

Science Fiction

In the Clone Zone

By Robert Silverberg



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COVER DESIGN BY CHRIS HARDWICK

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THE AIRPORT was very new. It had a bright, shiny, major-world-capital feel, and for a moment Mondschein thought the plane had landed in Rio or Buenos Aires by mistake. But then he noticed the subtle signs of deception, the tackiness around the edges, the spongy junk behind the gleaming facades, and knew that he must indeed be in Tierra Alvarado.

"Senor Mondschein?" a deep male voice said, while he was still marching down the corridors that led to the immigration lounge. He turned and saw a short, wide-shouldered man in a beribboned green-and-red comic-opera uniform which he remembered after a moment was that of the Guardia de la

Patria, the Maximum Leader's elite security corps. "I am Colonel Aristegui," he said. "You may come with me, please. It was a good journey? You are not overly fatigued?"

Aristegui didn't bother with passport formalities. He led Mondschein through a steel doorway marked SEGURIDAD, INGRESO PROHIBIDO which admitted them to a series of bewildering passageways and catwalks and spiral staircases. There was no veneer back here: everything was severely functional, gunmetal-gray walls, exposed rivets and struts, harsh unshielded light-fixtures that looked a century old. Here it comes, Mondschein thought: this man will take me to some deserted corner of the airstrip and touch his laser pistol to my temple and they will bury me in an unmarked grave, and that will be that, five minutes back in the country and I am out of the way forever.

The final visa approval had come through only the day before, the fifth of June, and just hours later Mondschein had boarded the Aero Alvarado flight that would take him in a single soaring supersonic arc nonstop from Zurich to his long-lost homeland on the west coast of South America. Mondschein hadn't set foot there in twenty-five years, not since the Maximum Leader had expelled him for life as a sort of upside-down reward for his extraordinary technological achievements: for it was Mondschein, at the turn of the century, who had turned his impoverished little country into the unchallenged world leader in the field of human cloning.

In those days it had been called the Republic of the Central Andes. The Maximum Leader had put it together out of parts of the shattered nations which in an earlier time, when things were very different in the world, had been known as Peru, Chile, and

Bolivia. During his years of exile in Europe Mondschein had always preferred to speak of himself as a Peruvian, whenever he spoke of himself at all. But now the name of the country was Tierra Alvarado and its airline was Aero Alvarado and its capital was Ciudad Alvarado, Alvarado this and Alvarado that wherever you looked. That was all right, a fine old South American tradition. You expected a Maximum Leader to clap his own name on everything, to hang his portrait everywhere, to glorify himself in every imaginable way.

Alvarado had carried things a little further than most, though, by having two dozen living replicas of himself created, the better to serve his people. That had been Mondschein's final task as a citizen of the Republic, the supreme accomplishment of his art: to produce two dozen AAA Class clones of the Maximum Leader. which could function as doubles for Alvarado at the dreary

meetings of the Popular Assembly, stand in for him at the interminable National Day of Liberation parades, and keep would-be assassins in a constant state of befuddlement. They were masterpieces, those two dozen Alvarados—all but indistinguishable from the original, the only AAA Class clones ever made. With their aid the Maximum Leader was able to maintain unblinking vigilance over the citizens of Tierra Alvarado—twenty-four hours a day.

But Mondschein didn't care how many Alvarados he might be coming home to. Twenty, fifty, a hundred, what did that matter? Singular or plural, Alvarado still held the entire country in his pocket, as he had for the past generation and a half. That was the essential situation. Everything else was beside the point, a mere detail. To Mondschein the clones made no real difference at all.

In fact there was very little that did make a difference to Mondschein these days. He was getting old and slept badly most of the time and his days were an agony of acute homesickness. He wanted to speak his native language again, Spanish as it had been spoken in Peru and not the furry Spanish of Spain, and he wanted to breathe the sharp air of the high mountains and eat papas a la huancaína and anticuchos and a proper ceviche and maybe see the ancient walls of Cuzco once more and the clear dark water of Lake Titicaca. It didn't seem likely to him that Alvarado had granted him a pardon after all this time simply for the sake of luring him back to face a firing squad. The safe conduct, which Mondschein hadn't in any way solicited but had been overjoyed to receive, was probably sincere: a sign that the old tyrant had mellowed at last. And if not, well, at least he would die on his native soil, which somehow seemed better than

dying in Bern, Toulon, Madrid, Stockholm, Prague, wherever, any of the innumerable cities in which he had lived during his long years of exile.

* * * *

They emerged from the building into a bleak, deserted rear yard where empty baggage carts were strewn around like the fossil carcasses of ancient beasts, a perfect place for a quiet execution. The dry cool wind of early winter was sweeping a dark line of dust across the bare pavement. But to Mondschein's astonishment an immense sleek black limousine materialized from somewhere almost at once and two more Guardia men hopped out, saluting madly. Aristegui beckoned him into the rear of the vast car. "Your villa has been prepared for you, Dr. Mondschein. You are the guest of the nation, you understand. When you are refreshed the Minister of Scientific Development

requests your attendance at the Palace of Government, perhaps this afternoon." He flicked a finger and a mahogany panel swung open, revealing a well-stocked bar. "You will have a cognac? It is the rare old. Or champagne, perhaps? A whiskey? Everything imported, the best quality."

"I don't drink," said Mondschein.

"Ah," said Aristegui uncertainly, as though that were a fact that should have been on his prep-sheet and unaccountably hadn't been. Or perhaps he had simply been looking forward to nipping into the rare old himself, which now would be inappropriate. "Well, then. You are comfortable? Not too warm, not too cool?" Mondschein nodded and peered out the window. They were on an imposing-looking highway now, with a city of pastel-hued high-rise buildings visible off to the side. He didn't recognize a thing. Alvarado had built this city from scratch in the

empty highland plains midway between the coast and the lake and it had been only a few years old when Mondschein had last seen it, a place of raw gouged hillsides and open culverts and half-paved avenues with stacks of girders and sewer pipes and cable reels piled up everywhere. From a distance, at least, it looked quite splendid now. But as they left the beautifully landscaped road that had carried them from the airport to the city and turned off into the urban residential district he saw that the splendor was, unsurprisingly, a fraud of the usual Alvarado kind: the avenues had been paved, all right, but they were reverting to nature again, cracking and upheaving as the swelling roots of the bombacho trees and the candelero palms that had been planted down the central dividers ripped them apart. The grand houses of pink and green and azure stucco were weather-stained and crumbling, and Mondschein observed

ugly random outcroppings of tin-roofed squatter-shacks sprouting like mushrooms in the open fields behind them, where elegant gardens briefly had been. And this was the place he had longed so desperately to behold one last time before he died. He thought of his comfortable little apartment in Bern and felt a pang.

But then the car swung off onto a different road, into the hills to the east which even in the city's earliest days had been the magnificently appointed enclave of the privileged and powerful. Here there was no sign of decay. The gardens were impeccable, the villas spacious and well kept. Mondschein remembered this district well. He had lived in it himself before Alvarado had found it expedient to give him a one-way ticket abroad. Names he hadn't thought of in decades came to the surface of his mind: this was the Avenida de las Flores, this was Calle del Sol, this

was Camino de los Toros, this was Calle de los Indios, and this—this—

He gasped. “Your villa has been prepared for you,” Aristegui had told him at the airport. Guest of the nation, yes. But Mondschein hadn't thought to interpret Aristegui's words literally. They'd be giving him *a* villa, *some* villa. But the handsome two-story building with the white facade and the red tile roof in front of which the limousine had halted was in fact *his* villa, the actual and literal and much-beloved one he had lived in long ago, until the night when the swarthy little frog-faced officer of the Guardia had come to him to tell him that he was expelled from the country. He had had to leave everything behind then, his books, his collection of ancient scientific instruments, his pre-Columbian ceramics, his rack of Italian-made suits and fine vicuna coats, his pipes, his cello, his family

albums, his greenhouse full of orchids, even his dogs. One small suitcase was all they had let him take with him on the morning flight to Madrid, and from that day on he had never permitted himself to acquire possessions, but had lived in a simple way, staying easily within the very modest allowance that the Maximum Leader in his great kindness sent him each month wherever he might be. And now they had given him back his actual villa. Mondschein wondered who had been evicted, on how much notice and for what trumped-up cause, to make this building available to him again after all this time.

All that he had wanted, certainly all that he had expected, was some ordinary little flat in the center of the city. The thought of returning to the old villa sickened him. There would be too many ghosts roaming in it. For the first time he wondered whether his

impulsive decision to accept Alvarado's astonishing invitation to return to the country had been a mistake.

"You recognize this house?" Aristegui asked. "You are surprised, are you not? You are amazed with joy?"

* * * *

They had made no attempt to restore his lost possessions or to undo the changes that had come to the house since he had lived there. Perhaps such a refinement of cruelty was beyond the Maximum Leader's imagination, or, more probably, no one had any recollection of what had become of his things after so many years. It was just as well. He had long since managed to put his collections of antiquities out of his mind and he had no interest in playing the cello any more, or in smoking pipes. The villa now was furnished in standard upper-class Peruvian-style comfort of the early years of the century, everything very safe,

very unexceptionable, very familiar, very dull. He was provided with a staff of four, a housekeeper, a cook, a driver, a gardener. Wandering through the airy rambling house, he felt less pain than he had anticipated. His spirit was long gone from it; it was just a house. There were caged parrots in the garden and a white-and-gray cat was slinking about outside as if it belonged there; perhaps it was the cat of the former resident and had found its way back in the night.

He bathed and rested and had a light lunch. In the afternoon the driver came to him and said, "May I take you to the Palace of Government now, Senor Dr. Mondschein? The Minister is eager." The driver must be a Guardia man also, Mondschein realized. But that was all right. All of it was all right, whatever they did now.

The Palace of Government hadn't been finished in Mondschein's time. It was a huge sprawling thing made of blocks of black stone, fitted together dry-wall fashion to give it a massive pseudo-Inca look, and it was big enough to have housed the entire bureaucracy of the Roman Empire at its peak. Relays of functionaries, some in Guardia uniform, some not, led him through gloomy high-vaulted corridors, across walled courtyards, and up grand and ponderous stone staircases until at last an officious florid-faced aide-de-camp conducted him into the wing that was the domain of the Ministry of Scientific Development. Here he passed through a procession of outer offices and finally was admitted to a brightly lit reception hall lined with somber portraits in oils. He recognized Einstein and Leonardo da Vinci and guessed that the others were Aristotle, Darwin, Galileo, perhaps Isaac Newton. And in the place of

honor, of course, a grand representation of the Maximum Leader himself, looking down with brooding intensity.

“His Excellency the Minister,” said the florid aide-de-camp, waving him into an office paneled with dark exotic woods at the far end of the reception hall. A tall man in an ornately brocaded costume worthy of a bullfighter rose from a glistening desk to greet him. And unexpectedly Mondschein found himself staring yet again at the unforgettable face of Diego Alvarado.

One of the clones, Mondschein thought. It had to be.

All the same it felt like being clubbed in the teeth. The Minister of Scientific Development had Alvarado's hard icy blue eyes, his thin lips, his broad brow, his jutting cleft chin. His smile was Alvarado's cold smile, his teeth were Alvarado's perfect glistening teeth. He had the coarse curling bangs—graying now—that gave the Maximum Leader the look of a youthful

indomitable Caesar. His lanky body was lean and gaunt, a dancer's body, and his movements were a dancer's movements, graceful and precise. Seeing him awoke long-forgotten terrors in Mondschein. And yet he knew that this must be one of the clones. After that first shock of recognition, something told Mondschein subliminally that he was looking at an example of his own fine handiwork.

"President Alvarado asks me to convey his warmest greetings," the clone said. It was Alvarado's voice, cool and dry. "He will welcome you personally when his schedule permits, but he wishes you to know that he is honored in the deepest way by your decision to accept his hospitality."

The aging had worked very well, Mondschein thought. Alvarado would be about seventy now, still vigorous, still in his prime. There were lines on this man's face in the right places,

changes in the lines of his cheekbones and jaw, exactly as should have happened in twenty-five years.

"It wasn't any decision at all," Mondschein said. He tried to sound casual. "I was ready and eager to come back. Your homeland, your native soil, the place where your ancestors lived and died for three hundred years—as you get older you realize that nothing can ever take its place."

"I quite understand," said the clone.

Do you? Mondschein wondered. Your only ancestor is a scrap of cellular material. You were born in a tissue-culture vat. And yet you quite understand.

I made you, Mondschein thought. I made you.

He said, "Of course the invitation to return came as an immense surprise."

"Yes. No doubt it did. But the Maximum Leader is a man of great compassion. He felt you had suffered in exile long enough. One day he said, We have done a great injustice to that man, and now it must be remedied. So long as Rafael Mondschein y Gonzalez dwells in foreign lands, our soul can never rest. And so the word went forth to you that all is forgiven, that you were pardoned."

"Only a man of true greatness could have done such a thing," said Mondschein.

"Indeed. Indeed."

Mondschein's crime had been the crime of overachievement. He had built Alvarado's cloning laboratories to such a level of technical skill that they were the envy of all the world; and when eventually the anti-cloning zealots in North America and Europe had grown so strident that there was talk of trade sanctions and

the laboratories had to be shut down, Mondschein had become the scapegoat. Alvarado had proposed to find him guilty of creating vile unnatural abominations, but Mondschein had not been willing to let them hang such an absurdity around his neck, and in the end he had allowed them to manufacture supposed embezzlements in his name instead. In return for a waiver of trial he accepted exile for life. Of course the laboratories had reopened after a while, this time secretly and illicitly, and before long ten or eleven other countries had started to turn out A and even AA Class clones also and the industry had become too important to the world economy to allow zealotry to interfere with it any longer; but Mondschein remained overseas, rotting in oblivion, purposelessly wandering like a wraith from Madrid to Prague, from Prague to Stockholm, from Stockholm to

Marseilles. And now at last the Maximum Leader in his great compassion had relented.

The Minister said, "You know we have made vast strides in the biological sciences since you last were here. Once you have had some time to settle in, we will want you to visit our laboratories, which as you may be aware are once again in legal operation."

Mondschein was aware of that, yes. Throughout the world Tierra Alvarado was known informally as the Clone Zone, the place where anyone could go to have a reasonable facsimile manufactured at a reasonable price. But that was no longer any concern of his.

"I'm afraid that I have very little interest in cloning technology these days," he said.

The Minister's chilly Alvarado-eyes blazed with sudden heat. "A visit to our laboratories may serve to reawaken that interest, Dr. Mondschein."

"I doubt that very much."

The Minister looked unhappy. "We had hoped quite strongly that you would be willing to share the benefits of your scientific wisdom with us, doctor. Your response greatly disappoints us."

Ah. It was all very clear, now, and very obvious. Strange that he hadn't foreseen it.

"I have no scientific wisdom, really," said Mondschein evenly. "None that would be of any use. I haven't kept up with the state of the art."

"There are those who would be pleased to refresh your—"

"I'd much rather prefer to remain in retirement. I'm too old to make any worthwhile contributions."

Now the thin lips were quirking. "The national interest is in jeopardy, Dr. Mondschein. For the first time we are challenged by competition from other countries. Genetic technology, you understand, is our primary source of hard currency. We are not a prosperous land, doctor. Our cloning industry is our one great asset, which you created for us virtually singlehandedly. Now that it faces these new threats, surely we may speak to your sense of patriotism, if not your one-time passion for scientific achievement, in asking you—" The Minister broke off abruptly, as though seeing his answer in Mondschein's expression. In a different tone he said, "No doubt you are tired after your long journey, doctor. I should have allowed you more time to rest. We'll continue these discussions at a later date, perhaps."

He turned away. The florid aide-de-camp appeared as though from the air and showed Mondschein out. His driver was waiting in the courtyard.

Mondschein spent most of the night trying to sleep, but it was difficult for him, as it usually was. And there was a special problem this night, for his mind was still on Swiss time, and what was the night in Tierra Alvarado was in Switzerland the beginning of a new day. His thoughts went ticking ceaselessly on, hour after hour. Sleep finally took him toward dawn, like a curtain falling, like the blade of a guillotine.

* * * *

Colonel Aristegui of the Guardia de la Patria came to him, phoning first for an appointment, saying the matter was urgent. Mondschein assumed that this would be the next attempt to put pressure on him to take charge of the cloning labs, but that did

not appear to be what was on Aristegui's mind. The wide-shouldered little man looked remarkably ill at ease; he paced, he fidgeted, he mopped his sweating forehead with a lace handkerchief. Then he said, as if forcing the words out, "This is extremely delicate."

"Is it?"

Aristegui studied him with care. "You control yourself extremely well, doctor. In particular I mark your restraint in regard to the President. You speak of your gratitude to him for allowing you to return. But inwardly you must hate him very much."

"No," Mondschein said. "It's all ancient history. I'm an old man now. What does any of it matter any more?"

"He took away the scientific work that was your life. He forced you to leave the land of your birth."

"If you think you're going to get me to launch into an attack on him, you're totally mistaken. What's past is past and I'm happy to be home again and that's all there is to it."

Aristegui stared at his brilliantly gleaming patent-leather shoes. Then he sighed and raised his head like a diver coming up to the surface and said, "The country is dying, doctor."

"Is it?"

"Of the Latin American disease. The strong man comes, he sees the evils and injustices and remedies them, and then he stays and stays and stays until *he* is the evils and the injustices. President Alvarado has ruled here for thirty-five years. He drains the treasury for his palaces; he ignores what must be done to preserve and sustain. He is our great burden, our great curse. It is time for him to step aside. Or else be thrust aside."

Mondschein's eyes widened. "You're trying to draw me into some sort of conspiracy? You must be out of your mind."

"I risk my life telling you this."

"Yes. You do. And I risk my life listening."

"You are essential to our success. *Essential*. You must help us."

"Look," said Mondschein, "if Alvarado simply wants to do away with me, he doesn't have to bother with anything as elaborate as this. Nobody in the world cares whether I live or die. It isn't necessary to inveigle me into a fantastic nonexistent plot on his life. He can just have me shot. All right? All right?"

"This is not a trap. As God is my witness, I am not here as part of a scheme to ensnare you. I beg for your assistance. If you wish, report me to the authorities, and I will be tortured and

the truth will come out and I will be executed, and then you will know that I was honest with you."

Wearily Mondschein said, "What is all this about?"

"You possess the ability to distinguish between the brothers of Alvarado and Alvarado himself."

"The brothers?"

"The clones. There is a secret method, known only to you, that allows you to tell the true Alvarado from the false."

"Don't be silly."

"It is so. You need not pretend. I have access to very high sources."

Mondschein shrugged. "For the sake of argument let's say that it's so. What then?"

"When we aim our blow at Alvarado, we want to be certain we are assassinating the real one."

"Yes. Of course you do."

"You can guide our hand. He often appears in public, but no one knows whether it is really he, or one of the brothers. And if we strike down one of the brothers, thinking we have killed the true Alvarado—"

"Yes," Mondschein said. "I see the problem. But assuming that I'm able to tell the difference, and I'm not conceding that I can, what makes you think I'd want to get mixed up in your plot? What do I stand to gain from it, other than useless revenge on a man who did me harm a very long time ago? Will his death give me back my life? No, I simply want to live out my last few years in peace. Kill Alvarado without me, if you want to kill him. If you're not sure whether you're killing the right one, kill them all. Kill them one by one until there are none at all left."

"I could kill you," Aristegui said. "Right now. I should. After what I have told you, you own my life."

Again Mondschein shrugged. "Then kill me. For whatever good it'll do you. I'm not going to inform on you."

"Nor cooperate with me."

"Neither one nor the other."

"All you want is to live in peace," said Aristegui savagely. "But how do you know you will? Alvarado has asked you to work for him again, and you have refused." He held up a hand. "Yes, yes, I know that. I will not kill you, though I should. But he might, though he has no reason to. Think about that, Senor Doctor."

He rose and glared at Mondschein a moment, and left without another word.

Mondschein's body clock had caught up with Tierra Alvarado time by this time. But that night, once again, he lay until dawn

in utterly lucid wakefulness before exhaustion at last brought him some rest. It was as though sleep were a concept he had never quite managed to understand.

* * * *

The next summons came from Alvarado himself.

The Presidential Palace, which Mondschein remembered as a compact, somewhat austere building in vaguely Roman style, had expanded in the course of a quarter of a century into an incomprehensible mazelike edifice that seemed consciously intended to rival Versailles in ostentatious grandeur. The Hall of Audience was a good sixty meters long, with rich burgundy draperies along the walls and thick blood-red carpeting. There was a marble dais at the far end where the Maximum Leader sat enthroned like an emperor. Dazzling sunlight flooded down on him through a dome of shimmering glass set in the ceiling.

Mondschein wondered if he was supposed to offer a genuflection.

There were no guards in the room, only the two of them. But security screens in the floor created an invisible air-wall around the dais. Mondschein found himself forced to halt by subtle pressure when he was still at least fifteen meters short of the throne. Alvarado came stiffly to his feet and they stood facing each other in silence for a long moment.

It seemed anticlimactic, this confrontation at last. Mondschein was surprised to discover that he felt none of the teeth-on-edge uneasiness that the man had always been able to engender in him. Perhaps having seen the clone-Alvarado earlier had taken the edge off the impact.

Alvarado said, "You have found all the arrangements satisfactory so far, I hope, doctor?"

"In the old days you called me Rafael."

"Rafael, yes. It was so long ago. How good it is to see you again, Rafael. You look well."

"As do you."

"Yes. Thank you. Your villa is satisfactory, Rafael?"

"Quite satisfactory," said Mondschein. "I look forward to a few last years of quiet retirement in my native country."

"So I am told," Alvarado said.

He seemed overly formal, weirdly remote, hardly even human. In the huge hall his crisp, cool voice had a buzzing androidal undertone that Mondschein found unfamiliar. Possibly that was an atmospheric diffraction effect caused by the security screens. But then it occurred to Mondschein that this too might be one of the clones. He stared hard, trying to tell, trying to call on the intuitive sense that once had made it possible for him to tell

quite easily, even without running the alpha-wave test. The AAA Class clones had been intended to be indistinguishable from the original to nine decimal places, but nevertheless when you collapsed the first twenty or thirty years of a man's life into the three-year accelerated-development period of the cloning process you inevitably lost something, and Mondschein had always been able to detect the difference purely subjectively, at a single glance. Now, though, he wasn't sure. It had been simple enough to see that the Alvarado who had greeted him in the Ministry of Scientific Development was a replica, but here, at this distance, in this room that resonated with the presence of the Maximum Leader, there were too many ambiguities and uncertainties.

He said, "The Minister explained to me that the national genetic laboratories are facing heavy competition from abroad,

that you want me to step in and pull things together. But I can't do it. My technical knowledge is hopelessly out of date. I'm simply not familiar with current work in the field. If I had known ahead of time that the reason you had decided to let me come home was to that you wanted me to go back into the labs, I never would have—"

"Forget about the labs," Alvarado said. "That isn't why I invited you to return."

"But the Minister of Scientific Development said—"

"Let the Minister of Scientific Development say anything he wishes. The Minister has his agenda and I have mine, doctor." He had dropped the first-name talk, Mondschein noticed. "Is it true that there is a method of determining whether a given individual is an authentic human or merely a highly accurate clone?"

Mondschein hesitated. Something was definitely wrong here.

"Yes," he said finally. "There is. You know that there is."

"You are too certain of what I know and what I do not know. Tell me about this method, doctor."

He was more and more certain that he was talking to one of the clones. Alvarado must be staging one of his elaborate charades.

"It involves matching brain rhythms. When I created the AAA Class Alvarado clones, I built a recognition key into them that would enable me, using a simple EEG hookup, to distinguish their brain-wave patterns from yours. I did this at your request, so that in the case of a possible coup d'-etat attempt by one of the clones you'd be able to unmask the pretender. The method uses my own brain waves as the baseline. If you jack my EEG output into a comparator circuit and overlay it with yours, the

two patterns will conflict, the way any two patterns from different human beings will. But if my EEG gets matched against one of your clones, the pattern will drop immediately into alpha rhythms, as if we're both under deep hypnosis. It amazes me that you've forgotten this." He paused. "Unless, of course, you're not Alvarado at all, but simply one of his—what's the word?—one of his brothers."

"Very good, doctor."

"Am I right?"

"Come closer and see for yourself."

"I can't. The security screens—"

"I have switched them off."

Mondschein approached. There was no air resistance. When he was five meters away he felt the unmistakable click of recognition.

"Yes, I am right. Even without an EEG test. You're a clone, aren't you?"

"That is so."

"Is the real Alvarado too busy for me today, or is it that he doesn't have the courage to look me in the eye?"

"I will tell you something very strange, which is a great secret," said the clone. "The real Alvarado is no longer in command here. For the past several months I have run the government of Tierra Alvarado. No one here is aware of this, no one at all. No one except you, now."

For a moment Mondschein was unable to speak.

"You seriously expect me to believe that?" he said at last.

The clone managed a glacial smile. "During the years of your absence there have been several internal upheavals in Tierra Alvarado. On three occasions assassination plots resulted in the

deaths of Alvarado clones who were playing the role of the Maximum Leader at public ceremonies. Each time, the death of the clone was successfully covered up. The conspirators were apprehended and things continued as if nothing had occurred. On the fourth such occasion, an implosion grenade was thrown toward the Maximum Leader's car while he was en route to Iquique for a ceremony of rededication. I happened to be accompanying him on that journey so that I could double for him in the riskier parts of the ceremony, when the general public would be present. The impact of the grenade was tremendous. There were many fatalities and serious injuries. In the confusion afterward I was mistaken for the true Maximum Leader. I quickly understood the situation and began to act accordingly. And so it has been ever since."

Mondschein realized that he was trembling.

"So Alvarado's dead?"

The clone looked smug. "His reign is over. His time is finished."

What a strange concept that was. Alvarado dead! His old enemy was really dead! Mondschein felt a flash of satisfaction and surprise—and then a curious sense of loss.

"Why are you telling me all this?" he asked, after a moment. "Assuming that it's true, and not just some game that your master is playing with me, why do you want to take chances this way? What if I tried to expose you and bring the whole crazy system down?"

"You would not do that," said the clone.

"Why not?"

"You have said it yourself: you want only to live out your remaining years in peaceful retirement. If you denounced me,

who would believe you? And even if you were believed, would things be better in Tierra Alvarado in the wake of my overthrow? No, doctor, the status quo is your only hope. And I am the status quo."

Mondschein nodded. "Even so, why confide in me at all?"

"So that you may protect me."

"How could I do that?"

"You hold the key to identification, this alpha-rhythm thing. I did know that you had such a thing, though not the details of it. Others know it also. Your possession of it gives you great power here. If there were a challenge to my legitimacy, you would be the only arbiter of the truth, do you see?"

"Yes," said Mondschein. "Yes, I do."

"There are twenty-one other surviving clones. One of them might take it into his head to overthrow me, thinking that he

could rule the country at least as well. It is quite a comfortable existence, being a clone of the Maximum Leader, but it is not pleasant to serve as his double, exposed to all the risks of public appearances. It is a much better life, believe me, to be Maximum Leader and have others double for you, than to be a double yourself, never knowing when the bullet will come. Besides which, there is the wielding of authority for its own sake. That is a highly desirable thing, if you are of the sort who desires such things, and we are. After all, we are all of us Alvarados to the core, as you know better than anyone else."

"So you think that if one of your vat-brothers suddenly tries to say that *he's* the real Alvarado, not you, then I'd be willing to come forward and test him and expose him as a clone for you?"

"So I hope and trust."

"Why would I want to take the side of one clone against another? It's of no importance to me which one of you calls himself President here."

"But I am the one who calls himself President just now. I might kill you if you didn't cooperate."

"And if I don't care whether I live or die?"

"You probably care *how* you die," the Alvarado-clone said. "You would not die in an easy or a gentle way, that I could promise you. On the other hand, if you pledge that you will aid me, when and if the need arises, I will see to it that you live out the remaining years of your life in the most complete happiness that I can make available. It seems to me a very reasonable offer."

"It is," Mondschein said. "I see that it is."

"You protect me, and I will protect you. Do we have a deal?"

"If I say no, what are my chances of leaving this building alive today?"

The clone smiled. It was the pure Alvarado-smile. "They would be quite poor."

"Then we have a deal," Mondschein said.

* * * *

The weeks went by. June gave way to July and the year descended toward its winter depths. Often there was fog; some nights there was frost; always the dry harsh wind blew from the west. Mondschein slept poorly. He heard nothing from the Maximum Leader or any of his minions. Evidently all was tranquil in the ruling circles.

He rarely left the villa. His meals were prepared for him according to his wishes, which were uncomplicated. He had a few books. No one came to see him. Sometimes during the day

he went out with his driver to explore the city. It was larger than he expected, spreading long, thin tentacles of slum toward the north and south—as in any impoverished country, everyone from the villages was moving to the capital, God only knew what for—and very shoddy everywhere except in its grand governmental district.

On two of these excursions Mondschein was granted a glimpse of the supposed President Alvarado. The first time, his car was halted at a police roadblock and he waited for half an hour in an immense tie-up until at last the President passed by in a motorcade coming from the airport, with the Director-General of the Republic of the Orinoco, here on a state visit, riding beside him in the armored bubble-roof car while the spectators who lined the boulevard offered sullen acclaim. On the second occasion, far in the outskirts, Mondschein stumbled upon the

ceremonial dedication of what he was told was the Grand Sanitation Facility of the Northeast, and there was the familiar figure of the Maximum Leader on high in the reviewing stand, surrounded by fierce-eyed, heavily armed bodyguards and orating bravely into the biting wind.

At other times while traversing the city Mondschein caught sight of various of the clones going about some business of their own. It was not at all unusual to encounter one. Doubtless the populace was quite used to it. Wherever you looked you could find one or two of the Maximum Leader's "brothers." Five or six of them headed government ministries—a meeting of the Cabinet must have been like a hall of mirrors—and the others, apparently, simply stood by to serve as presidential doubles when needed, and lived as private citizens the rest of the time. The real Alvarado, if there still was one, could probably have

passed in the streets without causing a stir, everyone assuming he was just a clone: a fine kind of shell game that could keep the whole population fooled all the time.

Colonel Aristegui came to the villa again, eventually.

"We are ready to make our move, doctor."

"Move, then. I don't want to know anything about it."

Aristegui looked tense, grim, right at the breaking point. "We need very little from you. Station yourself in the crowd, and when our man asks you, is this one the real one, simply nod or shake your head. We want no more from you than that. Later, when he is dead, we'll ask you to examine the body and confirm that it is the body of the dictator and not one of the imitations. A small service, and you will live forever in the hearts of your countrymen."

"There's no way I can give you the kind of information you want just by looking at him from a distance."

"It can be done, and you are the one who can do it. This much I know."

"No," Mondschein said. "What you think you know is wrong. I can't help you. And in any case I don't want to. I told you that before, Colonel. I'm not interested in joining your conspiracy. It isn't any affair of mine."

"It is an affair of every loyal citizen of this country."

Mondschein looked at him sadly. He could at least warn Aristegui, he thought, that there was no real Alvarado there to shoot, that they were all clones. But would the Colonel believe him? In any case what Aristegui was trying to do was fundamentally futile. Kill one Alvarado, another would move into his place and announce that he was the authentic article.

Aristegui could bring down one or two, maybe, but he couldn't get them all. This country was going to be ruled by Alvarados for a long time to come.

"They took my citizenship away twenty-five years ago," Mondschein said, after a pause. "I'm here now purely as a guest of the nation, remember? Good guests don't conspire against their hosts. Please go away, Colonel. I haven't heard a thing you've said to me today. I'm already beginning to forget even that you were here."

Aristegui glowered at him in a way that seemed to mingle anguish and fury. For a moment Mondschein thought the man was going to strike him. But then, with a visible effort, the Colonel brought himself under control.

"I thank you for your continued silence, at least," said Aristegui bitterly. "Good day, Senor Doctor Mondschein."

* * * *

Late that afternoon Mondschein heard loud voices from below, shouts and outcries in the servants' quarters. He rang up on the housekeeper's intercom and said, "What's going on?"

"There has been an attack on the President, Senor Doctor. At the Palace of Government. We have just seen it on the television."

So Aristegui had been telling the truth, it seemed, when he said that they were ready to make their move. Or else they had decided it was too risky to wait any longer, now that Mondschein had been told that an assassination attempt was impending.

"And?" Mondschein said.

"By the mercy of the Virgin he is safe, senor. Order has been restored and the criminals have been captured. One of the

others was slain, one of the brothers, but the President was not harmed."

He thanked her and switched on his television set.

They were in the midst of showing a replay of it now. The President arriving at the Palace of Government for the regular midweek meeting of the ministers; the adoring populace obediently waiting behind the barricades to hail him as he emerged from his car; the sudden scuffle in the crowd, evidently a deliberate distraction, and then the shot, the screams, the slim long-legged figure beginning to sag into the arms of his bodyguards, the policemen rushing forward.

And then a cut to the Hall of Audience, the grim-faced Maximum Leader addressing the nation from his throne in broken phrases, in a voice choked with emotion: "This despicable act . . . This bestial attempt to overrule the will of the

people as expressed through their chosen President . . . We must root out the forces of chaos that are loose among us . . . We proclaim a week of national mourning for our fallen brother . . .

Followed by an explanation from a sleek, unruffled-looking official spokesman. The Guardia de la Patria, he said, had received advance word of a possible plot. One of the President's "brothers" had courageously agreed to bear the risk of entering the Palace of Government in the usual way; the Maximum Leader himself had gone into the building through a secret entrance. The identity of the main conspirators was known; arrests had already been made; others would follow. Return to your homes, remain calm, all is well.

All is well.

* * * *

The executions took place a few weeks later. They were shown on huge television screens set up before great throngs of spectators in the main plazas of the city, and relayed to home viewers everywhere. Mondschein, despite earlier resolutions to the contrary, watched along with everyone else in a kind of horrified fascination as Colonel Aristegui and five other officers of the elite guard, along with three other men and four women, all of them members of the Popular Assembly, were led to the wall one by one, faces expressionless, bodies rigid. They were not offered the opportunity to utter last words, even of carefully rehearsed contrition. Their names were spoken and they were blindfolded and shot, and the body taken away, and the next conspirator brought forth.

Mondschein felt an obscure sense of guilt, as though he had been the one who had informed on them. But of course he had

said nothing to anyone. The country was full of governmental agents and spies and provocateurs; the Maximum Leader had not needed Mondschein's help in protecting himself against Colonel Aristegui. The guilt that he felt, Mondschein realized, was that of having let Aristegui go to his death without trying to make him see that he was attempting something impossible, that there was no way, with or without Mondschein's help, that Aristegui could ever rid the country of Alvarado. But the Colonel wouldn't have listened to him in any case, Mondschein told himself.

The days went by. The season brightened toward spring. Mondschein's driver took him up the mountain roads to see Lake Titicaca, and north from there to Cuzco and its grand old Inca relics, and up beyond that to the splendors of Machu Picchu. On another journey he went down to the fogswept coast, to Nazca

where it never rains, where in a landscape as barren as the Moon's he inspected the huge drawings of monkeys and birds and geometrical figures that prehistoric artists had inscribed in the bone-dry soil of the plateaus.

On a brilliant September day that felt like midsummer a car bearing the insignia of the Guardia came to his villa and a brisk young officer with thick hair that was like spun gold told him that he was requested to go at once to the Palace of Justice.

"Have I done something wrong?" Mondschein asked mildly.

"It is by order of the President," said the blond young officer, and that was all the explanation he gave.

Mondschein had been in the Palace of Justice only once before, during the weeks just prior to the agreement that led to his being exiled, when they had briefly imprisoned him on the supposed charge of creating abominations and monsters. Like

most of the other governmental buildings it was a massive, brutal-looking stone structure, two long parallel wings with a smaller one set between them at their head, so that it crouched on its plaza like a ponderous sphinx. There were courtrooms in the upper levels of the two large wings, prison cells below; the small central wing was the headquarters of the Supreme Court, whose chief justice, Mondschein had recently discovered, was another of the clones.

His Guardia escort led him into the building on the lower level, and they descended even below that, to the dreaded highsecurity area in the basement. Was he to be interrogated, then? For what?

The Maximum Leader, in full uniform and decorations, was waiting for him in a cold, clammy-walled interrogation cell, under a single bare incandescent bulb of a kind that Mondschein

thought had been obsolete for a hundred years. He offered Mondschein a benign smile, as benign as that sharp-edged face was capable of showing.

"Our second meeting is in rather less grand surroundings than the first, eh, doctor?"

Mondschein peered closely. This seemed to be the same clone who had spoken with him in the Hall of Audience. He felt quite sure of that. Only intuition, of course. But he trusted it.

"You remember the agreement we reached that day?" the clone asked.

"Of course."

"Today I need to invoke it. Your special expertise is now essential to the stability of the nation."

The clone gestured to an aide-de-camp, who signalled to an figure in the shadows behind him that Mondschein had not

noticed before. A door opened at the rear of the cell and a gurney bearing electronic equipment was wheeled in. Mondschein recognized the familiar intricacies of an electroencephalograph.

"This is the proper machinery for your brain-wave test, is it not?" the Alvarado clone asked.

Mondschein nodded.

"Good," the clone said. "Bring in the prisoner."

The door opened again and two guards dragged in the ragged, disheveled-looking figure of an Alvarado. His hands were shackled behind his back. His face was bruised and sweaty and smeared with dirt. His clothes, rough peasant clothes, were torn. His eyes were blazing with fury of astonishing intensity. Mondschein felt a tremor of the old fear at the sight of him.

The prisoner shot a fiery look at the Alvarado clone and said, "You bastard, let me out of here right now. You know who I am. You know who you are, too. *What* you are."

Mondschein turned to the clone. "But you told me he was dead!" he said.

"Dead? Who? What do you mean?" the Alvarado clone said calmly. "This clone was gravely injured in an attempt on my life and has hovered close to death for many weeks, despite the finest care we could give him. Now that he has begun to recover he is exhibiting delusional behavior. He insists that he is the true Maximum Leader and I am nothing but an artificial genetic duplicate. I ask you to test the authenticity of his claim, Senor Doctor."

"Mondschein! Rafael Mondschein!" the ragged Alvarado cried. A convulsive quiver of amazement ran through his shoulders and chest. "You here? They've brought you back?"

Mondschein said nothing. He stared at the ragged man.

The prisoner's eyes gleamed. "All right, go on! Test me, Rafael. Do your mumbo-jumbo and tell this fraud who I am! And then we'll see if he dares keep up the masquerade. Go on, Rafael! Plug in your damned machine! Stick the electrodes on me!"

"Go ahead, Senor Doctor," the Alvarado clone said.

Mondschein stepped forward and began the preparations for the test, wondering whether he would remember the procedure after so many years.

The prisoner looked toward the Alvarado clone and said, "He'll prove that I am who I say I am. And you won't have the guts to

carry the pretense any further, will you, you test-tube fraud? Because half the staff in the hospital knows the real story already, and somehow the truth will get out. Somehow, no matter how you try to suppress it. And it'll bring you down. Once the country finds out that you're a fake, that you simply seized power when the motorcade bomb went off. Once word gets around that I didn't die, that you've had me hidden away in the hospital all this time with people thinking I was you and you were me, what do you think will happen to your regime? Will anyone want to take orders from a clone?"

"You mustn't speak now," Mondschein told him. "It'll distort the test results."

"All right. Yes. Listen, Rafael, no matter what you tell him he'll say that you identified me as a clone, but you know that it's a lie. When you get back outside, you tell people the true story.

You hear me? And afterward I'll see to it that you get whatever you want. Anything. No reward would be too great. Money, women, country estates, your own laboratory, whatever."

"Please," Mondschein said. "I ask you not to speak."

He attached the electrodes to himself. He touched the dials.

He remembered, now. The whole technique. He had written these personality-organization algorithms himself. He closed his eyes and felt the data come flooding in. The prisoner's brain-waves met his own—collided—clashed—clashed violently—

To the Alvarado clone Mondschein said, "The alpha match is perfect, Senor Presidente. What we have here is a clone."

"No, Rafael!" the prisoner roared. "You filthy lying bastard, no! You know it isn't so!"

"Take him away," the Alvarado clone said.

"No. You won't do anything to me. I'm the only legitimate President of Tierra Alvarado."

"You are nothing," the clone told him. "You are a mere creature. We have scientific proof that you are simply one of the artificial brothers. Dr. Mondschein has just demonstrated that."

"Balls," the prisoner said. "Listen, Mondschein, I know he has you intimidated. But when you get out of here, spread the word. Tell everyone what your real reading was. That there's a usurper in the presidential palace, that he must be overthrown. You'll be a national hero, you'll be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams—"

Mondschein smiled. "Ah, but I already have everything that I want."

He looked toward the Alvarado clone. "I'll prepare a formal report and sign it, Senor Presidente. And I will be willing to attest to it at the public trial."

"This has been the trial, doctor," the clone said smoothly, indicating an opening in the ceiling of the cell, where Mondschein now saw an opening through which the snout of a television camera protruded. "All the information that we need has been recorded. But I am grateful for your offer. You have been extremely helpful. Extremely helpful, Senor Doctor."

* * * *

That night, in the safety and comfort of his beloved villa, Mondschein slept soundly for the first time since his return to Tierra Alvarado—more soundly than he had slept in years.

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