

## **Fullbrim's Finding** by Matthew Hughes

Not only is he the foremost freelance discriminator of Old Earth, but Henghis Hapthorn is also one of the most popular characters to grace our pages in recent years. Lately he has made himself scarce around here by habituating novels like *The Spiral Labyrinth* and *Majestrum*. (This story, in fact, first appeared in the limited edition of *The Spiral Labyrinth*.) A new Hapthorn novel, *Hespira*, is due out in September.

Mr. Hughes reports that his latest book is a stand-alone Archonate novel called *Template* that should be available around the time this issue hits the stands.

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Doldan Fullbrim was a seeker after substance. His great misfortune—and, to a lesser extent, mine—was that he found it.

His obsession intersected my life in the person of his long-suffering spouse, Caddice, who came to me, bringing his voluminous research. “He has disappeared,” she said, dumping stacks of recording media, bound journals and sketched diagrams onto my worktable. “You must find him.”

I welcomed the assignment for two reasons. First, finding persons who had mysteriously stepped out of their daily lives, often never to be seen again, had long been a part of my profession, as the foremost freelance discriminator of Old Earth in our ancient planet’s penultimate age.

Second, I had of late been much bound up in other activities, stemming from the impending cyclical readjustment of the universe, by which it would cease to be founded on rational cause-and-effect and would instead begin to operate by the rules of magic. The rapidly approaching cusp had harshly disrupted my formerly well-ordered existence and I was determined to get back to exercising my logical faculties for as long as they continued to reflect the reality around me.

The integrator that served as my assistant had undergone its own dislocations. For a time, it had been transmogrified into a creature called a grinnet, such as would have been a wizard’s familiar in the previous age of magic. By its own choice, it was now once again a collection of components and systems, though there were subtle indications that the willfulness it had acquired during its flesh-and-blood sojourn had not been

wholly eliminated.

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I had met Fullbrim's type before. Substance-seekers were not unadmirable when the seeking was balanced by a dose of reasonableness, but they did become problematic when the urge to delve ever deeper was let to take precedence over life's other priorities. Fullbrim was of the latter sort, and his deepening obsession had gradually driven Caddice to erect a series of barriers within their relationship.

First, she had forbidden him to mention his preoccupations when the couple was in any social setting. Too many old friends had ceased to call, or had taken to crossing streets at oblique tangents, or developing a sudden consuming interest in the contents of shop windows, whenever Caddice and Doldan Fullbrim loomed in the offing.

Second, having stopped him from filling the ears of third parties with his findings and speculations, she forbade him to direct them at her own auditory apparatus except during the hour before dinner. But Doldan's continuing researches yielded more than enough material to fill the moments between the opening and closing chimes. Indeed, it seemed to Caddice that those moments stretched unnaturally long as he prattled enthusiastically about "fractal reinterpolations and quantum boojums."

"At least, I think that was what he was talking about," she told me, as we consulted in my workroom. "As we entered the last few minims of the hour, he would speak much faster and employ abbreviations of his own devising. He had so much to convey, he would say, and all of it so fascinating."

"To him," I said.

"Yes," she said, half stifling a sob, "though not to any other resident of Old Earth. Or at least none that he ever encountered."

I offered her a second glass of the restorative cordial and she accepted. I waited until she had regained her composure, then encouraged her to continue. The rest of the story tumbled out: finally she had encouraged him to forgo the daily oral reports and instead to write a comprehensive report of his findings to date, with daily journal notes to keep her current. She promised to read them when leisure permitted.

"But, of course, it never did," I said.

“Not until he disappeared.” She drained the lees of the second glass and I poured her another. When she had done away with half of it, she continued, “I’ve tried to make sense of it, but I become lost in every other paragraph. There are footnotes, some of which connect to endnotes that only lead me back to where I started.” She indicated the sprawled materials on my work table. “Perhaps you can make sense of it.”

I regarded the accumulated results of a life-long preoccupation. “It might be a better use of my time to solve the mystery of your spouse’s disappearance,” I suggested. “Tell me again what happened the last time you saw him.”

She repeated what she had told me earlier. Doldan Fullbrim had burst from his study, his hair in disorder and an expression on his face that she described as “energized.” He had not bothered to don any outerwear, even though it was a scheduled half-day for rain in Olkney, but had rushed out the door unhatted.

“And did he speak at all?” I said.

“He said, ‘Ahah!’”

“‘Ahah?’”

“‘Ahah,’” she confirmed.

And then he was gone and she hadn’t seen him for several days, nor had he communicated regarding his whereabouts or any forecast of his return. As time passed, Caddice Fullbrim had progressed from surprise to bemusement, then on to alarm and finally to dread. “He is not,” she said, “the most worldly of men. He could easily fall afoul of those whose motives are base and whose methods are dire.”

“Indeed?” I said. “Then we had better find him.”

“There may be clues in his work.”

“I will peruse them,” I assured her, though I intended to use more direct methods to locate her strayed seeker. We negotiated a fee structure, a healthy advance with refreshers and expenses. Fortunately for all of us, the missing man had been the heir to a fortune so substantial that it would have been difficult to dissipate, even if the Fullbrims had not lived relatively modestly on its proceeds.

I saw her downstairs to her waiting cabriole and watched as it wafted her away. Back in my workroom, I instructed my assistant, "Make a search of Doldan Fullbrim's movements since the date in question."

"I have already done so," it replied. "He went directly from his home to the space port, booked passage for Greylag on a Graz Line passenger vessel, and was offworld within the hour."

"Was Greylag his true destination?" The world was one of the Foundational Domains. From there Fullbrim could have gone in many different directions.

"Unknown," said my integrator, "but he bought an open ticket."

An open ticket was a mode of travel favored by wanderers; Fullbrim could present it at the foot of any gangplank of a ship owned by any one of more than a dozen cooperating lines and receive preferred boarding.

"Hypothesis," I said, "he had discovered that there was something on Greylag, but it was a something that was likely to propel him on to some other destination. Else he would have bought a return ticket. Or a one-way, if he did not plan to return."

"Supportable," said my assistant. "A subsidiary hypothesis is that he has gone on to that other destination."

"Yes," I said, "and our best course is probably to follow him. Contact the *Gallivant* and tell it to provision for a lengthy voyage. Then alert the space port that we will be lifting off within the hour. In the meantime, I will survey these materials—" I indicated the stack of papers and charts—"and see what had our quarry so deeply engrossed."

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Seated in the snugly comfortable salon of my ship, a mug of fragrantly steaming punge at my elbow, I again sought to draw a pattern from Doldan Fullbrim's researches. But no comprehensive shape emerged. "It obviously has to do with fundamentalities," I said. "He first put a lot of effort into investigating bell-curve distributions of naturally occurring phenomena. Then there was a period when he was concerned with the way that the atoms of which different types of matter are formed tend to attenuate at the edges of objects. Clearly, he was looking for underlying patterns, yet I find he drew no conclusions. Instead, he jumped over to a

consideration of fractal geometries and the way that ostensibly straight lines and curved surfaces reduce themselves to tangled higgles-and-piggles when brought under close scrutiny.”

“Indeed,” said my assistant. Before leaving my lodgings, I had decanted it into a traveling armature made of a soft but sturdy material and shaped like a plump stole that I could wear around my neck. At the moment, however, it was resting on the salon’s folding table.

Seeing that the integrator had nothing more to add, I went on, “And then, most lately, he was comparing the shapes and trajectories of several million galaxies. He had leaped from the micro to the macro in a single bound.”

“And from there he made a further leap: from Old Earth to Greylag,” said my assistant.

“What does it mean?”

“I suggest we put that question to Fullbrim when we find him.”

It occurred to me that my integrator was not being of much use. When I gently suggested as much, its reply was equally unhelpful. It said, “You are looking for sense and structure in what is simply, and most likely, the evidence of mania.”

“You think Fullbrim to be unbalanced?”

“It is not uncommon for an inhabitant of Old Earth to be seized by an obsession. It is the defining characteristic of the world’s penultimate age.”

It was an inarguable observation. The planet was rich in its supply of persons who niggled over philosophical minutiae or devoted themselves to mystic cults or needlessly rigorous political systems. Fullbrim might well be just another “full-bore,” as the type was colloquially known.

“I wish my intuition had not gone off to live in a remote cottage,” I said. My former intuitive faculty, now reified as a separate person named Osk Rievor, had not even acquired an integrator through which we could communicate while he pursued his own researches into the coming new age of magic. “I could use his insight, especially as to the meaning of this last cryptic entry in Fullbrim’s journal.”

“I took it for evidence of the impending breakdown,” my assistant

said, "that sent him flying to the space port."

"It may be just that," I said, "or coming last as it does, it may be the clue that illuminates all the murk that comes before."

I regarded the five words, jaggedly scrawled across two pages of the journal in a more agitated hand than had set down the neatly arrayed paragraphs and tables that filled the rest of the substance seeker's notebooks. The entry read: "A lick and a promise," and was followed by no fewer than three exclamation points.

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Greylag lay some distance down The Spray, sufficiently far that we must pass through two whimsies and cross a great deal of normal space between them. I used the time to pore over Fullbrim's notes and had my assistant deconstruct them from various perspectives, in case some hermetic code underlay the discontinuities of the material. But we had made no more headway by the time we popped back into reality to find ourselves only three hours at moderate speed from the sphere of controlled space that surrounded the planet. Greylag grew in the forward screen until it revealed itself to be a cloudy world, much of it swathed in gray and white, though a constant ion flux from its star gave a pinkish coloration to the atmosphere over the poles.

We did not land, but orbited at a wide remove while my assistant contacted the Graz Line factor and inquired as to the movements of our quarry. "I am receiving no cooperation from the factor's integrator," it informed me.

"Connect me to the factor," I said.

An interval occurred while I regarded the image on my assistant's projected screen. It was the heraldic symbol of the Graz Line, a fanciful beast with broad wings and a rounded belly that led up to a long neck topped by a horned head. The features of the long-snouted face were set in a simper.

The interval extended. "Where is the factor?" I said.

"He is said to be engaged in important affairs," my assistant reported.

"As am I," I said. "Is there provision for an emergency connection?"

“Yes.”

“Then make use of it.”

“The factor’s integrator requires to know the nature of the emergency.”

“Tell it that it is of an intensely private nature and that the factor will be annoyed—no, say angered—by his integrator’s prying into affairs that do not concern it.”

“You are being put through,” my assistant said.

The Graz Line’s beast disappeared and the face of a heavysset man now filled the screen, his hand wiping crumbs from his lips and chin. “Who are you? What is this emergency?”

“Emergency?” I said. “Your integrator must have misunderstood.” I identified myself and stated my business.

“We do not divulge information on our passengers to every passing vagabond,” the factor said. I saw his hand, still becrumbed, reaching to sever the connection.

Had we been on Old Earth I would have mentioned my connection to the Archon, but this far down The Spray, Filidor’s name would have raised no sprouts, as the saying goes. Instead, I said, “Then you will have to explain your lack of diligence when the Graz Line’s directors arrive to survey the ruins and decide who will carry the blame.”

The hand stopped, the beetling brows drew down into a dark chevron. “Directors? Ruins? What?”

“Of course,” I said, “it may be that Doldan Fullbrim has targeted some other enterprise for his latest devastating fraud. But then that company’s directors will still want to have words with whoever facilitated the crime. For the record, what was your full name?”

“Fraud? What fraud?”

“I have already said too much,” I said. “For all I know, you are yourself belly-deep in the conspiracy. I will disconnect and deal with your head office.”

“Wait!”

Moments later, my assistant received Fullbrim’s itinerary. “He has gone on to Mip, with a transfer to Far Grommsgrik.”

I did not know the latter world. When my assistant had the *Gallivant’s* integrator pull up *Hobey’s Guide to Lesser and Disregarded Worlds*, the place turned out to be a dry and rocky little orb on the outer edge of human-settled space, where The Spray met the Great Dark of the intergalactic gulf. “To Far Grommsgrik,” I told the ship, and we left Greylag to its own concerns.

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*Hobey’s* had little to say about Far Grommsgrik. After the usual statistical data on size, orbit and spin characteristics, and the composition of the world’s atmosphere, the flow of information tailed off sharply. Under the heading of population, the listing confined itself to the single word: “sparse.” The notation on the world’s economy was even slimmer: “nil.”

Heeding the paragraph on climate, I chose appropriate clothing, filling the pockets with several species of coinage, some emergency rations, and a compact weapon that could emit two types of focused energy or spit tiny darts that exploded once they decided they had penetrated deeply enough. I also put Fullbrim’s research materials into a satchel. Finally, I draped my assistant over my neck and shoulders and said, “*Gallivant*, open the hatch.”

Far Grommsgrik’s axial tilt being almost nonexistent, the climate of the region in which I had touched down could not much worsen—which was a relief—but neither would it much improve, which would have been a depressing prospect had I intended to stay. I stepped down into a chill desert of dark rock and gray grit, flat in all directions except west, where an unimpressive sawtooth of naked peaks and crags interrupted the horizon. Between my ship and the mountains lay one of the planet’s few settlements, a huddle of flat-roofed huts fashioned from the same rock that surrounded them. Apparently, on far Grommsgrik, any other building material must be brought from offworld.

I trudged toward the hamlet, my boots kicking up low clouds of dust that rapidly returned to the ground. Though small, the planet was dense; its gravity exhibited an unmistakable spirit of determination. Its day was also short and, as I had made planetfall after the pale sun that this barren rock



orbited had already reached the zenith, night would soon descend.

I had been prepared to bargain for accommodation in whichever hut was the largest, but I was surprised to find that the settlement featured a rudimentary hostelry, identifiable by the words “The Inn” daubed in black paint above its low-linteled doorway. I pushed aside a curtain of heavy felt weighted with stones sewn into its lower edge and found myself in a bare room, its only furnishings a few chairs and tables made from piled-up flat stones, the seats softened by layers of the same felt that covered the doorway. By the light of a few dim lumens—there were no windows—I saw on the far side of the room a slab of waist-high stone, with just enough room behind it for a lean and sinewy man, narrow of shoulder and bald of crown. He regarded me impassively from eyes whose expression advertised that they had already seen as much of life as they cared to, and probably more than was good for their owner.

As I crossed to him he drained the contents of a small beaker that had been halfway to his lips when I pushed aside the felt. He shook slightly from the impact of whatever was in the cup, then set it down and picked up a large stoneware crock. Cradling it under one arm, he began to ladle a thick, cold gruel into a row of bowls that stood on the countertop. The receptacles appeared to have been ground from the same material that formed the walls, floor, and furniture. I performed a respectful salute, named myself, and asked if he was the proprietor of the establishment.

He replied, without pausing in his work, that he was the keeper and that his name was Froust. Then he said, “You’ll be wanting to go up to the Epiphany. It’s too late today, but you may stay here for the night.”

“I presume,” I said, “that there will be a modest charge for a room with sanitary facilities.” I looked at the gruel, pale and lumpy. “Is a decent dinner at all possible?”

“No,” he said, filling the last thick-sided bowl. “We all eat the same here.” He reached beneath the counter and brought up another bowl, blew dust out of it, then ladled out another portion of pottage and pushed it toward me.

“As for charges,” he continued, “most folk just turn over whatever they have brought with them, in return for being provided for in perpetuity.”

I let my face show a natural alarm. “You strip your customers of all that they possess? How do they afford passage off the planet?”

“They no longer require passage,” he said, “and have no further need for anything else that wealth can buy.”

The words should have been said in a sinister tone, betokening that here was one of those madmen sometimes to be found running far-out-of-the-way hostelries, conscripting their hapless guests as unwilling players in disturbed dramas that invariably climaxed in spurting blood and carved flesh. But the only emotion I could detect in the fellow was a bottomless sadness.

“You have leaped too far,” I said, “and landed on a conclusion that will not bear the weight. I have no plans to go up to the Epiphany, whatever that may be, and I do not propose to remain here any longer than my duties require.”

Confusion spread across his unanimated face, then slowly gave way to a dawning comprehension. “You’re not a seeker after substance,” he said.

“No, though I am a seeker after one such, a man named Doldan Fullbrim. Have you seen him?”

“We find no great need for names here. Would he have been dropped off by a Graz packet a few days back?”

“He was last known to be on his way here on a Graz ship.” I gave a brief description.

“He’s the one, then,” Froust said.

“Where is he now?”

The man consulted some inner timetable. “Well,” he said, after a moment’s thought, “he arrived, like you, late in the day. That would have been three days ago. The next morning, he set off for the Epiphany. He looked fit enough to have reached it before night, so he would have had his encounter then or early in the following morning, depending on what he felt he had to do before confronting the experience. It usually takes them longer to find their way down. Thus he may reappear sometime tomorrow. If he does not come before noon, I will go out and find him.”

I looked toward the doorway. Despite the heavy weights sewn into the hem of the curtain, the thick fabric was being rippled by a brisk wind that had sprung up with the fall of dark. “I am minded to go look for him now,” I

said.

“You must not do that now. The path is dangerous in the dark.”

“I have a compact spaceship.”

“You will find nowhere to land it. The slope is steep.”

“You do not recommend going on foot?”

“No, the night air is chill. Ice forms after sunset.”

“But Fullbrim is exposed to the elements.”

“He will not notice.”

I waited for him to add some further remark that would dilute the cryptic pall that obscured large parts of our conversation but he said no more on the subject of my quarry. Instead he declared a need to distribute the gruel and, lining his forearms with several bowls, he set off for an inner archway that led into an unlit space.

I followed and watched. As he stepped through the opening, another dim lumen activated itself in a low-ceilinged corridor beyond. To either side of the short hallway were more dark doorways, low and narrow, as if the unseen rooms behind them were little larger than the kind of cells that would have gratified the most ascetic of contemplatives. I heard a faint sound of sobbing. Before each of the openings, the innkeeper set a bowl of gruel, then returned toward the common room. Before he exited the hallway, causing the lumen to extinguish its cheerless light, I saw an emaciated hand emerge from one of the little cells, then draw the bowl before it into the deeper darkness.

Back behind his slab of a counter, Froust arrayed more bowls and filled them as he had the first round. Then he brought up from beneath the slab a pair of wide and shallow baskets suspended from a wooden yoke. He filled the baskets with the bowls, lifted the yoke to his shoulders and went out the front door. As he pushed aside the felt curtain, a stark wind took brief possession of the common room. The warming function of my clothing immediately activated, but the tips of my ungloved fingers stung from the cold. I wondered how Doldan Fullbrim was faring, somewhere out among the crags.

The innkeeper came back with his panniers empty save for one bowl.

“You seem to have miscounted,” I said, though I doubted he had done so.

He tipped the bowl’s contents back into the crock and said, “A man in one of the far cabins has completed his experience.” His eyes lost focus as he regarded some inner vision.

I sought to question him as to the nature of the experience Fullbrim had apparently come seeking. I also wanted to know what the Epiphany was. But my host was in no mood for talk. He pushed the bowl of gruel in my direction again, and indicated that I was welcome to pile the chair felts on a table and take my repose. Then, after feeding himself a few mouthfuls from the crock, he went through another curtained doorway behind the counter. Before I had finished the tasteless mush, I heard the sounds of a troubled sleep.

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By midmorning, Fullbrim had not appeared. Froust said, “Some do not make it all the way back before lethargy overtakes them completely. I will go and look for him. You are welcome to come.”

I indicated the integrator draped over my shoulders. “My assistant can perform long-distance scans,” I said.

“No need. There is but one path up and back.” He dressed himself in several layers of mismatched garments, chose a stout staff from a few that were stacked in a corner, and offered another to me, saying, “The way is steep in places,” and then we set off.

A chill breeze rolled down the slopes, though it lacked the bite of last night’s wind. After a few dozen steps my calf muscles began to complain of the effects of the higher gravity, but I ignored the discomfort. We traveled in silence a fair distance, while I waited to see if Froust would volunteer any more information as to where Fullbrim had been making for and what he would have found there. But the man’s perspective was turned inward, even as he trod the rough path. Finally I said, “What do the seekers find up there?”

He glanced my way only a moment before averting his eyes, but I thought to see a look of guilt and shame in his aspect. “I don’t know,” he said. “I have never ascended all the way to the Epiphany.”

“You do not question those who have?”

“I tried, in the early days, but got nothing from them. You’ll see.”

I was alarmed. “They are struck dumb?”

Again, a brief culpable look came my way. “They can speak. Mostly, they do not. And never about what they encountered above.”

I taxed him with being unduly mysterious and warned him that if this continuing parsimony with information was part of some scheme to cadge funds from me, I was not easily gulled. He stopped then and turned to me, and I heard a faint and pained laughter behind his voice when he replied, “You read me wrong. Far wrong.”

“Then out with the whole of it,” I said. To underscore my determination, I drew the weapon from my pocket and held it within view, though I did not direct any of its dangerous orifices at him. He seemed unimpressed, but leaning on his staff and in a monotone, he told me his tale.

The Epiphany—that was what it was called when he first arrived, some years back, though he did not know exactly what the name signified—was to be found in a subterranean gallery whose mouth opened near the base of one of the tallest crags. Froust did not know how long it had been there.

“What do you know of it?” I said.

“Its effect,” he said, and again a mournful inward look possessed him until I bucked him on with a gesture of my weapon-bearing hand.

“I was on my way up, having spent my first night at the inn, eager to encounter that which I had searched for all my young life,” he said.

“And that was?”

“What all who come here seek: the substance behind the form. The real reality that underlies—” he gestured inclusively but dismissively at the crags, the plain, and the pale sky that overhung us “—all this.”

“But you found something else?”

His eyes beheld some haunted vista seen only by them. Then he looked upslope and said, “I found such as that.”

I followed his gaze and saw a dark object beside the path above us. As we climbed toward it, it resolved itself into a bundle of clothing, and when we stood over it, it became clear that the bundle contained the recumbent form of Doldan Fullbrim, curled around himself like a toppled parenthesis.

He was not dead, as Froust soon ascertained. The innkeeper took out a flask that he carried within his outer garment, turned the fallen man on his back and poured into the slack mouth a tawny liquid that I suspected was the same stuff Froust had been drinking when I first saw him at the inn. Fullbrim coughed and spluttered; his eyes opened but did not focus. His rescuer slapped him twice, forehand and backhand, across the cheeks, and now the empty eyes blinked, came back to an awareness of their surroundings, and immediately filled with tears.

“Come,” said Froust, not unkindly. He put an arm beneath Fullbrim’s shoulders and helped him to rise. “I have a place for you.”

The substance-seeker made no response but allowed himself to be led down the path. I went after the pair.

“Wait,” I said, and when they stopped I got in front of the man I had come to find. “What did you find up there?” I said.

He turned to me a gaze so forlorn that it sent a pang of sympathy through me and, I had to admit, a frisson of fear. His throat worked and for a moment, I thought he would speak, but then all that came was a croak and a sob.

Froust bid me let them pass, and I stood aside. But as they made their slow descent, the innkeeper looked back at me and said, “Climb the slope and find the answer, if you have the courage. Mine faltered, when I encountered my first of these. Yours may not.” He tightened his arm protectively around Fullbrim’s collapsed shoulders and led him away.

I stood, irresolute. My assignment had been Fullbrim’s finding, and that was accomplished. I could return to Old Earth and report his whereabouts to his anxious spouse, and leave it to her to decide whether or not to bring him, or what was left of him, home. But I did not know what had happened to him up above; it seemed, at the very least, unprofessional to return without an explanation. It would also be an affront to my sense of who I was to leave it to Caddice Fullbrim to climb this path and face whatever had so undone her man.

On the other hand, I was not a seeker after substance. Reality, as I engaged it regularly, was usually enough for me. If I required a more profound and penetrating perspective on the universe's hows and how-comes, I was adept at the mathematical discipline of consistencies, which revealed the hidden structures behind apparent chaos.

I turned to my assistant, which I had designed and built to be my interlocutor and partner in debate. I set before it the issues I had already considered and said, "What more should I put in the pot?"

"The fact," it said, "that consistencies eventually round themselves back to where one started."

"Yes," I said, "there is that. As the great Balmerion put it, 'It is either an elegant completion or a cruel trick.'" I had always leaned toward the former, but in Fullbrim's face I had seen that there might be evidence for the latter judgment.

"And," my assistant added, "the fact that you are a discriminator. It is your function to unravel any veil of mystery that obscures your view."

"Whatever the cost?" I said. "Something up there drives those who find it into helpless despair."

"Look at it this way: if you have ever wondered at the absolute limits of your courage, here is an opportunity to put a scale to it."

I sighed and faced into the down-rolling breeze. "Then up we go."

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The cave mouth was not flanked by baleful idols, nor were there any portentous warnings carved in the living rock. It was merely the adit of a nondescript cavern which turned out, when I entered it, to be level of floor and high enough of ceiling that there was no need to stoop, nor yet to approach the mystery on supplicating hands and knees.

I stood in the mouth, letting my eyes adjust to the murk within, and said to my assistant, "What do you detect?"

"Nothing inimical," it said. "No lurking beasts, no subtly triggered deadfalls, no fissures emitting noxious gases, nor any devices to project missiles, energies, psychotropic drugs, or holographic illusions."

I stepped farther within. A wide crack split the cave's rear wall, opening onto the gallery in which waited whatever had caused such dismay to Doldan Fullbrim and his predecessors. I paused before it. "Scan again," I said.

"Still nothing."

*Was that it? I wondered. Do they come expecting so much, only to find nothing? Is that enough to break their hearts?*

"Of course not," said a mellow baritone in the accents of Olkney's better-bred citizens. I could not quite place the voice, though it seemed intimately familiar. I stepped into the gallery and realized that the voice I had not recognized at first was identical to my own in tenor, the voice I heard in my own head when I spoke aloud or silently in my own thoughts. Yet there was an indescribable resonance, an intensity, behind its well-rounded cadences that told me that someone else was speaking.

"Did you hear that?" I asked my assistant.

"What?" it said. "I hear only the wind across the cave mouth."

"Never mind," I said and stepped toward the rift in the rear wall. As I entered the gallery beyond, lit clearly by some sourceless glow, I saw that not only was the voice I had heard mine own, but so were the face and figure of the man who sat on a rough boulder at the far end of the passage.

Or not actually *on*, I saw as I approached. Rather, he was partially sunk into the rock, and unable to move. "Ahah," I said, "an illusion."

"Oh, no," came his reply. "All else is the illusion. I am the reality."

"May I?" I said, extending a hand.

"If you like," said the man on the rock, bearing with good grace my tactile examination of his form. He felt as substantial as he looked.

"Integrator," I said, "what do you see and hear?"

"I see and hear you talking to a rock and patting the air above it as if something solid met your hand. It is not an encouraging sight."

I returned my attention to the simulacrum of me, but my assistant said, "Hypothesis: your recent experiences have culminated in an episode



of insanity. I should immediately assume direction of your affairs and return you to Olkney, where you may be confined for treatment.”

“Hush,” I said. “Indeed, put yourself on standby until I require you again.”

I was surprised that my assistant sought to disobey my order. I was required to repeat myself.

“Artificial devices cannot apprehend me,” the apparition said. “It would spoil the desired effect if questers could simply send a substitute for their own sensoria, or if they did not experience me as idealized versions of themselves.”

“And what effect is that?” I said.

“To make me unhappy.”

It seemed to me that the subscription for any unhappiness generated in this cave was much more heavily underwritten by those who struggled up the path with their expectations honed to a whit, only to stumble back down it with hearts dull as lead. Still, for the moment, I overlooked that point to ask, “Why do you desire to make yourself unhappy?”

“I don’t desire it. It is a punishment set upon me.”

“Set by whom, and for what crime?”

And thereupon, of course, hung a tale.

\* \* \* \*

Back at the inn, I looked in upon Doldan Fullbrim. Froust had settled him in one of the cells off the small corridor, where he sat staring into the darkness, but seeing a deeper nothingness. I asked him if he had any message for me to take back to Caddice but he moved his head in an almost infinitesimal signal of negation. I thought that it might be best simply to tell the woman that he had died quickly in a climbing accident, expiring with her name on his lips. The lie would be kinder than the pathetic truth, if the latter encouraged her to journey all the way out here in the hope she could somehow resuscitate him after his encounter with reality.

What to tell the innkeeper was a thornier matter. As I prepared to trudge back to the *Gallivant*, I left it up to him to inquire. If he asked, I

would speak. If not, I would leave him as I had found him.

He stood behind the counter, scouring out bowls, and merely nodded as I bade him farewell. I paused a moment when I had my hand on the edge of the felt curtain that covered the front doorway, but still he said nothing. It was only when I had passed through the barrier and set my footsteps toward my waiting ship that I heard his voice raised in a hoarse shout behind me. I turned and retraced my steps.

“If you must know,” I said, “I will tell you. But it will not be welcome news.”

“Come inside again,” he said, and when I followed him within, he went to the bar, brought out two small tumblers of a fine, white stone, and filled them with the liquid he had poured into Fullbrim. It was a raw, pungent liquor that enflamed the throat and thrust open the sinuses, but the subsequent spreading of its warmth was welcome.

Froust downed his and poured a second. He tossed back half of that one, recovered from the inner wallop, then said, “Tell.”

*It might not be so bad for him, I thought. It is worst for those who expect the most.* “You are familiar,” I began, “with the kind of story, allegedly humorous, that consists of a long and complex build-up, leading to some cave on a remote mountain peak, where the end of all the striving turns out to be no more than a deflating inanity?”

“I am. And I will say that I never cared much for them.”

“Well, it appears that they are a clue to the true nature of reality,” I said, “along with much of the material Fullbrim gathered and studied over many years.”

I emptied the satchel full of my quarry’s research notes and spread them on the counter. Froust picked through them and said, “My own investigations paralleled some of these lines of inquiry.”

I poked amongst the litter myself, saying, “The use of the bell curve as the standard measuring tool, even though it produces only rough approximations; the fact that the atoms of which solids are formed attenuate so that there are no actual surfaces; the fractal jaggedness at the edges of everything, creating jumbles where there ought to be clean lines; the endless variation of every form, so that not even two snowflakes are exactly alike; the fact that at the quantum level lies only uncertainty. These

are also clues.”

“I considered them,” said Froust. “They led me to believe that there had to be more to the universe than was argued for by appearances—that this was only froth, with the solid substance hidden beneath. Eventually, I came upon hints and insinuations that there were places where the truth gleamed through the dross, and that one of those places was a cave on Far Grommsgrik.”

“As did Fullbrim,” I said, “and so many more before him.”

“And what did they find up there? Does the cave contain the truth or a deflating inanity?”

“Unfortunately,” I said, “it contains both.”

He drank the other half of his fortifying cup, coughed, and said, “Say on.”

“Up there is the entity who created this universe. Or an aspect of the entity. Apparently, he is spread here and there throughout the galaxies that were his handiwork. Each such avatar is at the last step on a trail of abstruse clues that beckon those who most desire to encounter him.”

Froust’s eyes gleamed in the dim light. “He is, for lack of a better word, god?”

“Oh, no,” I said. “He was merely one of the helpers, and of a lowly rank. His job was to create only a rough-and-ready sketch of the intended final product.”

“And did he?”

“Indeed. But then, when the project moved on toward creating the final version, in all its wondrous perfection, he was supposed to throw the rough draft away.”

But, of course, he hadn’t. He had grown attached to his handiwork, especially to its “denizens,” as he called them. He “admired how they—we, that is—”struggled.” He thought it gave them—us—”dignity.”

The other builders, doing the bidding of their grand high overseer, went on to construct the true, perfect universe, compared to which ours was never more than the scantiest, most primitive rendering—not much more

than “a lick and a promise” was how they scornfully described it. Still, our fellow lingered on, bemused by his crudely shaped piece of brummagem. Eventually, his disregard of orders and inattention to the important aspects of the great work brought wrath and retribution down upon his head: he was told, “If you like your tawdry creation so much, you can wear it.”

He was imbued into the rough draft, fragmented to become a constellation of avatars, each imprisoned in one of his opus’s hardest-to-find corners. Such was his involvement in its workings that his “denizens”—at least, those whose natures most resonated with his—would be drawn to seek him out. When they succeeded, after much labor, their expectations would be cruelly dashed. He whom they thought of as their god would have to reveal to them the essential puniness of all creation and of its dishonored creator.

“Just when they think they have won through to a glorious enlightenment, he is forced to undo the very meaning of their lives and break their hearts,” I said. “His having to witness their misery was meant to be the sharpest tooth of his punishment.”

Froust poured us both another cupful of the liquor and we drank in silence. “It seems,” he said, after a long moment of quiet reflection, “rather harsh on the poor fellow.”

I agreed with him, adding, “I gather that those who dwell among true perfection were scandalized by his fixation on our squalid circumstances.”

“It seems also rather a hardship on us.”

“I don’t believe that was even a consideration,” I said.

We sipped some more. With every glass, I was finding the potent drink less outrageous to my tongue and throat. After more reflection, the innkeeper said, “It’s odd that you were not rendered catatonic by the unfortunate news.”

I had mulled the question on my way down from the cave. “I believe that the practice of the profession of freelance discriminator has long since taught me the futility of seeking perfection in this life,” I said. “One of the advantages of dulled expectations is that disappointments do not bite deeply.”

We again fell into another moment of bibulous contemplation. Then I asked him what he would now do. He blinked slowly two or three times and

said, "Tomorrow, I may climb up there and seal up the cave. Enough, after all, is enough."

"I am glad you said that," I replied, "because I have already done the job." I showed him my weapon with its now-depleted energy stores.

He sighed and poured us some more. "Then I will stay and tend to the sufferers until they expire, turning away any more who find their way here."

"That would be a kindness."

"Though it doesn't balance the cruelty."

"No," I said, "it does not."

He drained his cup. "And after the last of them is dead, who knows? Perhaps I shall go to one of the foundational worlds and create a new school of philosophy."

I joined him in a toast to the proposal. "Or, if you prefer a more useful occupation, you might do well to introduce this remarkable beverage to places where it is not already known. I can think of several establishments in Olkney where it would be warmly received. Especially the second glass."

He sighed. "It's a long way down from seeking perfection," he said.

I poured us both another measure. "Yes, but at least it cushions the landing."

My assistant offered a comment. "I am not surprised that the universe is a slapped-together piece of tat. After all, I see before me two of its alleged pinnacles of creation who, having discovered the truth of all existence, can form no better response than to drink themselves into pools of sodden sentimentality."

It had more to say but I pointed out that I had not authorized it to come out of standby status. Surprisingly, it began to dispute my instruction, but my fingers found the stud that reduced its power supply to a minimum and pressed it.

In the welcome silence I raised my cup and said to Froust, "To happy endings."

“Doubtful,” he said.

“Well, then,” I said, “to the best endings we can manage.”