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November 2002

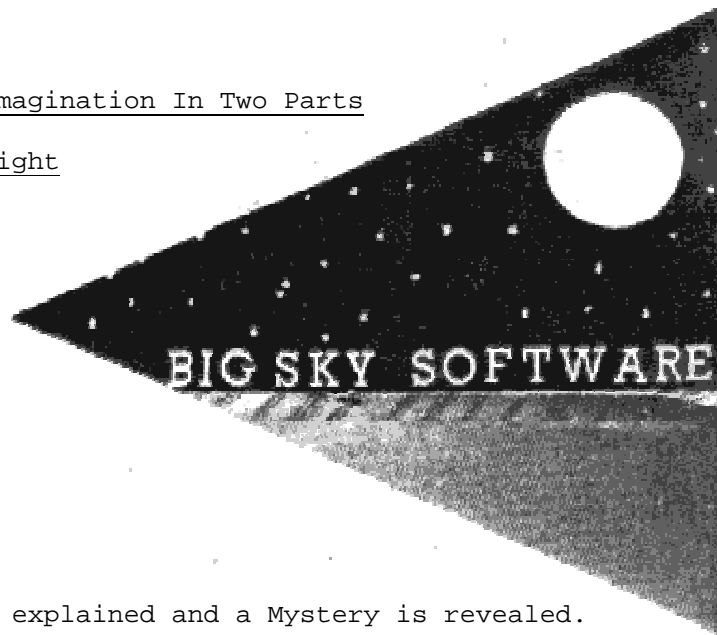
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TIME THIEF

A Tale Of Mystery and Imagination In Two Parts

Part One: Shadows and Light

Part Two: Ironhand



Introductory

In which some Facts are explained and a Mystery is revealed.

KEDRIGERN the Great, arch-wizard of the Principalities, sat down with his auditor's report and sighed. Already he could feel the great axe of Public Accountability beginning its swing over his head. A thing like this Just could not be kept secret. Even now perhaps, the people were coming to stare and point the finger at the great edifice that housed Time-share Travel...

...In this towering golden block thousands ate, drank and danced at post-tour parties, planning next year's trip and trading time-creds. Nowhere else could they do this. It was his marvelous idea; his glorious, patented, money-minting idea. His responsibility.

The few. the ever-increasing few who returned not dancing and singing, but crippled and withered with age. Or worse - dead, dry husks that fell out of the portals and lay crumbling on the floor. They were his responsibility too. And they would be his ruination, unless he could find the cause of this disruption. But what could it be? . The time-share process was watertight. Credit transfer only took place in the magicproof vaults deep in the building, and was over in a two nanosecond cycle or three if a Sharer crossed his or her credit boundary and was bounced out of the union). If someone was stealing time from the holidaymakers then they had to learn their ident-symbols first. That information was accessible only during credit-transfer , when the codes were exchanged for verification purposes. Who could be powerful enough to penetrate the hermetic locks and escape undetected in that short time? Nobody. it just was not possible. Random, he groaned aloud. it has to be random...

...He sat still for a long time, given over to despair. Surely his gloom must be radiating out over the city, signalling his guilt to all. Parents, friends and lovers of his unsuspecting victims would be converging on the killer's abode. He blushed - something he had not done for so long the sensation was new and strange - feeling surrounded by accusing eyes.

He suppressed a desire to look out of the window to see if * crowd really had gathered below. Instead, he leered and twitched his left nostril, redshifting his aura, and thus summoned his number one neophyte, Jocasta. He had to talk to someone, try at least to investigate the problem.

By the time Jocasta the Pure arrived (Jocasta the Almost Pure to the rest of the novitiate - she was fine technically, none could touch her there, but she just couldn't keep her hands out from under the bedclothes) his face had regained a semblance of its normal appearance, stern and yet somehow licentious, as befits an arch-wizard who bears great wisdom but has surmounted the need for austerity in private matters.

Jocasta waited silently until Kedrigern noticed her. In response to the arch-wizard's wink she made the ritual sign of Ignorance Professed with one hand, while covertly performing the finger-curl of Secrets Unhidden behind her back, in an attempt to find out why she had been summoned. Kedrigern smiled and rubbed his left ear. Her heart sank when she felt herself rise an inch into the air, every muscle locked rigid. Kedrigern twirled his little finger, and Jocasta turned slowly in the air until her furtive artifice was revealed.

'Not so ignorant now, my dear?' Kedrigern murmured. He dissolved the Suspended Static and whistled the melody of Trivial Itch.

'No, I'm not!' Jocasta snapped, justifiably annoyed at the arch-wizard's petty revenges, an indulgence one of his level ought to have resisted. She pulled a hair from her brow and fashioned the knot of Defensive Recoil. Kedrigern jumped, caught unaware, and began to scratch furiously as the Trivial Itch leaped from spot to inaccessible spot on his body. Quite beside himself, he forgot to desensitize his aura-react before scratching the back of his head, and Instant Babel was given an opportunity to live up to its name.

'Gwynfurio els fyles rho'ck ford, ka nama sputnik!' he yelled at Jocasta.

'Spelyk oltes ferkoav djim gharnir,' she replied, equally intelligibly.

The itch shifted to the back of his knee, and everyone in the building began to hobble under the Influence of Sudden Dead Leg, shouting dreadful obscenities none could understand. The itch shifted again, unleashing the turbulence of Priapic Pullulation which at least went some way to countering the effect of the previous spell.

Jocasta took advantage of the brief hiatus while Kedrigern was distracted from the itch to repair some of the damage. Showing herself worthy of the title First Neophyte she worked Mother Tongue, a certain remedy for Instant Babel but very difficult to execute, as it Involved the Intricate feat of licking one's own tongue. In the meantime, Kedrigern had gone very red. He was sweating profusely and trembling all over. '...must not, must not, I must not itch,' he chanted desperately.

'Why don't you just Negate the Itch?' she asked.

'I can't...Recoil won't permit it. When the original is cast in anger the rebound sticks.'

'Anger ? You?'

• •

'I had things on my mind,' he groaned. 'Oh, this itch...'

'Where is it?'

'Isn't it obvious? My toe!' Jocasta looked. Indeed. the big toe on his right foot seemed very bad. The skin writhed and wrinkled as if a thousand little worms were wriggling just underneath. 'Unknot the hair,' he ordered. 'The spell will fade naturally in time. I think I can hold out until it does.'

'I can't untie it!'

'You have to!'

'But I dropped the hair when Dead Leg set in. I'll never find it now. '

'That's it then, have to take direct action.'

'Why? What would happen if you scratched?' she asked, curious at his consternation. He was said, after all, to be as powerful as his fabled grandfather had been lazy. He couldn't be resorting to mere physicality so soon, could he?

'Cut it off!' Kedrigern the arch-wizard screamed. 'Cut it off!'

'Tell me what would happen,' she insisted, forgetting her place in the face of such unorthodoxy.

'Cheese Surprise,' he replied, quite calmly. 'You don't know it. Our brains would...' His voice trailed off. and one hand reached, as if of its own volition, towards the Jumping skin of his big toe. 'Quickly! In the bottom cupboard, under the wok, there's a cleaver. Use it.'

A sudden inspiration struck Jocasta: 'Turn off your auto-response!'

'No use. It's jammed on. . . overloading. . . my aura is too disturbed. It'll take hours to settle. We can't wait that long.' He raised his sandaled foot and hooked the offending toe over the edge of his desk. Jocasta went to the cupboard. There was the cleaver. She brought it to the desk and looked at her mentor. 'Cut!'

She cut.

Several tiring hours later, the troupe of Secondary Mages who had assembled to perform the Detox Rituals departed in a flurry of cloaks and incense, leaving Jocasta alone with Kedrigern. He lay back on his wall-length Seat of Gentle Repose, which the novices referred to as the Casting Couch, for reasons long forgotten. As far as she knew, it served no magical purpose. She had never even seen him work magic upon It. But he did so now, forming a cushion of cool, blue air for his injured foot. Perhaps the couch was imbued with the property of Aetheric Massage, as its official name would suggest. At any rate, he seemed quite relaxed as he motioned for her to rise from her knees and sit beside him.

Well, well. I never thought I'd see the day when I'd take Biblical advice, but there's a time and a place for everything apparently!' he said, in one of the fits of sententiousness which periodically overcame him.

'I'm sorry I...' she began.

'No, no. I shouldn't have reacted as I did, regardless of the troubles I was obsessed with. There will be no strictures or demerits for you. As for me, I am sure you will agree I have suffered enough for my hastiness.'

'Troubles?'

'That's why I summoned you. There's something quite grave I wanted to discuss with you.'

'If you've heard anything it's only rumour! The others are friendly enough but...they're jealous.' Jocasta said, embarrassed at her outburst even as she spoke.

'If they worked as hard as you they would have no reason to be. ' Jocasta relaxed. 'But never mind that, this is nothing to do with novitiate strife. See me tomorrow first thing, and I will explain. Right now we have a more pressing, if less serious problem on our hands. The staff, let alone the consumers, are going to want some explanation of recent events.' He led Jocasta to the door, and she

made formal obeisance to him as they went their separate ways outside his chambers, but he paid little attention to the gesture. He walked away slowly, favouring his bandaged foot. Strange, she thought, he's usually so observant of ritual. She too walked slowly, considering the significance of 'we' and 'our'.

The next morning, as soon as the Dawn Declamatory had ended, Jocasta returned to Kedrigern's chambers. She found him almost hidden behind a wall of paperwork that was piled around his desk like a bunker. Only the top of his bald head was visible. By a fortuitous trick of perspective his bushy eyebrows seemed to scuttle back and fore along the top of the wall as he moved from side to side. In conjunction with his brown pate, the effect was that of seeing a shelled creature with hairy feet patrolling the boundary of its nest. She stepped forward, dispelling the illusion.

Recently Jocasta had sensed a change in their relationship, so, when he looked up, she deliberately omitted the usual obeisance. These days, although nothing had been said he treated her more as an assistant than one of the novitiate. She hoped her silly faux pas of yesterday had not spoilt her chances. Apparently not, for he uttered no reproof.

'Ah, there you are,' he said. 'Have you eaten?*' She nodded. 'Fine, then we'll get straight to business. Take a seat.' He twisted a ring and a paperweight from his desk floated forward and unfolded into a bentwood chair.

'Business?' she asked, settling herself on the chair. 'Where to begin, that's the problem. Well, like alt novices you did a year on Sales and Bookings before entering the novitiate, yes?' 'Yes, nine years ago now.'

'Did you learn much about the technical details of the holidays you sold?

'Not really, all we were told was that your commercial operation was essential for the maintenance of the teaching faculty, and so we must not grudge a year of work before our training began. '

'Hmm.'

'The emphasis was all on marketing. We really had no time to study the technical stuff, and it was the start of the big expansion then.'

'I see.'

'Of course, I know what was in the brochures and contracts. How customers must agree among themselves who would swap and how much, and only approach Timeshare for ratification, which depended on whether the deal would overrun their time-cred limit. I never properly understood why there was a limit though.'

'That's easy. My first concept of timeshare travel was that people would use the years which they would expect to spend old and feeble, at best not young, for holidaymaking while they still had strength and energy. They would die at an apparently earlier age, but in subjective time the years not reached would have been spent in the pursuit of pleasure, not in a slow decline to senility. For reasons I myself cannot fathom, it proved impossible for people to use up their own time in advance. Then I had my inspiration. Perhaps they could 'borrow' time from someone else, and let the other 'borrow' theirs in exchange. So simple, yet it worked!' He paused for a moment, apparently gazing raptly at nothing, but inwardly, if truth be told, he was contemplating his own brilliance. Jocasta yearned to slap him out

of his cocoon of self-admiration but she merely waited, idly wondering if it was possible for all the vanity in the universe to be concentrated in one Individual. Eventually he frowned and gave a little start, as if some unpleasant thought had intruded on his reverie. "Anyway, in answer to your question," he continued. "There has to be a limit on the amount of borrowable time because everyone must die some time."

"Then the total amount will be from the present until the time of death?"

"In principle, yes but not in practice. We didn't want people dying as soon as they returned from a holiday, which is what would happen if someone borrowed all their future time."

"How is the limit calculated then?"

"If the Hariolaters could tell us the date of someone's death there would be no problems. Of course, as you know they can only provide the age someone will be when they die. Our problem is that customers are prone to lying about their dates of birth so we can't just do some simple arithmetic and work out the date of their death. Also, since the new Rejuv drugs were introduced a person can reasonably claim to be twenty years younger than they actually are. So what we do is calculate the apparent time-cred limit and then subtract thirty years just to be on the safe side."

"Isn't that very unpopular among the honest customers? Why didn't I get any complaints during my Sales year?"

"They don't know! It wouldn't do people any good to know when they were going to die. Actually, some do find out, from contacts inside Timeshare usually. If they complain we show them films of what happened to experimental subjects who became overdrawn accidentally. When they see people age in seconds and crumble to dust, their protests stop." A grimace flitted over Kedrigern's face, and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Now we are approaching the business I wanted to discuss," he said. "Quite simply, travellers have been dying despite all our precautions. Some live, but in a state of extreme decrepitude. Fortunately the return portals are attended only by staff so no consumers have witnessed these sad occurrences. I have managed 'with a mixture of bribery and coercion to keep quiet those who knew the victims.' His face had turned white and strained, oddly pinched-looking, as he spoke. Jocasta was shocked, stunned. This was not at all what she had expected.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Who else can I tell? As sole owner of Timeshare I have made innumerable enemies by my refusal to grant licences on my process. The Secondary Mages would love to see me disgraced so that they could usurp my power. The Principality Lords hate me for, as they see it, putting myself above them. The government is their puppet. In short, everyone of any consequence stands to gain by my downfall, except you. I ask you to help me, with the promise of considerable advancement if I survive this crisis. You are undoubtedly the best candidate ever to enter my Academy. The Mages themselves would have trouble withstanding an attack from you, should you ever forget your vows."

Jocasta was at once delighted and disgusted. For a moment she could not speak. Gratitude and scorn mingled bitterly in her mouth.

"First you flatter me, saying I am of consequence, and then you insult me," expecting me to help you in murder! You want to keep Timeshare open, keep your wealth and status secure, let time more innocents die. And you want me to help: I will get my advancement cleanly, or not at all!" Jocasta jumped up and stood trembling, eyes glaring at her fallen mentor.

"Sit. Please, sit," he said. "I misjudged you with my talk of

advancement. I am sorry. But you misjudge me equally in the motives you see behind my words. There has to be more murder, but I will not be the cause. Some external agency is at work. A malign force whose origin remains hidden is stealing time from Timeshare travellers. Not just years but entire lives are snatched away. It has to continue until the killer is caught.'

'Why? Why not just shut down? Then there would be no opportunity for more murder.'

•Think. The thief must be tremendously powerful. What crimes will he commit if he is not discovered and stopped?'

'Are you sure there is a thief? Could it not be a fault somewhere?'

'I thought myself it had to be a random fault at first. The time-cred transfer cycle is so fast and so well protected, it seemed impossible for anyone to break in and learn the necessary codes. However, last night I worked a Time Bubble and spent fifty years time-equivalent mapping clause and sub-clause of the Travel Effectuation ceremony. There is no fault. Moreover, there is a subtle pattern to the thefts, exactly as if someone were simulating random attacks. This pattern has a slight bias to one location in space/time. I think that location is the clue we need to find this...this time thief. '

'I wish I could doubt your word,' Jocasta said. 'I'd almost prefer you were utterly venal than believe such evil exists unconstrained. But believe it I must. What do you want me to do?'

'You will go as an ordinary traveler to the location I have pinpointed and endeavour to trace the thief.'

'And you?' she asked, doubt clouding her mind once more.

'I will cast myself disembodied into the Effectuation pathways and try to catch the thief in the act, if he attacks you.'

'Very well. I accept.'

'There is no sense hesitating. Go now and gather about you your strongest Mystifications. I'll prepare a portal myself. We will start tonight.'

Despite the urgency of his tone, neither moved. They sat in silence, not thinking much about anything at all. At last Jocasta spoke: 'Now the secrets are truly unhidden... Already I am weary of the knowledge.' She paused, then rapidly added, 'But I am proud to bear it with you.' She touched his arm gently, and left him, pausing at the door to perform the ultimate obeisance of Wisdom Apparent.

When she had gone Kedrigern laid his head on the desk and sobbed quietly, resolving never to permit her to make that sign again. She never has.

That night Jocasta entered the portal, Kedrigern already drifting watchfully on the pathways of time. Towards dawn he felt it. an inrushing of power hissing along the pathways. Gathering his energies he raced after it, trying to pinpoint then envelop the locus. He almost had it when it vanished with a blip like an imploding light-globe, insolently faint. Jocasta's trace was gone too. Had he lost it in his concentration on the interloper, or was she taken:

Whichever it was. she was gone. Cursing himself bitterly, he broke the connection and resumed his physical body. Tomorrow, he thought as unconsciousness claimed him. Tomorrow. I'll know what to do.

FINAL BRIEFING

Jocasta is missing, presumed alive. Kedrigern cannot quite give up hope. And you, her twin, know she is alive somewhere, sometime. For this reason, you accept his request to track down the thief whose booty is' time, and find Jocasta. Since you lack her magical talents, you should go undetected for longer. Unless, that is. you draw attention to yourself.

Anticipating this, Kedrigern has prepared an Aetheric Double of you which, in the event of a fatal mishap, will take on physical form and resume the quest. For you, death will probably be unpleasant but not final.

You are in the portal. Kedrigern awaits only your assent before beginning the Effectuation Ceremony that will transport you to unknown dangers. Are you ready?

Extracts from The Novice's Primer

Some essential vocabulary (short forms given in brackets). All words may be abbreviated to their first four letters.

NORTH (N), SOUTH (S), EAST (E), WEST (W), NE. NU, SE. SU, UP (U). DOWN (D), IN, OUT (O).

EXAMINE (X,EX), TAKE (T), DROP (DR), ALL (A), LOOK (L). CLS, INVENTORY (I), HELP (H), SCORE.

PUT, INTO, ONTO.

RAMSAVE, RAMLOAD. NEW, OLD. POSITION (P). FORWARD (F), BACK (B). OOPS. VERBOSE, BRIEF.

SAVE, LOAD.

Explanation of non-standard features

OOPS. Takes back the latest move. Oops can be used after restarting a game, as a sort of extra ramsave. This may only drop you right back in a deathly situation, so is not to be relied upon!

RAMSAVE/RAMLOAD. You can ramsave three different positions. POSITION tells you the current ramsave number. FORWARD moves forward one position. BACK moves back one. NEW initialises the ramsave record. OLD reverses the effect of new. If you should restart a game, or an I/O ERROR occurs then the ramsaves are automatically initialised. OLD will bring them back. This means you only need to save the ramsaves once, at the end of a playing session.

SAVE/LOAD. Saves/loads the three ramsave positions.

FUNCTION KEYS. Use f1,f3,f5 to change the screen colours, if you wish.

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Time Thief was written by Don Macleod.

Special thanks to Handy Rodrigues and Christopher Hester for their invaluable help and patience.

Manual designed and printed by:

Adventure Probe
24 Maes Y Cwm
Llandudno
Gwynedd
LL30 1JE
Wales

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