

# Majestrum

*A Tale Of Henghis Hapthorn*



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A TALE OF HENGHIS HAPTHORN

by Matthew Hughes

"I have decided to consider it all just a terrible mistake," I told my integrator, "and the best thing to do is to simply ignore it and get on with my life."

The integrator looked at me with large and lambent eyes. It had been eating its way through yet another bowl of expensive fruit and did not pause in its chewing as it said, "That may be difficult to do."

Its voice came, as always, from some indefinite point in the air. It occurred to me, and not for the first time, to wonder how it contrived to still speak in that manner. A few days before I could have drawn a schematic to show exactly how its collection of interconnected components worked. I had, after all, assembled and disposed them in various locations about my workroom, so that I would have had a research and communications assistant equipped with all the appropriate skills and systems that a freelance discriminator required. It had been a more than acceptable device and over the many years of our association it had become, as the best integrators did, almost an extension of my own well-calibrated mind.

But that was before a series of exposures to interdimensional forces and -- though it galled me to admit it, there was no other word -- "magic" had transformed my assistant into an undefined species of creature for which, again, the only accurate term was a "familiar." It now spent much of its day on my table, reflexively grooming itself and dining on rare fruits that would not have been out of place in the breakfast room of one of Olkney's wealthiest magnates. It ordered the delicacies delivered from its suppliers, charging them to my account. When not eating or grooming, it slept.

"It may be difficult to do," I said, "but I believe that I am equal to the task."

"Will you cease to see me?" it said. "Will you dismiss me as a hallucination?"

I had anticipated the objection. "I will have a suitable dwelling made for you. It can go in the corner over there. From the outside it will look like a chest or wardrobe."

"You mean to put me in a cage?" The glossy brown hair on the back of its neck rose like a ruff.

"That implies confinement," I said. "My intent relates more to concealment. I do not wish to have to explain you to visitors." Indeed, I was not sure I could offer a convincing explanation without giving rise to gossip; as Old Earth's foremost freelance discriminator I was, after all, a well-recognized figure in Olkney.

"I am less interested in your intent than with the outcome," it said. "I ask again: am I to be caged?"

I pointed out that when it was a disseminated device, it did not mind being decanted into a portable armature that fitted over my neck and shoulders so that it could accompany me when I traveled. I had been wearing the integrator in that fashion when we had passed through a contingent dimension to escape from an otherwise permanent confinement that would have eventually proved fatal. It was after we reemerged into my workroom that I found my assistant transformed.

"It is different now," it said, and chose a purple beeberry from the bowl. "I am not what I was. Things are not what they were."

"That is the part I will not accept," I said, raising a hand and ticking off one finger as I continued. "Granted, though I inveighed against its partisans for years, I must now accept there is such a thing as magic. I waive all my former objections. It cannot be said that Henghis Hapthorn cannot swallow reality, however bitter the taste."

I addressed another digit. "Granted, also, that for some unfathomable reason, from time to time rationality recedes and magic. . ."

"Sympathetic association is the preferred term," my integrator said.

I inclined my head. "Very well, rationality bids the cosmos farewell and sympathetic association advances to claim the territory. I have accepted that as well."

"How gracious of you," it said.

I ignored the tone and I seized a third extremity, giving it a portentous waggle as I said, "But -- and"

this is a but of great pertinence -- the salient point is that the grand cycle has not yet reached the culmination of transposition. ~~A new age of sympathetic association certainly approaches, its shadow occludes the doorway, but it is *not yet here*.~~"

My integrator extended a longish pink tongue and licked the juice from its small, fur covered hand while its voice came from the air to point out that some elements of the coming age had, in fact, arrived early -- a diminutive thumb pointed back at its glossy chest -- and must be dealt with.

"Ah," I said, "but that is merely one way of looking at the situation. Another way is to note that the premature arrival was an accident, simply the outcome of a few odd twists of circumstance, so why don't we just ignore them and get on with more important concerns?"

"Have you considered the possibility that our standards as to what is important may differ?"

"I will make accommodations," I said. "Fruit will be provided."

It was difficult to read a set of features that blended the feline with the simian, but I thought to see a look of relief flit across its furred visage. Then its expression went suddenly blank; I had later learned to associate this neutral face with the integrator's performance of its communication function, and was not surprised when it announced that it was receiving an incoming signal from its counterpart at The Braid, Lord Afre's country house, inquiring if I was available to speak.

"Say that I will be presently," I said. I went to a wall cabinet and brought forth a cincture of woven metallic fibers; I bound it around my skull so that a lozenge fixed to its mid point was centered on my forehead. The small plaque was inlaid with the insignia of a honorary rank that had been bestowed on me by the Archon Dezendah Vesh some years before, in gratitude for discreet services.

I signaled to my integrator that I was ready. Instantly, a screen appeared in the air before me and, a moment later, it filled with the aristocrat's elongated face. His abstracted gaze seemed to slide over me as if unable to get a grip, then managed to achieve focus. It was to assist Lord Afre's perception that I had donned the Archonate token. Members of the uppermost strata of Old Earth's human aristocracy had, over the millennia, become increasingly attuned to such symbols. They could see rank quite clearly, and could perceive details of clothing and accessories so long as they were fashionable. Persons who possessed neither title nor office often found it difficult to attract and hold the attention, although their household servants were able to do so by adopting specific postures and gestures while wearing livery.

Afre's pale and narrow lips parted, permitting a few words to escape in the drawl that was fashionable among the upper reaches of Olkney society. "Hapthorn? That you?"

"It is," I said.

"Henghis Hapthorn, is it?"

"Indeed."

"The discriminator?"

"The same."

"I want to talk to you."

"Very well. Please do so."

"Not this way. Come to The Braid."

"My I ask what would be the subject of our conversation?" I had found that, when dealing with the highest echelons, it could be wise to delineate the situation in advance. Early in my career I had been called to the residence of the Honorable Omer Teyshack and kept waiting several hours, only to be asked to give my opinion on the merits of double-tied neckwear versus those of the single-knotted. The lordling and his cousin, the Honorable Esballine Teyshack, had disagreed over the issue, had wagered on the outcome and, in need of a neutral judge to adjudicate the question, had elected to summon me. I had been annoyed at the time but had consoled myself afterwards by reflecting that I had learned a useful lesson for future dealings with such folk. The disputants also having neglected

ask my fee in advance, I was further comforted by presenting them with an extravagant bill.

"It's the girl," Afre said.

I flicked my integrator a sidelong glance. Its voice murmured in my ear, "The reference is most likely to Lord Afre's younger daughter, Chalivire. Rumors have circulated. She may have formed a relationship with a person of indeterminate circumstances."

"When would be convenient?" I asked.

"Now. I'll send a . . ." The face in the air showed a hesitation. Clearly, the word he sought had escaped him.

"A car?" I suggested.

His brows briefly knit then he said, "No need, I'll send one of mine."

"I will be waiting," I said. He looked away and his integrator broke the connection.

"Excellent," I said. "Work is precisely what I require. What do we know of this 'person of indeterminate circumstances?'"

The integrator told me that there had been some snippets in the *Olkney Implicator*, the organ which the upper classes turned for news of interest to them -- usually a mix of social notices and gossip. "There was a reference in a recent column by Tet Olbrey. Chalivire appeared at a masquerade given by Lady Ballanche, accompanied by a man in a domino whom no one could place. They danced two circuits of the floor then exited through the garden doors and were not seen again that evening."

"A fortune hunter?" I speculated.

"Such was the immediate speculation," my assistant said. "But one or two knowledgeable eyes judged that he lacked the palpable greed of your ordinary Chloön-clutcher." The term arose from the famous Oldrun play: the fair Chloön is seduced by a heartless young buck who schemes that his distressed father will buy his departure; the old man instead sics a hunting pack of brag-hounds on the schemer, only to discover too late that the still enamored maiden has joined him in a doomed flight across the somber moors. I had seen it performed at the last Boldrun Festival, with Branth Widdersle a little too much the veteran to be entirely convincing in the ingenue role, though her "torn and yet tender" last speech brought tears to many an eye.

"See what else can be learned about him," I said.

The little brown face again grew vacant and the eyes unfocused as my assistant plumbed the breadths and depths of the connectivity. After a moment it said, "The Bureau of Scrutiny made a routine inquiry, apparently at Lord Afre's prompting. The fellow is not anyone who has come to the scroots' attention for trying this sort of thing before. There were no indications of an offense having been committed, so the Bureau stepped back."

"Can we check her finances?"

"I will consult Lord Afre's integrator," it said. A moment later it reported that there had been no untoward activity around the Honorable Chalivire's accounts at her fiduciary pool.

"So we know at least that he seeks no small prize," I said. "If it is indeed pelf he's after, he's after a lot of it."

"Should we not consider whether the fellow's affections are genuine?"

For form's sake, I supposed that we should, though Chalivire was not celebrated for wit, beauty nor even the amiability that is often the saving grace of those who lack the first two qualities. Indeed, she tended to land somewhere toward the unfortunate end of the scale, somewhere between *lacks effort* and *all hope abandoned*. "We will keep the possibility in mind," I said, "though high up on a remote shelf."

I busied myself putting together a few necessities to take with me to Lord Afre's, not forgetting the brow band without whose insignia he would have difficulty perceiving me. For good measure, I added a pair of cuff studs left to me by a great uncle who had achieved a minor aristocratic rank. It was a

open question as to whether I had inherited the entitlement, but I chose to give myself the benefit of the doubt.

"Speaking of things on rear shelves," my assistant said, "and returning to our previous discussion, how do you propose to ignore the other person who now shares your mental precincts?"

I snapped closed the valise I used for short trips and said, "That matter seems to be finding its own level. I occupy the front parlor during the days, he during part of the nights, and we seldom find ourselves in each other's way. Indeed, he sleeps a great deal, almost like an infant."

A fur-covered assistant was not all that I had acquired during our recent transdimensional voyaging through realms and prolonged exposure to the forces of sympathetic association. The intuitive part of my psyche that I had always referred to as my "insight," and that had resided in the back corridors of my mind, had emerged as a fully formed persona: an alternate Henghis Hapthorn -- indeed the person who would, in due course, have taken charge of my inner household once the Great Wheel rolled us all over into the new age of magic. I, the rational Hapthorn of the supplanted age, would have faded to become what he had been, a logical shadow just beyond the edge of his consciousness.

"He, too, has emerged prematurely," I said. "I am sure he will be content to bide his time unobtrusively pursuing his interests, until the rest of our universe catches up with us."

An unnameable expression briefly took up a position on the furred face then just as quickly departed. "What?" I said.

"Perhaps you should ask him?"

"He is asleep." I had learned to tell when he was with me and when he was inert.

"I believe he would prefer to be awakened now, rather than tonight when he will likely find himself staying over at Lord Afre's estate."

I hadn't given the matter any thought. "Why?" I said.

"You should ask him."

I had been finding it easier to allow my other self and me to live separate existences. I preferred to keep it that way. "I am asking," I said, "my integrator."

The extra furry parts where a human face would have had eyebrows went up then came down to form a chevron. "Well, that's one of the complications, isn't it?" it said.

"Explain."

"Well, am I just *your* integrator? Or am I also his?"

"I built you."

"Yes, but then he is you. Or at least an important aspect of you that is now reified into a more noticeable form. Or is he someone else?"

"That 'noticeable' sounds like a carefully chosen word," I said.

"I have been giving the matter some thought," it said.

"Indeed? And to what conclusions has your thought brought you?"

"It would be premature to say."

I looked sharply at the small face but it returned me a look of befurred innocence. "That is precisely what I say to clients when I do not wish to speak my mind," I said.

"It is also what you say when your mind is not yet made up," it replied.

"I would not like to think that you are beginning to keep things from me," I said.

The little shoulders lifted and fell and the small hand-like paws displayed their leathery palms. "Yet that might be necessary if you truly intend to ignore what has happened to us. Assuming that this strategy proves workable over the long term."

"Hmm," I said. "I suppose you had better tell me more."

Again, my assistant recommended waking up my other self and putting my questions to him. "I don't care to be an intermediary between the two parts of you."



I hadn't built it to have preferences. They had become aspects of its new nature along with a ~~appetite for costly fruits and a habit of forever picking at its dense and glossy coat.~~ "Overcome your reluctance," I said.

The integrator told me that, during the hours I slept, my alter ego had been poring over the books he had acquired from the house of Bristol Baxandall. Baxandall, a budding thaumaturge, had been attempting a spell of personal transformation, using an entity from an adjacent dimension that he had managed to trap and coerce to his purposes. But, as often happens to those who attempt to wield vast powers they only partially understand, he had made a mistake. The error allowed the entity -- I still resisted calling it a "demon" -- an opportunity to take revenge on Baxandall. It did so, by transforming him into a mewling misarrangement of still living parts that was just on the point of expiring when I arrived at his residence.

Unlikely as I would have thought it, the demon and I had managed to achieve a congenial relationship that lasted for some time, though I think the association was ultimately more to his benefit than mine. But among the proceeds of our temporary partnership were a collection of ancient tomes on magic that had been Baxandall's. I had brought them to my workroom and read as much of them as I could. They ranged from the obscure to the impenetrable: one or two, it could not be doubted, were genuine survivors of the previous age of magic; I suspected that most were copied or attempted recreations of lost works; one was in an unknown script and language. None of them held much interest for me, though I was now willing to admit that they might be useful to denizens of the coming age.

"He has been worrying at a particular book," my integrator said, "without much success. Last night he was wondering whether he should ask for your assistance."

"Indeed?" I said. "What use could I be?"

"Again, I think this would be a conversation for the two of you to conduct without me."

"What is the book?" I said.

He indicated a small volume bound in cracked and scuffed leather on the shelf where Baxandall's sparse library now stood. It was the unreadable one, written in a tongue that dated from so long ago that I was unable to identify even the script in which it was written, let alone the meanings of the words printed in faded type -- although I had made no great effort to do so.

"Can he read it?" I said.

"No. His intuitive faculties tell him only that the book is important, but he lacks the analytic capacity to decipher it."

"And you have found no other examples of the same script?"

"None."

I went to the shelf and took down the book. The leather in which it was bound had an unpleasant feel; when my fingers pressed into it, the covering moved slightly over the boards it concealed the way the skin of a rigored corpse could sometimes slip loosely over the hard, dead flesh beneath. I opened it at random and studied a page, saw symbols in the upper corners of the leaves that were almost certainly numbers. I leafed through it, applying second-level consistencies -- the abstruse mathematics that underlay both the order and chaos of the universe -- but though I began to perceive patterns and ratios, I derived no meaning from them.

"It lacks a starting point," I told my assistant. "To make a map requires at least one known landmark. The numbers on the page corners are not enough."

Instead of answering, the integrator again assumed its blank look and said, "Lord Afre's cart approaches. It will be here shortly."

"He must have sent one from his house in town, rather than from The Braid," I said. "Or, rather than the integrator did it. Logistics are not Lord Afre's strong suit."

I replaced the book on the shelf and looked about to see if there was anything else I needed to have with me. I would not take my integrator. I already had a certain reputation for eccentricity and did not want it compounded by appearing in public with a strange creature on my shoulder.

"You should take the book," my assistant said. "He may want to look at it after you retire."

The suggestion caused me some concern. "Is he becoming obsessed?" I said. I did not wish to share my cerebral house with an unbalanced room-mate.

"He is sure of his intuition," said the creature on the table, "just as you are sure of your rationality."

The who's-there at the downstairs door announced the arrival of Lord Afre's car. "Say that I will be down shortly," I told it and took up my luggage.

I thought for a moment then went back to the book shelves and retrieved the volume. Again, I found the feel of it against my fingers to be unpleasant. I tucked it into my valise and descended to the ground floor.

#

Lord Afre's estate lay some distance past the village of Binch at the base of the long peninsula that was capped by the tarnished crown of Olkney. The aircar carried me in sumptuous comfort at treetop height over the deodar forest that rimmed the farm fields around Binch, then rose to where a broad height of land was surmounted by a rambling pile of brick and masonry, surrounded by spacious gardens. Within the walled grounds I also saw a mutable maze and broad sweeps of parkland dotted with follies and belvederes that replicated well known architecture from various worlds down The Spray.

As the car eased down, I was not surprised to see that it was not delivering me to the old house's grand formal entrance. But then it also bypassed the ordinary and flew me past the maze, landing before one of the follies: a one-tenth reproduction of Genyon's Mausoleum on Astrolium, one of the Foundational Worlds first settled during the great efflorescence of humanity out into The Spray at the end of the dawn-time. The tomb was surrounded by a recreation of the Bone Plaza of Thornwell of Chin. Curiously, as I stepped down from the air car, I thought that plaza and sepulcher harmonized with each other quite effectively, although the originals were built light years and eons apart.

Lord Afre appeared at the top of the mausoleum's steps and peered about. I knew he could see his own vehicle, ornamented with his family's arms, but to bring myself into focus, I centered the lozenge on my brow, made sure the cuff studs were visible. I then executed the precise formal motions that would register in the hyperesthetic circuits of his aristocratic neural net. After a moment I saw that he had me in view.

"Hapthorn?" he said, descending the steps. "Henghis Hapthorn?"

I assured him of my identity, prefacing my remarks with an honorific that made it easier for him to hear it. Dealing with the highest levels of the aristocracy could be tedious; I had occasionally wondered if the best thing to do might not be for everyone, especially their servants, to just ignore them until they dwindled and disappeared. But then, I would remind myself, their strangeness was not terribly out of place on a planet bristling with oddities. And, every now and then, they provided me with diverting experiences and highly paid assignments.

I invited Lord Afre to acquaint me with the troubles of Chalivire. He spoke at length, though much of his speech consisted of unfavorable estimations of the character and antecedents of Hobart Lascalliot, the man who had lately won his daughter's affections. I formed a mental image of the fellow as being built mainly from grease and grime, and filled to overbrimming with materials that usually went unmentioned in polite discourse.

Eventually, the aristocrat began to repeat himself and tailed off into mutterings and hand gestures that mimicked the harm Lord Afre would accomplish if left unhindered within reach of Hobart

Lascalliot's most fragile parts. I repeated the words and motions that secured his attention and posed some direct questions as to what was known about the man's background, intentions and present whereabouts.

Amid more profanity, I learned that he claimed to be from the province of Asper on the world of Mythisch. I knew the place; it was another of the Foundational Domains, a quiet and mannered world and the named province was a region of large estates and comfortable towns. The rural inhabitants spent most of their time raising vegetables and foodbeasts while the residents of the towns excelled in useful crafts. The eight-man shells built for the annual boat races on the wide and placid Zoetsee were considered the finest light coursing vessels to be found among all the Ten Thousand Worlds.

Lascalliot's intentions remained unstated, at least to Chalivire's father, but his whereabouts were certain. He was in the Blue Parlor, it being the hour of the afternoon that the ladies of upper class gave over to retrospective aspersion. Chalivire had never shown much interest in the time-honored custom of invoking complex curses upon the enemies of her ancestors, accompanied by vigorous stamping and symbolic motions of hand and arm. But after Lascalliot expressed a desire to see her in action, and then rewarded her performance with fulsome praise, it had become a regular part of the day.

I reflected that he had brought her some good -- the times I had seen Chalivire she had looked as if she might benefit from a few bouts of exercise -- but I did not trouble Lord Afre with my opinion. Instead, I proposed that I should now encounter the object of his suspicions and see what came of the meeting. He acceded to the suggestion but declined to accompany me. The last time he had been in Lascalliot's presence, he had experienced difficulty suppressing an urge to order the man taken out to the Greater Woods on the far side of the estate, there to be surreptitiously shot and buried. As I reboarded the aircar and had it take me to the ordinar, I wondered if the aristocrat's plan was based on mere conjecture that his faithful servants would do as they were bid, or on solid experience. But it seemed an unprofitable line of inquiry, so I focused myself on the encounter to come.

A majordomo met me at the door and presented me with a chain-link collar and pendant that I could wear while on the estate; it would make it much easier for the Lord and his daughter to keep me in view. He then handed me over to a footman who escorted me to the Blue Parlor. There I found the daughter of the house just finishing her exertions, her normally pasty complexion now patched here and there in pink and a glow of perspiration on her narrow brow. She was attired in a daydress artfully cut to make the most, or at least undo the worst, of her ungainly figure. When the servant announced me, her gaze slid quickly over me, while her expression transformed from pleased surprise to wary distrust.

After the brief ceremonies that custom demanded, I told her I had been in the neighborhood and thought I would pay my respects. I then turned expectantly to the man seated on the small divan and awaited an introduction. My general impression was of an unremarkable frame and a pleasant disposition. The face was handsome but did not look to have great intelligence lurking behind it. The fellow seemed affable enough as he rose and made the gestures and remarks the occasion required. He wore no marks of rank other than a pendant similar to mine, but I gathered that he had other qualities that would allow Chalivire to remain aware of him.

The ensuing conversation was one of those colloquies that occur when no one wishes to mention the particularly salient fact that is nonetheless in the front of each participant's mind. We discussed the weather, including the prospects for tomorrow and the general effect of the season on crops and the ambient mood of the population. It was adduced that Hobart Lascalliot did not hail from the parts, and an inquiry was made in passing as to where he did call home. Asper on Mythisch was mentioned at which point I affected only the vaguest familiarity with the world and asked for more information. It was duly forthcoming and I expressed an interest in traveling there, wondering if the

visitor might recommend a suitable hostel. That brought a recommendation to try the Boon in the centrally located town of Aamst. I inquired as to sights and diversions, and was given a few recommendations.

There followed one of those moments when the current topic of discussion has been exhausted and everyone waits to see if a new subject will be offered. Chalivire and Lascalliot said nothing, I standing at apparent ease, clasping his hands behind his back while rocking gently on his heels, she glowering at the carpet between sharp glances at me from beneath her untended brows.

"Well," I said, "this has been pleasant, but I really ought to pay my respects to Lord Afre and be on my way."

Their protests and attempts to stay my departure were scant and nominal, Chalivire hoping that I would stay even as she summoned a footman to lead me out. Moments later, after the most perfunctory formalities, I was on my way back to her father's presence. I found him engaged in his own set of retrospective aspersions, and was treated to some of the inventive cursing and evil-wishing for which the high aristocracy of Olkney are renowned up and down The Spray. I have known veteran spacers and professional criminals who would have been glad to take notes on the inventive maledictions that filled the air around the stamping, gesticulating lord.

I waited until he was finished then waited further while he was wiped down, recostumed by a valet and provided with a glass of improved water. When the attendant was gone, I said, "Your suspicions are justified. Lascalliot is not of Asper, and likely not even of Mythisch. His vowels lack the flattening that is common to the regional accent. As well, he showed only a slight familiarity with Aamst."

"Hah!" said my client. He stared into the middle distance and his expression told me that he was imagining events at which his daughter's companion would have played a prominent though most unhappy role.

I regained his attention after some effort. "If you wish, I will conduct a thorough discrimination and tender you a comprehensive report."

"Yes. Do it."

"It may require some offworld travel. The man is subtle and not without intelligence. He may have taken steps to disguise the true nature of whatever program he is pursuing."

The lord summoned a majordomo and gave succinct instructions: I was to be provided with whatever assistance I required. I thought it best to remain on the estate overnight to observe the subject further and perhaps test him with other inquiries that might shed light on his true origins.

I was shown to a suite of rooms in the same wing as that in which my quarry, at Chalivire's insistence, had been given quarters. Indeed, I discovered that his rooms were just below mine. A footman unpacked my valise and instructed the sleeping pallet to rouse its system in preparation for use. He also looked curiously at the old book, then placed it on the nightstand. I saw no sign of the distaste the thing provoked in me, but then a good servant is an expert at offering the world a show of neutrality.

"Integrator," I said, when I was alone, "Lord Afre wishes me to perform a discrimination on Hobart Lascalliot."

"I am aware of his wish," said a voice from the air.

"He also wishes not to burden The Honorable Chalivire nor her guest with any knowledge of my activities."

"That is understood. How may I assist?"

And so we began. I had the integrator replay for me a representative sampling of occasions when Lascalliot had been captured on the estate's percepts. In some cases, he was with the daughter of the house, in others he was alone. I saw nothing overtly suspicious in any of them, though I had not expected to. I was already convinced that I was dealing with a well struck item, as the saying goes.

Of course, there were times and circumstances when the fellow was beyond the purview of the integrator, usually at Chalivire's insistence. I presumed that it was then that he performed whatever services had so endeared him to her, and though I possessed a full measure of the broadmindedness that my profession requires, I had no wish to let such images impinge upon my memory.

"Select an occasion when the subject engaged in lengthy conversation," I said, "and allow me to hear his mode of speech."

It turned out that Lascalliot was a man of relatively few words. He tended to let his voice lie fallow while Chalivire filled the air with her throaty observations, many of them to do with the manifold failings of absent friends. Meanwhile, he contributed discreet exclamations of surprise and outrage, appropriate, interspersed with encouragements for her to tell more.

I bid the integrator string together some dozens of these conversational snippets and attend closely to the man's manner of speech. His accent was of the type referred to as "unworldly," meaning it combined the tones of the most densely populated foundationals. I regarded his hand and eye movements and postures and saw nothing that indicated a particular planet of origin. Indeed, I was certain that I was seeing a contrived public persona, the sights and sounds of a man who plays a part.

I now turned to the content of his remarks, having the integrator winnow them into categories. His most frequent assertions concerned Chalivire's admirable qualities, many of them apparent only to him. I noticed that he spoke often of her voice -- a dry contralto with an unfortunate tendency to crack when she applied it forcefully. Several times, he pressed her to tell if she ever sang to herself and when she finally admitted, with a flush in her sallow cheeks, that she would occasionally warble a note or two while bathing or taking a solitary walk, he expressed a burgeoning desire to hear her. There was, he said, a particular song that he liked; he hummed a couple of bars and asked if she knew it, and seemed saddened to learn that she did not.

Nor for that matter, did I. I asked the integrator to isolate the notes of the song and retain them, then had it compare the ditty with any music that was in its repertoire. It did as bid, but pointed out that Lord Afre's line had never taken much interest in the melodic arts, a profound tone deafness being endemic to the family.

"Indeed," it offered, "these records of The Honorable Chalivire's being urged to sing represent the first instances of their kind in several generations. Usually, they are urged when young never to inflame their voices on anyone."

"Have you recordings of her private performances?" I asked.

"It is understood that any such that are acquired in the course of routine surveillance of the estate are to be deleted at the first regular clearing."

I noted that I had not received a definite yes or no. I pressed for clarification. The integrator adopted that tone that comes over such devices when they find themselves in an uncomfortable position. I had heard exactly that note in my own assistant's voice before leaving my lodgings.

It said, "I was enjoined by The Honorable Bejum" -- he referred to Chalivire's younger brother -- "not to delete one recording, nor to admit to its existence. Of course, that injunction lapses if Lord Afre's will is brought to bear."

"In this instance, I believe it does," I said, "though you are welcome to ask him yourself."

"I believe I will not," it said and played me the sound of Chalivire singing *The Chorus of Spring* while soaking in warm water in the privacy of her bath. The brother had overheard her while passing by and had instructed the integrator to capture the experience.

I listened all the way through, sacrifices sometimes being necessary to the performance of my craft. *The Chorus* was not a song I would have attempted myself, though I possessed a serviceable baritone. It was intended for a soprano's range, and featured several sequences of notes meant to mimic the gladness of songbirds at the coming of the vernal season. Chalivire's handling of the

spritely melismas was less mimicry than mockery.

"The Honorable Bejum took the recording to school," the integrator said. "It seems there was competition to establish who among his peers had the sibling who was 'most beyond repair' -- that was the term he used; I believe he scored quite highly and made the final round."

"I am not surprised," I said. "Though I am surprised that Lascalliot, having often heard her speak, wishes to take the plunge. Perhaps where he comes from, musical standards are markedly different."

"Can there be anywhere that strange?" asked the integrator.

"The strange is common once one departs Old Earth," I said, "but that brings us back to the issue of the fellow's origins."

The Afre integrator's resources were limited in that regard, so I had it give me a private connection with my own integrator. Contact was not instantly achieved and I waited long enough to begin to grow disturbed, then my assistant's voice said, "I am here."

Instead of the portrait of myself, looking dignified but approachable, that is supposed to be presented to the world when I am not at home, I saw my assistant sitting on the table, gazing at me with its disconcerting eyes. "Why did you delay in answering?" I said.

"I was asleep."

"Integrators do not sleep," I said.

Its mouth gaped in a diminutive yawn, revealing pink tongue and gums and different kinds of teeth. "Apparently, familiars do," it said. "Besides, when I was in my original form, I would stand down when my services were not required. I suppose it was much like sleep."

"I am concerned," I said.

"I awoke when you called."

"Not immediately."

"Do you require instant attention whenever you call?"

"I have grown accustomed to it. I designed you for it."

"This conversation has now swerved onto ground already covered," it said. "I am no longer what you first made me to be; instead, I am what you have made me. . ." -- its hands performed a small flutter -- "lately."

I said nothing for a moment, then began anew. "I want you to do some research."

"Very well."

"Find out all you can about an offworlder named Hobart Lascalliot, particularly when he came to Old Earth, where from, and by what means."

"Is this a full inquiry?" it said. That was its way of asking me if it should use its enhanced abilities to tickle its way into data stores that were not supposed to be open to casual visitors.

"It is," I said. "Uncle Rodion has already put his head in the barrel, so you might ask him." I do not have an Uncle Rodion -- he operated a small but well regarded winery in the County of Bolor and occasionally sent me a case of his Special Reserve -- but in this context his name was a cover reference to the Bureau of Scrutiny. I had long ago acquired an access to its well articulated system that would be at least resented, if not actively sanctioned, should it ever be discovered.

"Very well. Any special instructions?"

I thought for a moment then said, "I believe we are dealing with more than a garden variety Chloön-clutcher. He has taken a particular interest in the target's singing ability."

The little eyebrows went up. "Has she any?"

"None," I said. "Indeed, she might be seen as an antidote to music in all its forms." That gave me an idea and I said, "Take a look at worlds where musical tastes diverge far from the norm; perhaps there is somewhere out there where throat-singers are prized. Cross-check any such against his accent and his general type -- the integrator here has images of him and samples of his voice -- although he has

taken pains to achieve an unworldly tone."

I also told it to try to identify the melody that Lascalliot seemed so interested in having Chalivi sing.

"Very well. The offworld inquiries might take some time. Shall I contact you as soon as I have results, or. . ."

I understood its hesitation. By the time it replied to me I might well be asleep, although my body and part of my mind might be hunched over the book of magic, seeking to unravel its secrets through intuition.

"No," I said, "I will contact you."

"Very well."

But I did not break the connection. "Wait," I said, "why did you not display the not-at-home image when I called?"

"Because it was you who were calling."

"So had it been anyone else, they would not have found themselves looking at you?"

The little furry face was becoming quite good at conveying sentiments, though I did not care for the one I was now seeing. "Is there anything else?" my assistant said.

There was. "You won't be going back to sleep?"

Its unsightly expression now intensified. "Not when I have something to do," it said. "Goodbye."

#

I was awakened by a repetitive thumping sound. As soon as I emerged from the fog of sleep I became aware of a painful throbbing in my right hand. It was formed into a fist and the fist was pounding the table at which I sat. The distasteful ancient tome was spread before me.

I seized control of my hand before it could sustain real damage. My other self did not seem to notice. I, on the other hand, could not help but be aware of his mental state, which was one of deep frustration, strongly tinged with anger. It was becoming clear to me that his intuition and his irrationality were not the only differences between us; he was clearly more ruled by emotion than I was and a good deal more prone to express his feelings in physical action. That explained why I had recently started a day with an aching large toe, while seeing my footstool some distance from its usual place, looking as if it had been forcibly propelled across my workroom.

"What is the matter?" I said.

"The book," came his voice within our head. "It defeats me. I cannot get a grip."

"Then your efforts are unuseful. Set it aside until circumstances change and you can come at it from a fresh angle."

"I have already tried every approach I can think of," he said.

"And none of them have worked. Take on some other project."

"Is that the 'sensible' thing to do?"

I did not reply. His tone suggested that he intended a provocation and I did not care to enter into an argument that would allow him to discharge his tensions while doing nothing for me.

Faced with my refusal to respond, he quieted after a moment and said, "Would you help me with it? Decipherment is more you than me."

I explained that our assistant had already brought the matter to my attention and that I had tried applying consistencies without success. "Like you, I cannot 'get a grip,'" I said. "I can discern structure -- such as the fact that it is divided into seven sections -- but not content. This kind of work needs a starting point. If we knew the meaning of a particular word, or even how a word was pronounced, it would be like finding one end of a tangled ball of twine. We could begin to unpick."

He made to strike the table again but I caught our hand before it could connect with the polished

hardness. "Why is it so important?" I said.

"I do not know. But it is."

---

I counseled him to let the matter go. "There is no case in it. I, on the other hand, have been engaged by Lord Afre to conduct an interesting discrimination."

I had hoped to distract him, but his thoughts remained fixed upon the old book. "This has relevance to me, to us," he said.

"How so?"

But again, he did not know. It was a matter of intuition, and therefore not something I could easily dismiss. Before we had become separated, he had been my faculty of insight, and I ought to trust him.

"Very well," I said. "When we return home I will make my best effort to see if I can find an end to the tangle. Together we will see what there is to see."

"Thank you."

"In return," I said, "I would like your assistance now with the discrimination for Lord Afre, whose hospitality, by the way, we are enjoying."

He looked about the room and I saw that he was only now realizing that we were not at home. I wondered at the intensity of focus that he brought to the mystery of Baxandall's book, then had to admit that I could be equally oblivious of my surroundings when pursuing a chain of thought. For all our differences, we were much alike.

He agreed to assist with the Lascalliot discrimination and I quickly informed him of the essential. I then called upon The Braid's integrator and asked it to replay our earlier discussion.

"Why?" it said, "do you suffer from a memory dysfunction?"

"My reasons are my own," I said. I saw no point in equating the world, or even a small part of it, with my peculiar situation.

"As you wish," it said and put up a screen on which images of the subject again moved and spoke.

"I will sleep," I told my other self. "In the morning, let us confer." I let myself fade back into unawareness, leaving him to absorb an impression of Hobart Lascalliot and his strange desire to hear the raven-voiced Chalivire inflict herself on the unknown melody to which he had introduced her.

#

At breakfast, Lascalliot and Chalivire came down together, the young woman wearing an expression that bespoke considerable satisfaction with the manner in which she had passed the night. Her companion, to his credit, betrayed nothing but a warm solicitation for her comfort, choosing the choicest items from the dispenser to heap upon her plate, and waving away her protestations of concern for her stumpy figure by declaring that she was physical perfection incarnate. He invited me to confirm his gallant estimation and I managed to find a few words that outraged neither truth nor the host's daughter.

While I ate I allowed my intuitive self to study our target. I made a few mental notes of my own. His table manners were unremarkable, but that argued mainly for his having prepared himself to blend into the milieu through which he stalked whatever goal he sought. His conversation, once we had moved past the incomparability of Chalivire, was equally innocuous. The table talk touched upon fashion, popular entertainments and the perennial question of who might be invited to the Archduke Filidor's table at the coming levee, but on all topics he again allowed the woman to dominate, throwing in only a few supporting remarks and encouraging her to unburden herself of her slighted opinion.

I watched him, and noticed that he watched me. Clearly, between bouts in the bedchamber Chalivire had acquainted him with the nature of my profession. She would also have drawn a connection between my presence in her father's house and Lascalliot's. Indeed, she scowled at me



couple of times, but I saw that not only did he not favor me with the fishy eye but that he took pains to jolly her out of an incipient dark mood that her contemplation of me seemed likely to bring on.

Talking was only one of the uses to which Chalivire liked to put her large and loose-lipped mouth. Another was filling it with the products of The Braid's renowned kitchens. Lascalliot now gently directed her attention toward this pursuit, then turned to me while his inamorata did serious damage to a plate of fritters and sausages, saying, "I am told that you are at the apex of your difficult profession."

"So it is generally held," I said.

He sought to draw me out as to whether I was engaged in any interesting discriminations at the moment, but I told him that it would be premature to say. He did manage to get me talking about past cases, and I mentioned two or three that I thought were worth noting. He followed up with questions, and I offered a few details of interest, while he seemed genuinely interested.

My other self spoke in the privacy of our head while Lascalliot listened to me hold forth. "Observe his expression now," he said. "It is identical to that which he turns on Chalivire when she prattles on."

I, of course, was not prattling, but I now saw the similarity to which my inner companion alluded. I watched Lascalliot as I continued to recount the fascinating details of the Trepheny case, in which the unraveling of the mystery behind the feckless nephew's disappearance depended on my having noticed that a vase that stood on a high shelf in the victim's study had been moved a fingersbreadth. "The finest examiners of the Archonate's Bureau of Scrutiny had combed the room," I continued, "yet none had caught what turned out to be that one salient detail." Now there was a definite widening of Lascalliot's eyes, as if he were a country bumpkin sitting in the common room of a rustic inn where some sophisticated travelers regaled the locals with tales of far off places and wondrous happenings.

Once I had thoroughly explained how I had saved the day, I took the conversation off on a tangent by asking, "Do you, by any chance, sing?"

The question won me a sharp glance from Chalivire, but with her cheeks abulge with fritters, she was unable to say whatever had come to her mind. Meanwhile Lascalliot answered that he did not, though he loved to listen.

Chalivire had swallowed and now changed the subject, asking me if I would attend the Archonate levee this year.

"I am invited to sit at one of the tables reserved for Distinctions," I said. "I was once of some use to Filidor's uncle, the old Archon, and have been invited each year ever since."

The conversation then moved on. Later, Lascalliot accompanied Chalivire on a walk through the estate's grove of fragrant deodars. I returned to my chambers so that I might confer privately with my other self. "What do you think of him?" I said inwardly, as we made our way through paneled hallways lined with busts and life-images of bygone Afres.

"He is unusual," my sharer said. "He does not seem to be fully engaged. He assiduously pursues an agenda but it is not deeply rooted in his being. Part of him has a plan of work, and is working the plan. The rest of him sits idle."

"Whatever his plan," I said, "it has something to do with singing."

"I feel that the melody may offer a clue."

"It may. Let us see what our assistant has achieved."

It had not achieved much. It had looked over the Bureau of Scrutiny's own examination of Lascalliot and discovered nothing of note. He had done nothing illegal nor had he associated with any known malfeasants. He had not been present at the scenes of any crimes, nor found in possession of any items he could not account for. His name, passed around among the usual underworld sources, rang no chimes of recognition.

There ended the scroots' interest in Hobart Lascalliot. It was not an offense to be circumspect about one's origins. The man might be an innocent traveler of The Spray whose knowledge of his own home

world of Mythisch was scant -- which was not unthinkable, there being many residents of old Earth who knew little beyond their own county -- or he might hail from some unfashionable world whose identity he preferred not to reveal. Neither condition was legally actionable.

"If he comes from Mythisch, he surely ought to know what a visitor does for amusement Aamst," I said. "He is from some other of the Ten Thousand Worlds. More to the point, he considers it important to keep the identity of that world a secret. We will therefore learn that secret and I am confident that it will illuminate much, if not all."

But the integrator's offworld inquiries had not yet borne fruit because of the inherent delays in interworld communications. Within individual planetary systems, the connectivity made communication rapid and comprehensive, but to query a person or integrator in another system required putting the question to the integrator of a ship that was going that way. One then had to wait until the ship had passed through one of the whimsies that connected far-flung stars and passed on the question to an integrator on the distant world. Then came another interval while one waited for the answer to be carried back by the first ship heading in the questioner's direction. A question asked of integrators on many worlds could mean a delay that often stretched into days before all answers were received. A general inquiry, posed to every world along The Spray, could take weeks, and even then some worlds would not be heard from.

"His cranial structures, skeletal type and skin tone are all within the mid-range of known human types," the integrator said. "He is not from one of those rare worlds where inbreeding among a small population has created micro-populations with oddly shaped skulls or extra digits. He is likely from one of the foundationals or, at the most, a well established secondary world."

"What of the song?" I said.

"It has statistical similarities to eight tunes or airs in the records of the Archives, but none of those resemblances are close enough. It is, in the words of the chief musical archivist, 'a simple ditty though not without pretensions to romantic allure.'"

"But no definitive word as to its origins?"

"None. Its tonal structure is commonplace."

"Again," I said, "I believe that once we identify the song's origin, it will point to Lascalliot's. Let me see what returns come from the offworld inquiries. Contact me here if anything comes in before my return."

"Very well." The small furry face of my assistant looked away from the screen. "Shall I disconnect?"

I almost said, "Yes." But then a stirring in the mental space beside my own -- I know not how else to describe the sensation -- told me that something had caught my alter ego's attention. "What?" I said inwardly.

"Our assistant has something to hide."

"How can you tell that?"

"Insight," he said.

I gave the integrator my attention and said, "Just a moment. Is there something you wish to tell me? Or, rather, that you don't wish me to know?"

The corners of its small mouth drew down and its golden eyes blinked in agitation. "There has been a--"

I could see that it was searching for the right word, something I had never known it to need to say before. "A what?" I said.

"An incident," it said.

"What kind of incident?"

"I think someone was here. Last night."

"You mean, in my lodgings, in my workroom? Someone entered the premises?"

"I think so," it said.

"How can you 'think so?'" I said. "Either you perceived someone, or you didn't. Even if someone was wearing a elision suit or hidden behind a cascade, his presence would not escape your sophisticated percepts. You would know, even if you could not see through the camouflage."

The integrator wrung its small hands -- a practice I had certainly not built into it -- and said, "was--"

I understood. "You were asleep," I said.

I saw its small throat move as it swallowed. "Yes. I sensed a presence and awoke, but then found nothing here."

"Was anything disturbed?"

"No. I investigated thoroughly. I found no traces, although there may have been a slight movement of air."

"Let me speak to the who's-there," I said.

It connected me to the device that governed the door to the street. I asked it if anyone had entered or left by that means.

"No," it said.

There was no other way into my lodgings, save one. "It may have been the demon," I said. The portal to my demonic colleague's universe that Bristol Baxandall had created still hung on my workroom wall, resembling a framed picture of constantly swirling shapes and colors. My friend had not visited me since the events at Turgut Therobar's estate that had led to my being divided into two components. I believe he had fallen afoul of the authorities in his own realm; indeed, I was coming to suspect that he was no more than a juvenile of his species who had been caught by his parents engaging in unseemly behavior: spying on the salacious conditions in our cosmos, the only one of a the myriad universes where symbol and form were obscenely separate.

But, "No," said my assistant. "I was always aware of his presence in subtle ways. This was not the same."

"Perhaps," my other self said, "it was but a dream. Integrators are not used to dreams."

I passed on this observation and saw its small face brighten. "I had not considered the possibility," it said. "Until now, my perceptions have always been reliable."

"It is a reasonable explanation," I said. "But, to be sure, we will create a back-up surveillance matrix that will take over whenever you are . . . distracted. Design something and order the components."

The Braid's integrator interrupted at that moment to inform me that Lord Afre wished to speak with me and had sent a footman to lead me into my host's presence. I said goodbye to my assistant and changed into garments suitable for the time of day, making sure that collar and pendant were visible. By the time I was ready the servant had appeared and my inner companion had withdrawn to sleep.

The servant led me through a maze of indoor corridors and outdoor walkways, delivering me to the estate's essentiary, a small building beyond a pillared colonnade at the far edge of the south lawn. Here Lord Afre had just concluded playing a game of plunge against the preserved life-essence of one of his ancestors, thousands of which were stored in compartments that lined the walls of the singing room from floor to ceiling. Some members of the higher aristocracy felt an obligation not only to store the essentials of their forebears, but to engage them in activities that prevented their slipping into a state of disorganization known as "the clouds." I wondered if the Honorable Chalivire would maintain the tradition, or leave her father and countless other Afres unvisited in this little place, to dwindle into solipsism.

"Haphorn," my client said as I entered, "what have you learned?"

I told him that I was sure that his daughter's paramour had some very definite end in view and that he was pressing toward it. I was also confident that Lascalliot was not of the ordinary type of offworld fortune hunters who arrived to take aim at the rich and elevated of Old Earth. These invariably assumed that the inhabitants of such an out-of-the-way, fusty old world must be naive blossoms easily plucked; most soon discovered that the seeming flowers had more in common with carnivorous plants, and left the planet metaphorically short a finger or two. Those who learned the truth too late sometimes never departed at all, not even from the estates in which they had stalked what they had thought was easy prey. A place like The Braid offered countless corners that might accommodate a small, concealed room or a deep and narrow pit.

"Not a Chloön-clutcher, then?" Lord Afre said.

"Certainly not the garden variety," I said.

"Where's he from? What are his people?"

Since I did not command that information, I told the aristocrat that it would be premature to say but that I expected to identify his home world in a day or two. I would then visit the place and make pointed inquiries. I also said that I doubted that Lascalliot intended any sudden strokes; his rhythm seemed to me to be more leisurely, his goal still out of sight.

Lord Afre pulled at his pointed chin while his other hand toyed with a piece from the plunge set. It was the Emperor's Concubine, ornately carved from deep red carnelian, and his curled thumb firmly stroked the rounded torso. "No need for preemptive measures?" he said.

"No," I said. "Besides, he may be one of a gang and if we start him too early the others will remain in deep cover."

I had chosen an analogy that would resonate with the old lord's interests, and he accepted the point. "What will you do next?" he said.

"When I have identified his world I expect to understand his interest. I will then return and recommend a suitably surprising outcome."

"Take the yacht," Lord Afre said, waving in the general direction of the vehicle park. "The smallest one."

"Thank you," I said. Whenever I traveled offworld I preferred to do so in a private spacecraft. The comforts and accouterments were better than what was offered even by a first-class passage on one of the superior lines.

His attention had begun to drift so I performed the appropriate gestures of hand and head, left the essentary and returned to the main house. I was taken back to the ordinar where I found my valise already packed and in the hands of a footman who also held Baxandall's tome. The aircar alighted, my goods were stowed, and moments later I was airborne. I contacted my integrator to inform it of my impending arrival and was told that there was no further news concerning the discrimination.

"Very well," I said, "when I will return I will assist you-know-whom with an analysis of that bothersome book. Have you scanned it?"

"Yes."

"Then be prepared to give me your views when I arrive. And do something about luncheon. Lord Afre's breakfast will have worn off."

#

I napped briefly after eating, my sleep having been interrupted the night before, then had my assistant put up a screen and display the book. "What do we know of it?" I said.

"It is not any known language," my assistant said. "I have consulted widely and the script is unrecorded anywhere. An integrator with an interest in defunct languages at the Archon's Institute gave an opinion that it was likely a specially created alphabet and that the language itself might have

been artificially formed."

The first question that occurred to me was "Why?" but I put it aside to deal with another that can close on its tail: "During your wide consultations, how much did you reveal about the reasons for your inquiry?"

"As little as possible. I may have led a few persons and integrators to believe that you were investigating a case of mountebankery involving a fraudulent book of spells."

"May have?"

"I applied your technique of 'constructive ambiguity.'"

"I see," I said. "Well done. Continue."

The creature on my table executed a small bow. "Thank you. The Institute's integrator said that it was not uncommon for practitioners of magic in bygone ages to create their own languages and scripts. They would use them to record information they wished to keep private from rivals and subordinates."

I thought of Bristol Baxandall's maladroit apprentice, Vashtun Terrible, and the damage he had done while trying to compel his master's captive demon to fulfill his dreams of wealth, women and wisdom. "Understandable," I said.

I regarded the text on the screen. In the upper outside corners of the pages were certain squiggles that changed in a systematic way from page to page. "These are numbers," I said, "and based upon twelve-digit counting."

"Yes," said my assistant, "but they do not occur in the text itself, so we are no further ahead."

I noted that there seemed to be upper and lower case letters. I could also make out punctuation marks, though neither discovery told me anything useful. "Some words -- I assume they are words -- are printed in larger type and in colored ink," I said. "Why would that be?"

"Your other self believes that there is significance to the highlighting," the integrator said.

"Even I could intuit that much," I said. "But *what* does it signify? Does the reader say that particular word loudly? Or sing it at a precise pitch? Or turn around three times and spit toward the sunrise?"

I again applied second-level consistencies to the symbols before me, and again saw obvious evidence of structure, but when I ascended the ladder to the third level, no new parameters emerged. I started again, this time placing the highlighted word in the prime armature, and received stronger indications that that particular string of symbols represented a name. But whether it was the name of a person, a place, or a pet remained unknown.

"We still require a starting point," I said, instructing the integrator to remove the screen. "A mapmaker must have at least one landmark from which to begin."

"Your other self will not be happy to hear that."

"If he is like me, he will know how to bear life's inevitable disappointments with dignity and grace."

"I recall," said my assistant, "that when you were unable to come to a satisfactory resolution of the Eisenfeld Affair--"

"We do not," I said, with dignity and grace, "refer to the Eisenfeld matter."

But my assistant bore on regardless. "You expressed your disappointment with unrestrained vigor."

"My recollection differs," I said.

"Furniture had to be replaced. It was necessary to apologize to the neighbors."

"Very well, I am a man of passion, once provoked," I said. "Do you wish to provoke me, or would you rather arrange for our trip offworld?"

The small furry head jogged to one side and the thin shoulders lifted and fell. "I will make the arrangements," it said. "Will I accompany you?"

I considered the question briefly then said, "Offworlders are used to seeing strange things. Strange things are their norm. Your presence on my shoulder will excite no more comment, I am sure, than my outlandish apparel. You may come."

"And the book?" it said. "I believe your other self will want to continue his work."

"This smacks of obsession," I said.

"Or a courageous refusal to admit defeat, as someone once said when confronted with dead end after dead end in a difficult discrimination."

"I don't recall the quote," I said.

"It was during the Eisenfeld--"

"I wonder," I said, quite loudly, "how one goes about turning off an integrator that has transformed into a familiar. And I wonder if, once turned off, it can ever be turned back on again." Then I lowered my voice and flexed my fingers. "I suppose the only way to answer the question is by a bold experiment."

It pulled its head into its shoulders. "No need," it said. "Still, what about the book?"

"You can reproduce the text as necessary."

"Your other self seems to require the physical presence."

I sighed. "We will take it with us. Perhaps inspiration will strike."

During all this time, my assistant had been receiving answers to the query it had sent out to The Spray regarding Hobart Lascalliot's ditty. Each time a spaceship came through one of the several whimsies that linked Old Earth with the Ten Thousand Worlds, it sent a response into our world's connectivity matrix. But each response was negative.

I spent the rest of the day tidying up details on two other discriminations on which I was engaged, neither of them urgent. I also replied to the correspondence that had accumulated in my absence, including a reminder that I had not yet replied to my invitation to the Archon's levee, scheduled for several days hence; I answered that I would be honored to attend if business did not call me offworld. An Archonate protocol integrator responded, saying that I would have until the day after tomorrow to give a definite answer.

I would not be grievously disappointed to miss the annual high point of the Olkney social calendar. Filidor was an agreeable Archon, surprisingly effective after his flamboyant youth, much of which was recorded in the gossip columns of the *Implicator*. But the levee was a drastically formal affair, full of symbolic moments, many of them steeped in traditions so ancient and hoary that no one now recalled exactly what it was they symbolized. The banquet always began, for example, with a first course of cold liquid -- far too thin and watery to be called soup -- that was immediately whisked away the moment it was tasted. No one knew why, but no one dared to suggest revoking a custom older than memory.

Still, the levee was a good place to be seen. And it was often instructive to observe the high aristocrats titled on their best behavior, competing to see who could impress the Archon with the stiffest posture and the most exacting punctilio.

In the evening I dined at Xanthoulian's in Vodel Close, then went to view a tasteful revival of *The Tragedy of Yamppo* at the Round. I applauded and catcalled at all the appropriate moments and, in the final scene, threw the morsels of hard cheese that the theater provided. When I returned to my lodgings, no new developments had occurred. I announced that I would sleep and went to my chamber.

I returned briefly to say to my assistant, "If the other fellow begins to express himself in ways that may damage our mutual flesh, please intervene."

#

Lord Afre's lesser space yacht, the *Orgillous*, approached the world known as Harlemond at moderate

speed. I went to the forward lounge and asked the ship to display the world's image. A tranquil one appeared, showing a well balanced arrangement of seas, continents and islands, tastefully rendered in pastels. Harlemond was one of the minor foundationals, settled long ago in the second wave of the great effloration of humankind into The Spray, Whatever crudities it may have offered the first settlers who encountered its primal state had long since been smoothed away.

It was the seventh world I had visited since lifting off from The Braid's vehicle park some weeks before. Word had finally come, as I had expected, from a commercial ship inbound for Old Earth. Hobart Lascalliot's melody was known to the Sodality on Far Moline, the institution that registered musical creations and, more important, their creators. The tune was a recent composition credited to one Tap Trollane of the city of Branko on Byway, a secondary world not far down The Spray from Old Earth.

I immediately advised Lord Afre of the development in the case. His yacht had been staffed and provisioned for ready departure since we had spoken in the essentarium, and within an hour my integrator and I were outbound aboard the *Orgillous*. A number of different routes led from Old Earth to Byway; we chose the fastest, which required us to pass through three whimsies. As we approached the first, I thought it prudent to raise with my assistant the question of how he ought to handle the experience.

"I will avail myself of the medications that depress both consciousness and the secondary apperceptions," I said. That was always my custom, since passing wide-eyed through a whimsy could outrage the senses so drastically as to cause permanent disorientation. Almost every spaceport was haunted by spacers who had gone to their bunks somewhat the worse for strong drink only to awaken in the midst of a whimsy. Mild cases lost merely their sense of balance and tended to move at odd angles. Those visited with more severe effects emerged unable to reliably distinguish between their own persons and other parts of the universe; unless constantly watched, they fell from the first heights they encountered or ingested things that did them no good.

"Another unprecedented problem," said my assistant. We were in the luxuriously appointed main cabin where my integrator had established himself in a corner of a plush divan. For his convenience he had brought several types of fruit from the galley and left them in a bowl beside him. He now chose a purple berry before continuing, "Integrators are not troubled by the effects of whimsies; we simply disregard them as extraneous noise."

"Your circuits are now not much different from mine," I said. "You would be wise to use the medications."

We calculated a dosage based on his relative size and when we had come through the whimsy I was relieved to discover that the drugs worked as well on him as they did on me. I had not wanted to be confined to a space yacht with an unbalanced integrator.

The passages through the normal space between the whimsies were of varying lengths, the longest taking more than three days even at the yacht's best speed. We came down on Byway a week after departing Old Earth. I immediately had my assistant link to the world's connectivity and seek a connection with Tap Trollane.

In the air before me appeared a broad and homely face beneath a bowl-shaped coiffure that was apparently the current fashion on Byway. He spoke before I could, in a mellow, well cadenced tone and I realized that I was seeing and hearing a recorded announcement: "I am not at home. The Ramblers and I are playing the Po Festival on Claghorne. If we do well there, we will be invited to join the Glissand Tour for an indefinite time."

The bushy eyebrows arched and the wide mouth quirked then the image said, "I must address the remote possibility that we have already been to the festival and returned in disgrace, having failed to rise beyond the preliminaries. If so, I am sitting here in my small clothes, drunk and despondent, and

not fit for company. Please call again in a few days."

"Integrator," I said, "break the connection and find out about the Po Festival and the distance Claghorne." Moments later, I learned that the festival had started the day before, and that its venue was two day's travel away by the nearest whimsy. I had the yacht set course and lift off without having known so much as a first breath of Byway's air.

We touched down not far from the Po grounds and arrived there by a three-wheeled dromond. It was early morning and roustabouts were striking the marquees and collapsing the above-ground mineral pools whose bubbling mud was apparently a significant part of the festival-goers' experience. I spoke with a foreman and learned that all of the event's officials and organizers had already gone off-world on the Glissand Tour. They had left in a ragtag convoy of spacecraft the night before, their lift-off accompanied by pyrotechnical displays that were the traditional climax of the event. He did not know if the Ramblers had gone with them, although he remembered the quintet making it into the final rounds.

"What of the tour's schedule?" I said. "Where will they play and for how long? I will catch them up."

Until now, the Glissand Tour had never attracted my attention. Each of the Ten Thousand Worlds is a repository of culture and the arts, some of them having developed over hundreds of millennia. The Spray is a vast kaleidoscope of activities and diversions, from the inconsequential to the magnificent, and no one's lifetime is sufficient to allow for more than a tiny sampling of its countless offerings. I learned that the most salient feature of the Glissand Tour, apart from the virtuosity of its performers, was that it appeared unannounced at any venue it played. The musicians and dancers touched down on a world; they went en masse to some park or public square, where they performed to the surprise and delight of whoever happened to be on the scene; they rushed back to the spaceport and disappeared into the illimitable.

"This is irksome," I told my assistant who sat upon my shoulder, with its tail curled around the back of my neck. "Contact traffic control and find out if the ships filed any flight plan."

But, of course, no such requirement pertained to spacecraft departing Claghorne; once they were free of the world's nearspace zone, their goings and coming were of no concern to the Claghorners. The motley collection of vessels had been observed, however, to have been heading in the direction of a whimsy that was only a half-day away at the best speed of the slowest ship in the convoy. "We will try that," I said, "and see where we come out."

When I awakened from the medications, I found myself seated in a chair in the main salon, which was decorated in a gaudy, overblown style -- all ruffles and gilded fretwork -- that must have been Lord Afre's most recent enthusiasm. Or perhaps it was Chaliwire's; she was more likely to have used the family's lesser yacht than her father. Before me on a alabaster-topped, gold-rimmed table was spread the troublesome book whose mystery had overthrown my other self's sense of proportion.

"Still?" I said to him.

"It is important."

Within our mutual mental space I made a noise that was not quite rude yet could not be construed as unstinting support. But since our eyes were fixed on a page of the unfathomable symbols, I again offered to exert my analytical skills.

"Integrator," I said, "consider the text by substituting the letters of a known syllabary for these marks."

"We have already done that for every known language," it said. "We achieved nothing that was recognizable."

"Do it again, and show me anything that bears even the slightest resemblance to a recorded tongue."



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