

G. STOLYAROV II



EDEN



against the

COLOSSUS

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Second Edition

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The characters and places in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to any living individual is entirely coincidental.

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Introduction to the Second Edition

It has been some ten years since I wrote *Eden against the Colossus*. I worked on this book gradually from July 2002 through July 2003, with some light edits made in the summer of 2004, for online publication in July of that year. In October 2011, Lulu.com, the former host of the e-book, took it down inexplicably. I decided then that I never again would risk the availability of my work being put in jeopardy due to the whims of an external host. Hence, I have worked this past year to release this second edition, entirely free of charge, for as many electronic and e-book formats as I could manage.

In the course of creating the second edition, I performed some thorough editing, largely for style and not content. The aim of the editing process was to retain as much of the original intent and vision of *Eden against the Colossus* as I could, while improving the phrasing of certain sentences and sometimes modifying or clarifying a few peripheral details to render the story more internally consistent. My writing style has progressed considerably in the past decade, and I have endeavored to apply some of what I have learned in order to enhance this work – but not enough to alter its fundamental structure, plot, or ambience. Moreover, I have not diminished the substance or sophistication one bit.

Science fiction is shaped by the author's ability to project the future from present circumstances. Upon re-reading and editing this work, it was interesting for me to contemplate the actual changes that had occurred in the world during the intervening ten years, and how they aligned with my predictions. In some ways, I am more optimistic about the future (especially the most proximate century) than I was when I wrote this book. Some of the technologies I anticipated, such as electronic ink, are already ubiquitous (though not facilitated by nanobots and an interface between the mind and an e-reader, as I had imagined). Other technologies, such as in vitro meat, are around the corner in our time – but have taken humankind in my projection some 750 years to arrive at.

I wrote *Eden against the Colossus* prior to my exposure to the work of Aubrey de Grey on indefinite human life extension and the work of Ray Kurzweil on exponential growth in computing technology, artificial intelligence, and the concept of the technological singularity. Even the Intergalactic Protectorate – with all of its technological marvels – is a pre-singularitarian society in Kurzweil's sense. I suppose that it had to be one in order for me – from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century – to have been able to conceive of its various aspects. This fictional universe is also one in which sentient machines have not emerged – as I considered them impossible at the time of writing. There are numerous intricate robots on various scales – to be sure – but all of them remain instruments of man. Humans do, however, have numerous technological enhancements to their bodies and minds – a combination of biotechnology and computing add-ons – that serves as a soft parallel to Kurzweil's concept of the merger of man and machine into an enhanced being of vastly greater cognitive capacity. The dialogue of the characters is far more advanced than most spoken discourse today; think of an entire society possessing the literary skills of elites during the 18th-century Enlightenment – in their speech.

It is important to understand this hypothetical future as one conditioned by centuries of retrogression, war, and gradual, staggered recovery of civilization. Perhaps

it represents one of the less palatable tracks of civilizational progress – where the Malthusians and Luddites set back prosperity and innovation for centuries, but where the human will for life, achievement, and expansion comes out ahead anyway – eventually. I certainly hope that, in the real world, we can do better to prevent the de-civilizing process from taking hold during the early third millennium. I harbor now – to a greater extent than I did ten years ago – the hope of personally someday living in a world where the level of human advancement and prosperity has surpassed what I envisioned here.

Eden against the Colossus is a humanist work, and a proto-transhumanist one. It embraces reason, industry, innovation, and technological progress, and thoroughly critiques and condemns the enemies of human development. Though it will be apparent to the reader from even the prologue, the book is intended as a response to and refutation of Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael*, which I still consider to espouse a worldview that is most diametrically opposed to my own. What would the society glorified by *Ishmael* really look like? Is it truly compatible with the human condition as it can be and ought to be? These questions are explored here in depth. I still think that most of my answers to them are correct, and worthy of consideration – especially as compared to their antitheses. It is particularly important for the ideas of reason, individualism, and technological progress to be spread today – in the face of misguided attacks from such diverse individuals as Leon Kass, Sherwin Nuland, Daniel Callahan, John Gray, and Nassim Taleb, which, if embraced by too many of our contemporaries, could seriously damage the advancement of civilization and our own life expectancies and standards of living. I might have phrased some of my statements differently had I written this work today, but the overall emphasis and intellectual direction are on target. I am rendering this book available to all for free download and redistribution, because I consider it essential to spread sophisticated discussion of these ideas and to counter the opponents of meliorism on both the Left and the Right.

Along with being a science-fiction tale, this book is a philosophical mystery story, which implies that not all pieces of information will be available to the reader immediately. I assure you, however: *they will be accounted for*. Reality brooks no contradictions, and any fiction that pretends to have value in *this* world cannot, either.

I have seen fit, as part of the mystery, to invent an entirely new language, which the reader will perceive to be quite confounding. It is *meant* to be. And, of course, the confusion is *meant* to be resolved.

This book is *not* what it seems when you begin reading it. If it were merely about a straightforward ideological disagreement, or about interaction with an extremely different alien species, it could perhaps be phrased better in a treatise. Even though it may seem that I am *telling* you a lot of the ideas in the book, this is just one of the mechanisms used to *show* you this story.

To those who are expecting light reading, this book is certainly not that. It must both set up an elaborate future world and develop the mystery within it. The book must necessarily get off to a slow start, but once the background is explicated, the story begins to take on a life of its own, and careful reading of the early passages will pay intellectual dividends to the reader during the latter half. If you appreciate a text that is constructed with great care and in which every fact and every statement is selected with a logical purpose, then you will enjoy *Eden against the Colossus*.

Prologue

From the Archives of the Ministry of Exploration and Colonization of the Intergalactic Protectorate, dated June 24, 2753:

To: Alan Orthog

From: Helmut Wolfgang Nachtreiter

Most esteemed Lord Orthog,

As this is a closely confidential message, I am hoping that you will comprehend the enormous difficulties and time delays I have experienced in arranging that it bypass conventional sortings and border inspections.

The droid ship Clipper R45361, which carried this message within its confines, needed to be outfitted with my final hyper-condenser to avoid a necessary landing at a refueling outpost. As I am a paid agent of the Protectorate government, this communiqué would have otherwise been apprehended by the administrators of whichever base Clipper R45361 happened to visit. Apparently the old days of solidarity behind the Lord Protector's initiatives and secure reliance upon even a fellow soldier are past. We old space dogs can still comprehend the genuine wisdom behind the designs of Mauricius, *Protector Intergalacticus*, (and he pays us handsomely besides), but it is evident now that a throng of the new grounded eco-locusts with which this department had been infested will likely through sheer blunt pressure of majority recall me back to Legardium to be confined to my estate and never again allowed near a scientific endeavor if they received word of my findings and of their implications.

Why do such anachronisms yet exist, in our marvelous age when cities spring up overnight and planets become terraformed within mere years? And how in the universe have they managed to consolidate themselves into such a potent clique of bureaucracy? Never mind that, though. I have already delved into the controversy too recklessly. Another step, and I shall be forced to mention a name of the Protector's family whose involvement you, from commendable loyalty I admit, vehemently refuse to acknowledge.

In any case, this will be the final of my messages to you, and I hope that you do not repair that hyper-condenser within any nearby time period, just in the event Rustain or Conford spot any references to my discovery during their routine rummagings through your files (which, knowing their inclinations and their capacity to deftly evade notice, is not unlikely). If they vote in the committee to expel me from the Periphery-32 Theater, I would not be pleased to lay eyes upon their verdict... and to incur criminal penalties for deliberate disobedience of their edicts besides. Thankfully, I am not even given the capacity to contact you electronically or via visual transmitter, as the distance between your outfitted headquarters and this rugged wilderness is too immense. The temptation to reveal more would have otherwise clouded my common sense. I long to share the knowledge and the thrill of my experience with at least another competent and sympathetic soul.

Whatever the scheming at home may entail, my labors here have proceeded unhampered by my associates. As all of them are automatons and none, thankfully, were trained by the Collegium of Frontier Conservation, they have been my primary

recorders of measurements that I deem too dangerous to be attached to this message. Five of them had accompanied me on a routine sortie from Hermes Base, which, thus far, as you may be disappointed to realize and I am outright enraged, is still the westernmost tip of the Intergalactic Protectorate. If I were one of the revived impulse cultists, I would have said it was premonition or whim that caused me to, for the first time, employ my fresh gravitimeter droid aboard the scout pod, but it was a simple logistical concern with space that was genuinely responsible for the outcome of events. My storage bins at Hermes Base have been overburdened to the point of near collapse with gadgetry (What do you expect from thirty-year-old titanium cubby holes without even a strip of promethium to act as reinforcement?), and a removal of all A.I. entities was required to keep them capable of containing lighter, more mundane utensils. The cause set aside, it was quite an astonishment to me when the particle streams under the screen of the mechanism began to slightly approach each other, as if intending to coincide at a distant location. Well, my friend, you comprehend as well as I had comprehended then, as a result of our superb performance in second-grade cosmometry, that such a phenomenon can only be triggered by the attractive pull of a massive celestial sphere. (Judging by the rate at which the blips neared each other, I exclude the possibility of it possessing enough size to be a star, or of its identity as a lightweight much like our planet Earth.) Following some deliberation I resolved that the sheer expanse of its gravitational field implied dimensions somewhat larger than the gas giants of our own solar system; either that, or, which is by far more impressive, it is significantly heavier, composed of *hard, solid elements!*

This conclusion alone was sufficient to transform a regular experimental flight into a journey into the abyss of the unexplored. I urged myself onward, remembering with sour disappointment that no attempts to expand man's domain within the area had been undertaken since your expedition in 2731. I was not about to remain a passive victim of the suffocating veil of stagnation which had been gradually enveloping me during all those prior months in which I concerned myself with details of significance only to a sub-specialist in the field. Here was the opportunity to examine a vast new world in a literal sense, with signs pointing to an unprecedented structure meriting detailed study in itself.

Now you comprehend the reason behind my supposedly abnormal shortage of hyper-condensers, all of which but one had been crammed into the pod's engine compartment in order to furnish a wormhole heading toward what my formulator droid had calculated to be the origin of the attraction. I did not wish for the endeavor of glancing upon this cosmic giant to expend three million centuries of Earthly time, as it would have under regular near-light-speed travel, nor would a year in a conventional wormhole be a satisfactory wait. This passageway of vacuum would need to be, I realized, folded upon itself ten times, a hundred times, three hundred times, until navigation through it would require but a day at most, a speedy, unhampered glide with plenty of data analysis to be performed in the meantime. Most of the "state of the art" machinery that the soft groundling committees designate for us field scientists, however, possesses nowhere near the endurance required to survive such a complex and energy-depleting operation. Thankfully, at least, the hyper-condensers had established an avenue sufficiently stable to persist for a week if not more, permitting me ample time for ventures on the other side. Afterward they became mere molten, amorphous chunks

of metal, as you have likely encountered in your experience with such less-than-reliable transformations. Nevertheless, the route ahead was not marred by any external obstacle or an unanticipated malfunction in any of my gadgets.

I entered the planet's orbit while glancing with my own eyes upon the mountainous surface of sudden and crude contrasts below me. Ravines bordered highlands, and fields of ice neighbored craters of wind-worn sediments. An occasional carpet of green caught my eye, pressed to the seemingly uncultivated ground – yet, if my judgment of proportions had been correct, not exceeding a centimeter in height. Nevertheless, they were a phenomenon meriting a detailed examination by means of my most potent magniscope. They were the first signs of uniquely *alien life* on this globe, and their structure differed from any manner of plant life forms with which men are familiar. Instead of existing as blades or stems, in the manner of common greenery, their shapes bulged outward, more substantially in regions of greater proximity to the ground. They seemed to sprawl across the landscape in an almost continuous layout, each of them frequently displacing its neighbors and fluctuating to-and-fro, it seems, not directly pinned to the rock (and they had no reason to be, either. The surface was as devoid of nutrients as the side of a cliff). This, of course, excluded the question of roots or any sort of permanent grounding. Gravity had warped their forms to resemble inverted mushrooms, but their locations were mere perching spots where they possessed significantly greater mobility than the Earth's plant forms. A minor scan of their atomic composition revealed a photosynthetic method of food intake much similar to the conventional, except that receptacles near the tip instead of the foundation served to absorb moisture from the surrounding air instead of the non-existent soil.

Nevertheless, I could spot neither organs of cognition nor any miscellaneous sign of sentience. These forms reminded me of colonies of bacteria packed together and bustling in close proximity with a mindless clumsiness so as to intrude upon one another's living space. I nevertheless could not resist in my journals forever creating an association between my name and theirs. I fittingly placed them under the proper genus of *Plantae Alienae Secundae*, presenting the particular species with the designation *nachtreiterus*, at last solidifying my scientific legacy enough, even if the name does refer to a dumb photosynthetic organism. I have collected over thirty-five pages of thoroughly descriptive data, sketches, and film regarding *Secundus nachtreiterus*, which I cannot share with you at the moment, although in any decent condition of things my findings would have been welcomed with gratitude and reward.

Alas, what dreadful double bind our committees have locked us in! We must either act in the interests of science and risk an expulsion from the scientific community or pander to their "conservation" agendas and entail a definite expulsion from the scientific truth. This finding alone would have caused them to designate my new discovery a "Wildlife Refuge" and suspend in perpetuity the use of all outposts from Hermes Base to Fort Righteous and Beacon Valley. They would thrive on the knowledge that somewhere in the Periphery a farmer has lost his last meal because his land was designated a Wilderness Preserve as a result of sluggish green bulbs existing ten million light-years from his property. You understand me, Lord Minister, old comrade, partner in the exploration endeavor. Let us hope that those who do not understand will also have no knowledge of this matter.

Nevertheless, I would not have expended my final hyper-condenser on a report of a new planet, however massive, or of Lilliputian plants, however fascinating. That in itself is sufficient to incriminate me and force me to stutter in futile defense before the hypocritically self-righteous Viscount Conford. What I subsequently laid eyes upon, however, is grounds on the fanatics' premise for me to be hanged, quartered, and then forced to gobble down a chunk of raw meat in the manner of those Barren savages.

Reporting what happened shortly afterward, however, is well worth the danger. The manifold wilderness prevalent on the planet suddenly, following an hour of its chaotic consistency, receded before my eyes to make way for a uniform, glimmering plain, seemingly crafted of smooth glass and producing impressive sights of specular reflection atop a surface that maintained even a microscopic evenness. What roamed this terrain was an aimlessly stumbling multitude of creatures to whom I can draw no earthly parallel.

Of a light magenta color and nearly flat with forms just about plastered atop the ground, they transport themselves by means of eight stubby tentacles on which their stretched, quasi-rectangular organisms balance. It seems, at least from the close-up shots, that their limbs are coated with a particularly rubbery adhesive substance which can firmly assure their stance when they choose to remain immobile, but acts as a propellant when they happen to prefer leaping.

I have witnessed their massive hops, as a result of which they tumble through the air at altitudes of three meters, if not higher –and, which is ludicrously perplexing, land some ten centimeters from their original position! Their jumps are not even; nor do they maintain any rational form while in the act. Their movements seem a factor of impulsive whim, disregarding any such concepts as ideal projectile motion or efficacy in distance. They flutter about, tracing curves, loops, and waves -- neglecting perhaps the very notion of Cartesian space. They are not acrobats, and they do not perform these escapades for aesthetic effect. It is as if they did not consciously select their outlandish meandering, as if it were second nature to them. At that time, I linked the magniscope with one of my superior sound amplifiers and heard what could not be anything except... voices! Gloomy, monotonous, extraordinarily low-pitched voices emanated from the creatures below, with discernible sounds and variations thereof that cannot be a simple animal noise.

The source of the vibration was a certain basin at their anterior, the opening of which possessed a fluctuating tongue as well as three peculiar orbs with a glint of magenta in them. I pondered over the utility of the latter. I suspected that they were visual receptors, and, as a surface molecular scan demonstrated, extraordinarily alike in structure to the human iris, appearing magenta only as a result of large amounts of semi-oxidized blood circulating through them. But one puzzling detail places a formidable doubt upon my hypothesis. These creatures possess no pupils or anything analogous to an opening for the admission of light! How can they view the world, and why would an eye-like structure exist for them in the event that they cannot? Are these the products of a malevolent mutation in an environment where, as my observations thus far have led me to presume, no serious competition exists even for blind organisms if they happen to be the sole animals on the planet? Nevertheless, they are sentient beings, as their communication between members of their kind verifies. I could not, despite some five hours of recordings, decrypt the actual *meaning* of their emanations. I

attempted to discover parallels between their sentence structure and ours, but those possess varieties even with Earthly tongues. How could one expect an extraterrestrial species to come to accord with our rules of grammar? I searched for repetitions and common combinations, but the only word which frequented the recording (or its subsequent computerized transcript) was the peculiar sound combination which I can only reproduce as "quisly". What is a *quisly*, you ask? You are as good a judge as I on that matter.

I continued to guide the scout pod over the territory of the Glassy Plain, inhabited with these intriguing creatures throughout its some thirty kilometers' expanse. I possessed the opportunity to observe their various routines of life, most importantly, their sustenance, which, as was no surprise, is *Secundus nachtreiterus*. What is perplexing, however, is the fact that they form no gathering parties or organized planting efforts to assure a plentiful harvest. I have seen swarms of them atop *nachtreiterus* patches where the plants happen to perch – moving, nevertheless, as they do on the un-vegetated sections of the plain, their organs drawing in the greenery without any manner of alteration to their positions, as if this were not an intended activity but rather an involuntary impulse.

I then realized that the very adhesive by means of which they were capable of hopping or standing also possessed the attribute of drawing *nachtreiterus* upward into their systems. As the food is not firmly entrenched in the ground due to its lack of roots, this is not a difficult task. The limbs of the creatures emit this substance, but they must also absorb, recycle, and re-eject it once it hardens sufficiently to no longer serve its intended purpose. During the process of intake, which I managed to observe on six instances, whatever food happens to remain lodged within the sap enters the organism and does not return with a fresh release of adhesive. A most peculiar food chain this is indeed, and the more astounding portion of my investigation was that I had seen not a single specimen among these creatures which is dead. They are an enormous population for a living space their size, numbering in the hundreds of thousands perhaps, yet I have witnessed no corpses. Assuming that they are sentient, it is a possibility that they may bury their deceased, although I did not observe any manner of artificial structure erected by these aliens. Even living quarters are non-existent for them, not to mention graves.

They employ no technology; they are aimless; their voices are on the verge of collapse; they are not directly concerned with sustenance... yet somehow they manage to survive! Or is this last assertion merely a first impression to be refuted by a more detailed study? This study, alas, I had not the time for due to the constraints presented by the wormhole's duration. My most recent act in relation to the aforementioned species was to grant them a proper classification, which, in this situation, I chose not to endow with my own name, but rather with its own primary characteristics. These critters shall henceforth be known as *Planus nonvisualis*, the unseeing flat ones. It was also then that I had officially designated the globe itself to be *Magnetica*, due to the sheer allure of its surface to me, due to its beckoning that I conduct further explorations for which I have not the time nor the material capacity.

I circumnavigated the planet along its orbit and subsequently visited the polar regions, all of which had occupied five days of my time. Echolocation cartography utensils aided my own sight in the drafting of a map which accounts for the major

geographic features of the gargantuan sphere. Lengthy segments of film will serve me in coming days to refine my sketches and store them in the archives at Hermes. Unfortunately they will not be traveling any further into Protectorate territory for any time in the near future.

Despite my fair confidence that I had laid eyes upon every possible stretch of terrain, I had not again encountered a glassy plain, nor had I observed another colony of *Planus nonvisualis*, although the *nachtreiterus* seemed frequent enough in every one of the regions I had visited. I have no reasonable grounds for speculation as to the reasons for this one-time phenomenon of sentient life, or, especially, of the landscape which it inhabits. However, I advise with the utmost sincerity that further studies of this object, the outermost of a yet undiscovered star system, be undertaken by fresh scientific expeditions sent here with additional supplies. (I do hypothesize that the star is itself of colossal proportions compared even to the giants of the Milky Way, for it presents the planet with adequate amounts of light.) Perhaps a detailed investigation should be launched into the question of sentient life and the mystery of its uniqueness. I would be more than willing to journey into this world once again, provided that our materiel are not so flimsy and inclined to break down as they are at present.

The only time at which the Intergalactic Protectorate will be able to incorporate this phenomenal land into its domain will be when its entrepreneurs become willing to invest in a permanent settlement and research base. I will attempt, in the meantime, to journey to places as distant as are now within my handicapped reach and determine whether my instruments spot signs suggesting the presence of an asteroid or minor planet in between Hermes and the prospective expansion ground for the establishment of a refueling station. Do not rely on my success, and do not rely on the approval of any committee in regard to the proposed venture. They will respond with their vehement indignation and their clichés of "sustainable development" and whatever other twentieth-century relics they have infested their slang with. The only means by which there is any hope for the pursuit of knowledge, truth, and our Universal Manifest Destiny is the Protector's own eyes examining this letter and granting his personal commission for an exploratory venture, the purpose of which does not necessarily need to be defined before the public.

You, Lord Minister Orthog, are my sole hope of success and the last remaining anchor of my turbulent career. Please, in the meantime, do not give in to those whining groundlings' demands for your retirement. Their warped twentieth-century standards may dub you senile, but you should consider that an affront. Just think about it: old at *eighty*? The very idea causes me to laugh and remember dreary times, my friend. You are not yet past a third of the present life expectancy, and I expect you to remain in office for that long at least. Retirement is for cowards without ambition. Life in this day and age offers opportunities for personal development undreamed of during the dreary pre-colonization era, and I suggest that we all exploit our years, and our yet unclaimed resources, to their fullest.

Best Regards,
Helmut Wolfgang Nachtreiter,
Exploratory Supervisor of the Periphery-32 Intragalactic Theater.

*Posted June 28, 2753, on "Friends of Anne-Marie Legard" Intergalnet Discussion Forum
by Alaric R. Rammings, 23rd Viscount Conford.
Subject: Time for Some Changes*

I have put this little tidbit to text for two reasons. First, I seek to expand our base of disciples and thus wish to gather as many open minds as possible behind our movement. Second, and more important and applicable to the matter at hand, I hold a fundamental opposition to the gadgetry of new-fangled live instant-response visual speaker/recorders with thirteen short-range teleporters attached, constantly leaping deeper into the abysmal sea of perks, complications, and confusing operating procedures learning which entangles our already faster-than-light-speed lives in a whole new web of unnecessary skills and distractions which sweep over us like a whirlwind. I ask that you do not cancel this out with another one of your neuron-accelerating medications (drugs, if you are prepared to accept the full implications of the term) and view an hour's worth of ultra-superior resolution film books within the length of a second. I instead request that we communicate without the snobbery, that we become more personal and willing to go out of our way to reach our neighbors and our friends, to show them that our message is not one by-the-way stunt among six thousand they receive on the virtual reality projectors nested in their hair and little plastic circles that hop onto their eyes like contact lenses to focus them on the images. This trend is what I endeavor to write about today. I ask that you read it at normal speed, just as I had written it, with the same principle in mind.

They tell me on the streets, "What is it I seek that my condition cannot offer?" In the Age of Stone man dreamed of leaving his cave to get to the berry bush and gather himself some fruit. During the Neolithic Revolution he wished to leave his village to travel to another and trade some goods. During the Renaissance he sought to leave his country to journey across the ocean for "Gold, God, and Glory". At the dawn of the twenty-first century, when the Earth was his and its resources succumbed to him one by one, he ventured outward to settle nearby planets to obtain "habitation and raw materials for the improvement of living conditions among the populace". At the turn of the twenty-second, by mercy of the first condensers and the man you call Magnus, who was your first colonist outside the Milky Way, he resolved all of a sudden that his galaxy was insufficient for him, that he could not stand being policed by its government and the society of "too many neighbors", that he would not cooperate with its expectations but rather form his own and let his followers form theirs for the sake of a settlement where communication with the Solar System was impossible. Then, four centuries later, our first Protector figured that the Universe possessed so many unexploited planets, galaxies, and materials that to claim it necessitated the revival of the Victorian doctrine of Manifest Destiny, from which the policy of Accelerative Settlement was derived. And they, the people, the public, the collective spirit, still ask me, "When is enough? Why are we not complete? What more do we want?" And they can't answer themselves. So I have taken it upon my shoulders to give them the resolution to their perplexing dilemma.

We live in an age where we can be on Sirius City one hour to purchase a month's dose of nutrition pills, then fly to Arcturusburg for a Calorie-free pastry and a diet Cosmic Beverage of thirty-three flavors rotating every three seconds, all of them furnished from who knows what chemical slime, but containing not a single bit of natural

stuff in it. Afterward we take a three-hour shuttle to an asteroid in the Andromeda where our place of employment happens to be located and where we perform in four hours what would have consumed four months of an ancient's time, still having ample time to gape at that grand interplanetary railway Ferdinand Winmer, Inc., is building in the Beta Centauri system so that it rotates in the opposite direction of the planets' motion (with *how many* different speeds in *how many* different sectors expending *how much* energy?) merely to stand in place, and to wander through the halls of a museum in Marsopolis, and to witness a spectacle of the fine arts at the renovated Athenian Amphitheater, then teleport a mere tenth of the way across the Earth and walk alongside the thousand-story spires of a palace crafted by means of the Protector's "self-made" funds. Even the most menial of us can afford a lifestyle with far more than the basic necessities, perhaps beyond the description "luxurious" even, depending on your definition of the term. Yet we are not content. At least, I am not content, and neither are the people I talk to. I am forty-seven years old. When I look ahead I see a stretch of time beyond visible end for me. A century ago the average life expectancy was one hundred thirty years. Today it is a hundred years longer. What will it be in another century when we will still be alive and probably having food pills teleported to all our vital organs to save us the "trouble" of extracting them from their canisters and swallowing? How many more hundred trillion tons of steel will be manufactured from the metal of how many more thousand assimilated planets? How many new alloys of promethium and herculeum will be discovered? How much faster and harder will we work and how many millions more credits will be added to our daily wages? And *how much more boredom and repulsion will I* (and, hopefully, you) *accumulate*? Do you want to know why you are not content? You seek escape from a value that the ancients accepted. You seek to dominate the universe *while separating yourself from the universe's plans for you and your society*.

A sage named Daniel Quinn from the onset of the Space Age warned man that he was destroying his world by placing himself at war with it, by expanding beyond the functioning capacity of an animal and expending enough resources to turn the world into the battlefield for a pursuit of his values and his alone. In his maniacal desire to control his surroundings, to shape the Earth to suit his needs, man forgot that there existed creatures outside himself. Those whom he consumed he maintained. Those whom he deemed "useless" were left at the mercy of whatever environmental impacts his transformations possessed. He neglected the fact that he had before shared the Earth with creatures outside his own species. He refused to compete with them on their terms. He thought himself exempt from the ecosystem structures which bound and dictated the routines of all other creatures. And what happened? His lifestyle and theirs diverged to the point where we can no longer recognize our common genetic heritage and the instinctive urges which define us as living beings. We consciously think we desire to control, while our primeval roots, struggling outward through the elaborate veneer we have placed over them to hide them from our sight, impel us to submit, to live not as pleasure-seeking individuals but as united tribes that work together to hunt, to cook, to migrate, to sacrifice petty pursuits of comfort to a gentle, cautious care toward one's neighbors, human and animal, and to rival other tribes for territory and food so as to check disastrous population growth. During Mr. Quinn's time the Earth was overflowing with six billion human beings. The 2753 Protectorate Census notes that the number of

inhabitants within our borders has soared beyond an unprecedented fifty trillion. Add to that the ninety trillion denizens of Allied nations and you will realize that, as ecological pioneers like Thomas Malthus have known for over nine hundred years, we are on the brink of a major disaster. Mr. Quinn has predicted even this: what do we seek as our population continues to climb? Why what else but land to put these people on? And where do we get this land? By expanding our borders. That is how the wilderness and the beauty that is the ecosystem became weeded out of the Earth, and how they receded with every blow by the hammer of man to planet after planet, galaxy after galaxy. You are running a race against a hamster orb which contains you, scrambling upward to safety only to be pushed down by the consequences of your motion, and forced to accelerate lest the sphere knock you off balance and splatter you against its sides.

That is why you constantly want more, more, more. Subsistence is not enough for you. A fulfilled stomach via the spoils of the hunt does not please you, and neither does a pill custom-designed for your needs and the infinity of delicacies to indulge yourself in without worry of obesity. You feast, you breed, you build machines to help you mend the consequences of your breeding. Your children are all glamorously handsome and intelligent (because you sent in your own custom design of their genomes in the mail to the local fertilization center), yearning to work and yearning to shape their would-be habitat so that their children can assist them in doing the same. You are likely to see two hundred direct descendants of yours during your lifetime, and all of them want a comfortable little planet with a nice estate and plenty of roboservants. In the old days tribal infant mortality rates were high enough to check population growth. We do not have that today. We have no checks today. You have forgotten your instincts. You think of yourselves as gods instead of mere links in an ecological chain, or mere cells on a superb organism which is the wilderness in its untainted essence. You think your prosperity should be your sole concern. Your instincts give you a suppressed but still occasionally felt hunch that this must not be allowed to persist.

As Mr. Quinn wisely remarked, "In order to save the world, man must renounce his knowledge of the power over life and death." This was the wisdom of fools that got Adam expelled from the Garden of Eden, literally. It removed man from the paradise that could have been his, that was the Wilderness, in which he could have fulfilled his predetermined role as an animal, as an intermediate link in the magnificent evolutionary progression which does not end with him and which he has no right to terminate. Now he is blinded from his destiny by the arrogant superstition that he is omnipotent, in the sense that he possesses the right to designate particular creatures as worthy or unworthy of living. He condemns animals to servitude or to slaughter and renders himself immune, as if he is exempt from the laws of Nature, as if his position is somehow unique and that presents him with some arbitrarily inalienable *right of life*. There is only a right of evolution, of species refinement by the natural process of mutations, and it stops where technological innovations secure the genetic status quo by expanding its dominance. And it is being proliferated as we speak. The crucial emotion, which is ever farther pushed back beyond your reach, is the desire to evolve, to submit to the scheme which will carry future generations there. The suppression of this grand plan of nature is being promoted by our own government, our own Ministry of Exploration and Colonization.

This is the dilemma that I wanted you to concentrate upon. You are still unhappy, despite the fact that I have identified for you the reason behind your dissatisfaction and continuing aspiration for that, which you do not possess. We need a concrete solution to the problem, and we must take every step back to Eden that is within our access capacity. Lord General Alan Orthog, Minister of Exploration and Colonization, has occupied his post for twenty-two years now, appointed there after (what do you know?) leading an expedition with intent to colonize the lands beyond the Western Periphery. He has shown to be a ruthless and relentless advocate of the Taker notion of Accelerative Settlement. His administration has seen the shackling of 36,312 planets in 22 galaxies, spheres which previously were barren, which had not been accessible to humans and where nature was permitted to take its course upon their surfaces, which have now become terraformed and are housing your always surviving excesses of offspring. Orthog's governance had seen the deregulation of border patrols and a virtual open avenue for colonists seeking to migrate outside already assimilated territory. An opposition effort scrambled together by means of all the support it could muster managed to halt further prospecting in the West, but the new mercury mining projects in the North and their adjacent worker towns have spread to encompass another tenth of Protectorate territory.

Loyal Ishmaelites (a following gathered from Mr. Quinn's most influential philosophical treatise) could only keep track of so much. We attempted to make our voices heard in the committees, to persuade and encourage other open minds in the Ministry to look back for a moment and see whether this rapid spreading was truly desirable, but that sly old fox always managed to deceive and circumvent us, or distract a majority of our attention upon a trivial matter while seizing yet another asteroid, or overruling another major industrial limitation. He is a military man with thirty years of service in his past, yet he has never so much as lifted a finger against blatant trespassers into Wilderness Refuges. However, he carries his soldierly mettle into the most improper of places, the discussion chamber! He argues his point without compromise, hearing the other side without interrupting, but not truly listening. Afterward he responds with a pitiless tirade pinpointing all the so-called "flaws" in his opponents' reasoning, and continues to plead his case without a minute alteration or any attempt to meet at the middle of the road. Would you trust this man with your frontier policy?

This is not, of course, to disregard the enormous military valor and tactical cunning displayed by General Orthog during his years of service in the Fourth and Fifth Intergalactic Wars. But this man has yielded as much merit as his condition permits him. He is in his eighty-first year, reaching an age of which the ancients could never have dreamed. We cannot conclusively state what alterations within the brain result from such an unnatural age. In the pristine condition, human organisms are not designed to weather the stern conditions of their environments for such a long time, and we do not know what form the conflict between instinctive atrophy and the elongating artificialities of our technologically-obsessed society assumes. Already his un-pliable character and uncompromising stances suggest an elderly stubbornness, a lack of the open mind necessary to adapt oneself to the conditions of one's surroundings. This may be the symptom of a maniacal tendency of his ego to usurp control over his impulses in order to fulfill the survival desire of an artificially-maintained organism. What will show externally, however, is an autocrat who cares no more for what others think than he

does for a maggot or a dung beetle (and it was he who had ten years ago given the rash and blunt command to exterminate their presence on Earth and succeeded). Who knows how far he has lapsed into his lunatic delusions of autonomy and how greatly his burden will worsen in the coming years? Especially with the enormous and excruciating amounts of work contained in a position such as his, it is prudent to suggest that the veteran be given a reprieve, to recover from his potentially threatening condition in a calm setting where the manifestations of his egotistical interest will never have the capacity to affect matters on so large a scale. Let someone younger, someone better geared up to the times, assume his position and discover a genuine cure to the disease of expansion that is a plague infesting our Tower of Babel.

This is a crusade that all readers can undertake if they care about their environment, the stability of their species, and the slow but steady march of natural evolution. Write petitions to remove Alan Orthog from his office and in his place nominate an informed ecologist, a man like Dr. Dirk Rustain, Professor at the Collegium of Frontier Conservation, renowned theoretical researcher on environmental disasters, and recently appointed member of the Ministry of Exploration and Colonization. He not only has the experience in affairs of government, but he can offer a genuinely scientific background, well versed in the writings of twentieth-century prophets as well as the sage Dortkamp's illustrious 2571 Theory of Imminent Anthropogenic Universal Collapse. It seems – as Dr. Rustain will tell you, quoting from twenty-five distinguished sources – that human development efforts on such a wide scale have so augmented the density of the universe that it is under threat of caving in under its own weight. There are many daily dangers that you do not notice, but Dr. Rustain has studied a majority of them and will reveal to you their consequences. But do not panic. His research also suggests to him numerous economical and eco-friendly solutions to the menace of Universal Collapse as well as the also significant phenomena of Permanent Space-Warp, the three Spontaneous Planetary Explosions projected over the next decade, Atmospheric Thinning caused by the construction of especially tall skyscrapers, and the chemical hazard which may be present in Food Pills. Why are you not content? Because your government tells you to grab more and more of the universe, not knowing where to stop, not retaining a destination in mind but rather continuing to proliferate you like viruses. We are aware of the desirable limits, and Dr. Rustain is the man to implement them. Perhaps in the near future, with some luck, we will witness our borders closed, our industry nationalized and placed under scientific guidance provided by the Collegium, and corridors of deterraformed wilderness sprouting to begin reclaiming the land which was not meant for us. Are you ready to save the universe?

Chapter I Protector's Summons

June 30, 2753,

"And what gargantuan web have you entangled yourself in now, Aurelius Meltridge?" Apparently Margaret perceived nagging to be the means of "optimizing" the situation. "I warned you to keep out of the political playpen, lest the sand there became lodged in your eyes..."

"And the sand is intermingled with glass. You have employed that metaphor all too frequently. As I see it you have nothing to fear and everything to gain. The man at the outer portal was a valet of the Lord Protector, a carrier of an oral message. He stated that the Protector has a job offer for my consideration, and supposes that the matter will be of great interest to me."

"So now the most powerful man in the universe sends his private lackeys to beg an employment from my husband while he could only find the time to deliver a recorded address via virtual reality transmitter during the last meeting of the Intergalactic Parliament. He is a busy man with exacting standards, demands that you could never have envisioned on your own even with your workaholicism. Whatever he has dragged you into, you can count that it is a matter of immense significance to him – which establishes you as a target of the despicable little schemes and manipulations at his court. Why do you suppose he did not merely send you a text message or one of his conventional recruitment propaganda projections?"

I had never considered that side of the matter. I did not respond, signaling to her to continue, skeptical though she was.

"Let me rephrase the question. Whom does he want *not* to discover about this arrangement? Every other means of sending a message could have been traced and apprehended by the numerous special-interest factions who are infuriated with him for not moving a step toward granting them privileged status. If this were a matter in which he was confident to face his foes, he would have flaunted it in their faces, as he did during the creation of his self-funded promethium concern and the construction of that outrageously lavish palace from the profits. But this is an underground task, something he is either afraid or ashamed of exposing. And you are to venture into that area which he seeks to evade. This is not as simple, Aurelius, as was the management of Count Cretor's private laboratory or even your research and presentations for the Ministry of Exploration and Colonization. There are elements in this so powerful that they might just sweep you away..."

"That is a risk which I acknowledge, yet it is inevitable at such heights which I intend to reach. One cannot attain a greater responsibility as a planetary biologist than a Protectorate Commission, nor is there in the entire universe a greater reward if it is carried out with success. This endeavor could present me with the resources I require to found a laboratory of my own and conduct in-depth studies of various biological structures to discover what has been a dream of mine for so long now..."

"Is that truly of such enormous significance to you? Why can you not realize that there are more important values than material wealth and more significant goals than your ascent on the meritocratic hierarchy?"

"Give me an example of what you are attempting to uphold as more significant."

"Love, Aurelius, a quality in which you can be quite deficient. Do you understand what strain it places upon me to witness you burn your brains out twenty-two hours every day dosed with who knows what mind-warping poisons just so that you can accelerate your reaction speed? Why do you even bother with this pretense of being a family man when your work is your mistress? You are twenty-five years old, and few men can reach your prominence at this age. We have a respectable home and no one in the community can display even a hint of contempt toward us without being shown to all to be an irreparable fool. You may be well versed in your technicalities, but many a wiser man would have sought early retirement, realizing that there can be a cap and a boundary to how far a man is willing to struggle during his own life. You have nothing more to want. You can eat six meals a day, yet you limit yourself to a pill you barely have time to swallow. You can live the next two hundred years of your life in utter bliss, and yet you perplex yourself with all your charts and books and drafts, and to add to all that those propaganda pamphlets in favor of 'preserving the spirit of scientific reasoning' which someone needs for something I cannot quite discern. I pity what you do to yourself, and at the same time I yearn for your company and attentions. I cannot help attempting to remedy the situation. Sometimes I find myself shedding those tears which you cannot release even out of simple love for yourself..."

"I love myself, and you, to a greater extent than you can imagine. That is the reason for my indifference to the opinion of my neighbors. They can revere me as a deity or direct at me the same scorn as at a leech, but I shall continue on my present course, carrying out that labor which enhances my life, granting me knowledge, competence to interact with the world, and the wealth needed to support my ventures, of which my present share is insufficient. Why live in a villa when I can custom-design a castle? Why scramble to-and-fro as an errand boy when I can forever secure my reputation, establish my own facilities, and receive clients in the comfort of my headquarters? Do you truly think, Margaret, that a man born in the middle class should remain there for the remainder of his years, simply because his world has lifted from him the concern of his stomach's immediate satiation? Is that the gray, lifeless constancy that you want permeating the air around you without any innovation, any amelioration until you lie on your deathbed and shed your tears of sorrow for passing from sameness self-inflicted to sameness eternal? If I had not loved you, Margaret, I would have been content to consign to you such perpetual boredom as you uphold to be ideal. But I understand that this robs our lives of purpose, and burdens them besides. Have you not read Goethe? 'That which moves not forward, goes backward.' The man was a prominent litterateur and scientist in one, whose legacy has lingered a millennium now. His approach is warranted, and his wisdom is proven by the filter of time. Would you rather have had your husband behave in the manner of a slothful degenerate like Conford?"

"The Viscount Conford has the time at least to truly reflect upon greater issues in the manner of a genuinely detached man. I have read his most recent post on FAML, in which he describes how an attitude like yours within the Intergalactic culture and its predecessors has resulted in a universe on the brink of catastrophe because humans cannot find their place and play safer roles which separate them from their egos and cause them to abandon the bizarre notion of their own centrality. That is what he writes, at least."

"If you did not view yourself as the core of the universe, I never would have married you. Was it resignation from worldly matters that served as the source of the handheld cell transformer? Was it instinct that led to the remedy for tens of malignancies and the virtual elimination of bodily imperfections?"

"You married me in order to apply the invention to design those outlandish zoo creatures of yours."

"I married you because you were the creator of a technological wonder, because of your ingenious mind and the enormous discipline and resolve which must have been exerted to yield such a product, and because of my admiration for those qualities. It was my most hopeful chance to become paired with an equal, because I never would have been attracted to my inferior."

"Yet it remains that you love the creator of the transformer, not the woman behind the creation. You always give people your preferences for the gains that they can bring *you*."

"Why do you see a dichotomy between the two entities? Did the transformer merely spring up out of an arbitrary void? The stamp of you, the person, is placed all over the invention. The qualities of your character had brought it into existence. If I did not admire you for those particular virtues, by what standard could I prefer you over one of those semi-conscious beauty-parlor coquettes whose only logical concern is the matter of placing a diamond comb into their ten-story hairdos so as not to cause them to fall over? How could I love you if I disregarded all the superiorities of your condition? Would you rather that I had selected you by arbitrary chance, for no particular preference? Then you would have had the same chance to end up with a space pirate or a Neo-Luddite or any other specimen of human slime still untouched by civilization as with me. And if I considered you a hindrance or an inconvenience to my designs, why should I have chosen you? Of course I married you for personal gain, be it for the satisfaction of having a heroine for a wife or for your analytical skills, or for a greater ease in negotiating for the products of your mind. And of course I will return to you the value of those endowments, because you would not have arbitrarily allotted them to me had you not seen some prospects for yourself in the making. You shall live under conditions that will cause Christine of Expansia or even the Lady Protectress herself blush with shame at their own destitution... if only you abandon that nonsense about a career being a detriment to love or the separation of the spirit, or the imminent collapse of the universe spouted by the lips of that crackpot Rustain. We are our own masters; we have no plan to follow but that which we deem optimal for ourselves. The universe is not an animate entity, a mystical, whimsical God whose scheme involves our destruction. It is our domain, and we shall have as much of it as we are worthy of receiving. And if it involves another calculated risk on my behalf, so be it."

"Have you been reading Ayn Rand in your spare time again?" she asked in a lighter tone. "I am beginning to become jealous of the place that woman occupies in your life."

"She is seven hundred seventy-one years dead now, Margaret."

"Yet you still take her advice over mine."

"Consciously examine your true desires and voice them: you will realize that the two are not as divergent as you suppose. The survival of a technological society and of the aspiring human spirit could only have been managed on the grounds of her

philosophy and the extrapolations that followed through the ages, which now must once again confront the fashionable idiocies of our time."

"You justify yourself too well," she said, this time joking openly, kissing me on the cheek. "Go as you wish. But I will miss you. And I expect one of the jewels of the Protector's collection tied around my neck by the time you return," she added as an afterthought.

"You will likely have two," I replied, with her laughter as the response.

A small device within the palm of my hand opened a portal from the kitchen to the spot of public land of greatest proximity to the Legardium Palace, the primary fountain of the Protector's Park with the statue of a burdenwing as its centerpiece. I examined its form for several brief seconds prior to stepping through the gateway. A massive, muscular back with several grooves following its colossal length served as the foundation for equipment packages also immortalized in marble, strapped onto the creature's firm stomach, while its head was supported by a disproportionately gargantuan neck, so designed since its throat contained pouches of oxygen for emergency use in an air-deficient environment. The first authentic genetically engineered species, it still possessed conventional animal features which left plenty to be desired. Its feet were scrawny – modeled from a mule genome – and its sole means of balance was their sheer quantity, six on each side. Its massive wings were those of a North American bald eagle, capable of spreading into a sweeping, dignified expanse. Employed as package animals in mountainous terrain frequently impassable to the average transportaton during the terraformation of the Colonia Nova system in 2525, they were integral in shaping the first outpost erected by the Intergalactic Protectorate that was truly intergalactic. Since that day no longer did the Grand Dominion of Expansia hold a monopoly upon the resource markets of the Andromeda and Gordian Clusters. This particular image of the burdenwing displayed no ferocity in its features, merely a solemn, dignified subservience to the marble colonist tugging at its reins. This was, despite its appearance, a gentle and compliant creature, an animal understanding its utility as a servant of man, designed solely to carry his baggage, to endure menial hardships in the place of man, and to nod willingly. It exhibited scant initiative of his own, and as little sentience, which in itself explains its temperament. The symbolism of the work was manifest; that man's task is to shape nature to his ends, and nature's task is to comply without resistance. Oddly enough, no Protector prior to Maurice Legard had the notion of elucidating a fundamental cultural tenet of the Intergalactic Protectorate along the avenue to his sanctuary, and none moreover possessed the audacity to sculpt the piece with his own hands. If one looked closer under the lustrous glassy screen of the colonist's helmet, one could see that the sparkle of its studious eyes and its lofty, definite smile emerged from all too familiar features...

I waved to Margaret in sign of final farewell and stepped through the microscopically thin wormhole into the vegetated alley which stretched toward the palace gate. The path underneath me was ornamented with many a sunken relief of astronomical objects, carved to such elaborate detail and flawless to so great a magnification (the layman's porta-lenses can enlarge or diminish one's view up to ten thousand times) that its material could only be Legardian Promethium, from the renowned smelters which continued to spring up in various spots within the universe like oases dotting a desert moonscape. Rumor holds it that our Prodigy Protector is

enlarging his manufacturing capacity to the field of jewelry while exploring commercial uses for a compressing method to design a stone sturdier and more lustrous than diamond, herculeum, or even the most durable promethium to date. It may well be true, for his exploits have transformed him into the wealthiest man in all recorded history, yet have touched not a single gold currency unit in the Protectorate Treasury to initiate his endeavors. It is well-known to the populace that his few inherited millions have been placed at the disposal of the government in exchange for a reduction of the income tax to 0.5%, and every bit of his present means is self-generated. So were the phenomenal colonnades looming in front of me, obstructing sight of the sun itself. Nevertheless, some six thousand stories beyond the range of my unequipped vision, perceptible only at minimum magnification of the porta-lenses, gold-plated domes reflected solar rays through prism-like pillars to display a glamorous array of rainbow-colored beams illuminating the central path and crisscrossing each other in astoundingly complex geometric designs. The guard contingent stationed at the palace was of an army on the Protector's personal payroll. These men conducted frequent tours of select portions of the palace, which extracted from visitors rather handsome fees: minimal, of course, in comparison to the scale of the accomplishment. I, however, was to enter for free, through select invitation.

I got a most uncommon reception at the gates, as beside the two silent halberdiers stood a man in the uniform of a General from the Fifth Intergalactic War, a bicorn hat with meter-long silver plume protruding from the pinnacle, along with a dark blue closed-collar jacket framed with golden epaulets and scarlet lace at the fringes, red trousers with black stripes stretching beneath the knee-length boots, all semi-concealed by a free-flowing iron-gray cape attached to the left shoulder by an immense brass pin in the shape of the Protector's top-hat emblem. His complexion was wrinkled with experience, yet in an evenly distributed, symmetrical manner. His hair had only faint traces of gray within it, and his pointed brown beard still held the gloss of youth. His penetrating blue eyes have always boasted of never requiring any manner of vision correctors, and still studied me with a meticulous concern, despite the fact that we had met on previous occasions. This man's energy never seemed to expire or require rejuvenation, yet the screeching twentieth-generation idlers in the Committees were turning their claims on the matter of "his need to retire" into a political scandal. What else could be expected from envious anachronisms of mediocrity in regard to an eighty-year-old such as him?

"Dr. Meltridge, it is a pleasure to encounter you once again," he uttered in a slightly heavy tone, as if his mind were burdened with a dilemma which did not grant him a moment of reprieve.

"I assure you that I share your sentiment, Minister," I replied, spotting behind him the same silver-haired valet who first informed me of this prospect.

"This is to take it that you are interested in the Lord Protector's proposition?" he spoke as vaguely as was possible, without presenting to me the slightest sign of its nature. "For this endeavor, no less than a mind among the *crème de la crème* of the universe will do. It will be challenging to an extent that will cause you to become perplexed, not able to discern a clear path in the midst of a thousand false leads, dead ends, and superfluous complications. Are you still interested?"

"Indeed I am," I stated with confidence. "If a matter is beyond my present expertise or requires an extension of my capacities, then this is a challenge. My intellect cannot tolerate keeping such problems unsolved and will overcome them by whatever means I can devise. Be assured that the Lord Protector will not be disappointed in his choice."

"Splendid," his complexion displayed a hearty, deep-rooted soldier's smile while a firm hand patted my back in approval. "Your character type is just the one required for this mission. Mr. Enridge," he motioned to the valet, "do kindly escort us into His Majesty's discussion chamber."

The gate floated some three meters into the air in order to allow us passage into the Inner Alley, while the halberds removed themselves from our path and their possessors saluted the Minister. Enridge walked several meters in front so as to remedy any inconveniences that could arise during our walk.

"The disruptor shield over this section of the palace should prevent any aerial drones from obtaining a recording of our discussion, yet it may be possible that they have one of those rare devices which can bypass the obstruction. Whatever the chances of that, I should withhold from you the primary briefing until we reach the soundproof confines of the chamber."

"Is there a reason for the secrecy which you can reveal to me presently in however general terms you can permit yourself?"

"Let me ask you this, Doctor: Have you read the Viscount Conford's most recent post, which has presently spread like a chain explosion through the databases of nearly every major ecological organization within our borders?"

"That fallacy-ridden work of deception!" I exclaimed, unable to withhold my resentment at a most superficial and deluded little statement achieving universal fame overnight.

"But what firm base of support was required for news of it to linger and spread? If this man were merely an insignificant retrograde leading an underground circle of Barrens, are you certain that his message would have reached a nationwide audience with thousands like it floating on the Intergalnet and millions of other political commentaries? This man possesses not merely the funds to launch an ideological proliferation effort, but also all the other resource prerequisites of a policy movement. If he is this potent at spreading information, what do you suppose his capacities are for obtaining it?"

"But his funds *are* limited, even given his inheritance. Would a man who considers any sort of employment to be the function of 'merciless Takers' hold some sort of inexhaustible fount of gold to permit himself every manner of spy gadget emerging throughout the Universe in competition with the various shield systems that are developed just as rapidly?"

"Judging by our past clashes, the man is amazingly well-informed. Some undetected leak revealed to him my designs for the Corvus-34 Expedition in 2742, which his cronies then deprived of funding by means of 'majority pressure' extracted from I can only suspect where. Since that time he has foiled my scheme for a permanent wormhole between Fort Righteous and Hermes Base to ease expansion logistics, and only a narrow evasion of a filibuster allowed Dr. Nachtreiter to be dispatched to the Periphery for gathering of data on the frontier regions. Where can he

obtain a constant flow of funds? It is well-known that he collaborates with my other archrival, Dr. Dirk Rustain of the Collegium of Frontier Conservation. He even managed to present that ruffian with a chair on the Funds Committee of the Ministry. And, let me merely suggest that *he* does not *need* to have a lead in technological resources in order to probe into our activities. I cannot tell you more."

Yet the picture was nevertheless elucidated for me. It was a connection that should have formed within my mind two days earlier. The Collegium was founded in 2736 by none other than the Protector's own sister, the Lady Anne-Marie, once a renowned field biologist who herself traversed the outer reaches of civilization to document instances of primitive alien plant and animal life, who practically single-handedly classified the entire "First" genus of extraterrestrial greenery. Apparently, however, a passion for the organisms in and of themselves clouded her appreciation of the search for truth and of scientific discovery, as she diverted continually increasing amounts of finances to purchase their habitats and leave them in an untouched condition. The situation from then on became a downward spiral. Having realized that "her beloved critters were still being apprehended by the too-far reaching colonists and imprisoned in zoos and laboratories like some sort of showpieces or curiosity trinkets," her "concern" impelled her to gradually shift her stance to the advocacy of "protection" measures beyond her own means or of the legislature of that time. Hence her establishment of a publicly funded entity cloaked under the associated label of "ecology" but in reality concerned with restrictive policy measures as a priority. During the 2740s it resurrected the term "Wilderness Refuge" from the coffin of the ages and has already managed to brand thirty-two planets with such a designation, implemented despite numerous popular overrulings in related referenda. In the meantime the bureaucracy of the facility has expanded to such an extent and intricacy that even the Protector would remain unable to disband it through any action short of declaring martial law, and such a condition during peacetime has never been imposed in all the 250 years of Protectorate history.

Gradually, as the facility developed, the ecological movement obtained clout with a horde of opportunists seeking to earn a name within the scientific community without possessing scientific merit. Its overt legitimacy permitted an even darker and more radical sect to emerge into the foreground and gradually obtain positions of prestige in the Collegium under the name of "fringe ecologists" (whom the dominant paradigm of "political correctness" could not afford to openly deny their demands) – the Malthusians. As their dominance over the field of environmental study increased, there emerged cliques of increasing authoritarianism – from Tartmann's Controllers to Rustain's Forestallers to Conford's Ishmaelites. What began as an attempt to contain several species for the purpose of study now turned into a campaign to curtail human acquisition of new sources of raw materials and grounds for habitat on a national scale.

Another group lurks still within the arcane channels of the ideological underground, but word of it has spread to an alarming extent in recent months. Its members are the open denouncers of initiatives upheld by the so-called "Greens" as insufficiently radical. Their sect relishes in the essence of the environmentalist movement, which its more reticent members seek to conceal. They have dubbed themselves the "Barrens". Their search is not for the preservation of animal species, nor "the tender guardianship that human beings must practice to maintain the perpetuation

of their natural cycles", as the Lady Anne-Marie once espoused, but rather the "untainted conservation of the surface of uninhabited planets to render them uninhabitable as beautiful embodiments of an intriguing prospect for implementation of nihilistic doctrines within this universe." Surprisingly enough, the coffers of the Collegium, despite its steady drift into lunacy, are regularly replenished, and the recent Parliamentary Budget displays a sum of expenditures toward its maintenance thrice that allocated at the time of its founding. In the meantime, its disciples have invaded not merely the MEC, but the Ministries of Justice and Defense. Some have even vied for positions in the Police Force, thankfully, rejected by the voters of their district.

Despite the movement's growing danger to the government itself and the principles of individual freedom and meritocracy that laid the framework for the Intergalactic Protectorate itself, Lady Anne-Marie has remained silent in regard to their activities for over a decade, continuing to permit leeches like Conford to employ as a means of communication the "Friends of Anne-Marie Legard" forum (in naming which she had omitted her "egotistically elitist" title). She has herself withdrawn from scientific studies and has not set a foot off Earth since a blunder of a journey to the Seeker-8 galaxy to collect several handfuls of distorted cosmic mushrooms in 2738. The most prominent innovators of industry and science have launched accusations against her for, in the words of interplanetary transportation magnate Ferdinand Winner, "inconsiderately letting loose a monstrosity," comments whose impact she has defused via the silent treatment. Nevertheless, even her brother once let slip a mildly chastising remark that "unlike some relatives of mine, I pave the planets I purchase," in regard to his staunch refusal to expend personal finances for the benefit of the ecological movement.

The beginnings of Conford's association with the Collegium coincided with his emergence as a major player on the political scene some thirteen years ago, when he merely appeared one day, firmly established in the Collegium bureaucracy, after having had a virtual void of a public past. It was a relationship which eventually carried numerous prominent "ecologists" into administrative posts, but the Viscount's fortune ought to have been depleted following his massive environmental regulation efforts and the propaganda which preceded them. Perhaps the Collegium itself granted him the means – but this is unlikely, for its expenditures are prescribed by the Parliamentary Budget, and no observer would have overlooked a considerable sum labeled "To the coffers of the Viscount Conford". Alternatively, as Minister Orthog suggested to me – with the utmost subtlety in order to avoid what he would have perceived as "dishonorable scheming against the Protector's kin" – the primitivist's income was generated by no other than the still-wealthy Anne-Marie Legard, which would explain his possession of not only updated equipment and intelligence, but also a more viable network of spies within and around the palace, originating from the source of the "monstrosity" herself.

The sealed metal doors of the palace were painted and ornamented in the manner of exquisitely carved wood with the Protector's Top Hat as the centerpiece and engravings of the Protector's exploits as a general in the Fifth Intergalactic War as the peripheral decorations. They receded before us, apparently in anticipation on the part of the footman at the controls on the inside. Enridge motioned for us to insert the soles of our footwear into the automatically fastening mechanism of the guest domestic travel

boards, lined up in the hundreds along the sides of the checkerboard marble floor. Our particular transporters were pre-programmed to transfer us to the desired location, at a comfortable moderate speed, apparently the default whenever the master of the house wished to relish the grandeur of his residence.

Describing the interior of the Legardium would require a thousand-page commentary on every pillar and fresco, every soaring staircase, colonnade, and walkway. Even more remarkable are the fountains springing from the floor to phenomenal heights or, conversely, from the ceiling. The droplets from the ceiling fountains are prevented by artificial gravity controls from contacting the ground and thus can be conditioned to form every manner of exquisite shape. I saw the form of a jester juggling spheres, rendered multicolored by streams of light emanating from the depths of the basins. Elsewhere I observed the water forming the keys of a grand piano, which seemed to behave as if struck and spread ripples upon a particularly strong impact. Bits of the palace glimmered and startled the eyes with a magnificent luster, and the inner sections of its spires and domes, constantly stretching upward, captivated by their sheer complexity and the grandeur of scale. It was as if the fantasy of some extraordinary child, refusing to accept the commonplace boundaries and caps on ornamentation imposed by "good taste", sneering at the unsubstantiated axiom that "less is more", had crafted this celestial sanctuary, which seemed to grow at every angle, to expand into another chamber or corridor or balcony or great hall from every discernible crevice and opening. A manner of purity and innocence permeated this lavish display, seeming to, through the radiant stone and glass, joyfully exclaim, "I am glorious, and *this* is what I can assemble!"

New sights entered my field of view as the board persisted in elevating us, and I observed the masterful contrasts of material, in columns of white alabaster and their capitals of raven-black obsidian, with colored geometric ornaments entwined around their slender cylinders. From someplace a gothic gargoyle stared at me with curious stone eyes, elsewhere a pattern of titanium triangles caught my eyes, spreading at even intervals from a single center in the style of the 24th-century Mathematica Revival. At other places still, which interested me most due to my avid enthusiasm for bioengineering, a live chorus griffins and basilisks, with color-shifted eyes unlike any others I have ever witnessed, sang Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" (of all things!) in angelically high tones.

The boards at last ceased their climb somewhere in the fourth hundred of stories, twisting themselves toward a metal-plated tunnel with synthetic ivory railings at the sides to separate the passageway from the various utility panels and coded button pads along the walls. This sector of the palace, I realized, was more reminiscent of a remote military installation than an aristocratic residence. Perhaps the effect was intentional, another addition to the eclecticism of the structure. Or it was likely that this was a more mundane region, not attracting any tourists or other unwanted visitors by any distinction from a power plant or an arsenal. If spies were to await us, especially internal agents of the Lady Anne-Marie within the palace, they would likely expect us in a salon with a fireplace and luxurious reclining hoverchairs – not here.

But here the discussion chamber was, concealed behind a steel door numbered by six digits and exhibiting no peculiar divergence from the other sternly uniform entryways stretching as far as I could see. Our means of transport halted in front of this

portal, removing themselves from our footwear while the voice of a security automaton programmed into the doorhandle instructed Minister Orthog to relinquish his ruby-hilted sword and place it into a receptacle camouflaged to conform without detectable difference to the texture of the walls. It was an old gentlemen's rule that prohibited the possession of weapons inside a discussion chamber, or the unleashing of any manner of force whatsoever upon anyone within such rooms, no matter what prior hostilities may have existed between the participants. As the walls were impervious to any listening device in existence (which would become distorted instantly if even attempting to overhear the conversation), the contents of one's propositions and deeds while inside could remain a mystery to the outside world for eternity until their author himself chose to divulge them. Thus, an uncompromising integrity was required in order to rely upon its features, and a man was expected to remain within proper boundaries toward his most cherished friend and most despised foe alike. Negotiations became much ameliorated since a weapons-collecting mechanism was installed in nearly every commonly used discussion chamber, in order to monitor that the "inflict no harm" principle remained in practice.

The door receded before us, and we stepped into an interior of sufficiently lavish decor, the corners of its metal walls smoothed into what seemed like fragments of arches instead of ninety-degree junctions of planes. Ornamented curtains and Oriental rugs hanging upon them concealed most of the austerity which pervaded this sector of the palace. The chairs were, too, reasonably cushioned and of ample height. At the opposite end of a polished redwood table stretching for nearly the length of the room, sat one who resembled a Victorian gentleman by his trim and thoroughly combed black hair and immaculate tuxedo suit with a scarlet waistcoat over a snowy white dress shirt. On the table lay a silver-shaded cylindrical hat with a golden rim. Its possessor maintained an uncommon brand of dignity, one emanating from his every gesture and expression, as if a constant feature of his life. The concentrated upward gaze of his frigid blue eyes was coupled with a meditative pose of a hand underneath his bearded chin. His unwavering aura of confidence assured any who encountered him that he possessed no intention of degrading or abasing himself before remarks that his carriage was too arrogant, or the intensity of his focus too great, or his slender jaw too prepared to respond to whatever words reached his well-proportioned ears. Even in an era as this, when the aging process is dramatically retarded in all individuals and a man in his sixties might seem twice as young, the lack of wear upon his face caused him to be frequently labeled as having fewer years than I. Not a hint of gray showed in his hair, and, at forty, he seemed literally unchanged from his twenty-year-old appearance. His trim, angular face showed no signs of senile slackening, and the bottom of his chin was as much a plane as his narrow, open forehead. He stood from his repose and faced us from an imposing height of two hundred thirty centimeters. There were men taller than he, but none could boast the peculiar effect communicated by his presence, not an intimidated sting of midgetry as felt by the moderately tall in the vicinity of giants, but a sense of one's own elevation along with him, as if he had unthinkingly, as a side effect, dragged nearby souls onto whatever platform or pedestal or column from which his dominance spread.

"My friends," he proclaimed in a smooth, flowing, elegant tone of neither high nor low pitch, but a particular intonation which granted finality to every expression of his,

"welcome. Dr. Meltridge, I trust you have had a stirring journey observing the features of my estate."

We faced him and responded with a punctual military salute to his own. The Protector's policy on bowing was one of complete disapproval. "I consider it a perversion of good manners that, for the sake of presenting with a courteous gesture another man, one must of his own will lower his stance," was his remark on the matter. He was not contemptuous of respects paid him and yearned for admiration and commendation, even of the ritual form, where it was deserved. But his policy regarding his citizens was never one advocating their deprivation for his sake. Men in his private employ are amply rewarded with currency units for scientific endeavors he commissions. The people in general, on the other hand, are his clients, delegating to him a minuscule portion of their income so that he may fund an army and police force for their protection, and support a justice system to resolve their quarrels. The miscellaneous services provided by the Estate of Maurice Legard have become separated from official association with the government. "My transportation networks, my promethium smelters, and my research laboratories need not extract mandatory fees from the populace. Should the people deem such facilities more optimal than those of competitors, they will pay for their own uses. Should they, on the other hand, prefer other ambitious entrepreneurs in these fields, then it would be a crime for me to cripple a fellow capitalist's superior endeavors through any manner of gratuitous funding presented to me from the people's wallets." The degree to which the Protector influenced the currents of Parliament and the power plays of his own relatives was the degree to which his vision of desired government corresponded with the frequently grimmer reality. Nevertheless it must be granted that, despite the grievous abomination that is the Collegium, the administrative spending of today is lilliputian compared to every manner of compulsorily funded expenditure during the days of my childhood. The Protector's private contributions to the Treasury have eliminated the need even for particular tax allocations for the military, police, and courts. The sole reason why any taxes persist are to fund that, which neither he nor I would wish to perpetuate.

"I comprehend your desire to inquire into my... shall I say... incomplete approach toward informing you of the precise nature of your assignment. We are presently in a secure enough setting to discuss this." He extracted a slip of paper folded over several times from a pocket on his vest. "Minister Orthog personally presented me with this letter sent to him by Dr. Nachtreiter, our Exploratory Supervisor within the westernmost Periphery." I was well aware of the navigational conventions to which the Lord Protector was referring. Ever since the 2500s, when the geography of single planets proved inadequate for expressing the relative locations of territories in the Protectorate, a three-dimensional Universal Euclidean System was devised, with six directions: North, South, East, West, Up, and Down, with the Earth's core designated to be the system's central point, relative to which all other locations in the universe could be expressed by a coordinate system.

"This document has seen no eyes except its author's. The scant data given here are reason enough for me to hire you for an undercover journey to the region," the Lord Protector continued. "This is, as of the present, an entirely legal action, sanctioned by both the Minister of Exploration and Colonization and the Protector himself. The official documents concerning this commission are presently in my private storage, to be

released only when any response to this mission will be rendered futile by the venture's overwhelming success. Read the letter, if you wish, and I shall elaborate from there." He handed me the unraveled silver sheet with glaring orange characters of a basic computerized font upon it, as was the preferred format for documentation along the frontiers. As I finished the text within the carrying capacity of the paper's area, the ink upon it molded itself into the characters which composed the second page, temporary electric interactions between the nanochips in the material's fibers and the electronic maintenance rovers within my cerebral cortex instructing the numerous tiny drones which carried a morsel of ink each to alter themselves in accordance with the program devised for them by Dr. Nachtreiter (although the user-accessibility of the technique has now rendered it a practice not exclusive to highly trained scientists). It was a most astonishing document, a historical account in itself, which I have since transcribed onto the foremost pages of this log detailing my adventure.

"Are you finished? Excellent. As it has been documented, we have stumbled upon the first entirely extraterrestrial sentient species since the Axztow Wars in Expansia during the twenty-fourth century. And these, at least as the description of their habits and physique thus far informs us, are not parasites who thrive upon planting their larvae into the brains of human beings. There will be plenty of Collegium minions, with whom then-Expansian dictator George Gakfield would have been pleased, who would state that mankind has proven itself utterly incapable of interacting civilly with creatures on 'its level of intelligence', which in their theories would serve as the warrant for affording us no more dignity or privilege than is granted to beasts. Dr. Nachtreiter rightly fears that, should word of this discovery reach the Committees' ears, not merely will the planet be branded off limits to human beings, and we forced to bid farewell to any of our aspirations for systematic investigation of the region, but all nearby bases and towns shall become depopulated, with expropriation as the means for doing so. Conford will attach himself like a leech or an Axztow seeker queen to this cause for the sake of 'Ishmaelism' and 'fair species competition' as an excuse to blight entire planets. He will act on his exalted 'precautionary principle' to prevent any manner of the aliens' knowledge of our existence. Simultaneously, he will form a 'Friends of *Planus nonvisualis*' Party in order to 'assume guardianship' over entities we in the Protectorate will never even be permitted to glance upon! Alas, his base of support is too numerous for us to convey a successful direct blow to his scheme. I am not overly captivated by the prospect of the new generation of ranting university students departing from their campuses and forming monstrous dark swarms amid residential streets and plazas, where people teleport to attend to their own peaceful affairs. But what perturbs me to a greater extent is their potential use of the enormous political leverage they amassed for themselves during the past two decades in a campaign too subtle for me to have detected and terminated until it grew into a menace to even my survival. This is a most precarious gamble I am undertaking. In the event of failure, I risk deposition in as swift a manner as that of my one-time elevation up the chain of command to the rank of *Protector Intergalacticus*. If success is ours, however, we can grasp onto another foothold for human habitation in the universe, and, which is more significant, exchange knowledge with this odd new species. The aliens are likely to embrace with joy and eagerness the multitudes of technological advances our culture can offer them, for, as Dr. Nachtreiter reported, their use of machinery is pitifully non-existent. In the meantime

we will be much benefited by receiving their ideas concerning Magnetica's geography and peculiar survival skills that may have to be undertaken. This is what your task shall aim toward. As a planetary biologist, and the best of your kind, you are fittest to refine our awareness of their consumption techniques, their exploitation of resources, their social structure, their language, and – which is our more immediate purpose – the terms under which they will consent to negotiations with arriving colonists. Along the journey to Magnetica, you are to station yourself for several days with Dr. Nachtreiter, the sole inhabitant of Hermes Base, with whom our secret is safe and who possesses valuable recordings and cartographic data which you will examine to recommend settlement locations and initiatives of resource extraction. Afterward you will proceed alone to the planet itself, found a base within walking reach of the Glassy Plain, and initiate data compilation. Dr. Nachtreiter must remain at Hermes in order to ward off any suspicious notions that his absence would ignite. Nevertheless, we will provide you with longer-ranged communications satellites and a permanent wormcable from Magnetica to Hermes, however great an expenditure that will entail. The planet is to be officially declared sovereign territory of Mauricius, *Protector Intergalacticus*, but property of Maurice Legard, to be explored and utilized in my capacity as a private citizen. The land upon it could subsequently be purchased from me by settlers and developers in all of its portions except the Glassy Plain, which belongs to the *Planus nonvisualis* until they are willing to annex themselves to us, which is also to be a worthy task for this mission. Our citizenship is open to all willing rational creatures, tall or short, humanoid or flat. You will be presented with standard equipment as well as any other tools that you deem necessary for the voyage. I will be generous with supplies and your salary, set, shall I say, at six million currency units daily, for the minimum length of one year that this mission shall encompass. Should the task be determined to require a longer stay, I will deliberate increasing this. You can expect to receive any manner of updated version of conventional instruments should you request this, including numerous hyper-condensers and clipper droids to relay messages directly to me. I would like you to ponder this evening over your precise needs and deliver to me a list. By nightfall I shall have my study connected with your residence by a private message tube, free of charge. You can drop your logistics sheet into the carrier vehicle, which will deliver it into a secret drawer in my desk. This is an innovation rendered possible by some of my research concerning the malleability of promethium, and our adversaries are not yet informed of its existence. It will be implemented by constructionbots, and thus you need not fear of any miscellaneous persons obtaining vital clues as to the nature of your assignment and our cooperation."

"How will the trip itself and the transportation of equipment be carried out without detection by border guards?" I inquired for clarification purposes.

"I have charted a probable course not nearing any outposts or settlements and advise that the ship be equipped with thirty Model Delta hyper-condensers, which should by several times exceed the amount required to transform you to Hermes Base within three days and renders any apprehension improbable," Orthog explained.

"Very well, then, my objectives are understood, and I shall endeavor toward their realization," I assured them.

"Splendid. Comprehending any man's need for mental preparation before embarking on such an unprecedented assignment, I would advise you to return home

for the evening," the Protector stated. "In the meantime, I would like to grant you a small advance payment for this undertaking. I am confident that you will appreciate its value." He extracted a brittle powdery substance compressed into a cube from a compartment underneath the table. This object was decorated with blue food paint, and scarlet type atop it, beside a representation of the Protector's Top Hat, displayed in slanted characters the word, "*Progress Unyielding*". "Throw this into the information receptacle near the foundation of your brain stem, and you will possess the opportunity to, at any time through the force of your will, present this musical performance in full scope to your senses and yours alone."

I had heard mention of music cubes, as well as image cubes and film cubes in the role of more readily accessible entertainment. They were the logical next step following the long-time popularization of Encyclopedia Chips and their derivations, Literature Chips, compact diskettes which permanently transferred phenomenal amounts of information to one's neurons, via the wiring enhancements and transportation nanodrones integrated into one's cerebrum, in a matter of mere seconds. The enhancement of men's erudition and processing capacity has enabled them to attain a level of erudition beyond the ancients' imagination. The average A.I.Q. (acquired intelligence quotient) of Protectorate citizens, hired as subjects of this year's independent scientific census, has reached the unprecedented level of 500, relative to a base level of 100 from the year 2000. Reaction time has simultaneously been condensed to a hundredth of what even the quickest reflexes can boast without artificial enhancement. To supplement all this, Swift Pills, during the 2720s, at last reached a national level of consumption, enabling an hour's work even under enhanced reaction circumstances to be completed in mere seconds, as one's own perception of time becomes delayed and the passage of milliseconds is perceived as a lengthy stretch by the equipped mind. Even as I am writing this presently, thoughts zoom from my head onto the paper at the speed of sound.

Luddites like Conford consider these techniques to be detrimental "drugs distorting the natural purity of the pristine human organism", that is, if the "pure organism" describes a diseased, decomposing walking carcass of early senility, barely managing to stand upright and to manipulate its surroundings. They neglect the fact that these substances have been demonstrated in laboratories and in consumer usage not to result in any harmful side effects, as friendly and symbiotic with one's organic cells as the maintenance rovers which, in one form or another, have been traversing the systems of the ten most recent generations, every next model more fittingly designed to repair atrophying structures and delay the aging process. Food Pills, Swift Pills, and now Esthetic Pills have in the meantime enhanced the health and substance of one's condition. I am glad to be living in this time.

"The cultural condition of our country has been so tainted by the antiprogressive demagogues that many even conscientious anti-environmentalist laymen cannot recall the words to our national anthem. Here," Mauricius pointed me out with an outstretched hand, "is one man whom they will never indoctrinate into their neo-Luddite reaction. I remember, in the days of my youth, as a general on the front lines, witnessing a crack brigade of our troops resisting an onslaught by a horde of mutations devised by the Alliance of Northern Dictatorships, which threatened to overrun our positions and assail my chief swiftporter refueling base, thus destroying my means of retreat and

reconsolidation. Already my supply dilemma was substantial, and this particular front had been subsisting on half-rations for several weeks, but this brigade's commander directed the men's attentions toward the plot of jagged iron which they were holding, and reminded them of the value of this land, its value to *them*, and the resources which would be theirs after they extracted them from it, and the territory which would be theirs to settle and to develop and use to fuel their aspirations. He proceeded to mention to them of the choking restrictions on land use in our enemies' lands and the Alliance's plans to rob the Protectorate of its terrain not for purposes of exploitation, but of barrenness, to blight our capacity to compete with them economically by bringing about our forceful deprivation. Then he began to sing this old colonists' anthem, the one under the notes of which the first expeditions outside the Milky Way hammered Protectorate flags into uncultivated rock."

His voice possessed tints of admiration and hope, but also of a certain nostalgic reminiscence. "The entire brigade took up his battle cry and, proudly, under the words of this creed, repelled the approaching waves of foes, simultaneously suffering only twelve injuries and no deaths. The news spread throughout the entire army, and singing, we began an offensive, driving the enemy back to his nearest fortified strongholds and overtaking those following a brief siege which terminated before nightfall." He laughed with a pure pride this time. "You expected us to behave like those sacrificial warriors in the past who 'surrendered their own lives' in order to protect their positions, or distract the enemy, or cripple him. But it is their own lives the soldiers were defending, and *Progress Unyielding* taught them this truth precisely: that no man is ever to lay a claim on their self-generated fortunes and the lives they made possible. It is oft that this element of moral identification, what the ancients referred to as 'the spirit', is of a significance as immense as the cleverness of one's battlefield tactics. Even the most adept scheme will fail if its executors act without a purpose, without a recognition of the reasons for their dedication to their struggle. But if they possess a solid determination to accomplish their objectives and bypass obstacles *for their own good*, evil will be rendered impotent in the face of the champions' radiant quest. Aside from the complexity of the piece, an intriguing challenge to one's perceptual mechanisms, listen to the lyrics, to stanza after stanza of lofty manifestation. *That* is what you will be defending; that shall be the cause which stands to benefit from your courageous and integral participation in this journey. May Reason be with you, Dr. Meltridge."

Chapter II Progress Unyielding

June 30, 2753,

*Our souls before these sights dwarfed shan't become.
Why bow to passive matter of antiquity?
What spreads from it is pandemonium;
Its barrenness is source for all iniquity.*

*'Tis in our minds the idols hatch,
Of stone for man to shape and mold.
Such logic does our hands attach
To this domain of lifeless cold,
To every cavern, crater, creek.
Wrong was the man who'd preached the norm
That worlds are destined for the meek!
Our will and strength give matter form.
He who grovels tastes his obsequies;
We float into the void, oases craft.
We are not slaving tribal bees,
And no collective guides our raft.
We are not one, but many knights;
Each does himself his quest ordain,
We thrive on work, and work from rights.
Our well-earned profit's our domain.*

*This ground bears meaning solely to our aims.
Its monuments stem from our ingenuity.
Glory to him who savage wildlands tames,
And weeds out every incongruity!*

*What shall replace the brittle dune?
What shall refine this cratered scar?
Our pavement shall embrace them soon,
And spread to every spawn of star
Yet seen, and into others we shall gaze,
And thus apply the universe's stock.
This is not but one transient phase.
Forever shall we tame new rock!
Cosmos is Man's, its means and goal.
Its exiled heirs now seek its wreath:
Supremacy, from atom, oil, and coal.
Our claim to treasures underneath
These jagged lands shall never wane.*

*Always grand mechanisms will be our guide.
No Luddites shall their betterment profane.
Inventors we exalt and vandals we deride!*

*Merit determines worth under our creed.
The self-made prodigy our government defends,
Does our endeavor by example lead,
And never harms one for another's ends.*

*What is the trait we deem sublime?
The source which does all virtue render.
It, dauntless, conquers space and time,
And never can its plight surrender.
It is inside us, best within the great,
The ego, mind, one's self, one's soul,
Prerequisite to any proper state.
Maintain your own, and you've fulfilled your role.
No world beyond this life is real;
Its furthering's our sole concern.
No godly favor is to steal,
No mystic afterlife to earn.
God's not above us, but within;
The Self's the Lord, Reason, His rite.
We have a universe to win.
Join us, great men, in splendid flight!*

"Aurelius, you seem rather exhilarated, and from no discernible source."

I told Margaret of the advance payment the Protector had granted me, and of my recent decision to employ this new ability of mine.

"A Music Pill! How exciting that must be. I am glad to see you contented for once. Am I allowed to learn more?"

"Only that I am to depart sometime tomorrow evening and not to see you for over a year. Where to and what for, I cannot tell you. As for the issue of my satisfaction, do not think the striving mind lacks it. Only in his work, knowing one's accomplishment, reaping its fruits, can a man be truly happy."

"So it is not enough that that Protector has lured your soul away from me, husband, but now he must deprive me of your body as well. I will miss these philosophical discussions during your absence, so we might as well converse into the night. I will ask you a question that countless philosophers have attempted to answer and failed to do so without arriving at some mystical 'intrinsic value'. Are you ready? Why do we live? You have stated to me that it is a virtue to act for the elevation of your condition and work to earn profit and create to lift hardships and deprivations from your existence, but what is that noble status or those treasured vaults or that, say, disease-free organism, going to be used *for*?"

"Why, to reach higher accomplishments, to generate more wealth, to attain greater health and physical perception. Think of it as a positive loop, Margaret. You live trying to live, and as a result live *better*, which then serves as a gateway to an even superior condition! Ayn Rand knew the answer to this question. 'It is only life that makes the concept of value possible.' It is a prerequisite to all your desires and to your hierarchy of importance. With increased wealth and influence comes the opportunity to obtain intellectual and emotional assets as well. A man whose robot sweeps his floors can, for example, pursue cooking or gardening in his spare time or learn a game to exercise his mind. Every skill he absorbs renders him self-sufficient to a greater extent, reducing his dependency on others. It simultaneously gives others an increased likelihood of seeking his services of their own free will. The pursuit of values does not end at some mystical intrinsic goal, and you seem to grasp that. It is continuous, and, if one wishes to live and to live well, it must never cease."

She laughed. "How quite considerate of you, Aurelius Meltridge. You are your own end and means, you egotistical little brat." She patted my head. "But what if you find that this attitude of the only good as your own places you at war against the universe and causes you to destroy everything that is not to your benefit?"

"When applied to human beings, this is not a threat. I recognize their legitimate self-interests and their right to pursue them, and I see no need to wantonly rob them and seek their enmity, to turn them into my dependents or my foes as a result of my injurious deeds. Where I wish to interact with them, I seek their consent. As for the non-sentient world, it is mine to the extent that I am capable of claiming it. What assists me, be it another species or a natural resource, I preserve and cultivate. What is of no value to me but also of no danger, I let remain as is and do not fill my mind with worries regarding its condition. What in the universe threatens my survival, however, be it by a sandstorm or an airless atmosphere, I must work to amend and adapt it to my ends. Any consideration outside that cannot have the term 'value' applied to it, for that designation exists only within the context of individual existence."

"But then what happens to that term Lord Conford always applies, 'fair species competition?'"

"Think about what this term implies, and laugh with me, Margaret. What, are we humans to compete with the elephants whom we sustain in our zoos by letting them loose to trample over our fields, or to release into an 'ecosystem' those hundreds of new species we have genetically engineered? Are we to compete for survival with our own resources, the animals who carry our loads and furnish our meals in a thoroughly cleansed and decolorified state? Or are we to relinquish territory until we have as much as the locusts that parasitically thrive upon infestation, or the vermin that would spread disease among our settlements; are we to submit again to their incursions instead of launching a lightning-swift campaign of extermination against them? There cannot be any 'fair species competition' in an ecosystem which caps man's abilities at the animal's level. We are not of their kind, Margaret. They are limited by their inborn instincts; they cannot help their helplessness; they cannot remedy their lack of innovation. Where they are encountered with benevolent conditions they multiply. When, however, the slightest whim of circumstance tweaks their fragile little ecosystem, they perish by the masses. Is that a dependence that you would want? And tell me honestly, because that is the vision propagated by the Viscount Conford.

“What is the essence of his creed? Like some Dark Age mystic of Original Sin, he proposes that man relinquish 'his knowledge of the power over life and death.' What is this power, and how is it manifested? It is the source of our conscious action, our desire to live, requiring volitional logical interaction with the outside world by means of resource utilization and technological development. The only result *for us* of surrendering such an awesome potential would be our own death; we would become like the transient, expendable little twigs we would consider ourselves to be, to be blown over by the first storm which happens to pass by. Who would prosper? Not our symbiotic comrades, not our beasts of burden, not our pets, not our laboratory experiments, not our food, the genome of which we must perpetuate if we wish to benefit from its attributes. We and they would all lapse into the same chaotic uncertainty, a turbulent worry about the next moment, not the next year, about their rumbling, bloated stomachs, not the amount of animated art on their white marble walls, about their premature gray hairs and rotting teeth, not their inability to detect turquoise lace from Newtonia in their commercial catalogs. Who would prosper? Only the monstrosities that do not serve our interests, but impede upon them. If we surrender our medical treatments, how many more viruses will re-inhabit our systems? How long would it be before another Cancer devastates our population like in the remote pre-colonization era of antiquity? The mindless ants would thrive in their totalitarian collectives; the mosquitoes would drench our blood from us without worry of retribution. What of those other planets where such despicable abominations have not spread? Who would prosper there? No man, and no creature. All would remain barren, mere rock, tattered and marred by unobstructed asteroids, eroded by sandstorms, the precious materials under its surface remaining latent for all perpetuity, not serving any end, existing without aim, while the Luddites remain obsessed with the aim of depriving them from us.

“Would the Luddites themselves prosper? I would like to see Conford in a savage's skirt, dancing around a hallucinogen-fueled fire, like the Leaver peoples which are but a dreadful memory of past ages, who have of their own will renounced their suicidal ways when man first began to orient himself spaceward. He would have relished it, indulging in the credulity of his subjects, chanting incantations which are to be taken on faith, which portray him as the sole medium between the people and the so-called 'gods', and grant him the blind subordination of men who could only be his inferiors. That is, if he could manage to become the one in a hundred thousand men who would remain able to persist to the ripe old age of forty-seven under conditions of the pristine wilderness. He wishes to be a Witch Doctor for a single reason: sloth. He desires supremacy, but he seeks not to work to attain it, but to ruthlessly suffocate the striving of men who do. He wishes to ascend to the peak by remaining at his present life of decadent deterioration, while pushing all others below his wretched state. That is the nihilism he advocates, the stranglehold of the incapable over the competent by virtue of their impotence to manipulate reality.”

“But,” Margaret said, “what if I claimed, as you would agree based on your philosophical foundations, that survival in any state is superior to non-existence, and that survival under the Ishmaelites' terms is the only kind possible in this universe, because man cannot exist as 'an island entire in itself', but possesses a role to play in the biological community, and relies as greatly upon the welfare of the parasites as he

does upon his beasts of burden? What if the destruction of the parasites and the subsequent proliferation of man's tools brings about such calamities as Imminent Universal Collapse or Spontaneous Planetary Explosion? Is it not more preferable, then, to retreat into a so-called balanced state rather than to continue a pursuit which will result in more harm than good?"

"What if I explained to you that all those apocalyptic prophecies are hoaxes?" I replied. "Every generation had its Witch Doctors, who hatched their own predictions of gloom and doom at hand. The Vikings trusted their mythology to forecast the inevitable fall of the gods in the final battle of good versus evil. From the superstitious popes of the Dark Ages to the underground mystic sects of the twenty-first century, 'divine prophets' have ranted about the Apocalypse to occur on every date of numerical oddity. Subsequently, neo-primitivist radicals in the 1960s formed their own pseudo-scientific branch, much resembling the perversion of genuine study that we can observe today, and 'projected' an Ice Age to occur due to 'malignant' anthropogenic effects upon the atmosphere. When that theory became empirically invalidated, those same fanatics launched a scare campaign of Global Warming and ozone-layer depletion derived from anthropogenic activities. When reality, following needless regulations and economic inhibitions, showed to be inconsistent with their dismal models, they began to chant the true essence of their unwarranted beliefs, that the Earth was not 'meant' for man and that the Wilderness in its pristine form, absent any manner of intrusion or extractive benefit, was of intrinsic value. When rational men exposed them for the contemptible crackpots they were, they kept silent for five hundred years, until the emergence of the next apocalyptic prophet, Felix Dortkampf, and his antiquated theory of universal collapse, based on a dynamic model which was already receding into the cesspit of recognized pseudoscience during his time. His prediction dates have forewarned of a singularity by 2600, the absence of which subsequent 'environmental scholars' merely explained via the excuse that 'the calamity is long overdue'. By one and a half centuries, Margaret!

"What of Spontaneous Planetary Explosions? Have you ever encountered *genuine accounts* of a planet's core collapsing due to the infinitesimal addition of mass contributed by human settlers and their structures, or of the second stage, the supposed violent dispersion of the planet's particles following an burst, which contradicts all of our studies of gravitation thus far? The parasites do not 'check' human expansion; they shackle the expansionists and slowly murder them. All the supposed injurious effects of development and colonization are not scientific discoveries, employed to devise a scheme of salvation. They are merely rationalizations concocted to support the scheme itself, which had been envisioned millennia prior to these environmental theories, by the first tribalistic sadist who saw his pleasure in inaction and the suffering of his brethren. Their world is his, and they are his heirs. They are the allies of the parasites, and of lifeless wasteland. By rejecting 'knowledge of the power over life and death', they are killing us and reviving the extinct pests. Some preach inaction and the balance between good and evil as the ideal. To counter this I will quote Ayn Rand: 'In any compromise between food and poison, only death can win. In any compromise between good and evil, only evil can profit.' The parasites are not essential to us or to our survival, just as murderers are not essential to their victims' lives. The only non-sentient creatures we require are those that possess values to share with us. They, in return, receive the

preservation of their own species and possible refinement through genetic enhancement. Mr. Quinn, Conford's idol, preached that evolution into more advanced beings as a genuine progress. Over a half millennium, Margaret, we have crafted several thousand new species, and enhanced ourselves to such an extent that would have occupied millions of 'Mother Nature's' years, by which time we would have been racked by some manner of cataclysm of circumstance, much like those which eradicated ninety-nine percent of all species existing before our time. What have the hypocrites to say to this? They scowl and state that we are merciless, ruthless destroyers. Excuse me, but who are the true destroyers here?"

"It is so soothing and reassuring to hear you speak, Aurelius," she said softly. "It almost leads me to perceive that I am living in some wonderful child's fantasy world, some vision out of my own innocuous adolescent years, where all is possible for one to accomplish, and one must only deliberate over the method, where one's purpose and one's motive force are as strongly ingrained as common sense, where everything seems so defined, rational, and clear-cut, like a game with rules one knows and tricks one can master..."

"What is a game, Margaret? How can an innovator design one? It is a construct based on objective rules, whose application can refine an individual's thinking. But the very concept of objectivity must exist in the game's creator as a prerequisite to his ability to devise such a tool. Wherefrom, as an irreducible primary, does he draw such awareness? Where else but from the world surrounding him, structured by means of the same fundamentals as those of a game, only more complex and more intricate a million times over? Here, however, the rules are not generously written out on an instruction sheet. They must be discovered and applied by man's mind through a process of logic, which in its advanced stages exists as the Scientific Method and its various corollaries. Life is not a game, but rather an approximation of the converse is true. A game is extraordinarily reminiscent of life. When man was ignorant and uncertain in the dreary swamps of his past, he lingered in a camp of rotting hides in the depths of the jungle wilderness. When he studied his world and realized that it can be fathomed, that it can be reshaped and refined to his purposes, he soared into space, he erected grand edifices on other worlds with heroic ardor, joy, and devotion. Why do you suppose the thinker who wrote *Progress Unyielding* and the explorers who sang it upheld precisely *those* ideals? Why were they so radiantly confident in their plight and in its nobility? Because absent that attitude, absent the worldview that comes about only following extensive wisdom and knowledge in regard to the one reality we inhabit, they would never have set foot on another planet. There would not have been a Magnus, a Gordian, a Protector Pierre, a Herbert Rudderman, an Alan Orthog. The child has his facts straight until the mystics stampede over him with their dogma of relativism, or of a superior reality immune to the senses, or of some cosmic Witch Doctor known as Mother Nature. Until his tribe or his campus or his environmentalist group pressure him to renounce the obvious, he possesses the firm, steady, unflinching hold upon his development that the weaker souls among the middle-aged are so nostalgic about. Unlike their paradigms have warped them to believe, life is not some incomprehensible miracle, and the conditions necessitating it are not to be confused with the preachings of a deluded charlatan taken on faith. It *is* clear-cut, deriving particular consequences from particular actions. Like in a game, it is a hindrance to act to one's detriment for the

sake of 'balanced play' when the rules give greater latitude. In chess, it is an injurious folly to permit your queen to become devoured by the opponent's pawn because your adversary is twelve pieces down. The object of the game is not to achieve stalemate, total harmony, inaction, i.e. a breakdown, but to *win*. How do you win in this game of life? Not merely by surviving, although that is a basic objective. You win by accumulating gains and advantages which enable you to live *better*. And, unlike a checkmate, which can be relished for but one brief moment, this triumph is continuous and escalating in magnitude. Here, you cannot extricate yourself from this game and simultaneously remain able to conceive much of anything, or retreat into an external world. When the game ends, you die. You as an entity cease to exist. Therefore, the objective is to prolong the game and enhance your position in it indefinitely."

"You and the Protector must have so many qualities in common. It is no mystery to me that you would be inclined to his service," she sighed. "I take it that this commission of yours is related to such a broad objective. Are you to become one of those cosmic adventurers who roamed the universe centuries ago in their scoutercraft? The Protector would not transfer to another even a *Progress Unyielding* cube if he saw no purpose behind the offering."

"You are more correct than you likely suspect," I replied. "I cannot inform you where I am headed, but you will become aware as soon as the time is right to reveal it. In later times you will not regret my absence."

"Write out the words to that song. No one seems to keep them in memory any longer, even though it is no Herculean task. Leave them for me, and I will remember you by them." A second later my hand concluded the transcription onto a nearby sheet.

"I am fighting a war," I explained to her in terms of greater bluntness. "The doctrine I refuted before you tonight is the vilest piece of treachery ever devised. Its sole objective is to demean the competent and create a hierarchy based not on merit but its diametrical opposite: impotence, the lack of virtue, vice. From the tribal shaman to Daniel Quinn to the present degenerate championing it, it has accumulated force, for few men of courage had the resolve to deny it, to combat it, and propel the entire species to ever greater heights. You are one of those minds with the ability be a general in the struggle instead of an ordinary soldier. But the first and most significant step is to reject the Luddites, to refuse to comply with their measures on any terms, to resist with operations centered at the headquarters of your mind: the only bastion they cannot conquer but of your own free will. They are parasites, and they thrive upon others' perception of inability as a claim to supremacy. Do not accept the legitimacy of their claims. Criticize them, expose their falsehoods, satirize their postings, identify their agents, deflect their heavy artillery – their double bind of stagnation or death – with your most powerful magnetic shield – your own example – your own life as independent of their victimizing and their sacrificing. Generations have built up a solid grounding for our army as well. We have had a most prosperous and functional nation in the past, called the United States, where speech was once free, property was personal, and living standards soared. Unfortunately the Witch Doctors, guided by the moral sanction of the people, drove that nation off course, undermined the values of freedom and progress which had enabled it to survive in the first place, and imposed a gradual downward drift toward their ideal of stagnation. But now we have another system, one whose theoretical footing is refined to an even greater extent than that of the United States

was. Yet it, too, is falling prey to expropriation, regimentation – to summarize, to tyranny. This will not linger. Only slightly longer than a year must we endure. Once I return, their stranglehold will have crumbled. Until then, I beg of you – as of my wife and of a creature of remarkable purity in her mind and the qualities which give it sustenance – to endure and not gullibly succumb to their tirades against our values and our glorious way of life. We are yet on the offensive, and we must make the decisive push, holding off their final and most massive volley against our approaching righteous legions. Do not 'give the enemy a chance'. Do not be appeasing or merciful in your approach toward them while they still hold a particle dispenser to your head. Reason is still the law of the land, and they shall taste its cold, imperturbable justice."

"I will not fall prey to them, and I will cease to criticize you for your tireless aspirations. I realize that it was improper for me to have attempted to impose a limit upon your creativity and your productive capacity, and you have convinced me that the alternative is not between restriction and death, but between aspiration and death, and I, for one, have decided upon the former. Oh, but I will still miss you, you splendid egotistical little brat!"

I embraced her and kissed her eloquent mouth repeatedly. I had, beforehand, taken enough Swift Pills to ensure that what transpired in a few seconds would pass slowly enough in my mind to be equivalent in tempo to the months in which I would not have her company.

Chapter III The Prodigious Underdog

July 4, 2753,

It was three days ago that I departed from the fair palace city of Legardium aboard an autowing of light Alpha class, the *ISS Adamant*, a swift contraption that endows me with more than ample cargo capacity. Sixteen hyper-condensers were activated to furnish the most efficient and economical wormhole to Hermes, within which the craft glided along without any malfunction. Four of the hyper-condensers are still in a reusable condition, and I plan to apply them at a later date, along with the reserves still at my disposal.

For purposes of base establishment at my final destination, I carry several boxes of portabricks. Each portabrick normally occupies only one cubic millimeter, but is prepared to unfold and attach itself via an adhesive on its sides to other such devices once I decide to give the command through a virtual-reality architectural program which permits me to determine the entirety of their arrangement, optional esthetic features included.

Three classes of droids accompany me on this voyage: the crew, the recorders, and the laborers. The pilot and the staff of the ship are possibly the most intricate in design that I have ever encountered, and they typically grant the passenger much breathing room, intervening only upon order and to bring some welcome convenience. They are skilled at decolorification of fruit and the cooking of pastries to serve upon command. There is even a musical automaton among them, which plays the violin while garbed in a full dress suit. Entertainment and material comforts are developed here to an extent which aims at replicating a surface lifestyle, and I find myself lacking none of the luxuries which permeated my earthly existence.

The recorders are to be my most capable instruments of data collection, including the gravitimeters, the cartographers, auditory collectors, magnifiers, subatomic samplers, storage computers (capable of independent self-relocation!), and agriplanners (as I seek to introduce a variety of earthly cultures to the soil of Magnetica in order to determine which are compatible with its nutritional yield as well as the terraformation potential of some less hospitable terrain).

The manual droid force at my disposal consists of farmers, building assistants, custodial droids, pavement depositors, porters, and miscellaneous entities to undertake tasks of sheer mechanical nature in my place.

With the ever-mounting pace of technological advancement in our society, man obtains continually increasing opportunities to utilize that faculty of his which separates him from inanimate matter or automatic brutes – his rational mind: the core of all activity that he originates. The robots can till his fields or gather his information, but it is ultimately his task to direct the expedition, apply the data to subsequent courses of action, and even repair his subordinates in times of imperfect fulfillment of their programs. Men have not become idle hedonists, but a drift of temperament toward the opposite direction has been achieved. With elimination of rote repetition in one's routine, creativity can thrive unobstructed; each problem is unique and requires a different approach, which one's analytical capacities must implement following extensive and complex deliberation. Man synthesizes his data into theories, and applies his theories to

material designs. That the material designs can be carried out swifter and with fewer hindrances only implies that man must comprehend his findings with increased expertise and yield theories of increasing complexity at a faster pace. Yet he also acquires the increased leisure, Swift Pills, and certainty of his basic necessities to enable him to soar to such a level of productivity. Simultaneously, he is endowed with superior capacities to reap the fruits of his ultimate labor, his *thought*. Every man is a theoretical thinker in our time, be it to an immense extent or a minor one. At one extreme, a man can be a Protector and industrial magnate in one – but another man can flourish as a designer of specialty recipes for a local restaurant.

What distinguishes man from the animals is precisely that activity which animals cannot perform. With the capacities bestowed upon him by achievements of technology, man further envelops himself in glorious civilization through increasing his exercise of his unique supremacy.

The *Adamant* reached the docking port at Hermes at 1325 hours today. I was greeted from the moment of my exit by the discoverer of Magnetica and the man who is to be my sole link to humanity for the next year. Doctor Helmut Wolfgang Nachtreiter is a thinker who witnessed an age preceding the Intergalactic Wars, the era when the neighbor galaxies of the Milky Way had still not become fully subordinated to human governance and the colonies were relatively autonomous with regard to Protectorate representation from Earth. Nevertheless, his was a visionary era, a time of bloodless and artificially unobstructed Accelerative Settlement, lasting from the 2498 triumph at the Grand Battle of the Potomac to the Protector Napoleon IV's declaration of war against the cosmic raiders from the earlier exile states in the year 2622. Nachtreiter himself was born in 2591, toward the conclusion of this period, but nevertheless still fueled by its extraordinary ideological momentum. Dortkampf, the author of the Theory of Imminent Anthropogenic Universal Collapse, was a rightly dismissed underground mystic back then, and the ideological arena had belonged to the Protector Pierre's formulations of Accelerative Settlement as the guideline for frontier policy, as well as the theoretical micro-foundations of a meritocratic society by Count Plasticmold. Dr. Nachtreiter is one of the few men I know who not merely *asserts* that he holds these ideas close to his person, but who also *demonstrates* a fiery passion for them with his every mention of related topics, in his devotion to his endeavors of exploration, and in his loyalty to the objective and humanistic spirit of scientific discovery.

His past speaks of loftier posts than this. For a brief period, he served as a research advisor to Napoleon IV with regard to reclamation projects on newly assimilated planets following the damage wreaked in the attempts to wrestle their possession from the cosmic raiders. Following the Protector's death in 2717, he worked as chief designer for Marscorp Insecticide Syndicate. There he developed a remarkable teleportable spray with nanoscopic cameras integrated into the canisters that contained it, so as to record the locations of insect-parasite habitats in metropolitan complexes and parks alike and literally vaporize them. His innovation has resulted in the virtual extermination of three-fourths of known insect species (except in zoos and research laboratories), at last permitting man to triumph over the gruesome pestilence which had once infested his organism, laid larvae in his system, and violated the territorial integrity of his home for dreary millennia.

Yet what did Dr. Nachtreiter receive in return for his benevolent invention? He was treated with a dreadful abasement by the fifth-generation executive slacker of MI Syndicate, who neglected to grant him so much intellectual credit as to place his name upon the commercial packaging of the product, which was instead misnamed "The Layman's Spray". The marketer who devised such an abomination of a title attempted to justify it with the statement, "It is not who created it that matters, but who the beneficiary will be. Since this product was ultimately envisioned to bestow a generous gift upon the average man, it is fitting that the name emphasize such a purpose." Dr. Nachtreiter resigned in outrage upon receiving news of this and entered a period of independent research funded from his own rapidly depleting resources, as it was during this period that the miscreant Protector Frederick was undertaking the deluded nationalization of the research industry. The increasingly government-dependent corporations rejected Dr. Nachtreiter's first-rate services on the grounds that "the public likes to see a more giving man at the head of its service projects, not a profit-mongering technocrat." Only following the Legardian coup d'état of 2725 was he able to regain a private commission, this time, to the irony of history, as a field assistant to the frontier studies of Dr. Anne-Marie Legard.

"The girl possessed perhaps the highest-rate mind I ever encountered," he spoke to me on the matter over a welcoming banquet that his mechanized staff had arranged for us. "There was none so skilled and systematic in classification and diagramming, as well as tracing ecosystem links and devising technological measures to transform all sorts of wildlife into human benefactors and resource generators. The first several planets upon which we landed were converted into locations suitable for development with unprecedented swiftness, and the near-entirety of mankind's knowledge attributable to Anne-Marie Legard was first formulated between 2727 and 2732. Her transformation was gradual, and not a single person in her vicinity was capable of tracking it, myself included. I did not notice her initial symptoms, nor the transition stages to what became a mania for the objects of her study, a subordination of the search for truth to some incomprehensible passion for the wildlife *per se*.

"At one point on our final journey together, I at last witnessed the outcome of her alteration. Our camp was surrounded by a horde of the most grotesque and moronic organisms imaginable, a semi-animate brand of giant slime – what would have been closer to a species of gigantic bacteria instead of an animal if not for its supposedly complex digestive tract and hundreds of aimlessly wriggling tentacles. These were creatures that emitted foul, potentially poisonous vapors in a vicinity of approximately two hundred meters. Left to themselves, they would oft suffocate in the mounds of excrement which they indiscriminately deposited at all times. Their presence on the outskirts of our research outpost had rendered inaccurate our measuring instruments and skewed our recordings of air pressure, particle abundance, and even the expanse of the planet's atmosphere. Some of the personnel began to experience symptoms of oxygen deprivation and were fainting on the spot while concentrations of infectious microbes were also on the rise. In the meantime the hordes continued to creep closer to our buildings, and I realized that further coexistence would be impossible. Their entire species could have been eradicated off the face of the planet, along with every particle of their byproduct, at the press of a button. The ultimate authority rested with the Lady Anne-Marie, and I consulted her. I was battered, in return for my consideration, with

volley after volley of every possible curse, vulgar condemnation, and suggestion of my depravity. The fact that we would shortly suffocate within the fumes did not perturb her. She remarked, to my appalled terror, that she would not eliminate the bloated bags of disease because she 'liked them.' I inquired into her motives in selecting such a preference, and she responded with a no less grievous a backlash. 'You hard, fanatical old man!' the Lady Anne-Marie screeched at me in so distorted a tone as ever no vulture could approach replicating. 'Why do you always seek some cold, absolute reason for everything? Is there nothing sacred and analytically inviolable to you? Do you always seek to squeeze some sort of personal advantage or petty gain out of your associations?! Why can't you understand that there are higher virtues, of mercy, and of love for one's fellow creatures, and forgiveness for their faults?! Why can't you leave them alone and go back to a realm where you cannot harm Nature's children?'

"In the meantime several of my assistants were in danger of lung collapse from a malignant form of microbe which existed in symbiosis with the slime creatures. To preserve their lives and, in the end, my own as well, I endeavored to remedy this irrational fit in the only manner accessible to me. After all, the alien slugs posed a menace to my existence through their infectious perpetration of my camp, as did the Lady Anne-Marie through her admittedly arbitrary refusal to permit me the commission of a self-preserving practice. I threatened her with a raygun and thus compelled her to disable her private security mechanisms and grant me access to the extermination trigger. Following my commission of the deed, the base was re-sanitized at enormous expense. The entire expedition was relegated to a recuperation facility, all while the girl sent at me never-remitting barrages of fists to 'demonstrate the combined weight of the suffering' I was said to have inflicted. Because the real threat to my life was averted, I put up with the beating – though it did not prevent her from seeing me as a threat.

"We were in no condition to prolong explorations of the region, and, shortly, following a return to Legardium, I was court-martialled under charges of species genocide and mutiny. I will not venture into the details of my trial presently, but to say that I was forced to single-handedly mount a defense against a cadre of the foremost jurists of the Intergalactic Protectorate. My primary argument was, as you could have expected, that I committed the deed in self-defense and thus as a perfectly justified procedure. I found myself chastised and libeled in every major publication, and the even judge himself uttered an occasional derogatory slip in my address, which action was neither noted nor its perpetrator removed from a post supposedly requiring objectivity. Gamblers were placing bets on how many millennia of imprisonment I would receive, and likely the uppermost of them would have not been significantly removed from reality had I not, upon the final date of the trial, received a lengthy oratory advocating my plight from the brother of the injured party himself. I was acquitted, and, subsequently, the panel which had presided over my case was in its entirety swept into the prisons on charges of accepting bribes from a source we can only guess at. It was then that I received, as a Protectorate Honor, my present position in the Ministry, although the Lord Protector could perform scant deflection of the Collegium's ploys to consign me to insignificant tasks fit for fresh university graduates. This is my first undertaking of lingering significance since those turbulent times, and also the first in which I have been capable of immortalizing my name in a discovery even as minor as that of a plant form. I hope that you comprehend the immense importance this holds for

me as a symbol of my life and my struggle for accomplishment. This mission, perhaps my clearest avenue to the legacy I envision, is one into which I shall pour the entirety of my energies and assist you as my confinement to this outpost best permits me."

While slowly eating my decolorified sugared pretzel, I inspected the mannerisms of this slender snow-haired prodigy. He had recounted his life to me with such a contrast of tone, a reflection of the variety of sensations he must have experienced, that I could hardly concur with the Lady Anne-Marie's identification of him as a "cold, hard old man" lacking "human" qualities. Due to his logical thinking and his unflinching loyalty to it, due to his firm grasp on his ultimate priority and his refusal to relinquish it for the sake of lesser honors or even harms, he is a more profound representation of *Homo sapiens* than a hysterical, capricious, oppressive Lady Anne-Marie could ever be. He is aware with an astounding clarity of the ideals that he upholds, and that cognizance, attainable only by means of thorough deliberation, only adds fervor to his advocacy of them. Despite his turbulent path – strewn with injustices and obstructions placed there for no identifiable profit to their originators – he retains a straightforward, methodical disposition, just the one befitting the adolescent "game player" I have professed myself to be and admire. During our introductions he spoke to me in summaries, sufficient for me to understand the peculiarities of his life and experience. He needed not justify his particular positions in my vicinity, for we have both, from our fundamental philosophical base, the capacity to forge infallible logical supports in their regard. That he harbors such a faculty I know from his occasional slips into the realm of ethical argument, as well as his recent letter and past scientific reports I have had the opportunity to review: examples of a most disciplined analytic, master at causation and data integration. He will be an ideal collaborator with me in this endeavor.

Following the banquet we entered the command chamber of Hermes Base, a stretching space almost squeezed against the bulging windows of the main compound, from which a comprehensive overview of the terraced structure was available, beginning at its near-apex. It was a sight beyond the experience of an earthbound "groundling", as Dr. Nachtreiter refers to them, as it requires an asteroid with a two-kilometer-wide equator to furnish it. The scintillating golden-orange herculeum pavement lay spread evenly, without a single breach in its placement, across a cap that was the visible half of the asteroid, as if a crown upon the head of some monarch too large to be seen. The intricately layered buildings were similarly plated – seeming to be its wedges – and other polyhedral ones in the distance – its gems. All exhibited a splendid luster and produced an interplay of beams which was not significantly inferior in complexity to similar designs at the Protectorate Palace, and which simultaneously served a practical purpose by proliferating the concentrated rays sent forth by the marble-sized Artificial Sun atop a nearby robotic power station. From there the rays were distributed evenly across the landscape in order to avoid their potentially destructive impacts in a concentrated state.

Yet it was the material inside the device-filled room that interested me most. I possessed the distinct honor of being the first audience for Dr. Nachtreiter's presentation of his *Magnetica* files, a compilation of his data and extrapolations in their entirety. It occupied some eight hours of our time, even while under the influence of some five Swift Pills each, to examine the files' every detail, but I shall swiftly declare the essence of my findings from that session.

The planet Magnetica is roughly 1.3 times the size of Jupiter in its diameter, but a fundamental quality differentiates the two celestial bodies. Jupiter is a gas giant, possessing as its only portion of solid material a core which nevertheless grants it substantial gravitational pull. Magnetica is in composition nearly identical to our Earth, excepting the extreme proportional difference involved. Its crust alone reaches a depth of some five hundred kilometers, as gathered from observations of the shallowest faults within it and the depth to which the source of magma could be pinpointed. This implies that, in comparison with Magnetica's pull, that of Jupiter is like the caress of an infant. Analysis of geological material on a subatomic level presents an estimate of the planet's age at some 7,302,280,000 years, explaining the diversity of terrain and the varying assortments one might find in every single spot on the planet. There are no vast expanses of tundra or desert, for example, but the two extremes of wasteland are frequently seen to border each other. A map of Magnetica thus far compiled reveals a multicolored patchwork of no particular pattern whatsoever, with the exception of two distinct mountain ranges, one of which circumvents the sphere and extends through both of the supposed poles (which, oddly enough, possess ice in near-equal amounts to the equatorial regions) that has been dubbed the Jagged Lands. This area is composed of lengthy stretches of odd needlelike spires, the majority of which manage to remain upright at heights of five to ten kilometers. One of the ancient explorers, traveling on foot, would doubtless have been unable to even enter onto the slope of one of those formations, not to mention surmounting it. A second, milder barrier is posed by the Metallic Hills, an understatement for a series of gently curved but nevertheless formidable giants branching off the Jagged Lands at the top of the planet's southern third and extending for some twenty thousand kilometers until leveling off thirty degrees northeast of their starting position. Dr. Nachtreiter spotted not merely a potential source for iron and copper, but immense deposits of various ores lying at the surface in unrefined chunks. The hills are a favorite perching spot for colonies of *Secundus nachtreiterus*, and it has thus been a task of considerable difficulty for him to distinguish their genuine texture using observational tools from a spacecraft floating along Magnetica's orbit. Nevertheless, he hypothesizes (and presents this with a noteworthy degree of confidence) that the range itself is comprised of largely metallic elements, suitable for extraction and refinement by mining initiatives which would alone provide for several millennia of occupation in those parts. He urged me to direct significant notice at such a prospect and design a method of extraction peculiar to the composition of the Metallic Hills.

Using these two ranges as points of reference, Dr. Nachtreiter has divided the planet into three geographic sectors. This classification is based in part on his identification of three massive tectonic plates – exhibiting discernible tension at their boundary lines which, as could have been expected, lie within the mountains. The region known as Southplate lies below the Metallic Hills and is isolated at the west by the polar stretch of the Jagged Lands. North of the Metallic Hills are the Forelands, the most massive of the three formations, encompassing some forty percent of Magnetica's surface. Between the endpoint of the Metallic Hills, stretching until contact with the Jagged Lands at the east, is an area of predominantly minor elevations known, in accordance with its approximate shape, as the Crescent. All of these expanses presently serve to contain only the ubiquitous greenery of *nachtreiterus*, without

miscellaneous predators or microscopic life forms. The plants nevertheless contribute to an atmosphere replete with oxygen, which would have been suitable for human life without artificial modifiers had it not been for the factor of Magnetica's gravity. Fortunately, I shall, during my journey, be clothed in a PRLS, a Planetary Repellent Levitational Suit, which can be adjusted to the gravitational specifics of any celestial sphere and exert a corresponding upward pull on my organism. A PLRS is capable of maintaining my presence on the surface without my being splattered across it, as well as endowing me with the capacity to float to a higher altitude by means of increasing upward force and to remain there by once again conforming it to the equivalent of the planet's gravity.

A fourth distinct portion of the planet cannot be assigned any classification aside from that of a phenomenon of its own class. It is the sole island of sentient life in a chaotic and turbulent wilderness. It is the unnaturally even, flat, and mirror-smooth Glassy Plain, habitat for the *Planus nonvisualis*, who have never been observed to venture outside its borders. The Glassy Plain, to add to the astonishing visual effect it creates, breaches what would have otherwise been a complete junction between the Jagged Lands and the Metallic Hills. It seems to be an unobstructed avenue between Southplate and the Forelands, and Dr. Nachtreiter can only speculate on the method of its formation. We both are inclined to deem impossible such a structure in nature, especially as it seems to cut through where, by all geological principles that I have been taught, mountains should have towered. Over its eastern border looms the gargantuan Mt. Sentry, at 35,312 meters tall, its peak the highest point on Magnetica. Too many discernible "coincidences" exist about this feature, that they render it possible to entertain a hypothesis of its artificial generation. Yet if that were the case, what tools must have been available to the aliens for the area's refinement on such an extensive scale? Dr. Nachtreiter's account of the creatures themselves displays them as clumsy, irrationally moving octapeds with stubby limbs and no apparent means of firmly gripping a foreign object (given that they cannot detect its particular location or coordinate their limbs toward grasping it). Moreover, not a single trace of technological utilization has been attributed to the *Planus nonvisualis*. The question at present remains a mystery, but one whose unmasking is necessitated by my mission.

Concerning potential settlement locations, any of the three plates possess terrain to establish colonies in close proximity to each other. Using present geographical data, I have initiated drafts for future metropolitan and industrial infrastructures. It is evident that strips of land near the Metallic Hills are to become the heaviest-populated in the smallest stretch of time. Residential communities will spring up at greater convenience to workers, so as to render the mining concerns immediately accessible. The Lord Protector had, in his final discourses to me, elucidated his desire to construct ample housing for future employees on the planet. My esthetic tastes have been granted free rein in the design of their residences and the placement of their majority during my stay on Magnetica. I must merely act in accordance with the minimum requirements of a three-story mansion with at least thirty-five rooms and ample space for a private garden and park. As soon as a permanent wormcable is established between Hermes and my destination upon landing, Dr. Nachtreiter will receive clandestine shipments of assorted building materials, packaged for teleportation to the new frontier. The expenses for the venture are to be colossal, but nothing the wealthiest man in the universe cannot afford.

The Lord Protector has confessed to me that he expects his personal fortune to be doubled as an eventual result of Magnetica's resource output, and thus he has hastened to place the planet under the proprietary fold of Legardian Promethium (although the venture will necessitate his business's expansion into the activities of an all-purpose corporation). Dr. Nachtreiter suggests also to invest in extraction operations and thus a metropolitan network within the Crescent, for he suspects that the expiration of uncounted generations of greenery there has yielded considerable deposits of coal for the taking. Nevertheless, the entirety of the surface, with refinements applicable to particular areas, can be rendered habitable and arable, and there are prospects for the initial mining communities' merger into a single residential/industrial complex encompassing the entirety of the planet's surface and possessing all the luxuries of Earthly life, similar to the supercity of Justicopolis in Expansia, the university haven of Academium in Aristotelia, or our own Marsopolis, Venusia, Plutonia, Sirius City, and Westland, serving as homes for perhaps ten trillion citizens of all trades. Considering that the payment for workers' dwellings, as well as the activity of their careers, will ultimately result in the benefit of Maurice Legard, this is quite an investment indeed.

Yet the foremost object of my concern manifested itself upon my examination of the various recordings of *nonvisualis* voices to which I had been exposed. For hours I struggled over the cryptic language in futility, not spotting, in the manner of Dr. Nachtreiter, any peculiar structure aside from the ubiquitous "*quisly*". That in itself was a sound distorted phonetically from its spelling, and some of the others were plainly unintelligible. Perhaps, upon first examination, the genuine patterns of the language merely did not flow into my mind. Any means of communication so varied in tone, pronunciation, and word length is accessible to a sentient being, but only to a sentient being. An automaton or a database can store hundreds of languages and dialects (inserted into it by human beings), but it cannot and will never possess the ability to process the unknown, to assume the creativity to decrypt the language of another. It is a mere machine, a follower of programmed commands, a mechanism established by the mind to perform its worldly bidding. It may be a machine of immense complexity and survival value to a human being, yet without the mind to operate it, it is as valuable as a currently idle deposit of ore in the Metallic Hills. I resolved, therefore, to transfer the language tapes into the source of all my theoretical innovations. Fortunately Hermes Base contained a chip converter, and the recordings became swiftly transcribed onto an older-model diskette compatible with my Neck Electronic Receptacle (a NER or a "ner", as the abbreviation's long-time usage has caused it to gradually transform into an item of common vocabulary). With a solid impression of the various multi-voiced conversations now within my mind, I nevertheless resolved to retain the Voice Chip in my possession so as to refresh any gaps that might potentially arise in the future. The reception of a chip is the accelerated version of the reading of a book or the hearing of a musical disk; it remains the task of memory to capture the content in its essence in order for it to become manipulable by the individual. The more updated pills, such as my *Progress Unyielding* cube, are permanent modifiers of one's cerebral structure, which possess the chemical catalysts to create additional neurons in the brain with precise bits of information already configured into them and capable of being accessed at will by means of the nanoscopic maintenance rovers that also serve to amplify the capacity of the nervous system to carry out the orders of one's volition. Nevertheless, the

opportunity of obtaining a Voice Pill in these parts is non-existent, and the chip, with sufficient re-usage, will grant me my objective of decrypting the *Planus nonvisualis* linguistic structure.

By this night of my repose, we have not yet advanced to a disclosure of the physical footage which had captured some of the creatures' activities – as well as whatever molecular data Dr. Nachtreiter was able to gather while in Magnetica's orbit. Nevertheless, the plethora of detail and the immensity of accompanying formulae and numerical figures have formed a whirlwind within my mind, and I must grant them time to become sorted into their proper structures and become more concrete within my own understanding before I can proceed. In the meantime, I entertain myself with a replay of the choral orchestration that is *Progress Unyielding*. I can almost envision the positions of the massive chords and the intricate sixteenth notes which accompany the lyrics in transitions and vocal parties. I become captivated by the glorious crescendos which serve to supplement the height of philosophical deliberation in the poem itself, and the confident, unflinching ascent of its passionate melody onto the heights of profound, contemplative ecstasy. Not a single shred of shame permeates the masterpiece, and the interplay of voices proclaiming its message never falters, never stumbles or wavers, but rather elucidates its creed, in a volume of booming magnificence, overshadowing all doubt, calling forth to all the thinkers of the universe that *this*, their splendid flight, is the destiny of man, and woe to him who casts a shadow of uncertainty upon it! Although the instrumental accompaniments are manifold and extraordinarily ornate, the primary one is a triumphant procession of octaves on the piano, requiring a massive, tense, determined hand and a dauntless temperament. I listen to it from beginning to end and nevertheless, every subsequent time, spot a new flavor or passage or melody previously undetected.

In times up to the Second Universal Peace, the epoch of the present, humans had a need for a period of suspended consciousness, known to the peoples of past as "sleep". For the sake of recovering its vitality and refreshing its processing capacity, the brain was required to "repackage" its contents and filter out any superfluous data clogging its storage. With the elementarily accessible Certainman Nanorover model, the human mind was endowed with the capacity of "repackaging" at will and discarding information based on conscious rejection rather than subconscious routine. The tiny metal buggies now zoom back and forth across the axons and dendrites of nearly every Protectorate citizen, myself included, and exercise that (and only that) authority which is granted them by individual volition. Whereas the unequipped human mind was unprepared to handle such detailed data processing, intelligence enhancements and Swift pills now enable such functions to be controlled deliberately. Sleep has become an obsolete ritual forgone by the majority of today's citizens, who desire to free the time for genuinely mind-stimulating activities, which are presently the sole means of renovating one's consciousness. And what other approach can there exist in amplifying the mind potency but that which renders it more effective with one's every deed, every second of one's entertainment, information acquisitions, and career undertakings? How many hours of idle, passive slumber have now been placed at man's willful disposal, to relish the fruits of his work and to equip him for increased productivity?

Thus, here I am, immersed in my lengthy deliberations during the absolutely arbitrary designation of "night", which may itself atrophy from our culture in coming

generations. Future generations may never be required to perceive the Earth's rotational dichotomy of light and darkness, either due to their presence on an asteroid such as this – which is illuminated constantly by an artificial source – or on even on the settled planets. There, the sprawling metropolitan complexes provide streetlights, glowing windows rising thousands of stories into the upper atmosphere, phosphorescent decorations and entire luminous buildings – experiments in esthetic design, specifically intended to render even pavement of the blackest tyrannometallum, that crude war-time grandfather of the Synthetic Metals that followed, striped with golden beams. It is doubtful that a significant alteration of the human psyche any longer accompanies the turning of Earth away from its natural Sun. This is, in any case, beneficial in expanding the productive capacities of man and retrieving the idle hours out from the grasp of that frightful impotence which had consumed man during the dreary millennia of antiquity, when he trembled in fear of encroaching predators, then of the thugs and looters who had roamed the streets veiled by darkness's cloak, then of the ruffians and drunkards who re-emerged in all their grotesque depravity during the intermittent periods of Enlightenment culture's decline.

This is the time at which my thoughts orient themselves in another direction, one related to the historical significance of the date at present. This, the Fourth of July, had been a holiday of independence in a nation whose tale is a tragic one at best. It was erected on a radiant vision – of the individual, capable of his own governance, and of government, serving merely as a penalizer of abuses, not a controller or re-distributor. A near-millennium ago, a collaboration effort by the best of its people, its statesmen, its thinkers, its planters, investors, scientists, and traders – along with the impersonal but powerful ideological presence of three esteemed giants of that time, Locke, Voltaire, and Montesquieu – forged a nation which, for the first time in all existence, repudiated the concept of societal or authoritarian sanction for rights – stating that rights to the aspirations of man, to his "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," are inherent. What a stir that must have created in a world which had only begun to awaken from the swamps of theological mysticism and unconditional tyranny! And thus this country progressed, its philosophy granting the innovators within it the capacity to develop many of the first massive industrial ventures of their time, which could compete with each other to create the most needed and best-designed products, and in return reap the greatest wealth. There, standards of living soared and life expectancy doubled in a mere hundred years, all because of a crucial recognition: that the right to life and the right to property are not antitheses, just like the spirit and the body are not. The utility of one's own property is the sole means to life in this world, just as the body is the sole means to spiritual fulfillment with this world, to the happiness reaped by one's mind through prosperity in the only universe that is of any significance.

Yet never did the masses in that country dare recognize that it was precisely their self-interested pride that rendered possible their love of property and their love of life. They did not comprehend that the witch doctors who had taught them otherwise, and who attempted to sever this link within their minds, were not apostles of peace and brotherhood, but the ancestors of Ishmael. These enemies of progress sought not fraternity but population control, not tranquility but disjoint tribalism, not capitalism and the free market of ideas, but the despotic primeval bog which their final apostles dared openly exalt. From abroad and at home, the rhetoric of Marx, Dewey, Woodrow Wilson,

and the Roosevelts was permitted to seep into the people's minds, to condemn capitalism and industrial prosperity as an exercise of "the law of the jungle," when the law of the jungle was what the anti-capitalists wished to implement. Their ideological successors in the mid-20th century split into several factions. Some, the religious fundamentalists of that nation, proclaimed with self-righteous fervor that a supernatural force was all – a capricious deity acting in the manner of a vengeful despot, demanding obedience above creativity and subservience above aspiration. Others, the collectivists and communitarians, also proclaimed that a supernatural force was all – an arbitrary amorphous blob known as society, comprised of all but acting in all respects for none, whom all must serve and of whom none must expect their own elevation. Their collectivism was a system in which a select few parasites, elevated via inability instead of merit, reigned supreme over the harnessed populace. Their children were ranting, hollering drug addicts who roamed university campuses, persecuted thinkers, and demanded an abdication from Western culture and a relapse into the horrors of stagnant savagery. Their children, in return, were the representation of their ideal, a tribe of apathetics who deemed apathy a virtue, who flaunted their lack of self-esteem and observed a crusading resignation. They perpetrated a systematic campaign to inflict terror and misery, not by means of brutal repression, but by the tactic a horde of puny ants, roaming the limbs of the prodigious giant, irritating him to the point of the unbearable, to provoke a hopeless collapse into their hill of muck so that they would feast on his carcass. Little was left of the ideal of private property and individual rights, as the new hoodlums spoke of "mercy and compassion" to armed fanatics from abroad while screeching mindlessly about the evils of "capitalist greed" and the need to restrict the productivity of the men whose efforts had sustained them and granted them the mass media by means of which they could broadcast their abominable dogma.

Such was the state of the free country at the turn of the millennium, but hope nevertheless lingered in the minds of the few thinkers remaining, a prospect of a second ideological leap forward, a return to the legacies of the Enlightenment but also their expansion to counter the destructive influence of the antiprogressives and tribalists. This was a philosophy which had nearly remedied all the previously unsolved contradictions, a movement known rightfully as Objectivism, initiated by a woman without whose influence I would not be on this asteroid today, preparing for yet another courageous expansion of my domain. Unlike the pseudo-utopian socialists of the past, this system proposed a different ideal for a society unfettered by limitations, expropriations, and sacrifices, for a purely voluntary means of association in which personal judgments would come to be based on merit rather than circumstance, and decisions would be founded on reason rather than arbitrary pronouncements from above.

A new breed of Americans came about in the 2010s, genuinely committed to the ideal of reason. They employed it above all in the sciences, rational, systematic, clear-thinking young innovators, Morton, Plateman, Riggins, to whom we owe the hovermobile, the raygun, and, above all, from the clandestine subterranean laboratories of the legendary Project FTLT – Faster-Than-Light Travel. Their work produced the early version of the hyper-condenser, the overtly and proudly designated Wormhole Creator. This device produced grand implications for centuries hence. With a gradual refinement of wormhole technology, the galaxy no longer served as an obstacle to

man's triumphant expansion. Hundreds of light-years could eventually be bypassed within seconds. The formation of passages to serve as shortcuts to distant locations was harnessed into a means of crafting permanent and convenient avenues among distant planets and even distant star systems. A near-half-century following the phenomenal breakthrough, the foremost of intergalactic expeditions was launched into a galaxy newly discovered by the meticulous astronomer Alexander Mantos. Onto the jagged cliffs of the planet Mantosia was in 2065 dispatched a mission of enthusiastic youths endowed with the time, the willpower, and the intellect to develop a civilization independent of the Earth and its resources. They were led by the brilliant Marcus Josephus Magnus – the political, philosophical, and physical founder of the Grand Dominion of Expansia, which did not re-establish contact with the remainder of humanity until 2456.

Yet these never-fading feats of scientific discovery led in a diametrically opposite direction from the political developments on Earth. The very men of genius, who had crafted devices which would ameliorate the lives of their fellow men without possibility of overestimation, were slandered as "elitist technocrats" for their superior ability and persecuted by the genuine elitists – as the term should apply to groups demanding exclusivity in their privileges. They were forced to hold their work under a veneer of secrecy and engage in elaborate concealment operations. Their lives as persons as well as free minds stood on the line, and so did the survival of the machinery that they introduced, threatened by the police state of the time. They suspected that the brainwashed populace of that period would respond with a fiery outrage at the magnificent capacities with which such radical technology endowed man. The leftist "champions of the people" would rant of unforeseen consequences and man's "destiny" not to know that, which had just been uncovered and replicated. And the crowds, like the compliant little Paleolithic savages their Ishmaelite manipulators urged them to be, would be among the hordes of petty neo-hippies, socialists, relativists, primitivists, shamanists, and collectivists clamoring to rip the great inventors to shreds and consign the fruits of their minds to the junk heaps. So the initiators of FTLT used their technology to protect themselves before irreversible damage could be wreaked upon their contraptions. After it became evident that they could not be overcome, they were granted their security and eventually a Constitutional amendment that forbade government suppression of technological development.

It was nevertheless difficult for these men, although most of them possessed a philosophical background, to apply the rational conclusions they had reached concerning the efficacy and morality of science to the field of politics. Following their coup d'état, they tweaked the mechanisms of government slightly, to include a council of self-made and elected intellectuals which participated in the law-making mechanism and served as a check on the Executive and Legislative branches of the American government. Their pristinely rational faculties might not at first have conceived of the existence of the vile notion of rules meant to be broken by their originators, the apostles of sacrificial altruism. They hoped, perhaps out of a naive association of political laws to scientific ones – and an expectation of enforcing moral behavior through statutes, to reform the deeply erroneous and destructive actions of their contemporaries. They attempted to legislate morality – and they failed. They forbade curses and profanities, abolished self-destructive habits such as alcoholism and tobacco smoke, sought to curb

politically formed monopolies by means of a middle man in pricing decisions – but the problems prevailed. Over time it dawned upon them that the prevention of foul language and suicides rested on more than outright prohibition, while the re-introduction of free-market competition necessitated the elimination of governmental subsidies and miscellaneous restrictive interventions.

A simple edict or Constitutional amendment does not guarantee adherence; to many it is mere print on dusty parchment scrolls. Likewise, many will not accede to the reasoned indignation of an elderly gentleman dismayed at the self-mutilation and persecution of free minds performed by indoctrinated youths. What was required was a campaign of *cultural* reform, not through censorship but through the proposition of an alternative. Technology should free people from habits born of misery. Analysis should replace vacuous mantras. Genuine thinking activism should take the place of screeching mass demonstrations. The new elites found a philosophy to propagate in Objectivism, while their positions in government rendered accessible market-liberalization measures which at last permitted people the rightful freedoms, the prerequisites to the rejection of conformity which the innovators had despised from the start.

For a brief period, from 2020 to 2072, as the Articles of Utopia (that name having been at last adopted by the genuine progressives rather than the mystical frauds posing as "noble visionaries") were revised into liberations rather than limitations. The economy was virtually unfettered by regimentation. The labor of scientists was granted absolute independence from the whims of the mob and from the whims of the gun. Police forces were thoroughly reformed, to protect against violations and penalize perpetrators, not to impose preventive shackles upon the innocent. It was then that the foundations of Marsopolis and Venusia were laid, that private transportation evolved from a land-based to an almost entirely aerial phenomenon, that man made the leap from clumsy behemoths of desk computers to conveniently portable telepathic screens worn on one's forehead, and that life expectancy first exceeded the hundredth year –following the legalization of genetic engineering, cloning of stem cells, and nanoscopic operations to perfect DNA replication. It was during that glorious era of the Objectivist Enlightenment that the United States managed to expand its economic influence worldwide, as half of all dictatorships on Earth collapsed – rejected by their people in favor of American liberty. These developments swayed the hierarchical bureaucracy in China to fully adopt capitalism and thereby cause that same bureaucracy to atrophy. Westerners were again a welcome presence in a majority of African lands. In exchange for physical resources, they assisted the populace in experiencing the transition to civilized culture that remained incomplete during the decolonization of the 20th century. Whole peoples voluntarily requested to be admitted into the United States, and American footholds sprang up in every continent as Western influence was eradicating every bastion of the tribalists, authoritarians, and primitivists upon the planet Earth.

The climactic moment in United States history arrived in 2068, when a delegation of Kalahari bushmen – who remained the most destitute of all people and who had prowled the deserts of southern Africa scavenging for roots and hunting antelope in the manner of their forgotten ancestors, their way of life unchanged for ten thousand years – arrived in Washington, D.C., the capital of that glorious free country, in a hovermobile. They had manufactured that vehicle following a voluntary exposure to the technical

skills involved. They expressed their desire to elevate themselves from the life-draining sands of their primordial "heritage", to be assimilated into the United States, and to journey into the frigid wastelands of Pluto, where they eagerly yearned to erect a Western-style metropolis. "We are tired of the life of animals," their tuxedo-clad chieftain explained, "We are tired of the life of the herd; blind, deaf, mute, unmoving, unaware of the great wonders which you foreigners have created for yourselves and which we would very much like to emulate." Thus was granted their request. In their sincerity, they crafted a supremely industrialized, lush, temperate, glamorous city, where their descendants in this day and age engage in philosophical discussions on the matter of the incompatibility of tribalism with the Lockean and Jeffersonian discovery of individual right. There they listen to the sonatas of Mozart and the symphonies of Beethoven. Such were the irreversible vibrations of joy and aspiration emanating from that stronghold of justice stretching from "sea to shining sea" and from "pole to shining pole".

But even in that era, the civilizational revival was threatened, not from the outside – where people relished the long-awaited liberation from the shackles of tyranny which had bound them for countless ages since their evolution from the beasts as well as before. Rather, the age of flourishing was undermined from within, by a resurgence of primitive conformist cultural trends. Popular tastes veered toward brutal drumbeats and militantly degrading tribal lyrics, of a deliberately arrhythmic, screeching, twisting, and head-bashing havoc, of no melody in particular excepting a cacophony intended to shock, dismay, disorient, and hurl into an enraged panic of a drunken mediocrity, aimless but envious, speechless but violent, unseeing but hateful. It was the subsequent step in the devolution of "folk art", a derivation of the rap of the early 21st century. This herd-based, primitive instrument of self-abnegation was – shockingly – embraced by civilized, materially endowed, culturally exposed Americans! How was this movement perpetuated in the face of massive civil reform, liberation, and elevation of living standards – when despair was no longer a dominating element in existence, when men could succeed as they pleased, and their prosperity depended but on the quantity of effort invested in their endeavors? The root cause lay not in the *unavailability* of knowledge, but the *unwillingness* of some men to learn, not in the deficiency of jobs but the reluctance of some men to work, not in the violation of rights but in their voluntary waiver, not in the suppression of independence but in a willfully self-destructive subservience. What had driven this craze of discord and self-destruction was *sloth*, that instinctive desire to impose limits for the sake of limits on one's creative ability and on one's productivity. Those limitations could be designated "an escape", "a compromise", "resignation", "renunciation", "retirement" – but all hinted at the abdication of man's self, of his suppression of the desire to work and elevate his material and spiritual condition (which are, unlike the dichotomies of the antiprogressives suggest, a single package; mind cannot exist without body, and body cannot linger without mind). When a man refuses to sustain himself through a constantly expanding field of activity, a sole survival option remains to him: parasitism, the scourge of free societies and the precursor of a slave state, wherein the meritorious are chained by virtue of their merit to those who are masters by virtue of their deficiency.

Is that a condition which even the most average of men adopt by default in a society where the efficacy of a rational self-discipline and relentless passion for higher standards has been demonstrated in every tile of pavement, in every cosmic refueling

station, and in every industrial concern? No. Is sloth the paradigm of a child who is fed by the productive labors of "the nice old men in the factories and the labs" and is allowed the leisure to curiously investigate what characteristics render these men so nice and productive? No. He is likely to strive for a personal replication of their legacy, or perhaps, if he is a prodigy, for its amplification.

What doctrine would then impel the few conformist "rebels" to become as they were, now that the welfare rolls had been obliterated by technological progress, and respectable education and salaries in the private market were rendered available to all those worthy of said services? They needed as their prerequisite an authoritarian propagation of an ideology which advocated limits and coercive caps: passivity, apathy, heedlessness, inaction. They found it in the blathering tome that was *Ishmael*. And whence had Mr. Quinn, their inspiration, inherited his suppressive anti-technological hodge-podge? From the dictatorial mystics of the very cultures now rejecting their "philosophical traditions"; from the scalping and massacring bands of pre-Columbian Amerindians; from the blood-feuding collectives of ancient Africa; from the paralyzed, trembling, overburdened rice farmers of the Orient who – because of their oppression by caste systems and totalitarian empires – had picked their paddies in an automatic, unthinking manner, without innovation over stretches of millennia. Who required the detachment and self-abnegation of the populace? Why who else but the tyrant of the Far East, whose treasured vaults were built on the expropriation of his subjects; or the crooked chieftain who disposed of his tribe's "collective property" as he pleased and sold his subordinates into slavery for a pipe of opium or a drawstring bag of hallucinogens; or the Amazonian witch doctor who concocted grotesque potions, inducing mental hysteria within him, and disguised his deranged spurts of madness as divine revelation? Every subsequent revolt against man's freedom, against his individuality, against the wonders of a technological and industrial society, was the power play of their mummies and their skeletons – of the dead, or the true undead, preying upon the life and work of the living. It was the club of the Paleolithic swinging across the timeline to shatter a scout pod sent to an adjacent galaxy. It was the muck of the wilderness encroaching upon the gilded steel frameworks of three-hundred-story skyscrapers. If ever something truly rotten stared into the face of man – something ultimately base and decayed, of the lowest caliber imaginable and seeking retrogression for the sake of retrogression, blood for the sake of blood, death for the sake of death – it was those phantoms of the past, revived by Quinn and his like. It is they who speak now from their catacombs and their graves, through the salivating lips of the Viscount Conford. It was they and their jungle vines that ensnared the United States.

Beginning in the 2060s, a terrorist minority of nihilists, environmentalists, and drugged teenagers launched sprees of wanton, arbitrary vandalism, sabotage, mass protests, stonings, ambushes, mob assaults on public structures, and cultural proliferation of their dogma. Positions in government were for a time closed to them, and the police efficiently curbed their illegal outbreaks. But nevertheless the sloth of the worst among men was triggered, as the least aspiring, least successful of them embraced the banner of decay and expropriation. Murders rose, thefts soared, malfunctions increased exponentially every year, and in the meantime the voices of the criminals' spokesmen gradually seeped into the mass media, and encroached unnoticeably into the minds of the more credulous sectors of the populace. The

reasonable men were unable to thwart them, as they did not deliberate about the miscreants' activities with sufficient care. Executions and imprisonments of the guilty did not cease their tidal wave, for alleged "humanitarians" urged "the dismantlement of the perilous neo-industrial, neo-colonialist expansionist infrastructure through the dedicated selfless efforts of concerned activists," and defended "the abused underdogs of Western society" who had been apprehended in acts of community "cleansing" and placed on death row. The ideological base for such acts had been crafted generations prior, and these men were merely implementing its stagnation-oriented implications, knowing that the only means of achieving stagnation is terror. The irreversible blow to American infrastructure and the nominal end of Objectivist Enlightenment arrived during the 2072 Presidential Elections, when the forward-oriented President Alice Andrews was outvoted by the lapdogs of Hack Dirton's Malthusian-Environmentalist Party.

Immediately the nation plunged into chaos. Industrial concerns ceased to operate altogether. Overseas states, as well as several ones on the American continent, seceded in an attempt to restore a vestige of their former glory. The next shortage in crops induced a famine of cataclysmic proportions, which the Malthusian-Environmentalists fueled by withholding available food supplies from the population at gunpoint. They functioned according to a crackpot theory of "population control" – which had been disproved time and again by history but now, through its implementation, resulted in the ignominious starvation of a hundred million. The masses arose and overpowered the government a mere year later, pleading for reform. However, it was too late. The people had already been transformed into precisely the cannibals Ishmaelism intended to create of them. For the earlier withholding of agricultural produce, President Dirton and the highest-ranking members of his cabinet were themselves grilled and torn into bits of meat, greedily devoured by the subsequent horde of savages that vied for power. Thus ensued three hundred years of local infighting and instability, administrations falling to the gun more frequently than to the ballot. An occasional true progressive did manage to reach a high office and momentarily dam the mighty current of destruction, to hold off the utter degradation of technology and production. Thus the United States lingered in a pitiful but quasi-functional state until 2460, gradually withering away into a rail-connected strip on the East Coast, then a hundred-kilometer fiefdom around Washington, D.C., then merely the city itself – guarded from raiders, looters, and resurging feudal overlords of the blight outside by a four-hundred-year-old defense complex, consisting of expired missiles, rusted tanks, rag-tag infantry, and ammunition-less machine guns.

Somewhere on the edges of civilization, a semblance of order prevailed; the peoples of Europe and Asia, at last liberated from centuries of burdensome yoke, were not easily swayed into accepting it once more. Their major cities functioned as the cultural and trade centers of the time, painstakingly lagging behind their aspirations of development and expansion, but nevertheless forging a gradual refinement of the arts and the sciences. The genuine bastions of advancement were, however, the extraterrestrial fortress-cities of Marsopolis, Venusia, and Plutonia, whose denizens had spent the entirety of their lives in a struggle against the elements, where every laxity implied death, and every reluctance incurred suffocation. There the terraforming process, not a gratuitous plenty of resources, required a daily effort to claim yet another lifeless stretch of dust for the civilization of man and to employ it for his utility. Over

several centuries, they conquered their planets and developed wondrous industries, commercial routes, and citadels of architecture. Each city was an independent state, and Earthly matters did not come to concern them until the twenty-fifth century, when their economic abundance permitted them to expand their fields of operations and again contribute to a marginal rise in living standards. But it was a more external force which finally turned the tides and suppressed the chaos once more. The legions of the Grand Dominion of Expansia returned – with marvelously sophisticated military devices unlike anything the Solarians could have envisioned, as well as stories of a floating paradise where men lived to two hundred years while Earthlings considered seventy to be a fortunate acquisition. Princeps Gordian II of Expansia yearned to expand his trade routes and enrich his lands, and enthusiastically strove to communicate, exchange knowledge, and introduce advertisements by Expansian businesses to inform the populace of Earth of their wares. Contact was shortly severed, not by the visitors, but by the proliferators of the muck to which the American continent had been reduced. It is fitting only to examine even how the nomenclature within the United States had decayed during that period. Instead of lofty designations marking their names, its denizens were called now Popcult, Thugson, Bashing, Bloodspill, Subservient, Natureschild, Trembler, and, the infamous alias of their President, Chickenton. Those were the parasites who upheld with self-righteous fervor the naked essence of their depravity, who had defiled the likes of Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Hancock, and Cleveland. It was Chickenton who terminated all communications with Expansia and set handsome bounties upon the heads of Expansian merchants caught trading on the black market.

In order for men of merit and aspiration to survive in times of rampant barbarism and slaughter, they must develop a capacity for retaliation – not an idle submission, not a transformation into a carcass to be looted. To survive, they must form a force of their own, to be used not for plunder and marauding, but for the deposition of the plunderers and marauders. They must institute a state of their own with even a slight guarantee of its denizens' security in exchange for an unflinchingly unified stance against crime and aggression required in such periods of emergency. That is the reason for the military occupations assumed by prodigies during times of turmoil. An Aristotle of tranquility becomes an Alexander of hostility; a Caesar during chaos could have been a Livy in an era of order; a Voltaire must transform into a Napoleon in order to preserve his capacity to think under fire. Thus it was with one man of the time. His name was Claude, and his most substantial misfortune was that of being born to a time when his love for the arts turned to a sorrowful melancholy for times gone by, for he observed what had once been a theater transformed into a whorehouse, what had once been a concert hall becoming a night club, and a formerly elegant café beginning to distribute subsistence rations. The vitality of Earth was becoming drained, he realized, and nothing short of foreign intervention would regenerate it, as nothing short of foreign intervention had civilized the savages of the jungles and the deserts. He recognized the necessity of Expansian influence, but remained unable to access it. He was, after all, a mere civilian, and a moderately wealthy one besides. His possessions would have been regarded as alluring spoils by raiders, looters, and thugs – had he ostentatiously displayed them on his clothing or the exterior of his residence. This perpetual fear he could not long tolerate, and he discovered the necessity of self-defense upon a day in 2446, when his

merchant parents were fatally injured by a horde of robbers breaching the fortifications around his villa. His continued existence required a cunning strategy of stealth by which he – in the span of twelve hours – disabled several tens of intruders with an antique revolver. This, he realized, was the only proper antidote, and called for a civilian force of minutemen, formed on the same premises as their predecessors in the days of the American Revolution seven centuries earlier. The moral motivations were identical, but the victims and the perpetrators had ironically reversed roles, as a semi-free Europe gradually organized itself under Claude with the aim of eradicating the epicenter of the calamity in a brutalized America.

I need not here examine Claude's story battle by battle. Every child in the Protectorate can learn of it by inserting an Encyclopedia chip into his ner. It will suffice to say that he managed to consolidate Western Europe, Africa, Asia, and South America under his rule and ventured into the former United States itself in 2460, seizing with lightning swiftness the rag-tag defense emplacements on the East and West coasts, entering Washington in triumph and personally sentencing the most atrocious of criminals, President Chickenton, to death by guillotine for his literal damnation of the planet as well as his overt promotion of "Nihilism, Primitivism, and Mother Nature" and the murder those slogans entailed. This was a sordid conclusion for a once-brilliant country, which now became assimilated into Claude's military coalition. It would require another thirty-eight years for the final vestiges of chaos to be suppressed at the Grand Battle of the Potomac in 2498 – this time, with the assistance of Expansia. Another five years would pass for the Intergalactic Protectorate to receive its first legal foundations in 2503 from Pierre, *Protector Intergalacticus*, the son of General Claude. But all that pertains to Protectorate history, for the final tome of America was closed by the severance of Chickenton's head.

Nevertheless, that ancient country's holiday is still remembered, and its intellectual contributions can never wane. The path to defining a proper sphere of government activity was first trodden by its Founding Fathers and their own philosophical predecessors. Absent the Enlightenment, there would not have been a Space Age, nor an Intergalactic Age – nor would Accelerative Settlement have been devised by men who would have trembled at the notion of employing the content of their own heads, instead of the content of their local propaganda pamphlets, in the activity of mending reality to their purposes and not committing any deed to the contrary.

The legacy of the United States, which its own people could not fully grasp or appreciate, is that of *rational self-interest*. When it was recognized as a right and, moreover, as a virtue, the grandest of accomplishments ensued. When it was suppressed – be it by central planners or local looters, collectivist demagogues or the uncontrollable mobs ignited by collectivist demagogues – the condition of that great country was the equivalent of any other ruinous tyranny in the stunted, drudgingly meandering march of early man. What I owe the United States is that I cannot permit myself to witness its collapse recurring in my own homeland, in a nation which is in many regards more perfect, as it does not perceive self-interest as a vice, capitalism as exploitation, colonization as robbery, and lofty aspirations as buffoonery. My country includes a head of government who is capable to a substantial degree of vetoing legislation designed to curb individual rights and is designated by his predecessor from his merit instead of genes or popularity. Yet even that system, so aptly structured in the

Lex Protectorata, has presently been assailed by a deranged sibling of the Protector and her Collegium. I will thwart their warped schemes of retrogression, such that no shrunken heads of the past shall any longer pose a menace to the progress of civilization.

Only then will the pages of *Ishmael* crumble into dirt in substance if not in physical form, and the radiant world of rationality and human flourishing be found by all.

Chapter IV Limited Government

Posted July 5, 2753, on "The Rand-Voltaire Coalition" Intergalnet Discussion Forum by Dr. Margaret Meltridge.

Subject: Concerning Proper Spheres of Influence

This message is addressed to all readers who have not yet been disillusioned by the mechanisms of our country and who still bear loyalty to themselves and their true interests, thus remaining patriots of the Intergalactic Protectorate. There is a considerable bit of history that every child seems to be aware of in regard to the early development of our national infrastructure, yet awareness of its relevance to events of the present seems lacking among the populace. The university students, whose access to educational resources is unparalleled, nevertheless, in large numbers, cloud their reasoning faculties with the arcane mysticism of twentieth-century ecologists and their Luddite/Malthusian predecessors. Petitions have been received (and, surprisingly enough, broadcasted) by Marscorp Insecticide Syndicate and Nexton Laboratories from student "spokesmen" at South Arcturusburg and Rexcitadel to "curb the expansionist greed of private industry". What, in particular, do they propound as the solution to the alleged "crisis"? They seek "to lift the safeguards from the protective hand of the state and render it capable of imposing maximum output quotas, artificial price inflation, and profit caps." Apparently these children are in desperate need of instruction in Protectorate History 10001.

It was a gruesome havoc out of which the Intergalactic Protectorate managed to exhume the population of Earth – a tortured people who had been experiencing living death: constant fear not merely for the cohesion of their heads and necks but for the satiation of their stomachs tomorrow, or for the survival of their harvest a month later. A gradual reunification of the planet, undertaken by General Claude, was required for an express purpose, stated in the "Temporary Defensive Coalition Manifesto" of 2451.

"For his survival, the educated man must not serve as a slave to the uneducated brute, but those roam the countryside. A man of sheer muscle equipped with a club is able to confiscate the fruits learned man's labor; he hence deters the learned from the pursuit of technologies which are alone imbued with the potential of extricating our planet from a state of blight. But to impose similar pressures upon the men of knowledge through the mechanisms of a government overseeing vast territories, is but to devastate their motivations and their livelihoods with increased organization and thus efficacy. As this is immensely undesirable, the Temporary Defensive Coalition has proclaimed its motive to seek out those men of learning wherever they may dwell and to confer upon them not restrictions and confiscations, *but the express ability to act as they see fit, so long as they themselves do not resort to the tactic of the expropriators.*"

The dream of a united Humanity has long been the agenda of various political movements, but their overwhelming majority has merely viewed this as a device to plan and regiment the activities of men from a single citadel and to herd men into legions of literal slaves. These movements wanted men shackled to perform the bidding of the powerful by means of "sheer muscle" rather than thought. A man of thought cannot function under coercion – a principle stated time and again and so lucidly

comprehended by General Claude. The noble purpose of a single planetary government is to prevent the possibility of a regional despotism or a local robber gang emerging with the desire to impose such coercion. Thus, the influence of a government is not to dictate what the measures for recovering the blight should be, but to permit those interested in the matter to conduct independent explorations into fresh scientific means. Private individuals can do much to repair the damage of war and decay by even a simple amplification of commerce. A proper leadership aims not to guarantee success to its subjects, but to ensure that they encounter no artificial obstacles along their paths.

The result was a grateful population, a large fraction of which voluntarily assembled itself into minutemen contingents. Craftsmen and researchers equipped the people with armaments unprecedented for about two centuries prior to that time, earning a handsome profit in the meantime and becoming capable of expanding their operations. This, in turn, fueled General Claude's ability to liberate further peoples and to permit them to function as they would. The trend of United States expansionism during its early history was replicated in its essence – entailing similar consequences of prosperity worldwide.

By 2483, all but the inner reaches of Australia, the tip of Patagonia, and the central portions of North America had come under the supervision of the Temporary Defensive Coalition. The TDC established, as a subordinate agency, a network of courts throughout the land to remedy disputes in cases of a legal breach, which in essence constituted only a forceful violation of another's rights. A man could not extort or rob another and remain unnoticed by the enforcement mechanisms. It is said that the grandest buildings constructed during an epoch represent the chief values of its people. In the period of the expansion of the TDC, those buildings were the courts, soaring frequently to two hundred stories in areas where they presided over an entire province. Their walls were rigid, straight, defined, and stretching outward from their foundations in pre-calculated diagonals. This architecture stated, as a metaphor, that there is a possibility for a voluminous system of objective laws, but only when derived from a constricted and comprehensible fundamental premise concerning the impropriety of the initiation of force against men. This was a style we remember today as the Delimitation, a fitting parallel to the idea of establishing a proper sphere for government function, where it may expand as its pleases in order to fulfill the original goals, but not to shift from its foundation, to arbitrarily leap around and claim space that is not its own, space that rightfully belongs to the independent efforts of free men.

Alas, it was in that same year, 2483, that General Claude was assassinated by an enraged peasant who reportedly refused to fertilize his soil during an earlier planting season and accused the TDC of causing his insufficient harvest due to lack of regulation. To repeat here the fallacies of that ignominious character would be redundant. Nevertheless, the consequences of such a mode of thought were disastrous. The death of its founder was nearly a trigger for disarray in the TDC. Few people then possessed the Classical education and knowledge of past philosophers to comprehend that the new system was designed to perpetuate itself even in the absence of its originator – simply by means of objective principles already discovered, rationally validated, and readily implementable.

The leadership of the TDC became frenzied and panicked – as a result unable to properly oversee the function of the atrophying courts of the domain. To add to the

calamity, a more malevolent brand of visitors than the Expansians began to plague the Earth for the first time. These were the exile states of the Northern Galaxies, descendants of the dictators of Earth and their followers, who had been either evicted there by more merciful and less foresighted revolutionaries, or by warring factions within their own realms during the twenty-second century. They would continue to plague the free galaxies until the conclusion of the Fifth Intergalactic War in 2729, and their foremost transgression was the occupation of the former United States and the institution of an authoritarian seat of power in its territories, subordinate to the Duchy of Rotland. The outcome for the local denizens was yet another era of chronic terror, as they were driven like animals into "community service" initiatives designed to perform (of all tasks!) the dismantlement of advanced industrial machinery to manufacture from its parts the weaponry for the occupants! Disease was rampant, as no medical practitioners could operate when the entire region was transformed into a gigantic chain gang. Incompetent overseers abused their laborers for showing the initiative they themselves lacked and for the inability to accede to contradictory orders. The "servants of the community" were not paid; their payment, they were told, was comprised of their contribution to some vague "collective good" – i.e. the empowerment of Rotland's viceroys to "assume a firm control over the area". The disintegrating forces of the TDC were gradually expelled from the North American continent, to the dismay of one of their young captains, Claude's son Pierre.

To restore the gains of his father required as firm a character and as insightful an analytical capacity. It was known to Pierre that two fundamental loopholes were present within the overall functional structure designed by his father: a lack of philosophical understanding by the people of its necessity, and the absence of a group of lower-level administrators as energetic, active, and clear-thinking as the General himself had been. Claude's own philosophical background led him to devise a solution to the first deficiency. He developed a policy which is to a substantial degree still practiced by our government today and upheld by a majority of its officials: Universal Manifest Destiny and its corollary, Accelerative Settlement. Perhaps it would be best to permit Pierre to speak for himself in his classic treatise of the same name (Smith Press, 2485):

"To a commonsense mentality, it is utterly clear that human beings, in order to survive in a world initially hostile toward their plight in all of its inconveniences, require the application of their cognitive skills to a restructuring of the natural elements. This necessitates the exploitation of so-called natural resources (and their replenishment wherever possible) for the purpose of ameliorating one's wealth, health, and sphere of activity. It is also beyond dispute that with such improvements arrives the opportunity for a further amelioration – one which can only be attained with an increased effort, demanding a course of action of even greater complexity, this time supported by the fruits of one's previous undertakings. All the meantime, one possesses an ever-amplified assurance of one's survival and prosperity, of one's cognitive competence, and – which is crucial to the above – one's control over the inanimate features of one's realm. To survive, man must constantly progress in all areas of his effort, including, of course, in his territorial access. What are the benefits of expansion? The capacity to house greater populations of sentient individuals, as well as a scientific challenge whose resolution requires a constant presence of innovation, logic, and their application through technology. This will yield, in return, increased commercial opportunities for

peaceful citizens of all realms, an overall surge in life expectancy, the profit of the creators, and gains for all those selecting to interact with them. Therefore it is integral to imbue the populace with the desire to entertain such ventures. Furthermore, for the people's own well-being and as the only course of true maintenance of their lives, it is crucial to colonize new planets at an ever-quickening pace, to reflect the increase of man's productive capacity and avoid lapses into an unwelcome satiated indolence. With this ideology dominant, its foremost champions are to be the people themselves, especially the prodigies among them who will discover wondrous new schemes of resource extraction and refinement, which will draw all other sectors of economic and residential activity to the newly assimilated territories..."

The people must, in other words, be given philosophical fuel to inspire them to a course of action for their own benefit, which will then find among its foremost supporters the undertakers of *industry*. A truly free economy, in which men know what they are doing, will thus result in Accelerative Settlement, a practice which could not have been carried out by a central planner of any caliber. Only a thinking mind can harness previously useless territories and transform them into flourishing centers of life, and coercion is incompatible with a thinking mind. The three concepts – rationality, free enterprise, and colonization – are interrelated at the core, and none can exist without any other. To thwart rationality is to collapse into a mystic bog in which no reality-oriented course of action is possible. To limit free enterprise is to suppress men's capacities to implement their reasonable designs in reality. To restrict colonization is to stifle the ability of men to invest their profits into wealth-generating commercial enterprises outside established realms. Restrictions on human expansion ultimately impede the functioning of human minds. Any attempt to prevent our business ventures from developing will inevitably result in stagnation, which always leads to retrogression, which always culminates in the death of a culture and the individuals comprising it. That is what the misled university activists need to comprehend.

Pierre's doctrine served as encouragement to the people and an assurance that they would not encounter government obstacles in the pursuit of their own good. This is evident in the condition of the Intergalactic Protectorate during most of its history. It is a nation whose cohesion was that policy and its philosophical foundation – the view that man, by his very identity, must expand throughout the Universe and that he possesses the entirety of inanimate existence in his subordination to utilize as he deems reasonable.

The fire of the philosophy's initial advocates was immense, and its vision of a noble, prosperous future was sufficient to reunite the TDC under the stewardship of a more cohesive military league, the Corps of Justice. As for the second dilemma of Pierre's early reign – the creation of a resilient system of administration – its solution was furnished by his friend and advisor, Count Anton Nailsley of Plasticmold, industrial magnate and gentleman-philosopher. Plasticmold deliberated on the matter of a system of leadership that, while imposing only protection against the initiation of force and not regimentation, will nevertheless attract men of the cleanest integrity and the finest intellect to its offices. The Five-Class Structure of Expansia was not compatible with a limited view of government, because it left the men of merit themselves dependent on government officials for recognition of their deeds and introduction into a higher social group. Thus Plasticmold was left to invent a liberty-based meritocracy, at which he

arrived by pinpointing the central characteristic of meritocracies as such: the rewarding of men based on virtuous, rationally self-interested choices. The more a man benefits himself, the greater voluntary benefits are conferred upon him by others. A rigidly defined system of social ladders and hierarchies is unnecessary in this regard. Quite the contrary, a man's perseverance and insight will yield him more substantial gains where there is no bureaucracy to prescribe his performance and no panels and committees to whose expectations he must conform in order to receive special favors. The government must therefore remain separated from the field of economics especially, but also from any subsidiary work within the arts, the sciences, and education.

Yet a dilemma remained within Plasticmold's system. If all the most prodigious men select to pursue their own designs outside the heavily curtailed political field, what types of persons apply for the positions of officials? At best they are average men, frequently lacking the experience and philosophical base to maintain the proper limitations of their activities and to confine them to retaliation against the initiation of force. At worst they are power-lusters, men who seek from lack of productive capacity not to create wealth but to *seize* it from defenseless creators by means of officially sanctioned force. The fault with such a system, realized Plasticmold, was its inability to attract the intellectuals genuinely committed to preserving a strictly limited government.

In all previous political structures, which had involved some manner of economic intervention, officials were forbidden to occupy any manner of post in scientific research, industry, or any miscellaneous money-making, competitive enterprise. This prohibition arose from the sensible fear that officials would employ their governmental positions as leverage to extort their rivals who would not possess such a footing. This menace could be remedied by a total separation between government and economics and a severe system of penalties for any attempt to restrict *laissez-faire* capitalism. Thus, the prohibition of multiple employments would no longer be warranted, and administrative offices would be opened to businessmen, scientists, engineers, and artists who seek the office out of the desire to enforce a principle, not add to an already substantial income. While in office, these men would remain unable to influence in any coercive manner their other field of activity. The best among men would be attracted to newly available positions, Plasticmold reasoned, because it would be in their rational self-interest (without which they could not have established their tremendous financial success) to provide an optimal check to government intervention by serving as the government and hence depriving the government of the power to shackle *their own enterprises*. Simultaneously, those same men would be encouraged to contribute monetarily to their own administrations in order to maintain an edge over authoritarian ideological opponents, strengthen the enforcement and penalty mechanism against would-be usurpers for the sake of a deterrent effect, and lighten the tax burden on their own customers, who would subsequently be encouraged to purchase their products (as well as those of their competitors, so no unfair manipulation is performed here, merely a mutually profitable action to all participants in the marketplace) for their core price alone.

This approach was termed "*laissez-faire meritocracy*", but its essence lay in its assignment of the pinnacle of power. There is required a man of ultimate merit, Plasticmold reasoned, who would not possess regulatory authority himself, but would hold veto power over any regulatory piece of legislation proposed or promulgated by a lower-level administrative body. This was to be the optimal deterrent against attempts to

subvert the laissez-faire economy and a firm check against abuses of power by the corrupt. This figure could not be elected like the other positions, for the majority, even with a sound philosophical base, could be undercut over a period of years by covert underground influences – as had occurred in the America of the 2060s and resulted in the 2072 Election. Simultaneously he could not be a mere hereditary dynast, in place due to an accident of genetics. The only solution, therefore, was an appointment by the previous leader – a Protector in a strictly delimited sense of the word, who would also be a man of ingenious skills and infrequently found understanding, as well remarkable success in another field of activity – of a successor deemed similarly worthy in serving as the guardian of a meritocracy. The position would be occupied for life, but nevertheless encounter the same limits to discretionary exercise of positive power as that of any lower-level official. Economic control, in other words, was denied even the Protector.

It was stated in Plasticmold's "A Treatise on the Fundamentals of Rational Meritocracy" (Ethan Allen Publishing Syndicate, 2492): "Should—as even the most apt of men are capable of overestimating another's character—the merit of a Protector's successor prove a mere illusion upon his assumption of the office and he, against the legal principles of this country, would usurp those mechanisms which by right should be let alone, it is not merely an option but an imperative for a man of greater merit to demonstrate such a quality through an overt and retaliatory revolt against the despot's regime. Afterward he, as the liberator, is entitled to assumption of the Office of the Protector and of the role as the guardian of unfettered human progress." This scenario was enacted only once during the history of our country – in 2725 when, due to the intolerable nationalization policies enacted by the Protector Frederick, that despot was toppled by the efforts of Mauricius, *Protector Intergalacticus*. But this is the message I intend to convey to the retrogrades based on the present exposition: *that the structure of our country in its every way, shape, and form is opposed to any manner of regimentation of peaceful human expansion. Should such regimentation become enacted, it will topple and no longer elevate honest men of merit, but rather will bolster depraved crooks.*

What would happen absent our system of laissez-faire meritocracy? Let us look into the past for a hypothesis. Let us examine the three centuries of destitution upon Earth following the rejection of man's self-interested aspirations, following the coercive prohibitions of his right to progress. We can only speculate upon what would have occurred had the system of Accelerative Settlement and laissez-faire meritocracy been rejected during the 25th century. The Earthlings would have had no means of forging a resolute opposition force to the tyranny of Rotland; they would not have petitioned for an alliance with Expansia following re-establishment of contact as a matter of rational self-interest. There would have been no Grand Battle of the Potomac, no defeat of the combined forces of the cosmic raiders and the Rotlanders, no institution of the *Lex Protectorata* – which rendered an official legal doctrine the works of Pierre and Plasticmold – and no resolution of whom to install as the first Protector, a decision which was arrived at in 2503 with the selection of Pierre following an evaluation of his military and philosophical contributions to the elimination of the blight.

The ultimate advantage that the founders of the Intergalactic Protectorate possessed over their foes was not military finesse or industrial production. Those were

of immense significance, but they were derivations of a more profound primary attribute. It was their role as the champions of liberty in a world where the only alternative was not secure subservience (which is impossible), but terror, chaos, decay, and death. I quote now a thinker and statesman of antiquity named Patrick Henry: "Give me liberty or give me death." This is not the audacious expression of a desire to risk one's life unless granted complete free rein; it is the far more audacious—and sagacious—comprehension that there can be no middle ground between the two, that death is ultimately entailed by any deprivation of rightful freedoms, however minor they may seem at first. With every absence of liberty, death gains ground.

But such a deprivation of liberty in a disgustingly horrid form is precisely what we are seeing in the government mechanisms of today. In regard to these mechanisms, the Protector himself – despite his constant struggles to remedy them – is cautious from fear of igniting a bloodbath by the same university students who advocate caps on industrial expansion. It all began on a fateful day in 2736, when a certain relative of the Protector overstepped her bounds and initiated a filibuster in Parliament to promulgate the initial desecration of progress – the establishment of a Collegium of Frontier Preservation. The Collegium is essentially a hive of Green, Ishmaelite, and Barren mystics, supported by the people's tax money. The fortune of Maurice Legard, Private Citizen, which is funding your police forces, the overwhelming portion of your military, and the network of courts (into all of which he has invested his inherited wealth, based on his desire to operate his endeavors on his earned funds alone). Meanwhile, the majority of your tax bill supports a faculty of sworn enemies of progress, of capitalism, of colonization, of Accelerative Settlement and Universal Manifest Destiny.

The Collegium's purpose is not to encourage the study of exotic life forms. Its patron abandoned those studies herself in near-coincidence with the institution's founding. Rather, the Collegium is here to oppose the very values which protect you against death and enable you to survive and prosper. It aims to compel you to fund the exact antitheses of *your* own moral principles. Had you not held dearly the foundations of the Intergalactic Protectorate – the philosophy of *life* – within your minds, you would have been consistent and committed suicide outright or condemned yourself to asceticism. You would have refused to work, refused to read this very posting, for those deeds are signs of rational intellectual activity. Moreover, as has been repeatedly demonstrated and as is contained explicitly within the fundamental documents of our country, it is improper for a government to fund an institution which belongs to the field of education and science – both subcategories of a free-market economy. Had the Collegium been poised to compete against private universities such as Academium, Newtonia, or Franklinton, it would have been crushed by lack of interest and lack of financial vitality. The progressive, systematic, inquisitive sciences are greatly preferable to the rational majority of today than the neo-Luddite, vehemently Malthusian, anti-intellectual, anti-rational, anti-self-interest, nihilistic, pseudo-scientific mystics on the faculty of the Collegium. If you wish to check the validity of my accusations, I entreat you to perform some reconnaissance of the ideas of man's greatest foe in this era. Read the abominable posting on the "Friends of Anne-Marie Legard" forum from a week ago by the Viscount Conford. The evil of his words should be self-explanatory after what I have written and after your own analysis of his words' intended effect upon *your* lives and *your* striving.

It is time to proudly assert our commitment to the absolute and sacred values of limited government and of a true meritocracy which does not penalize productive industrialists for their profit-reaping and profit-investing into worthwhile and righteous ventures of expansion. It is time to terminate the abomination that is the Collegium. To my Protector, I plead that he exercise his legal duty to dissolve an institution which has for seventeen years now gnawed away at the very fabric of our existence. The haphazard, contradictory, and impossible "red tape" defenses of the Collegium are like jungle vines entangling what should be a clean, coherent governmental establishment. They must be severed entirely. No matter how much "instant disruption" to the fiscal and political structure that action would entail, it is the sole means of returning once again to the fundamentals of Protectorate government. A court of the Delimitation style would not maintain its entire ornate expanse if not for a precise, constricted base that remained where it had originated for all time to come. If the foundation leaps out from a building, the structure crumbles, and it is prudent that we abandon all the arbitrary policy shifts beginning with the usurpations of Frederick and culminating in this cancerous tumor on our budget and our patriotic dignity. If the more fanatically inclined youths in the universities or the covert operatives of totalitarian Barrrens initiate bloody rampages as a result, theirs will be the blame, not ours, for our act will have been legitimate from statute as well as objective moral principle, while theirs will be the wanton initiation of physical force. As it is the duty of a government to protect its populace from such marauding and murder, it is also its right to station defenders in hostile regions as instant response mechanisms against threats when they emerge. Therefore, in order to quell the bloodbath before it begins, I propose an executive command fully within the Lord Protector's authority: a *declaration of limited martial law*, to enable trained contingents to be stationed in every major city center to thwart counter-demonstrations and incapacitate violent ruffians.

When he is acting within his proper authority, I know that the soldier is my friend, and I for one would voluntarily welcome him if that were required to maintain the peace. He who acts to suppress the imposers of economic and physical coercion is a retaliator, not an initiator; a liberator, not an inhibitor. To all others comprehending the logic of my methods, I advise that they petition the Protector concerning the necessity of this action, to be undertaken as soon and as swiftly as possible.

Reply posted by Anne-Marie Legard on July 6, 2753:

Since when do little girls turn reactionary? Your type shouldn't be wasting her time writing propaganda for old men whose only purpose is spread this rubbish of an archaic idealism. Try going to a beach or a night club, or find someone to have an adulterous affair with, but don't meddle in matters the irresponsible layperson will disrupt beyond repair without proper guidance from knowledgeable authorities. It seems that, like those ignorant patriots, you do not seem to comprehend that there is something beyond sheer rhetorical finesse and a higher force impervious to all argument. How do you *know*, for example, that people's minds cannot perform wonders when their bodies are leashed? Can't they just *want* to work, even to no particular profit of theirs, when they know that their labors are serving the maintenance of the proper natural scheme in which we humans have a predetermined place, as do all other creatures? How do you

know that the wise, prodigious industrialist even *exists* and that – if he does – he should not be forced to work in accordance to expert doctrine? How do you know whether your logic is all-mighty and capable of improving upon a natural design which has been in place for millions of years prior to the birth of your most primordial ancestors? The oldest of your supposed "sources" is from a millennium ago. How can you compare that to the stable, continuous lifestyles of countless earlier eras?

Chapter V Decryption

July 6, 2753,

What conceivable parallels to humanity can this esoteric language have?

I spent a taxing day and a half in solitude within my guest chamber, listening to the recordings repeatedly and attempting to decode some manner of concealed pattern, producing meticulous notes on paper. I have been unable to reveal the meaning of a single term. My only progress has been with sounds I have spotted to oft permeate the discourse around the perplexing *quisly*. Three of them have occurred five times or more, although pronounced with a particular vagueness and a tone so low that it may have been deliberately forced into the background by its speakers. They are *wakkchukk*, *anbdekk*, and *lkjarvp*. Apparently they exist also in a modified state, with a certain ending attached to them: *wakkchukksn*, *anbdekktk*, and *lkjarvptk*. The recurrence of the "-tk" in the latter of the two seems peculiar.

I am inclined to hypothesize that these endings perhaps are characteristic of adjectives within the Planar tongue, just as in the human languages there exist adjectives which coincide with certain action verbs. If, for example, members of a society are aware of the technique of coloring a wall, its language must be able to subsequently define the wall as "colored". Or, even with such simple physical tasks as leaping, which the *nonvisualis* seem to find in particular favor, there must exist a definition for the entity performing the action. A *nonvisualis* leaps and thereby becomes a leaping *nonvisualis*. Just like "-ed" and "-ing" are varied adjective endings in the English language, so might "-sn" and "-tk" be their counterparts in this case. Apparently, whatever this *quisly* may be, it is capable of some manner of activity or transformation. But what role is served by a *lkjarvptk quisly*? Could that be their first-person proper noun, or a native term used to define them as a species? Or am I overly narrowing my hypotheses by presuming that they, in the manner of humans, can formulate a collective designation based on a series of unifying traits? Whatever the prospects for meaning may be, they are, for the moment, mere shots in the dark. I may be capable of grasping particular recurrences and phonetic combinations, but only direct interaction with them can clarify for me the reference which the creatures themselves attach to their terminology, literally as well as connotatively. Simultaneously, I hope to teach them English, so that the vocabulary of both cultures could be used in conjunction with each other for the sake of negotiation on premises that they might otherwise not comprehend.

I resolved then that it would be proper to accumulate a larger volume of data on the aliens' physiology and behavior patterns, in order to narrow my guesses as to the concepts to which they would be exposed. Following a gentlemanly drink of finely roasted coffee in the reception chamber with Dr. Nachtreiter, we engaged in our second exploration of the Magnetica files. The creatures' peculiar sheet-like form presents their internal systems with the need for becoming compacted into an infinitesimal volume. Ranged cerebral scans from the scout pod have revealed an average brain the height of a millimeter, the length of twelve centimeters, and the width of five centimeters. Its tissue is, nevertheless, compressed into intertwined chains which enable the creatures to store a formidable amount of information within the dimensions of half a piece of

paper. The matter-density readings available are astoundingly high, thrice those of a human brain. If not for their blindness, what would the natural ability of these creatures to process data from the external world have been?

Nevertheless, theirs is an organ composed of mere gray matter. They have not yet ascended to the stage of robotic maintenance, nor of electronic compatibility. Fascinating as they are in their distinctions, I am already experiencing the sensation which could only be properly termed as one defining a relationship between a man of civilization and a destitute savage. This is a blend of pity and a subtle, minute, but discernible pride in one's own advantages, as well as in the means and comforts available to a producer within a technological society. I have never despised the primitives who have not ascended to my stage of artificial evolution. They are merely as blank sheets of paper, on which a dignified history must yet be written and which it is in my self-interest to assist them in developing. My resentment and my outrage are unleashed to their utmost boundaries against the men who *do* possess practical experience with the wonders of machinery and the unquestionable good that they entail, and nevertheless seek to destroy them, acting from the vilest of vices that is sloth. A *nonvisualis* is to me an object of curiosity as well as what will hopefully become a student of our Protectorate ways – a new citizen on his way to fully enjoying a society which permits him to utilize his mind and reap its fruits. A Viscount Conford, on the other hand, is the irreconcilable enemy of my own life and the values required to maintain it. He parasitically manipulates manmade tools to spread propaganda urging their dismantlement. The genuine defilement here is, of course, not of the machines *per se*, but of the men whose lives they ameliorate. He does not pretend to give this approach a reasonable veneer; that technique died out among like-minded dogmatists eight centuries ago. Instead, he blatantly exposes his design, in all its horrid deformity, through his pleas for "obedience which transcends all thought". He expects men to uphold his vision, as if rotting matter were superior to a planetary colonist. Savagery can be remedied, but antiprogresivism cannot. The man who inhabits a hut (or, in this case, a Glassy Plain) can be taught to build a mansion, but this learning will do no good for the man in the mansion seeking to vaporize its foundations.

The aliens' circulatory system is likewise distinct, in conformity to their overall shape. Only two chief blood vessels are capable of occupying the majority of their insides, one serving as a flattened vein and the other as a planar artery. The average volume of red blood cells floating through them at any one time is approximately equivalent to that within any one such human channel. However, as is necessitated by Magnetica's gravitational pull, the blood is pressurized and concentrated to a level where it is sufficient to maintain the entire *nonvisualis* organism. A *nonvisualis* heart is, curiously enough, spread out as a layer atop its similarly sheet-like lung. Assuming the necessary expansions and contractions required to circulate the oxidized liquid throughout an alien's system, it has occurred to Dr. Nachtreiter that the consequence of this layout is an alternation of lung expansion and heart contraction, followed by lung contraction and heart expansion. This is a system of optimal spatial utility and efficiency, which Dr. Nachtreiter attributes to natural selection acting on the Planars to favor the most compact arrangements in an environment of such extreme gravitational pull. This is an interesting hypothesis, but one of the extreme few that we consider to have the potential of illuminating our knowledge of these perplexing creatures.

This brings me to the epicenter of the mystery and the reason for this species' designation: its lack of any physical apertures to serve as tools of sight, and the seeming paradox that this fact creates in relation to the some twenty pages of surface anatomical data on the structure of the magenta orbs within what Dr. Nachtreiter calls their facial basin (as it contains the sensory organs normally found on the complexion of a human being). Not merely is the tissue astoundingly reminiscent of human eye formations, but a surface scan has discovered sporadic bits of retina and cornea tissue within the near-outer layers, enveloped by the seemingly purposeless purple jelly on the extremities of the sphere. The organs seem also to be linked to the brain via a system of neural passageways. This fact signifies some manner of practical usage for them either at present or at least sometime in the past. This could be explicable if Dr. Nachtreiter's theory of malignant species mutation is valid. But if natural selection has achieved for the Planars such an efficient coordination of respiration with circulation, why would it act beneficently in one manner and to great detriment in another? Would a creature's reproductive success in an environment of extreme gravity still not be favored if that creature had the ability to orient and direct its movements with precision?

It has, however, been verified through multiple techniques that the *nonvisualis* indeed possess a capacity for hearing foreign voices. Not merely do we have hours of their conversations on tape, the implications of which are self-evident, but Dr. Nachtreiter has also been able to distinguish four eardrums near the edges of the facial basin. These eardrums are properly attuned to vibrational activity. There also exist adequate neural connections and a flattened cochlea. The frequency range of their reception seems to encompass approximately 30 to 12000 Hertz, within the capacity of the human voice and ear, but excluding both extremely high and low-pitched manmade tones. Therefore I have been assured beyond doubt that interaction with the creatures will be an option for me after my landing to come. Perhaps then I can inquire into the nature of the elusive *quisly*...

Listening to the recordings during a brief fifteen-minute session afterward, I recognized a peculiar phonetic combination which incorporated the "quisly" into it, but seemed to be pronounced as a single lengthy word instead of the distinct pauses I encountered in other references to such a central term. At last triumphing over the distortions of the Planar accent, I managed to determine its spelling as *xruquislywuoxg*, with the peculiar double "x" combination at the end pronounced as two successive "ks" sounds – a near impossibility for a human being to utter continuously. The aliens' language seems to have developed an obsession with multiple consecutive consonants. The tongues of the *nonvisualis* are slender and long. They can be maneuvered to swiftly lash the sides of their facial basins without physical hindrance, oft rendering them capable of mouthing eight to ten consonants in a row without stumbling or impeding upon the yet unknown terms' continuity. The "quisly" itself, however, is a drastic departure from this norm. Not merely is it humanly accessible, but the particular enunciation placed upon it is a relatively gentle one, as if the *nonvisualis* were demonstrating a careful reverence toward the mysterious concept. Usually their voices are permeated with a stagnant monotony, a resigned and apathetic pattern of speech disrupted only in relation to the "quisly." They never hesitate nor ramble on in their typical indistinctiveness when pronouncing it. Rather, their voices assume a loud,

ardently passionate, almost melodious character, which is as transitory as the two syllables themselves.

Comprehending that further significant discoveries in so complex a field would not arise in a setting detached from the objects of study themselves, I articulated to Dr. Nachtreiter my resolve to depart for Magnetica at midnight tomorrow. The Magnetica files were copied to the databases within the *Adamant*. Afterward, ten of my remaining eighteen hyper-condensers were activated to unravel a wormhole between Hermes and my destination, in accordance with Dr. Nachtreiter's calculations derived during his own voyage there. The estimated duration of my flight is to be in the vicinity of sixteen hours, during which I shall analyze convenient landing sites around the Glassy Plain and employ my electronic tools of architectural design to fully compose the layout of my initial base. The base will be constructed by my cadre of building-assistance droids, using the portabricks presently in storage. This is to be my ultimate plunge into the frontier, into a wilderness yet to be tamed and colonized, which, ironically enough, presents me with a security I could not have received in Protectorate territory – a freedom from the illegitimate usurpers on the panels of the MEC and the Collegium.

Fortunately, during yesterday's search of recent Intergalnet postings, I have discovered no hints as to any manner of exposure of my endeavor by the Collegium. If all proceeds as planned and no divulgements of the mission occur at home, I shall remain permanently out of my enemies' reach. What exhilarated me was the sight of my wife's essay contributing to the battle of ideas and persuasive power. The fact that the Lady Anne-Marie upholds despicable moral formulations does not deny her intellectual cunning, and it is evident through her reply that she views the posting to be a threat to the movement. She does not address Margaret's particular claims except through elementarily refutable generalizations. The largest part of her puny tirade launches into *ad hominem* condemnations as shallow and illogical as they are gratuitous. I speculate that she is seeking to draw support from those whose cognitive apparatuses function "on a different level" – through a brutish standard of vulgar, unprocessed conjectures which are supposed to, in the minds of the mob, comprise a legitimate argument. She comprehends that she is unable to undermine the accuracy of Margaret's exposition and the rationality of her policy advice. She realizes that, were the struggle one of sheer persuasion, her legions of disciples would have collapsed prior to even comprising a significant political force. The fact that she seeks means other than persuasion is what alarms me to the greatest extent...

*Posted July 7, 2753, on "The Cosmic Enquirer" Intergalnet News Outlet by Victor Claudius Rovercraft, Chief Field Reporter of the Terrestrial Theater.
Subject: Turmoil in the State and Streets*

I make it a practice of mine not to distort the facts by feigning impartiality. All of us possess ideological biases, dependent upon our conscious convictions or on the subconscious hodge-podge lodged within a chaotic mind. One cannot escape a subtle evaluation, and to attempt to do so in defiance of reality would be to envision a false dichotomy between fact and value, just as Ayn Rand warned us of eight centuries ago. I refuse to slip back into the pre-egoistical mentality of the ancients, as certain protesters upon this day are attempting to convince you to do. I will not deviate from the fullest

scope of my experiences, as it is the capacities of my mind alone that I can rely on. I promise, however, that I shall present to you the information I have accumulated in the manner I perceived it. Only then will I editorialize, as integration must always be preceded by sensory collection. If you select to read on, you will encounter a departure from conventional politically correct journalism, but I emphasize that I have written and will continue to write in such a manner due to my ingrained resolve to preserve the spark which ignites the fuel of man's machines and to manifest my unconditional love for the truth and human understanding thereof. If I am to be viewed as old-fashioned, then what retrogression have we undergone in comparison to the old days?

A peculiar coincidence brought me to the halls of the Ministry of Exploration and Colonization at 0600 hours this morning, anticipating that my attendance of this scheduled meeting would be a mere routine data collection for the Enquirer's historical archives. Thus I sat in a reporter's booth adjoined to the chamber's polished granite walls. A Microscopic Image Recorder had been adjusted to my levitating microphone, and thus I could visually document the ascent of Minister Orthog to the executive podium while he spoke the conventional opening phrases and enunciated the order of business for the day – mainly discussions of micromanagement in his typical anti-raider campaigns on the frontiers. It was then that the Viscount Conford raised himself from his seat, which triggered a ripple effect throughout the chamber, whereby some twenty-five other panel members arose while the man voiced a proclamation:

"I move to discuss the issue of the Minister's competence to continue his duties," he stated, in the meantime seconded by the voices of the standing. I could spot particular faces among the multitude, and obtained the impression that all the discernible entities within this literal "uprising" were members of the Collegium for Frontier Preservation. Though none have, prior to this incident, been as intense or explicit as Conford in their demands for a change of leadership, I spotted an underlying motive to unseat Orthog present within each of the ecological factions and transcending their rivalries on the matter of precisely how extreme a restriction should be imposed upon expansion efforts.

"Delegate Conford, you are out of order. I have recognized neither you nor your desire to present a motion." the Minister replied. And he was correct on the matter.

"Evidently, Lord Orthog, when your very ability to properly supervise this forum comes into question, it would be dangerous to proceed in a setting where your sanction is the omnipotent determinant of a delegate's ability to express himself." Conford's voice was permeated by a certain insolence and simultaneous disdain for his superior, as if he considered himself to inherently reside on a higher plane than Orthog.

"Delegate, I am warning you. Another such act of misconduct, and I will have you evicted from the chamber," Orthog answered sternly.

"It so happens that the chamber does not recognize you fit for such a drastic action," Genseric Tartmann spoke in defense of his associate. "I would like to make the point that we have entered a different epoch in our history, and different times require different leaders and different ideas. Unfortunately the mysterious aging process imposes a certain clear-cut rigidity on a human mind, which leaves it unable to amend itself in accordance with the spirit of the times. In earlier eras, the services of Minister Orthog have been well-appreciated, as he was following the dominant historical and cultural paradigm. But the times have shifted, and the Minister is unable to shift with

them. He still embraces archaic values that have been abandoned by the vast majority of our avant-garde thinkers. He supports thoughts from a time when humans could still afford to expand and be granted liberty in determining their lifestyles and commercial interactions. But such a definite idealism is detrimental to an appreciation for other forms of life and non-life, for other cultures that do not share such values, and for the changing face of our own social tradition..."

"Oh, pour steel into your mouth, you demagogical buffoon!" interrupted Delegate Richard Magnetway, one of the three Accelerative Settlement Party members still holding chairs within the Ministry from days before the establishment of the Collegium. "Look upon Lord Orthog, and use your common sense, gentlemen! Do you see a trace of senility on his face? What about a hint of flabbiness or resignation? Why, his features are as youthful as I remember them from twenty-two years ago, and his mind has not lost a speck of its clarity! Examine his age, will you? He is eighty years old. Compare that to my one hundred five to understand that, especially in lofty positions as these, such age is not an atypical phenomenon. Why, he has not yet lived forty percent of his life expectancy, and I will stand by him for another century and a half or more before I even consider his retirement. No, gentlemen, your concerns are not with his competence to exercise the lawful functions of his post. They are with the procedural imposition of *your* particular retrograde fanaticism, which the people of this country have never voluntarily consented to support. Nor do I ever recall witnessing your names on the Parliamentary voting ballots for Ministry membership. Your positions have been assured by the grace of Her Dictatorship, the Lady Anne-Marie Legard. Every time she resolved to extend her political influence in government agencies, there so *happened* to surface allegations of prior delegates' 'misconduct' or 'incompetence' by some inexplicably absurd standard, or an 'emergency situation' requiring the institution of additional seats. And once you managed to thereby secure a majority on the panel, you voted your cronies in as well, by additional membership expansions, until your cultist 'paradigm' became the standard of judgment!"

"Our places are a result of our theoretical scientific accomplishments within the faculty of the Collegium!" Conford replied with a shocked indignation.

"Yes, a result of your warped computer models derived from your 'feelings' and unwarranted assumptions as postulates. They somehow manage to *predict* Spontaneous Planetary Explosions, neglecting the fact that none has ever occurred and none ever will! Yes, a result of your anti-observational rantings concerning the dangers of human control over the environment, depending not on the magnificent empirically justified effects of Accelerative Settlement and accelerative progress but on the primordial blunderings of mystics like Quinn and Malthus! Yes, a result of your cunning capacity to disguise inherited political pull and lack of personal merit as scientific endeavors, *Rammings, twenty-third Viscount Conford, Tartmann, fourteenth Margrave Bergenland, Rustain, seventeenth Baron Vertville!* What position other than 'environmentalist activist' have you held prior to your initiation into the Collegium? What education have you attained, aside from the protest rallies and the manifesto readings? Are you aware of the diligence and persistence it requires to introduce a mining network into a hideous, barren stretch of mountains? Can you envision the forethought, coordination, and meticulous monitoring required of explorers and colonists who wish to build themselves a new home? You have always considered your villas and your ten-

course decolorified meals as metaphysically given, and you have never pondered over the conditions which give birth to them. You naively envision that if we rob the human species of the expansive momentum that has paved its path to dominance in the first place, you will still enjoy an unhampered standard of living! You think that it is regimentation, humility, and submission that enable survival? Perhaps for an animal with a club to its head back in the swampy jungles, but not for any life worth living! Our job in the Ministry is not to prod our noses into and jam the gears and assembly belts of the heroes' machinery; it is to ensure that no malicious criminal or deluded vigilante looter attempts to do the same. It is not to carve spheres of 'life' and spheres of 'non-life' out of a planetary surface, but to crush cosmic raiders and provide armed escort for the navigators of the frontiers. That is precisely the policy Lord Orthog has followed, and that is precisely the reason for which you condemn him!" Magnetway finished another of his heated, passionate addresses of an unabashed sincerity I remember to have admired in my childhood – a trait which seems to be disappearing amid the attempts of today's rhetoricians to please all and accomplish naught.

"Mind your manners, Delegate. It seems that you need to learn some respect for other people's ideas, even when they are not your own," A certain Delegate Small reprimanded Magnetway, exhibiting the impression that his own dignity was somehow upset by Magnetway's tirade against the various factional chieftains within the Ministry.

"Mr. Small, you underestimate the significance of your detection," Conford fueled his accusation. "Delegate Magnetway's outbursts are yet another example of the unbending principled egoism which is a byproduct of senility. Note that he is older even than the Minister himself, and Lord Orthog at least attempts to preserve a veneer of proper procedure in his relentless promulgations. Would you like to see, twenty-five years later, a Minister with a similar attitude aimed against his own colleagues within the panel?"

"Mr. Rammings, by the power vested in me as the executive of this forum, I hereby expel you from the chamber and declare your further participation in the Ministry and affiliated privileges invalid..." Orthog attempted to regain a hold on the chaotically disintegrating meeting, his ceremonial gavel inflicting blows upon the podium whose impact was sufficient to stun the bickering delegates in the side conversations.

"Look, he is attempting to censor his colleagues and usurp the cooperative venture that should be the Ministry!" Tartmann intervened.

"And what have *you* been undertaking in the past seventeen years?!" Magnetway shot the bitter string of words at him.

"I would like to amend my motion and suggest that the competence of Delegate Magnetway and his Accelerative Settlement Party associates, Delegate Steelframe and Delegate Shipmenton, be judged along with that of Minister Orthog as basis for their permanent retirement from salaried professions in the event of a majority vote," Conford spoke, not having stepped a millimeter closer to the door.

"Guards! Evict this man!" Orthog called to the baffled soldiers standing watch over the inner side of the chamber door, clad in blue jackets over single-pieced outfits of multi-layered gray silk that covered them from head to toe, excepting their faces. Their activity alone would have been sufficient to restore order and knock the notion of the Minister's removal out of the Collegium ecologists' heads, but they hesitated, and their eyes scanned the delegates, as if seeking to comprehend with which side lay the

genuine legitimacy. They moved forward slightly and armed their ceremonial bayonets, but no decisive thrust toward the delegate was made.

"I would like to call for a vote on the motion!" Conford shouted in the midst of the intimidated and apprehensive silence of the chamber. Suddenly, the voices burst into cacophony once more while Steelframe sought desperately to remedy the situation.

"We have not yet conducted a vote on whether or not to even conduct the vote on the motion presently, which is a necessary procedural prerequisite for voting on the actual motion. The motion itself is an abominable perversion of law, as no government – and no majority vote especially – possesses the power to deny participation to legitimately established officials who have not committed any form of misconduct, not even to mention barring their employment in a free market!"

"Laws are mere social conventions, Delegate, and when the society, the culture, or its representatives decide it convenient to bypass, amend, or re-interpret them, then such is the proper course of action," Tartmann remarked with a certain cynicism, shaking his head as he uttered, "I vote affirmatively." A chorus of "ayes" drowned out any further objections as the Collegium ecologists, no longer feigning civility, began to shout derogatory expletives at Orthog in order to intimidate him into abandoning his place at the podium.

"This is an insurrection! You must realize that, gentlemen!" Orthog shouted in a booming tone. "I am still Minister, and shall remain Minister unless either the Protector or Parliament deems me unworthy of retaining the office. The proper purpose of government shall not be subverted by the caprices of primitivists on my watch!"

"Oh, shut up, you egotistical psychopath with an inflated superiority complex!" Delegate Small hollered at him furiously, sending a stream of saliva in the direction of the podium. Others followed his lead, all except the three bewildered, disoriented Accelerative Settlement Party members and a stocky straw-haired man sitting in the back row, half-heartedly attempting to soothe the enraged temper explosions of his colleagues.

"Gentlemen, this is no time for name-calling and violence! The Universe is overflowing with manmade problems, and we can only solve them if we work together, as one mind, as one body, with no petty bickering and irrelevant expenditures of energy. Orthog must go, but he will only go if we elect a Minister of our own who will be more suited to our preferences. Spitting does not constitute a nomination." The speaker was one, Dr. Dirk Rustain, seventeenth Baron Vertville, a theoretical ecologist from the Collegium for Frontier Preservation and recently initiated member of the Ministry Panel.

"Listen, people, this man makes sense!" urged a certain Delegate Murkton, whom I have observed to have been tacit and hesitant at speaking to a point of a phobia. Nevertheless, he has always voted with the members of the Collegium, and his leanings toward the Rustain faction did not strike me as a phenomenal alteration of his character.

The impact of Murkton's agitation was immense, as the whole ecologist body of the panel unanimously, in a single tone which seemed to indiscriminately project every syllable as if it were the edge of an electric blade slicing through the pillars which form an edifice's foundation, declared, "We, the members of the Executive Panel of the Ministry of Exploration and Colonization do hereby ordain as our speaker, chief executive, Minister, preserver of untainted wilderness, and leading forestaller of anthropogenic environmental disasters, the esteemed, influential, and expert theoretical

ecologist from the Collegium of Frontier Conservation, Dr. Dirk Rustain, seventeenth Baron Vertville!"

"Guards! Arrest these men! Every one but three of them is an affront to the rule of law!" Orthog dismounted from the platform, seeking greater proximity to the five troops near the back rows of the chamber. "This is an order from a General of the Armed Forces and your superior on the command structure!" Instead he found the guard captain's frigid black tyrannometallum glove gripping his wrist. He hesitated as he pulled a ceremonial scroll from his pocket, of a format presently reserved only for official warrants.

"I apologize for my inability to follow your instructions, General, but..." his tone altered from a fleeting compassion to a certain bureaucratic rigidity and sternness, "by the request and sanction of the Honorable Lady Anne-Marie, you are hereby relieved of your office in the Ministry and are to be transferred into temporary confinement, to await trial on twenty-one charges of national exposure to environmental risks, subjugation and assimilation of biological and non-biological spheres of territory belonging to other species and non-species, resource exhaustion through territorial acquisitions, non-compliance with the ideas and suggestions of your colleagues, ideological divergence from the officially endorsed environmental standpoint, improper laxity with regard to industrial concerns on the frontiers, potential genocide of extraterrestrial species and non-species, potential extermination of humankind, as well as..."

"These are artificial allegations unrelated to the law in any manner! I refuse to abase myself before such folly, and I possess a right not to undergo trial for acting as the law and my individual rights have required me to!"

"*Rights*, man?" Tartmann inquired mockingly, leaning over the side of his chair. "What an old-fashioned, archaic term!"

Orthog, without forewarning, swiftly bludgeoned a trained fist into the nose of his captor, subsequently lunging to the side to free himself of the guards' grip. Afterward, to suppress the ability of the remaining four gunmen to inflict physical pain – and avert the risk that his "pacification" might bring about his death – the still-able muscles of his upper arms lifted a chair adjacent to the aisle and hurled it into the approaching soldiers' midst. The soldiers were thrown into an un-coordinated heap of broken limbs and rasping shouts of pain. When force has robbed of his work and freedom, when his merits were ignored and his virtues were penalized, what other choice would a man have but to retaliate with a violence that was the sole means of quelling the original infraction?

Orthog sprinted toward the exit and slammed the door from the outside into the faces of some fifteen rampaging delegates who had stumbled over the chairs within the various rows in a frenzied, unthinking, and viciously brutish rush to detain him. Moments later, he was thrown back into the meeting hall, not by his own will or that of the delegates, but by a paralyzing, sudden burst of sound and light, which was followed by a collapse of the outer wall, including the supports for my booth. My own clothing was charred and the mechanisms of the Image Recorder defiled beyond reclamation; all of my irreplaceable video footage of this turbulent occurrence was confiscated by the flames, which the emergency robosprinklers near the upper corners of the room managed to extinguish several seconds too late.

As I sought refuge underneath one of the lengthier benches of the back rows, I noted that the true Minister himself lay in my vicinity, surrounded by a pool of his own blood, a gaping hole in the place of his stomach and a visible breach of his chest in the region of his lungs. It would require some fifteen minutes before the nanorovers in his system could coordinate even the most basic cellular regeneration program which all Protectorate citizens receive during their first doctor's visit. Until then, the functionality of his system would be assured only by the emergency neurons that would maintain the competence and awareness of his cognitive functions, as well as teleported oxygen from his private hospital filtering automaton to the various remaining organs of his system. Wounds such as these are but minor. Even had his heart been deprived from him, or a significant portion of his cerebral cortex displaced, they would have been elementarily substituted to ensure his proper health the next day. The primary danger for the moment lay in his detection by infuriated opponents, who no longer perceived any consequences beyond the range of the immediate moment, having turned into rabid, bleating, deformed beasts ready to rip the entire chamber to shreds if necessary. I resolved to remain by the Minister's side and observe the unfolding events without exposing either of us to their effects, placing my long black overcoat in front of us to disguise our surroundings to resemble the darkness which pervaded the entire lower portions of the bench. It was a flimsy coverture, but one possessing the potential to divert any hasty chance examiners.

The explosion was followed by a massive inpouring of that gray, amorphous entity known as a crowd. In all the centuries of man's progress, through all the advancements and conveniences his ingenuity brought about, *this* was the one visible force seeking to thwart his every subsequent design in a violent, emotional, collective backlash which saw not individual interests, but a brutal tidal wave of impulse, inexplicable urge, stinging envy, and burning hatred. Where a resourceful farmer diligently tended to his crop, a horde of Green Malthusians overwhelmed his fence and tore into bits of chunky soil what his plow had refined. Where a prodigious industrialist manufactured with precision his metallic wonder tools and granted jobs to thousands of men who otherwise would have starved, a throng of strikers smashed his windows, decimated his equipment, ostracized and befouled the lives of those heroes whom they called "scabs". And now – where a sagacious Minister fought with raygun and gavel during his entire life for the securement of individual liberties through the principle of limiting government force – a stream of half-baked university lunatics, teeth bared and dark scarlet mouths sputtering out hypnotic slogans, devastating everything in its path, roamed about on a head-hunt against him and his admirers. Even a simple wall lamp and a red-carpet path were not spared by the onslaught as they dissipated into shards of glass and lint.

"Say no to a nation of overpopulation!" the crowd chanted.

"Reject the archaism of Manifest Destiny!" it hollered.

"Return the world to pristine non-life!" it urged.

Amid all this I witnessed the chamber's elaborate antique ceiling of carved wood – with classical realist frescoes as its decoration – splintered by the jagged edges of... spearheads hurled there by the protesters.

"Awakening masses, we are your friends!" Tartmann hastened to declare as he tore his silver-embroidered orange robe from his shoulders and leaped into the crowd,

garbed only in ragged pantaloons and a disheveled drab brown vest. “Nature’s children, you have allies in the science of a new age!” His cry was echoed by a cheer, which more resembled the roar of a primeval beast.

“What tidings bring you that have provoked your march?” Rustain followed the more cautious route of inquiry, which was nevertheless of greater advantage to his cause.

A bare-chested, tattooed young ruffian, with mud-stained curly hair stretching down his spine and held near his skull by a green headband, answered him in a voice that fluctuated between a screech and a rumble. “That damn bastard’s banned the Colleej’um!” I had not encountered that manner of language spoken by any person I had ever associated myself with, but I can recall from a grade-school course on historical sociology that this was the argot employed by street hooligans in the welfare-state ghettos of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, the news created an alteration of temper within me to the same degree as it did in the disgruntled delegates, only possessing the precisely opposite effect. I was jubilant that the institution accounting for seventy percent of my tax bill – and using my money to deprive me of my life, work, and happiness besides – was becoming abolished, along with the root of the Green-Barren axis, which had escalated into the roving behemoth of a crowd I saw before me today.

“Alas, we have traded one power for another!” Small exclaimed regretfully.

“Don’t be afraid; the Colleej’um’ll be back!” a bent little hoodlum with streaks of black paint beneath his eyes assured him. “We w’r gonna go at the palace and tell that Protector that we ain’t gonna stand his ‘xpanshunist species-centrism, that we wanna fund a cool org’nizayshun like the Colleej’um, and we wanna have all others be made to pay for it, too... We w’r... um... gonna do that, but we d’cided instead... like... what’s the use of tellin’ ‘im?’ D’that really make him change things back? No, we gotta show him! We gotta show him... like... through this protestin’ thing, and the things we’ll *do* if he ain’t gonna do as we tell ‘im. We gotta... like... raid people’s houses and spread some terror, man! Yeah! Once a few people git their heads... like.., cracked ov’r th’ pav’ment, he’ll be too scared to lift his finger w’thout our lettin’ ‘im...” Suddenly, his rant was interrupted by a stream of cyan dust – a cloud of robotic vaporizers, gradually infiltrating the tissue at the back of his neck and inexorably wearing it away into tidbits of subatomic refuse. Before his throat became disintegrated in such a manner, he could gather himself to but mouth the cryptic mystical words, “In death there is life, and the balance must be preserved!”

I observed from underneath my hiding place as a squadron of yellow-plumed Police Sentries penetrated the Ministry rubble and initiated a massive cleansing strike against the crowd, using lasers, vaporizers, electric bolts, and precision-guided constrained-impact micro-missiles (PGCIMM, or cimms in the language-adapted version). Perhaps sixty of them confronted a throng of ten-thousand, facing a volley of stones, javelins, spears, mud clumps, antique bullets, and occasional rays every step of their advance. I saw them trigger the mechanisms upon their chest pockets, which unraveled and strapped onto their patrol suits a light but durable combination of cuirass and gauntlets furnished from the extraordinarily malleable alloy known as ulysseum, which would ward off any primitive devices and small-caliber projectiles hurled with the intent of destroying them.

“I offered you the opportunity to surrender near the Planefort Estate, but you neglected my promise of pardon and proceeded to tear the house and its inhabitants to bloody bits! The blame for their lives and for those of tens of others innocent citizens lies solely on your shoulders, and not on the Protector’s for having given his decree. The order to disband the Collegium is legal in its entirety, and you had the choice to comply and remain in your dormitories at Rexcitadel. But you initiated a spree of ravenous carnage! As you are evidently guilty and evidently still a threat, I possess no choice but to order your utter eradication!”

Thus spoke the captain of the squadron, a man whose features were concealed by a pointed visor, but whose uniform bore the nametag of “Rinkarm”. I must mention this name as a tribute to Captain Rinkarm, whose heroic resolve before today’s acts of wanton aggression saved my life and those of countless other prosperous, law-abiding Protectorate citizens. He uttered this message in defiance of the chaos, amid a hail of objects – foul, sharp, swift, and diseased alike – striking his personal magnetic shield and falling to the ground without effect. The Police Sentries’ armor was supremely effective against this despicable riot, and due to apt maneuvering and a proper attack formation, the men remained constantly impenetrable from any angle available to the crowd.

The mob, on the other hand, was mowed down by the thousands, and the delegates, to avoid a similar end, sought refuge behind the benches, like Minister Orthog and myself, and waved their ceremonial robes in the air to avoid becoming struck. In the case of the impulsive Tartmann, however, no such recourse was available, and he lingered in the crowd, hollering out nonsense at the bottom of his lungs in a rasping, distorted, desperate voice. Once a poster-holding boy beside him had fallen, he lunged forward and clung to the cuirass of the nearest Police Sentry with nails that clawed at the smooth ulyseum which composed it, while another hand sought to lift the man’s visor. Tartmann’s cheeks swelled with the stores of saliva that accumulated in his mouth. His face was stained by ash, mud, and blood, and distorted besides. Likely no one noted his identity, which he had voluntarily relinquished minutes earlier. A comrade of the harassed sentry neutralized the threat by lodging a two-pronged spike from a clipgun into a vein at the side of Tartmann’s head. The ex-delegate, in his final act, salivated profusely against the ground and fell into the motionless non-existence he had implicitly lauded all along.

“Stop in the name of the public order!” Rustain shouted from his bench. “You have just destroyed the Margrave Bergenland, a delegate of the people! Cease this massacre!” His cry was drowned out by the holler of the mob in front. The police action continued in full force until an unobstructed corridor was created between the squadron and the chamber, and the Police Sentries rushed in to form a protective barrier around the delegates. Rinkarm was among the group closest to my own spot of refuge. Hence, I resolved to manifest my presence as well as that of the Minister, whom I assisted in standing and who had already been repaired into a functional state.

“I thank you for your efforts,” he spoke to me. “I urge you to speak the truth to the people once you are released from this blighted rubble. Please condemn the usurpation by the delegates for what it truly is.” I concurred with him and promised that I would produce this work. As magnetic-field activators were thrown to us, he proclaimed

in a rejuvenated voice, "I hereby disband this assembly and declare all consequences of this meeting null and void!"

"As if you could, you stupid non-Minister!" Small hollered back. "There's enough to worry about without this! Look at the destruction you and your kind have caused!"

"At my side is the true Minister, who has always been Minister and whom the delegates sought to depose in violation of all legal processes!" I advocated Orthog's case before Captain Rinkarm.

"Lord Orthog remains Minister, and he urges you to disperse for your own good. There may be more turmoil heading this way," Rinkarm replied to Small's objection. Just as suddenly, in a dramatic turning of the tide, the captain of the Ministry guards, whose nose injury had by now also healed substantially, crept up from behind and bound with tyrannometallum shackles the hands of both Rinkarm and Orthog.

"I arrest the two of you, the ex-Minister on a series of accusations from the Lady Anne-Marie, the ex-Captain for orchestrating the murder of a delegate of the people. This operation is declared illegitimate and no longer possesses government sanction..."

"On whose authority do you babble such nonsense?!" Rinkarm demanded, attempting to wrestle free of his handcuffs.

"On that of the elected Minister of Exploration and Colonization," Rustain packed extreme amounts of intimidation into these words. "I possess the backing of the Lady Anne-Marie and of this assembly, and woe to him who dares disobey my dictates. This entire squadron is one of mutineers who attacked a demonstration of civilians seeking to make their viewpoint heard. All of the men involved will stand trial for this, but until then their activities shall be inhibited and the fulfillment of their offices curtailed. Thousands of protesters have already lost their lives, and I see it as my duty to preclude further bloodshed. I applaud Captain Nersmith of the Ministry Guards for his obedience to orders and understanding of the situation. Soldiers," he called to the other four recovering guards, who had begun to rebound from the injuries dealt them by Minister Orthog's hurling of the chair, "escort these men into confinement... and, for that matter, take along the intruders, Mr. Magnetway, Mr. Steelframe, and Mr. Shipmenton, and this unsanctioned reporter here, who is likely Orthog's hired agent."

"Our orders were from the Lord Protector himself!" a Police Sentry regular protested.

"I give the orders here!" Rustain fiercely retorted. The mob outside was turning into a swarm, giving him the numbers to support his pronouncement.

Realizing the imminent danger posed to my freedom and the victory of the Collegium crowd-pleasers in this encounter, I dexterously lunged back underneath the benches, reaching for my overcoat and in the meantime disheveling my hair, undoing the gelled fine tips of my mustache, and applying floor dust to my face. I tied the garment around my waist while rolling my vest into a thin strip of cloth and employing it as a headband. The safest means of escape for the moment would be to seek refuge among the triumphant mob by disguising myself as one of its own. I would sneak into the back alley of closest proximity, and subsequently make my way back through the embattled city and over the Northeast Auxiliary Atlantic Bridge to the Enquirer's terrestrial headquarters in Plasticmold City on the tip of verdant Greenland. There I planned to publish and broadcast this account of my experiences.

My encounters along the way hinted to me that the march on the Ministry was not an isolated incident. The entire vicinity of Legardium experienced intermittent bursts of turmoil. Up to a hundred thousand Barren rioters at last dared to exit the cellars of their cabals' gatherings and defile the open lands of industry, progress, and human life with their self-righteous nihilism. Captain Rinkarm's unfortunate imprisonment was not repeated in locations where, for the majority of instances, the resolve and heroism of the Police Sentries managed to disperse the howling lunatics and preserve innocent lives.

I realized that the forces of good, with their cimms and vaporizers, with their factories and spaceports, possessed always the means of overwhelming and utterly wrecking the minions of evil along with their primitivist methodologies and derivations thereof. The Barren doctrines preach not effort but *sloth* as an approach to one's cause, not production but *envy* as a source of one's sustenance and motivation. It is only through the ignorance and inaction of the good that such a monstrosity has been perpetuated throughout the ages to culminate in the riots of today. The Lord Protector hates the Collegium and has hated it since its initiation. However, only today has he acknowledged the fundamental moral breach constituted by its existence and the outcomes of the threat of regimentation, which has been looming over us for over a decade. His prior inaction inadvertently permitted the horror of primitivism to spread its parasitic vines over the fabric of our society, while a swift measure has shown us what modern intergalactic civilization can unleash against raving savages who belong in the muck of the ancient times which they seek to unleash.

But the precise opposite of the scenario had occurred within the Ministry, where all too few men of conscience desperately struggled with rational commentary against the force of rays, bullets, and stones. Why did the guards not rush to the aid of the good and instead imprisoned those who did? Why did they not fulfill the proper functions of their offices and realize that a flimsy series of accusations from a supposedly apolitical sister of the Protector is no ground for *any* manner of enforcement? Were those soldiers radical environmentalists who sought to destroy technology and return man to the state of club-wielding tribal warfare? I doubt that. But what I can infer in them is another paradigm perhaps as dangerous, that of *passivity*. They did not react against the vandalistic prodding of the mystic-collectivist-Ishmaelite axis and thus gradually fell into its service. They sanctioned an evil arrest warrant as if it were of no consequence and merely a part of their job. I have seen the face of the guard captain when he executed the command for Orthog's detainment. His philosophical grounding doubtless did not approve of the act, yet he carried it out nonetheless. Why, my friends, I ask you? Now a heroic defender of the peace and his squadron, as well as a valiant expansionist and his advocates, are stuffed into single-room prison cells where they likely do not possess sufficient reading material to last them a day. Now Rustain rules the Ministry, and we can expect a fanatical last stand from this final bastion of inhibition of the march of progress. Those are the results of the guards' indecision and passivity, but why? Why must they act that way? I only hope that the Protector will find it within his capacity to declare martial law within the shortest timeframe possible, so that the forces of good can weed out those perpetrators against man.

Chapter VI Colossus Base

July 8, 2753,

Once the *Adamant* entered Magnetica's orbit, Dr. Nachtreiter's autopilot program disabled itself, simultaneously with the cessation of the mighty hyper-condensers and their high-pitched background hum. I ordered the droid pilot of the ship to activate thrusters and descend to an elevation of some 2000 meters above the planet's surface, in the vicinity of the Glassy Plain. The location would render the nearby landscape open to visual and instrumental observation. Exploration into more elevated parts would be a later design, but at the moment my objective was to deploy Colossus Base, the planetary headquarters I designed during my presence within the wormhole.

I selected a gradually sloped but massive hill, with plenty of surface area and even a stretch of flatlands at the top, as the center of the compound. At its pinnacle would stand an observation tower, enabling the unequipped eye to view the entire nearby area – including the southern border of the Glassy Plain – for some eleven kilometers in all directions. This would serve as the operating center for my recorder droids and computerized databases, with virtual-reality projectors attached to the white domed ceiling to envelop its ample expanse with maps, diagrams, radar and field-droid signals, and data lists to be displayed at my demand. A suspended walkway linked the tower to my personal quarters in a neighboring Baroque-style villa. There porta-frescoes would be unraveled along the walls, and carpets would be deployed across the floors to beautify it. The *Adamant's* robotic maintenance, cooking, and entertainment staff would be transferred there in order to render it habitable. A canteen and life-support-systems hangar, along with an adjunct miniature hospital, would be located within a convenient distance and accessible by paved ground paths and, in certain rooms, short-ranged wormholes. A utility room, water-storage tank, and experimental crop field would be positioned slightly farther along the hill's southern incline. From there, power lines, pipes, and an automated underground food processing network would stretch to the canteen, where any of Magnetica's agricultural yield would be sanitized and decolorified. At the base of the hill would be paved an airfield with a control tower and several guest chambers for future expeditions, as well as a hangar for planetary rovers slightly to the west. In the precise center of the hill, however, I resolved to position a structure whose meaning was at first glance abstract instead of practical, but in truth both – since abstraction nourishes practicality. It shall be the centerpiece and the reason for the base's name, a precise replica of the ancient Colossus of Rhodes – a design I assembled from a study of ancient eyewitness reports concerning the statue's nature. It shall loom over the miscellaneous structures with its confident, equanimous eyes and a stony torch clenched in a mighty fist. The denizens of Rhodes built the first Colossus to commemorate their triumph over a horde of pirates who had sought to confiscate their profits. Presently, I construct it for the same purpose, to celebrate my victory over the pirates who have looted mankind from the classrooms and committees of the Collegium, but who will not extend their befouling theft of man's promise into this rightly human realm.

Upon landing, the building-assistance droids went into full swing implementing my design, while pavement depositors were dispatched to remoter parts in order to lay

a path of Legardian Promethium, intended for routine rover inspections of the area, around the foot of Colossus Hill and branching off across the *nachtreiterus*-littered rock between the base and the Glassy Plain. The path would stretch as far as and along the Plain's southern border, where I would gain a splendid firsthand view of the aliens' activities without intruding upon their territory uninvited. I released approximately twenty of my prospecting spikes (prospecspikes) into the air. These swift and compact devices possess nanoscopic cameras attached to their sleek outer lining, wired to each individual unit's command center and ordering it to descend whenever a substantial deposit of raw metal becomes detected. The prospecspikes would subsequently inject themselves into the surface and conduct detailed visual analyses and inferences to report not merely the exact amount of precious material present underneath, but also the technological and time resources required to extract it using various known techniques. My screens soon flowed with data of astounding diversity from a seemingly small area of the Metallic Hills, where gargantuan lumps of copper, silver, gold, and iron frequently lay side by side. Smaller deposits were scattered across the adjacent flatlands, but even those would warrant the creation of a mining town per source. First, expeditions such as mine, then specialized communities, then a gradual institution of an interdependent infrastructure, then a massive influx of residents, then glorious metropolitan centers, spreading over the rich Magnetican landscape, until... this world shall be ours, from peak to shining peak... someday.

Some two hours hence, I moved into the villa up an open staircase bordered by landscaped bushes, freshly inserted into a stretch of soil imported here from Planet Earth. The statuesque glance of the Colossus still watched over this base in my imagination only, but as I unraveled the wormcable – which I would connect to the power stations at Hermes – I caught a side glimpse at the figure's massive bronze feet, strapped with metallic replicas of traditional Greek sandals already emerging from the heated, spark-emitting block which the droid builders were diligently refining. I entered my new residence through a stately portico, dragging behind me the offshoot of the wormcable to be linked to my personal computer network. Dr. Nachtreiter's means of contacting me will be limited, as is entailed by the evident necessity of withholding any trace of our dealings from another human being. He had informed me, prior to my departure, that only three simple storage machines would be spared for detachment from the overall infrastructure at Hermes in order to relay to me his research files, the occasional news item from within the Protectorate, and answers to questions which I will certainly have. It will be a clumsy procedure on his behalf, having to transfer information onto private megadiskettes detached from the Intergalnet and from any tracking programs which may be scouring it. But, in light of the scientific progress it will yield, he is more than willing to undertake the endeavor.

Comfortably established within my office, I am able to familiarize myself with the geography of this region using Dr. Nachtreiter's visual data, as well as recordings from the *Adamant* in flight and still-disjoint facts compiled by the prospecspikes concerning the vicinities of the metal deposits. I note, among the anomalous features of the some ninety square kilometers occupying my focus at present, two formidable sheets of ice – one to the north and the other to the south of Colossus Base, encircled by stretches of tundra typical to Magnetica. To the far north, beyond the plain itself, stands a plateau with narrow dusty paths leading to its surface, which gradually rises to an elevated

rectangular outcropping directed toward the grounds of the aliens' habitation. Judging by my measures of the expansion of one's perspective as a result of the plateau's elevation, one would be able to observe the activities of the *nonvisualis* standing atop it. I termed this place the Lookout Grounds accordingly. Situated a mere ten kilometers to the east of the Lookout Grounds is a contrast in landscape, a winding muddy trench of half-melted, half-intact ice which slashes across the terrain as if it were a scar. The Damp Crevice has yet to yield any manner of utility to man, as no resources are discernible there at this time. But then my efforts would still need to be directed at its eradication and smoothening into fertile, terraformed flatlands.

Yet the one landmark, aside from the plain itself, which most captured my attention is that massive giant – the offspring of accident, Mount Sentry, whose apex is the highest point on the planet. It borders the Plain, but, in a peculiar configuration. While in all other locations it slopes gradually, its westernmost edge is a burnished, only slightly wind-worn vertical drop below one hundred meters, abruptly terminating what could have been another two hundred meters for which the mountain's foundation could have stretched. The elementary theory to propose here – had the society of the *nonvisualis* been even remotely technological – would have been the use by the Planars of some manner of Controlled-Impact-Range Explosive (cire), employed to clear away conveniently habitable territory. Yet I cannot imagine an aimlessly stumbling species, without even half an obsidian ax for a tool, capable of a single environmental transformation. This is what renders the matter that much more perplexing...

The puzzles seem to compound upon one another, and it irritates me that insufficient data are within my grasp to furnish a scientific explanation which *does* exist. There are no contradictions in reality, as a fact cannot be present and absent simultaneously in the same manner and under the same circumstances. Only greater exposure to the matter can yield satisfactory developments in my studies. Thus, tomorrow, I resolve to establish the first direct contact between *Homo sapiens* and *Planus nonvisualis*.

When I departed from Hermes Base, I managed to incorporate into my database the most recent story of developments at home in my possession – an eyewitness account by the Cosmic Enquirer's Rovercraft, a representative of a disappearing breed of reporters. He is one who, unlike the tens of thousands of pundits who seek to assume the role of a non-existent, detached, superior arbiter entity, recognizes that ideological bias in one's works is not a perversion of facts, so long as it is the *right* bias, warranted and logically inferable from the facts. A bias is an ethical framework, which is inextricably linked to objectively perceived data of reality; it is, in effect, a suggestion for how man *should*, for his greater benefit, employ the contents of his perceptual mechanism. Rovercraft, a champion of freedom, reveals alarming developments supplemented by essential commentary. Orthog has been ousted – in essence by the whims of the Lady Anne-Marie and mob rule – and Rustain now rules the MEC. Might this in any manner result in the Ministry's apprehension of documents relevant to this endeavor, such as Dr. Nachtreiter's letter to General Orthog? If so, will it be within the Protector's capacity to employ necessary countermeasures to prevent the recall of the mission? Will the Collegium be reinstated and granted access to Magnetic territories? The various possibilities form disturbing scenarios, but I remain confident of my capacity to forestall any intervention from the Collegium and to remain informed

through any bit of especially relevant news Dr. Nachtreiter will choose to send me. For the time being, however, the mission itself holds foremost priority. If it is completed, the Barrrens will have been dealt an irreparable blow. Tomorrow shall be but my first jab at them.

July 9, 2753,

At 0450 hours, I initiated my exploratory journey upon a swift three-wheeled blue planetary rover along the glittering freshly paved path, whose solid promethium overlay still emitted a mild, pleasant trace of the scent of a metal freshly emerged from the smelter. Terrain from tundra to reddish-gray volcanic dust bordered the ever-uniform roadway, and my eyes received quite a spectacle observing its peculiarities. I wondered which of the rocky bumps to my side would remain as fitting elevations for office buildings and broadcasting towers, and which would pose a hindrance removable through dynamite, fire, or TunnelDigger. I wondered whether the ash from those sporadically placed volcanoes within the Metallic Hills would serve as a fecund crop fertilizer or as a deleterious layer of wasteland preventing the emergence of seedlings into the open. Occasionally, I stopped the rover to ascertain the nutritional and metallic contents of ash samples using a portable spectrometer. My findings have yet to be compared with the data of the soil in which various earthly crops flourish – such as cotton, wheat, and certain brands of fruit which I hope to introduce in the first batch of non-native cultures to reside within the territory of Magnetica. It is always *potential* that I detect in sights of nature; as of now they are neither beautiful nor appealing nor worthy of contemplation for their own sake. Only upon their taming and improvement by man do they emerge from behind the curtain of insignificance and become a frontier in the struggle for man's habitation and enhancement.

Circa 0600 hours I reached the branch of the observation path which extended the entire length of the plain's southern boundary between the two mountain ranges. I disembarked from the rover and scoured with my hermetic gloves for a set of compact adjustable-magnification binoculars within my pocket. I anticipated becoming able to track the aliens' behavior without frequently cumbersome data-compiling and micro-analyzing utensils. Those would always be available for a later in-depth analysis, when I would possess at my disposal the opportunity to deploy, at the border, machinery on a massive scale. My present desire was to initiate *communication* with an individual specimen, entity to entity. For this purpose I kept a portable recorder and activated a virtual-reality notepad at the periphery of my vision to jot down combinations of words that would perhaps trigger interpretative inklings in the correct direction. But actually *spotting* one of the aliens was a necessary prerequisite.

As the metal of the binoculars' eyepieces contacted my shielding goggles, I became aware of a distant blur nearing the plain's border, its features appearing more distinct and characteristic of a *nonvisualis* as it approached. What Dr. Nachtreiter had observed from the window of his scout pod, I would be able to view directly. Yet, in accord with Dr. Nachtreiter's findings, I could note no traces of astonishment, or curiosity, or even plain consciousness of my presence within the planar creature, as it continued to leap aimlessly, sometimes scooping up more *nachtreiterus* than it could

gobble, at other times missing completely an abundant patch by mere millimeters and obliviously hopping away. It seemed to be nearing the boundary by mere chance, solitarily. This was a peculiar instance within the sociological patterns of the aliens, whom the various film recordings always portray in gatherings of at least five. I could not bypass an opportunity which might not have recurred in the future.

"I am Meltridge!" I shouted in as conspicuous a manner as I could manage. Would the alien comprehend it to be an attempt at introduction?

It halted and twirled its facial basin as far as the flexibility of its neck could permit, blindly seeking to ascertain the source of my voice. Some five seconds passed before it pointed its eardrum at me, while its tongue lashed out in a monotonously low voice.

"*Chokotar sorkk htgukrtk wuoxxg. Quisly ghnimt iknbt sorkk?*" That last sentence of his much resembled a question in its intonation, as if the native thought the *quisly* to bear some personal relevance to me. The intriguing characteristic of this address was the two-time presence of the word *sorkk*. Lacking the *-sn* or *-tk* endings I had already encountered in four adjectives (including *htgukrtk*, about which I know naught *other* than its grammatical function), it is likely not of their category. Is it a verb, a subject, or a direct object? Is *quisly* the subject entity of the sentence (provided it is an acting entity) or the direct object? And was there a direct reference to me, such as "you", in the question, or did the creature seek to address me on a matter not related to my particular condition? Moreover, the word *wuoxxg*, which I had previously encountered only as the ending of *xruquislywuoxxg*, was used in this case as a term on its own accord – of course, a noun, defined by *htgukrtk*. Then, which word, *Sorkk* or *Chokotar*, was the subject and which was the verb of the first sentence? I required the usage of one of the two in a further phrase to obtain sufficient evidence to support either conclusion.

"I am Meltridge, and you are *Sorkk*?" I tried.

"*Tmnurkbt sorkk Chokotar. Iknbt sorkk Meltrigg.*" Apparently, *sorkk* is the *nonvisualis* equivalent of the verb "to be". The creature seemed to have understood my greeting and responded with the revelation of its own name. *Tmnurkbt*, it follows, is the alien expression, "I", and *iknbt* is a second-person reference, such as "you".

"*Iknbt sorkk Chokotar,*" I spoke to the creature in affirmation. "I am pleased to meet you, Chokotar." I doubt that it comprehended the entirety of the phrase, although the "I", "am", and "you" elements should have already been familiar to it. Yet I was willing to overlook that factor in order to delve further into the elusive meaning of *quisly*. If I were but to grasp the definition of the word *ghnimt*, I would possess an entire sentence, using the context of which I would be able to evaluate the central expression of the Planar tongue.

"*Ghnimt sorkk...?*" I began, seeking to say, "*Ghnimt* is what?", but knowing not the Planar equivalent of such an elementary pronoun.

"*Ghnimt ghnimt sorkk?*" Chokotar replied, mildly curious, as I nearly leapt in ecstasy. I had just unknowingly conducted an inquiry to the effect of, "What is..." and been answered with the logical "What is what?" – since Chokotar was unaware of the object of my query. The statement was slightly out of order, but its meaning could nevertheless be detected. Thus, translated, Chokotar's second sentence can be rearranged to mean "You are what *quisly*?"

Is a *quisly*, then, to be taken to denote a particular category of membership to which a sentient entity can be attributed? Does it have "species" as its English

synonym? Or is it a more fragmented class description? There was but a single way of ascertaining the word's precise nature.

"*Ghnimt sorkk quisly?*" I inquired. Chokotar merely froze with shock, its prior random motions of the facial basin and limbs ceasing, as it stood, tensed, concentrated to the fullest extent of its muscular capacities, apparently bewildered and shocked simultaneously.

"*Iknbt sorkk degrutquisly?*" I inferred that the response, from an organism whose entire life was permeated by contact with the mysterious concept, was the further dismayed query, "You are not a *quisly*?" – with the prefix "degrut-" evidently denoting a negation.

"*Tmnurkbt sorkk degrutquisly. Tmnurkbt sorkk Meltridge.*" I replied. Perhaps this was a confirmation of my individual allegiance as antecedent to a supposed allegiance to "mankind", the species, if that is what the term describes. But Chokotar merely became ever more perplexed.

"*Ghnimt?? Meltrigg sorkk Meltrigg! Htgukrtk!*" Again, that adjective was employed. What, then, was its translation? Was it some manner of exclaimed indignation – something to the effect of, "Odd!" or "Queer!" or "Unbelievable!"? But then, in the context of the first sentence, it would entail Chokotar's admission of itself as an odd *wuoxg*, whatever that defined. The decryption of the Planar tongue would be more mind-boggling than I had initially supposed.

Nevertheless, I sought to justify to my new-found relativist discussion partner the Identity Principle, the essential groundwork for reality that brooked the existence of no contradiction and no phenomenon incomprehensible to the processing mechanisms of sentience. "*Tmnurkbt sorkk Meltridge. Meltridge sorkk Meltridge. Iknbt sorkk Chokotar. Chokotar sorkk Chokotar. A sorkk A.*" I translated the ubiquitous axiom of Aristotelian and Objectivist metaphysics into Planar as an abstract guide-point for the seemingly abstraction-oriented alien.

"*Htgukrtk! Chokotar sorkk degrutChokotar! A sorkk degrutA! Chokotar sorkk quisly! A sorkk quisly! Meltrigg sorkk quisly! Lmgakrptin sorkk quisly! Lmgakrptin lurgopt xruquislywuoxg! Lmgakrptin sorkk gmafft xt ggggmafft quisly, wakkchukksn, anbdekkttk, lkjarvptk, kp hzcmughtsn! Nu, quisly ghnimt iknbt sorkk?!*"

From the atypically heated tone of such a rant, I could determine that the creature was not pleased at my radical intrusion upon its pre-rational interpretative paradigm. It had overtly proclaimed that A does not equal A, and seemed to approach the matter as if it were one of common sense – as if I were the savage on the frontiers, to be enlightened by the superior *quisly* wisdom of the *Planus nonvisualis*.

Nevertheless, in its fanatical surge of temper, Chokotar had revealed to me a wealth of the elements of its language, which I proceeded to mentally decode, while remaining silent for the following minute, perhaps with the aim of addressing the alien mystic following a recession of its present anger.

Judging by its order in the procession of "As that are non-As" mentioned by Chokotar, *lmgakrptin* is a collective designation for "all" or "everyone". It is doubtful that the *Planus nonvisualis*, due to their isolation from all forms of sentient life from time immemorial, have advanced sufficiently in their deliberations to fathom a distinction between objective truths and culturally induced mental frameworks. By referring to me as a *quisly*, Chokotar may have been espousing the Animist notion of attributing a tribe-

specific designation to all species, regardless of entirely unique physiological, environmental, and, in my case, intellectual characteristics. Yet, given the aliens' lack of eyesight, might there be the possibility that they do not recognize species distinctions altogether, that Chokotar had perceived me as one of its own kind? After all, unlike *Secundus nachtreiterus*, I can maintain an intelligible conversation with it. I can swiftly repeat phrases of its own native tongue, perhaps with the same degree of stalling and indecisiveness as the typically disinterested and reluctant dispositions of the *nonvisualis* themselves exhibit. What indicator would exist, other than my likely bizarre name, that a cosmic expedition had been commissioned from a remote galaxy by the Protector of an immense realm belonging to an Extramagnetic species known as *Homo sapiens sapiens*?

Of greater import, however, is that I have encountered within Chokotar's response all three of the quisly-associated adjectives that had perplexed me since my introduction to them at Hermes. Moreover, the adjectives were found in proximity to the frequently recurring, but nevertheless infuriatingly confounding, *xruquislywuoxg*. With regard to the adjectives themselves, a fourth was seemingly attached to the list, also defining *quisly*. I categorized it along with *wakkchukksn*, *anbdekkttk*, and *lkjarvptk*. With my mind still dwelling on the number four, I recognized a most peculiar detail in the sentence with said adjectives. The word *ggggmafft* contained four "g" sounds, while *gmafft* possessed only a single one. Could this have been the Planar expression for numerical values, the quantity of "g" letters equaling the quantity referred to? Evidently, the adjectives had referred to varieties of *quisly*, and the expression itself thus roughly translated to: "Everyone is one of four types of *quisly*..." Then, could the term, instead of applying to the entirety of the sole species the *nonvisualis* are aware of, be the referent to some manner of hierarchical class distinction within Planar society itself? Did Chokotar inquire about my status, so that it could resolve whether to assign me, a lowly peon, to some menial task of labor, or more likely, ritual subordination – or to prostrate itself before me, its overlord and master? Is that the reason for Chokotar's sudden and vehement infuriation at my rejection of the confines of such a system? Is that why it was outraged at my assertion of my identity as primarily individual, instead of the collective blob that a *quisly* likely is?

It was to my utmost disappointment that Chokotar, during my pause, had inadvertently hopped away, toward the horizon and the central regions of the Glassy Plain. I was fortunate that I had, during the conversation, transferred onto the creature a nanoscopic tracking device that would be capable of pinpointing its location and display it on the screens of my field and headquarters computers. Nevertheless, my assignment did require my mind to address other tasks. I will elementarily be able to return to the Glassy Plain the next day and initiate a more detailed verbal exchange, hopefully not again infringing on the cultural taboos of the aliens until I can entirely grasp their natures.

Chapter VII

A Winner Prospecting Spike

Increasing the upward force on my PRLS, I soared to an altitude of some 1500 meters above Magnetica's surface, reinstated a balance of forces, and glided toward the Metallic Hills, where, using my virtual reality notepad and the data uploaded into it from what prospectspikes happened to be in the vicinity, I proceeded to address a most intriguing question: how to transport the virtually ubiquitous chunks of ore, beyond the capacity of man or animal or crane to even budge, to smelters whose standard dimensions admitted a mere half the size of a single such deposit.

Perhaps, I pondered, it would be feasible to create a gargantuan conveyer belt, suspended in air at the altitude of the various deposits and opening in select portions of its path to drop the chunks into accordingly-scaled crucibles below. A single massive processing factory per area, instead of several remote and minuscule ones in the distance, would reduce many of the customary transportation and maintenance expenditures. But one crucial dilemma remained before me. It was necessary to devise a scheme for carrying the ore from its haphazard resting places to the origin of the conveyer belt itself. Would creating a temporary path of levitational platforms, attaching a simple magnet to the metal, fastening it if necessary, and permitting the system to glide through to the belt, eliminate the costs of airlifting by means of craft of deep-space proportions, as well as the cumbersome logistics of managing automatons in settings where every insufficiently fortified foothold risked their fall, fracture, or even disability?

I resolved to experiment with the idea and summoned a cadre of my winged robotic porters, the transportomatons, which carried a supply of leviplatforms from the *Adamant's* laboratory stockpile. After selecting a rather moderately sized deposit of magnesium ore – among the lightest of the metals available – I dispatched prospectspikes to record its mass and thereby inform me of the amount of electromagnetic force required to counter the gravitational pull on the object. A Swift Pill and my virtual-reality notebook (with a calculating device attached) almost instantly produced the arrangement and proximity of leviplatforms required to sustain the magnesium in motion at a desired altitude. The magnesium would then head toward a makeshift steel platform, constructed by my building-assistance droids. During a genuine extraction operation, this platform would have been the initial several meters of the conveyer belt.

A slight push of the magnesium subsequently set it in motion via the designated route. *It is almost at the platform*, my mind declared, expecting the success of what seemed a marvelous process. But alas, I had not taken into account a most sporadic and inconveniencing factor – the movement of objects outside the system, the rattling plummet of a boulder, made of more rock than iron, through the levitational pathway, knocking some three platforms out of position. The platforms were sent flying to the base of the Hills, at a turn in the route itself, surprisingly close to the elevated natural rock platform on which I stood to monitor the operation. *A note for the future: this manner of transport requires a barrier to guard against debris from above.* Before I managed to respond with the replacement of the platforms, the magnesium chunk – substantially more massive than the previous projectile – speeded about the curve, its progress suddenly disrupted by the newly formed breach, as it rumbled to a halt. *Worse*

occurrences could have come about, I thought as I breathed a sigh of relief. Yet I underestimated the disruption the boulder's intrusion would bring about.

Moments later I was lying flat upon my back, knocked from underfoot by some manner of imbalance underneath me. Then, as my eyes swiftly surveyed the scenery, I realized that... it was shifting! Or, more dreadfully, my observer's platform was shifting, and I with it! The pace of my deliberations was still somewhat affected by the lingering effects of the Swift Pill. I thought quickly and constructed a hypothetical scenario that also incorporated the crumbling pebbles of the undercut platform below. It seems that the magnesium had halted, with its magnetic force directed sideways, toward one of the leviplatforms. This in turn repelled the ore toward my position, its brute force of impact having demolished the platform's already flimsy foundation. As soon as I gained sufficient comprehension of the phenomenon, I sought to extricate myself from it with due haste. I increased the upward force on my PRLS, but, alas, the suit's gauges remained still and unresponsive to my new input. The suit had evidently remained functional – or else I would already have been a pool of organic refuse, pinned by gravity to one of the Metallic Hills. Yet the abundance of dust permeating the air, and the stream of tiny but treacherous pebbles flying my way, could have jammed the controls so as to render them defunct with regard to manipulating the suit. There would be no opening for further danger, I resolved, as I endeavored to remove myself from the plummeting platform. I sought to jump downward and become propelled by the PRLS to my original altitude, except in a different airspace and at a time where the dust would already have been dispersed throughout the vicinity and would assume a density not far from typical, thus ceasing to be a menace to the survival of my equipment.

Yet, as intensely as I struggled to wring myself free of the platform, I remained pinned to it as it sped downward, at a rate seemingly inconsistent with Magnetica's acceleration of gravity, at a speed that seemed *constant!* I recalled, per Newton's First Law, that a balance of forces upon an object does not necessarily result in a standstill if the object had been moving previously. In such an event, the object would proceed in a straight path at an unchanging velocity. For me, this implied an inevitable collision with the jagged, cratered, rock-solid terrain below. This outcome, while not as grievous as the impact of free fall would have been, still was bound to result in numerous broken limbs and bones. It would have likely been a precursor to days of incapacitated writhing, while my nanorovers would scramble to repair the fractures, while I would be stranded in a place where my only companions would be the numb, senseless *Secundus nachtreiterus*, stretching for kilometers in their green, bulb-like homogeneity...

But moments later I discovered a transparent blue ambience about me, as streams of frigid water soaked my PRLS. The gravitational force somewhat intensified as the rock platform collapsed with a thud onto a surface I could not quite discern amid the wavy murk underneath what I comprehended to be the Northern Ice Sheet. A fortunate fall that was, indeed.

Some one kilometer underneath Magnetica's surface, acceleration due to gravity was only slightly stronger relative to its colossal value of approximately 10000 meters per second squared. However, even the incremental increase upset the balance of forces on my organism to such an extent that it was affected by a downward pull roughly equivalent to that of the Earth. Therefore, I was capable of swimming as I had been accustomed to. My PRLS remained functional due to the fact that its circuits were

well-insulated from water damage, and its various mechanical parts would not become jammed by the water. Water, unlike a pebble or a speck of dust, could elementarily flow through them without any disruption incurred. I raised my hands in a triangle, and my feet propelled me in a lunge toward the surface. The nanorovers within me entered, automatically, into a frenzy of motion which nearly doubled my bodily temperature to compensate for the immense cooling effects of the some 275-Kelvin water. *The wonders of technology!* Had I been thrust into such a situation two centuries ago, I would long ago have been lying motionless at the bottom of the glacial pond, blood frozen in my arteries, my nerves pulsing with electrical signals no more, my eyelids permanently fastened together with frost. I wondered then how drudging, how agonized and filled with spite my last moments would have been – spite at that celestial injustice, the natural status quo, that would have drained away my life and energy, joule by joule, in so wanton and indiscriminate a manner.

What if, on that blue-lit summer day in 2752 in the waiting room of Count Crentor's Sirius City Research Center, I had listened to Margaret's plea for "restraint?" "What does a man need gills for?" she had told me then. "And how do you *know* that they will adapt to your throat? What if men were simply not *meant* to flourish underwater with the same ease as do fish?" And this was said despite my meticulous calculations to integrate the gills into a human respiratory system without any inhibition of the conventional process of air intake. The query was more philosophical in nature. "How are meaning and purpose designated?" I responded then with a question. "Is there some unfathomable cosmic force that declares, 'Thou, man, shalt remain on land and thou, fish, shalt have the water as thy domain, and to thee, bird, I bequeath the skies?' No. Man has penetrated the seas with his submersibles and his underwater research and extraction centers. He dominates the air with his planes and spacecraft, and without these realms he cannot sustain his desires. So was he *meant* to be present there if he can only survive and flourish thereby? Yes. And was he *meant* to develop every manner of convenience, organic or mechanical, to facilitate his dominance over every imaginable sphere? Indeed he was, as the implication of his own objective nature."

The applicability of these words could be demonstrated by no situation clearer than that of my sojourn underneath the sheet of ice. I resolved, so as to resume the planned course of operations, to reach the surface without further delay. Alas, my hands collided against a transparent and solid barrier, instead of the opening that should have admitted me onto the land. I found that the ice sheet had reclaimed its full expanse during the minutes I had spent swimming toward its uppermost sector. It seemed to have been sliced in two by the rock's decline into the basin underneath, after which the two sheets had converged once again, their narrowed breach quickly sealed by newly frozen ice.

If I had not equipped myself with a fish's breathing mechanism a year ago, I would have suffocated mere decimeters from a safe haven, and along with me would have been suffocated whatever minute spark of hope for eternal progress remained. It becomes evident to me that, whenever one is asked, "Is it proper for man to tweak the characteristics of his organism in any manner?", the implicit question lurking underneath is, "Is it proper for man to hold fast to his life?" Hopefully, upon deliberation, the inquiring party will, in the manner of my wife, uphold an affirmative answer. If such modifications are to be denied, a glacier of peril would entomb the whole of mankind.

The immediate option before me was to seek an alternate exit from the pond. I was temporarily in good health, and my equipment (other than the disabled controls of the PRLS) remained in top-notch condition. Yet no radio waves could penetrate the obstruction above me, and thus contact with my automatons was out of the question. I had but my senses to rely upon. This is only a seldom-emerging constraint for a man living in my time, yet Aurelius Meltridge had not spent his days in a genetics research center in vain. Under the employ of Lord Crentor, I had produced a series of novel and splendidly original animal species, supposedly for their exposition at the Intergalactic Zoo of the Sciences in 2752. Yet my genuine motives for participating in such a venture were far more universal. I strove to learn the means by which to isolate a particular trait of an animal in its genetic and organic incarnations and *transfer it* to any creature in a manner so as to fully synthesize it with the latter's organism. The chimpanzee was my favorite specimen to experiment on, for its anatomical structure so greatly resembled man's own. Mere days after I had endowed a chimpanzee with a whale's faculty of echolocation, I gave myself this ability as well. And today I would will this atypically refined sense into effect and within seconds obtain a mental outline of the basin's walls in order to spot a possible extension.

I swam toward the corridor as the first signal of its existence reached my brain. It was an abnormally precise opening of a rectangular shape, with right angles within one degree of the ideal measure. The tunnel, sufficiently large for the passage of perhaps two people simultaneously, did not constrict me in the least. I sped through it in the shape of a bullet – that is, until one of my hands contacted a peculiarly elevated, thin, and conical protuberance, which I immediately proceeded to examine. The sensation of touching it reminded me too vividly of an object whose identity I pinpointed within a second: a prospectspike, one of the many I had dispatched to this glacier. It emitted no signals of functionality. *What could have disabled it?* I pondered. *These mechanisms are impervious to any manner of liquid except a corrosive one, and ice water is as close to the center of the pH scale as can occur in the natural world.* I briefly examined its surface. *No sign of external damage.* I undid a lid at the tip of the spike to peer into the circuits, and, to my astonishment, I saw nothing! The entirety of the tangled network of wires required for the prospectspike's operation had been swept clean from it, without a single element remaining. This was not some heedless chance devastation, but a deliberate, thorough appropriation by *someone* of the automaton's entire contents. *Who could have performed this act, and for what reason? And, moreover, why was that entity so devoid of caution as to leave the disemboweled shell of the mechanism where it had found it?* These questions were unanswerable without further observation, but I nevertheless realized that another sort of entity, a keenly visual one, previously unknown, inhabited the realm of Magnetica.

I laid the prospectspike shell aside, but left it in the same section of the corridor, to monitor in some future time whether its saboteur would return to claim it. As it conferred no distinct value upon me in my possession, I continued on through the tunnel without it, penetrating a northward stretch without visible end. It was lined with a homogeneous, almost polished rock. The right angles here were as sharp and definite as they had been at the tunnel's origin. I realized, given the approximate distance by which I had already separated myself from the ice sheet, that I must have been underneath Mount Sentry itself by then.

Mere seconds after that thought raced through my mind, I inspected my surroundings and found myself entering some manner of spacious chamber ahead. The rectangle of the passage widened on all sides and spread itself into a prism-shaped gallery, with tunnels, of similar dimensions as those I had just exited from. They spread left and right, all at right angles to the walls of the room of their convergence, in a design that no natural phenomenon could have carved out of subterranean rock. I was astounded beyond any previous degree by the eminent, even humanoid level of sentience required to construct such a network. Perhaps this was not advancement to the point of microscopically precise measurement, yet it was still a commendable level. I could not attribute such a technical feat to the *nonvisualis* for obvious reasons. I lowered myself to a standing position and merely observed the mesmerizingly even texture of the rock, devoid of a single crack or crevice, and the gracefully angular, clear-cut slopes of the eight planes at the transitions into the two tunnels at the northern and southern end. I would have continued to enjoy the view – for I had not yet resolved which path it would be to my advantage to explore – had an auditory signal not been presented to me. I heard, from the third northern corridor to the right, a faint transition of... musical notes, from a G to a C, then a brief pause, then, at a barely perceptible level, the beginning of a melody in the C major scale, a melody I had seldom encountered but vaguely recalled from some source. Regardless of the fact that I lingered underneath the surface of a planet that had seen no human presence prior to mine, I was certain I had listened to *that particular tune* perhaps two or three years ago, in the city of Legardium, at a gathering whose purpose just barely evaded my recollection. I swam into the corridor to investigate its source. As I neared it, the lyrics all of a sudden found resonance within my mind:

*I am a Winner prospecting spike.
I can explore wherever you like.
Oceans and tundra and mountains and sand
I will examine at your command.*

The voice that sang these words seemed remarkably familiar when compared to the one in my memory. I recalled then that every prospectspike manufactured by Ferdinand Winmer, Inc., possessed, for branding purposes, a built-in jingle, sung by the industrialist's wife, Julia, a career opera singer who had taken a liking to her husband's light-hearted advertisement schemes. Julia Winmer's voice was renowned for its capacity to grasp high notes that transcended even the typical keys of a piano. A second voice, also in the distance, mumbled something at a much lower pitch. This was a tone without doubt inaccessible to a female human, but one that could hardly be labeled that of a male. It was too much a screech, coupled with interludes of literal whip cracks, as if the source was beating the walls of its mouth by first drawing it back into its depths, then lashing the sides multiple times with startling rapidity, then withdrawing again for another round. Suddenly, recalling the voice recordings still almost photographically embedded within my memory from the chip I had uploaded mere days ago on Hermes, I realized that this manner of expression could only be Planar. Yet, in order to be heard, the jingle needed to be activated via a special button on the

prospecspike. The shell with the attached button had been abandoned within the southern tunnel. What means would a blind *nonvisualis* possess to play the melody?

I rounded a corner in the tunnel and promptly found myself nearing a dead end, which, as I could note – even through the rippled texture which somewhat hindered my direct vision – exhibited an entirely divergent arrangement from the smoothed, angular walls of the corridor. It seemed to be decked with... electronic devices, piled atop each other in rows, wired in an exquisitely complex manner, and playing a synthesized version of the Winner Prospecspike Jingle. A creature, a *Planus nonvisualis*, oriented toward the equipment, focused on the melody and words with an intense attention, apparently captivated by this one minuscule morsel of a faraway culture whose every trace is sufficient to impel one on the outside to gravitate toward it.

I noticed that the alien and its cubby hole of gadgets were mounted some fifteen decimeters above the tunnel floor, a sufficient height for the water to recede before them and grant some manner of dry haven in which the creature could relish its solitary comfort.

Bursting with curiosity, I prodded my head through to the air as my hand wiped droplets of frigid water from my brow. What I saw, as my vision became adjusted to a renewed clarity, were two considerable white orbs with widened pupils and blue-red irises, staring at me from the creature's facial basin.

"Hello, Aurelius," it murmured. "Join me for a drink of ice water, will you? I suppose you would like it filtered." My mouth dropped open as my pupils became larger than the creature's own.

"Surprised that I know your language? It is not so difficult to get a hold of with you humans scouring about the air, leaving radio signals from your droids and your scout pods, now your autowing and these Winner prospecting spikes. A simple antenna and a receiver, tuned to the right altitude, will give me every single word you broadcast. Add to that my image generator, and I have your alphabet as well as an approximate idea of what you and your machines look like. As for the rest, it was all too simple for me to look in the registration section of the spike's program to see that it was owned by an Aurelius Meltridge. I figured you would be coming for it sometime soon, but I cannot give it back to you. Every bit of precious information increases my knowledge about you humans, and that is the only bit of original entertainment I have had in two ergefts."

"Ergefts?"

"Yes, you would be confused, seeing as it is an original term of mine. I just needed to classify a pattern I have seen all too many times. Every time an ergeft begins, Magnetica is at the same position," the creature clarified. It was a rotational cycle, I realized, a Magnetican year. "One can grow quite bored when one has built a radio receiver with nothing to receive!"

"You *built* all of this?" I inquired incredulously, my hand pointing to the entirety of the creature's electronic array, from its multiple radio receivers to a presently blank screen, but one which in texture resembled an ancient television set, and even some sort of musical synthesizer with the capacity to be wired to external circuits and thereby interpret the content of foreign musical devices.

"Indeed I have. Well, I must admit that I had borrowed a few elements from the water filters in Dr. Nachtreiter's scout pod to build my own, but the rest came from right here." It pointed to its cerebral region with one of its stubby limbs.

“There is a multitude of questions I must present to you,” I spoke, seeking not to overwhelm my processing capacity with a raw lump sum of every deviation from the *Planus nonvisualis* lifestyle and dominant physiological characteristics that I had previously accepted as absolute features of that species. I sought a gradual enlightenment regarding this alien’s condition, one which I would be able to logically trace every step of the way. “What is your name?”

“The others called me Izmbarg while I still lived with them, but that address insults me. Translated into your language, it is, like most of our names, diminutive. It means, ‘Little-Small.’ Once I left that dreadful plain, I did not need to call myself anything. There was but one creature in my vicinity, and I, of course, could interact with me without need of a name. But now, since Dr. Nachtreiter has flown over Magnetica, and you have landed here, more humans are bound to arrive. It would not be in good taste to remain ‘the creature’ in civilized company. So I decided to borrow a name of one of your species, who is long gone, so I suppose he would not mind. Call me Magnus Eye-Eye.”

“Eye-Eye?” I asked, bewildered.

“Is that not how you humans label someone who has the same name as another, but lives in a later time?”

Apparently the creature had somewhere observed the designation “II” attached to a name. Indeed, how could it possibly, having learned only perhaps fundamental aspects of English pronunciation, have determined that the two “I” characters, back to back, were not spoken as they were spelled?

“What you describe is a Roman numeral. Allow me to draw you a parallel to your language. From one to three, the number of ‘I’ letters equals the number of g’s in your *gmafft*. When attached to a name, however, such a number becomes an adjective and reads as ‘the Second’ in your case. Nevertheless... I dare say your initial designation managed to also mention about you a feature which no others of your kind share, your capacity to see. You are not detached from reality but rather immersed in it, functional to the level of the most prodigious among us men. And because you were able to perceive its elements, you manipulated them, obtaining from a barren, rugged landscape the technologies that defined an entire century, a hundred rotational cycles of the Earth. You have been rewarded immensely for your striving by the ability to make intelligible contact with mankind. ‘Magnus’ is also a term which was employed by the Romans, a Latin title meaning ‘great,’ reserved for those of the utmost prominence in the physical realm, but also in the intellectual one. Your endeavors have been a combination of both, and this is a title you should proudly bear. By the way, what materials have you employed in the construction of your inventions?”

“I first found a particularly durable piece of iron and sharpened it by grinding it against the flat side of the Great Mountain, what you would call Mount Sentry. What I had then was a chisel, using which I made the covers for my devices out of the mountain’s inner rock. Then, perhaps after an ergeft of searching for the sturdiest possible deposit, I fashioned a pickaxe from a chunk of platinum and was now able to employ a far greater variety of metals and sizes of deposits than previously possible. I cut a crude hammer out of iron and began to bend what copper I discovered into thin, malleable sheets from which I furnished wires.”

“And how have you provided insulation for them?”

“Why, we Planar creatures have natural insulators on our very own limbs, that melt and solidify at our command. We employ them for our food and liquid intake, I reasoned, but why not also coat wires with them? Would you like to examine the result?” Magnus opened a compartment within his radio receiver, and I witnessed a covering for wires identical to rubber found on Earth and, in recent centuries – following the exportation of gum trees to other galaxies – in the entirety of the Intergalactic Protectorate.

“One final question on your devices,” I exercised my curiosity once more. “How have you managed to provide a power source for them?”

“In a most peculiar manner. After I carved this laboratory for myself out of the subterranean rock, I noted that water flowed down from this elevation into the tunnel at a startling rate. I wondered: what if I were able to somehow harness this energy and direct it into my circuits, using a turbine that the water would set in motion? That is why I eventually transformed this place into my base of operations. The crafting of the turbines themselves was by far the most difficult task, expending some two ergefts of my time, but eventually...” Magnus directed me to peer into an opening underneath the equipment, and I spotted three rapidly rotating objects, connected by wires to some destination that I, watching from my present location, could not quite discern. “I was able to create an opening in the back wall of this chamber and admit a slight stream of water from a neighboring upper section of this tunnel network through it. It then flows into the turbines, sets them in motion, and moves through the filter into my drinking reservoir.” He (I think, given his choice of name, it would be proper to refer to Magnus as a male, despite the evident lack of gender distinctions in the Planar species) pointed to a pool of immaculately clear water, lacking a single particle of dirt in it, beside a stump made of dried and hardened *nachtreiterus* plant which I presumed had its uses as a table.

Magnus brought toward the pool a cup furnished from a hollowed stone, perhaps a geode, considering that its crystalline insides hung from the ceiling of the chamber in a lustrously decorative manner. He filled the vessel with water and offered it to me.

“Thank you,” I responded, lubricating my throat. I had not been hydrated since the morning of this day. I took the opportunity to swallow one of the food pills I located in my pockets. Placing my entire stockpile of the pills onto the stump-table, I calculated that, even if I were to remain here in utter isolation from Colossus Base, I would not become famished in a month. “By the way,” this train of thought impelled me to a further inquiry, “How do you manage to obtain sustenance in these depths? Is there, as I presumed, an exit to the surface from one of the tunnels?”

“There is, if you follow the tunnel leading north from the main gallery. You will find a small lake, mildly cold, but without the ice barrier to prevent you from leaving. I must swim there daily, to obtain a fresh batch of the plants you call *nachtreiterus*, which do not seem to have any manner of seeds, as your Earth plants do, and cannot be grown in a new location. I am absolutely ignorant of the manner in which they reproduce, but they are the only food source available to me. Soaking them in water removes some of their cumbersome prickliness.”

Hmmm... peculiar, a plant without seeds, thought I. Yet, literal billions of them dot the Magnetican landscape, and they must have somehow been generated. Another

mystery to add to the host I must already tackle. Hopefully, Magnus II will be of some assistance in this endeavor.

This little tidbit of information also signified another characteristic of the Planar species, a gill-like organ either within or beside their lungs. Such distances as Magnus spoke of (the lake was some five kilometers north of Mount Sentry) would have resulted in suffocation for any entity incapable of soundly extracting oxygen from water. Perhaps I will, at a later time, dispatch an x-ray droid to the Glassy Plain and ascertain the presence and location of such gills within the systems of Magnus's "brethren".

But a fundamental matter of inquiry still remained. I resolved to address it right then. "Now, Magnus, you have likely observed that the other creatures of the Planar species are incapable of sight, whereas you seem as aptly oriented toward reality as I am. How do you explain the origin of the difference?"

"I cannot say, for I know not. I could see as I see now from as early a time as I can recall. I always found it proper and natural that everyone should perceive the same external world that I perceive. After all, we all lived in the same world, on the same plain, with the same features surrounding us. Not having then glanced upon my own reflection in a pool of water, I had not even the slightest notion that I *looked* different from the other Planars. They had magenta orbs for eyes, and I thought myself to possess them as well. Since no one could spot the difference to comment on it, that was a notion I held onto until some fifty-four ergefts ago, when I deemed myself sufficiently mature, after several trips to the mountains and observations on the properties of the metals I would later fashion into tools, to initiate a conversation with a few of my kind. I attempted, in vain, to convey to them the properties of iron, its malleability under pressure, yet also its sturdiness, as well as the potential for a chisel to be designed from this material, in order to hew houses from the rock of the mountains. I wanted to build rooms protected from the elements, so that we no longer would be crammed into a plain where we stumble aimlessly, collide into each other due to lack of space, and are left at the mercy of whatever boulder happens to collapse from the mountains at either side. But, as I began my explanation, I fathomed the sad truth that our language had not the terminology to refer to such phenomena, to objects of the external world, perceptible only by means of sight. I approached Ekrog, an acquaintance of mine, and turned what I supposed were his eyes toward the Great Mountain, inquiring in the meantime, '*Ghnimt iknbt sorkk?*', 'What do you see?' and he answered, '*Tmnurkbt sorkk wakkchukksn quisly.*' 'I see a rotated quisly.' I thought, perhaps, that *quisly* was our language's term for 'mountain', although how a mountain could be rotated confounded me there and then. I decided to test my hypothesis by directing Ekrog's eyes downward, toward the Glassy Plain, and discover its verbal parallel. '*Ghnimt iknbt sorkk?*' I asked. '*Tmnurkbt sorkk wakkchukksn quisly.*' The response was the same. 'How can those two be the same?' I inquired, puzzled, 'And how can you quite state that they have been rotated? Who could have rotated them?' 'It is the same quisly, you buffoon, there are not two of them! Are you blind, Izmbarg?!' Ekrog retorted fiercely, not characteristic of a response to an innocent attempt at comprehension. The further I pressed for an explanation, the more infuriated he became, until his tongue lashed out beyond the walls of his facial basin and would have struck mine, had he not clumsily missed by this much," Magnus indicated a space of about a decimeter by distancing two of his limbs accordingly. "Then, in his effort to hop

away from me, Ekrog collided with the flat side of the Great Mountain, the same mountain whose existence he had so vehemently denied. That was how I received the first signal that my senses were somehow distinct from those of the tribe.”

“To clarify, Magnus, you translated the verb *sorkk* as the English ‘to see’ in the phrases you mentioned. Yet, in my encounters with one, Chokotar, of your tribe, I got the impression that the Planar tongue employs it as the identity verb ‘to be.’”

“It will be extraordinarily difficult to explain the various nuances of the word to you humans. *Sorkk*, translated literally, means not ‘to be’, but something closer to ‘to seem’ or ‘to appear’, although its connotation is more universal than that. It can even mean, ‘to see,’ or ‘to perceive.’ When Chokotar told you, ‘*Tmnurkbt sorkk Chokotar*,’ he truly meant to say not ‘I am Chokotar’, but ‘I *seem* to be Chokotar.’ Then you must have considered it an obvious contradiction for him to have said later on, as Planars usually do, ‘*Tmnurkbt sorkk degrutChokotar; tmnurkbt sorkk* some sort of *quisly*.’ Possibly by a subtle intonation, but more by the context of the phrase, a Planar would understand the meaning to be, ‘I do not seem to see Chokotar; I seem to see some sort of *quisly*.’ There is never any form of rigid, definite certainty in the Planar tongue. We do not *hear* voices; we *seem to sense* them. The word for that, incidentally, is also *sorkk*. ‘*Tmnurkbt sorkk wuoxxg*.’”

“Hmmm... if there is no idea of any absolute truth in your society, might your fellow creatures have somehow *sensed* or *hypothesized* that they were not perceiving reality itself, but some manner of collective delusion, which the *quisly* apparently is?”

“What they likely do know, as it is self-evident to someone with even a shred of common sense, is that their eyesight is somehow detached from the world which they traverse and hop through – the world which obviously contains dimensions they cannot observe, yet in which they exist. The sounds they receive are also not in accord with the picture before their eyes. Whatever that picture might be, I can only speculate. They cannot glance upon *each other* even, hence my avoidance of being detected as someone ‘different’ for such a lengthy time – three *ergefts* to be precise. It is doubtful, though, whether they are certain that the *quisly* is real, or whether the plain they tread or the voices they hear are real. They may be vacillating within that supposedly unrelated trichotomy, therefore approaching every datum they receive with the interpretation, ‘It seems to me that...’ What puzzles me, though, is why, whenever one seeks to clarify to them a matter on which they had beforehand experienced a frustrating, disorienting confusion, they respond with such unfathomable antagonism, taking offense where none was given... This gray, blurry, never fully graspable application of *sorkk* and other words like it was perhaps one of the primary barriers to their comprehension of my forward-thinking suggestions and concepts. For this reason I prefer English by far, in its precise, narrowly-targeted, and abundant vocabulary. Presently, I can say all that I have always wished to express but never could quite find the words to communicate. I am, I see, I hear, I touch, I taste, I wish, I work, I think, I live! No longer must I fear to accidentally misplace the intonation on a syllable of a term and become ridiculed as a nonsensical buffoon or, worse, an insulting menace. English is the tongue of liberation, for one is not mired in any dichotomies, in any approximations and tone-orientations. One can say precisely what one thinks and be understood and rewarded, not shunned, for one’s insights. That is, of course, if one is equipped with the terms to express one’s ideas. So now you comprehend why I attach myself like liquid rubber to any trace of

your culture and your language I can detect, for even a silly little jingle is a treasured vault of knowledge, another step away from *them* and another step closer to *you*.”

“We in the Intergalactic Protectorate store our vocabularies in special containers which our minds can access through openings at the backs of our heads,” I showed him my ner. “They are called Dictionary Chips, and, if they are inserted a sufficient number of times, their receiver will learn all the words which have been stored in them. Alas, the technology to implant one in you is only available in laboratories of the Inner Galaxies. Perhaps someday you will travel with me to Legardium, and I will bestow upon you capacities that none of your fellow ‘tribesmen’ could ever have dreamed of seeming to imagine. For the time being, there is an antiquated but directly perceptible means of dictionary-keeping – a book, several of which I store in my archives at Colossus Base. Yet their material, paper, is fragile and will be irreparably mutilated when transported through an underwater tunnel. I would advise you to instead accompany me to Colossus Base for their exploration and, simultaneously, an introduction to some of the functions of my more complex machinery.”

“I accept your invitation,” Magnus replied.

“Splendid. We can journey to the exit together. Could you perchance describe to me the manner in which you designed and single-handedly constructed this network?” I dived into the watery tunnel once more, with Magnus trailing me. It seemed that our gills were both structured in such a manner as to enable us to speak even while surrounded by a dense fluid. In my case at least, the gills function to create a chamber of air that encompasses the mouth area beyond the teeth. The water is filtered out before it can reach the mouth, thus not intervening with the motions of the tongue.

“I did not create the tunnels, only my own laboratory. I *found* the tunnels in their present form. I am merely an occupant, as this was, prior to your arrival, the sole decent living quarters in the entirety of Magnetica.”

“Do you comprehend, then, what this implies? Some sentient creature *before your time* must have dwelt within these confines!” So, the entirety of the mystery of this network had not been dispelled after all. “Are there any signs in any of the tunnels that might identify a particular authorship?”

“No, I regret to say I have seen none. Knowledge of this kind is as accessible to you as it is to me. Yet... there may be more to this network than meets the eye. I know, for one, that the tunnel immediately south of mine does not terminate in a smooth, polished wall. It is considerably longer than the remainder of them, but it halts abruptly at some sort of cave-in. Crude, jagged edges jutted out of it when last I laid eyes upon it. I dared not clear a pathway with my pickaxe, for I feared that the unstable, almost spiky formations closer to the ceiling would collapse on top of me had I tried. But perhaps, the answer to your question lies beyond that obstacle.” By this time, we had passed through the gallery and streamed into the northern tunnel.

“You can be certain that I shall also visit you with a considerable frequency. Perhaps a robotic vaporizer can be programmed to eradicate only that obstruction and disrupt nothing beyond it. Doubtless, this will be an operation that I will ponder over once I am reunited with my equipment. By the way, you mentioned that *wuoxxg* is defined as a voice in the Planar language. What of its usage in a compound term, such as *xruquislywuoxxg*?”

“Literally, it means ‘the law of the *quisly* voice,’ yet it is in actuality the closest thing Planar society has to a science. My *former* fellow tribesmen’s vision may be horrendously distorted, yet upon what they can see they have bestowed classifications and measurements – quite primitive in nature and of an immensely narrow range, but still possessing vestiges of a scientific approach. The reason it is possible to employ the *gmafft* system in counting is because the Planar mainstream is only aware of numbers ranging from one to four, as there exist four variants of *quisly* for them to define. One is *wakkchukksn* – rotated – another is *anbdekkttk* – radiant – the third is *lkjarvptk* – magnified – and the final, which, incidentally, I have never encountered anyone mentioning a first-hand experience of, is *hzcmughtsn* – maximized. The four are arranged in preferential order, it seems, from least to greatest, and I recall that on several occasions Ekrog had boasted to me that he now ‘seemed to see’ a radiant *quisly*. When I requested a description, he scoffed at me. ‘It is beyond you for now,’ he declared contemptuously, ‘content yourself with your rotated inadequacy. Perhaps, as you learn more *xruquislywuoxg*, you will delve into the deeper mysteries of *quisly*.’”

“So these gradations of *quisly*, as I had suspected, *do* define some manner of social hierarchy!”

“Yes, and a sordid one, too. Fortunately, physical harm and coercion are seldom inflicted due to the sheer inability of the ‘enlightened ones’ to aim at their prey, yet this oppression endures by form of the insult. Perhaps the basest abuse that can be experienced in Planar society, a treatment I had met daily, is to be called ‘*htgukrthk*’. Like *sorkk*, it is a multi-faceted term. In some of its connotations, at least judging from a Protectorate standpoint, it is quite harmless. It can be used to describe something new or unusual, something original or unique. Of course, on the Glassy Plain, nothing new ever occurs in the minds of the tribe. Therefore they have grown to fear a phenomenon described by their language, in whose ancient roots the concept of progress may still have somewhat persisted. In the majority of its uses, it begins to assume a reprimanding connotation: ‘queer’, ‘bizarre’, or ‘eccentric’. When Ekrog and I were both *thought to seem to see* a rotated *quisly* (even though I have never seemed to see any manner of *quisly*), he called me odd on a regular basis – but as a part of a casual camaraderie, an exchange of mild reproof among equals, without the sense of impending submission to the towering weight of authority. But if, in a bleating tone coupled with a more explosive whiplash effect than you will ever observe in me, someone who perceives a more ‘preferable’ *quisly*, designates you a *htgukrthk*, you have just been called a heretic, a savage, a cur, an imbecile, a sub-creature, and a life not worth living, all in one. Everyone of your own ‘class’ then begins to loathe you and lay malicious traps in your path, to the best of their stunted capacity to manipulate external elements. More likely, they will poison the minds of their brethren against you.”

“Magnus, in the Intergalactic Protectorate there also exist individuals and organizations who would like to impose a hierarchal order where every ‘lower’ rung is enslaved by every ‘higher’ and membership is determined by incompetence, not accomplishment. Yet, thankfully, they are in the minority, and the men of reason have managed to thwart the bulk of their schemes – for the time being at least. The opponents of a primeval caste system are thinkers who do not view the social status quo as immutable and who envision a system that constantly rises in its caliber due to the competition of the truly superior for ever greater heights. The retrogrades scowl at

them while wallowing in the muck they have sought to impose on the remainder of mankind. The enemies of technological advancement realize that, given sufficient effort on the part of the ambitious, their brand of 'reform' is condemned to ignominious oblivion. So they resort to infuriated, defamatory *ad hominem* tirades, insulting their rivals. The insults are not due to any manner of flaw within their targets. Quite to the contrary, they arise due to the *grandeur* of the men of merit compared to the little insects of totalitarians that mischievously scurry about the great ones' flesh. They can be a nuisance, yes, but can their pitiful incantations truly penetrate one's scalp, seep into one's cranium, and cripple one's mind? Not unless one permits them. Refuse to concur with them, then, let them flaunt their signs of weakness, and observe as the entirety of their wicked designs crumble before your immutable presence. That is how we in the Protectorate survive our self-proclaimed 'inherent superiors'."

"That lesson I have already learned upon my departure from my kind. I needed not depend on the tribe for sustenance. My aptitude for the harvesting of *nachtreiterus* plants led me to be ten times as efficient as their method of blindly leaping into the air and *hoping* to land on a bountiful patch. In essence, only one trait had bound the other Planars and created formidable ties of association among them. (I cannot conceivably refer to their interactions as friendship, for they resembled, in nearly every aspect, the interaction between me and Ekrog.) That trait was their perception and discussion of *xruquislywuoxg*. Aside from the quisly variations, the core of the study, I could occasionally catch snippets of conversation which discussed the actual generic form of the quisly, prevalent throughout every possible alteration. Neither the basic shape nor the color of their vision were revealed to me. Rather I heard chats on the smoothness of the lines and the 'sleek beauty' of the quisly. They never spoke in direct concrete terms, but rather in a near-submissive tone of adoration concerning an image which was implicit within their minds, mutually perceived and mutually lauded by all but me. What had united them had also fractured me from them. So I withdrew. The *nachtreiterus* are distributed densely throughout the planet, and I would obtain nourishment wherever I went. Yet it was the tribescreatures' superstitions, as well as their vehemently maintained inability to grasp the existence of an external world, that I have managed to leave in my past. So I held vast ergefts of time at my disposal, in solitude, to ponder over the properties of this world and their utility."

We elevated our heads beyond the fold of the tiny, mildly cool freshwater lake – the northern water deposit – and pulled ourselves onto the land. My extrication seemed surprisingly simple. I did not, as could have been expected given my PRLS's current level of upward force, float to the altitude from which I had first fallen underneath the ice sheet. A brief inspection and adjustment of the controls beforehand demonstrated to me their renewed functionality. The pebbles which had previously jammed them must have been swept out of the mechanisms by a noticeably forceful current of water streaming to the surface from the exit tunnel.

"How did you come about the tunnels and render them your place of habitation?" I inquired while still concentrating on the underground network and seeking a completion of Magnus's tale.

"After wandering the surface of Magnetica for ten ergefts in search of any sentient beings who would present me with assistance, I realized that none existed upon this desolate sphere. Magnetica is barren, not due to a lack of impressive sights or

wildlife, but due to the shortage of the indispensable resource of intelligent thought. I stopped by this lake, seeking a sip of water to lubricate my parched throat and get a moment of rest from my travels. Hopping into it and prepared to absorb a portion of the liquid, I began to plummet to a level below my expectations. I expected a shallow bottom, yet I continued to descend, as if into a shaft. I found myself within the tunnels, at first thrown about relentlessly by the current. Although I possessed the innate capacity to survive underwater, I did not have the experience to swim optimally. Gradually, I mastered the situation and learned to swim against the flow, exploring extensively the corridors that so fascinated me. Yet, with greater vigor, I thought of the power of this fluid, of the force it can generate through its mighty flow. Perhaps, I pondered, it would be these waves that would launch my endeavor of planetary transformation into motion. Although, through my study of lightning phenomena, I had been then aware of the properties of electricity and deduced the concept of circuits from them, I did not have the power generators to translate my mental designs into something tangible, something functional, something *real*. But my source now surrounded me on all four sides, and I resolved to refine it into the hydroelectric system you observed within the chamber. I fashioned the wires outside, near the deposits of the Metallic Hills themselves, and insulated them entirely, so as to thwart even a minute penetration by water particles. Using cutting tools and pickaxes, I also carved an elevated chamber out of one of the dead ends and gradually transferred all of my raw materials and semi-completed parts there. It became my workshop, in which I spent ergefts on end, immersed in theories and their implementations, in the tedious manual labor of crafting every transistor and capacitor from its most utterly basic components, and in the gnawing intellectual strain of leaping ages forward in mind and proceeding at a crawl in practice. Nevertheless, I did accomplish something – a sufficient amount to communicate with you and to establish the foundation for further progress. This time I will possess all the prerequisite parts, already manufactured in such abundance as that of the *nachtreiterus* patches outside, as well as the automatons to assemble my design and liberate time for further pondering, rather than sheer mechanical work.”

“Come, let us proceed to Colossus Base. You can explain your designs to me there, and I shall endeavor, to the utmost of my capacity, to provide the necessary tools for your invention. Perhaps I shall even hire you as my assistant. Are you aware of the concept of currency and monetary exchange? Permit me to explain in flight...”

As I magnified the upward force on my PRLS, and Magnus prepared to launch into a firm, gradually-arched leap, I launched into an exposition of the concept of private property and its extrapolations by the civilization of men...

Chapter VIII Of Cultures

July 11, 2753,

Notes on the peculiar linguistic habits of the Planus nonvisualis, derived from an interview with Magnus II:

Kp (coordinating conjunction): “And”, except with overly restrictive bounds. When one declares, for example, A *kp* B to be true, one means not merely “A and B” but *only* A and B. The usage of *kp* assumes all referents not linked by the conjunction to be either false, non-existent, or not belonging to the category in question. The term is not expansive, nor does it presume the existence of uncertainty in one’s current understanding and the possibility for a broadening of one’s data access.

Lmgakrptin (noun): This is, as I had suspected, a denotation of the concept “all” or “everyone”, with, however, a slight variation. Due to the natives’ lack of outside contact, the word has also attained a connotation of “the Planar species” and every entity within it.

Lurgopt (verb): Literally, this refers to the process of learning or studying, yet it is not learning and studying in the “Protectorate sense”, to use here the words of Magnus. That is, it is not a systematic and active processing of new information to fuse into individual and original understanding. Its root is the Planar *lurga*, from which the adjective *lurgtk*, meaning “mimicked” or “repeated”, is also derived.

Nu (coordinating conjunction): “so”, or “therefore”, used also in the process of argumentation or inquiry as a term placing emphasis on the subsequent phrase. Oddly enough, its use is considered derogatory in the Planar culture—it is often associated with a gesture of contempt by whoever is saying it toward whomever is addressed. Is drawing new implications of any sort thus discouraged, except by members of the Planar elite, who would seek to draw implications in order to insult?

Xru (noun): law, postulate, or principle, seemingly a reference to an absolute doctrine. Nevertheless, I was stunned when I learned that this word also describes a “leader” or “elder” of the Planar tribe, one to whose opinions and decrees the creatures must bow *as if they were objective law*.

Xt (preposition): “of” or “belonging to a given set”. Like “*kp*”, this is an exclusive term, meaning “only of and belonging to no other realm.”

Additionally, there exists an odd structure of questioning within the language; direct objects are listed in a haphazard order at the beginning, followed by subjects. The question concludes with the verb. No articles of any sort can be found in the Planar tongue, and there are only scant distinctions between individual and plural referents. There are no plural endings as opposed to individual endings for nouns; all are generic. Quantity, unless one is referring to “the four types of *quisly*”, must be inferred indirectly – through terms such as “I”, “you”, “all” – or through the context of the conversation. Now I realize why Magnus complimented *xruquislywuoxg* as the closest practice to a science possessed by the Planar species. Compared to the remainder of their lives, this part is distinctly systematic.

Thus, here, translated to the best of my ability, is what Chokotar said to me in his final rant during our meeting on the Plain: “Queer/bizarre/despicable! Chokotar does not seem to see Chokotar! A does not seem to see A! Chokotar seems to see the *quisly*! A seems to see the *quisly*! Meltridge seems to see the *quisly*! Everyone [i.e., the Planar tribe] seems to see the *quisly*! Everyone [i.e., the Planar tribe] learns/mimics/repeats the law of the *quisly* voice!! Everyone [i.e., the Planar tribe] seems to see one of only four types of *quisly*, rotated, radiant, magnified, and maximized (with no others possible)! So [derogatory], what type of *quisly* do you seem to see?”

July 12, 2753,

The Colossus is complete. The droid builders, after fashioning it from a block of solid bronze, have stalled in the middle of the night – that is, the Magnetican night of some eighteen hours in length. As I furnished a blueprint for the latest ore transportation and smelting technique, I heard an abrupt halt to the sizzling buzz of the plasma saws outside. The droids were idle, and I dispatched them to lay a path to the Metallic Hills, for swifter access by me, as well as by future explorers and colonists. Then I looked upon the imperturbable features of the statue: a concentrated exploratory glance, lit by the cold fire of reason, its luster furnished by the bleak rays of the Magnetican Sun that, despite their minuscule intensity, glimmered at a hundred times their usual strength as they streamed to-and-fro atop the orange-red orbs of the giant’s eyes. It seemed almost as if they were drawn to the figure, away from the mountains, away from the rocks, away from the dim stretch of a Glassy Plain on the edge of the horizon, toward the luminescence of his vision, and the sparkle of the tips of his crown.

I summoned Magnus toward the monument. “This, my friend, is Man. If you desire an understanding of the essence of my species, he is to be your object of study.”

His eyes stretched to focus on the image before him. “He is made of bronze, yet he represents you. He is not Aurelius Meltridge, he does not possess your features, yet in his form there is a certain similarity to you... It is not a concrete similarity, but rather one of... disposition. If he were alive, if he walked this planet, he would mold it to his designs as you have. Is that why you say he is a bearer of your species name?”

“Yes. Yet, can you observe something greater in him?”

“I cannot quite grasp your meaning here. What can be greater than the essence of an entire species?”

Through a remote control, I sent a mirror to float toward Magnus’s complexion. “Look inside, and you will spot a similarity.” The mirror was linked to a Microscopic Image Recorder within my PRLS, which allowed me to perceive Magnus’s line of sight. His glance, the stern, resolute, decided forward orientation of his eyes, and the reflection of the rays of midnight upon them, were identical to those of the Colossus. Then, he shifted his glance toward me and pronounced in a tone of awe...

“I see myself as well.”

“Yet you are not, as the literally minded biologists would have us believe, of our species. The question that this giant now seeks to pose to you is, ‘Is that relevant?’ Where you were born, what your kin were, what their customs had been – all of that bears no reflection upon you now. You are not the product of your time, nor of your

genes, nor of your peers. You are an explorer, an inventor, a thinker. You are an individual, a *man* in every significant sense. The Planar race has, because of your advantage over them, expelled you, but the Human Spirit, the Spirit of Reason, which transcends all circumstance, welcomes you as one of its own.”

We returned to the observation tower, and Magnus directed me to his work station. Through a peculiar stretching of the eyes – a gesture manageable due seemingly to the elasticity of the Planar blood vessels and nervous passageways in a boneless channel between the facial basin and the eyes – he shifted my attention toward a neatly structured metal box of ruffled herculeum, conspicuously elegant amid a haphazard pile of scraps, computer boards, tampered circuits, tools, and microclamps.

“I prefer to furnish the prototypes with my hands, always. Perhaps this is because I am not yet sufficiently skilled to instruct the droids in the assembly, but the efficiency of my method will be enough to please you.” So this was the occupation which he had pursued during his leisure time – some forty-five hours during which he had not eaten or been interviewed, behind a separation panel of paper kept standing by two air streams of equal strength blown at it from opposite sides. He rotated the box to reveal a computer screen whose resolution – a mere ten trillion pixels on a fifty-square-centimeter surface – rendered it some ten years obsolete.

“I have rummaged through your storage for spare parts and assembled a device which functions in a manner similar to your data-processing machines. I have spotted, on your computers, immensely convenient language-translator programs for various human tongues, which, upon the insertion of a phrase in, say, English, yields an output, in French, of the identical phrase. Perhaps, to study ancient literature, I shall learn these languages at a later time. Presently, however, I have pondered over an application to the Planar tongue, using an adjusted system of input. Note the openings in the inner angles of the herculeum. They will admit sound vibrations and translate them into binary code and, subsequently, into textual data, which will be changed via a language-translator program to English words instead of Planar ones. The English words will then be reproduced aurally, with as accurate an intonation and pitch of voice as possible. This device, the Model One Magnus Translator, will automatically distinguish one language from another to determine which way the translation must occur. Moreover, the Planar-English and the English-Planar programs have been arranged in entire separation from one another. Therefore, it will be possible to fully decode a simultaneous two-way conversation between a man and a *nonvisualis*. The greatest difficulty for me came from furnishing accurate interpretations of your language in Planar. Numerous concepts and descriptions are altogether non-existent in Glassy Plain vocabulary. Moreover, there are few pathways to translating the absolutism inherent in nearly every English statement. A multitude of words needed to be combined in mind-boggling ways in order to even come close to an accurate definition of “is” or “and”. And, should you take the translator along for an interview with one of the *nonvisualis*, you will likely be met with startled, confounded indignation. You will have challenged their minds beyond the linguistic structure of simple phrases and questions to which they are used. But that will be inevitable, given the gulf between you and them, as you may already have noticed with Chokotar. I wish you well nonetheless. Perhaps you will be able to probe into the very mysteries that baffled me while I lived among them.”

“You have saved me from months of compilation labor, and I thank you.” I replied. “I see that even given a formidable portion of 28th-century technology – intricately and vastly complicated – you have managed to extrapolate upon it and carry it into new realms. For this I salute you. An occasional analysis of the programs themselves will also yield for me a fruitful knowledge of the basic premises and linguistic structures of your former tribe. Perhaps I should employ this on my visit, today, to the Glassy Plain. The information I obtained during the last visit has pushed my endeavor to this point. But for further progress in the venture, new data are needed. Would you be willing to come along, and assist me in the fineries of conduct expected by your ex-brethren?”

A tremor suddenly passed through Magnus’s horizontally positioned shoulders. “Although I thank you for the immense horizons which our contact has opened to me, I cannot grant your favor. They recognize my voice; their ears are especially attuned toward that, and they do not look kindly, or even tolerantly, upon one who has deserted the ‘tribal plight.’ I know not what awaits me should I return. Perhaps it is but a hail of reprimands to which I am immune, but certainly your own reputation before them shall suffer. Is your task here not to negotiate an alliance and the tribe’s membership within your nation? Then you must not turn my ex-brethren into antagonists – no matter how irrational you or I view them to be. Perhaps you can expose them to the world I have taken years to discover. Perhaps you can transform their culture into one which embraces innovation and exploration instead of shunning it. But you cannot do so with a *htgukrkt* as your accomplice. I shall, however, assist you in analyzing any data you happen to bring back and in, as you humans say, piecing together the puzzle.”

“I understand your concerns. Any final advice before I depart?”

“Locate the ones who seem to see a rotated *quisly*. Theirs will be the minds most open to your quest...”

The boundary between the pavement of the path and the similarly impeccable plain did not seem to linger inviolate. Instead of the deserted stretch of borderland that I had encountered previously, this sector was now replete with the native creatures, in collective, huddled together, with, in most cases, not two meters between them. Their proximity, however, was neither choreographed nor deliberate, I knew this, since the particular distances among them varied, and the distorted, unseeing purple orbs of the aliens focused every which way, not necessarily toward their partners in discourse. Some of the bulging orbs, were pointed at me, unknowingly, as the creatures went about their usual chatter without notice of my arrival, and their conversations seeped into the headphones of the Model One Magnus Translator. I adjusted the device to record the interactions on multiple sound tracks, so that they would all be available for study later. In the meanwhile, I linked the headphones to the emanations from the group of most proximity. A string of expressions – harsh and simplistic in content, but cumbersome in form – emerged.

“Have you seemed to have heard the newest story of Welrux, Migstrat?”

“No, Jherdum, it seems not so. What do you believe him to have done?”

Possibly, the Planar equivalent for all those verbs would have been *sorkk*, spoken in a slightly different intonation each time.

“Well, Migstrat, it seems to have been quite a scene. I do not believe that Welrux had ascended in his knowledge of the *quisly* voice for quite some time, and he declared that he was sick of perceiving the same rotated form. So, it seems, he tried to stretch it. Somehow, the wobbly axis—I think you know the one I am referring to—seemed to have become elongated and turn... straight!”

“No! A straight wobbly axis! That seems impossible!”

“To *you* it seems impossible, Migstrat. To Welrux it may have seemed just as I have likely told you a second ago. Remember, things seem different to everyone. That is why there are seen gradations of *quisly*. If everyone saw in the same manner, why, why... we would be living in a world that just... cannot seem to be! I, at least, cannot envision anything functioning without the gradations.”

“Yes, everything seems relative. I believe. Continue, Jherdum.”

“So Welrux, upon perceiving his altered *quisly* form, seemed to have started shouting, proudly, throughout his vicinity. That situation does not *feel* proper, already. I speculate that you will agree.”

“Yes, pride seems dangerous to me, especially for one of lower enlightenment, whose knowledge to back it seems non-existent.”

“Yes, Welrux, that silly *htgukrkt*, seems to me, thought to have first glanced upon the radiant *quisly*! Imagine that, a fool who has never seemed to fulfill his duties to the elders and to the tribe, promoted a level above us! ‘Fetch me some food, rotated inadequacies!’ he shouted where about twenty of his rank and ours perceived him. I believe they simply shrugged, because who would take such orders from one well perceived to seem to see the same gradation of *quisly* as they? Welrux, I believe, tried to pursue them and coerce them into the gathering, but he seemed to have found, to his astonishment, that he could not move! Then – at least as some others I have spoken with perceived – he seemed to holler out but one word numerous times, ‘Pain!’ Fortunately, the Great Tongue-Whipping Elder seemed to have been nearby.”

“You mean, Ekrog?”

“Shhh... lest you be heard speaking blasphemy. He is the Great Tongue-Whipping Elder to you... to both of us. In any case, it is widely accepted that the Great Tongue-Whipping Elder gave Welrux the lashing of his life, for pretentious posturing, for disruption of the great Harmony of Togetherness. Does it seem to teach a lesson?”
Later, upon my return to Colossus Base, I browsed the Planar version of the soundtrack, and noted that Togetherness was referred to as *Lmgakrptin*, the same term used to denote “everyone” or “the Planar tribe”. The Planars, I now realize, adhere to the theory that views an amalgam of individuals as corresponding to some mystical, divine whole.

“I see that it does teach a lesson, Jherdum.”

What did I witness? Two of the creatures, designated to the lowest hierarchical rung of this society, discussing matters of ideology, however ruinous and fallacious and derived from authoritarian whims. I noted that there lay a speck of doubt, unnourished, within Migstrat – a slight wish to transcend the narrow scope of convention into a world of, if not proper aims, at least logical coherence of means. This was a desire curbed to a microscopically small level by the pressures of conformity surrounding him. But perhaps this one seedling of autonomy was the crucial bridge between our consciousnesses,

one that would serve as a path to the arrival of the Protectorate mentality and of Protectorate ambitions.

"I am Meltridge," I spoke into the Magnus Translator, softly enough that the echoes of my voice would not reverberate to the creatures at a further distance. I find conversation with an individual enriching and promising; speech to several—a mild hope of intellectual advancement. But the triggering of attention from a collective is undesirable. Collectives are plagued by preconceived taboos and stereotypes, and often not one member dares to assert the primacy of individual reason for fear of mockery, overwhelming with brute strength of numbers. That hulking mass can easily become a fanatical mob, a horde of frenzied antagonists.

To my surprise, the translation of my simple introduction emerged as a string of Planar tongue lingering for almost a minute. *Is it that difficult to fully elucidate the concepts of absolute existence and identity for them?*

"I seem to have never heard a voice speak in such a strange manner." Migstrat spoke. Jherdum shook his head.

"What... did that seem to have been? Did he perceive that phrase to have been an introduction?"

"I am a friend." I spoke once again. A similar chain of cumbersome terminology emerged from the translator, but the word "friend" left it unamended, in its English form.

"Fri-end?" Migstrat repeated it with a slight slur, but a remarkable accuracy for a first attempt. "I do not seem to have ever encountered that word. Voice, do you perceive that to be your name?"

"My name is Meltridge."

"Meltridge... I believe you could have been perceived by me as speaking more simply." He *comprehended* me, despite a slight hint of irritation in his tone. Even that was a leap for one in his intellectual position.

"My meaning when I introduce myself is slightly different from a simple, 'I seem to be Meltridge.' No, there is something beyond that... I *am* Meltridge, to you, to myself, to Jherdum. Everyone will always perceive me as Meltridge, if all is proper with their functions, and if no one perceives me at all, I will remain Meltridge nonetheless." I explained my approach in terms of philosophical fundamentals.

"I believe this to be rubbish," Jherdum replied tartly and brusquely. "I cannot seem to understand what this voice means, nor do I seem willing to *lurgopt* it. And, besides, I do not recall having perceived the elders and the enlightened ones speak these things to or around me, so I cannot see them as true. I should probably see them as dangerous."

"What if he seems to see a higher gradation of *quisly*, Jherdum?" Migstrat spoke, albeit feebly, in my defense. "Everything seems relative, remember? I believe you should seem to give this... Meltridge... a chance."

"I seem to feel hunger," replied Jherdum. "I seem also to feel that you should speak to him until you seem to become sufficiently prudent to believe yourself to have reached my conclusions. I will seem to go food-gathering now, but later you shall perceive me interrogating you on the thoughts of this... Meltrigg." Jherdum's Planar accent was slightly more pronounced than Migstrat's. He leaped onto the observation path, scooped up a *nachtreiterus* plant by sheer coincidence of location, then, while the

rubbery adhesive on his limbs digested it, disappeared once again into the inner confines of the plain.

“If you seem to be Meltridge...”

“Use *are* in place of *sorkk*. That will provide the reference I am expecting, while not exhausting your tongue, however difficult to accomplish that might be.” I instructed the translator to retain the word *are* in its English form.

“If you *are* Meltridge, who *are* Fri-end?”

“When you use the word after ‘you’, say *are*. But before ‘he’ or ‘it’, use *is*. Moreover, should you use the verb following ‘I’, use *am*. This renders the verb more specific to the subject. Now, to answer your question, a friend is another creature, whose relation to you is closer, far closer than your relation to the remainder of the Togetherness.”

“Quite strange... how come that is, that something is closer to one than the Togetherness? The elders seem to have told me once that the Togetherness *is* everything... No, I do not think that this is the proper application of your new term. They told me: ‘To all your brethren, the Togetherness *seems to be* everything.’ And that was all that mattered.”

“Is there one creature in all of your knowledge,” asked I, “for whom you would neglect the cries of all your brethren, even if he were called *htgukrtk* by the Great Tongue-Whipping Elder himself? Is there such a creature, whom you would defend against all insults, and with whom you would communicate regardless of any barriers? *That*, Migstrat, is a friend.”

“No, no... I do not think that I have ever encountered such a *friend*. Yes, I speak with my brethren frequently, and often with more than one at a time, but only if the elders approve. If ever one of them in proximity is heard to accuse us of idle chatter or deviation from our duties, all sound seems to cease, no, *is* ceased, and we go about the sacred tasks of the law of the *quisly* voice.”

“Do you not think that there may be a law above the elders, a voice higher than they?”

A tremor passed through Migstrat as his sightless orbs wobbled from a sudden and only partly restrained inner tension.

“You spoke of the elders as if of a group of friends! For *quisly*’s sake, what do you deem yourself?”

“What was my offense, Migstrat?” I inquired, seeking to gradually bring him toward my perspective, rather than effacing the elders outright and risking the presentation of too blinding a portrait of truth before him that would, due to the stereotypical preconceptions planted into him by his tribe, avert him from comprehending my quest.

“Was it not obvious? You seem to have employed, in reference to the elders, the same expression as if you were speaking of those who seemed to see the same brand of *quisly* as yourself.” This about the Planar language I had not known. The term for “they” as Magnus had taught me, was *pnygargt*. I never suspected it to be applicable to only a fraction of its English parallel just as *xt* and *kp* were. Perhaps Magnus did not anticipate this, either... If his self-exile were preceded by the treatment of a *htgukrtk*, then his was not the character docile before hierarchical formalities.

“Is it improper to employ *pnygargt*?” I inquired.

“Why yes! Every creature more enlightened than yourself in the law of the *quisly* voice – for which rank, I suspect, due to your level of interaction with me, even a radiant *quisly*-seer would seem to qualify – must be addressed as *xru* to his person and *denkropt* at all other times, whether you are referring to one such superior or many.”

I was stunned, recalling hierarchical societies of the past, in the Europe before the unification of the Earth, where children were instructed to exhibit similar deference to their parents, teachers, and miscellaneous adults, isolating them from their intellectual plane, limiting interactions solely to those of proclaiming commands and fulfilling them. There was an address of respect toward the adults, and deserved respect in most instances, but, toward the children there was one of condescension at best, contempt at worst. The use of the formal and informal “you” structures created a linguistically ingrained distinction between master and subordinate. English was one of the few languages that, from times of antiquity, eradicated that distinction and referred to everyone in the formal sense. After its ascent to the Most Preferred Language status – voted so by private citizens for over two centuries now – English was followed by the other major languages in eliminating the informal address altogether. Only the formal “you” is now used in all languages of the Protectorate. And I, raised in a setting where respect for all of the receiving parties of one’s communication was implied and self-evidently desirable, thought *pnygargt* to be such a term.

“My apologies... I shall be more prudent in my further selections. However, I do not think it necessary to restrict the designation *denkropt* to superiors and superiors alone. I shall henceforth refer to every creature by that address, when necessary.”

“Blasphemy! To perceive every rank as elevated to the level of the enlightened ones and elders, to the sacred knowledge of the voice of the *quisly*, which all others seem not to have fathomed and must yet dutifully long for! Think not such thoughts, lest you be deemed a *htgukrkt*, like the Deranged One.”

“The Deranged One? Who is he?”

“You have not heard? But *everyone* seems to have heard of the Deranged One. He was the one who declared that he was disgusted with the Togetherness, that he was no longer part of it. And, after the day when he thus seemed to proclaim, no one has heard another word from him. But about him there floated rumors of a number with which none of our brethren had ever before been afflicted. I must have heard more than... four conversations on the matter, all encouraged by the elders as lessons of proper conduct, of what seems to happen to one when one abdicates one’s duties and disobeys the *quisly* voice. ”

“But what *did* happen to this creature, and what was his name?”

“No one knows what has truly happened, and his name is prohibited by edict of the elders. They state that it seems to the majority of the brethren that he ventured outside the bounds of everything, outside the area where there were voices, outside the place where he could be perceived by his brethren. They said he was cast out by his own impudence into this Outside, the great Nothingness which is all around our secure little Togetherness. I believe you will agree with me that the most devastating curse any one of us can ever fall prey to is to be detached from his brethren. If his voice is not heard, if his words not responded to, *what* is left?”

“His ego.” I countered Migstrat’s mentality – the precise disposition that deemed the creature branded with the label of *htgukrtk* the most defeated, deprived, and distraught of Planars. The word escaped the translator unchanged.

“Ego? You seem to have a habit of uttering the silliest words and then making some obscure sense out of them. The elders never taught us this word, nor the word *is*, nor the word *friend*. What is an ‘ego’, and where did you *lurgopt* it?”

“I did not *lurgopt* it. Long ago I heard of it from my friends, the creatures with whom I shared a bond of proximity, and I inquired into its meaning. They responded that the ego was an essential portion of oneself, that part which decides, that part which controls one’s selections and operates one’s convictions.” The word “convictions” remained un-translated, but Migstrat seemed to have latched on to the general meaning.

“You mean the ego is one that shapes one’s perceptions, one that shapes the way we sense and hear and see the *quisly*?”

“No, not perceptions: *convictions* – ideas which we hold to firmly which are ours, which we know to be correct because *we* have pondered them through – we, not our brethren, not our elders, not the Togetherness. Regardless of our egos, we perceive in the same manner perceive the physical phenomena of the world around us. But the next level – their analysis, their understanding, their derived desires and aspirations – that is what the ego crafts and wields. That is why all individuals encounter the same phenomena physically, but what they extract from such phenomena may differ. It may be correct or not, depending on the particular individual’s devotion to his ego.”

“What a *htgukrtk* concept!” He expressed his displeasure lightly, as disapproval rather than scorn, for he perceived me to be his equal. “Why would this hold when everyone in all the Togetherness is bound by the law of the *quisly* voice, so that every creature perceives *different* phenomena and thereby maintains the order of the Togetherness. Why, if everyone saw the same gradation of *quisly* and had this... incomprehensible... *ego* to depend on, well, there would be no more need for elders, no more need for dutiful adherence to the path and the voice of the *quisly*, no more longing for that ultimate delight, that ever-distant goal, the maximized *quisly*... I cannot begin to explain what a ruin this will make of our Togetherness! Why, it would be just like the Outside, then!”

I was astounded by both the piercing depth of his analysis and the clouded apparatus of his values. He had stated precisely what would occur following the demise of the aliens’ warped perceptions, of their ingrained hierarchies of title which robbed them of concepts more elevated on the hierarchy of ideas – individual rights, technological progress, free markets, and Accelerative Settlement. And it was then that my own ego tapped into a vital segment of my professional work – my experience as a biological engineer and my introduction into this world of animals neglected by evolution of nature and stewarded by evolution of machine. These were creatures through whose transformation I endeavored foremost to correct their flaws – the inadequacies of their physique and genetic code – and only then to amplify their capabilities via enhancements to their structures. So must it be with the *Planus nonvisualis*.

I shall grant them sight, I promised myself. I shall permit their sentient but constrained minds to escape from the prison of illusions surrounding them and into the all-expansive world of objective reality, where their capacities to think and create – and

my opportunities to trade and negotiate and cooperate with them – will be as limitless as the vast black skies of the beckoning cosmos. Prior to any compact, to any assimilation or any conversation on equal terms, they will need to be brought to equal terms, and this has become my chief occupation beginning today. Standing before me was my first beneficiary.

“Migstrat, would you like me to give you a gift?”

“What sort of gift do you have in mind?”

“A gift of food – bountiful, plentiful food so abundant that you will never again fear a shortage of luck in landing on a patch of it.”

“You can do this for me?”

“Yes, I shall but induce upon you a momentary slumber to spare you the strenuous wait, while the first of this food is to be fetched.”

“Ah, so you do have a sense of duty toward your brethren and the Togetherness. Perhaps your insolence is perceptible only by a superficial examination. Yes, I do accept your gift.”

“You will not be disappointed.” I tranquilized him with a spray launcher and carried his weight – some fifty-five kilograms, insubstantial due to the force amplifiers worked into the palms of my hands – onto one of the rover’s back seats. Migstrat had, by that time, already seen his last *quisly*.

Chapter IX Barbarism from Civilization, Civilization from Barbarism

An urgent communiqué to: Aurelius Meltridge, Meltridge@Legardian_Magnetica.privnet.

From: Helmut Wolfgang Nachtreiter, Nachtreiter@Hermes.gov.

Forwarded message:

Posted July 14, 2753, on "The Cosmic Enquirer" Intergalnet News Outlet by Victor Claudius Rovercraft, Chief Field Reporter of the Terrestrial Theater.

Subject: A Horrendous Calamity!

The Lord Protector is nowhere to be found! Yesterday Acting Minister of Exploration and Colonization, Dirk Rustain, rummaged in the Ministry's files to find the documents pertaining to the discovery of Magnetica, and the scandal over the legality and moral validity of the mission dispatched there has erupted in full. Since then, not one word has been heard from Legardium. The following is a chain of events that has lead me to my depressingly accurate conclusion.

With Lord Orthog and his defenders in the Police Sentries and the Delegation of the Ministry behind bars, Rustain has encountered little hindrance to passing a measure to terminate the daring and dauntless Magnetican exploration, with the delegates (or whatever was left of their rightful number) unanimously voting for the expedition's recall and the closing of all Protectorate outposts within the Periphery-32 Theater which are within a single flight's range to the planet of the *Planus nonvisualis*. A special mission is presently to be dispatched for this purpose, funded by the Protectorate government, with money diverted from the already miserably underpaid outpost police of the settlements on the Eastern Periphery. The political leverage wielded by businesses, pro-expansion officials, and their electronic activist cells encounters a counterbalance from half of this country's universities, rapidly surfacing underground societies, protest marchers, and environmental theorists. Meanwhile Rustain is exploiting the ideological deadlock to outflank the advocates of progress. He has already developed and passed a mid-term amendment to the Ministry budget that would dramatically increase the amount of security personnel directly subordinate to the bidding of the Minister.

Nothing short of a declaration of martial law would have halted Rustain's illegal seizure of power and physical and intellectual disarmament of all resistance. The Lord Protector promised in a brief statement during a July 8 visit to Parliament to declare limited martial law "as soon as all military personnel in strategic locations are mobilized to prevent wanton slaughter of civilians" and to crack down on the demagogues in the Ministry, as well as the hordes of marchers who have established machine-gun nests on crucial junctions of the Trans-Atlantic Highway with the Auxiliary Atlantic Bridges, including the Northeast Bridge to Plasticmold City and the home of the Enquirer. I happened to be present during that session of Parliament. I decided, following my narrow escape from the epicenter of the revolt, that I am the ideal person for tracking the developments of this crisis – both physical and political – on the spot, instead of relying on a fragile communication network of informants and relay messengers that would crumble should the mobs sever but one link of the chain.

I monitored the proceedings, which were supposedly directed toward the chamber's expression of a resolute condemnation of the waves of terror. The words

were present, and so was a skeletal plan of action – limited martial law, reclamation of usurped apparatuses of government, reversal of all changes instituted since Lord Orthog's deposition, investigations into the agencies and organizations responsible for the funding and equipment of the vandals, a subsequent direction of military action toward said organizations in order to prompt their dissolution. It seemed a solid plan, yet enthusiasm among a substantial quality of the Parliamentary delegates was absent. Some, as I could spot upon their faces, were permeated by fear, others by the sting of uncertainty, still others – which is of all things most alarming – by rote indifference. There was little resistance to any of the proposals introduced in their majority by Prime Minister Copterland, but I noted with a lingering perturbation that about half the chamber was dragged along on this measure, and that it was outlined and approved by default and not by resolution of convictions. The Protector, noticeably restless and frustrated by this passivity, seemed to be internalizing the text of the future declaration of martial law which must have been emerging within his mind. He yearned to leave the chamber and disregard the pomp of closing procedures.

When, circa 1700 hours, the meeting was adjourned and Lord Copterland's gemmed mantle was carried through the rear entrance and into the ceremonial wardrobe by two valets, the Lord Protector and some twenty of the Protectorate Guard stormed through the parade entrance in utter neglect of the hail of questions poured at them by reporters from every one of the agencies which poses any respectable manner of competition to the Enquirer. I did not bother to enter the commotion but rather continued to observe from my booth, where opportunities for grasping the totality of the situation remained plentiful. While my colleagues in the profession seem to be overly involved with minutiae and disappointed with every slip of the details away from them, there are opportunities for independent evaluation that they allow to pass by their very eyes. They would have utilized those opportunities had they bothered to function in the mode of data processing, instead of mere data acquisition. "I must put the declaration to paper!" I heard a voice that was distinctly the Protector's and wondered whether this, solely this, was the reason for his rush. A mere draft of the resolution on paper could already have been printed and waiting within his office for his signature. Moreover, the positioning of troops itself was not a significant challenge. The Protectorate military is still renowned for its near-instant response capability as well as the swiftest speed of conflict resolution in the entire universe. Something else was amiss – a power that even the Lord Protector himself would need to race against.

Thus, it was this aspect of the situation that I monitored most closely during the following days. I noted that the Lord Protector has not appeared in public since that Parliamentary meeting. I therefore resolved to keep close watch about his palace and to question those present nearby – his guards, valets, the occasional visiting officers and officials, as to the goings-on within the interior. I attended the majority of the palace tours until all access beyond the main gate was temporarily suspended on July 10. I frequently sat down near one among the line of fountains and observed the walkways and inner balconies overlooking my position. Gradually acquainting myself with the locations of greatest proximity to epicenters of the Protector's activity, I occasionally even obtained glimpses of him rushing through a suspended corridor or down a winding staircase – on foot or on a domestic travel board, but always swifter than the usual tempo, without ceremony, without formality of dress, ignoring other presences in his

vicinity. I checked back from time to time on the developments in the revolt, in part to view the text of the martial-law declaration and the progress of its enforcement. Yet, surprisingly enough, no reports concerning any release of such documents had come into the Enquirer's databases, nor into those of leading competitors. What could have caused the delay?

Then my thoughts turned to a known advocate of environmentalist usurpations of rightful government authority, the Protector's own sister, who had filed suit against Minister Orthog. Could she have been responsible?

In the coming days I would seize the opportunity to remain within the confines of the Legardium Palace, exploiting a job opening within the ranks of Anne-Marie Legard's own retinue of servants. I gave my identity to the elderly master of recruits and was extensively searched, due to my reporter's name, for any recording devices, notepads, listening probes, and miscellaneous equipment that would render me able to intercept the Lady Anne-Marie's clandestine undertakings. I was instructed to sign a contract wherein I would reveal none of the proceedings of my job unless I observed criminal activity (a formality that Ms. Legard must have resented, but which places this report of my experiences onto a perfectly legal plane). Little did they know what advantages are rendered by an unequipped photographic memory – trained and tuned to the extent of receiving a conversation or an image and replaying it within one's mind, reflecting upon it and deriving conclusions therefrom. *That* was a tool which they could not confiscate from me.

Thus I became a carrier of food trays to the Lady Anne-Marie and her guests. At first I was kept at a distance and substituted for by any ten-year-old part-time kitchen boy the master of recruits chose to employ. It is a peculiar practice of the Protector's sister to scorn automatic labor and favor the presence of a vast cadre of personnel, some dependent on her for the entirety of their income. However unfathomable such a lapse back seven hundred years seemed to me, I exploited it and volunteered to undertake the rote and repetitive maintenance endeavors that repulsed everyone else to the same degree as they did me. I washed the dishes, refilled the wine glasses (the Lady Anne-Marie seems to be an avid devotee of centuries-old French red wines), swept the floors, and wielded an ancient and cumbersome cutting tool known as a knife, which sliced food into straight-edged bits instead of the elaborate designs furnished by even the most basic of robocutters. Even the master of recruits' disposition warmed toward me by July 12. I was substantially elevated in salary and given a marginal degree of control over the task assignments to some fifteen kitchen boys.

I resolved to be the chief waiter during a dinner party that night, at which a certain character – a Lady Claudia Brighton, whose name I had never before encountered – was the guest of honor. The others seemed to be of no particular association with the recent tumult – several officers of the Intergalactic Fleet, Harvey Jensen, a cook renowned for the extravagance of his dishes (this time to be tasting the culinary marvels created under my supervision), a manufacturer of travel boards for rugged terrain, a couple of teenage boys – youth media “stars” whom I had seen occasionally in advertisements for new clothing designs.

The occasion took place on a balcony overlooking an extensive growth of pine trees some three hundred floors below, sequestered from the genetically inflated greenery by a screen of quarter-spherical glass within which sat the Lady Anne-Marie,

wearing a rose-colored suit with a conspicuous dried leaf of oak pinned to the chest. She had a gaunt, slightly creviced complexion and gray-tinged blonde hair cut short, curled, and whatever remained of its former length pinned to her neck in the form of a pony-tail. She seemed to have aged in comparison to those last images of her I encountered flooding the databases. She was forty-three years old, a mere three years the elder of Mauricius, *Protector Intergalacticus*. She seemed to be conversing in a flutteringly light tone with a woman some twenty years her junior, trim and dressed in a velvet garment ornamented with the same design of oak leaves—except woven ones—that was present on the hostess's garb. She would have passed for an attendant at a formal ceremony were it not for the lack of length in her skirt.

"Waiter, fetch the Lady Brighton a shot of Burgundy," Anne-Marie Legard instructed me, apparently not taking notice of my identity, since I had for the first time employed hair dye and a certain degree of temporary nanoscopic facial alteration so as to visually resemble little of a V.C. Rovercraft. I delivered it swiftly, much to the guest's appreciation, as she drank it in one lingering intake.

"Would the most esteemed Lady Anne-Marie and her guest sample some fine hors d'oeuvres of oyster-stuffed jellyfish?"

"I assume all-natural ingredients were used, of course?" the Lady Anne-Marie queried.

"And the specimens used for cooking were taken from areas where the delicate population balance of these creatures remains stable?" Lady Brighton probed further.

"Yes, of course, nothing less can be expected of the kitchen of Anne-Marie Legard."

"I'll take you on your word, although my tongue can finely sense the distinction. Bring them here," the hostess stated in a semi-commanding tone. She was satisfied with the appetizers and requested a second batch. While promising to deliver it post-haste, I nevertheless kept my ears about the clippings of conversation accessible to me.

"Have you contacted the inner confines?"

"Yes, I ventured there; the knife had given me some data – rudimentary things, really: location, geographic features, plans for settlement."

"And? What does he..." Alas, at that time, Rick, the kitchen boy, plunged into a brawl with his peer, Fred, over the exact amount of oyster stuffing to be relegated to every jellyfish, and Rick threatened to squeeze the extra stuffing out of Fred if necessary. I castigated the boys back to obedience and set them to roll out appetizers of twenty varieties, all strictly according to recipes from *The Exotic Culinary* – the Lady Anne-Marie's favorite cookbook, written by Harvey Jensen. I returned with a tray filled with a square dozen of them, which quickly ingratiated me with the guests. Harvey Jensen himself applauded my "masterful creativity and originality in the cooking of foods," a trait that he – with a reputation for rummaging through historical archives a millennium old to absorb and adapt a dish of traditional Mesoamerican, African, or Oriental origin – "admires beyond expression." In the meantime, Ms. Legard and Ms. Brighton seemed to be absorbed in a microcosm of conversation of their own.

"Ha! He still thinks his particular course of action to be a panacea!" The Lady Anne-Marie uttered this in an undertone more restrained than her usual expression.

"Well, it would certainly make the bulk of the civilians grateful..."

“Claudia, I have taught you much, and now you must learn this before experience teaches it to you in a manner you may not take the greatest comfort with: civilians, the masses, are not grateful of their own accord, they are not willful of their own accord, they are not *conscious* of their own accord, and what their given stance is on a given issue during a given day is not indicative of their support on another issue during another day. What sways their views one way or the other and, ultimately, configures them, is what is fed to them – by the media, activism, wide-scale demonstrations, expressions of viewpoints from their idols and figures of prominence. But who manufactures that – the masses themselves? Did they have the capacity to mutate Malthusian population theory into a plan for thwarting human expansion, or to sustain animist lore through millennia of so-called ‘progress’? Why, they, for all their alleged educational brilliance, are as incapable of telling environmentalism from recycling as they are of distinguishing hydrochloric acid from water if both are in similarly labeled plastic bottles! Disarmed of their gadgetry, let free of their intelligence and productivity enhancers, they *are* the blurs you have seen storming the Ministry.”

“A wild, brutal flow of flesh... I am glad it has subsided by the time of my arrival.”

“Tell me, Claudia, what do you see when you stare at them, from a distance, as an impartial spectator?”

“I see a current, a waterfall... no, more than that... the rush of a tidal wave at its peak, first looming over with its sheer mass, then descending in blind, utter chaos.”

“What you see, my dear, is the most powerful force in the world. Imagine, though, how can it act in such unison, such synthesis, when, naturally speaking, every individual’s particular condition stimulates him to pursue particular needs and interests? Do you truly believe that the volition of every single member is sufficient to unite them?”

“I do not see how that would be a sufficiently strong bond...”

“So, absent some control from the outside – either an external implant of a particular conviction so pivotal to the purposes of those millions, or a coordination of their activities in a given rally – would this force not emaciate, not wear away into a gentle ripple, just like a tidal wave culminating far from the coast and dissipating before ever reaching it?”

“Yes, I understand how an external authority would be required to sustain it.”

“And would it not be a pity if this power, the only true power that a mass of people could carry, were to be nullified? Would it not be a shame, for it is the sole expression of a voice of the people, a voice you would so urgently wish to be heard?”

“So, what they need is a common bond, a common means of expressing their interest via an orchestration from above?”

“Not quite, my dear, but close. The means are provided for, it is true – but, moreover, so are the *ends*. In order for the people to speak with a common voice, they must be granted a common aim, which they inherently do not possess. And who is to grant them that aim?”

“The creative, intellectual element in society.” There was a pause on the receiving end of the conversation. “Well... they should be compassionate, of course, and genuinely considerate of people’s needs. After all, what good is a mind if it cannot fulfill the basic wants of others?”

“Be more specific: what is the most compassionate and intellectual element in society in existence today, given that the current officials are aloof and pervaded by a tendency to repudiate their own potential for catalyzing some real social change?”

“I would suppose, some group not yet in power but that ardently, passionately wants to be, and is guided not by some selfish desire to keep inspectors and tax collectors out of its factories, but rather by powerful *causes* and the desire to help by any means possible.”

“And who is that group? And please, drop the timidity when you state this; that attitude is only applicable to behaviors of individuals, not groups.”

“We are.” I heard Anne-Marie give Claudia a hearty tap of the back after having elicited such a startling “insight into the human condition.”

“Wonderful answer! Yet there are matters which must be attended to before this is possible. That is why you, who are informed to the best of our abilities concerning the circumstances of this mission, shall now be sent to undertake it. Make sure no trace of the effort remains to be exploited later...”

“And the Minister?”

“Apprise the Minister that, by order of the Honorable Lady Anne-Marie Legard (oh, how I despise that antiquated title!), he is to relegate the particulars of Operation Rollback to one of the most trusted Sentry Officers in the Honorable Lady’s service. Should he equivocate on his decision, kindly remark to him by what means he holds such decisive authority as has recently been bestowed upon him.”

“And if this becomes known within the confines of this palace? Will your... sibling not surely veto the action altogether?”

“Maurice is scarcely worth a single plate of that fantasy metal he is manufacturing today, and it will be of no difficulty to encroach, gradually but surely, upon his capacity to effectively respond.” She had just disparaged her own brother, the wealthiest, most industrious man in the universe, as a hopeless artifact of an earlier age, when a Protector’s Edict was sufficient to rescind a proposition that would usurp the proper functions of government. Although I pretended to be involved in my own affairs in a corner of the room three couches away, mixing alcoholic cocktails with several pipette-drops of yak’s blood for Harvey Jensen and cherry-flavored liquor for Lady Brighton, my ear was well-attuned to the conversation between one whom I long suspected to be a subversive and a member of her intellectual retinue.

“And how might that be?” Claudia inquired, rather taken aback by the suggestion.

“Let us say, we should circumvent him while he is mired in the mounds of legal work required to crush the seedlings of social change which have been planted in the Ministry. You recall that he promised the nation a martial-law declaration three days ago, and yet no published text of one can be located anywhere within the public domain? Why do you think that is so? Well, it just happens that I sent an informant of mine – a timid little old jurisprudent, one of those diminutive clerks who seem as harmless as little gray mice... until the microbes off their fur transfer onto your skin. He presented a lengthy analysis of precedents for martial-law declarations to *the Lord Protector*,” she spoke those two words in a tone of sarcastic contempt, “with the stated purpose of avoiding legal entanglements after the execution of his rather violent scheme. He has discussed with him the winding and exhaustive consequences of martial-law declarations by the Protector Frederick, which have detracted from the

courts' likelihood to sanction similar further undertakings. For such men as my brother, it is not overt denunciation, nor even destructive rioting, that will sway them – but rather advice supposedly given for their own gain.”

“Has the Protector begun to vacillate in his resolve?”

“Not in the sense of abandoning his designs. For all my knowledge of him since his earliest days, that has never occurred. That staunch, ruthless brat!” Her facial configuration and emphasis were those of a scream, her tone and volume those of a whisper. “However, he has likely written tomes now concerning the perfect legality of his undertaking and its immaculate accord with both statute and precedent. At least, he is cramming out a sufficient amount of information to avoid *immediate* arrest and thwarting, as my handy clerk suggested. Presently, they are likely perusing his results together, and my comrade is suggesting further loopholes that could be exploited by a wary opposition. Knowing *the great Mauricius*, Protector Intergalacticus, he will work tirelessly to ensure that every undertaking of his is risk-free and shall be adjudicated by a court entirely inclined by the very nature of his actions to favor him. Ah, that naïve little brother of mine! He is just like a slab of promethium. He cannot be bent or broken, but can be worn out until he drops!”

“How much longer can he be held at bay, though?”

“For as great a period as we will ever require. You are to depart to the Ministry immediately after this lovely soirée ends. It will be a matter of hours for your autowing to be outfitted with all necessary materiel. Then, the colonization bid shall be thwarted, while the Minister employs every moment within his capacity to fortify his headquarters and amass greater funds, until similar takeovers of the Ministries of Justice and of the big fish, Defense, can be orchestrated. If we can establish a durable civilian infrastructure subordinate to our plan for reform in command of the military, we can bid adieu to all further martial law in the capitalists' favor, and to all further legal expenses on our behalf.”

“Are you certain that such an *extreme* will be necessary, Anne-Marie?”

“Let me tell you a story, Claudia, of happenings before your time and mine. The year I speak of is 2681, when the Third Intergalactic War had not yet reached its most climactic battles. The Exile States had concentrated their might on wrenching from the Protectorate a single planet, Argenta, a mining powerhouse. During that time, a blitzkrieg offensive of armor and airpower rolled over and crippled the financial empire of Geoffrey Trenton, the greediest and most powerful mining tycoon in his galaxy. His estates were in flames, and his profits slowed down to a trickle before Napoleon IV, an immensely distant great-uncle of mine, amassed a counteroffensive and suggested that Trenton direct his fortune toward the defense effort. However, Trenton was concerned solely with his own infrastructure, the damage to which could not be reversed by a military of any strength. As the Protectorate forces held the enemy at bay only precariously, and a breach in our lines was imminent, Trenton decided upon expenditures of a different sort. He would fund a massive private space expedition whose primary purpose would be to salvage and relocate Trenton's factories and equipment onto territory both plentiful in minerals and devoid of crime, government, and war. Many of his scientific advisors resigned over the proposition, citing enormous logistical difficulties and the overall foolishness of the task. After all, how could one dream of escaping war during that era! Where in the settled galaxies would one head?”

The Lady Brighton chuckled in return, as the Lady Anne-Marie gave an affirming nod. “Ridiculously absurd, is it not, Claudia? Those same scientific advisors graced me with their instruction some years ago, and I heard the same sentiments from them in person. It was a lost cause to every expert, but not to Trenton. He prated on about an endeavor of courage, about expanding the boundaries of human habitation for the sake of ‘liberty’ and ‘security,’ which of course meant his own bottom line. So he assembled an enormous flotilla of starships with whatever staff he could bribe to do so. Some of his contraptions were, without reservation, bizarre. Giant claws would spring out of the belly hatches of the ships and lift entire industrial districts from the ground to be flown into space for eventual relocation. You see, Claudia, Trenton did not wish to expend the time to build anew more of his facilities than he deemed financially prudent.”

This time the Lady Anne-Marie herself emitted a dry laugh. “During the Rotlander Offensive of June 2681, the Protectorate lines were marginally overrun by outnumbering enemy forces. Several more guns and a thousand more men would have enabled them to hold, but this was precisely the retinue that had taken off with Trenton himself on a lavish and much-publicized journey toward the unknown reaches of the Western Galaxies. The expedition steadily distanced itself from Argenta and the epicenter of the war, and visited one Protectorate metropolis after another, with Trenton, ‘the gentleman observer,’ coming, in between his recordings of peculiar geographic features of the sites, to the inevitable realization that the transplanting of an industry his size (which remained formidable) was spatially incompatible with the layout of habitation on the already populated planets. At last, his ships committed what was expected of them. They ventured into never-before-explored regions to the Universal West of the Protectorate. Contact was maintained for several days, as Trenton would broadcast pompous proclamations to the universe from his elevated command chair. Then, upon his fifth transmission, a distinct orange flare was observable in the background, beyond the window of his ship, and the booming ripple of an explosion shook the screen afterward. Trenton remained on the air for a minute more, but it was evident from the magnitude of the blow’s impact that one of the most weighty and sophisticated factories had just been incinerated. After that, no further communication was ever received from the Trenton Expedition. It just vanished into the abyss of history and out of the public’s minds. I spoke to an array of experts on the matter of what might have occurred. Each one speculates that, after a jam in the engine of one of the ships and its subsequent incineration, a chain explosion shortly afterward spread through the entirety of Trenton’s armada, blowing one of the largest mining concerns in the history of the universe into oblivion. What does this tell you about the behavioral tendencies of autonomous man?” She posed the question in a low, lingering voice that seemed to bask in the inquiry’s rhetorically elegant sophistry.

“Surely, it was... dangerous to allow a single man to dispose of all those resources, especially when his fellow men needed them more,” Claudia spoke rather waveringly, uncertain whether her mentor would be contented by such a response.

“Now you comprehend what disaster private enterprise can potentially become, and the necessity of government control and limitation, both for the benefit of the general population and of the environment of those lands not yet befouled by human industry. As for justifying the degree of measures needed to be taken to achieve such a social transformation, that will be a matter of discussion between the two of us on

another day, when we are in a fitter position to do so. For the time being, I shall invoke our bond of trust, my dear. You know, you are perhaps my most promising student, and the most insightful one. In the future that I envision, imagine all the power that could be yours. Do not disappoint me, Claudia, and I shall thank you in ways that even you, for all your grace, have not yet tasted.”

“I will do my best.”

“Your best is all I am asking for, as well as your patience and open-mindedness while committing to this task. Perhaps some of your assignments might seem abnormal or incomprehensible to you, but you shall be aware of their purpose eventually, when you are ready to make the next leap in your journey. Now, come, there are some charming young men I would like you to meet...”

My monitoring of the conversation was curtailed by several circumstances entering the scene. First and of smallest hindrance was the dissipation of the two “gentlewomen” into the crowd of other guests surrounding them, as Claudia Brighton shook hands with Harvey Jensen, gave a brief physics lesson to the IGF officers, and flirted with the clothing models.

“You know why I like you?” I heard one of the youths inform Claudia in a semi-formed adult voice. “You have compassion and feeling for the world; you’re not in the science business to make money, but rather to help, and you spot some problems with the way we’ve been doing things that other people haven’t had the heart to notice.” The Lady Brighton smiled warmly at what must have been a child by her standards and patted him gently on the head. Surprisingly enough, the expression on her face was one of *reassurance*.

The subsequent renewal of commotion between the kitchen boys forced me to withdraw from the scene of the party permanently and separate Rick and Fred before any of their bloody noses spoiled the delicate proportion between eyes of ram and grasshopper eggs on the chief entrée platter for the occasion. I complained of their raucousness to the master of recruits, who merely replied that “boys will be boys, just as the Lady Anne-Marie prefers them to behave” and advised me to separate the two for the moment being, yet to inflict no further punishment. I followed orders, but I could not restrain myself from implanting several literature chips on individualistic ethics and the non-initiation of force into their ners. If they did not heed this approach, I informed them, their next chip will contain a voice continually uttering personalized reproof into their minds for a day. This mitigated the situation somewhat, to the extent that my presence in the kitchen was no longer of the utmost importance. I relegated various rote tasks of cleanup and budget calculation to my subordinates, transferred my day’s wages into my virtual account, and rushed back onto the balcony, only to find the scene completely vacated, except for an assistant waiter who had informed me that the Lady Anne-Marie and her guests had ventured outside to take one of her treasured “nature walks” amid the greenery that Man, the creature most despised in her perception, had planted, arranged, and genetically modified. No food had been brought outside, and no waiters were requested, I was told, and thus departed from the Lady Anne-Marie’s sector of the palace entirely in order to attend to another portion of my investigation.

I realized that my foremost step in reversing the Lady Anne-Marie’s plot – an action which I was inclined to desire given especially my personal grievances against the usurpation of the Ministry – would need to involve the curtailment of the delay which

had afflicted the institution of martial law. *I must converse with the Protector about the information that I have overheard*, I resolved. *Where is he to be found?* Then, I spotted an envelope on the kitchen table with the monogram of Anne-Marie Legard printed upon it. I placed into it a blank sheet of paper and sealed the envelope. I would posture as the Lady Anne-Marie's confidential messenger and inquire the palace servants of the route to her brother's quarters.

I made my way into the hall lined with fountains and scanned the area for any human being in sight. A tour guide, who had just parted with a gathering of visitors, was returning to his office. The Protector preferred live guides to automatons due to their ability to respond to questions from the sightseers. ("To spread awareness of the capitalist lifestyle, one must appeal to the peculiarities of that element upon which capitalism rests, the individual," were his precise words on that matter.) The guide apprised me of a section of the palace on the 694th floor normally accessible to the public but sequestered from it during the past three days. That was where I journeyed subsequently, knocking on the locked entrance gate to the main corridor, where, surprisingly, no guards were present. Apparently, the Protector was not desirous of attracting notice or prying eyes during what must have seemed to him an urgent and tedious work session. Yet, I expected him to welcome an early and dramatic relief from that stress.

Following a minute of hollow thumping on the opposite side of the padded metal door, a woman's hand showed through the widening gap between it and the frame. A tall and slender figure emerged, twenty biological years old in appearance (although such appearances these days are most frequently deceiving), with larger-than-usual eyes of an intense blue and charcoal-black hair, confined within a deliberate volume of space not extending two centimeters from the head in any but a downward direction, where it spread in straight lines to below the shoulders. Were it not for an evidently severe tension straining her immaculately smooth cheeks, she, Gloria Legard, could have seemed even younger than her husband.

"Why do you stand before this gate?" a greater degree of shifting pitch than that of an equanimous person signaled that her mind was preoccupied by a burdensome discomposure.

"I am a confidential messenger sent to the Lord Protector. I must see him in person, for the tidings I bring are pivotal to his current endeavor."

"He has no endeavors as of the present that I am aware of," the Lady Protectress answered with a half-restrained fluctuation in her voice.

"I do not comprehend you, milady." I spoke, perplexed. "It is public knowledge that he is presently compiling a declaration of martial law and its enforcement measures."

"That task is complete. He has left the final draft, a full 1500 pages, upon his worktable. He has specified every detail, to ensure that no innocent citizens are harmed."

"Then, is it not all the more convenient for me to speak with him?"

"He is not present for you to speak with."

"Where is he, then?"

"Had I known, I could have been of greater assistance to you," she sighed worriedly.

“But were you not with him during the past three days?”

“Of course, until about an hour ago.”

“And then?”

“Then I departed to the kitchen to fetch him a glass of cold water that he prefers to drink to rejuvenate his energies. I expected him to remain sitting beside the virtual book onto which he was recording his text. What I saw instead was a printed copy, hard-bound, upon the table, with a brief typed and signed note on top: ‘Publish this. Yours, Maurice.’ And nothing more. I was bewildered as to the reason why he would not broadcast it himself through all the channels of media to which he has ample access. Yet I obeyed his request and sent it over the Executive Web Server to Marshal Fighterson and Prime Minister Copterland. It should be enacted within mere hours, but he has not yet returned. Usually, he parts with me in the most thorough of manners; he informs me where he is headed and the reason for his departure. And he frequently delegates to me the particular tasks of managing his commercial infrastructure during his absence. He has done none of that, nor has he even kissed me on the cheek in sign of farewell! You comprehend why I am perturbed... Why am I speaking to you of this in any case?” She paused. “I think I can trust you. There is something about your presence that reminds me of a man of integrity whom I encountered once... What is your name?”

“Victor Claudius Rovercraft, at your service.”

“Ah, yes, the renowned reporter for the Cosmic Enquirer. You recall our meeting, Mr. Rovercraft, at the site of the Mini-Star Experiment? You were in the vanguard of reporters willing to praise the synthesis of massive amounts of plasma into celestial objects that would be able to sustain new planetary systems, and we spoke of the potential someday of a single citizen’s realm being not a mansion or even a skyscraper, but rather an entire world, with its own automated maintenance structure, luxuries, and conveniences...”

“And given the vast amounts of space presently occupied by vacuum, imagine the sheer billions of spheres that could be inserted into currently useless realms! One would need not fly a thousand light-years to the nearest galaxy to conduct interplanetary commerce. Rather, the destination may be a mere several hundred kilometers beyond.”

“That was *precisely* your forecast on this issue. So, indeed you are he. Come in.”

She directed me into the Protector’s office and sat me onto a leather reclining chair while pouring two cups of artificially but intensely sweetened tea to accompany our discussion.

“There was an elderly gentleman who assisted the Lord Protector in the crafting of the declaration’s supporting documents, am I correct?”

“Indeed, there was such a man, a Mr. Twiggs, who literally did not allow me near my own husband until early evening today, when he took his leave, instructing Maurice to ‘proceed as advised, in which case the outcome of this endeavor shall be in accordance with my Lord Protector’s desires.’ He did not return, but I was certain that, beforehand, he had imposed his presence on Maurice, driving his good-natured temper to the verge of a frustrated scream as he picked at every detail and every fact mentioned in *this* book,” she held up the martial law declaration. “‘This text is clear and comprehensible!’ I heard Maurice exclaim desperately while I monitored the process from the room’s threshold. ‘I can interpret it without any ambiguity, and so can even the

semi-literate griffin who has not yet fully learned to read in his schedule that he is supposed to sing for me on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and not on Wednesdays. Your prodding is superfluous, and renders the text too tedious to even glance at!’ ‘My Lord Protector,’ Twiggs would reply in as deferential and calm a voice as he compose himself to display, ‘I intend but to inform you of the subtleties of our legal system which are too technical and convoluted for the common man to understand, let alone pry into, but which your adversaries, the very men against whom you would unleash the iron fist, would gladly mire themselves in so as to unseat you and obliterate your authority. If the common man is the target of your declaration, then you could write a popular edition of this text (which I do recommend by the way, as soon as possible), but this is intended to be disseminated into the ranks of those whose positions on law genuinely determine its course. It is a mere suggestion from my experience, that is all. I would like to supplement your wisdom with mine so that our power to act may be expanded twofold.’ Polite, appealing, accommodating that speech sounded. But what was it other than a tactful incitement to sit down and peruse that text again and again, until it became rigid, mundanely repetitive, and bureaucratic to the point of being unreadable aloud? And when I sought to attend to my husband’s well-being, I was replied to with similar courtesy, ‘Milady, I am graced by your presence, and whenever I am near you, I am gravitated to converse with you and bask in the light of your esthetic and intellectual refinement. I would be more than pleased to do so at any other time, yet presently my devotion to this assignment must trump my yearning for your company.’ That, of course, signaled that I had been equivocally dismissed from the office.”

I, in turn, informed the Lady Protectress of the name of the woman who had hired Mr. Twiggs to complicate the process of fielding the declaration, as well as miscellaneous details of her conversation with Lady Brighton that I hoped would trigger any associations within the Protectress to recent events from her own experience.

“That malicious wretch! Does she harbor *any* respect for the man who permits her to reside in Olympian luxury within his own palace?! How does she respond to his hospitality? She imprisons his minister, delays his efforts to foil a revolt, and utters degrading remarks concerning his endeavors, which are nevertheless infinitely more productive than anything she has ever undertaken! Moreover, how could *anyone* who is so intimately familiar with my husband, especially his sibling, loathe him with such intensity! He is the purest, most innocent creature this universe has ever seen!”

“Are you perchance aware of the so-called ‘Operation Rollback?’” I inquired.

“Yes, it is an effort by the renegades in the MEC to terminate the colonization of Magnetica and the settlement of all nearby Protectorate bases. The resolution to implement it was passed at about the time of Twiggs’s departure.” It was then that I became informed, a day ahead of the remainder of the nation (since Rustain permitted no reporters within the Ministry chambers), of the ultimate scheme of the usurpers, of that first link in the chain of confining our borders, gradually compressing them until this nation would lapse into staleness and decay. It was through my synthesis of this information with Anne-Marie Legard’s discussion with her intellectual apprentice that I gained awareness of the identity of the operation’s executor... and that of its mastermind.

I would conduct several further inquiries prior to presenting the Protectress with the “big picture” of the situation, since I wished for her response to be resolute, carefully

pondered, and fortified by understanding – not an intense but perhaps impulsive reaction to the political ventriloquism exercised by a woman toward whom she harbored no admiration even then.

“Have you ever before heard of Lady Claudia Brighton?”

“Brighton... I do recall that name. Let me think over where I have encountered it... Ah, yes! I saw her during Maurice’s and my visit to the graduating class of the Legardian Police Academy, where she presented the valedictorian address. The school’s administrator proudly introduced her as ‘a woman of unparalleled physical prowess and intellectual depth,’ and she spoke with considerable eloquence on the subject of the tactics of criminal apprehension, referring to concrete details and methods to a greater extent than ideological themes. Hers was an exposition of the police academy’s curriculum, and one could hardly dispute its contents. I recall reading notices of her promotion in police rosters and the occasional Intergalnet posting. She had risen to Colonel of Sentries and Deputy Chief of the Northeast Legardium District in an unprecedented six months. Many speculate that this is due to her exceptional knowledge of physics and the ability to apply its principles to the modification of commercial technologies for specific purposes of crime apprehension.”

“Hmmm... so it seems that she has kept her philosophical views out of the public’s knowledge.”

“Perhaps this bestows upon the public the perception that it is safe to assume that one of her talents and scientific enlightenment would be a secular humanist and friend of progress. But given the sort of company she holds, I am now wracked by doubts concerning the validity of that assertion.”

“Well, Lady Brighton has just been delegated by the Lady Anne-Marie to lead Operation Rollback. She is to be assigned an autowing, which, as I may reasonably extrapolate, is to land on Magnetica for the purpose of dismembering the current expedition of Dr. Meltridge and erasing all traces of the endeavor’s existence.” I conveyed to her that bitter realization.

“So not only is Anne-Marie an ungrateful guest and sister, but she also seeks to undermine an effort that was a product of Maurice’s most precious and profound longings. Not merely does she not display proper respect to her benefactor, but she seeks to cripple his financial affairs and the very lifeblood of his purpose in exchange for his generosity!” She tensed her facial muscles in evident restraint of an outburst of fury. “Now, what can I do?” she uttered through her teeth. “If it were within my power, I would have her bound in chains and brought before my husband, forced to beg and weep on her knees and kiss the soles of his footwear, for she is not worth even the tip of his boot. But that I cannot do, until and unless the courts sentence her to such a penance. We live under the rule of law, and I am not an autocrat. I can, however, file a suit in court charging her with the violation of Legardian Promethium’s property rights. Maurice did grant me the ability to act on the company’s behalf.”

“And what can be undertaken to stymie Operation Rollback?”

“It will take martial law to weed the Barrens and their sympathizers from the Ministry, after which it will be possible to rescue its loyal delegates from imprisonment in facilities controlled by squadrons that defected to Rustain. Simultaneously, a court order can withdraw Anne-Marie’s suit, on grounds of frivolity, from consideration and thus

assuage the legal entanglement that currently exists against freeing Minister Orthog. Then, the Ministry, under its rightful leadership, will ameliorate the situation.”

She seemed confident in her prognostication of the success of those measures. It seemed that her primary worry was the present location of her husband. “Will you search for him?” I inquired.

“I am better aware of the possible facets of the situation than to attempt any manner of response. Perhaps his departure was deliberate,” she spoke with a hint of uncertainty. “I will merely hope for his return. Please, in the meantime, expose to the public this interview and all that you have learned beforehand. However distressing the news may be, it is the truth, and must be disclosed before the Magnetica Expedition is further maligned and thwarted.” We bade each other farewell as I swiftly fled from the palace with an escort of two Protectorate Guards, who follow me to this day for purposes of intercepting any attempt by the Lady Anne-Marie to arrest me for what had amounted to espionage against her person and divulgence of sensitive “private” information.

The streets are no place for a reporter any longer. Martial law reigns, as troops advance cautiously, on alert for mobile strike teams of the insurrectionists’ sympathizers assailing the flanks, emerging from corners of minor streets or pouring on hoverplatforms from above. Mob action has effectively depopulated the region around the ministry and replaced long-time residents now fled with ruffians who burn everything in their path. An occasional air raid spews basic foam upon them and dissolves the flesh of some – as the General Staff seeks to minimize damage to buildings and prevent the city from becoming a genuine battleground. But this only scantily affects their infuriated havoc-wreaking as they continue to raucously utter the vacuous credos inculcated upon them by the instigators of the revolt. No person who does not share their convictions is safe from their indiscriminate onslaught. Alas, the seeds of such violent totalitarianism had been planted seventeen years ago, when the government did nothing to curb the inception of the monstrosity that was the Collegium. Now that pernicious weed has been cut at its stem, but its seedlings have already been disseminated throughout the Intergalactic Protectorate. It will take a concentrated effort to remove every one of the militant Barrens’ cabals throughout the nation’s cities and universities, and the situation is exacerbated by the mysterious disappearance of Mauricius, *Protector Intergalacticus*. Such desperate times I have not witnessed since the paternalistic tyranny of the Protector Frederick. I only hope that these events of today will come to as favorable a resolution.

Note from sender: Dr. Meltridge, I regret to inform you that I shall be unable to answer further inquiries that you may have on this matter. This is to be one of the bases visited by Lady Brighton and a launching point for a further flight to Magnetica. Her orders, as far as I have been able to piece together, involve the detainment of anyone associated with the expedition for “interrogative purposes.” This implies that I must disable our wormcable and conceal any traces of my communication with you. I apologize for this untimely breach of contact, but it will ultimately be to your benefit. You are presently equipped with information the Barrens do not suspect you to possess. Employ it to prepare your response to the inevitable arrival of Lady Brighton and the mitigation of its consequences.

Best Regards,
 Helmut Wolfgang Nachtreiter,
 Exploratory Supervisor of the Periphery-32 Intragalactic Theater.

July 15, 2753,

“What? Where is the *quisly*? Where is that image with which I have lived the entirety of my existence?” Migstrat, confounded, cried out as the effects of the tranquilizer dissipated rapidly. His newly gained orbs of vision – with bright green pupils that I had bestowed upon him to differentiate him from Magnus – shrank and expanded with every move of his facial basin, as he commented on their surprising properties.

“I no longer even see the same scene. The rotated *quisly* was so consistent, so... *familiar*. What is this? Is this a radiant *quisly*? Is that why I was told that it was incomprehensible from hearsay, that I needed to witness it with my own senses in order to perceive its majesty?”

“Majestic, is it not?” Magnus emerged from between the white walls of two sparkling-clean laboratory counters, sipping tea from a thermos with an automated pump.

“What? I cannot comprehend this. The picture has changed in some respects by introduction of another object, and a voice that I heard... seems to correspond with that object’s fluctuations!”

“Welcome to the world of sight, my rescued friend,” I spoke.

“*Sight*? I had been quite proficient in sight before the present! I saw the rotated *quisly* and was contented. What *this* is, I know not.”

I knew then that it would be a titanic expenditure of effort to edify Migstrat so that he would comprehend that the scenery from which he had departed – and begun to lament his departure – had been illusory in its entirety, and that his new endowment was indeed a gift and not a curse. It would be difficult on my part, for I have always lived in the comforts of direct interaction with and mastery of the world of objective truth. And I have treated capacities as elementary as sight as given, granted, and axiomatic. I am absolutely certain of the splendor of human vision. But would I be capable of conveying that certainty in terms fathomable for one not yet adapted to the light of truth, in its various shades and perspectives?

“You are familiar with the world of voices and other entities, Migstrat. Do you truly believe that those entities exist in complete isolation from one another?”

“I understand you not.”

“Do you realize that, in order for you to communicate with those voices, you must share the same realm of existence, the same space across which your voices spread, the same ground over which you harvest your food, the world that permits contact, both physical and verbal, between you?”

“Hmmm...I have never before pondered over it in such specificity. I had always thought the worlds of my perceptions and my activity to be absolutely disjointed, the only link between them being my presence in both. But I realize the seeming validity of your insight. So there is a world where I and my brethren exist. What of it?”

“Would it not be marvelous to actually be able to see this world, to see the entities that generate the voices, entities both similar to and unlike yourself?”

“See voices? What a silly notion!”

“Not only do you receive the benefits of seeing the sources of the voices, but your food, the ground, and a whole host of other attributes that you have never before envisioned: books, machines, buildings, works of art,” Magnus supplemented the discussion using the Planar language with English words inserted where no Planar parallel existed. “I cannot comprehend how you and your brethren have thus far managed to survive without them.”

“This is all so... confounding.” Migstrat exclaimed in an overwhelmed tone. “I seem to see an object, of a color that I have never before encountered, possessing some sort of linear boundaries to its form and fluctuating in correlation with the sounds of a voice that I hear.”

“I am that ‘object’ you speak of, only not an object. Nor am I a voice alone, for my identity consists of far more than speech. I am a *person*,” stated Magnus, who had by then attained comfort with the same generic designation that referred to human beings but was theoretically applicable to any sentient entities. “Yes, that is another word your language does not contain. A person is a *combination* of the emanations you have always heard, of the body you have always implicitly recognized to exist, and of that inextricable component, the ego. I suppose I shall need to explain that to you as well.”

“No need, Magnus, he likely can recall it,” said I.

“Yes, I can recollect Meltridge’s statement. He had declared that the ego was that portion of one’s self that shaped a unique set of convictions in response to perceived data, that a different ego could derive different values from sight of the same objects. I argued then that this concept was faulty, in that everyone perceives a certain gradation of *quisly* and that their egos are not be capable of soundly deciding their values if they experience one of the lower gradations of *quisly*, for the elders, who seem to see the magnified *quisly*, are always more enlightened than those who have yet to gain favor with the *quisly* voice. But you have placed me in such a state where *quisly* is not seen at all, where indeed everyone perceives the same reality, and in this world your *ego* concept is indeed supreme.”

“Brilliant!” I exclaimed. “Our egos are supreme; therefore, we in this reality are given no distinction but that of our own selection, resulting from our choice of activity and the value that our associates place on it, which determines the rewards we are presented for it. It is by the very virtue of our existence in the same world – with the same capacity to perceive and process information, but with the individual will to determine how it is to be applied – that no superior forces must dominate our lives and decisions.”

“That means... no hierarchies of submission, no deference to elders, no abdication of one’s desires in favor of the Togetherness. This is shocking! All that I have ever been taught to live for, all that I had *seemed* to live for, is false, deceptive and unnecessary.”

“Your new-found enlightenment manifests itself in your eyes,” I observed, as his new artificially grown pure white orbs reflected the golden light streaming down from the laboratory ceiling, which merely gave fitting external portrayal to the sparks within his

discovering mind. Due to the immense heretofore latent powers of his intellect, he had already acknowledged the desirability of his present condition over that of his past.

“Eyes. I presume those are the sources of my vision.”

“They are,” affirmed Magnus. “Aurelius, that is, Dr. Meltridge, and I both possessed them upon our emergence into this world. You have been granted them due to the generous efforts of Dr. Meltridge. He eliminated those illusory mechanisms within you that had obstructed your vision of the truth and had submerged you in the sticky sap of illusion that was the *quisly*. You are free of it now, and you are free to see yourself. Look.” He deployed a mirror-cube in front of Migstrat, so that his own form was arrayed in its entirety before him. “*This* is your own appearance.”

Migstrat studied himself and compared his features to those of Magnus. Magnus’s limbs had been slightly longer, and his eyes were blue instead of green, but their essential compositions were almost identical. He then glanced upon the entity whom he had already with certainty recognized to be me.

“There is such a distinction between Meltridge’s appearance and ours,” he commented on his observation.

“I suppose now is the time to introduce you to the concept of species distinction. Prior to meeting me, you had merely communicated with entities of your Togetherness, resembling you in their biological makeup. I am not of that Togetherness. I am a visitor from *elsewhere*...”

“No! Impossible! How can a world exist outside of the confines of the Togetherness?”

“It is quite possible, Migstrat, and quite expansive as well. Imagine the plain which you inhabit compounded many more times than four – four upon four upon four upon four times, if you will – and even that will not reach anywhere near the tiniest fraction of the vastness of my world. And the number of persons that inhabit it is similarly colossal as well. All of them possess the gift of sight; they employ it from their earliest moments. If, by accident, it should ever be lost, other persons – discoverers called scientists and specialists called doctors – are capable of promptly restoring it, oft rendering it even more vivid and precise. This world that I describe has developed in entire separation from yours, with numerous territories and barriers between us, until now. We are called *men, humans, Homo sapiens*, and we share essential physical structures in the same manner that you and Magnus do. Yet it is a mere physical distinction that I speak of. Both our minds can function with the same lucidity and proficiency, given freedom from the hindrances which your elders inflict upon you. Hence, our species welcomes contact with yours, and you will interact with other humans in the near future.”

“So, not merely have the elders been deceiving me in regard to the existence of a *quisly* and its alleged value, but they had also confined me within their pathetic little world by proclaiming that there existed a vacuous Nothingness outside it!” He was beginning to progress to the stage of resentment at his previous isolation from reality. “They narrated, in tones of scolding and warning, legends of the folly of the Deranged One, who, in the time when our current elders had not yet advanced in their knowledge of the *quisly* voice to their present exalted rank, sought to lure his brethren out into a world that fathomed not the existence of the gradations. He was banished into the Nothingness, or was it that he banished himself? The elders enjoyed always the

opportunity to claim some portion of the credit for his exile, saying that *they* had been the ones to push the Deranged One toward an utter rejection of the world they deemed the entirety of existence. ‘See what will happen to you if you disobey?’ That was always the moral of their tales, and it kept the lower gradations docile. Now I realize that the Deranged One was not such at all, that he had discovered the plentiful and immense world outside of the Plain, and outside the impositions of some of the sourest personalities one can ever encounter.”

“So they still tremble enough at my discovery to employ me as their example to dissenters,” Magnus spoke in a rather light manner, enjoying the reaction of surprise his remark was destined to produce in Migstrat.

“You... are he... the... Non-Deranged One, the one whose name is prohibited from ever being learned or pronounced?”

“Best that it remain so, for I had lived on the Plain under a different name, a name that I resented, a name that inherently demeaned and diminished my existence. Yet it is mine no longer, nor are any associations with your former elders and tribesmen. Only upon the seeing will I bestow my precious gift of association. That includes you. I will instruct you in the arts of technology and true beauty. I shall teach you to design machines, drawing on my fifty-two ergefts of experience. And I will expose you to that portion of the human world with which I am already acquainted. We shall begin by learning the English language, wherefrom all the words you considered unfamiliar are derived.”

“Are you implying that there exist entire systems of speech distinct from those of my brethren?” Migstrat inquired.

“Yes. The language employed by a people parallels their exposure to the phenomena of reality and the advancement of their culture. The expressive capacities of a tongue such as English reflect the mastery of humans over their surroundings and the swiftness and confidence with which they wield it. Have you ever, for example, hatched a thought and, due to some ineffable barrier, been at a loss of words for its communication?”

“Yes. It was oft that the grammatical structure of my tribe’s language needed to present the thought in its entirety was complicated and convoluted to such a degree that none of my brethren could track its course, and the elders dismissed it always as unintelligible rubbish, after which I suppressed any traces of the idea within my mind.”

“I encountered the same hindrance during my presence amongst your former tribesmen. The elders have designed your language, the Planar language, as a stale, rigid construct, immune to development and evolution. Any new intellectual discoveries would become so cumbersome to express that one might as well abdicate them without even attempting to broadcast them. But the English language is immune to authoritarian control. It is regulated not by whim of hierarchy, but by necessity. As new advances in the sciences of matter and the sciences of mind are generated, so are corresponding terms. Moreover, everyone is free to speak as he pleases, with the efficiency of his communication as his sole benchmark of judgment. It is a language where complexity and innovation are welcomed, not shunned. Hence, let us begin our lesson. Dr. Meltridge, if you will?”

“Yes, you and Migstrat are at liberty to leave my presence at any time. Migstrat has presently been transformed into a fully sentient being. No longer can I treat him as a mere scientific datum outside the areas to which he himself consents.”

“It is decided then. We shall meet again tomorrow to initiate work on the tranquilizer traps.” Magnus and Migstrat departed through the staircase below, leaving me to ponder a matter of the original physiology of the *Planus nonvisualis*. Having endowed Migstrat with new eyes, I, naturally, had removed the old and retained them as objects of study. I delved into the analysis of their structure, as I attempted to discover their function by transmitting an electrical signal through the neural endings strong enough to register the slightest sensation. I sought signs of reaction, but the impulse did not travel to the eye itself. Instead, it incinerated the nerve which led to it until the latter became a tiny pile of ash beside the violet orb, which now possessed a hollow tunnel in the back where the nerve had once been. So the so-called eyes of all the Planars had been in reality spheres of dead tissue, incapable of interacting with the brain in any manner! The nerve endings, unused for what must have been a lengthy chain of generations, had atrophied, and did not respond properly to the presence of an actual signal. The *quisly* was not a product of a *distorted* perception of external reality, but rather the result of *no perception whatsoever*. It was not a misinterpretation but a hallucination of the Planar brain, generated by a visual cortex absolutely detached from outside data. It was, in essence, the archetypical collective delusion. Where I had sought answers, I merely discovered that the eyes were not their source. It shall be necessary for me to examine the chemical interactions of the Planar brain itself to determine whence the fault originates.

Tomorrow I shall possess such an opportunity. During Migstrat’s gradual awakening from the effects of the operation, Magnus and I had discussed the means by which the entirety of the “tribe” could be transformed into fully autonomous creatures, free from the yoke of the *quisly* in the swiftest and most efficient manner. Our solution was fairly simple: the so-called tranquilizer trap – in reality, a patch of *nachtreiterus* plants of a different strain, containing chemical agents that would induce sleep upon the consuming creature. On my virtual-reality notepad I have already drafted genetic engineering schemes whereby I would craft the photosynthetic cells of these plants in an entirely different color – blue instead of green – so that, following the conversion of the Planars to true sight, they would not needlessly ingest them by accident. Winged transportatoms shall be positioned in strategic locations above the Plain to momentarily pick up any aliens detected as being under the influence of *Secundus nachtreiterus tranquillus* and to deposit them in the hospital of Colossus Base, where they shall await my services. An hour ago I adapted the *nachtreiterus* genome to be receptive to the tranquilizer loaded into the plant. Presently, it is time for me to begin cloning the resulting cells.

July 16, 2753,

Magnus loaded the bulblike *tranquillus* plants into the storage compartments of two rovers which would journey to the Glassy Plain and deposit them via remote control in strategic regions of Planar concentration. Porter droids were arranged in a chain to deliver the mutant organisms into the hangar from their accelerated-growth compartments, arrayed upon the experimental crop field. The plants were rather scaly to the touch, and callous in texture. How their digestion in raw form posed any comfort to the aliens, I knew not.

During a brief pause yesterday from the establishment of necessary infrastructure for *tranquillus* growth, I ate a slice of the original *nachtreiterus* with a cup of tea. Magnus had beforehand assured me that no harmful effects to my organism would result, but the plant nevertheless barely passed my throat. My tastes were automatically averse to it. For some reason, its rubbery firmness sparked thoughts of a piece of flesh within my mouth, a piece of skin detached from its possessor's body – as I had frequently encountered during my days in Count Crentor's laboratory. I have yet to study the Planars' digestive system in greater detail in order to discern whether their stomach acids are more concentrated than those of humans. Likely, due to the fact that they ingest their nourishment through their limbs, they lack the mechanisms of taste and selective intake of foods – hence their absolute toleration of this entirety of their diet. Nevertheless, Magnus and Migstrat have willingly consumed human food of the antiquated variety – fruits and vegetables that have not been decolorified and thus still possess nutritional value. Those seem to have gained the seeing creatures' preference over the staple food of their past. I plan to undertake a nanoscopic scan of tranquilized Planars as they arrive at the hospital in order to fill gaps in my acquaintance with their biological functions – their brains and stomachs being merely the two most straightforward of my curiosities. Essential questions came to mind that had evaded my consideration for too lengthy a time period already. I decided to speak of them to Migstrat, who was supervising the porters and observing their functions – a task that required only a fraction of his intellect and would not impede upon his ability to speak fluently to me using what considerable amounts of English he had already learned.

"I would like information from you concerning a question to which I have yet received no answer, nor any path toward one. It is a question of the means by which an individual of your species would be created. Every entity, after all, has its origin in time, and we humans have ours. Prior to the Genetic Revolution, our coming about was inextricably linked to a property known as gender, of which there exist two varieties, between which a certain mode of interaction was necessary. For seven-some centuries now, since the advent of in-vitro fertilization, that method of reproduction has been essentially obsolete. Since approximately two centuries ago, the generation of a new human being ceased any longer to be even a burden upon the body of the female who would become its mother and caretaker. Now, through computers similar to what you witnessed in the observation towers, the parents – the people to be responsible for the child's upbringing during the first years of its life – need but to list in detail the physical and genetic traits they wish their offspring to possess, and their friendly neighborhood commercial birthing laboratory will have promptly completed the remainder of the process and shipped the little human to them within mere hours. Then the child must

grow for several years and fathom the essential mechanisms of the world until he or she can survive and prosper independently. How does this process proceed in your species? How were you created, given the absence of physical gender distinctions that is so confounding to me?”

“One day, some twenty-eight ergefts ago – using a term Magnus taught me – I merely *came to be*. I recall myself always being in the same physical form (or perceived physical form at least), with the same voice and the same thought-processing abilities. And no, I never did encounter the care of another one of my brethren. No one in my tribe knew or was allowed to learn of any relationship but that of deference to the elders and the Togetherness. And that relationship was held by two bonds, the worship of the *quisly* and the stern warnings of Ekrog, the Great Tongue-Whipping Elder, and Stkromar, the Great Battering Elder. They were anything but the parents that you speak of. They treated the rotated *quisly*-seers with conduct we then considered normal. But I know it now for what it was – contempt and abuse. Perhaps this is why these concepts of family and parenthood that you speak of are as foreign to me as the concept of friendship had been two days ago. As for my conception, I obviously did not witness it, nor the means by which it was performed. It remains as enigmatic to me as it is to you.”

I could nevertheless extract several peculiar details from Migstrat’s response. The childhood stage in Planar development seems conspicuously absent. A *Planus*’s development parallels, to a greater extent, that of an ant, which hatches from its larva fully mature and equipped to face the limited challenges of its life. It may be that the Planars originate from similar compartments. Nevertheless, if that were the case, why had I not observed a single trace of it during aerial surveys of the Plain? Some 212,054 creatures were observed to comprise the Planar species population, and it is certain that their reproductive rate would be correspondingly large to produce a creature at least every day. Yet no traces of this creation are anywhere to be found.

It is not my expectation that the Planars are possessed by the same secretive tendencies in their birthing processes as humans had been in their primeval state. After all – given no genders, no intercourse, and likely, no growth of the child within the body of the parent – they have nothing to hide. Yet a hindrance to my comprehension of these habits is the sheer biological inability of any Planar to observe them. Perhaps, with time, due to their procurement of sight, this barrier shall be removed. Ultimately it will be observation, experimentation, and transformation on my part that I expect to yield these pivotal insights into the aliens’ physiology.

As I left Migstrat in order to monitor another section of the porter-droid chain, my thoughts drifted to yet another concern which should have occupied a more immediate and urgent place within my deliberations – the inevitable and forthcoming arrival of Lady Claudia Brighton and her Operation Rollback. The severance of contact with Dr. Nachtreiter was especially disappointing in this regard; I would now lack any information of happenings abroad, events that would have enabled me to track political developments in the major citadels of the Protectorate, as well as the movement of Lady Brighton’s autowing itself, and plan accordingly.

And how would I plan? What means of rational persuasion were left to challenge the minion of a woman who had once sued Dr. Nachtreiter for saving an entire expedition (including her) from a legion of foul slime? I anticipate what will be her so-called arguments for dismantling the Magnetican Expedition’s infrastructure. I am

intruding upon a sovereign life form's natural ecosystem and life cycles; hence I am a fiend of the lowliest possible sort, a species-destroyer. There is only one means to gather opposition to this smear: the honest testimony of thousands of Planars who would be transformed by my endeavors into a state congruent with their objective individualistic desires for advancement and prosperity. The operations will need to proceed at a prodigiously rapid pace, even with the ample number of Swift Pills at my disposal.

The rovers had by then been loaded with *tranquillus* plants to the brink of their storage capacity. They began their journey down the observation path toward the plain. The trap-setting procedure's further details did not demand sentient oversight. To quicken the rate of future eye transplants, I requested for Magnus and Migstrat to assist me in arranging necessary equipment within the newly constructed stem-cell facility adjacent to the observation tower, where thousands of humanoid eyes would be grown and cloned within the next several days. The first batch would need to be available for transplants and waiting in the hospital as soon as arrivals began. Throughout the rather monotonous procedure, lab droids would perform the majority of the manual tasks, outside the generation of particular instruction as to the quantity of eyes to be produced and the specific cloning method that would be employed, selected from a repository of some two hundred methods within my knowledge. The remainder of my time in the facility I devoted to explaining to Magnus and Migstrat the exhaustive details of eye transplants. I decided then to eventually elevate their medical proficiency to the level where they would be able to conduct such operations independently and thus triple the speed of the effort.

I knew not whether they would be prepared to treat the first arrivals; likely not, since no scientific training is complete without witnessing the actual procedure one is preparing to undertake. Nevertheless, the long-term benefits of their education will be colossal. Eventually, I expect this knowledge to be communicated to increasing numbers of Planars. I wish to observe the phenomenon of the species defect eradicated within the species *by members of the species itself*. I shall have effectively instilled a progressive tendency within the Planars that they have not, with the exception of Magnus, manifested beforehand. In essence, they would be fulfilling all the functions of free humans under a system of laissez-faire material and intellectual exchange. They would gain these liberties without the hindrance of the old hierarchy, from which all power would be drained rapidly. They would advance without the imposition of a new authoritarian order; I would not be their master. They would meet all the qualifications for Protectorate citizenship and develop Magnetica alongside human colonists in a manner free of their old taboos and superstitions. And considering their impressively swift minds, I can only begin to grasp the scope of their forthcoming contribution to the marketplace of ideas.

I only hope that my own contribution to their autonomy comes in a timely manner, and that my venture, thus begun, shall not be curtailed before it ever attains a chance to flourish.

Chapter X Operations

July 17, 2753,

The hospital was buzzing with the motions of porter and lab droids carrying to their designated places pallets of patients and boxes of instruments for the operations. Every minute I shifted from one *Planus* to another, as I conducted the transplants in a stepwise manner. First, I would trim the already purposeless nerve connections between the false eyes and the brain by creating an incision within the section of the facial basin immediately below the magenta orbs. The second step involved the actual extraction of the orbs from their sockets and the placement of plastic ringlets within the sockets in order to prevent them from compressing prematurely. The third step was the most significant, the biofusion of a living strand of nerve tissue with the now-exposed brain of the creature by means of nanorovers. Afterward, the fourth step – involving the insertion of genuine eyes into the sockets, the removal of the ringlets, and the biofusion of the eyes with the nerve ending – finalized the transplant. Within an hour after operation's end, the organism would become fully receptive to the new tissue, and the tranquilizer would wear off. The creature would awaken and enter a process of acquaintance with reality, guided by Magnus and Migstrat.

For six hours the operations proceeded at a pace that relented not one bit. However, the initial deposits of *tranquillus* plants on the Plain were becoming scarce, since 360 bulbs had already been consumed, and a new batch was required. As I journey to the crop field to initiate this new batch and arrange for as much as possible of its future automated transport, I possess snippets of time during which I can, via telepathic writing, supplement my log, literally on the spot.

I am aware that the newly seeing Planars are being “rehabilitated” in large groups, so as to conserve time. It is an inefficient and unwieldy manner of instruction, which does not permit for the maximum individual interaction necessary to transition to such a radically new environment. Nevertheless, it is the only means available to prevent the majority of the creatures from lapsing into hopeless confusion, panic, and despair. The most significant trait that they must develop at present is audiovisual coordination. The entirety of their lives, they have been leaping aimlessly and dangerously, *hoping* but never *genuinely attempting* to land on a *nachtreiterus* patch. Presently, with expensive laboratory equipment at stake and the possibility of lethal collisions in a crowded air space, the first objective is to imbue the creatures with purposeful, directed motion, lacking any superfluous leaps which are almost certainly bound to damage the base's infrastructure. The newly recovered patients are taken out of doors at the first possible opportunity and are further instructed there.

I have designed a temporary structure for their education, based on the amount of exposure they possess to the world of objective reality. Magnus and Migstrat have become the Chief Instructors, guided by a scant few Lieutenants – individuals who have already managed to grasp the deception which had been imposed upon them on the Plain and who have rejected the hierarchy. The Lieutenants have the opportunity to do whatever they wish with their newly found and fathomed abilities; they will become eligible to be paid Instructors themselves, or to do whatever else they desire. The level

below them is that of Novice, a creature that has already grasped the basics of absolute reality and the congruence of the world of his hearing to the world of his sight, yet has not attained full proficiency in his functioning within such a realm. The lowest standing, one which a Planar assumes upon awakening, is that of Starter. Presently, perhaps only twenty creatures have been able to transcend this stage, but I sincerely hope that, by tomorrow, the majority of them shall become Lieutenants, for the pace at which Unseeing Ones will transform into Starters will only quicken.

July 18, 2753,

Over twelve hundred Planars have already been endowed with the gift of sight. All but three or four of the original 360 have attained the standing of Lieutenants and are actively guiding the new Starters on their transition. I have even deemed it proper for Magnus to relegate his responsibilities to Welrux, a competent even if rather jumpy Planar. Magnus is instead to be employed for the conduct of operations. He is not yet prepared for the stepwise approach which permits for simultaneous work on many creatures, yet he has proven competent in completing a transplant on a single patient within fifteen minutes – a commendable amount of time given the fact that he possesses not the Swift Pills which dramatically accelerate my pace of work. The chemical composition of the pills will need to be tweaked in the future in order to render them compatible with the Planar system. But, for the time being, whatever services Magnus can provide are a welcome addition to my abilities.

Nevertheless, I do not wish to create the impression that the process has not encountered setbacks. Circa midnight, Migstrat requested to speak with me concerning what he termed “a matter of urgency.”

“Dr. Meltridge, it was never before that we encountered not merely reluctance but active resistance from a Planar to our attempts to enlighten him. One of the Starters in my newest group happens to be... an elder! He curses and calls all of us *htgukrtk* desecrators of the sacred *quisly*, and attempts to hurl his rather formidable form upon us as a form of beating. And no attempts of persuasion have yielded any effect but that of his further enragement. ‘It seems not,’ says he, ‘the province of my inferiors to explain to me what seems or seems not real. I say, the *quisly* seems real, and you seem to fathom not its grandeur. You seem to grasp not the full extent of its radiance until you have seen it in magnified form. And now, you seem to have separated me from its divinity, from the object of all my affections and devotions, for which I seem to have sacrificed and abandoned my own petty desires. I see you all as vile *htgukrtk* who deserve to be pinned to the ground for their departure from the sacred path and the will of the Togetherness!’ Lieutenant Dtrem and I were forced to confine him within a cage, as he continued to be a physical menace. He has managed to inflict bruises on six of the more willing Starters. To this moment, he rattles the cage’s bars and screams in a booming voice, ‘I, Stkromar, the Great Battering Elder, shall seem to be the peril of each and every one of you!’ What is especially bothersome still is that he continues to shout expletives from the cage and, whenever I seek to elicit knowledge of the falsehood of the *quisly* from my brethren, he screams, ‘No, that seems false! The *quisly* voice seems sacred, and none has the right to question it! Listen not to this blathering rubbish!’ The average time of transition into the mindset of objective reality within this group has been

markedly slower than that of others. Over half are still Starters, and some have lost the confidence even to pronounce a reply to the Lieutenants' questions in discussion. Some even tremble before Stkromar in repentance and must be urged by over ten of their brethren to cease before their enlightenment can proceed. I believe this matter requires your intervention, Doctor."

I completed those operations already in progress and left the remainder to Magnus for the time being, while journeying to the training field along the main road of the base. There I saw Starters and Novices becoming truly enlightened by means of discussion, reasoned physical exercise, and elementary scientific demonstrations. The cage stood at the edge of the field, the only still-open space where it could be positioned. Two Lieutenants, Dtrem and Enstog, stood on guard and held the cage in place to counteract the effect of any vibrations of the bars that Stkromar sought to cause.

"Stkromar, I frown upon your conduct," I spoke. "You know not the magnitude of the force that you have challenged. In your hallucinating stupor you thought that your world was the entirety of the universe, and that you were one of its omnipotent masters..."

"The *quisly* governs the universe! I serve the *quisly*!"

"The *quisly* was your term for a chemical impulse that you thought imparted upon you the right to oppress and demean creatures as sentient and physically capable as you. No more will that occur, for the universe is far larger than you can ever imagine with your numerical system that cannot extend beyond the number four. And within that universe exist wielders of justice – members of the race of Man, which spreads itself via massive spacecraft to newer and farther worlds without end. It has come to your planet as well, and I, as its representative and my own, hereby declare your past and present conduct, your stunting taboos and fanatical resistance to your subjects' enhancement of life's quality, to be abhorrent. Men know of no *quisly*, except for those who know it to be false. They do, however, know of the genuine meaning of freedom and the warning signs that surface whenever it is stifled. And few men of sanity will stand for your attempt to bring these creatures of marvelous capacity back under the fold of tyranny. Their allegiance is not to you, nor to the *quisly*, nor to the Togetherness. Their allegiance is to *themselves*, and thus it shall remain."

"You seem to be just some rebellious rotated inadequacy who imagines some foreign universes and creatures in order to justify to his own twisted deviant mind this horrendous sacrilege against his betters," he retorted in a hostile tone, though calmer than previously.

"*Look* at me. Learn to see with the eyes that I have given you. Do you spot no pattern between the motions that appear before you and the sounds that you hear? Had any of the previous voices you encountered possessed my form? No. They were entirely different. They resembled you in physique and were of your species. I am different."

"Nothing that I seem to see before me at present is valid. It is a mere illusion, meant to upturn the sacred hierarchy and disrupt the essential balance of things. Oh, what has the Togetherness come to when an elder can be spoken to thus!" Stkromar, it could be seen, was about to enter into a tirade of lamentations more sorrowful than enraged. "I had abdicated so many of my capacities – my agility, my strength of bounce,

my sound digestion, and the exceptional wit of my early years – merely so that I would be a step closer to the eternal essence of the *quisly*. I sought to be one with it, to advance once more to the peak of all accomplishment – the maximized *quisly* – but, alas, all has been foiled. All of significance has been destroyed and robbed from me. Now, my grieving and frail form is in vain, its strength depleted for nothing, its abilities taken without reward!” Then he, unthinkingly, exercised that one capacity of his eyes whose existence he had apparently accepted. He wept.

The information presented in his rant was nevertheless a promising lead into the exact nature of the hallucinations that brought about the *quisly* and its varying gradations.

“How do you consider yourself to have come about the perception of a radiant *quisly* and then a magnified *quisly*?”

“Ah, so you wish to have sight of it, too,” his tone regained some confidence. “I suspected that your rejection of the *quisly* altogether seemed to be a mere disguise for another motive. You merely wish to advance yourself by extracting sacred knowledge. Merely, ha! Well, I suppose I have no choice. Few of your brethren will have this dawn upon them, but one does not come upon the higher gradations through idle waiting or even intense desire. The *quisly* requires a genuine test of one’s devotion, the surrender of an attribute dear to oneself. When I embarked upon the radiant *quisly*, I bounced myself into the ground, bounced until my limbs snapped in place and could bounce no longer. I lay in place for a time beyond my ability to recount, and when the injury healed – oh, how pleasant that was – it healed crookedly! I felt the mutilation, and I relished it, for now the radiant *quisly* was within my sight. Then I realized the nature of my quest and strived toward even greater proximity to the sacred *quisly*. My next act was to cripple the mechanisms of my food intake by abstaining from consumption for an even longer period of time than the duration of my injury. At last, my body began to feed on itself – on some crucial components, no doubt – and when I reintroduced food to it once more, its digestion was tedious and caused me a lingering pain that I relished, hoping that this would bring me within the *quisly*’s favor. Yet that did not occur. The *quisly* can be quite demanding. By evoking from me a sacrifice and yet not granting me my reward, it was testing the genuine fortitude of my attraction. I realized this, and persisted. My most devout act of piety toward the sacred *quisly* was an inversion of my body, something that the sacred *quisly* voice guided me toward almost effortlessly. During that longest time period of my existence I bounced, not on my limbs, but on my *face*.”

He paused, as I at last took notice of horrific gashes and scars of a brown and even black color pervading what was no longer a pure magenta facial basin. So *that* was why his tongue was slightly off-center and his false orbs, now removed, had been dented and speckled with dust. “Gradually, my senses were dulled to the pain, but equally dulled was my ability to think and reason. I never could equal my brethren in discourse, and I recall how I would babble unintelligible strings of expressions with the word ‘*quisly*’ intermingled in it. It took frequent beatings from those who were then elders to exorcise this habit from me. Yet the *quisly* seemed to be appeased, and shortly I myself became an elder, loyal and devoted to my duties and planning another sacrifice in the near future. Oh, those were wondrous times, compared to today, when all my contact with the sacred and divine *quisly* has been severed, and I become a pathetic, dejected, old Stkromar. Heard enough, *htgukrtk*?”

“You misinterpreted my motives, but I sincerely pity your sufferings. They were indeed in vain, in pursuit of a false idol. Let us hope that you come to realize this in the future and right the wrongs which have hitherto afflicted your existence. When you realize the error of your ways, you have but to shout the name of Dr. Meltridge, and word shall reach me. I will then reform your limbs and rid your face of its esthetic shortcomings. I will revitalize your brain with cellular implants and nanorovers. For now, I bid you farewell.”

Indeed, the data obtained from this interview was phenomenal in terms of the insight it offered into the dynamics of the old Planar hierarchy. The system of *quisly* gradations not merely stifled individual thought and accomplishment but also *rewarded self-destruction and self-abnegation*. It was no wonder that the Planars had existed in a technological vacuum and undertook little effort to even expand the bounds of their crowded habitation. Perhaps Dr. Nachtreiter was correct to call their defect a malevolent mutation. The optimal scheme for stagnation had been inherent within them.

I combined the knowledge gained from Stkromar’s story of his asceticism with nanoscopic analysis of some ten Planar brains that I had performed during the aftermath of the transplant’s second step. The nanorovers that I had sent to deliver data concerning the functions of the visual cortex would remain there as added bonuses to the creatures for being subjects of my experimentation. The rovers would prevent their brain cells from lapsing into eventual decay and atrophy, a maintenance mechanism similar to the one present in humans today. Analysis of the visual cortex, surprisingly, demonstrated it to be sound. The various chemicals were present in the precise same ratios as within healthy humans. Moreover, all ties among other centers of brain activity were sturdy and functional.

Then the realization struck me; if the problem had been one of the visual cortex itself, then no eye transplant, no matter how thorough, would have been capable of relieving the creatures of the burden of experiencing the *quisly* abomination. Since the illusion dissipated with the replacement of eyes, its source must have been present *within those organs that were removed*. And the defunct nerve connection was not the culprit. It likely existed merely to stunt the visual cortex by barring it from any links to the external world. By process of elimination, the magenta orbs – what I had before termed “false eyes” – *did* in reality possess a purpose to them. They were the origin of the hallucination! And thousands of them were already at my disposal for study – later. I needed to return to the hospital to conduct further transplants, for I was well aware that Magnus would be able to maintain an acceptable pace of progress for an hour at best, until the number of new arrivals outnumbered that of new Starters by a quantity that would result in the overcrowding of the facilities.

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Magnus already can boast to have completed one hundred operations with results as flawless as mine. His experience is – I am pleased to state – more ample than that of the average specialist in the field of biofusion transplants. I requested that he communicate it to the most advanced of the Lieutenants and thereby initiate the foundation for the spread of this technique within the species. This would be the

culminating portion of the constantly evolving curriculum of Reality Studies, which has become the informal name of the Planar adaptation program.

The operations once again are entirely in my hands. Five thousand Planars have already been liberated, but the endeavor continues to accelerate in its pace and in the rigor required from me to maintain it. Not even during my most productive years in Crentor's laboratory did I treat so many creatures in the entirety of that time. Yet the procedure has become to me a matter of automatism. I no longer need to intensely concentrate on every single detail, and my precision has notably improved since my transformation of Migstrat. Every time I remove the magenta orbs from their sockets, however, the essential question resurfaces within my mind. *How precisely is the quisly illusion generated?* And if there exists no biological link between the brain and the orbs, can they even be legitimately considered portions of the Planar organism? Are they, rather, entities of their own accord that have latched themselves onto each and every one of the creatures and generated the *quisly* image? Is their presence indeed an accident of the Planar genome or instead a twisted example of alien parasitism? The Planar DNA strands, from what extensive sampling I had already performed, do not seem to be tainted by any tendency toward observing mystical divinities within their heads. Most likely, the entity to blame is an overgrown organism exhibiting virus-like behaviors: an inability to exist autonomously and survival only through the gradual draining of the host organism. The orbs that I had collected were immobile and have not infested anyone yet. My assumption is that their vitality cannot be sustained without constant contact with the flesh of a Planar.

Except – and this question exposes a potential loophole in my model – what direct benefits would a virus receive from compelling a Planar to destroy his limbs, numb his senses, and disrupt his digestion? Yes, the host organism's capacity to resist parasites externally is weakened – perhaps due to lack of capacity to exercise, to attain proper nutrition, or to reason soundly – but a more direct means of assault would be to the immune system and the various disease-fighting cells within the bloodstream. Yet these are left virtually unharmed within the Planar organism, and circulation occurs normally. I do not comprehend the means by which this entity, if it is a virus, would obtain its requisite sustenance and not become extinguished by natural selection due to its lack of adequate adaptation of means to ends. Moreover, if it is dependent directly on the biological deterioration of the Planar organism to survive, why does it not root itself firmly within it, instead of remaining separated from it by a dead strand of nerve tissue? It dawned upon me that no known life form's framework of activity can be applicable to this particular situation, and every hypothetical parallel would only possess a marginal degree of accuracy. I was delving into a realm entirely detached from the evolution of Earthly life and its patterns, and I needed to approach the orbs based on empirical data that I would gather in the future, not *a priori* speculation.

In the meantime, the boundaries of the training field have expanded, as the number of Starters at any given instant began to exceed the thousand-member figure. They have been divided into classes of three, each attended to by a Lieutenant. Magnus and Migstrat presently have relegated themselves to instruction only at the "higher levels" – scientific demonstrations and biofusion transplants.

During a fifteen-minute pause that I granted myself at the completion of the 5500th transplant, I summoned Migstrat to speak with me and discuss the question of habitation for the booming numbers of intellectually autonomous Planars.

“It befits a civilized and competent entity to possess a place of dwelling which it may permanently term its own. Prior to my arrival, you and your fellow men (I shall refer to them as such more frequently, as they near that standing) subsisted in the open air, a decision contrary to your volition. Yet presently, the choice is yours. You have attained some fundamental skills needed for the maintenance of a harmonious, free society. Already we witness glaring differences in the proficiencies of different men at different tasks. I have spotted—and you have likely immersed yourself in—informal meetings of Lieutenants interested in agriculture, physics, or engineering. As they develop these inclinations, we shall witness the emergence of a division of labor and a surge in your community’s ability to exploit surrounding resources. However, the requisite infrastructure, a settlement, is required as a starting point. Even schools with classrooms can be created for those already physically coordinated to an adequate extent. I would like you to teach this aspiration to the Lieutenants, who will then communicate it to the Starters. In the meantime, spend approximately an hour each day designing those buildings that you see as fittest for individual habitation in terms of comfort, appliances, self-sufficiency, and spaciousness. I will provide ample building materials as soon as you contact me with a willingness to build.”

“And, suppose that I construct a certain number of houses within the first day, a hundred if I am productive. How shall I determine even which of the Lieutenants will be settled first?”

“I think the time is ripe to introduce to you the notion of currency. Every culture needs an object of value that it employs as the standard for all transactions. That is, there is an agreement within the society that a particular medium, in quantities determinable by individual buyers and sellers, can be used in exchange for any manner of goods and services that are on the market. It is best that this medium be in itself valuable in order to prevent the gratuitous manufacture of currency and thus the depreciation of each individual unit’s buying power. Fortunately, this planet possesses the mineral resource that is optimal in serving as such a standard, gold. It lies in the Metallic Hills in such quantities as are sufficient to furnish a monetary supply for an entire civilization. This gold can be mined and thereby introduced into circulation. You can charge any amount you see fit for habitation that you construct. I also suggest that you establish a minting facility, wherein every bit of gold intended for use as currency will be transformed into coins for simplification of future transactions.”

“But what if too few Planars possess the amounts I charge for housing, or too many?”

“You must then adjust your prices accordingly to ensure that every one of your units is eventually occupied. And if demand for houses exceeds their supply, you would be well-suited to provide for additional housing. Remember, however, that, with the advent of currency, it will be employed in *all* transactions, for housing or otherwise. Consider yourself in my debt for the construction materials. I will give you generous bargains, but I will expect repayment. Moreover, I will not hesitate to contract with other efficient competitors in this endeavor and alter my rates in accordance to the degree of innovation and profit-generating capacity I observe in a given housing design. With

these caveats, the decision to adopt this new system is ultimately yours. It can yield supreme prosperity if employed consistently.”

“Hmmm... it seems rather interesting. At least, there will no longer be confusion in material exchanges. There will be some basis on which they could be judged as wise or unwise, advantageous or ruinous. Moreover, someone skilled at just one of those attributes necessary to survival does not need to perish under this system. This... currency... allows him to exchange his service with others who can provide for the remainder of his basic and advanced needs. I will spread word of it among the Lieutenants and encourage them to devise techniques for the harvesting of gold. But, one question surfaces in this regard. What if a Planar who has not earned this gold forcefully acquires it from one who has? Would it not still be as valuable for the thief in his further transactions? And in a world of justice, how is this proper?”

“Now I must introduce you to a concept that will be difficult to grasp because it is of a seemingly paradoxical nature. Yet, upon closer inspection, it is perfectly sensible. Ponder over this: if it is granted that theft is unjust, yet it poses possible advantages to the thief, what measures can a society take that would curb this practice?”

He hesitated slightly. “This may seem to be restating the obvious.”

“No, no. Go ahead.”

“The society would need to render the act disadvantageous.”

“Yes! And how can it go about doing so? What would render it disadvantageous?”

“I suppose, inflicting harm upon the wrongdoer.”

“Precisely! Now, you understand that physical force does have a role to play even in a society free of compulsion. It is employed against those who seek to nullify the efficient and honest workings of the system of currency, but not only there. Its function is to deter physical violence, fraud, and even murder – the willful attempt to destroy a sentient creature. You Planars likely know not of that atrocity, and hopefully never will. But to prevent it from ever becoming a lucrative undertaking, you should initiate a police force. Now, the athletic training undertaken in Reality Studies was not included there in vain. I had a purpose in mind. The most physically skilled Planars should be requested to join a contingent maintained in the name of the public, the entire community of Planars, in order to preserve the peace. Normally, there would have been funding difficulties, as policemen require their salaries as well. However, since this planet falls officially under the private domain of Mauricius, *Protector Intergalacticus*, I, as his representative, will pay all the requisite costs. We shall speak of all these endeavors’ organization later, at midnight, in a meeting to be held by the foot of the Colossus, open to all the seeing ones. Presently, patients await me, and I cannot delay further.”

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This midnight occurred during the genuine Magnetican nighttime. The Magnetican Sun, somewhere in the unexplored reaches of the universe, no longer manifested even a trace of its presence. The only sources of luminescence were the lampposts, arranged in a semicircle at the foot of the statue, whose glow reflected off the remainder of its body, especially the eyes, to form a lustrous aura that drew Planars

to it through sheer esthetic effect. It was the first grand-scale work of art they had ever observed, and they were awestruck by it.

I sat beside the statue on a plastic field scientist's chair with an electronic replicator in hand that provided artificial versions of every formal sound required to maintain order in a meeting, including an especially loud thumping of the gavel with which I opened the assembly.

"We meet tonight to discuss the essential matter of the directions that you shall take in order to secure your newfound free existences and rise to those heights of accomplishment and comfort that have been for centuries enjoyed by citizens within the Intergalactic Protectorate. Seven thousand of you have already been freed from the oppressive fold of the *quisly* and your coercive Togetherness. Some have quite proficiently grasped the essential dynamics of the absolute reality that you have entered – a reality based on elemental manipulation instead of the procurement of petty favors, a reality whose course can be shaped by your individual desires instead of a preconceived, stagnant, imposed-order hierarchy. Yet, perhaps due to the lack of adequate time hitherto experienced to achieve their removal, certain hindrances to the unfolding of your full potential are still present. For one, it is not fitting for any sentient being to subsist in the open air, without a place of refuge. All creatures deserve a shelter to which they can refer themselves, which grants them the assurance of security from the dangers of the elements, privacy from the intrusion of fellow men, and a realm that one can genuinely call one's own. Moreover, you have hitherto possessed no manner of government aside from oligarchic tyranny, no institutional structures that evoked from you anything but obedience, deference, and squalor. Obviously, you are averse to them. Nevertheless, there is the possibility of a government serving a legitimate role, so long as it is kept within certain proper bounds, so long as it punishes the wrongdoer without violating the innocent, harmless, and productive. A government must serve the interests of those who are governed; that is a truth known, although not always enforced to an optimal degree, among my people for over a millennium. Without the existence of punishment for villainous violence, virtue cannot thrive. It becomes suppressed in a tide of malice and expropriation. Hence, you, the free Planars of Magnetica, must organize a government with two and, heed this, *only* two purposes – protection against crime and the mediation of disputes. A system of housing can be established by ambitious individuals amongst you only after they become certain that their efforts will receive a just reward and that the dwellings will be occupied on their creators' terms. Hence, I invite you to elect two officials, a police commissioner and an assistant, who would assume the duties of police commissioner under dire circumstances. The commissioner shall be responsible for the prompt hiring and equipment of as many policemen as are necessary to efficiently maintain public order. He shall apply to me for funding on any project he seeks to undertake, but he may also receive voluntary contributions from any of you. I assume that Instructor Migstrat has taught you of the virtues of currency and the means by which it shall manifest itself in your lives. Hence, I invite any of you who are willing to assume these duties to presently announce your candidacy, which will qualify you to be balloted in a public election, wherein equal suffrage shall be granted to anyone possessing the capacity of sight."

Hesitation prevailed. After all, this novel system of government by representation had only then been introduced to the Planars, and many did not yet recover from the

sensation of treading on new ground, having to ascertain its stability. Several of the bolder ones, however, did announce their desires to fill such a post.

“What is your name?” I spoke into the gathering to one who had shouted, “I am a candidate!”

“Refber.”

“And why do you wish to become the police commissioner? Give the people some reasons to select you!”

“I loathed the old regime and the elders’ reign of terror. Even prior to my liberations, I despised them in the deepest reaches of my mind, but was afraid to manifest what I truly desired to inflict upon them. For I knew not the words then to express it, nor the means by which I could coordinate a revolt against them. But I have always hated anyone who sought to rob people of their sacred freedoms, for those people are all like the elders in essence, and I will strive to combat them wherever and whenever they shall threaten the good Planars of this community.”

“Does anyone else wish to speak on his own behalf? Yes, please introduce yourself.”

“I am Vcorft, and I have trained my physical agility and endurance for the three days during which I possessed the gift of sight. I can leap high and spot crime wherever it occurs. Moreover, my approach to my personnel will be to elevate them to my physical level and permit more certain apprehension of criminals. I will strive to create an extensive network of police, for it is my belief that it is better to possess too many policemen and too much advanced equipment than to be undermanned and underequipped. I shall also be vigilant against abuses of police power. I shall never reward my employees based on the *quantity* of arrests they make, but rather on their ability to distinguish between innocent citizens and genuine criminals. I shall give the police no incentive to arrest arbitrarily, merely to fill a quota, and will rather employ my extensive network to ensure an efficient and speedy due process for all those apprehended. Moreover, I will personally ensure that the severest treatment is received by any of my own subordinates who turn to crime.”

Those were the two most expressive of the candidates. Each of them had articulated sentiments that I shared, but I was inclined toward Vcorft, simply because his statements were more specifically aimed at *the means* by which he would fulfill his role. Refber’s condemnation of compulsory tyranny was commendable, but it would be as effective from the sidelines as it would be in the police station. I cast my vote for Vcorft by pressing a button on a portable computer that Magnus unraveled from a cube in front of my chair. He had managed to program the various candidates’ names into the database and add a number to their recorded amount of votes by the press of a candidate’s respective button. This electronic tabulation was a miniature and compact version of what occurs at home, in the major metropolitan centers of the Intergalactic Protectorate. Essentially, during the time span allotted to voting, a similar program automatically enters, via the Intergalnet, the main computers of all eligible voters and permits them to cast their ballots from the comfort of their homes, without disrupting the swiftness and efficiency of their occupation. Almost every single Protectorate citizen votes in elections, since they literally have nothing to lose by exercising a basic right and everything to preserve in somewhat determining the composition of their government.

“The polls shall be open for the next twenty-four hours, if you still waver in your decision. The person who receives the greatest number of votes shall become the Police Commissioner. You may also cast a separate ballot for the Commissioner’s Assistant. Presently, however, I will begin to hear nominations for the position of Chief Justice of the Magnetican District. The function of the judge is to enforce the laws as they are written and guard against violations thereof. He must arbitrate disputes without the intervention of personal biases and considerations. He must possess an impeccable knowledge of the codes of law. Whoever desires to undertake this occupation will need to be prepared to devote himself to extensive study of Protectorate Law, until he becomes aware of it to the letter. I will likely need to implant a ner into him so that this information could be communicated to him at the swiftest possible rate. I will be conducting interviews in private with every one of the applicants.”

“Why can we not elect the judge as well?” A question caught my attention from a Planar in the crowd.

“The judicial process must be free of popular opinions and prejudices. It is a sector in which the system of majority rule breaks down, as its designation is not to chart new courses which a society will take, but rather to enforce statutes already in existence, and to enforce them in an objective manner, without attempting to bring about alterations in such a structure by means of the judge’s decisions. It matters not in a courtroom what the public may think. What matters is a single question, ‘Was the law violated or not?’ In a courtroom, there will be a jury appointed to resolve whether the accused is guilty of violations of another’s liberties, but it is the function of the judge to allot punishments based on the statutes’ prescription. It is also his duty to maintain tranquility in the courtroom and to ensure that no portion of either the plaintiff’s or the defendant’s testimony is barred from reaching the ears of the jury. Juries will be selected from amongst the general public in order to assure that the defendant is not sentenced with rashness and haste, that a sample of the population upholds the legitimacy of the evidence presented against him – but there is no other means by which the public can or should determine the procedures of the courtroom in general, or the general trend its decisions should pursue. That is the function of inalienable human rights, which are bound by no restrictions of time, place, and community, which apply universally even to those by whom the majority is repulsed, and which thus must be left outside the province of popular sovereignty. “

Just as I completed my oratory, a messenger startled me by leaping in front. “What is it, Fnimgrok?”

“There is a strange human at the foot of the hill who rather offhandedly told me that it wishes to speak with you in private.”

No! That single word rang through my mind louder than the commotion of the Planars, the creation of which filled the gap in this abrupt pause of the meeting. The thought then formed itself with greater precision. *Not tonight, not on the eve of some of the most significant developments in Planar history! I have already crossed the point of no return; they already possess the physical and intellectual means to live on par with Protectorate citizens, but the efficacy of the transition would be far greater, if I only could retain the opportunity to finalize it! Do I have such an opportunity at present? Hmm... perhaps not all is lost. Seven thousand Planars owe their freedom to my efforts. They are not likely to abandon me in these troubled times. And I have not even*

met this Lady Brighton. How can I conclusively state that she is as fanatical as Anne-Marie Legard? The rush of panic had ceased, and I entered the stage of composure in preparation for the imminent encounter.

“My friends, I regret to state that I must depart for the moment on urgent matters, and the interviews for judicial applicants will be delayed, hopefully not by a significant amount of time. In the meantime, Magnus, please supervise the tabulation of votes. Applicants, this will grant you a chance to ponder in greater depth over what facets of your intellectual and methodological abilities you would wish to present to me during the interviews.” I raised myself from my chair and departed from the assembly, walking by the side of the general concentration of Planars toward my villa, glancing one final time upon the cold, determined visage of the Colossus. This needed to be my stature before the executor of an operation evidently intended to dismantle all traces of my ardent efforts on the frontiers of human expansion.

Chapter XI Allegiances

Colonel Claudia, Lady Brighton, found me as I ascended the steps from the airfield onto the base's main road. I had expected to encounter her beside her autowing and thus had taken an indirect approach toward it. However, she had already taken the liberty of ascending the hill and proceeding to the villa by an amount just sufficient for me to be required to climb in order to speak with her. She wore a khaki-colored Kevlar vest over a black turtleneck lined with attached pockets, devices, and clips – mostly to accommodate either weapons or communications equipment. Leggings, crafted from stainless promethium (likely made in the factories of the man whose design she was sent to dismantle) covered an area that would have been exposed by her ludicrously short skirt, above even knee-length. She glanced at me with scrutinizing brown eyes that likely were fixed on me more intensely than those of a medieval inquisitor on a heretic.

“Turning free species into your lapdogs and your living postal service, are you, Meltridge?” She spoke with a tinge of tart sarcasm.

“Colonel, I shall address you by your proper title, and I request that you address me by mine. I wish to be shown the respect deserved by a scientist with an exceptional record of accomplishment within and outside of my field...”

“I am afraid the circumstances of the situation do not permit you to dictate your terms upon me, Emperor Meltridge.” She said those last two words slowly and expressively, as if to drive them in beyond the sheer impact produced by their pronunciation alone. “Getting straight to business, this base and all the transformations in its vicinity are in violation of Ministry of Exploration and Colonization Resolution 7851 concerning the curtailment of exploitative activities within the Periphery-32 Theater.”

“Colonel, I am aware of the means by which this resolution was passed – subversion. This disgraceful perversion of proper government and MEC functions will not be upheld in the sovereign realm of Mauricius, *Protector Intergalacticus*.” I, in my white laboratory coat and dusty field trousers left over from an outworn astrosuit, eyed her sternly in return.

“The Protector has no direct jurisdiction over the proceedings of the Ministry. Moreover, on this planet, his interests count for no more than those of a private citizen, in which case they are subject to review by the public and what the public deems to be in the optimal interest of all the life and non-life of the universe. He is facing the decree of a government organization, and he had better comply or face criminal charges, along with you, his collaborator in the crime.” Her tone was startlingly bureaucratic, even for one of her convictions. The words seemed to be routinely rolling out of her mouth, without any particular attachment displayed for them. Somewhere in between, she emitted a sigh of boredom, then resumed in her old tempo, her voice not at all corresponding to the utmost atrocity of her words.

I resolved to assume a more subtle approach to her intrusions. Our standoff was not occurring in a debating society, and my purpose was not to convince her, but rather outmaneuver her, to gain time for my impact to become irreversible.

“Colonel, before you rush to hasty judgments concerning what is criminal or not, I entreat you to become acquainted with the situation firsthand. Survey the base with me, and then decide whether or not you wish to continue condemning my activities.”

“I will be doing you a favor, Meltridge, but at least you are honest in your intentions.” Suddenly, her hand struck my cheek with an intensity equivalent to an iron glove driving itself in until it contacted my teeth. I flinched and grasped my cheek with my hand out of impulse. She was a police sentry, I recalled, and many a petty thief and rioter must have covered before that mighty hand in months past. “This is what you would receive under my command for speaking insolently to a superior officer. But no, I do not see the harm in learning exactly what you are up to. Go ahead, show me what you will, but be warned that I would see it in your eyes whenever you would wish to seize control of a situation by pressing some button or diving for a weapon or conducting some other sort of trick. I have learned to deal with hostage-takers, murderers in plain clothing, assassins, and politicians. *You* are a civilian. You do not know the first thing about how to deceive a woman in uniform and get away with it. So, just to save me the effort of crushing your hands. Do not try.”

“You underestimate my integrity, Colonel.”

“No, I can sense why you would be so attached to this cause as to kill for it, not even to talk about little matters like seizing control of the situation.” Had she just stated that outright?

“You have my assurances that no harm shall come to you or any of your physical capabilities. And, in the event it does, you yourself have stated that you are more than adequately prepared to provide countermeasures.” She could no longer reasonably decline my request.

I began to guide her down the main road, motioning with my hand to the experimental crop field, abundant with greenery familiar to Earthlings at the sides – including orchards of cherry and watermelon, which have, with proper fertilizer and gravity control, quite readily adapted to the temperate Magnetican climate. The *tranquillus* bulbs, unharvested for some six hours due to a pause in patient admittance and hence a temporary cessation in the dispensation of tranquilizer, occupied the majority of the field’s central regions.

“The native species comes in a blue color as well, Dr. Meltridge?” Surprisingly enough, that question was devoid of animosity, and in her voice was present a genuine desire for knowledge, not the authoritarian tone of an inspector demanding the disclosure of contraband material.

“Since you have become willing to refer to everything by its proper name, I will disclose to you the truth.” I explained, in as concise a manner as I could, my endowment of the Planars with the ability of sight and the requisite means by which I transported them to the hospital.

“You mean to state that you have been operating on thousands of creatures, alone, during the past several days?”

“Well, Colonel, there has been one so exceptionally minded among them that he may well pass as a master surgeon at home. But, overall, yes. The majority of the effort has been mine.”

She glanced at me with a mix of incredulity and surprise. Her eyes seemed to survey me once more, perhaps more closely than during her initial inspection.

“Hmmm... Doctor, how could you, against their will? After all...” she seemed to struggle in forming the words, “they are sovereign living creatures, a species apart from yourself. Do they not have the right to deny treatment?”

“They are not sovereign creatures in their initial state. Quite simply put, their epistemology is flawed, arising out of flaws in their biology. What they witness in place of the reality you and I perceive...”

“That is, the reality you and I *believe* ourselves to perceive.” She cut me off almost by impulse.

“I stand by what I had said: the reality that you and I perceive. What they witness in place of it is a chemically induced hallucination, one that compels them to destroy the vitality and physical prowess of their organisms for the sake of its appeasement. It is truly a vile construct, Colonel, and it dominates their lives to the point of turning them into slaves to the whims of incompetent hierarchical superiors. They are also slaves to the happenstance of blindly stumbling upon a food patch one day, and enduring life-draining hunger – which man has not known for centuries – during the next. Truly, how can they be considered to possess a volitional consciousness, if their striving for advancement can be sated only when they have broken a limb, starved themselves, or bounced upon their heads and dulled their senses? How can even the most benign motives of individual elevation be carried out by the most industrious of them if they remain thus, worse than blind?”

“Benign, ha!”

“You yourself subscribe to them, Colonel. Or should I say, valedictorian of your class in the Legardian Police Academy, whose accomplishments in the establishment of an advanced scientific police force have been quite outside the realm of stagnation? But your distinguishing feature in regard to these motives is that you possess the sight to pursue them.”

“So I see you have been doing your research well, Doctor Meltridge. But your attitude smacks of those European imperialists who placed under their yoke millions of Native Americans, South Asians, and Africans during the first two eras of ‘great individualistic expansion.’ It is abhorrent to the compassionate peoples of a new age of tolerance and pluralism.”

“Ah, but you misunderstand the imperialists, Colonel!”

“Enough of the titles. We are not in a police station! Call me Claudia, or at least Miss Brighton, if you insist on being so proper. In any event, you sound like my old professor of philosophy in the Academy. You might as well address me by my first name, as he always called his students, whom he considered to always require moral enlightenment and edification. He was one of those ancient-generation types who always spoke of the grand old days of Western frontiersmen carving their way through the jungles and deserts and meteor craters of their new-found domains. What he had forgotten to mention, though, is that they had always carved their way through mounds of flesh and organic matter.”

“If you consider the virtual elimination of the slave trade, the industrialization of the Third World, and the establishment of colossal mining enterprises galaxies away to be acts of murder, then I question your definition. Of course, individual colonists did at certain times commit criminal acts, but so do, statistically, members of every society, with an exponentially decreasing percentage depending not so profoundly on a given

country's level of technological advancement, but rather on its political system. I contend that these infringements on human rights were the exception to, not the rule of, a credo that deemed colonized peoples to be on the epistemological level of children, possessing the basic rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, but lacking yet the epistemological *means* to obtain them. Hence, it became the function of numerous benevolent volunteers – first, missionaries, then, professional educators, then, the genetic engineers, who of their own volition resolved to eradicate mutation, paralysis, and physical defects within native populations that had beforehand not even encountered the word 'medicine.' We, in the age of intergalactic colonization, still subscribe to this premise via the structure of the family and the rearing of children..."

"The obsolete structure of the family and the inefficient rearing of children, that is. A nice, disciplined state sanctuary is what they require. But, I drift from the topic. What standard do you or the imperialists have to hold, by which your means of perception are superior to theirs? How do you know that their primeval senses are any less valid than yours?"

"Why, by all the data of science this is so, and by the data of commonsense empirical experience as well! You need not research in length to observe the tremendous leaps that have carried Western man to the forefront of existence, contending with the elements and bringing them under the mantle of his civilization. You need not but a second of logical thought to realize that this framework of activity, and its requisite means of perceiving the world, is essential to such prosperity. All those who put these ideas into practice essentially *became* Western men, while all those who did not remained in squalor and desolation. But if you do examine the matter in depth, if you study the functions of the human organism with utmost precision – an opportunity which has been accessible to the layman since Dr. Manfredsson's *Exhaustive Analysis of the Nanoscopic and Macroscopic Biological Structures of Homo Sapiens*, published in 2580 in encyclopedia chip form – you will note that every aspect possesses a crucial link to external reality. The brain views only those images that are reflected by the lens of the eye; it hears only the vibrations that cause the eardrum to fluctuate; it feels pain only when the nervous endings extending throughout the organism are excited. And, given recent technological amplifications of the range of human experience, man can magnify or reduce his scope of vision by factors of over a million, can attune his ear to the most subtle of fluctuations and fortify it to endure monumental clangor. He can deactivate his pain when encountering an inconsequential scratch or bruise and trigger it when conducting an internal scan of his bodily malfunctions. Moreover, man possesses the ability to integrate all these sensory stimuli into *ideas* and *decisions*, into, ultimately, his hierarchy of *values*, which becomes his further scheme for activity. He can choose to neglect his external awareness, it is true, but he cannot negate his capacity for it except by physical damage. And you state that man's senses have the same grounding in them as arbitrary mystical hallucinations? Think again, Claudia."

A Planar Lieutenant approached us as we passed the water-storage tanks and headed toward the hospital.

"Dr. Meltridge, I voted today for Vcorft and Nemmel." He stated with a certain luster of pride in his eyes. It was if, for the first time, he had experienced the realization that his mind's conclusions, not the arbitrary impositions of the elders, could contribute to the order and tranquility of the system under which he lived. He had yet to learn the

advantages of the secret ballot, but no harm would come from my knowledge of his selection.

"I am glad to hear that you have wisely employed the opportunity given you, Btherkst. Now, can you please speak to Miss Brighton here, honestly, of how you would evaluate your life today in comparison to days past?"

"Wonderful, and getting better, Miss. Never could I have thought that there existed such a variety of activities in the world! I know not whom I wish to become yet. Perhaps, a scientist. Or, perhaps, I will make my living out in the Metallic Hills as a miner and directly obtain some of this new *currency*. A fine idea that would be. This is not to mention the grand variety of foods that are now available to me. Even the old greens can now be boiled or steamed or salted for a top-notch taste. And it is all Dr. Meltridge's doing. Be sure to mention this to everyone you know." And with those words, he leaped into the air and beyond the boundaries of the base, likely scouring for some clay to construct a makeshift residence. Btherkst was not one to await the completion of Migstrat's private housing project and be placed on a waiting list; he sought to raise up his dwelling by his own hand from the barren planetary soil.

"More drugs in the food you have given him, Meltridge?" Her tone seemed to conflict with itself in its various leanings. One was toward a lighthearted joke, the other was toward a scolding concern.

"Not at all. They select their cuisine and frequently prepare it if the facilities are available. Perhaps I should found a restaurant in their communities and earn a handsome profit from selling dishes made entirely of ingredients grown here on Magnetica."

"Hmmm... I cannot say that I will permit you to do that. But, go on, show me more of this defense you have mounted for yourself." For some reason, she seemed to be eager to depart from any mention of her police role.

We entered the hospital. "This is where the operations were conducted," My hands motioned to the rows of presently empty pallets that had been sanitized and tidied up by the lab droids. "New patients *will* be arriving soon, but in the meantime this is the repository of an enormous stockpile of what I expect are the sources of the Planars' hallucination."

"Show me."

"Right this way." I opened a curtain into a sequestered area of the hospital, my "doctor's office." Here on the walls hung a variety of first-aid kits, medicine boxes, needles, and surgical instruments. Four sliding doors at the sides held within them storage closets for especially cumbersome equipment – which was either so novel or so specialized that a compact-cube mode for it had not yet been devised. The purple orbs, of course, were of that category. Each of them was wrapped in slippery plastic, and they filled two of the closets to overcrowding.

"I was planning to dissect one of these formations tonight, given a pause in the operations that must be administered. It is the only portion of the Planar facial basin that I have not yet examined in detail, and the only one that has not proven to be biologically sound. If only..."

"Doctor, common sense would suggest that my inspection duties should include a thorough acquaintance with both your efforts and the actual data of your study. I beseech you to conduct all the anatomical studies you wish in my presence."

“Will you be required to write a report and present it to the Ministry?” I inquired, fearing that a report from an officer commissioned specifically to dismantle the Expedition would acquire an aura of legitimacy by packaging genuine observations with unfounded judgments from environmentalist lore.

“Not if you permit me access to any data and observations that you yourself record concerning this experiment.”

“So long as any disclosure of these facts is as I have written them, without the alteration of a single word.”

“Why, naturally!” That seemed almost too lenient to be emanating from an agent of Anne-Marie Legard. I would be permitted to present, in my own words, the efforts and productive consequences of a key endeavor in the Magnetican Expedition.

“I appreciate your understanding, Claudia.”

“Now, I will just sit and observe. If it helps, pretend that I do not exist while you perform your studies. Any questions I have can be reserved for a later time. And, given the extensive quantity of samples within your access, you can adjust your subsequent examinations accordingly.”

Without any further hesitation, I delved into my work, comprehending that, for some time at least, I would be permitted to continue it. The orbs were quite familiar to me by then in their external appearance. But Dr. Nachtreiter’s initial subatomic scan had yielded data for only the outer first centimeter of the orb – eye tissue intermingled with highly concentrated quantities of blood. This was literal dead matter without any manner of uniformity or design to its composition. But did anything exist in the depths of that enigmatic sphere?

Physically slicing it open was not prudent as a first measure. Most crucial activity of advanced portions of human organisms – in brain matter especially – occurs on a level too miniature to be susceptible to the unequipped observations of the human eye. Even in an entirely “dead” state, however, it would be possible, given a proper magnification, to identify the source of any electrical or chemical impulses and the means by which they were induced. I resolved to send into the depths of the jelly a nanorover armed with a camera. Its introduction would scarcely create a visible opening within the orb, yet the makeshift room-width screen that I had put up behind me would present all of its sightings in impeccable detail, enabling me to control it remotely and obtain quantitative samples of chemical residues, as well as qualitative samples of various shapes and particles I would spot inside – all at my will.

While the rover penetrated still-familiar territory, I conducted a preliminary x-ray scan of the orb at a distance. The method was rather simplistic, and it could yield only a basic outline of the orb’s internal features. Still, it could present me with a rudimentary understanding of what to expect. As a diagram emerged from an adjunct mini-printer, I examined its contents. The layer of jelly continued for about two centimeters into the orb. The remainder was a peculiarly hollowed-out center, terminating at two tube-like orifices closest to what would have been the defunct nerve ending. Surprisingly enough, only a thin layer of jelly, perhaps a tenth of a millimeter thick, existed in their vicinity. Why had Dr. Nachtreiter’s scan not noted that? Of course. That would have been the region where the orb was plastered to the facial basin, without many cracks or crevices for a sampler program to penetrate.

The nanorover was through the first two centimeters of jelly from the opposite end to the former connection with the defunct nerve ending, when it came to a halt. "Error in directed motion! Cannot proceed due to insurmountable obstruction!" The robotic voice of the nanorover emanated through the speakers. This was the standard expression for a quite commonly recurring problem. Nanorovers remain unable to breach metallic materials and solid ionic compounds. I halted the rover before the error message could surface once again, and studied the screen, which displayed the rover face-to-face with a silvery-gray wall, literally buzzing at its foundation. I requested a scan of the metal; the rover would perform it by transmitting through it a gentle electrical impulse and testing conductivity. It would also conduct an analysis of metallic bond arrangements on the surface. If the metal were pure, the latter analysis would suffice. If it were coated, the conductivity test would reveal that fact. The results were automatically processed.

"Titanium intermingled with copper plates every 0.12 centimeters along the circumference." It proceeded to give density readings and create a computerized diagram of the structure of atomic arrangement.

Titanium is a fairly durable metal, at least by the standards of previous centuries, and copper would conduct electricity splendidly... an interesting combination. I pondered over the direct observations, then noted that I had missed a crucial, though commonsense, component: titanium spheres striped with copper simply *did not exist in unaltered nature!* Given especially the almost perfectly smooth surface of the metal, it was beyond any question that it was intelligently designed... as were the confounding tunnels underneath Mount Sentry within which I had first contacted Magnus!

"This is impressive!" I declared booming as the ecstatic rush of discovery, of presence on the brink of man's currently known spectrum of data, swept into my mind within seconds. I would need several moments to regain my composure and proceed.

My investigation was not yet complete. I still needed to determine the means by which the hallucination was induced. I charted a course for the rover, starting from the opposite end of the orb, where it would be capable of *entering the orifices* and thereby exploring the areas internal to the metallic sphere. Its journey would occupy several minutes. In the meantime, I addressed the Lady Brighton.

"I will note your presence for a moment to pose to you the following question. Are you aware now of the immense value of this experience to me, of the thrill it brings me to expand the horizons of knowledge, to delve into a subject never before studied in depth, and to extract from it data, methods, solutions that everyone will gain from tangentially, but of which the greatest beneficiary will be I, Aurelius Meltridge – in my standard of living, my glory, my sheer love of this act, the process of scientific study?"

Her face glowed with a euphoric tint, as she replied, contrary to her former interfering purpose and demeanor: "Yes, Aurelius, I know perfectly well what you mean." This was the first time that, upon omission of my title, she employed my first name instead of my last. Given her allowance to refer to her similarly, I assumed this to be the natural consequence.

"Entering open space. Analyzing surrounding air for gaseous particles. 70 percent nitrogen, 19.5 percent oxygen, 0.5 percent hydrogen. All other gases in negligible quantities. For data of greater detail, send Impulse A." the rover reported. The

composition of air was normal, the same as was encountered on Earth and the terraformed planets – a combination that sustained life splendidly.

“Now, we examine further,” I mouthed in a cheerful undertone.

Almost instantly, I obtained a screen display of the insides of a tube, which were not – contrary to the primitive image conjured up by the x-ray machine – perfectly cylindrical, on a microscopic level at least. I zoomed out one thousand times and observed a square of what the nanorover reported to be a rare sort of plastic, a screen of some sort, plastered to the walls. The plastic screen obstructed any further penetration. *Hmmm... another detail perhaps too infinitesimal to be noticed by the x-ray scan. Perhaps it is because this barrier is flimsy in width. I will ponder ways to remove it later. First, however, I will investigate that, which I can access. I cannot allow a screen of a material as advanced as plastic to escape my scrutiny.*

“Perform advanced scan of plastic screen,” I enunciated into the speaker.

“Instructions received. Performing advanced scan of plastic screen; sending subatomic probe.” Nanorovers inhabited a realm of sub-cellular proportions, ideal for the maintenance of cell structures within the human organism. However, in order to comprehensively examine solid formations, they needed to emit the expensive subatomic probe, still in its experimental and specialized development stages. The Magnetican Expedition was equipped with approximately one thousand of the prototypes, which the Lord Protector had procured to facilitate an intense testing effort. Should the probes prove to yield substantive results, they will be a product into whose commercial manufacture Legardian Promethium shall expand its capacities. Then, analysis of DNA strands would be accessible to an individual within the comforts of his home. One would no longer be required to refer to a genetic engineer for even a preliminary scan. A subsequent step, several years in the future, would be the creation of a rover model to replace a mere sampler probe at subatomic level, so that men would enter an era of genuine control over their organisms, capable of altering their genotypes and hence their physical forms at will, without the formalities and time expenditure of applying to a professional. The market for this product would be as large as the number of persons currently plagued with discomfiting but petty and largely inconsequential physical defects.

“Subatomic scan has yielded general shape and composition of screen as well as matter beyond.” The monitoring screen displayed a diagram of the plastic square with... a copper wire stretching from it and into the sphere! To obtain further data, I spoke into the receptor: “Perform elementary scan of wire.”

“Sending impulse.” Within a second, Claudia was on her feet, pointing to the screen.

“Aurelius, zoom out immediately! I sense some motion in front of the rover!”

“Yes. Zoom out back to magnification of one million.”

The plastic barrier within the tube was opening! The rover voice suddenly related a string of information.

“Air composition changing dramatically. New makeup: 99.8 percent stuperia. 0.2 percent all other gases. For data of greater detail, send Impulse B.”

“Stuperia!” Claudia exclaimed. “How?”

Stuperia was a synthetically manufactured gas with which only specialists in biochemistry, as well as some advanced fields of physics, were acquainted by the time

of my generation. It had reached its peak of usage circa 2200, on the swiftly desolating Earth, where vestiges of technological infrastructure still remained for the scientists of that time to fuse together thousands of atoms of five distinct gaseous elements into a single experimental substance. It was designed to induce a sense of physical *stupor* within laboratory animals, after which an analysis would be performed to determine which chemicals within which sections of the brain had reacted with the gas in order to produce the sensation. The original intent of the gas's design was noble, to predict the means by which disorientation would occur within a human being, which would be a gateway toward forestalling it. Nevertheless, the gas obtained notoriety during the twenty-third century, as the laboratory where it had been manufactured was raided and defiled by thugs. The thieves subsequently salvaged the equipment necessary for the production of the gas within their shacks and initiated an underground trade in "stuperia flasks," designed to induce the same sort of mental encumbrance upon *themselves*, of their own volition! The mentality of some of the ancients still confounds me. It is a remnant of that perverse primordial impulse to destroy oneself for the sake of a mere momentary, transient sensation.

Stuperia obtained quite a foul repute toward the dawn of the twenty-fifth century, when – as the Earth gradually began to resurrect itself from the ashes of the environmentalist uprising – an emerging brand of neo-Enlightenment philosophers widely condemned its prolific role as a recreational drug. As the Temporary Defensive Coalition began to reunite the feudal fragments of the world, living standards rebounded to the extent that men no longer felt compelled to bask in self-destructive evasion of their conditions. Of course, its original designers' scheme for its further usage was never implemented in a world governed by the spiked club of the thug rather than the nanoscope of the scientist. It was written into the annals of history as a worthless distorter of reality, and – as "recreational" drug usage plunged to near non-existence during the first years of the Intergalactic Protectorate – almost forgotten altogether. But how could it have resurfaced on Magnetica?

I scoured the nearby cabinets of the office for an encyclopedia chip with any mention of the observed effects of stuperia on sentient brains. An antiquated and small database, some fifty years of age, possessed an entry that I inspected as my mouth repeated, for internalization purposes, after the recorded voice speaking from the chip into my brain: "Stuperia was observed to induce a gradual degradation in the organisms of its consumers. The full effects would set in gradually, often over a span slightly longer than thirty years. Unlike most common contraband drugs preceding its time, it did not bear the risk of a momentary overdose and dramatic immediate health consequences. Moreover, the process by which a consumer's affinity to the drug was established was similarly gradual. A man who consumed stuperia for less than a year would scarcely feel addicted and would require an effort of his own volition to reintroduce the substance into his system. Nevertheless, the rare interviews with addicts of over two decades from that time period demonstrated that their day's schedule had revolved around a presence in an environment where this gas was intensely concentrated. Long-time addicts were also observed to display symptoms of the only noticeable flagrant effects of stuperia – a certain inclination toward *deliberate self-mutilating activity* and *an experience of rushes of euphoria from massive amounts of pain, a tendency that had been absent from the consumer prior to the addiction*. Essentially, a positive loop is established, whereby

addiction to stuperia results in masochistic tendencies, which fuel increased addiction to this toxin. Stuperia is known to yield temporary chemical imbalances within an entity's visual cortex. However, it does not intervene with the clarity of the visual image one perceives. The effects of stuperia tend to habitually bypass the region of the nerve connection between the cortex and the eye." The chip ejected itself after fulfilling my mind's instructions to reveal all of its information on this anomalous toxin.

The barriers of mystery then began to collapse before me in a domino-like chain. I began to mouth my deliberations in an undertone so as to systematize them in a traceable logical sequence – instead of the leaps of awareness that tended to occur within my mind. I automatized concepts far too swiftly for my consciousness to communicate them, absent a period of retrospection.

"It was no bizarre coincidence that all the nerve endings connecting the orbs to the facial basin were defunct. Stuperia tends to avoid them, likely because it does not react with the substances that facilitate electrical impulse transfer through the nerve to the eye and vice versa. Moreover, it is no coincidence that the Planars' illusion is dissipated once the orbs are removed and eyes are given them. If visual perception of reality exists, stuperia cannot harm it. It can only induce visual hallucinations *absent* the presence of eyes! It is not even surprising to me that few of the Planar 'rotated *quisly*-seers,' the common folk, had experienced any emotional melancholy over their loss of 'the divine *quisly* voice.' They are not yet addicted. But Stkromar the Elder is. It evokes a bothersome pity within me that *this* is his deity, his *quisly*, his destroyer. There is only one enigma that I have yet to grasp. That is the manner by which stuperia is released into the brain of the planar. Its presence there is not constant; it is regulated by the opening and closing of the valve within the orb. But an electrical impulse to the copper wire beyond the plastic screen would be required to open or close it. Since the nerve to the orb, the only available transmitter of such an impulse, is dead, how can the device function?"

"This is fascinating. An advanced technological presence on what seems such a pristine planet!" Lady Brighton exclaimed in an astounded tone as I paused to catch my breath.

"This is not merely the sign of an advanced technological presence, Claudia. It is the sign of a *human* presence! It is not as if an advanced civilization separated from mankind by millions of light years would be capable of inventing the same synthetic gas during a parallel stage in its development. That chance is improbable to the degree that it must be discounted as negligible. Yet the corollary discovery is frightening! What human being would wish to stunt these noble creatures so, and for no constructive purpose even? Enslavement, extortion, even conquest, despicable as they may be, are acts at whose root may lie the motivations of a human being – the desire to enrich and advance himself. The means such a man selects for himself confess a genuinely savage ignorance of the sacred concept of inalienable rights, but that man can still be *fathomed*. *This* cannot!"

"I suppose it is not mere ecosystems that we are disrupting here, Aurelius. It seems that this session was a true paradigm shift for me." Even as she stated those words – possible signals that the framework of judgment, which she had wielded when she arrived on Magnetica, had shifted – an inkling of discomfort sped through my consciousness as I observed that her forehead was wrinkled and her eyes seemed to

be staring... elsewhere – at the corners of the office, the shadowy regions of the ceiling, the rings connecting the curtain to a metal bar hanging above it, as if she were seeking to recall something from her memory and focus inward by observing nothing in particular. “What next?” she suddenly mouthed the brief but broad question.

“There is a network of tunnels that I located eleven days ago. I suspect that it is also manmade, since Magnus – the only Planar possessing the capacity of sight prior to my arrival – has denied having partaken in its construction. There is a passageway within it that I have not yet explored. It requires clearing, but I am willing to perform all that is necessary – even drain the water from every single tunnel and intersection and crevice – in order to detonate the obstruction with a cire. Beyond it, I am confident, lies the answer to the greater question.”

“Hmmm... Aurelius, you seem drained. Since when have you last received any nourishment?”

“I am not drained. I am revitalized by this snowballing discovery that I have embarked upon. I may well journey to the tunnels immediately. No genuinely rational man can delay the dawning of truth when the distance between him and enlightenment is so minute.”

“Just one food pill; that is all I ask. The task ahead of you is as taxing as the one you have completed. Now, where do you keep them?” *A most puzzling question that was, to emerge from a woman who had been acquainted with me for some five hours. Might there have been an ulterior motive?* Nevertheless, the dominant thought within my mind was that the proposition was harmless. I dismissed my suspicions and considered it a mere comradely expression of concern for my well-being. Perhaps I had been sufficiently weary then to display external signs of exhaustion.

“The canteen should contain a plentiful stockpile. Why do we not head there? You have not yet been to that part of the base.” My voice was friendly, a tone that my brain bestowed upon it in order to conclusively dispel any apprehension.

Claudia was already at the curtain, having lifted it and partially entered the principal section of the hospital. I began walking toward it. Suddenly, I – almost in an automatic reaction – extended the frequency range receivable by my ears, as Lady Brighton, in the mechanical low undertone of an incantation, uttered a chain of words which sparked a vague recollection within my mind: “Perhaps some of your assignments might seem abnormal or incomprehensible to you, but you shall be aware of their purpose eventually, when you are ready to make the next leap in your journey.”

As I reached for the curtain, it seemed to sweep me under, and the last thing I saw were the heavy white linen folds sliding across my forehead above...

Chapter XII Enigma

July 21, 2753,

“Aurelius? Aurelius! Can you hear my voice? Respond! Answer me! Please!” A tremor passed through my shoulder as my eyelids snapped open and I sought to regain my orientation.

“Oh, you live! You gave me quite a scare, Aurelius. Your heartbeat was on the verge of halting for almost a day now. I almost killed you, you know.” The gently sloped face of Lady Brighton, enlivened with a smile even as tear droplets still slipped from her eyes, hovered over me as I realized that the only supports that prevented me from collapsing onto the floor were her arms.

“What... how...” I struggled to utter a coherent expression.

“Do not talk, Aurelius. You will strain yourself launching into another philosophical tirade. Just listen. I will tell you everything.” She pressed her fingers to my carotid artery. “Yes, still irregular. Recovering, but nowhere near the normal rate. And your lungs are barely expanding, too. Such a folly of our time to have discarded beds along with sleep! You would be the prime candidate for one. But fear not. I will make you comfortable.”

My eyes surveyed my surroundings. I was in my villa, within one of the rooms that spilled out into the salon. There was no furniture in the vicinity, apart from the rigid wooden armchairs that I preferred to sit in and a miniature marble table. Below me was an Oriental rug – above, a ceiling clock that displayed time – 0342 hours – and the amount of daylight within this region of Magnetica – a slight increase from that of past night, signifying a forthcoming dawn. Claudia wore a scarlet short-sleeved dress of a casual, indoors variety, one of the types Margaret had donned back on Earth. Margaret’s skirt, of course, had always extended to the floor.

“You may be wondering why I have not placed you on a pallet. Magnus requires the entirety of them in the hospital. Patients are pouring in; you *did* program the next *tranquillus* patch to begin growing at midday yesterday. He can barely keep pace, although you will be pleased to learn that your endeavor, even without your direct presence, has met further successes – about five hundred of them. Magnus is even employing a few part-time assistants from the most advanced of the Planar Lieutenants. I have been leaving them alone, mostly, allowing them to proceed with business as usual. And no, they are not worried about you. I told them that you had accidentally opened a vial of mild toxin in the hospital and that you would recover shortly. Shortly indeed! Thank that air vent which diverted into itself the majority of the hydrogen cyanide gas and left you afflicted by only a mild residue.”

“W...w...wh...” I could not amass sufficient strength to utter it. She placed a finger to my lip.

“I know the question you wanted to ask, ‘Why?’ Why did I seek to destroy you? Do you want me to tell you a secret, something I am not supposed to reveal under pain of dishonorable discharge from the police forces, court-martial, and imprisonment? Well, here it is.” She placed her mouth to my ear and whispered, “It was all part of the mission. The instructions were all too clear in that regard.” After lingering there for a second longer than necessary, Claudia withdrew and resumed in her normal voice, “I can quote them to you. ‘In the event that unforeseen circumstances are introduced into

the situation, permanently terminate all participants and traces of the expedition; that will be support for the fact that man is involving himself in a system far too delicate and complex for any harmless interaction to be possible.’ And you thought you could outsmart Anne-Marie Legard! Poor, sweet Aurelius.”

My eyes began to bulge out of their sockets as I realized the implications of Lady Brighton’s instructions. Since mine was inherently a mission of discovery, and ‘unforeseen circumstances’ were inevitable, Operation Rollback’s primary intent had been to *murder me!*

I strove to violently free myself of her hold. My arms jerked in an attempt to separate my side from one of her hands.

“Do not overexert yourself, please. You are safe now. I had several other vials in my possession, which I could have released upon witnessing your narrow escape. I have instead buried them at the bottom of the hill and crushed them with my foot so that the gas would seep into the ground. I will protect you from anyone who would further seek your destruction.” Then, without any reservation, she kissed me on the forehead. “I suppose you can guess now the magnitude of my feelings for you. Yes, I know that you are a married man, and I will not exploit you in a position of helplessness. I have been conscious of that fact from the beginning. Yet, knowing all this, I plead with you not to loathe me. My affection did, after all, preserve your life.”

The irony of the event was all too overbearing. I had been saved by an emotion which was outside both the legal and moral spheres, and not within the realm of my volition, either. Her behavior had nevertheless confounded me to the utmost extent. If she had felt love for me, why had she released the hydrogen cyanide upon me at all? Why had she acted thus far in accord with her orders, and thereafter in blatant and conscious violation of them?

It was as if she had spotted the question in my eyes. “When I arrived on the surface of this planet, I had little knowledge of you, aside from sheer numerical and biographical data. My first glances upon you were directed by no consideration other than of you as ‘the enemy,’ the man whom I would thwart directly. I even found a perverse pleasure in responding with sophistries and abuse to your honest and genuinely respectful statements. Yet, inevitably, our conversation and your little tour shifted to a subject that I cannot resist, and could not resist since early childhood. Even then I would constantly question everything, unsatisfied with the two-word superficial answers presented by the adults around me. I sought to discover why a plain toy car, when launched off into the distance, would come to a gradual halt, and why the pain of being pricked by a needle was enormously greater than that of falling upon a massive wooden stump. My parents even imposed a ‘why’ toll on me because I continued to overwhelm them with inquiries that were foreign to them, and with little pause. And few people in the social circles around me would respond with anything but cumbersome apathy to my curiosity. They encouraged me to perform well in school, and that I did, but their type would never truly comprehend the motive forces within me. I used to fantasize then that one day someone, some champion, would appear and deliver me from that microcosm of routine and monotony. It was not the knight in shining armor archetype that most girls my age would have envisioned, however. It was a man of knowledge, someone whose database of awareness – but, moreover, whose *desire to acquire it* – would exceed even my own. And instead of carrying me away to his castle,

he would bring me to a pristine planet, where no human life existed but ours, a planet that would be ours to own, ours to study, ours to explore. A beautiful dream, is it not?" I nodded.

"By the time of my graduation from the police academy, I was on the verge of disillusionment with my dream. Few young men that I had met were anything but pragmatists. They would initiate discussions with me on scientific principles, discussions that drew me in, fascinated me, ignited my discoverer's drive – that is, before I was notified that they were merely seeking, via a covert approach, the answers to an examination I had taken several years ahead of them. My teachers offered insightful and challenging instruction, but, obviously, I could never undertake *that* sort of relationship with them. My mind was oft immersed in dreary prognostications of what was to come once their generation became replaced by mine in all fields, of the extinguishment of the light of curiosity within the ranks of academia, of its replacement by a cadre of orthodox pedants who would pursue advancement by standing in place and adhering to already established methods and career paths. In the meantime, my career was spread out before me in ways that could not have been more promising. I committed the coward's error of abandoning any prospects in the special sciences, as I realized that I would be pitted against the titanic forces of tired traditionalism that I did not consider myself alone capable of resisting. So I decided to lead a dual existence – one, at the police station, reforming just about everything within my sight until I had but to push a button, and my network would cleanse the district of crime within a minute. My other life was one of secret affiliations and radical discourse, with the one person I could find who would grant me access to that extensive network of the thinkers, the men of ideas, the purposefully driven, with whom I had so yearned to mingle. And you know her name."

"She, thinking?" I managed to intercede with what strength was returning to me.

"Oh, yes. She challenged every one of the premises I had ever held, even my conviction of the immutability of mathematics. She seemed to be preparing something for me, always, leaving little tidbits of knowledge and questions for me to ponder, but never rendering me aware of any more – as if she had some grand design in mind for me, which I would need to discover step by step, but which, in its entirety, it was 'too early for me to fathom.' I was naturally curious about another sort of science that she taught to me. It was new to me, but I was surprised to learn that it is far, far older than all others, even older than agriculture itself. You likely know it by name: ecology. I loved ecology because, even in its snippets, it offered a big-picture portrayal of events that was so immersing and awe-inspiring, so finely constructed that it resisted scrutiny. And I always expected my champion to be somewhere amongst the ranks of Anne-Marie's associates. I was slightly disappointed when I realized that the majority of her movement was either of a more advanced age, much like her own, or several years my juniors and merely swept up by those basic assumptions of ecology that I had already mastered. Little did I know that the man whom I had always waited for would be the staunch opponent of *any* ecosystem preservation, the man who in my mind had always been the bigoted propagandist creature-mutilator Aurelius Meltridge. I did refer to you thus several times in Anne-Marie's company, I must admit. Nor were my instructions particularly concerned with treating you as a human being. Nevertheless, upon hearing the first words from you concerning your endeavors, their pace, and the subjects of your

study, I began to ponder over whether you were truly the lackey of commercial interests that Anne-Marie had described to me, in loose terms. So I decided to establish a test for you by the only means which I knew to be genuinely efficacious – practical demonstration. That was why I was so insistent on observing your study of the orbs. Besides, the subject had come to fascinate me thoroughly by that time. I realized that this was an entirely new realm of biology, from which volumes of data could be squeezed, given sufficient time. And your activity seemed consistent with Anne-Marie's plea for 'a comprehensive awareness of the processes governing the balance of life and non-life in the universe.' So I sat still and observed your meticulous methodology, and your skillful implementation of the tools at your disposal. Then you began to communicate your discovery to me, to speak aloud and seek affirmation on my part. You drew me into the process. For the first time, another human being of my age group had, of his own initiative, elevated me further on the ascent toward knowledge. And you spoke with such passion, such resolve, that I thought that in those moments you would be able to cure all human death... literally. I imagined you in that role, unflinching, directed, vigorous, oblivious to any external nuisances and internal discomforts. I know that it is quite naïve of me to have made that connection, and I will understand if you view that merely as the product of a child's residually overactive imagination..."

"No, no, not at all," I insisted as emphatically as I could. "Please go on."

"So you have, too, experienced what I speak of?"

"More so than you suspect." I was now beginning to require only several seconds of recuperation between sentences.

"Then you are beyond my most intense projections of what your qualities would be, Aurelius. I understand now what the ancients saw in the Titans of their legends. And to think that I had nearly smothered that Promethean fire within you, forever... What sort of person am I?" She lowered her head in shame, and her flow of tears resumed. It was not a façade, nor a capricious fit that some more frivolous women entered. She exhibited sorrow of the most sincere and fundamental sort. I tapped her shoulder as a symbolic manifestation of my desire to quell her grief.

"I cannot love you, Claudia, you realize that." I paused to ascertain that this did not further exacerbate her condition. "But I will seek to understand you and befriend you."

"Oh Aurelius, you are too generous." She pressed her head against my shoulder, hoping that the resulting tension would suppress the flow of tears. "You are so innocent and trusting, like a little boy, and you have no great evil within your soul to plague you. I saw that in you once I attended to you on the floor of the hospital. Even in a condition of unconsciousness, you manifested no shame, no secrecy, and no self-doubt. Your face was open, composed, straightforward, noble. It was as if, despite all the hardships of your existence, you maintained the clear focus of a child, toward the future, toward a time of even more splendid discoveries and even more prodigious endowments. I knew that, if you were to die then, and if only a final sentence in parting were granted you, you would have stated, 'I regret only that I could not live further.' Out here, on the hills and plains of Magnetica, you have little to fear from the forces of nature. You wield them with the wisdom of Apollo and the resolve of Prometheus. It is back there – in the world of men, in the world of treachery and indolence and coercion – that you are in grave danger. And I... I know not which world I belong to. I know not where my allegiances lie.

Is Anne-Marie my friend, my mentor, or is she something else? With her depth of intellect, she could not have accidentally misjudged you, could she?"

"No, Claudia, I am afraid not."

"What, then, does she seek?"

"Something that neither you nor I would with any sanity pursue." My throat swallowed forcefully the final syllable of 'pursue,' as I had overestimated the length at which I would be able to maintain a flowing train of words.

"Oh no, you were about to tell me what it is, were you not? And I had forgotten how incapacitated you are presently! Rest, Aurelius. I can delay the probing of my soul until a later time. We shall discover it together. But, presently, there is an ancient antidote to your condition, sleep. You will recover in time, but you need to be at your fullest energy to finalize your breakthrough. Just suspend your consciousness, until you are ready to employ it..."

I awoke toward the conclusion of the seventeenth hour, and no hint of weariness prevailed anywhere within my organism. Claudia still held me, as patiently as she had during the previous day and a half. It seemed to me that she was reluctant to release me.

"I am recovered," I spoke without any internal obstruction. She smiled at me. "I appreciate your attendance to my condition."

"You know that I am yours to call on, whenever you wish. Let me help you to your feet." Her hands supported my back in my ascent. "The Ministry has not been informed of my whereabouts since I had given them notice of my arrival. Do you know where I placed my transmitter?"

"No."

"Of course you do not, silly. You did not even ask where I have concealed it!"

"What would its purpose be to you now?"

"I can employ it at my leisure, feigning the details, of course, so that this incident would never be divulged, but I can still maintain contact with headquarters and receive advice on the completion of my genuine mission. That is, unless I am somehow physically not present in its vicinity."

"Is that a threat, Claudia?"

"It is a plea, Aurelius. Wherever you are headed at present, I would like to accompany you, to never separate myself from your presence. You have much that I desire, but your everyday behavior, your focus, your methodology, that luster in your eyes, you can bestow upon me without second thoughts. It will violate neither your principles nor your physical integrity. Besides, I can be quite useful to you." Without warning I found my face a millimeter from the floor, with the palms of Claudia's hands supporting my stomach and chest. A slight ripple of pain spread through the circumference of my lower ankles as I realized that I had been tripped, kicked, and entangled several times over. "I could have conquered you, Aurelius, and forced you into whatever submission I saw fit. But I will only employ this power against your enemies. Anything else would be sacrilege." We stood up simultaneously, and my eyes were aligned with hers.

"So be it. We shall fly toward the ice sheet immediately to the north and establish there a pumping station linked to the water storage tanks within this base. We shall

squeeze that water deposit dry and obtain sufficient liquid to nourish a city. But that will be a mere secondary consequence. There will be a crawlspace of a tunnel leading us beyond the basin that will form as the water is depleted. At its farthest point, we will clear with care the obstruction I informed you of earlier. You will bring nothing with you except those tools necessary for our protection and the completion of the task. Afterward, we shall have ventured into a setting whose surroundings will doubtless inform us of novel circumstances in play upon this planet. We shall be the sole confidantes of its revelations. The MEC is not to learn of this until affairs on Magnetica – and at home – are once again in order.”

“I will do as you wish. I must put on a PRLS; await me at the rover hangar.”

My suit had already been adjusted to the present gravitational pull of Magnetica, although this was not a necessity within the confines of the base, which was equipped with its own planetary repellant system. Claudia headed to a “guest chamber” beside the airfield that she occupied, while I directed myself straight to the hangar, requesting of a passing-by Planar that he, for twelve of their new Standard Gold Units (SGUs), assist me in the outfitting of three rovers with care.

The Lady Brighton arrived at 1702 hours, and sat beside me in a rover reserved for passenger transportation. I had already programmed pavement depositors to lay a path, branching off the observation route that headed to the Plain. This roadway would be built at twice the speed of our approach and thus would grant us passage to the ice sheet without interruption. We rode in the rear of the train of vehicles, for safety’s sake. Should any obstacle have struck the self-driving rovers in front, we would possess the opportunity to react to it, evade it, or return to base and deliberate on another means of approach. Hence, every second did *not* count, and it was unnecessary to remain alert to our surroundings for the entirety of the trip. Claudia decided to engage me in conversation.

“There is an aspect of your convictions that has always perplexed me as a seeming paradox. How is it that you, a self-avowed individualist, who will permit naught but the rationality of his own mind to determine his commitments, require the sanction of the state and the state’s monogamous paradigm in order to even consider manifesting your love for a woman?” She was challenging a concept that I had always perceived to be a matter of common sense. I reached into my analytical capabilities in order to furnish an explicit philosophical justification. On this topic, I had never before been prompted to provide a defense of my views, but I realized then that it would be prudent to equip myself with it for future times.

“You presume that it is but the whim of the state that defines marriage, but, in reality, such a practice is an objective requirement of any ethical attraction toward a woman. Consider this: by the distinct nature of all individuals, it must be that only a single person of the opposite gender exists, whose dispositional, intellectual, and material endowments are best compatible with one’s own, and, self-evidently, it is with that person that one is fittest to enter a domestic partnership of mutual reinforcement. This is a commitment that, in order to reach to the fullest depth of the values that the other individual can offer, must remain exclusive and unshared. No other soul must venture into that precise dimension which is shared between a husband and wife. To marry two women would imply insufficient payment for each for their attentions; to share a wife with another would render one the victim of such scant rewards. Both cases

destruct the mutual compatibility of domestic partners. The state's necessity in the marriage endeavor is only to affirm the economic contract which marriage implies. A bond of this magnitude between two individuals permits for certain shared property and spending power, which must be defined by law to be enforceable in the case of dispute. Marriage is not a blurry free-for-all, but rather it is guided by objective principles and limitations that must be adhered to. The state's role is either to dissolve the contract if its obligations are blatantly violated, or to act as a mediator of marital disputes via its judicial system. Of course, Margaret and I have no reason to take recourse to its services, but it is there to provide an objective recourse for those who cannot find mutually amicable solutions. For me, however, loyalty to my promises and a marriage founded on mutual virtues and respect are paramount."

"Your wife must adore you for that mindset."

"Indeed. But even that is not the foremost of her characteristics. What I admire about her most is her willingness to diverge from my convictions if she does not view me as having proven them sufficiently. Then, when I do receive her advocacy, I know it to be genuine."

"Such as that article she wrote for the Rand-Voltaire Coalition? That, in itself, seemed a thorough justification for the Magnetican Expedition, despite the fact that she was likely as oblivious to it as the remainder of the population. Or do the secrets you share with her transcend even the sacred obligations of the job contract?"

"No. When I sign contracts of my own free will, no affinity can detach me from my part in them."

"Such definite, principled conduct! Do you *always* fathom your motives, Aurelius?" she inquired, evidently intrigued, as by a novelty.

"Without exception."

"Then perhaps you can assist me in a question that I have been discussing, at times arguing, with Anne-Marie for years. I am always fascinated by her sweeping scientific generalizations concerning the nature of the universe and the behaviors of vast networks of entities. Yet, when I express my curiosity to the utmost, she always replies with a caveat, 'Remember, the most significant dynamics of the universe are not ones that the human mind can grasp. There is an essence, a feeling, an intrinsic beauty beyond the reach of limited consciousness.' But, given that this *something* exists, would not claiming it to be ineffable, mystical, and inexplicable be a contradiction in terms?"

"It would be. Yes."

"Then, can that statement ever be valid, about anything? Especially when even something as profound and as veiled by impulses and impressions as love can be grasped abstractly, defined, and separated into its fundamental components?"

"No, Claudia." I spoke, my eyes intensely focused on her to prepare her for what I was about to communicate. "You have reached a pivotal insight. There is nothing in this universe that is closed to the probing mind of man. Listen to me, and listen carefully: whenever you should hear that a certain course of action should be followed or a certain object admired and protected for no logical cause – but rather for some intrinsic quality imperceptible both to the senses and to abstract reason – you should be certain that this quality does not in actuality exist, that it has been fabricated in order for its proponents to exercise an action which no logic can uphold. And such action will always be savage, primordial, and in violation of the inalienable and perfectly explicable

liberties of man. Those who would commit it believe that they have constructed around their criminal deed an impenetrable fortress of rationalizations, but the mortar holding its walls is feeble; it is merely subjectivism posturing as the absolute. With that knowledge, you can elementarily destruct it with a grapeshot of rationality.”

“But... you... cannot be calling Anne-Marie... a criminal!”

“She is. Else why would she have commissioned this expedition’s termination and my death?”

“Perhaps it is just a false assumption that she holds...” Claudia spoke rapidly, as if placed on the defensive by my remarks. Indeed, one of her fundamental allegiances had been challenged at its root.

“Maybe you should inquire of Dr. Nachtreiter what other assumptions this woman has held throughout her career.”

“Dr. Nachtreiter! But what does he have to do with... There is more to Dr. Nachtreiter than I had thought when I arrested him – is that what you are implying?” She inquired in a blend of caution mixed with regret.

“You... arrested him?”

“As the discoverer of Magnetica, he is wanted by the Ministry’s court-martial. I had sent him to Legardium in a scout pod, without even speaking ten words to him!”

“What are the charges arrayed against him?” I inquired, my pace of expression quickening as well to convey the urgency of my desire for information.

“There are but two, which is unusual: capital treason and species genocide. I do not comprehend directly how the second charge relates to this expedition, but, as Anne-Marie always tells me, there are many matters that I do not yet comprehend.”

“Then she still seeks to satisfy an age-old grudge against Dr. Nachtreiter...” I narrated to her the account of the doctor’s past expeditions with the Lady Anne-Marie, and of their ultimate confrontation during the finalization of her lapse into mysticism.

“But could she not have been right? I mean, who knows what ecosystems could have been forever mutilated with the destruction of those delicate organisms?” Claudia inquired rather feebly, her mind still attempting to latch onto some manner of justification for her mentor’s activities.

“You must now learn a crucial concept that should seem commonsense in an era as advanced as ours. In a time when man no longer exists in a hunter/gatherer society, when he has domesticated, then cloned, then cross-engineered animals for his food and leisure, when he has domesticated, then cloned, then genetically enhanced plants for his nourishment and commerce, does he any longer need the wilderness to yield him any organic resources, in the haphazard manner that it generates them?”

“Surely, you are not stating that man is entirely self-sufficient and free of the relationships of the ecosystem!”

“I am stating precisely that, and more. Man, with his capacity for independent thought, is the sole entity capable of purposefully altering his surroundings and rearranging the elements of nature for his own benefit. He can perform adjustments to organic resources as I have mentioned. Those fall entirely out of the deterministic province of the ecosystem and into the volitional province of his rationality. He can effectively draw out of the wilderness and into the foundations of his civilization all those creatures which he deems enhancing to his survival, and leave in the primordial jungles all those which he does not. Fundamentally speaking, that second category of creatures

holds no value to him – since intrinsic value, value outside of that gained by man, does not exist, as we have already discussed. He is still required to exploit the wilderness for its inorganic resources – or those, such as fossil fuels, that have been inanimate for millions of years. Yet no longer must he undertake the delicate effort of *not disturbing the ecosystems in the process*. After he has drawn to his side all that is of assistance to him, what remains is either the irrelevant, or the outright harmful. Moreover, I dare say that any entity that stands in the way of his survival objectives can therefore be considered a detriment to his condition, which the courageous man will remove. And, indeed, theory demonstrates itself in practice. With the clearing of the wilderness to deploy a mine, or a city, or a factory, colonies of disease-ridden pests are annihilated, the swampy dampness is purged from the air along with the stench of rotting flesh. Room is created for farms, parks, gardens, laboratories, and zoos to thrive, hosting animals which are conducive to man's interests and perpetuating their species in a manner that the ecosystem, in its haphazard turbulence, could never have achieved. Moreover, man is not entwined in the web of give-and-take which pervades the ecosystem. He is the master of the entire structure that he develops, exploiting the lower-order creatures *while they do not exploit him*, even if they benefit from his presence. In the ecosystem, a maggot can prey on the decomposing corpse of a lion, even though that same lion had once terrorized the third- or fourth-level consumers of the maggot. In civilization, most unconfined insects have at last been eradicated as nuisances and carriers of infection. Had men even been buried in the soil as was the custom of old, before the days of cryonics, no worms would exist there to devour their remains. No animal profits from the death of man under man's conditions. Hence, the relationship is one-way. Not only can human beings attain absolute self-sufficiency from the tumult of ecological systems, but they can ascend to absolute mastery as well."

"What if I reply that you hold too much faith in technology and its ability to transform the essential dynamics of the universe that have continuously evolved for billions of years?"

"Then I will answer that I hold absolutely no *faith* in technology at all. I *know* technology via my *rational faculty* to endow man with the autonomy that I have described. I know it to be the next evolutionary step within man's progression. No longer must he depend upon the accidental and unreliable mechanisms of chance genetic mutation to develop traits and conditions desirable to him, and no longer must he endure the unendurable – the passage of hundreds of generations prior to even a minute alteration within his species. It is a cruel fate to which nature, in her so-called pristine state, consigns the individual, for the entire range of his capacities and opportunities is delimited at birth in the natural world, and no will of his, outside of technological study, can amplify his scant arsenal. Man has expanded his sight and his hearing tens of millions of times in both directions, he has broadened the scope of his habitation and eradicated those hygienic flaws that nature had somehow never managed to purge from his organism. No longer must his teeth rot with the consumption of food, and no longer is a mere part of his nourishment converted into bodily energy. No longer must he rely on the shortcomings of natural memory and on the conventional passage of time to carry out his activities. No longer must he suspend his consciousness for half his life so that he may function during the other half. And no longer must he, in order to procreate, burden his wife with nine months of carrying the

offspring within herself. Could nature, if left to her own devices, ever have removed these barriers to man's ascent? Or would man have fallen prey to a capricious cataclysm in the manner of the countless of species of marine life, reptilians, and mammals before him?"

"I..." Claudia pronounced waveringly.

"Yes?"

"I... know not what to think. What you have just stated is so... sensible, so rational that I cannot discern a flaw in the entire theory. But it also... I do not know how to state this without lapsing into the Fallacy of the Bandwagon."

"Likely, that is because your statement possesses no means of avoiding it. But, go ahead, unleash it upon me anyway. I promised to endeavor to understand you, and I am hence willing to listen."

She inhaled heavily prior to initiating a full explanation. "It is merely that your analyses run to the contrary of every other idea I have ever encountered on that matter in a serious, scientific context. Sure, I would oft hear construction workers, mechanics, philosophy professors, and even my subordinate policemen speak something to the effect that 'Man can do anything if he tries and thinks of a method.' But no *specialist* in the field of ecology with whom I have ever engaged in discourse had endorsed that idea. They all either dismissed it as popular well-wishing or expressed overt antagonism toward it. How could hundreds of experts be wrong?"

"How could one Aurelius Meltridge be wrong and hundreds of experts be right?" I answered the fallacy jokingly.

"I feel like kissing you and knocking out your jaw at the same time," Claudia replied matter-of-factly. "But since, by terms of our *agreement*, I can do neither, I will say but this: you have dauntlessly selected to stand against the entirety of modern science."

"I do not stand against modern science; I stand against the handful of crackpots who have usurped its name for themselves."

"But how can you dismiss them out of hand?!" She stared at me with scrutiny and slight indignation, like an exceptional schoolgirl reacting to a classmate's mistaken answer. "How can you state that they care neither for science nor for truth, simply because you note critical flaws in their interpretation? And, especially, how can you apply the crackpot brand to Anne-Marie? Her days of exploration and study have yielded results and outcomes so remarkable that they cannot bypass even the layman's attention. Everyone has heard of her from the schoolbooks, and residents of whole planets can boast that their home had been rendered accessible to them by Anne-Marie Legard."

"Everyone has good reason to hear of her period of genuine accomplishment, which ended twenty-one years ago. She did, from what I can infer, harbor a devotion to science and truth then, but it has since been warped, tainted, and inverted to furnish a cultist adherence to mysticism and irrationalism. Why, otherwise, would a colonizer of planets suddenly wish to collapse the borders of the Intergalactic Protectorate? Why would a classifier of organisms suddenly come to consider it 'intended species genocide' to even venture near an alien entity? Why would one of the most efficient thinkers of today suddenly proclaim that thought is valid only in a limited context?"

“It takes a wise woman to know her limitations... and those of her kind.” Claudia began to repeat the old sophist paradox on wisdom.

“And it takes a wiser man to discover that there exist limitations only to the physical actions he can perform under given circumstances, but there exist none where the alteration of those circumstances is concerned. And certainly, none can plague his mind when the issue of his moral values and survival objectives is the center of his attention. With technology, man’s limitations are pushed outward, as an ever-increasing portion of existence becomes subject to his dominance.”

“You defend your contentions well, Aurelius, and...” Claudia shifted to a wavering tone, “I wish I could embrace your immaculate reasoning. From the viewpoint of a casual historical observer of a philosophical inclination, I would have conceded the verity of your arguments without further qualms. But I have known a different Anne-Marie than your words describe. I have known a generous, down-to-earth woman, who would oft stimulate my intellect without imposing too demanding or intolerant a pressure upon me. Therefore, I cannot see how your proof would bear semblance to reality.”

“Ah, but she treated you thus because you were useful to her design! You must not let the means justify the end!” The rover train halted at the terminus of the path, and we disembarked a meter from the ice sheet itself, now frozen over with formidable glacial formations, as if a breach had never existed. Building-assistance droids had already been positioned at key locations around the sheet to initiate construction of the pumping station at my command. Underneath the path whence we had just departed, a cylindrical tunnel had already been drilled from the base to its location, and droids were meticulously pouring liquid rubber onto its sides and subsequently applying streams of frigid liquid nitrogen to it in order to assist it in solidifying. Within minutes, a functional pipeline of water would be at my disposal. In the meantime, I unfolded a hard copy of the future station’s blueprint and programmed the droids at a distance via my portable command screens. Claudia’s attention immediately shifted to comparing the blueprint with the station that emerged before her eyes.

“This is astounding!” she exclaimed. “If this technology were available to my police force, crime in Legardium would be virtually annihilated. Imagine what barriers to offenders can be established! The infrastructure would exist for a near-instant police response to any crime in progress.”

“And imagine the process’s application to commercial buildings and private residences, now that direct oversight and individual programming of the droids is no longer a necessity. A man could wish himself a lavish mansion, and, in the time that is expended for him to reach its location, he would possess it – with minimal financial expenditure. Magnetica is to be the testing ground for this novel technique of expansion, by which any population, no matter how large, would be capable of forming full-fledged communities for itself in under twenty-four hours,” I replied, sensing her interest and seeking to further foster within her an attachment to the endeavors of the Magnetican Expedition. I was determined to transform her into an ally by appealing to those aspects of rationality already firmly ingrained in her in order to prompt the nourishment and growth of the others.

A massive drilling machine arrived at the scene of construction to form a hole at the side of the ice sheet, into which the receiving end of the pumping apparatus was plunged. The steam emitted by the pumping station swiftly liquidated the entirety of the

glacial covering and retained only water of a moderate temperature, whose extraction would be a mere matter of time.

“Would you enjoy a confession from me that will remove the veneer of any supposed hostility on my part toward your endeavor?” Claudia asked.

“I would be most pleased by it.”

“You have rekindled in me a love for technology and a grasp of the entirety of the fundamental implications of science that I thought to have lost during the later years of my education. Too frequently did I consider the purpose of scientific study to be the attainment of a mere *understanding* of the universe, an understanding for understanding’s sake. Yet I have realized presently that it is futile to separate theory from practice. It is not he who monopolizes knowledge that wields the genuine power, but he who *applies* it. By witnessing your machinery at work, I comprehend now that any barrier to man’s aspiration can be lifted with sufficient ingenuity and exertion. *That* is the purpose of knowledge – to furnish objective gains for man. Thus are science and technology inextricably bound, as two components of the same pursuit, which can either be fulfilled to entirety or abdicated to a realm of inaction and apathy.” The water level receded before our eyes.

“I am much relieved that you have grasped this truth. Now, Claudia, from your own observations, please inform me whether your mentor has embraced technology or departed entirely from the scientific realm.” As the opening into the tunnel began to become faintly visible, Claudia’s neck tensed, and she attempted to swallow.

“Aurelius, you are treading on thin ice here,” she stated, ironically for the situation. “It seems contradictory to me that such a prodigious woman as Anne-Marie would have rejected reason and science in its entirety. How could she have, especially given her immense success in the field? What would have prompted her to do so? There are components of this issue that I simply cannot decipher. But you are prompting me to challenge something deep-rooted and fundamental – an issue that may yield much confusion for me, and even struggle and pain.”

“How can a brilliant woman fall prey to the basest of imaginable doctrines? That is the essence of your inquiry. You cannot fathom the coexistence of the two characteristics within a single individual, because you have not thoroughly willed the second into yourself, which is a compliment to your integrity. Your mind thinks to the effect of, ‘Technology is a tool that I can apply for my objectives. I possess the training, skills, and intellect to operate, interpret, and design it. Hence, why should I not?’ Such is the commonsense and healthy approach to the matter.”

“Is there possibly a deluded and diseased approach?”

“Yes. And at its root lies the same pernicious defect that permits the Lady Anne-Marie’s adoration of the tainted wilderness.” The water deposit had been pumped dry. “We must now enter. Magnus’s inventions are located within this tunnel network. I would like to retrieve them before demolishing the obstruction.” I regretted not possessing the time to complete the communication of my insight to her, but the urgency of the matter ahead required an immediate attendance to it. “Shall we split tasks?”

Claudia would attend to the salvaging operation, while I would arrange the explosives in preparation for entering the inner reaches of the tunnel network. Within seconds, we were at the bottom of the now-dry basin, where I realized that my prior means of propulsion – swimming through ice-cold water – were no longer available to

me. A lengthy crawl was unsuitable for my preferences. Hence, I adjusted the gravity upon my PRLS to that delicate level which would enable me to glide through the tunnels so long as my elevation remained constant. Any significant rise or drop, and I would be – temporarily at least – plastered to one of the tunnel’s smooth edges. I carried a massive load of *cire* within my hands, obstructing my natural vision. However, the navigational system on my command screen presented me with a flawless portrayal of my surroundings, along with artificial diagrams of the network thus far explored, in order to assist in my orientation. The *Lady Brighton* followed immediately behind me, and posed to me, upon entering the central gallery of the network, a question similar to the one which had perplexed me: “Who could have designed this place?”

“I am confident that it is of the same origin as the spheres that had infested the perceptual faculties of the Planars. Both structures are artificial and must have required voluminous knowledge of engineering. I stand by my theory that they are man-made, which renders the situation more confounding, if anything. How could any human presence prior to Dr. Nachtreiter have reached the remote surface of *Magnetica*?”

“The Trenton Expedition...” Claudia murmured faintly and with evident uncertainty.

“What was that?”

“We shall see. Do not mind it for now. It was a mere speculation.” Within the gallery, we branched off into our respective passages, as I followed the southwestward corridor for a stretch identical to that of the initial tunnel. The navigational system would map out my vicinity several meters ahead in every direction. Hence, I would not inadvertently stumble upon an obstacle or an irregularity that I could not forecast.

After some fifty meters of uninterrupted passageway, the navigational system’s screen ceased to project in the forward direction beyond a spiky obstruction that interposed itself between further mapping of the area. I deposited the *cire* nearest to it as I could, and activated a backward thruster adjunct to my PRLS. Within ten seconds, the corridor would be cleared without significant damage, as I had already configured the parameters of the explosion not to exceed three meters to each side of the barrier. After withdrawing some twelve meters the way I had come, my ears caught the reverberations of a contained blast, not crippling to the senses, but considerable nevertheless. Claudia called out to me from the gallery. Evidently, she had completed her task ahead of my expectations.

“Aurelius? Is everything well?”

“That remains to be seen.” I responded. “Follow me.” I waited for her to reach my position. “Are the inventions secured?”

“Yes, but in no functional state. I could not discern any power source for the appliances.”

“They are hydroelectric,” I explained as we glided forward. “They will, however, function splendidly atop a miniature artificial waterfall. I intend to place them in a museum as unique exemplars of a creative capacity seldom equaled even by our most scientific minds – considering that *Magnus* was unaided by *any* prior technological knowledge.”

“It rather perturbs me that, had I not been witness to your study of the orbs, I would have considered *Magnus* an aberration from the natural condition of the aliens; I would have believed, as seemed proper at the time, that the ‘normal’ Planar is blind.

Only through intensive study, deliberation, and logical questioning could I determine otherwise.”

“What would you define as ‘normal,’ Claudia?”

“I knew that you would ask. I suppose, ‘normal’ refers to the conditions that should exist.”

“*Should* any creature ever be crippled and detached from operating in this reality? *Should* the lowest common denominator of a conceptual faculty be maintained simply because it is statistically prevalent?”

“And to think that two days ago I would have replied that there is no standard by which we can determine what is detached from reality and what is not! I suppose, under that assumption, what is most commonly encountered would be what is normal, and an absence of standards serves as the sanction for a majority, no matter how backward, to trample on the image, liberties, and aspirations of minorities.”

“Now you comprehend the reason why misuse of that term resulted in the most fanatical persecutions of humankind’s titanic prodigies throughout history. It is a confusion of objective fact with subjective perception that is the culprit for nearly every logical fallacy and its dire consequences. But, why terminate the insight with a revelation that it is not *normal* for the Planar species to be deprived of sight? Was it *normal* for the Aztec savages to spill the blood of thousands upon their altars simply because their priests had conferred sanction upon it? Was it *normal* for women in Medieval China to mutilate their feet into stubby little protuberances by years of binding, simply because miscreant Confucian estheticians had dubbed it the proper rite? Was it *normal* for a college student during the hippie cultural cataclysms to have ingested narcotics in the manner of the majority of his peers? The answer being self-evident, these situations’ underlying theme is now revealed: delusion and perversity *can* be collective, and most delusion and perversity *are*.” We reached the place which the cave-in had previously occupied. Presently, there were but a dented and amorphous ceiling, chipped-away sides, and a floor with several massive cracks extending across it, terminating not more than two meters from the explosion’s epicenter.

“Something worries me about the stability of this corridor,” Claudia uttered in transition to a concern more physically urgent than our prior discussion. “The new ceiling, atop the space where the barrier had been, is slightly higher than the old, and it does not seem to be a solid, monolithic formation. Look,” she led my hand with hers toward what seemed to be slight crevices within the rock. “I think these are entirely disjoint slabs of stone which are jammed together, but barely. If we are fortunate, we can remove ourselves in time before a second collapse either buries us underneath its rubble or locks us on the other side of the passageway.

“There are other remedies, Claudia. I am not about to turn back on the brink of discovery. I think my pockets contain several portabricks.” I extracted several compact black cubes from my suit and unfolded them to their full expanse. I began to stack them atop each other, two bricks per level, in order to form a pillar that would hold the ceiling in place and arrest a major cave-in.

“Without mortar, Aurelius?” Claudia inquired with uncertainty.

“These bricks possess interlocking teeth on the top and bottom. They can hold as they are.” I jammed the topmost bricks into the ceiling until the space between the pillar and the rocks was not even blade-thin. “We may now proceed.”

“As you wish. Perhaps this is what frustrates Anne-Marie,” she pronounced in a gentle undertone, “men who believe themselves invincible when armed with rudimentary science and embark upon risks unthinkable to the average man.”

“Risks that are calculated and undertaken with immense precaution and consideration for individual security.”

“Maybe so.”

The passageway continued straight onward, though with slightly altering surroundings. This area, apparently, had never been flooded with water to begin with, and the sides of the tunnel were consequently uneven and, at places, jagged. The air became simultaneously dryer and warmer. And it seemed, if for a moment only, that illumination had increased considerably, in a brief burst that emanated from some unknown origin directly ahead of us and became dispersed into indiscernible little remnants by the roughness of the walls.

“That was peculiar,” mentioned Claudia. “By all indications, we should be within the very heart of Mount Sentry by now. How could sunlight ever have reached us?”

“Perhaps this is not sunlight, but electricity. This suggests that we are nearing our objective.”

Six meters ahead, still in the darkness relative to my position, the navigational system discerned a dramatic widening of the tunnel, as if into a gallery similar to the one which I previously thought to have served as the center of the network. “Prepare yourself for novel sights,” I whispered to Claudia. Almost immediately afterward, my teeth grinded against one another as gravity dragged my PRLS along the floor of the tunnel, into the enigmatic opening. Three seconds of my time were required to enhance the upward force and once again float at a respectable distance from the floor of the new gallery.

“Aurelius, where are you?” Claudia pronounced worriedly. Darkness engulfed my vision, and I could scarcely see beyond the tip of my finger.

“I am here, and stationary!” I replied. “Try to locate me by the direction from which my voice seems to emanate!” My hand groped for the button on my command monitor that would activate an illuminator built into one of the PRLS’s sleeves. Before I could reach it, Claudia’s outline approached me.

“Wait, do not turn it on yet.” Her hands encircled my neck. “Please let me hold you for a minute at least. I sense... that this is the last moment I will ever be privileged thus.” She spoke into my shoulder, as she had back in the villa, when I was beginning to recover from the effects of hydrogen cyanide.

“Are you anxious?”

“I am suspicious if anything,” she replied softly. “I fear that the peace we have experienced ever since your awakening may be intruded upon... almost within moments. I feel as if we are on the threshold of that world back home, of intrigue, of politics and machination. Even the air here smells... of bodies, either living, dead, or somewhere in between. It is nothing like the refreshingly chilly frontier breeze that we had shared between us. Forgive me if I sound obscure...” Her head pressed against me as I stood, motionless and calm. My mouth would have been agape, however, had her approach been any less subtle and any less supported by her words.

“No, I also sense it to possess that peculiar scent of organically recycled particles, as if we have entered a place of habitation.” I replied with what equanimity I could muster. I would not disappoint Margaret.

“I know that your principles prohibit you from embracing me in return. Your wife would admire your stoic devotion to her. Likely, her love for you is nothing I can equal, but what harm does it do her if I manifest mine at a time when she cannot enjoy you?”

“But you understand that loyalty of that nature extends even out of her sight.”

“So say you.” She laughed, it seemed, with genuine satisfaction, not the girlish giggle that accompanies superficial attraction. “You need not reciprocate to fulfill that, which I desire of you. Your presence alone is enough. I must but be conscious that men such as you exist, and will continue to grace this universe with their labors. Let me just glance at you for a second.” Her eyes seemed to assume that illuminating quality that I had before witnessed on the Colossus. I could only enjoy glancing into them.

“You look heroic,” I complimented her. She smiled back in adoration, knowing that this was the highest and most intimate praise I could present in my position.

“You have already given to me more than the conventional husband will ever bestow upon his spouse, no matter how sincere his devotion to her. You have presented to me the fruits of your mind, and a spirit that I long thought to be extinguished in myself. I only regret that what wonders I could gather from you during the past two days could not be magnified and multiplied over a lifetime...”

Something rattled in the distance. I turned my head outward. “It seems that we have company.” Claudia performed me the service of locating the button that activated the illuminator and immediately lit into unobstructed visibility a distance of ten meters in every direction.

“We can confront it, whatever it is,” she whispered as her hands released me and rested on the hilt of her raygun. “Our approach need not be covert.”

I examined my surroundings and found myself levitating in the center of a gallery with a slightly asymmetrical, coarsely textured, vaulted ceiling. Below me was a narrow stretch of uneven walkway adorned only with chunky gravel. The gallery terminated abruptly near the opening into the tunnel whence we had come; there was none of that harmonious, sloping transition I had observed earlier in the network. Near the tunnel exit, the wall was particularly ridged and dented with marks that ventured only slightly into its surface, but nevertheless went in substantially in comparison to their minute diameter. This was, within my most acute suppositions, the trace of a crude pickaxe, furnished from obsidian or perhaps stone itself. Could this have been evidence of the same culture that had wielded the sophistication necessary to imbue the organic-seeming infestation orbs with stuperia? The levels of advancement manifested by the two traces of human influence were too disparate to suggest that. As further information gained my awareness, I was but confounded further. I did not yet possess the entirety of what data I required to resolve the matter of the Planars and the force traditionally extinguishing their aspirations.

The rattling seemed to fade into the background, its agent entity oblivious to our manifest source of light or too distant to consider it to be but a speck emanating from the remote reaches of the gallery – that is, if it were sentient in the first place.

“Let us proceed,” I whispered to Claudia.

"I will glide in front. Should any danger come to you, it will occur there," she responded, adjusting herself into a peculiar half-crouching position while speeding forward. Her velocity was not the swiftest available to her, but I realized that she was conserving the majority of her energy for a rapid dodge, lunge, or acceleration in anticipation of a hostile encounter. I assumed no special pose and proceeded leisurely, in my corporeal movements at least. My mind was attuned to any further peculiarities which would occur to it within the depths of Mount Sentry, for I knew that I had witnessed but a prelude to what was to come.

The haphazardness of the walls' texture seemed interminable, and the vertices of every particular cross-section of the ceiling seemed to arrange themselves in what roughly fitted a sine curve. My ongoing expectation to see more of the same dulled the acuteness of the focus of my vision, until a spot of scarlet disrupted it. I was first startled by the contrast, but, upon a second glance, I realized that I had not been mistaken. A brittle-textured coating of red decked the gallery toward the lower end of the wall.

"Dried blood," Claudia uttered suddenly, "relatively old, perhaps weeks, and not the cause of chance bleeding, either. This stain's area is too large for that."

Nothing deathly sharp was present anywhere in the vicinity, and even tripping on the far-from-level gravel could not have resulted in an "accident" of this manner. I shuddered with revulsion as I realized that I had been witness to the aftermath of an act of deliberate and brutal physical coercion inflicted by one human being against another.

"I am thoroughly disgusted," I spoke as my eyes pulsated to-and-fro in their sockets in hopes that motion would revive a sense of imperturbable alertness within them.

"You should be horrified, Aurelius," Claudia replied in the grave tone of one commenting on a phenomenon a step beyond her range of comfort. "Certainly, I was trained to analyze and respond to such atrocities, but all that was contained in virtual reality, training clips, simulations – all relics from a past when thugs and bandits roamed the streets of poorer city districts and day-to-day crime exceeded mere petty theft in degree. What I am accustomed to responding to with cold efficiency is not what I observe here; what I am conditioned to analyze with unwavering scrutiny is but an abstract image from a hypothetical scenario. Even police clashes with real murderers often involve vaporizing the criminals into thin air, without shedding blood or witnessing it shed. I know not within whose veins this blood once pulsated, but sight of it can plunge me into a grievous sorrow... How can anyone, anyone capable of thought, deserve this?"

"No peaceful human being is abominable to the extent that his existence must be wrung from him by anyone's whim or anyone's compulsion. That precept is so commonsense to the mentality of civilized man that an automatic impulse of disgust and loathing has been developed within the gentler peoples of modernity. Consider that within him who commits this... perversity, such a reaction is absent. He is on par with the primordial ape ancestors of man, whose short-lived existences predated rational consciousness. And as the primordial man's sole obsession is to proliferate his own genome, at whatever expense, he will eliminate others, especially the most competent and proficient, without reservation – as his means toward assuming dominance are unrestrained. He needs but eliminate any potential betters or plunge them below his level, instead of rising to theirs. It is his type that is lauded in apotheosis as the 'noble

savage' by the enemies of progress in our day, and it is against his type – that of the assailant – that the only legitimate employment of force must be directed.”

“But do you truly consider such deplorable behavior to be characteristic of man in the purely natural condition, rather than just the defect of a few? Surely, it cannot be that, when hurled into primeval circumstances, you or I would be would become as grotesquely odious. I refuse to believe it.” She, who had tried to envelop me in a toxic cloud two days ago, now halted in mid-air and stared at me with the broadened pupils of an innocuous schoolgirl.

“No, morality is not extinguished in people plunged into such a setting, but within it – within the dampness of the cave or the stench of decomposition in the jungle – there exists no means by which the producers can overcome the expropriators. Creativity is verboten, so is technological progress, by definition, in that primeval milieu. There the innovator is evanescent; he cannot employ his mind, and he has not the brutality to impose his will upon others. He vanishes into a pile of fissured bone which inter- and intra-tribal combat caused to amass. No mechanism exists for men to prosper side by side and to each others' benefit. They are masters of no talents or trades that would elevate customers' conditions – hence they can expect no payment for productive labor. Their sole remedy to the maximum of possible survival pressures is to extort and exterminate. The ones who refuse to commit such criminal deeds must become either victims or refugees, in either instance devoid of the leisure to invent and fortify their defenses against primitive barbarism. Morality may not be relinquished, but its advocates are annihilated.”

The rattling intensified once more. This time, it was not a mere quality of the background which rendered alertness a necessity. It pounded at my ears, and, although I could mechanically moderate the vibration of my eardrums, I decided – for orientation purposes – to allow it to continue. I motioned for Claudia to stop at a sharp curve in the tunnel. “It cannot be beyond thirty meters from us,” I whispered. “Be on your guard.”

“Perhaps I can send a scouter probe. It can update your navigational system beyond the illuminator's range,” she suggested, while releasing a thumb-sized capsule which had been embedded in one of her promethium leggings. “Stay close to the wall.” She did not hesitate to press me against it.

“Uploading the data into my navigational system will take time. For the moment, describe what you are receiving at present,” I instructed her.

“The gallery continues, with roughly the same dimensions. The scouter is speeding toward the source of the noise, which seems to be fading once more. A crude metal outline is beginning to form, parts of which seem to be jutting out every which way. It is a notably unrefined construction, but it seems to be moving toward the floor with a screech that accounts for part of what we have been hearing. Now, there seems to be a frame to that outline of intertwined metal bars. There also seems to be an opening out of which it emerges and into which it is raised. By all expectations, this must be a gate of some sort. Why would it be closing?”

“Can the scouter penetrate beyond it to discover the reason?”

“Alas, the bars are of extreme proximity to each other. There is no possible means for it to squeeze through. I shall recall it.” She teleported the scouter probe to its resting place.

“I think it should be safe to explore further.” I glided to the center of the gallery.

“With a caveat. That the gate has been closing implies that some entity must have been entering it. Unless, that is, its owners do not believe in conserving their machinery. We must approach stealthily, lest we be detected.”

She reassumed her position at the front and levitated through the curve. “There is an abnormality in the wall, near the foundations of the gate,” she reported. “Now, quietly...” She sharply decreased her altitude, and I trailed her. I followed her lead into the shadows, toward the juncture between the floor and the left wall of the gallery. The gate passed my eyes as a blur, while, barely within my notice, I found myself darting through a shaft almost as narrow as the dimensions of my organism. Suddenly, Claudia dropped onto her stomach and whispered to me, “Down! We glide too quickly. In all likelihood, there is an obstacle ahead.” The range of the illuminator exceeded that of our sight. The current shaft seemed to be terminating a mere three meters ahead, leading either to a right-angled turn or a dead end.

We had experienced the former, as Claudia prepared to inch toward it. The illuminator’s rays spread to reaches about which I could but surmise. It was our sole source of light in a damp, constricted, subterranean shaft, yet I regretted being unable to moderate its intensity. If we were nearing a settlement of this subterranean human civilization, detection would be imminent.

“Wait!” A young girl’s voice sounded from beyond just as that thought passed through my mind. “I can open it for you!”

“Stay here,” Claudia commanded me, “for your safety. I shall call for you when I verify that all is well.”

“Keep in contact, though. I shall activate my transmitter.” Something plummeted to the ground with a thud.

“I can see an opening, with light shining through, light that is independent of the illuminator,” she reported to me as she herself disappeared beyond my line of sight. “There seems to be a chamber, bordered by large, irregular slabs of volcanic rock. The descent into it will not cause me to plunge considerably. Perhaps I can even manage it without levitating. Well, it deserves an attempt.” She paused. “I am now within. There is a massive collection of *nachtreiterus* bulbs aflame in the center of the room. It seems that they provide an excellent substitute for firewood. A box-shaped stone pallet is located toward the left. A girl sits upon it, no older than thirteen, and immensely frail. I can see her skeletal frame protruding through her flesh. And, poor thing, she has mere dirty, amorphous rags on!”

“Give her my cape,” I tossed the topmost of my numerous layers of clothing in the supposed direction of the opening. In the meantime, I bore witness to a most unsettling dialogue.

“How old are you, old woman?” the question from the girl came bluntly and without reservation to my ears from the transmitter.

“Twenty-two,” Claudia replied, dismayed.

“My, you’re ancient! How could you live so long? How many little ones have you borne?” The fickle, occasionally collapsing voice of the girl continued to inquire rather innocuously.

“Why, none. And, of course, even if I had, it would not have been in *that* way. I am not even married!”

“Married? What’s that? And what are you putting on me?”

“Something to keep you warm,” Claudia replied, in a soft-spoken, fluent, melodiously flexible youthful voice that I had until then taken for granted. So common is it among us Protectorate citizens. Presently, I perceived it as years, perhaps decades, younger than the girl’s.

I was stunned to hear plain English spoken within the innermost reaches of Magnetica – a place which would, by all common sense, have been disjoint from all human influence, especially that of my own language and culture. How did man settle on Magnetica? And what caused his civilization to reach a level sufficient to intoxicate an entire alien species while insufficient to provide clothing for a little girl?

“Aurelius, I think you can enter now. No danger should come from her,” Claudia called for me. “Now, girl, please tell me your name.”

“Di. My mother loved me so much as to give me two whole letters,” the girl spoke proudly.

“And not enough to furnish you a dress for this cold?” I inquired in vexation.

“My mother is dead. Has been for five years,” she replied, pouting. “You’re very lucky to be where you are, very old man. Perhaps you were particularly healthy as a little one, so they decided to keep you. Don’t assume that everyone is as strong as you,” she spoke in a tone of reproach. “Twenty’s a very decent age to end one’s life. I wish I had seven more years, but it’s not likely. I mean, all the girls I played with in the Communal Upbringing Complex as a little one are already gone. They just took R away three days ago.”

“Took away?” Claudia asked for clarification.

“Guess she was overworked. Couldn’t bear any more.”

“Any more what?”

“Little ones, of course! If you are too tired or too weak, and the eugenicists find out, there’s no more need of you. Then they take you out, and all anyone knows is that you never return.” She related this as if it were a fact of everyday life. “You’re not from here, are you?”

“No.”

“Are you from the Common Classes? And how does a woman end up there?”

“Common Classes? I do not understand,” I stated in absolute befuddlement.

“The Roomless Ones from above. But only little boys are sent there. All the girls either stay here to breed with a few of the best boys, or are taken away at birth if they’re too weak.”

“That is abominable!” I could not restrain an outburst. “They have turned you into reproductive slaves, confined to the most primitive of living conditions, barred from mobility and any contact with your general society, from any freedom of occupation or association! And they dispose of you as one would of a match once it has lit its fire!”

“You are so *htgukrtk!*” At the sound of that word emerging from human lips, I recoiled. This was the Planar tongue, embedded within the speech of a denizen of this underground culture. Given that there were no traces of human existence ‘above,’ and Di insisted on the presence of a branch of her civilization within the upper reaches of Magnetica, I was left to assume the preposterous; a genetic link between her people and the Planars! How could that be, in blatant violation of all principles of species reproduction that I have ever employed as the foundation of the biological studies?

“Do not be so radical with her,” Claudia whispered to me while the girl’s attention was diverted toward fueling the burning heap. “She is of now our sole link to her culture, and she does not seem physically hostile. If we find favor with her, we shall advance by leaps to the solution to this mystery that you seek. Let us offer her something that we are able to grant.” She began to address the girl. “Di, how would you like to live not twenty, but two hundred years, and to have that number be but the bare minimum of the years you can accumulate?”

“*Two hundred years!* You must be mad!” Di replied incredulously.

“I know of a place where it is quite possible. Aurelius and I originate from there, and we are in fact extremely young by the standards of almost every one of our countrymen. Perhaps it is in part due to our impeccable hygiene. For one, we do not brook dust and mud stains on our cheeks, nor hair that is flung out every which way. Here.” She extended a mirror to the girl.

“What is this? I can see myself!”

“You are still not properly employing it. A long time ago, perhaps three hundred years, the people of my planet, Earth, were compelled by lack of other means to use an array of cumbersome instruments to straighten their hair, and the procedure was immensely time-consuming, especially for women, whose tastes for hairstyles extended to a far more complex realm than that of their male brethren. This is a device that no modern woman can rightly live in dignity without. It reads your mind and imparts upon you whatever hairstyle you might imagine. Ah, but do all your associates resemble you in appearance?”

“No, compared to me, they are all slobs,” Di replied proudly. I could not but speculate as to how her associates looked. “Am I doing anything wrong?”

“You are not imagining yourself in any different a form than you currently exhibit. Likely, you have not the experience with any genuinely orderly arrangement of hair to envision one.” Claudia shook her head in pity. “My own is rather simple, but you would do well to replicate it,” she referred to her standard hairdo of women in the armed and police forces – shoulder-length and tied from the neck down with a succession of metal clasps to prevent it from spreading out into an obstruction to coordination and maneuverability. It was compact to an extreme, with the hair closely following the outline of the head – in near-diametric opposition to Di’s lack of hairstyle, which rendered the contours of her entire face and neck nearly indeterminable.

The telepathic mirror functions on the basis of a discovery in 2465 by Hubert Welding – one of the first major neurologists at the end of the New Dark Ages – of the precise means by which signals of the human volition are coordinated with movements of parts of the organism. The mirror enabled the application of this coordination process to the involuntary mechanisms of the human body, including those which regulate the growth and arrangement of hair. An impulse from the brain, properly harnessed, can command the living portions of the hair to sway in a particular direction, grow only to a certain point, or atrophy altogether in parts where growth is not desirable. This, of course, is but the mildest of such technology’s applications. The ancient peril of heart disease, which had claimed the lives of the greater portion of the population until 2500, has been virtually eradicated. The heart, now subject to volitional control when necessary, can be directed to beat regularly where automatic bodily functions would have it stopped or caused it to fibrillate erratically. Even blood cells can be controlled to

gather in concentrated streams to flush clogged arteries clean – not that the diet of Protectorate citizens oft subjects them to such a condition. Absolute self-control at any needed time – the cleansing of the imperfections of bodily automatisms – was what contributed most substantially to a surge in life expectancy. Even prior to the mass marketing of nanorovers, telepathic manipulation had firmly affixed the human lifespan at one hundred thirty years.

The reformation of Di's hair was followed by a cleansing of her face that she eagerly, with that shred of inherent humanly self-preservation, pursued.

"This is but the beginning, of course, yet cleanliness is the first step toward longevity. And what of your nutrition? Do you truly deem it optimal to subsist on these callous bulbs for the entirety of your existence? Where Aurelius lives, which is quite nearby, you can entertain all the food that suits your fancy, and you can actually *enjoy* it, for not all of it tastes as bland as what you presently consume."

Speaking to Di, an uneducated little girl – who (irrespective of whether she would put forth her mating experience as evidence of the contrary) possessed the mindset and temptations of one little older than seven or eight – in terms of basic physical necessities began to me to seem a sounder strategy than immediately launching into intellectual lamentations far beyond her on the hierarchy of needs. This attribute of Claudia's, to obtain her aims indirectly, was perhaps the cause of the Lady Anne-Marie's high esteem for her, and a means that was of some utility *per se*, so long as the ends were proper. Yet a question sprang to my mind that would require further consideration. Was it perhaps by deliberate design that her culture constrained Di and those like her to a level of their basic necessities' scarcity – so that they would be unable, in their grueling daily struggle for subsistence, to even conceive, in terms of higher abstraction, of the intolerability of their general conditions as peons of a totalitarian order?

"It is my evaluation that whatever monstrosity can subject its own people to this slavery will not welcome us here and will inflict upon us a treatment more than unpleasant," I stated in an undertone to Claudia. "Perhaps we should bring her to the villa and inquire about her society in greater depth, lest we be detected by her overlords here."

"Aurelius wishes to extend an invitation to you to travel with us back to Colossus Base, where greater generosity than this awaits you," the Lady Brighton conveyed my intentions.

"Hmmm..." It could be seen that Di was intrigued, and the muscles of her face shifted in consideration of the offer. "But today is my mating day, and I may actually get someone not too old."

"All the better for you to depart, then, and promptly," I firmly replied.

"How is your health?" Claudia inquired of Di instead. "Do you feel exhausted?"

"Somewhat."

"Perhaps you need to rejuvenate your energies," Claudia was not overtly suggesting a defiance of the routine of Di's oppressive culture in itself, sensing perhaps that the girl would be receptive to a more moderate urging. "You do not wish to be deemed incapable and taken away to the place from which no one ever returns, do you?"

“Oh, all right, but you know, at least, that I will be breaking about a hundred rules by going with you. If anyone ever questions me about where I went, I shall have to tell them that you broke into my room and took me without my permission.”

“I do not think that matters will ever come to that,” I assured her, in accord with my own expectations. “Now, we must hasten to make our leave. I hear footsteps from beyond. It would do us well to leave the shaft unbarred and, instead, generate a hologram of the grate as it had been, so that the avenue of our escape would be neither suspected nor blocked.” Then I whispered to Claudia, “I do expect to return here.”

Chapter XIII The Unseen

July 23, 2753,

I was working in the crop field – attempting to adapt to an especially enriched patch of soil a particularly resistant strain of mango trees – when a gruff and desperate voice vibrated throughout the entire base from the training field, startling me out of my concentration, and causing some of the Planar Starters to jump up five meters in alarm. In front of the villa, still watching me, Di pressed against Claudia in the manner of a toddler attaching itself to its mother during an incident of fright. The words, whose echoes still discomfited me by their volume, were the sounds of my name, “Dr. Meltridge!”

“Btherkst, I will give you fifteen SGUs if you operate the farmer droids in my absence. Make sure the soil is adequately tilled and each seedling has at least sixteen square centimeters to itself,” I informed a Planar with whom I had come to be closely acquainted during the previous day, as he had constructed an adobe cabin near the crop field, and had also transformed a patch of land into his private field via employment of the products of his agriculturally inclined training. “Stkromar desires my presence at last.”

“Certainly, Dr. Meltridge. This will go a long way toward purchasing me that farmer droid I always desired for my field.” I strode toward the training area as my new neighbor busied himself with his assignment.

“Claudia, how come the Planars are so different from us in the way they look? Are they from the Common Classes?” I heard Di inquire as I neared her on the way to Stkromar.

“That is what Aurelius supposes. Though, I was meaning to ask you how that could be. You, I presumed, would know,” Claudia replied.

“I have no idea,” was Di’s answer. “The little ones get taken away right away upon birth, unless they are to become mothers themselves, that is. Then their mothers are allowed to train them. But that does not happen too often...”

Lieutenants Dtrem and Enstog pinned Stkromar’s cage as the elder’s limbs rattled its bars and threatened to, with a monstrous but haphazardly applied force, cause it to burst from the inside. The prisoner’s eyes were bloodshot to an extreme, and his tongue seemed to lash out without a sense of direction as he muttered unintelligible gibberish in between what tidbits of sensible Planar language and English I could discern.

“Meltrigg! Aargh!” It seemed as if Stkromar were about to ingest one of the bars of the cage through his limbs. “Help me! I... seem... am... aargh!”

“I am listening.”

“I cannot... quite say... what fails me. Pain... such pain... oh, sacred *quisly* help me! I used to relish the pain! Now... now... I wish for it to end! Help me! Cure me! Meltrigg!” He let out a last ferocious roar, then dropped down into the Planar equivalent of a lying position. I realized then that Stkromar was being overcome by severe withdrawal symptoms of stuperia.

“Dtrem, fetch a *tranquillus* bulb so that he may be carried into the hospital. There may still be residual traces of the toxin in his body. I shall endeavor to eliminate them and restore his physical and aesthetic integrity. Enstog, inform Police Commissioner Vcorft that Stkromar has been released from imprisonment and is entering my custody until the time of his rehabilitation.”

“Yes, Dr. Meltridge.”

While the Lieutenants attended to their tasks, I explained to Stkromar the genuine root of his problem, and the true nature and origins of the idol he had worshipped.

“Divinity... is... a delusion?” the elder inquired feebly, with a tinge of incredulity in his voice, still unable to renounce the entirety of his life’s prior direction.

“A malignant collective delusion at that,” I replied. “But, fortunately, curable. I have given you the means to be free of it, and, presently, I must remedy further physical symptoms of it. Perhaps, Stkromar, you will comprehend that reality is far more direct than you have been led to believe. Submission, subordination, appeasement, mysticism are all superfluous, artificial, and deadly constructs. Life does not require them. You can exist while serving yourself, your own good, and the good of those who benefit you and whom you value. And the optimal path toward doing so belongs to every individual to discover for himself, in accord with his own distinct characteristics and circumstances. Do you understand?”

“I... shall... try. Oh, but I believed that the maximized *quisly* would be the end of my torments... At least... so I have been told...by my predecessors. When one reaches it... one needs no longer suffer... one needs no longer sacrifice,” Stkromar muttered.

“Whom have you known who seemed to see a maximized *quisly*?” I inquired using the Planar lingo that evoked a sense of familiarity within the elder.

“No... no one.. not while they saw it. That is how... illustrious... such an insight is. Everyone knows only that it *is* grand. *How* grand is it? That cannot... be said.”

“But did any of the prior elders ever become promoted up the *quisly* hierarchy toward sight of the maximized *quisly*?” I pressed further.

“I... know not. Some of the elders who had... commanded... me simply... disappeared. Their voices were no longer present. One day, when I... obtained sight of the magnified *quisly*, I was proclaimed elder... and Ekrog followed shortly. I am unable to tell you what happened to those before me.”

“Is the maximized *quisly* spoken of frequently upon your Plain?”

“No... it is too sacred. It is spoken of, sometimes... but when it is... it is with the highest reverence. It is not a subject to be... touched on... lightly.”

“And what would have been required of you to reach it?”

“Oh... a sacrifice... unlike the others... greater. I would have to surrender... what is most dear to me. I know not what that can mean. The elders... and the *quisly* voice... spoke to me in riddles.”

“What *is* most dear to you?” I inquired.

“Why, what was most dear to all of our kind before you came along, the law of the... *quisly* voice, its study and its obedience.”

“Could it possibly be that, which sight of the maximized *quisly* would have deprived you of?” I suggested, half to myself.

“But that... makes no sense. How can... seeing a *quisly*... deprive me of... seeing a *quisly*, or... prostrating myself before its grandeur?” A paradox that was, but not a contradiction. Reality brooked no contradictions.

“Death.” It was clear to me at that moment. All addictive drugs except the mildest of them (and *stuperia* did not fit into the latter classification) have shown the potential of causing an individual’s demise with continued usage. Moreover, this drug was particularly triggering of such an inclination, as acts of escalating masochism contained in them the inherent possibility of lethally disrupting a Planar’s vital bodily functions, hence killing him. But, since the illusory pleasure induced by the drug increased in direct proportion with the self-inflicted pain, an act which fueled the ultimate disintegration of the individual, and, hence, the ultimate pain, was bound to produce the ultimate, maximized euphoria. The hierarchy of the *quisly*, of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation, was topped by its inevitable logical conclusion: the peril of its most devout adherents.

I explained my reasoning to Stkromar, but he seemed to be at a lack of grasp for my terminology.

“Death... What... is... death?” He queried, to my absolute confoundedness. Then I recalled that in Planar society there existed almost no sign of mortality, no corpses, nor any means by which they could be visibly disposed of. But, the disappearance of elders in correlation with a seeming acquisition of sight of the maximized *quisly*, as well as my knowledge of the effects induced by *stuperia*, led me to firmly conclude that the Planar culture was indeed one revolving around the cessation of life. Perhaps Stkromar and the other unseeing ones had merely been rendered unaware of such a pervasive process because their senses could only register the silencing of a given voice – the cause not knowable to them in their mutilated condition.

“Death occurs when a person ceases to function and disintegrates. It is the termination of his existence and individuality; it is his descent into nothingness,” I replied grimly. “While you may not have observed it, it does occur among your people, and rampantly. Had I not arrived in time and relieved you of your poison, you would have fallen into its clutches shortly.” Dtrem and Enstog returned, having brought me the *tranquillus* bulb and executed my instructions. Stkromar consumed the plant protractedly, then dropped, unconscious, to the floor of the cage.

It occupied some five minutes of my time to correct the elder’s mutilated limbs and biofuse his scars with normal planar skin tissue. Nanorovers were introduced to cleanse his cells of all *stuperia* traces which had remained within them. With the toxin fully withdrawn, the cells would become capable of more swiftly regaining their intended mode of function.

As I left Stkromar to awaken from his tranquilizer-induced slumber, I attended to the ongoing transplant operations, relieving the imminent threat of overcrowding facilities that Magnus and his five assistants encountered. The *tranquillus* bulbs of the recent batch had been deposited onto a particularly densely populated sector of the Plain. 8000 Planars had already been granted sight, and I wondered whether Migstrat’s housing project would serve to accommodate, with sufficient swiftness, many of those already trained in the rudiments of spatial orientation – so as to free space on the training field. The foundations for the three-room granite dwellings had already been laid along the first kilometer’s stretch of my observation path, which – in Migstrat’s plans – was to become the main avenue of Colossus City, the capital of Magnetica. I had

suggested yesterday that the customers be permitted to select features of esthetic design for their own residences, so as to render this undertaking of broader appeal. It would also serve as the inception of genuine, rational art amongst the Planars.

Yet always my thoughts drifted toward the culture beneath Mount Sentry and the paradoxes surrounding it. A link between it and the Planars was becoming ever more evident, and there existed no other creatures that could be dubbed “the Common Classes” and that dwelled above ground. Such a theory would also be a partial answer to the enigma of the Planar birth and origin. But how could a human being give birth to an absolutely distinct species? Reality brooked no such occurrences – hence the explanation lay elsewhere. Di knew not where her own offspring would be carried off to by her overlords. Following that separation, there would occur a series of events which were yet beyond my comprehension. Questions emerged: How was a human child transformed into a fully adult Planar? What technologies were employed? And, moreover, how did this altered creature emerge onto the Glassy Plain in a manner that seemingly bypassed every known avenue of transport between the subterranean depths and the Planar roaming grounds? For, if the tunnel network were used for such a purpose, Magnus would have encountered unwelcome company during his sojourn there, whereas, in actuality, his hermitage had been unperturbed.

The employment of the English language by the subterranean culture, intermingled with a chance Planar word, further verified the ties about which I had speculated. But why were the Planars oblivious to the very existence of an English language, whereas Di could converse fluently in it? Perhaps, thought I, questioning her would result in some leads. After twenty minutes of rigorously paced transplants – somewhat of a relief to my coworkers – I permitted a newly initiated Lieutenant, specialized in this operation, to replace me. With the passage of time, I must fulfill my promise and involve myself to a lesser degree in this endeavor, so as to permit the Planars to transition from my protégés to self-sufficient, productive equals.

I encountered neither Di nor Claudia near the villa, and their sudden change of whereabouts puzzled me. I addressed Fnimgrok, the Planar whom I had hired to be my private messenger.

“The Lady Brighton is in the observation tower with the visitor. She stated that she would have no quarrel with meeting you there.”

Amid the automatic equipment within the tower stood a telescope into which Claudia gazed, nimbly and rapidly adjusting the dials until they corresponded with what seemed to be her design. She turned about to face me with a subtle grin that blended pride with mischief.

“Aurelius, I have just discovered the location of the Magnetic Sun. And I am naming it after you. Aurelion. Does that suit you?”

“Well, permit me to glance upon it first,” I smiled in return as I approached the telescope. “How did you manage to track it with a medium-ranged device? By Dr. Nachtreiter’s accounts, its distance from here must be gargantuan.”

“Dr. Nachtreiter must have neglected his data concerning the particular density of this planet’s atmosphere, which obstructs vision of Aurelion. But it is there, and quite closer than you may suspect. You will find it about 153 million kilometers south-southeast, or about 1.03 times Earth’s distance from the Sun. And,” she began to reproach me light-heartedly, “you should have at least anticipated this. Were it the

distance of Jupiter, I doubt Magnetica would have been able to sustain even plant life, not to mention sentient creatures. Not all gigantic planets are remote from their stars.”

“Then, by Kepler’s Law of Harmonies, Magnetica must rotate about... Aurelion” I pronounced that name proudly, “every 1.05 years. This is the span of an ergeft. My, but what a discrepancy! This implies that the Planars live for a time period significantly longer than their supposed relatives underground. Magnus (though he may be deemed an anomaly from the beginning) is currently approaching the respectable early middle age of sixty, while Migstrat is slightly over twenty-nine, and this is only when one tracks time from the moment of their emergence onto the Plain.”

“Well, we should consider that they receive the benefit of fresh air, exercise, and absolute freedom from the pains of reproductive activity,” Claudia reminded me. “Perhaps we should consult Di on this. I have arranged that she would possess ample rest and observation opportunities at the base during the past day, and have not pressured her to disclose more than she herself felt willing. Come here, Di.” The girl emerged from behind a massive command chair, slightly less scrawny and less malnourished than I had first encountered her to be, and garbed in one of Claudia’s more conservative dresses – a peach-colored long-sleeved floor-length Victorian gown. She actually smiled lightly, for the first time that I could recall.

“I wonder, Di, how long do males live in your society? How old was the oldest one you saw?” I asked softly, handing her a strawberry-flavored candy that she nearly pounced at.

“Oh, that must be the Planner you are talking about. He cannot be younger than thirty, much older, maybe, but you’re the oldest other than him that I’ve seen.”

“The Planner?” this was about to be quite a revelation.

“You must be really new here. The Planner is in charge of... well... everything. He and the Council, that is, but he is at the head. They decide how to raise little ones in the Communal Upbringing Complex, how to ration food so that the pregnant mothers who need it most will get it, how to keep security around the breeding vaults – you know, the standard: grates, locks, dart traps... No one ever sees the Planner, except maybe once or twice. It’s an honor, really. He goes to the breeding chambers and picks out the best, healthiest girl for himself. My mother got picked, once. That’s how she got to be so old, by our standards at least. And the best part about the Planner is that, if he picks you for his mate, your daughter is guaranteed not to be taken away.”

My eyebrows narrowed. “By implication, then, are you...”

“Yes,” she had anticipated my inquiry. “But I’m still no better than anyone else. I get a break occasionally, and maybe an extra bulb for my fire, but that is all.”

“Have you any notion as to what occurs to little ones after they are born?”

“Well, I do know that the girls are taken to the Communal Upbringing Complex, where they are taught the Three Virtues – to breed, to give, and to obey. A few of the boys, the ones I know, stay behind; they just run around the place until they grow old enough. They are forbidden to learn what the girls learn; they cannot even come near a girl unless they are assigned to one. Boys cannot be virtuous or smart; it is a grave offense,” she seemed as if she were repeating an ingrained credo. “You, Aurelius, are a criminal. You deserve to be gutted and impaled. But I like you anyway,” she smiled.

“What about the other boys?”

“They are taken... elsewhere, but nobody would think of ever heading to that place. There are dart traps in every possible cranny.”

“Do you know, at least, where the entrance to that forbidden area is located?” In the age of personal magnetic shields, dart traps were of no consequence to the prudent explorer.

“If I can remember...” She hesitated, yet did not yield a concrete reply. “But don’t expect much.”

“You speak English,” I pursued another line of investigation. “But you also include words that are not of that tongue. They are, however, found in the native language of the Planars. How is that? Have you ever known of or encountered a Planar prior to your departure from the tunnels?”

“Why, no. They are the strangest little things! I would take one back, to keep me company, but I’m afraid the Council will never allow that. It’s all part of the Third Virtue, obedience. No one must exceed her set limits. No one must do more than her assigned task. To do less will not win the favor of the Council, but it can always be taken care of. To do more is evil. You don’t obey when you do more, do you? So I’m already bound to be a criminal. Unless I blame you, that is.” She then returned to my question. “English? Why do you ask about English? You speak English. I speak English. I’ve spoken it since I learnt it in the Complex...”

“Are you aware of how your people came to speak English?” Claudia interceded.

“They’ve always spoken it. My mother spoke it. Her mother spoke it, and her mother’s mother, too...”

“Do you know anything of your society’s history?” Claudia inquired again.

“His-to-ree? Now what *you* say seems unusual to me. You come from a strange place. Claudia, you’ve taught me a bunch of words I didn’t know, but this a new one. Marriage, etiquette, freedom, ego, architecture, justice, progress, science, rights, reason, capitalism, ideas... how complicated!”

“History, Di, is the study of the past; not just any past, however, but only the significant, the events that altered the face of a culture or were the work of an extraordinary personality,” I explained. “It can also be a study of the lifestyles and ideas (I assume you are aware of that word’s definition) prevalent in the past and of their development, their evolution into the present.”

“Hmmm... we are not taught it. What is good for?”

“To ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past,” Claudia answered.

“To answer the most essential question that can confront any society. Are our lives today superior in length and quality to those of our forbears? And, if so, what methods are responsible, and how can our situation be ameliorated even further? Also, what are the obstacles in the way of continuing progress?” I offered my version.

“How far back can you trace your society’s history?” the girl asked.

“Centuries, to the official formation of the Intergalactic Protectorate, and further – millennia – to the inception of civilization itself, and a million years, to the very beginning of Man on my home planet of Earth, from which you descend as well.”

“So, you know more of my people’s past than I do?”

“It seems so. But I do not know a sufficient amount, especially about the past several centuries, which is most crucial for what I seek.” I clarified.

“Di, I wonder, have you ever heard of the Trenton Expedition, just from word of mouth?” Claudia posed the question.

“Trenton has something to do with an expedition?” Di’s eyes lit up. “I remember Trenton. It’s a word I used to see on a stone, a few corridors from the Communal Upbringing Complex. When the Planner permitted it, my mother was allowed to take me out of the Togetherness.” There was a Planar term creeping in once again. *A crucial link between these two totalitarian cultures must exist*, I further assured myself. “We went to a place she knew; there were no guards there. My mother would even give me a few bulbs to eat from the Planner’s own stockpiles. It was against the law, but she couldn’t help it. They didn’t feed us much in the Complex, and what they did, they taught us to exercise the Second Virtue with it, and give it away to our elders. But that was not my mother’s... reason... for bringing me there. She would lead me to the stone. It was a very smooth, even stone, slanted on its side, jutting out of the bumpy floor. But it wasn’t smooth throughout. It was as if someone had smashed part of it off, and the other part was hammered into. But there were letters on that stone. Let me write them down for you, roughly, how they appeared.”

Geo Trenton
Di 693

“That’s how she named me; by seeing these letters. It was not enough for her just to give me one; everyone in my society has a letter for a name, because a name is not supposed to differentiate us from the Togetherness. When more people in the Togetherness have the same name, and only that same name, we can give to each other without thinking of our own petty needs, and not considering ourselves to be special. To use Claudia’s word, we no longer have egos.”

“Oh, you have egos, all right. They are merely pressed down into the deepest recesses of your mind by those who seek to exterminate your autonomy. It is as if they had placed a sticky patch over your eyes, so that you would remain incapable of sight,” I corrected her.

“My mother wanted to name me ‘Trenton.’ It had more letters, and so would speak of her love for me. But the Planner disallowed it. He never told her why; he just said no. Maybe there was a reason for it, but I cannot think back to one. But he didn’t mind us visiting the stone. My mother used it to teach me the letters of the English language and some of the numbers, things only a few of us know these days. The Planner taught them to her; he even had her write his reports... to the Council... once or twice. And he told her that, if I learned well, I would come to replace her when I wear myself out from breeding. Of course, he didn’t know about the extra food, but did he have to?” She smiled mischievously.

“No, of course not,” Claudia replied, affectionately ruffling Di’s hair, as if she were her own child. I doubted that she any longer supported government attendance to all minors in penitentiary-style day-care centers. A child’s nature dictates that she be raised by adults – not by other children, that she interact with those from whom she would learn, rather than those toward whom the only possible avenues of approach are – put in mild terms – to quarrel or to grovel.

Claudia turned toward me, with the slip of paper in her hands. Upon it, she wrote letters in between those of Di's transcriptions:

Geoffrey Trenton
Died 2693

I comprehended. Synthesizing my recollections of the last of the Rovercraft reports I had read prior to severance of contact with outside civilization, I realized that the Trenton Expedition had not been engulfed by an abrupt technical failure. It had reached Magnetica. And its initiator had remained alive in the twelve years since.

"If I can recall, Trenton was born in 2610. This implies that his death occurred at the age of eighty-three," I whispered to Claudia. "This is not a time to die of natural causes; nor are there any odd bacterial or viral formations on this planet which may have infected him. There can only be two explanations: accident—"

"Or murder," Claudia concluded my insight. "I have performed research on the Trenton Expedition *en route* to Magnetica. Inspired by Anne-Marie's telling of the tale, I searched the Intergalnet for scientific and biographical reports concerning Trenton, his designs, and the possible causes of the accident. The documents I found described the magnate as having 'an obsession with living.' Trenton employed 'every spurious experimental technique and protective measure' in order to keep out of harm's way and repair his organism in the event that damage did come. Given the extent of his endeavor, it is doubtful that this practice was not maintained on Magnetica. Hence, we can at least dub the accident scenario improbable. That leaves quite a dire turn of events to explain for the habits of this culture."

"Over a span of sixty years?" I inquired incredulously. "Di's mother, if her accounts are correct, would have been born twenty-five years ago, in 2728. Her grandmother, if we assume that she was 'taken away' at age fourteen, had only seen her society from 2714 onward. I wonder if the shift from a prosperous new industrial region to an underground collectivist dystopia had occurred in such a rapid manner – over a time span of twenty-one years?"

Inquiries concerning Di's grandmother proved to yield only rudimentary facts; Di's mother had only seen her two times at most, in her first year of life, and she disappeared shortly afterward. No knowledge of her personality, nor of the content of her recollections, was available.

"*This* is the consequence of communal upbringing. One of the primary purposes of parenting," I explained to Claudia, "is to convey the adults' experiences to the children. What memories the adult possesses of his own childhood, he can employ to determine the proper mode of treatment for his offspring, so as to grant the young one an existence full of the merits of his own past, and lacking the harms. The adult can use his past as a foundation for his teachings; he can package it in stories, in examples, to which the burgeoning mind, yet uncorrupted by plotlessness, will eagerly pay attention. But, in a herd setting, where children are forced but to 'share,' 'give,' 'play nicely,' and 'obey directions,' such memory is lost. All that is retained is the drudgery of the present, the pressure to obtain acceptance in what otherwise would be an intolerable environment of mockery, derision, and physical abuse. Thus is lost the memory of the

past and of its lessons. Every generation, in the manner of lemmings, plummets from the same cliff into thoughtless, unrecorded, unremembered oblivion.”

I sighed and glanced at the face of the girl. Its compact frame, light hazel eyes, and raised cheekbones – which would have been pleasant to look upon were it not for the vast hollowness below – all could have been wiped from history, and from human knowledge, within the space of under a year. The image could have sublimated, leaving behind but a void, without her innocuous mischief, her desires, her explanations and attempts at enlightenment. Even death of the body, in the most horrendous manner – squirming, futilely pleading with one’s executioners, erupting from infernal torment – was nothing comparable to this. The heretics – John Huss, Joan of Arc, Giordano Bruno – suffered it, but lingered beyond their oppressors, for theirs were the voices of truth and the legacies of righteousness, struggling to rise from under the fold of squalid meanness and superstition, centuries ahead of their demon-purging time. But this passive submission – devoid of intellectuality, compelled by its imposers’ deprivation of access to the records of the mind – merely rendered one vulnerable to a swift, clean, routine erasure from every page in every record, from every corner of every living being’s mind. And thus it could have been with her, were it not for our rescue. *But how many like her have already been irreparably lost?*

“Whatever thus tainted the Trenton expedition may be evident from a further inspection of the inhabited tunnels,” I finally spoke. “Di, we shall have to return to your home, but you will be in our company always, as a visitor and guide, not a host. Breeding, sacrifice, and obedience shall never be imposed upon you again.”

“But we will come back here, right?” Her eyes displayed a faint, though not yet firm, glimmer of hope.

“Indeed,” I assured her. Once she had become aware of genuine civilization and the dignified, radiant pride that it conveyed, returning to the rewardless toil of her old, transient subsistence was no longer an option. She ceased to consider it one; instead, it turned into a burden on her conscience – a grim possibility looming over, threatening to envelop her under its oppressive fold.

“Di, how do the Planner and the Councilors dress?” I inquired. Donning their wardrobe seemed the surest means of penetrating into the forbidden areas.

“The Planner wears a loincloth, even though, technically, he can wear anything at all,” the girl replied. “But you don’t know about clothing restrictions, do you? Fine clothing is set aside for the leaders and guards only, unless you have the Planner’s permission to wear something. The rest of us get rags once a year. And the Councilors, whenever anyone sees them, must wear a brown robe with a green sash at the waist. The robe has a hood that is very narrow and long. Its folds sometimes drop onto the face itself, except for the eyes, and I do not know anyone of the Breeding Classes who has seen the features of any one of the Councilors.”

“Claudia, this is most convenient! We can mask our faces and our identities, stride in through the front entrance, pose as Councilors, and demand access to all the secrets beneath Mount Sentry!”

“It takes fifteen people fifteen months to make one of these robes, and there are only as many as there are Councilors. They are embroidered with pictures – I don’t know of what – and the material is... strange... wiry, shiny, and in many colors. The robe is only mostly brown,” Di cautioned us.

“Can you draw us a picture of it?” Claudia requested, handing the girl a virtual-reality three-dimensional color-drawing notepad, onto which even a semiskilled hand could unleash an accurate depiction.

“I will do it as well as I can remember.” She began to form the outlines of the robe, as well as her rudimentary acquaintance with the device allowed. Both the sash and the garment itself were ornamented, with what Di began to draw as asymmetrical teardrops, filling them in with lines and a stem in the end. She had drawn leaves – plain, earthly leaves – coloring them in varieties of yellow, green, and gold. Vines of a dirty green spread out in the background, underneath the leaves. Already, I could spot patterns in the arrangement and shape of gaps that Di replicated with reasonable accuracy. After an hour and a half, the girl, her mind not yet properly conditioned and outfitted to receive Swift Pills, completed the drawing. Now that the appearance of the robe was known, what remained was a clarification of its material.

“Di, what is the texture of the thread you spoke of?”

“It is soft and even, though it is quite difficult to break, so I’ve heard.”

“Silk,” I replied. I had suspected this since its first mention, due to both the timeframe of the robe’s creation and the properties that Di had described. Yet, presently, this knowledge affirmed the course of action that I would take.

I grasped the notepad, and we journeyed to the villa, where, beside my dresser, stood a clothing actualizer, a semi-cylinder lying flat side down. I plugged the notepad into a receptacle on the actualizer and uploaded the image of the robe. The silk had already been loaded, and dyes of twelve hundred colorings – within and beyond the original visibility spectrum – were available. Scarcely a minute would be occupied by the creation of each robe.

“Fifteen months by fifteen people, substituted by this machine, by one person’s one minute of time. Labor is conserved by a factor of 9,855,000, almost ten million times. And you can do anything you please with those ten million man-minutes, too. *This* is technology, Di, and it shall gain us the upper hand over the retrogrades,” I remarked as the robes rolled out ready for wear, neatly ironed and still slightly warm. “I shall await you beside the rovers at 500 hours tomorrow. There remains another question that must be answered first – via a visit to the Glassy Plain.”

“Which one is it?” Claudia requested clarification.

“What occurs at a Planar’s death, and how are Planar corpses disposed of? What puzzles me most is the absolute lack of remains on the Plain, not even to mention piles upon piles of skeletons.” Certainly, this was no investigation for Di to attend. Death was pervasive in her culture, but she had likely never laid eyes upon a single corpse. Those marked for erasure had been “taken away,” out of the eyes of the living. Overt bloodshed and the ever-present stench of rotting flesh spark emotions of utter disgust and loathing – their root self-evident to the man by the same mechanism that renders pain and death sensibly undesirable to him. The subsequent comprehension of the evil of one’s condition is too lucid to sustain any totalitarian regime. Those who seek to entrench themselves into this manner of power must nevertheless maintain the boundary between the world of the living and that of the doomed. “Claudia, I would like you to remain here with her, to condition both her body and mind to the life proper in a society of free men. Perhaps, in a matter of days, I will be able to outfit her with the protective and perfecting technologies that will render possible a joyous, secure life in

the Intergalactic Protectorate. Until then, if we have need of contacting each other, we should keep our transmitters at hand.”

“I am loath to part with you, but so long as it is temporary, I will acquiesce,” Claudia replied. “Remember to keep out of harm’s way and watch out for those blind leaping Planars. They care not how heroic your mind is.”

“Oh, but they need not care. As long as I do, and long as I use it,” I answered her as she approached and gently tapped me on the shoulder. Her lips brushed against my cheek.

“I hope you did not mind... The French have used it as a sign of greeting and farewell for over a thousand years. Farewell, Aurelius.” She waved to me as I paced out of the room, unable to restrain a smile. As long as she remembered her limits, Claudia’s attempts to display her affection showed at least an abundant cleverness. She was visibly altered by my company and that of the child. It was as if – in revelation of the essence of her character, and in the frankness of her communication to those for whom no posturing was required – the burdens and conflicts within her – identified if not solved – weighed all the less upon her conscience. A forthright scientific mind, caught in a sea of contradictions, could be frightened only of those which are not yet decrypted, of the phenomena for which the agents are not known, or hidden. But the unknown can be discovered, fathomed, harnessed. It is only the unknowable, then, which will turn the bravest spirit to shuddering and cowering before the whims of circumstance, in the vague, fleeting hope that “somehow, all will turn out well.” But the unknowable does not exist, except in the shreds of mysticism still lurking in the shadows of the unexamined mind. Free of this self-imposed barrier, man can expand to any realm he pleases, in a manner fully consistent with and utilizing his broadening base of objective knowledge. And there is a place for Claudia in the world of ever-expanding comprehension and ever-rising creators, if she discovers her pathway there.

“What did you just do to him?” I heard Di inquire as I made my exit. Having engaged in almost rampant mating, it struck me as perturbing that the girl knew not the meaning of a simple kiss. But then, are men in a state of Wilderness exposed to the tenderness of any loving relationship, or do their mothers merely raise them by reflex, and do they mate by mere subconscious animal drive? The primeval condition motivates in the primitives a cruelty of all toward all – a litany of abuses, of parents beating disobedient children into submission, of children abandoning their elders to the elements upon reaching self-sufficiency, of spouses resorting to fists, mutilation, and rape upon a thoughtless urge of the moment. No, love cannot exist amid such irrationality and brutality. The sharing of values with a child, the aspiration to create a life of plenty in all respects but tears for her – *that* is love, not a grim impelled duty for continuation of the species. The appreciation of a single woman as the apogee of virtue, as a prodigious intellect, and a generous, comforting disposition, the reciprocation to those gifts by ones of an individual’s own planning – *that* is love, not the lust for vessels to bear one’s genome. Civilized gentility, not bestly ferocity, is the genuine mark of love. The kiss, the gesture harmless physically and profound symbolically, could only have been invented by civilized man. Man discovered love when he discovered reason, perhaps afterward, but not earlier. And, while reason was not firmly embedded as a tool for proper living, myriad trains of mystics could preach to the unenlightened populace of love’s exemption from its laws, of the blindness of love, of its coarse unconditionality.

But to them only lust existed – and that, when devoid of the values instilled by reason, could indeed lead toward the degradation and destruction of human dignity and the human ego. And their preachings fit their essence perfectly.

Magnus, during his cursory initial acquaintance with the Plain, had not the time to witness a Planar's demise in front of his eyes; the probability of this event occurring randomly was slim to nil. With a death rate of perhaps two entities per day and the vastness of the Plain, what would be the chances of stumbling upon a corpse prior to disposal? For a creature employing the unequipped eye, they are minuscule, but for one with observance of the entire Planar realm... they approach one hundred percent.

A hovertower with a monitoring capacity of thirty kilometers in each direction would need to be established above the center of the Plain.

But, to accompany me, Magnus was not my prime candidate. To deprive the transplants of his capable direction would have been less than prudent, as the other Planars had not yet developed anything near his level of expertise. Moreover, his reception by the yet unseeing ones would be stolid at best, inflamed with virulent rage at worst. *Whose presence, I pondered, is not yet a significant asset to Colossus City, yet will be such to my observation? Whom can I rely on to communicate with Planars and elicit their compliance in the event of unforeseen conflicts?* The answer did not delay its emergence. *Stkromar.*

I found Stkromar bouncing vertically, immediately outside the hospital.

"Meltrigg!" he shouted in a still gruff manner, nevertheless devoid of that odd blend of hollering fanaticism and spiteful, biting cynicism. As I approached, he made no move to assail me. "I feel... different... young... whole." His hesitation was not to grasp a breath. Rather, he was still unused to pronouncing these words, of a language still quite novel to him and unpracticed in its more intricate aspects. "The *quisly* is gone, gone without a trace. I should be... mournful... despaired. But no. No, I am not." He jumped slightly higher than previously. "All my sacrifices have been... wiped clean... as if I had not surrendered a part of myself for greater knowledge of the *quisly* voice. And... there is no... compulsion to pursue it further, no pain, no cowering, no blinding imposition... just the wind, just the lightness... the extraordinary maneuverability of an organism at full capacity. For all that is sacred, I should have received this... earlier... these... eyes... this... freedom. Thank you, Meltrigg."

Stkromar, rid of scars, gashes, and deformities, now resembled the formidable physique of any healthy Planar. Nor did his age particularly mark his organism with any distinctive features. I have noted this of all his kind; there are no children and no elderly, despite the fact that some are one year old and others, like Magnus, are sixty. While no Planar exceeds Magnus in age (likely because the inventor had remained unafflicted by the life-condensing agony of stuperia), Stkromar himself is fifty-four, and it cannot be said by mere empirical judgment that he is in any way senior to Lieutenant Dtrem, of age two. Even in the era of advanced youth maintenance, a fifty-four-year-old man would unavoidably exhibit an odd wrinkle, and perhaps even a trace of gray hair. Did Planars age and perish by natural causes? Could this be evidenced? Or was stuperia the sole cause of their deaths? If the latter is true, then *Planus visualis*, under the proper conditions, may be a species with far superior endowments than man himself.

"I ask that you accompany me to the Plain, as a visitor and observer, not a resident thereof," I requested. "Would you be able to assist in my efforts, say, for twenty

SGUs?” I handed twenty gold coins to him. The notion of currency apparently still resided unstably within him, and he appropriated the funds without the slightest hint of having recognized their significance. *There will be time enough for that. Several hours ago, he had not yet grasped the pivotal natures of freedom and objectivity. Now, upon his liberation, the rate of his progress will surge phenomenally.* Stkromar bounced in my direction, cautiously, still exerting much of his concentration toward the task of remaining in a straight path. He consented without protest, perhaps investing with trust the person by whose hand he had regained his cognitive and physical efficacy. This rationally founded judgment was not blind faith, and I was confident that the ex-elder would soon become fully capable of applying his reliance with proper discernment.

July 24, 2753,

The expedition to the Plain occupied eight hours in all, from 1700 hours yesterday to 0100 hours tonight. The first of these was spent on establishing the observational infrastructure. As a group of Planars departed from the vicinity of a space some ten kilometers directly west of the peculiarly cut-off portion of Mount Sentry – which I had calculated to be most suitable for widest observation via short-ranged monitoring systems – a train of ten rovers carrying materiel and building-assistance droids unloaded their cargo. The machines drilled a cavity within the Plain’s surface ample enough to hold a magnet which would serve to repel the projected hovertower. Between it and the structure itself, a force field would be interjected so as to maintain the building’s stability under duress. The force field would not be a barrier to any entities passing through it; rather, it would amplify and distribute the magnetic force toward the sides of the tower and thus achieve a holding capacity in the event of a hostile entity’s attempt to displace it from a vital position underneath the magnet. The tower itself was a streamlined, steeply sloped pentagonal pyramid, entirely transparent and tinted with the exception of the magnet on the bottom. The building’s design permitted for the storage of all required systems along with an unimpeded direct view on all sides.

Once in the tower, I resolved to deploy a compact technological infrastructure. Sensors tracking unusual organic-matter states and body-heat emissions were linked to data-processing computers that interpreted their signals in a graphic mode. All signals would subsequently be transferred to a set of goggles upon my own eyes, permitting me to witness the scene of the phenomenon, in a live visual portrayal accurate to the minutest detail.

Within another fifteen minutes, no part of the Plain evaded my notice. While waiting for an instant response to anomalous data, I divided the entire realm into thirty-two quadrants, each with a population of approximately 6,250 creatures, though densities ranged from non-existent to suffocating. No quadrant had a discernible pattern. What pattern could one expect from arbitrariness?

Tremors of uncertainty, conversations in repressed monotone, the unsystematic quest for an unidentified food, and the vast, pervasive green of *nachtreiterus* plants intermingled with the occasional *tranquillus* bulb, above which transportomatons patrolled – those were the typical sights, the routine of Planar life, with whatever variety my innovations have managed to spread even to the home of the aliens’ anti-culture. I had expected my transplant initiative to have removed some of the excess population

whose members were evidently clashing with each other in the quest for mobility. Yet collisions could be anticipated in almost every gathering. Sometimes I witnessed fifteen collisions per sector, and thrice as many close brushes. Had the situation in fact been alleviated? And what correlation existed between occupancy and interference? The latter did not seem to have receded at all in comparison to past, more distant observations.

I requested the computer to reveal an overall population estimate of the Glassy Plain. The numbers before my screen widened my eyes and prompted me to shut them with the hopes that, upon reopening, a more accurate figure would appear. Yet there it was: 212,054, *the* precise number that had inhabited the Plain prior to the initiation of my endeavor.

Indeed, the new Planars were not the same ones who had been brought into civilization. They were new specimens of a replenished population, one that had regained its former number with startling, seemingly inconceivable swiftness – inconceivable, that is, because such preferred quotas are never the “natural” course of the development of even animal populations. Despite the presence of an equilibrium in a given herd or pack, its precise quantity is always a rough approximation, and is attained over years of dynamic interaction with changing conditions. *This* situation could only have been explained by a single factor, intelligent design. But *whose* mind was responsible?

Already, the trip was yielding further leads. From 1830 to 2000 hours, I zoomed into several collisions to analyze them in detail. Outcries of pain were present, but never any blame allocation, not even any regret that the incident had occurred. As soon as they recovered from the shock, the Planars seemed *ecstatic*, with their exhilaration directly proportional to the damage caused by the collision. I have been fortunate to record several gleeful expressions to the effect of, “*Tmnurkbt sorkk anbdekkttk quisly!*” What was witnessed, I realized, was not merely inadvertent heedlessness, but a means of ascending up the *quisly* hierarchy for the first time. As the effects of stuporia began to manifest themselves to a significant degree, a slight injury would do to carry the individual Planar onto the treadmill of escalating masochism.

But deaths were still nowhere in sight.

“Stkromar, can you pinpoint to me all the elders that you are able to recognize – by their voices, of course, since you understandably possess no visual recollection of them? I am especially interested in locating Ekrog.”

“Ekrog seems to be below you! Ekrog hears all!” I suddenly heard hollered in a dissonant squeaky rattle through the insulating but audibly penetrable walls of the tower.

“Ekrog!” Stkromar shouted, as taken aback as I, recognizing his former partner in crime. “Ekrog, you are deceived!”

“Stkromar has gone the way of Migstrat, and Vcorft, and Welrux, and others!” Ekrog, a slanted, asymmetrical, and plump Planar with a tongue protruding in a curve like the blade of a malleable scimitar, pronounced in mocking disdain. “Your voice has not been heard for days! You expect me not to have learned of your departure from, indeed, your *betrayal* of, the Togetherness?!”

My eyes widened at the elder's unexpected awareness. Ekrog, of course, took no notice of my gesture, but continued as if he had sensed it vaguely or anticipated it at least.

"Jherdum seems to be a faithful informant. He trusts the elders. He trusts the *quisly* voice. He lets no silly doubts and heretical questions lurk in the face of his devotion to fathoming the Eternal Mysteries of that, which is sacrosanct! Jherdum informed me of the stranger, Meltrigg, when he had first disgraced the Plain with his presence, of the evil creature, who must be evil, for he is from the Outside, and all that is not of the Togetherness is evil. By all that is holy, I, the Great Tongue-Whipping Elder, will not permit this foul infestation of the sacred gradations!"

"The gradations are an illusion, intended to cause you pain, by your own will, they are but products of a... substance... a vile substance... implanted within you by malicious minds!" Stkromar yelled back at the edge of desperation, seeking to bring a resistant elder to reason, who was more actively working to undermine the notion that Stkromar himself had once been averse to. "There is a world beyond them, a world of liberty and respect, a world of *purpose*!" Stkromar was met with wheezing laughter.

"Purpose! Ha! There is no purpose but to ascend the *quisly* hierarchy, to reach the maximized *quisly*! Ah, the thought, and the corruption you infidels bring to it! The *quisly* voice does not stand for it! The *quisly* voice instructs me to purge the heretics from existence!" Ekrog let out a ferocious roar in preparation for a leap directly against the tower's floating foundation. Before I could react, the elder flung himself upward, clumsily, in a manner as slanted as his own posture, swerving constantly in every which way, yet ascending with ever-accelerating rapidity. Then, with a thud, he began to plummet onto his polished resting place. A repulsive splatter mark of blood and orb tissue stained the entire bottom portion of the tower. Technology had pre-empted a menace to mine and Stkromar's lives, and the offender, by his ignorance of it, was dealt a lethal blow. Yet, to my surprise, the Great Tongue-Whipping Elder did not perish on the spot.

As he fell toward another hard surface and an inevitable doom, Ekrog's spite departed from him. He shouted with the full force of his punctured, smashed lungs, "You think to have destroyed me! But you have given me everything I have ever yearned for! Ha, you, my foes, have done me the greatest service! *Tmnurkbt sorkk hzcmughtsn quisly!*"

"He has reached his goal, the goal he prated about for days at a time without saying anything in particular," Stkromar declared as Ekrog turned into a shallow puddle of blood and entrails. "And such is the result, his end, which would have been mine. Now I am aware of the death you speak of."

Puffs of stupera vapors emanating from Ekrog's dismembered orbs clouded the view of the corpse, and I dispatched a custodial droid to absorb them and store them for possible future analysis.

"So this is what we have come here to see," Stkromar pronounced with a touch of both cynicism and relief. Had the fortuitous *tranquillus* bulb not reached him on time, he, too, could have been a motionless amorphous stain like the one before his eyes. "Oh my... no.. it cannot be! Meltrigg! Look! He moves!"

"How?" I inquired with penetrating awe, as I directed my eyes at the elder's remains. Indeed, the blood, and the tissue, were... converging! All the organic matter

began to gather in a single heap, the blood flowing through the piled amalgam of shredded skin to its center. Over a tediously and gruesomely slow process of thirty minutes, I observed how the skin at the sides of the pile gradually inverted itself and displayed a barren inner texture, a scaly *green!* Shortly after, the disjoint pieces began to *fuse together*, forming the outline of first a teardrop, then, as it widened, a *bulb*. By the time of 2100 hours, a full-sized, motionless, edible specimen of *Secundus nachtreiterus* was all that remained of Ekrog the Great Tongue-Whipping Elder. Neither droplet of blood nor strip of skin remained to evidence his demise, and there was no knowledge within his unseeing brethren and subjects that it had ever taken place.

“Claudia!” I cried with mounting disgust into my transmitter.

“Aurelius, what troubles you?” the Lady Brighton replied, yet unaware of the tingle I felt at the edge of the tongue, and the sourness within my mouth; for I had eaten the bulbs as a matter of experiment several times, as late as yesterday, to share with Btherkst in a feast of celebration the fruits of his first crop, which he had produced with my technological assistance.

“It was no wonder that the *nachtreiterus* plants’ texture not long ago prompted my mind to recall the structures of flesh. They *are* flesh – the flesh of dead Planars, their funeral vessels! I have just witnessed the grotesque transformation first-hand, and it appalls me in more respects than I can communicate to you from afar in my haste. But, of all considerations, this one most vividly portrays my revulsion and horror: the Planars are unknowingly engaging in pure *cannibalism*, with the entire structure of their society oriented to bring about the practice’s continuance. Hence, Claudia, for the love of reason and rights, convey to the denizens of Colossus City my edict as the legal representative of the Intergalactic Protectorate: All consumption of *Secundus nachtreiterus* plants is hereby prohibited, unless the particular bulbs consumed have been artificially furnished via cloning or genetic enhancement.”

“As a thinker I am outraged,” Claudia remarked softly, “and I will convey your proclamation. But, as an ecologist...” the curve of her mouth wavered, as if in a struggle between a malicious grin and a paralyzed frown. Then she continued in a tone of ecstasy of a near-diabolical sort, “my God, it’s perfect! Aurelius, come back soon; we need to discuss this before journeying underground once more.”

“Claudia!” I retorted with only partly withheld indignation. She blew me a kiss.

“I know that you loathe the society of the Plain, Aurelius, but I can assist you, at least in *understanding* it. Anne-Marie has given me certain... resources... to attain that faculty. Do not worry, I am on your side. I just cannot restrain the delight, presently, that I can experience in ‘the enemy’s’ shoes.” She terminated the connection.

“The entire planet is littered with *nachtreiterus* patches. Is it thus riddled with the Planar equivalent of tombstones?” I posed the question. “But then, how can such a multitude of them exist and still furnish the entire Plain a steady food supply with an enormous excess? Some two or three new bulbs a day will hardly replenish the food supply of an entire population.”

“Your answer is beneath,” Stkromar replied, still observing, as, over the time of the next fifteen minutes, the bulb split open along its newly fused seams and revealed in the center sixteen miniature organisms in its image. These would require considerable time, months perhaps, to each develop into full size and similarly multiply. But already, a single Planar had furnished a mass of food equivalent to that of his body, to be

consumed by his brethren as a sacrificial animal on the altar of stuperia. But what could explain such an unnatural and rapid, by non-technological standards, mutation, especially one executed by a dead creature – an entity devoid of motion and agency? I realized then that the motion and agency must have originated from another, external source, perhaps of a smaller dimension than the unequipped eye could make sense of.

I inspected the recording of Ekrog's demise and the events following it, and zoomed into the very center of the corpse and the forming ground for the bulb with magnification of a million times, enough to perceive nanorovers in the same manner as the unequipped eye perceives ants. Yet the parts still coalesced in seeming spontaneity.

Perhaps, I hypothesized, the magenta-red backdrop of the elder's blood renders the color distinction between it and the rovers too slight to be noted at this level of precision, so I enabled a billion times' magnification.

Still, there was not a trace of any element previously indiscernible.

If there were nanorovers, whence would they originate so swiftly? I have spotted none in my extensive studies of Planar anatomy, nor did any of my observations of the orbs prove to present sight of nanorovers within the inner metal sphere. Had they been present, I would have detected them during the experiment three days ago.

It was within my suspicions, from the moment of comprehending the components of the orbs, that the slave culture underneath Mount Sentry was responsible for the infestation of Planar minds. Yet I had never even considered the notion of control from afar. Despite my inability to determine the self-regulating means of removing the barrier to the emission of stuperia within the orb, I had not suspected that such a process would be initiated from afar, from within those reaches of the profane catacombs of the living. Now the notion first struck me as a possibility. But it is one matter to determine openings and closings via the manipulation of electronic wave signals and their reception by the peculiar electrical devices within the orbs. It is quite another matter to induce motion within an entire body, an organic structure, while separated by tens of kilometers of space, rock, and glass.

Reality brooks no contradictions, and no miracles, either. If my solution was not present on the anticipated scale, then, I realized, I would need to seek it out on another. I turned my instruments to their maximum magnifying capacity, one septillion, into the subatomic realm.

A metallic engraving of immaculate cursive, in plain English, occupied my magniscope's field of vision: "Trenton Mining Systems, Inc." Astounded and curious with unprecedented intensity, I zoomed out by a factor of ten, to atomic level. Through, over, and underneath the blood and reforming tissue glided, purposefully, either in straight lines or graceful, directed curves, elongated rocket-like structures with a flat tray formation atop them, three times their width. These beasts of burden, trillions upon trillions of them, were the entities that undertook the task of gathering together all the elements of the *nachtreiterus* bulb, merging it into a single entity by means of organic glue, and, subsequently, dispersing away from their creation in every which direction, apparently in search of another host. Whence had they originated?

Upon a subatomic analysis of the once-again-rewound recording, the answer became apparent to me. They came from the inner orbs, their repository for the lifetime of the Planar. The Planar had but to perish, and they would be unleashed to perform

their incomparably paced labors. Yet this was their sole function, not the maintenance of the creatures' organisms while they still lived. Such brilliant technology was directed to so ignoble and ruthless a purpose!

Perhaps decades ahead of the most sophisticated subatomic probes of the Protectorate, the Trenton robots were capable of performing the most intricate repairs possible – of the atomic structures, the most rudimentary elements of any body. I was illuminated with a radiance of foresight that overwhelmed, for the time being, my profound disgust with the traditional Planar way of life. These probes could not only mend the data stored on every strand of DNA in every cell of an organism at the organism's command; they could also resolve the massive dilemma before which even nanotechnology had fallen short. The replication of DNA molecules has, since time immemorial – since the first development of life in the universe – rendered itself open to tainting imperfections, deteriorations, mutations, truncations of vital components – resulting in the enfeebling of the human mind, the draining of man's vitality in the years when his knowledge most justified its continuance, in the spite-worthy process of aging with its inevitable consequence of death. The genome, perfectly replicated every time – or at least restored to its original state post-replication – would maintain the organism of any creature, be it a Planar or a human, for a time period as lengthy as the machines' own renewable span of service! It would, in the literal sense, grant man the ultimate reward, the grand jewel topping the ornate crown of universal conquest, Immortality itself, and the perfect consistency of body and mind – whose capacities can but expand with no allowance for degradation! The child would grow into a healthy youth of twenty, who would be but a frail novice in comparison to his father of forty-five, and his ultra-athletic, prodigiously innovative grandfather of seventy.

Let the irrationalists then prate about the unworthiness of man, or of the need to curtail his ambitions. They would have nothing with which to curtail, no means of wielding their clubs efficiently, as the pain would be nullified and the damage repaired in almost an instant. They would be able to put forth no *de facto* threat, no practical intimidation by which to harness the titans of the mind and force them to grovel before the witch doctors' shriveled animate carcasses. The forces of reason and progress would have won their ultimate battle. After centuries of shielding themselves against the tide of mystic maggots, they would have devised the surefire repellent at last. This is why the mystics have always loathed the prospect of Immortal Man. This is why their propaganda has always dissuaded the masses from even conceiving of a future where man's only genuine limitation, time, is no longer a barrier to his aspirations, but a mere medium over which he can deploy, in infinite succession, the lush tapestry of his interests.

“Stkromar, may I investigate you with the magniscope for a moment?” I inquired, seeking to reinforce a newly forming hypothesis.

The ex-elder produced a low grumble of consent.

And surely enough, my initial supposition of the Trenton probes lingering idly in the orbs until the time of their task of turning fauna into flora was mistaken. The robots raced everywhere, mending imperfections within the skin tissue, clearing obstructions from the bloodstream, regulating the expansions of the lungs and heart in accord with a single, optimal tempo. The Planars had been mortal only because of the dread toxin infiltrating bodies otherwise of perfect integrity.

“Now I comprehend why death had been such a foreign concept to you. Aside from the machinations of the *quisly* voice and the road upon which it led you, you had no indication of its existence,” I remarked to Stkromar, at the conclusion of my inspection. As midnight approached, despite my immense enthusiasm at the data revealed to me through my endeavors, I was beset by further questions, the further need to clarify and render complete a consistent understanding of the Magnetican realm. Prior to venturing here, I was intrigued by this planet as soon as I learned of it and of its peculiar forms of life, too few to be part of any randomly evolved ecosystem. Vaguely, indeterminately, I had sensed from the very beginning that here – on this planet, as distant from the great centers of civilization as any human outpost of our era – the most perplexing questions concerning the nature, and finitude, of human existence would be answered and the obstacles caused my man’s ignorance lifted at last in prelude to an era of faster-than-light progress, growing exponentially into eternity. I had predicted that, within a year, the Collegium ecologists would be rendered impotent, were I only to succeed. And it did seem at that moment that a year’s puzzle was prostrated before me. Now, a year’s worth of questions and possible strategies loomed ahead.

If the Planar organism was equipped with the most advanced maintenance devices in the history of the universe, why did these probes sit idly by while stuperia wreaked its devastation? Why did they not repair the wounds dealt by fanatical *quisly*-worship? The only conceivable answer was that such was the nature of the robots’ programming. *Who*, if certainly not the atechnological Planars themselves, programmed them? Once again, all clues pointed to the subterranean dictatorship. That was where Trenton himself lay reposed in ignominious oblivion. The robots bore his name, which, perhaps, was indicative of their age – sixty years if not more – for Trenton would have possessed twelve years following the landing of his expedition on Magnetica to have designed them in the unperturbed solitude afforded by the frontier. But did he intend them to be oblivious to the blind stupor which had enveloped Planar society in primitive tribalism? Could the great industrialist, the seeker of peace and liberty, have had such a malicious motive in mind? Or were the stuperia infestations the product of a later generation, such as the one containing the domineering Planner? And, moreover, how, in an undetected fashion, did the Planar population replenish itself?

As to the matter of my purpose, it became evident to me that continued eye transplants on the surface, without addressing the root of the problem underground, would become an indefinitely protracted task. For every individual saved, another would emerge into unseeing slavery. While still an undertaking worthy of continuance for the sake of those individuals themselves and the values to be gained from them, the transplants could not alone eradicate the menace of the *quisly* – the last non-entity elevated to the status of divinity – the final, and ultimate, superstition, whose eradication I yearned for as the conquistadors desired the demolition of the Aztec altars of flowing blood, as the missionaries desired the collapse of the African genital-mutilation-seeking beast-spirits, as the British entrepreneurs desired the toppling of the chain-wielding, foot-binding tyranny of a pseudo-divine autocrat, the Emperor of China. What mechanism replenished the Planar population so consistently? What design, what unseen hand from below, ensured the continuation of the self-abnegation routines

almost without disruption? The answer would be one to seek during my next venture into the tunnels.

“The new Planars come from below,” I remarked to Stkromar, “but what puzzles me most is... how do they traverse the distance to the Plain? Certainly, it is not through the ‘back entrance’ of the tunnel network.”

My answer came to me in the form of an alert from the monitoring system at 050 hours today. “Foreign entity entering scene,” was the signal flashing before my eyes. I saw, from ten miles directly across from me, as a Planar, fully grown and fully blind, passed through the cut-off portion of Mount Sentry as through a hologram, as though there were no obstruction to his path at all.

Chapter XIV Sustainable Development

Claudia, reminding me of a Druid nature priestess in her Councilor's robe and now free-flowing dark brown hair, sat me down upon my return to a cup of tea, the last session of civilized drink that we would possess prior to reentering the halls of the primeval.

"I read a book once – a masterpiece, really – which was among the foremost of the featured literature in the Collegium's library," she began to narrate in a composed, moderate temper. "You know its name; it is the work you loathe most. Within it, the reader is shown a glimpse into a society of idealized self-containment and resource economy. It is divided into three strata, termed A, B, and C; each one cannibalizes on the other. The killings are performed in a ritual fashion, choreographed to the minutest detail, and accepted by victim and predator alike with perfect complacency, justified by the ideal of population control. Population grows; the excess must be trimmed by the butcher's knife to keep resource expenditures constant, especially in terms of renewables. (Needless to say, this society spurns fossil fuels and those other raw treasures which cannot be replaced.) This is the way to achieve 'peace' with nature, to exist without leaving a trace, without depleting the bounteous stores of goods which deserve to be left alone in their own right, as dictated by the Gods. By constantly pressing down the life expectancy and ambitions of its subjects, this circular caste system compensates perfectly for the inevitable growth that occurs so long as men with minds are permitted a second of autonomous function, which, with the society's absence of monitoring technology, is indeed a plausible scenario. I was instantly reminded of this world, this unerring dystopia, upon receiving word of the Planars' posthumous purposes. Here, of course, the layout is far more complex, as any realistic scheme must inevitably be. The Planars, the Common Classes, the majority, dwell on the surface. They are robbed of any self-generating capacity for the creation of life or the creation of machines. They are oblivious to reproduction. They are intoxicated away from reason. They are blinded from reality. Each of them lives by the dictates of an inner deity, the *quisly*.

"You thought, Aurelius, that the *quisly* voice was some incarnation of the Will of God, some ambiguous delusion induced by a narcotic, a mere floating abstraction to be interpreted by the elders of the Togetherness. What seems more plausible, under these circumstances, is that it is indeed an *actual voice*. Stuperia merely presents the background, and the motivation, for the deception. But the drive to self-sacrifice comes consciously; it is not merely blind stumbling for the key to attaining a higher gradation. Rather, the voice sets in after a particular period of time, to trigger the positive feedback loop of injury, degradation, and decay – to actualize the Planar's *planned* death. Otherwise, each one of the creatures – conditioned away from independent inquiry and treated with utmost contempt by elders who deem it unworthy to reveal their high-caste secrets – would have needed to devise a means of attaining the maximized *quisly* on his own – something which, in such a culture, would be rare to find in even one entity. The abundance of *nachtreiterus* bulbs on the surface validates my assumption even further. And, of course, this is a society of ideal population control, a culture that pays tribute both to the pristine wilderness of nature and the vitality of the collective. In such a

society, random, unforeseen deaths from accident or infirmity are a potentially upsetting factor, which renders planning oh so difficult. If you need to produce ten creatures on one day, then wait two days without any necessity to replenish your ranks, then have to conjure up fifteen, which your breeding programs can barely yield, every day is an unpredictable hassle. And, if government food stores run low, whom shall the masses blame but those monopolizing the distribution of food? Hence, all comings and goings must be engineered, and once a harvest has bloomed, another living seed must be planted in its place.”

Claudia continued: “This resembles the hierarchical ladder thus far, with some omnipotent oligarchic agency on top coordinating to the minutest detail the affairs of a people. But oligarchies in themselves are never stable; their leadership is always open to sprees of draconian expropriation, which will – though only after extreme abuse – arouse the revolutionary anger of the oppressed. This is why absolutist monarchies, feudal webs of power, and communistic dictatorships of the ‘representatives of the proletariat’ have all been ultimately betrayed by the sentiment of those very masses that had elevated them to power. Any lingering parasitic relationship must be mutual. The class that is the beneficiary of the sacrifices must also give of its own flesh and blood. We now can accurately comprehend the mysterious subterranean culture of eugenics. Unlike the Planars, which are used for the humans’ sustenance, but are only individually disposed of after a comparatively generous lifespan, their controllers are fortunate to live into their twenties, wracked by malnourishment, squalor, reproductive labor without rest, all due to a set quota for population replenishment, by which the collectively owned mothers must abide. Moreover, the elites must pay with absolute isolation from their subjects, replacing direct command with covert remote controls, for their scheme depends above all on its subtlety, on the fact that the blinded, drugged Planars will have no means to even conceive of its possibility. The dwellers of those subterranean tunnels wield an immense technological capacity, you see, but they must actualize it minimally, only to maintain societal cohesion; any course to the contrary would imply another undue expenditure of natural resources. Why can they not, you might ask, reproduce by in vitro fertilization, in sanitary, quality-controlled laboratories, without the need for mothers to render their bodies hosts to their offspring for nine months? That was, after all, the practice at home, in the society from which they... and we... are descended.” She paused as her pupils widened eerily, as if that last insight were a revelation of particular fright to her. “I will tell you why. The electricity to power the birthing machines and the organic-design computers, the mining and extraction processes to obtain the thousands of chemicals required, the helium to power the fusion engines of the delivery infrastructure—all that would require a Herculean extraction effort. I am confident that this planet has all that is needed for a society of the Protectorate’s level of advancement, but hundreds of businesses, or thousands of years of central planning, would be required to awaken its latent potential.”

“And that is precisely what the Planner and the remainder of the societal elite cannot permit to occur,” I followed her explanation. “For the endeavor of acquisition, of any but the most primitive of substances, inevitably requires a dramatic, unprecedented, naturally unforeseen transformation of not merely the surface, but the very essence of an environment. Our philosophy embraces this fact; their philosophy strives to eliminate the very notion of environmental alteration – that is, *progress* – from existence.”

“Yes, Aurelius,” she spoke in acknowledgment, afterward staring at my face with fixed, widened brown eyes, whose ordinary range of movements and expressions was far more expansive than I have typically encountered. Suddenly, she winced and began a pleading tone that leapt upon my ears. “But you must have pity... for them. They have surrendered, for the sake of an ideal, for its power... the quality of their lives. They have taken it upon themselves to assure the purely sustainable development of their society, its perfect, immutable stability...”

“And most despicably, too. I do not pity the irrational, Claudia. I eradicate it,” I responded in a frigid voice. “This society, which feeds on itself – to the purported gain of none, to the actual loss of all, sacrificing to a false idol of consistent power, when each one of its members could, as an autonomous individual, have wielded power far more immense and far less tyrannical – must be broken. The circle of parasitism must be cut at its weakest juncture and unravel into the line of purposeful development, whereupon no man preys on another, no man owns another, no man can dispense with the life of another. Do you realize, Claudia, that all of the societies that seek to subdue the pursuits of the individual inevitably become infinitesimally constricted? The cycle of parasitism merely whirls around in a single place, achieving nothing, serving merely as a waste of good life. The ladder of hierarchy comes to a terminus at the top, at the foot of a grotesque degenerate claiming divinity as his own, or at the bottom, within the swamp into which the gray masses that rule it descend. Only one system can stream forth in perpetuity, riding the arrow of time, and that is the system in which no man is permitted to constrict another’s movement.”

“But you come to a conflict of values, you and they.” I was perfectly aware of whom Claudia was referring to as “they.” “You seek to strive ceaselessly, to overcome obstacles without end, just to sate your appetites, gradually, one by one, against the antagonists whom you topple like dominoes. But they seek to maintain without change all that they have *now*.”

“What they have now is never enough. But even more dreadful is their presumption that what *I* have now is.” Minding the time, I ended my response on a low, confident note of finality. “Is Di prepared? Have her meet me by the rovers.”

“I think I shall be torn apart,” Claudia remarked in a tense whisper as I stood to leave.

The Councilor’s robe was the antithesis of the Western dress. It was thus in its thick, bulging, monastic folds, its stretch of hood that constantly substituted darkness for the external world, its earthen and dirty green coloring, intermingled with threads of golden silk deliberately scraped clean of their luster, blending into the mundane dullness of this intricate tapestry of abnegation. Still, the occasional thread of gold remained rather reflective of light. Despite its most arduous attempts, the Togetherness could not undo the fullness of the genuine variety found in nature, in order to fit its vision of the “natural”. Wearing a workingman’s outfit of black waistcoat, black trousers, and white collared shirt, I planned to discard the cumbersome robe as soon as I bypassed security. Gliding in it through the tunnels caused me to perceive them as considerably narrower than my past impressions had led me to predict. Claudia and Di, I could clearly observe, were even more inhibited than I, occasionally losing their balance when stepping upon the excess cloth at the bottom, which draped itself across the floor for a

considerable length. Would experienced members of the Council face such impediments? And would the guards be able to extrapolate our present clumsiness to its logical root?

By 0600 hours we arrived at the creaking gate.

"No one ever uses this as an entrance; many do not even know that it exists," Di explained. "But the gate has a few guards, and they would ask questions if you came through. What business would someone of the Council have in the outer reaches? We should enter through my chamber and leave it when patrols are heading in the opposite direction. I can take you to the Forbidden Areas from there."

"How far are the guards from the gate? Can they spot us from here?" Claudia inquired.

"No, but they are just around the corner. If you tap on the gate, they will hear and come out. I have been here, outside the gate, once or twice, but I could never get beyond those terribly narrow crawlspaces. Don't tell anyone, of course."

We dived into the shaft leading to Di's room. The grate remained toppled, and the hologram which we had put in its place was not disrupted. Would the Planner's cronies have the means of disabling it, or was that, too, an excessive strain on their "limited natural resources"?

"Scan the room," Claudia whispered to me. "We may come against an undue surprise."

My navigational system had retained in its memory the image of the room and its position relative to my location. Therefore, it was able to project its recording capacity into the chamber's confines, causing me to halt abruptly in response to its disclosure.

"There is a boy lying down on the pallet!" I remarked with cautioning apprehension as Di pushed against my shoulder in order to obtain a view.

"E! What is he doing there?" she nearly screamed the words out upon observing the reposed intruder. He was nowhere near as frail as Di, and the skin on his face did not seem to be strung upon his bones at a near-breaking point, though he was still substantially thinner than the norm of his age. *Are males more generously fed in this society?*

"What do you know about him?" Claudia inquired.

"I have mated him once or twice. Fairly nice fellow who would never strike a girl even if asked. But he is not liked; he is weak and clumsy. And he hates breeding. I have seen disgust for it in his eyes."

"That is promising. At least he is not likely to run to the authorities and report our entry," I presented my analysis. "But is he an easily frightened character? Might he simply lose his wits at the site of Councilors emerging through a ventilation shaft?"

"No, he does not get afraid, even at what he hates. He cannot stand what he was made to do, but he does not allow himself to make a show of it, so that he would get dragged out for punishment. We should be safe."

"Then let us proceed, perhaps surrounding him as soon as we land, so that he would not possess even a moment for a loud, sudden reaction," I concluded, as, one by one, we traversed the shaft and appeared before the unsuspecting youth. His gasp was silent and not prolonged, as he struggled to compose himself.

"Great Councilors..." he uttered, "forgive me for the breach... for remaining alone and not serving the Togetherness. But the girl to whom I was assigned... and I was

assigned here for the last three days... is missing. She was gone, but I kept being assigned here. I merely followed orders." His last word was followed by a protracted breath, a slight sigh of relief, which he had hoped to be warranted by his successful use of official dogma to justify his presence.

In response, Di removed her hood. "You have nothing to fear. We are not Councilors."

"Di!" he exclaimed, wavering between excitement and uncertainty. "You had fled here? You had broken the most important restriction?"

"Yes. And I do not plan to obey the restrictions, nor the Three Virtues. I am here for a different purpose."

"You are a sneak, a neglecter, a traitor, and a criminal," replied E in an even voice. "You have disobeyed the wishes of your people, your leaders, your Togetherness. You deserve to be taken away and to never enjoy the communal life again. But you are my friend, and I shall keep your secret."

"Secret? You mean they do not know?"

"How could they know when I was the only one to come here for the last three days? I returned every time my shift ended as if nothing unusual had happened, and I spoke with the other boys as well as the overseers of you, as if you were there. I told the overseers that you were particularly fond of me, that you would conceive a little one if I kept coming. Of course, I did it all for myself. It gave me a break from mating. So I guess you should not thank me."

"On the contrary, she should thank you even more passionately. The only time you can genuinely and without drawbacks fulfill the interest of another is when you place your own above it. If you had loved mating and your every inclination had torn you away from this chamber, would you have been able to save Di from persecution as willingly? The unselfish deed endangers its beneficiary gravely, and I am glad that yours was not one," I spoke while removing my hood, allowing him to gaze upon my face with agape eyes.

"Who are you to speak so? And to me? We boys are not allowed to learn these things. No, we are not taught the Virtues. We cannot be moral. We can only be pushed into breeding chambers."

"I am not one who advocates such brutish limitations. I am not one of your Togetherness, yet I am a man just as you. And I have arrived to show you the true conditions under which a man should live. And they, my friend, do not involve forced mating, nor the surrender of any child conceived."

His eyes lit up. "And you are headed to the Council? Yes, you are wise enough to be a member, but will they accept you?"

"They will not. But I shall destroy them. Then, I shall inform you of your history – of the past which your ancestors had, and renounced, of their one-time glory and of the source of their ruin. But, in the meantime, will you keep silent, as if we did not arrive here?"

"Yes," he whispered, as I handed him a spare set of Protectorate clothes from my rucksack.

"Wear these when no one sees you, for yourself, for your private dignity. Come and go from this room as you usually do, and pretend that nothing abnormal has

occurred. And do not give the guards any reason to suspect the contrary. When we are set to leave here, we shall come to transport you away from this dismal necropolis.”

“And they keep their promises,” Di assured him. “Can you tell me whether the guards patrol here this hour?”

“Fifteen-minute rounds,” E replied absentmindedly as he pulled on his new clothing to cover his rags. It was a bit too long for him, but the symbolism of the endowment rendered this an inconsequential concern. “This is the end of the corridor; they walk to it or away from it, and either way you will be seen. But if they are quite far away with their backs facing you, you will be able to run a large distance and make it seem as if you had branched into here from the Main Hallway.”

“When will they be in such a position?” Claudia inquired.

“Soon. Do you hear their steps on the other side?” Indeed, the granite rattled slightly as unseen feet flopped against it. It would have been militarily expedient to equip the guards with shoes at least, but it seemed that, in assembling extravagant Councilors’ robes, the Planner’s underlings had reached their quota of allowable resource allocation for garments. “You will depart soon, and I must return to doing what is normal? What is normal, when I do not mate? What can I do? I cannot read, as Di has learned to. I am given nothing to attend to, not even a chunk of sharpened stone with which I could have drawn on the walls. We may do nothing but that which serves the Good of the Togetherness, whatever that is. But I shall think; for once, I shall do what is forbidden. I shall think and wait. But, please, tell me your names so that you do not seem so mysterious...”

“Aurelius Meltridge.”

“Claudia Brighton.”

“Your names are so... unique, and therefore admirable. No one in the Togetherness, and perhaps outside it, would have the same ones. It is as if you are not afraid of being the planners of your own spirits. But there are so many other E’s out there. I come to fear at times that I am not what I am, that there is nothing to make me distinctly myself, that I have nothing I can truly call my own and that would remain with me regardless of how others wish to use me for their Good of the Togetherness. I need a real name, a longer name.”

“Erasmus.” I immediately devised what he sought. “That shall be your first name, after a thinker twelve hundred years ago who, in a time of fanatical collectivist hatreds and bloodshed, championed the importance of every individual’s existence and judgment, and the need to tolerate each man’s convictions. As for your last, let it be Egomind, for those qualities within you that caused you to discover the beginnings of a morality even in an atmosphere that suppressed it.” Erasmus Egomind smiled at his new endowment.

“What shall I be called? I, too, think that two letters are not enough,” Di remarked, with the pouting, near-impatient airs of a child who has not obtained what she deserves.

“Diana Brighton,” Claudia replied. I understood the implications.

“Until next time... Erasmus,” Diana pronounced as the steps began to fade. “We should start creeping forward.” She slid open the massive and rusty iron door into an opening in the stone. “They usually do not lock it, though they can,” she commented at a half-whisper. “Most of us comply. They only lock in those who resist mating and do not let in any food until the breeding act is complete.”

Diana's forehead shivered slightly as her earlobes reverberated with a barely visible vibration. Claudia had been employing a crude, centuries-old form of pseudo-telepathic communication, devised prior to the virtually universal introduction of electronic devices into the brain, which involved the transmission of sound waves from a microscopic speaker into a frequency/amplitude adjuster which reduced the waves' characteristics to those beyond the auditory range of the unequipped ear, and reconfigured them into an amplified version of their prior state upon contact with the recipient's eardrum. Thereby, reception by unwelcome third parties was curtailed, except, of course, when even the most elementary of sound-amplifiers or reducers were employed by those wishing to conduct surveillance on the conversation. Claudia was acting on the assumption that the guards would not possess them.

"Oh no, these are not the only guards. They have about ten or twelve at most important doorway. There is no use in escaping, and no one has ever bothered, that is, until now," Diana replied while still attempting, to the maximum of her abilities, to remain indiscernible by the guards.

The steps of the guards ahead were flopping toward the terminus of the hallway's other side, which led only to the beginnings of a small passage beyond, what I figured to be the connecting corridor between this row and the obscure "rear entrance" to the catacombs of the living. Our halfway distance to the branching point with the Main Hallway did not look promising. Nor would any play at further stealth via an attempt to hide in the shadows. The gold of the robes would reflect like a beacon manifesting our presence.

"Glide toward the ceiling!" Claudia urged us, bypassing audible speech, to attempt what would have been a routine police maneuver on planets of unearthly gravitation. Thankfully, Diana, too, had been, prior to our departure, equipped with a PRLS underneath her robe.

Momentarily, the guards' heads rotated in sloppy coordination as they began to pace, with semi-rhythmic, slackened gait, in our direction. The gleam of gold would become intriguing to them even atop the ceiling, if we would dally there too long. The expected sight for them would have been a monochromatic near-black gray, harmonious with the shadows. Yet the ceiling was not part of their observation routine, as I noted while monitoring their visual search patterns with a field magniscope. If they would spot us, it would require of them a chance notice and a substantially increased amount of time. In the meantime, one glided faster than one crept.

"Is the Main Hallway guarded?" I inquired of Diana.

"And better lit, too. They actually have a few candles; I do not know how they get them. Two guards at each door and branching point. They will notice us for sure, especially if we come down right under their eyes."

"Then let us glide past the branching point. We can outsmart their surveillance," Claudia declared.

"Past the guards?" I sought to clarify.

"Indeed." Claudia affirmed decisively.

The two enforcers of totalitarianism strolled by without so much as an upward glance. Their gaunt facial features exhibited a looseness uncharacteristic of their scrawny physiques. Their pupils – perched upon faces younger than mine, nearly lost in the watery mist surrounding them – were perfectly still and apathetic to their task. One

of them coughed reflexively as his steps became limper, resembling those of a senile man already struggling to maintain his balance.

Once we were past their backs, we darted forth, creating only a slight current of air that somewhat alleviated the dank, humid stagnation of the tunnel – the invasive and putrid heaviness that always accompanies organic decay. With the guards still heading obviously toward Diana’s former chamber, we smoothly descended to our feet some two meters beyond the branching point. Keeping to the side of the passage, we darted toward the Main Hallway and emerged through it, relinquishing our stealth, without detection by the sentries behind us.

The other guards, already catching faint glimpses of us, stood in place. The general outlines of our robes were visible from their posts, and they expected no visitors from the surface.

“We must go to the very end. The Forbidden Areas can be reached through the last door on the left,” Diana spoke. “The soldiers are a separate class of their own. They do not mate, and they are raised away from the rest. It is not their business to know anyone by name or face...”

“Of course,” Claudia said as if it were self-evident, “The Planner is wise in not permitting his enforcers to establish ties or sympathies with those of whom they would be required to viciously dispose in due time.”

Those were the final constructive verbal exchanges that the situation permitted us. While within the guards’ hearing range, we would be required to play our roles. I, at least, was in such a position.

“Councilor, it seems the guards are keeping the peace. I have not observed many disruptions in the routine coming through here. But the Planner must have had his reasons for this inspection,” I attempted to fabricate a gruff, slightly hoarse tone. “He has stated that he would like to discuss our observations with us.” I swung my hood in every which direction, catching glimpses of the guards and the slightly porous basalt walls, bordered by an occasional crude iron box upon which rested candles... *How could these Luddites ever manage to manufacture wax on Magnetica?*

Observing my attentiveness, Claudia and Diana followed suit, but in gestures only, remembering the extreme unlikelihood of female presences on the Council and hence our probable detection in the event of their speech. The guards remained motionless as I proceeded with the pretend review. Some of the hallways before which they were stationed had not been barred by any doors whatsoever. Instead, their granite walls extended from their branching points with nothing but the sentries’ spears to separate them from the passageway in which they merged with other similar corridors. Of what I could spot, rows upon rows of rusted metal cell doors stood uniformly in every hallway but the main one. I could already hypothesize, with accuracy, what waited behind them. A few guards on the farther end were stationed ahead of doors of a different sort: thicker and higher, ornamented with dulled – and, in some places, broken – engravings of what at one time would have been immaculate geometric patterns in a coal-colored black, excellently suited to the texture of tyrannometallum. By all indications, these doors were older, and yet, despite their wear, sturdier, than the ones to the breeding chambers. Their material suggested to me that they had been forged during the Trenton era.

Other than the Forbidden Areas, what would be kept out of public sight beyond those doors? I wondered. I recalled Diana's frequent mentions of the Communal Upbringing Complex, as well as the guard training facilities, whose existence was a matter of common knowledge, but likely not common access. Claudia sent a message to my ears, as if anticipating my question, "Diana told me yesterday, just in passing, that this society keeps contact between children and 'adults' minimal. Aside from the instructions and oversight of the caretakers, the children are encouraged to shun their elders, including their parents, and socialize amongst themselves, in little communes. This is how they supposedly learn obedience to the group and material renunciation. Excepting a few extenuating circumstances, none of the 'adults' in the breeding chambers is permitted into the Complex."

Something about this revelation seemed predictable – perhaps, I figured, due to the monolithic consistency with which this society enforced its central planning and the principles upon which it was based. Yet, there seemed – though my memory was preoccupied with other matters and could not recall it – an external link of some other sort... *If there is, I shall discover it later.*

We strode to the Forbidden door in a calm, stately manner as I addressed the guards. "Soldiers! You are to let us pass. We must meet with the Planner."

The two sentries – hollow-cheeked but, this time, rather stocky – whispered among themselves. My hands scoured under my robe for the button to activate the sound amplifier lodged within my ears. Before a second passed, I could receive their voices with clarity.

"He has graced us. Told us his business."

"I've never seen one before. A Councilor?"

"Yes, you imbecile. Oh, why must I be stuck with the new recruits? Well, don't stand waiting there. Set aside your spear."

The guards raised their weapons into perfectly vertical positions, so that they would not be able to obstruct our entry. Thereby, they silently acknowledged their permission of the latter.

The tyrannometallum did not end with the door. The broad hallway past it – slightly dented and caving outward at the sides – was lined with it, its pure black color stretching on indefinitely and merging ultimately with the shadows. There was neither a step nor a breath to be heard, and only the occasional dim candle kept us out of total darkness. Using the illuminator here would be imprudent, as this technology was, almost without doubt, inaccessible to the genuine members of the Council. Even here, where heavy guarding was unlikely, we would need to play our roles without hinting at our identities.

"I cannot lead you further," Diana whispered when she was certain we were out of the guards' hearing range "I have never been here myself. I have seen my mother enter through here many times after her visits to me. Apparently she had lived here with the Planner."

"What matters presently is that we are inside and yet undetected. I am equipped with a raygun in the event that matters go astray, and we all have force fields enabled. Even if we are discovered after attaining our objective, I am unable to conceive of any tactic that the Planner would employ to render us vulnerable," I assured my companions.

“But, Aurelius, you are examining only the primitive side of this culture. Remember, it also possesses immense technological capacities. Let me pose the obvious as an example,” Claudia cautioned me. “You realize, of course, that not a single denizen of these tunnels – and Diana no longer counts as one – is wearing a PRLS. This implies that this area is under the influence of a planetary repellent system, one that is still functional... somehow. I suppose it requires fewer resources for a central planner to furnish one such piece of infrastructure rather than provide his subjects with levitational suits, or any decent clothing for that matter. If the elite of this society is acquainted with gravity control and subatomic modification, I dare say they may possess arms before which our force fields may be swept aside.”

“I shall keep a lookout, then. But, do you suppose, Claudia, that, having penetrated thus far inward, I shall be gratified by a mere *understanding* of the situation?” I hinted that armed confrontation might be less avoidable than the Lady Brighton had anticipated.

We proceeded through the grim passageway as I scanned its walls for unusual extremities, openings, or protuberances, searching for a door. Following a surprising thirty meters, my method seemed to have proven futile. Tyrannometallum did not substantially transmit radiation, either, and only a far more concentrated amount of X-rays than I dared use without a hazard suit could have gained me the knowledge of what rooms lay on the side of the hallway. “Feel for doorknobs,” I mouthed to Claudia and Diana almost inaudibly, “And anything else you may find peculiar. The navigation system will, at least, record those places where we have already found no peculiarities.”

Footsteps rattled ahead. The entity emitting them did not, by the sound of them, seem to be intent on stealth or rhythm himself, engaged instead in what could be described as a casual, though noisy, stroll.

“If he walks there, he has likely emerged from someplace nearby,” I whispered with the utmost emphasis on my volume, almost touching Claudia’s ear due to the proximity required. She replied pseudo-telepathically, “Or it could be a guard on duty in the middle of the hallway, prepared to apprehend lucky intruders such as us.”

“He sounds like no guard,” I answered concisely.

“I sometimes do not sound like a Sentry Colonel deployed to arrest you, either,” Claudia responded in a tone, that, were it not for a thread of sarcasm that she held throughout, I would have perceived as dangerously serious.

She threw off her robe and PRLS and handed them to me, remaining in a set of black trousers and a jacket to match, both of a similar, scaly fabric whose thickness and durability were immediately perceptible.

“Wait here,” she communicated silently to both Diana and myself as she dropped to the floor. Her dark brown hair did not seem altogether out of place atop the tyrannometallum, and the remainder of her clothing completed the camouflage. She crawled forward, maneuvering her limbs as swiftly as the need for silence allowed. At a distance of some ten meters, I, not equipped with any infrared vision adjustment for the moment, ceased to distinguish between her and the floor. I sat in apprehensive silence, contemplating the possible implications of every slight rustle, if only an apparent one, that caught my ears. The footsteps continued to clatter for the next four minutes, until, with an abrupt whirr, they were no more.

The ensuing silence was almost absolute. My ears, so attuned to receiving data – no matter how insignificant – suddenly found themselves temporarily devoid of application. Not even a current of air was present to breach the stagnation. Diana, almost unthinkingly, sank her fingers into the folds of my robe. “That feeling again,” she whispered in a high-pitched, perturbed child’s voice. “The Nothingness. Either the Togetherness or the Nothingness. And I know not which is worse.”

I tapped her on the shoulder in an attempt to comfort her without relinquishing my stealth. Then, I activated *Progress Unyielding* to occupy my mind and relieve the tension mounting during the wait. As its monumental chords and passages streamed into my focus, I realized, peripherally, that Diana did not possess such a recourse. I had not yet had the time to install even a ner for the education and entertainment of her mind. Fortunately, she was not exposed to her dreadful dichotomy for much longer.

Claudia sprang into full height a meter before me, with whatever trace of a grin she could muster, pronouncing, this time in a soft but overt, ringing tone, “You are dead, Aurelius.”

“Well, I admit it, my spotting was abysmal,” I could not help but concede defeat. “I thank your... sound judgment... that you are on my side. That man, whoever he was, must not have been as fortunate.” Claudia nearly collapsed from the eruption of laughter whose volume she struggled to contain by pressing her sleeve to her mouth. She sensed the irony in my statement.

“He was distracted, just as you were,” she managed to explain at last, “almost mesmerized by the candles when I immobilized him with this.” She emitted a tingle of electricity from her stunning stick, which, to my astonishment, was already against the palm of my hand. “He should not be able to move a limb or any non-vital portion of his body until tomorrow, by which time we shall be well clear of him. In any case, he was a guard, just as I foresaw. And look at his suit.”

“He is... dressed differently?” Diana inquired incredulously.

Once Claudia shined a candle toward a mass that she had apparently been dragging behind her during her approach, I observed an outfit of multi-layered light gray silk that spread from head to toe of the incapacitated guard and remained in one piece, aside from a wiry titanium mask across the face, which concealed the latter entirely.

“Does this look familiar to you?” Claudia inquired, with a hint of faint allusion in her voice.

“The gray battle suit... I cannot quite put my finger on it, although I am certain that I have encountered it *somewhere*...”

“How about the Ministry of Exploration and Colonization? This is the principal portion of the uniform of a Ministry Guard, a suit that most of us would be unable to identify immediately due to the usual presence of the blue jacket over it. It provides quite useful maneuverability advantages in light urban combat or riot control.”

“Of course... V. C. Rovercraft mentioned these in one of his reports, during the rioters’ invasion of the ministry and the confrontation between Rinkarm’s Sentries and Nersmith’s Guards. A generous donation from the Lady Anne-Marie had turned the latter into her lackeys...” My eyes widened at the implication. “This could mean—“

“That she is involved in the ‘original’ Magnetican ecosystem and social dynamic!” Claudia completed my statement, hushing her voice prior to producing a full-fledged exclamation. “Rinkarm was under my command, you know. I was well aware of the

Ministry coup and endorsed Nersmith's actions, perhaps mainly due to Anne-Marie's plea for 'faith and patience' when she met with me the next day. The statement I submitted to the courts will serve as substantial ammunition for his accusers. Yet I never quite comprehended Anne-Marie's need to endorse *that* particular protest and the wanton carnage that it caused, partly due to the bulk of my Sentries' inactivity. I had always speculated that it would better suit her long-range political objectives to side with a clique of non-violent demonstrators clamoring for expansion of government restrictions on development or financing for environmental programs. Instead of securing a reputation of a formidable but respectable adversary, she has chosen the image of a blood-stained revolutionary, as, after Rovercraft's press release, it is no Herculean task to trace responsibility for the day's events to her. Now, I suppose, her reasoning becomes more fathomable, along with her motives for not revealing it to me overtly. A vocal but forceless demonstration would have achieved nothing in terms of curtailing the Magnetic Expedition, not with Orthog in the Minister's seat. Given Orthog's favorable position with the Protector and the Parliament, only an illegal uprising was capable of deposing him, establishing a puppet Assembly of Delegates, and attending to the Magnetic affair *as the first item on the agenda.*"

"This would imply, of course, that their alleged outrage at being informed of the planet's discovery was a farce. They knew of its existence from the beginning, perhaps prior to Dr. Nachtreiter's discovery itself," I commented.

"You are correct, but a bit conservative on your timeframe estimate. Consider this: officially sanctioned development along the Western Periphery has been virtually stagnated, through influence from the Collegium and the universities, and always paid the closest heed by the environmental groups, whereas the mining concerns in the North and East have developed with few real obstructions during that same era, despite half-hearted attempts on Conford's part to 'regulate the pace of settlement.' In view of Anne-Marie's desire for across-the-board curtailment of Accelerative Settlement, this policy may seem paradoxical as an uneven distribution of activity. But you yourself have taught me that a paradox is not a contradiction, that there is a deeper consistency at the root of her attachment to Magnetica. Now, from my experience, I have been able to note tendencies in Anne-Marie's thinking. She is an immensely social, outgoing person..."

"As if I had not noticed. The woman would surrender her own head for connections and pull!"

"She would much rather surrender yours," Claudia replied matter-of-factly. "Her affiliations are quite strategic indeed. She flaunts supporters in every field, from the universities to the research centers to the legislatures and ministries, and, of course, the armed forces. Now you comprehend why my friendship was invaluable to her in such a situation. In exchange for years of social courtesies, discussions, soirées, and patronage, she expects every member, every *cell* of her unofficial, often untraceable system to anticipate her expectations and react accordingly whenever the matter requires it. Of course, after the time spent acquainting oneself with her views, in the most technical and sophisticated sense, her expectations are known without ever becoming explicitly spoken. In the circles of delicacy, subtlety, and nuance, this means of coordination is far more efficient than any explicit organization. However, such groups are still vital cells in the organic unity that is Anne-Marie Legard."

“And her network erupted in activity just at the time when it became most urgent to preempt my discovery of the underlying social forces at work on Magnetica, because she herself, as indicated by the presence of one of her underlings in the depths of the entire system’s command center, is closely associated with the function of the entire Togetherness!” I exclaimed.

“It certainly matches her theories. Every bit of knowledge that I have been taught since my first acquaintance with her as a student – when she paid a visit to the Police Academy four years ago – fit the notion of sustainable development, of apprehending a society’s growth at a certain ‘acceptable’ level before such development could result in major ecological disaster. Recall that, despite her constant devotion to the objects of her study, and her ever-present fascination with the natural world, the bulk of her theoretical development had occurred during her mid-twenties, between 2732 and 2738, the year of the Seeker-8 Mushroom Expedition, a time when she became increasingly withdrawn from field study. Might it have been that the discovery of a particular planet – whose denizens were engineered to obey the social structure she would later uphold – served as her subsequent motive force?”

“Judging by what we currently know, your analysis fits the data,” I replied, smiling at Claudia’s uncovering of the mystery of the Lady Anne-Marie’s environmentalist transformation, which had so puzzled Dr. Nachtreiter. “Trenton died sixty years ago, and Magnus, who at that time was still not in exile, reports that the *quisly* then had featured as prominently as it does at present in the awareness of the Planars. The social structure of Magnetica *antedated* the Lady Anne-Marie’s own birth. She did not devise it, but rather became enthralled by it.”

“Well, that is a marvelous synthesis! Anne-Marie always encouraged her disciples to think in terms of complex wholes, with every element serving a purpose, just like in an ecosystem. And now we, by her method, have produced a convincing account of what would otherwise have seemed a chaotic jumble of unrelated events,” Claudia remarked.

“The difference between my approach and hers,” I replied, “is that I derive the whole from knowledge of the nature of its constituents, while she deals with arbitrary ‘wholes,’ apocalyptic predictions, population projections, forecasts of the desolation to be brought about by technology, while evading the nature of the *particulars* involved – namely, *men*, who act not by deterministic impulses or instincts but rather by the judgments of their own *minds*, whom no behaviorist model could accommodate due to the volitional nature of their convictions and motivations. She neglects the fact that the same ecological science that studies plants and animals cannot be legitimately applied to the world of men – no more than the blueprint of an automaton corresponds with a map of the human organism, no more than the analysis of the unthinking servitude of the automaton can legitimately serve as the case to deprive man of his inalienable freedoms.”

“But this distinction is so evident! We can see it all around us, in the expanse of human civilization and achievement, and even of the very study of nature that animals would never have been able to undertake. She could not have flouted it by accident or honest error,” Claudia stated, prior to abruptly putting a hand to her mouth.

“Precisely,” I replied, my voice firm, acknowledging the truth and immense courage of her recognition, with which she was still struggling inwardly.

A piercing shriek emanated from ahead of us, which reminded us of the danger of our situation, of the imminent possibility of detection, were we to dally in the hallway any longer. Claudia donned her robe once more, and we cautiously tiptoed forward, lifting the robes slightly off the ground so that their hems would not disclose our presence by the sound of their friction with the floor. Ahead of us, the candles formed a cross. We were approaching a branching point. Another brief scream, this time of greater intensity, reached my ears. The voice producing it was that of a young female, no older than Diana, yet it was twisted into a pitch that no human being would utter of her own accord.

The branching point was unguarded but illuminated brightly, with three tall candles on each side of the wall. The shadows were virtually non-existent as we came against doors to both of our sides, identical in appearance to that which guarded the entrance to the Forbidden Areas. The door to my left, itself tightly shut and not yielding a centimeter upon being pushed, featured a tight keyhole. "You can pick locks, of course?" I whispered to Claudia.

"Yes, but I must first ascertain that no one waits on the other side. Even posing as Councilors, if we disable the lock forcibly, we will be identified as intruders who prowled in areas where they are not permitted to venture." She peered through the keyhole. "I see many metal crates, all of them hollow and seemingly containing something in mass quantities. No one is there, at least for the moment."

Footsteps sounded behind. The entrance to the Forbidden Areas, I knew, had been opened, and another presence was heading our way. "Open it quickly!" I urged her.

Claudia prodded at the lock through the keyhole, using a miniature pick that sprang out of the side of her stunning stick. To our dread, the door slid against the floor, producing a metallic rumble at the bottom. I grasped the door with my hands once the slightest opening fit for a human being was created, in order to prevent more of the noise from reaching the ears of whomever approached from behind. Yet, only a wail sounded there. It was not the pain-permeated shriek which I had heard a minute earlier. Rather, it featured displeasure rather than horror, a tantrum instead of an outcry. "A little one," Diana whispered as we entered.

A walkway separated the dull steel room into two symmetrical portions, each packed to maximum capacity with the crates. Nevertheless, every row of the open containers was accessible by foot, as if their contents were not interchangeable and particular ones needed to be accessed by their possessors. Having shut and locked the door and sprinted toward the further end of the room, we darted to the side and crouched behind one of the crates as the footsteps' volume became more pronounced. Calculating myself to possess a spare moment of safety, I raised my head to peer into the container ahead of me.

With limbs crossed and tongue and irregular magenta orbs flopped limply upon the surface of a still uninjured facial basin, a Planar lay, unconscious, within that crate.

My hypothesis had at last been affirmed. But no pleasure at a competently directed mental effort could lighten my burden now. The door creaked open once more, and in marched one of the guards from the breeding chambers, cradling a minuscule infant in one arm, while hugging his spear with the other. Ignoring the child's escalating wails, the guard strode toward one of the crates in the foremost row and perfunctorily

deposited him within it. Upon that moment, I resolved to manifest my presence in hopes of obtaining further information. Motioning for Claudia and Diana to remain crouched and silent, I raised myself into view gradually, feigning the relaxed demeanor of an inspector who is the dispenser of scrutiny, not its object.

The guard stiffened at my unexpected appearance. "If I have startled you, soldier, you need not be afraid. You are merely on routine duty, am I correct?"

"Sir! Just arranging for a newborn, sir!"

"Indeed? Another member of the Common Classes?"

"Yes, they have ordered more and more births, Councilor. This one will still take a week before he's ready, though, and I do not know when they will release him into the open. It is not my business to learn these matters, sir."

"But it is mine," I eyed him reproachfully. "And you will reveal to me all the information that has caught your ears, whether or not you feel that you are the most competent source on the matter. Is that understood?"

"Sir!"

"For you know, I have been commanded to conduct this inspection by the Planner himself. He would wish for the replenishment of population to occur precisely according to his design. Now, tell me, do you come here often?"

"I usually bring the little ones here, sir. Unless there are too many of them, in which case T assists me."

"Have you ever witnessed a transformation occur?"

"Yes, sir. It is very gradual, sir, but if I am assigned a lot of work here, I can spot it happening."

"Describe it to me. I must know whether it proceeds as is intended."

"Well, Councilor, the little one first gets a face change. In a few hours, his head turns into this," his finger pointed to a facial basin several crates away, "his tongue gets longer, and somehow... I have seen it several times, his eyes are eaten away and a purple eye-like... thing plants itself into him. The things have to be brought here. I have seen it happen on my shift. Then his body gets flattened and turns that strange color very much like blood... but different! After that, his hands and feet become stubby things with sap sticking out. He is asleep while all this happens, and he remains asleep until he is released, sir."

"Very good. Now, where is the location of his release?"

"That wall. He merges with it. I have sent a few through it, sir, but I am not allowed to go myself. A strange wall, it is. Most walls, nothing can pass through, but this one... it is as if it does not exist, Councilor. Of course, only the little ones can go beyond it... Anyone else does so under threat of death."

"I am pleased that you know your duty *and* your restrictions, soldier. You are a valuable servant of the Togetherness and I shall render it a priority to inform the Planner that he should continue to... retain you under his command. Dismissed!" The guard demonstratively flung out his spear into a thrusting position in a show of expertise and marched away through the door. As his footsteps faded into inaudibility, I motioned for Claudia and Diana to stand.

"You are more of a master at creating false impressions than I had expected," Claudia observed. "You realize, of course, that it is a necessary tool."

“Only when any contrary action threatens you with destruction, when you have no other recourse but deception and disguise,” I replied. “Then, it can preserve your life. But woe to those pitiful mediocrities who need not delude others into perceiving them falsely, who can afford with impunity to manifest their genuine dispositions and interests, and who yet concoct their petty tricks! For they surrender their accomplishments and their only means toward the attainment thereof – their intellectual autonomy – to enslavement by the mob, or the tyrant, whom they had hoped to master. Their success becomes entirely dependent on the illusion they conjured, and how *others* perceive it. The man of reason bases his success upon the firm structures of absolute reality, and on his capacity to employ them, whereas the manipulator plunges himself into the fluctuating bog of subjective impressions.”

The infant had been pacified by a source too small for my eyes to spot. He ceased to wail and lapsed into the same state of unconsciousness in which the remainder of the Planars-under-construction in this room were immersed. My portable field magniscope, surely enough, spotted a stream of Trenton probes entering the little one’s head, every second one carrying a molecule of tranquilizer. No container of matter could have isolated several specimens of these enigmatic machines, for they could elementarily squeeze through the gaps between any two molecules. Only by means of a central command interface or a local program could they be controlled. I was powerless to stop the transformation without accessing its origin.

Though the probes seemed metallic on the surface, it required little deliberation to realize that a subatomic entity could not be composed of even the most elementary whole building particles of matter. Metal, though durable, was simply not suited for the proportions on which the probes were designed to operate. What composed them, then, was a substance of experimental novelty, whose uses have only recently begun to supplement the technological arsenal of mankind, *neutrons*. The overwhelming majority of an atom’s space is empty, with a few electrons separated from a dense nucleus that comprises much of the atom’s mass. Should the empty space be eliminated, and the neutral particles – the neutrons – of atoms’ nuclei, be combined together into one continuous mass, the result would be a substance far denser than any atom, and manipulable on a far smaller scale than anything composed of atoms could be. This material would render available the creation of advanced rovers of such miniature dimensions as to easily be able to work with and adjust any individual atom. Of course, the technical means necessary to engineer this are colossal by the standard of any time.

I yearned to gain possession of at least a single probe, to anatomize it, to furnish a blueprint, devise a scheme for mass production, and become the first great purveyor of Immortality. However wealthy and respected I am at present, I realized, I must aim to surpass my present condition by galactic leaps, to rise to the status of a great magnate of science and industry, and to relish my profits in a palace city named in my honor. Yet, alas, in the subatomic age, all my means of capturing and containing the probes were negated. I would need to seize control of the Magnetican society’s master technical interface in order to win what I sought. For the time being, I left the Trenton probes to their routine.

The hysterical outburst of pain emanated through the air surrounding me once again. Its imperiled intensity was moderated by the insulating tyrannometallum of the

door, but, in analyzing the flow of the waves which carried it, I realized that it originated not at some remote periphery, but from straight ahead – which meant, from beyond the opposite portal.

“When those who are judged unfit are taken away, where are they led to?” I inquired of Diana.

“I do not know. I must not know,” she replied grimly. This implied that she had not been *permitted* to know by her overlords.

“I am beginning to suspect a particular destination,” I stated in a tone of uneasy awareness. “I shall attempt to save this human being, for no creature can possess the right to seek her destruction.” I began to pace through the first door and toward the next. “Though I have not the obligation to attend to her welfare, I may still act. Where no authority for the elimination of initiatory physical force exists, the prerogative is mine to destroy the murderer and forge alliances with his victims.” I reached the keyhole, which was substantially wider this time, as if intended for a heavy, unwieldy ceremonial key that served exclusively to allow conduct into the confines beyond.

“Wait, Aurelius,” Claudia tapped me on the shoulder patiently. “Before you rush in, you would do best to recall that a dead man would be of no value to her. Glance through there,” she pointed to the keyhole. “The shadows cast by your hood should render your eyes imperceptible from the other side.”

I nodded and crouched, with my head inclined toward the opening. Claudia’s lockpick snapped into position as she held it determinedly, prepared to wield it when called upon. In the meantime, I initiated my surveillance. The chamber was a jumble of materials and furnishings of varying quality, with lustrous sheets of titanium bordering torn, dented, rusted panels of barely refined iron, which, at some places, gave way to plain unpolished granite. A few unkempt dust-devouring straw rugs lay scattered indiscriminately across a faded marble tile floor, amid which stood a single command panel, extending to one-half of the room’s formidable height, and outfitted with tens of blinking lights, levers, keys, constantly shifting screens, even ner links. An array of plush chairs, each one deserted, stood before this technological display.

But the activity within the room was removed from its center and oriented on a remote, dank, shadow-enclosed corner, in which the outline of a disheveled giant in a ragged white shirt and torn brown trousers sat in shackles on hands and feet, and a gag freshly disengaged from the mouth. In front of him, half-standing, half-crouching, was positioned a greasy-haired midget in a loincloth, one hand brandishing a whip, the other the neck of a writhing, contorted girl down whose spine ran rivers of scarlet.

I was about to avert my eyes from the gruesome scene when the midget whirled about in a flamboyant show of mockery, letting out a garbled snicker which echoed throughout the room. His face briefly came into view before he directed himself at his prisoner once more. Though I had never previously laid eyes upon him in person, his extensively publicized photographs in the mainstream Protectorate press were enough for me to instantly grasp his identity. I had briefly glimpsed into the complexion of the Viscount Conford.

Chapter XV The Inevitable Culmination

“Had enough, Mr. Legard?” the Viscount, or, more properly, the Planner, taunted the bound captive as he unhandedly the girl and pushed her aside. She inhaled heavily in a futile attempt to recover her drained energies.

“These sickening spectacles are what I waged wars against in my youth!” the Protector shouted in return, his voice managing to remain brisk and clear, though evidently enfeebled by deprivation and torment.

“Now, now, let us be more... tolerant of other cultures, shall we?” Conford shifted to a tone of condescending gentleness. “This girl... has lived out her days, in service to the cause she was meant to contribute to.”

“And you reward her with this most dismal of violations! Never in my days as a soldier did any of my comrades-in-arms bayonet those who had cooked their meals or carried their wounded or trained them as recruits. Never in my career as a businessman did any of my clients seek to destroy the concern that rendered their promethium possible, nor to undermine it, nor to restrain its production, nor to ‘equalize’ its profits with those of the rest. Your aim is not, despite your alleged claims, to attain the welfare of others, or else you would have let them alone to pursue their own interests! You would have guaranteed them their rights and demanded that no man serve as another’s sacrificial lamb!” The voice of Mauricius, *Protector Intergalacticus*, was on the verge of an explosion.

“Rights, my, my... that archaic delusion once again,” Conford sighed. “You remind me of a cell that conceitedly leaps up and down and proclaims itself an autonomous entity, entitling itself to rights, while its scope of vision is so narrow and limited that it does not realize itself a mere component of a greater, unified, organic entity without which it would have no aim and no purpose. Complex processes of interaction and task division take place among cells, among organs of a body, but those same processes occur outside it, between various people, to form a totality which lacks no element that the individual organism has. And it does not end even there. For you see, humans, as primeval Nature had intended them to be, must interact with other species in precisely that same way, each cell, each breed of creatures, performing its role to preserve the grand Togetherness of life in equilibrium. But this means that, no more than we can speak of the rights of cells, can we speak of the rights of man. And there are times in the history of any organism when a portion of it becomes irreparably diseased or distorted beyond usage. To prevent the malfeasance from spreading, to save the whole from becoming unduly incapacitated, such tumors must be... removed... by force.” He chuckled.

“You euphemizing fiend!” I heard in reply. “The only entity that can ever be judged as a unit for any considerations of purpose is not such because of any deterministic substance transfers or particle interactions, but because it possesses the only possible prime mover for volitional action – the Mind, the Ego, the Self! No collective can ever come to possess it. No society of men, no matter how tightly bound, can think with one mind, nor walk with the same set of limbs, nor speak a unanimous voice. And no unthinking, reflexive animal, nor any species thereof, can ever ascend to

the condition of rights-bearing entities unless the animals somehow acquire minds themselves.”

“You said, no society of *men* can act as one in perfect harmony. Perhaps you are correct. Perhaps you have identified a glitch that the movement has struggled to fix for centuries. But that little... dilemma... has already been solved... And it seems that one of our principal opponents has given us the means. What a society of men cannot do, a society of Planars can and must. They cannot think with a single mind? What have they to think of? The *quisly* voice thinks for them all. They cannot move with the same set of limbs? What we offer them is even more binding: they cannot competently use their own. Stumbling about, leaving the outcome of their movements to chance and impulse, their pretentious individual minds are at last released of their grasp on their organisms. You think their movements have no purpose, Mr. Legard? Ah, but you forget your own crucial position. There are two elements at play in the universe, causality and volition. The former of these applies to that which lacks the latter. If the absence of purposeful action on the part of cells is accomplished, what remains?” He tapped his whip against the floor. “Why pure mechanistic, predictable, planned *stupor*. Of course, each of these movements affects every other in their process and their results. Creatures collide, food disappears – all as a result of a dynamic, and absolutely foreseeable, interaction of a single, organic collective. They cannot speak with a unanimous voice? What other thoughts can they utter but those which the *quisly* voice had ingrained in them?” Conford shook his head. “You are old-fashioned, man, quite old-fashioned indeed. Rights! Ha!”

Claudia restrained me by the neck when I sought to burst in. Fury was rising within me and heating my cheeks, for I *knew* the perfect rebuttal to Conford’s brazen irrationality; I had witnessed it myself while winning Migstrat’s trust and toleration on the Plain, by observing that, given a genuine devotion to truth, no societal dogmas, ultimatums, or even outright hypnotisms can bar an individual’s way. “There will be time, Aurelius,” Claudia whispered. “For now, he calls the shots—or the whiplashes. Just wait and listen...”

“That you enslave a man does not destroy his claim to humanity. That you reduce him to groveling drudgery does not obliterate the fact that he is a creature capable of dignified free pursuits. That you mangle his eyes and contort his body to suit your longings for an ideally idle, complacent social drone does not eliminate his moral imperative to struggle against, and be rid of, your oppression. And that you have dubbed this girl unfit to live and worthy of the slaughterhouse does not render it so!”

Trembling, half-dazed, the girl crawled toward the Protector and reached out her hand to him, as if he could grant her safety.

The hand instead met Conford’s whip. “Back, you chunk of meat!” he roared. “She likes you, *Your Lordship*,” he pronounced with piercing sarcasm. “Perhaps you can... save her... that is... prolong her pathetic ardor for a little longer. Impregnate her, and I will let her live until the child is born. Then, we will watch with joy as Young Legard – who could have been heir to a fortune, who could have obtained the most magnificent education, the most exquisite refinement, the most prodigious intellect in the universe – turn into just another member of the pack, just another jumping rectangle slurping in the flesh of other jumping rectangles. And, when his time comes, I will serve him to you for dinner, in pieces, cut into a nice salad, at a banquet feast. What do you say? It would be

quite a favor to her, for it is long past time that she should be taken by a waste-disposal droid through the rear gate and be transformed into a bulb herself!”

“I will not violate her rights in order to prevent her rights from being violated! The treatment afforded her, in either case, shall be a more grievous instance of terror and brutalization that the most backward of patriarchal societies had ever inflicted!”

“And I know that you would like to ask, ‘Why?’ Why have we, whose ideological ancestors were the forerunners of the radical feminist movement, who sought to invert the tables and grant women the privileges and superiorities long denied them, transformed women into virtual breeding vehicles? Do you think we care for women’s rights? Check your history, Mr. Legard. Check every other movement that ever contributed to ours. The communists came into power with the promise of plenty for the poor. The result was a famine, claiming millions, engineered by those same communists. They, those faithful disciples of Marx, also promised to employ the state only as a vehicle toward a future anarchic utopia. Yet their purges and restrictions, along with the power of *their* state, became only ever more accepted and entrenched. The hippies, who cried frantically for love, peace, and happiness, brought about instead rape, narcotics, and militant depression. And, of course, as soon as the concept of the lady became obliterated – which it must be if the natural ways are to replace the ways of civilization – it became replaced by promiscuous fleshly lust... natural lust... acceptable lust. An inconsistency, a dichotomy between theory and practice, is it? That is what I would have said to the public. But we are all friends here, aren’t we, Mr. Legard? We will understand each other if we should speak *frankly*. Women’s rights? Ha! That is *your* territory, not ours.”

Conford’s voice cackled again as he wound his whip in a coil around his arm. “Notice the single similarity about all the movements that I mentioned, including environmentalism. Whom, in particular, are their ideologies targeted toward? *Victims*. Not the able, but the disabled; not the joyous, but the suffering. But if the lot of the victims is ameliorated, they cease to be victims, do they not? What use does the ideology have, then? If males are evil for oppressing women, and the government is the benevolent champion of gender equality that shall always grant women their due, what happens once the atavistic roots of machismo are eradicated? The very defenders of the victims, those men – those valiant, progressive thinkers to whom such destitute unfortunates owe the entirety of their prosperity – are left without a job, without a purpose, without the power to affect their victims’ lives in a positive way! And that, if you ask me, is an injustice. So the victim *has* to be victimized in order for the victimization to be combated. And the more victimization occurs, the more intense a combat is necessary; the greater powers can be granted to *us*. This is merely the inevitable culmination of such a development.”

The Protector glared at Conford with volcanic fury. “When men are free and prosperous, the intervention of the government on their behalf is not necessary. Somebody who truly holds their interests in consideration, as a prerequisite to deriving value from them, will *not* allow them to remain chained for purposes of retaining his shepherd status! If he is truly a friend of these men, if he wishes the poor to become productive workers, if he seeks to render gender no obstruction to economic advancement, then he may assist his beneficiaries by non-coercive, individual effort so that they cease, as swiftly as possible, to experience immolation, and become creators

on their own accord – rising, *not* remaining in place, due to the new enforcement of their rights.”

“Ah, but that is so self-centered, Mr. Legard! *You* always expect something out of it, or, even if not expecting it, you get it as a side bonus. You can only be generous and benevolent for *your* sake, *your* commerce, *your* filthy metals and currencies!” The Planner pressed a hand to his mouth, realizing that his temper had begun to slip. “Tut, tut... I am becoming too much like you in demeanor. I shall moderate my tone. You see, I, and the collective of which I am but a cell, do not behave out of those petty egotistical considerations. We are entirely selfless. We assist people not to reap a store of ever-accumulating values from them; we assist them for the sake of assisting them, just as we protect the animals, or the barren crags of the rest of the universe. We do it without any personal consideration whatsoever, as part of our *duty* to the whole, to the collective, to the eternal balance of opposites – of life and death, technology and wilderness, awareness and stupor, Togetherness and Nothingness, kindness... and brutality. For, you see, in your narrow, self-centered, rationally constricted worldview, you do not realize that the synthesis of opposites, their unification into one big picture, one grand concept, one *organic entity*... that is the essence of profound thinking. It is not just a puzzle-type integration as Lao-Tzu’s Daoism portrays it. No, we have progressed into and developed a better-adapted strand of Daoism. Our synthesis is a blend, a mix of every element in the same hodge-podge, in the same non-numerical Oneness, the same Togetherness. So, Mr. Legard, life *is* death, and kindness is... I shall show you, with one of my favorite victims, what kindness is... Stand still, you swine!”

He began to pummel the poor frail girl across the jaw with his fists, hammering in her bone until the breaking point. She continued to sob and gasp with the remnants of her rasping voice, as gashes further distorted her trembling chin. I could no longer bear to passively witness this crusading sadism.

“Claudia, now! Pick the lock, and draw your weapon as soon as we enter!”

“Are you...”

“Yes! Now! Stay here, Diana!” I forgot to whisper. The door snapped open, and Claudia and I sprinted in, rayguns drawn, directed at the Viscount’s spine.

“For a master of stealth, you sure are noisy, Brighton,” Conford responded, turning to face us with his flabby complexion, his eyes as glassy as ever, and as unperturbed.

“This is the Police. You are under arrest for grand treason, kidnapping, subversion, attempted murder, and the actual murder of thousands!” Claudia shouted resolutely.

“It depends on how you define your terms. Is it murder to shed a diseased or defunct flake of one’s skin?” Conford pronounced in rote, lazily, as he shoved the girl in front of him as a hostage shield, performing the oldest, and most demoralizing technique in the book of terror. I had burst in, for I could not stand to perceive with my own eyes as that beast sacrificed to the Nothingness yet another blameless creature. Therefore, to allow her to perish as collateral damage would have defeated the purpose of my intrusion.

But it was Claudia whose concentration and resolve were most interrupted by the Planner's unexpected reaction. "How did you... see past the hood?" she asked cautiously.

"I saw kilometers and kilometers past, to the plain, to the airfield, to the villa where you held Meltridge in your arms... ah, such a poignant spectacle of a romance that could never be, the relationship between an ascetic and a whore!" He snickered with unbearable cynicism. "Do you think that it is only repairs that the Trenton probes are capable of doing? Think again. A trillion such minions, each carrying a particle, can assemble – and disassemble – any system of surveillance on the spot, with none of your obstructions serving as any hindrance. I knew of your every move and every design, of the futile wriggling of ants struggling to fathom that which is forever beyond their grasp – that which they were not *meant* to learn, much less understand. So I let you put on your show – though, if you had been more careful, if you had prodded more into my mind and less into your laughable heroics, you would have noticed my... influence... before it noticed you even more. Did the most formidable Elder of the Planar community just *happen* to appear below the observation tower for you to witness his death? The *quisly* voice is an actual voice. It can give commands. You figured that out, remember? *Whose* voice do you think it is?"

He shook his head wildly to dissipate our apparent expectations. "No, not the inferior, rigid, cutting voice of the male, but rather a tone far more soothing and reassuring, almost lulling the Common Classes into their self-abnegation." He paused to allow us a moment to mentally process his hint. "It is that of your sister, Mr. Legard, the new Lady Protectress. Ha! You were not aware of *that* fact, were you, Dr. Meltridge? As the implementation of the voluminous martial-law declaration – the fulfillment of its every minute provision to the letter – occupied an immense span of time for those unoriginal enforcers, Fighterson and Copterland, the Ministry acted first. All that was needed was a pretext to seize power, the creation of a *vacuum* thereof, and the employment of a certain informant – a trustworthy man, of course – a man who had been essential in the very drafting of the declaration itself, to accuse those two peons of engineering the Protector's abduction. And, with the Sentries' leader away on a pivotal mission to Magnetica, and the Guards firmly under Nersmith's command, whose was the only credible party able to put a halt to the riots?" He grinned profusely, while clutching his hostage's neck, as if intending to snap it.

"This is usurpation!" The Protector screamed. "First, your lot removed my most competent officers – the Minister of Exploration and Colonization, the loyal Sentries, and the Assembly Delegates – then you proceeded to smear my partners in government, and now..."

"We have risen up the hierarchical ladder. It is the inevitable culmination, *Mr. Legard*. Oh, what praises and hopes are currently being propounded in your name!"

"For the purpose of retaining me in this abysmal cellar!"

"Now, now, Mr. I-became-Protector-by-military-coup-d'état; it is your turn to experience the... transition... on the receiving end. How did Frederick feel? Tell me that. How did he feel when you burst into his palace, waving the warrant for your arrest in his face, crumpling it before his eyes, then instructing your lapdog private army to exile him onto a desert planet?"

“Frederick was employing his position to commit acts of criminal expropriation and political assassination!”

“What is *crime*? Crime is a merely relative term, defined by the subjective perceptions of the society at large. And, although, in its more imperfect variants, every member of the society cannot be adjusted to the same perception, there does exist an organ which is symbolic of, and, to a large extent, conducive to, the collective will and the collective definition at large – the government. The government – the shepherd of society and the keeper of the balance – is what defines the nature and essence of crime. As the will of the collective is fluid, malleable, and dynamic, the definitions, too, change with a shift in government. What is a crime one day ceases to be a crime the next, and the fundamental principle of criminal law is, once again, something that your futile reason-bound epistemology cannot fathom or sympathize with: *retroactivity*. So you are a seditious rebel. Nachtreiter is guilty of species genocide. Orthog has violated the thousands of new regimenting statutes to be enacted a year after his last day in the Ministry. Dr. Meltridge is an eco-criminal, his wife is a vicious propagandist disturbing the peace, and V. C. Rovercraft is a slanderer and libeler. And you, Miss Brighton, are hereby found guilty of high treason against the State!” He erupted with feverish giggling. “You think that you have me cornered, do you? You think that this miserable maggot in front of me is the only safeguard against my arrest?” He kicked the girl in the stomach and threw her aside. “Guards!”

A squadron of spearmen emerged through the seemingly solid walls. “Holography. I should have figured,” Claudia whispered with tense frustration. Almost half-heartedly, she directed her raygun at them and prepared to advise them to freeze in place for their own good. But Conford’s security contingent had not been limited to the spearmen. From behind the primitively-armed locals, ten silk-clad, raygun-wielding Ministry Guards, masked like the one we had disabled, flew into the center of the room and formed a narrower ring around us.

“Drop your weapons!” A metallic shout emanated from one of them. To my immense disgruntlement, Claudia complied. Despite the tightness of her mouth and the lines of mental strain on her forehead, she had given up the fight in complacent resignation.

Then a quiet voice, unheard anywhere else, caressed my ears. “Do not worry, Aurelius. Do as they say.” Claudia smiled restrainedly, as her hood ceased to obstruct her face, and the tip of her little finger, masterfully barred from anyone else’s view but mine, pointed toward the doorway.

I realized that Diana was still outside the encirclement. The same means by which Claudia had communicated with me was possible... with her.

“Take them away!” Conford hollered. “Into separate cells, mind you! Now, *Your Ex-Lordship*,” he addressed the Protector with sarcastic patronization once again, “I am sure you would be thrilled to learn of all the work that goes into maintaining our infrastructure, of the computerized stuperia valve-activation systems that are incorporated into every orb, of the hidden wormholes and wormcables spanning galaxies so as to enable your illustrious sister to rule this province from her bedroom, and, of course, of the probes themselves... Ah, the probes... They could have been used for so much more, you must be thinking. Even an advocate of equilibrium could have used them to secure immortality for his subjects and prohibit further reproduction.

But no, Mr. Legard, remember that, to preserve the social-engineering capacity of the planners, victims are needed, always, constantly... And remember to keep asking questions, many, many questions, about the elements that contribute to the perfection of our system. This is classified information I am revealing to you, but I am certain that it will shatter your convictions of the evils of a centrally planned society. For, the moment you cease asking, that girl dies!"

Chapter XVI The Trenton Expedition

July 25, 2753,

Sheer blackness surrounded me for the incalculable hours that I was forced to idle away, recognizing consciously, and attempting to dwell on, the remote hope of my rescue. Yet the mood of my ambience was directly opposed to any prospect of liberation. In the dreary dark, I had as little a use for eyes as I had had for ears during the interludes of silence in the tyrannometallum hallway. I could see not even the grisly black solid door through which I had been shoved, and which had been bolted shut from the outside. I could not observe the dimensions of the cell, nor the precise locations of the restraints which inhibited every slightest twitch of my muscles.

“Is...” I heard a faint, collapsed, hoarse croaking, somewhere close. *Another prisoner!*

“Yes,” I replied with surprising strength and briskness. “Dr. Aurelius Meltridge, Magnetic Expedition.”

“So they caught another...” he coughed profusely, “expedition...did they not?” He groaned in the manner of a man on the final verges of senility. “Geoffrey Trenton... Pleased to meet you.”

“Trenton! How could you be...” I was thunderstruck by the identity of my new cell mate.

“I am dead... I know... I have been dead for sixty years. A nice smooth... tombstone... they made for me. I wonder what is left of it now... shattered... gone and forgotten. When you want people... to forget a man, declare him dead. Declare his accomplishments a great marvel of the past, a part of history, from which... a society needs to move on... into a new era *not* involving him. Spew eulogies into his coffin and seal his legacy shut... while telling, a day later, those who attended the funeral that he had never existed... that he was not human enough to exist... ‘human’ – meaning moderate, apathetic, statistically prevalent, idle, mediocre. And then you can enslave him for eternity.”

“But why had they permitted you to survive nevertheless? They kill subjects ten times younger, whom they determine to have outlasted their purpose.”

“Because... I will never outlast mine. They cannot... function without me. Sure, they have the probes that... I manufactured... before they closed down my factories and hid their traces. Sure, they have the computers that I designed... that serve as a central control interface for the probes. Sure, they have the blueprints for my communication equipment... But they could never use it... Not on their own... Not with their savage-like epistemology and technical incompetence. They merely desire to engineer society... not aware of how true engineering is done. No, it is not their genius that created the beast that imprisoned us. I must say,” he shifted to an even fainter and grimmer tone, “that it is mine. And to maintain it in their ‘desirable equilibrium,’ they must beseech me daily, at spear-point, to perform tasks of maintenance... to eradicate glitches... to supervise the manufacture of stuperia by mindless drones. But they cannot let me become too proud about it. So they have... apprehended my biological aging at its final stage, where the only factor that keeps me tottering in the balance... is one of my own design. I am

immortal, you see, but not by right. I am immortal by permission. They have the controls, and have already been taught how to withdraw the probes... The moment I cease to do their bidding, I am done for. And I want to live... Oh, how I want to live!"

"But what had plunged you into slavery to their like?" I inquired. "*You* were the initiator and head of your expedition, you arranged for the first settlement of Magnetica, you invented the Trenton rovers prior to your bondage. What would cause you to bow before the most grotesquely irrational monstrosities produced by history?"

"I suppose I should reveal my account from... the beginning... and tell you what is not heard... or known...at home. My expedition departed on its final westward journey, containing in a single spaceship that equipment whose utility most pioneers underestimate... My retinue of private security and my squadron of tanks and rovers were all contained within that ship, which carried, within the claw that I had invented, a factory adapted to the creation of further defensive installments. I may have been wealthy, Doctor, but I was not omnipotent... I could not devote any more of my resources to defense, nor did I think myself needy of that service. Alas, my expectations had been upset by an accomplice of great proximity to me, my own third-cousin, Darius Rammings. Both of us were descended from the Viscounts of Conford, who had risen to prominence by developing a safe bastion for American researchers and intellectuals during the tribal chaos of the twenty-second century. Darius himself was of a family line elder to mine, and thus had inherited the centuries-old Conford fortune, which had been magnified even by his father, Xenophon, the twenty-first Viscount, by a series of prudent investments and business acquisitions. Among Xenophon Rammings's most fruitful and long-sighted decisions had been to invest heavily in the burgeoning enterprise of his third-nephew, myself."

Trenton laughed feebly, with whatever energy his drained state permitted him to expend. "That was years before, of course, back in 2645, when I was still young and relatively unknown. By the time of the Argenta affair, Xenophon was an aged and chronically ill man, with a negligent only son who preferred the sophistries of Felix Dortkampf to the intricacies of financial management. Xenophon died shortly before the inception of my expedition in 2681, and, in his will, permitted Darius to inherit the Conford fortune only under the condition that no less than ninety percent of it remain invested at all times. So Darius, not by his own effort, nor by his father's particular like of him – merely due to Xenophon's desire to retain the accumulations of his life and intellect intact – became inextricably bound to vast vaults of wealth. He was critical of my enterprise from the start, joining the hordes of denouncers who condemned it either for its alleged impracticality – that is, for the fact that it had never been tried before – or for my alleged 'selfish cowardice,' due to my refusal to allow my factories to be incinerated by enemy shells and spaceship beams. Yet some one-fourth of the money within my expedition's coffers was invested in his name, and he could not touch it. Realizing this, he altered his course and lulled me into permitting him to partake in the expedition by purchasing additional materiel and recruiting willing personnel. I had genuinely believed, for a period of months, that Darius was a changed man, that he had at last put his funds to use of his own accord and discovered the value of productive work. He had even dropped the smear campaign against my venture and officially renounced any affiliation with Dortkampf's underground following of disciples. He became my logistics advisor and was entrusted with an expansive array of tools,

including weaponry and explosives. He enjoyed the highest level of access on the military ship, especially. Ah... back then I had quite the taste for publicity. I was so immensely proud of my accomplishment that I wished for the entire universe to witness its glories. Whenever I conducted broadcasts of my expedition's progress, the entirety of my activity on that day would revolve around coordinating and actualizing the event. I had not the time to personally attend to the soundness of vehicular upkeep procedures, and my logistics advisor, along with his subordinates, was delegated that responsibility." He paused, sighing with disillusionment.

"Now, you are well aware that a catastrophe of some sort had occurred during the fifth and final broadcast," Trenton continued. "What you do not know is what caused it to occur, nor what its consequences were. After the security ship was incinerated, the aftermath of the explosion produced a tide of electromagnetic impulses that disabled all of the expedition's more advanced long-range communication equipment. Over fifty men perished in that ship, but Darius Rammings and the entirety of the officers whom he had interviewed into my hire happened to be conveniently off-board at the time. Rammings, upon being summoned into my office, issued a most deferential apology, blaming a killed technician for poorly attending to the electrical wiring in the ship –which, he reported, was responsible for the escape of a spark and the inception of a fire instantly magnified a millionfold by the flammable fuels of the vehicles and automatons within. His fault, he had informed me, was not to have exercised sufficient oversight in regard to the purportedly negligent technician. A crippling blow was dealt to my infrastructure, and I would remain virtually without arms upon arrival at my new colony."

"Did Rammings..." I was interrupted.

"Now, now, let us not get ahead of ourselves. I shall reveal my knowledge in the order that I had attained it, lest I establish myself worthy of condemnation as a fool before I win your sympathy. We arrived on Magnetica in January of 2682. The factories were planted into the ground and began to operate in full swing, pumping out resources without dallying a single day. The hills east of here..."

"The Metallic Hills."

"Yes, if you wish, the Metallic Hills, were excavated to their innermost depths, with my mining infrastructure exceeding even the pace of processing. Within a year, we turned the hills inside out, and chunks of precious metals of all sorts just lay there, invitingly, for my droids to pick them up. Routes to the homeland, alas, were commercially infeasible due to the colossal distances and wormhole expenditures involved. The trip to Magnetica had already consumed half my fortune, not even considering that dire explosion that incinerated another fifth. So I resolved to settle on Magnetica, and, by the efforts of my own labor, establish a self-sufficient settlement, fertilize the soil, introduce flora and fauna, and construct a metropolis of tyrannometallum. Keep in mind that all of this happened seventy years ago, when tyrannometallum was indeed the king of metals, the most novel and durable of alloys. I had been churning it out in quantities that would belittle all the homeland industrialists' outputs combined. And I created for myself the ultimate headquarters, furnished entirely out of that shimmering black fortress-fabric of Nature's conquerors, engraved with monumental reliefs that spanned one's field of vision, the sky, and beyond. I have, in my later inspections of this gang's computers, once or twice spotted spy photographs of your new Protector's residence. It is a toy compared to the Grand Sentinel Tower, with

its sparkling walkways open to the sun, its columned galleries with kilometer-long tinted windows, its thousands of offices, processing units, game parlors, libraries, art galleries, salons, and my observatory at the pinnacle of it all – thirty-five kilometers above the foundation – with an ebony telescope reaching up toward the stars, near which I would sit, repose in my massive black-draped armchair, and gaze with supreme satisfaction over all that was below, over my rightful domain, and all that was above, which would soon become mine as well.”

He sighed with an even deeper nostalgia. “Alas, poor fool that I was! That which destroyed me was no great calamity of Nature; she had bowed compliantly to my supremacy. It was a pest at my very feet, whom I had, even since the explosion, deemed harmless at worst. While I was busy molding the world of matter, Rammings was up to another, more subtle task. He would mold the minds of my fellow colonists, tactfully, indirectly, through a network of rumor-spreaders and hooligans, muckrakers and lobbyists. I was oblivious to it, of course, and my personal press dismissed the accusations with illustriously rational rebuttals that seemed to satisfy everyone but the slanderers themselves. Oh, I was accused of a myriad of offenses, from the ancient charge of egotistical greed, to vulgar materialism, to relentlessness, to grabbing too large a slice of the ‘economic pie,’ to the new environmental rubbish of increasing the likelihood of a Spontaneous Planetary Explosion due to the ‘immense mass’ that Grand Sentry Tower purportedly added to Magnetica’s crust. But I had never considered these assaults anything but desperate verbal lunging by a lunatic fringe. Nor had I endeavored to replace the lost military infrastructure; two security guards were sufficient for me. For the most outstanding portion of my funds by far was devoted to reforming the very crust of the entire planet just as I had done earlier with the Metallic Hills. By the time of the Tower’s completion in 2685, I was already immersed in shaping landscapes and climates – tundra here, icecaps there, plateaus and volcanic craters a kilometer away. Each of these would, with some assistance from the chemical and physical catalysts and triggers that I employed, yield a resource that this planet previously had not possessed – a rare mineral, a crop, animal tissue (yes, I did manage to introduce, for a fleeting period of time, several domestic breeds here), and, even the best elements from which neutrons could be harvested.”

Trenton thus affirmed my initial suppositions. “Yes, neutrons, pressed together into an unprecedented new form of matter, which even now circulates through my organism. Being fantastically prosperous, materially endowed beyond any further want, and in possession of the cream of universal minds in my employ, I was prepared to tackle the task of the ages – to demolish the wall that had intercepted, blunted, dissolved Man’s radiant outcry of his will to live. I would shrink nanotechnology itself, and expand the domain of Man into the tiniest of conceivable spaces, more minuscule than even the atom itself. Focusing without reprieve or distraction on that task for years (which had led to mounting rumors of my asceticism), struggling with a dilemma where I could resort to no reference or precedent, being led astray many more times than not in the labyrinth of trial and error, I, at last, in 2691, produced the first Trenton probe. Under the strictest secrecy (for one does not release to the public a product of such sorts until its introduction becomes irreversible and irresistible, so that no whim of the retrograde, or the terrorist, would be able stifle it) I designed, this time with only my own effort, a series of automatons for the undertaking of the probes’ mass production in a

clandestine factory within the depths of Magnetican rock. As the machines, to my greatest exuberance, began to yield a prodigious output, I was oblivious to the fact that the political situation in the general colony had been altered dramatically, almost inverted, during those six years of my self-imposed seclusion. I had long since distanced myself from Darius, who had consequently lapsed back into his prior lifestyle of lavish social feasts coupled with environmental lore. Yet, he remained my logistics advisor, and I once called on him to plan the distribution of a routine tyrannometallum shipment on the market. He wrote me a scathing, 'offended' letter of refusal, spewing out openly, and rather confrontationally, all of the falsehoods that he had half-concealed during the past decade. I arranged for all the proper procedures regarding that shipment myself, while severing all contact with Rammings and continuing to be immersed in the next stage of my project, the application of the Trenton probes. I needed to design an advanced computerized interface, compatible with and able to be inserted into the human brain, so that every one of the probes' possessors would be able to monitor and repair or alter any part of his organism at will. This was to become a colossal medical leap which would, in the overwhelming majority of instances, render every man his own doctor and the sentinel of his own immortality. I confided in a few older scientists of the nature of my intent, and they assisted me with diligence – for which feat they are currently long dead and forgotten, just as I am, except that, when the alternative was offered to them, they selected their peril in a heap of mangled corpses rather than in my eternal bondage. But now *I* am getting ahead of myself, is that not so?"

He coughed in order to regain his fading voice. "Another year spent in underground research centers – with the affairs of the Grand Sentinel Tower delegated to some of my more *competent* subordinates – and a prototype was devised. It was not yet affirmed with unflinching certainty that it would not malfunction when incorporated into a human being, so another intelligent test subject was required. For that end, I created, out of an entirely synthetic genome – manufacturing which I had already been quite adept at – the very first Planar. I did not taint him with the stuperia orbs, as was done in later years. No, this creature was to be free and fully capacitated, with sight sharper than a hawk's and a mental processing mechanism to match. Ha! For all I know, they still have not caught him. I have imbued him with a stealth coat of probes that can instantly rearrange themselves over his skin in order to ward off any surveillance device. I let him out into the open, hoping that I would, as he matured, become able to teach him of the means by which he could control every single element of his person. But, alas, that endeavor I would not be able to attend to..."

"The first Planar that you designed... did he come into being sixty years ago, in 2693?" I inquired, suddenly recalling an essential fact.

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"I have met him. He is currently my partner in the Expedition, an inventor and surgeon of superb talents. Magnus is his name."

"Ah, Magnus... 'the Great...' Perhaps, despite his species, he can be considered my only true son, the only one of my creations that has ever been impervious to dictatorial impositions. I wish I could come into contact with him instead of rotting in this dank underworld..."

"You shall." I replied, resolutely, amassing all the strength of my voice that, despite my pervasive and all-restraining shackles, I could muster.

“Confident young man, hoping in the face of insurmountable adversity and treachery,” Trenton replied with a sigh, “I used to be like you, even when I was twice, thrice your age. But what befell me could easily claim you as well, and then what recourse will you have? What means will you possess to reclaim this radiant ambition of yours for a future that does not exist? I am disappointing you, am I not? Well, if that is your response, I can sympathize with it. On with my account. Two days after Magnus’s release, when he was still not even skilled in the rudiments of speech, I strolled toward Grand Sentinel Tower for a solitary cup of coffee and an hour of repose in the observatory. Barring my entrance to the building was a hostile mob of thousands, the majority of the colony (most of whom, I realized later, had been initially selected for settling it by Darius Rammings). The knowledge of what they brandished was like a raygun blast to my chest; they carried weapons, flailing them about like barbarians. Yes, they were weapons of a most primitive sort, not one more advanced than a musket, but – with virtually no defensive or offensive equipment available to oppose them – they could, and did, overrun the entire colony. I found the entirety of my non-concealed factories in ruins, torn to shreds by the vandals’ rage. In some places the metal withstood their pummeling, in testament to my engineering ability. But my productive capacity was ruined. I promptly fled into the tower and barred all possible doors. While the mob was wreaking havoc outside, I hoped to withstand their siege and begin to manufacture rayguns and artillery to retaliate against their wanton acts of savage invasion. With my two security guards and several still-loyal employees who happened to be inside, I had hoped to hold out for months. Alas, my triumph was not to be. Eight years earlier, when the tower was under construction, it was Darius Rammings whom I had commissioned to arrange for the shipment of tyrannometallum doors and ensure that their locks and reinforcing mechanisms were of the standard that I had explicitly communicated to him. And, during the advent of the Magnetican night, Rammings was called upon by the rebels, whom he had initially aroused to protest against my ‘usurpation and monopolization of the colony’s limited resources and intelligence,’ to assist in their hitherto futile attempts to gain entry. An hour later, when I and my associates were only beginning to assemble the weapons-production mechanisms, doors snapped open on all sides, and a squadron of Rammings’s ‘commandos,’ the forerunners of what would devolve into the current Tunnel Guards, began to press in with bayonets at the ready, demolishing and desecrating every bit of machinery in their path. The twenty-second Viscount Conford then sprinted into the din and hassle to capture six helpless, disarmed ‘enemies of the people’ and commanded the murder of all but me on the spot. ‘The same fate will await you,’ he spoke, his voice permeated with raging vengeance, ‘if you do not henceforth serve us forevermore.’ Frightened and trembling, yet still possessed by the desire to live – a longing which is so fundamental that it constitutes the root of the convictions of him who has it, and becomes impossible to renounce under any circumstances – I consented. The next day, I was declared officially dead while being tortured to reveal the locations of my secret laboratories and manufacturing centers. My colleagues had posed quite a hindrance to the rebels, employing what they could – slabs of metal, robotic arms, even primitive formations of Trenton probes gathering into spears, darts, or mere obstructions. Yet they were no match for the overbearing firepower of Rammings’s now reinforced gang. What was not ‘reunited with the earth’ was unscrupulously hoarded, as I was instructed, under the

point of a bayonet, to render it functional once more – *somehow* – for a purpose that suited their new – or should I say ancient, for they had inherited it from millennia of depraved totalitarian thinkers? – scheme for social engineering.”

“And they were able to demolish every bit of your expedition’s visible traces on the surface, including the Grand Sentinel Tower?” I inquired, baffled, confounded, and frightened at Trenton’s recounting of the power of evil to level and eradicate from memory even the most profound and persistently pursued of human aspirations.

“My friend, the Grand Sentinel Tower is where we are located right now.”

My eyes widened. He did not perceive this, of course, yet he must have presumed a similar reaction due to the pause which served as my only response.

“They sealed off every portion of it but the bottommost floor – this place here, which they expanded, in their haphazard, brute-force, mass pick-wielding approach, into the remainder of the tunnel network – a scheme that later proved too ambitious for them when their lack of engineering precautions led to one of the tunnels’ collapse and thus the inherent limitations of living space here. But this did not concern them in the slightest. ‘Every natural creature’s habitat is constricted within narrow limits which the population must utilize with great conservation,’ they told the remainder of the colony, whom they began to settle in what they made instead of the perfectly suitable living space that they had blocked off. While the agricultural produce rotted in the field with no one to harvest it, starvation began to set in. Did this trouble Rammings and the social engineers? No. ‘The population here has exceeded equilibrium,’ they declared. ‘This is just Nature’s way of eliminating the excess that can never be sustained in a balanced environment.’ Instead, they directed me to what would become my most painstaking task: the nullification of the most prominent symbol of my accomplishment, the flooding of Grand Sentinel Tower with rivers of rock and sand, extracting which a thousand men and the remainder of the colony’s machines were destroyed. Then, I was forced to coordinate for another thousand slave laborers to hack at the heap’s surface and create cliffs and crags for the purposes of rendering a more ‘naturalistic’ appearance. I asked them, as would have you, why it was in their interests to eliminate the last vestiges of civilized habitation on Magnetica, when control of the latter could have magnified their own power. ‘Our motives are entirely selfless,’ they responded. And they were correct. The fact became apparent to me that their autocracy would never have lingered in the face of an advanced technological society of plenty, prosperity, and privacy, that – to maintain their standard of living – the people would turn to men of innovation and endorse their mentality, that an inescapable revolt of reason would be brewing in the minds of men elevated to Apollonian ingenuity and Herculean strength by the act of their conquest of the elements. It was creation itself, and its visible consequences, that the ‘reformers’ needed to abolish, and as swiftly as possible, too. They exhibited absolutely no selfish motives in their ruthless campaign of annihilation. They sought no comforts, no luxuries, no refinements. They took pleasure in the destruction itself, in the shattering of a structure over which men had labored at drafting consoles, in machine factories, on delivery routes. The destroyers crushed and buried everything, with a hyena-like grin at the crumbling of prosperity’s supports. Or they would find their satiation in the rape of women or the driving of young men into tasks of absolutely useless and inconsequential labor just for the pleasure of seeing them squirm under the whip. ‘This was how men had lived for the majority of humankind’s existence,’ they

claimed to justify it. ‘Only in the past millennium did Western civilization with its capitalistic delusions disrupt the natural hierarchies and structures of social relationships.’ As soon as the Mount Sentry project was completed, they poured my mind into another vessel and set me on the task of designing the *Planus nonvisualis* and arranging for the transformation of human newborns into those aimless, blind self-sacrificers. To render the eradication of the colony final, they, in the meantime, turned their eyes to the ‘cleansing’ of what had once been their home – the ruins of the Magnetican settlement, at the pinnacle of which the Grand Sentinel Tower had once so gloriously stood. They salvaged an old glass plant and sent, using my planning, a pipeline into the valley where the city of Trentonia had once thrived. Then, they, in a last frenzy of mechanized production, flooded the valley with molten silicon and thus finalized the imperative to move underneath the new Mount Sentry into the ‘Togetherness of Eden,’ as they called it. They permitted me to send probes, instead of men, to smooth the mound of glass that had formed into the Plain you encounter today, which was to be reserved only for the Unseeing Flat Ones, who would be allowed to know naught about the humans manipulating them, and about whom the humans would know little more than the fact that some undefined ‘Common Classes’ existed above ground. Rammings’s support, by this time, had been sapped from under him. Even the conformists who had been lulled by his theoretical rhetoric realized, by the evidence of their eyes, the fact that they were being enslaved, and gratuitously so. By reference to an earlier era of liberty and plenty, they began to grumble and even organize circles for ‘counterrevolution.’ Darius realized that, as long as the past remained clearly in retrospect, eliciting an unconditional following from his subjects would be impossible – hence, my friend, the reason for the mass breeding and Communal Upbringing infrastructure. Children would be severed from contact with their parents, unaware even of who their fathers had been. They would not be enlightened as to the legacy their ancestors had... and renounced. Instead, the females would spend years reciting the Three Virtues and enforcing them within themselves and others, no matter what detriment they would cause. As for the males, Darius recognized the inherent dissatisfaction and the spirit of rebellion that would be aroused within them, were they told that they were mere fertilization machines who were kept alive for no more but their duty to the collective. He wished to reduce their presence to a minimal amount, and thus the majority of them were transfigured into Planars upon birth. Those that remained behind were not educated at all; it was hoped that their drive for knowledge would be extinguished if they were allowed to roam and play raucous games with their equally ignorant peers, if they were to exhaust themselves of any aspiration by engaging – until they came ‘of age’ – in constant, unrelenting, and oft purposeless ‘team activities,’ with no time for reflection, exploration, and, most importantly, *solitude*. You, Doctor, of all people, would know what happens to a boy’s mind when you leave him alone.”

“If every boy had wielded his mind at least as frequently as his legs, dictatorship would be impossible,” I replied.

“Precisely. But with the first new generation, Rammings’s scheme for the erasure of ‘collective memory’ was actualized. Immersed in the world of routine, commands, and joyless debauchery, those who formed the ‘adult’ population by 2705 (with their parents long dead of malnutrition and excruciating labor – another safeguard to prevent them from passing dangerous knowledge on to their offspring) were oblivious even to the

Coup of 2693, and the very existence once of a society that was even slightly different from theirs, not to mention diametrically opposite. And they were in fact only a transitional group, quite fortunate compared to their descendants. Their life expectancy was in the thirties, as food rations were more generous then; Rammings had still not managed to annihilate the entire stockpile left over from the agricultural age. But by 2720 the food crisis had become dire, and Rammings rejected one farming plan after another, arguing against 'an undue exploitation of the Wilderness's rightful land.' This was the time when the intoxication of stuporia had begun to set in with the oldest of Planars, and Rammings decided to 'put their deaths to use' by turning their carcasses into our food supply. Of course, it was not he who had engineered the food bulbs. Whereas it was advantageous for the regime to permit men to die as early as the first signs of exhaustion and physical wear began to set in (which was progressively earlier with every passing generation), it was important for a relatively long-lived and vast Planar population to exist to guarantee a constant inflow of sustenance, so that Rammings' quest for a 'self-sustaining society that does not depend on harvesting anything from the external world' could be fulfilled. In the culmination of his selflessness, Darius, perishing in 2729 from a rot fungus that had infiltrated his intestines and could have been easily cleansed in a technological society of six centuries earlier, urged for me to transform his corpse into a food bulb so that he could 'return to the cycle' and live out the inevitable end result of his social scheme. The powers of the Planner passed, not surprisingly, to his young son, Alaric, the current Viscount Conford. Alaric was the only male of his generation to be raised with any semblance of literacy, which he directed at a dogmatic pursuit of environmentalist texts, becoming a more consistent enforcer thereof than his father. Of course, not even with the elaborate maintenance schemes toward which he drove me, could he maintain a level of 'stability' within the Togetherness. Food was chronically lacking, despite the now intricately planned *quisly* system. The tunnels were crumbling ever closer to the living quarters, and I alone, in my senility, could not but temporarily hold back the entire network's collapse and the burial of all its denizens under the final rubble heap of Luddism. For, no matter what their preachings embraced and attempted to actualize, a perfectly static society is impossible. A system which does not expand outward must collapse on itself. Or, in the words of Goethe, 'That which moves not forward, goes backward.'"

"Indeed," I affirmed.

"Of course – given their vehement hatred of progress, their willingness to sacrifice everything to the barren wilderness just so that man would not reap and refine nature's fruits as he pleased – when faced with a choice between advancement and decay, the Planner and the Councilors chose decay. And they would have received their due, were it not for an evening in the summer of 2731, when an autowing crash-landed on Magnetica's soil. Its pilot was a solitary young woman of a fit and well-nourished physique and a fascinating range of sophisticated skills."

"Anne-Marie Legard." I pronounced her name with the realization of how all this had come to be.

"Yes, it was she. None of her like had, of course, ever been known by the denizens of the Togetherness. So, when she, by a peculiar technique of tracking inter-computer communications, discovered our 'community,' she sought refuge within it until she could repair her craft, which had been separated from her latest expedition in the

maze of an asteroid belt east of Magnetica. All of the citizens were awed by her presence and believed her to be an otherworldly goddess. Who else could have been, in their minds, so flawlessly healthy when rotting bulbs were the only food ever known to them? The young Conford would have quelled their enthusiasm for her presence – as a distraction from their ‘duties to the Togetherness,’ which he had only allowed reluctantly at first – had he not become infatuated with her even more than they. He would invite her into his command headquarters and employ tens of slaves to provide her with a semblance of the food and shelter she had enjoyed within the Intergalactic Protectorate. It was then that Conford was informed of the nature of that civilization outside Magnetica, from which he had vaguely known himself to be descended. Despite his most lavish attempts to entertain her, it was Anne-Marie who gave him far more than he could have ever envisioned: a reunion with the homeland, a covert channel of communication and transportation between the two worlds which was devised – at the cost of another surge of mass starvation – using my and her planning, the futile manual grunt-work of a hundred men, and the far more efficient operation of the droids that had accompanied her on the autowing. In those moments, when I had been able to speak with her alone, I inquired of her impressions in regard to the Togetherness of Eden. Her first replies bordered on pity. She stated that ‘these are good people thrust into malevolent circumstances, and it will take a considerable effort for them to rise out.’ She mentioned that she had colonized more desolate planets than this, and that she was already devising a scheme for doing so on Magnetica within her mind. But her greatest fascination by far was with the probes. Due to her influence I had, for the first time in thirty-eight years, been allowed leisure for hours at a time on any given day during which she wished to study. I needed to correct her errors with astounding rarity; she showed a keen capacity for inference, derivation, and integration of data. A glimmer of hope had lit within me that, perhaps, with her continuing presence, Conford would be swayed to abandon the course of stagnation and decay. Perhaps, I allowed myself to hope, the probes would be implemented for their most ambitious purpose, and an age of unprecedented expansion would begin, during which the tyranny of the Planner and the Togetherness would be swept aside by the currents of change. But if Anne-Marie spent substantial time in my company, she devoted twice that to the Viscount and what *he* had to teach. Though she was chiefly responsible for his refinement in manners, oratorical abilities, and the range of his vocabulary, it was he who spearheaded her theoretical education. As a result he became a tactful, pleasant-veneered shyster and she—a brilliant but tragically and willfully misguided environmentalist. She has always been fascinated with landscapes, animals, fauna, and food chains, but, prior to her evenings with the Viscount, they had been to her merely intriguing objects of study, knowledge of which was conducive to a larger purpose: the settlement of a planet, the domestication of a herd, the genetic modification of creatures for man’s use and consumption. Yet, by the early months of 2732, when she was already able to covertly travel back and forth between one of her private residences (later to become the headquarters of the Collegium of Frontier Conservation, which was planned within these very halls) and the tunnels of Eden, when I asked her the same question – whether or not she was satisfied with her host society – she replied that she had ‘come to grasp the immense intrinsic value of what the Planner and his associates seek to preserve, and the need to surrender certain material comforts for its sake.’ She was no longer critical

of Conford's management and began to offer slightly more sophisticated and veiled justifications of his course than Conford himself had in his efforts to indoctrinate his own people. I realized that Anne-Marie was manufacturing theories targeted toward a more intellectual and more technologically advanced audience. And I shuddered with fright when projecting mentally the consequences of her success."

"Did your personal interaction suffer as a result?" I asked.

"How could it not? We drifted apart until I was once again plunged to the level of Conford's full-fledged slave, and she, with her promises of Protectorate aid and a foreign market for the Viscount's brand of collectivism, became his ventriloquist master. In 2736, a vast refurbishing of the tunnels and bulb-mitosis scheme was coordinated, following a colossal influx of funds and machinery from... elsewhere. This just *happened* to coincide with Anne-Marie's thrilled announcement of the formation of an agency for 'environmental safeguarding,' to be funded by the government of her brother."

"So the Collegium of Frontier Conservation was merely a shell society designed to channel money to the Togetherness of Eden!" I grasped the implication with outrage. "This was performed for a twofold purpose: to retard the society's imminent collapse and to popularize its dogma in the remainder of the settled universe!"

"How much did it cost to support a library of a few moth-eaten tomes and a couple of assistant secretaries, compared to the money that flowed into the Collegium's coffers? Yes, the primary launching arm of the revolt in your capital was based here. The members of the Council at that time became its key organizers, let out into civilized society with forged documents and family histories to ward off suspicion of their genuine origins. I helped structure the Universe's most intricate and evasive spy network, the surveillance systems that could be formed and dissolved at the slightest command – all rendered possible by my poor probes, held in as inextricable a bondage to that evil as I. Gradually, an underground communication infrastructure was added, which rendered possible seemingly disjoint circles of Green and Barren conspirators acting in 'organic' unison. The leaders of Eden had come to enjoy Protectorate luxury and the expansion of their following, spending ever greater amounts of time in Legardium and the Academic Cities, while the near-entirety of the routine maintenance of these tunnels was delegated to me, assisted sometimes by the more intelligent girls whom Conford had periodically picked out to be his mates and housekeepers – disposing of them in the usual manner when his fancy grew bored with them. And this is what I have been immersed in most recently, thrust into tasks of ever mounting monotony, while isolated from the political developments whose groundwork I helped lay. And they feared me all that time, even during my most unquestioning service. They were afraid that I, as the only competent wielder of the technology which I had handed over into their effacing use, would become possessed by a change of mind as capricious as theirs had oft been. They dreaded the possibility that I would, at the expense of my own life, demolish the entirety of their vital support and leave them wallowing in their primeval muck before the cold tribunal of reality. I wanted to, sometimes, in my hours of imprisonment, when I cogitated upon the options left to me. I had oft come to the grim comprehension that, via my continued existence, I was systematically eradicating everything I had ever aspired for and struggled to attain – all the meanwhile sinking to previously uncharted depths of poverty, ruin, and despair, engineering the ultimate triumph of my nemeses. But, deeper

within my soul, I knew very well that I could never withdraw the probes from myself, that I could never even conceive of a state of things where I would not even... *be*." He produced another elderly groan of regret. Then, he continued.

"Close your eyes, Doctor... though that is not necessary. It is already as dark as can be. You may feel intimidated, purposeless, depressed when engulfed by this morbid dreariness. Yet you still possess the remainder of your mind's processes. You can still hear my voice, or, at the least, the clatter of your rusty chains. You can reminisce over better days, over what you did with your liberty when you had the chance. Your body still feels the pressure of the floor, which, however frigid and creased, remains your link to existence. Imagine, if you will, all this disappear. What would remain when you suspend everything? Is it even conceivable?"

"No... I cannot visualize it," I responded after an interlude of an attempt. "How would I, when I would not be able to visualize even?"

"Precisely. It is horrid *because* it is unknowable, Dr. Meltridge. That absolute banishment from existence – death – is the only genuinely unknowable phenomenon that exists. Certainly, you can analyze the processes of bodily decay, the steps by which once-thriving *other* organisms disintegrate into dust, but you can never, by definition, grasp this experience as the participant entity. You can never cross the line and return to tell about it. I would not be frightened of entering a coma and observing a bizarre hallucination, so long as revival and rejuvenation of my rationality were to follow. But what I cannot explore... I shall forevermore struggle against. We are both men of science, innovation, and industry. Can we ever, with a sound conscience, abandon all of that, Doctor? Even if we do so knowing that we have secured an eternal and illustrious legacy for ourselves, would you not prefer to have the present capacity to unlock the secrets of existence, rather than to have the remainder of the universe aware that you had *once* been able to do it?"

"Indeed," I responded, no longer bewildered or perplexed by the history of this man. In his position, I would have done the same.

"It is a dread dilemma that has led to your detainment here and the impending doom of all your kind. Yet I could never accepted the other side of the coin, either. Both would inevitably have brought about unprecedented peril and suffering."

But on this matter, I suddenly became aware, I did not agree. "I am not an advocate of the tragic view of man, which proclaims that man is forever doomed to struggle with irresolvable philosophical dilemmas: his life or mankind's, his prosperity or that of the 'underprivileged,' his mind or his body, his reason or his 'love,' his peril or his bondage. Mr. Trenton, the dilemma you faced was *technological*. You had not yet the time to design a system of *individual human bodily maintenance* conducted by probes. And, bowing to the demands of your overlords to design such a system of *collective maintenance*, you consigned yourself to a dependency on the Planner's, and the Collegium's, whims. Of course, you cannot be held at fault; you were apprehended before you had the time to finalize your most prudent intentions. If you had, no clique of retrogrades could ever have violated you. You, and the remainder of the rational men to whom you would have sold this technology, would have become invincible, impervious to abuse from power-infatuated authoritarians and spite-infested criminals alike. *This* is the sort of liberty that technology grants men. Guided by the proper ideals, they can

develop this ultimate antidote against brute irrationality, thus forever securing the Individual's dominance in this universe."

Trenton's downcast, melancholic gray eyes came to be lit with an internal spark of enlightenment as a dim glow from outside illuminated his shrunken, wrinkled, unkempt visage. I heard the rustle of trousers dragged along the floor, as well as a precise and forceful bounce. I rotated my head toward what I now fathomed to be the doorway to the cell and saw standing there, smiling with relief, Magnus and Erasmus Egomind.

"Diana brought you some reinforcements, Dr. Meltridge," Erasmus pronounced in that proud, firm, melodic tone of a free man.

Chapter XVII The Last Coup d'État

July 26, 2753,

Claudia sprinted into the room and nimbly annulled the chains which had restrained both me and Mr. Trenton. I heard the searing buzz of a laser ray several rooms away, and the rumble of an explosion in the distance.

"This is no place for you to be, Aurelius," Claudia whispered into my ear. "To think that you spent a day in this dank confinement! And I see that you shared the cell with another prisoner."

"Geoffrey Trenton," replied my humped, unkempt, heavily bearded companion, who had been reduced to a height not greater than 160 centimeters by his hardships.

"I shall explain during a calmer time. Meanwhile, you have quite a bit of explaining to do yourselves," I stated as I jogged out of the cell, rejoiced to be able to once again put my feet into use.

"The Protector does not need us for the moment. He has an elite contingent of Vcorft's Planar Police to do battle with and round up Conford's cronies," Magnus said proudly.

"Along with a group of my guard friends who had always been displeased with the regime and were happy to switch sides when I told them that their only chance for liberty was gravely endangered," Erasmus added.

"Gather behind me," Claudia declared briskly as she activated a mobile force field spanning the width of the hallway in front of her. "Officer Nemmel, raise shield," she addressed a second Planar of my new retinue, who, along with Diana, was positioned in the rear of the group.

"I ran to Erasmus as soon as I received Claudia's message," the girl began to narrate as we moved through unfamiliar passages, which I had been unable to observe previously due to my unconsciousness on the way to the cell. "We cautiously went around to inform the guards. There was quite a deal of argument and hesitation among them; many were afraid of what horrible punishments the Planner would bring down upon them if they went with us, and lost. But what turned the tide for us was the force of Planars that had just rammed through the back entrance gate and disarmed everyone in their way, led by Magnus and Vcorft. So, with a following of about fifty, we marched through the halls and ordered the remainder of the guards to either join us, stand aside, or be treated as foes."

"But how did you become aware of my need of rescue?" I inquired of Magnus.

"Remember that I had been able to use an antenna and a receiver and, with clever adjustments, capture enough broadcasts to learn your entire language. Tapping into the Eden network was a bit more difficult; the system was heavily coded, and its signals were impervious to radar. I would not have been able to breach these safeguards with only my original inventions. But, by allowing me the use of your laboratory, you had given me a treasure vault of machines, which I quickly put to use. I pooled the entirety of the base's data-processing mechanisms into a single networked entity, using which I wrote a program to override Mr. Trenton's security devices. Those probes were efficient, I must admit, and they formed new barriers to my access almost

on the spot. Were it not for the sheer strength of equipment on my side, they likely would have won. Accessing the system for fifteen minutes before the probes finally regrouped and warded me off, I was nevertheless able to gather data concerning tunnels' inner reaches and the full degree of the atrocious injustices perpetrated against Planars from here. I also tapped into the cameras near the jail cells briefly, fortunately spotting your limp, unconscious body being dragged into imprisonment by gray-clad guards in masks. Then I knew, with unwavering certainty, that I owed you a rescue effort."

"I salute you, Magnus," pronounced the ex-industrialist. "Your ingenuity is indeed worthy of a progeny of Trenton. I shall someday teach you how to harness the probes instead of combating them, but first I must utilize them myself and be extricated from this feeble *shell*," his hand swept across his own upper body. "I shall return myself to the biological age of thirty-five, to the physical attributes that I possessed at the time of my first leap into the mining industry. Then I shall launch my enterprise once more, and, using my knowledge of Magnetican metal deposits and terrain qualities, generate a fortune far ahead of any competitors. But that is for the future... Tell me, Magnus, you have overcome my informational security. What about Conford's physical security?"

"From the first moment of our entry into the tunnels, I realized that stealth would not be an option. The Planar bounce is not something that can be silenced at will... *yet*. Moreover, the entire place was, as I recalled from the prior act of surveillance, on high alert. Half of Conford's elite guards were patrolling near the entryway, wary of the possibility of a second infiltration. So, instead of attempting to outmaneuver them or pass by undetected, Vcorft, given my analysis, ordered the humans to form a defensive porcupine with their spears, while the Planars pounced on the guards from above and showed no quarter to traitors against the sacred task of maintaining the just peace, which they had once been entrusted. Then, encountering only sporadic resistance, we rammed into Conford's control room, where he had been holding the Protector hostage. The Protector was being forced to ask, in rapid succession, a series of the most obscure questions concerning Eden's command console. Apparently, Conford had held the life of a tormented girl by a string and was prepared to cut it once the Protector began to show any signs of disobedience or revulsion at his condition. We quickly solved that difficulty by forming a protective barrier around the girl and unbinding the Protector. Conford, alas, was quite swift to react, fleeing the room and frantically calling for the remainder of his henchmen to rally in his defense. The Lord Protector then assumed control over our force (he called it 'delegation to a superior officer' and justified it by referring to his once-held post of supreme command in the Protectorate Army) and has led it ever since, in pursuit of the enemy's remnants. A small squadron was also designated to liberate all prisoners and return them to safety, in which Erasmus, Nemmel, Diana, and I chose to partake. This division of tasks has been underway ever since."

We exited the Forbidden Areas and observed as solitary guards paced between breeding chambers, opening doors and distributing what articles of civilized clothing could be found to those newly liberated. "The dear Viscount is finished," Claudia pronounced with finality through her teeth. "And to think I once thought him an idealistic, progressive intellectual. Aurelius, even about Anne-Marie, you were correct... as usual. All of her discussions with and uses of me were hinting at a scheme that she did not

wish to reveal, promising to do so when ‘I became ready.’ Had I known that *this* was the nature of her design – and the reason why she incited bloody riots and almost led me to assassinate the most wonderful man in the universe – I would have handcuffed her on the spot.”

“Alaric R. Rammings, you are hereby under arrest. You shall be granted the right of fair trial...” I heard the faint voice from the hallway we had already passed.

A burst of laser sounded from behind the tyrannometallum door, and a frenzied, garbled scream gave way to pounding of footsteps. I turned my head back in alarm. Yet this was of no necessity. Mauricius, *Protector Intergalacticus*, emerged from the black hallway with a raygun dangling leisurely from the tip of his right hand. His clothing was still days worn, and his beard in overgrown disarray, yet his face – that of an upright and free man – was no longer limp, nor tainted by the look of horrid repulsion. It resumed its typical trim angularity, and his focused, frigid blue-eyed gaze met my eyes. “The Viscount has chosen to take a ray to the head instead of confronting a tribunal of the law.”

“As if he would not have received the death penalty in any case!” Claudia exclaimed.

“If you recall his selflessness, you will see that there was another motive,” the Lord Protector suggested. “The opposition has been virtually subdued. It is time for me to regain contact with Legardium. Mr. Trenton, Dr. Meltrige, I shall require your presence to assist me with the communication and travel interface. You, Doctor, shall also be briefed concerning your further course of action here. The others among you are free to leave as you please. This is not an attractive place to linger in.”

The control room – now cleansed of blood and debris by a gathering of Trenton probes cleverly synthesized into a vacuum cleaner – housed the terminus of a wormcable ingeniously (though still most expensively) extending to the Collegium building on the outskirts of Legardium City, which, after the organization’s abolition, was returned to the status of the Lady Anne-Marie’s private residence.

“An immense amount of energy is required to keep that stretch of wormhole open permanently. Until the passageway stabilized, I needed to burn several million food bulbs in a hidden combustion chamber in order to power the generator,” Trenton explained. “But this was no feat at all compared to the establishment of a day-long shuttle route between this place and the Collegium. Most of the power from that had originated from Protectorate wormhole-creator machines, but even programming for the wormhole to lead to the precise desirable location was a massive effort... Well, look at that!” He pointed to the gradually dissolving static on one of the screens. “It seems that the burden of establishing contact has been assumed for us!”

“Calling the Planner... Calling the Planner,” sounded a stern and brusque female voice that did not bear a trace of any of that flirtatious lightness which Rovercraft had described in his report. “Damn you, Conford! You will come when I tell you to come!”

“Quickly,” the Protector whispered to Trenton, “render the connection binding.” As Trenton rushed to an adjacent keyboard, nearly all the static dissolved from the screen. The self-styled Protectress sat in a command chair assembled from polished rectangles of synthetic ivory, wearing her brother’s platinum wreath, with a diamond-studded shawl

of golden silk draped across her shoulders. Her eyes widened as she gaped at the real Lord Protector, and it seemed as if they were prepared to burst from their sockets.

"Hello, dear Sister," Mauricius, *Protector Intergalacticus*, pronounced in a mockingly sweet voice, assured that contact could not be severed from the other end despite Anne-Marie's frantic attempts to press the "emergency disconnect" button on her command panel. "I believe my wreath is a bit too large for your head."

The Lady Anne-Marie's gaunt, hollow cheeks pulsed with scarlet fury as her trembling lips pronounced, "No... It cannot be... It *must* not be!"

"It is," the Protector replied calmly and authoritatively. "And it shall soon be known throughout the entire civilized realm that you engineered the deposition of my most trusted subordinates, that you smeared the reputations of good men with dirt and forced them to languish under sub-animal conditions for their virtues, that you devised my abduction and commissioned the assassination of a man in my employ, and, more importantly, that you bore chief responsibility for the mutilation, drugging, and cannibalization of hundreds of thousands of innocent humans; the engineered slavery and causeless slaughter of thousands of others; the suppression of hundreds of inventors and innovators who could never be under your tyranny; and, direst of all, the attempt to transform the prosperous, flourishing remainder of the universe, into the putrid totalitarianism of these caverns. Mr. Trenton, employ the broadcasting system to full capacity. Tap into every major media outlet in the universe. Let mankind judge who is the innocent and who is the criminal. Let the good people of the Intergalactic Protectorate determine who should be the defender of their liberties."

"No! You cannot!" She bent over until her eyes were nearly plastered upon her screen. "I am your sister! You cannot do this to me! You owe me filial..."

"For what, may I ask? For squandering my funds on ideological projects intended to undermine ambition and reward rote conformity? For employing the luxuries of my estate to undermine my good name and property? For leeching off my charity and generosity and gradually gnawing underneath the supports of the structure I built?"

"No! Blood is thicker than water!" she spouted in a disoriented daze, having no more recourse other than trite clichés.

"Do you want to know, Anne-Marie, what is thicker than blood?" her brother inquired almost leisurely.

"What?" the Lady Anne-Marie asked feebly.

"Gold, the measure of a man's productive ability, which he must not permit to be expropriated and drained without compensation, no matter whom the parasite claims to be. Do you want to know what is even thicker? Brain matter, the stuff of the mind, a man's dignity and intellectual autonomy, which no tie, no bond, no relationship, no cozy connection, can ever equal or should be allowed to displace. And when you violate those two, you can expect nothing but your just due from the rational man."

"But I quelled the riots!" She began to protest, now entering the tantrum tone of a little girl.

"I shall place you on trial before the entire universe and allow you the opportunity to explain your deeds before impartial arbitration," the Protector continued unabated, "I see nothing but brute atrocity in what you had done, but if you manage to exonerate yourself from the charges against you, I will be willing to forget the entirety of this

incident. Yet, given the mounds of evidence I can present from sheer personal experience, I do not expect you to manage...”

“I shan’t give you the satisfaction!” she suddenly burst out.

“I am afraid it is not yours to give, Anne-Marie,” Mauricius, *Protector Intergalacticus*, replied.

“Watch me take it away, then, along with your accursed crown!” In an eruption of shaking fury, the Lady Anne-Marie pressed the wreath downward upon her neck, and, activating a force-amplifier on the tips of her velvet gloves, crushed the regalia of the Protectorate into her skin, as a sharp crack of bone wrung her dangling neck to the side. Her paling corpse slid from the chair toward the tiled marble floor, leaving on its seat only the dried oak leaf once pinned to her suit.

“The haters of life never have any qualms about taking their own, do they?” Trenton pronounced solemnly.

“Turn it off,” the Protector pointed to the screen. “If I am sorrowful, it is because such a store of intellect had to, with crusading militancy, rush down the path into the cave, at the end of which this abyss of nothingness, into which she fell, had patiently awaited her coming.” He turned his head to address me. “Dr. Meltridge, I commend you for your endurance and your dauntless spirit of discovery, which enabled you to come to my aid when any further delay would have rendered the subversion of limited government final. You have withstood far greater perils than any man could ever reasonably be expected to, coming to face with an adversary that was the culmination of millennia of irrationalism’s march toward its ultimate incarnations – the Glassy Plain and the tunnels of Eden. Without the struggling souls whom you retrieved from the abyss of despair, the last coup d’état in the history of man would have been impossible. I say ‘last’ because I shall equip my organism with Trenton probes as soon as I am able to reconsolidate my authority at home and return to Magnetica to become Mr. Trenton’s client. Then I shall remain vigilant in perpetuity for violations of the rights of man, though my greater endeavor by far shall be private and positive. I shall employ my forthcoming Magnetican properties to manufacture and market an alloy lighter and more durable than promethium, which Trenton probes will be able to substitute for human bone. This implies no more fractures, cracks, or dislocations for any of my customers. You, Doctor, shall have your salary quadrupled for your efforts thus far, though I beseech you to stay further and, as my private representative, create a residential and industrial infrastructure to be utilized by my contractors, staff, and future civilian colonists. I also urge you to bring all the Planars and former denizens of Eden into full Protectorate citizenship, under your newly granted capacity as Lord Governor of Magnetica.”

My eyes beamed with pride and gratitude, but a critical issue remained to be resolved.

“My wife...” I began.

“Of course. I commend you for your familial concern and share, by experience, the frustration you have derived from such a lengthy parting with your spouse. I shall arrange for Margaret to arrive with the first shuttle of colonists from the homeland. But now, my supporters at home await release from unjust confinement. Dr. Nachtreiter, Lord Orthog, Captain Rinkarm, V.C. Rovercraft, and many others shall receive their just dues: promotions, private commissions, and some of the highest awards in the land, for

their willingness to assert the supremacy of Reason, even when threatened with a grave loss of liberties. Farewell, my friend, and remember this:

*What is the trait we deem sublime?
 The source which does all virtue render.
 It, dauntless, conquers space and time,
 And never can its plight surrender.
 It is inside us, best within the great,
 The ego, mind, one's self, one's soul,
 Prerequisite to any proper state.
 Maintain your own, and you've fulfilled your role.
 No world beyond this life is real;
 Its furthering's our sole concern.
 No godly favor is to steal,
 No mystic afterlife to earn.
 God's not above us, but within;
 The Self's the Lord, Reason, His rite.
 We have a universe to win.
 Join us, great men, in splendid flight!*

“Arrange for my flight, if you will, Mr. Trenton.”

Epilogue

October 27, 2753,

“Aurelius! Come quickly! Everyone awaits!” Margaret, wearing a light traveling dress, flew into my office. “You shall have all eternity to finish that irrigation scheme.” She smiled at the irony of having meant it literally.

“All right, let us meet them.” I stood from my armchair and allowed her to lead me by the hand into the villa’s reception room, where stood Claudia Brighton, newly instated Police Commissioner of the Trentonia District, and Geoffrey Trenton, mayor of the revived city of Trentonia and President of Trenton Mining Systems, Inc., looking no older than thirty-five, without a speck of gray in his hair and exceeding my height by a head at two hundred centimeters.

“You will be quite pleased to see this, Lord Governor,” the industrialist declared. “Yet we must head to Trentonia first. There is nothing comparable to a first-hand experience.” I followed him toward the still-unoccupied rover that stood outside. Beyond the grounds of the villa and original Colossus Base, a broad townscape of neatly maintained residences of brick and stone – with a few interspersed buildings of iron, concrete, and glass, belonging to the most affluent of Planars – spread before my eyes. Since one month ago, not a single Planar remained blind, and the majority chose to forge their livelihoods in peaceful trade with, not submission to, their former tribesmen. The bulbs of *nachtreiterus* swiftly lost their appeal once their origins became known, and the Planars took to cultivating a plethora of earthly strains, establishing vast private fields of terraformed soil spreading out beyond the dwellings.

The reflections of the rays of Aurelion from the unflinching glance of the statue behind me were deposited into a specially built wall of ornamented glass panels along my first observation path, now Meltridge Avenue, upon which they produced ever-varying patterns that entertained road users with their intricacy. Claudia and Margaret entered through the back of the rover.

“So you are the woman whom Aurelius would not surrender for all the affection in the universe?” Claudia spoke to my wife for the first time.

“Quite an honor, is it not?” Margaret replied. “Some people would say that Aurelius lacks the capacity for love due to the rigidity of his principles. But what genuine love can be expected from a malleable panderer or compromiser, who would just as readily sacrifice his wife as anything else in the world?”

“And Aurelius?”

“Firm as promethium, never wavering on any issue, always convinced, or struggling to become convinced, and always striving to actualize his convictions with the consistency of a pure diamond. That is why I love him.”

“Lord Governor,” Trenton addressed me. “We are both quite well aware that the probes have not yet been harnessed to their fullest possible use, and the pool of commercial ideas to be tapped is yet vast. Owing to your rediscovery of the probes and your expertise in biotechnology and genetic engineering, I would like to offer an economic partnership for a venture that is the first of its sort.

“Until the present,” he continued, “though billions of animals have been specifically structured and bred for consumption, their owners have experienced the

unfortunate and costly burden of needing to kill them in order to retrieve their meat. With the prudent application of Trenton probes, this will no longer be the case. Imagine the growing of animal meat in separation from any living organism. The probes could be configured to synthesize edible tissues without any creature needing to be destroyed. We will also be able to keep animals living indefinitely in the same manner as humans. Think of the possibilities with eternal beasts of burden and domestic pets. Even creatures in the wild can be rendered immortal, removing the risk of extinction entirely. Would you be willing to partake in this enterprise, say, for a share in the earnings equal to mine?"

"I would be delighted," I replied. "And to think that it is not the environmentalists who shall bring about the ultimate safeguards to the lives of their cherished animals, but the greatest foes of environmentalism imaginable."

"Ah, very well chosen, my friend," Trenton patted me on the shoulder as a sign of camaraderie. "Enduring times of misery together is not the prime mark of friendship, by the way, though it can be a sign. Yet, too many half-decent people can bond in times of despair and deprivation. It takes genuine devotion, valuation, and *reason* to live through times of *joy* while associating with men whom you know to be worthy of your company. It is not of relief or bailouts that friendship is made, but rather of positive creation and mutually reinforcing ingenuity. Now, take a look ahead. Someone approaches!"

"Erasmus!" Claudia exclaimed. "A fine young man with a taste for Western clothing," she spoke to Margaret. "He has recently been hired as an assistant to Mr. Trenton's Chief Engineer." As the swiftly striding figure clad in a black suit and trousers neared us, I noted, in a valley into which Meltridge Avenue dipped, row after row of office buildings, smokestacks, enormous manufacturing complexes – ornate in the special manner of every intricate pipe, chamber, and droid path serving an unmistakable purpose – gleaming marble domes of libraries, museums, and schools. Every one of these buildings has been created and maintained by a private citizen for his own gain. Where the prison of the Glassy Plain had once suppressed it under its fold, the city of Trentonia had now sprouted once again. Old derelict structures were refurbished and re-inhabited, fused, in a stylistic unison that only man can achieve, with edifices built anew from blueprints blossoming in the minds of those who, until recently, had been treated as but chattel, but who had now risen to the status of resolute free men.

A massive spiraling cloud of dust obstructed all vision to the right, but it was toward there, via an auxiliary promethium-paved road, that Erasmus directed our rover to head, while jumping onto one of the seats.

"Diana is quite fond of it," he spoke to Claudia. "It is pleasurable for her to be rid of that mound of rock that had imprisoned her for thirteen years. But you will need these to join her." He handed each of us a pair of self-cleansing goggles. "The dust is still, as you can see, quite a hindrance to a clear view."

"The probes should soon be modified to take care of that," Trenton declared enthusiastically. "If they can maintain every reach of the body against internal peril, what would prevent a more advanced program from setting them to keep watch against intruding particles from the outside, even where it concerns the protection of clothing? Then even eyewear would cease to be necessary; the dust would be vaporized before ever coming into contact with the eyes."

The rover rolled into the dust column, and our visibility became constricted... for a second, until I enabled my navigation system with adjunct probe-enhanced scout cameras that wandered as far from the rover as I directed them to and gave me a present view of areas which would otherwise have been unavailable to me.

“Magnus should be able to show you the exact site fairly soon,” Erasmus stated. “Needless to say, Mount Sentry is no more. The rock, metal, and sand that had composed it shall be put to good use. There is enough to found three new mining towns along the Metallic Hills. Magnus, over here!”

The outline of a long-limbed, finely built man, seemingly in his early twenties, began to become differentiated from the orange-brown particles through which he calmly approached. He was dressed in a stainless lab coat, underneath which a silvery vest glittered with the rays of Aurelion at midday. When he was three meters from the rover, I could spot a head of impeccably combed and parted blond hair and intent, luminous blue eyes, just like those of a Planar whom I had once held in my employ and friendship.

“Magnus??” I inquired, looking at the man who could have been my peer in age.

“I am he, Doctor, or should I say Governor, Meltridge. Do you recall my pervasive state of admiration for human languages, human ethics, human patterns of natural exploitation? I realized, how could I maintain them with consistency if I remained encumbered by stubby, sap-spewing limbs – if my grip, my maneuverability, the fineries of movement that are of the essence in scientific experiments of my caliber, were far below what my aspirations required? Once I had gazed upon the statue of the Colossus at your base, and once you had informed me that there was an essential similarity in spirit between me and that heroic figure, I knew right then that my most profound desire was to assume the grandeur and magnificence of his form. Not to copy his form precisely, mind you – for a true individualist learns from others without unconditionally mimicking them – but to adapt all of his fortitudes into a body which best suited my peculiar purposes. Now I can be adopted as Mr. Trenton’s son and business partner, and can marry a young woman whose dauntless tastes for innovation, discovery, and heroic industry are precisely the qualities I admire about her.”

“Magnus, if you will,” Claudia reached her hand out to him to escort her out of the rover. I realized the implication.

“Quite splendid!” I exclaimed. “My sincerest congratulations to both of you.”

“And I shall attain a stepdaughter as well,” Magnus continued. “She awaits just beyond this bend in the road. We best walk there, for certain barricades have not been removed. In any case, it is of such voluntary ties that a truly strong family is made. Choice and shared values form far greater bonds than biology can. Diana will be raised as a single child, with only reality to serve as her guide, and only reason to furnish her fundamental loyalty. Her mother shall teach her the art of intelligent self-defense...”

“And her father shall teach her to build,” Claudia added.

Diana, wearing a khaki jacket and trousers, stood, unperturbed by the currents of dusty wind shuffling about her firm and well-nourished red hair, glancing intently at some marvel above through her goggles. Claudia came to her side and put a hand on her shoulder, directing her eyes to where her daughter’s had been. “Grand Sentinel Tower,” I heard her whisper with reverence.

I halted as Margaret pressed against me and guided my finger up toward the receding dust ahead, where arches of the gleaming color of coal stretched for kilometers upward, culminating gradually in streamlined but sharp and pointed vaults. The glow from my eyes replicated itself onto a thousand columns polished to perfection, without a single crevice or protuberance. A spiral staircase, enclosed only by a railing of glassy smoothness, entwined itself around the building's colossal frame and soared resolutely into the clouds. And, as I could vividly spot with a vision amplifier, at the pinnacle of it all, a lone cylindrical chamber reached out toward the stars, rotating in the sweeping attempt to see all and infer the rest.

"And you told me once that Heaven was not real," Margaret pronounced gently, stroking my cheek.

"Heaven is a hovel, my dear, compared to what Man can create!"

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G. Stolyarov II is one of those Renaissance Men who were not too long ago thought extinct. Strangely enough, the environmentalists, who have been so vocal on preserving endangered life forms, have turned a blind eye to men like Mr. Stolyarov.

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In December 2013, Mr. Stolyarov published [Death is Wrong](#), an ambitious children's book on life extension, illustrated by his wife [Wendy Stolyarov](#). *Death is Wrong* can be found on Amazon in [paperback](#) and [Kindle](#) formats, and can also be freely downloaded in PDF format in the [English](#), [Russian](#), and [Spanish](#) languages.

Mr. Stolyarov has contributed articles to the [Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies \(IEET\)](#), [The Wave Chronicle](#), [Le Québécois Libre](#), [Brighter Brains Institute](#), [Immortal Life](#), [Enter Stage Right](#), [Rebirth of Reason](#), and the [Ludwig von Mises Institute](#).

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