The roustabouts worked frantically to finish driving in the heavy steel stakes that held the Big Top secure against the rising twilight wind. The Ringmaster stepped to the edge of the tent and looked out at the crowd impatiently waiting to be admitted. A small tremor ran down his spine. He was a tall man and the shiver had a long way to go, leaving gooseflesh behind in its wake. He took off the tall black silk hat and ran his hand through luxuriously thick hair as dark as the silk, then squarely settled it back atop his head and smoothed nonexistent wrinkles in his impeccable swallowtail coat.

Nerves always assailed him before the performance. He usually dispelled the anxiety by polishing his knee-high Spanish leather boots to a mirror-like sheen or buffing the brass buttons on his costume so they would turn into miniature spotlights when he stepped into the center ring, but today had been different. An added tension existed that he had felt
only a few times before.

Today was an important day, and these were important visitors to his circus.

His frown hurried the roustabouts at their jobs. Behind him in the tent he heard the crew spreading fragrant sawdust and expertly placing the three rings for the performance. This would be the only appearance for this town, whatever town it was. He lost track of where the circus went next and, after so many years, it no longer mattered to him.

This unique performance was all that counted. It was his world. It was the world.

He took a deep breath to calm himself and caught a faint hint of sandalwood—or perhaps it was a perfume made even more exotic by time and distance.

“Which one?” came a soft whisper. “Which one will live, which will die today?”

“Do you see a likely candidate among them?” the Ringmaster asked, his eyes never straying from the crush of the crowd eager to be entertained. Some would leave today exhilarated. Others would be perplexed that they had not seen the elephants and trick ponies and lion tamers so common to other circuses. And one would not leave at all.

“Yes,” came the answer, matching the sibilant hiss of a snake. Moving up beside him was a woman almost as tall as his six-foot-four, but she was cloaked in a soft brown robe shot with gold highlights that hid her well-proportioned body. In spite of his resolve not to look, the Ringmaster turned slightly to look at her from the corner of his eye.

“You’re wearing the two-faced mask of Janus today,” he said. The visage toward the crowd was different from the one peering back into the
Big Top. He had seen this mask before, many times before, but had never understood its meaning any more than he did the woman’s other costumes. Two sides of the same coin? Life and death? Or something more subtle that he could never understand?

“I chose this today because I felt the need to unchain my real essence.”

Hidden behind the dual-countenanced mask and cloaked in the shapeless garb she might have been facing in either direction, but the Ringmaster pretended such ambiguity did not matter to him.

“That one,” Janus said in her husky whisper with its suggestive sexual overtones. “That is the one.” From the folds of the sienna cloak emerged a thin-fingered, snowy white hand clutching a ticket of beaten gold leaf. Janus lifted her revealed hand with the shining ticket and pointed settling the question of which way Janus faced. The other question still required an answer. The Ringmaster could not tell who among the crowd had been singled out for the performance.

It didn’t matter. Someone had been chosen. Relief flooded him. The show could go on now.

“Let our patrons enter,” he called in a stentorian voice that cut through the crowd’s buzz. “The performance of a lifetime begins in fifteen minutes!”

Hidden gongs rang and restraining ropes dropped, letting the crowd surge forward. Through the crush of impatient men, women and children seeking diversion floated Janus like a bubble on a stormy sea. Somehow, she touched no one until she reached a mousy, harried looking woman. The Ringmaster saw the conversation begin and wondered what Janus said. After all these years, he had never heard what arguments she used
with the selected patron. Over too many years, he had never left the shelter of the Big Top. He spun, made a grand gesture with his arms high over his head and strutted beneath the acres of flapping, snapping canvas like a drum major leading a parade.

When he assured himself the patrons were settling down well on the bleachers and the concessionaire worked to sell peanuts, popcorn and other comestible necessities of the circus, the Ringmaster slipped behind a shielding curtain and made his way to the ready-area where the twelve acts prepared themselves before going out into the burning hot spotlight.

“Please, sir,” begged a young girl. She looked up at him with wide, round brown eyes, beseeching him for a favor. “Let me go first today. My act—I can have them crying for more within minutes. There’ll be none finer today! Let me go first.”

The Ringmaster put his hand on the girl’s thin shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze.

“You will do well today, my dear,” he said. Under his hand he felt the skin ripple and alter subtly from flesh to fur. The freckled nose took on the aspect of stripes that vanished as quickly as they appeared. “You have done well since you joined our company. There is no reason to believe your performance will be less than your best.”

“But I saw her, the one Janus picked,” the girl said anxiously. “She looks—different. Special.”

“As are you all,” the Ringmaster said, sorry he had become sexually involved with the girl. He tried to remember when that had been but couldn’t. Five hundred performances ago? A thousand? He doubted it was as long as twenty thousand, though that was not out of the realm of possibility.
“But, sir, please. Let me—”

“A word!” cried a short, stocky man, wearing a floor-length cloak firmly held around his neck by a writhing silver serpent pin. “I need to speak with you.”

“Please,” begged the girl.

“You’ll do fine,” the Ringmaster assured her, moving away as tiger stripes began to appear once more on her face. He pointedly turned his back to her and faced the other performer. “What is it, Mr. Jason?”

“You’re not lettin’ that one go first, are you?” The cloaked man stabbed his forefinger in the direction of the girl whose brown eyes puddled over, allowing tears to run unashamedly down her furred cheeks. “A bit of mistin’ up and she thinks she can get anythin’ she wants.”

“Mr. Jason, I’ve decided you shall begin the show today,” the Ringmaster said.

For a moment the man was dumbstruck. His mouth opened like a beached trout, then closed with a snap, all his complaints trumped.

“This isn’t some trick, is it?” he choked out finally.

“You haven’t been with the circus as long as the others,” the Ringmaster said in his booming voice. “You deserve to go first to prove yourself.”

“I . . . to prove myself? Do you mean that you’re thinkin’ of—”

The Ringmaster shook his head sadly. One performer begged to open the circus and another was suspicious of the honor. Rumors and accusations flew at the speed of light among the twelve acts. But why shouldn’t it be that way? They knew the importance of pleasing him. The twelve high-strung performers would be joined by a thirteenth.

Only twelve would travel on to the next venue.
A flush came to his cheeks as he looked out into the center ring. The steam calliope music faded just a little to give him his cue. That meant the bleachers were crammed and that Janus had signaled for the show to begin.

When the music began to swirl and swell again, the Ringmaster pushed the twelve nervous performers behind him from his mind and strode out boldly, confidently, the master of the circus. His circus.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls of all ages, welcome!” He spoke without need of a microphone. His resonant voice boomed so that no one could ignore him. The bright spotlights high in the tent rigging focused on him in the center ring. For a brief instant, the Ringmaster stood beyond time and space. Then came the muted whispers of anticipation from the audience.

It was time to begin the performance of a lifetime.

“This is an unusual circus with unusual acts, presenting performers the like of whom you have never seen before. There will be only thirteen performers, but each is unique and uniquely pleasing. In the center ring, I give you the Amazing Tattooed Man!”

The Ringmaster made a grand flourish, stepped from the ring and surrendered the spotlight to Mr. Jason. The man swept out from the ready-area, cape swirling theatrically. Although he had seen the act before, the Ringmaster found himself caught up in the presentation. Mr. Jason had been unsure of himself backstage. That man was gone, replaced by one of supreme confidence as he threw back his cape and revealed his costume.

Dressed only in skimpy flesh colored briefs, Mr. Jason struck a pose like a bodybuilder flexing for the judges. But the myriad tattoos on his
skin writhed, bucked and twitched, then popped out. A Japanese woman in colorful silk kimono bowed deeply only to vanish briefly in mid-bow. It took the audience a few seconds to realize the tattoos had come alive and, unlike the man, were only two dimensional. A small turn and the geisha disappeared, to come back fully in the spotlight as she turned to show one side or the other.

Another tattoo, a curiously designed snake, joined her. Then a floating death’s skull and glowing letters danced around in midair. Like a conductor before a world-class symphony, Mr. Jason directed his errant, animated, detached body art.

As the tattooed man held the crowd mesmerized by the strangeness of the act, the Ringmaster slipped through the dark to the woman Janus had chosen. Stringy brown hair needing serious shampooing hung in her eyes. She smiled weakly, futilely tried to push the hair back and scooted closer to her friend, as if the Ringmaster might bite.

“Your golden ticket, please,” he said, bowing deeply as if paying homage to a queen rather than a shabbily dressed woman.

“This?” She held out the ticket, blinking at how it glowed from some mysterious inner source.

“Thank you.” The Ringmaster took the ticket. For a brief instant, both of them touched the ticket. A jolt as powerful as a blow to the gut staggered him. He covered the impact, took the ticket and slipped it into a side pocket. Janus had, indeed, chosen well this time.

“May I call you Meredith?” he asked. He seated himself next to her on the bench in the special section reserved for the gold ticket holder.

“How’d you know my name?” she stammered. Frightened and mousy was not a fetching combination for anyone, much less Meredith
“You accepted the ticket,” he said in way of explanation.
“But I never told him, her, whoever gave me the ticket, my name.”
“You have been selected because of your travails,” the Ringmaster said.
“What do you mean?” Meredith spun about and scowled at her friend. “You told them.”
“Mrs. Santorelli has spoken to no one of your son, now six days in a coma. Nor of your husband in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, fighting for our country’s honor. He will board a plane headed for Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany within a few minutes.”
“He, Jerry, he wouldn’t have told you. Cara? Did you know Jerry got emergency leave? How could you have found out? I only learned before we came here. I was saving it as a surprise.”
“Mrs. Santorelli wishes the best for you. She brought you to the circus to lighten your burden, to help you forgot your troubles for a few minutes.”
“She didn’t know, but Jerry coming was what decided me. There was nothing I could do for Raphael, nothing I hadn’t done just sitting and watching him. Besides my mom is with him.”
“You knew that you would be more valuable to them by coming to the circus,” the Ringmaster said.
“What are you saying? I don’t like this. I want to go.”
“Please stay.”
“This is a weird circus. How’s he do that, the guy with the living tattoos? Some kind of computer? Raphael is always doing stuff like that with his computer. I don’t want to see any more. I thought there’d be
trained animals, not just human acts like that French bunch.”

The Ringmaster smiled faintly. Many who came to this circus mistakenly compared it with the Cirque du Soleil. Until the thirteenth act.

“We are singular,” he said. “You took the ticket from Janus.”

“The man in a cloak and wearing the goofy mask?” Meredith looked confused. The Ringmaster was not surprised that she had improperly identified Janus’ gender. For the woman, perhaps Janus had been male.

“Janus is old, very old. In ancient Rome, the temple of Janus signified beginnings and endings, war and peace. During times of war, the temple gates were thrown open wide and closed only during peace.”

He said nothing about how short had been the times of closed doors.

“What’s that have to do with me getting the ticket to sit in this box seat? Or how you know my name and so much about me and my family?”

“Before the king of Rome’s gods was ever mentioned, during worship or at other ceremonies, Janus was invoked. Janus was a favorite of Saturn, the god of time. Beneath this Big Top time does not exist.”

“Time’s not stopped,” Meredith said doggedly. “It can’t.”

“Your watch,” the Ringmaster said gently.

“It . . . it’s stopped,” she said, shaking her wrist and putting the watch to her ear.

“That’s curious,” said her friend, glancing away from Mr. Jason. “Mine’s stopped, too.”

“Outside the tent, your watches will again keep perfect time,” he said. “For a moment, though, you need only enjoy the show because you will find the show has taken not one second away from your time on this earth. You know that, don’t you, Meredith?” he asked gently. Through her
confusion he saw that she did. Janus had somehow conveyed the importance and reality of the stasis to her.

The Ringmaster looked up and saw Mr. Jason in the finale of his act. “Excuse me, Meredith.” He politely touched the brim of his silk hat, and moved gracefully to the edge of the right ring. As the spotlights winked off Mr. Jason and the applause came slowly, rising from a stunned silence to wild approval, the Ringmaster nodded and was again bathed in light.

“Each ring will see four performers, then for our finale a thirteenth act in the center ring. But now—” The Ringmaster introduced the next act, choosing from the eleven remaining through instinct, sensing the crowd and how it would respond. As the spotlights swung away from him, he returned to the box seats and sank down beside Meredith Kincaid.

“Why did you give me this special seat? Is it because of Raphael?” “In part,” the Ringmaster said. Until he had touched the gold ticket, he had known nothing of her or her sorry life. “You deserve recognition for your sacrifices. No one really knows how it has worn you down, sitting and waiting beside your son’s bed, unable to help him.”

“Th-the doctors say he might come out of the coma at any time. I want—wanted—to be there when he did but Mom said it’d be okay to come here today. For a couple hours.”

“The car crash was such a tragedy,” the Ringmaster said softly. He saw it reenacted before his eyes and forced himself to keep from wincing. Raphael Kincaid had been hot-rodding and ran a red light, only to be struck by a pick-up truck. His mother refused to believe her son was at fault, but the Ringmaster knew the truth. Deep down, so did Meredith Kincaid, which added to her feelings of guilt and helplessness.
“If only Jerry had been here,” she said.
“He is a brave man, your husband,” the Ringmaster said, seeing death and land mines and ambushes in desolate mountain reaches halfway around the world.
“Special Forces,” Meredith said proudly. “I worried he wouldn’t be given compassionate leave to come home. He’s in command of a squad.”
“A master sergeant,” the Ringmaster said. Meredith looked at him, more in curiosity than trepidation now.
“How do you know all that?”
“I learn what I can in order to persuade you to be our closing act.” Meredith stared at him in disbelief, then laughed.
“Me? I can’t do anything. Look,” she said, pointing to the act in the second ring. “I could never do anything so . . . odd.”
“You sell yourself short,” he said. The Ringmaster took a few minutes to introduce the next act in the third ring and returned to find Meredith talking in animated, hushed tones with her friend.
“She wants me to do it. Says it would be a hoot. I told Cara to give it a try herself. Or maybe we could both do something together,” Meredith said.
“No,” the Ringmaster said firmly, “it doesn’t work that way.” His words were almost lost in the audience’s cheers and laughter at the performer. The Ringmaster silently congratulated himself on such fine choreography. Choosing the order of performance was as important in pleasing the crowd as the act itself.
“Why not?” asked Meredith, settling down to look at him squarely.
The Ringmaster reached into the pocket where he had put her gold ticket, not sure exactly what he would find, drew out a clear crystal sphere
the size of a tennis ball and handed it to her. With shaking fingers, she lightly brushed the smooth surface. Meredith looked up in amazement.

“It filled up with smoke.”

“Look more closely,” the Ringmaster urged.

“Raphael!” Meredith seized the globe and peered through the mist to see her son lying unconscious in his hospital bed.

“Take this one, also,” the Ringmaster said, handing her a second sphere.

“Jerry! I can see him getting on a MATS flight. That must be Kabul. I’ve never seen a picture of it, except on the evening news. Jerry can’t send pictures. Top secret. And there aren’t any postcards.” Meredith giggled at her small joke.

“One more,” the Ringmaster said. Meredith took the third.

She turned and compared the face in this sphere with her friend. Cara watched the circus act in both the globe and real life.

“These actually show the people?” Meredith watched in fascination as Cara’s every move was mirrored within the smoky interior.

“They do.”

“Wait a minute. I don’t understand. The one with Jerry’s also showing a guy with a gun.”

“A Stinger missile,” the Ringmaster said, keeping his voice as emotionless as he could.

“He—he fired at Jerry’s plane. The plane’s gone up in a ball of flame! What kind of trick is this?” Meredith turned on him, face flushed and terrible anger leaping from her eyes.

“There is no trick,” he said. He took the third sphere and dropped it.

As the crystal ball hit the floor Cara Santorelli went into convulsions,
thrashing about. Her tongue thrust out as she began frothing. Meredith let out a shriek that was drowned by the crowd’s laughter at the circus act.

“Wait, don’t touch her. Take the sphere instead.” The Ringmaster pointed to the crystal orb he had dropped.

“But she’ll swallow her tongue. I... I don’t know what to do. Get a doctor!”

“The globe. Pick it up and you can save her life.”

Meredith swivelled back and forth looking from her friend to the crystal globe and back. She bent and snatched up the sphere. The instant her fingers touched the warm crystal, Cara sagged.

“Are you all right?” Meredith asked anxiously.

“I’m sorry,” Cara said, wiping her lips. “It’s been a long time since I had a seizure.”

“You never told me.”

“The medicine’s been controlling it. But it’s over.” Cara smiled.

“This is pretty strange but I feel better than I have in months.”

Meredith looked from her friend to the globe in her hand and started to throw it away. The Ringmaster grabbed her wrist.

“Don’t,” he said urgently. “She will have another seizure if you try to get rid of the sphere.” He waited a moment, then handed her the second globe, the one showing flaming debris from an airplane raining down on the distant airport.

She shook her head in denial and looked away.

“I don’t want to see it.”

“Yes, you do. Take the crystal ball.” The Ringmaster forced it on her. Meredith gasped.
“The missile. It missed!” She clutched the sphere in desperation. “As long as you hold the sphere, all will be well.”

Hating himself for doing it but knowing it was necessary, he held out the first sphere he had shown her. Raphael tensed in his hospital bed, then went limp as the monitors attached to him showed with their graphic electronic flatlines that death had taken another life.

“Raphael,” Meredith sobbed. She took the sphere from the Ringmaster without being urged to. Her bloodshot, teary eyes turned to him.

“Yes, he is well again. He will remain that way as long as you hold the sphere.”

“How? How is this possible? I can’t determine their fates. Their lives.”

“Their deaths,” the Ringmaster finished. He saw that the current act was swinging into its finale and knew he had to speak quickly to convince Meredith of what she had to do. The importance of having her perform now wore down on him. She was the one. Now.

“You must juggle if you want them to remain alive.”

“If I drop the balls, they’ll die? But that’s not fair!”

The Ringmaster did not answer. He had lived long and traveled far and had yet to find anything that was fair in the world.

“I’ll go with you,” he said. “I will introduce you. The audience will appreciate your skills at juggling.”

“Helping others is so hard,” Meredith said tiredly. “I’m worn out.”

“Come,” the Ringmaster said, taking her wrist and pulling gently. The act finished just as he and Meredith stepped into the center ring. She flinched as the spotlights speared down from above, pinning her in place.
“Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, I have for you today a special treat.” The Ringmaster’s words echoed inside the tent. No one took note of such a curious reverberation. They stared at Meredith, without a costume and lacking stage presence. “Chosen this day from the audience is a juggler supreme. A brilliant performer who can keep more than crystal balls in the air. I give you Meredith the Marvelous, the Soul Juggler!”

He made a grand gesture in her direction. Meredith stared into the three spheres she held as if she could wish them empty again. Inside each swirled colorful mist, and floating in that colorful fog were her husband, son and best friend. Hesitantly at first and then with greater precision, Meredith juggled. The crystal balls went higher and higher into the air, glinting in the light, sending out rays of living luminance from each denizen inside.

The Ringmaster stepped farther back and watched, considering what costume she ought to be given. It hardly mattered now. Her beginning moves were clumsy but she learned quickly. Meredith had spent her entire life juggling possibilities. Now she built a pyramid of dancing light that caught and held safe the lives of those she loved most.

“She is good,” came Janus’ sibilant voice. “You have done well positioning her among the others, also.”

“Thank you,” the Ringmaster said. He watched Meredith move about the center ring, beginning more intricate moves. The audience gasped when it appeared as if her son would slip away forever, then he returned from his coma. Other acts offered diversion. This promised life—or death.

“How long can she keep the customers in her thrall?” asked Janus.
Robert E. Vardeman

“They begin to tire, even when lives are in the balance.” The Ringmaster reached into his pocket and stepped forward. Meredith saw him and smiled her triumph. Then fear grew in her eyes when she saw what he held.

The Ringmaster tossed her another sphere. She almost fumbled it. Only by going to her knees and fighting did Meredith add the fourth crystal globe to the stack.

“Her mother,” the Ringmaster said to Janus. “A stroke is imminent.” “Unless she continues to juggle. Excellent,” Janus said, slipping away to allow him to concentrate on his work. By the time Meredith had finished her stint in the center ring, he had chosen the order for the rest of the acts.

The Ringmaster took Meredith’s thin arm and steered her toward the ready-area. She clutched the four spheres with a desperation that amused him.

“You will make a superb addition to our company,” he told her. Exhausted, she sank to the sawdust-covered floor and stared up at him. “I can’t leave my son and husband. And my mother! She’ll have a stroke and—”

“They all will die if you don’t continue juggling their lives,” he said harshly. “You have only two choices. Come with the circus and perform or leave now and have everything you’ve seen in the crystal balls come true.”

“Jerry dead in an airplane crash?”

“Shot down by an anti-aircraft missile,” the Ringmaster said. “And Raphael never comes out of his coma?”

“You saw his fate. He dies, too. And your mother’s stroke is
debilitating—for a few months. Then she will die.”

“Unless I keep juggling? That’s not fair!”

The Ringmaster ignored her. “You need only discard the sphere holding Mrs. Santorelli to know the truth of my predictions. She might be saved if we get EMT personnel for her quickly enough.” He shrugged. “I’m not sure we can.”

“That’s horrible,” Meredith exclaimed.

“None of it need happen,” he said in a more kindly voice. “Remember what I said about time being halted within the Big Top? Travel with the circus and juggle as one of our featured acts and nothing will harm your family and friends.”

“But if I drop one,” Meredith said. She swallowed hard when she read the answer on the Ringmaster’s face. “It’s too much pressure.”

“Is it any more than you’ve felt? This is the way you can help, do something. You are no longer helpless but are empowered to save those you love most dearly.”

“Th-they can come along, can’t they?”

“I don’t know where the circus will travel next. Wait!” he said, holding up his hand to forestall her objection. “That is the truth. I do not know.”

“What’s to stop me from leaving with the spheres?”

“Only under the Big Top will your juggling magic save them,” he said. “There’s something else you’re not telling me,” Meredith said in a croak. “I have to leave my family behind and keep juggling or they’ll die. What else?”

“Today thirteen acts will perform. Only twelve will move on to our next performance.”
“You mean you might throw me out? Then my family would die!”
“Yes,” he said simply.
“Will you?”
“Will I call your name and remove you from the list of headliners today? Only when all thirteen acts are done will that be revealed.”
“It can be any of them? Even the ones who’ve performed for you for years?”
The Ringmaster nodded. Meredith stared at the globes in her hands and then pressed her cheek to each in turn as she began crying openly.
“I don’t want to leave you, I don’t,” she sobbed, “but I have to so you can live. How I love you all!”
The Ringmaster moved away to introduce another act and left Meredith to appreciate the magnitude of her decision.

The roustabouts toiled silently to pull up the stakes they had driven into the dry, hard ground only hours before. A fitful evening breeze had died, leaving the night humid and still, interrupted only by the infernal buzz of hungry insects. The Ringmaster walked with measured steps under the Big Top, looked upward and saw it slowly billowing before coming down like a huge parachute. The bleachers were gone and the three rings were packed and ready to go to the next venue, wherever that might be.

Of the thirteen acts that had performed, only twelve moved on. He had made his decision, though it had been harder this time than usual. He went to the door of his trailer, pulled up on the far side of the collapsing tent, and hastened inside.
Janus waited for him in the semi-darkness.
She twisted front to back and then spun in a full circle so both faces could study him. He wasn’t sure she wore a mask now.
“I am the Ringmaster,” he said in a tired voice. Selecting the destiny of a human being after every performance like some ancient god of Hades wore on him, especially today. Worse, he was not certain he had chosen properly.
Janus lightly touched his arm and moved away as a deep voice welled from the utter blackness at far end of his trailer to fill his ears and mind.
“You have chosen well.”
The Ringmaster sagged in relief. He again said, “I am the Ringmaster.”
“That is your fate.”