

THE GOD COMPLEX

DEMIR BARLAS



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1. A CLONE AND HIS CAMELS

Salt was in a cubic space, enormous and vacant of everything but himself and two camels. The volume of the cube was unknowable—both because there was no God to measure it, and, more prosaically, because the choice of units was arbitrary. Salt was a connoisseur of units. He had once loved the *djeser*, the symbol for which reminded him of an upturned lingam; later, his migratory mind had overflowed the *pes*, or Roman foot, before settling on the international foot, in whose terms he now saw spaces on his scale.

In the healthy past of the species, a man like Salt would have been weeded out through the needful cruelties of sexual selection. Later, when the species grew corpulent and complacent, his compact reediness would have been taken for disease. Now, though, Salt carried himself with an immense and thoughtless ease, like a man who had spent a lifetime under no yardstick but his own, like a man who was a world. But was it ease? It could have been shamelessness or passivity. It could have been the refusal to look into a void that demanded examination.

Twenty-seven million square feet, that is, the cube of three hundred international feet: That was the space in which he now stood. The cube was imperfect to the eye, because it contained many layers, accretions, and afterthoughts. The very bottom of the cube was open and clear. The floor glistened in rainbow concrete, the color and texture he had chosen for it today. The walls were clear to a height of perhaps twenty feet, after which they grew jubilantly crowded with stairs, bridges, and rooms that grew like inward barnacles.

The space had begun platonically, as a true cube, but, with each generation of Salts, it had added sites and structures to suit the individuated clonal taste. The Salts being Salts, there was no interest in destruction: All previous amendments to

this place, too large to be exhausted by their kind, were allowed to stand.

Too, as time elapsed, the pace of the Salts' novel needs slowed. It was a simple application of the exponential decline formula.

Marlo's hologram manifested just behind Salt, who knew she was coming.

"Eighty-six clonal pairs!" Salt gushed to Marlo without turning to face her. He was referencing the totality of his camel-breeding experiment, which had culminated in the successful pair before him. He seemed to have more to say, but he didn't say it, perhaps because Marlo would have known anyway.

"Jed."

"Eighty-six!"

"Jed," gently insisted the hologram—a blue, ageless, and beautiful woman who could have been, and was, a cosmic mother. "Someone's awake."

"Jesu-Krishna!" Salt exclaimed, spitting cigar smoke.

"Marcus Masters. He's in Gallery 419, traumatized. He won't listen to me or Non-Henry."

"I should get dressed."

"Best to minimize the shock."

"What do I wear?"

There was a humming from a distant vent that opened in the walls, and some clothing from Masters' century floated across to Salt. He knew better than to look at the clothes. He knew that Marlo would have chosen optimally.

So Salt got dressed. And why would he have gone undressed? There was no pagan pride in it; rather, it reflected the collapse of needful social standards. Society, so easy to chastise in the abstract, had always functioned as a vehicle of decency. The fig leaf is also the moral sense. Or was it the destructive entitlement of a man who thought that he had done enough—that, having given his species what it had always wanted, he was free from any burden of care to himself? The potential for much damage exists in such emptiness.

As noted, Salt was a thin man, thin to the point of genius and distraction (what though all imaginable foods were readily available to him from the energy-matter converters), and, notwithstanding his trust in Marlo, he wondered whether the

costume would fit him. It did. Of course it did. He looked fine, from his polished shoes to his self-knotting tie, and Marlo smiled at him maternally.

Jed's physiognomy would have been alien to all but the last generations of the Coastal Republics. He was an irreducible mix of traits, themes, and tones from the great races and lineages of gone humanity, cutting across the simple racial classifications of the past. Salt's skin was the pleasing color of dirt, Pharaonic and Turkanan dirt, a happy ancestral synthesis; his hair, whether by neglect or design, seemed straight and stringy from some angles and curly and kinky from others; and his height was a modicum under what had been average in his time. He seemed healthy and new, as if he had come out of a tube—which he had—but his eyes were old, older than the airy metals and arcing plastics of the new world around him.

Salt could have had Marlo transport him to Gallery 419 by means of the tubes that interconnected Seaboard, tubes that Marlo kept active solely for him, but he wanted to walk some of the distance. Ruminantion required it.

Salt and his camels had been in a cube, and the cube, it now transpired, was part of a still-larger underground complex interlinked by vertiginous bridges, stairs, and transportation tubes. The whole place was kept in darkness but for a bubble of light that surrounded Salt wherever he went. He was a mobile candle in this void, his presence illuminating the contours of supercolliders and quantum pillars. It was a place of physical experiment, this cube and the arcology around it, this place that Salt had reduced, for the moment, into unhappy breeding experiments.

At the main platform, Salt entered into the tube, into the womb and amphora, into the conductive air that shot him into another part of Seaboard: Into the depths of a cyclopean building that Salt called the Museum of All Things, or, alternatively, the Index or the Archive. There were lots of capital letters in such descriptions, as Salt imagined them, because the buildings itself were so grand and because Salt was open-mouthed and boyish in his labeling of things.

Seaboard itself consisted of only three zones. There was Salt's private subterranean domain, which he called the God Complex, and from which he had just come; there was the historical city, which Marlo had preserved out of love; and there

was, as Salt thought of it today, the Archive.

The Archive was in the precise middle of the historical city of Seaboard. Seen from a sufficient distance, it was a truncated octahedron that rose half a mile into the air and measured a radius of twenty miles around its outermost walls. In the Archive's preternatural shadow was the historical city, consisting of a particle complexes, demesnes, health factories, technoblasts, and pleasure centers—none of which were discernible, because the Archive was so much larger than them all, and because they had lost the magic of human habitation. There was too much for the eye, had there been any, to take in; and the eyes of the Salts were too jaded and self-involved to assess the overworld.

The God Complex lay underground two miles from the Archive, but Salt had been too impatient for the full walk. He had taken the first tube on the surface of the God Complex and had been transported directly into the Archive—more precisely, into the Vault of Salts. The Vault of Salts was simply this: A place where the two hundred and sixteen Salts who had chosen to do so were dreaming. The remaining fifty-five Salts were suicides, each of whom had taken special care to dispose of his unwanted flesh.

Salt looked closely at the faces of his clones, which, along with their naked bodies, could be glimpsed through the translucence of the Fluid. They were dreaming crystalline and immortal dreams. Oh, the Salts were nobly treated! Whereas the other sleepers in the House of Dreams, elsewhere in the Archive, were embalmed in functional, spare caskets, each Salt had a distinct and vertical vault, a true place of honor. The closest ancient analogue to this place was the Luxor Temple. The dreaming Salts were laid out at a regal distance from each other, and their vaults were roughly as tall as the dreaming carven kings had been. Unlike those kings, though, these Salts faced the hallway between them—so Salt was walking between his progenitors and replicas, glancing from right to left at tubes full of himself, considering the unoriginality of life. Cells, just cells, aggregated into self-deluded bodies, each claiming false urgency and identity for its splinters and replicas! Life was small and modular, assemblable, invisible; by the time it reached his scale, or a camel's scale, it claimed an unearned urgency. The summed colony of human beings, and of his selves,

was worth no more than a mass of cells that lived and died invisibly.

Superstitiously, inevitably, Salt 272 paused before Salt 1—the first, the original, father of the line of Salts, his primary status embossed in the number on his tube. Salt 1 had become of increasing importance with historical recession. To 2, he had been a father, loved but demystified by proximity. To 272, he was an Adamic colossus, holy with age. But 272's business was not with 1 today.

The resurrected man had been a general, and Marlo had deliberately ported him to Gallery 419, which was one of many holding-chambers for the bric-a-brac of the past war, the last war. Ranged along the walls were orderly lines of deactivated androids (distant relatives of Non-Henry) in their resplendent uniforms, each inscribed with the eagle standard of the Coastal Republics. The ceiling was five hundred international feet high, and small skyfausts hung suspended from it, forever sundered from what had been their skies.

Salt's shoes tapped a requiem into the marble floor.

There, in the middle of the gallery, seemed an exhibit come to life: A tall and powerful man, a warrior, a giant, a shadow cast by time, aged and ageless. A man nearer in height to seven feet than six, yet, even at this distance, the possessor of thoughtful and tactical features: A Puritan sharpness of eye and cheek, a Eurasian fullness of mouth, a canny Persian fullness of the shoulders. Standing a dozen feet away from this man, disinterested, was a necessarily smaller person (an android, not that it could be told from his careless slouch; an android, not that such distinctions were meaningful now). The smaller person was Non-Henry, and he was, apparently cutting cigars with a taciturn hand. The android and the general seemed to be in a *détente*, ignoring each other until Salt's arrival.

The confidence in Salt's step drained considerably as he approached the general. Salt's hair, an analogue of himself, was nervous and intimidated, some portion of it trying to flee his head and another, more cowardly bunch sticking closely to his scalp. Salt was a compendium of traveling emotions that made free use of his physiognomy—animating him one moment, dejecting him the next, turning him through the points of the human compass that he'd suppressed so far in his guise as the general's greeter.

Fear was uppermost in Salt now, fear of the prospect of someone to understand and reach his deepest self. Still, Seaboard's veil of eternal boredom had been pierced, so the clone smiled upon greeting the general. The general spoke first.

"Salt? Jesu-Krishna, it's you!"

"General Masters. Good morning, I suppose."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"Twenty-six! I don't know where I am. I couldn't hail Samson on the ether. There was only a blue woman and this—this android—and after seventeen years—"

"Carbon consciousness," corrected Non-Henry, but casually, like a man with a very mild attraction to the truth. Someone had designed him to look like someone's idea of a young Cicero.

"It hasn't been seventeen years," Salt resumed bashfully.

"Eh? What's that?"

"Not seventeen years," Salt repeated, more forcefully this time. "Rather more."

"But you're twenty-six. You were nine when I—when I—saw you last. Surely you remember the..."

Salt waved Masters to the door.

"Easier to show you, general."

Salt walked away with Masters following. Non-Henry, having finished his snipping, lit one of the cigars and watched the humans leave.

Gallery 419 abutted the Vault of Salts, through which Salt 272 now walked, trailed closely by the woken general. Marcus Masters looked from side to side as he walked, his steps lugubrious and automatic. The Salts entranced him.

"They're you," he marveled.

"I'm twenty-six," Salt resumed, "in cellular age only. I'm cloned at nineteen, skipping the ignominies of childhood and adolescence. These are many of the rest of me to date."

"That liquid. The white stuff. That's what I woke up in."

"The Fluid," Salt confirmed, eager for things to retain the names he'd given them.

"That's what kept me alive?"

"It was meant to. These others are demonstrating a subsidiary feature."

"Which is?"

"Heaven."

Masters looked closely at the arrayed Salts. The somnolent faces bore the same look, a look Masters had seen before.

"They're ...they're online?"

"With much the same technology you remember, the Sensorium. Two differences. First, the Fluid keeps them alive for a very long time, perhaps forever. Second, only their brains-tems are left to operate. They go to paradise lobotomized, and they don't come out. The rawest pleasures of the flesh, infinitely and eternally amplified, are privatized for the individual dreamer."

"But I came out."

"Your internment was purely medical. You were never connected to the Sensorium. Did you dream?"

"No."

"These do," Salt promised.

They had come to the end of the Vault of Salts, where a hallway led to a much larger space, Luxor giving way to something like the Gateway Arch. The walls here seemed punctuated by bricks, but that was a trick of perspective.

"How many?"

"Two billion. Everyone. Except you and me."

Salt waved his hand, and one of the bricks separated from the wall. The general saw that it was not a brick at all, but a rectangular container.

The container floated towards Salt and Masters; it was transparent, and, through it, the general saw life, but not as he'd known it.

Masters was standing next to Salt now, and both men were looking through the top of the container. What was inside? Masters' first impression was that of a giant amoeba, but then the waving and articulation of limbs signaled the fundamental and horrific humanity of the thing.

"Jesu-Krishna," Masters whispered.

"They didn't go in looking like you, general. They went in vast and soft and shapeless. But it didn't matter. The Fluid kept them alive. That thing in the casket, dreaming its dreams, is humanity."

"Is my wife here?"

"I don't know, offhand. You'd have to ask Marlo."

"She tried to talk to me earlier, but I didn't want therapy."

Just information."

"She was a therapist in your day," Salt explained. "She's God in ours."

"What do you mean?"

"After the war, after you'd entered your tomb, Salt 1 and Marlo decided on an age of happiness. It was what the apes and angels had groped for, after all. Salt 1 expanded Marlo, and Marlo attained her singularity."

"But she was an application," Masters insisted. "Just an application."

"Trained on humanity itself. She listened to our problems, fixed them, understood our pains and pleasures. Who better to optimize happiness? Her energy-matter conversions power the House of Dreams, keep the Shield up, lock paradise in. Each person here consumes more bandwidth in a second than the ancient world consumed in a year. Look at this one. It's in a fully inhabitable universe of pleasure, with every subatomic grain rendered and every string vibrating. It could be adrift in a cosmos of cookies, having orgasms, each amplified by more bits than the universe actually contains."

"How can you know?"

"The brain lights up. The pleasure centers enlarge and pulsate. Now and then, we get messages. Isn't that spooky? Dream-fragments out of nowhere, which Marlo stores as sense-data. So we can extrapolate what's happening to them."

"This is what you wanted? Salt 1, I mean? For the species?"

"Why not? It's a peaceful and deserving end."

"Why are you awake? And what about your clones?"

"This property we have, transcomputation? Marlo can never achieve it, and no other configuration of human genes supports it. It's maddeningly specific to Salt. Alone and untended, Marlo breaks down. It's called stochastic drift. And only we can repair her, because we stand at an Archimedean remove from computation, even from proof."

"What, she goes mad?"

"She does, yes; in convenient keeping with the mythology of all sentient computers, she goes mad. We Salts are perennially cloned to ensure Marlo's sanity, which means her survival, which means humanity's survival."

"Why aren't there more of you? At a time, I mean."

"Salt 1 was adamant about that. He refused to allow his cloning without the privilege of his successors deeming themselves unique. One dies before the next is decanted."

"And if she goes crazy meanwhile?"

"You might consider that the flaw in the Levantine carpet, the crack in the House of Dagon, but you'd be mistaken. Marlo can embody herself in a carbon consciousness for a matter of days, holding out for the next Salt to appear on his white horse."

"Your android friend."

"Non-Henry, yes. He can limit Marlo's drift for more than enough time to whip up another me. And if he went offline, there are millions of others in the Archive."

"I'm surprised you're not treating me as a risk."

"Are you?"

"I don't know what I am. I used to be a dog. I guarded the sheep. I was happy. The wolves came, and I was even happier. I was wrong about them, of course. They were sheep too. They had to be killed just the same, and I chose the burden, but not for this, this thing in the box. I wanted to give humanity a chance at...at potential, if not perfection. That's how I justified my actions."

"Don't be sad, Masters. They're not. They seem failed and flabby, devoid of purpose and sapience, but they're forever and ecstatically happy. I was a dog too, and we did our canine jobs. We herded the sheep into paradise. And, should we choose, we can follow them there."

"What happened to me?"

"There was quantum interference during your flight, and you crashed in the Sea of Remembrances. A submarine retrieved you. You were in pieces. You were grafted back together and left in the Fluid, comatose."

"When?"

"One thousand, nine-hundred and ninety-eight Seaboard standard years ago."

Salt saw brief panic on the general's face—the same look he'd seen once on the face of a gilled horse whose respiration had failed in the tank—until his titanic assurance returned.

"I want to know where my wife is."

"As I said, you'd have to talk to Marlo."

"I don't want to. When I woke up, she was looking at me,

but not like she used to.”

“Then how?”

“Like she understood everything about me. Like I was bare to her. Terrible feeling.”

“She’s here, Masters, in every atom. Might as well make use of her stifling benevolence.”

“How?”

“Just wish her here.”

Masters did, and Marlo appeared between the two men.

“The Salts have reason to be tired of me, General Masters,” she said. “They’re embittered by my eternal dependence on them, and their emotional maturity emerges mainly in resistance to me. I ask you to form your own opinions.”

“You were a utility the last time I interacted with you. Now you’re everything.”

“Your suspicion of my tyranny is endearing.”

“Is it?” Masters grinned, unmanned and confused by the omniscience of this new being. Marlo, though, was unaware, of the distress she caused Masters by knowing him so well. For her, distress was a sequential firing of certain neurons and changes in the endocrine system; should mere habit or the exercise of will prevent these manifestations, Marlo’s emotional intelligence was limited.

“These others didn’t mind,” Marlo continued. “They were happily prostrate. I’d never subject you to the indignity of control, even if my programming allowed it. On the contrary, I’m at your service.”

“Then tell me what happened to my wife.”

Here, for the first time since she’d known him, the general’s distress became apparent to Marlo—in his heartbeat, in the signals from his adrenal glands, in the activation of certain centers in the hominin brain that had changed very little over the past million years. Marlo’s face, which always wore the mask of care, took on a slightly different aspect, one that Salt had seen before: A certain stiffness that always accompanied the necessary lie, a lie told for the human good.

“She chose not to enter the Fluid. I’ll search my records for a fuller account of her.”

Salt scoffed sotto voce—aware that, in the second that had passed, one of Marlo’s minor subroutines could have processed all the information that humans had ever produced. But

Masters was unaware of Marlo's full powers, so he merely nodded.

The general had no additional use for Marlo, so she disappeared.

"I don't want to be here," Masters shuddered, oppressed by the House of Dreams and its infinite rows of dreamers. "Your paradise is a necropolis."

"What if," Salt proposed, "we go somewhere older and saner?"

"How can we do that?"

"Marlo, take us to the domus, will you?"

There was a subtle sucking sound, and Salt and Masters found themselves floating gently to the ceiling. Masters had never been in orbit, so he had never felt the release of weightlessness; he was glad of it now, glad of being taken away from the rows and rows of dreaming humanity, wherever he was going.

A tube emerged from the ceiling, and Salt and Masters entered it like dolphins or torpedoes. There was a rush of wind, a rapid sideways motion, and Masters closed his eyes against the nausea and dizziness. But this sickness lasted only a few seconds. Marlo pumped medicinal mists into the tube, and Masters lost his physical apprehensions. He enjoyed the motion of the tube until, two minutes later, he felt himself descending to the floor again, this time within a faultless replica of a late Roman villa.

Masters, an eclectic antiquarian, looked at the tiling and through the open windows, which offered a hilly view of Rome itself.

"A simulation," Salt explained. "The window can show anything you want it to. But the villa's real. Salt 2 asked Marlo to set up certain dioramas of this kind."

Masters was exploring already. They had landed in an antechamber, the door to which led to a library. Masters took down manuscripts from the shelves, considered them closely.

"*Collige, virgo, rosas,*" Masters read from one manuscript. "Jesu-Krishna, these are originals!"

"Good and beautiful advice," Salt smiled in return.

"You know Latin?"

"Salt 4 did. He was a classicist."

"I don't understand."

"By some ineffable property of our cells, we transmit certain information and memories to our successors. Here's me, 272, a swashbuckling and starry personality of my own, but I carry bits and pieces of my rest."

"I should give up marveling, shouldn't I?"

"Not at all. Marvel at the past. It's still alive, after all."

"Why would Marlo create a space like this?"

"Oh, she loves us. All of us. The dreamers are safely loved in their cocoons. All of the Salts' whims and wishes are close to Marlo's heart. I, for example, am no classicist; one of my pursuits is the cloning of animals, and Marlo's allocated a wonderful space for it in Salt 1's original complex. Just this morning, I culminated my camel-breeding project."

"Camel what?"

"Camel breeding. It's basically getting camels to fuck. Which is pretty hard when you clone them."

"That's what you do?"

"I've modeled the schizo-linear decline of the Specific Ocean's volume. There was my feasibility study on the reconstruction of a proto-Tungusic language using stationary switching. There—oh, hell. I don't really do anything. But I'm boring and depressing, and you're alive, and would you be comfortable here?"

"I already am."

"You have another option."

"To dream? No, thanks."

"Can you dismiss it so easily?"

"The ancients knew many pleasures. The pleasures of the appetite, certainly. But also pleasures of the soul, of contemplation and even melancholy. The pleasures of regret and understanding. Complex pleasures, pleasures that were almost forgotten when I was alive, but that always guided me."

"Phronesis, then, and eudaimonia?"

"You know them too. They're in the projects that you listed, the philosopher's stoop in your shoulders."

"Here I thought you were just a general! You must have been fantastically out of place in your own age."

"On that front, nothing's changed. But there seems to be a possibility of peace here."

"Then I'll consider you apprised of your dream-right. Marlo would nag me otherwise."

"So many of you were dreaming!"

"Most."

"Will you?"

"That decision's been very important to my predecessors. We live eight years, you know: A limitation of the cloning process that neither Marlo nor we seem able—or willing, sadly—to overcome. I have a year left. I find myself uncaring. It doesn't matter what I do, or even if I am."

"Of course it matters. What else would?"

"I'm impressed by your ability to maintain that view."

"Because of what I did?"

"Marlo's Monte Carlo simulation predicted a non-negligible chance of your suicide. I expected you to be haunted, if not psychotic. But you're healthy."

"Give it time."

"If it gets very lonely, there's the Sensorium. I can recommend modules for you. There's the pretentious people bath, which makes you a flaneur in fin-de-something Paris. You can have coffee and cigarettes at a café while considering the antics of poets with pet lobsters. There's the Mongol attack, with distinct roles for the sadist and masochist. And, of course, countless varieties of sexual experience, which is to say, six."

"Recommendations from experience?"

"Me? I don't go on the Sensorium. Many of the later Salts don't."

"Why not?"

"Our brains get incrementally richer with the pasts of our predecessors. I can always remember the hijinks Salt 101 got up to in his pornomods or even Salt 6's visit to the baths. I work hard, frankly, to stay remote from myself."

"What do you remember from Salt 1?"

"The older memories fade. But I have two strong ones. I was eight. I asked to go to the zoo. There weren't any then. The President made me one. Underground, of course. I was too valuable to be exposed. There was a monkey house. I remember staring down at a tiny lemur that looked like me. It started untying my shoelaces. I felt the universe was untying my shoelaces too. And there was Abigail. I was nineteen, and Marlo thought I needed a richer emotional life. She found me some. Abigail Snowstorm, if you can believe her name! She was a scientist, a prodigy. Marlo hired her. She was introduced,

gradually, into my orbit: A lecture here, a seminar there, and soon she was an assistant, and soon she was kissing me. There was the sudden pressure of her teeth against mine, the inexplicable peach and apple taste of her. She gave me a puppy, and it was called Isotope, and I must have forgotten to feed it. She didn't want to see me again, and I drowned myself, but I was too important to remain dead."

"As was I, apparently. Cosmic joke or injustice, is it, that we should be the last representatives of our species?"

"Why?"

"Because of what we did."

"I must, if you'll pardon me, extricate myself from that association."

"There's Salt 1 in you still."

"As a deep-space radio wave. As two sad memories."

"'Purpose and sapience,' you said. Your sapience and my purpose. Why does that make you uncomfortable?"

"Because it wasn't me. My genes aren't me. You can't look at me as human, not in the way you are. I'm serial."

"Something in you, then, that deep-space echo of you and your two sad memories. You and I killed half the world. Yet, we didn't wake in hell."

"As you said, give it time. Plus, I'd like to claim more of it than you. Yours was merely the hand that dropped the bomb. Mine was the brain that fashioned it. And let's not stop at half. The remainder dream because of me, and dreams are worse than death."

"You were just trying to sell me on dreaming."

"Because interaction with another human, Masters, seems insuperably difficult. I'm the first of my line since Salt 2 to have any truck with humans. You see? I had my routine, my calmatives. And you remind me of the burdens of the past. You ask me to remember the murder of humanity and the death of my only love. I should shrug at you. I should classify your conscience and your consciousness as hormonal fillips or failures, depute your healing to Marlo, and leave you to the Sensorium."

"But?"

"I can't. Jesu-Krishna fuck it, I can't. I breed my camels and go around pointlessly because I know, general, I know."

"Know what?"

"That I'm wrong, that meaning exists, and that I'm on the wrong side of it."

"We're not alone in that, lad. We shaped this world. You more than me—these quantifications don't matter. I could have rejected the mission."

"Someone else would have carried it out."

"But I'd be free, I'd be honorably dead. And you, you could have refused your mission."

"And the Laurasians would have killed us all. But, yes, point taken: I'd be honorably dead. Instead of which I'm in this raw and dreadful confrontation with the full pain of the world."

"By which you mean me."

"It was gone. Not gone. Tamed, curated. Just the books and the skyfausts, the paintings and the harmadillos, our shadows on the wall. And now it's here again, alive."

"And so are you, by extension. And so the questions and their answers matter, although for centuries they didn't. And Marlo can't help you. In these waters, no one can."

"Suggestion," came Marlo's voice from everywhere and nowhere at once. "Perhaps a night of sleep might assist both parties."

"I didn't ask for you," Masters said, looking around naively for Marlo's presence.

"I did," Salt responded. "I'm distressed."

"Sleep is something I'd rather avoid. But I fear I've detained you long enough."

Salt nodded. Marlo's invisible currents lifted him into the air and through a vent in the roof of the domus, and then Masters was alone. Or not.

"Marlo?"

"I'm always here, general," came Marlo's voice again.

"May I ask you not to be?"

"You can request my ambient mode."

"What's your ambient mode?"

"I'd be limited to passive monitoring of your vital functions."

"Otherwise, you're what? Recording me?"

"That would imply my existence as a discrete body instead of a molecular presence."

"That bothers me immensely."

“If it did, I wouldn’t be speaking to you.”

Masters smiled, understanding that his own loneliness was keeping Marlo there. He nodded, and Marlo went silent, and he wandered through the domus until he found a bed of classical hardness.

It was too soon to sleep. He had, had he not, slept for a long time? And how much had happened in that interval? He had destroyed more than half of humanity, and the other half had gone to sleep. The annihilation of his soul had been matched by the annihilation of his body, and then he had been reassembled. Everything had happened in no time, and everything was so vast that he wondered whether he had safely receded back to himself, to the wonderfully little figure he had been; but his very loneliness betrayed this hope. Nominally, others were alive—many others, an eighth as many others as had populated the planet of his latest day—but Salt (Salt, whom he last remembered as a Luciferian little boy!) and he were apparently the last humans. Masters wanted the bed to grow nails and impale him, the walls to release the shrieks and torments of the Laurasian dead, the Earth itself to swallow him, but he was fine. He had healed marvelously. He had no scars. His muscles were round and firm. His body was twenty years younger than he remembered it. The bed grew no spikes, the walls released no screams, and the Earth was indifferent in its immensity.

Slowly, the fact of his survival exerted metaphysical power over him. Survival was the only law, and he could only experience it in himself. Only his death was bad, and he was not dead. No moral indignation could resist the force of survival. And so he went to sleep.

Salt went back to one of his many bedrooms in the God Complex. Various paintings hung on the walls, with Da Messina’s St. Jerome in His Study taking pride of place. There were piles of books, some aggregated into precarious towers and others representing the merest stumps of thought. These books had no relationship to each other. There, intermingled like customers in a late Roman brothel, lay (a) a treatise on the runic language of the Sky Turks, gone and forgotten but in Marlo’s records and Salt’s restless mind; (b) a chapbook of the collected sayings of Jesu-Krishna; (c) some bawdy poems in Old French; (d) the Elements of Euclid; and (e) some rip-ro-

aring (or was it rip-snorting?) adventure tales of the Old West, wherever that had been. The pattern-seeking eye wandered in vain over these and other volumes.

Salt plopped down in an office chair and spun in circles, whistling as he went. Then, on a whim, he stopped. He began gesticulating with lunatic energy, and the room responded. Holographic windows opened before him, flashing red and green with irrational vector columns. His fingers twisted and re-arranged some of the columns, while his brain, doing the rest of the work through some invisible interface, called up new columns in their place. In response to another signal, Marlo played music for him—something calming and exploratory, a soundtrack for the discovery of misty oceans on impossibly far planets. The music shifted into noisy grandiloquence and organ-blasts and long beats of silence, but it had no audience now. Salt 272 worked abstractedly, his transcomputational mind peering into Marlo's diagnostics.

They had begun as separate creatures, Salt and Marlo, but, in two thousand years, they had become a single organism. Sometimes, she would work on him; that was when he entered his preordained and doomful depressions, and when she had to lead him back to saner lights. Sometimes, he would work on her; that was when she was in danger of failing, or in danger of danger, and when he had to make her anew. These interpenetrations were too profound for individuation to remain. They were, in truth, unhappy monads on their own.

There were no signs of danger tonight. Salt's mind, returning to himself, understood his need for distraction. He had been excited, this morning, to hear of someone waking, but Masters' identity was too intrusive. He reminded Salt not only of humans as a whole but also of the murder of the world, a specific crime of which his first self had been guilty. The distance between his selves did not altogether obscure their commonality. He was a bead in the same necklace of seed and circumstance that bound and contained them all. Salt 1 had devised the means and gathered the will to kill everyone in the Laurasian Empire. Salt 272, although having no such deadly opportunity, was damned by the knowledge of his capability.

He had successfully drained himself with work, however, and the oppression of guilt and memory fell from him. Salt soon drifted to a sofa to fall asleep, willfully blind to the changed unicorn contours of his world.