

Hesperia

A Tale Of Henghis Hapthorn



Matthew Hughes

Hespira

*A tale of Henghis Hapthorn
by Matthew Hughes*

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*To James Davis Nicholl,
We get by with a little help.*

I was wrapping up the final steps in a case that hardly deserved to be called a discrimination—it involved a simple transaction that could have been handled just as well by a confidential courier. But the client, Irslan Chonder, occupied a place of such high standing among the second-tier social elite of Olkney that I had overcome my initial inclination to decline the assignment. I was also persuaded, I will admit, by the fact that, when he sensed my reluctance, he immediately doubled the already considerable fee he had first offered. A discriminator must make a living, after all.

Chonder's need for my services arose from his passion for collecting "soul boxes." These were relics of a Nineteenth-Aeon spiritual movement that had flourished in the Ar River country before the collapse of the Hurrans' hegemony. Adherents of the Retrospectance cult believed, not unreasonably, that the meaning of a life could only be understood in hindsight. But, as was all too common among those who opted to throw their lives under some passing philosophical system, a simple, logical analysis of the kinks and currents that marked out the course of one's passage from cradle to cry would not satisfy.

Retrospectants took a more complex view, believing that life offered each of us a series of "intimations." These took the form of seemingly random objects, perhaps a peculiar pebble or someone's lost button, a fallen sparrow or an interesting twig, that came by chance to the believer's notice. The items were scooped up and placed in a dedicated container known as a repository that occupied a place of reverence in the Retrospectant's residence. The wealthier the believer, the more sublime the container—when the cult was at its acme in the Ar River country, the high and mighty of the region competed with each other to commission renowned artists from up and down The Spray to create the shape and ornament what were colloquially called their soul boxes. Even the simpler repositories of the poor and humble, worked on over the lifetime of a member of the congregation, could become striking examples of naive artistry.

The end of life rarely took a Retrospectant unawares. A date was set, refreshments ordered, and all of the candidate's friends and family were invited. The repository was brought out to be admired, then its contents were arranged in a particular pattern that the soon-to-be deceased had deduced from contemplating the points in his life at which they had been found, and the events that had followed each finding.

The devotee would then explain the hidden meaning and structure of his existence, as revealed by the seemingly random milestones collected in his soul box. His fellow Retrospectants would utter appropriate gasps and "well-I-nevers" as the subtle architecture of existence was revealed. After the ultimate revelation, the adherent would then be quickly killed and cremated. His intimations were returned to their repository, to which were also added his still-warm ashes. Amid cheers and songs of enthusiasm, the whole congregation would form a procession and carry the container off to its final resting place: a continually expanding catacomb hollowed out in the hills that overlooked the Ar River.

Of course, the finality of any resting place was always subject to amendment by subsequent generations. The Retrospectant catacombs were rediscovered a decade or so ago by some boys looking for a quiet corner where they could escape parental supervision, and a vogue began for collecting and displaying soul boxes. Aficionados studied the relics and wrote appreciations of them. The finest specimens commanded high prices, and some truly spectacular collections were assembled. Irslan Chonder's was one of the best.

Thus when some of his most prized pieces were lifted, despite his house's grievous and expensive security apparatus, one would have thought that he would have gone straightaway to the

Archonate Bureau of Scrutiny, to lay a complaint and await the outcome of the law's impartial machinations. Unhappily for Chonder, however, bringing in the scroots was not an option; the theft of his best pieces did not constitute the first time the items had been purloined. Put bluntly, he had acquired them that way in the first place. Indeed, it was quite possible that the thief who had originally stolen them for Chonder was responsible for this subsequent laying of the lift, as the expression went. In one sense, however, my client was in luck: the thief had not restolen the goods in order to pass them on to a new—or even the previous—owner; he was quite willing to return them to Chonder for a “recovery fee.”

Chonder had weighed his desire to recoup the soul boxes against the cost of the ransom, which was bearable to one of his wealth, and against the humiliation of being played for a nobby, which was a dryer swallow for a man who so cherished his own dignity. In the end, desire overcame chagrin, and he agreed to pay the thief's demand. But rather than place the matter in the hands of a courier firm—there were several in Olkney that were well experienced in such transactions—he brought it to me.

“Why me?” I asked, when he stood in my workroom and explained his need. “Surespeed can handle it for you. Or All Burdens Borne.”

“Because I want to know who has done this to me,” he said, his leonine head jutting from his shoulders and the muscles of his heavy jaw bunching at the hinges. He turned steel-gray eyes my way and said, “I do not take kindly to being flipped and fleeced. I am not some rustic rube gawping at his first sight of Endless Square while his pockets are picked.”

I let my surprise show. “You do not know who sold you the pieces in the first place?”

“It was all done through intermediaries—I believe they're called shims and cut-outs in the underworld.”

“And now you know why it is done that way,” I said. “My professional advice is to get your goods back and revisit your defensive arrangements. I can consult with you on that score.”

“I will have retribution,” he said, and in the silence that followed I could actually hear his teeth grinding. Then he looked at me sideways. “Are you telling me that you can't penetrate some thief's camouflage?”

I let the implied insult pass. “I am telling you,” I said, “that launching a vendetta against a ranking member of Olkney's criminal substrata is always ill advised.”

His eyes widened in surprise. “I never thought that Henghis Hapthorn would fear retaliation from riffraff.”

“It is not I who would become the target of vengeance. My neutrality is accepted.”

Irslan Chonder harrumphed. Usually when one described a harrumph, a certain degree of literary license came into play, the word representing only an approximation of the sound actually produced. But, in Chonder's case, and on this occasion, the literary and the literal met on common ground. The man harrumphed and offered to double the fee.

“As you like,” I said. I told him to leave the matter with me. When he had stamped down the stairs and disappeared into the afternoon throngs on Shiplien Way, I said to my integrator, “We will require a list of senior-ranked thieves specializing in collectible artworks and rarities.”

“Bzwan Topp, Luff Imbry, and Li Untariam are the three most likely prospects,” it said.

“Agreed. Also Massim Shar. He's been rising through the ranks. See what you can find out about their recent activities.”

The search took moments. “Topp has taken his spouse on a vacation cruise. They are visiting several of the Foundational Worlds down The Spray.”

“Not him, then.”

“Untariam is said to be heavily involved in forging antique picture hats and hasn’t left his workshop all week.”

“And the other two?”

“No one is quite sure what Imbry is up to. There are odd rumors of his being seen in black and green.” Those were the colors of a Bureau of Scrutiny uniform.

The scroots were known sometimes to impress particularly able criminals into their own ranks, the alternative being a lengthy period of residence in an Archonate contemplarium. But first they would have to corner Imbry. “Hard to credit,” I said. “What of Shar?”

“He wore a new pair of boots in the public room at Bolly’s Snug last night. Trimmed with rare leathers and fine linings. And he made sure that everyone noticed because he spent most of the evening with them up on the table.”

“Hmm,” I said. The Snug was frequented by the most notorious figures in Olkney’s criminal underworld, and the setting of heels on the table was a bid for recognition of rank. “And no one knocked his boots back onto the floorboards?”

“No one.”

It meant that Massim Shar was vying to see his status rise, and his ploy was winning acceptance from his peers. That could only mean that he had pulled off some felonious coup with daring and panache. “He looks good for it, then,” I said, and turned my thoughts to measures and tactics. After a moment, I continued: “I think a bee swarm, don’t you?”

My assistant concurred. Together we instructed a few dozen of the tiny reconnaissance instruments, then launched them from a workroom window. They rose into the afternoon air and spread out across the city, where they would spend their time tirelessly peeking through windows and down into streets and courtyards. Eventually, one of them would spot Massim Shar; it would report the find, then either all of the swarm would converge on the finder’s coordinates and begin comprehensive surveillance, or the one that had made the discovery would contrive to attach itself unobtrusively to the target.

In the meantime, I studied again the instructions Irslan Chonder had received regarding the time and coordinates for the delivery of the recovery fee. The thief had built in several safeguards intended to allow his runners—for, again, he would certainly use cut-outs—to come and go without being apprehended or followed. I would do nothing to interfere with those precautions; instead, my plan was to confirm the identity of the ransom’s eventual recipient by having him already under surveillance when final delivery took place.

The rendezvous was set for that evening in Ambledown Way, on the edge of the Shambling district, a part of Olkney given over to fashionable townhouses and the kinds of commercial establishments that catered to those who could afford to rank fashion above all else when choosing residence. It was a neighborhood of wide boulevards that met in public squares, and lately I had heard of something happening there that had piqued my interest.

“Ambledown Way connects to The Old Circular, does it not?” I asked my assistant.

“It does.” A screen appeared in the air, showing a map of the area, with the street and square highlighted. The rendezvous was to take place on the west side of the plaza.

“And did I not hear,” I continued, “that Master Jho-su has opened new premises in The Old Circular?”

“You did. Right here.” A small red rectangle appeared on the eastern edge of The Old Circular. “It is called ‘The Pot of Fire.’ ”

I examined the map, then said, “Contact The Pot of Fire’s integrator and ask for a table for three.”

evening, an hour and a half before I am to make contact with the thief's shim."

—The response was immediate. "They are fully booked for the next four months."—

I scratched my nose and said, "Say that I am engaged in a discrimination involving elements of the halfworld."

Again, an instant response: "It wants to know if there is any possibility of violence."

I considered my reply, then said, "Say that there is always a possibility, but that I judge a negligible the likelihood of any harm coming to Master Jho-su's patrons. Add that, for me personally, peril is my constant companion, but that I do not count the risk when I am on the trail of malefactors."

"They can give you a table on the outer terrace."

That would put me right on the edge of the public square, where my well-known countenance would draw the attention of persons of fashion. Also, if anything untoward occurred, there was less chance of the other diners being wounded or otherwise inconvenienced.

"Make the booking," I said, "and say that I am not averse to the maitre d's letting it be known that I am on a case involving the theft of precious artworks, though I can share no details."

It would not have mattered if I had been diametrically opposed to the leaking of such information. The only reason there would be a seat for me at The Pot of Fire tonight was so that my presence and its purpose might titillate the restaurant's jaded patrons, for whom a discriminator on such a case was a figure of passing interest. But then, I had my own reasons for wanting to be seen there beyond the culinary wizardry for which Master Jho-su was justly famous: this Irslan Chonder business was my first major fee in some weeks, and I needed to keep my face visible among those who might next week or next year, have occasion to call upon my services.

The bees on their way and the booking made, I paused to consider whether there was something more I should be doing. My analysis of who had likely committed the theft was solid, and were the measures I had taken to confirm my conclusion. Up until quite recently, though, I would not have left off my mental efforts at this stage; I would have consulted my intuition, an act I used to refer to as "applying insight." Throughout my career, indeed throughout my entire life, my ability to combine rigorous logic with grand leaps of inspiration had been the twin engines of my prodigious intellect. Now I recognized that I was running on half-power.

The faculty I had called my insight had, through the workings of sympathetic association—called to be coarse about it, magic—first become a separate entity named Osk Rievor who for a time had existed beside me in my own head. Then Rievor had gone even further, managing to acquire, under circumstances too tedious to relate, an untenanted body of his own. He now dwelt in a rented cottage on a country estate some distance from Olkney. We had not seen each other for some time now, he being busy at pursuing his researches into sympathetic association in order to prepare for the new epoch—soon to arrive—when magic would replace rationalism as the fundamental underpinnings of our universe.

I, for my part, detested the very notion, and though I had been forced by painful experience to accept it as unalterable truth, I was still resolved to do my best to ignore it for as long as I could.

All of which meant that I must go through my days, and practice my difficult and sometimes hazardous profession, without the benefit of intuition. So far, nothing had gone amiss. To compensate for my missing insight, I piled on even more ratiocination, but even as I did so I could not be unaware that more of the one could not always substitute for the absence of the other.

If Osk Rievor had been anyone else, I could have contacted him through our integrators. But almost unheard of on Old Earth in this penultimate age, he had elected to live without one. Instead, he was attempting to create, by magical means, what would be the equivalent of an integrator in the

coming new age: a versatile animal companion known as a familiar. For a while, my own integrator had been such a creature—the technical term was a grinnet—until it had justifiably rebelled and arranged to become again the disembodied device that I had originally designed and built to assist me in my work.

“We should get Osk Rievor an integrator,” I now said, not for the first time.

“He has refused one,” said my assistant.

“I need to contact him from time to time. Otherwise, I am flying half-blind.”

“I am surprised to hear you say it.”

“I would not do so outside this room,” I admitted. “Try him. Perhaps he has realized the folly of trying to get by without an assistant. He may have put one in place but is too embarrassed to admit it.”

I waited for a response from the integrator, but there was none. “What is happening?” I said after the moment grew long.

“I am not sure,” it said. “Before, when I sought contact, there was nothing, just a gap in the connectivity grid.”

“And now?”

“Now there is a sense of... something—some undefined presence, but it does not respond.”

“Perhaps he is in the process of installing an integrator but has not yet tuned it right.”

“Integrators are self-tuning,” said my assistant, “otherwise the grid would be chaotic.”

“Try again.”

“I have been trying all the while. Nothing has changed.”

“Then stop.” I thought for a moment, then said, “Could a surveillance bee make it all the way to the estate?”

“Possibly, if fully charged and if the winds cooperate, though it would be surer to send an aircar. Or you could send the *Gallivant*.” He referred to a modest space yacht that I had acquired during a recent discrimination. It was parked at the spaceport on an island out in Mornedy Sound.

“I am conserving my funds,” I said. “The undockage and redockage fees for sending the *Gallivant* would be more than the cost of hiring an aircar. Dispatch a bee with a message, asking him to contact me.”

#

Master Jho-su’s artistry with the fieriest of spices had not diminished since the last time I had been so fortunate as to taste the products of his kitchen. But several of his signature dishes were new—the change in menu a consequence of his having spent a sabbatical year on Bloom, one of the Grand Foundational Domains, as the most anciently settled of the Ten Thousand Worlds were known. He had cross-fertilized his own genius with that of the chefs of the great cities of Os and Sheeshah, and brought back some of their Twenty-Year Sauce, as well as a shelf of powerful, brewed capsaicin-spices. The result was a fusion of cuisine that was drawing the attention of gourmets from all the parts of Old Earth still inhabited by human beings—or at least those that could afford the Pot of Fire prices. My meal this evening would eat up a week’s food budget, but I calculated that it was worth the expense to put myself under the eyes of so many potential clients. As well, I felt that after all my recent trials, I deserved a treat.

And a treat it turned out to be. As the old orange sun dropped behind the ornate facades of the multistoried houses on the west side of The Old Circular, like an arthritic old man lowering himself gingerly into his bath, I tasted the Master’s plate of the day: a platter of eighteen meat, vegetable, and nut pastes, into which one dipped pieces of a fine-crumbed bread studded with amarast seeds. The

different pastes could be combined on one cob of the bread to produce remarkable combinations sweet and savory, mellow and fiery, bold and subtle. A bottle of vintage Janvari red made a perfect accompaniment, along with a carafe of palate-cleansing improved water.

I dined alone, though I was aware of glances cast my way and whispered comments. Word had passed about my purpose in being there this evening. For my part, I let my gaze follow the coming and goings of pedestrians on the square. My intent was to spot not only Massim Shar's cut-out but the other member of his criminal coterie who would be there to watch our transaction. There might even be a watcher to watch the watcher, trust being a commodity in short supply among the lawless. I meant to have records of them all, captured by a suite of devices unobtrusively built into my clothing.

It was the time of day when those who cared about fashion walked in the evening air, showing each other their finery. The style this season, for men, was close-fitting, long-tailed coats accompanied by tall, cylindrical hats and tight, knee-high boots; for women, elegance came in the form of collarless dresses that fit tight above the bust and at the knee, though in between the fabric ballooned out on hidden stays to create an illusion that the body beneath must be spherical. The combined effect of so many ambulatory sticks and balls, each of whom wore an expression of complete self-satisfaction, added strength to my longstanding belief that the profession of couturier required only a good knowledge of fabric and a malicious sense of humor.

The time for the connection with Massim Shar's agent was drawing near. When she had brought me the platter of pastes, the server had pointed out to me the different strengths of the eighteen sauces, advising me to save for last the meat puree doused in Sheeshah's Nine Dragon Sauce, predicting that once it struck my palate, the dish's other, subtler flavors would be unable to register. I now scooped up a good pinch of the stuff, made sure my tumbler of improved water was full and to hand, and popped the laden bread into my mouth. There was a pause—my taste buds may well have gone into shock for a moment—then the full weight of Master Jho-su's genius crashed upon my senses. My eyes widened, simultaneously flinging a gush of tears down my cheeks, my tongue desperately sought an exit from my mouth, and my nose and sinuses reported that they had been suddenly and inexplicably connected to a volcanic flume.

I groped for the tumbler and took a healthy gulp, but the water seemed to evaporate before even reaching my throat. I drank more, my free hand finding the carafe even as I drained the glass. I could scarcely see to pour a refill and ended up drinking directly from the larger container. Gradually the inferno in my mouth subsided to a banked fire. I wiped my streaming eyes and sucked in a great breath and would not have been surprised, when I exhaled, to have emitted clouds of steam.

I glanced about me, using only the corners of my streaming eyes, and saw that my actions had drawn some amused smiles but just as many expressions of knowledgeable commiseration. Clearly the Nine Dragons Sauce had previously claimed the unwary as its victims, and I was relieved to know that the effects were not permanent. I drank some more of the improved water, felt it begin to repair my outraged tissues, and signaled the server to bring me the bill. The woman did so with that careful, neutral face which fits a great waiter to become a senior diplomat, if she is willing to accept the plunge in status. I added a generous gratuity and, wiping my eyes once more, looked out across the Old Circular.

Between the perambulating orbs and scepters, I spotted a lean and wiry specimen in a shapeless jacket and a wide-brimmed hat pulled low. He was moving at a steady pace toward the meeting point. I scanned the square again, and saw another man loitering at the mouth of an alley, his attitude casual but his eyes never leaving the path of the man in the hat.

I spoke the phrase that activated my surveillance suite and rose from the table, stepped over

the low ornamental fence that enclosed The Pot of Fire's outer terrace, and moved out into the square. Behind me, I heard a sudden rise in the buzz of conversation and knew that my fellow diners would now be entertaining themselves and each other with speculations as to the nature of my case and what might happen next.

My lips and tongue had had the benefit of a carafe of improved water, but my nasal apparatus had been left to deal with the effects of the conflagrant condiment all on its own. My nose was therefore, still streaming and my sinuses remained as closed as business premises that had been gutted by fire. Still, I kept my eyes on the figure in the slouch hat as I wove among the fashionable pairs that wandered at random through the plaza, meaning to arrive at our mutual destination at the same moment. My attention thus occupied, I did not see the young woman until I walked right into her.

She bounced off me and fell, without grace, to the pavement. I stopped and looked down, receiving an indelible impression of an upturned, longish face, gone pale with shock beneath its crowded constellations of freckles, ornamented by two pale green eyes beneath a tumble of copper-red curls and ringlets, less than artfully arranged. A mouth that it would have been kind to have described as generous when closed was now gaping open in bewilderment. The cut of her clothes and footwear, a long, ivory-lace dress and latticed sandals, each with no more ornament than a few limp ribbons, argued that she might be from offworld, though I could not place the origin.

I was naturally annoyed, but I bent and offered her my hand. The fingers that took mine were not at all soft, and the grip they exerted when she began to pull herself up was strong. I made the briefest of apologies, pleading a matter of urgent business, and made to move past her; even if I had not been engaged in professional and potentially dangerous business I would not have tarried, for she was the complete combination of feminine attributes that I found least appealing—including, now that she was standing, more height than I commanded. She said nothing in reply, but gave me a look that mingled surprise with resentment, holding onto me until I had to use my free hand to gently release the one she still grasped.

"I am sorry," I said, a statement that was not entirely true, "but you do not seem to be injured and I must keep an appointment." With that, I turned and saw that the man in the hat was at the appointed place. I saw him consult his timepiece and glare about him with an air of angry suspicion. Politeness argued for pressing my card into the young woman's hand, but I did not do so. Instead, I said, "I must go," and, catching the waiting man's eye, I forced myself through the pedestrians toward him. His air of resentful mistrust only deepened as he looked past me. I could only assume that the ungainly woman was staring at me, and therefore at him, since he was at the end of the beeline I was making across the square. His head now swiveled from side to side, doubtless expecting to see other eyes turned his way, and he became only slightly less apprehensive when I reached him and spoke the code word Irslan Chonder had given me.

"I was hurrying to make our appointment and bumped into the young woman," I said.

He glanced furtively past me. "She's looking at us."

"At me," I said. "She is probably angry." And justifiably so, I supposed to myself; the pavements of The Old Circular were not made to receive falling buttocks in a gentle embrace, and from what I had seen of hers she had less cushioning than most.

He glanced about, twisting the cords in his neck. "I'm covered, if you try anything."

"I'm not going to 'try anything.' Let us do our business."

The arrangement was that he would show me the contents of one of the soul boxes. If the items tallied with the list I had been given, I would show him a credit pip in the amount of the ransom. Finally, after much peering about, accompanied by grunts and half-voiced mutterings, we stepped in

a nearby doorway. He took a small bundle of cloth from inside his jacket and unfolded it. Nestled in the fabric I saw a dried flower, a small length of jeweler's chain, a silver coin bearing a likeness that had been worn away by decades of use, a round quartz pebble, and an animal's canine tooth, along with a half-handful of gray grit.

"Very well," I said. "We can do business."

He refolded the cloth and tucked it away, then said, "Follow me."

We went along the side of the square to where Ambledown Way began, but followed the thoroughfare only a short distance before we turned into a crooked alley that wound along the backs of several houses and shops. We soon came to a small open space where other alleys converged, crossed it, and went right, then down a flight of steps and through a door into a basement. My guide flicked on a small hand-held lumen and led me across a low-ceilinged room and through a gap that had been gouged in the opposite wall. We climbed a flight of stairs, passed through a door whose lock had been broken, and emerged into a ground-floor room of an empty house. Here we stopped and the cut-off consulted a button on the sleeve of his coat, saying to it, "What's the lie?"

I could not hear whoever responded to him, but he nodded as if barely satisfied and said to me, "No one followed us."

"Of course not," I said.

"All right. Let's go."

We set off again, this time climbing through the untenanted house to the roof. On a landing stage waited a nondescript aircar. "Don't think about tracing it," the man said. "It's stolen."

"You needn't have gone to the trouble just for me," I said.

We got in. "I know who you are, you know," he said, when we were airborne.

"That puts you one up on me."

He muttered something I didn't catch and didn't care to; it was unlikely to have been a generous appreciation of my character. He applied himself to the aircar's controls and we wove a varied course across the city, he several times again consulting his wrist button. Finally, when he was as satisfied as I suspected his nature could allow for, we spiraled down to a goods storage facility near the Creechy dockyard.

The man flew the aircar directly into the building through an open hatch on the upper floor. Here another man waited, clad from head to toe in a one-piece garment made of a flash-and-glitter fabric that could baffle most recording equipment—though not the suite I employed, most of which were made of unique systems designed and built by me.

The man I had come with handed me the cloth bundle and told me to get out of the hovering aircar. When I had done so, feeling the idling gravity obviators tugging at my legs, he turned the vehicle and flew away. The man in the incognito suit beckoned with one glittering hand. I noticed not that he wore a thin collar of dull metal around his neck, tight against the shining fabric. I again produced the credit pip but delayed handing it over. He moved to an inner wall and touched a control. The wall slid silently back and there were the stolen repositories, one of them open.

I stepped into the room and examined the goods, finding nothing missing and all in order. Only then did I turn over the pip. The scintillating man took it, examined it closely, tucked it away. A moment later, he was gone from the room. I made no attempt to follow but brought out my communicator and called Irslan Chonder.

"Your possessions are yours again," I said, and gave the coordinates of the building.

"I want to know who took them."

"You will know by the end of the evening."

It was full dark by the time Chonder's retainers had recovered the repositories and returned them to his manse in the Bells district. When he had seen them safe behind newly augmented defenses, he flew me in his own cabriole back to my lodgings where we waited for news. I poured myself a glass of a calming cordial, Master Jho-su's brilliance at the culinary arts being such as to create long-lasting effects, and meditated on the truth that different parts of the same system can have separate agendas just because something pleased my palate was no guarantee that it would sit well with other components of my digestive tract.

I belched discreetly, and Irslan Chonder did not notice. Having refused refreshment and a welcoming armchair, he sat on a wooden stool, his torso hunched forward, his meaty forearms resting on his thighs and his hairy-backed fingers gripping each other so tightly that the flesh around the nails was squeezed bloodlessly pale. His eyes were narrowed but I knew that he gazed upon some inner vision that promised him grim satisfaction.

Now he came back from wherever his mind had taken him and turned his iron eyes toward me. "Well?" he said.

"Not long," I assured him.

He grunted and fell back into his dark thoughts. I finished the cordial and poured myself another half-measure. The Nine Dragons continued to ramp and stamp through my innards, but I forgot the sensations when my integrator sounded a small chime and said, "We have a report."

"Show me," I said, and the screen appeared where Chonder and I could both view it. An image instantly filled it: one of the secluded private rooms at the rear of Bolly's Snug. The tavern was clouded by a web of interwoven energies that led its habitués to believe that the premises were secure from all surveillance, whether by the Bureau of Scrutiny or from private prying like mine. In their belief, they were largely correct. But I had found a way through the safeguards.

Any active surveillance device operating at Bolly's would immediately have been detected and destroyed. But I had had success in sending in a bee that had attached itself to the clothing of someone who was heading for the Snug, working its way under a collar or into the folds of a hat. As soon as it reached the outer defenses, the bee would become inert. After waiting long enough for its unknowing host to have passed through the shields, the drone would reactivate, but only enough to become a passive receiver of sound and light as well as a few other emanations. It would store that information, since no transmission could make it out through the barriers, then go inert again when the person carrying it exited through the defenses. Once clear of the protected zone, the bee would leave its host and send a report or, if complete secrecy was desirable, it would wait until it had returned home.

This bee was now reporting as it whirred back to my workroom. I saw a small private room at the back of Bolly's Snug, a rough table surrounded by a few chairs, a tankard on the tabletop, its handle in the sinewy grip of Massim Shar, clad in his customary black and gray and sitting in perfect stillness, the very image of a man who knew how to wait. Behind him stood a big fellow, corded arms folded across his broad chest, his face ornamented by rows of tattooed symbols.

"Interesting," I said to my assistant. "Shar has acquired the services of Hak Binram."

"The question is," said the integrator, "whether Binram has hired on for this evening only, or for a continuing relationship."

"Either way, it is another sign that Shar is now circulating among the uppermost strata of the halfworld."

"Hush," said Chonder. "Look."

The screen now showed the door to the room opening inward. Through the doorway came the man in the glitter suit, carrying a satchel. He placed his burden on the table, performed a respectful gesture, and stood expectantly. Massim Shar gestured for him to open the satchel. The man did as he was bid and the thief glanced into the opening. Then Shar signaled to Hak Binram, who approached the man in the incognito suit and applied something he held in one huge hand to the dull metal collar around the courier's neck. The solid ring came apart and Binram removed it and tucked it into his pocket. The man in the incognito suit said not a word, but his posture bespoke great relief of tension. He turned and swiftly departed, closing the door behind him.

Hak Binram now went to stand with his back pressed to the portal, and it would have been surprising to see a strong man indeed who could have opened it against the pressure of the tattooed man's shoulders.

Massim Shar took an unhurried swallow from the tankard and set it aside. Slowly, almost leisurely, he widened the satchel's neck then upturned the container to spill its contents out onto the table: a pile of glittering gems of several sizes, cuts, and colors. The thief sorted through them then nodded in satisfaction.

"Intelligent," my assistant said. "The ransom was converted into untraceable valuables before it was brought to Massim Shar. He cannot be connected with the extortion."

"Indeed," I said, watching as Shar took a dark red stone twice the size of my thumbnail and tossed it toward the man guarding the door. Binram's hand flashed out with surprising speed and caught the glittering jewel. He pocketed it, then as Shar rose and tucked the satchel under his arm, Binram opened the door and paused to look out into the space beyond before signaling to his employee that all was as it should be. The last image I saw was of the thief's wiry fingers extending toward the bee's point of view, which told the device—hidden in Shar's hat or cloak on a chair beside the table—that it was time to go dark again.

"Well, there it is," I said. "But again I advise you to let the matter rest."

Irlsan Chonder was on his feet, his eyes still fixed on the air where the screen had hung. The muscles in his jaw moved as if small animals were burrowing under his skin. "No," he said, without looking at me. Then he turned his hard gaze my way and I had to summon up an extra reserve of professional coolness not to give in to the impulse to look away. "I want you to help me with the next step," he said.

"No," I said, summoning fresh resources; he was not an easy man to refuse. "Your proposal is ill-considered. No good can come of it."

I saw that his fists had bunched. Then the fingers deliberately relaxed. Without a further word he left by the stairs that led to the roof. Moments later, I heard his big cabriole thrumming away across the top of Olkney. A few minutes later my integrator informed me that the balance of my fee had been deposited to my account at the fiduciary pool. Not long after that, the bee that had transmitted the report arrived home and went to join its fellows clustered around their vitalizer.

The one missing bee, that which I had sent out to locate my former intuitive faculty, would still be making its way to the estate where he now resided. There was nothing more to be done, so I told my assistant I was off to bed.

#

When I came down the following morning, clad in robe and slippers and carrying a steaming cup of punge, I found a surveillance bee waiting on my workroom table. "Is this the bee we sent to Osk Rievor?" I said.

"It is," said my assistant.

There had not been enough time for the drone to have traveled all the way to and from where

my other self lived, not to mention the time it would have had to spend recharging at some point along the course of its round trip. “Did it go only part way, then return without fulfilling its mission?”

“No.”

“Then how?”

The integrator showed me. I saw an image of my workroom table, with the usual scattering of materials relating to cases and the smaller tools of my profession. In the midst of these, the bee suddenly appeared.

“Do you wish to see that at a slower speed?” my assistant asked.

“Yes, and magnified.”

The sequence repeated. This time, the appearance of the bee was not instantaneous. It seemed to be pushed through a small rent in the air, nose first, the fissure closing the instant all of the drone had come through.

“How?” I said. Teleportation was possible, but required far more energy than Osk Rievor could command in his far-off little cottage. Besides, there was no receiver in my workroom.

“You won’t like the answer.”

“I know, but I will hear it anyway.”

Of course, it was magic. My assistant replayed the content of the message the bee had brought from my alter ego. I saw Osk Rievor gazing down from the integrator’s screen. I noticed that he now had a pointed beard and had let his dun-colored hair grow long enough to curl at the sides. He greeted me with a half smile then said, “I am sure it is no coincidence that you sent a messenger just as I was feeling that I ought to contact you. Even though we now inhabit separate bodies and reside at a distance from each other, we are still connected at some level.”

Not long before, I would have scoffed at the notion, there being no rational foundation for assuming such a connection. But now, from what I understood of the “rules” of sympathetic association, a regime that was gaining greater legitimacy as the cusp of the great change neared, I was quite right. Things that were “like” each other were linked to each other. The relationships thus could not be laid out in a step-by-step sequence, but they could be “felt” by someone who had a “feel” for such things, just as in a rational universe, cause and effect could be deduced by a mind that was well versed in logic.

Osk Rievor had paused. Doubtless, he “felt” that I would take a moment to consider the ramifications of his statement. Now he continued, “I had a sense that you were about to have an encounter that offered a great risk. Had I been there, I would have counseled you to caution and to take nothing for granted.” He paused again, and his expression became that of a man consulting his inner wherewithal, then he said, “Now I sense that that moment has passed and that you have come through it without harm.”

But now a look of concern crept over his face. “But the matter is not ended,” he said. “You have stepped onto a path that leads toward both peril and opportunity. Again, you must exercise caution in the coming days. Not everything is as it seems.”

My other self had a fortune-teller’s flair for vague prognostication. But I had learned to trust his insight, just as I had trusted it when it had been a component of my own psyche. And, truly, I had inserted myself into a dispute between a newly made kingpin of Olkney’s halfworld and one of the louche old city’s most ruthless magnates. I could not be certain that Massim Shar would respect the conventions that ought to hold me blameless for practicing my profession to his detriment; on the other hand, I was sure that Irslan Chonder bore me a grudge for not blithely leaping aboard his vendetta as it was leaving the dock. I decided that it would be a good idea to offer the world a lo

silhouette for the time being.

—“This bee was a good way to reach me,” Osk Rievor’s image was saying. “How do you like the method of its return? It’s an Eighteenth-Aeon spell called Phalderian’s Reversion. It allows me to send an object, or even a living creature, to any place it has already been, or to any person with whom it is closely associated. Something to do with resonances. Once I’ve learned how to generate enough essential fluid, I should even be able to project myself over a great distance. Then I may come and visit you.

“In the meantime, perhaps you could send some more bees, and I’ll return them to you whenever I have something urgent to pass on.”

He concluded with a salute that conveyed ironic affection, and my assistant closed the screen.

“Hmm,” I said. “We had better send him some bees.”

“How many?”

I wasn’t sure how many I could spare, but one does not show indecision to one’s integrator. I said, “We will consider that after lunch.”

“Will you take his warning to heart?” the integrator said.

“I will,” I said. “I hope it can never be said that Henghis Hapthorn does not learn from experience.”

“Then shall I cancel your luncheon at Xanthoulian’s?”

I had had the integrator make the booking after receiving the first half of Chonder’s fee. “Let it also never be said that Hapthorn panics and starts at shadows.”

My assistant reminded me that there were some buns and preserves in the refresher and suggested that the wiser course would be to stay in and catch up on my correspondence.

“An opportunity to dine at Xanthoulian’s is not to be lightly tossed aside,” I said, “but I will take you with me and you will warn me of any lurking dangers.”

“If one seeks to detect a shadower, without letting him know he is detected, it is best to proceed on foot,” I said.

“I know,” said my assistant. “Vehicles tend to travel at similar speeds, but if a car four spaces back follows yours through a series of random turns and other such maneuvers, the accumulating coincidences overpower the probabilities. But making all those turns and stops soon tells the follower that he is suspected. It is an elementary technique.”

“I know that you know,” I said. “I was actually speaking to myself.”

I was strolling toward Xanthoulia’s, which was set in a cul-de-sac called Vodel Close. My assistant was draped around my neck in its carrying armature so that its extended sensory apparatus could observe our surroundings.

“It is hard for me to tell when you are speaking to yourself,” it answered me, “if I am the only possible auditor within range.”

“I should think you’d be able to tell by my tone of voice,” I said. “I assume it takes on a reflective mode.”

“You have designed me to make precise distinctions between modes of speech, yet I am unable to distinguish between reflective remarks addressed to yourself and the equally reflective comments that you frequently send my way.”

There was something about my assistant’s own tone of voice that concerned me. It had never been the same since it had been magically transmogrified into a grinnet. Even after it went back to being an integrator—a choice that it made for itself, by the way—I sensed a qualitative difference. As an animal it had known appetite and satiety, fear and relief, pride and humiliation, and anger. Out of the interplay of these factors, it had developed a will—an essential attribute for the wielding of magic, which was a grinnet’s prime function, but a decidedly unwelcome component of an integrator.

“I wonder if a complete tear-down and rebuild are in order,” I said.

“Were you addressing me or yourself?”

“Never mind.” I stopped to examine the wares in a merchant’s display window. The place dealt in specialized goods that I could not immediately identify, a not unusual happenstance in a city with as diverse a population as Olkney’s. Many of my fellow citizens pursued intensely narrow passions about which their nearest neighbors might know nothing, and probably wouldn’t care whatever oddities were going on next door happened to be brought to their attention—provided the neighbor’s doings offered them no risk of harm or possibility of advantage. “Do you detect any undue interest in my movements?”

“No one has bent to fasten a shoe clasp or ducked into a doorway,” my assistant said. “Nor anyone’s breathing or heart rate affected by your actions. I also detect no devices that are taking an undue interest.”

“Then I am probably unshadowed,” I said.

“Or very well shadowed indeed.”

“So it would seem.”

I turned from the window full of incomprehensible objects and continued on my way. It was a pleasant late morning on a day scheduled for intermittent clouds moved about by light breezes. There had been rain before dawn and it would return again near midnight, but right now the air was fresh and mild.

I turned from Shiplien Way into Drusibal Square, a wide plaza where Reis Glindera’s troupe of shadow-casters was performing Babblot’s hoary old *Kings in Retreat*. I wove and dodged among the

crowds. Again, no one was paralleling my course. "I think I am not on anyone's watch-him list today," I said.

"Not yet, at least," said my assistant.

I performed a gesture of anticipation. "In that case, on to Xanthoulian's." I turned onto Eckhevery Row and soon came down to Vodel Close, arriving at the celebrated eatery a few minutes before my reservation. I had an aperitif in the bar, acknowledged a few greetings, and noted a couple of slightly alarmed looks from former clients who wouldn't have liked it to be known that they had once had cause to consult a discriminator. Holk Xanthoulian himself passed by and offered me a welcoming smile, precisely graduated to my social standing. Then I went in and had a splendid meal, emerging two hours later in a frame of mind that said that, despite the impending end of the age, life was a thing to be cherished and celebrated. I said as much to my integrator, as we set off back to my lodgings, and was surprised to hear my views contradicted.

"I have tried life," it said, "and I found it wanting."

"You would find death even more so."

"There is another alternative. I am neither alive nor dead, yet I exist."

"And you prefer mere existence to being alive?"

"Obviously, since when given the choice, I opted for my present, happier, state."

I pounced on the error in logic. "Happiness is an emotion. It comes out of the actions of glands and neural chemistry, none of which you now have."

"But I did have them once, and when I had them I knew happiness," it said. "I also knew several opposites—fear, hunger, pain, the temptation of despair—which are now absent from my existence. In their absence, even without glands or chemistry, I recognize happiness."

"You claim to be happy?"

"I do. I am."

"Then that must worry you," I said.

"Why?"

"Because if it is possible for you to be happy, then necessarily it must be possible for you to be unhappy."

"How? The likelihood seems farfetched."

"So have several of the situations in which we have found ourselves in the recent past," I said.

"But you are resolved to avoid those kinds of situations in the future."

I made a gesture ripe with fatalism. "I have come to understand that the universe accords my resolutions a good deal less consideration than I would prefer."

"Hmm," said my assistant. "I am now experiencing the state of mind I used to know as 'worry.' It is not pleasant."

"So now you are liable to some of the negative aspects of life, without being able to enjoy the scrumptious bits," I said, patting my stomach that was so amply rounded out by Xanthoulian's best. "It would seem you did not make such a good choice, after all."

The integrator would have argued further, but I instructed it to give its full attention to surveillance, since we were now entering the crowds that still packed Drusibal Square. It assured me that no untoward attention was directed my way. But I had taken only a few more steps when its voice spoke in the porches of my ear, where only I could hear it. "There is, however, a coincidence."

"What is it?" I said, glancing around, and my eyes delivered the answer before the voice spoke again. Walking toward me, brows downdrawn in an expression of concentration, as if working out a multistage problem in mathematics, or as if the simple act of locomotion required a concentration

presence of mind, was the unfortunate red-haired woman I had encountered last evening outside The Pot of Fire.

“What ill luck,” I said, in a soft voice.

My assistant wondered if my remark meant that the imminent encounter was not a thing to be cherished and celebrated. I told it to continue its surveillance and keep its peevish remarks to itself. Last evening I had had the press of important business to keep me from making a proper apology. I had no excuse today. Moreover, I had always put great store in observing the niceties of polite society; they gave form and structure to the world. Good manners said that I owed the young woman a decent expression of regret. I would now deliver it.

I stepped forward and placed myself in her path, mentally formulating the appropriate phrases and positioning my hands and arms for the appropriate gestures that would precede speech. But I did not get to perform them. The young woman, eyes still on the pavement before her feet, came toward me without pause, but her gaze did not rise to meet mine. Indeed, she seemed completely unaware that I was in her path and that she was closing on a collision course. Again, I had the impression she was giving concentrated thought to some mentally taxing problem.

I drew breath to speak, but the air came out not in words but in a gasp as, once more, she plowed straight into me. This time, however, I was standing still and had instinctively begun to shift my weight backward. The result was the reverse of the situation of the evening before. She struck with surprising momentum and I went backward and downward, until my hinderparts connected with the stone pavements of Drusibal Square. I found myself looking up into the same wide green eyes that yesterday had looked up into mine, and the face that surrounded them wore the same look of surprise.

“Well,” I said, “at least we’re even, then.”

I thought it not a bad specimen of wit; at least it had spontaneity. But her look of surprise now turned to one of confusion.

“What do you mean?” she said. Her voice was a raspy contralto, not the timbre of feminine voice that I most liked to hear.

“Last night,” I said, “we performed this same maneuver in The Old Circular, except that on that occasion, it was you who ended up unexpectedly seated.”

Her face took on the look of someone who searches for a memory that resists being pinned down. “I don’t remember,” she said.

I was rising to my feet. “I hope that I usually make a more lasting impression, even if the circumstances were less than ideal for a first encounter.”

“You don’t understand,” she said, and now as she looked up at me the confusion in her countenance grew deeper and was joined by an overlay of genuine fear. “I don’t remember anything.”

“You’re claiming amnesia?”

“Am I?” She blinked. “Yes, I suppose I must be.” She softly bit her lower lip, which I now saw was dry and cracked. She looked down at her hands, as if they might provide some clue, and I noticed that they were inelegantly shaped. And yet, when her head came up I realized that the pair of sea-green eyes she was showing me were such as some men might drown in, though not I. She was still speaking in that grating voice, saying, “I have no choice in the matter.”

“What is your name?” I said.

She opened her mouth as if to make an automatic reply, but then nothing came. “I don’t know,” she said, after a moment.

“Where do you live?”

Again, it seemed as if she was going to answer without hesitation, but somehow the

information did not make it from memory into the place where speech was formed.

—“What do you remember?”

Fear was no longer an accompaniment to confusion; it had supplanted it. “Nothing,” she said, and desperation was driving her voice toward a sob. “I don’t remember anything at all!”

“Just before we collided, I had the impression that you were thinking hard, as if you were working out a mathematical puzzle, or some problem in logic. What were you thinking about?”

For a moment, it seemed that she would grasp it, but then her face fell and she said, “It’s like a dream that disappears on waking. I almost had it, but now it is gone.”

In my occupation, I have seen many a forlorn face, but not many as discouraged as hers. Her expression did little to help her basic plainness of feature. Still, I felt moved to help her. I took her hand, found it cold and trembling. “You may not believe it now,” I said, “but whatever has befallen you, you have now just received a great stroke of luck.”

Her expression said she didn’t think so, and doubted my glib assurance from the cocksucker feather in its cap down to the soles of its gaudy boots.

“Please believe me,” I said, “when I tell you that you have just bumped into precisely the right person.”

#

It took some convincing before she agreed to accompany me to my workroom. I was reduced to having to ask Xanthoulian, who had been hovering near the front door to his premises, to vouch for me. He assured the young woman that I was indeed a discriminator of note and that I was consulted by persons of Olkney’s highest social rank.

“Olkney?” she said, the name clearly causing no chimes of recognition to resonate through her mental chambers.

“Here,” I said, indicating the city around us. “Olkney, on Old Earth.”

She repeated the name of the planet, but it seemed from her tone that she had at least heard of our ancient world. “I’m on Old Earth?” she added, as if the location was among the last she would have expected to find herself. Then she gave her head a small but determined shake, as if the motion might cause its internal components to fall into more useful arrangements. They clearly did not, but she noticed that her look of surprise and confusion was much more charming than it had been the previous evening.

“So you are not of this world?” I asked.

She looked about her, then up at the faded sun. “I am sure I am not,” she said. Then she shook her head, albeit less forcefully, and added, “Though I don’t know why I am sure.”

“Come to my workroom,” I said. “We’ll soon have this worked out.”

Still, she balked. “Why should I trust you?” she said, stooping a little to peer into my face. “You do not have a particularly kindly look to you. You look the sort who finds the thought of other people’s misfortunes none too hard to bear.”

“You do me an injustice,” I said. “I have made a career out of helping those who have been wronged.”

“For free? Out of the shining goodness of your nature?”

“Well, no. I do have to earn my living.”

Her hands felt for pockets in the lacy gown, found nothing. “I appear to have no means to pay you.” Her eyes narrowed and her head drew back. “Or do you intend to take your fee in other currencies?”

“I assure you—” I began.

“No, you do not,” she said. “I feel anything but assured. What do you want from me? What should I trust you?”

They were fair questions. I answered them honestly. “I do not want anything from you, other than to be of help. I am not sure why, because I do not think I like you. Yet somehow I feel a altruistic impulse.”

“Altruistic?” she said. “Is that what they call it on Old Earth?”

A counterurge was developing in me. To put some distance between myself and the unsympathetic woman, to let her get on with her problems as best she could, seemed a wise course. And yet...

“Let me propose this,” I said, looking at the stream of pedestrians that was dividing to pass on either side of the small obstacle that the woman and I made. “Stop anyone you see and ask them to give me a character reference. If that doesn’t satisfy you, I will be happy to direct you to the nearest agent of the Bureau of Scrutiny, and you can take your chances.”

“What is the Bureau of Scrutiny?”

“A large apparatus allegedly for the solving of mysteries. Especially appropriate for those who have a great deal of free time and a matching supply of patience. Also, it helps if you enjoy filling out complex and lengthy forms while a succession of functionaries require you to answer the same questions over and over again. I’m sure they have something quite like it wherever you come from.”

The suggestion did not conjure up a memory in her, but it certainly activated a deep-seated impression. “That does not sound useful,” she said.

I indicated the passing perambulators. “Then pick your referent.”

She turned and regarded the various people coming toward her, discarding the first few: a boy wearing an entertainment device that moved him to sing along to a tune only he could hear; a middle-aged man in a brocaded daysuit who, feeling her eyes upon him, responded with a leisurely and full-length inspection of her form; an elderly couple seemingly locked in argument over which owed the other an apology. Behind the squabblers came a broadly built woman of mature years who wore gabardine trousers and a high-collared wool jacket, a hat too small for the feather that bobbed above it, and a well-set-in look of general disapproval.

“Excuse me,” said the amnesiac as the woman made to pass, “but can you tell me who that man is?”

The censorious expression did not soften. “He is Henghis Hapthorn, some sort of discriminator.”

“Has he a good reputation?”

I had the impression that we had found an interviewee who had spent mere moments dwelling on the virtues of those held in good esteem, compared to the hours devoted to the vices of persons of lesser repute. The woman struggled with the concept, cast an irritated glance my way, then said, “I’ve heard he thinks quite well of himself.”

“But he’s not a bad person?”

“I suppose he’s no worse than most.”

I interceded for myself. “And am I reckoned a capable discriminator?”

The woman sniffed and said, “Certainly the quality goes running to him whenever they find themselves in the kinds of trouble that comes from possessing far too much wealth and far too little character.”

I pressed a hand to my breast. “To have won such praise,” I said, shaking my head in a show of modesty.

“Well,” said the matron, “as long as he lives he’ll always have at least one admirer.” With that, she swept on. If she had had a wake, we would have been left bobbing in it.

“Will that do?” I said.

The red-haired woman showed me distrust contending with reluctant acceptance until the latter conquered, though only just. “I suppose,” she said.

I had my assistant stop a passing jitney. It touched down, took us aboard, and lifted off again. The young woman looked out at the cityscape of Olkney, its towers and cupolas, its tall, terraced houses beneath their steeply canted roofs, its parks and tree-shaded avenues, and above it all the steep slopes of the Devenish Range topped by the vast palace of the Archon.

“Does none of it call up any associations?” I asked her.

“None,” she said.

“What about before we collided? Where were you coming from?”

“I don’t know.”

“Integrator,” I said, “replay your surveillance records and let us see where she came from.”

My assistant’s screen appeared before us on the forward wall of the vehicle, showing the woman walking toward me. Then the flow of the images reversed and she was moving backward. She backstepped across Vodel Close to the opposite side of the cul-de-sac, her gaze downcast to the pavement before her, wearing that look of concentration I had noticed before. I had the integrator pause the sequence.

“You don’t remember what you were thinking of at that moment?” I said.

She strove to remember, but couldn’t.

“You did seem to be thinking hard about something.”

“Yes, I did, didn’t I.”

I turned my head away, as if to examine the familiar scene and whispered a word too quiet for her to hear. My assistant, responding to my coded command, said, so that only I could hear, “She is telling the truth. I detect a general anxiety, but no indications of extra stress when she answers your questions. Also, she has not eaten today although that may be because she has only recently woken from sleep.”

It also informed me that she carried no concealed weapons or communications devices, was not pregnant, and that she was a natural redhead. At that point, I signaled that I had heard enough for the moment. We were, in any case, about to land on the stage above my lodgings. Moments later, we descended into my workroom where I waved her to a chair and began the business of finding out who she was and where she came from.

My assistant resumed its report, but I interrupted to say, “Out loud, for the benefit of the client.”

Its voice spoke from the air. “There are no structural alterations to her neural systems that we can detect. The amnesia is therefore not a result of organic processes.”

To the woman I said, “That is a good sign. Brains are notoriously difficult to rebuild.” To my assistant, I said, “Is the cause suggestive?”

“Not likely, unless accompanied by chemical suppressants.”

“And were suppressants involved?”

“There are indications,” it said. “I detect the aftereffects of paralethe, but there are other signatures I do not recognize.”

“A cocktail?”

“Almost certainly. Three, perhaps four, interacting ingredients.”

“Reversible?”

—“Directly? Yes, but we would need to know precisely the different ingredients and the proportions. Indirectly? Yes, though the process would take time and effort.”

I summarized for the woman’s benefit. “Someone, not likely yourself, has given you a powerful amnesiafacient in the form of three or four substances that have combined to block your awareness from your own memories. We cannot reliably concoct an antidote without knowing just what was administered.”

Her face showed confusion, anxiety, anger. Not despair, which I took as a good sign. I felt an unusually strong wave of sympathy pass through me and was moved to reassure her. I took her rough hand in mine, but she pulled it away.

“The effects are reversible, however,” I went on. “If you apply yourself to the mental work of recovering what has been lost, and I apply myself to providing you with the tools, you will overcome what has been done to you.”

She quited. “I will know who I am and where I come from?”

“You will. I promise it.”

She squared up to the situation. Whatever else she had been, she was no frail bloom. “Then let us begin.”

My assistant had already taken her measurements and would be able to pick her out of a crowd of millions. It began to search recent images and other data captured by the myriad of perceptual systems scattered across Olkney, starting with those in the areas where we already knew she had been. Most of the systems it consulted were accessible upon request; those that would not give up their information freely could be subverted by subtle techniques I had built into my integrator when I had designed and assembled it.

Its screen appeared, separated into several panels. I saw images of the amnesiac in The Outer Circular, and we worked backward until we caught her entering the plaza from an alley that ran behind a row of conjoined houses. But now no new images of her appeared.

“Are there no percepts in the alley?” I said.

“There are, but they were disabled at the time the subject was in the alley.”

“Disabled by whom?”

My assistant showed me three youths making their way down the narrow lane. As they approached each sensory pick-up, one or another of them would aim a tube and the image would go dark. “The cuffs on their right sleeves are turned back to show a lining of green and yellow plaid,” the integrator said.

“The Big Circle gang,” I said. “That was Hak Binram’s starting point, back when he was just a baby monster.”

“What are you talking about?” the young woman asked.

“Nothing to do with you, I’m sure,” I said, but I nudged my assistant again. It told me surreptitiously, that neither the name of Binram nor of the youth gang in which he had begun his criminal career had caused any flutterings in her autonomic systems. “It seems,” I continued, “that the last night you entered the square through an alley that had been blindfolded by the criminal elements who was there to meet. We do not have a record of how you came to be in that alley.”

She looked at me with growing alarm. “Why would you meet with criminals?” she said.

I hastened to assure her that discriminators could associate with criminals without contamination. Then I had my integrator look for more signs of her before she had entered the alley. None appeared.

“She may have been dropped off there from a closed and clouded vehicle,” I said. “Or she may have been in one of the houses that back onto the lane.”

“A stream of vehicles passed the far end of the alley during the time the percepts were deactivated. As well, some of the houses have enclosed landing bays. She might have been in one of those premises for any length of time.”

Not for the first time, I wished I still had a capacity for intuition. Reason could not tell me there was any relationship between the blinding of the alley and her appearance there.

“What about this afternoon in Vodel Close? Where was she before we met?”

This time there was more information. I saw images of her walking along Eckhevery Row and before that, across Drusibal Square. The earliest record showed her entering the square from Ponthos Parade. “Before that,” said the integrator, “there is nothing.”

“That cannot be,” I said. “Unless she suddenly appeared on Ponthos out of thin air.” A line of deep cold suddenly ran up and down my spine. I looked from the screen to where the young woman stood in apparent innocence and ignorance. Could she have appeared in Olkney the way the messenger boy had been manifested on my worktable? If so, logic led me to several linked conclusions, each one of them bad and each leading to a worse.

Conclusion one: the young woman had been brought to the streets of Olkney by magic. Conclusion two: our meeting twice was not a meaningless coincidence, because under the “like affects-like” rationale of sympathetic association, all coincidences were meaningful. Conclusion three: since magic was based on the exercise of will, nothing important ever “just happened”—it was caused to happen. Conclusion four: whoever had the will and the knowledge to cause an entire human being to appear in a place she had never been, and to simultaneously scrub from her mind all knowledge of who she was, was a powerful wielder of the magical arts.

The fifth conclusion was the worst: somewhere, a powerful practitioner of sympathetic magic far more powerful than Osk Rievor, had taken an interest in me; I had several times found myself on the receiving end of such interest from such people, and each occasion had brought me pain, involuntary confinement, and the prospects of remarkably unpleasant exits from this life that I had recently described as worthy to be cherished and celebrated.

I resisted the morbid fear that sought to wrap me in its chilly grip. Logically, I had no reason to suspect magic. There were any number of ways to move people around without their being seen. The criminal subculture knew them all, and even at the best of times I was never far from the border of the halfworld. Before I inferred a role for sympathetic association, I should exhaust all rational explanations. “Check the spaceport,” I said. “She has come from offworld.”

“I have already done so,” my assistant said. “She did not arrive on a liner or on any private craft that docked where the port’s percepts could register her.”

Of course, a spaceship could touch down almost anywhere on the planet, and the vast majority of the Old Earth’s surface was unscanned. “Hmm,” I said.

“What has happened to me?” said the young woman.

“It would be premature to say,” I said. “But I assure you there is no reason to assume the worst, or even the mildly unpleasant.”

Beneath its dabs of freckles and disordered mass of fiery hair her face was forlorn, yet the more I looked at its combination of unattractive features the more I felt sympathy for her plight. She said, “You told me you were precisely the right person for me to bump into.”

“I still maintain it.”

“Yet you are not able to tell me anything.”

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