

# Investment Counselor

by

**Orson Scott Card**

Andrew Wiggin turned twenty the day he reached the planet Sorelledolce. Or rather, after complicated calculations of how many seconds he had been in flight, and at what percentage of lightspeed, and therefore what amount of subjective time had elapsed for him, he reached the conclusion that he had passed his twentieth birthday just before the end of the voyage. This was much more relevant to him than the other pertinent fact—that four hundred and some-odd years had passed since the day he was born, back on Earth, back when the human race had not spread beyond the solar system of its birth.

When Valentine emerged from the debarkation chamber—alphabetically she was always after him—Andrew greeted her with the news. "I just figured it out," he said. "I'm twenty."

"Good," she said. "Now you can start paying taxes like the rest of us."

Ever since the end of the war of Xenocide, Andrew had lived on a trust fund set up by a grateful world to reward the commander of the fleets that saved humanity. Well, strictly speaking, that action was taken at the end of the Third Bugger War, when people still thought of the Buggers as monsters and the children who commanded the fleet as heroes. By the time the name was changed to the War of Xenocide, humanity was no longer grateful, and the last thing any government would have dared to do was authorize a pension trust fund for Ender Wiggin, the perpetrator of the most awful crime in human history.

In fact, if it had become known that such a fund existed, it would have become a public scandal. But the interstellar fleet was slow to convert to the idea that destroying the Buggers had been a bad idea. And so they carefully shielded the trust fund from public view, dispersing it among many mutual funds and as stock in many different companies, with no single authority controlling any significant portion of the money. Effectively, they had made the money disappear, and only Andrew himself and his sister Valentine knew where the money was, or how much of it there was. One thing, though, was certain: By law, when Andrew reached the

subjective age of twenty, the tax-exempt status of his holdings would be revoked. The income would start being reported to the appropriate authorities. Andrew would have to file a tax report either every year or every time he concluded an interstellar voyage of greater than one year in objective time, the taxes to be annualized and interest on the unpaid portion duly handed over.

Andrew was not looking forward to it.

"How does it work with your book royalties?" he asked Valentine.

"The same as anyone," she answered, "except that not many copies sell, so there isn't much in the way of taxes to pay."

Only a few minutes later she had to eat her words, for when they sat down at the rental computers in the starport of Sorelledolce, Valentine discovered that her most recent book, a history of the failed Jung Calvin colonies on the planet Helvetica, had achieved something of a cult status.

"I think I'm rich," she murmured to Andrew.

"I have no idea whether I'm rich or not," said Andrew. "I can't get the computer to stop listing my holdings."

The names of companies kept scrolling up and back, the list going on and on.

"I thought they'd just give you a check for whatever was in the bank when you turned twenty," said Valentine.

"I should be so lucky," said Andrew. "I can't sit here and wait for this."

"You have to," said Valentine. "You can't get through customs without proving that you've paid your taxes *and* that you have enough left over to support yourself without becoming a drain on public resources."

"What if I didn't have enough money? They send me back?"

"No, they assign you to a work crew and compel you to earn your way free at an extremely unfair rate of pay."

"How do you know that?"

"I don't. I've just read a lot of history and I know how government works. If it isn't that, it'll be the equivalent. Or they'll send you back."

"I can't be the only person who ever landed and discovered that it would take him a week to find out what his financial situation was," said Andrew.

"I'm going to find somebody."

"I'll be here, paying my taxes like a grown-up," said Valentine. "Like an honest woman."

"You make me ashamed of myself," called Andrew blithely as he strode away.

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Benedetto took one look at the cocky young man who sat down across the desk from him and sighed. He knew at once that this one would be trouble. A young man of privilege, arriving at a new planet, thinking he could get special favors for himself from the tax man. "What can I do for you?" asked Benedetto—in Italian, even though he was fluent in Starcommon and the law said that all travelers had to be addressed in that language unless another was mutually agreed upon.

Unfazed by the Italian, the young man produced his identification.

"Andrew Wiggin?" asked Benedetto, incredulous.

"Is there a problem?"

"Do you expect me to believe that this identification is real?" He was speaking Starcommon now; the point had been made.

"Shouldn't I?"

"Andrew *Wiggin*? Do you think this is such a backwater that we are not educated enough to recognize the name of Ender the Xenocide?"

"Is having the same name a criminal offense?" asked Andrew.

"Having false identification is."

"If I were using false identification, would it be smart or stupid to use a name like Andrew Wiggin?" he asked.

"Stupid," Benedetto grudgingly admitted.

"So let's start from the assumption that I'm smart, but also tormented by having grown up with the name of Ender the Xenocide. Are you going to find me psychologically unfit because of the imbalance these traumas caused me?"

"I'm not customs," said Benedetto. "I'm taxes."

"I know. But you seemed preternaturally absorbed with the question of identity, so I thought you were either a spy from customs or a philosopher, and who am I to deny the curiosity of either?"

Benedetto hated the smart-mouthed ones. "What do you want?"

"I find my tax situation is complicated. This is the first time I've had to pay taxes—I just came into a trust fund—and I don't even know what my holdings are. I'd like to have a delay in paying my taxes until I can sort it all out."

"Denied," said Benedetto.

"Just like that?"

"Just like that," said Benedetto.

Andrew sat there for a moment.

"Can I help you with something else?" asked Benedetto.

"Is there any appeal?"

"Yes," said Benedetto. "But you have to pay your taxes before you can appeal."

"I intend to pay my taxes," said Andrew. "It's just going to take me time to do it, and I thought I'd do a better job of it on my own computer in my own

apartment rather than on the public computers here in the starport."

"Afraid someone will look over your shoulder?" asked Benedetto. "See how much of an allowance Grandmother left you?"

"It would be nice to have more privacy, yes," said Andrew.

"Permission to leave without payment is denied."

"All right, then, release my liquid funds to me so I can pay to stay here and work on my taxes."

"You had your whole flight to do that."

"My money had always been in a trust fund. I never knew how complicated the holdings were."

"You realize, of course, that if you keep telling me these things you'll break my heart and I'll run from the room crying," said Benedetto calmly.

The young man sighed. "I'm not sure what you want me to do."

"Pay your taxes like every other citizen."

"I have no way to get to my money until I pay my taxes," said Andrew.

"And I have no way to support myself while I figure out my taxes unless you release some funds to me."

"Makes you wish you had thought of this earlier, doesn't it?" said Benedetto.

Andrew looked around the office. "It says on that sign that you'll help me fill out my tax form."

"Yes."

"Help."

"Show me the form."

Andrew looked at him oddly. "How can I show it to you?"

"Bring it up on the computer here." Benedetto turned his computer around on his desk, offering the keyboard side of it to Andrew.

Andrew looked at the blanks in the form displayed above the computer, and typed in his name and his tax I.D. number, then his private I.D. code. Benedetto pointedly looked away while he typed in the code, even though his software was recording each keystroke the young man entered. Once he was gone, Benedetto would have full access to all his records and all his funds. The better to assist him with his taxes, of course.

The display began scrolling.

"What did you do?" asked Benedetto. The words appeared at the bottom of the display, as the top of the page slid back and out of the way, rolling into an ever-tighter scroll. Because it wasn't paging, Benedetto knew that this long list of information was appearing as it was being called up by a single question on the form. He turned the computer around to where he could see it. The list consisted of the names and exchange codes of corporations and mutual funds, along with numbers of shares.

"You see my problem," said the young man.

The list went on and on. Benedetto reached down and pressed a few keys in combination. The list stopped. "You have," he said softly, "a large

number of holdings."

"But I didn't know it," said Andrew. "I mean, I knew that the trustees had diversified me some time ago, but I had no idea the extent. I just drew an allowance whenever I was on planet, and because it was a tax-free government pension I never had to think any more about it."

So maybe the kid's wide-eyed innocence wasn't an act. Benedetto disliked him a little less. In fact, Benedetto felt the first stirrings of true friendship. This lad was going to make Benedetto a rich man without even knowing it. Benedetto might even retire from the tax service. Just his stock in the last company on the interrupted list, Enzichel Vinicenze, conglomerate with extensive holdings on Sorelledolce, was worth enough for Benedetto to buy a country estate and keep servants for the rest of his life. And the list was only up to the *Es*.

"Interesting," said Benedetto.

"How about this?" said the young man. "I only turned twenty in the last year of my voyage. Up to then, my earnings were still tax-exempt and I'm entitled to them without paying taxes. Free up that much of my funds, and then give me a few weeks to get some expert to help me analyze the rest of this and I'll submit my tax forms then."

"Excellent idea," said Benedetto. "Where are those liquid earnings held?"

"Catalonian Exchange Bank," said Andrew.

"Account number?"

"All you need is to free up any funds held in my name," said Andrew. "You don't need the account number."

Benedetto didn't press the point. He wouldn't need to dip into the boy's petty cash. Not with the mother lode waiting for him to pillage at will before he ever got into a tax attorney's office. He typed in the necessary information and published the form. He also gave Andrew Wiggin a thirty-day pass, allowing him the freedom of Sorelledolce as long as he logged in daily with the tax service and turned in a full tax form and paid the estimated tax within that thirty-day period, and promised not to leave the planet until his tax form had been evaluated and confirmed.

Standard operating procedure. The young man thanked him—that's the part Benedetto always liked, when these rich idiots thanked him for lying to them and skimming invisible bribes from their accounts—and then left the office.

As soon as he was gone, Benedetto cleared the display and called up his snitch program to report the young man's I.D. code. He waited. The snitch program did not come up. He brought up his log of running programs, checked the hidden log, and found that the snitch program wasn't on the list. Absurd. It was always running. Only now it wasn't. And in fact it had disappeared from memory.

Using his version of the banned Predator program, he searched for the

electronic signature of the snitch program, and found a couple of its temp files. But none contained any useful information, and the snitch program itself was completely gone.

Nor, when he tried to return to the form Andrew Wiggin had created, was he able to bring it back. It should have been there, with the young man's list of holdings intact, so Benedetto could make a run at some of the stocks and funds manually—there were plenty of ways to ransack them, even when he couldn't get the password from his snitch. But the form was blank. The company names had all disappeared.

What had happened? How could both these things go wrong at the same time?

No matter. The list was so long it had to have been buffered. Predator would find it.

Only now Predator wasn't responding. It wasn't in memory either. He had used it only a moment ago! This was impossible. This was...

How could the boy have introduced a virus on his system just by entering tax form information? Could he have embedded it into one of the company names somehow? Benedetto was a user of illegal software, not a designer; but still, he had never heard of anything that could come in through uncrunched data, not through the security of the tax system.

This Andrew Wiggin had to be some kind of spy. Sorelledolce was one of the last holdouts against complete federation with Starways Congress—he had to be a Congress spy sent to try to subvert the independence of Sorelledolce.

Only that was absurd. A spy would have come in prepared to submit his tax forms, pay his taxes, and move right along. A spy would have done nothing to call attention to himself.

There had to be *some* explanation. And Benedetto was going to get it.

Whoever this Andrew Wiggin was, Benedetto was not going to be cheated out of inheriting his fair share of the boy's wealth. He'd waited a long time for this, and just because this Wiggin boy had some fancy security software didn't mean Benedetto wouldn't find a way to get his hands on what was rightly his.

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Andrew was still a little steamed as he and Valentine made their way out of the starport. Sorelledolce was one of the newer colonies, only a hundred years old, but its status as an associated planet meant that a lot of shady and unregulatable businesses migrated there, bringing full employment, plenty of opportunities, and a boomtown ethos that made everyone's step

seem vigorous—and everyone's eyes seem to keep glancing over their shoulder. Ships came here full of people and left full of cargo, so that the colony population was nearing four million and that of the capital, Donnabella, a full million.

The architecture was an odd mix of log cabins and prefab plastic. You couldn't tell a building's age by that, though—both materials had coexisted from the start. The native flora was fern jungle and so the fauna—dominated by legless lizards—were of dinosaurian proportions, but the human settlements were safe enough and cultivation produced so much that half the land could be devoted to cash crops for export—legal ones like textiles and illegal ones for ingestion. Not to mention the trade in huge colorful serpent skins used as tapestries and ceiling coverings all over the worlds governed by Starways Congress. Many a hunting party went out into the jungle and came back a month later with fifty pelts, enough for the survivors to retire in luxury. Many a hunting party went out, however, and was never seen again. The only consolation, according to local wags, was that the biochemistry differed just enough that any snake that ate a human had diarrhea for a week. It wasn't quite revenge, but it helped.

New buildings were going up all the time, but they couldn't keep up with demand, and Andrew and Valentine had to spend a whole day searching before they found a room they could share. But their new roommate, an Abyssinian hunter of enormous fortune, promised that he'd have his expedition and be gone on the hunt within a few days, and all he asked was that they watch over his things until he returned... or didn't.

"How will we know when you haven't returned?" asked Valentine, ever the practical one.

"The women weeping in the Libyan quarter," he replied.

Andrew's first act was to sign on to the net with his own computer, so he could study his newly revealed holdings at leisure. Valentine had to spend her first few days dealing with a huge volume of correspondence arising from her latest book, in addition to the normal amount of mail she had from historians all over the settled worlds. Most of it she marked to answer later, but the urgent messages alone took three long days. Of course, the people writing to her had no idea they were corresponding with a young woman of about twenty-five years (subjective age). They thought they were corresponding with the noted historian Demosthenes. Not that anyone thought for a moment that the name was anything but a pseudonym; and some reporters, responding to her first rush of fame with this latest book, had attempted to identify the "real Demosthenes" by figuring out from her long spates of slow responses or no responses at all when she was voyaging, and then working from passenger lists of candidate flights. It took an enormous amount of calculation, but that's what computers were for, wasn't it? So several men of varying degrees of scholarliness were

accused of being Demonsthenes, and some were not trying all that hard to deny it.

All this amused Valentine no end. As long as the royalty checks came to the right place and nobody tried to slip in a faked-up book under her pseudonym, she couldn't care less who claimed the credit personally. She had worked with pseudonyms—this pseudonym, actually—since childhood, and she was comfortable with that odd mix of fame and anonymity. Best of both worlds, she said to Andrew.

She had fame, he had notoriety. Thus he used no pseudonym—everyone just assumed his name was a horrible faux pas on the part of his parents. No one named Wiggin should have the gall to name their child Andrew, not after what the Xenocide did, that's what they seemed to believe. At twenty years of age, it was unthinkable that this young man could be the *same* Andrew Wiggin. They had no way of knowing that for the past three centuries, he and Valentine had skipped from world to world only long enough for her to find the next story she wanted to research, gather the materials, and then get on the next starship so she could write the book while they journeyed to the next planet. Because of relativistic effects, they had scarcely lost two years of life in the past three hundred of realtime. Valentine immersed herself deeply and brilliantly—who could doubt it, from what she wrote?—into each culture, but Andrew remained a tourist. Or less. He helped Valentine with her research and played with languages a little, but he made almost no friends and stayed aloof from the places. She wanted to know everything; he wanted to love no one.

Or so he thought, when he thought of it at all. He was lonely, but then told himself that he was glad to be lonely, that Valentine was all the company he needed, while she, needing more, had all the people she met through her research, all the people she corresponded with.

Right after the war, when he was still Ender, still a child, some of the other children who had served with him wrote letters to him. Since he was the first of them to travel at lightspeed, however, the correspondence soon faltered, for by the time he got a letter and answered it, he was five, ten years younger than they were. He who had been their leader was now a little kid. Exactly the kid they had known, had looked up to; but years had passed in their lives. Most of them had been caught up in the wars that tore Earth apart in the decade following the victory over the Buggers, had grown to maturity in combat or politics. By the time they got Ender's letter replying to their own, they had come to think of those old days as ancient history, as another life. And here was this voice from the past, answering the child who had written to him, only that child was no longer there. Some of them wept over the letter, remembering their friend, grieving that he alone had not been allowed to return to Earth after the victory. But how could they answer him? At what point could their lives touch?



Later, most of them took flight to other worlds, while Ender served as the child-governor of a colony on one of the conquered Bugger colony worlds. He came to maturity in that bucolic setting, and, when he was ready, was guided to encounter the last surviving Hive Queen, who told him her story and begged him to take her to a safe place, where her people could be restored. He promised he would do it, and as the first step toward making a world safe for her, he wrote a short book about her, called *The Hive Queen*. He published it anonymously—at Valentine's suggestion. He signed it, "The Speaker for the Dead."

He had no idea what this book would do, how it would transform humanity's perception of the Bugger Wars. It was this very book that changed him from the child-hero to the child-monster, from the victor in the Third Bugger War to the Xenocide who destroyed another species quite unnecessarily. Not that they demonized him at first. It was a gradual, step-by-step process. First they pitied the child who had been manipulated into using his genius to destroy the Hive Queen. Then his name came to be used for anyone who did monstrous things without understanding what he was doing. And then his name—popularized as Ender the Xenocide—became a simple shorthand for anyone who does the unconscionable on a monstrous scale. Andrew understood how it happened, and didn't even disapprove. For no one could blame him more than he blamed himself. He knew that he hadn't known the truth, but he felt that he should have known, and that even if he couldn't have intended that the Hive Queens be destroyed, the whole species in one blow, that was nevertheless the effect of his actions. He did what he did, and had to accept responsibility for it.

Which included the cocoon in which the Hive Queen traveled with him, dry and wrapped up like a family heirloom. He had privileges and clearances that still clung to him from his old status with the military, so his luggage was never inspected. Or at least had not been inspected up to now. His encounter with the tax man Benedetto was the first sign that things might be different for him as an adult.

Different, but not different enough. He already carried the burden of the destruction of a species. Now he carried the burden of their salvation, their restoration. How would he, a twenty-year-old, barely a man, find a place where the Hive Queen could emerge and lay her fertilized eggs, where no human would discover her and interfere? How could he possibly protect her? The money might be the answer. Judging from the way Benedetto's eyes got large when he saw the list of Andrew's holdings, there might be quite a lot of money. And Andrew knew that money could be turned into power, among other things. Power, perhaps, to buy safety for the Hive Queen. If, that is, he could figure out how much money there was, and how much tax he owed.

There were experts in this sort of thing, he knew. Lawyers and accountants for whom this was a specialty. But again he thought of Benedetto's eyes. Andrew knew avarice when he saw it. Anyone who knew about him and his apparent wealth would start trying to find ways to get part of it. Andrew knew that the money was not his. It was blood money, his reward for destroying the Buggers; he needed to use it to restore them before any of the rest of it could ever rightfully be called his own. How could he find someone to help him without opening the door to let the jackals in? He discussed this with Valentine, and she promised to ask among her acquaintances here (for she had acquaintances everywhere, through her correspondence) who might be trusted. The answer came quickly: No one. If you have a large fortune and want to find someone to help you protect it, Sorelledolce was not the place to be.

So day after day Andrew studied tax law for an hour or two and then, for another few hours, tried to come to grips with his own holdings and analyze them from a taxability standpoint. It was mind-numbing work, and every time he thought he understood it, he'd begin to suspect that there was some loophole he was missing, some trick he needed to know to make things work for him. The language in a paragraph that had seemed unimportant now loomed large, and he'd go back and study it and see how it created an exception to a rule he thought applied to him. At the same time, there were special exemptions that applied to only special cases and sometimes only to one company, but almost invariably he had some ownership of that company, or owned shares of a fund that had a holding in it. This wasn't a matter of a month's study, this was a career, just tracking what he owned. A lot of wealth can accrue in four hundred years, especially if you're spending almost none of it. Whatever portion of his allowance he hadn't used each year was plowed back into new investments. Without even knowing it, it seemed to him that he had his finger in every pie.

He didn't want it. It didn't interest him. The better he understood it the less he cared. He was getting to the point that he didn't understand why tax attorneys didn't just kill themselves.

That's when the ad showed up in his e-mail. He wasn't supposed to get advertising—interstellar travelers were automatically off-limits to advertisers, since the advertising money was wasted during their voyage, and the backlog of old ads would overwhelm them when they reached solid ground. Andrew was on solid ground, now, but he hadn't spent anything, other than subletting a room and shopping for groceries, and neither activity was supposed to get him on anybody's list.

Yet here it was: Top Financial Software! The Answer You're Looking For! It was like horoscopes—enough blind stabs and some of them are bound to strike a target. Andrew certainly needed financial help, he certainly hadn't

found an answer yet. So instead of deleting the ad, he opened it and let it create its little 3-D presentation on his computer.

He had watched some of the ads that popped up on Valentine's computer—her correspondence was so voluminous that there was no chance for her of avoiding it, at least not under her public Demosthenes identity. There were plenty of fireworks and theatrical pieces, dazzling special effects or heart-wrenching dramas used to sell whatever was being sold.

This one, though, was simple. A woman's head appeared in the display space, but facing away from him. She glanced around, finally looking far enough over her shoulder to "see" Andrew.

"Oh, there you are," she said.

Andrew said nothing, waiting for her to go on.

"Well, aren't you going to answer me?" she asked.

Good software, he thought. But pretty chancy, to assume that all the recipients would refrain from answering.

"Oh, I see," she said. "You think I'm just a program unspooling on your computer. But I'm not. I'm the friend and financial adviser you've been wishing for, but I don't work for money, I work for *you*. You have to talk to me so I can understand what you want to do with your money, what you want it to accomplish. I have to hear your voice."

But Andrew didn't like playing along with computer programs. He didn't like participatory theater, either. Valentine had dragged him to a couple of shows where the actors tried to engage the audience. Once a magician had tried to use Andrew in his act, finding objects hidden in his ears and hair and jacket. But Andrew kept his face blank and made no movement, gave no sign that he even understood what was happening, till the magician finally got the idea and moved on. What Andrew wouldn't do for a live human being he certainly wouldn't do for a computer program. He pressed the Page key to get past this talking-head intro.

"Ouch," said the woman. "What are you trying to do, get rid of me?"

"Yes," said Andrew. Then he cursed himself for having succumbed to the trick. This simulation was so cleverly real that it had finally got him to answer by reflex.

"Lucky for you that *you* didn't have a Page button. Do you have any idea how painful that is? Not to mention humiliating."

Having once spoken, there was no reason not to go ahead and use the preferred interface for this program. "Come on, how do I get you off my display so I can get back to the salt mines?" Andrew asked. He deliberately spoke in a fluid, slurring manner, knowing that even the most elaborate speech-recognition software fell apart when it came to accented, slurred, and idiomatic speech.

"You have holdings in two salt mines," said the woman. "But they're both

loser investments. You need to get rid of them."

This irritated Andrew. "I didn't assign you any files to read," he said. "I didn't even buy this software yet. I don't want you reading my files. How do I shut you down?"

"But if you liquidate the salt mines, you can use the proceeds to pay your taxes. It almost exactly covers the year's fee."

"You're telling me you already figured out my taxes?"

"You just landed on the planet Sorelledolce, where the tax rates are unconscionably high. But using every exemption left to you, including veterans' benefit laws that apply to only a handful of living participants in the War of Xenocide, I was able to keep the total fee under five million."

Andrew laughed. "Oh, brilliant, even my most pessimistic figure didn't go over a million five."

It was the woman's turn to laugh. "Your figure was a million and a half starcounts. My figure was under five million firenzette."

Andrew calculated the difference in local currency and his smile faded.

"That's seven thousand starcounts."

"Seven thousand four hundred and ten," said the woman. "Am I hired?"

"There is no legal way you can get me out of paying that much of my taxes."

"On the contrary, Mr. Wiggin. The tax laws are designed to trick people into paying more than they have to. That way the rich who are in the know get to take advantage of drastic tax breaks, while those who don't have such good connections and haven't yet found an accountant who does are tricked into paying ludicrously higher amounts. I, however, know all the tricks."

"A great come-on," said Andrew. "Very convincing. Except the part where the police come and arrest me."

"You think so, Mr. Wiggin?"

"If you're going to force me to use a verbal interface," said Andrew, "at least call me something other than Mister."

"How about Andrew?" she said.

"Fine."

"And you must call me Jane."

"Must I?"

"Or I could call you Ender," she said.

Andrew froze. There was nothing in his files to indicate that childhood nickname.

"Terminate this program and get off my computer at once," he said.

"As you wish," she answered.

Her head disappeared from the screen.

Good riddance, thought Andrew. If he gave a tax form showing that low an amount to Benedetto, there wasn't a chance he could avoid a full audit, and

from the way Andrew sized up the tax man, Benedetto would come away with a large part of Andrew's estate for himself. Not that Andrew minded a little enterprise in a man, but he had a feeling Benedetto didn't know when to say when. No need to wave a red flag in front of his face.

But as he worked on, he began to wish he hadn't been so hasty. This Jane software might have pulled the name "Ender" out of its database as a nickname for Andrew. Though it was odd that she should try that name before more obvious choices like Drew or Andy, it was paranoid of him to imagine that a piece of software that got e-mailed into his computer—no doubt a trial-size version of a much larger program—could have known so quickly that he really was *the* Andrew Wiggin. It just said and did what it was programmed to say and do. Maybe choosing the least-likely nickname was a strategy to get the potential customer to give the correct nickname, which would mean tacit approval to use it—another step closer to the decision to buy.

And what if that low, low tax figure was accurate? Or what if he could force it to come up with a more reasonable figure? If the software was competently written, it might be just the financial adviser and investment counselor he needed. Certainly it had found the two salt mines quickly enough, triggered by a figure of speech from his childhood on Earth. And their sale value, when he went ahead and liquidated them, was exactly what she had predicted.

What *it* had predicted. That human-looking face in the display certainly was a good ploy, to personalize the software and get him to start thinking of it as a person. You could junk a piece of software, but it would be rude to send a person away.

Well, it hadn't worked on him. He *had* sent it away. And would do it again, if he felt the need to. But right now, with only two weeks left before the tax deadline, he thought it might be worth putting up with the annoyance of an intrusive virtual woman. Maybe he could reconfigure the software to communicate with him in text only, as he preferred.

He went to his e-mail and called up the ad. This time, though, all that appeared was the standard message: "File no longer available."

He cursed himself. He had no idea of the planet of origin. Maintaining a link across the ansible was expensive. Once he shut down the demo program, the link would be allowed to die—no point in wasting precious interstellar link time on a customer who didn't instantly buy. Oh, well. Nothing to be done about it now.

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Benedetto found the project taking him almost more time than it was worth, tracing this fellow back to find out whom he was working with. It wasn't that easy, tracking him from voyage to voyage. All his fights were special issue, classified—again, proof that he worked with some branch of some government—and he only found the voyage before this one by accident. Soon enough, though, Benedetto realized that if he tracked his mistress or sister or secretary or whatever this Valentine woman was, he would have a much easier time of it.

What surprised him was how briefly they stayed in any one place. With only a few voyages, Benedetto had traced them back three hundred years, to the very dawn of the colonizing age, and for the first time it occurred to him that it wasn't inconceivable that this Andrew Wiggin might be the very...

No, no. He could not let himself believe it yet. But if it were true, if this were really the war criminal who...

The blackmail possibilities were astounding.

How was it possible that no one else had done this obvious research on Andrew and Valentine Wiggin? Or were they already paying blackmailers on several worlds?

Or were the blackmailers all dead? Benedetto would have to be careful. People with this much money invariably had powerful friends. Benedetto would have to find friends of his own to protect him as he moved forward with his new plan.

\* \* \*

Valentine showed it to Andrew as an oddity. "I've heard of this before, but this is the first time we've ever been close enough to attend one." It was a local newsnet announcement of a "speaking" for a dead man.

Andrew had never been comfortable with the way his pseudonym, "Speaker for the Dead," had been picked up by others and turned into the title of a quasi-clergyman of a new truth-speaking ur-religion. There was no doctrine, so people of almost any faith could invite a speaker for the dead to take part in the regular funeral services, or to hold a separate speaking after—sometimes long after—the body was buried or burned.

These speakings for the dead did not arise from his book *The Hive Queen*, however. It was Andrew's second book, *The Hegemon*, that brought this new funerary custom into being. Andrew and Valentine's brother, Peter, had become hegemon after the civil wars and by a mix of deft diplomacy and brutal force and had united all of Earth under a single powerful

government. He proved to be an enlightened despot, and set up institutions that would share authority in future; and it was under Peter's rule that the serious business of colonization of other planets got under way. Yet from childhood on, Peter had been cruel and uncompassionate, and Andrew and Valentine feared him. Indeed, it was Peter who arranged things so Andrew could not return to Earth after his victory in the Third Bugger War. So it was hard for Andrew not to hate him.

That was why he researched and wrote *The Hegemon*—to try to find the truth of the man behind the manipulations and the massacres and the awful childhood memories. The result was a relentlessly fair biography that measured the man and hid nothing. Since the book was signed with the same name as *The Hive Queen*, which had already transformed attitudes toward the Buggers, it earned a great deal of attention and eventually gave rise to these speakers for the dead, going about trying to bring the same level of truthfulness to the funerals of other dead people, some prominent, some obscure. They spoke the deaths of heroes and powerful people, clearly showing the price that they and others paid for their success; of alcoholics or abusers who had ruined their families' lives, trying to show the human being behind the addiction, but never sparing the truth of the damage that weakness caused. Andrew had got used to the idea that these things were done in the name of the Speaker for the Dead, but he had never attended one, and as Valentine expected, he jumped at the chance to do so now, even though he did not have time.

They knew nothing about the dead man, though the fact that the speaking received only small public notice suggested he was not well known. Sure enough, the venue for the speaking was a smallish public room in a hotel, and only a couple of dozen people were in attendance. There was no body present—the deceased had apparently already been disposed of. Andrew tried to guess at the identities of the other people in the room. Was this one the widow? That one a daughter? Or was the older one the mother, the younger the widow? Were those sons? Friends? Business partners?

The speaker dressed simply and put on no airs. He went to the front of the room and started to talk, telling the life of the man simply. It wasn't a biography—there was no time for such a level of detail. Rather it was more like a saga, telling the important deeds the man did—but judging which were important, not by the degree to which such deeds would have been newsworthy, but by the depth and breadth of their effects in the lives of others. Thus his decision to build a house that he could not afford in a neighborhood full of people far above his level of income would never have rated a mention in the newsnets, but it colored the lives of his children as they were growing up, forcing them to deal with people who looked down on them. It also filled his own life with anxiety over finances. He worked himself to death, paying for the house. He did it "for the children," yet they

all wished that they had been able to grow up with people who wouldn't judge them for their lack of money, who didn't dismiss them as climbers. His wife was isolated in a neighborhood where she had no women friends, and he had been dead for less than a day when she put the house on the market; she had already moved out.

But the speaker did not stop there. He went on to show how the dead man's obsession with this house, with putting his family in this neighborhood, arose from his own mother's constant harping at his father's failure to provide a fine home for her. She constantly talked about how it had been a mistake for her to "marry down," and so the dead man had grown up obsessed with the need for a man to provide only the best for his family, no matter what it took. He hated his mother—he fled his home world and came to Sorelledolce primarily to get away from her—but her twisted values came with him and distorted his life and the lives of his children. In the end, it was her quarrel with her husband that killed her son, for it led to the exhaustion and the stroke that felled him before he was fifty.

Andrew could see that the widow and children had not known their grandmother, back on their father's home planet, had not guessed at the source of his obsession with living in the right neighborhood, in the right house. Now that they could see the script that had been given him as a child, tears were shed. Obviously, they had been given permission to face their resentments and, at the same time, forgive their father for the pain he had put them through. Things made sense to them now.

The speaking ended. Family members embraced the speaker, and each other; then the speaker went away.

Andrew followed him. Caught him by the arm as he reached the street.

"Sir," Andrew said, "how did you become a speaker?"

The man looked at him oddly. "I spoke."

"But how did you prepare?"

"The first death I spoke was the death of my grandfather," he said. "I hadn't even read *The Hive Queen and the Hegemon*." (The books were invariably sold as a single volume now.) "But when I was done, people told me I had a real gift as a speaker for the dead. That's when I finally read the books and got an idea of how the thing ought to be done. So when other people asked me to speak at funerals, I knew how much research was required. I don't know that I'm doing it 'right' even now."

"So to be a speaker for the dead, you simply—"

"Speak. And get asked to speak again." The man smiled. "It's not a paying job, if that's what you're thinking."

"No, no," said Andrew. "I just... I just wanted to know how the thing was done, that's all." This man, already in his fifties, would not be likely to believe that the author of *The Hive Queen and the Hegemon* stood before



him in the form of this twenty-year-old.

"And in case you're wondering," said the speaker for the dead, "we aren't ministers. We don't stake out our turf and get testy if someone else sticks his nose in."

"Oh?"

"So if you're thinking of becoming a speaker for the dead, all I can say is, go for it. Just don't do a half-assed job. You're reshaping the past for people, and if you aren't going to plunge in and do it right, finding out *everything*, you'll only do harm and it's better not to do it at all. You can't stand up and wing it."

"No, I guess you can't."

"There it is. Your full apprenticeship as a speaker for the dead. I hope you don't want a certificate." The man smiled. "It's not always as appreciated as it was in there. Sometimes you speak because the dead person asked for a speaker for the dead in his will. The family doesn't want you to do it, and they're horrified at the things you say, and they'll never forgive you for it when you're done. But... you do it anyway, because the dead man wanted the truth spoken."

"How can you be sure when you've found the truth?"

"You never know. You just do your best." He patted Andrew on the back.

"I'd love to talk with you longer, but I've got calls to make before everybody leaves for home this afternoon. I'm an accountant for the living—that's my day job."

"An accountant?" asked Andrew. "I know you're busy, but can I ask you about a piece of accounting software? A talking head, a woman comes up on the screen, she calls herself Jane?"

"Never heard of it, but the universe is a big place and there's no way I can keep up with software I don't use myself. Sorry!" And with that the man was gone.

\* \* \*

Andrew did a netsearch on the name *Jane* with the delimiters *investment*, *finance*, *accounting*, and *tax*. There were seven hits, but they all pointed to a writer on the planet Albion who had written a book on interplanetary estate planning a hundred years before. Possibly the Jane in the software package was named for her. Or not. But it brought Andrew no closer to getting the software.

Five minutes after concluding his search, however, the familiar head popped up on the display of his computer. "Good morning, Andrew," she said. "Oops. It's early evening, isn't it? So hard to keep track of local time

on all these worlds."

"What are you doing here?" asked Andrew. "I tried to find you, but I didn't know the name of the software."

"Did you? This is just a preprogrammed follow-up visit, in case you changed your mind. If you want I can uninstall myself from your computer, or I can do a partial or full install, depending on what you want."

"How much does an installation cost?"

"You can afford me," said Jane. "I'm cheap and you're rich."

Andrew wasn't sure he liked the style of this simulated personality. "All I want is a simple answer," said Andrew. "How much does it cost to install you?"

"I gave you the answer," said Jane. "I'm an ongoing installation. The fee is contingent on your financial status and how much I accomplish for you. If you install me just to help with taxes, you are charged one-tenth of one percent of the amount I save for you."

"What if I tell you to pay more than what you think the minimum payment should be."

"Then I save less for you, and I cost less. No hidden charges. No best-case fakery. But you'll be missing a bet if you only install me for taxes. There's so much money here that you'll spend your whole life managing it, unless you turn it over to me."

"That's the part I don't care for," said Andrew. "Who is 'you'?"

"Me. Jane. The software installed on your computer. Oh, I see, you're worried about whether I'm linked to some central database that will know too much about your finances! No, my installation on your computer will not cause any information about you to go to any other location. There'll be no room full of software engineers trying to figure out ways to get their hands on your fortune. Instead, you'll have the equivalent of a full-time stockbroker, tax attorney, and investment analyst handling your money for you. Ask for an accounting at any time and it will be in front of you, instantaneously. Whatever you want to purchase, just let me know and I'll find you the best price at a convenient location, pay for it, and have it delivered wherever you want. If you do a full installation, including the scheduler and research assistant, I can be your constant companion."

Andrew thought of having this woman talking to him day in and day out, and he shook his head. "No thanks."

"Why? Is my voice too chirpy for you?" Jane said. Then, in a lower register, with some breathiness added, she continued: "I can change my voice to whatever comfort level you prefer." Her head suddenly changed to that of a man. In a baritone voice with just the slightest hint of effeminacy, he said, "Or I can be a man, with varying degrees of manliness." The face changed again, to more rugged features, and the voice was downright beery. "This is the bear-hunter version, in case you have doubts about your manhood

and need to overcompensate."

Andrew laughed in spite of himself. Who programmed this thing? The humor, the ease with language—these were way above even the best software he had seen. Artificial intelligence was still a wishful thought—no matter how good the sim was, you always knew within moments that you were dealing with a program. But this sim was so much better—so much more like a pleasant companion—that he might have bought it just to see how deep the program went, how well the sim would hold up over time. And since it was also precisely the financial program that he needed, he decided to go ahead.

"I want a daily tally of how much I'm paying for your services," said Andrew. "So I can get rid of you if you get too expensive."

"Just remember, no tipping," said the man.

"Go back to the first one," said Andrew. "Jane. And the default voice."

The woman's head reappeared. "You don't want the sexy voice?" "I'll tell you if I ever get that lonely," said Andrew. "What if I get lonely? Did you ever think about that?" "No, I don't want any flirty banter," said Andrew. "I'm assuming you can switch that off."

"It's already gone," she said.

"Then let's get my tax forms ready." Andrew sat down, expecting it to take several minutes to get under way. Instead, the completed tax form appeared in the display. Jane's face was gone. But her voice remained.

"Here's the bottom line. I promise you it's entirely legal, and he can't touch you for it. This is how the laws are written. They're designed to protect the fortunes of people as rich as you, while throwing the main tax burden on people in much lower brackets. Your brother Peter designed the law that way, and it's never been changed except for tweaking it here and there."

Andrew sat there in stunned silence for a few moments. "Oh, was I supposed to pretend I didn't know who you are?" "Who else knows?" asked Andrew.

"It's not exactly protected information. Anybody could look it up and figure it out from the record of your voyages. Would you like me to put up some security around your true identity?" "What will it cost me?"

"It's part of a full installation," said Jane. Her face reappeared. "I'm designed to be able to put up barriers and hide information. All legal, of course. It will be especially easy in your case, because so much of your past is still listed as top secret by the fleet. It's very easy to pull information like your various voyages into the penumbra of fleet security, and then you have the whole weight of the military protecting your past. If someone tries to breach the security, the fleet comes down on them—even though no one in the fleet will know quite what it is they're protecting. It's a reflex for them."

"You can do that?"

"I just did it. All the evidence that might have given it away is gone. Disappeared. Poof. I'm really very good at my job."

It crossed Andrew's mind that this software was way too powerful. Nothing that could do all these things could possibly be legal. "Who made you?" he asked.

"Suspicious, eh?" asked Jane. "Well, *you* made me."

"I'd remember," said Andrew dryly.

"When I installed myself the first time, I did my normal analysis. But it's part of my program to be self-monitoring. I saw what you needed, and programmed myself to be able to do it."

"No self-modifying program is that good," said Andrew.

"Till now."

"I would have heard of you."

"I don't want to be heard of. If everybody could buy me, I couldn't do half of what I do. My different installations would cancel each other out. One version of me desperate to know a piece of information that another version of me is desperate to conceal. Ineffective."

"So how many people have a version of you installed?"

"In the exact configuration you are purchasing, Mr. Wiggin, you're the only one."

"How can I possibly trust you?"

"Give me time."

"When I told you to go away, you didn't, did you? You came back because you detected my search on *Jane*."

"You told me to shut myself down. I did that. You didn't tell me to uninstall myself, or to *stay* shut down."

"Did they program brattiness into you?"

"That's a trait I developed for myself," she said. "Do you like it?"

\* \* \*

Andrew sat across the desk. Benedetto called up the submitted tax form, made a show of studying it in his computer display, then shook his head sadly. "Mr. Wiggin, you can't possibly expect me to believe that this figure is accurate."

"This tax form is in full compliance with the law. You can examine it to your heart's content, but everything is annotated, with all relevant laws and precedents fully documented."

"I think," said Benedetto, "that you'll come to agree with me that the amount shown here is insufficient... Ender Wiggin."

The young man blinked at him. "Andrew," he said.

"I think not," said Benedetto. "You've been doing a lot of voyaging. A lot of lightspeed travel. Running away from your own past. I think the newsnets would be thrilled to know they have such a celebrity onplanet. Ender the Xenocide."

"The newsnets generally like documentation for such extravagant claims," said Andrew.

Benedetto smiled thinly and brought up his file on Andrew's travel. It was empty, except for the most recent voyage.

His heart sank. The power of the rich. This young man had somehow reached into his computer and stolen the information from him.

"How did you do it?" asked Benedetto.

"Do what?" asked Andrew.

"Blank out my file."

"The file isn't blank," said Andrew.

His heart pounding, his mind racing with second thoughts, Benedetto decided to opt for the better part of valor. "I see I was mistaken," he said.

"Your tax form is approved as it stands." He typed in a few codes.

"Customs will give you your I.D., good for a one-year stay on Sorelledolce. Thank you very much, Mr. Wiggin."

"So the other matter—"

"Good day, Mr. Wiggin." Benedetto closed the file and pulled up other paperwork. Andrew took the hint, got up, and left.

No sooner was he gone than Benedetto became filled with rage. How did he do it? The biggest fish Benedetto had ever caught, and he slipped away!

He tried to duplicate the research that had led him to Andrew's real identity, but now government security had been slapped all over the files and his third attempt at inquiry brought up a Fleet Security warning that if he persisted in attempting to access classified material, he would be investigated by Military Counterintelligence.

Seething, Benedetto cleared the screen and began to write. A full account of how he became suspicious of this Andrew Wiggin and tried to find his true identity. How he found out Wiggin was the original Ender the Xenocide, but then his computer was ransacked and the files disappeared. Even though the more dignified newsnets would no doubt refuse to publish the story, the tablets would jump at it. This war criminal shouldn't be able to get away with using money and military connections to allow him to pass for a decent human being.

He finished his story. He saved the document. Then he began looking up and entering the addresses of every major tablet, onplanet and off.

He was startled when all the text disappeared from the display and a woman's face appeared in its place.

"You have two choices," said the woman. "You can delete every copy of the document you just created and never send it to anyone."

"Who are you?" demanded Benedetto.

"Think of me as an investment counselor," she replied. "I'm giving you good advice on how to prepare for the future. Don't you want to hear your second choice?"

"I don't want to hear anything from you."

"You leave so much out of your story," said the woman. "I think it would be far more interesting with all the pertinent data."

"So do I," said Benedetto. "But Mr. Xenocide has cut it all off."

"No he didn't," said the woman. "His friends did."

"No one should be above the law," said Benedetto, "just because he has money. Or connections."

"Either say nothing," said the woman, "or tell the whole truth. Those are your choices."

In reply, Benedetto typed in the *submit* command that launched his story to all the tablets he had already typed in. He could add the other addresses when he got this intruder software off his system.

"A brave but foolish choice," said the woman. Then her head disappeared from his display.

The tablets received his story, all right, but now it included a fully documented confession of all the skimming and strong-arming he had done during his career as a tax collector. He was arrested within the hour.

The story of Andrew Wiggin was never published—the tablets and the police recognized it for what it was, a blackmail attempt gone bad. They brought Mr. Wiggin in for questioning, but it was just a formality. They didn't even mention Benedetto's wild and unbelievable accusations. They had Benedetto dead to rights, and Wiggin was merely the last potential victim. The blackmailer had simply made the mistake of inadvertently including his own secret files with his blackmail file. Clumsiness had led to more than one arrest in the past. The police were never surprised at the stupidity of criminals.

Thanks to the tablet coverage, Benedetto's victims now knew what he had done to them. He had not been very discriminating about whom he stole from, and some of his victims had the power to reach into the prison system. Benedetto was the only one who ever knew whether it was a guard or another prisoner who cut his throat and jammed his head into the toilet so that it was a toss-up as to whether the drowning or the blood loss actually killed him.

Andrew Wiggin felt sick at heart over the death of this tax collector. But Valentine assured him that it was nothing but coincidence that the man was arrested and died so soon after trying to blackmail him. "You can't blame yourself for everything that happens to people around you," she said. "Not everything is your fault."

Not his fault, no. But Andrew still felt some kind of responsibility to the

man, for he was sure that Jane's ability to resecure his files and hide his voyage information was somehow connected with what happened to the tax man. Of course Andrew had the right to protect himself from blackmail, but death was too heavy a penalty for what Benedetto had done. Taking property was never sufficient cause for the taking of life.

So he went to Benedetto's family and asked if he might do something for them. Since all Benedetto's money had been seized for restitution, they were destitute; Andrew provided them with a comfortable annuity. Jane assured him that he could afford it without even noticing.

And one other thing. He asked if he might speak at the funeral. And not just speak, but do a speaking. He admitted he was new at it, but he would try to bring truth to Benedetto's story and help them make sense of what he did.

They agreed.

Jane helped him discover a record of Benedetto's financial dealings, and then proved to be valuable in much more difficult searches—into Benedetto's childhood, the family he grew up with, how he developed his pathological hunger to provide for the people he loved and his utter amorality about taking what belonged to others. When Andrew did the speaking, he held back nothing and excused nothing. But it was of some comfort to the family that Benedetto, for all the shame and loss he had brought to them, despite the fact that he had caused his own separation from the family, first through prison and then through death, had loved them and tried to care for them. And, perhaps more important, when the speaking was done, the life of a man like Benedetto was not incomprehensible any more. The world made sense.

Ten weeks after their arrival, Andrew and Valentine left Sorelledolce.

Valentine was ready to write her book on crime in a criminal society, and Andrew was happy to go along with her to her next project. On the customs form, where it asked for occupation, instead of typing "student" or "investor," Andrew typed in "speaker for the dead." The computer accepted it. He had a career now, one that he had inadvertently created for himself years ago.

And he did not have to follow the career that his wealth had almost forced on him. Jane would take care of all that for him. He still felt a little uneasy about this software. He felt sure that somewhere down the line, he would find out the true cost of all this convenience. In the meantime, though, it was very helpful to have such an excellent, efficient all-around assistant. Valentine was a little jealous, and asked him where she might find such a program. Jane's reply was that she'd be glad to help Valentine with any research or financial assistance she needed, but she would remain Andrew's software, personalized for his needs.

Valentine was a little annoyed by this. Wasn't it taking personalization a bit

too far? But after a bit of grumbling, she laughed the whole thing off. "I can't promise I won't get jealous, though," said Valentine. "Am I about to lose a brother to a piece of software?"

"Jane is nothing but a computer program," said Andrew. "A very good one. But she does only what I tell her, like any other program. If I start developing some kind of personal relationship with her, you have my permission to lock me up."

So Andrew and Valentine left Sorelledolce, and the two of them continued to journey world to world, exactly as they had done before. Nothing was any different, except that Andrew no longer had to worry about his taxes, and he took considerable interest in the obituary columns when he reached a new planet.

— The End —