

A Journey

I was at the local convenience store, buying a 6-pack of Lone Star beer. That's how it began, a few years ago. You may say that beer-drinking is not good for a person, but I didn't do it often. I wanted to relax and watch a football game. It was Saturday, this was supposed to be an important game, and I had decided to kill some time.

I was waiting in line when he came in. He saw me waiting, saw my six-pack and snack, and went to the cooler. He got behind me in line, carrying a six-pack of the same beer, and said, "It seems that we have similar tastes." I grunted an acknowledgment. Then he asked, "Are you going to watch the game?"

I turned my head and said, "Yes, I am."

He smiled and said, "I am, too, and I would welcome your company."

I sized him up. He was about my age and height; he had on the same kind of casual clothes as I did and he spoke well. He didn't seem like any kind of oddball that I could put in a category of oddballs. He seemed normal and friendly. I had doubts, of course.

"I don't know you," I said.

That made no difference to him. "Oh, I don't know you, either, but you seem OK to me. My name is Daniel. We can go to my house,

which is just a couple of blocks away. I think we can get along for a few hours, at least."

I lived near the store, too, so we were neighbors in a way. He didn't need to know that, and didn't seem to care. I lived alone, and I never had visitors. I had a routine of going to my little office every weekday to maintain my harmless and meager trade, and walking in the park daily. Perhaps I needed something different to do. I didn't think I needed a friend, but maybe I was wrong. He could be an axe murderer for all I knew. I decided not to agree as we moved up in line. I noticed that everyone in line was probably buying beer to watch the game.

"I wasn't planning to do something like that. I was going to spend the afternoon alone."

He tilted his head a bit, and said, "Well. So was I. But I remember sometimes changing my plans after meeting someone, say, back in college, and it never did any harm."

"What college did you go to?" I asked.

"Purdue." That was one of the teams playing today, and I was interested now.

"I went to Northwestern," I said. "I'm Stanley." We shook hands as I arrived at the cash register.

"Don't get the idea that I want to bet on the game," he said. "Or that I really care about it. But I was looking for something to do, and..."

"All right," I interrupted. "Let's go to your place."

"Good. I might have some snacks ready, too."

He checked out and led the way. We turned in the opposite direction from the one to my house, walked a block, turned a corner and walked another block. We continued to talk about this and that, but our conversation was short, because we had arrived. There was a stone wall about eight feet tall around a corner house, and he stopped there. He reached into his pocket and pulled out some keys, but I didn't see a keyhole. Daniel slid a stone in the wall, stuck the key in and turned it. The wall moved backward without any noise, and I was somewhat amazed, and entered after him.

"Very mysterious," I said.

He grinned at me. "It's one of the oldest houses in the city, and the person who had it built was rather eccentric. There are two other entrances, but this one was the closest. Oh, I guess I'm showing off a little bit. We are inside the house, now."

Right. The stone wall was the outside of the house. There was a short stone corridor with a door at the end that Daniel opened and showed me through. I entered a cozy room, about 20 by 20 feet, with comfortable-looking chairs, rugs, occasional tables, some shelves with various items and a divan against one wall. Light came through clerestory windows on the right. "This is what I call the parlor," Daniel said. "I don't use it very much." He produced another key and opened a formidable door opposite the one we had come through. A cat appeared from somewhere in the parlor and ran through.

This room was much larger. It had several couches and chairs, tables, a refrigerator and sink behind a counter, a large screen television, stereo equipment, a pool table and a pinball machine. It was fully carpeted except by the refrigerator. The walls had shelves with sports memorabilia and photos and art of sporting events and players. There were more clerestory windows on the left, right and behind us. There was a large arch straight ahead and ornately carved double doors to the right. "This is the game room. We'll watch the game here. Let's put the beer in the fridge and I'll show you where the bathroom is. I want to see what my son is up to, and you can meet him, if you like. His mother isn't around any more."

I said sure, and we went over to the refrigerator, and then he led the way through the arch, and made a right turn into a hall. I noticed that there was another hall to the left and that there was a smaller arched door a few feet that way. A few yards down the hall he opened a door and said, "Here's the rest room," and left the door open. Then we proceeded about 10 more yards, and he knocked on a door on the right side.

A distant voice shouted, "Come in!" and we did. Past a smaller version of the "parlor" I had seen before was a much smaller version of the game room, just some chairs and a TV. I was starting to realize that I should have known from the stone wall that Daniel's house was pretty large. To the right of the TV was a door. Through that I could see a workshop where a young man was sitting on a stool,

working on a bicycle. He said, "Hi, Dad" and rose to his feet, looking at me expectantly.

"This is Stanley," said my host. "We're going to watch the Purdue game and hang out for a while. Stanley, this is my son Robert."

"I'm pleased to meet you," said Robert, extending his hand. As I shook it, I thought to myself that he could not be more than 14 years old, but he had the manners of a confident adult. "As you see, Dad, I'm getting another bike into shape. It doesn't need much work, and it's nothing special. I'll donate it if no one wants to buy it. I have a couple of cars to fix after I'm done."

"Good," said Daniel. "Is anything unusual going on?"

"Not really," replied Robert. "I heard that the city has a problem with one of the water pumping stations, and I looked at it online. I saw what might be wrong with it, and asked if I could take a closer look, but of course they don't want a kid without an engineering degree butting in. The usual thing." He shrugged. "I'll have my degree in a couple of years, and then I'll see what they say."

"Fine," said his father. "At least they know who you are. That's the way to do it. I'll talk to you later. The game starts soon and we need to get back."

"OK." Robert turned to me and said, "Nice to meet you. Have a good time."

We left him and the bicycle, and went back to the hall. "Robert is a sort of mechanical genius," confided Daniel. "He started when he was a toddler, asking me how to fix his broken toys. If I couldn't do it, he figured it out himself. Then he fixed toys that belonged to other kids in his kindergarten class. I removed him from school when they started teaching him to read and write. He already knew that, and arithmetic, too. I turned him loose in the library I have, and gave him assignments. He also went to the city library. He started auditing college courses online when he was 9 or 10, learning calculus and other things that I couldn't teach because I don't understand them myself."

"Wow," was all I could say. He were back at the game room, now, and we got beers and moved a couple of chairs in front of the TV, with a little table in between. Daniel used the remote to turn on the TV and find the channel, which was showing the last few minutes of the pregame. "Do you ever watch the pre-game?" I suddenly blurted. "I never bother."

Daniel chuckled. "No, I don't. It's all a lot of foolishness. I've decided that the announcers have no idea what they are talking about. They must be reading from scripts, I think. How could they be so well-prepared otherwise?"

"Yes. They seem to know everything about every team in the country, and they fill up the allotted time perfectly, leaving room for commercials, of course. The performance must be written down like a play or a movie."

We talked like this for a little while, through the National Anthem, and eventually saw the kickoff. The game started leisurely as the teams tested each other out. In between plays and during commercials, we talked. Daniel never failed to use the mute button when advertising came on. I asked him if he was interested in any of the things advertised. He said, "Not really. When I want something, it makes no difference whether it's advertised."

"Interesting. In my business, I sometimes delve into modern products when I get an idea from a commercial."

"What is your business?" he asked me.

I explained that I bought, sold and brokered collector's items of all kinds. I had a small office with lists that I maintained on my computer, and a phone. I knew collectors all over the world, and I kept my inventory in a storage unit. "If you want something that I don't have, for instance a coin from the 17th century to complete your collection, or a drawing by Goya, I probably know someone who does have it. I mention those, because those are two transactions I made this week. Not everything I deal in is so impressive, though. People have collections of everything you can think of: candles, figurines of angels, beer cans, old photos ... it's endless. I have a good reputation because I insist on provenance and I have an eye for fakes." A cat appeared and eyed me, then whisked itself away.

"Fascinating," he said. He meant it. I asked him what he did for a living. "I'm retired. Robert is the one with a job, and he freelances. I rarely leave the house now. Robert doesn't go anywhere

either. By the way, I have a rather large library, and if I decide that I need to add to it, I usually just use the internet. But if it is something rare, I suppose I you could find it?"

"Oh, yes. Rare books are part of my business and I have a number of them in my inventory. A book might not be available, though, because all the copies of it might be in museums and private libraries, and not for sale. Twice I have bought the entire library of someone who died, when his heirs saw no reason to keep a bunch of old books. Both times that was a good investment."

"Speculation, you mean."

"Not really. I traveled to see the books first. I had a good idea about what I was getting."

"I think it's time for another beer. And I missed that touchdown, somehow." I said I had missed it, too, and we both laughed. We hadn't been paying attention to the game.

Soon it was half-time, and Daniel excused himself, saying he'd be back very soon with some snacks. I took the opportunity to use the bathroom. When I returned, there was a woman standing in front of the television, watching it. I made some kind of exclamation, and she turned to me and said, "Hello, I'm Deidre. I live here."

I told her I was Stanley, and I was just visiting. She said she was pleased to meet me, and went to the double doors and slipped through them. A cat followed her.

Daniel returned, pushing a cart that had dishes of food on it, which he quickly unloaded onto the table. There were chicken wings

and potstickers, some squares of bread with toppings, stuffed peppers, cucumber slices and other little treats. I exclaimed that this was too much to eat, and he said, "I'm sure we can take care of it all."

"Daniel, this is a little puzzling. You must have been expecting a guest to have this ready, but I was unexpected, wasn't I?"

"Good question," he said, seating himself and grabbing a potsticker with chopsticks. "No, I was not expecting a guest. You met Diedre, didn't you? She prepared this during the first half. She likes to be mysterious, and she had told me that she was fixing us something. You didn't notice, but she was out of your view through there," - he indicated the arch - "and let me know by hand signs."

"Hah. And you kept the secret, so I'd be surprised," I said, spearing a slice of cucumber with a toothpick. "I appreciate this very much. Who is Deidre, may I ask? She said she lives here and left."

"She lives here, yes. The house is easily large enough for three of us. Robert has his suite of rooms. You saw part of it. He has a kitchen and full bathroom and other rooms you didn't see. I have a similar suite. Past the arch there is a large living room, the front entrance hall, the library I mentioned, a room full of plants, a bar, a dining room and two small suites with sitting rooms and bedrooms."

"Really. This place is huge. But Deidre doesn't have a suite of her own?"

"Deidre lives in the basement, which is through those doors and down the stairs. The basement is the size of the house, and has all the necessary facilities and furniture, and whatever she needs. She has ample room."

My mouth was open. I found it hard to imagine. Daniel looked at me and grinned. "The second half is beginning soon. When these guys stop yammering I'll turn the sound back on."

"Sure," I said, still trying to imagine the enormity of this house. "I think I'll get another beer, you?"

"Yes, please. I see that you are shocked by the size of the house. I can take you on a tour after the game, if you like. I ask you, though, not to tell people about my house. If I wanted people to know, I could have banquets and parties and all sorts of things that I don't want. Summit conferences. Renters. Bah. Robert has some trouble with people he has met who want to visit. The policy here is no visitors – a policy I broke today for the first time in years, and I don't regret it."

"Well, thank you. And I assure you I will tell no one. Much of my business involves concealing what I know."

"I suspected that when you told me what you do. I can see how you get some business leverage by not admitting that you have a certain item on hand until it's to your advantage."

"It's not quite like that," I began, but the second half kicked off. The return was poor, only a few yards. "He should have made a

fair catch," I observed. "He had no chance of getting very far. It makes no sense to risk losing the ball that way."

"I think you are right, but these young men are involved in the game and their emotions are at work. Prudence doesn't occur to them in the heat of the moment."

I nodded at Daniel, for he was undoubtedly right, and settled back in my chair to watch the game for a little while. Purdue was ahead by two touchdowns, and naturally I wanted the other team to make it a closer game.

But it was over soon, it seemed, even with the usual timeouts and delays at the end, when the other team had no chance of winning. Daniel and I watched the talking heads do a post-mortem and name a most valuable player, until we traded glances and Daniel turned it off. He said, "Let's go to the bar. I'll show you some of the house on the way." I acquiesced and we got up and went through the arch. He said, "You've been to Robert's rooms, that way" - motioning to the right and imitating a football referee calling first down - "and mine are this way." He pointed to the left. "The other door there is a storage closet, not another bathroom."

We went through another arch, not in line with the first one, into the living room. It was huge. Here there was a fireplace with comfortable-looking furniture around it. There were oil paintings, shelves of books and objects and tables, chairs, plants and lamps scattered around. I was attracted to a small statue of a man on a horse on a table against the wall by the fireplace. I examined it

closely and looked at Daniel. He said, "Yes, it's a Remington. This way leads to the entrance hall." I looked down an elegant corridor with an ornate single door at the end. There were a few doors off the sides of the hall, and Daniel said, "There are storage and cloak rooms, there. Now, the rest of the house."

We crossed the living room and went through another arch. "The library is here on the left." The door was closed. We walked for a few more yards. There was a cat ahead of us. I pointed at it, and Daniel said, "They lead or they follow, as they choose." He stopped in front of another door that was made of metal and looked airtight. "This door leads to the plant room." He took out his keys and opened the door. The interior looked like a jungle. There were small trees, huge amounts of dirt, rocks scattered around, vines, plants with huge leaves forming an understory, and even some beds of grass and little flowers. "You see" - he pointed up - "I have a lot of LED lights in here to simulate the outdoors. They turn off automatically to make it night in here."

I noticed some ants and flies and pointed them out. "They can't get out. This door seals when it's closed. There are also lizards living in there to keep them under control. You can get lost in here. There is a path of sorts between the planters, the pots and the plants growing free, but you can still lose your way. Robert did when he was younger."

We looked a little longer and left. There was a sort of popping sound when Daniel closed the door. "Next is the bar. I think you'll like it."

He opened another door and I followed him in. There was a pair of bat-wing doors inside. When we pushed through them, the lights came on and revealed a perfect replica of a bar with about ten tables and some booths along the walls. There were paintings, drawings and neon signs on the walls. The bar itself ran nearly the length of the opposite wall, about 40 feet, was made of wood, had 10 or more barstools, a brass foot rail and a shiny black polished wooden surface. Daniel lifted up part of it on the left side and said, "I'll play bartender. What would you like?" The array of bottles behind the bar showed me that I could order anything. I don't usually, you know, but I told him a gin and tonic.

Somehow, there was ice ready, and limes that were freshly cut. He served me and poured himself a glass of whiskey. "Do you keep this place ready all the time?" I asked. "Is this one of Diedre's jobs?"

"Diedre doesn't work here, she's an inhabitant. She fixed our snacks because she wanted to. Everything is always ready here. I can't explain it to you. You must accept it as a mystery."

"Very well," I said, a little annoyed. "It certainly is marvelous. We could have watched the game in here... but I don't see a TV."

"There's no TV in here. I don't know if you've been to a bar lately, but they all have big televisions and I don't like it. This

is a place to talk about things, not watch sports or Jeopardy! Or things like that."

"Fine with me," I said. And so we started talking. Daniel wanted to know more about my business, and I wanted to know how he had acquired this remarkable house.

"I inherited it from my parents," he told me. "I've added some things, but much of what you've seen was handed down by them. That old furniture was built to last, and there's no point in trying to modernize."

"That's right. I got into my business partly because I have a liking for old objects... not to mention unusual ones."

He talked about various things for a while. I had two more drinks and I was beginning to feel them. "The restroom is through that door," he said, pointing at the wall to the left of the entrance. I hadn't noticed it before. I looked the other way, and sure enough, there was a door with a "WOMEN" sign on the opposite side of the barroom.

I had just exited the rest room to come back to the bar when Robert burst through the door, shouting, "Dad! I found the ballroom again!"

Daniel looked my way with with an pained expression. Then Robert followed his look, and said, "Dad, I didn't know Stanley was still here."

"No problem, Robert." Daniel said with an obvious effort. "Stanley is our friend and he's not going to be curious about the

ballroom or anything like that. He's stayed a while because we like each other's company, but he'll be leaving in a while. "

"I have to admit that I'm curious," I said. "Do you mean that there's a ballroom in this house, too? I'll believe it... I'll believe almost anything after seeing this bar." I chuckled, but I was unsure.

And now, dear reader, I must confess that I've been leading you on. I could have told this story without the suspense and with fewer details, and if you've gotten this far, and I don't mean this far through my tale, you already know. But I wanted to give you an idea of what this experience was to me. I had no intention of getting involved in this. This affair or whatever you would call it. I've written this down and left it in the library at the 226th level, where someone may find it someday. To you, the finder, I ask, Was your experience like mine, or did you get here some other way? Tip a slip of paper into this notebook.

But, returning to my story, it seemed to me that Daniel and his son were at odds somehow, and also oddly in agreement. Robert had walked up to the bar and was speaking in a low voice to Daniel. When I walked over, they stopped talking. I knew Robert was very mature for a 14-year-old, and when he turned his face to me blankly, I knew that whatever decision that was about to be made was his father's.

Daniel cleared his throat. "I've asked you already not to reveal to anyone what you saw here. Can I still trust you? Or are you so curious that you might try to come back here? Or might you be convinced by someone else that you should come here again? You know

by now that this place is secret, and it should remain so, and I trust you. Robert doesn't trust you as much. That embarrasses him, because he carelessly mentioned the ballroom."

"I didn't know he was still here, Dad," Robert said.

"It doesn't matter." replied his father. "That's done. The problem is still the same." He looked at me. "I should never have invited you here. If you like, I will blame it on the beer." He smiled.

I was not reassured. Daniel was being forthright, and it gave me a chill. I cleared my throat. "I don't understand, Daniel. I can keep a secret. What I don't like is the way you say I might visit you again, as if that were a bad thing. I don't see the harm in that, and I'd like it. What have I done wrong?"

"Nothing. That's the problem. From my point of view, I'm afraid that I have done something wrong. I shouldn't have have invited you. We have ... our own way to live here and no one must know about it. I shouldn't have showed you the house. You've seen that it is rather large. Now you've heard about a ballroom, and you'll want to see it, of course. I haven't seen it, myself, but I'm sure it exists. Does that make any sense? I suppose not." He hesitated. "You might have to stay here, like Diedre. Robert, what do you think?"

"I don't know. But you'll have to find out. Stanley, I want to trust you, too. But I can't do anything. When I saw you here, I thought this might happen, and now I'm afraid I've had a part in making it happen. Dad?"

"Yes," Daniel said. To me, he said, "Excuse me for a few minutes." He left the bar. The batwing doors swung back and forth without a sound.

"What's going on?" I asked Robert. He didn't answer. He went behind the bar and fixed himself a Coca-Cola in a glass, and refilled my drink without asking. I wondered how he knew what it was. He came out from behind the bar and sat at a table. "This is awkward. I can't tell you what's going on. I'd like to get back to my work."

"Don't let me stop you," I said sarcastically. He just shook his head. I decided to leave the bar and find Daniel, but I didn't see the batwing doors any more. I saw a wall. I made a noise of astonishment and stood there gaping.

Robert looked at me, and then at where the doors used to be. "Ah," he said. That was all he said.

I seated myself on the barstool again, and came to a realization. "So, I have to stay here."

Robert said, "Let's wait for my Dad to come back."

We waited, not speaking, for a few more minutes. Then Daniel entered, through the reappeared doors, and stopped and looked at us. He went back behind the bar. "I suppose you have figured it out, in a way. Yes, you have to stay."

"Let me know how you know that," I demanded.

"You have to know everything now. I asked the House." He somehow let me know that the House was capitalized, now. "The House says you are a risk. A risk to our peace and quiet. I am sorry. But you will

find that living here is easy. You can continue to conduct your business and pursue all your interests – I can make arrangements. You will learn to talk to the House, yourself. We'll help find you some living quarters and an office and everything you need. But if you still want to leave, I can't help you with that."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because the House won't let you. You will not be able to find an exit." He looked at Robert, who nodded. "You've already seen that happen when you wanted to leave this room."

"But you were outside when I met you. Robert can leave."

"Yes, it is permitted to a very limited extent. You may be allowed to leave someday. And perhaps bring someone back. I met my wife that way. And Diedre. Robert has his work to do, and the House approves. But he does most of it here. And we know other people who don't live here. Sometimes they visit. We can visit them, too, sometimes."

"But in general, we are captives here, of the House." Now I was doing it.

"Not really captives, you see. But we have rules to follow. We do the best we can under the circumstances. You may in time be trusted by the House. It's not as horrible as you seem to think. Again, I am sorry, and this is my fault. But ... I like you. And I think you'll adapt." He smiled suddenly. "We have no lack of food or drink and things to do. And now there are four of us."

"I'm going to have to get used to it, I guess. How is it done? Is it some kind of magic?"

"I suppose you could call it that. But the question is rather meaningless. The House is very old, and updates itself. There are manuscripts in the library with drawings of how it used to look - stone walls and floors, tapestries on the walls, huge fireplaces with pots hanging in them for cooking food, and so forth. Now, if you want the very latest model of refrigerator in your kitchen, you'll have it. Yes, we must get you set up. The guest suites are not good enough. Where would you like to be? Robert and I like our arrangement with our two suites at either end of a hall. I think there must be another hall by now."

Robert looked up, and said, "I'm sure of it. Stanley will be closer to the big living room than we are." He stood up and said to me, "Let's take a look." He turned around and left.

Daniel and I followed. We went back the way Daniel and I had come, past the plant room and library doors, and crossed the living room, where a cat was on a chair, to the arch. Daniel asked, "Left or right?" and Robert headed to the right. I said to myself, this is the way to Daniel's suite, but the hall was somehow different. We reached a door at the end that looked like the door to my house. Daniel and Robert waited, so I opened the door. It was very much like my house. The door opened onto a living room with the same threadbare carpet and old furniture.

Daniel chuckled. He looked at me with a smile and said, "This is not very impressive, Stanley. I expected something more. But you can change it, or rather, the House can. I suppose the rest is also similar to your house. Try this. Is there anything you don't really like about the rest of the house that you would like fixed or made better?"

I didn't have to consider very long. "The bathtub. It's old and has stains in it that won't come out."

"All right, let's go see it." My living room had a door to a sort of sitting room, and another one to the rest of the house. I went through the latter door, and directly to the bathroom. To my surprise, it was completely different. It had a new tub, and a walk-in shower. The toilet was around a little corner. The sink was new, larger, and more ornate. "Do you like it?" asked Daniel. "If not, it will change, but only when you're not looking. Let's go back to the living room."

The living room had also changed. It was paneled, the chairs were new and looked more comfortable, there was a reading light by one of them, and there was an Oriental rug. Out of habit, and frankly dazed, I turned up a corner of the rug and examined the weave. It looked genuine.

Daniel chuckled again. "You'll never see the changes made. You're already talking to the house, in a simple way. You will have deeper conversations later. This is your place. Let's go and I'll show you the rest of the house, the parts you haven't seen."

We went back to the arch from the living room, and Daniel turned right. "You've seen this hallway before. There's Robert's and there's mine." We entered the game room. "Now, Diedre could have had a suite like yours, but she chose to live in the basement. I suppose you have the same choice, if you want. There are other basements. One of them has the ballroom that Robert mentioned, but I haven't been there."

Deidre came through the double doors. "I understand we have a new housemate," she said without any greeting. "Welcome, Stanley. May I call you Stan?" I nodded.

"I was showing Stanley around and I was going to show him the basement," Daniel said.

"Fine," said Diedre. "Good idea. Show him how it works, if you know."

"I don't," Daniel said. "Let's go," he said to me, and led me through the double doors.

There was a staircase there, very solid-feeling and with walls, carved like the doors, on both sides. I wondered where the light came from, but I didn't say anything. On the way down, I saw a couple of little doors on the right side, at the level of a stair. After 20 steps or so, we came to a landing, where there was another set of double doors to the left.

"This is where Diedre lives," Daniel told me. "Of course we shouldn't enter."

"Of course," I agreed, noticing that the stairs continued down from the landing. "Does someone else live farther down?"

"Not that I know of," Daniel said, "But I thought you might want to see the next basement." He led the way down the stairs. I tried to figure out what the carvings on the walls were supposed to be, and failed. There wasn't any figural art in them, but they didn't seem random, either. I thought for a moment that they were influenced by Art Nouveau with their swirls, but then I decided they could not be. Looking at them gave me a strange feeling and since the patterns, whatever they were, went all the way down the stairs, following me, I decided to give up my analysis. There was one little door on the right, as before, and a cat disappeared through it.

Daniel stopped at the second landing. "I think you ought to see this place. You make a business out of collectibles and from people who collect things. Well, this is a storeroom."

He pushed open the double doors and we entered a warehouse. There were boxes as far as I could see; wooden, cardboard boxes and chests of wood, and large ceramic or metal jars. Some were piled up, and a few near the door were open.

"We have no lack of artifacts. Please take a look at a few things, and then we will go down another flight of stairs."

I went to one of the opened boxes, and the objects within were women's jewelry. Some of it was unusual, things that I had never seen pictures of before, for example a carved ivory pin in an Art Deco design. Considering the value of the metal and jewels (assuming they were real), I was looking at a million dollars. I looked back at

Daniel, near the door, and he was standing impassively with his arms crossed.

I went to another wooden box, opened it up and it contained furs. Furs had come up only once or twice in my trade, but I could see that these furs were elegant. I felt one, and the hair nearly covered my hand. I said, "Do you know that a lot of trade in furs is prohibited by law?"

Daniel laughed. "Yes, I know that. We don't know what to do with that box. Or most of them, really. We opened that box several years ago out of curiosity. Look. One skin is labeled "Sabre-Toothed Tiger." I found it.

"How is this possible?" I asked. "The label is in modern English but it seems to be very old, itself. It seems to be a striped skin, sewn together with ... horsehair? Threaded through neatly made holes."

"When we ask the House about details like that, it has few answers. Look at that one, over there."

I examined the contents of a larger box that had been opened. It contained rugs and cloths. I like to think that I know a little about rugs, so I examined them, as I had examined the Oriental rug that had appeared in my living room upstairs. The patterns were traditional and the weaves were correct. They seemed to be authentic. I said in what I hoped was a polite way, "These look real. But the rug business is peculiar. There are many real ones, and some fakes, and some cheap imitations. These rugs can't possibly have any provenance, which

might be a problem. And the entire field of rugs – and these cloths as well – is extremely complex and requires expertise.”

“That is indeed a dilemma,” Daniel said. “But the House solves all problems of that kind. They are genuine, even if they come from another reality.”

“I had almost forgotten about the House,” I admitted. “And I am in another reality now, aren’t I?”

“Not really. You met me at the store. This is the same reality as that, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” I said with a grin. “I remember talks like this in college between football games, though.”

Daniel laughed. “OK. Let’s go down another floor. It’s a big empty room, or it should be. But the farther down you go, the less likely that things remain the same. That’s why Robert has found the ballroom twice and I’ve never seen it.”

“How far down do the basements go?” I asked as we went out the doors and started down the stairs. A cat was on the stairs, and it ran into one of the smaller holes on the right side of the stairs.

“I don’t know. Robert says he has gone down to the 50th level. He has kept records of what he finds, and then when he goes down again, the floors have changed. He found the ballroom, which he says is spectacular, by the way, on the 8th level this time. The first time he found it, it was on the 11th. Also, if you count the stairs, they change in number. So there is really no way to map the basements by floors or by the stairs.”

"But Diedre's floor remains the same?"

"Yes, and so does the one we just visited. We've been there frequently and made changes. That seems to stabilize them. Here we are." There was another set of double doors on the left. Daniel pushed them open. "Yes, it's the empty one. There's not much to see here."

I looked inside and it was a vast empty room. "Why doesn't this place look dusty?" I asked. "It looks like it's been empty for a long time, but it looks pretty clean."

"I can't explain that either. We don't need to clean up the House. Every particle of dirt disappears to somewhere. It would be a full-time job to clean the ground floor, right? But we don't have to. It might have something to do with the cats."

I stood in the big empty space and looked around. "I see why you want to keep everything secret, and why I am a prisoner here. This could be a factory. Hundreds of people could work here."

Daniel said seriously, "That's been tried in some of the other Houses. It did not turn out well. You are right. Making money is not the object."

"The other houses?"

"Yes, there are others."

I decided that another question was more important. "What is the object?"

"We don't know. Maybe something in the library says. The oldest documents there, which you need to see, are indecipherable. It's something we talk about at times."

I could not think of anything. I said, "Lead on, Good Shepherd."

Daniel smiled. "I'm glad you can maintain your sense of humor. I did not want you to stay here like this, though. I apologize again. This is your new home. Let's go down one more floor. It should be plants, similar to the room upstairs that I showed you."

He led the way out and I closed the doors. "There doesn't seem to be a way to lock the doors," he remarked. "Diedre tried it on her doors, and the locks disappeared. Nor can she put a bar across the doors. She tried that, too, and it simply vanished overnight, or so she said."

I counted the steps as we descended. There was another cat on the stairs that ran through one of the little doors in the right as we came down. There were 34 steps before we reached the next landing with the carved double doors on the left. The stairs continued on.

"Again, how many basement floors are there?"

"We don't know," Daniel replied. "The library has a manuscript by a person who claims that he went down 100 floors, and there were still more stairs leading down. It took him two weeks, because he had to climb up again. Some of the floors are like Diedre's; they are living areas. There are food and other facilities on them. The person who did this took along supplies and he says he didn't need them. He kept a detailed record of what he found on every level, and then when he came back up, he found they were different. He found a ballroom, maybe the only ballroom, on the way up that wasn't there on the way

down. Robert goes down 10 or 20 floors on his expeditions. It's always different after the floors that we visit regularly."

"Huh. So what's at the bottom?"

"If there is a bottom, maybe it connects to the basements of the other houses. It's been discussed. No one knows."

He pushed open the double doors. Sure enough, it was a jungle of plants. There were insect noises and rustlings that might have been little animals fleeing from us. I was intrigued. "Where do they get the light to grow?" I asked.

"That's another mystery. As you saw up there, the empty floor had light, too."

"Yes, and I didn't wonder about that, although it was three floors underground." I thought about it for a few seconds. "I guess you will say it's the House."

"That's the best answer. Yes. It gets on my nerves, too, sometimes. But we have to accept things as they appear, without knowing how things work."

I laughed. "OK, we are done here. Let's go back upstairs. I want to see how my apartment has changed. I've been thinking about it."

"First, let's go down one more floor. Usually it is another house, like the one that Diedre lives in."

"OK, let's look," I agreed.

There were 30 steps this time. When we pushed open the double doors, I saw an opulent entrance hall, with wooden paneling, a coat-rack and an oriental rug.

"Wow," I said. "This looks pretty lavish."

"You can live here if you want," Daniel said.

"I don't think so," I said, annoyed by the idea of having to climb five flights of stairs.

"I want to see the kitchen, and what's in the fridge," Daniel said. He led the way through a few rooms that were in the same style as the entrance hall. It was the mansion of a millionaire. We had to discuss which way to go to find the kitchen, but we eventually found it. Daniel opened the refrigerator and showed me that it was full of fresh fruits and vegetables. "We don't know how this happens, either. The fridge in your place upstairs is full, too. I bet you."

"So, everything is taken care of," I mused out loud. "Or did Robert bring all these groceries down here today?"

"I don't think so," Daniel said, just as I had a little while ago. And we looked at each other with amusement and went back out to climb the stairs.

So, I settled in because I had no choice.

Daniel did not lie. He connected my business to a trusted proxy outside the House, and my correspondence was forwarded to me. After I caught up, I did business as usual. I could not leave to go to my storage unit where my personal stash was, so Daniel's outside connections moved them to the house and got back the deposit on my storage unit. A storage room appeared in my suite. The proxy, whose name was James (he said), could do that for me. I think that "James" was more than one person. Selling the things I had accumulated had

never been my only business. The items in the basement were a temptation that I had to resist. I still had to pay taxes, and the IRS doesn't like it when your money seems to come from nowhere.

So, I settled down into my life as a prisoner. It was pleasant in some ways. There was plenty to eat and drink. Daniel eventually told me that maybe the House only let him go out to buy beer because he might meet someone. He said that maybe the House was bored. That made sense after a while, and after I learned to talk to the House better. But underneath my acceptance and the satisfaction of living there, I was rebellious.

I started looking for ways to escape. I went to the front door, which I couldn't see any more. I felt around the walls, trying to feel it. I closed my eyes and tried to walk through it. I did the same thing at the door where Daniel let me in. It wasn't there. I was shut off from the outside: a prisoner. Daniel caught me trying to get out one day, and calmly told me that it was OK. He did it when he was a child; Dierdre did it; Robert had done it and Robert's mother had done it. There was no way out. I wondered why he never named Robert's mother, but I didn't ask him.

Very well. Living there was pleasant; there was always good food and drink; there were places to go and things to do there; and Daniel and I got along fairly well. Robert was a ball of energy and a welcome companion when he wasn't studying or working. As Daniel had said, I was able to continue my business. The arrangements were simple. Somehow, mail showed up on the table in the entrance hall.

The House provided me with paper, envelopes, stamps, and other business supplies as I needed. My leases on the house and office I had "outside" were paid off by the proxy, and whoever he was, he dealt fairly with me and my clients.

Yet I was still somewhat dissatisfied. Daniel understood that, although he had lived in the House his entire life. He told me that he had never known anything else, but he knew that I had. He suggested that we should find wives; we could communicate with the other Houses and see if there were available women. He had a glint in his eye when he said we might find sisters, but I ignored it. I have never been very interested in marriage, and when I asked him what happened to Robert's mother, he went silent. I could have gotten married, I suppose. There was easily enough room in my part of the house for another person, but I did not want the obligations that would ensue. Dierdre was attractive and friendly, but clearly off limits. It was a strange household.

I convinced one of the cats to move in with me as a companion. Daniel and Robert thought that was amusing; Dierdre said she had three cat companions in her basement house, and others sometimes visited. My cat had visiting cats, too. I was never sure how they came and went.

This went on for a year or so. I still retained some hope of escaping, but hope is bait for misery. My previous attempts to escape were motivated by the idea that it was possible, but now that I knew

it was not, my hope was futile. I finally let my frustration out when I was talking to Daniel one day.

"Daniel, I want out of this place," I said bluntly.

He sighed. "Stan, you know that is not possible."

"I do not," I retorted. "Robert's mother is not here any more. You have never told me what happened to her, or even her name. Come on, now. You can't keep this secret any longer."

"I can, and I will," he said. "My journal with all you want to know will go into the library after I die. I hope you are keeping a journal, too, aren't you? Just about every one in the library begins by telling you to do that."

"Yes, I've started one. I've read some from the library, too. Some of them I can't read, because they are written in languages I don't know, but the ones I have read are very interesting. But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. I want to know how to get out of here. Nothing I've read in the library tells me that."

"No. I think the House does a little bit of censorship on works in the library. I'm sure there are people who have left, but those who are here are not supposed to know about it. There is a journal from the 17th century – I forget who wrote it – where a woman writes about her life here. She mentions her husband many times and then she doesn't mention him any more. Nor do the contemporary journals. They all do the same thing; first he is here, and then he is not. You know that when we die here, we are buried in the garden room, and that is recorded. There were once as many as 40 or 50 people living here."

"Yes, I've read those old documents. Maybe not all of them. I think I know who you mean. Umm. Elijah Woods? Was that the name?"

"Yes! That was the name." He looked a little bit sideways at me. "Have you tried to read the old ones telling about how the House was created?"

"No, the ones that old are not in English."

"There is a whole shelf of translation books."

"Yes, but ... how do I say this? I figured that when you translated into an old language from an even older one, and then translated into another one, and finally got to English that you could understand, it wouldn't make any sense."

"That is right. I tried it and it was a waste of time. Did you ever play the telephone game when you were a kid?"

"Yes. That describes what I was thinking. Thanks." I could not help but smile at him.

"I wish you'd consider getting married. More people living here would be more interesting. I'll tell you this - I haven't mentioned it to Robert yet - but there is a young woman in a House in Finland who is willing to move here. Her name is Mimmi. We've written letters and sent pictures and so forth. She also grew up in a House, and is willing to come here and be my wife."

"Congratulations," I said. "but if you brought me here for reproduction, I'm afraid you picked the wrong guy."

"No, I brought you here to watch the football game," he said, and we both laughed. "The House let me do that. I sometimes wonder why."

"I guess the House doesn't know everything."

"A common theory is that the cats run the House. They are very diligent about keeping it clean and making sure we are happy, but they do not understand us. And we don't understand them."

I could not disagree. "Yes, the cats are everywhere, aren't they? Mostly they are unseen but ... things get taken care of. Although stocking the refrigerator and refurnishing the rooms seems beyond their abilities."

"You've read about it in the library, I'm sure. Some things can not be explained with what we know."

"There's a good summary of that in the library. I think your father wrote it. He concluded that there was no answer."

"That's what he said, but I don't accept that pessimism. We just don't know yet."

"Well," I said, "thanks for the talk. I'm kind of struggling at times with living here, although I have plenty of things to do. I guess I feel better about the whole thing. And congratulations, again."

"Thanks," he said. "Maybe after you see how happy Mimmi and I are, you'll reconsider. If it works out between us. If it doesn't, she can go back to her House, or there is Robert... or you."

"Maybe we should have more visitors," I suggested.

"We have them sometimes. And if only the ballroom was easier to find, we would throw a large party. You've been here only a while, but you can go to other Houses after the House approves. Right now, none of us are going anywhere, because I brought you here. The house knows you are uneasy. You should talk to your cat."

"I know what you're saying. Robert said it more definitely. He said the cats run the house."

"It's open to interpretation. It's an opinion some of us have."

"Well, I'll try," I said. "I wonder what will happen if I talk. The cat already reads my mind."

Daniel grinned. "That's the spirit."

I went back to my apartment, unconvinced of anything. I talked to my cat, but there were no answers forthcoming. It seemed to me that I had already decided what I should do. I should not escape. The rules were clear. I would not violate them. I needed to do a little research, and after I handled a small matter of business with my proxy, I went to the library again.

I had glanced through the old manuscript of the man, Simon Weather, who had explored the basements before, but I wanted details this time. There were few. He had kept a careful record, and numbered all the floors and described what he found at each one, but he noted that everything was different when he climbed back up the stairs. He expressed a feeling of being lost as he came up, and his relief at finally reaching the House itself, and meeting his friends and his spouse again. The number of floors was not the same on the way up as

on the way down. He went down 216 floors, but there were 237 when he came back up. What he found on each floor was different, too. It was a very confusing and stressful journey. However, he never lacked for food or a comfortable place to sleep. He said that a group of people could have made the same expedition. He had been unable to convince anyone else to go with him, though. Some were afraid. Others thought it was foolish. Some of the basements lower down were inhabited by people he'd never met before. They had their own lives and interests. They farmed and manufactured. They explored the jungle floors and used the empty ones. He was welcomed by them but he felt like an outsider. They sometimes spoke languages he could barely understand. Below the 100th floor, he met no one, but there were always floors with living areas, beds, kitchens and food. He concluded that his exploration was pointless and futile. "I lacked nought," he wrote, "yet the burden of the journey was heavy. Happy I was, when I returned to my home." His chronicle was dated 1654. But the essence of it was that there was no escape.

I thought about this, and I decided I would make my own journey. Since I expected everything to be provided on the way, all I did was take notebooks. I made my preparations quickly. On the next day after my conversation with Daniel, I left. I went through the ornately carved double doors and went down the stairs. Dierdre was outside her apartment on the first landing, and gave me a knowing look. I greeted her and kept going. In the other notebook, I have kept a record of everything I found on the way down. The people that Simon Weather

found were not there. The floors were deserted. Some things may be products of my imagination. The floor with the zoo on the 110th level was almost certainly one of them. Some of the caged animals there were dinosaurs and impossible animals. I remember thinking about that the previous day. I'm sure the House created it for me. The cats followed me.

I am leaving these notebooks in the library on the 226th floor, by my count. This notebook is full. I have found food and comfort every day, and although there is neither day or night here, every basement floor has light or darkness. I find a place to stay when it starts getting dark. I have been on my journey for 33 days. I am going to go on, and I have more notebooks. As I go, I am starting to understand, but I may be wrong. Simon Weather came down this far and returned. But I think others have done what I am doing. I think I know where Robert's mother is; she is ahead of me.

[other houses]