she had to do several turns in the courtyard, water the plants, and read a certain number of lines of Arabic before the day was properly started. Then there was the tidying of the library: although she left her desk in total chaos--the one hold-over from unredeemed days--she dusted the bookshelves carefully and arranged the books by author and subject. She concentrated on one shelf each day and at the end of the month it was time to start again. She had promised herself when she first came that she would organize the countless libraries in the mansion, but little by little she abandoned and forgot that goal, as, with experience and weariness, people narrow their goals in life.

After completing her library duties, she fed the pigeons that came to light on the window ledge, took an afternoon walk around the court, tended the plants, and continued her study of Arabic. This study did not satisfy her sensuous delight in language, since she had no idea of how to pronounce the odd chicken scrawls on the page. But it gave her a sense of order and control, a feeling that her brain was being put to safe use. Finally, she had a journal, more a daily reminder of tasks to be done than an account of events or feelings. There were really no events or feelings in her life, except when the plum tree bloomed or when she discovered an unexpected book in the library. If she dreamed at night, she kept no memory of those dreams; it no longer even occurred to her to daydream. As time passed, the room by the courtyard came to define the limits of her physical existence as the study of Arabic grammar defined the life of her mind. She found that she had everything she needed within the four walls of the room and the confines of the courtyard.

One day she awoke with the realization that a great deal of time had passed and that, in years, at least, she was no longer a child. On an impulse rare to her, she ran and stood in front of a tarnished mirror in one corner of the room and stared at her unfamiliar, colorless face and wasted body. She was increasingly haunted by the notion of time; she made more and more detailed lists of the books to dust and arrange, the pages of Arabic grammar to study. She was aware of the passing of each day, the fading of summer into fall and the dimming of fall into winter. At the same time, she felt such weariness that she longed for the moment when her daily duties would be done and she could go to bed. For the first time since her early days of solitude, she thought of the other rooms in the mansion, the libraries with their undusted, disorganized books, and other rooms she could hardly imagine. She knew that she should make it an item on her list to visit the room next door, for example, a room she could not even remember entering. But the more she thought about it, the less capable she felt of moving, perhaps as much from fear of disappointed expectations as from imagined horrors--possible filth, bats' nests, roaches, and piles of dusty human bones. She did not even conceive the delights the room might hold, beautiful canopied beds, chests full of lovely outmoded gowns and peacock feathers, sculpted desks concealing crumbling love letters. Soon she put aside the very thought of venturing outside the safety of her library, and all the other rooms became taboo to her, like illicit thoughts. At about this time she began to think, vaguely at first, then with greater and greater intensity, of the angel. She had forgotten the sound of his voice, the contour of his figure, all but the general essence of his pact. But gradually a wish began to form in her mind, the wish that he would visit her again.