

Science Fiction

# World of a Thousand Colours

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COVER DESIGN BY CHRIS HARDWICK

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When Jolvar Hollinrede discovered that the slim, pale young man opposite him was journeying to the World of a Thousand Colours to undergo the Test, he spied a glittering opportunity for, himself. And in that moment was the slim, pale young man's fate set.

Hollinrede's lean fingers closed on the spun-fiber drink flask. He peered across the burnished tabletop. 'The *Test*, you say?'

The young man smiled diffidently. 'Yes. I think I'm ready. I've waited years—and now's my big chance.' He had had a little too much of the cloying liqueur he had been drinking; his eyes

shone glassily, and his tongue was looser than it had any right to be.

'Few are called and fewer are chosen,' Hollinrede mused. 'Let me buy you another drink.'

'No, I—'

'It will be an honor. Really. It's not every day I have a chance to buy a Testee a drink.'

Hollinrede waved a jeweled hand and the servomech brought them two more drink flasks. Lightly Hollinrede punctured one, slid it along the tabletop, and kept the other in his hand unopened. 'I don't believe I know your name,' he said.

'Derveren Marti. I'm from Earth. You?'

'Jolvar Hollinrede. Likewise. I travel from world to world on business, which is what brings me to Niprion this day.'

'What sort of business?'

'I trade in jewels,' Hollinrede said, displaying the bright collection studding his fingers. They were all morphosims, not the originals, but only careful chemical analysis would reveal that. Hollinrede did not believe in exposing millions of credits' worth of merchandize to anyone who cared to lop off his hand.

'I was a clerk,' Marti said. 'But that's all far behind me. I'm on to the World of a Thousand Colours to take the Test! The Test!'

'The Test!' Hollinrede echoed. He lifted his unpunctured drink—flask in a gesture of salute, raised it to his lips, pretended to drain it. Across the table Derveran Marti coughed as the liqueur coursed down his throat. He looked up, smiling dizzily, and smacked his lips.

'When does your ship leave?' Hollinrede asked.

'Tomorrow midday. It's the Star Climber. I can't wait. This stopover at Niprion is making me fume with impatience.'

'No doubt,' Hollinrede agreed. 'What say you to an afternoon of whist, to while away the time?'

\* \* \* \*

An hour later Derveran Marti lay slumped over the inlaid card table in Hollinrede's hotel suite, still clutching a handful of waxy cards. Arms folded, Hollinrede surveyed the body.

They were about of a height, he and the dead man, and a chemotherm mask would alter Hollinrede's face sufficiently to allow him to pass as Marti. He switched on the playback of the room's recorder to pick up the final fragments of their conversation.

'... care for another drink, Marti?'

'I guess I'd better not, old fellow. I'm getting kind of muzzy, you know. No, please don't pour it for me. I said I didn't want it,

and—well, all right. Just a little one. There, that's enough. Thanks.'

The tape was silent for a moment, then recorded the soft thump of Marti's body falling to the table as the quick-action poison unlatched his synapses. Smiling, Hollinrede switched the recorder to record and said, mimicking Marti, *'I guess I'd better not, old fellow. I'm getting kind of muzzy, you know.'*

He activated the playback, listened critically to the sound of his voice, then listened to Marti's again for comparison. He was approaching the light, flexible quality of the dead man's voice. Several more attempts and he had it almost perfect. Producing a vocal homologizer, he ran off first Marti's voice, then his own pronouncing the same words.

The voices were alike to three decimal places. That would be good enough to fool the most sensitive detector; three places

was the normal range of variation in any man's voice from day to day.

In terms of mass there was a trifling matter of some few grams which could easily be sweated off in the gymnasium the following morning. As for the dead man's gesture—complex, Hollinrede thought he could manage a fairly accurate imitation of Marti's manner of moving; he had studied the young clerk carefully for nearly four hours, and Hollinrede was a clever man.

When the preparations were finished, he stepped away and glanced at the mirror, taking a last look at his own face—the face he would not see again until he had taken the Test. He donned the mask. Jolvar Hollinrede became Derveren Marti.

Hollinrede extracted a length of cotton bulking from a drawer and wrapped it around Marti's body. He weighed the corpse, and added four milligrams more of cotton so that Marti would have



precisely the mass Jolvar Hollinrede had had. He donned Marti's clothes finally, dressed the body in his own, and, smiling sadly at the convincing but worthless morphosim jewels on his fingers, transferred the rings to Marti's already-stiffening hands.

'Up with you,' he grunted, and bundled the body across the room to the disposal.

'Farewell, old friend,' he exclaimed feelingly, and hoisted Marti feet-first to the lip of the chute. He shoved, and the dead man vanished, slowly, gracefully, heading downward towards the omnivorous maw of the atomic converter buried in the deep levels of Stopover Planet Niprion.

Reflectively Hollinrede turned away from the disposal unit. He gathered up the cards, put away the liqueur, poured the remnant of the poisoned drink in the disposal chute.

An atomic converter was a wonderful thing, he thought pleasantly. By now the body of Marti had been efficiently reduced to its component molecules, and those were due for separation into atoms shortly after, and from atoms into subatomic particles. Within an hour the prime evidence to the crime would be nothing but so many protons, electrons, and neutrons—and there would be no way of telling which of the two men in the room had entered the chute, and which had remained alive.

Hollinrede activated the tape once more, rehearsed for the final time his version of Marti's voice, and checked it with the homologizer. Still three decimal places; that was good enough. He erased the tape.

Then, depressing the communicator stud, he said, 'I wish to report a death.'

A cold robot face appeared on the screen. 'Yes?'

'Several minutes ago my host, Jolvar Hollinrede, passed on of an acute embolism. He requested immediate dissolution upon death and I wish to report that this has been carried out.'

'Your name?'

'Derveren Marti. Testee.'

'A Testee? You were the last to see the late Hollinrede alive?'

'That's right.'

'Do you swear that all information you might give will be accurate and fully honest?'

'I so swear,' Hollinrede said.

The inquest was brief and smooth. The word of a Testee goes without question; Hollinrede had reported the details of the meeting exactly as if he had been Marti, and after a check of the converter records revealed that a mass exactly equal to the late

Hollinrede's had indeed been disposed of at precisely the instant witness claimed, the inquest was at its end. The verdict was natural death. Hollinrede told the officials that he had not known the late jewel trader before that day, and had no interest in his property, whereupon they permitted him to depart.

Having died intestate, Hollinrede knew his property became that of the Galactic Government. But, as he pressed his hand, clad in its skintight chemotherm, against the doorplate of Derveran Marti's room, he told himself that it did not matter. Now he was Derveran Marti, Testee. And once he had taken and passed the Test, what would the loss of a few million credits in baubles matter to him?

Therefore it was with a light heart that the pseudo-Derveran Marti quitted his lodgings the next day and prepared to board

the *Star Climber* for the voyage to the World of a Thousand Colours.

The clerk at the desk peered at him sympathetically as he pressed his fingers into the checkout plate, thereby erasing the impress from the doorplate upstairs.

'It was too bad about that old fellow dying on you yesterday, wasn't it, sir? I do hope it won't affect your Test result.'

Hollinrede smiled blankly. 'It was quite a shock to me when he died so suddenly. But my system has already recovered; I'm ready for the Test.'

'Good luck to you, sir,' the clerk said as Hollinrede left the hotel and stepped out on the flaring skyramp that led to the waiting ship.

The steward at the passenger hatch was collecting identiplates. Hollinrede handed his over casually. The steward

inserted it tip—first in the computer near the door, and motioned for Hollinrede to step within the beam while his specifications were being automatically compared with those on the identiplate.

He waited, tensely. Finally the chattering of the machine stopped and a dry voice said, 'Your identity is in order, Testee Derveran Marti. Proceed within.'

'That means you're okay,' the steward told him. 'Yours is Compartment Eleven. It's a luxury job, you know. But you Testees deserve it. Best of luck, sir.'

'Thanks,' Hollinrede grinned. 'I don't doubt I'll need it.'

He moved up the ramp and into the ship. Compartment Eleven was a luxury job; Hollinrede, who had been a frugal man, whistled in amazement when he saw it. It was nearly eight feet high and almost twelve broad, totally private with an opaquer

attached to the doorscope. Clinging curtains of ebony synthoid foam from Ravens-musk VIII had been draped lovingly over the walls, and the acceleration couch was trimmed in golden bryozone. The rank of Testee carried with it privileges that the late Derveran Marti certainly would never have mustered in private life—nor Jolvar Hollinrede either.

At 1143 the doorscope chimed; Hollinrede leaped from the soft couch a little too nervously and transluced the door. A crewman stood outside.

'Everything all right, sir? We blast in seventeen minutes.'

'I'm fine,' Hollinrede said. 'Can't wait to get there. How long do you think it'll take?'

'Sorry, sir. Not at liberty to reveal. But I wish you a pleasant trip, and should you lack for aught hesitate not to call on me.'

Hollinrede smiled at the curiously archaic way the man had of expressing himself. 'Never fear; I'll not hesitate. Many thanks.' He opaqued the doorscope and resumed his seat.

\* \* \* \*

At precisely 1200 the drive-engines of the Star Climber throbbed heavily; the pale green light over the door of Hollinrede's compartment glowed brightly for an instant, signaling the approaching blastoff. He sank down on the acceleration couch to wait.

A moment later came the push of acceleration, and then, as the gravshields took effect, the 7g escape force dwindled until Hollinrede felt comfortable again. He increased the angle of the couch in order to peer out the port.

The world of Niprion was vanishing rapidly in the background: already it was nothing but a mottled grey-and-gold ball



swimming hazily in a puff of atmosphere. The sprawling metal structure that was the stopover hotel was invisible.

Somewhere back on Niprion, Hollinrede thought, the atoms that once had been Testee Derveran Marti were now feeding the plasma intake of a turbine or heating the inner shell of a reactor.

He let his mind dwell on the forthcoming Test. He knew little about it, really, considering he had been willing to take a man's life for a chance to compete. He knew the Test was administered once every five years to candidates chosen by Galaxy wide search. The world where the Test was given was known only as the World of a Thousand Colours, and precisely where this world was no member of the general public was permitted to know.

As for the Test itself, by its very nature it was unknown to the Galaxy. For no winning Testee had ever returned from the World of a Thousand Colours. Some losers returned, their minds

carefully wiped clean of any memories of the planet—but the winners never came back.

The Test's nature was unknown; the prize, inconceivable. All anyone knew was that the winners were granted the soul's utmost dream. Upon winning, one neither returned to his home world nor desired to return.

Naturally many men ignored the Test—it was something for other people to take part in. But millions, billions throughout the Galaxy competed in the preliminaries. And every five years, six or seven were chosen.

Jolvar Hollinrede was convinced he would succeed in the Test—but he had failed three times hand running in the preliminaries, and was thus permanently disqualified. The preliminaries were simple; they consisted merely of an intensive

mental scanning. A flipflop circuit would flash YES or NO after that.

If YES, there were further scannings, until word was beamed through the Galaxy that the competitors for the year had been chosen.

Hollinrede stared moodily at the blackness of space. He had been eliminated unfairly, he felt; he coveted the unknown prize the Test offered, and felt bitter at having it denied him. When chance had thrown Testee Derveran Marti in his path, Hollinrede had leaped to take advantage of the opportunity.

And now he was on his way.

Surely, he thought, they would allow him to take the Test, even if he were discovered to be an impostor. And once he took it, he knew he would succeed. He had always succeeded in his endeavours. There was no reason for failure now.

Beneath the false mask of Derveran Marti, Hollinrede's face was tensely set. He dreamed of the Test and its winning—and of the end to the long years of wandering and toil.

\* \* \* \*

The voice at the door said, 'We're here, Testee Derveran. Please open up.'

Hollinrede grunted, pulled himself up from the couch, threw open the door. Three dark-faced spacemen waited there for him.

'Where are we?' he asked nervously. 'Is the trip over?'

'We have come to pilot you to the Test planet, sir,' one of the spacemen told him. 'The *Star Climber* is in orbit around it, but will not make a landing itself. Will you follow us?'

'Very well,' Hollinrede said.

They entered a lifeship, a slim grey tube barely thirty meters long, and fastened acceleration cradles. There were no ports. Hollinrede felt enclosed, hemmed in.

The lifeship began to slide noiselessly along the ejection channel, glided the entire length of the *Star Climber*, and burst out into space. A preset orbit was operating. Hollinrede clung to the acceleration cradle as the lifeship spun tightly inward towards a powerful gravitational field not far away.

The ship came to rest. Hollinrede lay motionless, flesh cold with nervousness, teeth chattering.

'Easy does it, sir. Up and out.'

They lifted him and gently nudged him through a manifold compression lock. He moved forward on numb feet.

'Best of luck, sir!' an envious voice called behind him.

Then the lock clanged shut, and Hollinrede was on his own.

A riotous blaze of colour swept down at him from every point of the compass.

He stood in the midst of what looked like a lunar crater; far in the distance on all sides was the massive upraised fissured surface of a ringwall, and the ground beneath him was barren red-brown rock, crumbling to pumice here and there but bare of vegetation.

In the sky was a solitary sun, a blazing Type A blue-white star. That sun alone was incapable of accounting for this flood of colour.

Streamers of every hue seemed to sprout from the rocks, staining the ringwall olive-grey and brilliant cerise and dark, lustrous green. Pigments of every sort bathed the air; now it seemed to glow with currents of luminous pink, now a flaming red, now a pulsing pure white.

His eyes adjusted slowly to the torrent of colour. World of a Thousand Colours, they called this place? That was an underestimate. *Hundred thousand. Million. Billion.* Shades and near-shades mingled to form new colours.

'Are you Derveran Marti?' a voice asked.

Startled, Hollinrede looked around. It seemed as if a band of colour had spoken: a swirling band of rich brown that spun tirelessly before him.

'Are you Derveran Marti?' the voice repeated, and Hollinrede saw that it had indeed come from the band of brown.

It seemed a desecration to utter the lie here on this world of awesome beauty, and he felt the temptation to claim his true identity. But the time for that was later.

'Yes,' he said loudly. 'I am Derveran Marti.'

'Welcome, Derveran Marti. The Test will soon begin.'

'Where?'

'Here.'

'Right out here? Just like this?'

'Yes,' the band of colour replied. 'Your fellow competitors are gathering.'

Hollinrede narrowed his eyes and peered towards the far reaches of the ringwall. Yes—, he saw tiny figures located at great distances from each other along the edge of the crater. One, two, three ... there were seven all told, including himself. Seven, out of the whole Galaxy!

Each of the other six was attended by a dipping, bobbing blotch of colour. Hollinrede noticed a square shouldered giant from one of the Inner Worlds surrounded by a circlet of violent orange; to his immediate left was a sylphlike female, probably from one of the worlds of Dubhe, wearing only the revealing



token garment of her people but shielded from inquisitive eyes by a robe of purest blue light. There were others; Hollinrede wished them well. He knew it was possible for all competitors to win, and now that he was about to attain his long-sought goal he held no malice for anyone. His mind was suffused with pity for the dead Derveran Marti, sacrificed that Jolvar Hollinrede might be in this place at this time.

'Derveran Marti,' the voice said, 'you have been chosen from among your fellow men to take part in the Test. This is an honor that comes to few, we of this world hope you appreciate the grace that has fallen upon you.'

'I do,' Hollinrede said humbly.

'We ourselves are winners of the prize you seek,' the voice went on. 'Some of us are members of the first expedition that found this world, eleven hundred years ago. As you see, life has

unlimited duration in our present state of matter. Others of us have come more recently. The bank of pale purple moving above you to the left was a winner in the previous competition to this.

'We of the World of a Thousand Colours have a rare gift to offer: total harmony of mind. We exist divorced of body, as a stream of photons only. We live in perfect freedom and eternal delight. Once every five years we find it possible to increase our numbers by adding to our midst such throughout the Galaxy as we feel would desire to share our way of life—and whom we would feel happy to welcome to us.'

'You mean,' Hollinrede said shakily, 'that all these beams of light—were once *people*?'

'They were that—until welcomed into us. Now they are men no more. This is the prize you have come to win.'

'I see.'

'You are not required to compete. Those who, after reaching our world, decide to remain in the material state, are returned to their home worlds with their memories cleared of what they have been told here and their minds free and happy to the end of their lives. Is this what you wish?'

Hollinrede was silent, letting his dazzled eyes take in the flamboyant sweep of colour that illuminated the harsh, rocky world. Finally he said: 'I will stay.'

'Good. The Test will shortly begin.'

\* \* \* \*

Hollinrede saw the band of brown swoop away from him upward to rejoin its never-still comrades in the sky. He waited, standing stiffly, for something to happen.

*Then this is what I killed a man for,* he thought. His mind dwelled on the words of the band of brown.

Evidently many hundreds of years ago an exploratory expedition had come upon some unique natural phenomenon here at a far end of the universe. Perhaps it had been an accident, a stumbling into a pool of light perhaps, that had dematerialized them, turned them into bobbing immortal streaks of colour. But that had been the beginning.

The entire Test system had been developed to allow others to enter this unique society, to leave the flesh behind and live on as pure energy. Hollinrede's fingers trembled; this was, he saw, something worth killing for!

He could see why some people might turn down the offer—those would be the few who cautiously would prefer to remain

corporeal and so returned to their home worlds to live out their span.

*But not me!*

He faced upward and waited for the Test to begin. His shrewd mind was at the peak of its agility; he was prepared for anything they might throw at him. He wondered if anyone yet had come to the World of a Thousand Colours so determined to succeed.

Probably not. For most, the accolade was the result of luck—a mental scanning that turned up whatever mysterious qualities were acceptable to the people of this world. They did not have to work for their nomination. They did not have to kill for it.

But Hollinrede had clawed his way here—and he was determined to succeed.

He waited.

Finally the brown band descended from the mass of lambent colour overhead and curled into a tight bowknot before him.

'The Test is about to begin, Jolvar Hollinrede.'

Use of his own name startled him. In the past week he had so thoroughly associated his identity with that of Derveran Marti that he had scarcely let his actual name drift through his mind.

'So you know,' he said.

'We have known since the moment you came. It is unfortunate; we would have wanted Derveran Marti among us. But now that you are here, we will test you on your own merits, Jolvar Hollinrede.'

It was just as well that way, he thought. The pretence had to end sooner or later, and he was willing to stand or fall as himself rather than under an assumed identity.

'Advance to the centre of the crater, Jolvar Hollinrede,' came the command from the brown band.

Leadenly Hollinrede walked forward. Squinting through the mist of colour that hazed the view, he saw the other six competitors were doing the same. They would meet at the centre.

'The Test is now under way,' a new and deeper voice said.

Seven of them. Hollinrede looked around. There was the giant from the Inner World—Fondelfor, he saw now. Next to him, the near-nude sylph of Dubhe, and standing by her side, one diamond-faceted eye glittering in his forehead, a man of Alpheraz VII.

The selectors had cast their nets wide. Hollinrede saw another Terran, dark of skin and bright of eye; a being of Deneb IX, squat and muscular. The sixth Testee was a squirming globule

from Spica's tenth world; the seventh was Jolvar Hollinrede, itinerant; home world, Terra.

Overhead hung a circular diadem of violet light. It explained the terms of the Test.

'Each of you will be awarded a characteristic colour. It will project before you into the area you ring. Your object will be to blend your seven colours into one; when you have achieved this, you will be admitted into us.'

'May I ask what the purpose of this is?' Hollinrede said coldly.

'The essence of our society is harmony—total harmony among us all, and inner harmony within those groups which, at the same temporal juncture. Naturally if you seven are incapable even of this inner harmony, you will be incapable of the greater harmony of us all—and will be rejected.'



Despite the impatient frowns of a few of his fellow contestants, Hollinrede said, 'Therefore we're to be judged as a unit. An entity?'

'Yes and no,' the voice replied. 'And now the Test.'

Hollinrede saw to his astonishment a colour spurt from his arm and hang hovering before him—a pool of inky black hue than the dark of space. His first reaction was one of shock; then he realized that he could control the colour, make it move.

He glanced around. Each of his companions similarly faced a hovering mass of colour. The giant of Fondelfor controlled red; the girl of Dubhe, orange. The Alpherazian stared into a whirling bowl of deep yellow, the Terran green, the Spican radiant Violet, Denebian pearly grey.

Hollinrede stared at his globe of black. A voice above him seemed to whisper, *'Marti's colour would have been blue. The spectrum has been violated.'*

He shrugged away the words and sent his globe of spinning into the area between the seven contestants ringed in a circle. At the same time each of the others directed his particular colour inward.

The colours met. They clashed, pinwheeled, seemed to throw off sparks. They began to swirl in a hovering arc of radiance.

Hollinrede waited breathlessly, watching the others. black seemed to stand in opposition to the other six. yellow, green, violet. The pearl-grey of the Denebian seemed to enfold the other colours warmly—all but Hollinrede's. The black hung apart.

To his surprise he saw the Dubhian girl's orange change hue. The girl herself stood stiffly, eyes closed, her body now bare.

Sweat poured down her skin. And her orange hue began to shift towards the grey of the Denebian.

The others were following. One by one, as they achieved control over their Test colour. First to follow was the Spican, then the Alpherazian.

*Why can't I do that?* Hollinrede thought wildly.

He strained to alter the colour of his black, but it remained unchanged. The others were blending, now, swirling around; there was a predominantly grey cast, but it was not the grey of the Denebian but a different grey tending towards white. Impatiently he redoubled his efforts; it was necessary for the success of the group that he get his obstinate black to blend with the rest.

'The black remains aloof,' someone said near him.

'We will fail if the black does not join us.'

His streak of colour now stood out boldly against the increasing milkiness of the others. None of the original colours were left now but his. Perspiration streamed down him; he realized that his was the only obstacle preventing the seven from passing the Test.

'The black still will not join us,' a tense voice said.

Another said, 'The black is a colour of evil.'

A third said, 'Black is not a colour at all. Black is the absence of colour; white is the totality of colour.'

A fourth said, 'Black is holding us from the white.'

Hollinrede looked from one to the other in mute appeal. Veins stood out on his forehead from the effort, but the black remained unchanging. He could not blend it with the others.

From above came the voice of their examiner, suddenly accusing: 'Black is the colour of *murder*.'

The girl from Dubhe, tilting the ugly words lightly, repeated it. 'Black is the colour of murder.'

'Can we permit a murderer among us?' asked the Denebian.

'The answer is self-evident,' said the Spican, indicating the recalcitrant spear of black that marred the otherwise flawless globe of near-white in their midst.

'The murderer must be cast out ere the Test be passed,' muttered the giant of Fondelfor. He broke from his position and moved menacingly towards Hollinrede.

'Look!' Hollinrede yelled desperately. 'Look at the red!'

The giant's colour had split from the grey and now darted wildly towards Hollinrede's black.

'This is the wrong way, then,' the giant said, halting. 'We must all join in it or we all fail.'

'Keep away from me,' Hollinrede said. 'It's not my fault if—'

Then they were on him—four pairs of hands, two rough claws, two slick tentacles. Hollinrede felt himself being lifted aloft. He squirmed, tried to break from their grasp, but they held him up—

And dashed him down against the harsh rock floor.

He lay there, feeling his life seep out, knowing he had failed—and watched as they returned to form their circle once again. The black winked out of being.

As his eyes started to close, Hollinrede saw the six colours again blend into one. Now that the murderer had been cast from their midst, nothing barred the path of their harmony. Pearly grey shifted to purest white—the totality of colour—and as the six merged into one, Hollinrede, with his dying glance, bitterly saw them take leave forever of their bodies and slip upward to join their brothers hovering brightly above.

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