

THE YELLOW CABOCHON

A Luff Imbry Novella

by Matthew Hughes

Excerpt

Sep Halpheroon was waiting for Luff Imbry in one of the private back rooms at Bolly's Snug, where the fat man often conducted business that it would have been unwise to do in public. Imbry was not pleased to find the middler already in one of the two chairs that faced each other across a bare table; he preferred to arrive at his assignments well before the other party, so as to avoid any surprises. His was a profession that did not greet surprises gladly; the unexpected was usually unwelcome, sometimes fatal. Imbry was a thief, a forger and an adept at several of the varied arts of relieving the careless--or even those who were merely not quite careful enough--of the burden of owning precious goods. Sometimes those he had unburdened so deeply resented his entry into their lives that they would have gladly arranged for him to exit his own. Other denizens of the Olkney halfworld harbored no particular resentment, but would have killed him on the off chance that the contents of his purse and pockets would repay the effort.

From the doorway he made a careful inspection of the room, the furniture, and the occupant, all of which were almost exactly as he had last seen them, here in this same chamber. The sole difference was that this time the middler's hands, resting on the table, framed a pouch of supple blue leather. The sight did much to mollify the fat man. Imbry entered, closed the door, and sat opposite Halpheroon, who lifted the pouch and stretched his arm across the table to deposit the bag before the thief. The middler's arm trembled from the weight and the bag's contents clinked musically as they settled.

Imbry undid the pouch's fastening and put his hand within, scooping out a handful of polished metal ingots, each a little less than half the length of his plump fingers. An iridescent sheen reflected the light in a transient rainbow as Imbry examined one of the pieces.

"Satisfied?" said the middler.

"Satisfied," said the thief. The precious metal was genuine. He replaced the ingots in the pouch. There was no need to weigh or count them. Halpheroon would be mad to short the fat man; for though the latter's girth might lull the uninitiated into dismissing Imbry as one of the lesser dangers of the halfworld, those who survived the initiation never forgot it.

Imbry made a gesture that constituted an appropriate farewell between peers and rose from his chair. As he moved, the pouch disappeared into a secure wallet beneath his half-cloak. He turned to leave.

"Wait," said Halpheroon, "there is another matter."

Imbry turned back. "What?"

"Another operation," said the middler, then paused as if to order his words. "It is much like the operation we have just concluded. But with a difference."

"How like?" said Imbry, "and how different?"

"Like--in that it concerns the same end-market, who again wishes to acquire a certain piece of jewelry. Unlike--in that the present owner of the item is not yet dead."

Imbry said, "Would it not be more appropriate to raise that issue with Green Circle?" It was the Green Circle gang that had ownership of the operation. Imbry was engaged only as a subcontractor, and Green Circle was a numerous and far-reaching criminal clan notorious for their resentment of freelancers who encroached.

"I did," said Halpheroon. "They declined to be involved at that level."

"But they do not mind if someone else takes up the slack?"

"They do not."

Imbry paused to think about it. "Who is the current owner of the desired item?"

"Lord Frons, of the House of Elphrate."

Imbry ran the name through his capacious memory. "Ah," he said, after a moment, "so the object of desire is the Grand Cascade?" He referred to a glittering tabard of seven different species of priceless jewels--hundreds of individual gems, even including a pair of matched thunderstones--that Lord Frons was pleased to wear over his chest and back on formal occasions.

"No," said Halpheroon, "not the cascade. The Yellow Cabochon."

"Really?" said Imbry. "Those things usually do not spark a blaze of avarice hot enough to consume the life of a high-ranked aristocrat."

"It is what the customer will pay for. Who are we to question his taste?"

The fat man let his face show that he had not yet come to a decision. "Frons Elphrate is a voyavod,"--the rank meant that the subject was of the first-tier aristocracy, though only of the outer circle--"but does he not also perform some function within the Archonate, close to the Archon himself?"

"I researched him," said the middler. "He is the Minder of the Spoon when the Archon dines formally."

Imbry made a confirmatory noise. "Is that why Green Circle declines to take part?" Halpheroon moved his shoulders and hands in a manner that said the question invoked a mystery. Imbry said, "You did not ask?"

The middler gave the forger a look that inquired whether the fat man was new to the business. Imbry accepted the mild rebuke. Putting an impertinent question to a Green Circle power was a reliable method of ending up in Nazur Filiarot's cold locker, awaiting the next sealed coffin that could accommodate an extra occupant.

"But they definitely don't mind," the fat man said, "if you find someone who is less . . . shall we say, risk-averse?"

"We would have a free hand."

"But if things went awry," Imbry said, thinking it through, "Green Circle would want to be able to disavow any connection?"

Halpheroon signaled that this was so, and both men paused to consider the permanence of a Green Circle disavowal. The gang's philosophy, handed down through the ages, was that anything that threatened its existence forfeited all rights to its own.

"If Green Circle is out, who then is the client?"

"I have not been told. The dealer, Holton Baudwer, was approached by an off-worlder."

"This off-worlder realizes that there would be an additional fee?"

"He does."

"A substantial one."

"Baudwer says the man is prepared to pay what it costs."

"He must," said Imbry, "have found a customer who has as strong a yen for the Yellow Cabochon as Nazur Filiatrot has for his dreams."

"So it would seem."

That aspect of the matter puzzled Imbry. Yellow cabochons, even those as grand as the one that adorned Frons Elphrate's brow on formal occasions, did not normally provoke a murderous passion. But an off-worlder's standards could very likely be different. The fat man put the issue aside and turned his supple mind to other aspects of the proposal. There were a number of considerations to be weighed. After a while, he said, "I believe we can fill the order."

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Imbry and Halpheroon had been doing occasional business for several years. To begin with, Imbry had sometimes used him as a go-between for the return of stolen goods when sentiment moved their erstwhile owner to pay more than a new possessor might offer--not an unusual circumstance, since even the most precious items shed a good deal of their practical value if they could not be publicly displayed lest they draw painfully pointed questions from the Archonate Bureau of Scrutiny.

A year or so after their association began, Halpheroon had come to the fat man with a proposition. The middler was bringing him two parts of the plan, because Imbry had the qualifications that allowed him to supply the necessary third. The two elements Halpheroon brought were: first, the services of Nazur Filiatrot, purveyor of funerary obsequies to a broad swath of Olkney's social elite; and, second, a client willing to pay for the goods the operation would yield.

Before Imbry agreed to take a hand in the proceedings, he first researched the mortician. He learned that the current proprietor of Filiatrot's Entombment Emporium was the latest in a long line of undertakers of that same name. The family had operated the establishment for centuries, if not millennia; when it came to disposing of the noble dead, Filiatrot's was the preferred choice for most of the second-tier aristocracy, and even some of the lower ranked families in the top echelon.

Nazur had inherited the solemn, unctuous personality that had served his ancestors well for generations. But to that inherited jewel he had added a new and clouded gem: a fondness for the lethotropic drug known as blue borrache. Fondness had not yet become outright dependency, but borrache was expensive even in moderate use. It also tended to diminish the earning capacity of its devotees, who spent long stretches of what should have been productive time enwrapped in colorful, comforting dreams.

So Nazur Filiatrot needed income and he devised a daring plan to secure it. Old Earth's aristocracy had, in recent generations, adopted the fashion of entombing not only their departed members but also their most precious possessions. The tombs, holding jewels and other finery of surpassing value, naturally attracted the attention of people like Imbry. But their speculative ambitions met defeat at the hands of Nazur's great-grandparent, Mireyam Filiatrot, who devised an unbreachable sepulcher.

The noble residue, treated and preserved, clad in appropriate garb and bedecked with its most precious ornaments, was positioned in a chamber of the family tomb. Sometimes it sat in a favorite chair, or it might recline on a divan, or it might be posed in an activity that recalled a favorite pastime. When all was as it should be, the surrounding space was swiftly filled by a clear, heavy liquid that was then bathed in a specific sequence of finely tuned energies. The process, a carefully guarded Filiatrot secret, caused the liquid to undergo a phase shift, solidifying into an adamantine mass that Mireyam Filiatrot trademarked as Clarity. The transparent stuff refracted light so that the relict at its center seemed to be bathed in a golden glow, as if caught in a perfect moment of an ideal afternoon.

Enterprising tomb-breakers made attempts to penetrate Clarity, but found it resistant to all of the cutting tools and energies commonly used in their trade. It was hypothesized that it might be possible to batter a path through it with modified tumblethrusts, or to burn through with heavy-grade phase weapons. But the busters would have made far too much noise, and the ison cannons--even if they could be manhandled into the tombfields and brought to bear--would also melt the corpse and its treasures into an undifferentiated slag.

After the advent of Clarity, even more of Old Earth's highest and haughtiest consigned their dead to the clammy hands of the Filiatrots, secure in the knowledge that they and their possessions would rest inviolate for all time, or at least until the old orange sun finally reached its dotage and swelled to encompass the three innermost planets.

But then came Nazur and his affection for the comforts of blue borrache. In need of funds, the mortician got to thinking of the process by which his clients were entombed in Clarity. And he found an opportunity.

A corpse chamber was typically set with furnishings and accouterments brought from the aristocrat's own apartments. After the ritual ceremony that irrevocably separated the dead from the living, the body would be prepared, dressed and positioned as specified in a document known as the "corporeal courtesy." At the last moment, the subject's senior servitor, a person genetically attuned through millennia of inbreeding to be incapable of defying even a dead master's wishes, would uncover the precious goods. Filiatrot would take the jewels, robes of wondercloth, gowns of spun-pearl and such-like, and reverently adorn the body. A few final adjustments, and he would order the chamber cleared. Immediately, liquid Clarity would begin to flow and, under the eyes of the mourners, the deceased would be sealed forever in aureous light.

Nazur's plan required boldness and daring, of which he had little. But he found, as many a blue borrache addict had found before him, that desperation could be enlisted as a workable

substitute. He began by acquiring a primer on the art of sleight of hand. He practiced until he became proficient in all the workaday slips and palms. He then graduated to ever more subtle and difficult sleights, mastering each in turn. Within months, he knew himself to be as good as the best, and he reached out for the next step in his plan.

He made inquiries in the halfworld. Ordinarily, that process would have put him in peril. But the Filiatrots had for generations offered a not-often-used but lucrative sideline: when members of Green Circle found themselves encumbered with corpses whose discovery would have been inconvenient, the morticians would make the inconvenience vanish. Nazur approached the family's contact within the Green Circle hierarchy and was soon put in touch with Sep Halpheroon.

The middler listened to Nazur's proposal with interest then went out and located the other two necessities for the plan: a dealer like Holton Baudwer, who could dispose of the proceeds off-world, there being markets among the Ten Thousand Worlds where valuable antiquities from Old Earth could command high prices; and a skilled forger who could replicate the goods well enough to pass for the real thing.

Imbry was the forger. Halpheroon was careful to point out to the fat man that this operation had been arranged by Green Circle; that was to limit Imbry's ambition, else the forger might have sought to replace Baudwer, who would probably make as much from the operation as Imbry's, Nazur's and Halpheroon's shares combined.

But now the business had taken a new tack, with the gang opting not to be involved in the initial phase of the next operation, in which Frons Elphrate would be separated from the Yellow Cabochon, by first being separated from his existence. "You are absolutely certain that Green Circle will have no comment?" Imbry asked Halpheroon.

"Baudwer said there was no ambiguity."

"Whom did he consult?"

"Wrython Herrither, the force in charge."

That sounded reasonable to Imbry. He moved on to the practicalities. "Did you have anyone in mind, for the task of easing Lord Frons off the path?"

Halpheroon said, "I thought of asking Ils Buttram, but he has just taken a contract with the Shostakos."

"Really? I hadn't heard that." Custom required that he pass Halpheroon a coin for the new information. He did so and the middler pocketed it without comment. The room was silent while Imbry pursued his train of thought. After a while, he said, "Leave that aspect with me."

"Very good," said Halpheroon. "Let me know when you have someone in place."

"I will," said Imbry, he made an appropriate gesture and departed.

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Imbry made inquiries to determine the availability of two other contractors of Ils Buttram's caliber. He discovered that Toba Blom was fully booked by the House of Smolleren--hereditary

antagonists of the Shostakos--and would probably remain on the Smollerens' strength until the current phase of threat and confrontation worked its way, as with the preceding feuds, to another stalemate. Siva Verein heard the fat man's proposition but declined. "I've made it a rule not to entangle myself with aristocrats," she said. "They are too strange. They not only want to specify the exact setting and circumstances, but often they want to play a part in the crucial moments. I had one . . . well, you would not believe the mess. And he expected me to clean up after."

"Unacceptable, said Imbry. "So you would not accommodate me with Frons Elphrate, even if it is I who sets the terms?" Verein began to answer, but Imbry added, "Because the only stipulation would be that the event seem accidental."

The woman thought about it briefly, her slender fingers drawing at her lower lip. Then she said, "No. What is the point of making rules if one then makes exceptions?"

Imbry was not greatly disappointed. Even back during the meeting at Bolly's Snug he had felt himself leaning toward the idea of keeping this additional chore in his own hands. The assassin's fee would not only increase his earnings, but doing it himself would ensure a job done right.

He went by a roundabout, surveillance-avoiding route to his operations center, a pair of ill-kept houses in the Grindle district that he had acquired by an equally circuitous series of transactions; ownership could never be traced to him. He entered by the back door of one of the properties, after carefully transiting an overgrown rear yard that he had planted with aggressive poisonous plants and set about with hidden defensive systems and mantraps. In the dim, dusty basement he spoke a sequence of syllables and moved his hand in a certain way. A pile of debris and broken furniture slid out of position, revealing a heavily defended door. The fat man quieted the portal's murderous inclinations and bid it open. He stepped through into a lightless corridor and waited until the door had closed and its disguising rubbish had slid back in place. Then he spoke another password and the passageway lit up brightly before him. But still the fat man waited, slowly counting to ten, until he saw a small lumen light itself at the far end of the tunnel.

Moments later, he had crossed the distance that separated one house from the other and ascended a narrow spiral staircase that led to the back of a closet in an unfurnished spare room. Standing in the closet, Imbry said, softly,

"Well?"

"All's well," a voice answered. He exited the closet and room, and went down a dingy hall to another chamber that looked as if it been furnished with items found along the roadside. Imbry touched a battered dresser in three specific places; instantly, some of its parts withdrew into itself while others appeared from within. Imbry took the offered seat, touched a number of keys and studs on the control panel that came into view and said, "We will research the House of Elphrate." He reflected a moment, then added, "I will also need full specifics on the Yellow Cabochon."

"Which first?" said the integrator.

"Elphrate."

A screen appeared in the air, filled with text and images. "Overview," the fat man said, and turned his eyes toward the display. He had read only a few lines when he uttered a mild oath. "I should have remembered that," he said.

The overview of the first-tier noble house of Elphrate reported that the family had risen to high rank during the first great effloration, the time aeons ago when humankind had spilled out into The Spray, locating and populating the Ten Thousand Worlds. The Elphrates had remained on Old Earth, flourishing and enjoying the opportunities for more elevated rank and territorial acquisition that arose as the old planet emptied out.

As the ages wore on, however, the central loci of human civilization moved inevitably down The Spray. It first took root in the Grand Foundational Domains, as the original human-settled worlds came to be known. Then the Grand Foundationalists created the second great effloration by sending their surplus and enterprising citizens out to fill up the lesser worlds; somewhere along the way, Old Earth became a half-forgotten backwater; as the millennia piled upon each other, the little orb scarcely drew a glance. On the original Grand Foundational Domains, now grown rich and splendid, the question was raised: how could such a fusty little place, so deeply unfashionable, have been the primeval font of a civilization as majestic as that of the Ten Thousand Worlds? After a while, the question was not even considered worth raising. Three other worlds--splendid, opulent cornucopias--each let it be known that it was the authentic cradle of humanity.

It was about then that Old Earth's last remaining remnants finally fled the species's worn-out nursery. Some left all behind, hopping the first liner or passenger-carrying freighter that was standing out into the immensity. Most of the aristocracy had long since gone out to the Grand Foundationalists. Attrition had thus made the Elphrates almost the highest-ranked family remaining on Old Earth. The restiveness of the junior members of the clan finally moved the patriarch, the Domine Jurgon Elphrate, to load his entire household onto his several space yachts, most of them antiques though perfectly maintained; off they went in search of a new home.

But a rude shock awaited these latecomers: noble rank on Old Earth meant nothing to the elites that had grown up on the Grand Foundationalists; citizens who had migrated to the secondary worlds had mostly abandoned traditional class strictures or had developed new ones of their own, often rooted in philosophies that put scant value on heredity. For the Elphrates, the choice was between becoming little more than commoners on the settled worlds, or finding some unused planet where they could maintain their standards. The problem with the latter option was that humankind had been filling up The Spray for aeons; all of the best, all of the second-best, and even most of the not-very-best-at-all worlds were spoken for.

The junior Elphrate scions were dispatched to search the edges of the human-settled cosmos, even into the dark spaces of the Back of Beyond. They found arid balls of rock, or steaming jungles thick with savage plants, or ice-worlds so cold the first breath congealed the lungs, or planets without land, whose single ocean teemed with poisoned spines, gargantuan maws, ragged claws, and insatiable appetites.

They reported back to Jurgon Elphrate that they had located one world that could be made habitable. Issa was a smallish planet, half shaded from the main body of The Spray by an obscuring cloud of interstellar gas. It offered but a single continent--really not much more than a large island--though the climate was equable; the seas, though no less full of eat-or-be-eaten life, were shallow and not often oppressed by extravagant storms.

Issa was not a virgin world. Every few centuries, bands of settlers had come to try farming the island's indifferent soil, but each successive clump of humanity had failed to prosper. When the world passed into the control of the aristocrats from Old Earth, some of the existing population agreed to take on the duties of a peasantry in return for the Elphrates' guaranteeing them the necessities of life.

Issa's geology was still in its active stage, however, and the single small continent was almost completely riven from north to south by a long sea loch that widened by a hand's breadth every year. At the same time, the east and west coasts were perceptibly sliding under the waves. Eventually, there would be little land to support the Elphrates' way of life. But the new owners were Old Earth nobility, well accustomed to thinking in the longer term. The elders of the clan decided that it would do no harm to prepare for the eventual: they had the younger members' gene plasm edited to make them semiaquatic. They did not opt for the full gills-and-flippers approach, but did borrow liberally from the marine mammals of Old Earth. That gave generations of Elphrates webbed toes and fingers, large, light-gathering eyes with a second nictitating membrane, and an altered musculo-pulmonary systems that allowed them to remain under water for two hours or more on a single breath of air.

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It was this last finding that caused Imbry to swear. On previous occasions when he had needed to relieve his environment of an inconvenient presence, without drawing official inquiries, he had found that a quick drowning was a useful means. Old Earth's surface was, after all, seventy per cent covered in water, and even the driest zones had might have precipitators or even water supplies piped in. Now he called up an image of Frons Elphrate and, when his integrator enlarged it, he clearly saw the folds of loose skin between the voyavod's fingers. The fat man swore again; it would have to be some other method. He said, "Review the subject's habits and pastimes with a view to arranging for an accident. Does he, for example, hunt?"

"No," said the integrator.

"Then what do we have to work with?"

"He has been known to climb."

"Hills?"

"Mountains."

Imbry considered the implications. For all his girth, he was agile and strong. But there were limits. "What else?"

"His duties since he was made Minder of the Spoon have tended to keep him close to Olkney, in case he is summoned to the Palace."

"How much minding can a spoon need?" Imbry said.

"The ceremonial aspects of the post are numerous and varied. For example, at the Feast of Slamming Doors, it is his responsibility to lift the salver that covers the soup, while the Custodian of the Bread Dish--"

"The question was rhetorical." The fat man sighed. "Now specify an opportunity to kill Frons Elphrate, so that it seems to be an accident, and with minimal risk of my being apprehended."

"There is one possibility," the integrator said. "He always visits the Antinori Shrine three days before his birthday. No one knows why; it may be the outcome of a private vow. He does not discuss what he does there. Nor is he attended."

"When is his birthday?"

"In fifteen days."

Imbry made a small sound of appreciation, then his brow drew down. "He doesn't climb to the place?" he said. The Antinori stood atop a tall pillar of natural stone near the edge of the desert known as Barran, far to the northeast of Olkney. It was a relic of the legendary civilization of Ambit, which had vanished aeons ago in a great cataclysm that was said to have created the wasteland of Barran.

"No. He travels by aircar."

"His own?"

"Naturally."

"What would he do if his own vehicle were disabled en route?"

"I can only predict. He would either summon another from the estate pool or hire one locally."

It was a long way from Frons Elphrate's estate in Long Burre, well south of Olkney, to the edge of Barran. "If the aircar broke down almost to the destination . . ."

"There is a hire service in Vanochi, a half-hour's flight from the shrine."

"Are the owners . . . malleable?" Some hired car services were accustomed to accommodating unorthodox requests, if the requests were accompanied by substantial sums.

"No."

The fat man grunted. "Then it will have to be after he gets there. Show me the Antinori, inside and out." Imbry was not familiar with the place, other than what everybody knew: that it was an ancient cubical structure, made of closely fitted blocks of white stone, aeons old. Even the origin of its name was lost; it might celebrate a forgotten deity, a person of note who was entombed there, or the shrine's builder.

One thing was known: the site was entirely private. "There is not even an integrator," said Imbry's assistant, using the tone that, among its kind, expressed shock and disapproval.

It took several seconds before the device could answer its owner's command to show the Antinori, inside and out, and when it did, it had to report partial failure. "I have researched widely," it said. "Of outer views, there are plenty,"--it showed a selection from different angles--"Of inner, there are none. Or almost. Here is a sketch said to have been done from memory by one Tharn Holbach, a citizen of Bilbaron."

"I do not know Bilbaron," Imbry said, peering at the faded pencil drawing.

"It was one of the towns that ringed the walled city of Ambit, destroyed in the disaster that obliterated the moon."

"What moon?"

"The one that used to orbit Old Earth."

Imbry vaguely recalled hearing about that, back in his school days. "That was a long time ago," he said.

"Indeed. Shall we proceed?"

"Can you enhance the sketch?"

The faint gray lines deepened. The fat man told the integrator to magnify the image. He examined it carefully. "It seems to be a corridor leading to a simple inner chamber. What is the object beyond the archway?"

"I would say a tomb or an altar," said the integrator.

"And what about the writing above the entrance to the sanctum?"

"Unknown," said his assistant, after a long pause.

It was not an answer Imbry had ever heard from his device. He had constructed it not only to have access to the world-wide connectivity, but to many supposedly private stores of information, including even the highly protected integrators at the Archonate Bureau of Scrutiny and the ancient devices housed deep in the living rock of the Devenish Range, atop which sat the palace of the Archon himself.

"Unknown?" he said.

"It has similarities to the Golonoi script, used by the savants of the Ythe Civilization that flourished in the late Sixteenth Aeon, one of the periods when the universe is said to have been ruled by magic."

"Pah!" said Imbry. "There is no need to traffic in myth."

"As you say," said his integrator. "I can but report what I find."

"No matter. The important thing is that he goes there alone, and is unobserved during his stay." He looked at the external images, saw a flat space in front of the shrine where an aircar would land; when he magnified a couple of the images, he could see scratches in the rock that looked to have been made by a volante's undercarriage. They were at no great distance to the edge of the precipice. "How great is the drop to the desert below?"

"Seventeen seconds."

"Well," said Imbry, clasping together his plump palms, "there it is." He called for a wider view and regarded for a moment the isolated spire, the long drop, the sharp rocks below. "As if it were made for an ambush," he said.

The Yellow Cabochon is available for pre-order from [PS Publishing](#).