I've been told. Go on."

"Both challenges are for mind and body. Mind\_and\_body. Be prepared!"

I managed not to suggest the Arboli should test a freaking Boy Scout.

One branch-like limb waved toward one of three doors set at the end of the dining room. "You will leave by that middle portal. There you will find a hallway. Enter the room at the hallway's terminus. Close the door after you go inside. You will find yourself in a place of water: water shower, water bath, and water closet."

"A bathroom. I got you."

"Do you need to avail yourself of such a facility?"

"No."

"Superb! Do not become distracted by internal needs! Two humans with sharp cutting blades will soon enter and attempt to puncture you."

"What? You're kidding!"

The Arboli swayed from side to side, creaking. "Not at all. Do not fear to injure these humans; they are not real."

"Well, that a relief."

"It should not be. The blades are real. You may be injured."

I stared at my host dubiously. If I'd really believed the Tree-person, I'd have gotten up and walked out the front door, prison or no prison. The Arboli were famed for their convincing illusions and I was sure that I was about to experience one for myself.

"This is your test: find something in the room to be used as a weapon against cutting blades. Drink twice!"

"You mean ... think twice?"

"Meaning is identical. Proceed."

As I left the room, the alien was scrutinizing the shreds of Wheaties on my plate. Cerealomancy, I suppose.

I hadn't counted on the Test being physically dangerous, and I wasn't much of a fighter. Still, I was certain the first challenge would only seem to be dangerous. That didn't mean I wasn't nervous as hell as I walked down the hallway.

Light was shining from under the bathroom door and when I opened it and stepped inside, I got my first real surprise.

"Excuse me," I stammered. "Hadn't expected the room to be occu..."

I'd trailed off because of the young woman's facial expression: acute fear. She was staring at my hands and it occurred to me that she might be

looking for a "sharp cutting blade." Was she taking the same test as me?

"I'm not here to attack you," I said as reassuringly as possible.

"You're not? Good!"

"What are you doing here?"

She still regarded me warily, but a smile abruptly pulled at the corners of her mouth. "That's a strange question to ask a stranger considering where we are."

I glanced around uncomfortably for a moment. My companion was boyishly thin and very small, so small she made me feel big and I'm only five seven. She might have reached five feet tall in high heels. Her straight dark-blond hair was cut in a pageboy, framing a heart-shaped face with a broad forehead, high cheekbones, and a long but delicate nose. Her eyes were a much nicer shade of green than mine, and a faint yellow stain discolored one front tooth. Somehow, I found the small imperfection charming.

I had a feeling the woman was older than she looked -- perhaps in her early thirties. She was wearing jeans, black running shoes, and a loose blue blouse mostly covering a black tank-top. A tiny gold post was set in each ear. She wore no other jewelry. Oddly enough, I was sure I'd met her somewhere before, but I couldn't imagine when or where.

I'd already been staring at her far too long....

"Sorry," I said simply to end the awkward moment. "I hadn't intended to, uh, intrude. I'm Paul Carter and I'm supposed to be taking the Test. One of the Arboli sent me in here."

"Me too. I'm Tina Prince. I'm wondering. Do you suppose they expect us to work together?"

"There's an idea! I didn't think the Test was set up that way, but unless the Tree-people made a mistake, you must be on the right track. Anyway, I'm guessing we don't have time for debate. We'd better start looking for weapons -- fast! What have you found so far?"

"Nothing yet, but I only got here a few seconds ahead of you. Let's get to work. I think we're supposed to close the door."

"Right." I slammed the door and studied the room. The facilities hadn't been modified for Arboli. Perhaps the aliens put up human visitors from time to time.

The bathroom had an institutional look, more like something from a good hotel than a similar room in a private home. Except for the towels. I edged past my new ally and squeezed a towel thoughtfully. It was large, thick, soft, and pink. Perhaps I could snap them at the blade-wielders when they showed up. That would be sure to scare them.

Weapons, weapons. What about the towel rack itself? It appeared to be a solid bar of stainless steel. I tried to pry it off the wall, but I couldn't budge it. The damn thing was set into concrete.

The next potential weapon to receive my abuse was the shower curtain-rod. Once again, steel. These fixtures had been built to last, unfortunately. I learned something interesting and useless: I could do pull-ups from the rod without bending it or pulling it from its socket.

"What do you think of this?" My partner was holding the heavy white ceramic lid of the toilet tank.

"Not bad, but it might be hard to move it around fast enough. Better keep looking, but hang on to the thing just in case. Anything useful in the tank?"

"Just a bunch of plastic parts. I suppose we could choke someone with the float if -- listen! What was that?"

I'd heard it too, a tiny click outside the door. I would've been terrified, not just nervous, if I took this situation seriously. Only a game, I told myself. But an important game.

"I don't know what that was," I whispered, "but we'd better get ready.

I gave the room a quick once-over. With a screwdriver and more time, I might come up with all sorts of deadly weapons, not even counting the screwdriver. For now, the tank lid seemed our best bet. Perhaps I could TP our

attackers.

Think, Paul, \_think\_.

"Sharp blades" could mean swords or axes but I was betting it referred to knives. What chance would we have against swords? Knives, unless thrown, are infighting weapons. We needed was something that could act at a distance. Some kind of club...

Another distinct click outside made us both jump and a childhood memory bubbled up.

My grandfather had once shown me a trick he'd learned in the old country. I almost smiled. We had two perfectly fine weapons at hand, hanging conveniently on the towel-rack.

"What are you doing?" Tina asked nervously.

"Watch me and do the same thing with the other towel."

I'd grasped the soft fabric in the middle with both hands and twisted hard in opposite directions, applying pressure until a knot appeared in the towel's center. Then I simply kept twisting until I had a rock-hard flexible braid. I held the thing in my right hand and tapped it on my left palm. Perfect.

"Voila!" I announced.

"What do you call these things?"

"Beats the hell out of me. It's just something I picked up as a -- look out!"

The doorknob was slowly turning.

I gestured Tina over to the left side of the door, which opened outward to our right. I wanted to be the first person our unreal intruders would see. I'd back up. Presumably, the attackers would follow. I'd attack one and my new partner could clobber the other from behind. Only a \_game\_.

The door abruptly swung open -- hard -- and two monsters rushed into the room. As I'd hoped, they ignored Tina, heading straight for me.

If this is how humans look to Arboli, it's a wonder they'd bothered to hang around for eight years. These mockups were unskilled caricatures at best. Their heads were twisted lumps with asymmetrical eyes; their bodies were blobs of dark gray jelly. Real ugly. One had three arms and his buddy had four. To the Arboli, I suppose, the distinction was trivial. Each arm held a long, gleaming knife.

In a panic, I swung my club. It struck Three Arms on its left temple. The sound wasn't much louder than a door-knock, but the creature's skull caved in horribly.

Unluckily, the monster fell into me, knocking me backwards. I lost my balance and learned that tile is a bad thing to fall on. Dazed, I jumped up as fast as I could. I was too slow. Four Arms, further crushing its buddy's head by stepping on it, was already too close. I had no room to swing my weapon.

I saw the flash of a knife coming toward my chest and tried to move out of the way. I was only partially successful. The blade sliced across my collarbone and left shoulder. I only felt a mild stinging, but in an instant, I was drenched in my own blood. The knife was heading toward my belly and this time, I knew it wouldn't miss.

Suddenly, I heard a powerful ringing thud. Four Arms, like his comrade, fell against me. This time, the head hit me squarely in the solar plexus. I found myself on the floor again, unable to breath, and could only watch helplessly as the monster rose up and spun toward Tina. She'd apparently abandoned the towel, hoisted the tank-lid, and struck Four Arms on its slimy back. A gray, translucent arm moved like a deformed cobra and Tina jumped backwards, crying out in pain. Fresh blood on her right shoulder....

The bathroom had grown an ugly smell: coppery from blood and foul from the swampy breath of our assailants.

Four Arms turned its attention back my way. I'd just managed to finally snatch a shallow breath and still couldn't move. I watched a lumpy arm rise up, but before the knife could strike, Tina hoisted the lid and smashed it down squarely on the thing's grotesque head. And that was definitely that.

The two collapsed forms vanished, leaving seven knives scattered on the floor. Tina and I stared at each other with expressions closer to shock than triumph. The tiles underfoot were carpeted with our blood.

"Damn it," I muttered. "This cut is really starting to sting. Yours looks even worse."

"It's nothing compared to being ignored."

Confused, I stared at the woman. "Do you get ignored a lot?"

"I'd say so."

"Oh. Well, thanks." Now I was even more confused. "I mean thanks for saving my life." I'd never had occasion to say those words before. I felt very strange. Detached.

Tina smiled. "The way I look at it, we're even. You saved my life. Good thing we were both here!"

"Yeah. You know, I figured all along that we weren't in real danger -- I still can't believe what just happened. What the hell are the Tree-people doing?"

Before she could respond, an Arboli, probably my breakfast buddy, appeared at the bathroom door toting a large bowl overflowing with something dark green and mossy. The alien had a talk-branch strapped to its trunk along with a Nikon flat-camera. Our host stopped in the doorway and snapped a few pictures of the bathroom floor.

"You have both passed your first test," Water-Holder creaked. "This is a good sign. Allow me to heal your small hurts. Please remove your upper torso coverings."

"What," I demanded in fright, "is that?"

A creature suggesting the upper half of a starving Tree-person was entering the bathroom. It might have been some horrid hybrid, half plant and half tarantula, and crept around on branches bent into spider-leg shapes.

Water-Holder swayed in place. "Is cleaning bush. Organic mechanism. No danger to vital tissues."

I shook my head, unconvinced, but removed my ruined shirt -- no longer the pristine white it had been three minutes earlier. Next to me, Tina was taking off her blouse and the black tank-top underneath. She'd turned away from me and I found myself staring at her bare, pleasantly freckled back.

The Arboli reached into the mossy substance with several manipulative branches at once and spread them gently on our wounds, which brought instant relief. Meanwhile, with other branches, it grabbed our torn and soiled clothing and passed them on to the cleaning device.

I felt a feather touch on my bare shoulder and looked down. Then I stared. The cleaner's upper appendages were equipped with tiny tongues. They were busy lapping away the blood and moss from my skin. As the mess vanished, healthy pink tissue was revealed with the faintest scar. When the "cleaning bush" went to work on my trousers, which I hadn't removed, I thought of a sign I'd once noticed: "Pants Good As New While U Wait." The damn thing even washed and polished my shoes....

I was even more impressed when the self-propelled dry-cleaner handed over my shirt -- spotless and mended. Tina and I dressed in silence.

"At this now," our host informed us, "you two must grow in divergent directions. Dr. Carter will come with me, and Tina Prince will remain here until Aquarius takes you to your next test."

"It's your show," my ex-partner admitted. "Hope to see you soon, Paul."

"Same here. Good luck." I followed the alien back down the hallway wondering if I really wanted Tina to have good luck. After all, weren't we competing? Who was I kidding? Odds were that we'd both wind up in otherworldly comas, maybe sharing the same hospital room, unaware of each other or anything else.

My host didn't lead me all the back to the dining room. Instead, it opened a door that led to a large kitchen -- another place clearly maintained for humans rather than Tree-people. The sun was up and the room was glowing with enough light to make my eyes water.



The Arboli stopped. "Before commencement of next test, you should be offered refreshment. Courtesy and respect demand no less."

"Thanks. I guess I could use a little snack."

The alien grabbed a large yellow-glazed bowl off a high shelf and held it out before me. "Consume as much as you desire," it offered.

I looked in the bowl. Dozens of gumballs in dozens of bright colors. And I could have as many as I wished! Where were the fancy utensils now? How was I supposed to consume my gumballs with properly elegant dining etiquette?

"I've reconsidered," I said with a straight face. "I'm not as hungry as I thought."

"Very well. We will use one of these foods for your test. Observe!"

Water-Holder carried a gumball over to a small kitchen table. It's branches reached high to pluck three small cups from the top of a wall-mounted cabinet. The cups were thin, brown, and seemingly identical. Perhaps they were made of wood or heavy paper.

"This self places the food sphere under one of these three potting cups." From the corner of my eye I noticed some branches placing the Nikon on a shelf, pointed straight at me. The lens-cap was open and I wondered if the camera was set to periodically take pictures. "This self places the remaining cups on the table. Attend the cup with the sphere underneath."

Water-Holder began moving the cups around, first slowly then with ferocious speed. Of course, I quickly lost track of where the gumball was supposed to be, but I heard it clattering against the side of its cup.

"Ah! The old shell game," I said. "Where did you pick up this little trick?"

"San Francisco." The cups had stopped, lined up in a straight row. "Do you know where the sphere is, Dr. Carter?"

"Hardly. Probably under none of the cups if you play by the usual rules. So have I failed the test?"

"No. You were intended to be uprooted, to not know which cup contains the food. We do not play by usual rules! Here is the game: find the sphere without touching or moving any cup, directly or indirectly."

"Well ... I've got a one-in-three chance of guessing right."

"You must not guess. You must know. This self leaves you to the test." Then the Arboli was gone before I could ask any thing more.

I looked carefully at the cups. They weren't perfectly identical. Small variations would've helped me immensely if I'd been able to observe more carefully. Damn.

I couldn't touch the cups, but maybe I wouldn't have to. I noticed a small lamp resting on a nearby cupboard. I unplugged the thing and re-plugged it near the table. I turned the lamp on, held it near the cups and tried to spot a gumball-shaped silhouette inside of them.

No good. The material was too opaque.

I seriously considered cheating, but wasn't naive enough to believe that I was unobserved -- not to mention that camera.

What had Water-Holder first said about the Test in general? Something about "Mind and body." And "drink twice." That statement made me realize I was thirsty. I looked around the kitchen, poking into a few cupboards until I found a glass. I went to the sink and got some water.

Water. If the cups were really made of paper, if I soaked them, they might sag until I could spot the ball. No. I'd been instructed not to touch the cups, even indirectly.

With a drill, I could drill through the table from underneath. Now there was a practical idea. Practically imbecilic.

The water had a bitter taste and foul smell. At my home in Sunnyvale, I filter my tap water into pure, clean H<sup>2</sup>O and I'd forgotten how bad the stuff can taste at this end of the Bay Area.

If I lifted one end of the table -- no, that would also be moving cups. Ditto for shaking the table. Was the problem insolvable? What were my other options?

Could I use sound somehow? Maybe, if I were a bat or a porpoise. How about opening a window and hoping some breeze would blow the damn cups over? Hell, that would also be moving the things indirectly...

Unconsciously, I brought the glass back to my lips, but the smell reminded me the stuff wasn't fit to drink.

And that was it. So stupidly simple, I'd almost missed it.

"Your time for solving the puzzle has expired." Water-Holder, or a twin, had reentered the room. "Are you prepared to identify the proper cup?"

"I am."

"Proceed."

I moved over to the table, put my nose near the cups, and said, "this one."

From close range, bubblegum scent was wafting nicely though the porous paper.

"Superb. You have now passed our Test. Please follow this self."

Success was too easy and sudden for me to trust. Numbly, I followed my host through the kitchen, down a long corridor, and into a sunken living room. Tina was sitting nervously on a black leather couch near a large, empty fireplace.

"Paul, they tell me I passed. How did you do?"

"The same, I guess. What's supposed to happen how?"

The Tree-person creaked and the words from its talk-branch came out especially slow and clear. "This self is now offering you a choice. You have both mastered our Test and may share the Reward. In the next room, you will find small funguses, mushrooms. Very special. We Arboli store information on these. Each of you may ingest one -- these are safe for your species -- and you will share in our knowledge."

"We'll find out how to build Rootcraft?" I asked.

"Build? You will learn everything we know."

Good God.

"Incredible," Tina whispered. "But what's this choice you mentioned?"

"We offer one of two extra gifts. Gratis. The first is complete memory, absolute retrieval."

I had to work my jaw before I could get any words out. "You mean eidetic memory? Total recall?"

"Certainly. Otherwise you will retain little from the mushrooms. The other choice is cash -- a supply of fresh American currency."

"How much cash?" I asked, although the answer had to be irrelevant. A head full of alien knowledge and total recall! The possibilities....

"A large supply of cash, Dr. Carter. Five hundred dollars."

Tina and I just stared at the Arboli.

By straightening up, the Tree-person seemed to grow taller. "Are you ready to make decisions?"

I opened my big mouth to say "Of course," then snapped it closed. Drink twice.

"How about you?" Water-Holder was addressing Tina.

"Memory, what else?"

"Very well. Travel through this door and seek a small refrigerator. In the freezer section, you will find small blue mushrooms. They are for memory. Consume only one. Then ingest any brown mushroom from the main compartment beneath; they are all the same."

Tina stood and smiled at me. "Paul?"

"Just a minute. I need to think."

"All right. See you inside." She stepped past me and opened the door.

I was in the worst battle of my life. With myself. This was my chance to bring back at least some Arboli secrets -- alone. Tina was walking into a deadly mental trap.

Only ... I kept remembering how she'd risked her life to save mine.

She was opening the door and I realized that I couldn't let her do it.

"Tina. Stop."

She waited, hand on the doorknob. "Why? What is it?"

"Five people have lost their minds here already. What do you think happened to them?"

She frowned. "I don't know. I guess they ... failed the Test."

"Hardly. The so-called Test was too damn easy. I bet every one of them passed, but failed the real test. What do you think would happen to someone with total recall who suddenly absorbs the entire knowledge of an advanced species?"

Tina was gazing at me with a facial expression I didn't understand: radiant approval.

"I'm afraid these Tree-people," I said a bit uncertainly, "are a race of real bastards. Water-Holder, old chap, we'll take the brown mushrooms and the five hundred bucks."

The Arboli raised four or five branches excitedly. "Fertile soil! You have justified much hard work!"

Now, I felt completely off balance. "You're not disappointed we didn't go the way of your other victims?" A nasty thought occurred to me: these aliens might have other means of getting rid of humans who passed the Arboli Test....

"There were no other victims, Dr. Carter."

"What? What about the five geniuses who are brain-dead, or just plain dead because of your little game?"

"A useful fiction agreed to by your government. Symbols made manifest. Drink twice, friend! Why would we seek to test anyone with a lower Profile than yours? Only beings such as you could tell us what we need to know."

Implications were pouring down like rain. "So Tina has a high Profile?"

"Tina is also a useful fiction, a manifested symbol. As are your knife wounds." I turned my eyes toward my female ally and watched in shock as she faded out, smiling.

"Jesus Christ! What the hell?"

"You have truly passed our Test."

"Wait. Wait! You must have based Tina on someone real. You couldn't have just ... made up somebody that believable."

"It was you who created her with small assistance from this self and others. Don't you recognize her? Even an Arboli could see she was a small, female version of you. Your buried root."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Perhaps your sun will shine on a day when you drink this. For now, be content. You are the human we have used to judge your species, and you have grown well."

I was furious. "For God's sake! You blew it when you chose me! As a human being, I'm a crappy specimen. For the past three years, I've done nothing but lie and cheat. If I 'passed' your quiz, it was an accident. You had no right to use me as a -- "

"What do you think the Profile told us? Your tracks on our paper carpet, the food-fragments on your plate, and the red sap on the water-room floor all wrote an identical message."

"Hold on! How the hell could you take a picture of blood from imaginary wounds?"

"Not imaginary. Illusory. The illusion of your sap had fallen where you thought it should fall -- quite visible. And most revealing. That is how our science works."

"Christ!"

"No. We cannot judge based on a Christ. We needed a person of your exact suchness: dishonest and devious. Not a saint, nor a monster or animal. Just a greedy, selfish human intelligent enough to see the true danger. A high Profile specimen. How else to learn if the possibility of redemption exists in the spirit of your species? Now we know. You sacrificed personal advantage to save someone who was essentially a stranger. We are well satisfied."

I nodded slowly. "I'm beginning to get it. But tell me this: how the

hell can you seriously think that a pile of leftover cereal crumbs reveals a damn thing?"

"How can it not? Everything is pattern. And any system of studying pattern will show truth of those with minds to discern."

"If you say so." I was feeling uneasy. How had the Arboli determined what kind of person I was? Then I remembered something. "Sorry, I forgot to mention it: some people out front were worried because they noticed smoke coming out of an upstairs window."

"The smoke is proper."

I'd figured that. But what if it had really been a fire? After entering the house, I hadn't given the matter a second thought. I was truly one self-involved jerk. Another thought occurred to me.

"So the business of the Reward is just a crock?"

My host made several loud creaking noises -- the laughter of trees? "The mushrooms weren't real, but the Reward is, along with the generous five hundred American dollars. We will provide you the four basic principles behind Arboli Rootcraft; your species will easily grow the rest. Just now, the information has been transmitted to the data system in your home forest. Soon we will leave this planet to await your coming -- at your own growth rate -- to join us among the life-giving stars."

I didn't know what to say. Within a span of two hours, my life had utterly changed. I had changed. I could see this opportunity was too important of one person to handle, especially a selfish greedy son-of-a-bitch like me. I'd work with Beth Robinson and HIMSA -- why the hell not?

Out of the blue, I knew exactly where the Arboli had found Tina. No wonder she'd been so small. I hadn't listened to my conscience in a long, long time.

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