

CHAPTER ONE: THE OLD GUY

There was this room, this really strange white room. That's where I first saw the Old Guy.

I mean, who ever heard of *everything* being white? The floor and walls, a sectional sofa, an end table, a floor lamp, the whole nine yards! There was even a solid white framed picture hanging on one wall. (I only knew that because I bumped into it. Untitled; might have been Casper the Friendly Ghost eating a powdered donut or the KKK doing the downhill at Aspen.)

What I thought even stranger was how I got into this white room. Because I don't have a *clue*.

The last thing I remember was walking along Broadway in downtown San Diego, near Horton Plaza. Interesting area. Here's this beautiful multilevel shopping mall with brightly colored architecture and lots of neat trendy shops—fronted by a little park filled with dozens of down-and-outers.

Anyway, it was mid-morning and I'd just biked here from my place in Del Mar, about twenty-five miles up the coast. Don't know why, on a Wednesday, I had this urge to see preoccupied men and women in proper business attire scurry in and out of office buildings, or to cross streets crammed with cars, trucks, taxis, and buses. It usually happens about as often as Qaddafi goes to a bar mitzvah.

So, after locking my bike in front of the plaza, there I was, waiting to cross Fourth Avenue, surrounded by lots of the aforementioned wage slaves, three down-and-outers, and a young male Chicano with the world's biggest and loudest dual-speaker Sony radio superglued to the side of his head.

That's it.

Now I was here, in this weird white room, with the Old Guy—who was coming toward me.

"You want to know what's happening," he said.

Surprise, the Old Guy was dressed in white, something like pajamas with enormous sleeves and no visible fasteners. His complexion was mostly white, but flecked with tiny dark spots, like his face had been carved from a block of Oreo Cookies & Cream. He didn't seem to be crotchety-old, like Scrooge before the ghosts, or lovable-old, like Marcus Welby or Gramps on *Lassie*, but crotchety-lovable-old, like Uncle Charlie on *My Three Sons* or any character played by Wilford Brimley. Though stooped, he moved around quickly with short steps.

"Well, do you?" He was in my face now.

"Do I what?" Unlike his voice, mine sounded hollow in the room.

"Want to know what's happening?"

"For openers, that would be good."

He fluttered his fingers, like dismissing an irritating kid. "Don't worry, everything's cool."

"Everything's...cool?"

The Old Guy stuck a finger in his ear and twirled it around. "Didn't I say it right?"

This was starting to annoy me. "Look, if you don't tell—!"

"Yes, okay." He pulled the finger out. "I didn't think you'd be so excitable." He looked me over carefully, like he wasn't sure about something. "No, there can't be a mistake. You *are* Jack Miller."

I started to slip off my backpack, shouting, "You lifted my wallet, didn't you?"

"Oh, I did not!" he said peevishly. "I know everything about you. We've made a complete study of Jack Miller, ever since..."

"Ever since what?" I asked, checking for the wallet anyway.

"Since you acquired the bicycle."

"Bicycle," I said numbly.

The Old Guy put a finger back in his ear, this time twirling it longer than before, like he was rotating an internal Rolodex. "Nishiki Pinnacle mountain bike. Light but powerful, twenty-one speeds, chromoly frame and fork, linear response mountain brakes, front and rear derailleur indexing, great in the boonies and on the street—"

“That’s mine,” I interrupted, “bought it a couple weeks ago. What are you, CIA or something? I know, there’s a blueprint hidden in the frame. Some nuclear doomsday thing that can fry eighty percent of the world in under an hour. Or a microdot with a list of all satanic cult headquarters in Southern California.”

“Nothing like that,” he said.

I took a few steps, nearly tripping over a white throw rug that I hadn’t noticed, and sat down on the white sofa. “Then let’s cut the mystery and tell me what this is about—from the beginning!”

“You wouldn’t understand half of it,” the Old Guy said.

“*Then tell me the half that I would!*”

The Old Guy smiled, or twisted his mouth, or something. “Okay. First, you want to know where you are. Actually, you’re right where you were. You never left.”

I don’t know if he did anything, but the white room was suddenly gone. The corner of Broadway and Fourth was there: people, traffic, a Carl’s Jr. burger joint, the whole thing. Only problem was, *nothing moved*. Just me and...the Old Guy. He was there—sort of—but all wrong, like a negative. And he was floating—I think—right next to the kid with the blaster.

We were back in the white room again. The Old Guy’s white tennis shoes were solidly on the floor. I looked at him.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” I said.

He twisted his mouth. “At least you understand *that*.”

“So, where’s home?” I was trying to be cool, failing.

“That’s part of the half you wouldn’t understand. Let’s just say it’s...far off. It’s the best I can do, Jack.”

“Okay, assuming I accept this, and you’re not Doug Henning in disguise putting on one hell of an illusion that Phil Melkowitz or my other friends paid through the nose for...then what do you want with me?”

“We came to offer you something.”

“What?”

“A challenge, Jack. Adventure on a grand scale! A chance to travel to...places, yes, places, to do things that no one on your rather pragmatic world can *begin* to imagine! Does that appeal to you?”

I was dubious. “Great. How did I get singled out for this?”

“It was...” He cocked his head and stuck a finger in much farther than before. “We have no word for it. You, on the other hand, have many. It was destiny, fate, providence, karma...that’s enough.” Out came the finger. “Over here we had Jack Miller, planet Earth, North America, Dilber California—”

“Del Mar.”

“Yes, isn’t that what I said? And over there we had the Anlun Bicycle Factory, on the *same* planet, East Asia, Taipei, Taiwan.”

I nodded. “An amazing coincidence.”

“Your profile suited our requirements well,” he continued. The finger again. “Jack Benjamin Miller, age thirty-four, five feet-eleven and three-quarter inches—”

“Six feet.”

The Old Guy nodded, or moved his head with the finger. “Yes. Continuing: 170 pounds, married six years, now divorced. No offspring. Heterosexual... An interesting idea. Where I come from...never mind. Works as a writer, lecturer, but mostly supports self from...” The finger was in as deep as it would go, but he looked puzzled. “We had trouble with this. Can you explain Lotto?”

“Sure. It’s a game of chance. You pick random numbers, get lucky, win money. That’s what happened to me last year. It wasn’t one of those mother lodes of jackpots, forty or fifty million, but it wasn’t bad. Every year I get a check for about the same after taxes as what I was taking home when I was a worker bee, sitting in freeway rush-hour traffic twice a day, doing stuff that bored me to death—wearing a freaking *tie*. So when the chance came, I took it and got out of that life. I have to be careful but I manage okay, and the freedom’s great.”

“So you write your stories.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But without much success.”

“I’ve had a few books published!”

“But...”

I shrugged. “Without much success, you’re right.”

"I absorbed all of your stories."

"You *read* them?"

"It was required as part of the briefing. My people absorb rather quickly. One of them, *Tree Men of Quazzak*; interesting, but inaccurate."

"What do you mean, *inaccurate*? It's a fantasy. I made the whole thing up!"

"No, Quazzak *does* exist. A planet in a rather insignificant solar system, the second, I think—or perhaps the third quadrant of the Helios 84 galaxy. Wretched pile of sand and rock, Quazzak, not a forest world like you described, and its nomadic primitives would have no more concept of a feudal society than—"

"Wait a minute!" I exclaimed. "I've been going along with this till now, but—"

He held up both hands. "You're right, you're right, I digressed. Back to the point. So you write your stories of adventure, and it's satisfying, but because of all the time you have to yourself, it's not enough. You wish that you could *live* those adventures, don't you, Jack? Be a part of Earth's barbaric past or uncertain future, explore some distant world. Don't you?"

"I suppose... Yeah, sure, who wouldn't? But it's not—"

"But it is! You *can*!" The Old Guy was really getting charged. "That's what this is all about, Jack. The bicycle. *Your* bicycle can take you anywhere because of the Vurdabrok Gear, which we put in while it was being assembled."

"The *what*?"

"Vurdabrok Gear. It's, uh, part of the half you wouldn't understand. Named after its creator, one of the wisest men in our history. Quite a *cyclist* in his own right. Once your bicycle left the factory we followed it across the ocean and ultimately to the San Dieguito Cycle Emporium, where you would buy it. We...looked ahead to make sure it would be you. But we didn't have to interfere."

This was either getting good or I was beginning to freak out. "I've run through the gears from top to bottom," I told him, "all *twenty-one*, and there was nothing weird about any of them."

"You couldn't have tried this one, Jack. It's your *twenty-second* gear. I'll tell you how to use it."

"That would be a wonderful thing," I said wryly. "So okay, to summarize all this, you're a visitor from another world and you came looking for me because I fit the profile and you want to send me to great and glorious adventures on worlds all over the universe, or the past and future of my own world."

He tried that smile again. "See how easy?"

I felt like my brain was going to short-circuit. But you know, I *wanted* this to be true and looked at him hopefully.

"No shit?"

The Old Guy's smile was getting better. "No shit, Jack. I think that was the proper response." He withdrew the finger. "We are in earnest about wanting you to undertake this journey."

"But what's in it for you?"

"An appropriate Earther question. You think *you* have time on your hands, Jack? My race has more time than you could comprehend. So our diversions must be of considerable magnitude. We *study*, Jack; study every race we come in contact with, try to understand why they do what they do, or have done what they've done, even try to imagine what they might do in the future. We want to know why the throbbing light creatures of Proneus travel their solar system putting an end to all disease, famine, and the like. Or why the Kodommo of Soldon III find it necessary to annihilate half their planet and enslave most of whoever is left. This is our existence."

"Then you'll be...watching me?"

"You'll be under observation by our particular study group during a goodly portion of your journey. We don't interfere—"

Something happened. The Old Guy flickered, and through the wall behind him I could see the U.S. Grant Hotel, although kind of dimly. He looked around, then seemed solid again as he turned to me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"The field is dispersing. No time, and oh, so much more to talk about. Jack, tell me, do you want to know more or not?"

He flickered again. "Yeah, sure."

"Then meet me tomorrow morning."

“Where?”

“I have the coordinates.” He shoved the finger in again. “Camp Pendleton Marine Base, Stuart Mesa Road, top of the big hill, near the eucalyptus tree. It’s the Starting Point. You know where that is?”

“Sure, I biked it hundreds of times.”

The bottom half of him was gone. He reminded me of an albino Cheshire cat. “See you later, Jack,” he said in a voice that came from somewhere else.

“Wait a minute! I don’t even know your name.”

Only his face was left. He curled his mouth. “You can call me the Old Guy,” he said, then winked out.