



Illustrated by Kurt Huggins

The Methuselah Generation

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I wonder which one it is? Emily thought as she surveyed her fellow travelers around the table in the small hotel dining room. The tall, gangly old guy with his cap on backward? The couple so young she wondered how they got enough money for this trip?

The *chile en noga da* was tasty, she was eager to get out of the city and up to the sanctuary, and Alejandro, the guide from Mariposa Kingdom Adventures, was saying things that she should probably be listening to. But it was hard to concentrate, knowing that one of the people at the table was probably an extraterrestrial.

She'd never met one, to the best of her knowledge. But she knew they'd been coming to see Earth's unique attractions for a long time, even before a couple of them blew their cover during a total solar eclipse. That had led to a human travel agent who happened to be with them getting in touch with their tour operator, and eventually to an open if uneasy alien tourist business on Earth.

The bureaucratic and political maneuvering necessary to make that happen wasn't over yet, and a lot of people were still uncomfortable with it, but it was now common knowledge that extraterrestrials were coming here with some regularity. Some of them didn't even bother trying to hide or blend in any more.

But some did. If there was really one in this group, as the pre-trip briefing materials hinted, he or she (or whatever) must be one of those. Certainly nobody here *looked* like an alien, so if somebody was one, they (for simplicity) must be either an avatar or disguised. The effect would be the same, for a human observer, but very different for the alien using one of those methods of camouflage. She'd heard that they were very good at both, but she was amazed that she couldn't see any clue in anybody she looked at.

She kept trying, looking again and again at everybody in the group for possible clues. The participant list gave everybody's name and hometown, except one of them just gave the name. Might that be significant? Probably not; any alien trying not to be recognized would surely have not only a human-sounding fictitious name but an address to match. More likely the address had just been omitted by mistake. Still, she stared longer than she should at Bill Sebastian, the guy with no listed address. . . .

Until she felt somebody shaking her by the shoulder and saying, "Ms. Anderson?"

She snapped back to attention, embarrassed that she hadn't heard anything anybody had said in the last few minutes. "Sorry," she said. "My mind was wandering. Could you repeat the question, please?"

"No problem," Alejandro said with a pleasant smile and just enough Spanish accent to sound slightly exotic. "Lots of our guests get too excited to concentrate on mundane details. I was just asking each of you to introduce yourself and say a few words about why you came on this trip."

"Oh. I'm Emily Anderson. Minnesota. Bucket list item." She didn't add, *I don't have time for many more*, even though the words wanted to scream themselves. "I never set out to do it, but I've been sort of collecting the great wildlife spectacles of the world. I've seen the wildebeest and zebras on the Serengeti, the bats in Austin, and a megapod of whales and dolphins in the Channel Islands. I was too late for the passenger pigeons. I don't want to miss the monarchs too."

"I think you'll find them a most worthy addition to your collection," Alejandro said. "Okay, everybody, tomorrow we'll get a good early start so we can be up there to see them before dinner. Bags out before eight, buffet breakfast in the dining room beginning at seven. The little *alebrijes* on the table are yours to keep. ¡Hasta mañana!"

* * *

Anganguero was little more than a hundred miles from Mexico City, but the drive took several hours—much of that just getting out of town, thanks to always-heavy traffic. The middle part was easy: a big, modern toll road (with super-bright lights on the toll booths) across a largely flat valley with soil black from its volcanic origins and centuries of slash-and-burn agriculture. Mountains, some obviously volcanoes, always loomed in the distance, and after a while, the tour van started climbing up into them. Those roads were smaller, steeper, and curvier, and progress got slow again.

The van stopped for an *al fresco* lunch in the patio of a small hotel full of bougainvillea and other tropical plants and flowers. The long ride and the leisurely lunch gave Emily plenty of time to observe and trade small talk with other members of the group. They all seemed so ordinary that the idea that one of them might be an alien gradually receded to the back of her mind. Maybe that one, if there had ever been one, had had to cancel. She thought less and less about it, and eventually stopped thinking about it at all.

Back on the road, she enjoyed watching the procession of farms and little towns and villages as they wound farther up into the mountains. They reminded her of a time in her youth when she had lived and worked not too far from here, and the good parts remained fresher in memory than the bad. Some things had changed quite a bit, others surprisingly little. She still got a chuckle from the signs on businesses, which most of her companions either didn't notice or couldn't read, like, "Cremations in 2 hours. 24-hour service."

Anganguero had once been a thriving mining town, and she could tell when they were getting close by the remnant tailings and ruined structures in the hills nearby. The town itself consisted

mostly of a single narrow street winding up into the mountains, lined with colorful adobe houses, small hotels and stores, and a few prominent churches. It was midafternoon when they got there, and Emily would have been content to settle in for a siesta in the patio.

But there was no time for that. The van pulled into the cobblestone drive behind the pink facade of their hotel, with guest rooms in a row along one side. Alejandro and a couple of hotel staffers unloaded all the luggage, and Alejandro hustled all the passengers off the bus and into the back of a pickup truck with benches along the sides under a canvas canopy. Emily wondered why they didn't just stay in the van, but the answer soon became clear.

It was only twelve kilometers to the sanctuary, but it felt like more. Once out in the country, the road grew narrower, steeper, rougher, and more winding, with a couple of great views along the way. Jostled from side to side, Emily began feeling queasy and hoped there wouldn't be too much more. Alejandro passed out odd tubular scarfs that could be rolled down over a person's head and arranged to cover mouth and nose.

A prominent, colorful sign marked the entrance to the sanctuary, and Emily welcomed the chance to sit still for a few minutes while Alejandro paid the entry fee for the group. Then they had to get off and walk a hundred yards or so to an area where saddled horses waited quietly, each accompanied by a young local man. One by one, in two orderly processions, horses and their human leaders stepped up to two platforms, where Alejandro paired each one up with a rider from his group, according to size. Thanks to the platform, all the rider had to do was stand next to the horse and swing a leg over the saddle.

It was perfect for riders with no experience, which included at least half the group. Emily wasn't one of those; she'd done plenty of riding in these mountains, fewer years ago than it felt like, and she was a little embarrassed at how relieved she was that it was being done this way. She used to ride these trails at a gallop, reins in her own hands, exhilarated at the feel of her hair blowing in the wind. Now, before she saw the platforms, she'd worried that she might have trouble mounting, but that was no problem. It still felt strange leaving the reins looped around the oversized horn while she held onto its rim and let her "horse guy," Pepe, lead the horse at a leisurely walk with a short rope.

"¿Cómo se llama el caballo?" she asked Pepe.

He grinned. "No creo que tiene nombre."

That was a little odd, she thought, but she grinned back. She felt a little like a character in an old America song: "A Horse With No Name." But it was a fine-looking horse with no name, a sleek chestnut with black mane and tail.

She quickly found out why Alejandro had handed out the scarfs. The trail was so dry and dusty she found herself coughing and squinting. Pulling the scarf up for as much coverage as possible helped, but only a little. Everybody did it, though; the main effect was to make their group look like a gang of inexperienced *bandidos*.

The ride ended in a dusty clearing where all the horses waited while their riders dismounted and continued into the forest on a wide trail. It was a little less dusty than the horse trail, and the walkers' feet stirred the dust up less than the horses' hooves. Occasionally a lone butterfly would flit by, and sometimes a few at a time, whetting Emily's appetite for the spectacle to come. She noticed an informational kiosk and stopped to read it, but Alejandro said, "Please don't stop for the signs, even if you read Spanish. You can take your time on the return, and you can walk all the way back down if you like. For now, we should just get up there. They'll soon be settling down for the night, and they're more interesting when they're active."

So Emily postponed the reading and concentrated on keeping up. Alejandro set a brisk pace, and her pounding heart reminded her that this whole trail was above ten thousand feet, and her cardiologist had tried to talk her out of coming on this trip. But there was no way she was going to skip it!

They were well into the *oyamel* firs now, and seeing the orange and black butterflies more and more often, and in bigger groups, swirling all around them, flashing in the sun. *They look like they're dancing!* Emily thought with a grin, and she heard the excitement growing in the others' voices even though they were whispering and sometimes shushing each other in response to the

frequent signs urging silence.

Then, abruptly, everything went silent as they came to a barricade across the road, with a sign saying, "No Passage Beyond This Point."

* * *

At first Emily didn't realize what she was seeing. There were few butterflies in the air at that moment, and a passing cloud blocked the Sun, muting the colors of everything. Emily had the vague feeling that there was something odd about the scene ahead. All the trees seemed to be covered thickly with dense clumps of brown leaves, looking rather like big squirrels' nests back home in Minnesota.

But these trees were conifers, and it wasn't just a nest here and a nest there, but entire trees completely covered with them.

Then, abruptly, she realized what they were.

Butterflies. Great masses of them, piled so thickly that individuals weren't even recognizable without binoculars. Hundreds, maybe even thousands in a clump. Many thousands in a tree; millions in this grove; hundreds of millions in the forest.

Almost the entire world population crammed into a few dozen acres, here and in a handful of other nearby sites.

She felt a tear form as she realized the immensity of it, something she couldn't even do without a conscious effort. A muted chatter grew around her as other people had the same reaction and couldn't contain themselves despite the signs urging silence.

Then she remembered why that was so important. "Quiet!" she stage-whispered. "Listen!"

In a few seconds the chatter faded, but what remained was not silence. The cloud had just released the Sun, and the forest again glowed. The brown masses turned to gold, quivered, and dispersed into clouds of fluttering wings as the butterflies, reinvigorated by the new warmth, dispersed into the air, swirling around and among their human visitors, gleaming and flashing in the sunlight.

And when the humans went silent, what remained was a soft but unmistakable murmur, the whisper of millions of flapping butterfly wings, individually so quiet that no one ever thought of them as making any sound at all, but in such numbers making an ineffably gentle roar.

Magic! Emily thought. She and the others watched and listened, spellbound, for maybe half an hour, though that was just a guess; the moment seemed timeless. Twice a monarch landed on her, once on her shoulder and once on her hand, and each time stayed several minutes. Eventually the light began to fade and the air to cool, and the butterflies settled back into their masses on the trees. And at some point, at some unspoken signal, the people started moving back down the trail.

* * *

Gradually they started talking again, still in hushed tones but nonetheless full of excitement at what they'd just experienced. As Alejandro had promised, the pace was easier this time. The route was gently downhill, few butterflies still flew, and Emily took time to read the few signs about the natural history of the area and the monarch migration. Most of the group walked right past them, but one middle-aged man noticed her reading them. He came over as she was reading the second, and asked her, "You read Spanish?"

"Sí."

"Would you mind if I tagged along and asked you to tell me what they say?"

"Not at all." She translated the sign in front of them for him, and they moved on down the trail.

"Are you Mexican?" he asked as they walked.

The question caught her by surprise. *Do I look Mexican?* she thought. *Even remotely?* She just said, "No. I was born and raised in Minnesota. My grandparents were Swedish." She looked at his nametag. Bill. She should try to remember that, if they were going to be chatting.

"So how do you happen to know Spanish?"

"When I was younger, I taught for a while at a mission school in another part of Mexico."

"What is a 'mission school'?"

"A school run by missionaries." He still looked a little puzzled, but she hurried on, "I have mixed feelings about that now. It was very satisfying in some ways, and I suppose it was good that they

wanted to help people here. But missions usually try to push a belief system as part of the package, and it struck me as arrogant to assume that what they had to offer was better than what the locals already— Oh, look, Bill. Here's another sign." Welcoming the chance to steer the conversation in another direction, she read him this one, about how far the butterflies migrated and how many of them crowded into their tiny winter sanctuaries.

Soon they were back at the clearing with the horses. She debated herself for a moment about whether to walk or ride the rest of the way, and opted for walking. She hoped she was up to it.

It looked promising. The trail divided here, horses on one, walkers on another, gentle, paved, and mercifully free of swirling dust. And with more informational kiosks.

They stopped in front of one near the junction. "Methuselah Generation—" she read.

"What is 'Methuselah'?" Bill asked.

"Methuselah was a man in the Bible who lived a very long time."

"What does that have to do with butterflies?"

"Well, let's read it. 'Imagine that your children could live 525 years. In the case of the monarch butterflies, the equivalent is the so-called 'Methuselah Generation.' When autumn approaches, around the end of September, in the parts of Canada and the northern United State from which the monarchs come, this special generation arises, characterized by its long lifetime. Unlike their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents, which had ephemeral lives of four or five weeks, these migratory butterflies will live seven or eight months and will be the ones who make the journey to their wintering areas in Mexico.'" She paused, unexpectedly moved. She'd known that, intellectually, but seeing it put that way made her suddenly grasp how extraordinary it was, as never before. "Imagine," she whispered, "what it must be like to live that way."

"I don't have to imagine," Bill said, his whole body trembling in a way Emily had never seen. "I do live that way."

* * *

It took a moment for his words to sink in. Then she stopped in her tracks and looked at him. "You do?" she said while struggling with how to ask the next question. "Where . . . Where are you from?"

"You don't have a word for it," he said. He seemed to hesitate. "They did tell you there would be a star traveler in your group, didn't they?"

"Yes," she said. "That is, not exactly. They hinted strongly. Our pre-trip briefing materials included a general statement that there would be, in some groups, and advice on how we should behave if we met . . . one." She smiled, feeling awkward. "That doesn't sound very good, does it?" Another part of her mind was thinking, *I was right. He is the one with no address.*

"You're doing fine," he said. "You're new at this—and we're new at interacting openly with you." *Well, sort of openly*, she thought, and as if reading her mind, he added, "Some of us are more comfortable with it than others—on both sides."

"Understandable. I see why we wouldn't have a name for your home, but can you give me any idea where it is? What it's like?" She started walking again, afraid to prolong the walk more than necessary.

He followed. "It's a planet rather like yours, with a sun rather like yours, within a few dozen light-years. But there's enough difference that you would find my home as exotic as I find yours."

"I find parts of my own exotic," said Emily, trying not to get too absorbed in amazement that she was talking so casually with an extraterrestrial. "I noticed that you seemed to get very excited or agitated or something when I read you the sign about the Methuselah generation. And you said you do live like that. What did you mean?"

"Actually, we only live partly like that. Like the monarchs, my species has very unequal life expectancies in different generations, in a very regular pattern. Four short ones, then one long one, then the same cycle over again."

"Is that why you came to Earth? Because of the similarity of your life cycle to the monarchs?"

"Oh, no. I didn't know about that till you read me the sign. I was just fascinated by the existence of such small and beautiful creatures, in such huge numbers, and the fact that they made such a long migration between places they'd never seen before. On my world there are few species that

still exist in such numbers, so the sheer biodiversity here drew me.”

“We may not have that much longer ourselves,” Emily said sadly. “So what actually prompted you to come? The trip must have been very expensive.”

“Indeed it was. But I’d been feeling trapped and frustrated and sometimes bitter because I’ve always enjoyed the wondrous variety of the Universe, and I knew I wasn’t going to have much more time to explore it. I could afford the trip, and there wasn’t much point in trying to save my fortune beyond the little time I had left. I wanted to get one more good trip in—maybe even a glorious one, I hoped—now, in case I never had time for another.”

Now Emily found herself trembling. *Who could have imagined we’d have so much in common?* she thought. She stopped again, recognizing that there was no one else around but they were almost back to the entrance area, where the others would be congregating. “Bill, when I was younger I always thought I’d love the chance to meet someone like you. There’s so much I’d like to ask you, but not if it would embarrass you or compromise you. I assume you’re not showing your true form. Will it be a problem if the others find out who you are? Are you trying to keep that secret?”

“Not very hard. I’d prefer to keep a low profile, because it’s simpler. I never know how people will react. But there’s a lot I’d like to ask you, too, and I’d be glad to try to answer your questions. It would be nice to do that privately, but if there’s no such opportunity, I’d like to do it anyway.”

“Me, too,” she said. “Maybe we can make an opportunity. Meanwhile, there’s one I’d like to ask you right now, if I can. If it’s too personal, just say so.”

“What is it?”

“Well, you seemed to have a sense of urgency about coming on this trip. Are you dying too? Did a doctor or whatever you have tell you you only have a short time to live?”

“That wasn’t necessary,” said Bill. “I’ve always known that. I’m in the last of a series of short generations.”

* * *

Minutes later they were back with the ebullient group, and then in the back of the pickup truck (with a stop to watch the sun set over the valley), and finally back at the hotel to check into their rooms. At dinner she and Bill sat together, but there was no opportunity for private conversation; they were promptly joined by a chatty couple who made it hard to get a word in edgewise. They weren’t bad sorts; in Emily’s experience, people she met on one of these trips had usually been on others and had interesting tales to tell. But she doubted that theirs were as interesting as the ones she was hoping to hear from Bill. Meanwhile, she couldn’t help wondering, as she watched him, what was actually happening to the food he took in. Was she looking at an avatar or a disguise? In either case, how did it work?

The food was okay, but the parts she liked best were the hot chocolate (one of Mexico’s major strengths, she’d always thought) and the soup, the only two items that were served genuinely hot. Or maybe it was just that those were what she really needed now. Her throat had been feeling dry ever since the dusty trail and the bumpy, windy road back down.

After dinner Alejandro gave a slide talk about monarchs and their life cycle and the dangers they were up against, but Emily could barely stay awake through it. A draft from an open door reminded her that it got cold at night at eight thousand feet, and she wondered how she would sleep without central heat. But the hotel had answers: Pablo would go around and build a wood fire in the fireplace in each room that should last a couple of hours, and Miguel would stand at the door of the dining room as they left to give each guest a “baby,” a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel, to take under the covers when they went to bed.

The “baby” and the flickering fire were comforting, but she fell asleep slowly despite her fatigue. Her mind was racing, and when she got deep enough into sleep, her dreams were full of dancing clouds of gleaming monarchs—and extraterrestrials (what did Bill really look like?) who also had a Methuselah generation. How would a species evolve that way, and what kind of civilization could they have?

Sometime in the wee hours, she woke up and couldn’t get back to sleep. Her throat had gone from dry to burning, and several times she was wracked by coughing and had trouble breathing. It

got worse; sometimes her throat hurt so badly that she wondered if she should wake Alejandro and ask him to get her to an emergency room.

Did Anganguero have an ER? Or even a hospital?

She made it through the night, but in the morning she felt poorly rested and lethargic. With barely enough energy to go to the common room for breakfast, she had only juice, hot chocolate, and a mysterious “mountain tea” that one of the cooks made from local herbs. That actually helped, but not enough to make her change the decision she’d made.

“I’m afraid I don’t feel up to going on today’s trip,” she told Alejandro. “I’m going to stay here and rest. Do you have anything for a sore throat and a cough?”

“I can recommend something,” he said, “and ask one of the hotel people to pick it up at the *fármacia* up the street.”

“Thank you,” she smiled. “I’m sorry to be a bother.” She noticed a lot of coughing among the others, too, but they were all eating more than she was, and she didn’t hear anybody else telling Alejandro they were bailing.

But as she started back to her room and the others were boarding their ride—the van rather than the truck, since the roads to today’s site were apparently easier—Bill came over to her and said, “I hear you’re not going today.”

She shook her head. “I’m not feeling well. I think the dust and the altitude got to me yesterday.”

“They got to everybody,” he said. “But I think you more than most.” He paused. “I’m not going either.”

“What? Why? After all you went through to get here . . . Aren’t *you* feeling well?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “But you’re not. You hinted yesterday that you had . . . bigger problems than dust and altitude. Somebody should stay behind to take care of you if you need anything—and keep you company if you want it.”

“That’s very kind of you,” she said. “But I’d hate to deprive you of another day of what you came here for—”

“The chance to actually get to know a local is more than what I came for,” he said. “They told us to keep a low profile, but when I travel on my own world a big part of the fun is getting to know locals in other cultures—to the extent that we still *have* different cultures. I never anticipated getting that here, but you gave me a little taste of it yesterday. We both said we’d like to take up where we left off.”

“That’s true,” she said. “Well, if you’re sure you don’t mind, I’d like that very much.”

* * *

Her room was still cold, the fire having gone out shortly after she went to bed. “I’m going to crawl back under the covers,” she said. “You’re welcome to sit there.” She gestured toward the one wicker chair near the door.

“Thank you.” He remained standing. “Would you like me to ask Pablo to build you a new fire?”

“No, thanks. But could you go to the kitchen and see if they can send me a new ‘baby’?”

He came back a few minutes later with a water bottle swaddled in a blue towel. She took it and gratefully pulled it under the blanket with her. He started to close the door, but she said, “No, leave it open. The warm air will seep in as the day warms up, and I like to look at the flowers and the mural on the wall across the driveway.” That was true, but she also wasn’t entirely comfortable being alone in a closed room with him. After all, she barely knew him, and he was an alien. . . .

Or maybe just a human pretending to be one. She wasn’t sure which would be worse.

Bill finally took the chair, leaving the door open. Emily held the baby close and propped herself on pillows so she could see both him and the pink wall outside, where the sun was beginning to hit the bougainvilleas and colorful mosaics. “So,” said Bill, “I gather we’re both here because we felt that our time was running out and we wanted to get one more spectacular thing in before that happened. In my case it’s because I’m in the last short generation of a cycle. And you hinted—forgive me if this is indelicate or too personal—that for you it’s a medical matter. As if you’re getting less time than you expected?”

“That’s right. Our life expectancy is about eighty of our years. I’m only fifty-two. My doctors tell me I can’t expect even one more.”

“That must be terribly disappointing. They can do nothing to change that?”

“They can make me more comfortable, but they can’t stop the decline. Our medicine has learned a lot, mostly in the last hundred years or so, but there’s a lot that it still needs to learn.” She smiled weakly. “Maybe I was just born too soon.”

“I’m sorry.” Bill sat silent for a while. Then he said, “My situation is different from yours. I don’t know which is more painful. You had every right to expect many more years. You must feel cruelly cheated to learn that you won’t.” Another long silence, then, “I had no such surprise. I knew very early how much time I could expect, and so far I have no reason to believe I won’t have that much, barring accident or disease.

“Comparing myself to you, I feel ashamed to complain. Yet I, too, feel cheated. Not much of my time is left, and I know the next generation will have far more. Why them and not me? It seems . . . unfair.”

Emily knew she would find it unfair too, in his situation—much as she did in her own. “May I ask how long your generations are?”

“Our ‘Methuselah generation’ typically lives about two hundred of your years. Ordinary generations, like mine, only about thirty. I’m twenty-six.”

Emily gasped. Now *she* felt ashamed. She’d already had much more time than him, and looking back over what she thought of as her short life, she realized how many of her cherished memories had been made at ages he would never see.

Who was she to complain?

“That must make life difficult in some ways,” she said. “The ‘longs’ and ‘shorts’ must see the world very differently.”

“Indeed,” he said, and despite the (impressively slight) inadequacies of his translator, she could hear bitterness. “There are . . . frictions between the generations. I don’t just mean between the young and the old, which I believe you have in some form even here. I mean those who, at whatever age, know they can expect long lives, and those who know they can’t.”

“Are your generations synchronized?” Emily asked. “Like the monarchs?”

“No. Maybe it would be easier if they were. If everybody alive at one time was either a long or a short . . . But then, how could a whole world of shorts teach a generation of longs how to live their kind of life? Or vice versa?”

“As it is, there are always some of both around, and each can learn some things from the other. But—”

“That sounds tricky,” Emily interrupted. Her throat was hurting again, but she was barely aware of it. “Don’t the longs keep . . . accumulating? Becoming a bigger and bigger part of the population because they stay around longer?”

“It is tricky,” Bill agreed. “Complicated. But it works out. The birth rates for different generations are different. Apparently a mechanism evolved to keep the population stable. But there are other kinds of instability. The two kinds of generations mistrust each other. Longs think they should run things because they have more time to plan and more historical perspective. Shorts say longs are set in their ways and can’t adapt to change. Longs feel they can afford to wait for payoffs of long-term plans, shorts feel they can’t. It causes friction and hard feelings. Things can be different within a family, because they’re all related and care about continuity of things like wealth and opportunity. But overall, there’s a lot of awkwardness because of the stark differences between us.”

“Is the difference obvious?” Emily asked. “Can one of you tell by looking whether another is a long or a short?”

“There’s no obvious physical sign, if that’s what you mean. But folks know. Friends, family, neighbors all know where in the cycle a birth is, and as someone grows up, longs tend to congregate with longs and avoid shorts, and vice versa. Everybody knows it’s a big problem, but it’s always been that way, nobody knows why, and it never occurred to anybody that it might be possible to change it. Until now. That’s why I got excited when you read that sign to me—and why I’m more grateful to you than you can imagine.”

* * *

Emily had felt herself fading, but that jolted her into full wakefulness. “What? All I did was

translate a sign.”

“No, what you did was give me a powerful idea—and a new goal. When I came here, I was just looking for an interesting way to spend some of my little remaining time. But when you told me about the Methuselah generation, I thought, ‘What if we’re like that for similar reasons?’ Maybe my kind has short generations and a Methuselah generation because sometime in our prehistory our ancestors had to make a similar migration. It’s just a beginning, of course. I gather nobody even knows why the monarchs do it that way—why the northbound trip is broken into several short generations instead of one long one like the southbound. But it’s a concrete question we can try to answer. Find out why we got this way, and maybe we can find a way to change it. Maybe make all our generations about the same, not too long, not too short—”

“So you’re going to go home and do research on it?”

“No, no, not me. I don’t have enough time. I might help start it, but there’s no way I could finish it. But my offspring—my ‘kids,’ as you say—are longs. If I can get them interested . . . maybe *they* can do it. And it wouldn’t have occurred to me to try without you. So thank you.”

“Glad I could help,” Emily murmured, though she didn’t feel sure she really had. But if she had . . . that would give new meaning to her life too. “Good luck,” she tried to say, but the attempt disintegrated into a coughing spasm that left her too weak to speak.

Her thoughts kept spinning. If he could do what he wanted, it might solve a lot of his species’ problems—or create new ones, at least temporarily, on the way to something better. Right now they had a system that worked, however awkwardly, and disrupting it as drastically as he wanted would throw it out of kilter, at least for a while. How would longs feel about giving up the very long lives they now had? How would any of them feel about doing whatever it might take to change the old cycle? Would doing so throw their delicately balanced population dynamics into chaos?

It was hard to tell how such a big change would work out in the long run. It always is.

“Good luck,” she tried again, and that time it came out intelligibly, though weakly. “And be careful.” Again she couldn’t speak, and she was gasping for breath.

His voice sounded far away—and alarmed. “Emily, are you all right? Should I have the hotel people call a doctor?”

An oddly detached part of her mind thought, *Probably you should. I’ve never felt this way before. I think this might be . . . it.* But she said, between gasps, “No, please don’t. If I lose consciousness, do it then. But not now. If these are my last hours, I’d rather spend them talking to you than fading away in a hospital.” She managed a feeble smile. “Tell me about your world, Bill. What’s it like there?”

He told her of a world with few natural wonders and many artificial ones, but wonders nonetheless: sprawling cities that covered most of the lands and seas that used to be forests and savannahs and reefs, but had become things of light and sound just as intricate and beautiful in their own way, which his descriptions brought to life in her imagination. There were also scattered pockets where vestiges of the past remained, lifeforms as breathtaking as birds of paradise but as different from those as they were from crocodiles. Bill in turn coaxed her to tell him more about this world than he would be able to see for himself: the Great Barrier Reef, the single-craft villages a few miles from here, the cathedral spires of Milan, the solid waves of Antelope Canyon.

For a couple of hours, they both gloried in imagined glimpses of each other’s worlds. Gradually it grew harder either to speak or to think about what he said. But she managed one last request. “Bill, there’s one very personal thing I’ve wondered about. Ever since I met you, I’ve been fascinated by how human you look. May I ask: is that an avatar, or a costume?”

“A costume,” he said softly. “Or perhaps I should say a projected illusion. The technology is complicated, but the package small. It creates a visual image that looks like one of you, surrounding me. Of course an image can’t actually touch things or carry a ‘baby’ or open a door, but I can do those things while my ‘costume’ makes it look like my image is doing them.”

“Can you turn it off? It’s very impressive, but it’s so convincing that it’s hard to think of you as not one of us. This time has been very special for me, but just for a moment I’d like to see who I’ve really been talking to.”

“Are you sure you really want that?”

“Very sure.”

He sat silent for at least half a minute. Then he got up and closed the door.

And vanished, to be replaced by a form that was most definitely not human, but to Emily’s eyes quite beautiful. “Real Bill” had two extra arms, a skin covered in gleaming turquoise and golden scales, and a face with big lavender eyes that she shouldn’t have been able to read but felt sure looked sympathetic and kind. Here and there were bits of covering that she assumed were clothing.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you. And good luck with your quest.”

Then, deeply contented, she slipped smoothly and softly into sleep.