

A Herd of Opportunity by Matthew Hughes

Journey now, dear reader, to the penultimate age of Old Earth, an eon before Jack Vance's Dying Earth. Here we encounter a time when all has been mapped and everything is known.

Now consider the Commons, the collective unconscious wherein all our dreams are made manifest. Brave are the nonaunts who venture into this realm.

Yes folks, we have here a new tale of Guth Bandar (last seen in our Oct/Nov. 2005 issue). This story flashes back to Bandar's younger days and suggests that perhaps there is something new under the sun.

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"Say nothing. I shall do all the talking," Preceptor Huffley had whispered to Guth Bandar as they'd entered the low-ceilinged stone hut. So now the young student sat on the hard wooden chair near the door, hands neatly folded, as his elderly teacher chattered with the Eminence Malabar, the white-bearded ascetic who was head of this cloistered settlement.

"How will you proceed?" said the Eminence.

Huffley's hand idly stirred the air. "Oh, the usual approach. Assess the elements, delineate the parameters, identify the paradigm, adjust the interactions."

The patriarch's brow creased. "We did not pay an exorbitant cost to bring you and your assistant all the way from Old Earth for assessments and delineations," he said. "Action is required, preferably vigorous, decisive and prompt. Our reflections will suffer as long as that intolerable racket continues."

"Indeed," said the preceptor. "Then we had best be about it."

"I will show you," said the patriarch.

He led the way out of the hut and across the Sequestrance. Bandar followed his teacher, his eyes taking in the details of the place. They crossed a central open space floored in swept hardpan and surrounded by neat rows of domed, windowless huts built of the ubiquitous dun-colored stone that, along with pebbles and grit, comprised all that Bandar had yet seen of this remote and lightly settled world called Gamza they had traveled halfway down The Spray to reach. A larger dome stood on the far side of the square, low roofed but roomy enough to hold all of the settlement. Bandar glanced within its broad, arched entrance and saw that the bare floor was covered with rows of wide, flat bowls of polished wood, with a woven meditation mat beside each bowl.

To his right, dozens of robed and sandaled men labored in the garden to coax straggling rows of legumes from the uncooperative soil, while others pumped water from a central well and carried it by yoke-borne buckets to irrigate the furrows. The high white sun directly overhead must steam the moisture from the dirt almost as soon as it was delivered, Bandar thought, feeling rivulets of sweat trickle down his back and chest under his two-piece traveling suit.

Their path angled away from the main building and Bandar surmised that they were heading for the Sequestrance's encircling wall--or not quite encircling, he noticed. The barrier, three times as high as Bandar was tall, was still under construction, although it must soon be finished. In the gap he saw two other crews working quickly: one group used a fragmenter to break bedrock into manageable chunks, while the other stacked the pieces to shape the wall. A brawny man with a shoulder-slung aggregator then melded the serried rocks into a smoothness.

None paused to watch their patriarch and the two strangers make their way across the square, passing

the self-guided carryall that had collected Huffley and Bandar from the minimalist spaceport--two unserviced pads and a rough shed--where the freighter *Abron* had touched down and deposited them on the world's single continent. The carryall's prime mission had been to collect several heavy crates whose clanking contents Bandar had assumed to be agricultural tools. The preceptor and student had had to sit atop the cargo for the short flight across level desert to the Sequestrance, their teeth set on edge by the whine of its untuned gravity obviators. Bandar noted that no one was bothering to unload the vehicle.

At the path's end they found a set of steps and climbed to a landing that ran the full length of the south wall. Here the patriarch struck a pose and gestured with an outflung arm. "Thus the foul stain brought by Rul Bazwan," he said, pronouncing the name as if it generated an unappetizing taste.

Encompassed by the sweep of Malabar's arm was a sight that Bandar found to be at sharp variance with the austere simplicity of the Sequestrance. Below the wall was a gentle slope, from the base of which a ramshackle sprawl of tents and mobile caravans rambled off to the south. Costumes and accents of several worlds met Bandar's eyes and ears as he looked down on the throngs bustling along the narrow, twisting ways and passing in and out of the flimsy buildings.

At the far edge of the shantytown a more substantial edifice was under construction. Workers were assembling prefabricated components into the second story of the Hotel Splendor--so the sign above the building's verandah boasted. The first story was already in full operation as a saloon, judging from the trio of inebriates Bandar saw emerge from its swinging doors, supporting each other as they staggered a short distance to the next establishment, a multi-poled tent whose wooden marquee featured a garish painting of two naked women holding a sign that read: The Pleasure Garden.

Now Bandar saw a balloon-tired, open-topped charabanc draw up outside the Splendor. Its rows of seats were quickly filled by folk, mostly men but with a smattering of women, who had been waiting on the front porch. They chattered animatedly as the vehicle pulled away and headed south toward a range of low hills.

"Intolerable!" said Malabar.

"Indeed," said Huffley. "Quite beyond endurance."

"And you can undo this? We must have peace for our reflections."

Huffley's hand again gave its insouciant wave. "I foresee no problems."

Bandar blinked in surprise, unaware of any expertise the preceptor might have acquired in the art of slum clearance. Immediately, he knew his face had betrayed his reaction because he saw the patriarch's glance touch him, then swing back to Huffley for an incisive examination of the academician's bland countenance. "You have indeed done this before?" Malabar said. "Your message implied wide experience and an almost facile competence."

"Times without number," said Huffley. "Institute scholars are frequently called in to handle these little matters. In fact, unless there's more you need tell us, we shall set to."

Suspicion lingered in Malabar's downdrawn brows and lips, but he said, "It is time for the noon reflections. Go to your work. But hurry! The disturbance bars us from the ineffable. We will not stand for it." He threw the shantytown a final glare and descended the steps.

"Master," said Bandar, "what have you told these people?"

"You need not be concerned," was the preceptor's reply.

Bandar was prepared to argue, though it was a rare student of the Institute of Historical Inquiry who would even voice a question to a senior fellow like Preceptor Huffley, let alone challenge him. But the young man had been conscious of a growing apprehension ever since they had arrived at the Sequestrance. "The Eminence holds a vast anger that strains a thin leash," he said. "I doubt he responds well to disappointment."

Huffley's face stiffened. "It is not a student's place..." he began, but was cut off by the clanging of metal on metal. Bandar turned and saw a man standing in the center of the central square, beating with a bar of black iron on a circle of the same metal suspended from a wooden frame. Across the Sequestrance, all of the robed men stopped what they had been doing and converged on the main building, many of them pausing at the well to dip a ladle into a water barrel and drink deep.

"Come," said Huffley. "While they're occupied."

He led the way to the gap where the wall was nearing completion. Bandar noticed that there was no gate, nor any timbers from which one might be fashioned, and told his teacher that the absence seemed peculiar.

"These people are, by definition, peculiar," Huffley said. "They would not otherwise have secluded themselves out in the desert on an unfashionable and barely habitable world."

They passed through the gap and followed the west wall until they came to a path that led down into the other settlement. Huffley continued to discourse on the people who had paid their way to Gamza. Bandar suspected his attention was being diverted from his earlier question, but he listened with at least a show of the polite deference expected of a student of the Institute.

"Malabar heads a sect that has broken away from the Revered Society of Hydromants on Ballyanhowe," the preceptor said.

Bandar was familiar with both the cult and the world. Ballyanhowe was one of the Fundamental Domains, settled long ago during the great effloration from Old Earth that ended humanity's infancy. It was an old world now: rich, mellowed, and given over to the esoteric pursuits devised by peoples whose wants were won without toil. Hydromancy was an ancient art occasionally revived among such leisured populations. Its practitioners gazed into pools of standing liquid, usually purified water but sometimes oils or natural essences, seeking a deeper acquaintance with the universe that lay without or within.

"The Eminence was dissatisfied with the practices of the Revered Society," Huffley said. "He experienced an inspiration that insights are more penetrating if the contemplated liquid 'originates within the seeker,' as he put it."

"You mean they're all sitting there staring into reeking bowls of their own...."

"Who are we to quibble with another's inspiration?" Huffley said. They had reached the bottom of the slope. The scholar chose an alleyway and set off toward the hotel, whose upper story was visible beyond the sprawl of tents and towables.

He continued as they walked, dodging other pedestrians and ignoring explicit offers of personal services from men and women standing in doorways. "Malabar's innovations were generally not well received. A few of the younger hydromants sided with him but their attempts to practice the new dispensation in the Grand Tabernacle met resistance. When he would not compromise, the disaffection of the majority was inflamed into an outright hostility that Malabar's followers returned redoubled. Harsh words were thrown about, then--as is not unknown in such disputes--a few bricks and stones. He and his adherents thought it prudent to withdraw. They pooled their wealth and bought passage to this barren spot. They dug a well

and created the Sequestrance, to follow their inclinations undisturbed."

Huffley looked about, saw no obvious eavesdroppers, then continued, "Then the Bololos arrived."

"The Bololos?" said Bandar. "Are they this rabble that infests the shantytown?"

"No, they are the cause that brought the rabble here. They are the autochthones of Gamza, a large but harmless quasi-sapient species of lichen grazers. Yet they are 'fundamental to the nuisance,' or so Malabar described them in his missive accepting my offer to resolve the problem."

"Master, I did not know that you were versed in conflict resolution."

Huffley looked slightly abashed. "In truth, it is not among my accomplishments."

"Perhaps you should fall back a step or two and explain how you came to make such an offer."

"The Bololos are telepaths," the academician said, "but otherwise devoid of interest. They have no discernible culture, no arts or quaint customs, no wars or religious enthusiasms. In the literature, they are described as an entirely happy and entirely boring population who pass their uneventful lives in calm, unbroken communion with each other. They follow an annual round of wandering from one oasis of desert vegetation to another, spending the days grazing except when they pause briefly to create more Bololos. Even that process is said to be sedate."

Bandar was puzzled. "Yet people have come all this way to watch them graze?"

Huffley signaled a negative. "Since Malabar's hydromants settled close to one of the grazing areas, the telepaths have exhibited unusual behavior. They strike poses or run about. One will suddenly embrace another, receiving in return a welcome or a buffet to the midriff. It is all rather harmless, since they are completely unequipped to do each other real damage. Though they are strong, in their way, there is neither a fang nor a claw amongst the lot of them."

The phenomenon only occurred while the Bololos were within close range of the hydromants, Huffley explained. Once they had eaten all the season's crop of vetch or whatever it was they craved, they would move on. As soon as they put distance between themselves and the Sequestrance, the odd behavior stopped.

Bandar had been conscious of a growing excitement as the preceptor spoke. "Master," he said, "you are saying that a cross-species transference has occurred."

"I am not saying it quite yet," said Huffley. His front teeth chewed nervously at his lips for a moment before he continued. "I am saying that there are definite indications. We are here to observe and draw conclusions."

"It's unheard of," Bandar said. "It would be,"--he swallowed, throat suddenly dry--"a new datum."

Huffley's face twitched. The old man seemed torn between joyous excitement and stark terror and Bandar thought the mix appropriate to the situation. No one had contributed a new datum to the Institute's vast compendium of knowledge since time immemorial.

The two scholars had stopped to contemplate the enormity of the prospect. Now a rotund man, who wore a remarkable hat and smelled strongly of the devastating liquor known as Red Abandon, stumbled into them and caromed away. They resumed their progress toward the Hotel Splendor.

"So we are not here to solve the hydromants' problem, though it was that expectation that led them to

pay our passage?"

"The search for knowledge sometimes requires a scholar to make bold leaps," said Huffley. "Do you imagine the first explorers of the Commons paused to quibble and cavil over every little detail?"

"I imagine they risked their own identities, not the wealth of others," said Bandar.

The preceptor threw his student a look that carried unmixed sentiments and Bandar subsided. Instead he indicated the shambles around them and said, "How did all this arrive?"

Huffley told him that after the Bololos had come and gone three years running, news of their odd antics reached the distant mining town of Haplick where a boom built around the discovery of surface deposits of odlerite was beginning to fade. The impresario Rul Bazwan, a man as long on enterprise as he was short on qualms, operated there, supplying miners with the services they craved in their off-time: ardent liquors, games of chance, and compliant companions. His receipts beginning to decline, Bazwan was casting about for a new place in which to pitch up, and fearing that he would be put to the expense of moving his troupe offworld. Then the Bololos offered opportunity.

"He sent men to harvest lichens at the next point on the creatures' migratory circuit, delivering the stuff to feeding stations he established in a natural amphitheater not far from here. The Bololos, their fodder at hand, did not move on. Near the food Bazwan left heaps of costumes and theatrical props. The Bololos, their psyches contaminated by the contents of the human unconscious, took them up and began to act out myths and archetypical situations.

"Bazwan takes tourists out to gawk for free as the poor things strut and fret," Huffley continued. "He profits when the punters return to his establishment for wine, whoopitude, and song. His enterprise is popular among the jaded. They now come here even from other worlds, as do disreputable hangers-on who feed dissolute appetites. A town has sprung up and the noise is a sore trial to the sequestrants."

Huffley's soft hands met and parted in a gesture that expressed resignation at the misfortunes of others. "But it is an unheard of opportunity for two scholars of the Institute."

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The Institute of Historical Inquiry had been established in the city of Olkney on Old Earth scores, some said hundreds, of thousands of years ago, to explore and map the human collective unconscious. Through a mastery of recondite mentalist techniques, the founding scholars of the Institute had learned to delve beneath their individual, personal unconsciousnesses and enter that vast nosphere resident within all humanity, where resided the eternal archetypes of the species: the Fool and the Hero, the Mother and Father, the Wise Man and the Helpful Beast, the Deliverer and the Devourer, and many more. Here, too, were all the elemental Events, Situations, and Landscapes of the human story: from the Discovery of the New Land to the Invasion of the Barbarians; from the First Kiss of Innocence to the Scorning of the Inamorata; from the Forest of the Beasts to the City of the Machines.

Over thousands of years, the nosphere, colloquially called the Commons, was thoroughly mapped and delineated by resolute explorers. By adapting the lesson of the dawn-time orphic myth of the singer whose songs had kept him safe in the underworld, they discovered that chanting certain sequences of tones--the technical term was thrans--would allow them to pass safely through the nodes that connected one Location to another. Other thrans could hide the nonaunts from the perceptions of the Commons's denizens. The latter ability was important, whether dealing with the general archetypical figures or the idiomatic entities that inhabited specific Locations. Many of these were appallingly violent by their very natures, but any of them could become dangerous if disharmonious elements were added to the stories that were, literally, their existence.

The Commons, then, was the most wonderful, most terrible, of places. Every joy, every horror, was crystallized there, in a realm that was timeless though not boundless; for the early explorers had discovered a barrier--it usually presented itself as an endless chain of mountains, or a topleless wall of closely fitted white blocks of stone--between the human nosphere and the collective unconsciousness of any other intelligent species. The wall could be neither breached nor climbed. Nor could it be dug under, for there was nothing below the "ground" of the Commons but the formless gray sea of unsapience through which swam the great blind Worm of preconsciousness, eternally seeking to devour its own tail ... or, as one unlucky nonaut pioneer found, anything else that entered the pearly light of its "waters."

None of the few telepathic species that humans had encountered could breach the wall. Thus it was concluded that each Commons must operate on its own unique "frequency," though what these purported frequencies might be had never been conclusively demonstrated. Still, it was accepted that the separation of Commonses, each from all others, was a fundamental underpinning of the universe, like the gravitational constant and the three speeds of light.

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Bandar was musing on the import of the Bololos' contamination when the two scholars emerged from an alley directly across from the Hotel Splendor. They crossed the dusty street and mounted the stairs to the verandah, where a mustachioed man in a garishly patterned suit stood behind a lectern on top of which rested a roll of paper tickets. "Next charabanc leaves in twenty minutes," he told the pair as they approached, adding, "No charge."

Huffley took two tickets. He looked about for somewhere to wait out of the sun, but there were no seats outside the establishment.

"Master," Bandar said, "perhaps a cold beer would wash away the iron taste of the water they gave us at the Sequestrance."

The young man noted that his words brought them a sidelong glance from the ticket-seller, but Huffley was already through the hotel's swinging half-doors. Bandar followed him into a large room. A heterogeneous crowd was taking advantage of the availability of food and beverages dispensed from behind a well-polished bar and carried to the dozens of tables by young women wearing uniforms apparently designed to avoid the slightest possibility of confusion over their gender. At the back of the room, spinning wheels, flashing lights, and occasional cries or wails betokened victory or defeat at games of chance.

The Institute men took seats at an empty table and ordered flagons of ale from a passing server whose attributes caused Bandar's eyes to follow her as she departed, until Huffley's booted toe connected with his ankle under the table. Having secured his attention, the academician leaned toward him and said, "We should discuss our program."

Bandar bent to rub his aching joint. "I have yet to hear of any program," he said.

"I detect in your tone a hitherto unsuspected capacity for bitterness," Huffley said. "Perhaps it is the first time I have heard you speak from your heart."

"I am speaking from my ankle," Bandar said, "but that is beside...."

Two flagons of ale arrived on the table at that moment, but when the two disputants looked up they saw not the buxom young woman who had taken the order, but a tall, lean man with a prominent scar across his clean-shaven chin.

"Mind if I join you?" he said but did not wait for an answer before sitting.

"This is a private conversation," Huffley said.

"In my establishment," said the stranger, "all conversations involve me."

"You are Rul Bazwan," Huffley said.

The man inclined his head. "I already know who *I* am," he said. "What interests me is who you are. And specifically how you came to approach my saloon from the direction of the piddlers' palace up there on the hill."

The preceptor drew himself erect in his chair. "We are scholars of the Institute of Historical Inquiry on Old Earth. We are..."

"...on sabbatical," Bandar broke in, "and thought it might be interesting to take in some local sights." He took up his ale and looked around. "Quite a colorful establishment you have here."

Bazwan fixed the young man with a suspicious eye. "And into what, exactly, does your Institute inquire?"

Bandar saw that Huffley was inclined to answer and again leapt in to seize the floor. "Nothing much. Odd little quirks of Old Earth's distant past. For most of us, it's more of a hobby than a profession."

"Now, just a moment..." Huffley began, a reddening flush rising from his collar into his cheeks.

But Bandar cut him off again, both with words and with a kick under the table. "My esteemed colleague, for example, has made a comprehensive study of the pubic hairstyles that were fashionable in the Eighteenth Aeon. His expertise in the matter of braided merkins is unparalleled. I'm sure he'd be delighted to tell you about them."

Bazwan drew back. "That won't be necessary," he said, though mistrust lingered in the crevices about his eyes. "But what were you doing among the piss-pots up above?"

"I don't know whom you mean," Bandar said.

Bazwan's thumb hooked in the direction of the Sequestrance. "The place you came from."

"Oh," said the young man. "We were stranded at some little space port and hitched a ride on their dray. Why do you call them piss-pots? Are they noted for their tipping? By the way, this ale is quite good."

"Never mind," said the innkeeper, rising to his feet. "Enjoy your stay."

When the scarred man was gone, Huffley said, "You assaulted me."

"That is nothing compared to what I suspect Rul Bazwan would do if he thought we were here to interfere with his livelihood."

Comprehension dawned in the academician's face. "Oh," he said, "yes, I see. Good thinking."

"Not that we're actually capable of doing so," Bandar continued, keeping his voice low. "Unless you have powers a mere student cannot guess at."

Huffley took up his ale. "I have no such powers," he said. "I will ascertain if there is phenomenon of telepathic leakage across species lines. Then I shall declare to the hydromants that the situation is more dire than I had thought, paint the Bololos in the colors of dangerous psychotics, and recommend that the Sequestrance move to another site."

"Malabar will not hear that news gladly." Bandar said.

"What can he do? He is, after all, a contemplative."

"My impression is that he might have no difficulty contemplating murder and mayhem. He did allude to another plan."

"My assessment of him differs," said Huffley. "They will all probably hide behind their wall, their ears stuffed with that horrid bread they tried to feed us. It would certainly be a better use than eating it." A noise from outside drew his attention. "There is the charabanc. Let us embark."

They took seats in the front row. The vehicle soon filled up with passengers whose costumes, coiffures, and adornments of skin and appendages identified them as having come from at least a dozen worlds. When all the seats were taken the vehicle began to roll forward, then stopped briefly at the call of a muscular young bravo in a wide-brimmed hat and fringed leggings who came out of the saloon and leapt aboard to take a position standing behind the operator.

The high-wheeled conveyance rolled away, flinging dust and grit in billows behind it. Huffley leaned toward Bandar to say something, but the student signaled his teacher to silence while indicating with an inclination of his head the man standing close to them. The fellow did not look their way, but Bandar had the impression that if his ears could have swiveled in their direction, they would have.

The journey was short, ending at the rim of a shallow depression that formed a natural amphitheater. The charabanc unloaded and the passengers descended to find seats on narrow ledges of rock that sloped down toward a wide and open space. Bandar looked down upon a herd of Bololos.

The creatures stood on their hind legs like humans, freeing their upper appendages to scoop up handfuls of dark lichen from the several piles scattered about the natural basin. This they ate with jaws and dentition that again approximated the human, though to call the entire effect humanoid one would have to stretch the definition to include beings that were half again as big as Bandar, covered in coarse hair that came in shades from dun to light brown, and with skulls topped by a pronounced cranial ridge that anchored their huge chewing muscles. They also had short, broad and hairless tails that Bandar thought might have something to do with radiating excess body heat.

"Come," said Huffley, and led the way to a seat near the rim of the amphitheater. "We will watch."

The piles of lichen were disappearing at a rapid rate, there being as many as a hundred adult Bololos in the herd, with a scattering of juveniles. "I have read about this," Huffley said. "They will eat until they are sated. When the food is gone, they normally lapse into a state of mutual communion."

The autochthones did not do so, however, because as the last handfuls of lichen were crammed into the gaping maws and chewed to pulp, a flying car came to hover over them. Two men dropped bundles of brightly colored clothing and various objects and implements among the Bololos. The car then sidled over to where the spectators sat and a florid-looking man in spangled garments took up an amplifier.

"Honorable and distinctions," he began, "I invite you to witness a rare incidence of cross-species assonance. But first, I must have your cooperation, for you yourselves are an intrinsic part of this experience."

Some of the audience looked interested, others annoyed at the unexpected prospect of exerting themselves in the pursuit of their own entertainment. The master of ceremonies assumed a mollifying air. "All that is required of you is that you choose," he said, "from among the common pantheon of stories on which the literature of all the many worlds of *The Spray* is founded. The comic misadventures of *The*

Three Orlicants, for example. The rousing saga of *The King in Darkness*. The tragedy of *Heliocanth and Helaphion*."

Each of the titles was advanced with an expansive gesture and roll of the man's eyes. "Choose one," his amplified voice continued. "Let its scenes and motifs well up into your thoughts from the deepest springs, dwell upon its tropes and meanings, and--behold!--the creatures below will assume the principal roles and reenact them before your eyes. The spectacle will delight and astonish by the incongruent juxtaposition of the familiar and the bizarre."

He executed a final flourish and assumed an air of expectation. There was silence from the crowd, then a tentative voice called out, "*The Justification of Ballion*!"

"*The Remarkable Ring*!" cried another.

"No," said a third, more confident voice, "make it *The Lad Who Persevered*!"

At this, there was a general murmur of acceptance from the crowd. The master of ceremonies gave a knowing wink and said, "*The Lad* it shall be." The air car rose slowly as he continued, in a sonorous tone, "Close your eyes, clear the mind. Now, softly, softly, let the first scene of the story rise to fill your inner screen. Do you have it? Can you see the fated child among the tyrant's cabbages? Now, then, open and gaze upon a wonderment!"

Bandar had done as the man had bid. Now, as he beheld the area below, he saw the Bololos bending over the piles of costumes and props, draping themselves in outsized garments and picking up various implements. At first, the scene was random and chaotic, then the elements of the old story suddenly fell into place.

"Look," he said to Huffley, "that one with the hoe is obviously the lad. See, he gouges the soil, now pauses to dream. And, yes, here comes the brutal overseer--there's his whip and there's the shackles--and that light-shaded one must be the child's despairing dam."

"Yes, yes," said the academician. "It is what I expected."

"Now the ones in the background are forming ranks," Bandar said. "They'll be the army. There goes the lad to volunteer. And now the overseer is changing into the abusive sergeant."

"Remarkable, I'm sure," said Huffley. "But let us do what we came to do."

"Which you have not yet vouchsafed to me," said Bandar. "Shall I sit here and guess?"

"You are becoming quite forward for an undergraduate," said Huffley.

"Doubtless it is the broadening effect of off-world travel," said Bandar. "Or perhaps I am so naturally impatient that after spending hardly more than a week traveling halfway down The Spray I begin to require answers."

"And somewhat snippy, to boot," said the preceptor. "You put me in mind of Fartherthwaith, the Overdean. Still, you cannot do your part unless I acquaint you with it. So pay heed."

Huffley quickly outlined his plan, the elements of which were much as Bandar had expected. Each would descend through his own unconscious into the Commons. They would meet and seek the breach in the wall through which human archetypes were being telepathically drawn into the unconscious of the Bololos.

"I will approach the gap and look through it," Huffley concluded, "while you chant the thran that will keep us unapprehended by the archetypes."

"May I also not look through?" Bandar said.

"You are but in your third year. You would be terrified."

Bandar was indeed apprehensive, yet he hoped he was brave. "But I have come all this way."

"Enough," said Huffley. "We shall begin."

The pair assumed the cross-legged position and prepared to begin the mental exercises that were the first step on the road into the Commons. Before he closed his eyes and drew his focus inward, Bandar looked around. The spectators around them were avidly watching the drama unfolding below, where the Bololos were now enacting the Battle of Millefolle, the military catastrophe from which the plucky boy hero rescues the heir to the kingdom only to see another given the reward. Bandar looked for the man in the hat and leggings, but could not see him.

"I'm concerned about that bravo in the hat and leggings," he said.

"Such men are of no account," Huffley said. "Commence."

Bandar withdrew his attention from the scene, closed his eyes and concentrated on the exercises that prepared him to enter the unconscious. In a few moments he saw the familiar portal: a sealed door that, even as he reified it, began to glow about its edges as if behind it stood a great lamp. Bandar fashioned a mental hand and had it lift the latch, causing the door to swing outward. His whole inner vision was now bathed in a rich light of rosaceous gold. He propelled his consciousness into the warm effulgence and instantly it faded. He was standing in the great storage room behind his Uncle Fley's housewares emporium, the place where he had spent much of his later boyhood. He looked about him and saw, as he knew he would, an item that was inconsistent with the remembered reality from which this vision was drawn: set in the far wall was a door of dark, close-grained wood with a black iron handle in the shape of a gnarled hand. Fearlessly, Bandar approached the door, seized, and yanked.

Beyond was a darkness in which loomed a shadowy figure. As Bandar stepped forward it also came toward him and resolved itself into the image of someone he knew: Didrick Gabbri, a fellow student at the Institute with a flair for self-aggrandizement and a general approach to life that struck Bandar as a basic meanness of spirit. Bandar knew the dark eidolon was not the real Gabbri, was in fact a projected reification of those negative qualities that Bandar rejected in his own makeup. The figure sneered at Bandar, but the young man simply strode through it and, as his chest made contact, the image vanished like a burst bubble.

Now Bandar stood at the top of a wide curving stairway that descended into mist. He went down swiftly, knowing that Huffley, a master nonaut, must reach the outer circle of the Commons before him and sure that the old man would levy criticism for delaying their work. In a moment the mist evanesced and he was walking down a country lane that led down into a green valley from a gentle hill. On either side, low stone walls separated the road from open fields dotted with copses of trees.

He caught a flicker of light from the corner of one eye, stopped, and turned toward it. The light faded and was replaced by a pale rendition of Huffley. The image quickly darkened and solidified until the academician appeared as solid as Bandar.

"I've been waiting," the senior man said, tapping his foot.

Bandar made an apologetic gesture and the old man sniffed and turned to look down the road. "We will go first to the outer arrondissement and see what the effects are on the pure archetypes." Even as he spoke, he set off down the road, adding, "The situation may be roiled. Begin the three-three-seven."

Bandar began singing the most elemental thran, a sequence that sounded much like an ancient children's song about an old man, a dog, and a bone, among other things. Its notes would prevent them from being apprehended by any archetypes they might encounter. He looked about him and saw nothing but fields and trees, but he knew that neither actually existed and that an attempt to cross the apparent open spaces beyond the walls would soon have him walking into an unseen gate that would drop him into one of the myriad Locations of the Commons. He kept to the road.

After a few moments, he became aware that the road encountered a deep ravine across which hung a suspension bridge of ropes and planks. Bandar studied the construction with some small interest, knowing that it must be Huffley's conception of the entry into the outer shell of the great sphere that was the Commons. If Bandar had been exerting the primary influence on this exploration, they would have come to a stream overarched by a bridge of dressed stone. Others would have seen a simple fence with a stile, a log over a brook, a high-flying ribbon of bright metal over a bottomless chasm, a city street marked by a crosswalk.

The scene on the far side of the barrier was indistinct, in the manner of dreams, but as they made their way to the midpoint of the span they saw a limitless open space in which a host of figures stood or sat or moved about at random.

"Stop," said Huffley. "But chant louder. I sense a definite tension."

Bandar increased his volume, at the same time using a nonaut technique that extended and sharpened his vision. He focused on the figures in the field, identifying many of them at first appraisal. Here came the Wise Man, there the female Temptress and the male Seducer. The Fool lolloped by. The Eater of Children stalked past, rubbing its gnarled hands together. Bandar saw the Judge of Souls and the Helpful Beast, and off in the distance he could see the Willing Sacrifice and the Redeemer--all the "usual suspects," as Institute undergraduates were wont to refer to them.

But no, not all of them, he realized as Huffley spoke. "I do not see the Tyrant, nor the Commander, nor the Boy of Destiny. I think that settles it. There is a breach." Bandar heard the excitement in his teacher's voice, mingled with an overtone of fear.

The preceptor led the way back to the road, Bandar continuing to chant the three, three, and seven. This close to the first level, with its denizens disturbed, anything might happen. Direct contact with a pure archetype meant instant obliteration of the nonaut's identity and complete absorption. The body left in the waking world would be suffused by the archtypical entity and its subsequent actions would be indistinguishable from those of a full-blown psychotic.

Huffley's face took on an introspective cast and Bandar knew that he was seeking a direction. After a moment, the old man said, "Do you sense the flux?"

Bandar applied the nonaut mentalism that could identify the location of nodes between Locations and felt a slight but definite sense of motion, representing itself as a gentle breeze. He gestured with his chin in the direction that the "air" seemed to move.

Huffley said, "I concur." He approached the wall on one side of the road and climbed over. Bandar did the same. The old man moved carefully, counting his steps and changing direction so that he traced a zigzagging route across the field. Bandar followed precisely, knowing that each invisible corner turned meant they were stepping around a gateway that would have plucked them from this place and dropped

them in some other Location of the Commons where they might face lengthy delays in getting out or encounter lethal challenges.

Working their way through the unseen maze, they came all at once to the great white wall. In the manner of dreams, one moment it was absent, the next it was close by, stretching up and to left and right, with no discernible limit. Here the "breeze" was more pronounced, rippling past the tightly joined blocks of bright, shining stone. Huffley turned to follow its motion and Bandar noticed that the man's knees seemed to have weakened.

With each step the movement of air palpably strengthened. Bandar could feel it tickling the back of his neck and soon he heard a soft whistling over the sound of his continued chanting.

"We are here," said Huffley, a quaver in his voice. He had stopped before a section of the wall that, to Bandar, looked like any other, though the breeze now sounded like the wind that often suffled around the eaves of the undergraduate dormitory back at the Institute. The young man felt a momentary desolation at being so far from home and, perhaps, about to face a peril unprecedented in the long exploration of the Commons. But he summoned his courage and continued to chant.

Huffley reached a trembling hand toward the wall. Bandar could see the hairs stirring on the backs of the preceptor's fingers as their tips approached the stone. Then the age-spotted hand disappeared into the whiteness and swiftly jerked back. Huffley examined the appendage closely but found nothing wrong. He thrust it into the wall again, up to the wrist, then to the elbow. He drew it back and again found no harm.

"Well," he said. "There it is." He sounded short of breath.

Bandar waited for the academician to take the next, logical step. But Huffley just stood before the invisible breach in the barrier. His breath came rapid and raspy. Bandar, still chanting the thran, made motions with his hands, as if to usher the old man forward, but the preceptor had begun to tremble, a wild look in his eye.

Bandar broke off the thran. "Master," he said. "You must look. We have come all this way." He took up the chant again, but Huffley made an inconclusive gesture with a shaking hand, and whispered, "I cannot."

Bandar made shooing motions toward the wall, but Huffley looked away. The academician lowered himself to the ground and sat, disconsolate, his head bowed. "I lack the explorer's courage," he said. "Never in my life have I done what no one else has done before. Nor has anyone on Old Earth or the Ten Thousand Worlds. It is the curse of living in a latter age."

Then I will, thought Bandar, still sounding the three, three, seven thran. He stepped to the wall and, before he could think himself out of it, thrust his head at the space where Huffley's hand had passed through. For a moment all was a white brightness, then his face popped through and he beheld the space beyond.

Here was the archetypal Landscape of the Bololos, which Bandar was not surprised to find looked exactly like the surface of Gamza in the waking world: a level plain of rock, sand, and grit broken here and there by dark patches of lichen. He was surprised, however, that there was no crowd of Bololo archetypes such as those that populated the human Commons. Instead, he saw but one figure in the Location: a large, placid Bololo of indeterminate gender who stood, apparently bemused, and watched the human archetypes that had come through the barrier.

Of course, Bandar thought. *A deeply telepathic species would have a unified psyche from top to bottom--no contending, cooperating fragments, no partial personas--just one self-composed entity.*

He drew his head back into the human nosphere, broke off the thran and said, "Master, the Bololo Commons contains but a single archetype."

Huffley made a small noise and it seemed for a moment that he would rise and take a look, but then his fear of the new reasserted itself and he sank down. Bandar resumed the thran and put his head back through the wall. Now he ignored the Bololo entity and focused on the contaminants that had been able to pass through the breach caused by the aliens' telepathic resonance.

They were clearly the elements of the ancient archetypal story, *The Lad Who Persevered*. There was the strutting Tyrant, here the forlorn Helpless Mother, there the Enemy Host, rampant for battle, and here the fearless Boy himself, striding toward his destiny. Bandar saw that the tale was nearing its conclusion, the Tyrant having been cast down while the Boy picked up the usurper's fallen sword and positioned himself to strike the final blow.

He pulled his head back to his own side of the wall and again ceased to chant the insulating thran. "It was as you surmised, Master," he said. "The contaminant human archetypes enter the Bololo Commons. There they play their various roles, turning the poor creatures into naturals,"--he used the Institute term for victims of psychosis--"for the entertainment of Rul Bazwan's excursionists."

Huffley looked up and said something indistinct, then broke off whatever the remark had been to begin loudly chanting the three, three, seven in a frantic tone, his eyes wide and fixed on something behind Bandar. Bandar immediately joined in the thran and stepped quickly away from the wall. Only when he was well clear did he turn to see what had so frightened his preceptor.

He recognized the grim and towering figure striding toward the breach. It was the archetype known as the Angel of Wrath and Vengeance, usually found only in a few of the nosphere's more apocalyptic Locations; Bandar knew it by its great dark wings, dripping droplets of gore, and its sword of black iron. *And those behind it*, he thought, *are surely the Piacular Legion, their faces dour and their weapons bristling*.

It was clear that another drama was to be enacted after the tale of the Lad was wound up. The Angel marched straight to the wall and passed beyond, its following horde filing through in its train. Bandar shuddered, because he knew what must now ensue in the waking world, for the Angel had borne the face of the Eminence Malabar and the ranks of the Legion had been full of lean men in coarse robes.

When the last of them had disappeared through the breach, he broke off the thran to speak to Huffley, but the preceptor was beyond conversation. Panic had seized control of his face, underlain by a wash of shame. Bandar swiftly intoned a short thran that would open an emergency exit from the Commons. A shimmering rift appeared in the air before them. The young man thrust his teacher through it and sprang after him.

* * * *

Bandar fell back into his body with the jolt that always accompanied an emergency departure from the nosphere. That shock was followed by another: he was no longer seated in the amphitheater above the Bololo feeding station. He and Huffley were in a roofless room with unfinished walls. Above him he saw the thickly starred Gamzan night. Music and the hubbub of a crowd sounded faintly through the floor. Time spent in the Commons could often be elastic; clearly here in the waking world enough time had passed for him and Huffley to have been roped, gagged, and carried back to the Hotel Splendor while they were entranced.

"They're coming out of it," said a voice behind them. "Get the patron up here."

Bandar turned his head and saw the man in the leggings talking into a communicator. The fellow returned

him a look that said he shortly expected an enjoyable spectacle. Bandar doubted he would be similarly entertained. Moments passed, and Bandar heard a new sound above the noise from the saloon below: the thin, aggravating whine of untuned gravity obviators coming from behind and above. As the keening sound reached its loudest, the student looked up and saw the Sequestrance's carryall passing overhead from the direction of the Bololo amphitheater, its scarred hull illuminated by the lights of the town. When it banked to head toward the Sequestrance, he noticed that its load of crates was gone.

Bandar grunted through the gag, seeking to attract the preceptor's attention. But Huffley's head was sunk on his chest, the academician offering a portrait of despair.

Now firm footsteps sounded beyond the room and the door opened and closed. A moment later, Rul Bazwan came into the young man's field of vision, wearing an expression that invited no further wasting of his time. In his hand was a wandlike instrument. The implement was unfamiliar to Bandar but he was sure he did not wish to become well acquainted with it.

"This time," said the saloonkeeper, "we will have the truth. Get the gags off them." When the man in leggings had pulled the rags from their mouths, Bazwan addressed Huffley. "You will tell me what this was all about."

A soft sob escaped the scholar. He did not look up. "I have failed," he said.

"What did you do?" said Bazwan.

Huffley's gaze remained on the floor. "I thought that when the moment came I would be bold. Instead, I quailed. How they will mock."

Bazwan rubbed his chin and showed his lower teeth. He turned his attention to Bandar. "What's he talking about?"

Bandar swallowed. "I think he has gone a little mad," he said. "It is not unheard of amongst the Institute's senior savants."

"Then it's up to you," said the impresario.

"I am happy to cooperate," Bandar said.

"Then I may not need this?" Bazwan touched a control on the device in his hand. It buzzed as if it confined a swarm of hornets. A light glowed darkly red at its tip.

"Definitely not," Bandar assured him.

"We will see," the saloonkeeper said and Bandar saw that the man in leggings was chagrined. Bazwan continued. "Let us begin. You and the old man are scholars from the Institute of Historical Inquiry."

"We are."

"The piddlers brought you in."

"They did."

"To disrupt my legitimate business." Bazwan's voice had taken on an edge.

"I do not deny it."

"And what have you done?"

"Absolutely nothing," said Bandar. "It is not our role to interfere, even if there was anything we could do, which there is not and never was."

Bandar was pleased to hear a less strident tone from his interrogator, though the wand remained within sight and hearing. "Then what were you doing here?"

"We wanted to observe the phenomenon of the Bololo herd. But we could not afford space travel."

Bazwan stroked the scar again and drew down one eyebrow. "You mean you spun the old piss-artist a tale just to cadge free travel down The Spray?"

Bandar assured him it was so.

"And there is nothing you can do to close the connection between humans and the Bololos?"

"Not a thing. I swear on my honor as a scholar of the Institute."

Bazwan pursed thoughtful lips as he regarded the two of them. "All right," he said after a moment. To Bandar's relief, he extinguished the buzz and glow. "But we had better keep you around for a while just to be sure."

"My master is unwell," Bandar said. "It would be best if I took him home."

"He will come to no harm here. I will send this man out to see what is happening with the autochthones. If all is as it should be, you will be freed in the morning."

Bandar made to protest but Bazwan's response indicated that he would entertain no further objections. When the ringing in Bandar's head stopped, he found that he and Huffley were alone in the room, still bound but ungagged.

"Master," he whispered, "we must depart from here. The Bololos are coming. Listen." He strained his ears. Over the music and ruckus from below he could faintly hear another sound: a chorus of male voices chanting the harsh sutras of the ancient epic, *The Doom that Besmote the Iniquitous*.

Huffley said something indistinct, his attention still fixed upon a space somewhere between his eyes and the floor.

"Master," Bandar said, "I know what Malabar's other plan entailed. I know what was in those crates." He also knew that Rul Bazwan would not quibble over who was responsible for the horror that was about to befall his town.

"Master!" Bandar tried again. If he could bring Preceptor Huffley back into focus, perhaps they could hunch their chairs around and work at each other's knots. "There can be little time. Please!"

But Huffley only sent another mumbled remark in the direction of the floor. Bandar listened again. The chanting from the Sequestrance was louder now, a note of raw excitement infusing the unsympathetic verses. Bandar could imagine Malabar and the angry hydromants, standing along the south wall, eyeing the darkness beyond the shantytown and waiting for the first glint of spear and halberd in the grip of massive Bololos who were themselves no less in the grasp of an archetypical holy violence.

Huffley began to blubber. Then he abruptly stopped and offered the floor an incoherent rebuttal of some assertion only he had heard made. Bandar realized that his preceptor could be of no further use.

The hydromants' chanting grew louder still and Bandar heard creep into it a note familiar to any

schoolchild who has fallen out with his peers and become the target of organized vindictiveness. From the other edge of town he heard a shout, followed by a scream, then a crash of shattered glass and splintering wood. The music from downstairs faltered then stopped and the raised voices took on a new emotion. Sounds came from the street, frightened at first, then overborne by the distinctive tone of Rul Bazwan issuing hurried orders.

Another scream, this one closer, followed by the unmistakable *zivv* of an energy pistol, then a deep-throated roar and a rush of feet too heavy to be human. Something struck the wall of the Hotel Splendor--it sounded as if it had been the rear of the building--hard enough to make the unroofed walls quake.

Bandar pulled at his bonds but the man in the leggings must have been a perfectionist. He looked again to Huffley and heard a snatch of a nursery song. Now a new clatter arose from beneath the floorboards and Bandar, seeking to make sense of it, reasoned that Bazwan had summoned all who could make it into the hotel and urged them to bar the doors and windows with furniture. The young man lacked faith in that stratagem. The Bololos were very large and motivated by the rage of fanatics. Tables and chairs would offer no obstacle.

There was but one avenue of escape and Bandar took it. He closed his eyes and performed the mental exercises that would take him "down to the basement," as Institute jargon had it. Forcing the pace, he was soon in his uncle's storeroom. He crossed it swiftly, yanked open the anomalous dark door, barely taking time to note that the shadow of Didrick Gabbris wore a deeper sneer than usual before Bandar was racing down the staircase to the road between the walls.

And here he wished he had his preceptor. He could feel the breeze flowing toward the gap, but the exact place at which to step from the safety of the road and the zigs and zags required to navigate the apparent field? He could only trust to memory. Fortunately, a capacious power of recall and a flair for detail were characteristics every student of the Institute soon mastered. He summoned all the mnemonic strength he possessed, chose a spot along the low gray wall that seemed to answer, and stepped over.

He could picture clearly how Huffley had made the passage. He took four steps forward, then one to his left, two more forward, then six to the right--and stopped dead as a throbbing sensation rippled down the entire front of his virtual body. He leaned slightly backward and it eased.

Very carefully, Bandar shuffled a minim backward. The throbbing meant he had almost blundered into a node. He might have found himself in one of the Landscapes, Situations, or Events that were preserved in the Commons, some of which were almost instantly fatal; a thran could make him invisible to the idiomatic entities on an archetypical battlefield but that was scant help if he arrived just as an artillery barrage was landing--and since the Commons preserved crystallized memes of the most memorable events on its battlefields barrages, cavalry charges, or screaming infantry assaults were always imminent.

Bandar calmed himself and let the memory of Huffley's movements well up in him. He determined that he had come the right way, but that he had let his strides grow fractionally larger than the preceptor's. He turned left and took three carefully measured steps, then right for four and four more forward ... and there loomed the topless wall.

He turned in the direction of the flow and shoulder-rubbed his way along the wall until he came to the breach. Without hesitation, he stepped through. His feet grated on the gritty floor of the Bololo Commons, making a scritch sound that drew the attention of a soldier, one of the Piacular Legion who was slicing the air with a single-edged sword. Delight lit up the archetype's face and it swung the heavy weapon at Bandar's head. The young man leaped back and passed through the wall into the human Commons.

Calling up a mentalism to calm himself, Bandar chanted the three, three, seven and went again into the Bololo nosphere. This time the Legionary did not notice him, and the nonaut paused a moment to take in the scene. The Angel of Wrath and Vengeance was striding back and forth, gesticulating and exhorting his followers to holy violence. Before its leader, the Legion had deployed into four ranks that were advancing across the empty space, stabbing and splitting the air with the metronomic precision of a fighting machine. Bandar shuddered to think how the actions before his eyes were being replicated by towering Bololos in the waking world.

Beyond the one-sided battle, the Bololo archetype stood and regarded the interlopers with an aspect that Bandar read as puzzled concern. The Angel paid it no heed, intent on acting out the drama of its existence, its wings throwing blood in all directions. A droplet touched Bandar's virtual skin, and he felt as if a hot coal had been pressed against him. He rubbed the blister that was already rising and, dodging the martial display and the towering figure of retribution, he made his way toward the Bololo entity.

Now comes the difficult part, he thought. For a moment, fear came burbling up in him. To expose oneself to an archetypal entity was an invitation to be absorbed into it, all conscious identity lost in irreducible psychosis. To expose oneself to an alien entity was unheard of, but Bandar told himself that unheard-of seemed to be the motto of the day. Besides, it would not be long before the raging Bololos stormed the Hotel Splendor, and he gave only the slightest of odds that his corporeal body, bound to a chair, would survive the massacre.

Still singing the three, three, seven, he put down his inchoate terror and placed himself before the Bololo archetype. He waited until the Angel and the Legion had marched to the limits of their advance and were marking time, preparing to about-face and come back the way they had gone.

As the grunting fanatics turned on their heels, stabbing the air, Bandar ceased chanting the insulating thran. The looming Bololo archetype noticed him first, and stared down at him with a look of polite interest. Bandar gazed into its calm, dark eyes and saw depths beyond reckoning.

Behind him, a thundering voice shouted words of discovery, answered by a roar from many throats. Bandar heard the thud of hobnailed boots on the hardpacked ground and knew the Legion was coming for him. There was no way back. He fought down another burst of panic and stepped toward the Bololo archetype.

He felt its fur brush his face. There followed a sense of intense dislocation, as if his whole being suddenly blasted into fragments, billions of Bandar-iotas flying in all directions both temporal and spatial, each a dimly sentient spark. Then, just as abruptly, the explosion stopped, froze for an instant that seemed to last forever, then every item of Bandar shrapnel retraced its arc and all coalesced once more into....

Not Bandar. Or, at least, not just Bandar. He was aware of being himself ... and yet more. It was as if he had lived all his existence in a small, windowless cell, but now its walls, floor, and ceiling had become porous, transparent glass, and he knew that his cell was but one of an infinite honeycomb of cells, each inhabited by a consciousness, each consciousness aware of every other, and all bound together in a comforting matrix of supernal equanimity. But as he looked deeper into the infinity of the Bololo archetype, he realized that he was seeing more than just what *was*--he was seeing all the Bololos that ever had been, that ever would be, every existence from the beginning of the species to the last of its kind, far off in the unimaginable future. Here they were, all together--and he was one of them.

Here and there he noticed cells whose walls were opaquely dark, like spots of cancer in otherwise healthy tissue. He was cut off from those cells, could feel the separation, and it troubled him.

How long Bandar spent contemplating the immensity of Bololodom he would never know. After a time,

he drew his attention back to his own persona in his own cell and saw that he was hunkered down on his haunches--the posture of a Bololo at rest. For no reason other than the training that said always to be active in the Commons--if a nonaut was not doing, he was likely to be done to--he stood up. Immediately, all the Bololo entities in all the cells did likewise.

Bandar raised his right hand in front of his face. So did a billion Bololos. He lifted his left foot, and a billion left hindquarters followed suit. He set down the foot and clapped his hands. The sound came from every direction within the self-contained universe that was the Bololo archetype.

Using an Institute adept's mentalism, Bandar concentrated his will. "I wish to see," he said. At once he was gazing out upon the archetypal Gamza landscape, where the Angel and his Legion had returned to their martial display. From the height of his perspective on the scene, Bandar knew that he was seeing through the eyes of the Bololo archetype. And from the way Wrath and Vengeance was casting sidelong looks his way, Bandar concluded that the Bololo archetype had already stood up, raised a hand and a foot, then clapped its paws together.

What must happen next was clear to the young scholar. But as he prepared to summon the mental focus necessary, he realized that another imperative tugged at him. It could not be merely a case of *what I will do*. It had to be *what we will do together*. Yet even as he posed the question, the answer came from every direction in space and time: *Yes. We need you to save them/us*.

Bandar/Bololo flexed the enormous muscles of his shoulders, brought up his hands and clenched them. He found that the Bololo's great paws, with their prehensile digits and opposable thumbs, made impressive fists. He swung his heavy head toward the Angel, opened his low slung jaw and shouted, "Hey, you!"

The Angel of Wrath and Vegeance and the legionaries were pure archetypes from the nosphere's outer arrondissement. Unlike the idiomatic entities that populated the various Events, Situations, and Landscapes that filled the interior of the Commons, the pure entities' awareness was almost entirely limited to themselves. Bandar suspected that it was difficult for the Angel, so fixated upon its own attributes, to be aware of such an outlandish entity as Bandar/Bololo. But he intended to get its attention.

The Angel could not ignore the Bololo archetype as it drove through the ranks of the Legion, scattering legionaries like toy soldiers, and delivered a roundhouse blow to the Angel's bearded chin. A look of profound consternation troubled the stern face, but only for the moment it took for Bandar/Bololo's other fist to connect with a short, brutal uppercut. The archetype stumbled backward, its shadowed wings fluttering, the black sword falling from its grasp, and Bandar followed with a two-handed shove that sent the Angel backpedaling on shaking knees.

They had crossed the space to the wall. Bandar noticed that on this side it had the appearance of a natural cliff, then he returned to his task and shoved the Angel one more time. The original surprise on its Malabar-featured face faded and a glower of determination began to assert itself, so he pushed heavily again, putting all of the Bololo entity's bulk into the effort.

The Angel was driven back into the breach, its great pinions crushed against its sides by the narrowness of the gap. But now its hands reached out, fingers spread against the rock of the cliff face, and Bandar saw rage and resolution firm in its face. It straightened its legs and dug in its armored heels, and its corded shoulder muscles bunched as it prepared to squeeze out of the breach and propel itself at him.

"No!" The word roared from the Bololo throat. He squatted, let his weight rest on his backthrust hands and the broad Bololo tail, and drove both splayed feet into the Angel's chest. The interlocking archetype shot through the breach like a stopper from a shaken bottle.

Bandar/Bololo turned to the Legion, but found no threat. Disassociated from their Principal, the subsidiary archetypes had lost their verve and were wandering aimlessly or standing inert. Bandar strode to them, offering buffets and backhands to gain their attention, and soon had them staggering and stumbling toward the opening in the cliff.

The black sword lay on the stony ground. Bandar picked it up and cast it through the unseen gap in the wall. Now there was nothing in the Bololo Commons but a vast plain and a single entity. An inner sense told him that the contaminated cells of the Bololo matrix were returning to health.

Bandar reached a paw toward the cliff face and said to himself and all the others, *We should close this*. Assent came back to him from all directions. He gathered rocks and stones and began to fill in the breach, fitting the pieces closely. When the space was almost chin high, he felt an urge to cease work.

Time for you to go, said a soundless voice within him. He was suddenly back in his cell within the infinite matrix, but only for a moment. He experienced a gentle dissolution, became first a liquid, then a cool vapor. He wafted away from something, toward something else, and then he was once more standing in his virtual flesh before the Bololo entity. It regarded him, as before, with bemusement, then one dark eye closed and reopened in a slow wink of bonhomie. A moment later Bandar was tenderly taken up and put through the remaining gap in the top of the breach. As he slid down into the human Commons, he heard a soft voice say, "Good-bye."

Off in the distance, Bandar could see the ejected Angel and his dejected Legion slouching toward the outer arrondissement. The sword on the ground was already being reabsorbed into the protean stuff of the nosphere. The young man focused himself and chanted the emergency exit thran.

* * * *

Bandar was back in the chair in the roofless room atop the Hotel Splendor, Preceptor Huffley slumped in his bonds beside him. He drew in and let out a long breath. A noise called his attention and he looked over his shoulder to see the door to the room lying smashed on the floor. Filling the doorway, as if it had merely paused in the act of forcing its way in, was a full grown bull Bololo. In its paw it held a thick-bladed falchion. Blood dripped from the weapon's edge. Its dark eyes were fixed on Bandar but it blinked like a sleeper just woken from a dream.

It made to withdraw, the paw that held the curved sword opening. "Wait!" cried Bandar.

The creature paused. Bandar indicated with motions of his head the rope that bound his hands and arms. The Bololo regarded him with stolid disinterest. Then it blinked again, and Bandar saw another presence well up in its dark eyes. It squeezed through the doorway, splintering the jamb, and applied the edge of its weapon to the cords that held him. When the job was done it let the falchion clatter on the floorboards and thrust its way back out of the room.

Rubbing his wrists, urging blood back into his agonized hands, Bandar watched the creature go. It disappeared into the hallway without a backward glance and Bandar turned his attention to Huffley, taking up the sword to cut the old man free. A sound from the doorway made him look up.

The Bololo had returned. Stooping, it poked its heavy head through the doorway. Again, as in the Commons, Bandar saw one eye close then reopen. A giant paw rose to the creature's chest height and the digits executed a gentle wave.

"Good-bye," Bandar said, and then the Bololo was gone for good. The young man pulled the sitting Huffley toward him, hoisted him over one shoulder and left the room. He transited the hallway and descended the stairs that led down to the saloon. Here he found unappetizing sights. The Bololos, possessed by the hate-filled hydromants, had been as unforgiving as they were thorough. Bandar had

seen worse in some Locations within the nosphere--the Slaughter of the Innocents and the Pillage of the Defenseless City were egregiously gruesome--but he found it was different when the victims could not be reconstituted to begin the cycle all over again. From beneath a shattered gaming table protruded the head and torso of the young woman who had taken his order only a few hours before. He looked elsewhere and noticed that the corpse of Rul Bazwan was not to be seen.

There was more horror outside. Those who had been overwhelmed by the initial assault lay where they had fallen. Bandar picked his way through the carnage to a high-wheeled vehicle on the other side of the street. Bazwan's henchman lay in two pieces just short of the step that led up to the control chair. Bandar tucked Huffley into the passenger compartment, ignoring the disconnected words and salty expletives that the preceptor intermittently issued forth. The student took charge of the vehicle and guided it into an alley that wandered toward the Sequestrance. From time to time the wheels bumped over what lay strewn about the ground, but Bandar steeled himself against the inevitable thoughts.

He angled up the slope to the Sequestrance, then paralleled its wall until he could turn the corner and strike out across open ground. Over the hum of the vehicle's motor he heard discordant cries and moans from within the walls. He speculated on whether there might have been "blowback" from the hydromants' deliberate summoning of prime archetypes, especially Malabar's close association with the Angel of Wrath and Vengeance--he suspected that the Eminence had not been more than a short hop and skip from psychosis to begin with, so the channel would have already been well lubricated.

From the passenger compartment, Huffley expostulated energetically to some unseen interlocutor, claiming that since he had baked the cake himself, he would have the first slice, and malodorous roommates could wait their turn. Listening further, Bandar deduced that the old man had been catapulted back into his youth, when he had shared quarters with an unpleasant young man to whom Huffley had given the name Fartywhiff. He let the preceptor ramble on and concentrated on guiding the vehicle out to the barebones spaceport. When they arrived, Huffley was hissing something about "My Lord High Hiedyin of Fulldoodledom." Bandar made the old man as comfortable as he could on a tattered settee within the shed and made sure that their travel vouchers were still in the preceptor's wallet. Then he activated the beacon that would inform any passing spaceship that passengers desired transport offworld.

* * * *

On the second-class liner that took them the last leg of their multistage journey back from Gamza, Bandar composed a series of papers dealing with the discoveries that he had made: that interspecies telepathic nospheric connections were indeed possible; that archetypically induced psychosis could be transmitted across species lines; that a telepathic species could have a unitary archetype that enfolded not only their dead but individuals not yet born (there were fascinating metaphysical aspects to that one); and that a human consciousness could be absorbed into an alien archetype and be regurgitated without experiencing psychosis. Bandar had tested himself thoroughly and was almost completely sure that he was returning home as sane as he had left.

The same could not be said for Preceptor Huffley, who daily sank deeper into a private and idiosyncratic world of constant argumentation and vicious debate, in which, though frequently beset, he always triumphed by bedtime.

When the liner touched down at the Olkney space port, offshore on an island in Mornedy Sound, Bandar was surprised to find a delegation of the Institute's superior officers and senior fellows at the bottom of the gangplank. He allowed Huffley to go first, the old man descending to Old Earth once more in the middle of a one-sided colloquy with the repellent Fartywhiff.

As the preceptor reached the group, no less a potentate than Overdean Fartherthwaith stepped forward. In tones of studied outrage he demanded to know what the preceptor had done to cause dire claims to

be levied against the Institute's treasury by distant offworlders. "Some rogue called Rul Bazwan--from where do they get these barbarous names?--demands restitution for a town smashed with all its contents. He claims extraordinary sums in general, special and exemplary damages. And there's another from some transcendental mountebank who wants you returned to face summary justice, which I gather involves capital punishment followed by revivification for as many repetitions as your parts will sustain."

Huffley looked in the Overdean's direction but Bandar saw that the old man's eyes did not encompass the scene before him. "I'm afraid Preceptor Huffley has suffered an onset of the adbdabs," he said, referring to an ailment that could afflict nonaunts who, in Institute jargon, "tarried too long at the fair."

Fartherthwaith peered at Huffley and listened briefly to what the preceptor was saying. "Sounds more like the blithers to me," he said. "I always thought he'd be susceptible, even when we were boys. In either case, he'll have to go to the sanctuary." At this pronouncement, the Overdean brightened and rubbed his palms against each other with vigor. "Of course, that means he was incompetent to represent the Institute, thus all claims against us for whatever he did are nuncupative." His hands rubbed each other again, making a scritch sound reminiscent of insect wings. "Fetch my volante," he said, "We are overdue for lunch."

"Sir," said Bandar, "As a result of our experiences, I have several new data to offer. I have taken the liberty of drafting four papers."

Fartherthwaith froze for a moment, then peered at the student. "Exactly who are you?" he said.

"Guth Bandar, sir, third year."

"You were with Huffy during all this foofaraw?"

"I was."

"Now think about this, and answer carefully," the Overdean said, accompanying his words with a look that was charged with meaning, "were you at any time named to anyone on Gamza?"

"I'm sure I wasn't."

"Were you officially identified as associated with the Institute? Was identification asked for and did you proffer it?"

"No, I was not officially credentialed."

"Very good, because you are not in any way connected with the Institute."

"But my lord Overdean...."

Fartherthwaith leaned toward him and winked. "Come back in a year or so, when this is all as forgotten as Cholleysang's poetry, and we'll slip you back in. There's a good boy." He turned away with the happy air of one who has avoided a sordid complication.

Bandar called after him. "But sir, the new data."

He pulled the papers from his satchel and waved them futilely. His words were not heard over the powerful thrum of the Overdean's descending aircar. The officials climbed into its luxurious accommodations and the volante sped aloft, its powerful backdraft sweeping the documents from Bandar's hands and strewing them across the waves of Mornedy Sound.

Preceptor Huffley stood squinting after the departed vehicle. "Fatuous Fartywhiff," he said, apropos of nothing.