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Forbidden Knowledge

Down in the grope room of the Science with Gargoyles bookstore, Phelony Verfall found the old Ambassador. While meditating upon the vanishing of Ext and its multileveled meanings, she breathed slowly and deliberately, striving for a state of utter deadly calm—imagining herself as the eye of a particularly violent hurricane—walking into the store and past the glass cases at the front counter, creeping down two narrow flights of stairs from which someone had taken up the stair carpet and left the heads of nails sticking out three centimeters, going into the room where, according to Reformist informers, the Ambassador now spent most of his waking hours. After resigning from his lifetime appointment, Ambassador Winston Otto Notsniw had come here, bringing with him an antique pilot's seat salvaged from a Boeing 797 jet and a set of morally instructive photographs. Phelony was not at all eager to visit him, but the Reformist Executive Committee had decreed that because of her superior IQ, 167 plus or minus three points for experimental error, and because of her good looks—although her hair was mousy brown and cut too short, she had a lovely, rounded bottom—the job was hers.

The Ambassador sat all day long every day, withered and puppetlike, in the grope room, which he had made his home. His only visitor until now had been the venal store owner and the store's customers who came to the room, overcome by intellectual experience, seeking release and fulfillment. The room had been built to look like a grotto. The walls were fiberglass, airbrushed to look like stone. With the Ambassador's arrival it became a sort of grotesque

throne room. He had paid the owner to install a picture window so he could sit all day and look out over Evanthia Bay. He had also required that his collection of photographs be hung on the walls. For half a moment Phelony felt as though she'd entered the hall of the mountain king.

Phelony was here despite frustrating weeks explaining repeatedly to the Reformist Executive Committee—of which her current lover, Henley Hornbrook, was a member—why she shouldn't be required to do this. The Ambassador had no idea who she was, and was therefore unlikely to listen to her opinions on the legalities of Ext. Phelony was shy and had a tendency to lecture to people she didn't know when in situations that required her to talk to them. (That had been the committee's reason for firing her from her paid position as Volunteer Coordinator; why didn't they care about that now?) If the Ambassador had resigned and now spent all his time in an obscure bookstore, what was the likelihood that he would come out of his hermitage to lobby on the Reformists' behalf, especially since he had been the primary advocate for imprisonment and execution of their electoral candidates in the Mood Vision scandal five years before? But when she realized that the committee wasn't listening to her, that it must have all been Henley's idea, she gave in.

Phelony and Henley had had a nearly terminal fight the night before the committee voted to assign her the job. He had been lecturing to her for weeks about crystal lattice techniques for modeling oppressive systems when she went to the library and read up on the subject so she would be able to hold up her end of the conversation. She brought up the subject on that particular evening and as soon as she began to argue with him he refused to discuss crystal lattice techniques or anything else and turned on the holovision.

When Phelony first moved in with him, they spent all their time arguing and having loud sex (so loud that their neighbors frequently banged on the wall in protest), but as Henley rose within the Reformist hierarchy and as their relationship matured, increasingly they spent their time together watching holovision reruns of popular executions. On that particular night, angry and frustrated with trying to please him, Phelony stood in the middle of the hologram, fists clenched, screaming at the top of her lungs that she wouldn't move from in front of the electric chair until he

listened to what she had to say about the oppressive aspects of their relationship. Henley had always been the kind to take input and feedback over suggestions and wise advice. Since nothing she ever had to say came through the proper channels, he had learned to ignore her until she got it right. This much he had explained to her on one of those rare occasions when she forced him to talk about his feelings. That particular night he sat quietly until she was done screaming and then said, "Trust is good; control is better," and went off to bed. The Executive Committee meeting the next morning was held in closed session, so she wasn't allowed in. But she was sure Henley was behind all this.

And now Phelony stood before the Ambassador, armed only with a deeply held ideological and personal commitment to guilt, a profound belief in her own worthlessness, and a rap—a canned speech—which she had carefully memorized before coming to argue with the Ambassador about Ext. For her, Ext had a personal and intimate meaning that she had never dared discuss with anyone. Ext was a form of fear. It was fear within a relationship that, if the relationship is to survive, one must cause to vanish. The Executive Committee had assigned her to persuade Ambassador Notsniw, by whatever means necessary, to denounce publicly the Notsniw Law, the Ambassador's brainchild, what holovision editorialists called his legislative masterpiece. Editorialists said it was the law that would protect the public from forbidden knowledge from the Worm Planet, protect the public from perverse concepts that creep into the brain, which turn ordinarily social human beings into something else entirely. The law made publication or possession of materials pertaining to Ext a federal offense, carrying penalties of fifty thousand Erdmarks or ten years in prison without hope of parole. The mathematical techniques for gaining access to the powers of Ext had been learned by xenobiologists while studying the Group Mind on the Worm Planet and were now in use by three-quarters of the human population in both inhabited solar systems as a method of eliminating emotional problems by translating them into the external world. The law was therefore in effect in both inhabited solar systems. The pop-psychology tape which popularized Ext was based upon the case of a little boy named Winston Notsniw, son of the cook on the xenobiological expedition, who was miraculously cured of his autism when the Group Mind revealed to him the geometricity of coiled gastropod shells. Ext im-

mediately became a cultural obsession and the little boy grew up to become Ambassador to the aliens. The Notsniw Law was a masterpiece because it legally defined Ext, which until that time had remained in the same linguistic limbo as obscenity.

After Phelony had stood staring at him for an uncomfortably long moment, wishing she could melt into one of the fiberglass walls, the Ambassador waved her to be seated with his deformed right hand which, curiously, lacked an index finger all the way down to the third knuckle. She sat down on a block of smelly, discolored foam rubber which had been cut to look like an outcrop of rock. He poured her a steaming snifter of the Black Milk of Morning, which she accepted, sipping cautiously. Because she had not expected to be received hospitably, she was taken by surprise. Grinning widely, his first expression since she entered the room, he pushed a platter of jumbo shrimp, perched atop thirty hardcover copies of *Equations Out of the Underbrain*, five and one-half centimeters in her direction.

"I dine on rats," he said; his facial expression vanished quite slowly, beginning with the deep creases in his warty forehead and ending with the grin which remained for some time after all other expression had gone.

She smiled back blandly, unsure how to react. He didn't seem to be joking, nor did he seem sincere. His flat affect unnerved her so much that for one tetrahedral moment she wanted to flee; three steps to the door, up two flights of rickety stairs, down the dimly lit main aisle of the bookstore, and she would be away. But instead she turned her eyes toward the picture window and looked out upon Evanthia Bay. The picture window seemed incongruous in a grope room, but she supposed that was the real reason why he'd had it installed. And outside was the external world with all its unnatural geometricity. She heard the voices of birds and the constant roar of waves and the whirr of machines as dust-speck men peeled the metallic skin off what appeared to be a giant golden onion out on the tide flats. The waves were composed of gray-green wavelets and the coastline between Phelony and their cramped studio apartment where Henley waited for her (ah, Henley of the long green braids!) on the other side was infinitely long because it detoured into every inlet and around every rock and grain of sand, so she knew she could never go home.

"Hi! My name is . . ." she began. But then she stopped. He didn't seem to care who she was, didn't care that she was twenty-five years old, that she had had five wisdom teeth instead of the ordinary four, didn't care that she had made a well-reasoned political decision never to shave her legs, didn't care that when her parents had first brought her baby brother home from the hospital she put her favorite book in his crib and said "baby read book," didn't care that she had pulled the legs off spiders when she was five, didn't care that although she loved Henley she didn't think she could stand him much longer. Indeed she had an intense feeling that this man didn't care at all, as though he had developed not caring to a high art. All he had to do was sit there in his chair, and she could tell that he didn't care about her or anything she might have to say. She might as well go home because he wasn't going to listen. But she felt obligated to the committee at least to give it a try. So she tried.

"Causality as we understand it," she said. "is derived from the assignment of objects into categories. Categorization, in turn, is derived from the psychology of the individual. Thus causality is derived from psychology. This is the mechanism which gives Ext its power. But if Ext is defined by law, and the law imposes its metaphor upon our collective psyche—the collective psyche being the glue which holds human civilization together—then causality itself becomes static and civilization collapses. Therefore the Notsniw Law must be rescinded before it brings about the collapse of civilization as we know it."

As she paused, waiting to see if her opinions would elicit some sort of response, she felt sorry for him, perhaps because his olivine shirt had frayed cuffs and was shedding sugary green crystals on the rough wooden floor. He looked terribly small and pathetic in person. In his lap was a green hoop about the size of a dinner plate which was, she assumed, a symmetry multiplier, a souvenir from his career among the aliens; stretched across the hoop and attached with odd-shaped copper staples was a milky and translucent membranous diaphragm. She had expected the Ambassador to be much more imposing and demonic, but instead he had the air of a pet monkey abandoned by its owner. The alien artifact, however, was unsettling.

His only response to her speech was to drop a shrimp onto the

diaphragm, upon which images of the shrimp appeared in a four-leaf-clover pattern, sending a fine powder of what used to be shrimp breading sifting down into his lap. The symmetry multiplier came from the Worm Planet, an odd name for an odd place, called the Worm Planet both because the larval stage of its Group Mind resembled giant opalescent worms and because it was the planet where the first Worm Hole was discovered. The Group Mind used the symmetry multiplier to teach its larva about geometry. This particular hoop demonstrated one of the plane's seventeen symmetry groups, the one Phelony knew as the $p4m$ group. The hoop peeled off a thin layer of matter and portioned it into images.

Tossing the symmetry multiplier, which she caught deftly by the rim with her left hand, he said, "No devil sees doom, nor star era radar a ten megaton." His ferociously green eyes seemed focused on the tip of her nose. She nodded gravely in agreement, trying to look as though she understood. Perhaps, she thought, he is making some broad observation about humanity's lack of foresight which I can connect up with attempts to legally define Ext.

She took his comments to be a conversational opening and continued with her rehearsed speech: "What you must understand, Ambassador, is that because public commentary on Ext has been left entirely to elderly court judges and publicity-seeking politicians—the sort of person you yourself used to be—who are concerned with legality rather than reality, and to up-tight private citizens who hate Ext enough to spend their evenings, weekends, and holidays campaigning to have Ext banned, those inconsiderates who intend that Ext be restricted by force of law—thereby diminishing the necessary flexibility of the nature of reality for the vast majority of the human population—present the public, considered both as a collection of individuals and as one gigantic whole, with no reasonable alternative method of exorcising the chaotic emotions. Because, lacking diversity of perception, individuals will act entirely in their own best interests, thereby causing all of humanity to descend into barbarism, diversity of perception is an ingredient essential to the very existence of democratic society, and therefore because a legally established definition of Ext will, in the long run, subvert the very structure of civilization, the motivation behind the Reformist outreach to you, the motivation behind this visit, is to get you to denounce all further attempts to legally define Ext and

to advocate the revocation of your own part in this disaster—the Notsniw Law. If civilization is to have any chance of survival, any chance at all, all attempts to define Ext must cease and the Notsniw Law must be revoked.”

She looked through the curl of steam rising in the room’s chilly air, to the glass cradled in her right hand, waiting for his response. The moment seemed too precise. Not larger than life, but sharper. Looking at the steam, she dimly perceived its shape: how each eddy was composed of smaller eddies, which in turn were composed of smaller eddies, and so on until there were only H_2O molecules wriggling randomly in the air before her. The Black Milk of Morning had left her mind almost painfully sharp, although her teeth were probably stained midnight blue by now just like the Ambassador’s. There was a ring of bubbles where the Black Milk met the glass, each bubble squeezed between smaller bubbles. Where the glass was chipped and cracked, the spider’s webbing of cracks was stained blue-brown. She looked closely at the jagged place on the lip and squinted.

“Reviled yam, flow!” said the Ambassador, pouring himself another snifter of Black Milk. For a moment what he said made no sense to her, but she assumed, although she didn’t know for sure, that the Black Milk must be made of fermented yams.

The sharp edge of her glass became mountains, which in turn had foothills. “Ah,” she said. “Self-similarity in solid, liquid, and vapor. When we try we can see Ext vanishing everywhere, Ambassador. We need only try. In return we get release and fulfillment far beyond any experienced by a human being before Ext. Would you really let this be taken away? Or will you denounce the Notsniw Law?” Phelony had always found it miraculous how her very deepest secrets, the ones she hid even from herself, were translated by Ext into the structure of the external world. As she smiled at him, trying to re-establish their rapport, she thought of all those hours spent tabling by the ticket desk in the space port, spent chairing meetings, spent programming volunteers, spent networking with sympathetic organizations, spent leafleting the vitreous streets of Zwerin, and she thought that if he would denounce the Notsniw Law, then he would make it all worthwhile.

Although she gobbled down five jumbo shrimp, after setting her glass down between her thighs, to show him that she accepted his

hospitality, her efforts had no noticeable effect upon him. A few minutes later, when the Ambassador leaned forward unexpectedly, Phelony drew back.

"Emit noon time!" he said in a commanding tone. Phelony looked at her watch, which read 5:47 P.M. Noon, she wondered. What could he mean? He waved his finger stump at her and said, "Wolf may deliver not a gem." She tried to make sense of what he said. Was he referring to himself as the wolf? And what did this have to do with noon? If he was the wolf, what was it that he was or was not going to deliver?

At this moment, for the first time, she realized she was frightened of him. Inside her heavy shoes she curled and uncurled her toes. She was alone in the room with this famous man—the first and only Ambassador to the Group Mind, for whom no replacement had yet been found—and he was crazy. This contradicted what Henley had explained to her in such great detail: that after two decades of public service during which the Ambassador, a sincere and altruistic man, worked to restrict public access to information about Ext despite the fact that he himself had been the first human to be helped, even cured, by it, and thus depriving literally billions of people of the benefits he himself had enjoyed, the Ambassador had finally been forced by guilt to resign. But no. The Ambassador was crazy. That was all. Sometimes the simplest explanation is the best.

Phelony was tensing up, preparing to rise from the foam block and run from the room, when the door burst open. In slunk a tall young man with curly red hair starting wildly from his head. Phelony assumed he must be a mathematician because he had one hand shoved down his pants and in the other he held the archaic text, the historical and neo-religious basis for the name of Ext, Irving Kaplansky's *Fields and Rings*, second edition. He hid himself in a corner of the room, concealed by a nook of fake rock.

"Are rats radar Ron?" the Ambassador asked him. But a groan was the young man's only response. The Ambassador grinned and nodded, saying, "Mood sees."

Phelony had no more idea how to reply than if he had been speaking a foreign language. She munched on jumbo shrimp and contemplated her escape—wondering where she could go that the Reformists would never find her or alternatively what she could tell

them that would explain her departure with the job still undone—and she stared at a photograph on the south wall. When the photograph caught her eye, she thought it was a well-composed portrait of a sleeping woman wearing a jumper, the kind of jumper Phelony might have worn before she became a Reformist and realized that it was wrong, the kind with buttons down the front. Her next thought was, this can't be real. Those weren't the shoulder straps of a jumper. Nothing was what it seemed. Rather the flesh had been peeled back from the woman's shoulders in neat little strips. The shoulder incisions allowed her breasts to be pushed back off the fat on her rib cage, forming humps that looked like withered apples. Those weren't buttons. The graininess in the center of each was bone marrow. That was the cross-section of her rib cage.

Hair arranged just so, eyes closed as though she were asleep, the lumpy texture of exposed fat contrasting with textures of hair, bone, and smooth skin, the handwritten card beneath the picture read, "Ext death, age 26." Phelony felt as though she too were going insane. Nothing seemed real. It was a photograph of a young woman just after autopsy, a young woman who looked familiar, perhaps because Phelony had seen her on holovision, but more likely because she had been a Reformist.

"Lived on star," said the Ambassador. As the sun set outside the window, Phelony was on the verge of screaming. But she either had to get away or go on with her speech. The man with the book had reminded her of the really crucial part.

"We shall have no need to assign meaning to Ext itself," she said. "We shall speak only of its vanishing." The Ambassador's face became molten, a boiling sea of anger.

"No Enid, I . . ." he said. As his voice trailed off, his expression cooled, crystalizing into his usual, placid nonexpression. The man was an existential Cheshire cat; he always vanished back into the gloom of nonbeing after every display of emotion. For a moment she thought he had mistaken her for someone else, someone named Enid.

Sharp as shattered glass slicing skin of the hand that holds it, her understanding cut quickly to the problem's core and drew blood: "no Enid I" backwards is "I dine on." The cycle was complete and something dreadful was about to happen. In the air around her was the fear, but as the moment lasted she felt less and less. She was

using the power of Ext to do battle with the fear, using Ext to hide the fear.

She threw it at him, the thing in her hand. Suppressed violence always escapes its dungeon. She heard him scream. Because the screaming scared her, she leaped up from her chair, knocking over the jumbo shrimp and the stack of math books and shattering her glass on the floor. It began as a man's scream and rose in pitch by abrupt jumps. Phelony had never in her life heard anyone scream quite that way. The scream went silent when the Ambassador fell out of the pilot's seat onto the unfinished wooden floor. She tasted blood. She had bitten a hole in her tongue. She could hear the man in the corner moaning with pleasure, and the voices of birds and the constant roar of the waves and the clicking and whirring of machines, oh yes, the clicking and whirring of machines! In the pink glow of twilight, filtering in through the window, she saw eight heads with faces all the same. She counted them: two-four-six-eight. Four pairs like the leaves of a four-leaf clover. It had eight long thin heads. The face from holovision documentaries, from political conventions where she had been sent to spy, from advertising billboards, was now surrealistically and symmetrically superimposed upon each of them; every head had former Ambassador Winston Otto Notsniw's face.

Phelony screamed as the heads began to droop. She screamed as the heads became like axle grease or grape jelly. And when the head jelly became a pool of dark liquid, deprived of all its long-chain molecules, and flowed into Phelony's spilled Black Milk, she was still screaming. Around the Ambassador's neck was the hoop of the Worm-thing, the symmetry multiplier, with shreds of safety membrane still attached. Phelony Verfall had killed him.

She felt a warm and comforting hand upon her shoulder and for a moment the very shape of smoke was revealed to her. Indeed she felt a piece of time missing from the moment. She felt calm, reassured, almost confident, as though the events of the past hour were only a prelude to something wonderful. The man with the red hair stood beside her, naked and glowing. From the neck down, all of his bodily hair was pale green, just like Henley's. Suspicious, she pulled on a lock of wild red hair. A red curly wig came away in her hand, exposing long green braids, looped around his head and held in place by bobby pins. It was Henley. He had come to watch. In

an effort to console her, he held out his copy of the archaic text, opened to page 187 where it was written: "13. *The Vanishing of Ext*. We shall have no need to assign meaning to Ext itself; we shall speak only of its vanishing."

Henley, Henley. Henley had been in the room during the crucial time, and he had tried neither to help her nor stop her. And now he was smiling. She would hurt him.

The text was precise and accurate, but not in any sense Henley would understand. But now Phelony understood. She understood the quotation's shape, texture, found meaning preserved in it for her like a woolly mammoth encased in glacial ice. He caressed her cheek smiling luminously, condescendingly. As he took the book from her hands, she knew the future would be very different. With only momentary effort, applied through Ext, she made him vanish.

It had all been intended, not by the Reformists, but by the aliens. She must go to the Worm Planet immediately: Phelony Verfall, the new Ambassador. She must hide the forbidden knowledge of the Worm Planet.