

Approx. 7,600 words

CONCERNING INTEGRITY AND THE VENTRILOQUISM OF WHISTLING FROGS

by Mandy-Suzanne Wong

I am no good at games, and O!, what a night of enforced levity has cost me; for I have neither will nor strength to choose between the commands of the Palace and the goodwill of the Collegium Arcanum, between the oath I have sworn and the integrity I cherish. Indeed, what can I do?

Lady Canna, Magica Eminentissima and my erstwhile instructor at the Collegium, would advise me: *Write, Avlonphus Magus Qualiava. Look upon the problem's words. Let them tell you what they think your ensuing steps might be.* As I prepared to take my leave of her and the hallowed Collegium, my lady counselled further that in my new office I should do great service to myself and our beloved Monarch by making fortified records of potent conversations. In such archives, the words must mirror those which were spoken; for only thus may histories

gainsay suspicions and forgetful memories, which share a tendency to congregate around magicians-in-service. There are, after all, spells which can detect hypocrisy in written documents.

Such Magic is my reassurance that even in a world which seems to thrive on paradox, nonetheless there remains a place for truth. With the earnestness of one who cherishes such things, I promise that what follows is a true and faithful accounting of my conversation with Lord Urtitius, Royal High Chamberlain and Most Trusted Councillor to His Majesty, on this the thirteenth day of the Twenty-Eighth Summer of the Reign of King Gregorius of Viendebonia. I hope the words may scry a course which will allay the anguish in my heart.

#

As I bent my leg in the Classic Obeisance Due To A Superior Not The Monarch, Lord Urtitius said:

'Do you know why I summoned you, Lord Avlonphus?'

'With regret, Lord High Chamberlain, I do not.'

'Yet you are calm. Who has prepared you?'

'Nobody, Lord High Chamberlain.'

I was not calm, though I went to some lengths to appear so. My position at the Palace is provisional and will be for some time. If ever Lord Urtitius finds reason for displeasure in my

conduct, it will only be his duty to accordingly advise His Majesty.

'Neither Prince Elius nor any of the other hooligans spoke with you?'

Was my obligation to defend the Royal offspring against charges of hooliganism or to refrain from provoking the Royal High Chamberlain? My understanding of what is proper between Royal Advisors, of Lord Urtitius and Prince Elius and of what the Court-at-large expects from a Royal Magician is yet imperfect and, I fear, ever will be.

In the discomfiting silence, my Lord Chamberlain's great moustache grew restless as his patience became likewise. He said with a sigh:

'Lord Avlonphus, you are here because you refused to honour a request made directly to you by His Royal Highness, Prince Elius, son of our gracious Sovereign. And to make matters worse, I infer from your blank expression that you have no sense of the import of a personal request from said Royal Highness, son of our gracious Sovereign. Am I correct?'

'No, my lord. That is, I haven't received any missive from the Prince of recent. That is, to my knowledge. Unless I unwittingly missed - '

'The request to which I refer descended upon you from Royal lips on the night before last, at some (ahem) gathering of hooligans.'

I grew evermore confused, for the evening under contention was indeed a night of revelry for young relatives and friends of Prince Elius.

'I suppose I did attend upon His Highness.' I forbore to note that I'd done so against my better judgement. 'He invited me.'

'Of course. I've not forgotten that upon your arrival in the Palace, I myself recommended that you respond with judicious enthusiasm to any friendly overtures made by the Prince and Princess and young noblefolk; for other than yourself, none of His Majesty's Advisors are any longer, shall we say, of springtime's age.'

Now, whereas I do not enjoy drink, disorder, jokes, crowds, bantering, shouting, dancing, gambling or anything involving tambourines (and indeed prefer the company of books), I nonetheless accepted the Royal invite to please the Prince and Royal High Chamberlain. The latter's knowledge of Prince Elius' private gathering suggested that even without my assistance, Lord Urtitius was hardly lacking in effective spies. Nevertheless:

'I begin perhaps to see the root of your unease, my lord.'

'Do you?'

He looked on with scepticism as I assumed the Stance Appropriate For Conversing With A Superior Not The Monarch, whence I explained:

'Prince Elius' request was made in the context of a game. The game is regrettable, being known as "Quest Or Question"; however, the rules permit that requests for information which are made while the game is recognizably underway need not necessarily be granted. It is understood by all participants that a refusal to answer any question posed in the context of play does not amount to an affront.'

Yet Lord Urtitius' moustache became energetic. 'Begging pardon of His Highness in absentia, that is quite beside the point. I am told that your refusal was adamant enough to cut short this silly game which, however ridiculous, was for the moment Prince Elius' chosen pastime.'

'My lord, I was a perfectly docile participant. In accordance with the rules, it was for me to choose to undertake a Quest named by the Prince or to answer his proffered Question. I elected the former, only the other players thought that as I am a magician I'd complete whatever Quest they named all too easily, thereby providing little entertainment.'

'Then why did you not answer the Question? Why call attention to yourself and waste my time of a busy morning?'

'My lord, it was all in fun. There is no need whatsoever for you to concern yourself - '

'Lord Magician, have a care! I will decide what to do with my concern! Now, were you not considered such a prize by our devoted Sovereign, I would take you for a dullard!'

Under the blackening gaze of the Royal High Chamberlain, what could I do but drop my eyes to his crimson carpet? I'd earned the Scholars' Seal and Mark of the Adept, yet I could not but swallow his lordship's insult and arrange myself in the Contrite Obeisance Due To A Superior Not The Monarch.

'The plain fact is that you still have much to learn, Lord Avlonphus. You will therefore permit me to plant the seed of good sense in your witchy brain: for a Royal Advisor, no game is a game. Your refusal to answer Prince Elius implies that you do not trust His Royal Highness or his chosen confederates. It implies secrecy, some personal concealment on your part. And as His Majesty's Most Trusted Councillor, I cannot permit such matters to evade my attention.'

I began to understand. It is in the best interests of our treasured Sovereign for those in his proximity to be transparent and predictable. For this reason, many (I among them) wonder why the King saw fit to add an Adept of the Secret Arts to his Council of Advisors. Doubt pierced the heart beneath my hands as I maintained the Contrite Stance, awaiting my lord's pardon

though I understood at last: I did not deserve it; I had placed my own concerns above the interests of my King, I knew at once that Lord Urtitius meant to sack me on the spot! What would I write to Lady Canna? How would I explain that my ineptness at frivolity had plunged the Collegium into Royal disgrace? Such clamorous thoughts drowned the words of Lord Urtitius:

'I said rise, magician! One does not have all day!'

'Lord Chamberlain, the depths of my shame are all too - '

'Thus you are not an utter nincompoop. Be that as it may, I must hear the Question that Prince Elius put to you.'

'He asked me to tell of the defining moment in my life thus far.'

'Why, that is innocuous. You could not describe some blossoming wench or your first night at the Collegium? Nor even your admission to His Majesty's Council?'

'My lord, I could not!'

'And why?'

'Because I would rather be silent than utter falsehood, my lord.'

'Such virtue will not win you friends at Court, young mage, though you might earn hollow praise from King Gregorius,' he grumbled.

Hours of earnest thought failed to reveal the meaning of this smug advice. I still cannot discern which Courtly friends

one ought to find preferable to the good opinion of His Majesty; nor can I understand how sincerity would fail to prove itself a worthy virtue in the estimation of such worthy friends.

My confusion on the matter compounded my distress when I remembered how that night, that strange meeting in the black forest of Muddenwood, threw everything into such disarray that I could no longer distinguish integrity from faithlessness, vitality from unimportance, fear from desire, nor even *here* (that strange concept) from *elsewhere* (stranger still). The sensation of this vast disorder was akin to standing in the middle of a brawl and wanting no part in it. To call it panic would be no exaggeration, and those who would accuse me of unmanliness have neither any notion nor the vaguest sense of that which is called Magic.

'Tell me what you failed to tell the Prince,' said Lord Urtitius.

'I swore an oath to Lady Canna never to tell of it, my lord.'

'And why should the eminent mage require such a thing?'

'For the sake of Arcana Esoterica, the natural secrecy of Magic, which must be respected and revered; and thus for the protection of magicians everywhere!'

Lord Urtitius frowned with smoky, bushy brows. 'With respect to the Arcana, you must tell me.'

'I dare not.'

'Surely you wish to protect your King as much as you do your colleagues. Lord Avlonphus, you have not the slightest grasp of your situation, do you? Relatively speaking, you are still a stranger to the Palace. You are the youngest individual ever to be appointed to the Royal Council of Advisors, which has not in seven Reigns included a magician. No one quite understands His Majesty's purpose in creating your office and bringing you to Court. And your refusal to speak about yourself even at the bidding of the Prince does much to foment the general attitude of wariness towards you. How can I be sure that this grave secret of yours, which apparently altered you forever, does not bode His Majesty some ill, perhaps - '

'Never. Never, my lord, upon my life.'

'Perhaps some hope of expanding the Collegium's thus far negligible influence at the Palace?'

I wish I'd never heard of 'Quest Or Question'. I wish I had been ill with some debilitating fever, unable to accompany Prince Elius that night. I threw out my arms and bent my back in the Suppliant Obeisance To A Superior Not The Monarch (an extreme posture, to be sure, but I did not know what else to do).

'My lord, I beg you to believe that I have no such intentions - nor indeed any at all except to serve His Majesty

to the limits of my strength - and furthermore that the Collegium has no designs on the Palace or the Council. Dismiss me if you will, send me packing in disgrace, but do not believe that malice would ever have a place at the Collegium Arcanum!'

Lord Urtitius sat in thought. He asked that I unbend myself. He regarded me in silence, his woolly chin resting in a seat made of his hand. At last he addressed me quietly:

'Why in blazes didn't you make something up, lad? The Prince's entourage wanted a laugh. Had you but given it to them, you would not be the object of muttering in the corridors.'

A flush came into my cheeks. 'Invention of that sort isn't in my nature. And, begging my lord's pardon, I cannot bring myself to be sorry for it.'

'(Harrumph.) Very well, young man. Nonetheless, I will have your secret. And I will have it now.'

'But - '

'You may be earnest, Lord Magician, but integrity is proving to be a vice of yours, yes, an indulgence, I daresay. If you do not learn to curb it, you will find yourself playing the sap in many (ahem) tricky situations. You may have already done so, indeed without your knowledge. I am obliged to form my own judgement.'

Did Lord Urtitius mean that Lady Canna and the Collegium might have dissembled their intentions? Would not such circumstance entail that my memories and sense of honour become sparks and spoils of an unnecessary conflict between Collegium and Court? I cannot believe Lady Canna would see me so used; and yet, in terror of the possibility, I could only say:

'My lord, I swore an oath.'

'You swore a hundred to the King when you took your place in Council.'

I stood with downcast eyes and shuffling feet, my mind a tumult.

Now that it is done, I doubt the course I chose. I fear that it sorely wanted honour; and I will regret it forever, even as I wonder if I will ever have the wisdom to judge it properly.

'Would you swear in turn, my lord, not to act on whatever you may hear?'

'You know very well I shall do no such thing.'

I knew that Lord Urtitius could force me to tell all if he believed it necessary. He had no need to remind me, for I was as if a knot in a pair of tangled chains, each of these a fearful complex: dread of uselessness, disgrace, of encouraging prejudice against my profession, tangled with my terror of that great secret of Muddenwood, which had in a single moment

overturned all my convictions. The latter should have taught me to beware the ambitions of the powerful.

'I am waiting, magician!'

I began to speak in an anxious voice, which to my dismay I soon found difficult to keep in check.

'My lord, you will recall that in certain symphonic ballads, the Royal Orchestra - '

'The Orchestra?'

'Yes, my lord. The Orchestra is called betimes to approximate the sounds of other beings. If the proffered ballad has anything to do with lowland forests such as Muddenwood, one will often hear an excess of little flutes and things attempting to simulate the communal vocalizations of *Praedonis clamorus*, the whistling frog or amphibious ventriloquist. Alas, the species is all but extinct - banned, as you know, from important human gatherings - however, it is all too common to hear its vociferation employed as a musical symbol. Many audiences find it idyllic, however - '

'Your point?'

'Yes, my lord. To my ears (and as I was born in Muddenwood, one of the rare locales in which *Praedonis* thrives, you may be assured of accuracy on this point), such orchestral simulations are inadequate. To be sure, the frogs are tiny, no greater than a man's thumbnail; their voices are high like those

of songbirds, only much louder; hence the smallest silver flute is indeed the best mimic that the orchestra can hope for. Here in the Palace, the practice is to use a veritable horde of flutes, tooting and twittering at the very summit of their range, and add to these the tinkling things which I suppose are meant to make the sonic texture sort of shimmer.'

'Lord Avlonphus.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'You would not attempt to oust the Royal Composer, would you?'

'Nay, my lord!'

'You are not going to tell me that you think someone in the Royal Orchestra swallowed one of these ventriloquizing frogs so that he might filch the dulcet singing voice of King Gregorius, are you?'

'No, my lord, but I see you know the legend - '

'Then for the sake of what is left of my morning, boy, what is your point?'

To bended knee once more, as despair took root. 'Begging my lord's forgiveness, I don't know how to begin!'

A sigh from Lord Urtitius, hefty enough to riffle the papers on his desk.

'Sit down!'

I took the nearest chair.

'I am going to regret this,' he grumbled. 'Begin at the beginning, lad. With a bit of good luck, I shall savour the meat of your tale before we both expire from starvation.'

#

I was fourteen, by far the youngest student at the Collegium. With all the new scholars, I received the following missive from Lady Canna:

A Lesson in Method. Attempt to use empirical evidence to prove or disprove some prevalent conception about Magic. Attempt to articulate your findings in a presentation which we will discuss as a group.

From my father, the apothecary at Muddenwood village, I had just the problem: an ancient notion which I daresay still holds sway here in the Palace, as in many Great Houses and Konzertsaaes. People believe that whistling frogs, who despite their diminutive size can project their high-pitched voices to significant distances, also possess the magical ability to steal other creatures' voices and make them seem to issue from convenient locations.

This idea is the germ of several well-known tales. It was my opinion, which my father shared, that these old stories were responsible for turning misconception into contagious falsehood. Throughout history, in consequence, the blame for every manner of disinformation, from rumour-mongering to wilful

misrepresentation, tended to fall upon the slippery shoulders of very small frogs.

During the reign of Queen Koi, for example, an amphibious ventriloquist was named the culprit in a horrible situation wherein a Royal Advisor seemed to have insulted a Royal Provincial Steward but had not in fact uttered a word. At least, those in his surrounds beheld no movement of his lips. Alas, there was nearly civil war. Then there was the legend to which you referred, my lord, in which King Spirion contrived to lend his celebrated voice to a dramatic symphony, but in the improbable costume of a younger, taller gentleman of significantly lesser girth than His Majesty possessed. Elsewhere, a bride meant to decline, heard herself saying yes. A dead uncle made his wishes known without a Necromancer. Queen Feidra, who succeeded Spirion, banned all amphibians from the presence of the Monarch, as from each and every Palace, Great House and diplomatic gathering, including and especially the Council of Royal Advisors.

But the ban did not have quite the desired effect. For whilst no frog has been seen or heard at Court in generations, Courtiers and would-be suitors still, even to this day, believe that good magicians or apothecaries can circumvent Queen Feidra's law.

I've seen it, my lord: connivers, ill-bred and high-born likewise, descend upon my father's shop bearing these monstrous traps, such cruel and horrid things as even you have never seen! Inside - poor little animals! - sometimes their shrivelled little corpses! And the numbskulls ask my father to grind the dead little bones into powdery perfumes, to extract the creatures' blood - or mayhap mix blood and bones into a colourful and bubbly, sweet-tasting liqueur which can go into a phial, itself small enough to fit within the pocket of a formal costume. They believe such loathsome potions can place the fabled power of the frogs in their own throats.

My father turns them all away. I once heard him rebuke a man who sought to whisper to his son in the voice of his beloved. The customer had ill opinions of this girl; he planned to arrange for her to 'confess' her 'betrayal' of his son with another. Deceit and treachery in a clean bottle, my lord; that is what they're after!

The result of Queen Feidra's ban was thus a massacre of whistling frogs. Those who escaped the traps retreated into the forests, but many of our woods have fallen silent. One may hear frog-choruses at Muddenwood largely because my father takes those who are brought to him, if they are still alive, and under cover of night goes deep into the forest and releases them among the trees. When I was a child, I would go with him betimes.

Nowadays he takes my sisters, those who are old enough. They like to hear the frogs sing with the orchestra of the trees.

My plan was to disprove the existence of magical ability in *Praedonis clamorus*; to demonstrate that what my father says is true, despite the counterarguments of deluded customers; and singlehandedly thereby to save the whistling frog from extinction at the hands of sheer stupidity. Armed with visions of eager hands snatching my leather-bound conclusions from the shelves of every library in His Majesty's lands, I made ready to depart the Collegium for Muddenwood forest.

The question of method was a puzzle, though unfortunately I did not permit it to deter me. Lady Canna required *empirical* evidence, the sort that anyone can validate with eyes, ears, noses, hands or tongues. Evidence pertaining to the other senses, the Arcane senses which only magicians cultivate, I therefore presumed irrelevant to the assignment.

How then to *exhibit* the inability of frogs to pilfer voices? The thought of dissecting one of the poor creatures did not sit well with me, even after I accepted that I had no other ideas. It seemed the only solution: to sacrifice someone for the good of the species. The poor little dead body, I thought, would be only too accessible to eyes, ears, noses, hands or - well, I wanted to believe that one had just to see the frog,

that its lack of potency would mark its body in some obvious fashion.

(Of course, my lord, humans do not see Magic with their eyes. We cannot smell or taste it; and even a magician never technically hears it, nor does he ever touch it. I did not grasp this at the time. I did not see that what I hoped to do was not only unempirical but also tautological: to use the absence of Magic to prove the absence of Magic! No matter, I was but fourteen, new to Magic and the rigours of philosophy. To continue...)

I rid my pen-box of pens, filled the thing with powdered sugar. I took a lantern and a book on hermetic hermeneutics and set off.

#

Muddenwood forest. The word that comes to mind, directly I begin to reminisce, is Ooze. Yes, I'm afraid so. Muddenwood is the incarnation of ooze. It is ever damp even when it does not rain. In the form of mist, water oozes into the air. Creeks and bogs spring up hither and yon, only to ooze back into the earth and disappear. The earth is mostly mud, except where the blubbery grass, long and sort of pocked, as I imagine grass to be at the bottom of the ocean, packs the earth together with roots, creating a foothold in the ooze by force. The roots of the trees ooze into the ground and become it; thus my father

says that what one thither treads upon is hardly earth at all but vegetable and water. The trees seem to be of every stooping, coiling, wrinkling kind, but the variety is less eclectic than competitive. Vines ooze into the trees and strangle them. Trees ooze into the vines and turn them into branches. Branches bend to earth and guzzle the moisture within, so that certain trees possess multiple trunks. Leaves are everywhere fat and gummy; their secretions are like slow, oozing rain. The dripping sap of certain trees is poison; they use it to kill the vines. But the flesh-mushrooms thrive upon it: black, wet fungi that appear to ooze out of the tree trunks but are not part of them at all. One should always wear a hat in that place, and heavy boots.

I did not wish to be there on a rainy day, for my father told me that these forest denizens are gluttonous. The grasses suck the humid air. The vines' vegetal throats open themselves to the sky. The earth vies with the roots for precious droplets, and the roots writhe and stretch in feeding frenzy. The vines are said to sigh and the trees moan; some say that certain trees even do battle in rapacious ecstasy!

No, I would not brave the rain. However, *Praedonis clamosus* sleeps unless the sky is dark. Someone told my father that these animals are thieves and that is why they cherish darkness so. My young sister, Mirthe, said it is because little

frogs like to sing along with things of their own size, things like raindrops and stars. But when at last I had the chance to ask someone of credibility, the question of darkness entirely escaped me!

Mayhap I ought to have taken little Mirthe; it might have made things easier. But Muddenwood village is two days' ride from the Collegium; riders must circumvent the oozing wood between. Failure to do so would doom one's horse to a snapped limb. I went alone.

I was untutored enough to believe that when I strode into the wood, the event entailed only my striding into the wood - even as the shadows oozed into the blue light of my lamp, and the lamp seemed more and more to shrink from its vocation as I moved among the trees, and the muddy, warty grasses sucked upon my boots. I followed the sounds of my quarry to a place where they seemed numerous and I could set myself down upon unpoisoned roots. I opened my pen-box and placed it at my side, that the scent of powdered sugar might drift on the damp air to froggy noses.

When I was a child, the whistling frogs seemed to lay a shimmering mantle over the forest: like a swatch of silk with bits of silver thread worked into the weave; like what happens when the sun strikes the ripples in the Royal Moat, filling the whole with sparkle. Such dazzling effect, my lord, but in

sound. It was as if the whole forest trembled with delight at the thought of itself.

Yet in my memory of that night, when I was in the wood alone on what I failed to recognize as a fool's errand, the emanations of the frogs do not glitter but throb; the forest throbs and swells, presses itself against the air, clinging and presumptuous. That is not what happened - the frogs surely twittered just as usual - yet I cannot help but think of it in that invasive way.

Perhaps it is because I made myself listen so deeply. Most people never listen deeply, as I'm sure my lord is quite aware. Making ourselves deaf is one of human beings' surest defences, even when we do it without knowing.

That night, I listened for a frog: an individual amidst the general scintillation. I'd assumed that each produced a single tone and thus contributed to a choral harmony, and my ears did not refute that simplistic conjecture. But the longer I listened - the deeper I withdrew from thoughts of dampness, mud and predators, concentrating my every sensitive capacity upon the voice of one small creature - the more it seemed to me that each sonic singularity was also a multitude, not all of which was audible but which made itself known to me nonetheless. I cannot say how. One might associate the matter with my Arcane senses. I only know that the longer I sat there, the more each

voice seemed to be many, although each indeed belonged to only one.

Lady Canna wondered why I failed to enjoy this expansion of my perspective. Most magicians relish every amplification of their puissance; and Lady Canna feared, for a while, that my failure to do so might make me less of an Adept. Indeed, I did not enjoy it; I began to feel - I suppose you might say overwhelmed - I was surrounded by frogs, and though I could not see them each of their voices was louder than emanations of much larger throats; and each one of their sounds had within it a multitude of sounds and a conspiracy of things that are not sounds. I wanted to leave, yet I could not make myself move. I wished to hear them simply again as flutters in the air, as Mirthe hears them! But I could not unhear, for sound is never only sound; for as you said yourself, my lord, nothing is ever just itself.

Though I seemed rooted there for an eternity, it was not long at all, according to the level of my lamp, before something sensed my discomfort. My eyes were shut, my fingers clamped around my book, when from the incoherent clamour issued words.

Words borne on a voice that I knew well: my own.

#

'Good evening,' it said. 'You appear to be in some distress.'

It did not sound as timid as I felt. In fact it was unusually direct.

It said, 'Might I be of service?'

I felt no movement in my mouth or throat. I assumed I'd fallen asleep and dropped into a dream. Dreams, however meaningful, do not qualify as empirical evidence; therefore I opened my eyes.

'You're not deaf, are you?' I said, though I could not imagine how.

'No,' I replied, in a tremulous tone more appropriate to the situation, and the word had an off-colour taste in my mouth.

'Ah! Where are my manners? Thank you for the sugar. It is a human myth that such as I may thrive on such potent delicacies, but a nibble now and then is nice.'

I looked into my box and there he was: a wet, squatting little body with a flat head, from nose to heel no larger than my thumbnail. He was the colour of sodden soil. He regarded me with intelligent black eyes. I regarded him with my mouth open.

'Are you lost?' he asked.

'I'm a magician from the Collegium.'

Not, perhaps, the sort of response he sought. But he'd stolen my voice: he had little right to expect much.

'Are you really?' he said. 'But you're too young!'

I felt it in that moment, hearing it from myself. Thoroughly chagrined, I resolved to summon some aplomb. I cleared my throat and said:

'I am sorry for my confusion at first, sir. I was unaware that frogs could speak the King's Language.'

'Understandable. We can't do it all the time.'

'Begging your pardon, sir, but must you do it in my voice? Couldn't you use another?'

This listening to myself talking to myself and looking at this creature which was so unlike myself that it should not have been talking - well, my lord, I felt severely muddled.

'Well,' said he, 'I don't hear any other voices that can speak the King's Language in our immediate vicinity, do you?'

I had to concede that I did not.

'Now, if I may make an observation, albeit at the risk of my own neck: I've been in your box for quite some time and you have yet to slam the lid over my head. Indeed, you've done nothing at all, you haven't even opened your book. And you do seem out of sorts, all of which leads me to wonder - well, do you mean to slam the lid over my head?'

I thought in despair of my assignment. 'I don't want to hurt anyone.'

'You don't want to make a potion out of me?'

'Indeed not at all! I don't even want to dissect you to save your species!'

Imagine doing that to someone who expressed concern for you in your own voice. I was quite beside myself.

'O dear,' said the frog. 'Well, it would be nice for all of us not to go extinct. And I can't say I would mind being a hero. But the idea of having my chest cut open and my organs spread about lacks a certain appeal. Look here, you're a reasonable human. At least, you're the first I've ever known to care stale prunes about somebody else's species. Can't we work this through? Negotiate, perhaps?'

'I'm not sure we can,' I said, forlorn. 'I wanted to prove that there's no point in killing whistling frogs for potions because frogs can't steal other people's voices. I wanted to prove that it's impossible. But, well, do you see the problem, sir?'

'Yes, I'm afraid I do. Dear me. I suppose I shouldn't have launched myself out of the colony with my tongue flapping, should I? My dear aunt warned me not to, but I did want to try some sugar and I thought it was high time that somebody said something on behalf of our kind and you really do look like a magician from a distance even though you turned out to be just a little one, so I thought I was making a fair bet. I say, you couldn't just forget you'd ever seen me, could you?'

'I don't think so.'

'No, I suppose not.'

We fell into silent thought. Somewhere close by, a droplet fell into a pool, and I noticed that the other frogs were silent too. The very air had gone still, as if to listen.

He said:

'O how ye wrong me, sitting on thy lily where the water froths frilly!'

'"The Ballad of the Jilted King"?' said I.

'No, I made it up. I enjoy your voice. Although it's most unfair of you to accuse me of stealing it. When your voice departs your body and goes into the air, it's no longer just yours, I should think, if it ever was. The rain does not belong to clouds, especially once it leaves them to tumble through the sky. You inhale the air to make your voice, your voice becomes the air, the air takes it and carries it and then dissolves it to make itself. And air also makes water - '

'Is that really what happens?'

'Isn't it? I'm just a little frog, but it's always seemed that way to me.'

'The rest of me is out here in the air, and I'm still mine.'

'Tell that to the people who drank my ancestors,' he said.

'I say, what *will* you tell them?'

'I don't know!'

'What proof can you offer?'

'None, thanks to you!'

'Well, one only meant to be helpful, didn't one? Confound it all, boy, can't you make something up?'

'Of course not!'

'Not even for the good of my species? But you were willing to dissect me for it!'

'I told you I wasn't willing!'

'Well, you can't go off spouting the truth.'

'I've got to say something. I've only got another day before somebody asks. There isn't time to find another research exercise.'

'Then I'm afraid there's no way round it: you'll just have to lie.'

'I can't! Besides, you try lying to a professional magician!'

As you know, my lord, integrity is as dear to me as my library. In addition was the real concern that if I falsified the results of my work, Lady Canna would expose me with a glance and dismiss me from the Collegium. I could think of nothing but: What will I tell my lady? When I am dismissed, what will I tell my father?

Said my voice out of a small and slimy body:

'If you tell the truth, the Massacre will come to Muddenwood.'

'Why don't you speak to Lady Canna?' said I, desperate and in earnest. 'She'll know what to do.'

'Me? I'm just a little frog! And I'm not going anywhere with you. Your motives are suspect to say the least.'

'I beg your pardon, sir!'

'You say you don't want to dissect me but you'll change your mind as soon as you get back to your colony.'

'I will not!'

'Someone will make you. Or they'll steal me when I've fainted dead away from lack of air inside this monstrous box, and *they'll* dissect me! That lady of yours, mayhap.'

'Lady Canna is the most reasonable, compassionate person in the world,' I said stiffly. 'We have yet to discuss magical species but I'm confident that she understands them. She will look upon your plight with - '

'Bah! You're all alike. Have some sugar, little frog; you've had a rough time of it, haven't you, keeping yourself alive; come into a nice, safe box and have a treat. Next thing I know, I'm missing all my little limbs.'

'Sir, you are leaping to conclusions based solely upon generalizations.'

'And you are trying to talk your way out of your history with promises that will amount to nothing more than powdered sugar - which isn't good for anybody anyway, my aunt said so. O, just go away, won't you? Get a forgetfulness spell.'

'There isn't any such thing.'

I wanted to say: Goes to show how much you know about magicians, sir! But I sat in silence and thought hard. Much to my surprise, he stayed and did the same.

In the days and years to come, I would speculate upon what he might have thought during our final moments in each other's company. I came to comprehend that, blinded by our own gallantry, neither of us wished to see that the truce we'd drawn between our species was fragile as mist; it would not outlast our patience with each other. Both of us were aghast when at last we understood that the heroic intention which had brought us together was without hope. Thus I believe it was horror, not vengeance, which led him to express what he did next. He had talked his family into even graver peril; he could not but scramble to talk them out of it again.

A truthful magician shall tell the entire truth (he thought, so I believe). In consequence, many foolish humans may find themselves in our place: face to face with death before their rightful time. Might they learn thenceforth to leave little frogs in peace?

For it is evident that he had some sense of a distinction between magicians and other people. On some level perhaps he sensed the duty and desire of the Adept, which is also our curse: to extrapolate from every fact and question far beyond whatever bounds apply to reasonable speculation. He was obviously more intelligent than people would care to believe. He said:

'What if air were to do to you as it does to your voice?'

'What do you mean?'

'Shall we try it: you giving your body to the air as you do you your voice, the air giving itself to you as it does to make you speak? And I will see if I can pick you up out of the air, just as I did your voice, and put you somewhere else. I can do that, you know, with voices. I could make you sound like you were speaking from the top of that tall tree or the bottom of the stream where you couldn't even breathe. Could I change you if I picked you up, I wonder? Or put you down in some ancient world where all the dead trees have come to life?'

'You're just trying to frighten me. Well, you can't,' said I.

'Can't I?' said the frog.

I did not wish to be afraid. I wanted to challenge him to do it. Dissolve me in the air and send me! Put your power to the test, amphibious ventriloquist, if you dare! In his

petulant offer, Possibility opened a window on her wondrous self. Every time that happens, my lord, the whole world is reborn.

Already the air seemed different. It seemed to develop dancing, eager fingers. The lamp blazed and in the small blue flame I envisioned oceans, mountains, buildings in strange shapes. Time itself seemed to reach for me. And yet:

What if the frog gave my body to the air and failed to get it back? Would I die or become a wraith? A lipless voice on the wind? Could he steal a thought of mine and make it strike a person in another generation? Are my thoughts no longer mine after I have thought them? What within myself is mine? When does each of us cease to be his own? Where, my lord, is the integrity that holds a man together, binds me to myself? It is fluid; as a mage I must accept it now. But what then of truth and certainty, which are also integrity?

What of the frog, if he succeeded in extending his power, if humans thenceforth exploited him and learned his far-reaching Magic? Lady Canna could pop out of the air when I dozed over my books. I could visit my family whenever I wished without having to borrow someone's horse. But if this kingdom were at war, if some malevolent wizard from some far-off clime should appear without warning at the shoulder of our King even as he slept...

My lord, I was shaken - and tempted, sorely tempted. If what the frog suggested is genuinely possible, not just for him but for us, no one must know of it. And yet, what I might have written!

In subsequent years, I learned that any mage with a shred of sensitivity must find himself divided as his extrapolations show him, first, that there is more to fear therein than anybody realized, and second that in spite of every warning he must extrapolate further. Fear and desire: the one nourishes reason, the other power. A magician must have both. I must do battle with fear lest it overwhelm desire, then turn against desire lest it undermine the prudent fears. Since a frog showed me this rift within myself, how I have suffered from it!

We said not another word. I walked away. I abandoned my pen-box in the wood. No sooner had I turned to go than the frogs began to sing.

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'You left him?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'You did not go back and seek him out?'

'No, my lord. I have never spoken to another frog.'

'So you never learned how to project yourself somewhere instantaneously?'

'No, my lord.'

'Then what bloody good are you? The lot of you?'

'Lady Canna might know, my lord. But if she did, she would tell no one. Humankind has proved itself unworthy of such Magic.'

Lord Urtitius said nothing. He was on the edge of his chair, frowning at what thoughts he spun out of my strange tale. His fingers toyed with a pen-box; one much larger, richer and more beautiful than any pen-box I have known.

'My lord,' I ventured, 'upon departing Muddenwood, I spent a day in anguish before seeking Lady Canna, to whom I made a full, distraught disclosure. My lady is kind; she said I had done well, for I'd abandoned empiricism and approached the subject on its own terms, however incredible they were. I had discovered the lesson, which was that no magical proposition can be verified or disproved by empirical evidence, ergo neither the Arcane senses nor persistent questioning are ever irrelevant. But when I expressed my opinion that it would be unwise to share my findings with others, my lady agreed. Indeed, she bade me swear not to speak about the frogs until she'd discussed the matter with the other *Magicae Eminentissimae*.'

'And?'

'She broached the subject nevermore. Her silence can only mean that the *Magicae Eminentissimae* deemed the Arcana of *Praedonis clamorus* not only Esoteric but rightfully Forgotten.'

Such a resolution would only be in keeping with the laws of Viendebonia, defiance of which would spell the doom of privacy, integrity, even security for humankind as well as for the frogs. I therefore beseech you not to advertise their power. I beg you put it from your mind, the whole affair!

Once again the Suppliant Obeisance, as with sinking heart I wondered how long my lord would wait before he slammed the lid of that pen-box over my head.

'You wanted a Royal errand, now you have one,' he said grimly. 'On behalf of His Majesty's Council of Advisors, I command you, Royal Magician, to find the power of which you speak. Study it, pursue it to the limits of your strength and make me a full report.'

'But my lord - '

'Mere frogs are unworthy to be the sole possessors of such potency. History will commend you for the gift that you will make your Sovereign.'

'But my lord, the potential for power does not equal the right - '

'Withdraw, Royal Magician! I must think! And you are not the only fool who must learn what he has to offer me this day. Retire to your lair. Begin your work at once.'

I almost neglected my departing Obeisance. Dazed and enraged, I returned to my turret and summoned pen and paper. I

traced the words you see before you, watching carefully for signs.

The *t* in *integrity* became the slash-stroke in *Betrayed!*, for that is what I am; the yielding of a *V* seems to say to me *Obey*. But the *Q* within my mother's name and mine, hand-mirror of the alphabet, most prescient of letters - its great circle is empty; for the words I uttered to my lord the Royal High Chamberlain are no longer my own but the fuel of his desire. Yet some aspect of a *W* seems to intimate that for reasons I cannot discern, my candour only fattened the doubts that Lord Urtitius fledges in his mind: doubts of my reliability. O, I am a fool.

THE END