

Galatea

A Tale of the Atonement

by
Stephen Rice

© 1994 Stephen L. Rice

Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| <u>Introduction: Advice and Explanations</u> | 3 |
| <u>I. A Light in the Darkness</u> | 6 |
| <u>II. Galatea</u> | 14 |
| <u>III. The Source of the Light</u> | 27 |
| <u>IV. Thieves</u> | 40 |
| <u>V. The Travail of His Soul</u> | 51 |
| <u>VI. The Worlds Outside</u> | 62 |
| <u>VII. Ransom</u> | 75 |
| <u>VIII. Zoe</u> | 85 |
| <u>If you're interested in more</u> | 94 |
| <u>Copying, rights, permissions, etc.</u> | 94 |

Introduction: Advice and Explanations

It will help you to remember a few things about this book.

First, this is not some bizarre, mystical tale written for a small group of intellectuals: though it will challenge your thinking, you should have no trouble understanding it, because you won't have to wade through symbolism a mile deep. Relax and follow the story: everything will be explained as the tale progresses. Everyone I know who got bogged down did so because they were trying to out-think the story, trying to find deep inner meanings for everything. Such deeper meanings are often there, but it's a mistake to concentrate on trees and never notice the forest. There will be plenty of time to go back and analyze the piece carefully after you have read it through once.

Second, it is based more on truth than on fact, so various events have been shuffled around to make the ideas easier to grasp. This is not a history but a story based on the Story. Thus the place of execution is obviously also a place of sacrifice, though this was not the case historically. Likewise, I wanted to contrast death before and after the Sacrifice, with the result that one of the thieves had to die before Christ. It should be clear that I am not trying to rewrite Scripture by such tactics.

For the more literary and theological crowd:

To prevent confusion, I should point out that *Galatea* is not an allegory, for many characters and things do not definitely symbolize any one idea or condition. It isn't quite a parable, either, though it is nearer that than anything else you may have heard of.

Parables are generally very brief stories teaching some truth through an ordinary event.

Galatea is more nearly what C. S. Lewis called a 'supposal,' like the *Chronicles of Narnia*, which merely assumed that something out of the ordinary might occur, such as

Jesus appearing in the form of a lion. I would call it ‘metaphorical fiction,’ that is, fiction based on a single, central analogy between the visible and invisible realms. A visible device—in this case, clay—acts as a metaphor for a normally invisible thing—in this case, our nature apart from and in opposition to God. The story did become more allegorical than I had originally intended, however. For example, it is reasonable to see Elihu and Brutus as God’s and Satan’s approaches to the Law: the teacher we are bound to until he leads us to Christ versus the sadistic executioner.

Students of theology and early Christian writings will notice that several of my ideas are drawn from the works of such writers as Irenaeus, and from the more recent work of Gustaf Aulén (*Christus Victor*), though I have extended and unified their thinking considerably and tidied up a few loose ends.

Students of C. S. Lewis will find many areas where I have borrowed, modified, or disagreed with some idea of his. It should come as no surprise that I have inserted a thoroughly anachronistic (and slightly rephrased) quote from Lewis, whom Elihu calls “a wiser man than I,” in Chapter Three.

Whatever group you may be in—theological, literary, or neither—as you read this, may you examine yourself, not others, according to the purpose of the Law. Yet do not be drawn in too far: just see that you, too, are clay. If you have accepted the Life of God—the blood of Jesus—you should see evidence of it. May you appreciate more deeply the importance of Communion—a holy act commanded by the Lord Himself, yet commonly ignored or reduced to a rote action.

If you haven't accepted Christ, may you do so: simply ask Him to forgive your rebellion and give you the life and power to do what you were designed to do: to worship God and enjoy Him forever.

Let us truly live and move and have our existence in God.

I. A Light in the Darkness

The Light shone in the darkness. Yet no one saw it—except a few who were looking and a few who were shown. The Light poured down on the ancient city, illuminating the Tablet that crouched like a huge beast of prey in the temple courtyard. It shone also on other, distant cities—on the streets of their people, deserted in the night. Near one of the streets of one of the cities, the shape of a boy sought refuge in what few shadows it could find, and a lone statue stood gazing up at the heavens.

Book-weary eyes of clay stared at the light. There was pain in those eyes, but also a glimmer of hope or joy. Or perhaps it was just a reflection of the brilliance from above. The face bore the weathering of years, yet its outline was as fine as the robes the body wore. Here and there the handiwork of some great sculptor was marred by a blotch of especially filthy clay, obscuring the beauty the image must once have had.

Yet why would a master artist waste such effort on mere clay?

Behind the figure frightened footsteps rushed past then stopped suddenly. The statue remained gazing upward.

Curses and shouting broke the stillness. A soldier marched down the street to where the statue of the scholar stood. He grabbed one tired shoulder and pulled the figure around to face him.

“You! Where’d the boy go?”

“Boy? What boy?” The statue refused to look at the slimy, stony paw that grasped his shoulder.

The other statue cursed again, drooling foul mire down his front. Not that he noticed. All of his form was crusty, rock-hard—or covered with the same sludge that he had just spat out. There was little trace of the artwork he must once have been.

“A slave boy came past here. You must’ve seen him. It’s so light out...”

“Ah, yes! So you have seen the light up there?”

“I don’t care about any light! You just tell me which way the brat went!”

“I am sorry. I have been studying the light for so long now, I can hardly make out what happens on the street. Someone came by here a short time ago, but I did not see him or which way he went.”

The soldier swore again and stormed down the street, dripping foul-smelling ooze.

The Scholar smiled for a moment—then froze. Trained eyes could make out some dim shadow of the new eruption of mire from his chest. He pulled the robe back. His flesh could almost have been real, but clay ran through his veins, flooding his body with the dead ooze. He prayed for pardon as he tried to wipe away the filth. His hands only spread the mess, but the well of his pride stopped gushing.

Relieved, he began listening for sounds of the soldier’s whereabouts. After the muttering, dripping sounds had faded into the blackness further down the street, the Scholar called out, as quietly as he could, “He has gone. Come on out. Come look at the Light.”

From the shadows a small figure crept. It had a handsome outline, though it still lacked detail. Its expression was clear, however. Curiosity and suspicion were locked in a

struggle for control. Curiosity was on top at the moment, aided by the soldier's departure, so the little statue stole cautiously onto the street.

“How did you know where I was? You said you didn't know.”

“I said I had not seen where you went; however, I could guess well enough from the sound of your footsteps.”

The scholar inspected the boy-image. Tattered clothes, no shoes, and filth. Yet there was also a bit of pure wonder buried in the look of fear and defiance. The features were unmistakable too.

“You have nothing to fear from a fellow-countryman, my child.”

“I have everything to fear from my countrymen. And I'm not your child!”

“Not the soldier's child, surely; but do you really know that you are not mine?”

The boy's hasty glance away answered the question.

“No. I am not your father. But you have no father of your own. Perhaps I could be your teacher. Would that please you?”

“What're you talking about? Why are you doing this to me?”

A swift, strong hand grasped the boy's shoulder before he could run.

“You will not get far on your own. Come with me. I am traveling to another city, and I need someone to help me get there. We can help each other.”

“Why should I go with you?”

“You know that I will not betray you—I could already have done that—and you must leave this city or be captured by the soldier. Or do you know someone who will keep you?”

The boy lowered his eyes. Staring at the ground in front of him, he silently shook his head. Finally he asked softly, "Is it far?"

"A few days' journey, I think. But first, come with me, and I will get you proper clothing. No student of mine ever wore rags."

He led the boy through a maze of streets and alleys. More than once they stopped as a soldier passed blindly by, or they skirted a shadow where someone lurked, weapon in hand. At last they came to a small building. Light poked through a crack in improvised shutters inside a window, and a glow faintly outlined the door. The Scholar rapped softly.

"John! Open quickly, my son!"

A scuffling sound answered, and soon the door opened wide. The figure of a disheveled man in his thirties stood in the doorway and peered uncertainly into the night. The Scholar stepped closer so that the light shone clearly on his face; the statue in the doorway smiled in recognition.

"So it really is you! Come in, Teacher! Why are you out so late at night?"

The Scholar drew his young companion inside with a speed that belied his age. John must have been used to such adventures, for he had the door shut and bolted almost as quickly.

The old man embraced him, as friends did in that time and place, and then he stepped back and gestured toward his new pupil. "I need clothing for my new student, and silence for anyone who asks questions. I think that the boy is about the same size as your son."

John looked the child over for a moment; then he nodded. "Actually, he's about the size little Joseph was the last time you came by. It's been a while."

“You know how I get lost with my books. I have discovered something quite important, but I shall need clothing for the boy and provisions for the journey—if you have any to spare.”

John smiled. “Another adventure! I wish I could go with you....”

The Scholar glanced about the room. There was still evidence of a tidier time, a more careful touch. A half-finished tunic lay abandoned in a corner, dusty with neglect; the mending on John’s cloak was his own rough work.

The Scholar seemed to withdraw into memory for a moment, but then he suddenly remembered himself. “I have heard about your wife, my son: taking care of her is the adventure that the Sculptor has granted you. For some reason the Sculptor has chosen to send us in different directions.”

“My wife’s doctors have left little, but you are welcome to it. If I can’t go myself, I will at least have that part in your quest. Yet you do not usually walk about so late; what has happened?”

The Scholar pulled back the shutters—actually a pair of scrolls—and light shone in from outside, overpowering the feeble glow of the lamp. The light from outside was not brighter or visibly stronger: it was simply different from the lamplight, as warm, golden sunshine is different from cold, pale moonlight. The lamp’s rays retreated from it as if embarrassed. The Scholar pointed toward the source of the light.

“Do you see that star? What is it called?”

“Yes, I see it. Now that you mention it, I don’t recognize it. What is it?”

“It is the Sculptor’s Messenger, calling me to follow wherever it leads.”

“A star, the Sculptor’s Messenger? You know the Law prohibits searching the sky for such signs!”

“It forbids looking, but surely not seeing. To waste time seeking the miraculous is evil, but so is ignoring the miraculous when it occurs. The sign may not be for us at all, but for the rest of the world.”

John laughed. “Perhaps. Your interpretations of prophecy always angered the others.”

“Or simply amused them. Yet I cannot help wondering whether we have become so certain of our traditional interpretations that the Sculptor will decide to confound our expectations. He has done so before: in part it is His judgment on our pride. The Sculptor never lies, but He certainly allows the proud to deceive themselves with their scholarship and wisdom. Sometimes I think that when the King comes we will not recognize Him, or know the Judgment until we stand before Him, even though He wrote it all across the sky in letters of fire.”

“Are you so sure that He has come?”

“I do not know. Yet I do know this: He has sent for all who would learn to come. How I wish you could accompany me!”

John shrugged helplessly and pointed to a doorway behind him. “You know my wife is about to give me another child; she cannot come, and I must not leave her.”

“Yes, I know. This lad is your replacement for this journey. Pray for us, and on our return we shall tell you a marvelous tale. The Messenger would not call us for less.”

John brought some clothing from some dark nook behind the table. Dressing the boy was no problem. Both men had considerable experience with children: the Scholar

with his youngest students, John with his own boy. They did not bother washing the child, of course: washing was unknown to the statues except as a religious rite, and water alone would have been useless anyway. Removing the encrusted mire would have taken something much stronger.

John also gave them some food and water for the trip. Then the child discovered the real reason for their visit: John's house was on the city wall, and the gates had been shut long before. The Scholar strode purposefully to a window across from the door to the street. He peered out for a moment and then nodded his satisfaction. John produced a length of rope that he had evidently already secured to something: the Scholar grasped it firmly, giving himself some slack, and slid out the window.

A moment later John pulled the rope back and lowered the boy quickly but gently over the side. The Scholar helped the child down and led him a safe distance from the wall and its guards. He had clearly done such things before, though the boy could not imagine why and dared not ask.

"It points southeast, I think," the Scholar said, peering into the heavens. "There are a few villages that way; we shall no doubt end up in one of them. I suspect that I even know which one, though it will be better to watch than to guess."

The boy could no longer contain his curiosity.

"What points southeast?"

"The Messenger, of course: the thing that looks like a star. See how it shines downward?"

"It looks like any other star to me."

“Ah, but it is not a star at all. The stars move as the night passes, but this one remains in one place, standing guard over something. It is a Messenger of the Sculptor’s glory, and we must follow it to the treasure it guards.”

They watched the star a while longer, and then they resumed their journey. Soon the Scholar spoke again.

“If we are to travel together, we ought to be better acquainted. My name is Elihu. My fellow Sages think me mad for going on pilgrimages such as this, but they admit it has taught me much.”

“I’m Clay. I grew up as that soldier’s slave, and I know nothing about my family—or about anything else, according to the men in the barracks.”

“I doubt they got where they are by knowing very much. Has no one told you of your people and of your name?”

“What about my name? The soldiers called me Mud.”

“It is their pagan word. Yet yours is one of the oldest names: a name of glory and shame, life and death, hope and fear. I will tell you the story tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow! Why not tonight?”

“Now that we are far enough from the city to move quickly without being noticed, we must increase our pace. We dare not travel during the day, and by morning we must be far from the city. That leaves us very little time tonight—but we will have plenty of time for stories tomorrow.”

II. Galatea

The next evening Clay discovered why they would have plenty of time for stories: the Scholar refused to travel at all.

“It is the Day of Rest—the day the Sculptor set aside for celebrating His work of creation. We shall neither work nor walk tonight.”

“What about the soldiers?” Clay asked. “You wanted to get as far from them as you could.”

“The Sculptor protects those who honor His rules. From now on we shall travel slowly enough for conversation: the main search area should be well behind us. Anyway, you wished to hear about your namesake.”

“Yes: the one you say was famous. I guess if we aren’t going anywhere anyway, I might as well hear about him.”

The Scholar pointedly ignored the boy’s tone. “The story begins as all stories ultimately do: with the Sculptor. You have heard of Him?”

“Not really, sir; mostly jokes, except for what you’ve said.”

“What! Then you remember nothing of your heritage?” A quick glance at the boy’s expression confirmed this. “The Sculptor created the universe—and us. He shaped us with His own hands.”

“Why?”

“I think it is just His nature to love, and He wanted creatures who could enjoy that love. I suppose He could have loved a tree or a lump of clay, but it would not have known it. So He created us to enjoy His love.”

“So He was lonely?”

“No. He has no need of us. In some of the holy writings, His spirit and His wisdom almost seem to be separate persons, so that They could have loved each other and not have been lonely. Yet the writings also say that the Sculptor is alone. It is probably a mystery we shall never understand.” He noticed the boy beginning to fidget as boys do, kicking pebbles and looking around, and he abruptly returned to his tale.

“Anyway, the Sculptor lives in an enormous palace, larger, they say, than the whole world.” The boy began to protest that nothing could be larger than the whole world, but this time the Scholar just kept talking. “He built a small studio—much too small for any of His usual projects, but just right for a special work He had in mind. He crafted a tiny garden, large as the world, and called it the Garden Kingdom. The detail was magnificent, yet He created it in just a few days: for He merely spoke to the clay and it eagerly took whatever form He desired.

“Then He rolled up His sleeves and began to work a piece of clay with His bare hands: it was the special work for which all the rest was merely a stage. It was a tiny model of the Sculptor, so like Him that when He breathed into it, it caught Life, as a dry leaf catches fire. The breath of the Sculptor entered its being and flowed through its veins, and it became a man—not just a living statue, but a real, flesh-and-blood man. The Sculptor called the man Clay.”

“Just like me!” the boy interrupted.

“Yes. Clay was very like the Sculptor, and they became good friends at once. Yet the Sculptor had even more planned, for He said that it was not good for His friend to be alone. You see, although the Sculptor and Clay were very similar, the man needed someone of his own kind to be with: someone of his own flesh and bone, so that they

could be close, yet different enough to be interesting. For flesh means kinship, and bone symbolizes essence: she would be related to him and have his nature and identity. So the Sculptor made Clay fall into a deep sleep, and took a piece from his side. Then He formed another being from Clay's own flesh and bone—a woman. Clay called her Zoe, that is, Life: for it was from her that new life would enter the world.”

“One of the soldiers said that the first woman was named Pandora,” Clay said.

Elihu smiled. “That is one of their pagan myths, though it has a certain truth to it. Pandora means ‘all-gifted’—and Zoe was very gifted. She was also the Sculptor's gift to Clay, so it is true in that respect as well. She was a great blessing to Clay while she used her gifts for him, but like the mythical Pandora, she turned evil loose on the world. (As we shall see, though, it was Clay who made the evil permanent.) The myth says that Pandora was also a source of hope, though how that could be true of Zoe remains to be seen.

“Anyway, the Sculptor showed Clay and Zoe around the Garden Kingdom, especially its most beautiful spot, where they were to live and work as gardeners. He said that He had another great plan for them, but what it was they probably never found out.”

“Why?”

“Patience, child. There were a couple of trees in the Garden. One had the Fruit of Light and Darkness; the other, the Fruit of Life. The Sculptor told Clay not to eat the Fruit of Light and Darkness. It was a test of Clay's obedience.

“Now a snake lived in the trees; he loved to glide from one to another. Some say the Sculptor had put him in charge of maintaining the place—not the gardening proper, which was the people's job, but keeping the area free of defects. He was to call such

problems to the Sculptor's attention and keep them from cluttering up the rest of the Garden until they were fixed—or he would destroy them if they could not be fixed. This left him with very little to do, for search as he would, he could find no imperfection. He thought he had found one when Clay was created alone, but then he discovered that the apparent flaw was actually part of the Sculptor's plan. So the serpent found himself proving again and again that the Sculptor was perfect and that His decisions were best.

“What happened then, no one knows. Perhaps from seeking out bent and imperfect things, the serpent grew to love bentness; or perhaps he began to think of his imaginary junk heap as his personal kingdom. For whatever reason, he began to grow twisted himself; and as he grew away from the Sculptor and His ways, he developed new ideas, such as hating, lying, and killing. He also began to despise everything outside of his kingdom—everything good—and looked for ways to bring them under his power.

“So the serpent hated the people and wanted to show the Sculptor how weak they were. He thought that if he could make them defective somehow, they would become his property. Perhaps he even wanted to use them as hostages to make a deal with the Sculptor. In any event he told the people that eating the Fruit of Light and Darkness would let them live apart from the Sculptor's life-giving power as independent beings. Zoe believed him and ate the fruit, and then Clay did likewise. (It was really Clay's act that was important, for what he did affected all of their children to come.) Then they discovered that eating the fruit did separate them from the Sculptor's power—but it did not, could not, enable them to live that way. The Darkness entered them and began to change them back into clay, into mere statues.”

“Then what?” The boy was beginning to be interested again.

“The Sculptor banished the serpent from trees forever, sending him to wallow in the dust. The snake eventually burrowed down deep inside the earth, where he dwells to this day. It is said that before that time he had no teeth, but that after he deceived the people, he began growing tiny fangs, which he used to frighten and catch the people and their children. (His real teeth came later.) He also mastered the ways of the clay: he learned how to mold it according to his desires, and so he began to pervert the Sculptor’s original design.”

“Yes, but what about Clay?”

“Ah, Clay,” the Scholar sighed. “He and Zoe thought that eating the Fruit of Life would restore them, but the Sculptor knew that it would mean eternally dying with no hope of healing or even the rest of death. So He sent them from the part of the garden where the two Trees grew. Thus began their terrible wandering: every time they moved further from Him, as the Fruit of Darkness made them do, their ‘clayfulness’ increased.

“Soon the statues and their children so filled the world with their mire that they nearly drowned in it, and the Sculptor had to wash it all away. Most of the fools clung to the clay and were swept away with it: only one family was saved. Yet soon their children began to do the same thing; and as people were united in those days, they could pollute the whole world with their evil almost overnight. In fact, the people after the flood piled their mire on top of the remains of a great old tree and tried to reach the Sculptor’s palace with their filth. So the Sculptor separated them and made them quarrel with each other, as is the case to this day. I suppose that if the Sculptor ever let us unite again, we would so cover the world with filth that He would have to cleanse it all over again. So He has put a restraint on our unity and our evil, lest we fill the world with our clayfulness.”

“But if clay is bad, why did the Sculptor make them from clay?”

“Clay is not bad, just weak. It cannot even hold a shape by itself. What I call ‘clayfulness’ is not the presence of something, but the absence of Life and Light. Without them, we lose our shape; the serpent can mold us at will. So the polluted clay—the dark mire—is not really the problem; it is only the symptom of the problem: the problem of lacking the life and power to do what is right. We have no real blood in our veins. What we call blood is only the ooze that permeates our bodies and makes us too weak to be real people; it is the sludge that formed in Clay’s veins and that he passed down to the rest of us. For the clay is passed from father to child: as the father was, so must the child be.

“Anyway, once the people had eaten the Fruit of Light and Darkness, they began to lose their identity and revert to mere clay. Yet the life within them could never be entirely extinguished. Perhaps one day the Sculptor shall reawaken the life He placed in us, although I do not know how or when. But He will certainly do something: the Day is coming when His brilliance and power, which would be light and life to flesh-and-blood people, will shine throughout the land, baking mere clay hard forever. Right now, through His mercy, the sun is veiled; we never see more than twilight. And even if the veil were removed, there would only be enough light and heat to increase our agony. For when Clay and Zoe rebelled, the Garden began to die (some call that time the Fall), and we have been in Winter ever since. During the Winter, the Sun does not rise very high or have much heat; but when Spring comes (if the Sculptor can somehow make it come!), there will be light and warmth all over the world, and perhaps the Garden will bloom again.

“Meanwhile it is Winter, and we do not feel the Sun’s full heat or see its full light, or we would be destroyed. Think of it! The very thing that is your only chance for life and joy burning you into a helpless solid mass, until your face crumbles away, leaving the rest of you a charred, unrecognizable lump of stone, always being destroyed, but never quite annihilated.”

Clay’s face was twisted with the effort of a new idea.

“So I’m a clay person too?”

“Yes; have you never noticed that...” Elihu paused. “No, of course not. The Law was given to show us that we are clay, and you evidently do not know the Law.”

“What’s the Law?”

“It is a description of the way real people act—people without any clay in them. It shows us what we do wrong, though it does nothing to change us. That is the puzzle of the Law: it commands us to do good of our own free will, something the polluted clay within us makes impossible. Yet it gives no hope for removing the mire inside, only that which leaks out into the open. My fellow Sages say that being clean outside is enough, but I cannot believe that.”

“The Law sounds pretty stupid.”

“Nothing the Sculptor does is stupid; we simply do not understand His purposes. Anyway, the Law is also the basis of our race—yours and mine. The story of Clay involves the whole world, but the Sculptor also chose a race for Himself from the whole world—our race. The people He chose were slaves in a foreign land, and He redeemed them.”

Clay’s eyes grew wide. “He redeemed a whole country?”

“Yes. Of course, He did not redeem them the way one usually redeems a slave: He paid no money for them. In the old Stories and the Songs, ‘redeem’ usually means ‘rescue.’ There are two ways to rescue a slave: buy his freedom or defeat his master. So the Sculptor defeated our masters to free us. He also redeemed or rescued His people from His own wrath, for He struck the land where they were slaves with His wrath, but He spared them in the midst of it. He told them to eat a lamb to celebrate their deliverance and to use its blood as a sign of His protection, and they were kept safe while His wrath struck all around them. The people there were so frightened that they let the Sculptor’s people go. So the Sculptor redeemed His people not just from the ones who claimed to own them, but also from His own wrath. Then He led them through a sea deep as death and brought them to this land.”

“What’s that got to do with the Law?”

“That was when the Sculptor gave us the Law. The writings tell us that out of the stump of a huge tree grown hard as iron the Sculptor fashioned the Tablet of Law with deep-set letters whose every detail would remain until they were fulfilled. The edges of the letters curl upward into jagged blades, like row upon row of serpent fangs, which reveal to us our clay nature and our inability to live on the Tablet.”

“The big Tablet in the courtyard of the Old City?” Clay had heard of more than he had seen, for the soldiers enjoyed talking of their travels. If the Scholar was surprised, he did not show it.

“Yes. It was supposed to prove how much we have changed. Real flesh would be too light and too resilient for the blades: a real man could rest atop them with little damage. But being away from the Sculptor and His life has softened us and weighted us

down: clay would be pierced; even hardened clay would crack and ooze forth life—such life as it had. For all the Tablet seems to do is draw forth the clay—the death—within us, without curing us. So what pours into the Tablet is not life, but death; and only life can even temporarily satisfy it. You see, the Tablet’s thirst for life is unquenchable. Perhaps that is why the Law states that anyone who is exposed upon the ancient tree is cursed.”

He paused, and then he muttered almost to himself, “This is a peculiar curse: the only one that holds even against an innocent party.

“Anyway, the Sages have set up other cutting letters radiating out from the Tablet. They say that people can harden themselves for the Tablet by learning to walk on these smaller letters.”

“Does it work?”

“No, but it has made the Sages less sensitive to cuts. They spend much of their time putting other people on the Tablet.”

“Why?”

“If you are afraid or ashamed to look at your own faults, you become concerned about the faults of others.”

Clay sat silently for a moment, inspecting himself for signs of the filth that he had not yet learned how to see, but that he now felt sure covered his body. Finally he looked up. “But nothing can really be done to save us, then.”

“The Sculptor cannot be defeated,” the Scholar replied. “Someday His love will win. As I understand the writings, they say that one is coming who will change us statues back, so that we can withstand the fire of the Sculptor’s presence and not change forever

to stone. He will be descended from our greatest king—the one long ago who thought of building the Temple, in fact.”

“Why did he just think of it?” Clay interrupted.

“He wanted to build the Temple to honor the Sculptor, but the king was a man of blood, that is, a man who had shed other people’s blood in war. Such a man could not create such a holy place. So the Sculptor told him that his descendant would build the Temple.”

“His descendant?” Clay asked, barely getting the word right. “You mean the one who is coming?”

“No, of course not!” the Scholar replied, irritated. “The Temple has already been built, and it was the king’s son who had it done, though the Sculptor did furnish the design. Now be patient! When you interrupt, you confuse us both!”

“I just wanted to know who did what,” Clay answered grumpily. “And I don’t see what good it’ll do that king if someone does come and change us. He’s already dead, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he died centuries ago. Yet there is hope even for him—for the one who is coming may also waken the statues that sleep in death. Now, when we die, it is said that the serpent reaches up through the earth itself to claim us, grabbing that tiny spark of the Sculptor’s fire that lets us think and speak and be who we are. For the serpent hates individuality, probably because he gave up his own long ago. He seizes us with his iron teeth and drags us down to his kingdom beneath the earth. All he leaves behind is an empty shell—that is the part that we bury.

“For he now has greater, stronger teeth than those he grew after being thrown to earth: row upon row of teeth, so that he now considers himself a dragon. His new teeth are like the ones on the Tablet—indeed, some say that the blades on the Tablet were copied from his teeth, but I am certain that his are the copy. The Tablet shows our weakness, but it only condemns those who pretend that they can lie on it unharmed—and those who flee it in panic. The serpent’s teeth, however, exist only to capture and kill. So the two are quite different, though everyone admits that the Tablet gave the serpent his bite. The Sculptor is often willing to risk letting some people hurt more to enable everyone to hurt less in the long run; this is undoubtedly such a case, even though we do not understand yet.”

Clay was fidgeting again. “If the Sculptor’s so good, why doesn’t he get hurt for us? And why doesn’t he just forgive us for messing up?”

“The Sculptor feels pain whenever we turn from Him, but he could not actually experience our pain without becoming one of us, and even the pagan philosophers know that that is impossible. As to forgiving us, He could forgive our guilt, just as we can forgive someone who hurts us or who owes us money. However, the hole inside us—the hollow place where life should be—He cannot forgive: one cannot forgive a hole and make it go away: it must be filled. Yet if He filled us with life again, as He filled Clay at the start, our clayfulness would soon kill the new life; and if He changed us all through to get rid of our clayfulness, then we would no longer be ourselves, but just copies of ourselves. The hole must be filled with a life that cannot be corrupted or killed—but who has such life except the Sculptor Himself? And His life would burn us to ashes instantly.

“There is another reason the Sculptor cannot simply ignore our condition: without the life and design He put into it, clay is nearly nothing. That is what He worked with at the beginning. But now that we have turned away from Him Who gives existence, our clay has become nothing—or less than nothing. So there is literally nothing for Him to see when He looks at us—and if we persist in turning from Him, from our life and design, turning back to clay, there will finally be nothing for Him to save. In a sense, the Sculptor does ignore such clay; and if we become nothing but the ghost of His original clay, He will ignore us, and we shall be left outside to curse the noise and cheer of the banquet He will hold for those He can see.

“So the problem is not as easily solved as that: the Sculptor cannot simply wish it away. It is an enigma that only the Sculptor can resolve; the rest of us shall have to wait. Somehow the Sculptor will refill our empty shells with life....” The sheer impossibility of the idea silenced the Scholar, and the two thought to themselves for a moment. Then Clay spoke.

“I remember a story about a sculptor, now. The soldiers were talking about a sculptor who fell in love with one of his statues. One of the soldiers said that the sculptor’s love brought the statue to life. Another soldier said that the story didn’t end like that, but the first soldier shut him up.”

The Scholar nodded absently. “Yes, it is another of their myths. A master sculptor used all his skill to create the most beautiful woman of all: Galatea. He fell in love with the statue—about that, both versions agree. In the first version, he somehow through his love gave warmth and life to his creation. It is nearly true. But in reality, she spurned the

Sculptor's love, and leaving it, became only a statue again. So the true story does not have the happy ending of the pagan myth.

“In the other version, the morning found his studio empty of life: the statue was still cold stone, and the sculptor lay dead of a broken heart in his statue's lifeless arms. He...” The Scholar's voice broke, and he turned his face away hastily. “Foolish pagans! How could He Who is Life ever die? And even if He could, why would He die out of love for a lifeless statue!”

III. The Source of the Light

The history lesson was only the beginning of the Scholar's curriculum. He spent the rest of the journey teaching, explaining, and discussing the Law, until the mere mention of the word made young Clay fidget. It wasn't that the talks were boring; the Scholar quickly remembered all the old tricks for keeping a student interested, such as teaching through stories. The problem was that the teaching was working too well for Clay's comfort. It is no fun discovering that you are filthy, especially in a world without soap. All you can do is try to limit further outbreaks of mire—and try not to look embarrassed. There is another way to get relief, but the Scholar forbade that almost immediately.

“You must remember to use this knowledge to examine yourself, not others.”

Clay looked up, startled. “What're you talking about?” The Scholar must have read his mind: an extremely uncomfortable thought.

The Scholar smiled. It was early morning, and they had stopped to rest for the day. “The lessons of the night were unpleasant for you, and I know the temptations of the Law. You want to analyze someone else for a change, and since we meet so few traveling by night, and since you would be too frightened to look at me—you know that I would catch you at it—you must be thinking about the soldiers in the barracks.”

Clay blushed—as much as a statue could blush—and protested, “But it's more fun to look at other people.”

“Is it? While you gloat over their ugliness, they are gloating over yours. We are all nearsighted—we see most accurately close up. Yet we prefer to look further away, where light and shadow are most likely to trick our eyes. Perhaps it is just to avoid

looking at ourselves; but I think it more probable that we want to learn to see others incorrectly so that we may do the same thing (only more charitably) when we do glance at ourselves. Watching others also causes your own clay to surge to the surface.

“Of course, it is dangerous to spend all your time looking at yourself, too. As you study the dark places they loom larger and larger until you fall into them and are swallowed up forever. For as you turn inwards you collapse in on yourself and become smaller and smaller until there is little left but a hole. It is safest to keep looking at the Law, for then you will recognize evil and avoid it; just glance at yourself from time to time to remind yourself of your imperfection and to reduce new outbreaks. With the Law, that is about all one can do.”

They journeyed on for some days—or rather for some nights: the Scholar evidently wanted to avoid patrols and strangers. Or perhaps friends. The star lit the landscape as well as a full moon, and it even seemed to chase the adders away.

The journey was like a longer version of the excursion through the back streets of the great city. The wilderness, too, had its open spaces and dark corners, and the Scholar knew enough to keep clear of both. The route sometimes seemed longer than necessary, but he proceeded purposefully onward.

One night he was acting unusually stiff, as if all of his years had finally settled on his back like a boulder. The way he bent over also made him look fat, and the boy almost laughed. When the Scholar began to skirt a large rise, his companion stopped in disgust.

“It’ll take all night to go around that!”

“It will take a lifetime if we climb it—by the obvious path, at least. We need to go south for a while; then we can head up.”

“What do you mean, it would take a lifetime?”

“The length of one’s life depends in part on what one does with it. Can you see those black patches near the top of the rise?”

Clay squinted for a moment. “Yes.”

“Think of them as alleys full of eyes and knives.”

“Those tiny things?”

“They are small with distance.”

“Have the thieves seen us?”

“Probably, but they will think that an old man like me would rather go around the rise, where their accomplices can deal with him. We will leave the trail before then.”

The two continued south briefly, and then they began their climb. The Scholar’s frailty disappeared as he pulled himself onto a ledge a little way above the path.

“Keep silent as we near the top. I am not as feeble as I seem, but neither am I in any condition to fight even one of their number.”

They ascended noiselessly; then they went down the other side as quickly and quietly as they could manage. The Scholar was really puffing by then.

“I am definitely getting too old for this type of adventure. If our mission were not the sort best kept secret, it would have been better to get mounts and join a caravan.”

“How did you know about the robbers?”

“Experience. I have traveled the route many times. Also, some things remain the same wherever one goes. As I said, the dark places were like alleys. This is much like a city; the buildings and streets are merely farther apart.”

They continued walking for a few more miles before setting up camp. Clay spent the time watching the scenery and his guide with greater care and respect. There was more to some things than he would ever have imagined!

The next night they stayed at their makeshift camp. The Scholar evidently had no intention of leaving, and eventually Clay's curiosity won out.

“Are you still tired from the climb, Teacher?”

“No. Have you forgotten so quickly? On the last day of Sculpting, the Sculptor rested. He has commanded us to follow His example, and this is the Day of Rest.”

“I thought you were so eager to get wherever we're going.”

“It is said that those who obey will not be in haste. If you follow carefully, you will seldom have to run to catch up.”

Soon they drew near to a small town. Even Clay thought he could see the tail of the star pointing toward part of the town, and the Scholar was certain of it.

“This prophecy has been fulfilled as expected, anyway: the ancient city called the House of Bread, as though we could eat the one who comes from there! Yet the world is hungry for his arrival, I suppose; the Sculptor's puns and riddles never cease!”

He surveyed the scene carefully.

“There is a small problem, of course: do we enter now with the star to guide us, and risk being reported, or do we wait until morning and guess? Either way there will be talk. I suppose it would be safer to go now and reach our destination directly.”

The town was too small for gates or a regular guard; the lone sentry seemed asleep. Yet somehow Clay felt uneasy, and he gripped the Scholar's sleeve to stop him.

“What is it, boy?” the old man snapped.

“That man sees too much with his eyes closed,” the boy replied. “See how he leans back? But he could have either sword or spear in hand before you could blink. I’ve seen guards do it before.”

The Scholar studied the sentry more closely. Slowly he nodded, half smiling.

“Yes, that man is definitely too asleep for my comfort. Yet why would he bother, unless...”

As the Scholar thought, he noticed the boy’s fidgeting and frightened glances. Suddenly the old man’s eyes grew wide with an idea too large to utter. He seized the boy and quickly drew him away from the town toward the sheltering hills.

“Who was your master, boy? Quickly, now! Was that ragged centurion only your keeper?”

The boy only nodded silently, tears washing tracks down his dusty cheeks.

The old man gently, irresistibly brought the child’s chin up, forcing him to meet his gaze.

“How high?”

“Th-the garrison commander, Brutus Tyrranus. He won me in a game, and I heard how cruel he was, and when I got a chance to run, I just...”

The rest was lost in tears. The Scholar shook his head wearily and sighed.

“I have heard of Tyrranus: an ambitious man, unusually young for his rank. He holds his slaves tight as death, and he is as cruel as the serpent himself. Yet will he have no replacement? Why are you so valuable to him?”

“Because he won me, that’s all! It’s like you said: he doesn’t care about me—all he wants is his property! The centurion must’ve told his friends to keep an eye out.”

The Scholar pondered for a moment—and had to reinforce his grip to keep the boy from bolting.

“Stop that! Where would you go? To the darkness and the thieves? Stay with me; I will protect you somehow.”

He thought hard for a few moments more, and then he said, “We will stay here tonight. Tomorrow we will mingle with the evening crowd. The star will guide us to the right house without our needing to ask questions. Then we will leave the next morning as the men go out to work.”

They found a small ravine away from paths and pastures. As they settled down for what was left of the night, the Scholar produced a length of rope and began to secure the boy.

“Hey! What’re you doing?” Clay protested.

“I suspect you need to be protected from yourself. You are frightened and impulsive; left to yourself, you would surely run straight into a patrol or some thieves.”

The strategy was simple. The old man doubled the rope and brought it around the boy’s waist. Then he opened the folded end out into a loop and passed the other end through it. After adjusting the tightness around the boy’s waist, he ran the end through the loop again to make it harder to get slack. Then he tied the remaining rope around himself, putting the knot on his right side, under his arm and away from the boy. Then he went to sleep.

The boy thought about loosening the loop around him, but it was more difficult than he had imagined. Soon the Scholar stirred and got the same too-asleep look as the town guard. Finally the boy gave up and slept.

The morning passed slowly. From time to time someone would wander close to their makeshift hideout, and the two would try to exist as quietly as they could until they were alone again. But the Scholar had chosen the spot well: none of the few who approached came all the way or remained for long.

Eventually the Scholar got up and crept to the edge of the ravine. He nodded with satisfaction and returned to the camp.

“It is time. The men are going out to work in the fields. We must join them.”

“I thought we were going to wait until evening.”

“No. We will enter the town with the crowd this evening, but first we must become acquainted. If we waited until the last moment, they would stare at us, and the guard would certainly notice. The best way to become one of the group is to work with them during the day.”

“Are you sure? You look tired. Maybe we...”

“Quickly, boy! Time is short!” He turned abruptly but stiffly, and began trudging his way out to the fields, not even looking back to see if the boy followed.

Clay hesitated for a moment; then he scurried after the old man. The Scholar smiled as if he had been right about something; Clay never asked what.

Soon they found a cluster of men and boys, and merged with them. The locals were surprised and spent a little too much time staring at them at first. However, as the day progressed, the men satisfied their curiosity—the Scholar did all the talking—and finally took no notice.

The Scholar himself was soon puffing, but Clay made up for it. Although he had never done any farm work, the soldiers had made him strong and diligent, and the

Scholar knew precisely what to do, even when he was too weak to do it by himself. He also had Clay gather some firewood during a break, as some of the others were doing.

“What’s this for?” Clay asked.

“By the time we return, the women will have used all their wood for baking. The men bring back a little for the evening fire and the morning bread.”

“So? We don’t have a home to build a fire in.”

“No, but it will help us blend in with the others. Fetch the wood.”

Clay began to protest, but the Scholar looked so old and tired that he just shrugged and gathered the sticks.

Toward evening, the group headed for home. The Scholar and Clay kept a little apart from the rest until they were near the town. The old man wanted to compare notes with the child.

“No one mentioned anything out of the ordinary,” the Scholar said, “except that there have been many visitors here recently. The Sculptor is kind: we should escape notice.”

“One of the kids said that a visiting couple had a baby and decided to stay till he was older.”

“A baby! I wonder...” The Scholar’s pace slowed as he weighed competing thoughts. “In one way, it is improbable, but in another way, that makes it all the more likely. I have learned that the Sculptor delights in confounding our expectations. My fellow Sages sometimes act as though the coming King shall appear out of nowhere fully grown, like Clay himself. Yet perhaps we shall find a baby beneath the star. The Sculptor does more than we think by doing less than we hope.”

As they drew near the village, the Scholar gave what little firewood he was carrying to Clay. The boy started to complain, but again there was the tiredness. He studied the old man uncertainly. Was it an act, as it had been before, or was it real? He still had not decided when the Scholar pulled him into a shadow.

“You may drop the load now if you wish.”

“What?” They were inside the town! “How did you do that?”

“One of the best ways to avoid notice is not to notice others. The eye contact and furtive looks give most people away. You were too busy watching me to be afraid of the guard, and he could hardly see you for the wood. He peered at me, but I obviously did not fit the description he had been given. Nonetheless, we must not prolong our stay here. We should slip out with the morning crowd—if not sooner. There will be gossip about us tonight, and by morning the sentry will be more alert.”

The shadows deepened to night in the corners and nooks, but in the streets they surrendered to the brightness of the star. It really did seem to be pointing downward—a little to the southeast.

“Quickly, now! What we seek is among those buildings.” The Scholar kept glancing upward to correct their course as they proceeded. *A bit to the right. No, back to the left a little. What if we passed it?* When they arrived, however, there was no doubt. Even Clay thought the place looked brighter than its surroundings.

It was a house neither bigger nor smaller than its neighbors; no plainer, no fancier; clean and neat, yet not spotless. A light burned inside, a pale reflection of the warmer welcome that shone down. The Scholar hesitated for a moment, and Clay almost knocked on the door instead.

“The rashness of youth!” The old man moaned, restraining him. “Have you no idea of the magnitude of what lies beyond this door?”

“No, but I won’t find out by standing around out here, either.” The boy looked at his companion more closely. “You really aren’t sure anymore—you’re afraid!”

“I am sure of this much: this is the end of my journey. What lies beyond? A wiser man than I once said that speaking of the statue’s search for the Sculptor is like speaking of the mouse’s search for the cat. The quest kills us, yet we know that life lies beyond. If I must die anyway, let it be after seeing the wonder that has drawn me here!”

The Scholar knocked.

The door opened to reveal a slight young woman—a servant-girl, the Scholar guessed.

“Yes, lord?”

“I have come to see...” He paused. Come to see what?

“The baby,” the girl finished. “You are the first to come in several weeks. We thought there would be no more. Enter, lord; our guests have asked us to let in whoever comes.”

She led them through the house to the guest room, where a young couple was sitting up. News of the visitors had clearly preceded them, and the Scholar apologized for calling at such an hour.

“We’re used to it,” the husband replied. “Or at least we were. There was quite a crowd at first, but everything becomes commonplace after a while.”

“We saw the star and came to find out what it marked.”

“Yes. A few others have told us about the star.”

Clay was startled from his silence. “Told you about it? Can’t you see it?”

“Not from here. But I suppose it doesn’t matter: we know where we are; we need no guide.”

The Scholar took Clay’s hand to guard against further outbursts. “I see. So this is your son.” Away from the starlight, the scene and the people seemed so ordinary that he began to wonder....

“Actually not,” the husband corrected. “The Sculptor formed him Himself. He’s the Sculptor’s son.”

“What! Then he...” The Scholar looked more closely at the child.

Perhaps he saw it, the eyes behind his eyes straining to take in a sight too great for clay to hold. Perhaps he merely knew in his heart what he beheld: a child exactly like any other child, but ruddy with the real blood that flowed through his veins. The baby awoke, and the world heard again the sound it had not known until a few months before: the cry of the first and last baby without a trace of clay.

The Scholar fell to his knees, worshiping and weeping.

Eventually they left. The star was yielding to the mere twilight that they called dawn in that land. The shadows grew bold and again stretched out their darkness, and a small boy and a tired old man neared what passed for a city gate.

The Scholar stopped at the corner where they had left the firewood so long ago. He absentmindedly fiddled with the wood.

A few minutes later, the guard heard a noise from a nearby alley: a clink of metal on stone. In those days, in that land, there were only two types of metal: weapons and money. Either one deserved a look, so he cautiously made his way to the side street and

peered into the darkness. There was an inviting glint on the ground: a gold coin! He looked back toward his post. Nothing happening there. Slowly, carefully, trying to watch every shadow at once, he slithered into the alley. A trap? But there was no waiting knife (as if a robber would risk the Empire's wrath by attacking him!), no lurking figure. He reached down, grasped the coin—and froze. There, in the doorway! A crouching figure!

He picked up the coin. Then he moved warily on, his attention apparently riveted to the street as he breathlessly watched the man in the doorway. Then, just as he came up almost to the man, the guard seemed to spy something on the ground. He knelt down and thrust up and out with his sword. It went right through the figure into the door behind. Then the guard grasped the robe—and the fact that it contained nothing but wood!

Some distance from the town, the Scholar finally slowed to a walk. He was out of breath anyway. Clay wanted to keep running.

“It will be all right, lad; we escaped unseen. Why should the guard chase us when he does not know that we have even left? He may inquire later, but we shall take a different route. For now, I need to rest.”

The boy looked back toward the village. “You're sure he won't come after us?”

The old man merely nodded, and the boy studied his face anxiously.

“You ran too hard again!”

“No,” the Scholar replied, gasping. “My weariness is not of the body. My great hope has come—another like Clay. Will the Sculptor merely begin again with a pure race?”

“How could He do that?”

“Clayfulness is passed from father to child through the father’s blood. This child could produce a race of real people with any woman he chose.” He paused for breath; then he cried, “But how does that help me? I am already clay, and who can cure me? My hope mocks me from the cradle!”

“Don’t talk like that! You said the Sculptor would find a way.”

“But how? I cannot understand....”

“You’re talking like those Sages, now! The Sculptor does more than we think by doing less than we hoped, remember?”

“Yes.” A familiar strength began to creep back into the Scholar’s voice. “He will save me...somehow.” Then a curious look stole over him. “My night has come, boy; but the dawn is breaking! Trust that! Trust Him!”

Clay seized him desperately as he fell. “Don’t leave me! Not now!”

“I have no choice. Go to my friend John; he will care for you. Tell him—tell everyone—that the Dawn is breaking!”

Night came in the early morning, and the old man’s body slept. Clay’s mind was suddenly filled with the image of the serpent coming for its prey, and he turned and ran. He could almost hear the scales scuffing against the earth. Then too, the Scholar’s last words seemed to echo in the wilderness: “The Dawn is breaking!” But they were answered only by the sobbing and the footfalls of a frightened child fleeing into the darkness.

IV. Thieves

It had been years since the baby was born and the child vanished into the darkness, and in a sense both were forgotten. But a new attraction had arisen.

The crowd was large as usual that day, a mixture of noise and awe, commentators and listeners. There are three parts to most crowds: the center of attention, the audience, and the people trying to make a profit. All three were present.

The Man was speaking quietly, yet with a force no mere shout could equal. What he said was simply true, without the exceptions and the twists and turns the Sages always used. The sheer relief of hearing reality spoken, even though they could not comprehend it, drew many. Then there were the miracles.

It was said that the Man had cured every illness, fed the hungry—even removed hardened clay that had bound people for years. All this was astonishing enough, yet there was more: the Man never failed to confound the Sages. As the Sages confounded everyone else, the audience for their humiliation was tremendous.

A small part of the crowd came for this reason alone; several came to see the Man; most were there for some combination of reasons. Some came to watch, some to investigate, a few to believe. Was he a prophet? A king? Someone to amuse them and care for their needs? No one knew, but it was interesting to see what he would do next—and to hope that he would explain himself as clearly as he answered the Sages' questions.

As for the Sages themselves, they were as puzzled as they were outraged. They were experts in prophecy and knew exactly what to look for in the coming King. This upstart clearly wasn't it. He was the wrong sort of person doing the wrong sort of things. What was worse, he wasn't one of them; and what was worst, he refused to become one

of them. Such a lack of humility was clear proof of his evil, just as his failure to meet their expectations was proof of his fraud.

The thieves were mostly on the outskirts of the crowd—such a Man could probably expose them if they got too close!—though rumor had it that one of the Man’s friends was a thief too. Unlike the Sages, the thieves did not know whether the Man was really one of them. Nor did they care, so long as the take was good. The problem was that the most profitable targets were the also most dangerous—the Sages themselves. Their hands seldom strayed far from their wallets, and they were firm believers in speedy punishment. Although the Man had supposedly delivered an adulteress from their wrath, no one wanted to take such a risk.

Two of the thieves in particular were having a bad day. They were old for thieves—most were forcibly retired at an early age—yet experience and skill fail everyone eventually.

“That’s my pocket you’re digging in! I’ll have you on the Tablet for this!” The Sage whirled around surprisingly fast for one of his shape and seized the shoulder of the fleeing man. The Sage’s hand had well-developed muscles from years of finger-pointing and money-grasping, and the grip was as sure as death.

His prisoner was as ragged and rumped as his clothes, with a voice like aged parchment. “Please, my lord, I did nothing! Don’t threaten an old man....” He glanced around quickly, unobtrusively, as if waiting for something.

Or for someone. Suddenly a younger man stepped between the two. He bowed respectfully to the Sage, and pointed down a bit dramatically.

“Gently, Teacher; your money is there on the ground. You can’t blame this poor old man for that!”

The Sage fumed as he bent down for his gold, but his attention was suddenly distracted by something the Man said: some especially irreverent reference to the Sages. “I’ll have him on the Tablet soon, too! Now as for you two...”

The thieves had disappeared.

The younger thief’s respectfulness also vanished once they had gone a safe distance.

“‘Golden fingers,’ eh? And to think you taught me to pick pockets! I’m surprised I can tie my shoes with a teacher like you!”

“Shut up, kid! Remember who got you those shoes, and how. While you’re at it, you might remember who voted to keep you alive all those years ago.”

The younger thief looked away angrily. If only he could forget the night he met the thieves! It had been long ago, when he still had a name—thieves had little use for real names; he had been just ‘kid’ for decades. Names are for people; lumps of clay need only titles and descriptions.

The older thief spun him around roughly. “And if you’d been paying attention instead of gaping at that guy, I could’ve passed the money to you instead of dropping it. D’you know how much you cost us? And all because you had to be watching with the other suckers. I don’t know why you had to drag me here anyway. Did you just want to see that guy? Are you going to go straight and join his group? Or maybe see if he can use another thief?”

“There’s something special about the man—something familiar—and I’ve just got to figure it out.”

The old thief sputtered. “What, even if it costs us our lives?”

“Our lives aren’t worth much these days anyway. We can’t go on like this, and you know it.”

“This just isn’t a good place. We should be in town by the market or on the trail where you don’t have to be so subtle.”

The younger thief laughed. “You can go into the city if want to: it’s swarming with soldiers for you to practice on. The patrols on the roads are pretty bad too: remember what happened to the rest of the gang? Face it—the only safe way to rob people these days is for the government as a tax collector. Anyway, if this guy is all some people say, he may be a way out of this stinking business.”

“What, you mean if he feeds us and clothes us and tucks us in at night? Maybe he’ll scare off the Empire, too.”

“Maybe he will.”

“Look, kid, all he’ll do is get himself killed. The Sages are going to put him on the Tablet—with the Empire’s blessing, of course: they don’t want another loony would-be king stirring up trouble. Nobody with any sense does. So go ahead, hang around with the guy. He’ll get killed, and then the soldiers will come looking for you. I’ve seen it all before.”

“So are you going or staying?”

The old thief glanced toward the city. Then he shrugged. “Aaah, I’ll stick around ’til the show’s over. Might actually pick something up when they leave; who knows? Anyway, we did get a meal out of those dummies...”

“They were a nice family.”

“Sure, kid. Anyway, a full stomach is as good as a day’s wages, so I guess we came out okay. Besides, I haven’t seen a good show in years.”

“What do you mean? He isn’t acting.”

“Maybe he isn’t, but from what I hear, these things all go the same way: he talks for a while, mostly saying clever things that don’t really mean anything, so everybody thinks he’s some kind of genius—people think you’re smart if they can’t understand what you ‘really mean.’ Then the Sages get up and heckle him, and he makes fools of them, and then he gets people so wound up they say they’re healed.”

“You think they aren’t?”

“Look, it’s an old game. Maybe some of it’s real, maybe not. Sometimes I think the Sages must be getting paid to look stupid, but they’re too proud to take a fall for anyone. So that part’s probably real. But the rest of it?”

The younger thief turned away angrily and gazed at the Man. “I still say he isn’t acting. Maybe the rest of them are, maybe everything else is a fake, but you can’t tell me he is.”

“So maybe he isn’t. The best games have a sucker up front who really believes it all. If I didn’t know the Sages were going to shut it down, maybe I would try to get in. But they are, so it’s not worth it. Rumor has it they’ve already put a price on his head, and someone’s going to take it. Besides, some of the Imperials are getting too interested.

They say old Brutish himself wants to get involved, so you know it's gonna get nasty.”

The younger thief paled at the mention of Brutus, and his companion laughed. “You have to grow up sometime, kid; you're getting too old to believe stuff like this. What are you, forty?”

The younger thief scowled. “Maybe you're getting too old not to believe something. Or maybe I'm getting old enough to realize we can't keep this up forever. Anyway, just shut up and listen if you're staying, or leave if you aren't. I want to hear the man.”

The older thief shrugged. They sat and listened for a while. The Man was doing well: his popularity had increased incredibly since he came to the City. Everyone knew about him, and almost the whole City had come out to hear him. The event followed the outline the older thief had given, as he was quick to point out. “Preaching, clowns, and magic. Now if I ran the thing, I'd have the preaching in between, and pass the hat a little.”

The younger thief scowled. “He doesn't pass the hat at all.”

“He doesn't turn anyone down, either. Anyway, I hear some of the ladies are paying him to preach. Women are always trying to spread a little morality around.”

“The ones you hang around with don't. Now shut up! He's saying something again.”

The Man stepped forward with a deliberate air. He wasn't trying to be dramatic, but the importance of what he had to say was clear. The crowd hushed: the time had come for him to announce his kingship!

“You cannot be part of my Kingdom unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood.”

The crowd was astonished. As soon as the shock passed, people began hurrying away.

“That does it,” the old thief cackled. “I heard he said something like that once, but I never thought he’d be dumb enough to do it again!”

The younger thief was almost in tears. “He must mean something else! He’s too wise—too good—to say such a thing.”

“Look at the bright side, kid: at least he’s a generous cannibal—he’ll let others go first.”

“Shut up! Just shut up!” The younger thief was crying now, like a disappointed child. “I thought he was better. I thought he was... It was like he did it on purpose, just to get rid of the gawkers. But why?”

“Don’t take it so hard. Maybe they already ate and didn’t want any. Anyway, he didn’t get rid of everybody—look over there!”

The scene captured the younger thief’s attention. Some statues carried a struggling, cursing boy to the Man. They seemed as frightened as everyone else, but much more desperate. They spoke to him quickly, pleadingly, as the child tried to escape or at least to injure himself or them.

The Man looked at the boy, seeing what clay-covered eyes could not. The statues were hollow inside, for all the emptiness they put there not only did not fill the hole left there by the ancient fruit, it made it worse, as if one could compress a vacuum and put a mountain-sized hole into a heart-sized space. Yet in this case there was more and worse

than mere nothingness. A toad-like face peered out at the Man, almost too frightened to bluff.

“What do you want, Servant of the Sculptor? My time has not yet come. Leave me alone!”

“Your time is closer than you know; but for now, come out of this boy!”

Those standing near the Man heard only the command. They certainly knew nothing of the struggle, nor did they feel it when the earth shook.

Now, no one would strike an Imperial soldier, for to do so would be to strike the Empire itself—and who could be so strong or so foolish? Removing one of the serpent’s toads meant defeating the serpent himself—and who could be so powerful?

Yet only the serpent’s voice emerged from the ground; he had been defeated every time he had risen up to fight, and he was beginning to learn from his experience. “I don’t know who you think you are, but the time has not come. Just leave us alone, or you’ll regret it. I control these creatures, you know.”

“I control you. Get out.”

The only answer was a retreating growl. The toad fell from the boy, who immediately hugged the Man in joyful relief. It wasn’t the proper thing to do, but the Man hugged him back as though no clay covered the child. Yet there was no mark or stain on the Man when he sent the boy back to his parents. One with eyes to see would have witnessed the child’s mire melting away to nothing as it neared the Man, for his cleanliness was not just a lack of mire but an all-conquering purity no filth could corrupt.

The younger thief shook his head. “I don’t get it. If he’s just a weirdo, how can he do that? And if he’s for real, how can he say such things?”

His companion moved away, muttering. There was something different about the older thief, something frightening.

“What’s the matter? I thought you said you liked a good show—if that was just a show. Hey! Come back! Wait!”

But the older thief was running wildly away, and his only answer sounded like a croak.

It was night before the two thieves met again. A day of careful, cautious searching had revealed nothing, and the younger thief finally gave up. It was too late to leave the City easily: the gates would be guarded. Considering how his companion had been acting, he had probably been picked up by a patrol a long time before.

And patrols were everywhere: the thief knew from long experience that there was some kind of alert out. The soldiers were doing their best to keep out of sight while they watched the streets. Maybe they had caught his friend and were looking for him! Or maybe they just knew a madman was loose. It made no difference.

The thief used all his skills to move toward the city center, where the soldiers would probably be more widely scattered: they seemed more interested in keeping someone from leaving the City. Yet it was still well past curfew, and the thief wasn’t up to answering awkward questions. He paused in the sheltering shadow of a large building, away from such light as the heavens offered. The building’s protection mocked the flimsy cover of darkness. If he could just get in, he would be saved!

From above he heard voices: it was a house. Well, it was that part of town, he supposed. He listened for a moment, and a familiar voice came to him.

“Remember what I told you: these are My body and blood. You must eat them until we are together again. Remember!”

It was the Man! And there was more to what he had said that afternoon! The thief listened for a moment longer; then he realized that the Man and his followers must have been leaving. What a strange message! It echoed in the thief’s mind, especially the final command, strong and imperative as a general’s order, passionate and imploring as a lover’s farewell: “Remember!”

Somewhere in the depths of the thief’s being, in a place made for and by forgetting, the word began to untie ancient knots, to free mummified memories of long ago. It was not done in a moment, but it was a beginning; and some processes, once begun, can never end, only succeed.

In the meantime, though, something immediate did happen: soldiers’ footsteps approached, and hushed and urgent inquiries were made.

A voice croaked angrily. “He’s gone! I told you to get a move on!”

“We would have been here long ago if you hadn’t insisted on counting the money twice!” The second voice was somehow much like the first, though the tone was more educated.

“Well, no matter. I know where he’s going. Come on!”

The mob moved away, and the thief sighed with relief. Just then he heard another group coming from the other direction: probably a patrol looking for the source of the hubbub. The thief pressed back into the shadows—and into something hiding there. The person or creature croaked with rage and bolted into the street and the patrol. The next

thing the thief knew, he was staring up at an Imperial soldier, while nearby the remains of a familiar face leered at him.

V. The Travail of His Soul

It was a dismal morning, more an extension of the long, weary night before. The Tablet crouched in the yard, surrounded by an army of jagged blades set up in perverse homage to it. Around these a crowd was collecting. Everyone glanced at the Tablet, but none could look at it for long. It was so ancient, so dark, so cold and unyielding, who could believe that it had ever been a living thing?

A Sage approached the knife-like letters. They formed a path spiraling toward the Tablet, but he took a shorter, more direct route. There was a narrow path through the blades, clear and smooth, but only the foreign soldiers who officiated at the executions used it. No Sage would even consider taking such a route. Carefully, painfully, the Sage made his way to the Tablet, using a path he knew well. He had long ago learned to walk it with a minimum of injury. He pulled his richly embroidered robes up and away from the stains left by others less skillful in avoiding the sharpness of the torturous letters.

Finally he stood by the Tablet. He gazed at it with a mixture of love and awe. One of his old teachers used to lecture about the beauty of the words etched so deeply in the ancient stump. Elihu, that was it—whatever did happen to him? The Sage reached out, not quite daring to touch the letters. He had decided long ago that the true beauty of the Tablet was not in its words but in the efficiency and the ruthless consistency of its letters. Unlike the blades the Sage had just crossed, these letters never failed to draw all the miry blood from their victims, and the life they drank never stained their edges.

Soon the Tablet would swallow more life, make it vanish without a trace as it had always done. From what he had heard, the victims were all so filthy the letters would tear them apart. One of the prisoners in particular.

The three were marched in through the gate as victims always were. Two of them were ordinary Tablet-fodder: mere thieves who had strayed too far from their den. The third was different, more unusual: a rabble-rouser who was stirring up imperial wrath against the people. He also had no respect for the Day of Rest, and taught many other strange and horrible practices. Some even said that he claimed that his followers would eat his flesh and drink his blood! What was more and worse (to the Sage, anyway), the man actually seemed to think himself immune to the Tablet, and he opposed the smaller blades that the Sages had erected in its honor.

The Sage smiled. Soon the blades, big and small, would testify against him. It was always soothing to watch someone else's righteousness yield to the perfection of the Law. Of course, the untrained found it reminded them of their own softness and frailty. The Sages, however, knew that the Law existed to punish those who denied it; it could never turn on those who worshiped it.

The Sage's musings were interrupted by the sound of the soldiers calling the condemned forward. The soldiers were running things, of course; the execution had to be according to their specifications. They had almost as many rules as the Sages, though theirs were only ones they had made up themselves. Brutus Tyrranus himself, gray and terrible, had shown up to represent the Empire. Though the Sage despised the foreigner, he felt a certain kinship and admiration for him as well: the man knew how to keep the rabble in line.

Finally the condemned were led to the circle of blades, the so-called teacher sandwiched between the two thieves. The ceremony required them to walk the entire spiral course to the Tablet to ensure that they would feel every letter of the text.

Meanwhile, other Sages would thread their way carefully through the safer, more direct path to join the one waiting at the Tablet. No Sage would accompany the prisoners on their last march; the Sages wanted to avoid touching the filth that would gush from such evil people. Those watching the spectacle might even think that some of the mire had come from the Sage himself. It was better not to confuse the unlearned.

As the prisoners stepped onto the knife-edges, the thieves began cursing. The other simply walked on quietly except for groans and what sounded like prayers. The groans reassured the waiting Sage. For a moment he thought that the blasphemer (for so the Sages' official charge read) felt no pain. He clearly was suffering as much as the others, though the Sage could not help wondering if it was for the same reason: the blasphemer did not wince with each step the way the others did. The Sage studied the Man's feet. They weren't bleeding! But the Sage knew that they were bleeding—all feet bled on the blades; only real flesh could resist them, and no blasphemer...

The Sage scowled. The Man must be bleeding. He must, he must! Then he saw something dark by those feet. It could have been, probably was, from the thief in the lead; none of it clung to the Man's feet, though he must certainly have touched it. But the Sage preferred to imagine that it flowed from the blasphemer's feet. That decided, he soon was able to see what had to be slashes gushing the blackest mire he had ever imagined. Good! There was nothing different about this man after all! He could fool the untrained rabble, but a properly trained eye could discover faults where others saw only innocence.

Muck poured from an ancient well near the Sage's heart, but he was too busy to notice.

Meanwhile the thieves had realized that the easiest way to forget their own torment was to attack someone else.

“Hey, Holy Man! Why don’t you flatten out these blades for us?” The older thief had been a wild man when the soldiers caught him; he had since become less violent but more full of curses. The younger thief had been different, but whether from despair or simple weakness, he could no longer resist his companion’s mocking spirit.

“Yeah, you’re supposed to be a king—what are these things you’re walking on, rose petals? There must be an easier way to the palace!”

The Man gave no reply; he just trudged on resolutely, loathing the agony that awaited him. The onlookers thought they knew what that pain was, and some pitied him. Yet the thieves found his silence maddening.

“Come on, change these blades to flowers, then.”

“I think he has—can’t you feel the thorns?”

On they all went, circling ever closer to the Tablet. As the pain grew, the comfort of the insults and jokes diminished. The younger thief at the end of the procession stopped talking and started thinking. Remembering. He tested his bonds again, though he knew it would make no difference. There were too many guards and no way to leave the circle quickly, even if he could still run. And there was Brutus, following them from outside the circle, waiting for them to reach the Tablet before he took the foreigner’s path. But still... The thief tried again.

The knots held. The thief knew well how it felt to be bound by an expert, and the guard who had tied his hands was clearly no amateur. The last time he had been tied so firmly was...when? Through the agony that pierced him, a memory stirred. Something,

someone, somehow was familiar here. He strained to recollect something a child had known—something a child could see—once so long ago. He examined the Man more closely than ever before. Something about him just wasn't right. Or maybe it was completely right, and it was that which puzzled him.

They were at the Tablet. The jagged edges of the letters seemed longer than before; the bladed surface suggested the wide-open mouth of a monstrous serpent. Unmoved, the Sages separated the prisoners. For the first time the second thief really looked at the Man's face—and into his eyes.

“Well, King, it looks like I'll get to warm up your throne for you,” the first thief said. His tone was not as confident as his words, and suddenly the foolishness of it all nearly took the younger thief's breath away.

“We're about to die! We lived like fools; we certainly shouldn't die that way. We deserve this, but this man hasn't done anything to...”

A Sage's fist interrupted him, and as he staggered, his eyes cleared. For the first time in such a long time, he could see truly. His hands, invisible under their coating of black, brackish slime, halted before they could touch the bruise on his face. Not that his face was any cleaner—he had no illusions about that! The worst fear is to be horrified of yourself, the bogey you cannot escape; and he was almost to that point. Yet he did not have quite enough time to be completely appalled at his own filthiness or even to examine the mire that covered his executioners. Something else caught his attention: a Man without spot of clay, standing in a pool of light, as if the haze above had opened to let some of the blazing power above fall on one who alone could survive its heat. And

then the thief knew and remembered what he had not dared think about for years—a hope he could not understand, like a light shining in the darkness.

A cry broke his thoughts. The first thief was being placed on the Tablet—he was already squirming from the slightest touch of the letters. What would he do when the Sages stretched him full length on the jagged edges?

The thief howled with agony. As he fought to escape the blades, they bit deeper, causing ooze and curses to pour from his being and making him struggle even more desperately.

It was the first time the younger thief had ever really seen his companion. Had all that darkness and stench actually been inside him all along? The thief shuddered. “There’s worse in me: he was largely ignorant, but I knew what I was doing. I chose to run.” He began to inspect himself again: it helped him ignore what was happening on the Tablet, and it also was morbidly fascinating. Looking into the blackness practically drew him inside, deeper and deeper, like a bottomless pit. He was collapsing in on himself.

A sound roused him from his fall. Was the Man offering to help the thief on the Tablet? If so, the dying form only vomited blasphemy in answer, together with pitiful whimpers as his agony became too great even for screams. As the last of his life seeped into the gouged writing beneath him, he crumpled in on himself until only a withered shell remained. Something like a small toad hopped free at the last moment and disappeared. Then the final clay-sodden trace of the being who had lived in the shell began sinking through the Tablet toward the ground, toward the earth’s very core. Yet it had not disappeared completely when it was seized.

Most of the people there could not even sense it. Probably only one pair of eyes saw it. The Man's face set with grim determination as he watched the thing rise from deep within the earth and superimpose itself on the Tablet. It was the head and neck of a monstrous serpent. Quick as death, the iron fangs struck at the husk on the Tablet, as though the stone-like surface itself had snapped shut on the heap. The fangs sank deep into the soft, helpless blob. The serpent surveyed the crowd for a moment, the Man in particular; then it dove beneath the surface, pulling some part of what had been the thief down into the ground. The shell on the Tablet was now quite empty.

The Sages had the remains cleared away with practiced efficiency. The Tablet, as always, left behind no hint of the ooze it had absorbed. It was as empty—as hungry—as ever. The Sages turned toward the Man; he seemed to smile, for all his pain.

“What do you want Me to do?”

“You will get on the Tablet, Blasphemer,” the Sage croaked.

“As you wish.”

He was smiling! Something, somehow, had gone right! But what? The remaining thief was so stunned by the Man's reaction that he almost forgot what he had decided to say. Then, just as the Man sat on the edge of the Tablet, the thief remembered.

“My King, grant me a place in your Kingdom!”

The Man looked at him and smiled a quieter smile—of reassurance rather than victory. “You shall be with Me in My Kingdom today.”

Then he stretched out on the Tablet.

At first it appeared to have no effect: he simply lay there on top of the razor letters. The thief was not altogether surprised; in fact, he had almost expected it. But he

remembered something he had heard long before: anyone who was placed on the Tablet was cursed, regardless of his innocence. What of the curse?

The next moment gave the thief his answer, for the Man seemed somehow to let himself down, to let the blades pierce his flesh. But how could that be? Blood poured forth: not sludge, not clay, but pure life, red as wine. And the life did something no mere clay could have done. Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the letters changed. There was something different about them—but what?

The letters were filling up. The blood overflowed the grooves and ran up the blades, covering them. Soon the entire top of the Tablet was encased in crimson. The thief glanced at the Sages, astonished. Could no one else see? Then he noticed another change: the light that had fallen on the Man had gone out. Even the usual twilight of day was fading to night. There were shadows everywhere, converging on the Tablet.

On the Tablet the Man finally screamed in agony. He had cried out when the blades entered his flesh, of course, but this was different: a cry of utter aloneness. It was as if a thunderclap wept, as if something stronger and greater than a man could imagine were meeting a torment almost as great. And as he cried, he grew darker—not just with deeper shadow, though the shadows seemed to swarm him. Something too black to be conceived—almost too black to be seen—was beginning to cover him.

It was clay: the foulest, most putrid filth that the world would ever know. Where did it come from? From the Tablet itself? Or was it drawn to him from the four winds? The thief imagined for a moment (though it was an absurd idea) that the clay came from him and perhaps from the other statues in the courtyard. Anyway, the thought of the muck touching the spotless Man was almost too much for the thief to bear. All that dirt

and cold! For even if the light had still been shining down, it could not have penetrated the shell of clay that encased the Man as completely as his blood encased the letters on the Tablet. And suddenly there was no light shining down at all—not on the Man, not on the crowd, not anywhere, as though Light itself had gone out or turned completely away. Though the thief had little experience with or love for light, its loss still tore at his clay heart.

It was over as quickly as it had begun: the veil over the heavens was ripped away. By some mercy, the legendary sun was not up; otherwise the statues would have been burned to stone on the spot. Yet a few rays shone blood-red over the horizon, and Spring and sunrise both seemed quite near. The light clearly showed the clay-covered form of the Man, stretched out as though in a deep sleep.

It was over. Somehow they all knew it: the Man was dead. Brutus looked at the mess on the Tablet and impulsively stabbed it in the side: the Empire was taking no chances. The other soldier with him seemed horrified. Had he understood? Had he seen what happened? Not that it made any difference. Brutus sneered at the soldier's weakness and began laughing viciously, almost uncontrollably. Then a change came over what was left of his face. He clutched at his heart and fell behind the Tablet out of sight, destroyed in his moment of triumph. Others gawked at him, and the Sages had him removed from the area, while the garrison commander took his place at the Tablet. Only the remaining thief remembered the form on the Tablet and glanced at it again. That is why he was probably the only one who saw what happened.

The Man was dead. Yet where the first thief had crumpled in on himself, this form did not shrink—if anything it was a little larger than the Man himself had been. Nor

did any part of it begin to fall through the Tablet. It just hung there. The serpent head rose from the earth and through the Tablet greedily seized the shell. The snake yanked hard enough to pull a mountain down. Yet nothing happened: the form did not budge. After a moment, as if some point had been proved, the form descended deliberately into the earth, leaving its old shell behind. The movement must have caught the serpent by surprise, for its jaws briefly went slack, almost releasing its prey. Then it began pulling with all its might—to no avail: the form continued to descend at the same slow, deliberate pace.

After the mass of clay had sunk out of sight into the ground, the Sages had the soldiers remove the shell from the Tablet. (The Sages themselves refused to touch the dead.) The thief wanted to see what became of the body, but he was soon on the edge of the Tablet and facing away from whatever funeral procession might have awaited the remains. He did notice something curious: the blades in the circle around the Tablet lay limp and withered on the ground like so many wilted weeds. The Tablet's wide-open serpent jaws were no longer frightening either, as though someone had permanently lodged an unbreakable stick in its mouth. The former thief felt so relieved at the sight, and it struck him as so fittingly absurd, that he began laughing, his own pains completely forgotten. A Sage shouted at him to be quiet (perhaps they did realize that something had gone wrong!) and shoved him viciously down on the blade-letters of the Tablet.

The thief flinched for a pain that never came. The Tablet was smooth as a giant ruby, and felt warm on his back. He stretched out willingly on its length. There was a burning sensation, but it was less like a fire than like hot water sloughing off years of mud. The Sage screeched at him, but somehow he no longer cared. The Sage pounded on

the glassy, red surface, and then he drew his hands back in pain. They were burned half off! He poked at the crimson again, with much the same result.

Then the thief saw that the furious Sage was dripping mire on the tablet as he cursed under his breath. The clay vanished the moment it touched the surface, as though completely dissolved. Suddenly the thief realized that the red absorbed all clay—and anything that clung to the clay. If someone surrendered himself and his filth to the red covering, he would be cleansed; but anyone touching the blood and clutching his filth would be burned away with the mire. Could it be? Was real cleansing finally possible?

As he looked at the Tablet, the thief noticed something else: the redness that covered up the letter-blades made the words themselves stand out more clearly than ever. He saw that the words were only the letters of a greater word: a commandment, a promise, a truth large as Life and deeper than the world could hold; a word so vast that mere statues had to break it into smaller ideas such as Love, Truth, and Holiness. How could anyone respond to such a revelation?

For the word was a name.

The Sages began picking at the crimson barrier with knives, staffs, anything they could find, but failed to make even the slightest dent in the unyielding surface. (Their descendants are still occupied with this task to this day, and some of them imagine that they are succeeding.) The thief smiled as a ray of light broke through the veil and warmed him. Even when he was stabbed by the commander, who looked strangely like Brutus, the thief managed one final laugh through the final pain, saying, “Yes, Teacher, the Dawn has broken at last!”

Then Clay’s body slept.

VI. The Worlds Outside

At first Clay was aware of sinking not down but out. For he was in some sense outside of his old world, and moving in a direction he could not have imagined a moment before. The change so distracted him that he briefly forgot that he was dead. Then he remembered and began scanning his surroundings nervously. Where was the serpent? It would be coming for him soon, reaching out to drag him away against his will to someplace he would rather not go.

There it was! The head hung motionless below him—or beside him: he had not yet figured out how directions worked in this place. Why didn't it seize him? Then he saw that the jaws still held (or rather, were closed around) the clay-covered figure of the Man. The figure reached out an arm, and a shining hand suddenly emerged from the blackness. The Man greeted him as he laid his burning hand on Clay's shoulder.

“They certainly took their time! I've been waiting for you. Come, there is someone who has been waiting even longer.”

They descended, while the snake frantically coiled in to keep pace. The serpent evidently wanted to preserve some illusion that he was pulling them in, though the Man stopped and started occasionally as if to demonstrate his freedom. Clay couldn't help feeling a certain mischievous pleasure at the snake's frustration. He looked at the hand on his shoulder. It still bore the marks of the Tablet, all the way up the arm to... He blinked.

There was something unusually clear about the region, despite its darkness, and it was neither possible nor necessary to doubt one's eyes there. Yet even so Clay stared at the Man's arm. The clay did not in fact touch the Man; it merely surrounded him, kept at bay by some light that radiated from his very being.

Clay thought he heard a suppressed chuckle. “You can laugh at a time like this?”

The mass of clay trembled, as if it would collapse into nothingness at any moment. “It is very hard not to! But this flimsy shell could never withstand the force, and I wish to keep it for now. The laugh shall wait—but not for long!”

Then Clay saw that they were approaching two realms, one large and dimly lit, the other small and dark but fiery. The serpent tried to draw them toward the dark place, but the Man slipped easily from his grasp and escorted Clay toward the other area. The head darted after them, but it could get no grip on the Man, who kept himself between the fangs and Clay. The snake must have decided simply to keep pace with them, but eventually he had to give up.

The gulf between the two realms was too great for the serpent to span; Clay suddenly realized that the world he had just left lay between the two areas. The journey had been outward from the old world rather than toward either region, and they had only just started heading for their destination.

The serpent snapped like an angry dog behind them; then he called out, “You can’t stay there! You’re mine, and you’re coming with me! I’ll tell the Sculptor!” Yet he could only wait and watch, weaving from side to side like a cobra guarding its prey.

Meanwhile the Man paid him no attention, and so neither did Clay after he got over his initial fright.

As they approached the lighted realm, Clay saw that it was a sort of garden or park, walled against the surrounding night and full of forests and meadows. The whole place seemed caught at that last moment of twilight before night falls or day breaks. Clay looked at his companion expectantly. It wouldn’t be twilight long!

Yet when the Man reached the garden, he did not stay. He merely said to the people there, “Give me your load of clay; you no longer need to bear it. I have come to take it where it belongs.” So he gathered their clay and added it to the mass he already carried—it made little change. Finally he rose into the air. “I will return for you soon. I have concluded some business with the snake, and I want to tell him and his prisoners about it.”

Then he was gone, crossing the void between the garden and the pit so quickly that the serpent lagged behind for all his speed. The inhabitants of the garden laughed, and Clay found one of the laughs familiar.

The people in that realm were easily identified: if you looked at someone long enough or took the time to listen to his voice, you could tell who he was or had been, and what he had done. It was scarcely harder to recognize someone you had never met than it was a member of your own family. Death, for better or worse, always makes you more of what you already had been, and thus more clearly yourself. And once the clay had been removed, there was nothing there that wasn't really part of the person's identity. So it should be no surprise that Clay recognized a voice in the crowd—then a face, then a person. “Teacher!”

The Scholar hugged him. “So you finally became a man, my child.”

“Only right before I died.”

“Well, it is better than never. I was allowed to watch your rescue.”

“I failed, Teacher. I left you alone and ran off in the wrong direction. And since then... Well, I've only done one thing right since then.”

“Indeed; but it was the best thing you could have done, and that is enough. I bear you no grudge. The One you offended has already forgiven you, and I cannot and will not disagree with Him.”

“Still, I did waste a lot of time. At the end I saw things so clearly. What could I have been if I’d just done what you said?”

“That is a question I doubt will ever be answered, for it would be cruel to show someone what might have been when there is no remedy for it; and the Sculptor is not cruel. Yet there will always be aspects of His nature that you will see more clearly than anyone else—things as uniquely yours as a name no one else knows. You have lost a great deal, but the Sculptor will make something wonderful of you yet.”

The Scholar turned, as though hearing something. “Wait! The Man has arrived—he has crossed the gap no one else could cross!” He pointed toward the dark, fiery realm, and Clay found that after looking and listening for a moment, he could see and hear what was happening over there.

The serpent gathered in his tail as he examined the Man; a searing, venomous scowl grew on the scaly face, and then it twisted into a victorious sneer. Finally he laughed aloud, opening his mouth wide enough to reveal the reason he had been unable to hold the Man: his row upon row of teeth—more like a lamprey’s than like a serpent’s—were broken off, as though the snake had tried to bite something harder than diamond. The stubs were sealed over with a familiar crimson glaze. Clay wondered whether it had happened when the Tablet overflowed, or when the snake first bit the Man. But whatever the details, it had happened, and the serpent clapped his mouth shut in sudden realization. Yet when he spoke, he betrayed no embarrassment.

“I’ve got you at last! You thought you could outwit me—start over again! But now I will teach you what torment is—and how to worship me!”

Through the clay the Man seemed to hold the serpent’s gaze. Clay could almost see him cock an eyebrow at the snake’s words. “I already know more about torment than you will ever imagine. And as to worshipping you, I never did it before, and I don’t see why I should begin now. I did not come here to be tortured, much less to worship you. I wish to talk to your prisoners; then there will be time to deal with you.”

And he calmly walked away.

The serpent sputtered. “What! Wait! I am God here! No one ignores me! No one gives me orders! You come back here and worship me!” His arrow-shaped head whipped toward the clay-covered mass, but somehow his fangs failed to get a grip on the Man. The serpent tried again and again, until finally he made a loop of his tail and placed it over the Man, only to find himself helpless to pull his tail back. The Man walked on apparently unaware of the snake’s efforts, dragging the indignant creature backwards. After bellowing some of his best curses, the snake grabbed a stalagmite with his powerful jaws—only to find himself stretched thinner and thinner until the rock broke loose and sent him flying into some of his prize mire, taken from some of the most pustulent prisoners.

This would have been bad enough, but the mire was (as the Scholar had said) really nothing but nothing: non-existence colored and folded in on itself in perverse spiritual origami so that it looked like something. So the serpent kept going, as if he had dived headfirst into an empty pool. The impact could be heard and felt all over the realm by as many as were not forever lost in their self-inflicted misery.

“Stop laughing!” the snake shrieked, pushing his mouth barely out of the mess.
“I’ll blast anyone who so much as smirks!”

He crawled painfully out. Some of his toad-like underlings were a little too slow stifling their laughter, and he threw a coil around them so tight that they almost merged into an amphibian Cerberus.

Clay and the Scholar, meanwhile, like the other residents of the light realm, were doubled over with laughter. Clay finally stammered, “I’m about to die laughing!” The Scholar retorted, “It is too late for that now!” and they started all over again. By the time they could bring themselves to look again into the darkened realm, the serpent had just managed to regain control of his minions. (The rest of the place was still chaotic in patches, though most had been so intent on themselves that they had missed the episode.)

“Silence, fools! Don’t you know why I did that?”

One of the toads mumbled an ill-considered explanation and was batted into the miry bog himself. The serpent guffawed, and then he continued.

“I only decided to let the creature have a little more rope. I will allow him to preach all he wants,” he hissed magnanimously. “It will make the let-down that much sweeter. When he bows before me and begs for mercy, I’ll...I’ll...I’ll throw him in the bog! In the meantime, we must think of tortures we have never imagined before. He is a special guest, and we shall have to keep him entertained for the rest of eternity!”

The toads looked doubtful, but nodded agreement. The serpent ran his tongue out in warning. “You admit that I tricked him into thinking he could beat me. I tricked him. I tricked him. I tricked him...” On and on he went, over and over they repeated it after him, until they all seemed to believe it—even the serpent himself.

The Scholar pulled Clay back. “Do not bother listening to him repeat himself like that. It wears the brain out.”

“He doesn’t appear to be very bright.”

“Actually, he has a great deal of intelligence; it has just become separated from him. Look, there it is, behind him.”

Clay peered once more into the shadowy world across the gulf. There was a small withered thing like a tiny dragon sprawled behind the serpent. The dragonet must have been magnificent once, but its colors had long since faded to dingy clay color. Then the serpent, having given his underlings another mantra to practice, brought his head back and began consulting in whispers with the other reptile. Clay looked at the Scholar, but he either could not hear the conversation himself or else did not care to repeat it.

“One of the many problems with clay is that it lacks individuality,” the Scholar said. “One lump of clay looks pretty much like any other lump until the Sculptor crafts it into something unique. That is another reason why the Rebellion destroyed our fellowship with Him: one cannot know a lump of clay, only a person. For a mere lump of clay has no real name by which it may be known: only a person can have an actual name.

“The mire-encrusted mind likewise loses its individuality. After you are exposed to clay long enough, it dulls your thinking, and you either lose the ability to think for yourself (like most of the poor creatures over there, who only have one or two phrases muttering mindlessly on and on in their heads) or you separate your intelligence from yourself, as the serpent has done. It is something he uses, but it is no longer a part of him and cannot truly guide him.”

“I see what you mean,” Clay said. “Everyone over there seems to be either a blob or a bunch of fragments.”

“Yes; everything that makes up a real person either blends together into a single, useless mass, or falls away from everything else. I cannot say which is worse. On the one hand, the blobs are destroyed by becoming largely mindless lumps of self-inflicted pain; on the other hand, the fragments tear themselves apart so that the pieces wither and mummify. In either case the result is the same: the creatures are destroyed—incurably changed for the worse—without knowing the peace of annihilation.”

“I wonder if we’re any better,” Clay replied. “We’re clean now, but we’re also empty. I feel like I’m only half a man.”

“You are, and so am I. Yet we are no less men than we were before—in fact, we are closer to being men than ever. In taking our clay, though, the Man only relieved some of the discomfort: one cannot remove a hole, remember; it must be filled in. For clayfulness is not just the absence of life and light. If life were a mountain, the mere absence of life would be a plain; clayfulness, however, would be an almost bottomless canyon.

“That is one of the things I see clearly now which used to puzzle me: when we Sages spoke of the mire as a hole, we believed it could be filled with ordinary life, such as the blood of an animal. Now I realize that the use of animals was only a picture of what was to come, for there is not enough life in any animal to fill up the canyon. Even the life of a man—indeed, even the life of a perfect Man, such as your rescuer—could not possibly fill the canyon. It is nearly bottomless, so only a nearly infinite life could fill it. Yet where can we find such a life? I still do not know.”

“Are you sure that he is just a perfect Man?” Clay asked. “The serpent thinks so, and I’m sure he’s wrong about a lot of other things. Did you know that the Man isn’t really covered with the slime? It just hovers around him. And he’s overflowing with light: I don’t think I could have survived his touch before he removed my clay.”

The Scholar looked at him, pondering an idea too large for a clay-tinged mind to conceive. “The couple in that town so long ago said that he was the son of the Sculptor. It was an astonishing thought then, yet I supposed he had come only to begin Clay’s line over. What a fool I was! The Sculptor never goes back without also going forward! He always does more and better than we could have dared imagine. No, he will not return us to the days before the serpent taught us to die: they are forever gone. Yet in a sense He has brought us back to those days with a second Clay.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Sculptor usually takes something old and fills it to overflowing with new meaning. We shall be as different from the old Clay as this new Clay is.”

“But how? And what will He fill us with?”

“I do not know how, but I do know that He will fill us. It also brings up another question: if the Man is the second Clay, who shall the second Zoe be? Perhaps the myths were right after all: the morning has found the Sculptor dead in His studio; but can the other version be true as well? Will His love yet bring the statue to life?”

“Will it?”

“I cannot say. The outlook is promising though.” The Scholar gazed across the void. “Look at him preaching to those poor creatures down there. Can they have any idea what is happening?”

“I can’t hear what he’s saying.”

“Neither can I; no doubt it is something we do not need to know. Yet there is something more important that I am convinced that we soon shall know: What does he have to say to the serpent?”

“I know what I would say to the serpent, but it would be my clayfulness talking,” a new voice answered. It was not a completely new voice, however, and Clay recognized the speaker even before he turned and looked at him.

“John! You’re here too!”

The Scholar cocked an eyebrow. “You suppose that one of my favorite students would have wound up over there?”

“No, I just didn’t know that he was—”

“Dead? Yes. It happens to the best of us,” John said. Then he glanced across the gulf. “To the very best of us, it seems. What is he doing?”

“I suppose we shall find out soon enough,” the Scholar answered.

“I apologized to Elihu,” Clay told John, “and now I should apologize to you, too. I heard that you ran into trouble because of me.”

“The Imperials did question me, but that wasn’t really why I left the city. My wife didn’t survive, nor my second boy. There was nothing left for me there, so I went back to my hometown. At least my son Joseph amounted to something in the end.”

“He is still alive, and he is one of the few Sages with a real interest in the truth,” the Scholar explained.

“And your wife?” Clay asked, looking around. He was sure he would be able to recognize her even though he had never seen her before.

“She’s around here somewhere. I just came over to see what you and Elihu were talking about. We saw you arrive, of course: not everyone gets that kind of escort. When most people die and come here, the serpent seizes them—it seems to be his job—but a Messenger from the Sculptor makes him turn them over, and the Messenger brings them here. Of course, Brutus was an exception too.”

“What happened to him?”

“When he died, the serpent grabbed him and tossed him over there. I think the snake was worried about missing his main target. He had his eyes fixed on the Man from the moment he got on the Tablet.” John turned just then, hearing his former wife’s voice in the crowd, and left to talk to her.

Clay was surprised at first, but soon realized that the people who lived in the twilight garden were very casual about coming and going: everyone would still be there later, for there was nowhere else to go. With the passing years they had grown into a group of friends closer than any family.

On the other hand, there were plenty of people in the dark realm, but they were all too concerned with themselves to notice or care about anyone else, no matter how important or dear they had been in life.

Clay looked back at the dark realm for a moment, amazed at the number of residents. “I suppose most people come here, though.”

The Scholar shook his head. “I do not think so, Clay.”

“But the other place seems so much smaller than this one. Why would that be if most people went there?”

“It is smaller—but so are they. The people who go there have collapsed in on themselves; they need very little space.”

“They also don’t move around as much as we do,” John added, returning as suddenly as he had left, this time with his wife and child. “We like to look out and around; they only look in—and that doesn’t take anything like as much room.”

John was about to introduce his wife and son properly when suddenly the Scholar pointed to the dark realm. “I think that the serpent is up to something: whenever he twitches his tail like that, it means he has thought of some new evil.”

They watched and listened, and soon one of the serpent’s toads went to fetch the Man. “The Master says that you have played long enough. He wants to see you right now.”

“I will talk to him tomorrow; this is the Day of Rest, and what I have to say and do to him really ought to wait until tomorrow.”

“What!” The serpent’s roar overflowed his realm; the residents of the paradise across the gulf could hear it quite plainly. He darted from his throne to the place where the Man stood. “You never had any respect for the Day of Rest while you were alive!”

“I always respected it; I was just never enslaved by it. And why do you insist on acting as though I were not alive? I have died, but I have never ceased to be alive. It would be a contradiction in terms.”

“The only terms you’ll care about are my terms, and you’ll care about them now!”

“As I already said, you shall have to wait until tomorrow. I’m not bound by the Day of Rest—or by any Law, for that matter—but I do appreciate a good piece of symbolism. The business I have concluded with you should be proclaimed on the first

day of the week, and so it shall. And speaking of proclaiming, the Day of Rest is best spent talking about the Sculptor, so...” And he immediately launched into a sermon.

The serpent hesitated. He evidently knew he had no way to stop the Man, and he certainly did not wish to listen to the praises of his ancient enemy, so he finally muttered something about giving the fool a little more rope and slithered off to sulk on his throne.

VII. Ransom

The Day of Rest was over, and the first day had barely come when the Man began walking toward the serpent's throne. The snake sat on the stone chair like a cobra in a basket, coiling and uncoiling slightly in time to the impatient flicking of his tongue. He was testing the air as snakes do, and something clearly smelled wrong.

Then the Man stood before him, and the serpent glared at him fiercely. The look had always liquefied the hardest clay and made even the most defiant prisoner turn in on himself, becoming smaller and smaller to escape the fearful gaze. Yet for once the serpent felt (because of the mask of clay he could not see) his gaze being returned, and he found himself beginning to curl and coil up into the smallest ball he could manage. By tremendous effort, he wrenched his eyes away. He did not let them stray back to the Man for some time.

"Now then, slave," the snake began shakily, "it is time for you to learn your place here."

"I already know My Place, and it isn't here. I just stopped by for an inspection."

"Silence! You fooled others with that act before—maybe there was even something to it once—but now you're here, and you're mine forever."

"When will you admit Who I Am?"

At the last two words a strong wind swept through the place, which shook violently. The snake managed to jam himself into the tiny crack between the seat and the back of the throne, only to emerge in a fury of humiliation after the storm had passed.

"You'll pay for that!"

"Nonsense; I can do it whenever I wish. As I was saying, who do you think—"

“You are, I know,” the serpent hastily finished for him. “Look, we both know that the Sculptor is really a puppet master. He promises these vermin all kinds of things and then uses them. We’re much the same, really.” The Man must have given him a stern look, for he hurried on. “That’s been our game: He sets up some puppet, and I eventually bring it down—these creatures are so weak, I don’t know why He bothers with them. But in your case, He tried His last trick: to recreate the race with real blood.

“Now I admit, you put up a good fight—though only because He kept helping you. But once I got you on the Tablet all that ended: you’re cursed, so He can’t help you. So you see, I can defeat even a pureheart like you. Soon the Sculptor will realize that He must deal with me on my terms.”

“We do not have to deal with you on any terms but Our own. Yet because you are trying to set yourself up as independent—or rather as a parasite We must support throughout eternity—We decided to let you destroy yourself, as you have done.”

“What! I’m in control here!”

“You are not, and you know it—or you would if you would open your mind to the possibility. What curse is stronger than the Sculptor? We have burst it asunder—though it gave you a pretext for bringing Me here.”

“Even if you could overcome the curse, it wouldn’t matter,” the serpent hissed. “You can’t start a new race now, and the ones who have already been born are still firmly in my grasp.”

“How is your grasp these days? There seems to be something stuck in your teeth.” The serpent had no answer fit to be recorded, and the Man continued, “Don’t you understand yet? The Tablet is finished!”

“The Sculptor promised that it would never be destroyed!”

“We said nothing about its never being fulfilled—and it has been! What does the Tablet demand but life? And now it is full to overflowing with Mine: a Life greater than any death, a fullness greater than any lack.”

“Perhaps that will help future statues—I suppose you’ll say they don’t have to keep the Law anymore—but it still doesn’t help anyone here. And it still doesn’t bring the things back to life.”

“My blood—My Life—is outside of time and space. It flows throughout the ages, filling in every hole that receives it. That is why I have dealt with these statues in the past: I knew that they would come to life later.

“Why won’t you simply admit who I Am? I Am the Son of the Sculptor: We are the same race, the same kind. In dealing with Me you are dealing with Him. You know what that means.”

“It means nothing—nothing at all! Except that you must meet my terms or leave!”

“I will leave—on My terms and with My property. But first you are going to face some facts. The life of a being is in his blood, and the blood of a child comes from his father. I am the only son of the Sculptor; His blood is Mine. And Our blood is infinite, indestructible life. What other life could fill up the canyon that you and your slaves have spent so long digging? For deep as it is, it has a limit: even you can only be just so miserable, and no more. Now My Life and Joy have not only filled in your canyon but overflowed it into a mountain reaching to eternity. What your poor slaves once tried to achieve on their own from below with their tower has been perfectly accomplished now from above—only through them, not by them.

“As for you, your actions have been predictable. Even if We had not known the future, We could still have foreseen your every move. Creativity belongs to Us; when you left Us, you left creativity, wisdom, and true freedom of action behind. You became a mere machine operating by perfectly predictable rules, so it was quite easy to bring you to a place where your warped logic would destroy you.

“Look at what you have done! Long ago, you led these people to take the Forbidden Fruit from the Tree. It became a Tree of Death for them, but you thought it was a Tree of Life for you—giving you claim to their lives and a chance to demand a ransom. And that ransom We have now paid—not because you deserve a reward for your evil, but because the ransom you demand is the fitting punishment for your crime!

“Have you forgotten what happened to that Tree? It became harder than steel—as hard as their hearts! So they used its stump as the anchor for their great monument to their pride. We drove them from their building, for they did not realize that they were actually building not up to Us but down to you, and We separated them to keep them from delving even further into misery. Centuries later, I led some of them back to that spot and carved out the letters that were already written in the heart of that ancient tree. It became a monument to humility—though you soon made it into a tool of pride and death.

“When I arrived, you had no excuse for putting Me on the Tablet, for your position gave you the right to dispose only of imperfections—and I was perfect. Yet in your greed and violence you put Me on the Tablet anyway, supposing that the curse would justify you by condemning Me. But your evil deceived you and led you to take the Forbidden Fruit from that tree; and thus it became the Tree of Death for you who took Me in pride, but the Tree of Life for any who will take Me in humility.

“For now Life has entered Death; and your kingdom is far too small and weak to hold Me or any who will join Me. Just as I defeated you every time I drove one of your toads out of the hollow place you have dug in these statues, so shall I defeat you now.”

The serpent sputtered. “Even if that were possible—even if you could be Who you claim—it would be a victory for me, not for the Sculptor. Because then He would have tempted me and deceived me, so He would become my slave, or at least my fellow criminal.”

“Not at all. We did not force you to do anything, nor did We even suggest that you kill Me. That was your idea: you were led into it and tempted by your own pride and greed. You self-destructed, as We knew you would. As to the deception, I told you plainly Who I was. You even pretended to believe Me at times. Yet in the end you chose from your own pride to disbelieve, to think Me a liar like you. The evidence was everywhere; you just refused to look. Even when you saw Me covered by the curse, veiled from the Light, the truth never dawned on you. Who could exist, cut off from Him Who alone gives existence, except the Self-existent One? And now it is finally time to remove this shell.”

“Wait a minute! What about my ransom?”

“I Am the ransom: the Sculptor is payer, payee, and payment: the Sculptor is all in all. The only ransom you shall receive is the full fury of My cleansing, indestructible Life sweeping through your realm. Even as We ransomed Our people out of a foreign land—ransomed them from Our wrath and defeated their supposed owners—so We now ransom Our people out of your defeated kingdom and from the wrath with which We

shall strike it. Then, the life of a mere animal turned back death; how much more shall infinite Life turn back all death and wrath?”

“But there’s a debt which I’m authorized to collect! You must pay me!”

“We decided to forgive the debt long ago—and who repays himself a debt that he has forgiven? For the debt they owed Us has been forgiven; it shall not be repaid. We are fully justified in forgiving any debts owed Us. You were merely Our collecting agent—a position you have lost by trying to take that which was not yours, namely Me. One of the reasons I came down here was to give you notice: I will take charge of corrections and penalties from now on. And the ransom shall be presented in the proper place: in our own Temple.

“For now the ancient prophecy is fulfilled: the king’s son, not a man of blood, shall build the true Temple. The shell buried above did indeed come from My servant the king, and I am his son on My mother’s side. But he was too weak to construct the place where the Sculptor shall dwell with his people, for the eternal Temple can only be built with righteous blood willingly offered. My blood comes from My Father the Sculptor, and I have come at last to create the Sculptor’s dwelling.”

“But if part of you isn’t sculpture,” the serpent interrupted, “you aren’t fully anything, sculpture or Sculptor—just a freak.”

“I am fully sculpture and fully Sculptor. My physical blood came from My mother, but its essence—omnipotent Life—is from My Father. Don’t you understand that the perfection of any symbol is the thing it symbolizes? In My hands, the bread and wine become the Body and Blood they symbolize, and while the first Clay only symbolized the

One in Whose image he was made, I perfect the symbol in Myself: the symbolic sculpture and the symbolized Sculptor.

“So I shall eternally cleanse the true Temple and set it apart with Our own blood and life, and the gates of Death shall not prevail against it. For Death is weaker than Life, and soon no vestige of Death shall remain to bind My people.

“For while we could forgive their debt, forgiveness alone could not restore them to life. We could only eliminate their guilt, not the result of their suicidal rebellion. The clay would remain and multiply. So it had to be removed. That is why the Tablet is sealed with My blood: not to remove guilt, but to destroy the evil itself—all these rebellious things you and they plot together to do in Our presence. When My life flows through them, their weak temporary acts shall be transformed into eternal ones, and they shall be united more thoroughly than they ever were before We separated them at their monument.”

“What! But how can You put Your Life in them?”

“Watch and find out; if you had been paying attention, you would have known. Now it is definitely time for this shell to go.”

A crimson glow grew behind the blackness of the mire that surrounded the Man. The clay faded away, first retreating before the light, then surrendering to it as the lack of light was replaced by its fullness. Finally the pure light of the Man shone forth unhindered, filling the dark realm with His brilliance. “This is the Life I shall put in them!” the Man announced, drawing a red-stained hand from His side. “This is Life! As I am the Clay you cannot defeat, so the Zoe you shall never prevail against has come from My side while My body sleeps above! The first Zoe was created from the first Clay’s

flesh and bone—his nature and essence. My Beloved can never have My uncreated and self-existent essence, but she shall partake of My flesh and blood: My kinswoman, filled with indestructible Life. I shall give her every gift to serve Me as I shape her from My own Life, and she shall bear the light of My hope throughout the world.”

The serpent was still gazing at where the clay shell had been, studiously ignoring what the Man said: it was more comfortable to search for clay than to listen to the Man’s words. Finally the snake had to admit that there was not a speck of clay to the Man. “How can You act so pure when You carried all that filth?”

“Darkness cannot darken light, nor can death kill life. You have always believed that less than nothing could somehow absorb infinity, but Our mathematics doesn’t work that way. Look!” He reached out to touch some of the local mire. It shrank back as though alive, but finally yielded and dissolved—not into nothingness, of course, but into somethingness: a pebble, tiny but fully real.

“How dare you!” the serpent hissed. “You come here and fill the place with your disgusting light and put a horrid real thing in full sight of my throne! If You weren’t such a coward, I’d show You what torture is!”

“As I already said, I know what torture is far more thoroughly than you ever shall. I lived in infinite Joy—not just in Our presence, as you once did, but actually in Joy Ourselves. When I let Myself be cut off from that Joy, I knew pain beyond your ability to imagine. You are a creature too, just like these statues you torment, and you depend on Us for your continued existence. There is a limit to how much separation you can experience, just as there is a limit to how much fellowship and joy you can know. I have no such limitations: I can experience infinite fellowship and joy, and infinite separation—

and the infinite agony between them. And as I call all times ‘now,’ that time of separation always has been present in My experience, and it always will be present. I am experiencing right now a torment that would utterly annihilate you.”

“That’s impossible! No one knows more about pain than I do!”

The Man turned, and for a fraction of a second, the serpent glimpsed some fragment of a shadow of the agony He knew: an abyss yawning wider than the universe and utterly bottomless. The serpent was crushed, squashed flat. “It can’t be!” he croaked. “Such pain can’t exist, and you can’t feel it, or you couldn’t smile like that!”

The Man was smiling, on the verge of laughter. “It is a joy to serve the ones I love—My Father and My friends—even though it cost infinite pain. If you knew love, you would understand that this has not made my joy less but infinitely greater! For pain and loneliness are very strong, but joy and love are the strongest of all!” He turned toward the people in the light realm, scarcely able to contain Himself. “My brothers, My sisters, it is time to go!”

His irresistible laugh filled both lands and all between and around, so that His joy and light could no longer fit in such a tiny world. The light brought fire to the dark realm, which before had been only unbearably hot.

Near the throne, the shadow of the shattered serpent rose up from the mire. It was an insubstantial thing, but, like the shadow-clay around it, strong enough to kill any whose blood did not flow red with life. As it struggled painfully toward its throne, it muttered and whimpered, “It’s a lie, a trick! He cheated! He always cheats—that’s why He always wins! Nobody has seen deeper blackness than I have! Nobody knows more about pain than meeee...!” The last word was a keening, whining wail of self-pity, trailing

off into a silent pout. Then it repeated the chant over and over, until it believed that it could believe the lie. Now the shadow of the serpent's shadow was darker and more terrifying than ever, though the serpent itself was less than it had ever been before.

Meanwhile, the Man and the whole lighted garden realm bolted upward, outward with a speed that blew open several graves as they passed. He wakened His old body to complete Life as a sign that His new Body would someday rise as well. The world sang as the second Clay rose from the earth a living being, with the second Zoe at His side.

VIII. Zoe

The Sculptor's workroom was immense, yet the light from the Man—the Sculptor's Son—overflowed it. The brilliance washed over and through most of the objects in the workroom, giving them form and substance. One dark spot drew considerable attention. Like everything else in that place, it would have been hard to describe in the old world, for while it was just one thing in the Sculptor's workroom, in the old world it would have taken many different names to explain its nature. It was a lump of clay; it was a swamp; it was a rough gem encrusted with worthless rock. Most importantly, however, it was a studio, a tiny copy of the great workroom; and from it a gleaming form was rising slowly, surely through the swiftly passing years.

The form was a Temple—a smaller version of the great Temple of the Workroom and clearly part of it. Despite the darkness and smallness of the spot where it grew, the little Temple was bright with jewels and so vast that its opposite walls never suspected each other's existence. It was also a woman ruddy with Life, beautiful and growing more so with each passing moment. Her outer fringes, being fully removed from the clay of her birth, were the most active and aware of all her members; they exulted in the Life and Light that flowed through them in a delight no mortal could bear.

Clay joyfully embraced the Scholar. "I still can't get over how big this place is!"

Nodding, Elihu gazed around the workroom once more. "I still marvel at how this place is big. It is not just that the area is greater; even the small things have a kind of size that would have been impossible in the old world."

Clay studied his old friend again. People had certainly been different in the old world: there just hadn't been enough room in them to hold a whole person, and their

features and traits pinched so close together that some important things went unnoticed. The Scholar still looked old—not because he was old, but simply because it was his nature to look that way. Yet there were baby eyes set in his ancient face. Those eyes were almost the only common feature of the new Zoe: new and open to the wonders all around them. Other characteristics varied: the Scholar somehow gave the impression of wearing a robe, though he did not, while Clay gave the impression of being a very young man, even a teenager, and unclothed. Yet he seemed no less dressed than the Scholar. In the old world, appearances were deceptive, being based on fact; here they were completely reliable, for they were based on truth.

“Even in the old world some things bore testimony more to truth than to fact, especially the things made before the Rebellion,” the Scholar pointed out.

Clay nodded in his heart, undisturbed by the Scholar’s seeming ability to read his thoughts. Thinking and speaking were much the same thing there, and there was no need for secrecy.

“You were looking at the old world again, Elihu.”

“Yes, the view is so much better from here, and there is so much going on there. Zoe is really picking up speed.”

What had begun as a crimson spot in the temple yard had become a stream, then a river, spreading Life throughout the world from the altar of the great Temple of the Real World. Even this much was invisible in the old world, yet the woman’s form within the flow, so obvious from the Real World, was not only unseen but also generally unthought of even among those through whom her life flowed. She and they were already in the Real World to some extent—they were all too large with reality to be contained in the

tiny old studio—yet this too went mostly unnoticed. As time passed, more and more of her entered fully into the Real World, where she was constantly growing into more and more of a Person.

Meanwhile, as the statues in the old world entered her flow, that part of her that was fully home rejoiced in the growth. Their joy increased as each baby cell became a functioning member, so that the sheer delight of being grew along with her toward that moment when at last she would open her eyes and look upon Him Whose deep sleep had brought her forth: to the moment when the Garden Kingdom would be fully restored.

At that instant, some part of the Lady still chained to the old world took notice of the rest of her body—and of her Head. It was mostly formal and blind, but a tiny spark of reality and joy was there too. The ones at Home cheered as the Lady murmured in her sleep, “We are one.” Reality Himself answered, thunder-strong and whisper-gentle: “Yes, My Love, I am yours, and you are Mine: We are one!” And Life entered into her anew, as if the floodgates had opened wider still, for the current grew stronger and the river purer as she accepted Reality into herself and ate and drank from the Tree of Life.

Elihu smiled. “Such a small effort, and such benefits! Think what will happen when He comes for her, when He finally shouts, “Arise, My Love; My Lovely One, come!” He will lift her from her sleep, and their marriage feast will last a thousand years in the Garden Kingdom. Then finally the second Clay shall have His Bride, His Zoe: made of His flesh and blood for relationship, yet as delightfully different as woman is from man. We shall be one with each other and with Him. What shall it be like when all together at last we taste the fullness of the wine and the bread?”

He looked wonderingly at the Reality spreading through the old world and renewing it bit by bit, lifting it out of itself and into Truth: for “Truth,” “Reality,” and “Holiness” are the same word in the language of the Real World.

“And when she wakes, the Garden shall truly be reborn. We shall fill the old world with the new, and Purity shall kneel down to cleanse the filthy. For clay can never come here, but we shall go there to restore whatever may be restored, and it shall be our joy to stoop down and reconcile the world to its Master and ours. By the time the wedding ends, the old world will be completely transformed, and the marriage shall continue forever in a Garden made eternal. For there must come Spring before Summer, a thousand years of wedding and renewal before eternal marriage and delight. Then finally the Winter shall be over, and there shall be no more Fall.

“Even now life and judgment grow: whatever Reality touches must reach outward and upward into Truth or collapse in on itself into the less-than-nothingness of a lie. Everything and everyone must grow or die, join the wedding or be left forever outside that world that alone is real with the Sculptor’s own Reality.

“For look at the two kingdoms: the kingdom of light, the Lady, is growing larger, not only in extent, but in kind. How easy it is to imagine the time when she shall outgrow the confines of that tiny studio completely! Meanwhile, the kingdom of darkness grows broader but also shallower: for the natural growth of clay is inward, growing ever smaller and less as it becomes more and more concentrated. How easy it is to imagine the time when it shall collapse in on itself completely, too small to notice save as a reminder of the wisdom and justice of the Sculptor in condemning it. So from both kingdoms He shall

receive glory: the delighted praise of His beloved and the vindicating epitaph of His enemies.”

Just then John and his family joined them. In a sense, they had never been apart: it was more like pausing in conversation than it was like being away. The woman with John was no longer his wife, either, though they were more intimate and in love than any couple in the old world ever could be. The One Who had placed them together refused to separate them now that they could know true unity.

“Have you noticed my son Joseph?” John asked. In the old world, there would have been a ring of pride in his voice; now there was simple joy in being part of the Sculptor’s work—and love for a brother.

They watched together as the mortal Joseph spoke to a friend. The crimson flow poured through the man’s being into his words, and a spark of life began to grow in the hollow place inside the listening statue. The words washed the clay from his eyes, and the watchers could tell that he was beginning to realize that there really was something different about the one talking to him. For the mortal Joseph was no longer a mere statue, but the beginning of a man. There was real blood in his veins, washing away the clay as it collected and bringing life to his members.

The life began to spread, and soon the statue opened itself to the flow as well, yielding its dead clay to Life Himself. Already he had grown too large for the tiny world to contain, and he spilled out into the Real World as the river flowed over and through him.

The inhabitants of the Real World echoed his joy as he embraced both his new-found brother and the treasure of indestructible Life Who lived within him—indeed, Who

now dwelled within them both. For they were now smaller copies of the growing Temple of which they were a part, and whatever happened to those temples would happen also to the One Who lived there. He knew their joy and their sorrow, their pleasure and their pain; so all of the temples were careful to honor and cherish their Master through each other.

“It is but a small example of what I was just talking about,” Elihu said. “Life continues to grow and conquer, while Death continues to die.”

Clay nodded, but then he sighed as he looked down. “Life begins, but will it triumph? Sometimes I’m not so sure when I look at the old world. See all the statues trying to shut up the flow? They get just enough to warm them, but the strength of the current frightens them.”

“Yes, those are sad cases. Life is a river: you cannot shut it up and have it remain what it is. It becomes a slough—no new life flows in, and the old dissipates. Look over there! Those people are doing much the same thing: they allow the current in, but are too frightened to let it flow through them into eternal acts, so they let the Life swirl around inside them like an eddy. It flows in, rushes around in circles, and then it flows out again, doing little good in the process. No wonder they are always in turmoil!

“Yet there are positive signs as well. Here and there some people realize that they have become branches of the Tree, and they let Life flow through them to produce the Fruit of Life. They are few, but Life is so powerful that He still accomplishes much through them. They also know that they must have as much coming in as going out: it is the flow that does the work, and the glory is the Sculptor’s. So we must be refilled constantly to live, and we can call no good work our own. It is the answer to the question

that puzzled me for so long: we cannot grasp the Life or the glory without being destroyed, but we can let them flow through us and transform us. Then, when the Sculptor sees that we are ready to become real, He awakens us so that the old world can no longer contain us.”

“Some of us may not have been as ready as we could have been,” Clay said, though there was no longer any pain or regret in the memory.

“In a sense no one ever is,” the Scholar replied. “Yet the Life flows into the inadequacies and completes them. Only the Sculptor knows when the statue is ready for the finishing touch. When the Lady goes through her pains, we shall know that her time is near; yet only the Sculptor will know when she has had enough fire and scraping to awaken. Then He shall strike the land where she is treated as a slave, protecting her by His own Life from the judgment that He pours out around her. When she has passed through a sea of trial deep as death, the world will no longer be able to contain her, and she shall rise up into her Beloved’s arms as He speaks re-creation to the ruined Garden. Then their marriage feast shall continue until the transformation and restoration are complete, and the Garden Kingdom shall perhaps be ready to become part of the Real World. That is beyond even our understanding now.

“Meanwhile, we can never go back. The Sculptor leads ever forward, and even when we retrace our steps and undo our errors as much as we can, He transforms the old into something greater. We can never become as Clay was; we can only become as he would likely have become by a shorter, less painful route: not to be mere clayless flesh modeled on Life, but bearers and reflectors of Life Himself. As the Sculptor transformed life by bringing Life into it, so He transforms death. Soon even our dead bodies, which lie

in the earth, shall be filled with Life and rise out of the smallness of that world; and then the process shall be complete.

“For now, however, Life and judgment, Good and Evil grow up together, and both shall have their budding: Good in revival and resurrection, Evil in apostasy and wrath. For there shall come a time when the Sculptor shall remove the ancient restraint, and Evil will grow to a point where it must persecute the Lady to its own destruction, and to the glory and vindication of the Sculptor’s justice. In the same way, the serpent was bound by his own perverse logic to swallow the Forbidden Fruit, and so to destroy himself through his own evil and to prove that the Sculptor had been right all along. And when Evil has destroyed itself, it shall be generally removed (for it shall no longer fit in the renewed world), and the universe shall be transformed by the glory of the Sculptor; and the great River we see now shall become an ocean over the land. And when the glory has reached its fullness, and the last cell of Zoe completes her, Evil shall be completely removed, and something entirely, unimaginably new shall begin.”

Elihu’s whole being shone, and Clay’s with him, until they became nearly as bright as the Light they reflected: the Son, Who reigns over the eternal Day of that world.

The River of Light and Life still flows through the dying land that once had been a garden. From time to time its children, like blind fish vaguely guessing that they swim in a river with other fish, reach upward and outward, saying “We are One!” and growing as they do so—though many have become bored with the ceremony and see no point in it. In the Sculptor’s good time, the Lady shall arise from the earth to join Him in ruling over it—and then all shall see the Light.

For now, however, the Light shines in the darkness. Yet no one sees Him, except a few who are looking and a few who are shown.

If you're interested in more...

Check out my Web sites:

<http://ansric.pbworks.com/> A bare-bones writing site; not much for graphics lovers.

<http://www.christiansuperheroes.com/> A more graphics-intensive site.

<http://ansric.blogspot.com> My amazing blog.

Copying, rights, permissions, etc.

Galatea is presented under [Creative Commons terms CC-BY-ND](#), specifically allowing free reproduction with attribution, but disallowing derivative works without permission.

The reason is that the story is very intricate, and if you tweak it, you'll probably mess something up. So I'd like to inspect and approve any derived works.