Both Logotarians stood as still as statues outside my tree-office. Silklike threads trailed from their broad disc-heads through my window, ending in small four-legged drones with gleaming blue eyes. It was unsettling, watching them skitter and bump through my office—too few legs.

“Why don’t you tell me about the job?” I asked, in an effort to get them to stop moving.

“It’s like this,” said the first drone. That is, the first Logotarian, through their drone.

“What my colleague means to say,” said the other, “is that we would like to hire you.”

“So I gathered,” I said.

“It’s like this,” said the first drone again.

“What my colleague means to say, is that the job will require some travel and might include an element of danger.”

“Why don’t you let your colleague finish a sentence?” I suggested.

“Thank you,” said the first drone. “It’s like this.” Then they paused, as if, having reached a point they had never reached before, they had no idea of how to proceed.

“What is the job?” I asked. “You said it involved travel. Travel where?”

“Sector 17,” said the first drone, gratefully.

“The Valley of Jewels, my colleague means to say.”

“Sector 17, also known as the Valley of Jewels.” The drone turned sharply and a hologram image of a map streamed from its unblinking blue eye and flickered against my wall. “There are certain animals endemic to the region that are of interest to our research.”

“And we cannot simply dart them and transport them to a Logos facility for analysis.”

“Because observation of the specimens in situ is more conclusive.”

“What’s your research?” I asked. Then, realizing I may have made a tactical blunder, I hastened to add: “In layman’s terms, what’s your area of study?”

“Why, the only true area of study worthy of the Society of Logic and Reason!”

“Intelligence, my colleague means to say. Definitions, comparisons, that sort of thing.”

“And what’s your interest in these animals?” I hesitated by my kitchen. My instincts as a host instructed me to offer the two drones something to drink, which seemed pointlessly silly.

“Are they, or are they not, intelligent?” asked the first drone. “The Niffle apes, that is.”

“We’d just like to compare them against a standard low-level baseline. A human being, say.”

“We’ll be deploying our own observational drones in due time, of course, but the Uncertainty Effect being what it is, observations changing the observed and all that—”

“Your footprint is much softer and should cause less disruption of the data,” said the second drone. “Think of your observations as our control group. Also, personal accounts of ethnography are popular in certain journals and might make the resultant paper easier to publish.”

“Publish or perish,” sighed the first drone, somehow, despite not having any lungs to sigh with.

“Does your Ethics Review Board have any guidelines for how to respond if they are or aren’t intelligent?” I asked.

“Our what?”
Later, much later, after I recovered from the exasperating interaction, I made my way toward Sector 17, also known as the Valley of Jewels. The valley was richly forested and covered with crawling vines and brightly-colored flowers. Spurs of rock jutted at odd angles from the valley floor and the hills above, each shot through with gleaming veins of metals, gems, or Æmber. The air thrummed with life, setting the hairs on my legs quivering.

I soon found a small troupe of Niffle apes gamboling over and around a particularly large tree, one hanging with fruit-laden vines and blooming with flowers from a thousand epiphytes of every description. I climbed up the tree and found a good perch, waving my legs to catch the attention of the closest ape.

It—or he, I suppose, for it was a male—came forward, snuffling. “Niffle?” it asked.

“You speak!” I said. “Well, that makes my assessment much easier.”

“You speak,” he said. “Wollzat makes m’assment much eez-yar.” He cocked his head, studying me intently. He was a large creature from my perspective, and being scrutinized so closely made me uncomfortably aware that Niffle apes were noted to be omnivorous, and not above scooping up an insect or two for a snack. There was no reason to think he might not eat a spider.

“Ahem,” I said, skittering back. “That’s a lovely shade of violet on your fur.”

“Ahm,” said the ape, hand-over-handing along a vine above and hanging upside down by his feet to stare at me. “Zatsa luvy shadovielet on yer fur.”

“Look, no monkey business,” I said. “Stop aping me.”

“Niffle,” said the Niffle ape. “Niffle. Niffle! Niffle!” He—it?—hooted louder and louder, and other apes nearby took up the cry.

“Niffle! Niffle! Niffle!”

Suddenly, one of the apes leapt from a branch high above to crash to a landing scarcely inches away from me. In one movement, the ape swept me up in a cupped hand and deposited me in the shell of a large nut of some sort. What followed was a haemolymph-curdling hell-ride through the trees and vines, lurching up and down at improbable speeds while I braced myself against the shell of the nut and prayed for it all to be over.

Eventually, my chariot and I came to a rest, and after another minute or two I crept from within the shell and lay splayed and gasping on a promontory of purple-veined slate, warmed by the sun. When I had recovered enough to study my surroundings, I saw that the shelf of rock on which I lay overlooked a wide pool of clear water, rippling and rushing into a stream that tumbled down into the valley below.

At the far end of the pool fell a slender razor of white water from a cliff far above. Trees, bushes, vines, vegetation of every description surrounded the scene with a gold-green frame. I’ve never before, nor since, seen any place more beautiful.

My companion on the shelf was a Niffle ape, one more than twice as large as the others. She had a broad face with
the folds and ridges of many years upon it, and on her brow rested an Æmber crown. The rest of the troupe splashed in the water or sunned themselves upon spurs of rock nearby, and as I looked closer I saw that some of them sported twists of feathers or wraps of cord, crude ornaments that looked to set them apart from mere animals.

A word here on clothing and its significance. Mammals, I have found—and humans in particular—place great significance on whether or not a creature wears clothes. I myself rarely bother with any, except a small pouch for my ink and paper, and sometimes a quartet of lenses to see better. In the unlikely event that I require additional protection from the elements and cannot simply take shelter, I weave myself a cocoon from silk. I have, in all seriousness, encountered scholars who declare that the dividing line between a person and an animal is whether or not a creature wears pants. My protestations to the contrary were dismissed because, of course, spiders do not wear pants and ergo my well-reasoned arguments were merely the squawking of a nonsentient animal.

The Niffle apes were clearly not wearing pants, but some of them had as much “clothing” about their persons (if persons they were) as I did. But adornment alone does not indicate a sentient intelligence either, as the decorative bowerbird and the Jumtaran trophy wasp demonstrate.

So I found myself in a position I did not expect, not only pondering how to argue or prove the intellect of Niffle apes, but genuinely uncertain which side of the argument I was on. I turned my attention to my neighbor, hoping to find some clarity there.

“Hello,” I said. She turned her head toward me and studied me with fathomless brown eyes, but gave no other indication she had heard or understood. But still, I saw—or imagined I saw—wisdom in that gaze.

“I am Inka the Spider,” I tried. “Who are you?”

The ape gave a soft chuff, somewhere between a laugh and a sigh, and leaned against the rock behind her. She scratched at her side absently, and closed her eyes.

I felt as if only two of my feet had purchase. Was that an answer? Was she telling me “I am the Niffle ape, here, on this rock, and only that matters?” Was this just animal behavior, or the wisdom of some sage hermit, at one with the Crucible?

“Are you the…queen of these apes?” I asked.

A particularly small and rambunctious ape scampered past just then and my interlocutor—if one can call the recipient of a one-sided conversation that—scooped him up and cradled him intently against her side. She tickled his belly with her free hand and bared her teeth with a low rumbling hoot. The young ape responded with a screech of his own, and wriggled while she lifted him up by one leg and dangled him in front of her face. Another loud chuffing sound and she released the child, letting it scamper away.
Less queen, I decided, and more mother.

“I’ve been, uh, contracted by some scientists from Logos,” I said. “Do you know what that means?”

The queen leaned back, eyes closed. This question apparently didn’t warrant any kind of response—or I was once again reading a cause-and-effect into our conversation that didn’t exist.

“They’re investigating intelligence, as a phenomenon. And they’re trying to determine whether Niffle apes are intelligent, that is to say, uh, you know. Whether they’re people.” I fluttered two of my legs. “So if I can prove that you are as smart as, say, a human being, then the scientists will have to treat you like people. But if I can’t, they might treat you like animals, lock you in cages, things like that.” Actually, I wasn’t at all certain that the Logotarians would have those sorts of scruples, even if I did convince them that the Niffle apes had a human-level intellect. But I chose to believe that they had some ethics.

The queen—the mother—Niffle ape chuffed again and cocked her head at me.

“I don’t know!” I complained. “Just, are Niffles as smart as people? As human beings? That’s what I want to know. Can you show me? Can you answer that one for me?”

The queen leaned back again and scratched her belly quietly. I turned away, ready to report my failure to the faceless bureaucrats, when suddenly I was cast into shadow as the Niffle matriarch stood, blotting out the sun. Soon, I was deposited back into my nutshell and we were off again, this time at a much more sedate pace. I even braved the edge of my nutshell, poking a few of my eyes above the lip to see the forest streak past as the queen knuckle-walked downstream.

Soon we stood on another spur of rock, looking down a cascade of clear water that fell into a shimmering pool. At the edge of the water crouched a hairless ape—a human being. It was wearing pants of brown wool, but they were torn and stained. The hair on its head was tied back by means of a broad, long strip of patterned cloth that I’d sometimes seen knotted around human necks. Next to it was a Niffle ape, chuckling and grumbling as it splashed at the water and snatched a diamondfish from the current.

The human being nodded its head and leaned forward, splashing at the water in the same way. The Niffle queen and I watched for some time, she scratching idly at her belly, me smoothing out the hairs on my carapace after our journey. Eventually, the human managed to catch a diamondfish of its own, while the Niffle ape had amassed a small stack of them.

“Niffle!” hooted the ape.

“Niffle!” said the human proudly. They both vanished into the trees.

The Niffle queen sniffed and placed my nutshell down on the rock. She chuffed once at the pool and threw out her arm, miming splashing the water to find fish. Then she turned and climbed off into the still-green forest behind me, and I never saw her again.

When I presented my findings to the two Logotarian professors, they murmured excitedly and argued back and forth with clicks and buzzes too fast for me to follow. They paid me and left the room, still arguing with a few snippets of language I could hear and understand.

“Fine, we’ll take the darts off the spydrones.”

“And no vivisections.”

“What do you mean, no vivisections? That’s outrageous!”

I wondered, as they left, just how much the “Uncertainty Effect” was going to change those Niffle apes. And whether the apes would change the Logotarians right back.