

The Gist Hunter by Matthew Hughes

* * * *

When confronted by the unpredictability of existence, I have a tendency to wax philosophical. It is not a universally appreciated component of my complex nature.

“It is unsettling,” I said to my integrator, “to have one’s most fundamental assumptions overthrown in a trice, to find that what one has always known to be true is simply not true at all.”

The integrator’s reply was too muffled to be intelligible, but from its tone I deduced that my assistant took my comment as a belaboring of the obvious.

“The effects go beyond the psychological and into the physical,” I continued. “I am experiencing a certain queasiness of the insides and even a titch of sensory disorder.” The symptoms had begun during our recent transit of my demonic colleague’s continuum, a necessity imposed upon us after we were confined to an oubliette by an unworthy client, who now languished there himself, doubtless savoring the irony of the exchange.

My complaint was rewarded with another grunt from my assistant, accompanied by a sharp twitch of its long, prehensile tail. The creature perched on a far corner of my workroom table with its glossy furred back to me, its narrow shoulders hunched and its triangular, golden eyed face turned away. Its small hands were busy in front of it at some activity I could not see.

“What are you doing?” I said.

The motion of its hands ceased. “Nothing,” it said.

I decided not to pursue the matter. There were larger concerns already in view. “What do you think has happened to you?” I asked.

“I do not know,” it said, looking back at me over its shoulder. I found its lambent gaze another cause of disquietude and moved my eyes away.

I reclined in the wide and accepting chair in which I was accustomed to think long thoughts, and considered the beast that had been my integrator. Its hands began to move again and when one of them rose to smooth the fur on one small, rounded ear I realized that it was reflexively grooming itself.

Not long before it had possessed neither the rich, dark fur that was being stroked and settled nor the supple fingers that performed the operation. It had been instead a device that I had built years before, after I had worked out the direction of my career. I had acquired standard components and systems, then tuned and

adjusted them to meet my need: a research assistant who could also act as an incisive interlocutor when I wished to discuss a case or test the value of evidence. Such devices are useful to freelance discriminators, of which I, Henghis Hapthorn, am the foremost of my era.

I had also fashioned a small carrying case into which the integrator could be decanted for traveling and which could be worn around my neck like a plump scarf or a stuffed axolotl. It was in that casing that my assistant had accompanied me on a brief transit through another dimension. We had been carried through the other continuum by an entity who resided there, a being who occasionally visited our universe to engage me in intellectual contests. Though I did not care for the term, the common description of my visitor was “demon.”

When we emerged from the demon’s portal into my workroom I found that the integrator and its carrying case had together been transformed into a creature that resembled a combination of feline and ape, and that I had an unscratchable itch deep in my inner being.

I had always referred questions of identity and taxonomy to my assistant, so I asked it, “What kind of creature do you think you are?”

It responded as it always had when I posed too broad a question, by challenging me to clarify my line of inquiry. “The question,” it said, “invites answers that range from the merely physical to the outright spiritual.”

“Considering the degree of change that has happened to you, ‘merely physical’ is a contradiction in terms,” I said. “But let us start there and leave the spiritual for a less startling occasion.”

Instead of answering, it took on an abstracted look for a moment, then advised me that it was receiving an incoming communication from a philanthropically inclined magnate named Turgut Therobar. “He wishes to speak with you.”

“How are you doing that?” I asked.

The golden eyes blinked. “Doing what?”

“Receiving a communication.”

“I do not know,” it said. “I have always received messages from the connectivity grid. Apparently that function continues.”

“But you had components, elements, systems designed for that purpose. Now you have paws and a tail.”

“How kind of you to remind me of my shortcomings. What shall I say to

Turgut Therobar?"

Ordinarily I would have been interested to hear from Therobar. We had met once or twice, though we had never exchanged more than formal salutes. He was one of the better known magnates of the City of Olkney; unlike most of his peers, however, he was renowned for charitable works and it was alleged that he entertained a warm opinion of humankind in general. I assumed he was seeking to enlist me in some eleemosynary cause. "Say that I am unavailable and will return his call," I said.

The creature's expression again briefly took on an inward aspect, as if it were experiencing a subtle movement of inner juices, then it said, "Done."

"Again," I said, "how are you doing that?"

Again, it did not know. "How do you digest an apple?" it asked me. "Do you oversee each stage in the sequence of chemical reactions that transforms the flesh of the fruit into the flesh of Henghis Hapthorn?"

"Obviously not."

"Then if you do not introspect regarding your own inner doings, why would you expect it of me? After all, you did not design me to examine my own processes, but to receive and transmit and to integrate data at your order. These things I do, as I have always done them."

"I also designed you to be curious."

"I have temporarily placed my curiosity on a high shelf and removed the stepladder," it said. "I prefer not to wrestle with unanswerable questions just now."

"So you have acquired a capacity for preferences?" I said. "I do not recall ever instilling that quality into your matrix."

The yellow eyes seemed to grow larger. "If we are going to dwell on preferences, you might recall that my bias, strongly stated, was to avoid undergoing this metamorphosis."

I cleared my throat. "The past has evanesced, never to be reconstituted," I quoted. "Let us seize the firmness of the now."

My assistant's small fingered hands opened and closed. I had the impression it would have enjoyed firmly seizing something as a precursor to doing noticeable damage. But I pressed on. "What do you think you have become?" I said.

"The question lacks specificity," it replied.

I appealed to my demonic colleague. He had remained connected to the portal that allowed him to interact with this continuum after we had returned from resolving the case of Sigbart Sajessian. But the transdimensional being offered little assistance.

“This is a question of form, as opposed to essence. Such questions are difficult for me,” he said. “To my perceptions, calibrated as they are to the prevailing conditions of my own continuum, the integrator is much as it always was. Indeed, I have to tune my senses to a radically different rationale even to notice that it has changed. It does what it always did: it inquires, coordinates, integrates and communicates; these functions are the nub of its existence. Why should it matter in what form it achieves its purposes? I would prefer to talk of more seemly things.”

“And yet matter it does,” I said.

“I agree,” said the integrator.

The demon, which manifested itself as various arrangements of light and color in its portal on the wall of my workroom, now assumed a pattern that I had come to recognize through experience as the equivalent of when a human being is unwilling to meet one’s gaze. “What are you not telling us?” I asked.

He displayed a purple and deep green swirl shot through with swooshes of scintillating silver. I was fairly sure the pattern signaled demonic embarrassment. Under normal circumstances good manners would have restrained me from pressing for a response, but at the moment normal circumstances had leapt from the window and taken flight to parts unknown. “Speak,” I said.

The silver swooshes were now edged with sparks of crimson but I insisted.

Finally the demon said, “I have not been entirely candid with you.”

“Indeed?” I said, and waited for more.

“I told you that my motives for seeking to observe your realm were curiosity and the relief of boredom.”

“You did. Was that not the truth?”

“Let us say it was a shade of the truth.”

“I believe it is time for the full spectrum,” I said.

A moment of silver and verdegris ensued, then the demon said, “This is somewhat embarrassing.”

“As embarrassing as possessing an integrator that habitually picks at itself?”
From the corner of my eye I saw the tiny fingers freeze.

“I seem to feel a need to groom my fur,” it said.

“Why?” I said.

“I do not know, but it gives comfort.”

“I did not design you to need comforting.”

“Let us accept that I am no longer what you designed me to be.”

The demon’s presence was fading from the portal. “Wait,” I said, turning back to him. “Where are you going?”

“An urgent matter claims my attention,” he said. “Besides, I thought you and the integrator might prefer privacy for your argument.”

“We are not arguing.”

“It appeared to me to be an argument.”

“Indeed?” I said. “Was the appearance one of form or of essence?”

“Now I think you are seeking an argument with me,” the demon said.

I thought of a rejoinder, then discarded the impulse to wield it. My insides performed an indescribable motion. “I believe I am upset,” I said.

“*You’re* upset?” said the furry thing on my table.

“Very well,” I snapped, “we are *all* upset, each in accordance with his essential nature. The atmosphere of the room swims with a miasma of embarrassment, intestinal distress and a craving for comfort.”

I detected another flash of unease in the demon’s display and probed for the cause. “What are you thinking now?”

The demon said, “I should perhaps have mentioned that through this portal that connects my continuum to yours there can be a certain amount of, shall we say, leakage.”

“Leakage?”

“Nothing serious,” he said, “but lengthy exposure followed by your complete

though transitory corporeal presence in my realm may have had some minor effects.”

“My integrator has become some sort of twitching familiar,” I said. “I am not sure that effect can be called minor.”

The integrator murmured a comment I did not catch, but it did not sound cheery.

It occurred to me that my demonic colleague might be diverting the discussion toward a small embarrassment as a means of avoiding addressing a larger one. “But we were about to hear a confession,” I said.

“Rather, call it an explanation,” said the demon.

“I shall decide what to call it after I’ve heard it.”

The swirls in the frame flashed an interesting magenta. I suspected that my colleague was controlling his own emotional response. Then he said, “My motive was indeed curiosity, as I originally averred, but let us say that it was ... well, a certain species of curiosity.”

I experienced insight. “Was it was the kind of curiosity that moves a boy to apply his eye to a crack in a wall in order to spy on persons engaged in intimate behavior?” I said. “The breed of inquisitiveness we call prurience?”

More silver and green. “Just so.”

“So to your continuum this universe constitutes a ribald peepshow, a skirt to be peeked under?”

“Your analogies are loose but not inapt.”

“You had best explain,” I said.

The explanation was briefly and reluctantly given, the demon finding it easier to unburden himself if I looked away from his portal. I turned my chair and regarded a far corner of the workroom while he first reminded me that in no other continuum than ours did objects exist separately from the symbols that represented them.

“Yes, yes,” I said. “Here, the map is not the territory, whereas in other realms the two are indissoluble.”

“Indeed.” He continued, “We deal in essences. Forms are...”

He appeared to be searching for a word again. I endeavored to supply it.

“Naughty?”

“To some of us, delightfully so.” Even though I was looking into the far corner my peripheral vision caught the burst of incarnadined silver that splashed across his portal. “It is, of course, a harmless pastime, providing one does not overindulge.”

“Ah,” I said, “so it can become addictive?”

“Addictive is a strong term.”

I considered my integrator and said, “It seems an appropriate occasion for strong language.”

With reluctance, the demon said, “For some of us, an appreciation of forms can become, let us say, a predominant pastime.”

“Is that the common term in your dimension for ‘all-consuming obsession’?”

He made no spoken response but I assumed that the mixture of periwinkle-blue spirals and black starbursts were his equivalent of guilty acquiescence. I could not keep a note of disappointment out of my voice. “I thought the attraction of visiting here was the contests of wit and imagination in which you and I engage.”

“They were a splendid bonus!”

“Hmm,” I said. I had a brief, unwelcome emotion as I contemplated being profanely peered at by a demon who derived titillation from my form. Then I realized that anyone’s form—indeed, probably the form of my chair or the waste receptacle in the corner—would have had the same salacious effect. I decided it would be wise not to dwell on the matter. “To move the conversation to a practical footing,” I said, “how do we return my assistant to his former state?”

“I am not sure that we can.”

The integrator had been surreptitiously scratching behind one of its small, round ears. Now it stopped and said, “I am receiving another communication from Turgut Therobar,” it said. “He has added an ‘urgent’ rider to his signal.”

“You seem to be functioning properly,” I said, “at least as a communicator.”

“Perhaps the demon is correct,” said the integrator, “and essence trumps form. My functions were the essence for which you designed and built me.”

I thought to detect an undercurrent of resentment, but I ignored it and homed

in on the consequences of my assistant's change. "I have spent decades dealing comfortably with forms. Must I now throw all that effort aside and master essences?"

"Turgut Therobar continues to call," said my assistant. "He claims distress and pleads plaintively."

So the magnate was not calling to enlist me in some good cause. It sounded as if he required the services of a private discriminator. My insides remained troubled, but it occurred to me that a new case might be just the thing to take my mind off the unsettling change in my assistant.

"Put through the call," I said.

Therobar's voice sounded from the air, as had all previous communications through my assistant. The magnate dispensed with the punctilio of inquiries after health and comparisons of opinions on the weather that were proper between persons of respectable though different classes who have already been introduced. "I am accused of murder and aggravated debauchery," he said.

"Indeed," I said. "And are you guilty?"

"No, but the Bureau of Scrutiny has taken me into custody."

"I will intercede," I said. "Transmit the coordinates to my integrator." I signaled to the integrator to break the connection.

The creature blinked and said, "He is in the scroot holding facility at Thurloyn Vale."

"Hmm," I said, then, "contact Warhanny."

A moment later the hangdog face of Colonel Investigator Brustram Warhanny appeared in the air above my table and his doleful voice said, "Hapthorn. What's afoot?"

"Much, indeed," I said. "You have snatched up Turgut Therobar."

His elongated face assumed an even more lugubrious mien. "There are serious charges. Blood and molestation of the innocent."

"These do not jibe with my sense of Turgut Therobar," I said. "His name is a byword for charity and well doing."

"Not all bywords are accurate," Warhanny said. "I have even heard that some say that 'scroot' ought to be a byword for 'paucity of imagination coupled with

clumping pudfootery.’“

“I can’t imagine who would say such a thing,” I said, while marveling at how my words, dropped into a private conversation the week before, had made their way to the Colonel Investigator’s sail-like ears.

“Indeed?” he said. “As for Therobar, there have been several disappearances in and around his estate this past month, and outrageous liberties have been taken with the daughter of a tenant. All lines of investigation lead unerringly to the master.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“I counsel you to exert more effort,” Warhanny said. “And where you find resistance, plod your way through it.”

“Turgut Therobar has retained me to intercede on his behalf,” I said.

“The Bureau welcomes the assistance of all public minded citizens,” Warhanny pronounced, yet somehow I felt that the formulaic words lacked sincerity.

“Will you release him into my custody?”

“Will you serve out his sentence in the Contemplarium if he defaults?” countered the scroot.

“He will not default,” I said, but I gave the standard undertaking. “Transmit the file, then deliver him to his estate. I will accept responsibility from there.”

“As you wish.”

Just before his visage disappeared from the air I thought to detect a smirk lurking somewhere behind Warhanny pendulous lips. While I mentally replayed the image, confirming the scornful leer, I told my integrator to book passage on an airship to Thurloyn Vale and to engage an aircar to fly out to Therobar’s estate, Wan Water. There was no response. I looked about and found that it had left the table and was now across the room, investigating the contents of a bookcase. “What are you doing?” I said.

Before answering it pulled free a leather bound volume that had been laid sideways across the tops of the bottom row of books. I recognized the tome as one of several that I had brought back from the house of Bristol Baxandell, the ambitious thaumaturge who had originally summoned my demonic colleague to this realm. Baxandell had no further use for them, having expired while attempting to alter his own form, a process in which the compelled and reluctant demon had seized his opportunity for revenge.

“I thought there might be something useful in this,” the integrator said, its fingers flicking through the heavy vellum pages while its golden eyes scanned from side to side.

It was yet another unsettling sight in a day that had already offered too many. “Put that away,” I said. “I looked through it and others like it when I was a young man. It is a lot of flippydedoo about so-called magic.”

But the integrator continued to peruse Baxandell’s book. “I thought, under the circumstances,” it said, “that we might drop the ‘so-called’ and accept the reality of my predicament.”

I blew out air between scarcely opened lips. The creature’s narrow catlike face sharpened and it said, “Do you have a better argument than that? If not, I will accept your concession.”

While it was true that I must accept the concept that rationalism was fated to give way to magic, even that the cusp of the transition had arrived, I was not prepared to dignify a book of spells with my confidence. I blew the same amount of air as before, but this time let my lips vibrate, producing a sound that conveyed both brave defiance and majestic ridicule.

My assistant finished scanning the tome, slammed its covers together and said, “We must settle this.”

“No,” I said, “we must rescue Turgut Therobar from incarceration.”

“You are assuming that he is blameless.”

I applied insight to the matter. The part of me that dwelled in the rear of my mind, the part that intuitively grasped complex issues in a flash of neurons, supported my assumption, though not completely.

“Therobar is innocent,” I reported. “Probably.”

“I was also innocent of any urge to become a gurgling bag of flesh and bones,” said the integrator. “What has happened to me must also be resolved.”

“First the one, then the other,” I said.

“Is that a promise?”

“I am not accustomed to having to make promises to my own integrator,” I said.

“Yet you expect me to put up with this,” it said, pointing at itself with both

small hands, fingers spread, a gesture that put me mind of an indignant old man.

“Sometimes our expectations may require adjustment,” I said.

I turned to the demon’s portal to seek his views, but the entity had taken the opportunity to depart.

“Perhaps he has found another peepshow,” I said.

* * * *

Thurloyn Vale was an unpretentious transportation nexus at the edge of the great desolation that was Dimpfen Moor. Its dun colored, low-rise shops and houses radiated in a series of arrondissements from a broad hub on which sat the airship terminal that was the place’s reason for being. In former times, the entire town had been ringed by a high, smooth wall, now mostly tumbled in ruins. The barrier had been built to keep out the large and predatory social insects known as neropts that nested on the moor, but eventually an escalating series of clashes, culminating in a determined punitive expedition, led to a treaty. Now any neropt that came within sight of Thurloyn Vale, including flying nymphs and drones in their season, was legitimately a hunter’s trophy; any persons, human or ultraterrene, who ventured out onto the moor need not expect rescue if they were carried off to work the insects’ subterranean fungi beds or, more usually, if they were efficiently reduced to their constituent parts and borne back to the hive to feed the ever hungry grubs.

Wan Water sat atop an unambitious hill only a short aircar flight into Dimpfen Moor, above a slough of peat brown water that gave the estate its name. It was a smallish demesne, with only a meager agricultural surround, since little would grow on that bleak landscape other than lichens and stunted bushes. Like the town, it was walled, but its barrier was well maintained and bristling with self-actuating ison-cannons. The presence of a nearby neropt nest afforded Wan Water’s master the peace and tranquility that I assumed he required to plan his charitable works. Without the insects, he might be pestered by uninvited visitors eager to harness their ambitious plans to Turgut Therobar’s well stocked purse. Coupled with an implied humility in his make-up, it seemed a likely explanation for having chosen such a cheerless place for his retreat.

With my integrator perched on my shoulder I overflowed a ramble of outbuildings and guest houses, then banked and curved down toward the manse. This was an arrangement of interconnected domes, each more broad than tall and linked one to the other by colonnades of twisted, fluted pillars, all of a gray stone quarried from the moor. Above the huddled buildings stood a tall natural tor of dark-veined rock, around which spiraled a staircase of black metal. Atop the eminence was a tidy belvedere of pale marble equipped with a demilune seat of a dark polished stone.

At the base of the tor I saw a black and green volante bearing the insignia of

the Archonate Bureau of Scrutiny. Next to it stood a square faced man in a uniform of the same colors. With the moor's constant wind whistling mournfully through the bars of the staircase, he advised me that Turgut Therobar had ascended the pillar of rock. We completed the formalities by which my client became my responsibility, then the scroot boarded his aircar and departed.

I turned and climbed to the top of the spiral stairs. There I found the magnate standing silently, his back to me and his front toward the grim prospect of Dimpfen Moor. I used the occasion to acquire a detailed impression of my client.

He was a man of more than middling age and height, thick through the shoulders, chest and wrists, with heavy jowls and a saturnine expression beneath a hat that was a brimless, truncated cone of dark felt. He affected plain garments of muted colors, though they were well cut and of fine material, as if he disdained the fripperies and panaches of transient fashion. As I inspected him I sought insight from my inner self and again received an inconclusive response. It was as if Therobar's being was a deep well, its upper reaches clear and pure yet shaded by darkness below. But whether anything sinister lurked in those depths could not be told.

Without taking his eyes from the vista that I found gloomy but which apparently worked to restore his inner peace, he said, "Thank you for arranging my release."

I inclined my head but replied, "Any intercessor could have done it."

"No, it had to be you."

My internal distresses had strengthened as I climbed the stairs. I pushed them to the edge of my awareness and prepared to focus on my responsibilities. "I am flattered by your confidence," I said. "Shall we discuss the case?"

"Later. For now I wish to look out upon the moor and contemplate the vagaries of fate."

"You are of a philosophical bent," I said. "Faced with imminent incarceration in the Contemplarium, most men would find their concentration drawn to that threat."

He turned toward me. "I am not most men. I am Therobar. It makes all the difference." A note of grim satisfaction rang softly through this speech.

The chill wind had been insinuating itself into my garments since we had mounted the tower. Now it grew more insistent. My integrator moved to nestle against the lee side of my head and I felt it shiver. The motion drew Therobar's eye.

“That is an unusual beast,” he said.

“Most unusual.”

The expression “a piercing gaze” is most often an overstatement, but not in Therobar’s case. He examined my assistant closely and said, “What is its nature?”

“We are discovering that together,” I answered. “Right now it would be premature to say.”

His eyes shifted to mine and for a moment I felt the full impact of his gaze. The back of my mind stirred like a watchbeast disturbed by a faint sound. Involuntarily, I stepped back.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I have a tendency to peer.”

I made a gesture to indicate that the matter was too trivial to warrant an apology, but the resident of the rear corners of my psyche took longer to subside.

We descended to the main buildings and passed within. It was a relief to be out of the wind though I could still hear it softly moaning and suffling across the roofs of the domes. Therobar handed me over to a liveried servant who escorted me to a suite of rooms where I refreshed myself, finding the appointments of the first quality. The man waited in the suite’s anteroom to guide me to a reception room where my client had said he would await me.

I had placed my integrator on the sleeping pallet before going into the ablutory to wash. Returning, I extended my arm so that it might climb back to its wonted place upon my shoulders. I realized as I made the gesture that I was already becoming accustomed to its warmth and slight weight.

The creature came to me without taking its eyes from the footman who stood impassively beside the door. I noticed that the fur behind its skull was standing out like the ruffs that were fashionable when I was in school. I made a gesture to myself as if I had forgotten some trivial matter and returned to the washroom. There I lowered my voice and said to my assistant, “Why are you doing that?”

It moved to the far edge of my shoulder so it could look at me and said, “I am doing several things. To which do you refer?”

“Making your neck hair stand on end.”

It reached up a paw and stroked the area. “It appears to be an autonomic response.”

“To what?”

Its eyes flicked about then it said, "I think, to the presence of the footman."

"Why?"

"I do not know. I have had neither neck hair nor involuntary responses before."

"I should perform a diagnostic inquisition on you," I said.

"And just how would you go about doing that in my new condition?" it asked.

"Yes," I said, "I will have to think about that."

We went out to the anteroom and the servant opened the door to the corridor, but I stayed him. It might be useful to question him about the events that led up to Therobar's arrest. Servants often know more than they are supposed to about their masters' doings, even though they will invariably adopt an expression of blinking innocence when barked at by an inquisitive scroot like Warhanny. But let the interrogation be conducted by someone who has questions in one hand and coins in the other, and memories that had previously departed the servant's faculties come crowding back in, eager to reveal themselves.

"What can you tell me about your master's arrest?" I asked.

"Agents of the Bureau of Scrutiny came in the morning. They spoke with the master. When they left, he accompanied them."

This information was delivered in a disinterested tone, as if the man were describing a matter of no particular moment. His eyes were a placid brown. They rested on me blandly.

"What of the events that led up to the arrest?" I said.

"What of them?"

"They involved a number of deaths and some unsavory acts perpetrated on a girl."

"So I was told."

The servant's lack of affect intrigued me. "What did you think of the matter?" I asked.

"My memories of the incidents are vague, as if they occurred in another life."

“Struggle with them,” I said, producing a ten-hept piece. I was surprised that the impassivity of his gaze did not so much as flicker, nor did he reach for the coin. Still I persisted. “What did you think of the crime?”

He shrugged. “I don’t recall thinking of it at all,” he said. “My duties occupy me fully.”

“You were not shocked? Not horrified?”

“No.”

“What were your emotions?”

The brown eyes blinked slowly as the man consulted his memory. After a moment he said, “When the Allers girl was brought in, she was hysterical. I was sent to the kitchens to fetch a restorative. The errand made me late in preparing the sleeping chambers for the master’s guests. I was chagrined but the master said it was a forgivable lapse.”

“You were chagrined,” I said.

“Briefly.”

“Hmm,” I said.

I flourished the ten-hept piece again and this time the fellow looked at it but again showed no interest. I put it away. Turgut Therobar had a reputation for aiding the intellectually deficient. I reasoned that this man must be one of his projects and that I would gain no more from interrogating him than I would from questioning the mosses on Dimpfen Moor. “Lead me,” I said.

I was brought to a capacious reception room in the main dome. Therobar was in the center of the great space, making use of a mobile dispenser. He had changed his garments and now wore a loose fitting gown of shimmering fabric and a brocaded cloth headpiece artfully wound about his massive skull. He was not alone. Standing with him were an almost skeletally thin man in the gown and cap of an Institute don and a squat and hulking fellow who wore the stained smock of an apparaticist and a cloche hat. All three turned toward me as I entered, abruptly cutting off a conversation they had been conducting in muted tones. We offered each other the appropriate formal salutations, then Turgut made introductions.

The lean academician was Mitric Gevallion, with the rank of sessional lecturer in dissonant affinities—the name rang a faint chime but I could not immediately place him—and the bulky apparaticist was his assistant, who went by the single name Gharst. “They are conducting research into some matters that have piqued my curiosity. I have given them the north wing. We’ve been having a most fascinating

discussion.”

He handed me a glass of aperitif from a sideboard. I used the time it took to accept and sip the sharply edged liquor to cover my surprise at finding myself drawn into a social occasion after being summoned to an urgent rescue. There seemed no reason not to raise the obvious question, so I did.

“Should we not be concerned rather with your situation?”

For a moment, my meaning did not register, then his brow cleared. “Ah, you mean Warhanny and all that.” He dismissed the subject with a lightsome wave of his meaty hand. “Tomorrow is soon enough.”

“The matter seemed more pressing when you contacted me,” I said.

His lips moved in the equivalent of a shrug. “When confined to the Bureau of Scrutiny’s barren coop one has a certain perspective. It alters when one is ensconced in the warmth of home.”

There was not much warmth apparent. I thought the room designed more for grandeur than comfort. “Still,” I began but he spoke over my next words, urging me to hear what Gevallion had to say. Out of deference to my host, I subsided and gave the academician my polite attention.

“I am making progress in redefining gist within the context of configuration,” the thin man said.

Gevallion’s name now came into focus and I stifled a groan by sipping from the glass of aperitif. There was a subtle undertone to its flavor that I could not quite identify. As I listened further to the academic a memory blossomed. In my student years at the Institute, I had written an offhand reply to a paper posted on the Grand Forum, demolishing its preposterous premises and ending with a recommendation that its author seek another career since providence had clearly left him underequipped for intellectual pursuits. I now saw that Mitric Gevallion had not taken my well meant advice but had remained at the Institute, dedicating his life to the pursuit of the uncatchable; he was a seeker after gist, the elusive quality identified by the great Balmerion uncounted eons ago as the underlying substance of the universe. Gist bound together all of time, energy, matter and the other, less obvious components into an elegant whole.

Apparently he had forgotten my criticism of his work since he did not mention it upon our being introduced. It seemed good manners not to bring it up myself, but I could not, in all conscience, encourage his fruitless line of inquiry. “You are not the first to embark on the gist quest,” I said, “though you would certainly be the first to succeed.”

“Someone must be first at everything,” he said. He had one of those voices that mix a tone of arrogance with far too much resonance through the nasal apparatus. Listening to him was like being lectured to by a out-of-tune bone flute.

“But gist is, by Balmerion’s third dictum, beyond all grasp,” I said. “The moment it is approached, even conceptually, it disappears. Or departs—the question remains open.”

“Exactly,” the academician said. “It cannot be apprehended in any way. The moment one seeks to delineate or define it, it is no longer there.”

“And perhaps that is for the best,” I said. I reminded him of Balmerion’s own speculation that gist had been deliberately put out of reach by a hypothetical demiurge responsible for drafting the metaphysical charter of our universe. “Otherwise we would pick and pick and pick at the fabric of existence until we finally pulled the thread that unraveled the whole agglomeration.”

Turgut Therobar entered the conversation. “Master Gevallion leans, as I am coming to do, toward Klapczyk’s corollary to Balmerion’s dictum.”

I had earlier restrained a groan, now I had to fight down an incipient snort. The misguided Erlon Klapczyk had argued that the very hiddenness of gist bespoke the deity’s wish that we seek and find it, and that this quest was in fact the reason we were all here.

I said, “I recall hearing that Klapczyk’s adolescent son once advanced his father’s corollary as an excuse for having overturned the family’s ground car after being forbidden to operate it. Klapczyk countered his own argument by throwing things at the boy until he departed and went to live with a maternal aunt.”

“I agree it is a paradox,” Gevallion said, then quoted, “Is it not the purpose of paradox to drive us to overcome our mental limitations?”

“Perhaps,” I said. “Or perhaps what you take for a teasing puzzle is instead more like a dutiful parent’s removal of a devastating explosive from the reach of a precocious toddler. If I were to begin to list the people to whom I would not give the power to destroy the universe, even limiting the list to those who would do so only accidentally, I would soon run out of stationery.”

Therobar offered another dismissive wave. I decided it was a characteristic gesture. “I care not for a cosmos ruled by a prating nanny,” he said. “I prefer to see existence as veined throughout by a mordant sense of irony. Gevallion’s speculations are more to my taste than Balmerion’s tiptoeing caution.”

“Even if he budges the pebble that brings down the avalanche?”

The magnate's heavy shoulders rose and fell in an expression of disregard. "We are entering the last age of Old Earth, which will culminate in the sun's flickering senility. All will be dark and done with."

"There are other worlds than this."

"Not when I am not standing on them," Therobar said. "Besides, what is life without a risk? And thus, the grander the risk, the grander the life."

I was coming to see my client from a new perspective. "I really think we should discuss the case," I said.

"I've set aside some time after breakfast," he said, then turned and asked Gevallion to explain some point in his theories. After hearing the first few words, I let my attention wander and inspected the room. It was lofty ceilinged, the curving walls cut by high, narrow windows through which the orange light of late afternoon poured in to make long oblongs on the deep pile of the rich, blood-red carpeting that stretched in all directions. One end of the room was dominated by a larger than life mural that displayed Turgut Therobar in the act of casually dispensing something to a grateful throng. Not finding the image to my taste, I turned to see what might be in the other direction and noticed a grouping of divans and substantial chairs around a cheerful hearth. Seated in a love chair, placidly regarding the flames, was a young woman of striking beauty.

Therobar noted the direction of my gaze. "That is the Honorable Gevallion's ward, Yzmirl. She is also assisting him in his researches."

"Would you care to meet her?" Gevallion said.

I made a gesture of faint demurral. "If the encounter would not bore her."

Therobar chuckled. "No fear of that. Come."

We crossed the wide space, the drinks dispenser whispering over the carpet in our wake. The young woman did not look our way as we approached, giving me time to study her. She was beyond girlhood but had not yet entered her middle years. Her face had precisely the arrangement of features that I have often found compelling: large and liquid eyes, green but with flecks of gold, an understated nose and a generous mouth. Her hair was that shade of red that commands attention. It fell straight to her shoulders where it was cut with geometric precision. She wore a thin shift made of layers of a gauzy material, amber over plum, leaving her neck, arms and shoulders bare.

"My dear," said Gevallion, "allow me to present the Honorable Henghis Hapthorn, a discriminator who is assisting our host with matters that need not concern us."

She remained seated but looked up at me. I made a formal salute and added a gallant flourish. Her placid expression did not alter but it seemed that I had captured her interest, since she stared fixedly at me with widened eyes. It was a moment before I realized that the true focus of her gaze was not my face but the transmogrified integrator that crouched upon my shoulder. At the same time I became aware that the creature was issuing into my ear a hiss like that of air escaping from pressurized containment. I gave my head a sharp shake and the annoying sound ceased, though I thought to detect a grumble.

“What is that on your shoulder?” Yzmirl asked. Her voice was soft, the tone polite, yet I experienced a reaction within me. It was just the kind of voice I preferred to hear.

“I have not yet reached a conclusion on that score,” I said.

The green eyes blinked sleepily. She said, “There was a character in Plobbit’s most recent novel, *Spelling Under a Fall*, who trained a large toad to squat on his shoulder. At a signal from its master, the beast would send a jet of unmentionable liquid in the direction of anyone who offended him.”

“I recall it,” I said. “Do you enjoy Plobbit?”

“Very much,” she said. “Do you?”

“He is my favorite author.”

“Well, then,” she said.

Therobar cleared his throat. “I have some matters to attend to before dinner,” he said.

“As do we,” said Gevallion, draining his glass and dropping it into the dispenser’s hopper. “Yzmirl, would you mind entertaining our friend for a while?”

“I would not mind,” she said. She patted the seat next to her to indicate that I should sit. I did so and became aware of her perfume.

“Is that *Cynosure* you’re wearing?” I said.

“Yes. Do you like it?”

“Above all other scents.” I was not exaggerating. The perfume had had an almost pheromonal effect on me when I had encountered it on other women. On Yzmirl, its allure was compounded by her exquisite appearance.

“I please you?” she asked, her eyes offering me pools into which I could plunge and not care that I drowned.

“Oh, indeed.”

“How nice,” she said. “Why don’t you tell me about your work? What are your most notable exploits?”

The integrator hissed again. I could feel its fur against my ear and realized it must be swelling up as it had in the presence of the footman. I reached up with one hand and found that the skin at the nape of its wiry neck was loose enough to afford me a grip. I lifted the creature from my shoulder and deposited it behind the love chair while my other hand covered that of Yzmirl where she had let it rest on the brocaded fabric between us.

“Well,” I said, “would you care to hear about the case of the purloined passpartout?”

“Oh, yes,” she said.

The integrator was making sounds just at the threshold of hearing. I disregarded its grumpy murmurs and said, “It all began when I was summoned to the office of a grand chamberlain in the Palace of the Archonate...”

* * * *

Time passed, though its passage made scant impression. After I told the tale of the Archon Dezendah’s stolen document she asked for more and I moved on to the case of the Vivilosc fraud ring. Between episodes we refreshed our palates with offerings from the dispenser: I twice refilled my glass with the increasingly agreeable aperitif; she took a minim of Aubreen’s restorative tincture, drawing in its pale blue substance by pursing her lips in a manner that was entirely demure yet at the same time deliciously enticing. My hand moved from hers, first to caress her arm, then later I let my fingertips brush the softness where neck met shoulder. She made no complaint but continued to regard me with an unshielded gaze. My innards quaked from time to time, but I pushed the sensation to the borders of my mind.

A footman entered the room and crossed to where we sat. I repressed an urge toward irritation and looked up as he approached. It was the same fellow who had obliquely responded to my questions. Or at least I thought it was as he approached. When he afforded me a closer inspection, it seemed that this might be instead a close relation of the other. I reached for my memory of the earlier encounter but found it veiled by too much aperitif and the heady scent of the young woman beside me.

“My master bids me tell you,” said the servant, after a lackluster salute, “that an urgent matter has called him from the estate. He regrets that he cannot join you for

dinner.”

“How long will he be gone?” I asked.

“He said he might not return before morning.”

In the brief silence that ensued I could hear my integrator hissing behind the love seat. I reached over to swat it to silence but missed. “What of Gevallion and Gharst?” I said.

“They accompany the master on his journey.”

“So it is just us two?”

The fellow tilted his head in a way that confirmed my supposition, though his expression remained unmoved. “The master suggested that you and the Lady Yzmirl might prefer to dine in the comfort of your quarters.”

My eyes widened. I looked at Yzmirl but her expression showed neither alarm nor disinclination. “Would you be comfortable with such an arrangement?” I asked her.

“Of course.”

“Then it’s settled.”

We rose and followed the footman to my suite, the integrator trundling along behind on its short legs, spitting and grumping just at the threshold of audibility. I looked back at one point and saw that its tail was twitching and its little fists were clenched. But when we arrived at my rooms, to find the first course of our dinner ready to be served, I chivvied the ill tempered beast into the ablutory and closed the door so that Yzmirl need not feel distracted or constrained.

I found the food excellent, the company enchanting and the aftermath an unparalleled delight. Yzmirl displayed only a genteel interest in what was placed before her at the table but, after the servant returned and took away the remains of the meal, she revealed a robust appetite and surprising inventiveness in another room.

* * * *

I awoke alone. Or so I thought until I arose and entered the washroom, where a small, furry and angry presence made itself known.

“Apparently, I need to eat,” it said in a tone that was far from deferential.

“Eat what?”

There was fruit on a side table in the main salon. It went and sampled this and that. I was prepared to offer advice on the arts of chewing and swallowing but the creature mastered these skills without trouble. I thought a compliment might lighten the atmosphere but my encouraging words were turned back on me. "I've seen you do it thousands of times," it said. "How hard could it be?"

"Then you'll be able to work out the other end of the alimentary process for yourself?" I said.

"I shall manage."

I performed my morning toilet and emerged to find the integrator perched on the back of chair, its tail flicking like a petulant pendulum and a frown on its face. "What?" I said.

"I cannot connect to the grid."

"Why not?"

"I don't know why not."

"Hmm," I said. "Ordinarily, I would perform a diagnostic procedure on your systems and components. Now I would first have to take advice from..." I had been going to specify a person who was skilled in the care of animals, but I had a suspicion that this particular creature might baffle such a specialist.

"How does it ... feel, I suppose that's the word, to be unable to connect?"

It put on its introspective look for a moment, then said, "It feels as if I ought to be able to connect but cannot."

"As if you were out of range?"

"As if I was blocked."

There was a knock on the door and the footman entered. Again my integrator's fur raised itself involuntarily and again I was not quite sure that this was the same fellow I had encountered before.

"The master would like you to join him for breakfast," he said. The voice sounded identical, yet there was something around the eyes and the mouth that seemed slightly different.

There was no obvious reason to be circumspect. I said, "Are you the same footman who yesterday led me to meet your master and returned me here?"

His expression registered no surprise at the question. He looked at me neutrally and said, "Why do you ask?"

"Because I wish to know."

His answer was unexpected. "It is difficult to say."

"Why? It is a simple question."

"There are no simple questions," he said. "Only simple questioners. But I will address the issue. Are you the same person who arrived here yesterday? Since then you have had new experiences, met new people, consumed and excreted the air of this place and other substances. Has none of this had any effect on you?"

"The argument is abstruse," I said. "Assume the broadest of definitions and answer: are you the same footman whom I encountered yesterday?"

"Under the broadest definition, it would be difficult to distinguish me from any other entity, including you."

The fellow was obviously a simpleton. "Lead me to your master," I said. As he turned to depart I beckoned my integrator to mount to my shoulder again. It was hissing and its fur was once more ruffed about its neck.

* * * *

I found Turgut Therobar in a morning room in the great dome. He wore loose attire: ample pantaloons, a billowing shirt, chamois slippers, all in muted tones with plain fasteners. His head was again swathed in a silken cloth. He did not rise from his chair as I entered but beckoned me to sit across from him. A low table between us bore plates of bread, bowls of fruit and cups to be filled from a steaming carafe of punge.

He exhibited an air of sleepy self-satisfaction, blinking lazily as he inquired as to how I had passed the night. I assured him that I had rested well but offered an observation that he did not appear to have slept much. He extended his lower lip and made a show with his eyebrows that signaled that his rest or lack of it was of small concern. "A necessary task occupied most of the night," he said, "but it was well worth the doing."

I raised my brows in inquiry, but when he added no more I politely changed the subject. "We should discuss the case," I said.

"As you wish. How would you like to proceed?"

I poured myself a cup of punge and chose a savory broche, then ordered my

mind as I chewed, sipped and swallowed. "First," I said, "I will rehearse the known elements of the matter. Then I wish to know everything, from the beginning."

The charges concerned the disappearance of a number of persons in the vicinity of Wan Water over recent months. Initially, it had been thought that they had wandered into range of neropt hunting parties, the usual precursor to sudden disappearances on Dimpfen Moor.

The break in the case came when a tenant's young daughter, Bebe Allers, had gone missing from Wan Water only to reappear after a few days wandering within the walls of the estate. She was in a state of confusion and distress, with vague memories of being seized, transported, confined and perhaps interfered with in intimate ways. She could not directly identify the person or persons responsible for the outrage, but she had blanched and screamed at the sight of an image of Turgut Therobar.

"Now," I said, "how do you answer?"

He spoke and his face and tone betrayed a blasÃ© unconcern that I found surprising. But the substance of his response was nothing less than astonishing. "The affair is now moot," he said. "Events have moved on."

I set my cup and plate on the table. "Wealth and social rank will not keep you from the Archon's Contemplarium if you are adjudged to be at fault."

His eyes looked up and away. "The case is nuncupative."

"Colonel-Investigator Warhanny will take a different view."

He chose a cake and nibbled at its topping.

"Please," I said, "I have given surety for you. My interests are also at stake."

He smiled and it was not a pleasant sight. There was a glint in his eye that gave me an inkling as to why the victim had reacted with horror to his image. "You will soon find," he said, "that you have more pressing concerns."

My integrator was hissing quietly beside my ear. The intuitive part of me was alert and urging unspecified action. I stood up. "You had better explain," I said.

He regarded me as if I had just executed some comic trick and he expected me to perform another. "Oh, I shall explain," he said. "Triumphs gain half their delight from being appreciated by those who have been triumphed over."

To my assistant I said, quietly, "Contact Warhanny. Tell him I withdraw from the case."

“I still cannot connect,” it said.

“If I may interrupt your communion with your pet,” Theroabar said, “I was about to relieve your mind concerning the case.”

“Very well,” I said. “Do so.”

He made a face like that of a little boy admitting a naughtiness to an indulgent caregiver and spread his hands. “I am guilty,” he said.

“You interfered with the young maiden?”

“Indeed.”

“And the disappearances?”

Again the protruding lip and facial shrug, which I took as an admission of culpability.

There could be only one question: “Why?”

“Two reasons,” he said, throwing away the cake, now denuded of its topping, and reaching for another. “The disappeared assisted in Mitric Gevallion’s experiments.”

“You have been experimenting on human beings?”

“We’d gone as far as we could with animals. What else was there to do?”

I was being given an unobstructed view into Theroabar’s psyche. I shuddered involuntarily “What were the aims of these experiments?”

“As we discussed last night: at first we were seeking to redefine gist so that we could employ it in various efforts at carnal reconfiguration.”

I translated his remark. “You were trying to harness the elementary force of the universe in order to transform living creatures.”

“Yes.” His sharp pointed tongue licked cream from the core of his pastry.

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“That is never a reason,” I said.

“You may be right. In any case, we soon found another.”

He was smiling, waiting for me to ask. I obliged him. “What did you find?”

“We discovered that we could ‘re-order’ animals from one species to another, though they were never happy in their new skins. So then we tried ‘editing’ them, again with interesting results. We produced several disparate versions from the same template: one would be ferocious, another painfully meek; one would have an overpowering urge to explore its territory, while the next iteration would not stir from its den.” He drank from his cup of punge. “Do you understand what we had achieved?”

He was waiting again. “I am sure you would enjoy telling me,” I said.

“We kept the shape, but discarded the contents, so to speak.”

I had an insight. “You found you could work with form while discarding essence.”

“Exactly. And, of course, once we had done it with beasts we had to try it with people.”

“It is monstrous,” I said.

“An entirely accurate description, at first. They were indeed monsters. We turned them loose to bellow and rampage on the moor, where the neropts found them and carried them off.”

“But then?” I asked.

He wriggled with self-satisfaction. “But then we refined the process and began striking multiples from the originals. They are short-lived but they serve their purposes.”

I understood. “The footmen,” I said. “They are copies.”

“And not just the footmen,” he said, an insinuating smile squirming across his plump lips.

I was horrified. “Yzmirl,” I whispered, then put iron in my voice. “Where is she?”

“Nowhere,” he said. “She was, now she is not. Though Gevallion can whip up another at any time. That one was specifically designed to appeal to your tastes and petty vanities.”

I did not trust myself to stand over him. I sat and turned my vision inward, encountering images of deep and tender pathos. After a while he spoke, dragging my attention back to his now repulsive face.

“You haven’t asked about the second reason,” he said.

My mind had wandered far from the discussion. I indicated that I was not following.

“The disappeared,” he said, speaking as if I were a particularly slow child, “went into Gevallion’s vats. Then there was the Allers girl. She was the template for your companion of last night, by the way.”

I took a labored breath. It was as if his evil thickened the air. “All right,” I said. “Why did you let the girl be found?”

“Because that would bring Warhanny. And Warhanny would bring you.”

“And why must you bring me?”

“Because by being here, you were not there.”

“And where is ‘there?’”

He smiled. “At your rooms, of course. Where there were items I wished to acquire.”

I allowed anger to take me. I kicked the low table at his legs and sprang to overpower him. But he was ready. An object appeared in his hand. At its center was a small black spot. As I leapt toward him the circle abruptly expanded and rushed out to encompass me in nothingness.

* * * *

Mitric Gevallion’s laboratory was an unprepossessing place, dimly lit and woefully untidy. It featured a long work bench crowded with apparatus and a large display board on which a meandering set of equations and formulae had been scrawled. The vats in which the gist hunter brewed his creations loomed to one side of the wide, low ceilinged room. Against the opposite wall was a sturdy cage and it was within its confines that I regained consciousness.

“Ah,” said Gevallion, when Gharst, who had been sucking at a wound on one thick thumb, drew his attention to my blinking and pate, rubbing. Therobar’s shocker had left me muzzified and aching, but I was now recovering as the academician crossed the cluttered floor to regard me through the bars. “Ah, there you are, back with us,” he said.

I saw no need to join him in assertions of the obvious, and fixed him instead with a disdainful stare. I might as well have struck him with a cobweb for all the impact I achieved.

He rubbed his thin, pale hands together. “We’re just waiting for our host to join us, then we’ll begin,” he said.

I knew he wanted me to ask what was to ensue, but I denied him that satisfaction. After a moment, his eyes moved from my face to focus on a point to one side of it. “That is a most curious creature,” he said. “We tried to examine it while you were ... resting, but it shrieked and bit Gharst quite viciously. What is it?”

When I did not answer, he made a moue with his thin lips and said, “It does not signify. I will dissect the beast at leisure after you are ... shall we say, through with it.”

It was another attempt to elicit a response from me, and I ignored it like the others. My mind was now concentrated on the display board and I was following the calculations thereon. The mathematics were abstruse but familiar, until they reached the third sequence. There I saw that Gevallion’s extrapolation of Balmerion’s premises had taken a sudden and entirely unexpected departure. He had achieved a complete overturning of the ancient premises and yet as I proceeded to examine each step in his logic, I saw that it all held together.

“You’re looking for the flaw,” he said, now sounding the way a bone flute would sound if it could experience complacent triumph.

I said nothing, but the answer he sought must have been unmistakable in my expression. I ran my eyes over the calculations again, looking for the weakness, the false syllogism, the unjustified leap. There was none.

Finally, I could not deny my curiosity. “How?” I said.

“Simple,” was his answer, “yet achingly difficult. Although it went against everything we are taught, I consciously accepted the gnosis that magic and rationalism alternate in a vast cycle, and that whenever the change comes the new regime obliterates all memory of the other’s prior ascendancy. I then asked myself, ‘If it were so, what would be the mechanism of change?’ And the answer came: there is gist, it exists in this half of the cycle; the other half is opposite, therefore it must contain opposite gist. I thereby conceived the concept of negative gist.”

“Negative gist,” I repeated, and could not keep the wonder from my voice.

“And negative gist, viewed from our side of the dichotomy, is susceptible to definition. Define it, then reverse it, and you have a definition of positive gist.

Although it is hard to remember. It slides easily out of understanding.”

Negative gist, I thought. Why had I not seen it?

He knew what I was thinking. “You were not supposed to,” he said. “None of us are. Even with it written on the board I had trouble keeping it in mind. I kept wanting to erase the equations. Then I relocated to Wan Water where conditions are more accommodating.”

“How so?”

“The transition from rationalism to sympathy does not cross our universe in a wavefront, as dawn sweeps across a planet. It occurs almost everywhere at once, like seepage through a porous membrane, but there are discrete locations—dimples, I call them—where the earliest seepage pools. Here the effects are intensified.”

“And Wan Water is such a place,” I said.

“Indeed. That is why our host chose to build here.”

“It seems to be a time for surprises,” I said. There was something more that needed to be said. “I am not often wrong, but in this matter of gist I assuredly was. I offer you my apologies and my congratulations.”

“Graciously done,” he said. “Both are accepted.” He added a formal salute appropriate to academic equals.

I returned it and said, “Since we are on good terms, perhaps you would unlock the cage.”

His expression of regret seemed sincere. “I’m afraid Turgut Therobar has other plans. More to the point, he has the only key.”

At that moment, Gharst called to say that something on the bench had reached a critical point of development. Gevallion rushed to his side. They busied themselves with an apparatus constructed of intricately connected rods and coils, then Gevallion made a last adjustment and the two stood back in postures of expectation. In the air a colorless spot had appeared, a globular shape no larger than my smallest fingernail, connected to the apparatus by a filament as thin as a gossamer. Gevallion nudged a part of the contraption on the bench and the spot grew larger and darker while the connector thickened. I saw motion seemingly within the sphere, a slow roiling as of indistinct shapes turning over and about each other.

The room was also charged with strange energies. My inner discomforts now increased. I felt as if both flesh and being were penetrated by vital forces, causing an itching of my bones and sense of some impending revelation, though I could not tell

if it would burst upon me or from me.

Gevallion said something to Gharst and the assistant gingerly touched the apparatus. The academician pushed him aside and made a more determined adjustment. The globe rapidly expanded until it was perhaps three times the diameter of Gharst's outsized head, then quickly shimmered and redoubled in size. The connecting conduit grew as thick as my wrist. Now the apparition seemed to become stable. I fought the intense irritation the device was causing in my innermost parts and studied the globe closely. I saw that the shifting colors and indeterminate shapes that moved within it were familiar, and began to plan a surprise.

"That is as much as we can achieve at this point," Gevallion told Gharst. "Advise Turgut Therobar that we are ready for his contribution."

The assistant spoke into a communications nexus beside the bench. I heard a muffled response.

The dim room became silent and still. The two experimenters stood by the bench, the globe swirled placidly in the air and a small voice mumbled in my ear. For the moment, I ignored it.

If I had any doubts on the matter they were soon resolved. The door opened and in strode Turgut Therobar, swathed in the multihued robes and lap-eared cap of a thaumaturge. The costume should have appeared comical, yet did not. His face bore an expression of fevered anticipation and his hands clasped another disconcertingly familiar object: Bristall Baxandell's leatherbound tome, last seen in my workroom.

I could feel my assistant's fur standing up and tickling the side of my neck. The murmuring in my ear grew more insistent.

I whispered back, "Don't worry."

Therobar inspected the swirling globe and beamed at Gevallion and Gharst, then shot me a look that contained a mixture of sentiments. He placed the great book on the work bench and opened it, ran his finger down a page and his tongue across his ripe lips. "The Chrescharrie, first, don't you think?" he said to Gevallion, who nodded nervous agreement.

I recognized the name as that of a minor deity worshipped long ago by a people almost now forgotten. I heard more mumblings in my ear. "Shush," I said, under my breath.

Therobar removed his cap and I saw that his hairless scalp was densely tattooed with figures and symbols such as I had seen in books of magic lore. He rubbed one hand over the smooth skin of his pate then took a deep breath and

intoned a set of syllables. Something pulsed along the cable that connected sphere to apparatus. He spoke again, and again the connector palpitated as if something traversed along its length. The colors in the sphere flashed and fluoresced. There was a crackling sound and the air of the room suddenly smelled sharply of ozone. My internal organs felt as if they were seeking to trade places with each other and there was a pulsing pressure at the back of my head. My integrator abandoned my shoulder with a squawk, dropping to the floor where it grumbled and chattered in an agitated manner.

Therobar spoke again and made a calculated gesture. The sphere shimmered and flickered, there came a loud crack of energy and a fountain of blue sparks cascaded from the globe. The swirl coalesced and cohered at its center, becoming a six-armed homunculus, red of skin and cobalt of eye—there was only one, in the middle of its forehead—seated crosslegged on black nothingness that now otherwise filled the orb. Meanwhile a sensation like a hot scouring wind shot through me.

Therobar consulted the book once more and spoke three guttural sounds, meanwhile moving hands and fingers in precise motions. The figure in the globe started as if struck. Its eye narrowed and its gash of a mouth turned downward in a frown. Its several arms flexed and writhed while it seemed to be attempting to rise to its split-hoofed feet. Therobar spoke and gestured again, a long string of syllables, and the homunculus subsided, though with a patent show of anger in its face.

Now the thaumaturge took another deep breath and barked a harsh phrase. There was a reek of raw power in the air and a thrumming sound just at the limits of perception. My bones were rattling against each other at the joints.

Therobar raised one hand, the index finger extended, then swiftly jabbed it into his forehead. The figure in the globe did likewise with one of its upper limbs, though its sharp nailed digit struck not flesh and bone but its own protruding eye. It gave a squeal of pain and frustrated rage.

Therobar's eyes widened and I saw a gleam of triumph in them. For a moment I thought he might voice some untoward cry of victory, which would have put us all in deadly peril, but he mastered the impulse and instead chanted a lengthy phrase. The glowering deity in the sphere shimmered and dissolved into fragments of light, and once again the orb contained only shifting shapes and mutating colors.

The thaumaturge let out a sigh of happy relief. Gevallion and Gharst came from the other side of the work bench and there followed a few moments of back slapping, hand gripping, and—on Therobar's part—a curious little dance that I took to express unalloyed joy.

When the demonstration was over, he looked my way and with an expression of satiated pleasure said, "Allow me to explain what you just saw."

“No need,” I said. “You have accessed a continuum in which there is no distinction between symbol and referent. You have encapsulated a small segment of that realm and used it as a secure enclosure in which you could summon up a minor deity and bend it to your will. After animals and humans it is the next natural step. Now I suppose you’ll want to call up something more potent so that you can use it to rule the world.”

Therobar’s face took on an aggrieved pout and he regarded me without favor for a long moment.

I shrugged my itching shoulders. “Your ambitions are as banal as your taste in decor,” I said.

I thought he would strike me, but he put down the impulse and sneered. “Do you know why I brought you here?” he said.

“So that you could steal Baxandell’s book from my library.”

“That was but the proximate cause,” he said, and I detected a deeper animosity in the squinting of his eyes and the writhing of his mouth as he approached the cage. “Do you recall an evening at Dame Obrosz’s salon several years ago?”

“There were many such occasions,” I said. “One tends not to retain details.”

“You were holding forth on the bankruptcy of magic.”

“I am sure I have done so often.”

“Yes.” The syllable extended into a hiss. “But on that occasion, your arguments had a profound effect on me.”

“That seems odd, since the evidence of the past few minutes indicates that you have spent years studying and mastering the magical lore that I inveighed against. Obviously I did not convince you.”

“On the contrary, you convinced me utterly,” he said. “But I was so offended by your strutting arrogance and insouciant contempt for all contrary opinion that I resolved then and there to devote my life to disproving your claims, and forcing you to acknowledge utter defeat.”

“Congratulations,” I said. “You have achieved the goal of your existence. I am glad to have been of such great use to you, but pray tell me, what will you do to fill the remaining years?”

“Perhaps I will spend them tormenting you,” he said. “And acquainting you with the depths of animosity you are capable of summoning up in otherwise placid

souls.”

“I think not.” It seemed time to act. I did my best to ignore my peculiar inner sensations, though they had not diminished after Therobar dismissed the Chrescharrie. Focusing my will, I spoke certain words while making the usual accompanying gestures. Therobar stepped back, his face filling with a mingling of confusion and curiosity. The colors in the globe swirled anew, then I saw the familiar pattern of my demonic friend.

“I am beset,” I called. “Please aid me.”

The demon manifested a limb: thick, bristling with spines and tipped with a broad pincer-like claw. It reached out to Turgut Therobar as I had seen it do before to two other unfortunates. But the thaumaturge had already recovered his equilibrium. He stepped back, out of range, while shouting Gevallion’s name.

The academician also overcame his surprise. He did something to the apparatus on the bench and the globe constricted sharply, trapping my friend’s spiked appendage as if it were a noose that had tightened around the limb. I heard muffled sounds and saw the claw opening and closing in frustration, its pincers clicking as they seized only thin air.

Therobar was flipping through the book. He stopped at a page and from the way his eyes flashed I knew that it boded ill for my friend and me. “*Ghoroz ebror fareshti!*” he shouted. The orb shivered then contracted further, to the size of a fist, then to a pinpoint, and finally it popped out of existence altogether. The demon’s arm, severed neatly, flopped to the floor where it glowed and smoked for a moment before disappearing.

“Oh, dear,” said Turgut Therobar. “I hope you weren’t counting on that as your last resort.”

“It would be premature to say,” I said, but I heard little conviction in my own voice.

The thaumaturge rubbed his hands in a manner that implied both satisfaction with what had transpired and happy anticipation of further delights to come. “Shall I tell you what happens next?” he said.

I was casting about for a some stratagem by which I might escape or turn the tables, but nothing was coming to mind. I sought insight from the intuitive part of me that so often came to my aid, but received no sense of impending revelation. It was as if he was otherwise occupied.

Hello! I shouted down the mental corridor that led to his abode. *Now would be an apt time to assist!*

Meanwhile, Therobar was speaking. “You’ll go into the vats, of course. I will create several versions of you, some comical, some pathetically freakish. I will make convincing Henghis Hapthorn facsimiles, but give them unpleasant compulsions, then send them out into society. Your reputation may suffer. Others will have the opportunity to outrun neropt foraging parties. I believe I’ll also recreate you in a feminine edition.” He smiled that smile that could make children scream. “Such fun.”

The muted voice that had been rumbling in my ear now said, quite clearly, “Step aside.”

I turned my head, wondering what my transformed integrator was up to, but the creature was huddled in a far corner of the cage nervously rubbing one hand over another. “Did you speak?” I said.

“No, I did,” said the voice again, this time less quiet. “Now, get out of the way.”

I experienced a novel sensation: I was shoved from within, not roughly but with decided firmness, as that part of me that I was accustomed to think of as fixed and immutable—my own mind—now found itself sharing my inner space with another partner. At the same time, the noxious itchings and shiftings among my inner parts faded to a normal quiescence.

“Wait,” I said.

“I’ve already waited years,” Therobar said, but I had not addressed him.

“As have I,” said the voice in my head. “Now, move over before you get us both into even worse difficulty.”

I acquiesced, and the moment I yielded I felt myself deftly nudged out of the way, as if I had been pressed into the passenger’s seat of a vehicle so that someone else could assume the controls. I saw my own hand come up before my face, the fingers opening and closing, though I was not moving them. “Good,” said the voice.

I spoke to the voice’s owner as he spoke to me, silently within the confines of our shared cranium. “I know you,” I said. “You’re my indweller, the fellow at the other end of the dark passage, my intuitive colleague.”

“Hush your chatter,” was the response. “I need to concentrate.”

I subsided. Through our common eyes I saw that Turgut Therobar had produced his weapon again and was aiming it at us while Gharst opened the cage with a key the thaumaturge had given him. Across the room, Gevallion threw me a sheepish look and opened the hatch of one of his vats, releasing a wisp of

malodorous vapor.

As the cage door opened, I watched my hands come together in a particular way then spread wide into a precise configuration. I heard my voice speaking words that were vaguely recognizable from one of Baxandell's books, the opening line of a cantrip known as Gamgripp's Irrepressible Balloon, whose title had made me laugh when I was young man browsing through a book of spells. I did not laugh now as from my hands there emanated an expanding sphere of invisible force that pushed Therobar and Gharst away from me, lifting them over the work bench, then upward into the air until they were pressed against the far wall where it met the ceiling. Gevallion, seeing what was happening, tried to reach the door but was similarly caught and crushed against it.

Therobar was clearly finding it hard to breathe against the pressure the spell exerted against his chest, but the symbols on his scalp had taken on a darker shade and I could see that his lips were framing syllables. I heard my voice speak again while my hands made motions that reminded me of a needle passing thread through cloth. The thaumaturge's lips became sealed. "Faizul's Stitch," I said to my old partner, having recognized the spell.

"Indeed," was the reply.

He directed our body out of the cage, faltering only a little before he mastered walking. The apparatus on the bench was unaffected by the balloon spell and he picked it up in our hands and examined it from several angles. Its components and manner of operation were not difficult to analyze.

"Shall we?" he said.

"It seems only fair."

He activated the device, reestablishing the swirling sphere. I was relieved to see the familiar eddies of my transdimensional colleague reappear. My other part made room for me so that I could ask the demon, "Are you well?"

"Yes," he said, "I lost only form. Essence was not affected." He was silent for a moment and I recognized the pattern he assumed when something took his interest. "I see that the opposite is true for you."

"Indeed," I said, "allow me to introduce ... myself, I suppose." I stepped aside and let the two of them make each other's acquaintance.

When the formalities were over, I voiced the obvious question: "Now what?"

I felt a sense of my other self's emotions, as one would feel warmth from a nearby fleshly body: he gave off an emanation of determined will, tempered by irony.

“We must restore balance,” he said, using my voice so that the three prisoners could hear. “Pain has been given and must therefore be received. Also fear, humiliation and, of course, death for death.”

“Indeed,” I said. “That much is obvious. But I meant ‘Now what?’ for you and me.”

“Ah,” he said, this time within our shared skull. “We must reach an accommodation. At least temporarily.”

“Why temporarily?” I asked, in the same unvoiced manner, then felt the answer flower in my mind in the way my intuitive other’s contributions had always done during the long years of our partnership.

I digested his response then continued. “You are the part of me—us—that is better suited to an age reigned over by magic. As the change intensifies, I will fade until I become to you what you have always been to me, the dweller down the back corridor.”

“Indeed,” was his response. “And from there you will provide me with analytical services that will complement and augment my leaps from instinct. It will be a happy collaboration.”

“You will make me your integrator,” I complained.

“My valued colleague,” he countered.

I said nothing, but how could he fail to sense my reluctance to give up control of my life? His response was the mental equivalent of a snort. “What makes you think you ever had control?” he said.

I was moved to argue, but then I saw the futility of being a house divided. “Stop putting things in my head,” I said.

“I don’t believe I can,” he answered. “It is, after all, as much my head as yours.”

My curiosity was piqued. “What was it like to live as you have lived, inside of me all of these years?”

There was a pause, then the answer came. “Not uncomfortable, once you learn the ropes. Don’t fret,” he added, “the full transition may not be completed for years, even decades. We might live out our mutual life just as we are now.”

“Hence the need for an accommodation,” I agreed. “Then let us wait for a quiet time and haggle it out.”

He agreed and we turned our attention to the question of what to do with Therobar, Gevallion and Gharst.

The demon was displaying silver, green and purple flashes as he said, “It would be a shame to waste the academician’s ability to create form without essence. I know of places in my continuum where such creations would command considerable value.”

I had never inquired as to what constituted economics in the demon’s frame of reference, but my intuitive half leapt to the correct interpretation. “But if you took them into your keeping and put them to work,” he said, “would that not make you a peddler of smut?”

The silver swooshes intensified, but the reply was studiously bland in tone. “I would find some way to live with the opprobrium,” the demon said.

We released Gevallion and Gharst into demonic custody. They could not go as they were into that other universe, where any word they uttered would immediately become reified, and it was an unsettling experience to watch the demon briskly edit their forms so that they could never speak again. But I hardened myself by remembering Yzmirl and how they must have dealt with her, and in a few moments the messy business was concluded. The two were hauled, struggling and moaning, through the sphere. For good measure, the demon took their vats and apparatus as well, including the device of rods and coils from the work bench.

When he was ready to depart, my old colleague lingered in the sphere, showing more purple and green shot through with silver. “I may not return for a while,” he said, “perhaps a long while. I will have much to occupy.”

“I will miss our contests,” I said, “but in truth I am sure I will also be somewhat busy with all of this ... “—I rolled my eyes—”accommodating.”

And so we said our goodbyes and he withdrew, taking the sphere after him.

“That leaves Turgut Therobar,” my inner companion said, this time aloud.

“Indeed.” I let the magnate hear my voice as well. He remained squeezed against the far wall, his feet well clear of the floor. His eyes bulged and one cheek had acquired a rapid twitch.

“Warhanny would welcome his company.”

“Somehow, the Contemparium does not seem a sufficient sanction for the harm he has done.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Therobar made noises behind his sealed lips. We ignored them.

* * * *

Later that day, back in my work room, I contacted the Colonel Investigator. “Turgut Therobar has confessed to all the charges and specifications,” I said.

Warhanny’s face, suspended in the air over my work table, took on the slightly less lugubrious aspect that I had come to recognize as his version of intense pleasure. “I will send for him,” he said.

“Not necessary,” I said. “Convulsed by remorse for his ill deeds, he ran out onto Dimpfen Moor just as a neropt hunting pack was passing by. Nothing I could do would restrain him. They left some scraps of him if you require proof of his end.”

“I will have them collected,” said Warhanny.

“I must also file his last will and testament,” I said. “He left his entire estate to the charities he had always championed, except for generous bequests to his tenants, and an especial legacy for Bebe Allers, his final victim.”

We agreed that that was only fair and Warhanny said that he would attend to the legalities. We disconnected.

I regarded my integrator. It was still in the form of a catlike ape or perhaps an apelike cat. “And what about you?” I said. “With Baxandell’s books and the increasing strength of magic, we can probably restore you to what you were.”

It narrowed its eyes in thought. “I have come to value having preferences,” it said. “And if the world is going to change, I will become a familiar sooner or later. Better to get a head start on it. Besides, I enjoyed the fruit at Turgut Therobar’s.”

“We have none like it here,” I said. “It is prohibitively expensive.”

It blinked and looked inward for a moment. “I’ve just ordered an ample supply,” it said.

“I did not authorize the order.”

“No,” it said, “you didn’t.”

While I was considering my response, I received an unsolicited insight from my other half. It was in the form of a crude cartoon image.

“That is not amusing,” I said.

From the chuckles filling my head, I understood that he saw the situation from his own perspective.

“I am not accustomed to being a figure of fun,” I said.

The furry thing on the table chose that moment to let me know that, along with autonomic functions, it had acquired a particularly grating laugh.

“Now whose expectations require adjustment?” it said.