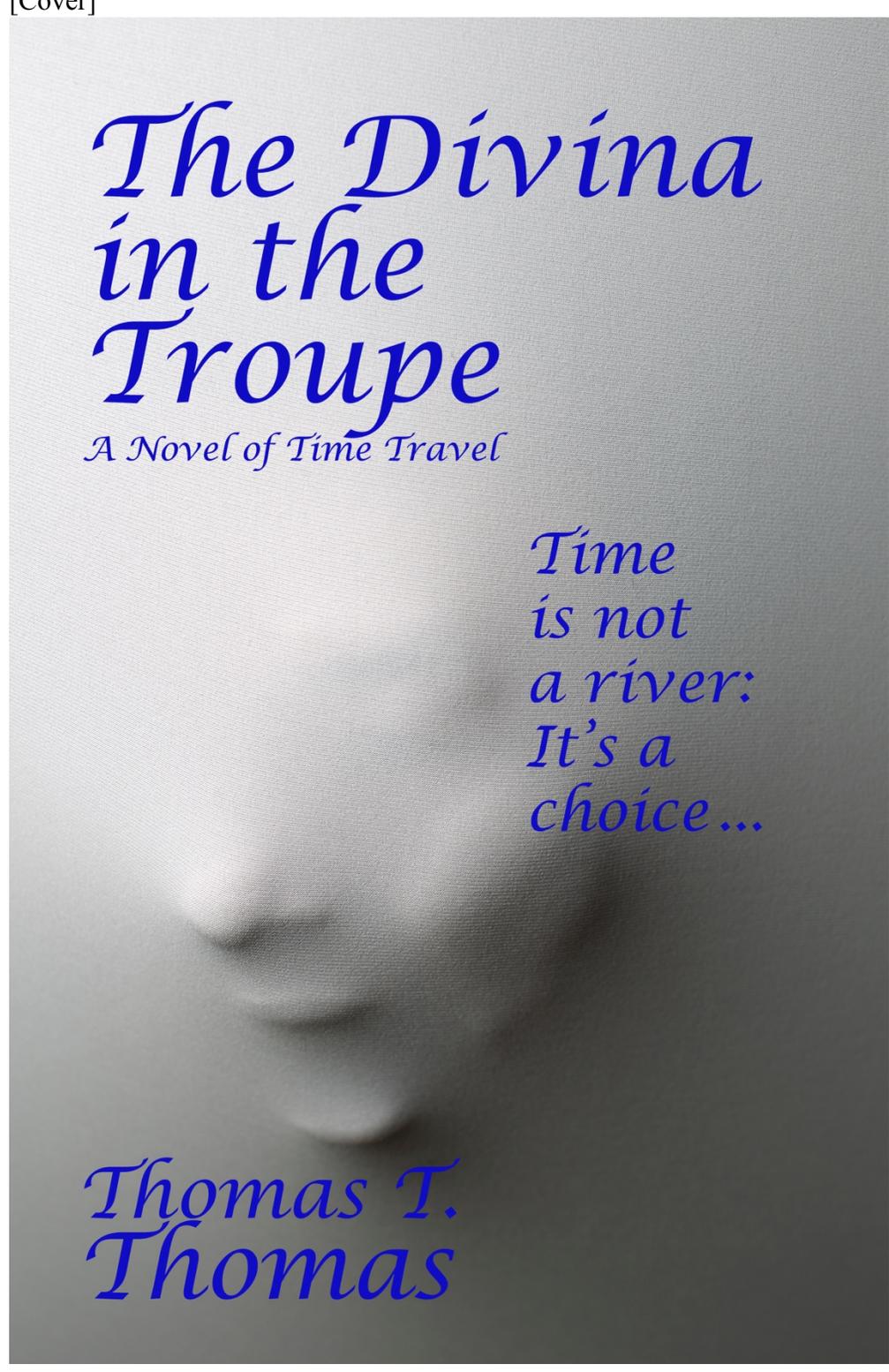


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*The Divina
in the
Troupe*
A Novel of Time Travel

*Time
is not
a river:
It's a
choice...*

*Thomas T.
Thomas*

THE DIVINA IN THE TROUPE
A Novel of Time Travel

Thomas T. Thomas

Time is not a river: It's a choice ...

Returning from a rescue expedition to the Devonian period, 360 million years in Earth's past, Coel Rydin, Merola Tsverin, and their robot companions discover that their mission has failed, at least partially. The monster Glyph had concocted a virus to change the lobe-finned fishes from evolving into the familiar line of four-limbed animals known to Earth and instead sprout *six-limbed* chimera. And Rydin's antibody had not worked completely. So the modern world the travelers return to now contains a mix of familiar and exotic creatures ...

... including the mute but musically inclined strain of six-limbed hominids known as "Divina." This gentle species, widely divergent from the human line, hides a great secret—one that Rydin and Tsverin must discover if they are ever to unravel the mystery of their changed world. As if by accident, one of these creatures approaches Merola and apparently wants to join the Troupe des Jongleurs, the elite time-traveling organization of which she is a member. Against the Troupe's better judgment—but finally permitted by their difficult and disagreeable supervisor, Captain Tavia—she and Rydin accept the Divina as a Jongleur trainee. Almost inadvertently, they give him the ominous name "Ghost."

In their attempts to reverse the evolutionary process that Glyph had unleashed, the pair and their new-found pupil try to intercept Merola on her original mission to the early twenty-first century, where everything had gone so wrong. When that doesn't work, they attempt to track down—ultimately to eliminate—the mysterious Ramsay triplets, who had put the monster onto Merola's trail in the first place. And finally, they must learn the real nature of the time to which they have returned.

This sequel to *The Children of Possibility* closely follows that story, picking it up from the moment of the pair's return to the eleventh millennium. In their desperate struggle to put the world right, they discover that time is not a river, nor some grand Möbius strip of repeated failure, and not even a tangle of loose strands and alternate possibilities. Time is ultimately a choice.

THE DIVINA IN THE TROUPE

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Excerpts from a 102nd Century Dictionary

Chassis, *n.s.*: (1) a frame and working parts, as of a machine or electronic device, exclusive of housing and external surfaces; (2) of any Silicate intelligence, one or more interchangeable physical carriers designed for some specific purpose and having the shape, structure, and tools appropriate to that purpose.

Compradoro, *adj.*: of or relating to a time-traveling culture of the late ninth millennium. Their interventions in previous time streams through the notorious Sindicato della Conoscenza tended to muddy clear historical waters.

Divina, *n.s. & pl., m. & f.*: any member of a humanoid race of the chordate *Hexapoda*, noted for their mental deficiency, voiceless state, and musical talent.

Flüchtling, *n.s., m., ~e, pl.*: fugitive, refugee, runaway; *colloq.* an outcast from the reference now (*q.v.*), usually gathering in an earlier time and place as members of (*collective term*) a coven. *O.G.*

Hexapod, *n.s., ~a, pl.*: subphylum of the order *Chordata* (not to be confused with the subphylum of the order *Arthropoda*, of the same name), consisting of various classes, orders, families, and genera of vertebrates possessing six functioning limbs, variously styled as arms, legs, and sometimes wings, as opposed to the four limbs of the superclass *Tetrapoda*. All chordate Hexapods possess a well-conserved anomaly in their homeobox gene cluster that differentiates them from the parallel evolution of Tetrapods.

Jongleur, *n.s., m., ~s, pl.*: 1. tumbler, acrobat, juggler, street busker; *also*, mountebank, huckster, charlatan; 2. (*cap.*) an officer of the organization that consolidates and regulates travel through time, member of (*collective term*) the Troupe. *O.F.*

Möglichkeit, *n.s., f., ~en, pl.*: possibility; **Möglich**, *~en, pl.*: a sentient theoretical construct from one or more probabilistic decision points (*cf. Wahrschein Punkt*) following the “Schein” or “not taken” direction. *O.G.*

Neural imprint, *n.s.*: the process of transcribing electrochemical activity in the human brain into quantum entanglement of electrons across multiple time cones, as a means of preserving thought and memory against distortions due to alteration of the past. For Jongleurs, the preserving impulse is initiated by touching the right forefinger to left eyelid; the recovering impulse is by touching the left forefinger to right eyelid. Silicate imprinting employs a different paradigm.

Reference now, *n.s.*: current time, the actual or true “now,” as perceived from a subjective viewpoint. Colloquially, as applied to time travel, “reference now” may also refer to the traveler’s original or starting time and place, as opposed to the time and place of arrival.

Selvage, *n.s.*: 1. the edge on either side of a woven or flat-knitted fabric so finished as to prevent raveling; 2. of a fractured singularity (*q.v.*), the process of annealing the point of quantum leakage so that it does not naturally close.

Silicate, *n.s.*: any member of the machine culture, or technosphere, arising in the late ninth millennium in the borough of Sheffod on the island of Ongleterre. Silicates are self-aware cybernetic systems sharing a common origin.

Singularity, *n.s.*: 1. (*physics*) a point or region of infinite mass density at which space and time are infinitely distorted by gravitational forces; the final state of matter falling into a black hole; 2. (*mathematics*) a point at which the derivative of a given function of a complex variable does not exist but every neighborhood of which contains points for which the derivative does exist; **fractured s~**: a singularity exhibiting quantum leakage of mass/energy into one or more temporospatial dimensions.

Temps, *n.s.&pl., m.*: 1. time; 2. weather; 3. (*grammatical*) tense; 4. (*musical*) tempo, *T. fort*, downbeat, *T. faible*, upbeat; 5. (*gymnastics, military exercises*) repetition. *O.F.*

Voyageur, *n.s., m. ~s, pl.*: traveler, passenger, explorer. *O.F.*

Wahrschein, *~lichkeit, n.s., f., ~en, pl.*: probability; ~
Punkt: probability node, probabilistic decision point. *O.G.*

Prologue: Arriving in Lune

The stolen medical ship landed on the grassy slope that defined the southern crest line of the Temz valley and the boundary of Lune. The ship's intelligence cycled the portal, and Merola, with Berzher's baton in its holster, Rydin, and Cinquemain stepped out into the fresh air and sunlight. From this elevation she could spot, across the river, in the northwest quadrant of the village, the tree that she called home.

"Can we make the first order of business getting me a new chassis?" said the intelligence at her hip. "I get seasick when you walk."

"To get seasick," Cinquemain said, "you would need a stomach—and an inner ear."

"No," Berzher corrected, "just a jury-rigged motion sensor."

"Yes, first thing," Merola told her intelligence. "You can pick out the entire tool kit." And then, to Rydin: "What are we going to do with the ship? It's contraband, isn't it?"

"That will be for the Troupe to decide," he answered. "However, I think there are only three possibilities: turn it over to Dottroessa Gerbus and the clinic for deep-time studies, return it to the ninth-millennium builders, or crash it into the sun."

"Did he say, 'crash into the sun'?" the ship's intelligence asked through the portal.

"Of course," Rydin went on, "returning the ship to Lore raises a problem—that uploaded personality software."

"Hey, you ordered that," Cinquemain protested.

"More like a question or suggestion," Rydin said.

"I don't want to 'crash into the sun,' " the ship said.

"We'll have to see what the Troupe decides," Rydin told the ship. "Close the portal, please."

The returning travelers started down the slope. Merola was wearing the clothing she had first worn to twenty-first century London: knee-length skirt, blouse and jacket, and pumps with stacked heels. The heels did poorly in turf and nearly turned her ankles when they reached the crushed-chalk pathways of Lune. She ended up taking off the shoes and walking in the grass alongside the chalk.

"You do understand that all of this was your fault," Rydin told her as they walked. "Don't you?"

"Berzher has explained to me about the baseball," she said. "But I still don't remember any of it."

"That's because you didn't follow protocol and failed to take an imprint before starting your mission."

"But Berzher could remember."

"That's because his brain processed imprints right up until his chassis was destroyed and his power inputs cut—which was *after* the baseball exchange but *before* the point in time that I ... corrected your first error."

"What did you do?"

"Made certain that Pinkus Boskin never heard of baseball."

"Did you kill him?"

"Oh, nothing so crude," Rydin said. "Cinquemain and I simply arranged that certain influences never surfaced in his life. What you do not know, you cannot covet. That eliminated not only your own temptation but also the probability of his contaminating other Jongleurs as well."

"That still didn't bring me home," she observed.

“No, because by then—and through the action of stealing the McGwire baseball—you had already attracted other attention. A trio of Flüchtlinge became so fixated on your mere existence that, apparently, any change in pre-existing circumstances, such as non-theft of the ball, could not shake them off.”

“I never saw them,” she said.

“But Cinquemain and I did.”

“I killed one of them,” the intelligence said.

“And did they send the Möglich after me?”

“Perhaps not intentionally,” Rydin answered, “but we know the Möglichen sometimes follow them.”

“So, the three Flüchtlinge blew up the toy store. That sent me to London and the Gill family’s mirror-maze. And there the Möglich saw me and followed us back to the Devonian. What happened to my backup suit and ship?”

“And my chassis,” Berzher added.

“Perhaps the Flüchtlinge were simply being thorough,” Rydin said. “Perhaps the Möglich had already spotted you.”

“So even though, by now, with your help, I have actually committed no breach of protocol—”

“Except,” Berzher put in, “for neglecting that first neural imprint.”

“—don’t do anything like that again,” Rydin finished. “Fortunately, we were able to resolve the situation without—”

By this time, they had walked through the outskirts of the village, penetrated the outer ring of treehouses, and switched through several branchings in the path. They had already passed a number of public benches, set out in sunlit glades, where citizens could relax in their idle moments. On the bench they were approaching a musician sat and sang a mournful song of love and loss, accompanying herself—for the person appeared to be female, although it was hard to tell—on a familiar nine-stringed mandolin. At the same time, she underscored the melody with chords from a squeeze-box concertina. The fact that this performance required one mouth and four hands, while the performer sat comfortably cross-legged on the bench, struck all three of the travelers at the same time.

Merola looked around. Other people were using the paths as well, and they were indeed all ... people. Two arms, two legs, normal placement and posture. One of them, the circuit designer who had recently improved the efficiency of her last liteship, greeted her.

“Why, hello, Mira Tsverin,” he said. “Have a good flight?”

“Yes, um, thank you, very smooth, Mir Dustin.”

“Always good to hear.” He walked on.

This exchange had interrupted the musician, who paused, looked up at them, and smiled. The face was almost human, but the eyes were a fraction too widely set and had the vacant look that—in an earlier age, when such things were allowed to happen—suggested brain damage.

Merola smiled back.

The singer merely said, “Hmmm,” and picked up her song again.

Merola, Rydin, and Cinquemain walked on in a state of shock. At the same instant, the two humans reached up and touched their right eyelids. Merola did not know what Rydin might be feeling, but the imprint did nothing for her.

“It could be some kind of mutation,” he began when they were out of earshot.
“Not in a genome as thoroughly cleansed as yours,” Cinquemain replied.
“Could it be a recessive gene?” Merola asked. “Something from—”
“Generally, recessive developmental coding will kill the fetus.”
“Then some kind of parallel evolution?” Rydin suggested.
“Your antibody worked,” she said. “Most of the time.”
“Not a word of this to anyone,” Rydin ordered.
“No,” she said. “Way too much to explain.”
“No Search reports with the Troupe.”
“What about the Conoscenza?”
“For once, we let them go.”
“Without retaliation?”
“On what basis?”
“Never mind!”

Forward

1. One Second Later

“You realize ...” Merola Tsverin began and then paused.

Coel Rydin waited for her to complete her thought. The four companions had stopped on the crushed-chalk path in Lune, a hundred meters beyond the bench with the six-limbed songstress. The two humans were facing each other, while their Silicate intelligences waited with them: Cinquemain in his low-profile, eight-legged mobile chassis, Berzher encased in a sensory baton that had been devised for him by Sam Gill, the Builders’ station keeper at Crossroads House in—when was it again? The London of the early twenty-first century. A lot had happened since then ...

“For all these people—” Merola went on, waving her arm at the nearby paths and treehouses. “—*our* people, this is all *normal*.”

Around them, Rydin reflected, all of Lune resembled a remarkably orderly and well-kept forest, because the residents lived in genetically sculpted trees, variants of the genus *Acer*, *Quercus*, and the occasional slender *Ulmus*. Bioscientists had trained their seedlings to grow into graceful, spreading homes among the sparkling white pathways. And all of this was normal. But what Merola seemed to be implying was that the people living there—the category of beings that Rydin would have defined as “sentient”—might now no longer possess only two arms and two legs.

“What is normal?” Berzher asked from his holster at her hip.

“That woman with the extra hands,” Merola said. “Oh, you didn’t exactly see her, but she was—”

“Cinquemain has just transmitted the image,” Berzher replied. “The monstrosity ...”

“Merola is right,” Rydin said. “That ... creature did not just pop into existence immediately after we left the ancient Earth of the Devonian period. She—and probably others of her kind—have been evolving from a six-limbed fish, seeded by the Möglich monster whom we failed to stop three hundred million years in their past.”

“Three hundred and sixty, plus or minus twenty million,” Cinquemain put in.

“That means,” Rydin continued, “this time stream is thoroughly embedded in everyone else’s consciousness. This world and these creatures are the reality now.”

Cinquemain made the soft noise that sounded like criticism. “You say ‘this time stream’ as if there were some other.”

“There’s the one we left,” Merola said. “The one that wasn’t infested with—what? Chimeras? Hexapods? Four-handed monkeys? And that’s a start.”

“Apparently, we are also from that past, too,” Rydin said. “You saw how that circuit engineer, Dustin, greeted you by name back there. He recognized you. So the temporal disjunction—let’s call it the ‘Devonian mistake’ for now—did not keep any of us from being born, making a life here in Lune, and joining the Troupe.”

“I can’t believe that millions of years of a parallel evolution with these other humanoid creatures didn’t change at least *some* parts of the world we left,” Merola said. “I mean, is there even a Troupe anymore? Are we still Jongleurs? Do we have homes to go back to?”

“All of that is waiting for us to find out,” Rydin said. “For now, take comfort that Dustin was unsurprised to see you—and he did fix your ship.”

“It’s a start to what?” Berzher asked.

“Excuse me?” Merola said, confused.

“Thirty-six seconds ago in this conversation you mentioned ‘a start,’ ” the Silicate said. “What did you mean by that?”

“I don’t know yet,” she replied. “Maybe ... we can find a way to fix things?”

Rydin sighed mentally. “Certainly. It is our duty to restore the time stream.”

“That would be a lot of evolution to try to reverse,” Berzher said.

“We just have to find the right place to put our lever,” Merola said.

It seemed to be time for someone—Rydin himself—to take command.

“Very well then. I am still a Jongleur chief—your chief—even if there is, or is not, a Jongleur Troupe still in existence. And whether or not we are still part of it. So, for now, we will operate as if on Search, with full masking protocols.”

“Against our own people?” Merola asked.

“Against the unknown,” he replied.

2. Home Again

After the four of them broke up, with promises to meet later, Merola Tsverin and Berzher walked the path—the almost-familiar path, with here and there a new branching—to her treehouse, or what she thought was hers.

It was still based on a Norway maple, *Acer platanoides*, whose wing-shaped seeds had been harvested in Nortamerica in the late second millennium. Lune’s biosculptors had genetically modified the genome so that its limbs formed planks and supporting columns, and its leaves overlapped to create enclosed, weather-tight rooms. Genes from other modified organisms furnished the materials for windows, water supply and waste disposal systems, and even electrical conductors. Her home was familiar in every respect—except that the main room now had *five* sides instead of four, the ceiling was artfully domed instead of arched, and a window of secreted *Mollusca* shell that had once faced north now looked south. Merola recognized all these changes without having to refresh her neural imprint.

So some things *had* changed in the current reference now ... unless she herself had disappeared and this tree had become someone else’s home.

“Excuse me?” said the voice at her hip. “Fully functioning organic person? Could you get me a mobile transport now?”

“Oh, sure,” she told Berzher.

The tree’s utility closet—at least that was still in the right place—held, among other things, a generalized crablike robot, with minimal weaponry, localized communications, and none of the interfaces needed on Search for piloting a liteship. It was the chassis Berzher preferred to occupy when off duty. Merola freed it and opened the carapace. Then she took the baton from her hip, unsnapped the rounded end cap, and released the glass ball with its filigreed layers of gold-wire circuitry that was Berzher’s central processor. She inserted the intelligence’s brain into the robot and closed the access hatch. After two seconds, the machine stirred, its legs stretched and flexed, and the camera stalks swiveled to find and focus on her.

“Thank you,” the intelligence said. “Except ... this isn’t mine.”

“What? It *looks* like yours—the one we left here. How is it different?”

Berzher made a churring noise. “Could you describe your leg if it belonged to somebody else? The contact points, the equipment setup, the residual software are all

different. It's like wearing another individual's skin. And the serial number is off by sixteen digits."

"Your factories put serial numbers on those things?"

"Sure. How else do you keep track of inventory?"

"But are you incompatible with its technology?"

"I can cope," he said. "Just need to re-route a few circuits."

Next, Merola wanted to establish the date of this reference now, the exact time in this millennium that they had returned to occupy. In the corner of the main room, between two windows, where it resided in shade but received residual sunlight, once had stood her horological fern. This was a gift from Rydin, who was a biosculptor—an artist, really. He designed the fern's diurnal rhythm to open and close the tender fronds in a pattern that counted off the hours, days, and months, and then he had taught her how to read them.

The fern was now gone, and in its place was a terrarium with an orb weaver spider, which she vaguely remembered from her biology training as being from the family *Araneidea*. The tiny animal had created a complicated web with many overlays and dropouts. Merola guessed that this pattern was meant to display a calendar as well, driven by an engram genetically inserted into the spider's brain. But she could not interpret the date, because she had never seen this creature before. The worse trouble was, she didn't know any biosculptor who worked with insects—it certainly wasn't one of Rydin's creations—or who might have given her the clock.

At a loss now, she asked Berzher for the true date, knowing that he could access the telemetry network the Silicates maintained among themselves.

"It is two days after you left—we left—on Search. That was the original mission which included the unfortunate baseball incident and your encounter with the Möglich."

"Did it take us that much time—time in *this* reference now—to transit from the Devonian?"

Berzher consulted his external resources again. "No, the choice of arrival point from a Search—even one as complicated as Rydin's mission to rescue you—is always precise to the minute and second. The delay is because the Troupe waited two days in this reference now before declaring you overdue and sending him back to track you down."

"I see. A lot must have happened in those two days," she said.

"Or in the last three hundred and sixty million years."

It was as if other people had lived here who were almost, but not quite, like her. Or could *another* Merola—one with slightly different tastes and friends—have lived in the tree during the million-year invasion of the four-handed monkeys? Troupe doctrine said such a thing was not possible, that the personhood of a Jongleur remained intact from the start of one Search mission to the return. But no Jongleur had ever, to her knowledge, traveled back to the origins of chordate morphology on this planet. Perhaps, in such an incredible time span, impossible things could happen.

"My house turns out to be much like your chassis," Merola said. "The same but different. What have we gotten ourselves into?"

"Nothing good," her companion replied.

3. A Whole New Genome

"I am having trouble accessing the Troupe network," Cinquemain told Rydin as they walked toward his treehouse in Lune.

“Is it a problem with the telecommunications of your chassis?” he asked. After the beating Cinquemain’s robotic form had taken recently—including a fall from more than one hundred meters when their last liteship exploded above a hillside in Lore, on the Indian subcontinent—it would be no wonder if a few connections had loosened.

“No,” the machine replied. “I have full communication with the Silicates—and have had that since we arrived. But the human bandwidth is—” A pause. “Ah, offset by four hundred and fifty kilohertz above its previous signaling range.”

“Could that be a glitch in your tuning system?” Rydin asked.

“Not at all. It seems the frequency spectrum has ... changed.”

“So? Now tie into the Troupe and find out what they know.”

“Are you planning to make a mission report after all?”

“Nothing more than the fact that we found Tsverin and brought her back,” Rydin said. “And only in reply to the query from Personnel that reported her overdue.”

“But not the whole truth,” Cinquemain observed.

“The whole truth would include the fact that she broke protocol by stealing a baseball for a rich collector. But that person is not now—and, through my subsequent action, has never been—interested in the game. Such a breach would end Tsverin’s career. Worse, the Troupe might put her under the authority of another chief. And that would make it harder for her to keep our secret.”

“So, nothing about our trip back to the Devonian and the changes it created.”

“Which no one in this time stream would believe anyway. So why bother?”

“A point. Nothing about the four-armed singer we found on the bench?”

“Not until you can scan the archives and get me a genome to match.”

As a biosculptor, Rydin was eager to explore the new genome represented by the six-limbed creature they had just seen. From the fact that the “normal” humans around them, including the circuit engineer Dustin, took the singer for granted, Rydin surmised that the creatures—and other variants with multiple limbs, similar to the “seals” and “horses” he and Cinquemain had observed in their brief return to the eleventh millennium during the previous mission—were probably embedded in the current time stream, although not to the exclusion of more familiar, tetrapod life forms and humans.

Cinquemain’s telemetric scan of the genetic database took less time than Rydin anticipated. “Nothing,” his pilot and companion reported.

“Nothing from any Jongleur Search in the past?” Rydin asked.

“Nothing from any Search, any current research effort, or from any medical records. It is as if the creatures do not exist.”

“But we saw one,” Rydin said.

“Yes. One. Maybe a freak.”

“After our fighting that six-limbed monster over the lobe-finned fishes? A mere freak would be too much of a coincidence.”

“Perhaps the singer on the bench was a genetic throwback to a race that was short-lived and died out,” Cinquemain suggested.

“Not since our bioengineers actively purged the human genome of damaging recessives. And certainly none would remain in the developmental homeobox gene set, which is the key to bodily form and function. But ... we are not *complete* masters of the genome, after all. So ... yes, hold that thought for now.”

Still, it was odd, Rydin thought. Extremely odd. The Troupe's most critical mission was research into ancient genomes, to adapt gene sequences and proteins from the evolving biosphere and use them in creating new and useful plants and animals. A radically altered homeobox—such as Rydin had studied back in the Devonian, in trying to counter the Möglich's viral alteration of the fish genome with his own cleansing antibodies—would be useful in many other animal experiments. Yet here was the most significant departure from the tetrapod gene set ever discovered, and nobody had explored it.

“Perhaps these creatures are too new?” Cinquemain said.

“No, they might be new to us, because we've just returned to this reference now. But these creatures have been coexisting with ... well, with the amphibians and lizards, the dinosaurs, the mammals, and the first species of the genus *Homo*, competing with all of them since ... well, forever. Based on that cat-thing Merola and the Conoscenza people say they discovered in London immediately after the Fire Strike, it's a parallel evolution. Or it would have been, except we caught and reversed the Möglich's viral agent.”

“Or you thought you did,” the robot said.

“Apparently we weren't thorough enough.”

“So now you want to go back and try again.”

“First things first,” Rydin said. “I want to study a current specimen to see how the gene set has evolved.”

“Except you don't have a specimen to study,” Cinquemain replied. “Not even traces.”

“And isn't that curious? The Troupe's geneticists have shown no interest in this hexapod species.”

“Unless someone is hiding something ...”

“And hiding it pretty thoroughly.”