

THE CITY AND THE STARS

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Arthur C. Clarke

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Prologue

Like a glowing jewel, the city lay upon the breast of the desert. Once it had known change and alteration, but now Time passed it by. Night and day fled across the desert's face, but in the streets of Diaspar it was always afternoon, and darkness never came. The long winter nights might dust the desert with frost, as the last moisture left in the thin air of Earth congealed—but the city knew neither heat nor cold. It had no contact with the outer world; it was a universe itself.

Men had built cities before, but never a city such as this. Some had lasted for centuries, some for millennia, before Time had swept away even their names. Diaspar alone had challenged Eternity, defending itself and all it sheltered against the slow attrition of the ages, the ravages of decay, and the corruption of rust.

Since the city was built, the oceans of Earth had passed away and the desert had encompassed all the globe. The last mountains had been ground to dust by the winds and the rain, and the world was too weary to bring forth more. The city did not care; Earth itself could crumble and Diaspar would still protect the children of its makers, bearing them and their treasures safely down the stream of time.

They had forgotten much, but they did not know it. They were as perfectly fitted to their environment as it was to them—for both had been designed together. What was beyond the walls of the city was no concern of theirs; it was something that had been shut out of their minds. Diaspar was

all that existed, all that they needed, all that they could imagine. It mattered nothing to them that Man had once possessed the stars.

Yet sometimes the ancient myths rose up to haunt them, and they stirred uneasily as they remembered the legends of the Empire, when Diaspar was young and drew its life-blood from the commerce of many suns. They did not wish to bring back the old days, for they were content in their eternal autumn. The glories of the Empire belonged to the past, and could remain there—for they remembered how the Empire had met its end, and at the thought of the Invaders the chill of space itself came seeping into their bones.

Then they would turn once more to the life and warmth of the city, to the long golden age whose beginning was already lost and whose end was yet more distant. Other men had dreamed of such an age, but they alone had achieved it.

For they had lived in the same city, had walked the same miraculously unchanging streets, while more than a thousand million years had worn away.

CHAPTER ONE

It had taken them many hours to fight their way out of the Cave of the White Worms. Even now, they could not be sure that some of the pallid monsters were not pursuing them—and the power of their weapons was almost exhausted. Ahead, the floating arrows of light that had been their mysterious guide through the labyrinths of the Crystal Mountain still beckoned them on. They had no choice but to follow it, though as it had done so many times before it might lead them into yet more frightful dangers.

Alvin glanced back to see if all his companions were still with him. Alystra was close behind, carrying the sphere of cold but ever-burning light which had revealed such horrors and such beauty since their adventure had begun. The pale white radiance flooded the narrow corridor and splashed from the glittering walls; while its power lasted, they could see where they were going and could detect the presence of any visible dangers. But the greatest dangers in these caves, Alvin knew too well, were not the visible ones at all.

Behind Alystra, struggling with the weight of their projectors, came Narillian and Floranus. Alvin wondered briefly why those projectors were so heavy, since it would have been such a simple matter to provide them with gravity neutralisers. He was always thinking of points like this, even in the midst of the most desperate adventures. When such thoughts crossed his mind, it seemed as if the structure of reality trembled for an instant, and that behind the world of the senses he caught a glimpse of another and totally different universe....

The corridor ended in a blank wall. Had the arrow betrayed them again? No—even as they approached, the rock began to crumble into dust. Through the wall pierced a spinning metal spear, which broadened rapidly into a giant screw. Alvin and his friends moved back, waiting for the machine to force its way into the cave. With a deafening screech of metal upon rock—which surely must echo through all the recesses of the Mountain, and waken all its nightmare brood!—the subterrene smashed through the wall and came to rest beside them. A massive door opened, and Callistron appeared, shouting to them to hurry. (‘Why Callistron?’ wondered Alvin. ‘What’s *he* doing here?’) A moment later they were in safety, and the machine lurched forward as it began its journey through the depths of the earth.

The adventure was over. Soon, as always happened, they would be home, and all the wonder, the terror, and the excitement would be behind them. They were tired and content.

Alvin could tell from the tilt of the floor that the subterrene was heading down into the earth. Presumably Callistron knew what he was doing, and this was the way that led to home. Yet it seemed a pity....

‘Callistron,’ he said suddenly, ‘why don’t we go upwards? No one knows what the Crystal Mountain really looks like. How wonderful it would be to come out somewhere on its slopes, to see the sky and all the land around it. We’ve been underground for long enough.’

Even as he said these words, he somehow knew that they were wrong. Alystra gave a strangled scream, the interior of the subterrene wavered like an image seen through water, and behind and beyond the metal walls that surrounded him Alvin once more glimpsed that other universe. The two worlds seemed in conflict, first one and then the other predominating. Then, quite suddenly, it was all over. There was a snapping, rending

sensation—and the dream had ended. Alvin was back in Diaspar, in his own familiar room, floating a foot or two above the floor as the gravity field protected him from the bruising contact of brute matter.

He was himself again. *This* was reality—and he knew exactly what would happen next.

Alystra was the first to appear. She was more upset than annoyed, for she was very much in love with Alvin.

‘Oh, Alvin!’ she lamented, as she looked down at him from the wall in which she had apparently materialised. ‘It was such an exciting adventure! Why did you have to spoil it?’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to—I just thought it would be a good idea—’

He was interrupted by the simultaneous arrival of Callistron and Floranus.

‘Now listen, Alvin,’ began Callistron. ‘This is the *third* time you’ve interrupted a saga. You broke the sequence yesterday, by wanting to climb out of the Valley of Rainbows. And the day before you upset everything by trying to get back to the Origin in that time-track we were exploring. If you don’t keep the rules, you’ll have to go by yourself.’

He vanished in high dudgeon, taking Floranus with him. Narillian never appeared at all; he was probably too fed up with the whole affair. Only the image of Alystra was left, looking sadly down at Alvin.

Alvin tilted the gravity field, rose to his feet, and walked towards the table he had materialised. A bowl of exotic fruit appeared upon it—not the food he had intended, for in his confusion his thoughts had wandered. Not

wishing to reveal his error, he picked up the least dangerous-looking of the fruits and started to suck it cautiously.

‘Well,’ said Alystra at last, ‘what are you going to do?’

‘I can’t help it,’ he said a little sulkily. ‘I think the rules are stupid. Besides, how can I remember them when I’m living a saga? I just behave in the way that seems natural. Didn’t *you* want to look at the mountain?’

Alystra’s eyes widened with horror.

‘That would have meant going outside!’ she gasped.

Alvin knew that it was useless to argue further. Here was the barrier that sundered him from all the people of his world, and which might doom him to a life of frustration. He was always wanting to go outside, both in reality and in dream. Yet to everyone in Diaspar, ‘outside’ was a nightmare that they could not face. They would never talk about it if it could be avoided; it was something unclean and evil. Not even Jeserac, his tutor, would tell him why....

Alystra was still watching him with puzzled but tender eyes. ‘You’re unhappy, Alvin,’ she said. ‘No one should be unhappy in Diaspar. Let me come over and talk to you.’

Ungallantly, Alvin shook his head. He knew where *that* would lead, and at the moment he wanted to be alone. Doubly disappointed, Alystra faded from view.

In a city of ten million human beings, thought Alvin, there was no one to whom he could really talk. Eriston and Etania were fond of him in their way, but now that their term of guardianship was ending, they were happy

enough to leave him to shape his own amusements and his own life. In the last few years, as his divergence from the standard pattern became more and more obvious, he had often felt his parents' resentment. Not with him—that, perhaps, was something he could have faced and fought—but with the sheer bad luck that had chosen them from all the city's millions, to meet him when he walked out of the Hall of Creation twenty years ago.

Twenty years. He could remember its first moment, and the first words he had ever heard: 'Welcome, Alvin, I am Eriston, your appointed father. This is Etania, your mother.' The words had meant nothing then, but his mind had recorded them with flawless accuracy. He remembered how he had looked down at his body; it was an inch or two taller now, but had scarcely altered since the moment of his birth. He had come almost fully grown into the world, and would have changed little save in height when it was time to leave it a thousand years hence.

Before that first memory, there was nothing. One day, perhaps, that nothingness would come again, but that was a thought too remote to touch his emotions in any way.

He turned his mind once more towards the mystery of his birth. It did not seem strange to Alvin that he might be created, in a single moment of time, by the powers and forces that materialised all the other objects of his everyday life. No; *that* was not the mystery. The enigma he had never been able to solve, and which no one would ever explain to him, was his uniqueness.

Unique. It was a strange, sad word—and a strange, sad thing to be. When it was applied to him—as he had often heard it done when no one thought he was listening—it seemed to possess ominous undertones that threatened more than his own happiness.

His parents—his tutor—everyone he knew—had tried to protect him from the truth, as if anxious to preserve the innocence of his long childhood. The pretence must soon be ended; in a few days he would be a full citizen of Diaspar, and nothing could be withheld from him that he wished to know.

Why, for example, did he not fit into the Sagas? Of all the thousands of forms of recreation in the city, these were the most popular. When you entered a Saga, you were not merely a passive observer, as in the crude entertainments of primitive times which Alvin had sometimes sampled. You were an active participant and possessed—or seemed to possess—free will. The events and scenes which were the raw materials of your adventures might have been prepared beforehand by forgotten artists, but there was enough flexibility to allow of wide variation. You could go into these phantom worlds with your friends, seeking the excitement that did not exist in Diaspar—and as long as the dream lasted there was no way in which it could be distinguished from reality. Indeed, who could be certain that Diaspar itself was not the dream?

No one could ever exhaust all the Sagas that had been conceived and recorded since the city began. They played upon all the emotions and were of infinitely varying subtlety. Some—those popular among the very young—were uncomplicated dramas of adventure and discovery. Others were purely explorations of psychological states, while others again were exercises in logic or mathematics which could provide the keenest of delights to more sophisticated minds.

Yet though the Sagas seemed to satisfy his companions, they left Alvin with a feeling of incompleteness. For all their colour and excitement, their varying *locales* and themes, there was something missing.

The Sagas, he decided, never really got anywhere. They were always painted on such a narrow canvas. There were no great vistas, none of the

rolling landscapes for which his soul craved. Above all, there was never a hint of the immensity in which the exploits of ancient man had really taken place—the luminous void between the stars and planets. The artists who had planned the Sagas had been infected by the same strange phobia that ruled all the citizens of Diaspar. Even their vicarious adventures must take place cosily indoors, in subterranean caverns, or in neat little valleys surrounded by mountains which shut out all the rest of the world.

There was only one explanation. Far back in time, perhaps before Diaspar was founded, something had happened that had not only destroyed Man's curiosity and ambition, but had sent him homeward from the stars to cower for shelter in the tiny closed world of Earth's last city. He had renounced the Universe and returned to the artificial womb of Diaspar. The flaming, invincible urge that had once driven him over the Galaxy, and to the islands of mist beyond, had altogether died. No ships had entered the Solar System for countless aeons; out there among the stars the descendants of Man might still be building Empires and wrecking suns—Earth neither knew nor cared.

Earth did not. But Alvin did.

CHAPTER TWO

The room was dark save for one glowing wall, upon which the tides of colour ebbed and flowed as Alvin wrestled with his dreams. Part of the pattern satisfied him; he had fallen in love with the soaring lines of the mountains as they leapt out of the sea. There was a power and pride about those ascending curves; he had studied them for a long time, and then fed them into the memory unit of the visualiser, where they would be preserved while he experimented with the rest of the picture. Something was eluding him, though what it was he did not know. Again and again he had tried to fill in the blank spaces, while the instrument read the shifting patterns in his mind and materialised them upon the wall. It was no good. The lines were blurred and uncertain, the colours muddy and dull. If the artist did not know his goal, even the most miraculous of tools could not find it for him.

Alvin cancelled his unsatisfactory scribblings and stared morosely at the three-quarters-empty rectangle he had been trying to fill with beauty. On a sudden impulse, he doubled the size of the existing design and shifted it to the centre of the frame. No—that was a lazy way out, and the balance was all wrong. Worse still, the change of scale had revealed the defects in his construction, the lack of certainty in those at-first-sight confident lines. He would have to start all over again.

‘Total erasure,’ he ordered the machine. The blue of the sea faded; the mountains dissolved like mist, until only the blank wall remained. They were as if they had never been—as if they were lost in the limbo that had taken all Earth’s seas and mountains ages before Alvin was born.

The light came flooding back into the room and the luminous rectangle upon which Alvin had projected his dreams merged into its surroundings, to become one with the other walls. But were the walls? To anyone who had never seen such a place before, this was a very peculiar room indeed. It was utterly featureless and completely devoid of furniture, so that it seemed as if Alvin stood at the centre of a sphere. No visible dividing lines separated walls from floor or ceiling. There was nothing on which the eye could focus; the space enclosing Alvin might have been ten feet or ten miles across, for all that the sense of vision could have told. It would have been hard to resist the temptation to walk forward, hands outstretched, to discover the physical limits of this extraordinary place.

Yet such rooms had been ‘home’ to most of the human race, for the greater part of its history. Alvin had only to frame the appropriate thought, and the walls would become windows opening upon any part of the city he chose. Another wish, and machines which he had never seen would fill the chamber with the projected images of any articles of furniture he might need. Whether they were ‘real’ or not was a problem that had bothered few men for the last billion years. Certainly they were no less real than that other impostor, solid matter, and when they were no longer required they could be returned to the phantom world of the city’s memory banks. Like everything else in Diaspar, they would never wear out—and they would never change, unless their stored patterns were cancelled by a deliberate act of will.

Alvin had partly reconstructed his room when a persistent, bell-like chime sounded in his ear. He mentally framed the admission signal, and the wall upon which he had just been painting dissolved once more. As he had expected, there stood his parents, with Jeserac a little behind them. The presence of his tutor meant that this was no ordinary family reunion—but he knew that already.

The illusion was perfect, and it was not lost when Eriston spoke. In reality, as Alvin was well aware, Eriston, Etania, and Jeserac were all miles apart, for the builders of the city had conquered space as completely as they had subjugated time. Alvin was not even certain where his parents lived among the multitudinous spires and intricate labyrinths of Diaspar, for they had moved since he had last been physically in their presence.

‘Alvin,’ began Eriston, ‘it is twenty years since your mother and I first met you. You know what that means. Our guardianship is now ended, and you are free to do as you please.’

There was a trace—but merely a trace—of sadness in Eriston’s voice. There was considerably more relief, as if Eriston was glad that a state of affairs that had existed for some time in fact now had legal recognition. Alvin had anticipated his freedom by a good many years.

‘I understand,’ he answered. ‘I thank you for watching over me, and I will remember you in all my lives.’ That was the formal response; he had heard it so often that all meaning had been leached away from it—it was merely a pattern of sounds with no particular significance. Yet ‘All my lives’ was a strange expression, when one stopped to consider it. He knew vaguely what it meant; now the time had come for him to know exactly. There were many things in Diaspar which he did not understand, and which he would have to learn in the centuries that lay ahead of him.

For a moment it seemed as if Etania wished to speak. She raised one hand, disturbing the iridescent gossamer of her gown, then let it fall back to her side. Then she turned helplessly to Jeserac, and for the first time Alvin realised that his parents were worried. His memory swiftly scanned the events of the past few weeks. No, there was nothing in his recent life that could have caused this faint uncertainty, this air of mild alarm that seemed to surround both Eriston and Etania.

Jeserac, however, appeared to be in command of the situation. He gave an inquiring look at Eriston and Etania, satisfied himself that they had nothing more to say, and launched forth on the dissertation he had waited many years to make.

‘Alvin,’ he began, ‘for twenty years you have been my pupil, and I have done my best to teach you the ways of the city, and to lead you to the heritage which is yours. You have asked me many questions, and not all of them have I been able to answer. Some things you were not ready to learn, and some I did not know myself. Now your infancy is over, though your childhood is scarcely begun. It is still my duty to guide you, if you need my help. In two hundred years, Alvin, you may begin to know something of this city and a little of its history. Even I, who am nearing the end of this life, have seen less than a quarter of Diaspar, and perhaps less than a thousandth of its treasures.’

There was nothing so far that Alvin did not know, but there was no way of hurrying Jeserac. The old man looked steadfastly at him across the gulf of centuries, his words weighed down with the incomputable wisdom acquired during a long lifetime’s contact with men and machines.

‘Tell me, Alvin,’ he said, ‘have you ever asked yourself *where* you were before you were born—before you found yourself facing Etania and Eriston in the Hall of Creation?’

‘I assumed I was nowhere—that I was nothing but a pattern in the mind of the city, waiting to be created—like this.’

A low couch glimmered and thickened into reality beside Alvin. He sat down upon it and waited for Jeserac to continue.

‘You are correct, of course,’ came the reply. ‘But that is merely part of the answer—and a very small part indeed. Until now, you have met only children of your own age, and they have been ignorant of the truth. Soon they will remember, but you will not, so we must prepare you to face the facts.

‘For over a thousand million years, Alvin, the human race lived in this city. Since the Galactic Empire fell, and the Invaders went back to the stars, this has been our world. Outside the walls of Diaspar, there is nothing except the desert of which our legends speak.

‘We know little about our primitive ancestors, except that they were very short-lived beings and that, strange though it seems, they could reproduce themselves without the aid of memory units or matter organisers. In a complex and apparently uncontrollable process, the key patterns of each human being were preserved in microscopic cell-structures actually created inside the body. If you are interested, the biologists can tell you more about it, but the method is of no great importance as it was abandoned at the dawn of history.

‘A human being, like any other object, is defined by its structure—its pattern. The pattern of a man, and still more the pattern which specifies a man’s mind, is incredibly complex. Yet Nature was able to pack that pattern into a tiny cell, too small for the eye to see.

‘What Nature can do, Man can do also, in his own way. We do not know how long the task took. A million years, perhaps—but what is that? In the end our ancestors learned how to analyse and store the information which would define any specific human being—and to use that information to recreate the original, as you have just created that couch.

‘I know that such things interest you, Alvin, but I cannot tell you exactly how it was done. The way in which information is stored is of no importance; all that matters is the information itself. It may be in the form of written words on paper, of varying magnetic fields, or patterns of electric charge. Men have used all these methods of storage, and many others. Suffice it to say that long ago they were able to store themselves—or, to be more precise, the disembodied patterns from which they could be called back into existence.

‘So much you already know. This is the way our ancestors gave us virtual immortality, yet avoided the problems raised by the abolition of death. A thousand years in one body is long enough for any man; at the end of that time, his mind is clogged with memories, and he asks only for rest—or a new beginning.

‘In a little while, Alvin, I shall prepare to leave this life. I shall go back through my memories, editing them and cancelling those I do not wish to keep. Then I shall walk into the Hall of Creation, but through a door which you have never seen. This old body will cease to exist, and so will consciousness itself. Nothing will be left of Jeserac but a galaxy of electrons frozen in the heart of a crystal.

‘I shall sleep, Alvin, and without dreams. Then one day, perhaps a hundred thousand years from now, I shall find myself in a new body, meeting those who have been chosen to be my guardians. They will look after me as Eriston and Etania have guided you, for at first I will know nothing of Diaspar and will have no memories of what I was before. Those memories will slowly return, at the end of my infancy, and I will build upon them as I move forward into my new cycle of existence.

‘That is the pattern of our lives, Alvin. We have all been here many, many times before, though as the intervals of non-existence vary according to