

An epic saga that takes place far into the future.

The Creature Crafters

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Chapter 1

Dreamscape

Lieutenant Carrigan took in the view of the Lakota village near the Sandy Creek estuary. Through his binoculars he could see that it was a typical cluster of tepees and communal fire pits bordered by small corrals where horses were kept. Carrigan had come up through the ranks earning his current commission through a series of field promotions in the last of the skirmishes that swept the countryside just after the battle at the Little Big Horn. He was a literate man with a modest education but he'd never learned to drop his backwoods vernacular. It made him popular with the men but it had a negative affect on his career; his superiors never really included him in their social events.

He had been assigned a company sergeant by the name of Tanner MaCullam. MaCullam was a tough old veteran of the Civil War who had decided to stay in the Army after he'd been mustered out of the 32nd Illinois Regiment so he volunteered for duty with the 1st Cavalry in the summer of 1865. Sergeant MaCullam lay with Carrigan at the crest of the hill overlooking the Lakota village. They had taken cover behind the tall prairie grass.

"Typical dumb-ass injuns," Carrigan quietly remarked panning the vista.

"How so," Sergeant MaCullam asked?

"Well, iffing I was on the war path, the last god damned place I'd stake out my position would be on a river bank at the bottom of a valley bordered by these foothills." Carrigan returned smiling through his ample mustache. MaCullam noticed that Carrigan's teeth were irregular.

"Maybe these injuns ain't on the war path, Lieutenant." MaCullam replied.

"What in the hell makes you think that?" Carrigan asked his inquiry seething with a high-born arrogance he'd learned to mimic by watching the West Point graduates.

"Looky there," MaCullam replied pointing toward the village. "Nothin' but old men and women and a few young boys...and there...just a bunch of kids playin' some kind of injun game." He explained directing his commander's attention to a place near one of the horse corrals. "I don't see any braves about. The horses is old-lookin' and there can't be

any more than a few hundred people down there. Nah! These ain't the injuns we're lookin' fer."

Carrigan turned to look at his Sergeant with a countenance of sarcasm. "Well then, what 'n-the-hell are they doin' off the reservation?" Carrigan asked with a sarcastic tone in his voice.

"I think they're lookin' for a little food is all." MaCullam replied. "They don't look like they're much good fer anything—least of all fightin' an' raisin' Cain."

"The only god damned good injun is a dead one! Or didn't you listen to the General t'other night? God damn MaCullam! Yer a damn good soldier but you can't be whinin' about savin' injuns to the Command! Yer gonna' get yer ass court-martialed fer sure!" He explained as he returned to viewing the encampment through his binoculars.

"I ain't sympathizin' with the plight o' these here savages Lieutenant," MaCullam asserted, "I'm tryin' to make sure we ain't a gonna' go wastin' time shootin' up a bunch of old ladies and broke-dick dogs just to lay in a claim we had an engagement!"

The Lieutenant snapped his gaze back from his binoculars. "What the hell are you sayin'?" He challenged.

"Listen Lieutenant, our unit has been out ridin' around fer six weeks. They ain't had a decent meal or a bath in as many days, we're low on ammunition and supplies, and I think it's high time we get our asses back to the fort fer some rest and re-provisioning. I don't much care about what in 'tarnation it is those beat up ole' injuns are doin' at the bottom of this here hill. Now, don't you go makin' threats! It don't impress me much—not after what I've been through." MaCullam replied with self-confidence.

"Well I'm the god damned commander o' this here outfit and I'm sayin' that we're gonna' go and get our selves some injun ass! That's what I'm sayin' we're gonna' do!" Carrigan replied forcefully although he took care to keep the volume of his voice down.

"Like yer sayin'...yer the commander. You wanna' go down there and shoot up some people just to try out yer new Winchester. Who the hell in Sam Hill am I to tell you that you can't?" MaCullam replied. He wasn't even paying attention now. He was lying on his back with his hands crossed behind his head and his hat resting on his chest.

The Lieutenant gave him a really nasty look. "God damn yer ass, MaCullam, don't you shit on me god damn it! Yer Civil War medals ain't a' gonna' give you *that* much protection!"

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MaCullam rolled over on to his stomach and put his cap back on. Then he carefully withdrew himself down the side of the hill so as not to expose his position. When he was clear of the crest of the hill, he stood up. “Well come on Lieutenant. Let’s go an’ get you an easy kill or two...or three.” He said in disgust as he walked away from his commander.

The Lieutenant was livid! “*God damned Civil War heroes!*” He thought. “*No stomach fer fightin’ an’ killin’ people anymore.*” He thought on. He knew he couldn’t ever convince the Command that Sergeant MaCullam was insubordinate. He always did his duty. But he was tired of his lackluster attitude toward the current campaign and his argumentative behavior when ever the subject of killing Indians came up. Carrigan needed a promotion if he was ever going to convince Colonel Mayes that he was worthy of his daughter’s hand in marriage. A nice body count would get the Colonel’s attention; he was certain of it!

Carrigan withdrew back down the hill to where his men were waiting. “Sergeant MaCullam!” He began in a careful tone of voice. “Have O’Leary and Buckhaven roll that fifty-pounder up to that knoll over there and set that cannon up to take out the biggest of them horse corrals.”

MaCullam had been walking away from the Lieutenant toward his horse when he heard the command. It made him wince. “*Jesus Christ,*” thought MaCullam, “*now we’re going to kill the god damned horses too?*” MaCullam repeated the order to Corporal O’Leary who led the caisson team toward the location where the Lieutenant had instructed them to set up their cannon; Private Buckhaven followed behind walking—leading his horse, his horse’s reins in his right hand. It took about ten minutes to set the cannon up and load it. O’Leary lit off a slow-burning fuse at the end of a long stick and stood there waiting for the Lieutenant’s order.

“Mount up!” The Lieutenant gave the order to Sergeant MaCullam. There were sixty-four men left from the original unit of one hundred. Most of the men were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five. They looked haggard and much older than their age so rugged was their lifestyle. Their uniforms were ragged and dirty; many of the men had lice and hadn’t bathed or shaved in weeks. And they smelled bad—all of them—a fact that explained why Lieutenant Carrigan had learned to approach any enemy encampment from down wind. As the Lieutenant mounted his stallion it arched its back and took a healthy dump. MaCullam was watching and rolled his eyes in disgust. “*A horse is its owner.*” MaCullam thought. And he repeated the Lieutenant’s order. The

men staggered to their feet and mounted their horses; you could tell they were exhausted. Lieutenant Carrigan gave a hand signal that indicated he wanted the men to split up into two formations. Sergeant MaCullam took one group of thirty men, the Lieutenant took the rest. They would approach the encampment from the west along the creek bank and from the east down the hillside while O'Leary and Buckhaven pounded the village from above.

Lieutenant Carrigan gave the order to fire. Corporal O'Leary lit the fuse at the breech of the fifty-pounder. It roared to life in a cloud of blue-grey smoke and jumped back a couple of feet pushing its chocks into the moist prairie soil. Buckhaven struggled to reposition the weapon. Carrigan and MaCullam had reached the top of the hill to witness the first shot. It completely missed the horse corral and exploded directly over the group of small children who had been playing near the corral. MaCullam pulled the visor of his cap down over his eyes a bit in a body movement of revulsion. The children were shredded to pieces. Lieutenant Carrigan cried out: "Charge!" And Private Whipple began blowing his bugle.

Down in the small valley below, the people stood frozen in disbelief as the cannon fired again—this time raining death down upon the largest horse corral. Horse flesh went flying in all directions. Old men and women poured out of their tepees—their first thought to rescue the children. A number of them ran to the site where the children had been playing only to find, to their horror, a pile of mangled little bodies. Looking up they saw the approaching cavalry. Two-Bears-Walking, the village holy man, thought to retrieve from his tepee an American Flag that had been given to him at their treaty signing. He struggled to tie it to a lance waving it about to signal the soldiers that they were not Indians on the war path. But, it did no good. Lieutenant Carrigan's men soon swept through the camp guns blazing. Carrigan had drawn his saber and was concentrating his attack on a young boy of about sixteen years. The young man had raised his hands in the air to indicate that he was prepared to surrender. As Carrigan rode past the poor little fellow, he swung his saber and cut off the boy's right hand. The boy fell down writhing in pain.

At the other end of the village, Corporal Karpinski the standard-bearer had just run a man and a woman through with his lance pushing the Cavalry's Flag through the open wound in the man's chest as the Indian struggled to protect the woman behind him. Karpinski had difficulty withdrawing his lance and so dropped it allowing the two he had killed to

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fall to the ground. He then drew his pistol and began firing indiscriminately at anything that moved around him.

Close to Karpinski's position, Private DuLane had run out of pistol ammunition but found that he could kill by trampling people with his horse. He had run two old women into the ground. He realized that his carbine was fully loaded so he drew that out of its scabbard and began chasing young boys and girls into gullies to corner them. They made easy targets scrambling up the steep embankments in a desperate attempt to deliver themselves from the hail of bullets as other soldiers joined in. Overhead, O'Leary and Buckhaven kept firing the cannon dumping rounds of fifty pound shot down on the encampment indiscriminately. One of the rounds had killed two of their own cavalymen whose horses had become entangled in a collapsing tepee as they careened into the campsite. Other cavalymen began setting the tepees on fire with burning wood that they had retrieved from the fire pits.

From a military point of view, the engagement was completely unnecessary, poorly executed, and an outright waste of resources. As Sergeant MaCullam's column made it into the village from their previously planned approach, they saw nothing but total confusion and inexcusable savagery. His men stopped short behind him preferring to follow his lead. He watched as the outrage drew to a close, his eyes welling up in tears, and he became very, very angry. MaCullam ordered his men to ride along the outskirts of the village and make every attempt to bring their fellow soldiers under control. He had been under the impression that their *main* mission was to have been an action that would compel these Indians to return to the reservation at Fort McBride some twenty miles to the south. He had thought that the Lieutenant would have preferred a couple of kills to set the tone and then they would round everyone up and march them all back behind their column with a platoon of cavalymen drawing up their rear. What he saw instead was half of his company's compliment engaged in a bloodlust! MaCullam forced himself to control his rage.

"Tell those two ass holes on the hill to quit firin'!" MaCullam screamed to one of his men. The soldier galloped off toward the cannon position waving his hat as he rode. O'Leary and Buckhaven stopped firing the cannon and stood waiting for their comrade to arrive and confirm what they had assumed to be the order to cease firing. After about another twenty minutes, the encampment became quiet. The soldiers could hear an occasional cry from the women who had managed to escape the

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devastation. They walked about the village in a daze—their facial expressions filled with horror as they surveyed the death and destruction of their kin. And then there were the pain-laden moans of those who lay dying. In some places, you could smell hot blood—human blood.

The young boy who had lost his hand had managed to crawl into the bushes where he feverishly wrapped his bloody stump in a ragged piece of buckskin tying it off with a leather strap to stop the bleeding. He lay quiet for over an hour as the soldiers gathered up the survivors for the long walk back to the reservation. He could hear the frightened whinnies of horses that had escaped from their corrals in the frenzy. As dusk came, the soldiers left. Some of his people had also hid among the bushes of the embankment along the creek. He was weak from his injury but he somehow managed to stand and walk back to the encampment. There he found a few of the people trying to organize the bodies and prepare them for their right of passage. He looked at his arm—its missing hand—and thought that he couldn't even help to cut the poles and erect the platforms on which his poor people would be placed in their death shrouds. His pony had survived and walked up to him. He grabbed its mane and, with great effort, struggled to mount the beast. Then, he led the pony out of his village past the survivors and into the mountains. He felt himself dying and wanted to go to a holy place—to the Lake of the Full Moon. There he would say his final prayers and let death overtake him.

On his way he rode silently along the crest of a hill that overlooked the once peaceful valley where his people had enjoyed life. He saw, off in the distance, the column of cavalry and Indian survivors walking south toward Fort McBride; it would be a death march—the end of their journey into oblivion. He fought to conserve his strength and turned his pony north toward the lake. As he rode, the sun sank behind the horizon and night fell. Millions of stars, in the Lakota tongue called *wichapi*, bled through the black of night providing some comfort from his distress. Gradually the moon rose and became bright bathing the night in its mysterious blue-white light and, after another hour, he cleared the top of yet another hill and saw the Lake of the Full Moon before him reflecting the subtle presence of its namesake. He stopped at a rock outcrop at its southern shoreline and dismounted. Struggling to make his way toward the huge monolith, he reached it and slid down its side to the ground where he took some time to rest and marshal his strength again. His faithful pony wandered off along the shore to graze and then to lay down in the soft prairie grass that grew along the lakeshore. The boy watched for a while

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dazed by his traumatic experience and suffering from his savage wound. Then, he looked up into the heavens and spoke to Wakan Tanka, the Creator, in the ancient Lakota tongue:

“Wakan Tanka...My father had hoped that one day I would walk among the people a poet, a countenance of compassion and human understanding, filled with your spirit, imbued with your wisdom, tolerant, patient, holy. Had this happened, the people would have had great power in their presence and, perhaps, they would not have died so miserably. My father's dreams were borne upon the wind as dust devils along the valley floor.

Today, before sunrise, I stood in twilight as the stars shed their light upon the darkness of my world and gave up my quest. I have done all that I can do with this life. Tradition claims that you loathe a man who gives up but hear me out.

The children whom you have chosen to succeed us are mean-spirited! Two summers ago their warriors passed through our hunting grounds. Seeing my sister gathering berries at the edge of the woods, they slew her as one would an elk or deer for meat.

She was sixteen summers old, Wakan Tanka. Her death crushed White Ghost's spirit. He disfigured himself horribly not wanting any woman to look favorably upon him ever again!

Wanagi Ska! I said to him. Shall you die, drowning in your sorrow? I shall *suffer* and die! He answered me. He traveled northwest into the mountains and disappeared. I never saw him again.

Then today, shortly before the first snows of this year, they sent one of their smoke and fire demons into our village. It cut a swath through children playing near the river bank. Our men were inside the council lodge discussing the need for an autumn ceremony with Two Bears Walking, our holy man. They rushed outside to find the little ones scattered about; broken in pieces like old clay pots in a heap!

We fought them, shouting fearsome war cries, all the time wondering: *What are they doing here?* Had we not signed a treaty? Did we not appease their avarice? Isn't enough that we have agreed to give up the land upon which our people walk?

This past spring brought a peculiar trouble upon our heads. Your chosen people made sport of our braves as they hunted the buffalo. They ran the young men down into the canyons along the Mother River and killed them. By summer we had only boys and old men left to care for us!

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This Season's gathering was meager. We found very little food. We have had to hide like field mice burrowing into holes in the ground to stay warm and out of sight of their hunting parties.

Wakan Tanka, these people you have fashioned hunt men! I have never seen them eat the flesh but they whoop with *joy* when ever they kill. They leave what they kill to rot as they have left the buffalo to rot --their power drifting aimlessly toward the stars. It makes no sense to me!

My father is dead now. He died standing before my mother to protect her from an onslaught of one of their warriors. The warrior's lance speared both my parents. In the clash, their horses trampled my little brother to death.

This day I lost my right hand to the long knife of one of their chiefs. Stupid man! I was surrendering! They did not seem as though they were interested in our submission. Afterwards, the smell of our blood was heavy in the evening air. The cries of the old women could be heard in the dark of night.

Having no one to care for me, I wrapped this bloody stump and came here to the Lake of the Full Moon. My grandfather spoke of this place often and claimed that, here, you read the souls of men as you would a sand painting. So, knowing that my spirit struggled to depart from this place, I came to petition you.

Our people trusted you. We kept your sacred ways. We blessed the Earth with our obedience and made the appropriate offering for each thing we took from it. And, Wakan Tanka, as you had commanded us, we took only what we needed and gave much of our spirit in return!

Now, why have you ruined us? Why, Wakan Tanka, do I cower here beneath this old rock in the dead of night, cold and hungry, filthy from my sojourn through smoke and fire? I have done nothing wrong and, yet, I must die?

I am only sixteen summers old, Wakan Tanka. I have never known a woman's love --have hunted only twice! Perhaps Young Eagle is right. You have made yourself a new world on the other side of Creation and have lost the eyes on this side of your head!

My time runs short now. I am weak. The cold night is the only kindness I have known in a long time. It numbs my body and I cannot feel much pain.

Will you at least permit me passage through the Valley of the Summer Sun? I would very much like to see my family again. I know that, in their innocence, you were compelled to escort them through that place to the Ancient World of our peoples' Hope. There, love cannot be compromised and peace will last forever.

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Forgive me, Wakan Tanka, but I am growing sleepy. My eyes are heavy and I want to close them for just a little while. Humor me and release me from this somber vigil. I have said enough.”

And then the boy died. Time moved on relentlessly. His body remained undisturbed by Nature until it had become nothing more than skeletal remains and the shifting sand and dust of the mountains had covered it over. His name was forgotten; his life was forgotten. A small ponderosa pine began to grow where he lay beneath the surface of the lakeshore and, in the centuries that followed, it grew into a sturdy massive living edifice that marked the spot whereon the spirit of Running Deer had departed the Earth to begin its long journey. It would prove a seemingly endless quest through space and time—the Cimmerian voyager—caught up in the spinning mindless mass of the Cosmos.

* * *

“You believe our ambition too praetorian?” Emile asked. He held a glass of cool liquid to his temple. The two sat beneath silver-blue moons and clear night sky. A thick band of stars blazed over head lending an almost surrealistic glow to the countryside around them. The night carried with it a warm refreshing breeze. Tofla's robe rustled gently. He turned on his side and propped his head upon his hand.

“Not at all, my dear friend, I meant no moral judgment.” Tofla answered. “We stopped making dramatic improvements eons ago. I don't think we can get any better at it. You seek perfection. No one knows what our stewardship requires of us.”

The gardens had just been groomed that day. The smell of newly mown grass mixed with the tender scent of summer blossoms. “Then, you will permit this final . . . adjustment?” Emile asked just to be certain.

“Of course--oh, make as many as you like. That's not the point of my inquiry.” Tofla turned on his back and stared into the star-filled night sky. “The goal was . . . reclamation--was it not?” Emile sipped his beverage slowly then paused to answer.

“Yes . . . yes, that was the original intent of the project. But, don't you think our dedication to that end commendable? We have not wavered all these many millennia. Our commitment to scientific objectivity can only be considered admirable. Wouldn't you agree?”

“Oh yes, I would agree. Yet, as with our own evolution, if the natural process is to succeed we shouldn't continue to tinker with every aspect of

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development. Time line studies confirm that their genetic profile will, eventually, fulfill every expectation.”

Emile sat staring into the red Orvis Nebula as it hung low in the eastern sky. “Do you sleep occasionally?” He asked.

“Yes, sometimes I do. It's not necessary, I know, but I do like the dream time.” Tofla responded.

“Our ancestors accorded supernatural attributes to dreams.” Emile said. He set the glass down in the arm pocket of his recliner. “They believed them to be a form of communication with . . . God!”

“Our ancestors hadn't discovered chaos--had no idea that God used a less cryptic idiom.” Tofla sighed momentarily. “What do you intend to accomplish with this . . . this design improvement?”

“Oh, we intend to lay the genetic foundation for regeneration and, ah, we think that we've perfected the heart. They should live much, much longer. Perhaps, some day they may even attain immortality.”

“I see,” Tofla returned, “then these are amendments to the original aquatic criteria are they not?” He turned his head toward Emile.

“Yes and no.” Emile began. “Ah . . . you see . . . yes, we are using the original aquatic criteria as a basis for the new design but . . .” Emile became pensive for a moment.

“But what, old friend,” Tofla cajoled?

“Well, you see we've introduced some genetic alterations the technical foundations of which are . . . well . . . reptilian.”

“What?” Tofla asked. There was an ever-so-slight expression of exasperation in his voice. “We've been through that before--the brain stem doesn't develop well! And, what about the design changes of the late Paleolithic period? The poor creatures--half fish--it took thousands of years for their species to die off! The stories that raged within the control group! Honestly, Emile, I expected a more lucid extrapolation.”

“Based on what?” Emile shot back. He looked at his friend through moonlight and shadow. “Oh . . . oh no, not Bela's amphibious construct? That whole idea was ridiculous! Breeding by the thousands in tropical tidal pools. And, what if the planet they claim hasn't any tropical tidal pools? Ahhh! Absurd!”

“Am I to expect a flat-headed xenomorph with the cognitive ability of a common slug? . . .one that eats rotten meat and breaks wind all day?” Tofla returned in good humor. “The Directorate wants something that has the capacity to use logic as well as emotions!”

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*“They all ready have the ability to eat rotten meat and break wind!”
Emile returned breaking into laughter. Tofla joined him.*

“Promise me that you didn't submit the proposal to a design review committee.” Tofla begged still laughing. “Remember that animal our group submitted a review request for oh so many aeons ago? What did they finally call it?”

“A Ka-Amel,” Emile answered now laughing quite vigorously.

“A what,” Tofla asked through a raspy chuckle?

“A Ka-Amel,” Emile returned still laughing.

The humor died down and the two friends mused in silence for a while.

“Emile,” Tofla began, “do you intend to introduce these changes using the previous protocol?”

“Yes,” Emile replied, “we shall, once again, use . . . Mother Eve. Oh, it will be a bit more difficult this time. There are three locations now--three eras to consider--three distinct realities in space and time. The planning will have to be done with some precision.”

“But, you don't anticipate any complications?” Tofla asked.

“No, none whatsoever; we've learned that this is the best way to modify the genetic pool. It's the timing that can be tricky. Among the control group, relationships must be permitted to . . . blossom, if you like. A bond must be formed—some kind of enduring commitment or the offspring may perish before they can establish a viable population that will foster the fundamental change.”

“Yes, yes I see.” Tofla continued. “Well, good luck, as they say.”

“My dear Tofla . . . probability has little to do with it in its inception. Luck, if you prefer, only affects the progress after the gene pool is established.”

Tofla raised a hand. “It's just an expression, Emile.”

“Oh . . . forgive me.” Emile returned.

“With which group will you begin?” Tofla asked.

“We, ah, have a preliminary plan that, if executed properly, would introduce the design change into all three groups simultaneously. In this fashion, in the odd chance that they might meet one another and their groups intermingle, the objective would not be compromised.” Emile explained.

“Ah! Very good! Then I will take my leave in the morning, dear friend. You will be leaving with the expedition?” Tofla asked.

*“Yes, of course--if that's all right with you and the Directorate.”
Emile replied*

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“Oh, by all means Emile. The Directorate has no intention of interfering as long as you can continue to comply with our prime directive. Of course, a luminous explanation, now and then, always helps--it puts the old people at ease.”

“Of course it does. I can understand their concern. It was their project at its inception. They've stayed with it all these many epochs. They aren't allowed transfiguration until it's finished, I suppose.” Emile said.

“Ah, your supposition is correct.” Tofla returned. His voice became casual. “They've grown weary in the press of time. A little bit of Heaven would make them very happy.”

Silence fell upon them again. Their conversation had taken them well into the gloaming hours. The Orvis had risen to its apogee alongside the many stars of the night sky. Peepers sang their love songs from the reeds along the water's edge. Nearby an owl hooted. The warm breeze continued. In the air, the slight presence of wind-borne dew permeated their sense of smell. There was a strange, not quite fathomable, scent of life in the evening air. It was a pleasant and quiet moment. They were both lulled into slumber by it and, in time, the dreams came to both of them.

* * *

It was Cutter's delusion; a claim lost among the stars. He'd left his homeland centuries before making his way into this rugged wilderness to escape the insanity and evil he had left behind. But it didn't seem to do him much good. He never stopped feeling troubled—like a place where water is always turbulent. Now, he'd set himself up on this mountaintop as far away from civilization as he could. He had made some friends in this country over the many years of his odd and rather unusual life. Those most current of his acquaintances paid him friendly visits now and then—brought him gifts of delicate foods and paper and typewriter ribbons. That was nice. He still wrote for Newsweek and still made a decent living but he had gradually shifted his emphasis to environmental issues over the years. His popularity had waned somewhat; obviously because the environment was no longer a hot topic in the media. And, saving the planet from the gradual destruction of its ecosystem was no longer of any particular concern to anyone least of all those whose life-style had come to

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represent the mobile, resource hungry, in-your-face brand of neo-capitalism that had become so popular in recent years.

“Poor wretched people,” he often would say. Most of them never realized that they were being exploited on a scale never before experienced in human history. In debt up to their ears and absolutely *possessed* by the need to acquire material possessions that made little or no difference in their quality of life, this was a generation preoccupied with *pizzazz!* In Cutter’s view, it was just another iteration of the same old shit he’d seen over the last two millennia the only difference being in the abject audacity of the campaign of deception in which everyone around him had become so completely embroiled.

He’d just recently been commissioned by National Geographic to do a story on the local wilderness area; they were primarily interested in the effects pollution may have had on the watershed. Cutter had enlisted the assistance of his environmental scientist buddies and had written a really thought-provoking article that, surprisingly, had garnered the attention of Congress. God knows what they would do with the information; maybe his hard work would help those who really cared. He couldn’t say. This morning he’d been out along the trails behind his property photographing the majesty of the natural architecture when a storm rumbled along over the peaks of the mountains to the west. It hadn’t caught up with him yet so he felt he had some time to capture the essence of his subject matter in the strange and beautiful contrast that always manifests itself when ever light and darkness compete with one another.

He tried to hurry along, the storm was passing east-northeast down from the grand lakes along paths of swirling ether now pitched against the season of summer and a cooling rain broke through the ponderous heat. It was a tumult that fell toward the thirsty earth in sheets so heavy the animals below could hardly breathe. Black clouds cast bright bolts of lightning upon roiling plains withering the grass before them. Mountain streams were gorged with turbulent waters as the mindless madness carved its way along.

The horizon became indiscernible when the storm front passed high above the mountain tops. Powerful winds savaged the tall trees stripping branches from their great trunks and pummeling the larger game that hid beneath the forest canopy with millions of stinging droplets. The salvation, brought by the thunderstorm, was tied to the spinning landscape by the fabric of an ancient arrangement from which there seemed no escape. Nature proffered no tolerance and the primal force raged on.

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Cutter had sought refuge for a time, crouched in a shallow cave—a fearless field mouse his only companion—safe from the terror that lay just outside. The entire breadth of the valley, three hundred feet below, was visible from his vantage point. He watched a herd of white-tailed deer follow their patriarch along well-worn trails to the apparent safety of a dense stand of pines.

Darkness changed the shape of everyday things making them appear sinister—even threatening. Yet within the hour the tempest had subsided giving way to the rich hues of a setting sun and the quiet of dusk. He shook his head in disbelief and noticed that his tiny friend had fallen fast asleep in a lump of dry grass that had spent its last effort reaching for sunlight. Carefully, he crawled out upon the ledge, dropped down to the trail a few feet below his position, and made his way back toward his cabin.

Enriched by the latent humidity, the musty odors of his mountain hideaway piqued his senses—coupled his mind to a time when he was a boy. His memories fixed upon an event so long-past he had nearly forgotten it. In his reverie he sat upon the back steps of his grandmother's house and heard her call him to a late afternoon meal that she had resolved his growing body needed. She was always kind to him.

He stepped up on the porch and walked across to the threshold opening the cabin door. At the fire's edge across the room a bursting bubble of moisture erupted from the simmering stew. It leapt over the rim of the pot and into the mellow flames that danced beneath the mantle hissing as it evaporated. The sound cast him from his reflections and he stood, motionless for just a moment, wondering what his reaction should have been. Walking over to the fireplace, he grabbed a handy pot holder and lifted the stew pot off the hearth setting it aside to cool.

Gone now, her passing a major event in his life, he had not seen his grandmother for more than two thousand years. A feeling swept over him—an emotion so elemental that he hardly recognized it for its virtue. He wanted to stand beside her again as she sat by the kitchen window. Together they would feel the cool night breezes of summer descend upon them carrying the fragrance of her person: scents of cooking oils and laundry soaps—of homemade bread and the aroma of strong tea. His grandmother loved him.

Tears forced their way into his eyes. From what obscure corner of his subconscious had these feelings found their freedom? He gathered his faculties and shut away the longing for his heart ached to reconsider the loss of that special friendship.

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What is it that takes us back through time to such tender moments? Is it the frenetic struggle of life, in general—a continuum of catastrophes marked by occasional contentment? So violently are the forces of the Universe thrust upon us that we are compelled to invent abstract explanations for all the tragedies that characterize our mean existence. And it *is* a pathetic set of circumstances that combine to shape our lives.

The human condition is enslaved to the artificial ethos of exploitation. We grope along the twisted fabric of space and time like blind moles burrowing holes into reality, hoping that an agreeable change will either foist itself upon us or, like Riemann's cut, draw us through some unseen doorway into a parallel dimension where Alice is real and wishful thoughts form the foundation of our observations.

People dream dreams built with incredible architecture—that fold space and stop time. Our mere attitudes form powerful forces that oblige the rest of Creation to deal with terrible consequences—consequences that are material—that annihilate entire communities obliterating even the notion that they once existed. And, to put it all into perspective, to make it fit for our puny intellects to consume, we characterize our natural propensity with subtle phraseology. We are *always* at arm's length with our animal nature squeezing its manifestation into vague descriptions of the articles of our common experience.

...Lidice.

It was such an unfortunate little village in the Polish countryside, he thought. He had visited the site decades after its destruction when he had worked for Time Magazine. It was just an empty field by then. How many children—happy, content, rose-cheeked little children had been born there down through the centuries. Now it is forgotten. Utterly destroyed, its inhabitants murdered or taken off to be worked to death by the proponents of National Socialism, its location was nothing more than a place for its ghosts to haunt. But, then again, we all promised each other that we would *never* forget. We wrote poems and produced epic sagas on film. There was a burst of indignation among the ruling elite for just a little while and then our dysfunctional intellects forgot all about the tragedy. The emptiness continued . . . the darkness overwhelmed us . . . our essence, the brute that makes us die, somehow healed our psyche. And then, my God, we began again!

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Consuming the stew refreshed him. He did not often take game reasoning that God would not miss a rabbit or two. At such times, when the craving was uncontrollable, his simple thoughts were torn between compact objectivity and unmitigated loathing. Perhaps it was the solitary lifestyle that made him focus on so many diminutive aspects of living on this strange and faraway planet but he couldn't help wondering about himself: what he was, where he was . . . *when* he was . . . where ever. He already knew *who* he was. He's the fellow in the room—the thing that makes noise as it breathes . . . the rabbit-killer.

He threw a few small logs onto the fire to replenish it. As it waxed more vigorous, the interior of the cabin became animated with its dancing colors of red-orange and yellow and of the shadows cast. Beneath the cupboard lay a package a friend had sent. It was filled with useful things: coffee, dried figs, dates and apricots, sugar, and a selection of herbal teas—all carefully wrapped in the pages of a dated newspaper. From his chair by the fire he could just make out the visual impressions of a photograph on a page that he had crumpled unwrapping the tea. His curiosity was aroused; he had not thought to examine it before. He stood and walked to the cupboard, knelt down and retrieved the page.

On the table beside him he carefully pressed and patted the newspaper with his hands until its surface was sufficiently readable. There, in rich hues of grey, were the images of several human corpses. The caption beneath read ". . . *they had been executed by rebel forces.*" There they were—men, women, and little children—slaughtered for being something other than what the ideology of their enemies required. Utterly destroyed because their countenance and deportment did not conform to someone's expectations! Even the knowledge of it was reprehensible.

As a journalist, these shameless offenses had left him distraught. He could no longer cover the carnage and had fled to the outback to escape the daily *grinding*. Now he found it oozing into his consciousness wrapped around a package of tea!

Returning to his chair by the fire restored his composure. He extended the recliner back a bit and sipped his tea. *Our kind has labored through an epoch of evolution to reach the bottom of the barrel and, once thereon, we bored our way into hell!* Why do we love it so? What is it about the smell of hot blood that stimulates us? How can the sight and sound of screaming children being put to death motivate our intelligence?

...*Rwanda.*

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It is a place so far from his recollection that no one he knows believes it lies beneath the same sun. None of us can fathom its importance. It is a strange word rolling off the lips of the media people, a place where humans go to die, an allegory, a fable, a supposition in someone's prayer in some distant future when God's wrath consumes the whole of Creation for the sins of ten thousand centuries. *Kali, do not grieve...we are legion—the spawn of your womb come to nourish you with our own flesh...Such devotion!* We are mindless.

Hours passed and he had moved to a rocker on the porch. From there he considered the consequence of his having comprehended evil. Many millions of stars, their bright points poking holes in the black veil of deep space, glimmered through the atmosphere. Fire flies drifted through the tall grasses in the meadows. The aroma of wet earth permeated the evening air. From the west a mild breeze wafted through the woodlands rustling the leaves.

"*My God,*" he thought! The ebb and flow of time had deceived him. He had always *believed* in a superficial speculation that the presence of mankind was extraordinary—that a higher authority had given to us a living garden to be subdued and serve our ambitions. For thousands of years the extravagant claims of philosophers compelled us to arrogate our own significance and we contemplated our existence in terms that gratified our subordinating emotions of fear and revulsion. But that had *not* been the truth that Yeshua had told him. Yeshua had explained that we fear death and claim immortality—*not* in the name of that Supreme Intellect that governs the reins of our reality but according to a definition of what we call our supreme value! And it is this self-appointed sense of importance, this penchant for aggrandizing our participation in the universal scheme of things that dazzles us to the extent that we cannot compass meaning in our lives. Ah! *He* was a prophet! The kind of prophet that argues our purpose is "*...to serve God!*" But our temperament baffles us because we cannot determine the *nature* of God. So we live in constant anxiety and die the embodiment of great expectations.

What a waste of precious energy! We are here because the immeasurable forces of an unfathomable cosmology combined to form the origin of our materiality. Our essence is borne upon the all-embracing supremacy of these forces—a dispassionate power that creates and then destroys in innumerable cycles. We are the product of constant, crushing, irresistible *transformation*. There is no *beginning* for us and there will *never* be an end to those things that God conceives.

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And so, we *serve* God in any case because His magnificence consumes us. From the center of the Universe His sovereignty reaches out, across the vast nothingness of that which we struggle to comprehend, and molds the very essence of our being! What else can we do but submit to the inclination of so great and overwhelming a force?

...*Earth.*

It was his home—a haven for his elegant constitution. *It is* a place where people are delivered into the light of a resplendent sun, where they live in blighted agitation, and where they may die lamenting the day that they were born. “*All around us, the vibrations of our ignorance collide to create Chaos...despair exhausts us as we soak the earth beneath our feet with our own blood,*” he thought!

Cutter walked back inside his cabin and sat at the head of his modest dinner table. In solitude he wrote words that best described the thoughts drifting through his troubled mind; he had not slept and, after a time, filled several pages. His narrative formed the justification for an obsession: *He wanted to be free*—not the abstract idea that cloistered sophists make so much of from the safety of their hermitage. No, he wanted access to the physical freedom from the natural forces that produced his person—to travel to distant galaxies, explore alternate dimensions, and enter a covenant with an all-together different reality.

He did not like the killing that took place; the killing made him feel so desolate. Its destructive process was of an arbitrary and capricious character, an artificial circumstance because so much reason lay behind it! Even murderers have reasons...*Nature* has no reasons. In his effort to travel to a vantage point somewhere outside his quantum-mechanical body and view the human pathos from an unfleshed perspective, the thought occurred to him that, however rational our actions might appear to us, might we be nothing more than an instrument of that sweeping power?

There is justice. We are the ordinary bug on a blade of grass, the sweet song of a solitary sparrow, the dolphin and the tree, the beast that plods the field and the eagle that navigates the heavens. Our spirit can compose the courses of great rivers and plumb the depths of endless oceans. We are the heart that beats within and the intelligence that reaches out for the patterns of infinite duration and the substance that binds them all together.

These are the portraits of consequence with which the Christ struggled to envision in the garden at Gethsemane—a mythical place invented by a

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people who lived oh so long ago. They are the chronicle of the Cheng-tao Ke and were written of in ancient Sanskrit before the dawn of modern civilization. We are the upadhi—the deception—the disguise that God has assumed. The harder we search for the truth, the less likely it is that we will find it.

...John E. Cutter.

He *is* the knower. From this higher plain he can see his body walking in a garden not unlike Gethsemane. Above him the sky is a breathless, clear blue. Below his feet the grass is deep green. And all about him the people sleep. “*Will you not pray with me one hour?*” He remembered those words spoken by his dear friend. He had failed him too.

Cutter sat back in his chair. He reached over and took up the newspaper in his hand. Gently folding it again he read the headlines on the first page. The “insurgents” (as the morons in the press were want to call them) were at it again. Killing their fellows to advance chaos and their gluttonous avarice for absolute power over the lives of everyone around them; they were madmen, he thought. They didn’t even *know* what they were doing! The world was coming to an end! It was apparent to him at the very least although he knew of many others who shared his point of view. After all, how long could it go on? Over the many centuries he had never seen the seething madness last for more than a century or so before the collapse came and everyone went off screaming into the night. He understood that, in these last days—these final fleeting moments caressed by civility, most of the population preferred to have lies whispered in their ears and they certainly seemed to prefer a belief in a distortion of the truth—at the very least. They probably all thought that *he* was the madman!

Often when he managed to attend the dinners and the other social functions for which his job required his participation, he would make every attempt to articulate the warnings in the most erudite and courteous manner possible. But, most would slowly shake their heads in sympathy; they all were a study in compassion because he knew better for, when the edge of darkness engulfs us—brave souls, to where will our pilgrimages take us? He so wished that they would comprehend their predicament and put down the keys to their prison but he fathomed that his fellows preferred dying in obscurity and profound ignorance. He put the paper down. “*Let them learn the hard way then,*” he thought, “*this voyage through Eternity begins with understanding.*”

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From the northwest a glacial wind moans along the ancient rock. Space and time are mysteriously balanced at the advent of Dawn. The textures of the meadows sparkle in the subtle light—their grasses laden with moisture. Living things give pause to drink in something holy and a curious silence descends upon the moment. We must leave your world now, screaming madness, howling terror all around us. There is a dream that we must dream. It is a dream in which all those innocent children are resurrected from the dust of the earth and sent to a place called Paradise.

* * *

“He knew of us, Emile.” Tofla spoke through a whisper.

“Yes, but, by now, he has forgotten us or that he ever met us. Such are the mental limitations of the existing design. Yet, John was an aberration—the consequence of our success and the maddening enigma of life’s representation. Such living luminosity has not manifested itself since then. It was a shame he had to live on like that. But, all feelings of remorse aside, who are we to question His intentions? No matter, his spirit is accurately recorded in the memory of the Creator. Perhaps, when He is finished with him, He will release that essence of a life so peculiar and it may find its way back into awareness once again.”

Tofla’s countenance displayed...profound sadness. “I would have liked to have him as our companion.” He said. “He is a very lucid thinker.”

“Cutter was a solitary life. He fled chaos and treasured tranquility. It may be that his spirit may grace our consciousness in time, Tofla; do not grieve for him.” Emile said tenderly.

“I wish...I wish that life might not always be so tenuous—clinging to its existence—traveling upon the Continuum like a wind-born seed to settle itself upon a fate hidden in unknown places.” Tofla replied.

“You seem weary, old friend. That is all. You know that stardust is eternal and that it will always find its way back to Paradise.” Emile reassured him. “The Cosmos beats out its rhythm in never-ending cycles of fantastic creativity! Weep not for those who pass on before us, their journey is for their own good, their future is certain, and their happiness is secure in our knowledge of the Truth.”

* * *

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Dawn. The mysterious blue hue saturated all the colors of the wilderness landscape. Encompassed by steep rugged slopes, the high bluff provided an advantage for tired eyes. The panorama was magnificent.

Morning, crisp and cold, brought with it the heavy scent of pine and dew. The birds were the first to stir—a grouse fluttered its wings somewhere in the brush. A hawk, in the atmosphere above, screeched—its lonesome discourse echoing along the canyon walls.

Jan awoke to the whining cries of the coyotes on the mesa opposite his camp. They could smell the smoke from his small fire and were curious. He watched them for a moment. They did not seem curious enough to permit him the opportunity to make of them his winter coat.

He rose up perched above the encampment, his small tree house offering basic protection against the population of predators, and climbed down the larger of the two trees between which he had suspended the platform. Jan stoked his campfire, still aglow with waning embers, and began to brew a hot wild mint tea. The activity stirred his flesh with a rising tide of ambition. The campfire glow warmed the front of him, the heat caressing his nostrils and eyelids as he filled his mug. It took him nearly an hour to finish his tea and, when he was done, he turned from his musing, set his mug down on a nearby tree stump, and picked up his axe. “Time to work!” He said to himself.

It was early summer and he wanted the time to build a cabin to his liking. He thought of the spring behind his camp site. In his mind he played with the vision of himself behind a crude potter's wheel making tile pipes from the blue clay of the valley floor. “Yes,” he thought, “running water, a bath, and a cooking stove!”

This was the place to which he had run. He thought to make a life for himself in this rocky, unforgiving, isolated place. The collapse of civilization outside his wilderness domain had taught him an important lesson: *self-reliance*. He understood his perspective. His antique ideals resisted the advance of contemporary society: a progress with a vengeance in which the mountebanks of his culture constantly opposed logic.

His world had become an unhappy place where men and women labored beneath the never-ending turmoil of capital exploitation expending all their energy and resources on an ever-expanding common indebtedness that clung to everyone like some unpleasant pest. The goods were *designed* to assume uselessness. The food, saturated with a plethora of compounds, was *intended* to impersonate a natural process with which the masses had, long ago, become unfamiliar. The concept of the individual's personal contribution to

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society had gradually dwindled into insignificance within the collective attitude. People plodded along, daily completing their chores, reverently watching over their few remaining material possessions, and bitterly contemplating the prospect of a better life in the hereafter.

Jan was not one of them. Their resignation disgusted him and he felt no sympathy for their dilemma. People were content to abandon their humanity while single-minded technocrats reduced the whole of a living planet to symbols on a sheet of paper. The ruling elite had mastered the art of communicating through the medium of the image. Here, in this god-forsaken mining colony, the public was force-fed pictures of impassioned patriotism, religious fervor, unlimited opportunity, and immeasurable wealth. Morality was perceived as something *familiar*.

The common man smiled and laughed the laugh of an imbecile. They ate their synthetic food and did a little dirty dancing. Plague after plague had decimated the global population so there was plenty of everything (that nobody wanted or really needed) to go around. Humans clung to the few remaining population centers like fleas on a ragged old blanket. Nobody complained. The resolute warnings of a concerned minority annoyed them. "These ideologues ought not to be so gloomy," their leaders asserted, "there is always the power of positive thinking." But Jan, and a few others like him, could see that there was no longer any power in ordinary reason. Cutter had been right all along and where was he now?

Inside the mean cities a storm of destruction ensued. The Nistasi were on the move—wreaking havoc with their primitive terror. Then there were the religious zealots! They murdered innocent people for no other reason than to experience the thrill of having human blood smeared on their bodies. They had no purpose—no creed. Their motivation was nothing more than the exhilaration that their compulsion provided them. And, the governing elite had allowed this to happen—they quietly encouraged it behind the facade of their civilized demeanor. Constant fear kept the population under control, effectively, inexpensively—comparatively speaking. Social concepts had always been imperfect, true, but now Civilization, riddled with evil and human suffering on so extreme a level, carried mankind ever farther away from the fulcrum of the human community. Humanity was being propelled toward those ancient origins in which human flesh was slaughtered and consumed to fuel the cosmic engine.

He swung his axe. He felt very lonely here. But then, he had a good chance of living past thirty. The other side of the reality *he* knew was

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terrifying enough for him to abandon his kind and take his chances with Creation.

Jan decided to build his cabin into the slope of a heavily forested hillside. The huge spruce pines would shelter him from mountain winds and hide his location. Since finding this place, he had seen no other people--not the Kree who populated small areas in the territories to the southwest of him—not even military patrols from Gannemead and they wouldn't have bothered him in any case. The regional governments had come to appreciate the Loners as men like Jan were called. They would always try to persuade you to take a two-way radio. Loners were useful as eyes and ears along the frontier. It made the Military's job somewhat easier. But Jan didn't even want to keep *that* connection. Of course, he wouldn't refuse if they stumbled upon him—he *couldn't* refuse! They had weapons. He could always move to a new location but he couldn't spend the rest of his life breaking his backside building mountain hideaways now could he?

He finished sizing the log. Later after he had rough-hewn the log into the appropriate dimensions, he would position it with block and tackle. Jan disciplined himself to do one thing at a time. Naturally, the flat stone foundation and sandstone floor had come first. He cut and prepared one log at a time. They were small logs--about six to eight inches in diameter and perhaps eight to twelve feet long. He couldn't handle anything larger than that. In two months of work, he had completed the walls and had most of the roof timbers in place. The cabin was about forty feet long, by twenty feet deep, by nine feet high. He had put a steeply sloping roof on it that extended out past the front of the structure about eight feet—his front porch. He hadn't built the floor of the porch yet.

The cabin wasn't a traditional rectangle. Its final shape was the result of Jan navigating the foundation around a stone ledge that was the entrance to a small cave. He thought the cave perfect for storing provisions. A small spring-fed stream kept the ambient temperature of an adjoining grotto at about forty degrees and provided fresh water in any season. It was a dry place, having a small exit in its rear wall into which Jan had built a heavy wooden door that swung on hardwood hinges. He kept the grotto isolated from the main cavern with a large slab of sandstone. It was about four inches thick and about five feet in diameter. He could roll it along a channel he had cut into the cavern's sandstone floor and cover the grotto's entrance.

There was a natural chimney on the northwest wall terminating on the cavern dome in a hole about sixteen inches in diameter. Jan had built the fireplace of the cabin and a few feet of flat stone chimney into this natural

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feature. Later, he intended to build a clay lined flue, alongside the massive masonry, to accommodate his cooking stove. Several tasks remained if he was to realize his dream by fall when the snow came. The walls needed chinking. The windows and doors needed to be installed. The roof needed to be thatched and the stone chimney needed to be finished. He also thought it would be a good idea to build a sheltered walkway out to his sturdy little out-house. The snows of winter were deep in this part of the territory.

In one corner of the cabin a huge sandstone boulder lay. It had fallen away from its place in the side of the cave entrance and had landed where it now rested weathered side down. The huge rock had a deep concave shape on the “up” side. At first Jan was depressed. The thing had taken up about ten square feet of the floor space and was too big for him to move by himself. He went on about his work for several weeks before he got the idea that, properly configured, the thick slab of sandstone would make an ideal bath tub! He dug beneath one end and, with his mallet and chisel, carved a round hole into the stone to which he connected home-made clay pipe. It had taken him a week just to make enough of the pipe to complete the drain's exit from the cabin floor. Jan used crudely manufactured limestone slurry to set the pipe in place beneath the bolder. It dried hard enough to seal the tile joints. He then filled in the floor around the stone again. His bath tub tested perfectly! A wooden plug tied to a length of old rope kept the water in. When he removed the plug, the water burst from the end of the pipe filling in the hole where he had intended to build a dry well.

Jan's thoughts often dwelled on designs that would allow him to have running water from the cave's small stream. But he felt that he had lost enough time fooling around with his bath tub and thought it more prudent to tinker with this problem later—once the shelter was completed. For now he would focus his attention on the job of completing the roof.

In his daily routine, Jan would gather a stiff brown grass from the alpine meadows just below his location. It looked like Johnson's Grass to him and he harvested it easily, tying it into sheaves that he would carry home after hunting or fishing. The sheaves were stored in the cave where they remained dry. The roof of his modest home was a single slope that just fit beneath the rock ledge of the hillside above the cave entrance. He had placed the roof rafters into pockets he had carved into a narrow layer of soft limestone. The cabin faced east and its northeast wall was sheltered by hillside and forest. If the roof were properly thatched, Jan would have no problems with blowing wind, rain, or snow.

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He had spent months in the public library in Sentia researching traditional crafts. The effort served him well. It was the only valuable information he had been able to glean from a crumbling society. He had stolen an old set of technical books, wrapped them in plastic, and lugged them all the way out here to this remote place along with all the old tools and his camping gear. The preparatory phase of this project had taken him almost two years. A year to figure it all out and come up with a plan, a year to lug everything he thought he would need out to the site in backpacks. On his last trip he ditched his worn out old trike in the desert and climbed the west face of the southern range for the last time.

He had the good fortune of having a twenty millimeter rocket launcher—called an *RL* and a nine millimeter pulse rifle along with ample ammunition. The weapons were ancient but easy enough to buy on the black market. He used them sparingly. Jan taught himself how to hunt with a bow and arrow and to fish with either a net or a pole. He brought with him a good hunting knife and a machete and, over the months, they had taken on the uniform look of continued use.

The wild animals stayed well away from him though and he had difficulty hunting elk or deer. Yet, he seemed to be doing alright on a diet of fowl, fish, and wild greens. Whenever he managed to get meat, he dried it in the sun as jerky and stored it in sacks hung from stalactites on the grotto dome. The *only* animal he feared was the mollith—a bear-like creature that could weigh as much as a ton and often stood nine feet at the shoulders. They were an indigenous species and even with the destructive hunt-downs of the last century, there were still a few of them left. Once on a hunting expedition in the mountain ranges to the northwest, he saw a big mollith bring down an elk, stone dead, in less than five minutes! Those animals that had been introduced by the early explorers to provide food and clothing were really no match against any of the native predators. He had waited, hiding in the tree line upwind from the mollith a whole day before the vicious thing left following the scent of something. Then he scrambled down to the river's edge to carve a knapsack full of meat from what was left of the carcass. It was the easiest meal he had ever taken from the mountains. Had the mollith returned too soon . . . he shuddered just to think of those huge jaws!

His work had taken him into afternoon. Jan didn't feel like cooking so he nourished himself on some jerky and wild greens. The mint tea had been sitting by the fire all afternoon and was too strong for him now. He quenched his thirst with cool spring water. Jan had just one more rafter to put in place and then he'd be able to tie down the tree bark roofing tiles he had

meticulously fashioned. Over these he intended to build a tightly thatched roof. “*That’ll keep the weather out!*” He thought. The eaves were woven of branches anchored to both the wall and the roof rafter at each end. He would plaster them with a ground limestone stucco to complete the roof’s weather-proofing.

He reminded himself. He took up his RL and loaded it. It would only be used if he happened upon a mollith, or saber-toothed towna, or . . . “Let’s get going here fella!” He told himself. Jan donned his shoulder rack, and bow and quiver and plodded off down the narrow trail to the sandstone bridge that led to the valley floor. Above him a deep blue afternoon sky and summer sun cheered his spirit and a mountainous panorama thrilled his senses. He was making it on his own and he was very, very pleased with himself! Crisp mountain air filled his lungs. He felt happy and let out a thundering “Ha!” that echoed along the canyon walls. “What a life I’ve made for myself!” He shouted into the endless wilderness. Jan would return to his mountain home at dusk; just in time to see the setting sun color the world around him with a crimson sigh. Then he’d curl up in his hammock strung between the two towering pines while the moon and the stars dazzled his senses filling his soul with a calm that would then put him fast asleep.

Jan had been climbing the pass for the better part of an hour now. To his left, a clear mountain brook roared down upon jagged rocks and over a precipice to the canyon below. Just over the break above him was a narrow cleft in the mountainside that led to a small alpine valley in the center of which there was a beautiful lake—the source of the stream. Tall pines grew dense along the hillsides. Aspen, their buds just now pregnant with life, forested the southwestern approaches. In the marshes along the eastern extreme, water fowl rested from their flight north to their nesting grounds. They would visit this place as they journeyed south in the fall. The air was fresh and full of the smells of the wilderness—damp earth and pristine water spray mingled with the scent of pine. There was a breeze among the tall branches—a constant murmuring that kept him company.

The lake was full of trout too and it was from this source that he was able to obtain most of his provisions. He didn’t think that there would be any Elk up this high so early in summer. Predators and prey alike would, most likely, still be on the canyon floor below right now. He also hoped that the great molliths were down there with the rest of Creation.

Patches of snow still lay along the meadows on the south side of the valley that faced north. It would stay cool up here for at least two more

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weeks. At this time of the year it was dangerous. Melting snow and ice would collapse in upon itself and come thundering down the mountainside in a spectacular but deadly avalanche killing anything that lay within its path.

As he began his descent along the downward side of the trail, he heard the tell-tale “clap and thunder” of an avalanche in the distance. Jan shook his head and was glad to have been at the safer end of the valley. He took in the view again. About a mile down along the lake shore he saw large animals at the water's edge. “*Elk!*” He thought. He pulled his binoculars from his waist pouch and examined his sighting in more detail. “Yup . . . that's Elk all right! Wonder what they're doin' up here so early?” He mused aloud. He trained his field of view on the lake itself. There were a few geese on the shore line. “Slow-pokes,” he said to himself.

Jan put his binoculars away and continued on. He had come here for a few fish. The trout were a decent size here; their species had been introduced during the millennia before as settlers terraformed the planet to suit the needs of the colonists. Up at this elevation they usually grew to about eighteen inches long. He would pick some wild greens from the canyon floor on his way home. He approached the western shoreline of the lake. The geese eyed him cautiously. They took on additional distance from him honking nervously as they waddled east along a small spit of graveled shoreline. Jan stopped by an old fallen pine; it was a huge tree. Some of its bulk was still alive and new branches sprouted from its mangled stump sprawled along the southern side of a rocky outcrop that jutted out into the water a few yards or so. Jan climbed the edifice to its flat top and looked around him—first down at the huge stump and giant weathered tree that had fallen down along the lakeshore, then up along the opposite side of the lake.

He wouldn't use his net today. He removed his fishing gear from its long pouch and put his pole together. Threading the line from the reel through the pole eyelets, he tied a hook and lure to the end. He cast his line. Not a few seconds later he had hooked a good-sized fish. “Hungry little bastards!” He said astonished at the quick catch. Jan reeled the fish in. It was a good-sized rainbow trout. As he eyed his catch, he thought how, originally, they had been introduced to the region as were the familiar brown trout and he remembered reading somewhere about a stocking program in days gone by.

Jan caught a second fish and then a third. “That's enough for now.” He told himself. He looked down toward the eastern end of the valley again. The Elk had vanished. Just a ways past the first turn of the eastern pass he saw the snow from the avalanche had piled up against the North Slope to a height of about twenty feet.

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“Gees,” he thought, “*lucky thing I wasn't standing there!*” And then he noticed a dark spot just above the ground at the edge of the field of snow. He tried to focus. Jan removed his binoculars again and, peering through them, made out the outline of a *man!* He appeared to be trapped at the waist! Jan studied the area to make sure of what he had discovered.

“Yes, it's a man!” He said. From his vantage point he could make out the forest green and camo of a military uniform. A paratrooper's round padded helmet prevented Jan from making out the man's features. He hurriedly packed the fish he had caught in his basket and broke down his fishing gear placing it back in its carrying pouch. He swung his RL from his shoulder and jumped down off the great rock to run down the lake's shore toward the eastern pass about a mile away.

He kept his eyes trained on the site where the man was trapped and thought he saw the poor fellow move a couple of times. “I wonder if he's a colonial trooper or a mercenary.” He asked himself. Jan just felt a pressing need to get there and help him if he could.

Minutes later he was close enough to see that, yes, it was a soldier—a Mountaineer by the look of his gear and uniform. And, his shoulder patch bore the emblem of the Republic of Gannemead. He was struggling to pull himself from the huge chunks of snow that pressed tightly against him. Had he been able to go a few more steps he would have completely missed the western edge of the avalanche.

He was in up to his rib cage struggling to get free. Then he stopped and fell back against the snow, staring into the sky holding his helmeted head with gloved hands. “Oh shit!” He said. “I don't want to go this way!”

“Now wait just a minute.” Jan said calmly. “Who says you're going to go anywhere much less die?” The soldier strained his neck to look as he was lying on his back.

“Help me mister, please—I give you my word: I'll owe you one!” Jan jogged toward him, came to a stop and knelt down beside him. Jan unhooked his camping spade from his waist belt and began to dig. The snow was hard but chunks gave way to the point of the spade.

“Don't want to cut you--be patient.” Jan instructed the soldier. The soldier seemed exhausted from his struggle. Even after Jan had cleared enough snow to free his legs, the poor fellow needed help to get free of the snow. He pulled him away from the snow and onto the gravel of the shoreline.

“Let's see if anything is broken.” Jan cautioned him. The soldier shook his head “no” and began to try to catch his breath.

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“My squad!” The soldier said, pointing to the area just behind the place where he had been trapped. Jan turned to see a gloved hand protruding from the surface.

“Holy shit!” Jan shouted and jumped up, racing toward the spot to begin feverishly digging again. About an arm's length into the snow he found the other soldier's helmet. He worked quickly to widen the hole and free the body of the soldier beneath him.

He finally cleared enough debris to allow an attempt at pulling the soldier out by his arms. The limp body began to slide out and then broke loose in a sudden motion knocking Jan onto his backside. Jan struggled to get up and pulled the second soldier to a place beside the first.

“Milo, Milo!” The first soldier cried out. The second soldier just moaned. Jan covered the man with the bedroll strapped to his backpack. The soldier rolled his eyes, breathing heavily. His insulated coveralls had worked to keep his body temperature stable but he *too* seemed exhausted. Jan searched the debris for signs of life—nothing.

“How far back were the rest of them?” Jan cried out to the soldiers.

“About twenty yards.” The first soldier responded.

Jan climbed the slope of the avalanche's edge. “About twenty yards.” He repeated in a small voice. He continued climbing back along the top of the rubble. There, just about twenty yards from the edge, a huge angular boulder lay against the opposite side of the narrow pass. Beneath the boulder three pairs of legs lay exposed, soaked in blood.

His first reaction was to retch but he brought himself under control. He climbed down from his position and walked back to the two soldiers. The second soldier was sitting up.

“Three people?” Jan asked them. The first soldier nodded “yes.” Jan looked away toward the western slopes.

“Well, they're dead now.” He said in a gentle voice. The soldier dropped his head. Jan knelt beside him.

“Look,” he continued, “you guys have lost some body temperature. You're friend, here, doesn't look too good. We have to build a fire and warm you two up--understand?”

Jan noticed the single bar of a lieutenant on the soldier's collar. “Lieutenant?” He asked trying to get some kind of response from the man. The soldier peered up at Jan from beneath the brim of his helmet and nodded affirmatively. There were tears in his eyes.

Jan knew they all would need some shelter. He gathered fallen branches and used his camping axe to trim them working steadily to build a lean-to in

which the three men could spend the night sheltered against the wind. After a time, Jan had built a roaring fire and had constructed the lean-to in such a fashion facing the fire that it captured the fire's warmth quite efficiently. The second soldier had recovered now. Jan had wrapped them in their blankets and ponchos and instructed them both to warm themselves before the huge fire that he had built. He had staked out his fish on spits and had his small teapot brewing mint tea beside the fire. He could see that they were inexperienced—greenhorns—and, why were they up here in the mountains?

"We'll eat directly, gentlemen." Jan reassured them.

The Lieutenant gave his name as Jack Ranford and the other fellow was his Sergeant, Fred Milo. "You saved our asses," Ranford said, "We owe you mister."

Jan looked back at them. "Relax, Lieutenant . . . but it sure was a lucky thing that I had decided to come here to fish today. What were you and your people doin' in the eastern pass anyway?" Jan inquired ready for the usual need-to-know lecture.

"Tracking bio-smugglers." The Lieutenant answered. "Chopper went down about six miles northeast of here. They must have gotten through." Ranford pulled the blanket around him a little tighter. "Did you see anyone on your way up?"

Jan shook his head. "No but just below the western pass the trail breaks out into a half-dozen directions. They might have chosen one of the others that lead down into Black Bear's Hollow. I don't live there, guys, and I don't like to frequent the place either."

"Why not?" Milo inquired.

"The Kree don't like you brassin' your way around their homelands." Jan returned. "They evolved to become the only sentient species native to the planet, you know. At least, that's what some scientists think."

"Oh..." The Sergeant said understanding the meaning of what Jan had said. The Kree were a strange lot indigenous to this planet but were small in numbers. They were a humanoid-like species, intelligent but caught up in their own stone age. After the Colonial Government had finally collapsed eight centuries before, humans had withdrawn into their towns and villages. The Kree remained in the wilderness a nomadic people who lived off the land according to their ancestral ways and aboriginal life style. Having been persecuted in the past they weren't too friendly to humans. Jan was a big Lakota—a race of humans that had once lived on Earth, the legendary home of all human beings. He had met a few of them while hunting. They

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tolerated him because they sensed he was wild like their own kind but they always kept their distance.

“Maybe they'll take care of our work for us.” Ranford remarked.

“Oh yeah . . . they sure will!” Jan assured him as he tied the last support in place. “There ya’ go, boys, home sweet home!”

“You guys from Cutter’s Claim are you?” Jan asked.

“No. . . we’ve been assigned to the settlement as part of the program to assimilate the colony back into the Old Republic.” Ranford replied.

“I won’t tell you that you’re a little late but, at least, it’s about time.” Jan said half-jokingly.

Ranford smiled back at him.

The three men sat before the warming fire that night and ate the fish Jan had cooked and drank the hot tea that he had brewed. Jan told Ranford all about himself mostly just to have something to talk about. The two soldiers returned the courtesy by telling Jan the news from the flat land villages and cities—that is, the few that were left.

“The plagues have decimated the population.” Ranford said, staring into the burning embers at the edge of the fire. “At least the famine is gone—dead people don't eat any food.”

Jan sensed a personal tragedy connected with what the Lieutenant was telling him. “Loose family, did ya’?” Jan softly inquired. Ranford nodded affirmatively.

“They've got good vaccines against the plagues now but I guess that won't bring anybody back—will it?” Ranford answered.

“No, I suppose it won't.” Jan Replied. He understood the comment—don't ask any questions. It was late and time to rest now anyway.

“Whose gonna' take the first watch?” Milo asked.

“I will,” Jan returned, “. . .because you guys need to get a few hours of sleep or you won't be worth shit in the morning. We've got a lot of walking to do. I'll guide you down to the old settlement road that leads to Soda Springs.” The two men nodded in agreement.

“Thanks again, Jan.” Ranford said. The two soldiers crawled into the lean-to. The rugged structure was warm from the heat of the fire in front of them and kept the night chill off their backs. They pulled their blankets over them and watched the flames. They began to fall asleep. Jan threw more wood on the fire. He took up his RL pulling back the pump to put a round in the chamber. He looked at Ranford.

“Molliths!” Jan said without bothering to explain. Ranford just nodded his head and closed his eyes.

The next morning was overcast and gloomy. The three men broke camp and made their way out of the alpine valley through the western pass following the lake-fed stream until they met the falls. From there they turned south and walked along animal trails until they came to the river below. Jan would have to take them through a narrow cleft in the canyon wall about five miles further south—into Kree territory.

“Don't fool around, you guys; we have to walk through Kree lands now.” Jan cautioned them. “See the narrows in the river?” He said pointing to a place where the river ran over bedrock in a narrow turn of the canyon. “We have to cross the river there.” The soldiers said nothing and followed his lead. As they walked a gust of wind filled the mountain ranges howling along the tree line above. It blew on for more than an hour until clouds gave way to patches of clear blue sky.

“It's clearing up.” Jan said to his companions. “I know we've got to have rain once in a while but I prefer sunny days—you know?” They arrived at the cleft around mid-morning and crossed through it into Kree territory. After they had walked for about an hour Jan noticed a silent sentry on the ridge above. He stood motionless watching them but when Jan waved to him, he waved back.

Ranford strained to make a pointed observation of the creature. He was just over seven feet tall, humanoid in build with many of the same familiar muscular definition. Ranford thought the creature to have a blue-grey skin color. The sentry stood supported by a javelin in his right hand while his left foot rested gracefully on the inside of his right knee. Ranford thought his feet resembled those of a human but his facial features seemed chiseled and his hair seemed fine; it was long and it caught the breeze flowing around his chin. He looked like a graceful bird perched atop the precipice.

“It's not hair, you know,” Jan explained, “it's...it's like long feathers or something. I think they're evolved from something like birds. You know? I've seen one up close and the teeth...they're wide and serrated like a bird's beak.”

“Is everything Okay?” Ranford asked.

“I think they know that I'm escorting you out of their homelands,” Jan replied, “so I don't think that they're going to interfere.”

“Are you held in high regard then?” Milo asked.

“No...not really. They call me Eeche' cahn pinchette. I think it means: the pinchette that doesn't kill.”

“What is a pinchette?” Milo asked.

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“It’s a mammal...sort of like a beaver only bigger. It builds lodges in the waterways. They see me building a cabin; they *think* I’m a mammal—two plus two...you know. I think they just want me to get rid of you guys is all.” Jan replied adding a sarcastic raspy chuckle to close his explanation.

The landscape was rugged but the men could feel that they were heading down off the western slopes of the mountain and into a broad valley. As they came to the southwestern boundaries of the forest they were met with a panoramic view. It took off north and south as far as the eye could see. The valley was wide and colored deep green and was cut by a narrow fast-flowing river at its center. On the northern approaches a herd of Elk grazed. White Mountain Goats dotted the cliffs and crags of the opposite side.

“No wonder you live up here!” Ranford said. “It’s beautiful!”

“Don’t let it fool you.” Jan replied. “That awesome beauty can kill you if you’re not careful!” Ranford gave Jan a quizzical look. “Mmm-mmm!” Jan continued. “Crevasses swallow you up! Goddamn snakes are as big as a small tree—can strike out at you four feet or more! Wild dingoes will hunt you down and rip you limb from limb. And, if you piss off the Kree, they’ll skin you alive! Watch your ass around here!” Jan continued down through the meadow into the grand valley before them. The two soldiers looked at each other.

“Flak!” Ranford commented to Milo. Milo just shook his head. The two men followed Jan in silence.

By noon they had crossed the great valley and were climbing the western slopes.

“We need to get down the other side. There’s an old access road down there that leads to the settlement road. You’ll be safe if you stay close to the road—the Kree won’t want to discourage you from leaving” Jan smiled a big broad smile and chuckled again.

“Where do *you* live?” Asked Ranford?

“Hey look guys I came all the way out here so no one would bother me—you know?” Jan replied.

“I said we owed you one, Jan, come on you must need something—name it!” Ranford answered as the three kept walking.

“Yeah . . . well, I want a tall, athletic, good-lookin’ woman with a body that won’t quit” Jan teased. “It gets lonely up here sometimes.”

“Hey—I’ll see what I can do.” Ranford remarked with in a casual tone.

Jan thought to ask Ranford if he was serious but just shook his head slightly and let it pass. He stopped and turned to face the two men. They stopped short just behind him.

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“See that mountain range right there?” Jan pointed northeasterly. “I live on a plateau at the northern end of that canyon we crossed. So when you find some beauty queen that wants to spend the rest of her life fishin' and pickin' pine cone nuts, that's where you bring her Okay?”

The two men looked at each other and then at Jan. Milo began with subdued snicker provoking the other two to break into laughter.

“Wise-ass,” Jan snapped with good humor!

“Hey!” Ranford replied through his laughter. “I said: I'll see what I can do.”

The men continued laughing as they walked over the crest and down to the ancient road bed below.

Jan was trying to be serious but kept laughing all the same. “No . . . seriously guys, if you really want to get me something, I could use some nails. . . different sizes—you know.” the three companions continued to joke.

“What! Now you're telling me you're a freak! Hey! Hey! Milo he wants to do it with nails—now how the hell do you do it with nails?” Ranford inquired sarcastically. The laughter persisted. Jan's natural humility coupled with his kindness and compassion had bonded the two strangers to him. He did not know it then but these were decent men who valued friendship. And Jan would have their friendship for as long as he lived.

* * *

On his way home Jan cut through the northeastern end of the forest and ambled up along the eastern slope until he found an old trail that cut deep into forest floor. He remembered that at the top of this mountain, well into its eastern pass, there was a small pond where he might be able to catch some fish for dinner. He didn't think that the Kree would begrudge him a few fish. He had no way of knowing but, of course, they would not. Their perception of territory focused on community. One lone Lakota would not threaten the material well-being of their entire clan. So they let him go. Besides, as their Head Man had once insisted, he was of their kind. They were an instinctive people.

Jan had walked about six miles when he came to the pond. He broke out his fishing gear and cast in the line and lure. His legs felt a bit tired from all the walking he had done that morning so he sat down on his haunches to rest at the edge of the pond. The sunlight danced off the water's surface and played with his consciousness and he began to daydream. But a movement

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to the right of his focus snapped him out of his reverie and he turned his head to see what it was.

An old Kree, in native dress, was walking along the deer trail on the opposite side of the pond. His soft feather-like hair was long and white as snow. Bird feathers adorned his head, although Jan could not make out what kind they were. He carried a leather backpack and powerful bow and quiver. Jan could make out an intricate design embroidered into the man's shirt; he could tell that it was made of some kind of animal skin as were his leggings and moccasins. Yet, he couldn't remember the significance of that design even though its pattern seemed familiar to him.

Jan made no effort to get the old man's attention and the traveler seemed preoccupied as he was singing an ancient chant in a very low voice, occasionally whistling the forlorn melody—as though praying. In a short time he vanished into the woods. The incident was innocent enough yet Jan began to feel uneasy about this place. And then he felt a tug on his line.

After catching three more small brown trout from the pond, he put his gear away and took up his journey home once again. The land became more familiar to him after he had crossed over the northern range of smaller rolling foothills. Originally, he had climbed the western slopes of that southwestern range and followed the canyon up to where he now lived. Sunset was nearly upon him when he reached the base of the forested plateau he called home. He had traveled all day and had but a few fish to show for it. And for the last two days he had not worked on his cabin. As Jan climbed the trail to the top, he resolved to work all the more harder to make up for the time he had lost.

That night, as he sat before a comforting fire cooking his evening meal, he thought about the two men whose lives he had saved from certain death. He wondered, for a moment, if they had made it to the outpost at Soda Springs Okay and, after considering their profession once again, reassured himself that they had.

“Funny,” Jan said to himself, “I'm worried about two complete strangers!” He poked his fire with a stick until it began to crackle.

“It is because you have saved their lives, my son; you have altered their destinies. Their spirits will be indebted to you until they are able to return to you this kindness.” A low calm voice spoke from out of the darkness surrounding the cabin.

Jan jumped from the stump on which he had been sitting. The old Kree stood before him motionless—his countenance at seven feet tall was all the more eerie in the glow of firelight. Jan regained his composure. He coughed and swallowed to calm himself. The old man remained still.

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“You startled me, grandfather!” Jan said addressing the old man with courtesy and respect lacking any knowledge of the proper way to address a Kree elder. “Uh . . . would you like something to eat?”

The old man draped his blanket over a small boulder that lay a comfortable distance from the fire and sat down on it. He dropped his pack to the ground and then reached over and picked off a morsel of fish from the spit nearest him.

“Sit down and eat, my son—I’m not a ghost!” The elder reassured him.

Jan sat back down on his squat wooden stump. Again the pattern embroidered into the old man's shirt caught his eye—again the feeling of familiarity came over him. Where had he seen that design before? The two men ate in silence for a long while. Occasionally, Jan would look at the old man and on each occasion the familiarity grew stronger. Memories from his youth began to seep into his consciousness and they reinforced the growing awareness that he had known this man at some time in the past! His behavior was instinctively familiar to him even though Jan *knew* this creature was another species the likes of which he had not know until just a few months ago. *After* a time the suspicion became certainty and the countenance of the man in his memory became completely mapped to the image that his eyes beheld.

“Wanagi Ska!” Jan whispered—The White Ghost. Sweat beaded up on his brow and forearms; his hands became clammy. He suddenly realized the Kree elder was communicating with him in his native Lakota Tongue.

“I was wonderin' when you were gonna' recognize me.” The old Kree replied in a low but very casual voice.

“You were an old man then.” Jan said. “I was just a boy—that was more than twenty years ago!” Jan stood up slowly and took a few steps backward. He wore an expression of complete disbelief.

“My father called you 'old man' and *his* father before him!” Jan continued. “How old are you? And...you are Kree!”

Wanagi Ska finished chewing his food and swallowed.

“I’m a pretty damn old man, my son. I knew your ancestors. I am the guardian of your blood line. I have watched over you since you were born. Do you think that you're here because you wanna' be? You came to this place to fulfill your destiny, my son. And, if you keep goin' the way you're goin', you're gonna' be dead by winter! I've come to teach you the ways of your ancestors—the ancient ways—to give you knowledge of our earth mother, so that you can survive and have children. It is important for you to have children so that your heritage can continue. And me? Why...I can be

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anybody I damn well please! But, it's not important for you to understand all of this right now so sit down and finish your dinner—you're aggravatin' me and I'm really hungry. Where are your manners anyway?"

Jan sat back down and began to eat again. He ate slowly. *"This guy has got to be a couple of hundred years old!"* He thought to himself.

"I'm over three thousand years old, my son. Wakan Tanka has given me immortality. My work takes a lot of time." Wanagi Ska replied.

Jan was startled once again to think that the old man could read his thoughts.

"Don't be troubled, my son. I can't read your mind but I know you well enough to read your body's language. You're scared a' me aren't you?" The old man asked.

Jan did not reply but asked: "How am I gonna' have children? I've got no woman here. Are you also a match-maker, grandfather?"

"Wakan Tanka will take care of that. Finish your food and get to bed. You will need your rest—we have work to do in the morning!" Wanagi Ska motioned to the construction around him. "We gotta' finish buildin' this lodge of yours. Then I gotta' teach you how to be a true Lakota and you have to learn the Way of the Kree as well or you're gonna' die of starvation this winter; I swear!"

The two sat in quiet conversation for the rest of the evening until Wanagi Ska told Jan he was tired and wanted to sleep. Jan watched as the old Kree curl up on his bedroll and cover himself with his blanket. His blue-grey skin took on a golden luminescence before the light of the waning camp fire. Jan climbed to his tree house and got into his hammock covering himself against the night chill as well.

"Don't you want to come up here with me, Grandfather?" Jan politely asked. "It's safer."

"The animals won't bother me, my boy, now go to sleep." Wanagi Ska answered. And, after a while the two men fell asleep.

"Well done, Emile." Toftla said.

"You see?" Emile asked rhetorically. *"Stardust always finds its way back to its origins. It's still impressive though."*

"What—to see so perfect a transformation," Toftla asked?

"No, not so much that...we've seen it so many times among the elders. No, what I meant was the act of summoning the soul to duty. This old fellow's life on Earth had ended well over three hundred millennia ago. The Creator had lifted him up again nearly five centuries before our subject was

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born—all in preparation for this event. Come on now, Tofla, even you are impressed by the Creator's capacity to view events along the continuum!" Emile explained.

"Oh, yes, I certainly am impressed but I would find it a fearful thing to view the future." Tofla returned.

"So would I. I'd rather just watch reality unfold as we have always done down through all these countless epochs. It's like reading a really good book. You know?" Emile seemed to be reminiscing. "I've forgotten my own beginning. Have you?"

"Well, of course dear friend, I'm as old as you." Tofla replied.

"I hope that we always know each other...that we never forget...you've been such a good friend and a trustworthy companion." Emile said quietly turning a leaf of the book before him.

"I wonder where all this will lead, Emile, I wonder what that phenomenal force has planned for all of us." Tofla mused.

"Paradise, I would assume." Emile replied.

* * *

Time passed. Together Jan and the old man finished the cabin. Wanagi Ska was good at the potter's wheel and made several items for the household besides the tile pipe required to plumb the structure—items such as bowls and platters, cups and baking pots. The old man even knew how to make the cooking stove properly. Once completed, Jan marveled at how the stove required only a small bundle of dry wood to produce enough heat to cook and warm the cabin.

Wanagi Ska taught him how to harvest wild oats and how to grind it in a home made, hand operated grist mill so that it could be made into unleavened bread. He taught him how to hunt Elk properly with a throwing stick and javelin and bow and arrow and not with his pulse rifle. Jan learned the different ways to hunt each species of fowl. And, the old man taught him how to gather more than just wild greens; Jan was taught to identify and harvest the right tuberous plants, roots, and berries. His diet improved dramatically. The old man taught him how to trap and how to treat the pelts and tan leather and make clothes for himself. He taught him how to process the marsh nettles and spin their fibers into a linen-like cloth or a sturdy rope.

Jan also learned the art of healing. Wanagi Ska taught him knowledge of the many different kinds of herbs and natural compounds available to him in the wild. He learned their medicinal uses and the beneficial substances that

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could be concocted by combining them in the appropriate manner. But, most of all, Wanagi Ska taught him about Wakan Tanka and how he must train himself to be in harmony with Creation. This was necessary, the old man explained, because Wakan Tanka had, long ago chosen the Kree and, more importantly, had chosen Jan to help fulfill his “plan” for the Universe. It was too great a concept to fathom but Jan accepted Wanagi Ska's assertion nonetheless.

The two men grew very close as would a father and son. Jan loved Wanagi Ska very much and valued his companionship more than any being that he had ever known. Wanagi Ska never stopped teaching him. He taught Jan valuable lessons even when he told him the ancient stories and legends of the Kree people just to entertain him.

The “growing period,” as the old man called it, was intense and lasted all through the summer and into early fall. And then one day Wanagi Ska was gone. Jan awoke one pleasant fall morning to find that he was all alone. He called out to Wanagi Ska but received no answer; he searched for him diligently but could not find him. At the end of the day, on his way back to the cabin, he stopped to rest beside the river at the bottom of the canyon. He felt sadness enter his heart. He missed his teacher if only for a day and, strangely enough, he wanted to cry like a small child.

In the stretch of river bank to his right he was startled to see, emerging from the woods, a great bull elk. It had, what appeared to be a beaded belt in its mouth. It quietly walked up to within a few yards of Jan and laid the belt down on the gravel river bank directly in front of him. It looked at him for a moment and then turned and trotted away into the trees.

“Pick up the belt, my son.” Jan heard his teacher's voice whisper on the evening breeze.

“Grandfather,” Jan began but the old man cut him off.

“Shut up and listen because I haven't got time to be foolin' around with you.” Wanagi Ska replied and then continued. “Your training is over with. Soon, Wakan Tanka is gonna' send you a nice wife and you're gonna' be happy 'cause a gentle spirit like yours shouldn't be left alone in the world. And I want you to get rid of this sadness I'm feelin' from you. I'm not gonna' abandon you, my son, I just gotta' go on a walk for awhile. I'll be back. My heart will always be with you so don't do anythin' stupid! Remember what I have taught you; observe the life around you. Live in harmony with it. I must commence my journey; goodbye for now.”

Jan dried the tears from his eyes, stood up and walked over to the belt to pick it up. As he gathered it into his hands he recognized the pattern,

embroidered with small beads, as the one he had so often seen on the old man's shirt. Then a reckoning came to him. He realized that the pattern was the same pattern that his father and grandfather had worn on their clothing. It was a pattern he had grown up knowing and he understood why he had overlooked its significance before. It was the talisman of his tribe's holy man—the emblem of Walks with Wakan Tanka, a holy man of God!

Jan looked up and across the river. There on the far side stood three Kree warriors—javelin in hand, their throwing sticks dangling from their belts. One warrior stood slightly apart from his companions. He was a huge, powerful creature standing there with the wind in his feathery hair. He made the sign of respect, touching the palm of his right hand to his forehead and gently waving it off toward Jan. Jan stood and returned the expression of respect. The big Kree smiled.

“Che'klah-pinchette,” the Warrior cried out to him from the other side showing the palm of his right hand—a sign of greeting! It meant: pinchette of the People. Then the man turned away with his companions and disappeared into the thick forested ridge. Jan realized that they had been watching his indoctrination all these long months; human or not, he had become one of them.

Over the next two months, before winter really settled in, Ranford came back to visit a few times. He brought some provisions that he thought Jan could use and a small generator so that Jan could power a two-way radio, an entertainment center, and a couple of lamps. On this last trip out, Ranford chidingly reminded Jan that he was working on that “special request.” The soldiers brought news from the flat lands and told stories that made them all laugh as they sat waiting for Jan to finish cooking the evening meal. It was rabbit stew. His companions enjoyed the meal immensely—it being far more palatable and nutritious than the synthetic food they were accustomed to eating. Jan made no mention of the old man to any of them and they just assumed that Jan had been a very busy person during the many months they'd been away.

Shuttle crews are usually about five in number so the cabin was kind of crowded as everyone bed down for the night. But as Jan lay in his bed, he thought of how much he enjoyed their company and figured that reporting the weather over the radio was the least that he had to do in return for such social amenities as their simple presence in his life.

The following morning Jan followed all of them out to the shuttle. It was a heavy-lifter perched on a grassy knoll just up from and behind the cabin.

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Ranford explained that he wouldn't be making any more trips until spring because of the severity of the weather. He didn't think the bio-smugglers would risk their lives attempting to enter the Republic's territory in sub-zero weather and an almost continuous snow fall. Jan agreed.

The black market always got real lean during the winter months down in the flat lands along the coast. The bio-junkies always went berserk because they couldn't get their natural drugs—the drug traffic having dwindled to almost nothing during winter. It was a dying trade anyway. The settlers were gradually dying off. The planet's human population had become so small that the birth rate had gone negative. The Kree did not very often trade in manufactured goods and killed smugglers when ever they found them astray from their colonial settlements. Cutter's Claim only attracted the hard cases now. Hardly anyone used the space port as a stop over anymore. Overland through the mountains of the Che'-Kree were the only routes black market smugglers could follow without attracting the attention of the colonial police and, soon, those ancient by-ways would be closed off—buried beneath twenty feet of snow or more. Some drug freaks were going to die, for sure, but this is what winter always brought—depravation.

Jan helped them load their belongings and then he shook hands with everyone and said goodbye. "Remember," Ranford said, "if you get into trouble, you call us on the radio right away and I'll come out here—I mean it, Jan."

"Ah, relax Jack, my kind are used to the wild; I'll be alright—see you in the spring." And Jan shook his friend's hand as he pulled him into a generous hug. They slapped each other on the back and then Ranford climbed into the cockpit. Jan stood back away from the forward turbine blades and out of the worst of the thruster wash waving goodbye as the shuttle made its ascent.

"Goodbye!" He yelled out to them even though he knew they couldn't hear him but they read his lips and waved back to him. The shuttle made one circular sweep above Jan's head and then took off into the west. Quiet returned to the mountain wilderness Jan had made his home. He shook his head and laughed to himself. He really enjoyed that visit. Then he remembered that he should check his trap line today. The weather was crisp and cold; even though it was a gloriously sunny day and Jan knew that the great snows of the Che'-Kree Mountains were on their way.

That year, winter came down upon the mountains hard. The snows lasted until March. Jan appreciated his teacher's considerate schooling in the

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art of survival more than ever. He was also glad that his friend Ranford had left him so many books to read—there was very little else to do and the idleness might have driven him crazy! He spoke with Jack just about every other day. Jack would initiate the calls at a time during the day when he thought that Jan might be having a hot cup of tea by the fire. He continually insisted that Jan wear the personal radio phone. It had a GPS unit on it. If Jack thought Jan might be staying in one spot too long as he walked the trails outside, he'd call him. Jan knew that, if he didn't answer, Jack would assume that he'd been hurt and come for him zeroing in on that GPS signal. Jack was always worrying over Jan. But, Jan was careful and the winter plowed on uneventfully.

Jan needed a ladder to get out of the cabin from time to time. The snows had buried the doorway in over twelve feet! Jan dug out a steep tunnel to the outside and used his crude ladder to get up and down. During winter's onset, it snowed almost every day. Most of the time the snow fall was just a few inches. Sometimes it was several feet! And it wasn't until March that the sky cleared and the snow fall became sporadic.

Jan hunted a little by day but, aside from a few deer and mountain goats, there was very little variety up in his part of the countryside. He had happened across a Kree hunting party once and shared his jerky with them telling them where he had last seen game. He invited them to his cabin for something to eat but they declined explaining that it was very important for them to find some game for their village that day. Those were the only people he had seen during the whole winter season.

When April came around the weather warmed. The snow began to melt and everything in the wilderness was damp with the water of spring. Jan drew sap from a tree similar to a maple he had located here and there and boiled off the sap to make a small quantity of sweet syrup. As May arrived the bulk of the snow had dissipated becoming run-off that gorged the mountain streams and fed the colossal network of Mountain Rivers that carried the raging waters off toward the distant brine sea.

Jan kept busy by repairing the damage to his homestead caused by shifting snow and ice. The damage wasn't extensive and he had the repairs completed in no time at all. May was also a muddy month and it wasn't until the third week that warmer temperatures and sunny days had dried up the trails and meadows enough to where it wasn't a pain in the behind to walk about. But the warm winds and wetness of spring also caused the alpine meadows to blossom and that was quite a sight! The pastels were dazzling shades of red, yellow, blue, green, and purple. Sometimes it just took his

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breath away making him glad that he was alive to witness all of the color and magnificent beauty of the wilderness left untouched by human hands now for over eight hundred years. Jack had given Jan a digicam and he would take pictures of these magnificent natural wonders. At night when he was at his workstation filing his daily report, he'd send Jack and the boys the pictures.

The months on Cutter's Claim were an average of 30 standard days in length making each season a welcome change. When June came so did the brisk winds of early summer. The days invigorated him. Jan gathered, chopped and split, and stacked wood for three days at a time. Then he'd break off from that work and hunt and fish for a couple of days. While the meat was drying in the sun, Jan would gather grains, tubers, and wild herbs. He kept busy in this way for he knew that it was important for him to have enough to eat for the winter. And his previous experience warned him that winter would be very hard and very long.

One day Jan decided to rest from his labors. He sat on the heavy stout stump he used to split wood and rummaged through a canvas bag full of goodies that Ranford had left him on his last visit. His fingers felt the shape for which he was looking—a small plastic rectangle—he immediately withdrew it from the bag.

Studies in Classical Music the title read. Jan mumbled the title and put the bag back down. He stood, with the cartridge in hand, and walked over to his front porch to climb the steps to the deck. Occupying a corner of the porch was a rustic chair and small table. Upon the table he had put the entertainment center that Ranford had given him. He pushed the cartridge down into its receptacle and settled into the chair to listen to the music.

After a moment, a narrator's voice began outlining the tutorial. Jan wasn't much of a classical music votary but he preferred it to the tinkle and clash of contemporary music as it attempted to imitate the erosion of the human condition with strange sounds. Classical music had rich strains of melody and harmony that he enjoyed listening to. The music stirred his emotions and made him think about things—life, death, the seasons of the year, the Cosmos. Yes, it was thought-provoking stuff!

To Jan the sounds of contemporary civilization were the sounds of someone screaming through a nightmare. Down there in the flat lands along the coast, in the last remaining scraps of Civilization, it seemed as though they were justified in composing such music but he believed it would have helped mankind more if they had used music as a guide to find the way out of Hell instead of as a "last will and testament."

The population had been shrinking for centuries. Tradition claimed that plagues had visited humanity late in the millennium. Their biology had progressively mutated preventing humans from developing immunity to them and so they had devastated the global population. The onslaught had made men weak and unable to resist disease. People died like flies from it—especially those over forty years old. The only old people common to human experience were older humans in the rural and wilderness areas that were not continually exposed to the plethora of common diseases prevalent in urban populations. But, even though everyone could draw the same conclusions from this fact, the majority of people elected to remain in the crumbling urban centers and take their chances with an early death. The thought of living a life that men like Jan preferred frightened most and kept them hostage to a horrible fate.

The last of the uninfected humans had left the planet for Gannemead over eight hundred years ago. But for a few scientists, no one was interested in space travel anymore. The great Wars of Annihilation had put an end to progress. The human experience, on Cutter's Claim, had become an ugly little routine in an isolated place among the stars. Cutter's Claim was an outpost of the old routine and *that* was gradually giving way to cessation. Those who remained were mostly rugged outdoorsmen and Military people manning a remote outpost of civilization for the Gannemead Republic—a group of home worlds where humanity had made a startling recovery and civilization had been reborn according to the principles of common sense.

Jan's people, the Lakota, had immigrated to Gannemead thousands of years ago on great generation ships—or so they were told. They were a people who had always loved the wild open spaces of the great wilderness mountains, valleys, and plains. By the beginning of the last millennium they had re-established themselves as a race of hardy people. When Cutter filed a claim to the planet, he invited those who were hardy enough to manage a wilderness life to join him. Many of Jan's people emigrated to Cutter's Claim to start a new yet more traditional life. Some contemporary historians claimed that, at one time, there were men whose skin was white and that they had been a variety of human on the mother planet—the legendary Earth. But, the colonials thought that these were the stories of a people who were nothing more than mythical characters; a metaphor for a ruling elite in ancient times. They doubted that such an enclave of humanity ever existed. Jan's people had a genetic memory and they *knew* differently.

After the collapse of the First Epoch some four millennia ago, much of human history had been destroyed. Archives did survive in time capsules

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buried deep inside the ruins of these ancient places. These records often contained pictures depicting people with white skin but they had always been held suspect by academicians. Perhaps these were the stylized photographs of a religious people; an early expression of art or body painting—no one really knew and this left much to speculation.

Archaeologists of the forty-first century asserted that the white man might have been a strain of human that had evolved on Earth—the origin of mankind. They had found consistent evidence in the archives they discovered that dated all the way back to a period when people from the first generation ships had landed on Gannemead. It suggested that such a race had once existed—a very long time ago. Jan found such stories interesting but knew that no such human existed now except in the stories of his people told around their dining room tables.

Most men and women had skin that ranged in color from yellow to red to a very light brown to dark brown or black. Scientists had claimed that the variations in color were the result of a subtle evolutionary modification to the human genome over the millennia, the result of the environmental changes perhaps.

Historic archives mentioned that, on the old world, humans had destroyed the ozone layer. Without this layer, the increased radiation destroyed the skin cells of those humans who were “white.” Over the ensuing centuries, humans evolved natural defenses in their skin that gradually shifted the color of humanity toward darker hues. Contemporary scientists suggested that white-skinned people, if they existed at all, may have been plagued by the destructive effects of such an environment and died off completely or, as some theories speculate, evolved into the human of today.

Maybe the white race actually did exist—who could tell? Maybe there were enough whites among the star-bound colony ships to continue their kind. Perhaps such a race was lost forever—extinct. The facts were interesting to discuss but totally irrelevant now. And, at any rate, Jan had never been off the planet and didn't know for certain. All the people he had ever seen, including Ranford and the others, were all an olive-complexion or darker. Jan's color was an earthy light shade of red. He was a huge man by anyone's standards--well over six feet tall. His body was hard and muscular but he had always had a pensive and gentle disposition.

When he worked on the Great Barrier Wall, that was built to save the City of Somitta from the sea, he had met a woman. She was Chinese. Jan had fallen very much in love with her; she had told him that he was very handsome. Her companionship had made him feel good about himself. But,

she died of the plague. He watched her wither slowly and, in her final death throes, he held her tenderly and loved her without reservation until the end. Shortly after her death, he applied for permission to move into the frontier. The bureaucrats pushed his paper work through not because they had compassion but because Loners were useful to the Military. No body wanted to live out there among the Kree. He avoided assignment by neglecting to report the location of his proposed homestead. He just left Civilization behind knowing no one would bother looking for him. When Ranford set him up as an outpost he pulled his original application and brought it up to date so no one would ever suspect that he had broken the law. The truth was, even if they had known, they wouldn't have done a thing. The dregs of humanity were just too damn tired to care.

The music flowed. It relaxed him and made him meditate upon the issues that made up his intellect's perspective on reality. He thought about his ancient origins; his unusual up-bringing in the household of his maternal grandfather—himself a powerful shaman. Jan realized that he did not plan his actions as did other men he had known. There was never an agenda to follow. There were no specific goals, no primary objectives to achieve. In Jan's mind, life was its own reason for existing. *"How strange of me!"* he thought, *"I never wanted anything more than...to see the next sunrise!"*

The lyrics of the music caught him in a migratory thought and broke his concentration. His intellect reached out into his reverie and tried to capture it—tried to examine it but it escaped his scrutiny. He felt the notion fly off into the corridors of his mind leaving him with the sensation of familiarity poised at the tip of his tongue. He settled back as the song finished its harmonic chorus.

Jan turned his head to view the generator Ranford had brought him months ago. It sat squat on a steel pad some distance from the cabin. *"God damn Technology,"* he thought, *"music is the only thing it's good for!"* He listened patiently to the next narrative. The tutorial focused, once again, on music of the Great Migration.

"These were the people who financed the Great Migration that eventually led to the human Diaspora throughout this part of the Galaxy." He thought. "How could their music have so much insight and their *actions* so much insanity?" He asked himself. Music had survived the long period of dramatic change. Several thousand years of human history had passed since the music he was listening to had first been composed. Jan felt curious. Technology had produced a devastation as well as music that continually warned against the danger of abusing it. It was a fatal paradox.

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In Jan's own time, the technocrats concentrated their talents on improving biotechnology and bio-mechanical engineering. It was a technology that was inexpensive to develop when compared to, say, a military weapons system such as a pulse canon. A debilitated humanity knew about space travel, robots, cyborgs, androids, and intelligent life-forms cleverly designed in the laboratory but focused precious little attention on interplanetary exploration for example. There hadn't been an expedition out to the mining settlements in nearly eighty years. The last effort to travel off-world from Cutter's Claim into the blackness of space was an idiotic project that put an intelligent communications satellite into orbit. It was called CARL—an anagram for *Communications And Ranging Link*. They stopped using it during the fifth year of its operation. About seventy years later some scientist in Somitta had restored its communications link only to find out that the thing had gone crazy; after all that time in isolation it couldn't do anything more than babble. So, they left it there to babble on until its fusion pack died.

The society of this latest epoch had anti-gravity ships that could travel at mach 3 within the atmosphere but nobody used them for anything other than military purposes. They had teaching machines that could embed the combined knowledge of an entire library into a human brain over night. They had modern medicine that could reconstruct a severed limb or repair a damaged heart through regenerative genetic engineering. But, they couldn't stop the killing—the viciousness of human nature—they had no weapon against greed! And then there were the Nistasi. Some thought them demons from an unknown world. They were a blood-thirsty race that periodically raided the home worlds. And, like the mythic barbarians of antiquity, when ever humankind came into contact with them they would leave nothing but ruin and death in their wake. They hadn't bothered the settlements or "lost worlds" as the Republic was apt to call places like Cutter's Claim. There weren't enough humans to eat or enough of a civilization to bother destroying.

The plagues had become a conundrum. They had kept the global population on Cutter's Claim at less than one hundred million. Scientists just couldn't get a handle on any of it; it kept mutating into something new. Environmental Philosophers had proposed that Gaea, the Earth Mother—a concept of ancient times and a metaphor for the Ecosystem in general, had "perceived" the human race a threat. Humans had, at one time, polluted the planet much beyond Nature's capacity to cleanse it. And so, the Mother of all the Titans had "decided" to eliminate man—the ultimate source of her personal tragedy.

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For the last three centuries the planet's human population had steadily declined. Some historians had found fragments of ancient literature that suggested that the global population had once been around five hundred million! But, then there came the Holocaust. According to legend, the Holocaust was more than a global conflict; it was a bloody carnage that lasted over two centuries! It had taken place some eight hundred years ago.

Civilization had suffered set-backs before but never on that scale. It had taken all this time for mankind to recoup. Here on Cutter's Claim, civilization never regained its former vitality. It had lost its roots. It was withering as its remaining constituents eked out a living on a hostile wilderness planet that was fed up with their very presence. And, the memories of days gone by gradually died with the decaying communities. Now, very few people were even interested in the past primarily because there didn't seem to be much of a future.

This experience with music relaxed him and he fell off into a deep sleep. The darkness of natural rest gave way to a vision of wide green meadows, of swaying grass and clear blue sky. The sun hung low on the horizon splashing a torrent of red upon the snow-capped mountains of the Che'-Kree. Below him the sweeping plains ran on forever!

Strange looking horses—small powerful-looking beasts with short bristled manes grazed complacently. He turned slowly to face north. On the plain several miles distant, a great wall of ice ran east until it faded from sight over the horizon. Jan heard a haunting melody played upon a Kree bone flute and wondered at the significance of what he was experiencing.

"Lakota!" a voice spoke from behind him! Jan turned to see the image of his teacher, Wanagi Ska—the White Ghost! He was arrayed in the finest of ceremonial clothing. Feathers of the great Che'Klat: a giant bird that resembled an eagle decorated his hair and he held his old ceremonial spear in his right hand.

"Grandfather," Jan asked the wraith? He felt a longing to reach out for him—to embrace him for he loved him so. But the old man held up the palm of his left hand—a greeting signal to be still.

"Che'klah-pinchette," his teacher addressed him using the Clan-name the Warrior had given to him. "Do you remember the most important legend of our people?" Jan nodded affirmatively.

"Yes, Grandfather, it is the promise that one day Wakan Tanka will return the land to us." The yearning to embrace his teacher grew stronger but he fought his emotions and remained obedient.

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“Look before you, my beloved son...the hour is at hand.” The great shaman extended his left arm and gestured toward all Jan saw before him. Jan looked away from the old man and down into the broad valley below. By the placid river he saw men of his own kind sitting around a sacred fire, beating drums—chanting in the *Lakota* tongue. He had not seen them there before.

He heard the sound of the melody again and looked toward the place where his teacher had been standing; where once he had seen his teacher's apparition there, instead, a cottonwood tree grew. It towered over him—the branches of the tree spread wide into the open sky. Jan turned back to view the valley again. To his astonishment, he saw thousands of dwellings along the river. To the left of his view, dust clouds swirled around bare-chested young men playing a game on horseback. Women, in traditional dress, washed clothes by the river, cooked meals over open fires, or picked berries along a hillside. Children ran screaming delightful cries as they played a game not unlike tag.

Jan turned back toward the tree and saw the image of Wanagi Ska within the tree. His face was part of the trunk, his arms the strong lower branches, his feet among the roots at its base.

“Rejoice, my son, for Wakan Tanka has kept his promise!” His teacher proclaimed as his image faded from view. “This is the tree from which our people shall be sustained. Remember me...remember your Clan.” And then, the image disappeared.

The strange, almost alien, music continued. Night fell fast upon the earth; it was as though time had been fast-forwarded. The campfires of the people dotted the landscape. Jan felt the need to look up and did. He saw two silver-blue moons hanging in the sky and he wondered at this. The sky became rich with starlight drawing his orientation into its vastness. He felt vertigo; thought he might fall and reached out for the rocks around him only to discover that they were no longer there! He was standing in the middle of eternity—suspended in nothingness—with millions of stars, planets, and great nebulas all around him! And the haunting melody continued until his fear subsided and darkness washed over him again.

Jan awoke to the whining of thruster engines. They were the engines of a shuttle. “Jack?” He thought. Jan sprung from his seat and vaulted down from the porch, clearing all three steps, to land on the ground in front of his cabin. He quickly turned to face the knoll behind his cabin. The sun was low in the sky. Had he slept through the afternoon?

It was Jack Ranford alright. Jan recognized the big blue number “1” on the nose of the shuttlecraft. *“I guess it’s that time.”* He thought. In an even gait, Jan took off up the narrow trail that led to the hilltop. He noticed six people, instead of the usual five, get out of the ship. Everyone removed their helmets except for a tall person that followed behind the soldiers, those he knew waved to him as they approached. Jan waved back.

As he neared the group he looked the newcomer over. “A woman,” he realized! She took off her helmet. Like the other soldiers she wore the standard camo-green. But, that’s where the similarity stopped. She was tall, athletic, and very, very shapely. The other men allowed her to walk through their group and straight up to Jan. She stood there a moment and Jan took in the detail of her features—she was so tall and so beautiful!

“Hi . . . my name’s Sarah.” The woman said extending her hand. Jan reached out and took her slender hand in his. He felt strange. He thought that he knew her but couldn’t remember that he had ever seen her before.

“You’re Jan?” She asked. Jan stood there shaking her hand, speechless.

“What?” He replied.

“I said: you’re Jan—am I right?” She repeated. To this Jan nodded “yes.”

“Wakan Tanka. . .” Jan began to say but he stopped himself.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Jan replied. “It was just...nothing.”

Her hair was cut short and the helmet she had worn had pressed it down close against her scalp. She was not quite six feet tall; her hair had a carrot-colored hue. Her skin was very light tan but it too seemed infused with the strange mild hue of her hair. Her blouse was open in the front and form-fitted to her figure. Delicate freckles decorated her cheeks and neck ending at her cleavage. He had no trouble noticing the ample, round breasts and deliciously curved hips. Her trousers were also form-fitted revealing a pair of long, magnificently shaped, slender legs.

Ranford walked by him and headed toward the cabin. He was smiling a wry smile and, as he passed behind the woman, he lifted his eyebrows teasing Jan with his expression.

“Welcome.” Jan said to her and turned back down the trail toward his cabin but then he remembered his manners and turned back to her. “I’m sorry.” He said and he gestured to her to follow him. Sarah trotted out a few steps then took up a stride alongside him.

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“Sarah is a meteorologist, Jan.” Ranford explained as he passed a bowl of roasted wild potatoes to the man seated next to him. The cabin was full of the wonderful sounds of company! They all sat at evening meal.

“A scientist, up here,” Jan asked eyeing Sarah? She sat across from Jan and acted as though she was keeping something from him; she seemed embarrassed and would not respond to his open question.

“Well, meteorology *and* Astrophysics, actually,” Jack returned.

“Huh?” Jan asked. The idea sounded absurd given the attitude most people had toward space exploration in general.

Ranford stopped eating momentarily and shook his head. “Let me explain.” He said as he took another bite of elk roast. “Some scientist in Somitta thinks we're all gonna' get hit by this big meteorite heading toward the planet.” Jack began. Its way out there now—probably won't be here for years. Ain't that right Sarah?”

Sarah was chewing her food and couldn't speak but she nodded approvingly.

Jack continued: “Well Sarah, here, is gonna make some observations from this sector on account of the atmosphere is clearer up here. We didn't think you'd mind some company...and some help with the meteorology—your weather reports suck.”

Jan had stopped eating and was expressionless.

“You *don't* mind the company—do you?” Jack repeated. Jan felt the shock of the implications buried in that question. It was a two-room cabin. And, he remembered Ranford's promise to him. Ranford had a thoroughly “wise-ass” look on his face.

“Well, I...uh...” Jan's voice trailed off. Jack broke the tension of the moment by slapping Jan on the back.

“What a guy!” Ranford said in an overly-emphatic tone.

“What a true friend!” Milo added. Everyone knew that Jan was too embarrassed to answer (and much too lonely to refuse).

Sarah smiled. She thought Jan was sweet and looked at him in as friendly a fashion as she could conceive. It seemed to diffuse his apprehension.

“Okay, Okay,” Jack added quickly, “we'll work the details out later. But, let's eat now—huh?”

Laughter broke out among everyone. The moment was awkward. Sarah made no comment but continued smiling at the big handsome red-skinned fellow before her.

At twilight the next day, Jan was up before everyone else and had gone out onto the porch to drink his morning tea. He wiled away the better part of an hour watching the dawn ebb away and listening to the sounds of an awakening wilderness. The sound of footsteps on the wooden deck behind him caught his attention and he turned to see Ranford standing there gulping tea from an over-sized mug embellished with a big blue number “1” on one side and the name “Jack” on the other. He walked up to Jan and put his hand on Jan's shoulder.

“Hey buddy, you look disappointed—or is it sleepy?” Ranford said in a subdued voice.

Jan smiled nervously.

“It's not because of Sarah is it?” Ranford asked.

“Jack, how big is that thing out there?” Jan inquired.

“Ohhh . . . I see. Ah, it's pretty big—they estimate about eight miles in diameter.” Ranford replied. The answer brought a visible change in Jan's facial expression.

“Eight miles,” he said in amazement!

Ranford motioned to him to keep his voice down.

“What are they planning to do?” Jan asked in almost a whisper.

“They're going to try to have some sort of rocket array ready by the time it enters our solar system. They're saying that they have to build this space station and all. Most of the home worlds have signed on to the program but it'll take 'em several years to get their asses in gear. Hell! We don't *have* a space program here on Cutter's Claim to speak of!” Ranford answered.

“What'll happen to us if that thing hits the planet then?” Jan asked.

“Well, Sarah says it'll kick up enough debris to kill most everything on the planet, not to mention screwing up the weather for a decade maybe more. The best we can do for now is plan—you know—store up food supplies, move populations to more stable ground--that kind of thing. Their telling us that screwing up the weather could bring on an extended winter. We're already living through the dawn of a new ice age. The scientists only agree on one thing. . . a lot of people are gonna' die if that thing hits us!”

Jan watched the sun spill over the horizon—daybreak. What would life for him be without that fair friend to start each new day?

“Jack,” Jan began, “there aren't many people on this planet to begin with, you know.”

“Yeah, but the Government is saying that we have to save this world as a part of the Gannemead Republic. It still has good deposits of titanium ore.”

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Jack replied. “They feel they need an outpost and the investment in the technology to drive that chunk of rock back into space is worth the effort.”

“I only want to see the next sunrise.” Jan murmured.

“What?” Jack asked.

“Nothing,” Jan answered, “just talking to myself.”

The men finished unloading Sarah's equipment. They had brought along a portable observatory and technical lab that they erected on the knoll just behind the cabin. Jan suggested the spot—right over the rear entrance to the cave so that Sarah could enter the observatory through the rear of Jan's dwelling, even in bad weather.

In the week that Jack Ranford and his crew had been there Jan had become used to Sarah's presence—and her strange, almost alien, beauty. He learned that she was a native of Erta, one of the distant home worlds. Sarah had volunteered for duty at the frontier shortly after graduating from college. She talked to him often and was able to glean, from those conversations, Jan's character and personal history. By week's end she felt that she knew a great deal about him. Jan, on the other hand, was much too shy to probe Sarah's past and preferred her to remain the mysterious beauty.

On the final day of Jack's stay, Jan and Sarah walked with the recon team back to the shuttle. They all said their goodbyes and shook hands with each other.

“Until next time then,” Jack said, shaking Jan's hand. He turned to Sarah. “Take good care of him, Sarah, he's the only *real* friend that I ever had!” Milo began revving up the engines and Jack had to almost roar through the noise of the thrusters and engine exhaust.

Jack shook Sarah's hand then turned to Jan so that Sarah couldn't see his face and playfully winked at Jan.

“*You damn dink!*” Jan thought. “*How am I gonna' deal with this?*”

“Have fun, you two!” Ranford bellowed out as he jogged towards the shuttle. Ranford entered the rear of the craft and closed the door. Jan and Sarah waved again. Jack soon appeared in the cockpit next to Milo and smiled at them then motioned to Milo to lift off.

The big machine rose from the ground awkwardly at first then, in a deafening roar of engine exhaust, it plowed straight up about thirty feet to turn and face west southwest. With a lurch, dipping its stubby snout down slightly, it took off banking left and then right—Ranford's way of saying goodbye. Jan and Sarah watched the departure until the shuttlecraft disappeared over the first string of mountain peaks.

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Quiet returned to the wilderness and it soothed their ears. Sarah walked over to Jan and stood directly in front of him. She reached up and gently embraced the strong contours of his face. Jan stood frozen with embarrassment—blushing like a child. It piqued his senses. He drew in the scent of her—vaguely like the mild fragrance wild strawberries—it was intoxicating. He momentarily lost control of his consciousness. His thoughts skipped off to somewhere else and then came back to him in an instant. He focused on her eyes.

“I want you to grow your hair long. I think it would look nice.” She quietly instructed him.

She said this as though she had loved him for a thousand years. She required it of him as a wife would require it of a husband—with authority—as though he owed it to her. Then she let him go and walked away from him into the field toward the cabin. Strangely enough, Jan felt compelled to indulge her.

Chapter 2

The Dig

In a time before now, on the plains of Arcadia near the River Kafir—that broad and fast-flowing body of clear water that flowed from the snow-capped mountain that had given it its name—the people of the Apolinari built a Common House. It stood squat against the rough weather of the Rift Valley and served as a temple wherein those of a Kristan Faith could worship the one true God of Creation. Around this massive structure, the ruling elite had compelled their people to lay out a modest village built of the stone that they had gathered from their fields. The Common House was built, in a post-and-beam construction, of huge timbers rooted firmly to the ground in a stone and mortar foundation that rose up above the surface the customary sixty inches. It was a huge perfectly round building of about one hundred feet in diameter with double doorways opening to the east, west, north, and south. The building proper was surrounded by a raised stone plaza that dominated the center of the village and sprawled outward from the building for three hundred feet in every direction. Its massive roof was tiled with heavy slate and its oculo possessed a venturi fashioned from sheet metal funneling the smoke from the common fire within to the outside in a poignant stream of white.

Here the Bards came from every kingdom to deliver the news of the day, however dated it might have been, and here the ministers of the Kristan Faith gave their sermons and admonished the people to keep the law of the one true God of Creation. It was a fitting addition to the architectural complexion of the village giving those who lived within the thick defensive walls a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves. The people of the Apolinari were a disciplined and orderly people of a serious bent of mind. Since the downfall of the colonial civilization two millennia before, surviving on the wilderness planet of Erta had become difficult at best. The culture of the Arcadians became militaristic. A warrior class evolved in time sharing authority with the elders who continued to exercise a formidable amount of power in governing the land. There was little crime; the people were too productive in their labors to trouble themselves with such distractions. The children took their schooling seriously. An education, it was taught, was a person's

only path toward enlightenment. And, enlightenment was an experience that bound a human to the mind of the Creator.

The Arcadians were not a peaceful people but neither were they offensive to their neighbors. Other peoples thought of them more as though they were the descendents of hornets. Kick their nest and trouble would consume you! But, for the most part, they kept to themselves and respected the lands and borders of the neighboring clans—keeping to the roads when ever they traveled and paying for their room and board where ever they went. They were not as the Abyssinians who were traders and merchants. The Arcadians were a pastoral people who, although they possessed the common technology of the day, practiced the arts of agriculture: gardening, animal husbandry, and beekeeping for example. And they were recognized as great builders as their stone structures were well-designed for the purposes for which they were built and built for those purposes quite carefully. No matter what they built for themselves or their neighbors—a barn, a bridge, a road, a house—one could easily identify the structure as Arcadian. It was always erected in a sturdy construction of a blend of materials—stone, mortar, steel and wood. It would always have a *design* to it wherein its form followed the demands of its function. And, it was always richly decorated with pleasing images of objects common to nature: trees, flowers, people, animals and the like.

Their technology was like their architecture—beautifully fashioned and purposeful. A wagon, for instance, built by an Arcadian wheelwright looked and functioned as though it was intended to last for all of eternity. Tools were carefully made from metals carefully prepared for the purpose in mind and embellished with its owner's personal preference for artwork. The people of the surrounding tribes and clans clamored to buy such products for their own use. And it was common practice to apprentice one's child to an Arcadian craftsman; in that fashion, the trade might be well learnt.

The Arcadians loved and respected educated people who had labored to edify themselves in the knowledge of things: art, literature, science, medicine, engineering, architecture, the trades and so on. Any person, whether male or female, could achieve a high status in the Arcadian community by acquiring a thorough education. And, this high regard was extended to *any* person from *any* tribe or clan. So, the Abyssinian Bards, for instance, were regarded as sages having spent the balance of their lives acquiring good literature to recite. Men of medicine were considered equal in status and stature to the Kristan Priesthood—even by the Kristan

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Priests themselves! Engineers and Architects, Scientists and Mathematicians, Artists, Musicians, and Writers of prose and poetry were given special recognition by the people because their labors kept barbarity at bay.

Now it was that in the year 6510 of the Common Era the Kristan Monk Telemus Bene Claris found himself in a quandary. He had *thought* himself visited by angels the night before but found himself secure and warm within the bedcovers of his modest monk's bed in his modest monk's quarters. He had been dreaming then—at least he assumed—and the powerful Crafter Emile had *not* really given him the vile. Yes, the vile. He clearly saw it in his dream—if, indeed that's what one could call it; a dream. And he remembered the vile which, of course, resembled the vile that lay before him on his night stand by the expended candle—its candle cup now immersed in melted bee's wax. Indeed, there it was as mysterious as the figment he had thought a part of his dream. He was terrified to even touch it!

According to the dream, Emile had told him that the vile contained a powerful defense against the coming “demons of destruction,” as he had referred to them...*he*, Emile...the angel of God that is. Telemus strained the connections between his synapses to conjure up his subconscious and remember what else Emile had told him about the curious artifact in that rather troublesome dream. He thought hard and wished the Crafters were not given to such dramatic intervention. A simple note on cheap paper would have done the job a lot more effectively. But, then again, who was he to tell a Crafter how something should be done?

Telemus rose up and immediately dropped to his knees to say his morning prayers of thanksgiving. Actually, he needed to get on his knees to get at his shoes which he carefully placed beneath his bed each night. This act was not so insignificant; each morning it compelled him to get down on his knees and reach for his shoes. He thought: “While I'm on my knees anyway, I might as well thank God I'm alive.” And thus, Telemus overcame his natural propensity for sloth; clever fellow.

He made his way toward the commissary and found himself a tray and plates and silverware to gather up his first meal of the day. Brother Carlo was a darn good cook!

“Ah, eggs and bacon, and hominy; and such fine whole wheat bread! And, look here, sweet cream butter—and my coffee, yes!” He said mumbling to himself. Brother Carlo—arrayed in his white chef's uniform—looked on pleased as could be for he had heard every word that

Telemus had muttered to himself. Telemus absolutely loved his simple fare. He would often hear the fellow humming away as he consumed his meals satisfied with every bite he took—every morsel he swallowed. Would that Brother Carlo had an entire monastery full of such happy people!

Outside the dining hall, the sun rose lazily over the blue and white capped mountains that framed the largest peak—Kafir. Below, in their peaceful valley, the swift clear river ran its course cutting through a pastoral panorama of small farms and tidy villages. On the roadway below the huge windows of the hall, Telemus could see Magus, the farmer from Sistoli—the little village between the capital city and the monastery—delivering his fresh milk to the Monastery kitchen. The horse slowly made its way up the gentle incline of their promontory; there was no rush. Magus used to say: “I’m delivering milk, your honor, and not making cream!” when the Gardner, Brother Emmanuel, would tease him about his absolutely pathetic pace.

At first Telemus paused between mouthfuls of food to examine the morning star. But, after several minutes the star became very much larger on the horizon. He heard another monk blurt out: “Here, now, what’s this?” Surely something was amiss he thought and then he remembered his dream and the horror of it seized him! He left his breakfast and hurried back to his quarters to grope through the room until he found the vile. With it in hand he made his way down the hall toward the north entrance of the first floor. Father Gabriel bellowed to him: “Slow down, Telemus! You’ll hurt yourself or some other poor fool!” But Telemus kept running down the hall and out on to the lawn, through the sheep at the northwest gate and down the drive toward the County road. He nearly spooked Magus’ horse, Alfa, as he sped along toward the monolith. He needed to make it toward the monolith. That is where the dream had told him to break the vile—upon the hard stone surface of the rugged old monolith that stood just down the road from the great Gates of Arcadia. It was a mile away and he was no athlete.

Telemus ran for his life looking over his shoulder at the horizon occasionally to find the glowing presence of some artificially fabricated object growing ever larger in his view. For all of his effort the monolith seemed to draw closer to him with every step. As he neared the circle of stones, of which the monolith took up a commanding presence at the center, he found the grounds awash in a red glow and felt a sickening feeling overwhelm him. He turned to see the massive air-born object

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directly over him—why it must have been a good mile in diameter! It hovered in place as smaller versions of it descended to the ground where they set themselves down around the city walls.

Still holding the vile in his hand, Telemus watched with horror as the most gruesome creatures he had ever seen descended from the gaping doorways of each ship and, quickly, ran toward the city gates blasting at them with wands afire! Soldiers on guard at the outer wall were literally brown-roasted as the beams of energy enveloped them! Then Telemus saw one of the creatures had taken in the view of him standing there on the hill beside the monolith and began to make his way up the path toward him. Telemus froze with horror his arms outstretched completely amiss at what he should do. That was when the beam of energy lit up the nozzle of the creature's wand and washed over him like a million searing-hot nails. He dropped the vile into the grass and disintegrated in a ball of flame.

The Bolin ate well that day.

* * *

Adam slowly shook his head as he finished the translation. The description of the carnage was graphic building horrific images of death and destruction in his mind. He leaned against the monolith and briefly looked up at its roughly hewn pointed top then back toward the grass just beyond his small dig.

“That must have been where the poor fellow died.” He said to himself. Walking over to the smaller boulder on his left, he sat down and produced his journal from his backpack. He opened it and read a few of his passages then produced a pen from his shirt pocket and began to write:

Swet God of moonlit night distills the dew from summer's day. Earth, cold and wet, plays host to eventide. Whippoorwill and worm, wolf and ox, cat and mouse, man and meadow rest from life for yet another time in endless time.

The scent of loam rises in the evening air. Cool breezes hang about the high trees to soothe the living things; their fear of dark quiet ebbing as they fall prey to slumber. In the heavens, the light of ten million suns reminds us that we are not alone. A silver pale defines a pond where, earlier, tadpoles played among the reeds. And, from the marsh not far off, the peepers sing their love songs.

Here, in this peaceful place, sturdy fellows tramped the grassland underfoot an epoch ago; their bodies bronze from journeys 'neath the gibe of an indolent sun. They brought wonder with each step they took and covered their callow understanding with

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wild tales of testy gods. Cavalier and sanguine heroes, born of vivid inspiration, creating us to wonder if everything we ever knew or would know was true.

What sport! What pleasure it must have been to think those simple thoughts so long ago! What value relevance? Am I any different? Am I of any greater value? Does what I know about the ancient artifact I found within the dig make me better than the seed from which my substance sprang? How long must I dwell on instinct—the old and ancillary habits of the flesh that bristle at the light of reason and slaughter fact at every expectation?

I have come to sit upon this homely rock, created at the dawn of time, to contemplate the usefulness of thinking—to contradict amid the dry and pallid certainty of my wretched evolution. My eyes perceive the moonlit night. They see the fireflies. I know how meager my expression is compared to all of this tranquility.

In the time of ritual, weathered faces searched this place for the spoor of their game. They built modest shelters here. They made love to each other and begat their offspring here. They fashioned their clothes and crafted their cooking pots from everything around them. And, everything around them was born of “time and earth”—of natural conception—the eternal source of a constant and reliable provider.

Their dust is buried here; with the shards of their civilization, with the memories of spring plantings, summer hunts, fall harvests, and winter’s deprivation. Memories carried round upon eternal wind until their patterns weave back into the fabric of life upon this planet, until the trick of their existence finds itself expressed in the equanimity that has swallowed me alive!

What use to me is this gaping hole I made in the ground beside their primeval monolith? Two symbols in the ground: one an ancient talisman that hailed the summer solstice, the other a felony that augurs the advent of inquiry. The great carved standing stone remains. It is all that is left of their presence in this wild place, cracked and jagged from countless seasons—as old as the Moon that casts its rugged shadow on my field of view.

Why have I pierced my spirit? Their confidence brought us wisdom did it not? Would it not be enough to stand and wonder at what *might* have been so long ago? If all we can do with what remains is postulate, would it not be better for us all to let them rest in peace?

Night’s spice is the sweet smell of ripened grass, a harbinger of rain, tradition claims. Cicadas compose cantatas in the trees. How hot it must have been for them today! *My* thoughts converge on love, its scent fresh in my mind—a garden of flowers. I whisper her name: *Mariam*. My eyes are fixed upon the evening sky, so full of Moon and Milky Way. Reflection carries with it comprehension: I am the way they were! *Nothing* has changed.

Have I not traveled to this place as did those ancient folk? Will I not fashion something of my cleverness to help me pass the time and survive this sojourn? Shall I not love and be loved, bearing fruit of myself that my own life may continue? And,

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when I can no longer abide, will I not become as dust and drift, with earth and sky, among the stars? The stars—so many stars! Burning brightly, they share the reassurance that, in me, a star is yet unborn for someone else's eyes to see.

I linger and witness the glimmer of approaching dawn. The compass of the world I know has come about. Have I thought so long on so casual a speculation? Am I real or just insinuation? God! I want to love them all! I want to reach out and touch my companions to *know* that I prevail.

Robin red breast, on the ground, studies a hapless worm exposed and lazy from the chill of early morning. The deer are up and venture to the pond to savor the day's first taste of substance. Nearby, upon a sturdy stem of wild grain, a small green locust preens its limbs. Voices of the wilderness combine to consummate yet another movement in a never-ending symphony. The concert of Creation, and I am here to hear it! What fortune I have found!

Aroused and full of wonder too, I watch the Sun return with such commanding presence. Its yellow light spills over misty blue horizons to signal a *renaissance!* "Rise up! Rise up and marvel at my spectacle!" It cries out from the heavens, "I am absolute!"

And so am I. Molded from the stuff of stars, I too am eternal; my vigor not yet wasted, for I've discovered intuition. I shall watch and learn. I shall walk and breathe. I shall eat and drink—and endure. My soul, my sum, shall revel in awareness!

I am man, conceived in a fusion of flesh and passion. Is it not natural for me to feel so secluded trapped here inside myself? But...I have my senses. I can comprehend the presence of the vitality around me and, for as much as I can do, preserve it. The consuming question answered, I must travel on. I am complete and God has kept his promise: we *shall* remain, forever!

Bright blue bleeds in from black of night. Clouds billow from the morning mist. Bees, hungry for work, fly off to embrace their flowers. I leave my room beneath eternal sky and walk back to the dig, to cast my lot with its discovery. I wish that I could cover up the hole. Grandfathers, forgive me—craziness has taken hold of me—but I will not forget you rest assured. I resolve to plant some things to eat, to fish, perhaps. I'll read and write some stories to amuse *my* generation with idle conversation. I'll hold their hands and love my comrades to pieces! We'll rollick beneath the summer sun and live lives that are full of wonder!

AC

When he had finished, he put his pen back into his shirt pocket and read through his latest journal entry feeling pleased with himself that he had captured the moment. And, the moment was significant because he had neglected to consider the fact that he was a descendant of the survivors of the

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holocaust that had become so much a part of his civilization's legends. His people had endured the Bolin pestilence for millennia. Possessed by his destiny, his mind dominated by archeological minutiae and their associated relevance to his historic panorama, he couldn't see that behind all of those events lay a story of unimaginable importance.

* * *

"You see, Tofla? He has had an epiphany! He understands The Way. Let this one become one of our chosen few then."

"I agree, Emile."

* * *

Adam Canaveron worked the dig with a concentration that was beginning to frighten his associates. For days now, he painstakingly scraped the hard-packed earth with his tiny trowel, within the same grid square, as though he knew that there was something there. Beads of sweat dropped from his brow onto the earth moistening the dust that he continuously scraped and brushed, scraped and brushed. Since Mariam had discovered the square chamfered stone two days earlier, Adam had become animated with the possibility of finding the gates of Arcadia. In the fables of the Kristan Bards, the legendary general Armarigo Canavero, Adam's ancient ancestor, had lived there—ruled there, more than four thousand-five hundred years before.

If this were truly the site of the great walled city of Arcadia then he would soon find the walls and within those walls the Temple of the Covenant. Inside the temple, legends claim, laid the records of a religious and sturdy people who arrived on this planet some five thousand years before. The records lay within a vault cleverly constructed to preserve, through time, its contents from the ravages of both men and nature. For thousands of years these fascinating stories were thought to be the dogmatic rambling of the Order of the Kristan Philosophers. They were a religious cult devoted to preparing people for Kamavachara—the Paradise World. This was an event toward which the Creator of the Universe patiently worked. Its advent would signal a new beginning for mankind; it would destroy evil and usher in a lasting peace throughout the Cosmos. Men would become...*immortal!*

That people had lived at this site was certain. Thousands of years of continual human habitation had built up the surrounding land into a Tell some hundred-fifty feet high. An ancient walled city lay beneath the tangled

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flora of the forest floor. And, as the excavation trench became deeper and wider, the layers of earth testified to its existence—a forgotten place where the people of a once-great civilization had lived and worked and prospered.

Adam believed in the old tales—not so much for their religious merit but for their historical value. In his doctoral thesis he explained how modern society had inherited its history from a people who kept records of their past using simpler methods such as story-telling. As time progressed, they developed complex art forms that served the same purpose; ballads, epic poetry, and intricate myths whose characters and places were inevitably rooted in the lives of real people. Over time, their civilization became sophisticated enough to regard the recording of history as an academic discipline. The old ballads became popular folk songs and the ancient stories became classical literature. Research into the past usually started with the *possible* truth behind some fable or myth and this work absolutely fascinated him.

The Kristans claimed that a book lay preserved in The Holy Temple of Arcadia. This book told of a primal past when the first humans to inhabit Erta made their long journey through deep space in a gigantic ark built by the mythic patriarch, Prego Dalpha. They had left their home world—a place called Earth—to travel the stars in search of a new beginning and had found it here on a planet they called Erta. Scientific inquiry seemed to lend credibility to the idea that the present population was not native to the planet. Man seemed to have first "appeared" upon the surface of this world some nine thousand-five hundred years before. Subsequent civilizations with their attending prosperity and eventual devastation obscured the historical record. But Adam felt that he had every reason to believe that there was, indeed, some form of historical record hidden somewhere in the ancient ruins beneath his feet.

He thought, and justifiably so, that despite modern scientific advances, these legends simply could not be dismissed as ritualistic prattle. Adam was sure that they would have had to have an origin in pre-historic times as the story-tellers claimed. Reasoning that a culture-building philosophy could have its foundation in an ancient doctrine, why would it not be possible for that dogma to have, as its origin, a supposition the foundation of which might be an even older belief system? Using this reasoning, one could then trace each occurrence back to the first arrival itself were it not for the depredation of Time. Time, felt Adam, perpetually squandered its chronicle upon the fabric of the material universe so that such an origin is not likely to be discovered. Such explorations were like rivers trying to find their way back

to their head-waters; an ageless preoccupation of humankind that looking forward to some future event when a Creator-God will reveal Himself to an inquiring mind and explain away all of the apprehension that comes with being alive.

He gasped as his small trowel uncovered the protruding shape. This attracted the attention of his companions who left their work to rush to his side, satisfying their curiosity at what it was that excited him so. Mariam brushed the crumbling dirt from the object until it lay exposed before them. Adam withdrew momentarily to give her the working room she needed. With a look of great expectation upon her face her work gradually revealed a marvelously carved threshold stone. The soil beneath her brush had changed color now. It had a charcoal-grey hue and Adam thought that it might be evidence of a conflagration at some time in the past. Feverishly he moved in to pick and slice, scrape and brush until the minute point of something unnatural—something man-made began to appear. A massive metallic hinge—ravaged by time but still in place—its butt end driven firmly into the square stone door post; its long flap still in possession of the thick bolts that had probably once held a huge wooden door. They had found the left door post of the southwestern gate of the fabled City of Arcadia Adam thought! And, as the team moved into clear away the dirt, the threshold stone revealed a large letter “A” carved deep into its ancient face.

The day went quickly as they uncovered the ruin. Adam returned to the monolith in the meadow nearby and dug himself further down into the strata to discover a strange artifact laying a few feet inside the foundation of the ancient stone gateposts that framed the approach to the front of the large upright stone; the stone appeared to be some kind of a marker along the roadway. From its position, one could assume that someone had casually dropped it as they had walked through the huge gate and out onto the ancient cobbled roadway. He would bring the artifact to the field lab for Belinda to study.

“It's encased in some kind of a polymer,” Belinda explained. “As though whoever constructed it thought to preserve it through time?” She glanced up from the electroniscope and rolled her chair over to a portable computerized laboratory unit. She spoke into the miniature microphone: “Start multiscan; A1-spectrum scan; A2-crystallography; A3-spectroscopy.” The computer acknowledged her instructions by repeating her voice command and then displaying: “Multiscan started: 10:25:45 / 07.32.9557” on its visual display.

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“Belinda, forgive me for my enthusiasm, but how long do you think it’ll be before we find out a bit more about that strange artifact?” Adam asked. He hadn’t eaten a full meal in two days and, feeling hungry, wanted to break for lunch.

Belinda turned to him and deliberately gawked at him. “Why don’t you go back to the base camp and get something to eat?” He looked like he needed rest. “If people saw you eating food, they might believe you were human!” Belinda turned to her work again smiling and shaking her head. “Then you wouldn’t scare everybody.”

“Don’t mother me,” Adam returned. “I need to know!”

“Adam...*you* are making me nervous,” Belinda replied.

Adam knew that hanging around would definitely make her *very* nervous and that might cause her to make serious errors in her analysis. “You’re right,” he sighed. “Besides, I smell roast janta—and *that’s* been going on all afternoon!”

Belinda gave Adam a look that mocked surprise. “I didn’t think you were aware of anything outside a few cubic feet of that dig!”

The momentary humor of their conversation relaxed him and the feeling of being tired and hungry intensified somewhat. His precious find was in capable hands. The people on his project team were thorough and he knew enough not to worry. Adam turned to walk out of the lab module’s air lock.

“Bye-bye!” He heard Belinda say melodiously. Adam’s hand appeared around the corner of the hatch and waved back at her. Savoring the taste of janta, Adam headed for the cafeteria.

Crenello saw Adam walking his way. He had a look of determination and Crenello anticipated his reasons for “wandering” so close to the cafeteria. So he laid out a service for one then went to the kitchen to prepare a hardy portion of roast janta, boiled jiffany root, Erta peas, and a thick slice of a gelatinous substance called sonaballina—a popular condiment. Crenello worked fast, slicing the janta and scooping the side dishes, such that, as Adam arrived he had merely to slide the tray across the service counter where Adam immediately retrieved it.

“Thanks,” Adam said heading for the table setting Crenello had put out for him.

“Don’t mention it,” Crenello returned.

Slicing off a thin slice of janta, Adam pushed it down into the condiment and then popped it into his mouth with a smooth action of his hand withdrawing the fork from between his closed lips to savor the combined flavors. As he reached for the day’s dispatch lying on the table in front of

him, the full force of hunger combined with the robust flavors of Crenello's cooking hit him! He dropped his paper and began gorging himself. Adam hadn't realized how hungry he had become.

Crenello watched from the service counter patiently preparing, what he knew would be, a second helping. "He's not hungry . . . he's starving!" Crenello mumbled under his breath. About ten minutes later Adam got up from his place and walked to the service counter where Crenello exchanged trays with him.

"You knew . . ." Adam began.

"Shut up and eat, boss." Crenello bluntly instructed his superior.

"Absolutely," Adam returned smiling, and headed back to his place where this time, as his hunger was somewhat abated, he actually *read* through the morning dispatch.

Belinda was down-loading the information Adam had given her into her notebook. She began studying details of the lab computer's analysis. Apparently, the polymer *was* a protective encasement but beneath that covering lay, in a thick glass artifact, an organic substance much like human DNA. Until they could get at it Belinda couldn't be sure. Certain protocols in archeological investigation and analysis precluded *her* tapping the artifact for a larger sample. It would certainly have to go before some committee. Such action would certainly have to be decided by professionals more experienced in these matters.

"DNA . . . let's not jump to conclusions." She said to herself. "It could be anything." She examined the graphic presentation and noticed a string of symbols along the bottom of the bottle. "08.08.2250-3S12C01SUB," the enigmatic string of alpha-numeric symbols read. Belinda thought that it was, obviously, a lab control label that might include a date and possibly the source of the sample but beyond that hunch she had very little more to offer in her report. Though an experienced archeologist, she had never seen this writing before. It appeared to be some derivation of Old English. She found herself desperately trying to second-guess the originator of this ancient artifact asking: "At this stage of development, I'm certain that these people did not have the technology to produce a plastic. What ever purpose could this artifact serve? Wait! Where the hell did this come from?" The hours passed without her noticing how much time she had spent in her deliberations. She thought she knew what might be inside but, having never seen an artifact similar to this one, couldn't guess its purpose. And the fact that they had discovered such an artifact at that level of the dig bothered her.

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It was definitely out of place—it didn't belong there where they had uncovered it, unless, that is, a more advanced element of the colonial presence may have left it—or dropped it—in that place. That was a plausible hypothesis, she thought. There was plenty of evidence to suggest that the collapse of civilization had only occurred on Erta. “But, then,” she thought, “why *only* on Erta?”

That evening, Adam decided to walk the site. The sun hung low on the horizon awash in a vivid blood red sky. Night was on its way. The Tell loomed before him. There was a large dark cleft in the rock at its base. The wind was howling—blowing in from the north-northwest with a loud moaning sound. Small twigs and leaves were whipped about in the minor maelstrom and they beat against him forcing him to cower against the wall of rock. The storm frightened him a bit. There was no rain, no ominous clouds approaching; just the howling wind. He stood before the great gaping hole in the side of the Tell and raised the courage to enter alone.

Adam stepped forward into the cavern's darkness like an awkward child. The pale of dusk settled in upon the crystalline structures of the inner walls and lent them an eerie amber sparkle. The Temple of the Covenant—just as it had been described by the Bards in their mythic legends—their fascinating stories of Erta's age of antiquity.

“What a remarkable find!” He whispered to himself. They had spent the better part of six months uncovering the ancient facade. How curious he had felt to find the sturdy hinges still resting in their niche their massive form had once supported the great bronze doors that now lay flat before the entrance. What was this place for? Why had it been built there? It lacked the ceremonial accoutrement familiar to his notions of ancient history.

He turned left and began to walk the great hall now illuminated with modern lamps installed by his technical crew. Toward the center of the hall lay the large stone sarcophagus. It rested on a circular pedestal about a foot high and about 12 feet in diameter. The coffin's surface was embellished with the likeness of a human; a woman. Painted, the semblance was in bas relief and had been meticulously executed: long hair with almost a carrot-colored hue, blue eyes, a serene facial expression, and a curious texture of freckles that ended to a region just above the figure's breasts. Was it the light? Or did Adam see a peculiar hue in the figure's skin that matched the strange color of its hair.

He touched the sarcophagus. Adam envisioned that, inside the huge coffin lay the remains of a beautiful princess—wonderfully preserved—dressed in royal robes and golden sandals, her face an expression of bliss, as

though she was but dreaming—imprisoned in the clutch of a deep sleep. But he knew that, more likely, it would be the dried-out mummified remains of an ancient queen of Arcadia that he would find. After all, this room had all the indications that it was a crypt. Still, he remained fascinated with the image so delicately carved into the surface of the sarcophagus.

Having been carved out of solid rock, the temple remained in excellent condition. Their best estimates concluded that the huge building had been buried for over two-thousand years. Adam wondered what event or chain of events could have compelled the people of Arcadia to abandon their beautiful walled city with its attending fortress.

It would have taken at least a thousand years for the rough winds of New Canaan to cover the Tell with enough wind-borne debris to hide so massive a structure. The smooth, natural formation of the Temple's solid rock roof remained above the thick blanket of earth and rubble. There was the catch! The rubble! From all appearances, a succession of small communities had been built one upon the other—all of them inside the great walls. Adam's team had discovered three. They were much smaller communities; their houses built with unfired brick and field stone bound together by a crude limestone mortar. Yet, the curious thing was that the earliest of these towns was built upon a blanket of wind-blown sand and debris that had taken hundreds of years to accumulate. Successive occupations had raised the level of the surface within the walls until the compost of thousands of years of human habitation spilled out over the high ramparts covering the glacis to within a few meters of its top. Countless seasons had nurtured vines and young trees until, from a distance, the gigantic walled city appeared to be nothing more than a forested mesa in the middle of the vast Plain of Carmel.

"How mysterious this place is." He thought. *"And all that mystery is rooted in my ignorance of its history."* Adam felt a momentary pang of sadness for he knew that the meticulous attention of hundreds of scholars and specialists over the coming years would gradually reveal the truth inside the walls of Arcadia. With that revelation the myths and legends would finally die and the adventure in digging into civilization's obscure past would be no more.

Outside the sun had long since set and the moons of Erta had risen to their task of guarding the night; *Dinari* hung low on the horizon—reflecting a soft golden glow and *Prima Casa*, the larger moon, at watch overhead the landscape awash in its cool blue-white light. A solemn soft moonbeam broke through the crystal of the temple's roof light and bathed Adam where he stood. Guarded by moonlight each night, warmed by the sun every day, the

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ancient sarcophagus had occupied this place for millennia. Adam looked up and through the crystal. Time had weathered its outside surface making it translucent but he could still see the bright form of *Prima* and marveled at the dazzling moonlight as though he had seen it for the first time.

"We've come full circle," he thought. *"Our ancestors traveled to this planet in a great ship with star drives pushing them through the universe within the dominion of hyperspace! Once they landed their social order began its long slow decline into barbarism. A thousand years had passed before the Arcadian culture was established giving way to an age of enlightenment and progress that became the root of my civilization. And now, our spirited explorers once again traveled the pathways between the stars in search of the lost colonies."*

An epoch had past before the colonial government on Gannemead had recaptured space with its developing technology. They could only travel to their moons a first but, with great enthusiasm, they built space stations and colonized the larger of the moons, a forested planet they called Farah; it sat in orbit around Gannemead at about seven hundred thousand miles. It was a big moon—a planet in its own right continually fixed in the sky, its orbit following the rotation of their home world that had captured it in a gravitational embrace. As they reached out into interplanetary space they learned to mine the wealth of the asteroid belt that lay between them and their neighboring planet Duomo. How excited the population had come to discover that the unassuming asteroid named AB-21 was, in fact, the ancient vessel that had sheltered their ancestors on their long journey through space. The first arrivals had parked it out there for safekeeping in the cold dark vacuum of space and so everything within it lay preserved over time. It was from the meticulous re-engineering of the vessel's technology and from the information found in its many libraries that the colonists regained the science of their forefathers. Now their men and women plied their way through the deep black of the Universe in great starships that could pierce the mysterious fabric of hyperspace and with this powerful knowledge they would mitigate the ferocity of Time in their search for the lost tribes of their mother—lost to them these many millennia—the legendary blue planet of their origin.

History had been warped in the process. You can't go from a space-faring society to a planet bound barbaric culture and back to a scientifically advanced civilization without having some of your history fall through the cracks. All total, nearly five thousand years had elapsed since the brave explorers of the, now ancient generation ship, Tyrolia had landed their shuttles and great barges on the planet's surface. Over four millennia had

passed since the first rulers of the new colony had raised the flag of a once-proud space-faring population and claimed the new world as their inheritance.

“What had compelled them to set aside their humanity and fall into the grip of barbarism?” Adam thought. *“Having known where they had come from; having lived together in close quarters for centuries. How could they have let their society slip away into a dark age of ignorance and fear?”*

For all the effort, the people of Gannemead had, at first, located only Erta and one other colony. It was a small outpost of human activity in the Jenovian sector of a neighboring star system they called Persepholi. On the third planet of a star they called Buffo they found a society founded by an explorer named Igregori Petrovitch. Marshal Petrovitch, as was his honorific title, had been the commander of a military contingent that was supposed to have provided security for the Tyrolean community once they had found a planet to colonize. Ertanians called them simply “The Legionari”, a descriptive pronoun of an ancient language that people interpreted as “Warrior Class.”

The Legionari colony didn't amount to much; its population had never exceeded ten million. Their ancestors were professional military. These people had kept a military leadership intact. After four thousand years, their ruling elite had evolved into a royal hierarchy. Their society maintained rigid moral and ethical codes and while their government was not elaborate by any means, their penchant for objectivity kept a rough justice that was fair and the distribution of common wealth was equitable.

Unlike the people of Erta, the Legionari had not suffered a complete collapse of their civilization. Their history and technology remained intact. They *knew* who the Ertanians were when those early expeditionary groups from Gannemead visited them and told them of the small colony on the big green planet. Their legends referred to them and, in the era before the collapse of the Ertanian colonial order, they had made a few visits to the planet to trade. But, after a time, the Legionari reasoned that their home planet was a place to tame and populate. The long journey from their home world had made the people weary of life aboard the huge generation ship. They hungered for land beneath their feet again. As the centuries passed, the Legionari placed less and less importance on space travel until it became useful only for maintaining satellites or for mining minerals not indigenous to their new home world. Explorations to neighboring star systems seemed irrelevant to their new life and too expensive for such a small society to adequately finance so they discontinued deep-space travel all together.

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When the first astronauts from Gannemead emerged from their shuttles to greet the awaiting Legionari dignitaries a great roar of joy went up from the huge crowds that surrounded them. As the governor of Onega, the name the Legionari had given to their home-world had proclaimed before his people: “I have found my brother who was lost and now my eyes cry tears of joy at the sight of him!” The event marked a beginning of a long and prosperous relationship between the two societies. The isolation of their worlds within the vacuum of space compelled them to cooperate. They learned to trust each other—to work together for the common good. And, the common good was a term loosely defined as anything that improved the human condition. Through the following centuries, their cultures found neighboring worlds to colonize and discovered a few more remote settlements. All of the planets they discovered were capable of supporting life and a few had indigenous species populating the surface but none were discovered to have any higher order of intelligent life and so humans remained an isolated species of intelligent life for millennia. Curiously enough, the Government had realized that these habitable worlds all lay in almost a contiguous group that followed the spiral from about mid-point to just a few thousand light years from the center of the Galaxy.

What often preoccupied Adam's thoughts was the question of how the two great generation ships had become separated. Ancient Legionari records told a story of how *both* ships had been destined for Onega. Had there been some conflict? Why had the larger of the ships—the Tyrolia—sought out Gannemead and Tavali? Why were the colonies on Erta, Argo Navis, and Onega so small? The Gannemead star system *did* have several planets suitable for colonization. It had a larger sun and the inner planets ranged in variety of environment from tropical to arctic. For what ever reason, that decision had resulted in a break in communications between the two societies that had lasted for a period of over five thousand years. And then, *why* had Erta declined into barbarism while, on Onega, the civilization had not? No records of such events existed in Legionari culture. Moreover, when Argo Navis was rediscovered, there were no human beings on the planet at all. Perhaps, buried in the ruins of this ancient walled city, Adam would find some answers.

The sarcophagus dominated his curiosity; its delicate image fascinating him. His eyes were drawn by its sensual lines to the foot of the burial case. An inscription in the ancient language of his forebears spoke to him from the crystalline-metallic looking surface. He had seen those inscriptions elsewhere in the dig. Where? And then it came to him. He turned to leave

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the cavernous tomb and return to the night outside the yawning doorway that was the cleft in the rock.

"Sweet God of moonlit night," he thought to himself as he remembered! The same inscriptions had been carved across the marker stone that stood by the road just outside the Tell. They had thought it some sort of a shrine because the markings had been scrawled across the face of it in free-hand.

* * *

The light rain had moistened everything, and a fresh, earthy scent filled his enclosure. Adam lay on his side under a warm sleeping quilt of natural cotton filled with an insulating fiber. His mother had given him this quilt before he left Abbotshire and he was glad for her insistence that he should take it with him. He forced himself up and groped his way toward his lavatory. "Why is waking up so difficult?" He asked himself. He sleepily maneuvered his body to the front of the commode and relieved himself. "Ahhh—the pause that refreshes!" He joked to himself. Finishing the more intimate business of his morning's ritual, he shaved, showered, and brushed his teeth. "Why am I brushing my teeth?" He asked rhetorically. "I'm going to breakfast and I'll have to brush them again!" He rinsed his mouth.

Adam finished dressing and pushed open the door to his hut. The sky had cleared to a radiant azure and the sun was at about nine o'clock. He pulled his wrist watch out of his pocket and looked at it. "Yup, nine o'clock," he muttered to himself. Then he stepped down off his veranda and out on to the narrow cobbled pedestrian's walk that connected all the buildings of the university's camp site. The cafeteria was filled with others who had slept in as well. Adam pushed the doors aside and made his way toward a group of his coworkers. "Hey, hey, what's up," he greeted them cheerfully? They all returned the morning's greeting. Adam made his way to the counter where Crenello made him up a generously proportioned tray of delicious food. Tray in hand, he walked back to the table where his friends had gathered and slid in comfortably next to Mariam. They were in the middle of a conversation so he began to eat and tune himself in to the talk across the table. Crenello came by the table and effortlessly slid a cup of coffee in front of him.

"You forgot." Crenello explained

"Thanks, Crenello." Adam replied and lifted the cup to his lips to drink up a couple of hardy gulps of the brew.

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Then Leno broke from the conversation and asked: “Hey Boss, you know a guy by the name of Polinka?” Leno stuffed his mouth with bread and reached for his coffee, a casual expression on his face.

“Yeah,” Adam replied. “He was my Archaeological Techniques Professor back home. He’s like family. Why?” Adam grabbed the thermal pot and poured himself another cup of coffee. He added milk and stirred in some sweetener from a dispenser.

Leno finished swallowing and paused. “Well, this guy Polinka got military clearance sometime last night and he’s coming here to see you!” Leno resumed stuffing his mouth.

Belinda dropped off a bowl of fruit on her way past the table. “Morning, Big Guy,” she said casually. Adam turned his head to follow her pass. “Morning,” he returned.

Adam picked up his knife and fork and began eating. “How’d you find out?” Adam asked between mouthfuls not wanting so seem as barbaric as Leno.

“Dispatch,” Leno said in a muffled reply through another mouthful.

“What?” Adam replied not completely understanding Leno’s answer.

Leno finished chewing and gulped some coffee to wash his mouthful down. “Dispatch,” he said more clearly. “Last night,” he continued, “I was on watch and a hyper-space transmission came in—said he was coming in on the Destroyer Ganady Slovesk. Kind of heavy-duty don’t you think?”

“Well, Estaphan is an old friend of mine. And, he *is* the Project Director back at the University. He’s probably curious about our progress and he’s just coming out to check on us, that’s all. And, you know, this *is* a military project—I mean, we’re supposed to be clearing up the archeological studies so that the Military can finish building their base here” Adam replied. “And, you should remember, it *is* his University that put up half the credits for this expedition—you know—paid for the civilians and all.”

“Oh really,” Leno asked? “Then, why didn’t he pick up a Jaguar or even a Corvette? Look, Boss; you get some big-shot university guy coming all the way out here to the vacation capital of the Galaxy just because he wants to look at a hole in the ground?” Leno said sarcastically. “I mean, I love my History too but we could have sent him a video—right?”

Adam stopped eating. Leno was right. Professor Polinka taught Adam most of everything he knew about archaeology. Adam felt sure that Estaphan trusted his abilities. He felt mixed emotions. Adam pushed some food around in his tray and then began to eat again. “I don’t think it’s something we have to worry about.” Adam’s eyes widened. He impolitely

pointed his fork at Leno as though on the brink of discovery: “Wait, maybe he’s discovered something important and he wants to tell us himself!” Adam exclaimed. “It’s *his* team that’s doing all the translations on the writings we send back and then there were all those artifacts we discovered in the vault. We all know that the University had based their request to the government for this expedition on the historical documents they had found here some twenty years ago.” Adam looked at each of his companions in turn trying to extract some kind of response.

Leno had an expressionless look on his face; as though he was trying hard to accept Adam’s supposition. Adam’s suggestion had missed the point.

“I guess we’re gonna’ find out real soon—huh?” Adam asked rhetorically.

Leno resumed stuffing his mouth. “I finished that study for you, Adam,” Leno said, “It looks like we can yank that monolith outta’ the way for you without wrecking everything.”

“You mean you’re going to *remove* the monolith without wrecking *anything*, don’t you, Leno?” Adam asked as though instructing his companion.

“Yeah, yeah,” Leno replied somewhat annoyed, “we’re gonna’ be real careful and take all day long to move it—that Okay?”

Everyone at the table began to chuckle. Adam returned Leno’s reply with an expressionless look.

“What? I *said* I’d be careful—Okay?” Leno replied inquisitively.

Adam spent the morning studying the dispatch. His old mentor had included attachments: translations from the historical archives that his team had just recently released back at the University. Leno had overlooked them because of their academic content. “*So, Estaphan was coming out to discuss a discovery after all.*” Adam thought. That was typical of Estaphan. When ever he became excited about something he always elevated its importance to *urgent*. There were several articles but one, in particular, caught his attention. It was a translation of the ancient historian, Carmelo Vespasi from the Old Language Text. It described the events that took place in the year 6104—by their ancient way of dating historical events. In that year the Arcadians, as they had called themselves, had been in a sustained conflict against the kingdom of Dalmatia. He read with interest. Vespasi’s account was written in the heroic style and read like a dramatic narrative. But, what was the significance of this account? Other chroniclers had written of it—less colorfully, albeit, but none the less detailed. Wait! He read on. Here

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was a reference to divine intervention and, from the account, it had been witnessed by thousands!

“*Oh, Estaphan,*” Adam thought, “*are you trying to council me again?*” He had a very close relationship with Estaphan and his mentor was a very religious person. Just as Adam had always believed in the relationships between myth and fact, Estaphan believed that there were relationships between the facts that we discover in our reality and a tradition of faith; he claimed that such a relationship could often be proven to underwrite an entire belief system. Adam relaxed and poured himself another cup of coffee. He was alone as the others had finished their breakfast and had gone out to the dig for the morning’s work. He read on with interest.

[COMFLEETSIX: URGENT] 9557.210

TO: **Dr. Adam Canaveron**
Research Site Six
Erta Base
Quadrant 4

FROM: **Dr. Estaphan Polinka**
Ganady Slovesk
En route

RE: **Unusual artifacts!**

Adam!

My graduate students have discovered some interesting facts about the Dalmatian Conflict not present in other translations. I have included the first part for your perusal. Please note the distinct and vivid reference to some kind of divine intervention. Have you discovered any unusual artifacts at this site? We’ll talk more upon my arrival. I’ve garnered the Military’s indulgence and have been allowed passage aboard the Ganady Slovesk on its way to its patrol station nearby your star system. See you soon.

Best regards,
Estaphan

See attached file: Apolinari.txt

The History of the Apolinari
Chapter 1: The Conflict of Dalmatia
Carmelo Vespasi fu Luciano

Christopher Martin

Storm clouds gathered at the summit of Mount Kafir, its peaks still covered in white from lingering winter snow. The swirling vapor, caught in the updrafts of the Great Rift Valley, blocked sunlight and from these massive roiling clouds huge bolts of lightning reached out to strike the mountainside. Several minutes passed before General Canavero heard the low rumble of nature's awesome power echo out along the valley floor.

He hated the desert as was everything on the eastern side of Kafir. He was born to the lush green valleys of New Canaan where his family had farmed and prospered for over one thousand years. Still, he had his responsibilities. The Atticans had threatened the peace of Erta and his people were determined to obey the will of God. He had marched out of the Abyssinian Pass at the head of the Army of the Apolinari as its Generalissimo—frightened, worried for his wife and children, concerned for the future of his powerful and prosperous nation.

General Quillia had suffered a mortal wound at the battle of El-Quatar leaving the huge highly disciplined army under Canavero's sole command. From among his Centurions he chose the great warrior Luciano Vespasi to be his second-in-command. It was a wise choice. The men loved Vespasi and valued Canavero even more for having chosen him to lead the heavily armored infantry.

With overwhelming skill and courage the Apolinari had crushed Attica and slain their ruling elite. Canavero spared the walled city from a traditional conflagration and leveling and left both the real estate and the surviving citizenry in the capable hands of the Attican Chancellor, Perigo Montivanido, an honest man whom Canavero knew and trusted.

"Montivanido worships the one true God." Canavero said to his first officer, Vespasi, as they continued their journey along the wide road back to Arcadia, the capital city of New Canaan, their home. "I know he had no part to play in the rebellion."

"True." Vespasi returned. "It was wise to preserve the innocent for retribution must never be delivered upon the children for the sins of their fathers. This is the will of God."

"I'm not sure what we should do with the Dalmatians, however. They continue to draw blood for that worthless deity of theirs—murdering children to satisfy the psychopathic cravings of their evil priests. How long will that go on before God tires of them and destroys them?"

"I cannot say my General." Vespasi answered. "But if God wills they shall, indeed, be delivered into our hands as well. Our people have inhabited this planet for over six thousand years and, as our history demonstrates, we backslide and fall from grace from time to time."

"Ah, but these are truly evil times, Vespasi—the Dark One is afoot again...plowing through the Universe ...obscuring reason...promoting wickedness—I can feel it in the pit of my stomach! I have never known of such despicable deeds as are committed

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against the Throne of The Most High in this day and age! God did not command us to be bored with our lives! He gave us many splendid gifts to challenge us and fill our souls with excitement. Why, then, do these beast-children of Moloch occupy themselves with such butchery and black-hearted wretchedness?"

Vespasi gave his General an inquisitive look and slowly shook his head. "Was this not foretold to us by God himself? They are the *Machinia* are they not?" He turned to look into the heavens as they rode along. "When the thousand years are over," it is said the Dragon shall be set loose from his bonds and will go out to deceive Creation. He shall gather his evil hordes together and make war against the people of God. The *Machinia* shall be in number as grains of sand along the coasts and they shall march across the breadth of the earth and surround God's people." Vespasi quoted the sacred writings from memory.

"But it goes on to say that fire shall come down from heaven and consume them. And the Dragon, who opposed God, shall be cast into a lake of fire to be tormented forever!" Canavero returned, quoting also from the sacred writings.

"I do not know, my General, what tomorrow may bring. And, I really must admit that the few cities that follow Moloch bear no resemblance to the teeming hordes of sacred literature. But the *Machinia* have no souls; you know that!" Vespasi said.

"Souls or not, Vespasi, evil always starts with a little thing and, like some kind of disease, it festers and grows until it consumes everything. And when it has finally devoured all that is wholesome and beautiful, it turns in upon itself until there is nothing left. When God wants peace and quiet He leaves us wilderness but Evil leaves us nothing—not even time!" Canavero returned. And the great Army continued its passage home to the green pastures of New Canaan.

Three days into Abyssinia the weather grew dark and gloomy. A moist breeze blew from the southwest continually. The short grasses of the wide Rift Valley swayed like a green sea before the marching army as it made its way through allied territory.

On the morning of the third day, Abyssinian scouts dashed from the forested foothills and raced along the flanks of the Apolinari seated upon swift steeds—their horses' short manes bristling at the backs of their powerful necks. The young men wore little armor and carried their swords in sheaths strapped to their backs. Their round leather shields, bearing the emblem of their king, were carried on their right arm as they rode. As they raced past the cohorts toward the head of the column, the foot soldiers would cry out: "Salute!" in unison to welcome them.

The scouting party slowed as it approached the column head falling into a deliberate pace as they came alongside the General and his entourage. "Hail! Mighty Canavero! We bring important news from our king." The young Abyssinian leader said addressing the general.

The general continued to guide his horse in a slow relentless walk and he nodded to the dashing young leader. "Your name, lad" Canavero asked?

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“Caspasio Ragusa,” the young man answered in a serious voice, “captain of the Ninth Frontier Patrol.”

“Your message,” Canavero inquired?

The young man spoke quickly: “King Phillip wishes to warn the general that, today, Dalmatia has invaded the northern territories of New Canaan. They march with their god, Moloch, at the head of their column!”

The general understood the significance of this report. Dalmatia had declared a religious war against New Canaan—the most powerful nation on Erta. They must truly believe that their god, Moloch, would prevail and so followed him into battle. Thousands would be slain; cast alive into sacrificial fires, to placate this wretched god for the victory that Dalmatia had already assumed would be theirs! It would be two days hard march to reach Arcadia.

“My General,” young Ragusa continued, “King Phillip marches to Arcadia as we speak. He apologizes for not having first obtained permission but argues that there is no time for formalities.”

“I dare say that your good King is right!” Canavero returned. Then turning to Vespasi he ordered the column to reform for the hard march to Arcadia. If God was with him, he might still make it there in time to defend the heavily walled city. “I fear that, despite King Phillip’s best intentions, our homes may fall to the Dalmatian Sword.” He groaned to Vespasi. Canavero knew that the light infantry of King Phillip, as they fought with long spears, broad swords and too few horses, would be no match against the heavily armored cavalry and infantry of the enemy who would, most certainly, assail the city with their terrible siege engines!

From the vantage of the Palma Promontory, Canavero could see the carnage. Five kilometers distant lay the beautiful city of Arcadia awash in a sea of destruction. The siege engines were nearly at the walls and fires raged throughout the broad valley as burning farmhouses foretold of the terror in the countryside.

Canavero knew that he would have to give his men at least one day’s rest lest their fatigue from the hard march deliver them into the hands of their hated enemy. So he fought his urge to sweep down upon the battlefields before him and ordered the column to remain hidden in the pass behind his camp.

“Look!” Vespasi said pointing to a place along the southern wall of the city. “Phillip has destroyed the siege tower setting it afire!”

Canavero looked down into the valley. The Abyssinians had hurled hundreds of ‘canisteri’ into the base of the massive siege tower. When the small incendiaries exploded a destructive fire ensued setting the Dalmatian defenders ablaze as they fell from the crumbling structure. The Abyssinian infantry fought to defend their position long enough for their men to withdraw. They encircled their sappers with a tight wall of long spears to give the men time enough to hurl their remaining canisteri at the approaching Dalmatian cavalry. The explosions and incendiary ash frightened the

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enemy's mounts driving them into the wall of bristling long spears whereupon they fell hurling their riders onto a bed of death. Seeing that the Abyssinians held their ground, the Dalmatians retreated.

"He gives us time." Canavero said with satisfaction. Then he turned to Vespasi. "How long do you think it will take you to march your infantry to the base of Mount Vasuva and emerge from its northern pass?"

"A half of a day perhaps; it's only five kilometers to the north." Vespasi returned. He, at once, realized Canavero's intentions. His infantry would attack the enemy from behind!

"Do so." Ordered Canavero, his voice dominated by a flat emotionless military connotation. Vespasi left to complete his task. From the valley below them they heard enemy trumpeters signal a withdrawal to regroup.

On the following morning Canavero addressed his Centurions and Legionary Commanders. "Disregard the abomination these beasts of Moloch wreck upon us. They are nothing more than Machinia—soulless and evil as their disposition toward bloodletting demonstrates. Today we fight for the lives of our families and for the sovereignty of our nation! Stick together and follow your orders and we'll overwhelm them soon enough. Forget about the booty. Crush them without mercy and win the day and the whole lot will be yours! Kill them! Kill them all. Leave no Dalmatian alive. Now, get going and God speed you to victory."

"Amen." The assembly answered in unison. Then the officers left to take command of their units.

That day the Apolinari descended upon their adversary as a wall of fury! Vespasi hacked and stabbed his way along the enemy's northern flank; Canavero brutally crushed whole legions from the southwest. By the twelfth hour the victorious New Canaanites had reached the walls of their beloved city and the inhabitants swung wide the gates to admit the victorious troops.

But bad news lay waiting for the grand general as he made his way along the road toward the city gates in the company of Vespasi and his personal guards. From atop his war horse, he saw his wife stumbling toward him along the paved approach—alone, with a crowd of townspeople following some distance behind. He knew, then, that his children had fallen prey to the evil they had crushed.

She wore a simple robe which was filthy with dust and blood and she staggered her face awash in tears and dirt, her hair disheveled. A dispirited countenance from the ordeal she had suffered, she looked to be a thousand years old so tired was her expression!

"Canavero," she sobbed! "Two days ago was our beloved son was pierced as a sacrifice to Moloch that the enemy might be assured a victory. They captured us in the fields as we worked." Canavero knew tragedy was upon him but he was completely

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stunned nonetheless. They had taken the boy and his friends playing in the orchards and had impaled them on stakes before the image of their God.

He dismounted and walked to her whereupon she fell into his embrace sobbing uncontrollably.

“Where is his body, woman that I might grieve also and then bury him and his little friends?” And she lifted her right arm, extending her finger to point in the general direction but could say nothing. Canavero looked and the crowd parted to reveal King Phillip in full battle dress carrying the tiny body of his beloved Sabastiano. As Phillip approached, Canavero could see that the man was distressed and rivers of tears flowed from his eyes. Phillip held out the body so that Canavero gathered his son to him and let out a great wail that echoed off the walls of the city. Silence fell upon the masses as their general wept for the loss of his son. The people permitted him this moment of reverence and then Meir, the Temple high priest began to pray:

“This is what the Lord says--
Israel’s King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty:
I am the first and I am the last;
Apart from me there is no God.”

“Silence” Canavero bellowed through his tears! “Of the enemy alive, who is responsible for this wicked deed?”

A small-framed peasant woman close to him softly spoke: “Robenelli, the Centurion, holds them at the west wall for your judgment, my general.”

Canavero moved through the crowd still holding the body of his son. The child’s limp arms blue with the color of death. Blood drenched his tunic around a gaping hole the stake had made in his chest. As Canavero approached the wall he saw that Robenelli’s men had captured the entire body of priests who served the god Moloch! They were dressed in fine red woolen robes and golden sandals—their heads and faces clean-shaven. Before him they stood defiant—their arms akimbo—they cried in loud voices: “Moloch be praised!”

The Great General laid his son down upon a wide flat boulder in the field beneath the looming west wall. Outraged by the loss of his son, the treachery of Dalmatia, and the arrogance of the priests he drew his short sword and fell upon the priests hacking and stabbing them bellowing: “This day shall you know a god more terrible than the one you served!”

He continued his indignation for the space of about a half hour. Those priests whose fear had compelled them to make an effort to escape through the crowd were unceremoniously thrown back into the ring of death until every priest had perished beneath Canavero’s sword. The soldiers passively stood by while their commander completed his gruesome work. Some even yawned for they would have liked to have had a part in the task and seemed bored to merely watch.

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When the last priest had fallen, begging for mercy that could not be given him, Canavero rested from his fury for a moment. And just as all thought he would stop, he looked up at Vespati, his face covered with the blood of his enemies, and roared: "Bring me more!" And they brought him more until he had slain one hundred Dalmatians--their bodies lying in a heap of mutilated human flesh.

Then the general drew back exhausted and sat upon a small rock close to the great stone that bore his son and ordered that the bodies of the enemy should be left for the wild carnivori to devour. But as he gave this order the bodies were consumed by a great blue flame that burned so hot that the people drew away to keep themselves from burning also! Clouds above them parted as the fire raged blue-white and an intense beam of light descended upon the little body of Sabastiano. From the air around them came a low rumbling voice that everyone heard and they trembled!

"As you have given me victory, I shall give you back your heart, Canavero."

And with that he heard the small voice of his son whine: "Father?" Canavero turned to see his son alive and whole! The savage wounds were gone. His skin pink with life! He gathered the boy into his arms weeping with joy crying out: "Thank you! Thank you, my God! Praise you! Praise your everlasting name!" At that moment a woman cried out and all turned to see what had happened. There amidst them stood Sabastiano's little friends alive and well also! And, the people wondered at the miracle they all witnessed. At once, the revolting statue of the god Moloch was struck by a gigantic bolt of lightning about a meter in diameter. The current from the strike could be felt in the legs of all who stood there and they fell to their knees shouting "Adoni" in unison! When they looked up they saw nothing but a pile of fine grey dust where once the statue had stood.

"These people are Machinia--the witless children of Evil and the flame of life must be put out from all of them." Spoke the voice. "Have courage, for I know that you are a gentle people, and do as I command you. Slay them all and take their kingdom to be your own and I will bless you--even you and your children and your children's children. For, as long as your kind inhabits the earth, my Will shall be done!" The voice instructed.

In the month of August of the year 6104, ninety thousand sons and daughters of Dalmatia were put to the sword and their blood drenched the grass and earth so that a glistening crimson field surrounded an entire city by day's end. And in the heat of the following day, the bodies were consumed by the mysterious blue-white fire of God such that the hot ash was carried away with the wind.

Throughout that year the Apolinari aided by their allies, the Abyssinians, swept through the Kingdom of Dalmatia slaughtering all whom they found regardless of their station or of the complicity in the treachery of their hated king, Ruffo. As the autumn waned and the snows of early winter began to fall, a detachment of the Fifteenth Legion, led by Tribune Augusto Stephinado, located and captured King

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Ruffo and his companion Muergella. Within two days they had delivered the two into the hands of Canavero who immediately ordered their crucifixion. And there, in the wilderness of Alba, as the bitter winds of winter descended upon the grey-white hills and valleys of snow-swept Dalmatia, the despised king and his whore were left to die, naked and alone.

END TRANSLATION

“Machinia,” Adam said to himself putting the dispatch down, “what are Machinia?” He sipped his coffee and thought about it for a moment. “Machinia, *Machines*, maybe,” he asked himself? “But, why would they refer to their enemy as machines?” And then he rose up to drop his cup off at the washing station and left the cafeteria, folding the dispatch in half and stuffing it into his right rear pants pocket. Adam thought he would take up the issue with Estaphan when he arrived.

* * *

“Tofla, see the communications? I think that these two may discover our plans. Do you think we may be somewhat exposed, old friend?” Emile asked in an almost insignificant and academic way.

“It was a gruesome thing to have them do, Emile!” Tofla said.

“What?” Emile asked not quite understanding Tofla’s response. Emile then realized that Tofla was reading the transmission on his view screen. Emile rolled his eyes but then waxed philosophical his facial expression becoming sublime, his voice calm and very serious. “They had it coming to them—each and every one of them! They were a bloodthirsty people preying upon the innocence of everything around them—laying waste to the environment—slaughtering whole communities! They were soulless and intellectually destitute. They’d become cannibals, for God’s sake! Even the children! You can’t expect a race to mature beneath the yoke of that much depravity, Tofla! By the time we had intervened, many of them were contracting dementia brought about by their reprehensible dietary habits. Besides, they weren’t in the control group anyway which, most likely, explains their aberrant behavior.”

“Once again, your argument is difficult to oppose. Then these, how shall we say, “chosen” few are to be included in the final press toward perfection?”

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“Yes, they are.” Emile replied. “And, do pick up a bit, old friend, we have work to do!”

* * *

Fleet commander Servano Petromistalli turned his attention to the wide screen that dominated the layout of the great dreadnought's Control Room. Here, aboard the battle star Intrepid, technology mitigated the limitations of his human form. With his ship's bristling armament he could savage whole planets. The awesome power at his command permitted him to travel through hyperspace. His great ship and its attending fleet of cruisers and destroyers were hunting the Nistasi—the Demons of Destruction.

Within the last two hundred years, Argo Navis and Onega had been attacked on two occasions by an alien race the Ertanians called *Nistasi*—demons or *angels of darkness* more exactly. The Colonial Government adapted the word to the Common Tongue. The attacks were small and random; a rural town in the southern hemisphere or in the Erta star system, a space station at the half-way point between Erta and Onega, the mining community on Orad, a huge asteroid in the Buffo star system. It seemed as though the attacks were timed to come every forty years or so. So, colonials often referred to the advent of such barbarous onslaughts as Nistasi Swarms.

The human defenders had never been able to capture a Nistasae warrior alive so they knew little more than their anatomy but they appeared to be a "type" of humanoid. All of the specimens taken *seemed* to be male although no one was sure how the Nistasi reproduced. They stood upright, on well-formed and powerful legs, an average of about six feet tall. Their hands and feet were similar to humans but somewhat elongated and larger. They had muscular, well developed shoulders, arms and chests. Their heads seemed an exaggeration of every human feature—an elongated skull sporting long stringy green-colored hair, bulging eyes, twice that of a human, eyelids that closed from both directions, short powerful necks, fleshy protrusions on each side of their head formed their ears. The short flat nose of their face spread itself across the top of a frightening mouth that was framed in needle-like teeth—all covered in a pink-white flesh. They were an obviously intelligent species—they had discovered the science of star drives. Over the centuries of contact with these creatures, humans had come upon an occasional Nistasi corpse that differed greatly from those that they were used to engaging in bloody conflict. These specimens, although few in number, had slimmer more human-like features and rather large craniums indicating that they

might have greater intellectual capability than those thought to be the common warriors. After much discussion and with good reason, human scientists naturally assumed that Nistasi culture might be composed of a caste system. These large-skulled, strange-looking creatures might be the ruling class who held power by reason of their greater intellects.

In the first encounters the colonists had suffered heavy casualties. The Nistasi were brutal creatures killing without restriction. They were not given to negotiating anything and they slaughtered any living creature they came upon making no distinction between the flesh of their victims when ever they ate! Demons the Legionari shock troops called them. And it took the Legionari Special Forces to stop them for, when the Legionari warriors had become fed up with the bestial behavior of the Nistasi, they butchered them without mercy, ignoring orders to make every attempt to capture a specimen alive. It was these savage battles that forced the Nistasi to retreat into the safety of deep space. Their numbers seemed small but no one knew for sure. Yet, the Legionari commanders had reckoned that where there were thousands there might be millions so the campaign for the location and subsequent destruction of the Nistasi home world was launched.

Fleet Operations had ordered Petromistalli to proceed to star grid coordinate 141.3—it was half-way across the Gannemead constellation. Here he would join the huge carrier task force assembling near, what appeared as, a fold in space and assume command of the seventh battle group. The carrier group remained in deep space more as an outpost. But the mobile battle stars traveled between the groups offering relief to the people manning them. Fitted with huge hyper-drive engines, a battle star could make it to any location within the Republic within a matter of hours. When finally integrated the combined ships would form a super fleet which would shield the settlements that dotted the frontier from anything the enemy could launch against them. The Battle Star, *New Iberia*, the ship with which the *Intrepid* would make up the super fleet, would be three days in re-fit preparing for patrol and exchanging crews before setting out on its six-month tour of duty.

Petromistalli had an odd feeling that preoccupied his mind with apprehension. He sensed a coming crisis. In recent times the attacks by the Nistasi appeared poorly planned—almost improvised. The colonial troops quickly dispatched them but it just seemed too easy. Were the Nistasi probing colonial defenses? Petromistalli thought so and the Unified Colonial Command had agreed that caution was the better path to follow. So they had steadily built up the military over the previous decades until, now, they had

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four formidable super fleets that could guard all the approaches to their frontiers. No one knew for sure how far human civilization had spread throughout the Galaxy, the lost colonies notwithstanding, but at least, in this part of the Milky Way, humans had not claimed so broad an area of deep space that it had become impossible to control.

In addition, the colonies were building an armada of vessels of every kind that would form the expeditionary forces they would send against the Nistasi home world if they could find it. Locating their home planet seemed very difficult. The Nistasi maintained a communications black out when ever they engaged colonial forces. Their language was barely understandable but, within the last century, they noticed bands of them communicating in the Common Tongue or something similar to it. It seemed akin to the rudimentary root of the language common in the colonies; it was the *way* in which it was used—short, sometimes incomprehensible phrases, replete with foul cursing, that seemed metaphorical rather than concrete. And, if they could *not* make a clean get-a-way, they activated the self-destruct mechanisms on their ships. Life was cheap to these bastards.

No matter how far out the Colonial military sent their picket ships, they could never pick up Nistasi war vessels until they were just about on top of them. Something kept the Nistasi ships "cloaked" until they were practically within the colonial peripheral defenses. This was why the colonial defenses combined active patrols with passive defenses—it made the net tighter and harder for the enemy to penetrate.

"Excuse me, Commander, battle management radar reports no enemy sightings," the Bridge officer said.

"And the space debris from our last engagement, O'Conner, is everything clear ahead," Petromistalli asked while he continued to stare at the forward view screen?

"Aye, sir," O'Conner replied, "and we haven't any indication of significant amounts of matter along our charted course either."

"Very well, Mr. O'Conner, you may proceed." Petromistalli answered.

Captain O'Conner approached the intercom panel at his station and depressed a lever labeled: 27-MC. Holding the lever down, he gave the order to the Engineering Officer of the Watch: "Engine Room, Bridge; prepare for hyperspace acceleration. Bring the ship to light speed. Prepare for jump to star reference grid 141.3."

Over the Bridge speaker the Engineering Officer responded in a bland voice that marked his confidence and professionalism: "Bring the ship to light speed and prepare to jump. SRG-141.3. Bridge, Engine Room Aye."

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The great ship shuttered with the power of the stars. The forward view screen went completely black for just an instant, then became blue-white, and then faded into the more normal scenery the men were accustomed to seeing: the forbidding blackness of deep space brilliantly embellished with star light and clouds of cosmic dust.

“Bridge, Engine Room,” came a report from the Engineering Officer, “the ship is at light speed. I am standing by for your permission to execute the jump.” There was a pause and then a completely different star map appeared on the Quartermaster’s navigation stand. The ship’s computers would coordinate the jump to star reference grid 141.3.

“Steady as she goes, Mr. O’Conner,” Petromistalli ordered. It was a tacit approval to continue.

“Aye, Aye, Sir.” O’Conner replied. “All hands, this is the Officer of the Deck. Secure your stations in preparation for a jump to hyperspace.” O’Conner announced over the ship-wide intercom.

O’Conner waited the customary three minutes and then turned to the Helms Officer and gave a nod along with an accompanying order: “Mr. Peterson, you may execute the jump.”

Peterson grabbed his intercom mike and called the attention of the crew: “All hands, this is the Helm, prepare for jump to Hyperspace.” He depressed the lever on the clag horn next to his station three times. Then spoke the command into the intercom, “Computer, you have permission to execute the jump.”

Everywhere crewmembers braced themselves as the ship’s navigational computer executed the jump to hyperspace flawlessly.

* * *

Estaphan Polinka depressed the button to open the blast shield. Through the porthole of his stateroom, he looked out into space. He could see the western hemisphere of Erta gently rolling by his view. “*I wonder what he’ll think of me.*” He mused to himself. He hadn’t seen Adam since Adam left for Erta almost two years ago. Popping in on him wouldn’t make explaining his visit any easier. Polinka was a deeply religious man and his one-time student and friend Adam held more of a secular point of view.

Professor Polinka thought Adam his star pupil. Anyone could see that Adam Canaveron loved archaeology. Even after his summer apprentice training, one could find him devoting hours of volunteer labor to the University Archaeology Department restoring ancient artifacts. Adam had

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lived with Polinka and his family. Once, Estaphan even entertained notions of Adam and his daughter, Avrille, starting a family but things never worked out between the two. Adam and Estaphan used to spend hours in his study before a raging fire discussing ethics or philosophy over a bottle of fine brandy.

Something plucked at the old man's heart. An unfamiliar feeling wrestled with his reason deep down inside his soul. Tears came to the Professor's eyes. He so loved his daughter, Avrille but Adam was the son that he had longed for and never had.

He could see the long shadows of the sun stretching lazily out across a worn, ancient range of mountains below. Their rounded tops establishing a boarder between the approaching evening sky and what would surely be the morning of the next day. Below, he thought, starlight would speckle the black canopy. Here, at the outermost reaches of the galactic spiral there weren't as many stars. In the night skies of the Buffo System, whose location lay further in toward the center, the starlight rivaled the reflected light from his planet's moons. Estaphan breathed in deeply and exhaled slowly through pursed lips relishing the refreshing thought of *getting away*. It made him feel exhilarated and slightly giddy.

At first he thought he had seen a meteorite dash across the darkening sky. As he followed the moving dot of light, he realized that it was the supply shuttle from the *Ganady Slovesk* penetrating the atmosphere. The shuttle would bring supplies to Adam's encampment while the destroyer's heavy shuttle would land at Marina Bay Space Station. His friend would have to wait and his mission would remain shrouded in mystery until then. After taking on provisions, the Ganady Slovesk would leave orbit and continue on to its patrol quadrant leaving Polinka to remain with Adam on Ertá. The dot of light grew brighter as it continued its decent to the planet's surface; its hull shields sporting an aura of hot gasses. About twenty minutes into its descent it began to zig-zag along its entry path to break its velocity. When it finally achieved sub-sonic speed it would switch on its landing engines to make the tight, semicircular approach to the base camp's landing pad.

Adam felt someone approach and he turned to see who it could be. "Oh! Mariam," he said quietly, "hello, sweetheart. I came out to meet Estaphan."

She folded her arms about her to shield herself from the cool of the night which she found slightly uncomfortable. Adam continued to watch the shuttle descend and he pointed to it turning his head to smile at her. "He's

not on the shuttle, Adam.” She remarked in almost a whisper. She snuggled up to him for warmth and he obliged her by putting his arm around her. She could see an expression of surprise forming on his face. “Not to worry!” She quickly added. “He’s disembarked at Marina Bay; Leno went to get him in the UV.” They remained quiet. Moonrise would not be for yet another hour and the two lovers relished the mysterious calm of nightfall. The stillness was soothing to their senses.

After a few minutes the quiet of the Ertanian night broke with the distinct distant “boom” of the shuttle breaking the sound barrier. It was a much larger dot coming in from the west now. As it approached the landing pad its powerful engines broke up the night with a frightening, thunderous roar. The base camp’s landing lights came on revealing a clutch of personnel to the northeast of them whooping and hollering in excitement. It swooped in a semicircle above their heads as it approached the landing area and then, effortlessly, came to a full stop in midair directly over the brilliantly lit pad. The bottom surface of the shuttle's hull sported steam as its hot leading edges cooled to the moist night air. Its upper surface reflected the lights of the landing pad.

Slowly, the craft wafted down as it extended its landing gear. The massive displacement pads of the landing gear seemed to clasp the concrete as though they were the claws of some frightening alien creature; the engines swept up a miniature dust storm. Then the slowly whining hydraulic pumps could be heard emanating from the hull as the crew leveled the craft. The engines shut down but the blast ports remained red-hot. A fog emanated from around the blast ports and from the bottom of the hull around the vertical thrusters as the moisture in the night air met their heated surfaces. Mariam and Adam could see the crew completing the landing check list through the forward view port. They lowered the reentry shields to allow them to cool. One crew member waved to them through the view port and they waved back.

They heard a rush of air. The sound of hydraulic pumps whined as the rear hatch popped equalizing cabin pressure with the atmosphere. A ramp lowered itself down onto the ground. They heard some conversation coming from the hatch airlock but couldn't make out what was said. Then the shuttle captain walked down the ramp with two companions. He turned and snapped off a salute to the man standing on the pad. A Marine had gone out to greet the shuttle’s crew. The shuttle’s captain looked around for a moment; then his eyes fell upon Adam and Mariam. He smiled. “How *are* you my *dear* Canaveron,” he asked sincerely. He quickened his pace and

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Adam walked out to meet him. When the two men met Adam suddenly realized that he was staring into the face of his brother Dante and he rushed to embrace him. Mariam saw Dante close his eyes and heard him say softly: “Ahhh! It's so good to see you my dear, dear brother!”

“It is very good to see you again, Dante,” Adam returned.

Gently breaking the embrace, Dante looked at his brother and asked: “How's Mom—how's Dad?”

“They're fine.” Adam replied.

“We had to drop Estaphan off at Marina Bay. He had to check his baggage through customs—not being military personnel. You know the drill.” Dante said.

“Well, do you have any news; any secrets?” Adam joked.

His brother looked at him seriously. “You haven't received word yet, then? Has no one told you? The Nistasi swarm again!” Dante returned. He had stopped his brother by gently placing the fingers of his left hand against Adam's chest.

That news drew very concerned looks from both Adam and Mariam.

“Where have they been seen?” Adam asked.

“The Pisces constellation—out past New Iberia; they stationed a super fleet out there.” Dante answered.

“That's us! That's right next door!” Adam exclaimed.

“Well, yes, so-to-speak. We think that there might be some kind of a fold in the fabric of space at a location near the mining colony of Brent-Sophia. A colonial frigate actually saw the sons-of-bitches pop out of nowhere—their ships were those small fighter escorts they always use in the atmosphere and that's telling us that something bigger might be close by; say, on the other side of where ever it is they are.” Dante explained. “Tonight, I've been told, the Navy is in the process of getting everyone ready for the party as we speak. We're supposed to stay close to here on a planetary space patrol. So, we'll be leaving for the outer planets to take up station until our sister ship, the Drummond, gets here sometime tomorrow.”

“You'll be leaving soon, then?” Adam asked.

“In about four hours.” Dante replied. “We've got to be able to rock-and-roll within 12 hours just in case the little bastards pay us a visit. I mean, this is a remote station but, you never know; it *is* a colony. The closest planet is Cutter's Claim and that's way out there.”

“I don't understand...” Adam trailed off.

“Colonies are locations where there are several thousand humans and, well, you know...” Dante stopped short.

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“Excuse me, but I *don't* know what you're...” Adam replied almost totally confused.

“Food, goddamn it—you're all food to these ass holes,” Dante let the statement sink in!

“Oh.” Adam replied. “I didn't want to consider that I suppose.” Adam accepted his brother's chastening. He was military and had a different way of representing the truth. No sugar-coating here.

The two men glanced at Mariam. She looked worried. Dante threw his left arm around her. “Don't worry, Sis, we won't let anything happen to this little gem of a home world.” He reassured her.

The group continued to walk on toward the cafeteria.

“Can't these creatures grow their own?” Adam asked rhetorically.

“We attacked a remote outpost last year and it turns out they were. They had captured colonists from Bienvenuto and were raising them like cattle. Damn! There were only about a hundred or so left—totally screwed up people. They'll never be right again. The psyches came to get them I don't know where they were taken from there and never heard another word about them.” Dante reported.

“Grief,” Adam exclaimed! “You've got to be kidding me! You mean to tell me the Nistasi swarm because they're on foraging expeditions?”

“Little brother, I don't give a shit what they do when they come through that god damn stellar gateway of theirs. All I know is that they have to be killed or they will eat their way toward the conquest of the human race.” Dante explained from his very military point of view. “You see one; you *kill* one. You gotta' get used to that logic or you become someone's meal. I don't know how else to explain it.”

Later that evening, Leno returned in the UV with supplies from town and the good professor. Estaphan stepped down the rear ramp of the UV smiling as he saw Adam and Mariam but then his expression turned to concern. “The Nistasi swarm again,” he said. Adam slowed his approach slightly and took Estaphan into a welcoming embrace. Then he broke away and looked into his old master's eyes. Estaphan could see Adam had become agitated.

“Yes, yes, I know, my brother has told me everything.” Adam replied. He turned to walk toward Mariam extending his hand in a gesture that beckoned Estaphan to follow. The two men walked a few feet before Estaphan spoke.

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“Colonial scout ships have seen them in the Sammarah Gap as well—near the mining colony of Cutter’s...” Estaphan began but broke off his sentence, “They might be headed this way too.” He quietly informed his mentor. Estaphan and Adam continued to walk until they reached Mariam.

“Well, this must be Mariam—eh?” Estaphan asked though he knew. He put his hand on her shoulder. “Keeping this fellow honest?” He asked. Mariam smiled. Professor Polinka maneuvered himself between the two and put his arms around both of them. Then the three of them walked over to Adam’s personal vehicle for the short trip to the Base Camp’s living quarters.

Adam noticed Estaphan had taken care to wear warm clothing being familiar with the crisp cold of Ertanian nights in mid-summer. “Let’s get you settled in and properly fed; then you and I will talk—OK?” Adam said. The Professor looked at Adam from the passenger’s side of the vehicle and nodded his head approvingly. In the dark of the evening, the instrument panel lit their faces with an eerie glow as Adam turned the ignition switch to start the electric motors. He shifted the vehicle into forward gear and sped off into the night toward the Base Camp.

“Eh...how is your father?” Estaphan asked Mariam.

“Oh fine; he’s been given a new post at the University here on Erta. Mother will return soon. She’s been settling family affairs. They wanted to retire to Erta anyway. They prefer an agricultural colony to settle down.” Mariam replied.

“Ah, yes,” Estaphan returned, “Edward and Greta were quite the traveling couple, weren’t they? Not characteristic of Ertanians but it did you a galaxy of good, did it not, Mariam? Seeing all those faraway places and the like! Ahhh! The life of a diplomat can be exciting, I suppose.”

“Yes!” Mariam said gleefully. “And, those were very exciting times, Professor!”

“Hey!” Adam broke into the conversation. “You’re not excited about *our* time together?”

“Oh, I suppose digging holes in the ground might be considered exciting in some social circles.” Estaphan said in dry humor.

The three friends all broke into laughter.

“Have you accommodations?” Adam asked.

“Why, yes, I’ve reserved an apartment at the University’s inn. Nice place; comes with a housekeeper and a cook. I like it.” Estaphan replied.

They approached the cafeteria. The swing shift had arrived for supper most of them were soldiers from the base.

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“Here, let’s get some coffee. Are you hungry?” Adam asked his mentor.

“Coffee is fine but I’m not really hungry.” Estaphan replied.

They came to a stop in front of the building and got out of the vehicle.

When they walked in Crenello saw them and made a motion suggesting they might want some midnight rations. Adam walked up to Crenello and explained that they had only come in for coffee. Crenello made up a small dish of pastry and slid it across the counter to Adam. Adam smiled and took it thanking Crenello for his thoughtfulness.

Upon returning to the table where Mariam and the Professor were seated with their coffee, he sat down across from the Professor and set down the pastry.

“I have to tell you, Estaphan, we lucked out when they assigned Crenello as the chief cook to this project.” Adam said.

“It would seem so.” Estaphan replied biting into a pastry.

“So,” Adam began, “what brings you all the way out here. Are you checking up on me?” Adam asked with a humorous bent to the tone of his voice.

“Well, I wanted to see you—that’s one thing that I wanted to do. But, the other...” Estaphan trailed off and ate some more of his pastry. Then he drank some coffee.

“Tell me, Adam, have you found anything—shall we say—unusual in the dig?” Estaphan asked.

“What’s going on?” Adam asked pedantically. “You *know* we found that strange artifact. It was in Belinda’s report yesterday. Did you not get it?”

“Oh? No, I had left for this destination two days ago. So I didn’t get Belinda’s report but I knew of the threshold stone from Mariam’s drawings filed with the previous week’s reports. What, eh, what was this artifact, tell me?” Estaphan replied.

“We found it before a standing stone on the roadway leading out of the northwest gate of the ruin.” Adam explained. “It appears to be a glass container of organic substance encased in a clear plastic. Belinda has been studying it but, without the proper tools here in the field, she is recommending that it be sent back to the University on Gannemead.”

“I don’t think that it has much to do with the standing stone.” Estaphan replied. He took hold of his travel pouch lying next to him on the bench and retrieved a document from it. Then he took a paper napkin from the holder on the table and, with his pen, drew a picture on the napkin. “Did it look like that?” Estaphan asked moving the drawing between them so that

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Mariam could look at it.” Adam and Mariam nodded affirmatively. Unfolding the document he had taken out of his travel pouch and checking it briefly to make sure it was the right piece of information, he calmly slid it across the table toward Adam.

Adam took up the document and began to read from a translation:

“The Angel had given Telemus the relic to keep safe with him until our people had safely fled the city but Telemus was struck down by a bolt of light and killed on the road as we fled to the safety of the mountains to the west of us. In the press, I searched for the relic but could not find it. We prayed to God that He might see the calamity before us and compensate for our misfortune but it was not to be. Our prayers went unanswered and within two days march from Arcadia, the devastation had begun. With no defense against the evil of Moloch, the demons laid waste to the city and destroyed everyone that had not had the good fortune to escape.”

Professor: I have not found any additional documentation that might be associated with this event.

Paulie

“Who translated this, Paulie Freemont?” Adam asked after he had read the note.

“Yes. In that last batch of documents you had sent to us, we found fragments of one that described this peculiar event. However, we don’t know who this fellow Telemus was and we aren’t sure who was recording the event. Paul thinks that it might be Vespasi but I’m not so sure. We’re not even certain of the *time* the event might have taken place. It reads as though a student wrote it. Know what I mean?”

“Yeah...it does!” Adam said with mild surprise in his voice as he realized what Estaphan was alluding to. “But do you think that’s what we’ve found? Is it a relic, perhaps?”

“Well, it might actually be a reliquary. But, I’d like to look at it before it gets too late.” Estaphan replied. “This fragment was discovered in a collection that seems to have been part of an old archive dating from the later half of the fifth millennium. We believe that it was a dark age of some sort. Many of the associated documents describe planting and harvesting rituals. We know that during the reign of Canavero, agriculture was considered a science albeit a rather simplistic and crude one but that’s five hundred years of our people’s history that we can only describe as supposition. Then there was that massive tome your people found in the

vault. By god! That'll keep Paulie busy for at least the next five years!" Estaphan added.

"Okay," Adam said as he turned to Mariam. "Mariam, would you wake Belinda. Tell her she can sleep in this morning, I want to examine the artifact with Estaphan in the light of this new perspective." Mariam nodded affirmatively as she rose to fetch Belinda.

"Say, how did you know to bring this along?" Adam said gently waving the document as he waited for a reply from Estaphan.

"When I saw Mariam's manifest of the items retrieved from the day's dig in the report last week, I recalled how Paul had come out of his office absolutely bewildered by it. He had been painstakingly translating some obscure ritual when, on the very next fragment, he found this entry. From the location of the artifact indicated in the accompanying drawings, I simply made an educated guess that what you had found *might* be the relic to which this account refers. I really can't be certain that what we have *is* the relic described in this translation." Estaphan explained.

About a half of an hour later, Mariam came into the cafeteria accompanied by a sleepy-eyed Belinda. After some coffee and small talk, Belinda led everyone to the lab where she retrieved the artifact from a container filled with packing material. She laid it out on the workbench and turned on the viewing lamp directly above them. Professor Polinka studied the artifact for a few minutes. Everyone remained silent so as not to disturb his concentration.

"There was no ornamentation around it?" He asked them.

"No," Mariam responded, "we discovered it just as you see it."

Estaphan held it in his right hand and began to explain. "See how it is an oval shape? And, look here, you see the double rib protruding all the way around the elliptical circumference? That's telling me that this article was once encased in some kind of a metal setting. Relics were often encased in a copper or bronze setting—austerity of the Kristan Monks you know. They didn't like to use gold or any other type of precious metal. Perhaps the setting has corroded away over the many thousands of years. Yet, I agree with your inquiry, Belinda, I had thought that they had lost any knowledge of the manufacture of plastics by this time." Estaphan held the artifact up to the light and moved it to see if the substance within had any viscosity. There seemed to be some sort of a fluid at the center.

"DNA, you think?" Estaphan asked Belinda.

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“It seems to be.” She replied. “But, I can only give you assumptions based on the scans. We’d have to test a sample to be sure. I wish there was some less intrusive way we could be certain.”

“It’s...,” Mariam’s voice trailed off.

“What?” Estaphan asked.

“It’s almost like an egg. You know?” She finished.

They all looked at the relic again—there in Estaphan’s hand—the subtle light reflecting its mysterious purpose. No one said a word.

Meanwhile, back at the launch pad, the shuttle crew had finished unloading the medical supplies their commander had sent to the colony as a courtesy. They were destined for the University Clinic at Milltonshire, a small township to the west of the military base that bordered the archeological camp. They rigged the craft for liftoff, raising the shields as they started the engines. Then, with a graceful upward movement, the ship rose into the night air, turned gracefully and flew into the western sky; it climbed in a tumult of thunderous noise, swirling hot gases, and brilliant glow until it faded from sight.

On Erta, the primary City was its space port—Marina Bay. The climate here ranged from sub-tropical to temperate. It had arctic poles but they were small. The continents tended to be located either in the northern or southern hemisphere with a great global ocean between them. Erta was an agricultural colony and the population of the entire planet devoted itself to the production of food and natural materials used elsewhere in the Gannemead Republic. Here among these people, religion was a more prominent aspect of the average man’s belief system. And so, churches and cathedrals sprang up everywhere there were enough people to fill them. There were a few Universities with colleges in each township. The public school system began the education of the children when they attained the age of three and one never really completed one’s education. It wasn’t unusual for people in their first and second century of life to completely change their professional focus by taking up an entirely new program of learning.

The planetary population was at about 200 million most of which lived in small towns and villages. Erta had been a staging area for colonial development since the first great generation ships had arrived there from earth nearly ten thousand years before. But its fledgling settlements had degenerated into barbarism and civilization had developed from that point only to die out completely at around the fourth millennium of occupation. By the time that the more advanced colonial government of Gannemead had

reached the planet five thousand years later, the population that remained was a mere three million mostly concentrated along the plains of Attica where they thrived on the produce of the rich soil. They had little technology by then—mostly associated with metals and wood. Their primary power had become, water and wind and, of course, the horse—an animal that had been introduced to the planet's fauna during the first epoch of settlement. They were living in well-kept villages of about twenty to thirty dwellings and farmed fields of grain and rich vegetables as well as fruit orchards nearby each settlement. Some of the plant and animal species were introduced by the first colonists but most of the life upon the planet remained indigenous although the humans *had* given them the names of plants and animals familiar to them.

Peculiar to the Ertanian population were its women. They all possessed similar physical characteristics: carrot-colored hair, light skin that was lightly freckled and a body fragrance that resembled wild strawberries. They came in different shapes and sizes as was common to most of humanity but their single most significant feature was that of their incredible beauty. Throughout the colonies, everyone could agree that the women from Erta were the most beautiful human females that anyone had ever seen. As their population grew and the women began to travel off-world, they married men from other colonies and anthropologists noticed that their peculiar features began cropping up in their offspring spreading these unique characteristics to other human populations.

Throughout the first millennia of colonial occupation, education remained rudimentary. They had become a superstitious people and had fallen back on belief systems developed from their limited understanding of those religious perspectives from antiquity. Language too had suffered transformation. It had taken nearly a month for representatives of the colonial government to realize that Ertanians spoke a version of the Common Tongue which eventually became the standard of verbal communication. The road to growth, development, prosperity, and enlightenment took over eight hundred years. Though they were awestruck by the event of their first contact with their space-faring brethren, they remained set in their ways and intransigent to any change in the status quo for quite some time.

They were a conservative people. However, as their population began to grow and their children, sent off to the big universities off-world, returned with rich tales of adventure out among the home worlds of the Gannemead Republic, their attitude toward change began to soften and, gradually, their culture evolved into what it is today. Adam was a direct descendent of that

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culture, his beloved was also but her family's profession had made of her a star child who had lived most of her life traveling from one world to another as her father's diplomatic duties required. Adam's only connection to the outside was his years of university study under Estaphan at the Liberal Arts Campus on Gannemead, the home world of the Republic. It was a place where government seemed to be the primary industry and profession of just about everyone who lived there. The cities of Gannemead were very much larger than anything he had ever seen before. But, their culture had not become urban—densely populated as it had in the city of Cartania on New Iberia, the business capital of the Republic. No, Gannemead retained the look and pleasant image of a culture of college campuses, libraries, government buildings, parks, and intelligently planned residential communities that resembled the larger towns on Erta. It was known as “The Learning Place” out among the home worlds.

It had its own agricultural community and, for the most part, supported its global population which never exceeded about one billion. For the most part, Gannemead kept its wild places intact. Conservation and environmental balance were important policies to every resident. It was a peaceful place to live. And, for eight years, Adam lived there with Estaphan and his wife and daughter as though he were their son. The memories were rich between them and their bond had become inseparable.

“Will you stay at camp tonight?” Adam asked Estaphan as they walked away from the lab. Mariam and Belinda had gone off to bed for the night.

“No, I'd like to take a day and just rest and read and meditate. Do you need me for anything important or special?” Estaphan replied.

“Well, I'll have Belinda re-examine the artifact from your point of view—as a reliquary—however, if the crew discovers anything unusual in the dig or any additional information in the crypt or vault, I'd like for you to know.” Adam answered.

“Oh, I see.” Estaphan said. “I'll probably spend some time in the church in Marina Bay, tomorrow is Holy Day here on Erta, of course. And then, I think I'll go back to my apartment and rest...might catch up on some reading too...these reports Mariam gave to me, you know. Quite frankly, my boy, I came out here to spend some time away from the politics of the campus while Jennifer and Avrille are on vacation.”

“Well, splendid then! Where did they go?” Adam asked.

“Where else, Argo Navis,” Estaphan replied snapping his fingers and mocking a movement of a dance familiar to that tropical paradise! He smiled at Adam and then broke out into laughter.

“Alright then,” Adam replied joining in the humor, “I’m sure that what ever *might* turn up it can wait the day or so you’ll need to rest and recoup from your journey. How is Jennifer these days, Estaphan?”

“Ahhh, she’s *still* the best little wife a fellow could have. Have you been out to the family homestead much?” Estaphan asked.

“Oh, my word yes, father and mother are well and you should see what my nephew, Matt, has been doing with the place. He drives my sister crazy sometimes—always a new improvement project. Poor fellow, he misses his father you know.” Adam explained.

“His father is a cruiser commander now. Isn’t he?” Estaphan asked.

“Yes, just earned a promotion. His ship is the Royal Dominance. Odd for the Legionari to trust one of us with a top-of-the-line warship but, I understand that he’s a really good tactician and has earned their respect by virtue of his performance at the Battle of Savoy. He and his men annihilated an entire division of Nistasi...wiped them out!” Adam said as they continued to walk. “You can tell that Matt is proud of his father but he prefers his father’s company to the news of his heroic exploits.”

“I read or, perhaps, heard somewhere that he’s become a favorite of Petromistalli as well.” Estaphan added.

“Right, it was that special program on the NET last fall wasn’t it?” Adam inquired of Estaphan. “You know—the one about the making of a Star Fleet. Dante had called me to have me tune in. Always ready to brag—my family.”

“Yes, yes, now I remember. Well, it’s good to know that Stephan’s career is on the rise.” Estaphan replied.

Adam motioned to Karl who had been checking the engine of one of the UVs. Karl walked over to him.

“Yes, boss?” Karl asked.

“Karl, would you be so kind as to take the good Professor home to his apartment in town?” Adam asked. “He’s lodged at the University Inn.”

“Sure, I have to pick up the post and a few supplies for Crenello at any rate. I was going to leave in a half an hour but, I guess, we could leave right now. The supply depot is open around the clock anyway.” Karl replied. “Right this way Professor.” Karl indicated the direction by pointing to the vehicle he’d been checking. The third shift had about three hours left before sunrise and the start of the first shift.

“The Military has you people digging around the clock too. Doesn’t it?” Estaphan asked.

“Oh yeah,” Adam replied with some humor in his voice. “They *have* to get this outpost completed soon and the extended space port runs right up

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against the ruins. It's a shame we have this conflict with these horrible creatures. Life *used* to be so peaceful and simple out here." He shook his head negatively, closed his eyes and briefly smiled to himself before continuing the conversation.

"Well, I'll probably visit with you tomorrow then." Estaphan said shaking Adam's hand. He drew Adam toward him in an affectionate hug. "Ahhh, it's good to see you, my boy!" Estaphan said. Estaphan knew that the Military would, most likely, shut down the dig within the next few months. The republic was at war; it was *not* and could not be business as usual for much longer. He hoped the historical evidence beneath their feet would not be destroyed in the struggle for survival.

"It's been good to see you again, Estaphan. We'll work through these new translations on Monday then. They promise to give us clues to where we might find some answers. I'm excited about some of the assertions you've advanced." Adam explained.

Estaphan nodded affirmatively. He had not yet told Adam of his theory or of the discovery of a reference to a conflict that had taken place in ancient times, the likes of which fit the description of a Nistasi invasion. He was waiting for the final translation from Paulie and that wouldn't come until tomorrow anyway. Estaphan checked to make sure that he had left nothing behind and then climbed into the UV as Karl was starting the engines. Adam waved to them both and then turned toward his cabin. He needed a rest. He was tired, he thought, and the better part of the day had been spent in meetings and greeting old friends instead of digging up history. He slowly shook his head and walked into the night.

* * *

A warm beam of sunlight radiated through the huge window on his left. Estaphan Polinka sat still and meditated—the warmth of the sun on his forehead. From somewhere within the cavernous building he heard the soft, soothing musical chant of the old Kristan monks. They sung praises to the *Creator God* and begged for his intercession on behalf of all humankind.

Estaphan opened his eyes and studied his surroundings. After service, he had decided to spend most of the Sabbath Day in this quiet meditation. Estaphan told his housekeeper that he would not be home for lunch as he left the apartment shortly after breakfast. He walked to the church instead of riding the trolley. The church was a beautiful country structure with high thick walls and vaulted ceilings. He found delight in the lovely colored rays

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of light that sifted through the stained glass windows and splashed off the walls onto the heavy wooden pews and shiny granite floors. There were six sets of such windows on each side of the west chapel. The monks had opened a few of the lower panels to allow the cool mid-summer breeze of the late afternoon into the sanctuary. In the sky, passing clouds periodically blocked the sun causing the beams of light to dance around him and this pleased Estaphan and made him content.

From his vantage point he watched a beam of red and blue play upon the sculpture of General Canavero his image kneeling, eyes toward the heavens, as some long-forgotten artist had imagined him—an arcane expression upon his face, as though God had revealed something of great importance to him. Estaphan, ever the consummate historian, thought of how desperate a life Canavero had actually lived. There were never any divine revelations or great prophecies to mitigate the cruelty of his age, just an arduous reality chiseling away at Canavero's mortality until, at last, the great warrior fell still, his essence redeemed as dust among the stars.

His musing was broken by a movement in his peripheral vision. A monk approached in a slow, deliberate pace. It was a mysterious figure that Estaphan saw draw upon him—a tall, powerful-looking appearance; the man's face obscured by the generous hood of a dark brown robe of coarse-woven fabric. The full-length garment was tied to the waist by a length of white rope and a prayer chain of small black iron ingots hung from the right hip. The monk sat beside him and he noticed that this visage towered over him. They both remained silent for some time. Estaphan returned to his meditation. The chanting of the monks grew faint in his ear and he could hear himself breathing. He meant to move but found that his body would not obey his will and his heart began to race with fear for the moment was *strange* to him. The two men sat together for quite some time.

The figure laughed in a low and quiet voice as though he were filled with amusement.

“Always the philosopher—eh,” the monk asked allowing some moments to pass for Estaphan's reply?

For a reason momentarily unknown to him, Estaphan feared he had crossed the power of the angels and remained silent.

“Oh, very well then; in that moment of revelation you must tell your companions that you are inspired by the Will of God.” The monk continued. “Tell them in this way and they will believe you. Your faith alone will empower you with the authority that you require to save your people from self-destruction.”

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“Then . . . there is a God?” Estaphan heard himself speak but he had said this to himself as though he had suddenly struck upon the truth from being *told* of it by God himself.

“Do you think the Universe so remarkable a materiality that it needs no law to govern it?” The monk asked—his voice filled with exasperation for the obvious logic of such an observation.

Estaphan found himself engaging this impromptu conversation as though he were compelled to; his mind began racing with thoughts. “Forgive me, brother . . . ahhh.” Estaphan’s voice trailed off. Having regained the control of his body he turned his head a bit toward the monk expecting the monk to respond, in some way, identifying himself at the very least.

“Emile, my name is: Emile.” The monk replied not bothering to complete the response with a surname.

“Well, then—Brother Emile—I suppose that it's just a good idea to know a fundamental truth without requiring the weight of speculative theology to bear it up!” He answered—almost in the voice of a child squirming to get out from under the yoke of discipline.

The monk quietly laughed in a slow and deliberate way and turned his chasmal black-as-night countenance to Estaphan. “Speculative theology,” The monk asked rhetorically? “Children” He replied quietly in mild exasperation! “Theology, Estaphan, *is* speculation because its suppositions cannot be proven empirically. Belief systems should never be used to navigate your way through the articles of your reality. They become useful as theory only—guidelines to exploration, shall we say. But, I perceive that it will be quite some time before you begin to accommodate this point of view.”

Estaphan strained to see his face but could not so withdrawn was the man’s head into that cumbersome hood. But he managed to make out the outline of a powerful jaw and chiseled cheekbone. He thought of the customs and courtesies that might be required for the moment and began to feel awkward and became confused. This monk had come from out of nowhere to engage him in conversation the purpose of which now escaped his capacity for understanding! The two sat in silence for a moment and then Estaphan felt the strands of power that bound him to his place slowly ebb away. He found himself staring at the statue of Canavero and the Chapel had become dark save for the light of the many devotional candles. Now he broke out of his reverie—had he been day-dreaming? In the limited light of the devotional candles, he rose, groping along the pews until he had found his way to the great bronze doors and let himself out through the small panel in

the right door. Estaphan remained confused. *“Perhaps, I had fallen asleep.”* He thought. *“I’m tired from all the traveling and it is so peaceful here.”*

Estaphan stepped down on to the sidewalk and continued on along the dark streets of the city guided only by moonlight. He realized that a military curfew was in effect and the street lights were shut down—the windows of every household and business shaded. He walked quickly, with determination, turning corners and crossing streets with an impulsive sense of direction until he came, at last, to the doorway of the Inn in which he had taken up his residence. He ascended the steps to unlock the door to his apartment but the noise of his keys had alerted the house servant and the servant opened the door before Estaphan could complete the turn of his key.

“Doctor Polinka!” The servant exclaimed. “We were worried about you, sir. We thought to call the police!”

“Yes, yes, forgive me for causing alarm but I sat thinking for the longest time in the Sanctuary and, well, lost track of time, Stevens.” Estaphan answered as he walked into the hall of his cozy home and removed his coat.

“Dinner has been over for hours, my lord, but Betsy made some cold dishes for you; they’re in the kitchen. Would you like me to fetch them?” Stevens asked.

Estaphan wasn't very hungry but he knew the staff. They would dawdle over him for as long as his behavior deviated from the normal routine they had all grown accustomed to. “Oh, yes, please, Stevens. And bring me a cool glass of wine will you? To the library—is there an evening fire going?”

“Yes, my lord, I had anticipated that you might like to read a bit before bed time.” Stevens replied with quiet pride at being so thoughtful.

“Well done, Stevens!” Estaphan complemented him. “I’ll go to the library now—you bring the goodies—hey?” Estaphan continued rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

The servant smiled; his charge appeared no worse for wear despite the evening's anxiety. Stevens hung Estaphan's coat in the hall closet and hurriedly walked down the hallway toward the kitchen. Estaphan retired to the library. He opened the heavy oak door and looked in. The old bronze floor stand lamp was lit beside his reading chair and a cozy fire warmed the room. He walked to his chair and collapsed into it with a sigh of relief. Moments later he heard Stevens coming up the hallway towards the door—dishes and flatware clanging on his tray. Estaphan smiled to himself at his servant's concern for his welfare.

“You're food and drink, my lord.” Stevens said as he entered the room.

“Yes, yes, thank you.” Estaphan replied.

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Stevens laid the tray down on a small table at the side of Estaphan's chair. "Will that be all tonight?"

"Oh, my word, yes Stevens; you've been wonderful . . . so kind . . . thank you again!" Estaphan replied reaching for the goblet of chilled wine.

"Then, good evening, sir, and I've laid out your bed clothes." Stevens said.

"Thank you." Estaphan answered and then he drank down the wine. Stevens studied his charge once more—to be certain that custom had prevailed and then he bowed slightly toward Estaphan and left to go to bed.

Estaphan found that he *was* a bit hungry and he sampled one of Betsy's sandwiches. He refilled his glass from the decanter watching the dark liquid cover the ice within his goblet and thought of the gaping darkness in the monk's hood. Before the fire, Estaphan could think of nothing but the day's adventure and he wondered how he might discharge himself of the uncomfortable feeling it gave him. Yet he found that, despite the sense of confusion, he was exhausted so, after completing his meal and reading a bit, he rose up and quietly walked to his bedroom where, upon changing into his bed clothes, he got into his sumptuous bed and fell fast asleep.

When he awoke the following morning, it was some time before he remembered the experience of the previous night. And so, after he had taken breakfast, he set off on a visit to someone he trusted—someone with which he might discuss the issue in confidence. He wondered, as he walked toward the university's plaza, if he had not been given some kind of vision. However, his faith was on an order of intensity that could not give him any confidence in that possibility.

* * *

Adam awoke to the pitter-patter of yet another morning shower. On Erta, it was not uncommon for a light rain just before sunrise. He lay on his side under his warm sleeping quilt listening to the patter on his cabin roof. He heard a noise at the door and turned his head to see what it might be. The door quietly opened just enough for Mariam to poke her head in. She had come by the cabin on her way to breakfast. She smiled at him when she realized that he was awake and gently pushed the door aside to step in. "Hey you!" She said in a half-whisper.

"Hey you!" Adam replied quietly while peeking out through the covers. "Who the hell let out that primordial scream this morning? Was that Gayle? What did they do—pull the hot water fuses again?" Adam asked.

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“Well, Divvy had repaired the power cable so he had red-tagged the hot water heater’s switch and pulled the fuses. After he had finished, he completely forgot to put them back and remove the red tag. Gayle was the first to find out...must have been a surprise.” Mariam explained.

“Power cable? What happened to the power cable?” Adam asked rising to a sitting position at the edge of his cot, the covers wrapped around him like a cocoon.

“It got severed when Rolf ran the boom crane over it.” Mariam continued.

“What? The boom crane...what was he doing with the boom crane?” Adam’s voice trailed off.

“Well, we wanted to move the portable lavatory to the west side of the dig.” Mariam answered.

Adam thought to ask why but decided not engage the discussion any longer. “What kind of place am I supposed to be running here? Was there anybody in the lavatory when you moved it?” Adam asked sarcastically.

“No.” Mariam replied, letting out a short giggle. “See you at breakfast then?” She asked. Adam nodded approvingly so she left quietly closing the door behind her.

Adam was not too surprised to see Estaphan seated at the table with his staff as he entered the cafeteria. So, as he slid into his seat across from Estaphan and set his tray down he asked: “Well-rested I hope?”

Estaphan nodded smiling then continued chewing his food while reading the morning’s dispatch. “It would seem that the work week will start off well. The Military reports no observed incursions of the Nistasi anywhere within our Republic’s territories. The home worlds seem safe enough.” He added reading through his half-rim glasses.

“Would you like to start our discussion of the dispatch that you had sent to me two days ago?” Adam asked. “Or should we visit the dig. It’s turning out to be a really nice day for grubbing around in the dirt, you know.”

Estaphan looked down his nose and over the top of his reading glasses as he prepared to answer.

“Estaphan, why do you insist on using that arcane technology? The corrective procedure is quite painless and effective.” Adam interrupted.

“What? Oh! These things...” Estaphan replied. “Maybe someday...so, you found that translation intriguing?”

“I suspect it may have been instructive.” Adam replied through a gentle chuckle. “I was raised in the Kristan Philosophy but I don’t practice *The Way* any more, Estaphan, please, I don’t mean to upset you.”

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“Oh, no, my boy, you aren’t upsetting me in the least. I was talking about the translation’s reference to a *divine intervention*.” Estaphan gently corrected him.

“Yes, that!” Adam replied. “But there are thousands of such references in the old texts; this one was just another colorful alteration of the facts made by an author whom we all know to have been a poet and bard. I think he might have been making some attempt to legitimize Canavero’s blood lust—act of revenge—what ever you want to call it. It makes sense to have *God* approve of your slaughter by consuming the corpses in a brilliant *blue-white light*. Anyway, it didn’t have any significant affect on my immediate interpretation of the account. But, I *am* curious about the so-called Machinia. What does he mean when he refers to the Machinia?”

Estaphan finished a mouthful of his food and replied: “Alright. Do you remember the reference to an angel in the translation that I recently gave you?”

“Yes.” Adam replied as he ate his breakfast.

Estaphan waited for some connection to be made in the mind of his protégé but nothing happened. “Adam, what kind of light is emitted by plasma cannon...come on, son, you’ve seen them in the movies and on the news.”

Adam kept chewing while his face displayed an intentional thoughtfulness. He finished and swallowed then sipped his coffee. “Are you insinuating that a space-faring people may have intervened in the affairs of my barbaric ancestors?” He asked rather dryly.

“Come now, Adam, don’t be sarcastic; yes, I am making such an implication. Say, for instance, it could have been a few scientists from Omega or, possibly, Gannemead. Those home worlds were much farther advanced than anyone here. Perhaps they were trying to bring them ‘round, so to speak. What do you think?”

“Omega had given up inter-stellar space travel by then and the Gannemead Republic had just discovered the mother ship Tyrolia. It would be centuries before they could move out into this part of the Galaxy. That being the case, which *do* you think it might have been?” Adam replied convincingly.

“I really can’t say right now, Adam but, if it wasn’t our people, then it *had* to be someone—and it had to be someone *interested* in the affairs of men...know what I mean? I’m a religious man but I can’t find the faith to believe that God would intervene in our petty affairs in such a lame and completely theatrical fashion.” Estaphan said. “You’re right, you know,

Paulie and I have scoured the archives with an army of undergraduates and have found nothing to suggest that the government was out here any earlier than roughly eight hundred years ago. And, as far as the Legionari, well...you're right on that score too."

Adam was buttering a slice of toast. "Are you saying that you and Paulie had made the connection after translating that second account?" Adam asked.

"There have been some one hundred fifty-seven such accounts in the translation of the Kristan tablets that you sent back to Gannemead for further study. They all describe these...well...these *incidents* where someone or something is found to have intervened in the affairs of those who survived the Dalmatian Wars." Estaphan replied.

"Estaphan, wait until you see what we've discovered in the ruin of the temple; it's a complete sarcophagus!" Adam said as he covered his toast with berry jam.

"What's in it?" Estaphan asked after a sip of coffee.

"We don't know yet. I thought that you and I would make the find together!" Adam said with a nervous movement that definitely revealed his excitement.

"Really?" Estaphan responded. "When do you want to tackle this task?"

"Today!" Adam said with flare as he steered a forkful of scrambled eggs into his mouth.

"You still have that childish exuberance about you, Adam. It's so pleasant a feature of your professional deportment." Estaphan said laughingly.

Adam raised his coffee cup to the group who had now given their attention to the two men to see what all the humor was about. "To Discovery," Adam said!

The others raised their cups as well. "To Discovery," they all replied!

Estaphan could see that the phrase seemed to be some sort of a motto to those on Adam's staff.

"Whoa!" Cried Belinda, "Here we go again!" And everyone rocked with laughter.

"Now, tell me about the Machinia." Adam asked his mentor.

"Ah yes, the Machinia. Well, that has to do with a little-known sect of the Kristan Faith called the Maccabeans. You see, thousands of years ago, there was this prophet the bards call Saint Vincent of Arden. He was a theologian and apologist who wrote a treatise on The Nature of Man. I've read a translation of a later copy. It's an interesting perspective of humanity.

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At any rate, according to his theory of the nature of man, there exist two kinds of human being: one kind is a complete personage, so-to-speak, connected to God through the intervention of a soul which enters into the physical body at birth—taking possession of it—and struggles to communicate with the individual through the mechanism of the subconscious mind. If the soul can make this connection, the individual is capable of developing a powerful intellect and therefore capable of understanding morality and ethical behavior. Such an individual could be called a *complete* human being. The other *kind* of human creature is one that has no soul and hence no connection to the Creator. It has been brought into the world apart from the fellowship of the Creator. The individual, in this case, is nothing more than an organic machine—call it an android if you like; hence the name *Machinia*. These *Machinia* are often predisposed to barbarous acts of depravity and immorality. Their minds are not under the influence of the metaphysical power and reasoning capacity of the soul which is connected to God and therefore cannot act with a completely developed intellect governed by the moral or ethical perspective of God. Even if they don't become evil in their orientation, they tend to follow the crowd—so-to-speak—and acquiesce to the instincts ingrained in their biology. They are intellectually incapable of rational action obligating themselves, instead, to employ action based on emotions—wanton desire for lack of a better way to put it. They become impulsive and emotionally unstable sociopaths and when they finally die, their personality ceases to exist.

Now, here's the interesting part of this philosophical perspective: If a *Machinia* were to somehow stumble onto *the path of righteousness* through some kind of rational effort or through some act of enlightenment, its developing intellectual essence might be judged worthy of immortality by the Creator. In such a case, God might capture its intellectual essence or programming if you prefer upon its death and with it create an individual personality or soul that would then be allowed eternal existence in either form: pure spirit or the combination of spirit and physical body. In either case, one begins to understand that intellectual development is dependent upon making a connection to the power and presence of the Creator God.

You might ask yourself: why would God go through all of this trouble? That's another condition of existence defined by the philosophy. Our kind have this aspect of dualism—a physical body dominated by a soul that struggles within—so that we can function in the material universe. We are taught that the material universe is a place that God created especially for us

to enjoy. Our bodies offer sensory connection to the physical universe in a fashion that the soul is incapable of entertaining. Now, one might also ask: why would God insist on such an arrangement? The philosophy states that God wants such an arrangement to exist because it allows Him access to the individual—a divine fellowship if you will—while at the same time permitting His creature an individual existence private and apart from the intervention of other souls. Therefore, we are not *homogenized* with our fellows in our awareness of reality—we might not have a communal understanding of it. We are individuals apart from it capable of independent action and an ability to leverage our perception of reality according to our own individual capacity for acquiring knowledge. Our notion of self, then, exists within the domain of this intellectual relationship with the soul and its connection to the Creator God. This defines our existence.”

Adam was stirring sugar into yet another cup of coffee. “Wow! That’s and incredible point of view and I find it very thought-provoking!” He answered with quiet sincerity. “I hadn’t any idea that the Kristan Faith delved so deeply into such suppositions.” He added.

Estaphan smiled approvingly. “I always thought that Saint Vincent was a profound thinker. You know, in the Faith itself, he’s just a Saint and Theologian. But outside of the Cannon Law—in the popular view of Kristan Philosophy, he’s referred to as a *prophet* of the Creator. The difference is that a plain old Saint or theologian is associated with the Church and its governing hierarchy. He receives his instruction and education from his mentors—his superiors who are themselves men. Ah but a *prophet!* A prophet communes with God! You see? His soul has managed to pierce the veil of the subconscious and communicate directly with the mind inside the man. A prophet develops an incredibly rich and powerful intellect. He communicates directly with the Creator and can remember events along the space-time continuum all the way back to his origins! Fascinating! Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, yes I would.” Adam replied. He looked around at his companions. They all stared at Doctor Polinka with stunned expressions of disbelief. They had never heard of such a theological perspective.

“So, the philosophy, in effect, asserts that our physical bodies are nothing more than a shell in which our souls reside?” Mariam asked for clarification.

“Yes, my dear. That’s what it declares. The *real* you is the spiritual you and *that* is the reason why so many Kristan priests counsel us to accept the notion that our bodies—which represent our physical existence only—are

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not important. What *is* important is our soul because *that* is the immortal component of our human character and it can occupy any number of bodies over time. Remember your catechism?" Estaphan replied.

"Say." Belinda asked Adam. "Do you think that Milo has a soul? Or is he just an ale tasting machine?" Adam's group broke into a thunderous laughter attracting the attention of everyone else in the cafeteria. Milo was holding his forehead and was on his fourth cup of coffee. He thought the comment funny too but his head hurt too much from the previous evening's festivities. So he just smiled and gently shook his head.

After breakfast they all went out to the dig. Estaphan and Adam worked, for most of the day, in the temple painstakingly prying open the sarcophagus to examine the mummy within. After removing the grave goods and the inner coffin, they removed the lid from the inner coffin and opened it. They suspected that the mummy—which was beautifully preserved—was that of Queen Magdalena Luciana Vespasi. The inscriptions said as much. Legend had said that she was the very first woman to display the unusual physical and genetic characteristics shared by all Ertanian women today. That placed the age of the sarcophagus at around nine thousand years.

Estaphan thought it reinforced aspects of the legend concerning the great queen in that, from all appearances, her sarcophagus had been lovingly preserved for at least five millennia before the fall of the first colonial civilization. Adam agreed. However, Adam seemed entranced by the fact that, even in death, her features were absolutely beautiful. The two men allowed the record keepers to photograph the find and thoroughly document all of its contents including the mummy. The mummy itself had not been unwrapped but had been thoroughly scanned by the team's portable magnetic imaging device.

After the scholars had completed their work, Adam and Estaphan asked everyone to leave and then the two men, with the assistance of Mariam, returned their Queen to her coffin and sealed it within its sarcophagus once again pumping nitrogen through the coffin and sarcophagus to purge it of air. It was State policy to return such an archeological find to its original condition once it had been documented. The people felt that the dead had earned the right to rest and return to dust to float among the stars. Adam's team now had plenty of information to examine and study. The utility crews installed permanent lighting and repaired the opening to the crypt by installing new carbon composite doors. The University would allow public access once the musicologists had completed their cleaning and refurbishing. Estaphan thought that, in time, the people would make this

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place a shrine and Adam, knowing his mentor's method of analysis, agreed with this assessment.

* * *

"...a lame and completely theatrical fashion! Indeed!" Emile cried, a look of contempt sweeping over his facial expression.

"Now, now," Tofla offered, "admit it, Emile, you always had a flare for the theatrical. Don't tell me that your progeny disappoint you; their supposition is quite correct, you know."

Emile broke his stormy look with a soothing smile. "Well, it would seem that our efforts to improve their mental capacity have been somewhat successful!"

Tofla began to laugh in that low sarcastic fashion again. "Do you mean that their improved abilities might expose your hapless penchant for unnecessary drama? Or, might they be stumbling dangerously close to discovering what it is we're up to?" He asked.

"Oh, the latter," Emile exclaimed, "and my penchant for drama is not unnecessary!" Emile lowered his voice a bit. "It's an expression of kindness and understanding toward them; their species being still in the process of rudimentary development." Emile returned matter-of-factly.

"You mean: they're simpletons!" Tofla roared with laughter.

Emile waited for his friend to find his composure. "I mean, they're in a stage of psychological development that has not prepared them for a rendezvous with the truth." He replied raising a finger to emphasize his point.

"Oh, what is truth?" Tofla asked pensively while adjusting the instruments before him.

"Stop paraphrasing that curmudgeon!" Emile replied dryly.

"Just checking." Tofla replied.

"Must you have the last word all of the time?" Emile asked clearly irritated.

"Must you?" Tofla replied a smile breaking forth from the seriousness of his countenance.

They both began to laugh.

"I would not want discovery without you, old friend!" Emile said through gentle laughter.

And, time moved on.

Chapter 3

The Traveler

The Intrepid emerged from hyperspace three days out from planetary orbit. In the Control Room, the Officer of the Deck ordered: “Main Engines, all stop.”

“Main Engines, all stop, Aye,” came the reply from the Engineering Officer of the Watch over the Intercom. Commander Willis viewed their destination on the Control Room Forward Monitor. The planet lay suspended in the forbidding blackness of space as quiet and complacent as does an infant in its mother's womb. Argo Navis: the pearl of the Carinas. It beckoned their affections so beautiful was its countenance. The big Fleet Carrier slipped through stolid darkness passing Canopus Space Station, its titanic structure outlined in a stark shadow cast by the distant sun.

“Welcome to Argo Navis, Commander,” said a voice over the communications monitor. Willis nodded to the Quartermaster who activated communications on his Panel. “Thank you Canopus. We will be launching shuttles to the surface of Argo Navis shortly.”

“Aye, sir, Station six, dock four has been reserved for your supply shuttle. Hope you have a nice stay,” replied the space station's duty officer.

“I'm sure we will.” Willis drew his finger across his throat to signal the Quartermaster to cut two way communications. He touched his left index finger to the Intercom pad from its mount above his head and spoke: “All hands, this is the Officer of the Deck. ETA to Argo Navis is 72 hours. No liberty will be granted until Department of Health inspectors have completed their inspections. In-port duty sections will commence once we are in orbit. That is all.”

Ambassador Francisco Mendoza and his entourage waited aboard the Fleet Carrier. The planet preoccupied their conversation. They had discussed its history and geography at each meal. The Admiral even indulged their enthusiasm allowing them access to the ship's chart room. By the time they boarded the shuttle to the planet's surface the group had become very familiar with its geography and could easily identify the larger land masses. Mendoza sat along the port bulkhead of the shuttle and gazed out at Argo Navis. He let his forehead rest against the thick glass of the observation port. *“It really is a beautiful place, however remote it might be.”* He thought.

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“Ambassador Mendoza,” the shuttle steward said, “please keep your head away from the window, sir. The ride can get rough once we enter the atmosphere.”

Mendoza nodded. “Thank you,” he returned. The steward continued along the aisle checking the passengers.

The shuttle was released from its moorings and began the journey toward its destination. Once clear from the carrier, it proceeded on its course at nearly the speed of light. A short time later, it took up its approach to enter the planet’s atmosphere. Mendoza noticed some vibration but couldn’t call the ride entirely rough. He turned his attention to his view port again. They drifted through clear blue strewn with billowing white. As the shuttle passed beneath the first layer of clouds, the sun’s rays splashed gold and rose upon a magnificent panorama. They sailed along over a tranquil ocean passing, now and then, a solitary island deep green with tropical forest, fringed light brown with sandy beaches. He felt as though he had come home. Mendoza nearly lost sight of his mission and it was with much regret that he remembered the dour reason for traveling to this place.

Landfall brought them within sight of the only space port on Argo Navis. It was a modest, though thoroughly modern, port. The port facilities could accommodate most any type of shuttle craft or small freighter but had no landing zones for the really big ships. Argo Navis was an agricultural “district.” The massive engines of the larger deep space vessels spewed too much exhaust. The Planetary Council had banned all such landings to protect the environment from pollution.

“Don’t let all that serenity fool you, Francisco.” Mithano said from the seat next to him. “I’ve been down there during the monsoon season. Wind velocity in some of those storms can reach 120 miles per hour. It’s a very frightening experience!”

“I imagine it *would* be!” Mendoza replied. “Do such storms occur often?” He turned in his seat to face Mithano.

“They have two or three a year, I suppose. You’ll see many of the towns and villages along the equatorial zone are built into the high ground. Some of those storms can create tidal surges as high as twenty feet or so!”

“My Lord,” Mendoza returned in an even voice. “It looks as though it’s such a beautiful place to live. Wouldn’t you think?”

“It is,” said Mithano now looking, past Mendoza, through the port. Mendoza turned to join his friend. “I lived here for ten years during my last assignment. I tell you, Francisco, after the first few days you began to...” Mendoza waited for the answer with interest. “It’s like falling in love,

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Francisco!” Mithano added quietly. “When my tour was up, I hated to leave. I would have stayed but for the needs of the Republic.”

The two men continued to stare through the port as the shuttle made its final decent. The pleasant sound of the attention tone broke their musing. “Welcome to Argo Navis, ladies and gentlemen,” came the pilot’s voice. “Please use the starboard exit upon landing, thank you.” With that the shuttle hovered momentarily then gently drifted down onto the landing pad.

Governor De Salva was there to greet them. “Welcome...welcome, Mendoza! How are you old friend?” The two men embraced each other. De Salva motioned to the right where a ground car and motorized escort waited.

“Marco, how have you been?” Mendoza asked. He took his attaché case from an aide. “It’s been, what, twelve years—has it not?”

“Yes, I suppose it has.” The Governor replied. “Then you must understand that I am all the more happy to see you again.” He smiled broad and cheerful. “How are Catherine—and the children?”

Mendoza returned a smile. “They’re fine. Roberto attends his first year of graduate school soon.” An expression of surprise fell over De Salva’s face and he stopped short of the ground car. “What is it, Marco?” Mendoza asked.

“Nothing, Francisco...it’s just that...I had a vision of a ten year old boy in my head. He is to start his graduate studies now. It *has* been a long time.”

Mendoza let out a short hardy laugh. “You old goat!” He teased his friend. “While you wile away the years in Paradise the rest of the Universe grows old! Of course, he is a young man now—he still remembers his Uncle Marco though and appreciates the gifts you send him.”

They got into the ground car and began their short trip to the diplomatic compound, a stately villa on the outskirts of the city. As they rode along, Mendoza continued his conversation with the Governor.

“Tell me Marco, have the Toulles made any attempt to communicate with you since the last contact?” Mendoza asked.

“No, they haven’t.” De Salva replied. “They’ve parked their warships out there at a sensible distance from Canopus. That’s it; nothing more! They acknowledged the fact that you had been sent for and, in their last communiqué, explained that they preferred to wait for your arrival.”

“They’ve displayed no hostile actions; am I correct?” Mendoza asked.

“Absolutely not! They even allowed our patrol craft to monitor their presence without any interference. They don’t seem to have any hostile intentions. I believe that you’ll find they’re here because of the recent spate of Nistasi incursions. This planet is...well...sort of a hallowed place to

them. It is the planet of their origin—before they became a space-faring people.” De Salva explained. “They keep to themselves—the Toulledan and the Zonin. The Cantor race chose not to leave the planet and still live here on Argo Navis in small communities to this day.”

“So there were three distinct races here at one time?” Mendoza inquired.

“Mmmm, yes, that’s what I’m told: the Toulles, the Zonin, and the Cantor. The Toulles and the Zonin established some sort of symbiotic relationship. The Zonin provide protection, if you will, while the Toulles provide the brain power; although, you’ll find both species quite intelligent and conversational. The Cantor *look* as we do but they are *not* human. They’re hominid, to be sure, but another species all together. Physically, the Cantor live their lives in the same way as do we though, in many respects, their social customs are firmly rooted in their rural life style. They’re a docile people. You’ll see.”

“Have you learned why the Toulledan and the Zonin migrated to their present world?” Mendoza asked.

“No, but the Cantor have told us that they—the Cantor People—just decided to stay. Their birth rate isn’t very high, you know. Not like ours at all.” De Salva replied.

“Mmmm, interesting,” Mendoza added.

“Oh, I’m sure that you’ll find the entire story quite interesting once you’ve the time to inquire. And, Francisco, time is one thing that you’ll have plenty of here on Argo Navis!” De Salva explained with an exuberant smile on his face.

“While we’re on that topic—time, that is—I’d like access to the communications center when we arrive so that I can file my daily report.” Mendoza said.

“Oh, Absolutely!” De Salva assured him. “By the way,” he continued reaching into the breast pocket of his tunic, “here is your security pass. There: one for you and one for Mithano.” He looked at them to make sure that all was in order and then handed them to Mendoza.

“Ah! Thank you, Marco.” Mendoza said. And, then the motorcade arrived at the villa. “Marco! Do we rate such luxuriousness?” Mendoza asked eyeing the compound from the window of the transport.

“Why of course! This is the Consulate Building, Francisco. If you would prefer something more discrete and private, I can arrange that. The Government owns a few beach houses that we assign to visiting Academics from time-to-time.” De Salva explained.

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“Oh no, this will do just fine. I suppose my apartment is on the second level?” Mendoza asked as they drove around to the rear entrance for privacy and convenience.

“Yes. See the second level perched atop that bedrock outcrop? It’s the part of the compound with the garden walls over there.” De Salva pointed out the private residence.

“Oh how lovely. It overlooks the ocean does it not?” Mendoza replied.

“Yes, yes it does. I’m confident that you’ll enjoy your stay here. Ah, let me know if you need anything. I want you to have a memorable experience, old friend.” De Salva said.

Mendoza smiled at his friend and then they came to a stop. The driver got out and opened the door for the Ambassador and his Governor and they stepped out on to the neatly cobbled driveway. The residence staff came out to greet them and take their baggage. De Salva motioned to the Ambassador to follow him through the huge glass doorway. They walked down a wide hallway tastefully decorated with art work and furniture at strategic locations. De Salva stopped at an elevator and spoke to the AI’s communication station. “AGNES, we need to visit the Communications Center.” De Salva said.

A pleasant feminine voice replied: “Very well, Governor De Salva. Welcome, Ambassador Mendoza.”

“Why thank, you—AGNES, is it?” Mendoza replied hesitantly.

“Yes, Ambassador and please let me know if you need anything.” The AI replied.

The elevator doors opened and they got in. As the elevator began to move, Mendoza could tell that they were traveling down—probably into a bunker of some sort. When they got to the right floor, the doors opened on to busy office complex where many people worked. The Governor led Mendoza down the corridor to the Communications Center and over to a private cubicle.

“Here you are, Francisco. I’ll assign a clerk to you shortly. You’ll have the privacy you require. You are, of course, familiar with the terminal. I’ve arranged for the talks to be conducted at the resort on the Isle of Dindi. Too much Government going on around here; I thought that a neutral location might be more agreeable to both parties. I’ve also arranged a secure military transport for you and the Toulledan delegation. Sorry about having to use a sea-faring vessel but the laws here on Argo Navis forbid air transport for anything but the most dire of circumstances. You understand, of course.”

“Yes I do, Marco. And, the Toulledan Ambassador has no problem with this?” Mendoza inquired.

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“Well, I detailed my intentions to him in the last communiqué and have heard no objections from him. I rather think that they approve of our environmental laws considering the significance of this planet to their history as a people.” De Salva replied. “I have to get back to my office but I’ll send a car around for you tonight to fetch you for dinner at the Governor’s quarters. Say, at seven o’clock?” He asked.

“That would be fine.” Mendoza answered with a pleasant expression. “See you then, Marco—and thank you for the courtesy.” He added casually waving his hand at the room around him. “You know, for all of this.”

“Any time, Francisco!” De Salva replied. “I’ll have a bottle of my favorite brandy ready for us tonight!” And he gently slapped his friend on the back of his right shoulder. Then he turned and left. Ambassador Mendoza sat down at the terminal and paused to think a moment.

Just then, a clerk entered the cubicle to announce herself. “Good afternoon, Mr. Ambassador. My name is Maria Hernandez and I will be your assistant during your stay here on Argo Navis.” She politely gave him a calling card. “Please—you can reach me at this number at any time. Just insert the card into the communicator or enter it manually if you prefer.” She added. Then she handed the Ambassador a personal communications device. “This is yours to use, sir. It has a secure channel.”

“Why thank you, Maria.” Mendoza replied taking the device and calling card from her. She gave him a little bit of a bow and then turned and left.

“*Efficient people here,*” he thought to himself. “*I shall have to include that detail in my report.*” He put his hands on the keyboard and began to type out his dispatch. He preferred to author his own personal reports to the First Consul. It gave him a sense of control and control was an abstract state of mind—he knew.

[COMFLEETTWO: DIPLOMATIC] 9557.123

TO: **First Consul Casius Vespasi**
Gannemead Federal Republic
State Department
Gannemead

FROM: **Francisco Pablo Mendoza**
Federal Consulate
Argo Navis

RE: **Preliminary Report**

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Your Honor:

Permit me the predilection to summarize the content of our original conversation which we shared when last we were together. You had instructed me to determine the reasons for the sudden and curious presence of the Katavvi (as the Toulledan and Zonin people call themselves collectively) along the entire breadth of the Argo Navis Periphery. Reports, transmitted by remote communications beacons, described their deep space armada penetrating our frontier defenses. At first whole colonies felt threatened, their settlements under constant observation and the population terrified of the possibilities of war.

Yet, for all the pandemonium created by the appearance of their fleet, in time, it became obvious that, however foreign the Katavvi may have seemed, their objective most certainly was *not* the domination of the planet Argo Navis. We had no notion of its importance to them. We have not had much opportunity to learn about the Katavvi even though some of the indigenous peoples of Argo Navis are, most certainly, of a similar species; those remaining seem to be descendants of an original population that chose to remain behind.

They call the planet Delf. It is a remote and lonely place however beautiful and pleasant this small paradise among the stars may be. You may recall that its primary exports are processed agricultural commodities; hardly a reason for so expensive and elaborate a military campaign. It held no military value apparent to us yet, and this was all the more interesting to our intelligence corps, the aliens seemed to treat the entire planet as though it were a shrine of some sort; harming neither its settlements nor its human inhabitants. No hostilities had ever been shown and, therefore, we were not inclined to challenge them either. Fortunately, we have made formal diplomatic contact with the Katavvi Ambassador who explained that their fleet had been dispatched to *protect* the planet from any Nistasi incursion (that race of degenerates whom *they* call The Bolin) and that they had no intention of interfering with the strategic defense of the Gannemead Federal Republic or from challenging the Republic's territorial claim. Inasmuch as we had not the Military resources to devote to the protection of the planet, they felt compelled to take these actions upon themselves.

I appreciate your initial concern for my welfare and safety but I can assure you that the trip was entirely uneventful. The jump through hyperspace was calculated with flawless precision and we suffered no hardships or danger, emerging very close to the planetary system of which Argo Navis is a part.

My arrival was greeted with the utmost diplomatic courtesy. The delegation extended generous affections to the Republic. Permit me to make the comment that your new Agricultural Policy is very popular here as would

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be expected in such a place. After the official reception at the space port, Governor De Salva escorted me to the diplomatic compound outside the city. He was more than willing to provide me the resources I felt that I needed to complete my mission.

On my way here, the Governor and I did not discuss the Katavvi in any detail, our minds were not yet in order and we needed time to ponder the situation. As you are aware, a few families among the Argo Navians are the descendants of settlers who migrated from Gannemead during the exploration age of our fourth millennium—pioneering voyages made during, what our historians refer to as, “The Great Migration.” Alas, these natives speak little of the Common Tongue, preferring a quaint little language that they call *English*. However, nothing that I have seen to date suggests anything that might impinge upon the vested interests of the Republic.

While, I am told that their culture and habits may appear a bit coarse, as do those of most frontier societies, they are marked by a sincere and courteous demeanor; being full of kindness and of a tolerant disposition; or so Mithano informs me. Generosity seems to be second nature to them. Their behavior brings to mind an observation the Governor once made. Of conformity he complained: “What possible value can a human society be wherein everyone is cast from the same mold?” These loyal subjects would certainly seem to prove his assertion for they are a hardy and diverse people given to endurance and great expectations!

While en route to Argo Navis, the Governor and I exchanged a number of communiqués discussing our assumptions with regard to the presence of the Katavvi fleet. We had thought, at first, that something of great importance, some fantastic treasure perhaps, significant only to the mysterious motives of the Katavvi might lay hidden upon the planet's surface for they continually scanned the planet as though attempting to pinpoint some critical location. They remained outside the planetary system, refusing to engage our fleet, during the entire time. Once the Governor had sent a communiqué to them suggesting the Isle of Dindi as the location for formal diplomatic discussions, the transmissions stopped. I found this odd at the very least.

It is also necessary that we provide their diplomatic entourage the necessary means of travel and transport of their honor guard and those supplies associated with their mission. For this task I see from the document given to me by the Governor himself, I have been assigned the unrestricted use of the Princeton, a fusion-powered submarine, and its seasoned, well-disciplined crew commanded by one Captain Ladislaw Chrzenowski. This Chrzenowski, I believe, is a veteran of the Battle of Brent-Sophia: that unfortunate conflict in which your distinguished Uncle, Simon Naverra, preserved the Republic from the political intrigue of that usurper Jesus Malaguerra.

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I like the idea of meeting Captain Chrzenowski. Indeed, he is reported to be a likable fellow being even-tempered and continually courteous to those around him. Captain Chrzenowski should be a great help to me as I develop my diplomatic approach (I've a mind to encourage him to befriend his Katavvi counterpart, Captain Vida) who I hope to learn more about. All this makes for some very delicate diplomacy, I'm sure you will agree.

It is said that "Great Conflicts purge the soul of man and draw, from flesh and blood, the best of human action." However, those of us who have survived troubling times know that men are creatures of delicate constitution and we are seldom given to courage that has not been borne upon human fear. This is the illusion, Your Honor, that what a fool believes, he can see as though it were real to him.

In this manner I count myself such a fool, hoping for the best but I make this statement in the context of goodwill. We all love the teaming life about us with such voracity that, in the time of great need, we hardly considered our own. Such temperament is the stuff from which our heroes are made and the power of their presence must certainly wend its subtle way through the collective memory of our fragile evolution. I, therefore, entrust this account to you, Your Honor, for only a wise and noble man could possibly fathom the honor and privilege our race has been accorded by the Katavvi people.

Let us rejoice in life, however harsh it may seem to us from time to time, and engage our destiny with vigor that our kind might continue, justified in our own existence, children of a vast and wonderful Universe! I await your reply.

Francisco Mendoza

END TRANSMISSION

* * *

Dusk quietly settled into Lad's reality. The ship was running on the surface now and he had been on watch for nearly six hours. They were running on the surface for a change and, from his vantage point on the Bridge above the massive sail planes, he gazed out over the ocean. The Princeton's course took the nine thousand ton fusion-powered submarine out over wide, sweeping circles through a placid summer sea. Occasionally, he would study the horizon through his binoculars looking for contacts to report to the Control Room below.

Dolphins swam ahead of the bow. Gulls, following in the ship's wake, cried out to each other. A rim of red clung to the horizon as stars bled into

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the evening sky. The Harbor Master would not allow them to enter port until early morning and Lad didn't care.

To him, this was a pleasant way to approach retirement. He thought himself a proper sailor now. Piloting a submarine through a planet's ocean was different—certainly different from navigating a deep space Destroyer through the cold black emptiness of the Cosmos. The ocean was just as unforgiving but, here, life followed you about. You were never alone. It had taken him a year to complete Submarine School and some five years in the fleet to qualify for this command—he was glad to have spent the time and effort.

The Princeton was an oceanographic deep water submarine. It could also carry cargo. Its mission was to navigate the planet's oceans, chart its thousands of islands, and map its ocean floors. It was an exploration of measured importance. In the two hundred years, since the first settlers had arrived on Argo Navis, no one had ever completed a thorough study of the planet's geography. They had estimated that it might take five years just to navigate decent trading routes between the big islands. Lad didn't care if it took forever. In his most private and personal places of the heart, he had found his place among the stars. He loved his work and he would continue in this great adventure until they called him home.

Combat had scarred him—torn his feelings from him. He had become sullen. The Government had decorated him a hero. But, in his mind, it had taken him years to cleanse the blood from his hands. He no longer had the stomach for it.

At least this new Consul wasn't bloodthirsty. He seemed an eloquent, sensitive man. The First Consul had seen the torment in Lad's eyes at that final public ceremony and had taken him aside for a private chat. He sympathized with Lad's attitude. He understood the significance of its expression—how the ugliness of the most destructive human enterprise might have corrupted his sense of self-worth and human dignity. The First Consul had also traveled that perilous route—had similar experiences with which he could pity the other man's suffering. The two men needn't have communicated anything more but it was the First Consul who had suggested this assignment. It was the First Consul who pulled the strings of a slow-moving Colonial Bureaucracy so that he could find the serenity he now enjoyed. He thought of His Honor as a man who might have been his best friend and, while he was never aware of it, the First Consul had hoped he would. “Keep your heroes in safe places.” The First Consul would tell his

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favorite aide, Mendoza. “They can do more than preserve your power and safeguard your authority: from time to time, they may even save your soul!”

“Comin' up!” Someone cried through the open hatch beside Lad's feet. An arm extended out of the opening, its hand clutching a hot mug of tea. Lad stooped to take the mug from the hand and smiled at the emerging Karinski. “Thanks Mike,” Lad said bringing the mug to his lips. Lad sipped the hot beverage. “We'll be docked around ten hundred hours tomorrow morning,” he continued, “...bet you'll be glad it's over then—hey?”

“Aaaah! I didn't mind my hitch so much,” Karinski began. “It's just that—well after Jennifer and I got married...I have a life now...gotta' do somethin' else with it besides map the ocean floor.”

Lad agreed. “Have you a job lined up?” Mike shook his head “no” and turned to look out over the bow. He leaned forward resting his forearms against the smooth metal surface of the sail top.

“What am I going to do?” Mike began. “I'm in love. When you're in love you do what you gotta' do...” His voice trailed off. “I'm a first-class Navigator—maybe I'll get a job on a deep water freighter or something...I don't know.”

“Carpenello?” Lad asked. Mike shook his head affirmatively. “Well, the guy likes you, Mike. New Portugal is a really great place to live—a paradise!” Lad tried to console his old friend but there was something of a barrier between the two men, destiny perhaps. Old man Carpenello had offered Mike a job on one of his freighters. That was a job more accommodating to a married man as the freighters were never gone for more than a couple of weeks at a time.

“The whole damned planet is a paradise.” Karinski returned. “It's the end of an era, I guess...we're gettin' old and it's time for us to go.”

Lad thought about his friend's statement; how it focused so much of his feelings on the truth. He didn't want to deal with that right now. The air had become crisp as evening approached. He felt a slight chill come over him and he gulped the tea down.

Francesca and Paolo, the planet's two small moons, began to rise above the eastern horizon. Paolo was a relatively new moon and had been swept into a closer orbit an aeon ago. Its presence presided over the dark of the sky like a child's night light. The gulls were gone. Lad could see the lights of New Athens to the west. He could feel the quiet sadness of his friend as the two men kept company in silence.

Humans are creatures of habit. It had become Mike's habit to cherish the companionship of the people around him—even the androids. They were

people with whom he had shared the experiences of the past three years. Of all the adventures through which his career had taken him, *this* assignment had given him the most satisfaction. The crew was small, the ship was big enough to be a comfortable place in which to live, and the mission was fascinating. Together, they had survived the mindless fury of fierce tropical storms, charted routes to undiscovered islands, and taken thousands of specimens; marvelous native life forms that continually aroused their curiosity. For three years they had been on the forefront of planetary exploration. They had worked and played together as a scientific unit; they thought themselves a family. The friendships made would last, Mike expected that they would, but the separation from his friends would be, for him, unbearable.

He turned casually to face his friend. In the glow of moonlight, the expression on Lad's face disturbed him. Lad stood facing west, his eyes riveted to the sky—his gaze fixed on a position about forty degrees off the horizon. His mouth was agape. He clutched the mug to his chest.

“Mike...Look at that!” Lad whispered, so low that Mike could barely make out the words over the sound of sea breeze and ship's wake.

Mike turned to face the same direction. Above the horizon, a rose-colored light hovered. It had come from out of nowhere and was, perhaps, ten or twelve miles out; it glimmered softly. The ship's course had now taken it north. The light did not change its relative position suggesting that its course was parallel to the ship's track.

The light began to move east, across the bow. Lad estimated its speed to be several times the speed of sound. As the light's position reached a point about twenty degrees off the starboard bow, it turned northeast and soon disappeared over the horizon.

The two men looked at each other. They had heard nothing. Besides, no scanner contacts had been reported to the Bridge. Mike keyed the intercom on the forward Bridge Panel. “Control, Bridge...did you pick up anything unusual on the ship's scanner?”

“Bridge, Control, Aye—wait one.” A moment passed and the answer came, its voice the controlled, professional response Conklin always used when on watch. “Bridge, Control; no contacts have been reported by ship's scanner. The last one was CT487, a cargo transport out of the Keefer Islands bound for New Athens. That was at, uh, 2145 hours, Commander.”

Mike keyed the intercom again. “Control, Bridge, Aye.” He answered. “What the hell *was* it? Mike asked facing Lad.

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“Hey! You're asking me?” Lad kept his gaze skyward. No shuttles that he knew of could travel that fast. He didn't think that it could have been a deep space vessel either. Inside the planet's atmosphere, that kind of velocity would have raised hell with any hull. There would have been chatter all over the radio. Conklin would have reported it. The only ships that could withstand that kind of molecular impact were the big starships and a commander would be crazy to bring so colossal a vessel this close to planetary orbit! What was more; the ship's scanner hadn't detected a thing!

“Do you want to log this?” Mike asked him, his finger on the intercom key. Lad looked down at the glowing red lights of the forward Bridge Panel. “No, record the time, position, and description of the contact in your notebook; I'll make a similar entry in mine. Write up a report summarizing what *you* saw. Have it ready for me by zero-six-hundred hours. We'll compare notes and talk about it.” Lad held his notebook close to the dim red light of the forward Bridge Panel and recorded the particulars of his recent observation.

Mike felt awkward. He didn't know whether to stay or to leave. Lad's demeanor had changed so quickly from the casual disposition of a friend to that of the proficient character of a military commander.

“What do you want me to do now?” Mike asked.

Lad finished the entry in his notebook. “Stay with me awhile.” He said in a voice again smooth and friendly, “Let's talk about old times.”

“Are you, at all, worried about what we just saw?” Mike couldn't make the emotional connection and Lad's sudden dramatic shift in mood made him feel uneasy.

“Sorry,” Lad reached out and touched Mike's shoulder to reassure him, “I saw many strange things when I used to patrol the deep space shipping lanes...always felt as though I was being followed.” Lad grinned; his teeth showed blue-white in the moonlight. “That response was drilled into me. It's what you do when you don't know what it was that you saw. Tomorrow morning I'll submit a report to the Squadron Commander. They'll probably have some questions but we'll let them deal with it.”

The intensity of the moment began to subside in Mike's mind. He felt his emotions returning to normal. The moons had reached their apogee and were in descent. By twilight the little spheres of mellow moonlight would be hanging just above the western horizon.

The Princeton steered southeast, making seven knots, heading into the wind. A light salt spray moistened their faces. Lad licked his upper lip. The smell of blue water was heavy in the air. “Think I'll ever find anyone?”

Mike eyed him for a moment. “Hell, first you're gonna' have to let someone find *you!*” He smiled and let out a gentle laugh. “Sure, Lad, if your soul is searching. I think there's this power out there that answers our most private desires—matters of the heart, you know?”

Lad nodded. He wanted to probe Mike's emotions—to find out what it was that made him crave a woman's affections. He and Jennifer were more than friends, more than husband and wife; they were lovers. What, in his mind, allowed him to trust another human being with the code to everything that made up whatever it was that defined Mike Karinski?

Lad was a recluse and he knew it. He was cut off from humanity in his youth—an orphan crying in the wilderness of Mabrouk; his parents slaughtered by Djado Raiders; his entire history destroyed. Lad's ultimate existence was left, by accident, to the caprice of one Sahid bin Soluk, a common bandit of the Adrar Desert. The onerous old man enslaved him; beat him; rebuked him until, in the fullness of time, Lad matured into the survivor that Sahid had intended him to be.

“I love you with a rod of iron, boy.” The old man said on his death bed. “Now, as you travel about the Universe you will forever hear my voice inside your head! Be strong! Be fierce! Never loose sight of your horizons! And, boy, see through the eye in the back of your head!” It was Sahid's way of warning Lad not to trust anything over which he lacked complete control. Love was such a thing.

“You see, Great One, I have finished the task. Is this young lion not a wonderful warrior?” Sahid had said his eyes fixed upon the night sky. Then, turning to Lad, he produced a worn leather pouch from inside his cloak. He pushed it into Lad's hand. “Here, this is yours now; all my meager possessions belong to you. Do not hate me, boy. And, think of me often. God makes families and I am the only father you ever had!” With that the old man clutched at Lad's cloak, gasping, and then he died. In the brief moments after Sahid's death Lad thought that he might have felt affection but it passed.

He sat with the body of Sahid until morning then buried the old man in the desert as he had insisted. Bathing himself in the small pond of the oasis they had called their home, Lad reflected on much that had passed in his young life. He wondered what he might do with his life now that there was no Sahid.

As he dressed himself, the little leather bag that Sahid had given him fell, from the lid of his clothes chest, to the ground. Lad remembered that he had placed it there the night before. He picked it up and, reaching in, removed a

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large blue-white gemstone attached to a gold chain. It sparkled in the raging sunlight. “It must be worth millions of credits!” He thought. But, just then, he heard the voice of the old man in the hot desert breeze: “See through the eye in the back of your head, boy!” He couldn't exchange this treasure here in Mabrouk. If anyone knew that he possessed it they would kill him!

He spent the rest of the day breaking camp and packing. His desert beasts would carry him and his belongings to Djahar. There he would sell everything and seek employment as a laborer aboard a Starfreighter. Lad wondered if the old man hadn't planned it this way: knowing that Lad would have to leave the planet to claim his prize. How would he ever know where providence would take him? His fate was like the old man's voice: borne upon the wind.

“Captain, I am here to relieve you.” The words broke in on Lad's reverie. How long had he been submerged in his memories? He peered through the moonlight to see Naveras standing in front of him. Mike had climbed to the sail top behind him and was eyeing the western horizon.

Lad quickly regained his bearing. “I stand relieved.” He returned. “Everything is normal. We cross into the southern shipping lanes at 0700 hours. Be alert for screamers its kiwi time—hey?” He handed the binoculars to Naveras. “They're on night vision.” Screamers were swift boats that brought the fruit crop from Brazilia and the Pampanos Islands to The Hellenes. It was the season for kiwi, a fruit very popular among the residents of New Athens if not the entire Republic.

He climbed into the hatch and slid down the ladder. Mike followed him. Once in the Control Room he turned to Karinski. “Don't talk to anyone about the sighting until I tell you to.” Karinski agreed. “Let's get some zees. Lad patted Conklin on the shoulder as he passed him and headed amidships toward his stateroom.

Once inside his stateroom he lay in his bunk trying to find the place in his reverie where he had left off but he couldn't. He turned off his bunk light. The murmur of the ship's machinery penetrated the walls of his small cabin. It was the sound of alternators and ventilation fans. The passageways were quiet; it was the mid watch. Only the droids and a few people were on duty. He thought of the sighting momentarily. He had seen them once before; a long, long time ago when he was on patrol out in the periphery of the Carina star system. Lad let his mild curiosity pass from his thoughts and fell asleep.

* * *

Christopher Martin

[COMFLEETTWO: DIPLOMATIC] 9557.137

TO: **First Consul Casius Vespasi**
Gannemead Federal Republic
State Department
Gannemead

FROM: **Francisco Pablo Mendoza**
Federal Consulate
Argo Navis

RE: **Addendum**

Your Honor:

This planet, Argo Navis, is a mysterious place to me; I'll have to admit to you. It is located in the Arcadius Sector of, what (here on Argo Navis) is referred to as, the Primary Spiral. It has a sun—somewhat larger than our own—and two small moons. It is, like Gannemead, the third planet from its sun and is one of eight planets in the system. But, its distance from that larger star is much greater accounting for its long “year” by our standards. As with our own Solar System, the Argo Navis system has gas giants and an asteroid belt. It is the only planet within this planetary system, as far as we can tell, that has intelligent life or for that matter any life at all. However, there is another planetary system within three light years, New Portugal, and that accounts for most of the immigration in this sector.

Among the indigenous species, it would appear that there once existed an odd culture which had institutionalized bigotry and this may account for their small population. The persistent killing was almost a ritual and its faithful observance promoted by the Bolin—those adulterous and ugly creatures whom we call the Nistasi *and* who have a disposition to match their appearance. I learned that, at one time, they reproduced in a process whereby their females would disgorge their eggs, by the thousands, in the large tidal pools of the Nouvo Sea. The alpha males of each clan would then wade through this hatchery depositing their sperm on the egg clusters. But, about eight hundred years ago, they were driven off the planet and their residual population exterminated in successive wars waged by our fledgling Colonial Government with the help of the other indigenous peoples, the Cantor, Toulles, and the Zonin.

There remain four groups, or what one might call races, on the planet Argo Navis: The Cantor are a mild-mannered race of humanoids that seem very similar to us but are not related to our species having evolved upon this planet in isolation. The Toulles are a tall slender race of beings whose appearance would remind one of a heron back on Gannemead. The Zonin

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are a fierce and independent people who live among the coniferous forests of the Eastern Plate. They are reptilian folk and walk upright on powerful legs. They have three digits and an opposing thumb on each hand and have developed, independently of any contact with other races, literature and art. Last, there are the human colonists.

With the exception of the colonists, these “racial” groups seem to have evolved here upon this planet in isolation and while they *do* have technology, it remains in its most simple forms and is planet-bound. However, there were, at one time, a large group of Toulles who adopted the technology given to them by the early colonial settlers and *those* are the people who emigrated to the planet Katavvi together with many of the Zonin. Over the last eight hundred years, they have advanced their civilization and developed their technology to the extent that they have been able to hold their own against the Nistasi barbarians. It is this group of Toulles, accompanied by a large contingent of Zonin Infantry, whose deep space armada has returned to Argo Navis. We have been contacted by their consulate and I am preparing to meet with their Ambassador, a very old fellow who goes by the name of Kalloopus tet Navi Zonin—the “Navi” indicating that he is an émigré to the Planet Katavvi which would fix his age at about nine hundred standard years old!

We are waiting for the arrival of the Princeton and have been told that it should put into port tomorrow morning. We hope that we will be able to meet with our Katavvi guests before then. Governor De Salva has a state dinner planned for tomorrow night. Shortly thereafter, we are scheduled to board the Princeton for the trip to the Isle of Dindi. I, of course, will keep you informed of our progress.

Francisco Mendoza

END TRANSMISSION

* * *

Lad realized how much he had missed being in port. It had taken them over two hours to tie up along side their pier. The harbor master was such a cautious man; he maneuvered the tugs with such careful consideration. The Princeton’s small crew had become impatient. They could see their families waiting for them on the pier and had wanted the docking to go much faster—why, even the androids seemed edgy. But, Lad gave into the harbor master’s insistence on making everything just right. Minutes passed as the harbor mater blew his whistle signaling each tug to complete the appropriate maneuver. For a moment during the maneuvering watch, Lad laughed to

himself and thought the behavior of everyone comical but, in time, they were safely and securely nestled in their berth.

When the base messenger came on board with a sealed communiqué, Lad thought it kind of odd. He opened the files in the privacy of his cabin and carefully read the documents included with his orders that had been downloaded to the small electronic tablet. He would take a diplomatic entourage to the Island of Dindi for an important meeting between the Gannemead and Katavvi Ambassadors. *“Boy! These guys have a flare for the dramatic.”* Lad thought as he read through his instructions from the Governor’s Office. *“They could have just called me on the radio!”* He thought about the sighting but blew off the notion that the craft he and Mike had seen might have been Katavvi transports. He’d served in the Republic’s Deep Space Navy and knew what such craft looked like. What he and Mike had seen were certainly *not* Katavvi transports of any kind.

When the boat was finally tied up to the pier and the gangway had been set down, the engineers brought the power cables across with a dock crane and his crew installed them. He ordered the reactor shut down and had his people bring the ship up on the base’s power grid. Then he ordered the ship secured. He had asked Terry Plumber, the ship’s Engineer and one of the androids, Maslow, to stay on board. Maslow seemed completely functional and could turn himself in for maintenance on the following day. The androids were humanoid in appearance and very important to a small society as was the population on Argo Navis. Sometimes they performed duties hazardous to humans but were treated with high regard as part of the citizenry. Of the three androids aboard the Princeton, Maslow was Lad’s favorite. He was witty and had classical training. His intelligence was self-developing and he had shone a great deal of improvement in independent sentient thought since he had first arrived. Lad had made Maslow the Assistant Engineer. Despite his engineering duties though, he was constantly given to quotations and poetry from the ancients. The man *loved* poetry. The human crew as well as his fellow androids found him to be pleasant company. Lad wanted everyone gone for a few days to blow off steam, so to speak, spend time with their families, and set up their in-port routines. The ship was due for refit this time around and the ship yard android repair crews could handle most of what needed to be done.

He understood the critical nature of his pending mission but had informed his command of the requirement for repairs and outfitting. They had agreed and, since the yard crew could complete the refit in about three days, Squadron Command had secured a postponement of the mission until then.

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He got up really early this morning. He wanted to inspect and service the periscopes and communications antennae in the sail. Maslow would be the perfect companion for this day's job. After fixing himself some breakfast in the galley, he told Maslow that he would be up on the sail going through the preventative maintenance procedures and to come by to help as soon as he was done in the auxiliary machinery room.

It was just after noon when Lad first caught sight of Kaye Mathis. Tall and delicious, her long strawberry-blond hair done up in military style, she moved as gracefully as the gentle sea breeze among the palms. She seemed deep in thought, casually running her hand along the pier railing as she walked wistfully, almost absent-mindedly, down the pier toward him.

He *felt* her presence. All of the feelings of which he was aware might be his, collided in a cacophony of almost uncontrollable desire. He thought her the most magnificent looking woman he had ever seen and found himself somewhat surprised by the suddenness with which the longing overwhelmed his being. Deep within his soul he felt an inexplicable passion well up to burst from his chest in the form of a quiet sigh.

At that moment she looked up at him as he stood on the Port Sail Plane. His gaze telegraphed his apprehension to her unexpectedly and a vague impression flashed across her thoughts: "*This man likes the way I look, I think.*" it whispered. They froze in each other's gaze.

The bright sunlight and blue sky of a perfect day accentuated her unusual beauty. A gull cried overhead. The soothing sound of the sea gently played up among the rocks and sand along the breakwater. Salt marsh grasses swayed along the shore behind her. Lad let his feelings break free loving this splendid stranger more, in that one moment, than he had ever loved anyone in a lifetime.

She dropped her duffel bag gently to the ground and brought her left hand up to shield her eyes from the sun. "Hi there!" She said in an easy voice. "Seen the Captain?"

Lad thought to himself how good she looked in her form-fitting coveralls. The anxiety began to abate. "I...I *am* the Captain—your name?" He asked.

"Kaye Mathis, Navigator." She returned but her voice trailed off. She brought herself to attention and snapped off a salute. "I'm sorry, Captain...I guess it's a new assignment for me."

"Relax," he assured her, "this is an oceanographic vessel; no need for military formality—common courtesy will do." He returned her salute and then deftly swung off the Sail Plane on to the ladder at the aft end of the huge

Sail, climbing down to the deck amidships. “Welcome aboard, Sailor!” He said in an easygoing fashion.

Kaye picked up her duffel bag and walked up the gangway stopping to salute the Jack Flag and then Lad. “Permission to come aboard, Captain.” She said throwing a snappy salute toward him.

“Permission granted.” He said, slowly returning her salute. They stood for an awkward moment trying to size each other up. Convention required propriety but it was then and there that both understood, with mysterious conviction, how one felt about the other. It was there that the one was bonded to the other. He would never let himself lose sight of her and she felt as though an arduous journey in her life had, finally, come to an end. Any fool would have known it was love at first sight—anyone would have *still* found its sublime expression a remarkable experience.

Lad took her through the ship. He introduced her to Terry and Maslow and explained that the rest of the crew was on open gangway liberty for the next two days. He took her to the Navigation Center and showed her the ship’s inertial navigation system or SINS as everyone referred to it. She demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the equipment and the navigation periscope so Lad felt comfortable with her core competence almost at once. He then took her to her stateroom and left her there to unpack her things having had Maslow deliver them from topside for her.

When he returned to the sail, the first of the diplomats were there checking in with Maslow and Terry who had assumed topside watch duties. Lad looked down off the Bridge and saw the big Zonin warrior standing next to Maslow, himself a reasonably sized humanoid. The creature was a full head taller. Lad climbed down off the Bridge to go out on the aft deck to greet everyone. He walked up to the Zonin greeting him cordially: “Hello, I’m Captain Chrzenowski, commander of this Vessel.”

The big warrior extended his hand to return the courtesy. “Captain Vida at your service Commander,” he said. “I have a small contingent of Zonin Infantry to transport to the island of Dindi.”

Lad looked up at the big soldier and took his hand firmly as the two completed a customary hand-shake. “You guys are going to have to take up quarters in the forward compartment; you’re kind of...very tall, Captain. The overhead is only eight-and-a-half feet high most everywhere on the ship. However, in the forward compartment, it’s twelve feet.”

Captain Vida laughed a hardy “big guy’s” laugh and gently slapped Lad’s shoulder. “I hope we’ll not be too much of an inconvenience, Commander.” He said still laughing.

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The two smiled at each other and then Captain Vida took Lad over to the others to introduce him to everyone. Everyone would stow their gear on board for now and go back to the Diplomatic Compound. The Princeton would depart in four days for the isle of Dindi, Lad explained. Diplomatic personnel could come and go as they pleased but were asked to be mindful of the ship yard repair crews and to stay out of their way.

Meals would be served with the crew in the base chow hall outside the industrial zone until they were underway again. As he thought of his upcoming cruise, Lad was thankful that the designers had built the ship's galley and crew's dining facility to include a twelve foot overhead.

"What the hell was the Governor thinking?" Terry asked while he, Lad, Kaye, and Maslow were enjoying a brisk cup of tea later that evening. "These Zonin soldiers have to be, at least, seven and a half feet tall! Why didn't he book them passage on a freighter or something?"

"Think about it Terry." Lad replied. "The coastal patrol boats are kind of small. A freighter is going to get there when they get there. We were the only ship that could provide direct passage to Dindi which is only a couple of days out of New Athens. Besides, we're an extension of the Athenian Navy even though we're a scientific vessel. It makes for better security, I suppose."

"I guess you're right, Skipper." Terry said, realizing the Governor's Office *had* thought things through.

"I find this assignment very interesting." Maslow said. "I've been on this planet for several years and I had never seen a Zonin. They're here to provide security for some sort of a shrine, I'm told. Apparently, it is the Crypt of their King; the legendary Alfred."

"What makes it even more curious," Lad replied, "is that *their* King was a human. I've never seen another species offer so much regard for one of us. I'm interested in the story behind it. This morning I had a conference call with Ambassador Mendoza and he told me that he would allow me to learn the entire account."

"I'm interested in discovering the reason most of them left to colonize Katavvi." Maslow added.

"Yeah," Terry agreed, "that *is* a curious point, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is, sir." Maslow replied.

The four of them fell silent. Why *did* the Toulledan and Zonin People leave Argo Navis? The Cantor had not set off among the stars. And, the Toulles and Zonin that *had* remained on the Planet had taken up the life

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styles of country folk, working tidy little farms and minding their own business for the most part.

“*Odd thing to consider.*” Lad thought. They would be underway in a few days and would arrive at the small harbor on Dindi. It would be a leisurely cruise and an interesting one at that.

* * *

Four days later, the ship, having been properly serviced by the refit crew, the Princeton was once again underway. She let loose her moorings at zero-six-hundred hours and, after the tugs had pulled her a safe distance from the pier, Lad gave the Engine Room the order: “All-ahead one-third.” The Engine Room answered the order. Chop and sea foam billowed out from behind the submarine as the ship lumbered forward toward the breakwater. Lad was on the Bridge as usual but, instead of Mike, this time Captain Vida stood on the port sail plane, his back resting against the sail.

As the ship picked up speed, Captain Vida shouted to Lad: “This is marvelous!”

“You’ve never been on an ocean-going vessel, then, Viktor?” Lad asked.

“No! I’ve been in Star Fleet since my thirteenth year.” The big Zonin replied. “I think it’s absolutely wonderful that your government doesn’t allow air transport. It makes for a cleaner atmosphere wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, I would, and I believe *that’s* why they passed that legislation after the first colonists had established themselves.” Lad explained. “But ships like these are used for oceanographic assignments like—well—like we map the ocean floor a lot and our scientific crewmembers study the ocean’s plant and animal life as well as its geology. The Government realized that such studies had never been done so they built a small fleet of these submarines. We also perform rescue at sea and take care of special assignments like this one. Most of the other ships run on the surface but *all* of the sea-going vessels on Argo Navis are nuclear powered.”

Lad keyed the ship’s horn as they passed through the breakwater. It was a long and low blast that swallowed the screeching noise of the gulls flying around them.

“What do you do with the waste?” Vida asked, after the ship’s horn had abated.

“Well, every so often they take a load off the planet with a big shuttle and when they get out passed the space station they send it on its way into this big star about twenty light years out past Carina. None of the stuff is ever stored

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on the planet. But, then again, these are fusion reactors so there isn't a whole lot of waste to manage—you know?" Lad replied.

Vida nodded affirmatively. They were about two miles out past the breakwater now. The sea was calm. It was zero-eight-thirty hours.

Lad keyed the intercom and gave the order: "All-ahead two-thirds."

Maslow was standing the Engineer's watch underway and answered: "Ahead two-thirds, Aye."

The ship shuttered to its new pace through the waves. The waves wrapped over the bow and parted at the bottom of the forward sail surface creating a magnificent wake that spread out behind them.

"Answering two-thirds." Maslow's voice came over the intercom.

Vida shook his head in wonder and smiled. He seemed to be enjoying the moment immensely.

"We'll run on the surface for a while. My crew has to shake out the bugs—you know?" Lad shouted back to Vida through the noise of the surging waters and the final blast of the ship's horn.

After they had been running on the surface for about three hours, Terry reported over the intercom that the ship was performing as expected. Lad turned to Vida and said: "Viktor, we're going to submerge now, you'd better get below."

Vida acknowledged Lad and climbed up to the Bridge again. He got down into the hatchway and, just before descending the ladder, snapped a salute to Lad. Lad returned the salute smiling.

"You're having some fun today, aren't you?" Lad asked.

"Oh, yes. Yes, I am!" Vida replied and he descended the ladder into the Control Room.

Lad removed the communications panel and closed the cubby's watertight door then he descended the ladder as well pulling the hatch shut behind him. He handed off the Communications Panel to the Chief of the Watch. When he was down in the Control Room, the Chief of the Watch climbed up the ladder to verify the hatch was properly shut. Jumping back down to the deck as he ran his hands down along the ladder rails, he turned to view the ship's ballast control panel. All the lights for the hatches were green indicating all the hatches had been shut.

Lad gave the order: "Take her down to periscope depth, Chief."

The Chief keyed the intercom and gave the ship-wide order: "Now, dive, dive." Then he hit the clag horn twice. He allowed the ship's AI to process the order and open the main ballast tanks. The helmsman kept his hands on the yoke as it moved forward to give the ship about a ten degree downward

bubble; the ship dived into the sea. Vida shook his head slowly in absolute wonder. Lad smiled at him.

The Officer of the Deck raised the scope and swung it around a few times. He reported to Lad: "Captain, the sea is clear of contacts." Then he lowered the periscope back down into its well.

"Very well," Lad replied. "Chief of the Watch, make your depth three-zero-zero feet."

"Three-zero-zero feet, Aye." The Chief replied. And, the Princeton gently submerged her sleek hull to the depth that had been ordered and leveled off under the control of her AI. The Helmsman kept his hands on the yoke but, as soon as they were at depth, he took his hands off and reported: "The ship is at three hundred feet, sir."

Lad turned to Vida and said: "Let's go down to the crew's mess hall and get some coffee—what do you say?"

"Capital idea, Commander!" Vida replied.

They were on their way to the island of Dindi. Captain Vida's men were billeted in the forward compartment while the rest of the diplomatic entourage sat quietly in their assigned staterooms. Later in the day, they would all enjoy a fine meal in the ship's dining hall, affectionately referred to by the crew as "the chow hall." The voyage would prove pleasant and uneventful.

Later on, as Lad sat in the privacy of his stateroom reading Mike's version of the sighting report, he thought to himself: "*Where have I seen this mystical-looking orb before?*" He remembered seeing them when he was on deep-space patrol but couldn't remember the forgotten reference his mind kept making with that memory. It was as though his brain were pointing to a place he couldn't recognize. He let the confusion pass and put the report away.

"Time for some stories." He said to himself. And he took out a good novel from his stateroom library. He'd been reading it in bits and pieces for a couple of weeks. He walked over to his personal locker and withdrew a small bottle of brandy from his private stash. Pouring himself a small glass, he sat down in his lounge chair and beneath the cozy comfort of the lamp began to read from the place he had left off so many days before. Hours passed. He rose up and walked to the intercom. "Control, Captain, I'm going to retire now." He said keying the intercom.

"Aye, Captain. Sleep well." The Officer of the Deck replied. He thought he recognized Ben Sloan's voice.

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“*Sloan’s on watch?*” Lad thought to himself. “*How long have I been reading?*” Lad looked up at the chronometer. It’s LCD panel read 1400 hours. He’d been reading for nearly four hours. He looked at the book in his hand; its title read “Beautiful Women.” “Damn good book!” He said to himself. He had six hours remaining in his off-duty time to get a good rest. Lad went to his personal lavatory, brushed his teeth, washed, combed his hair, got into his bed clothes then slipped into his bunk to fall fast asleep.

Three days out they began to make their approach toward the harbor at Dindi. Lad was in the upper level operations compartment discussing the navigation track with Kaye. The Navigation Room was directly behind the Control Room; a passageway running on the starboard side connected them. Someone walked by them in the passageway and both of them looked up to see who it was. It was Mathias, the medical android. He was obviously on his twice-daily tour through the ship to check the instrumentation for atmospheric analysis. *He* didn’t need breathable air but the organic creatures aboard certainly did. As he passed the switchboard for the inertial navigation system, he noticed Lad and paused in his work to approach him.

“Captain,” Mathias began, “the aft port CO₂ scrubbers aren’t working up to par, I’d like to take the time to perform maintenance on the units before we have an incident; with your permission.”

“Certainly, Lieutenant,” Lad replied. “Carry on.”

“Sir,” Mathias cut in, “If you’re planning to run on the surface for a while prior to maneuvering watch, I’d like to do it then. We could ventilate the ship, sir.”

“Understood, Mathias, carry on.” Lad replied again.

The android gave a quick smile and resumed his duties.

“Maslow was explaining the diplomatic mission to me this morning.” Kaye said. “He was able to get Ambassador Mendoza to tell him the story behind this mission.”

“Yes, I know, I watched him at dinner last night. He began a discussion with the Ambassador revolving around the Great Migration. Naturally, Colonial History is the Ambassador’s favorite topic. Those two gabbed for the next three hours.” Lad returned. “You know, we’re lucky to have Maslow. Of the droids on this crew, he’s the most inquisitive. Have you noticed?”

“You know, I’m beginning to realize why the manufacturer gave them all the ability to consume food for energy,” Kaye replied inquisitively, “it helps them assimilate into human culture much more effectively.”

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“Yeah,” Lad replied! “Seein’ how the consumption of food is so important to us...yeah, I see your point.” He said agreeing with her. “So, what did Maslow tell ya’,” he asked?

“Well, from Maslow’s point of view, it sounds like our planetary defenses are being assumed by the Katavvi for the time being.” Kaye continued.

“Yes, so I gather.” Lad answered. “It seems odd but I guess these people have a culture that places a great emphasis upon such traditions. Apparently, this entire planet is a shrine to their King. They never challenged the Republic for a couple of reasons: one was because we were members of *his* kind and the other was that, Argo Navis being on the frontier, we never really settled in to get serious about colonizing it. The population has remained rather small for all these years.”

“I guess, from the story I get the feeling that they might have prevented us from populating the planet if we immigrated in numbers akin to those that settled the Home Worlds.” Kaye offered. “But, the Ambassador confirmed the reason for their migrating to Katavvi: they wanted us to take control of the planet as compensation to the spirit of Alfred.” She added.

“I don’t doubt it.” Lad replied. “It’s strange how they revere him so but I still think that they’re nice people. They’re not hostile. They *assume* the most positive rapport in every case—I don’t know—even their infantry soldiers, while formidable warriors, are given to courtesy and good manners.”

“You like Viktor Vida—don’t you?” Kaye asked.

“Yes, yes I’ve become quite fond of him. He’s developing into a good friend.” Lad replied.

“Captain,” Kaye asked changing the subject, “will we be having any liberty in port?”

“The resort?” Lad replied assuming she’d learned of the resort across the harbor at Dindi.

“Well, yeah!” She said with an enthusiastic smile.

Lad laughed: “Of course!”

Later in the day the Princeton surfaced and ran with the Bridge hatchway in the sail open. Mathias and Maslow had set up ship’s ventilation to move fresh air in throughout the boat. At dinner, Ambassador Mendoza inquired of Lad: “Captain, is it me or is it because of the fresh sea air; I no longer have a headache.”

“It was probably the ventilation, Mr. Ambassador.” Lad replied. “Our ship’s doctor discovered one of the CO₂ scrubber units on the fritz this

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morning. We decided to run on the surface while we waited for permission to enter the harbor at Dindi.”

“I’ve been addressing all the many diplomatic protocols with the Katavvi Ambassador.” Mendoza continued. “He seems a very kind person. He’s very old I think.”

Lad eyed the Katavvi Ambassador. He was involved in a dialogue with Maslow at the other end of the dining table and seemed engrossed in whatever it was they were talking about. “Yes, he *does* look like a venerable old fellow. Have you noticed how his aide and Captain Vida care for him?” Lad said.

“Yes, I have. His assistant told me that Ambassador Zonin is some sort of a National Treasure.” Mendoza replied.

“You know, his last name is Zonin but he’s obviously Toulledan—I mean I’ve *seen* Toulledan farmers on the Big Island before.” Lad said.

“You know, I hadn’t thought about it but now that you mention it, I’ll ask him. Perhaps he has an interesting bit of Katavvi history to tell.” Mendoza answered.

The crew and their guests finished dinner and, while the galley mess cooks cleaned up, everyone retired to their staterooms for the evening. It was late in the day and in the morning they would be entering the harbor at Dindi. Lad sat in his stateroom reading his novel and sipping his brandy in private. He wondered what the future would bring to this paradise planet. The entire Empire of Katavvi had marshaled its deep space fleet to defend it. What kind of confrontation were they facing?

In her stateroom in the officer’s quarters, Kaye Mathis readied herself for bed. She had just been relieved of her watch and was tired. She was even too tired to grab a quick bite to eat in the galley and had gone directly to her room to bathe and brush her teeth. Kaye looked at herself in the mirror. “Awww...freckles!” She quietly said to herself—almost in frustration. A light sprinkling of freckles formed an intriguing pattern of coloration that ended just above her breasts. “I hope he likes freckles.” She said absent-mindedly. “I hope he likes freckles.”

At 0700 hours the next morning Lad set the maneuvering watch and took up his station on the Bridge. It was overcast but there was a clear bit of sky toward the rising sun which made for a spectacular sunrise. One of the galley cooks had brought him a steaming mug of coffee and he was enjoying the moment as they approached the harbor. Dindi was a relatively small but rather lovely isle in the New Hebrides. There wasn’t much on the island; just

a small resort where people came to get away from it all. The resort, however, had a casino and a night club where people could lose their money or take in entertainment and have a decent meal. Argo Navis was an agricultural colony and so was primarily a planet where the population had settled in small comfortable communities. New Athens was the largest city and its capital of the Isle of Athens. There was a decent university and several business concerns that processed the commodities and shipped them out to the Home Worlds. So, life was slow and predictable on Argo Navis. Still many of the professional people—the doctors and lawyers, the teachers and business executives—enjoyed vacations at these isolated getaways.

It took a couple of hours to tie up and get the gangplank down. Lad turned the ship over to Maslow and the android crew for the rest of the day. He had been invited to a diplomatic luncheon at the resort's hotel; it would have been rude of him to decline. Lad changed into his dress-white tropical uniform. As he walked off the gangplank he saw the diplomatic entourage toward the back of the pier by the supply shed and walked over to them to pair off with Viktor. The two, now friends, took a leisurely walk to the hotel where they had breakfast in the sun room.

"I understand that you've spent some time out among the stars." Vida asked Lad as they enjoyed their breakfast.

"Why, yes...yes I have. In my younger days, I was an officer in Star Fleet." Lad answered as he sipped his coffee.

"What kind of ship?" Vida inquired as he took a bite of his toast.

"A deep-space destroyer," Lad replied, "We patrolled the sectors out past Carina Space Station Four. The Nistasi were swarming then. There was a lot of trouble as I remember but we finally drove them back into their own region."

"Have you humans ever considered taking the struggle to *their* home world? They do a lot of damage to people when they start their campaigns." Vida asked.

"I've heard some of the Flag Officers suggest as much. But, it seems to me that Gannemead has its own issues to deal with and so, I suppose, a barbaric incursion every forty years or so can be tolerated—at least, that's *my* take on it Viktor." Lad explained.

"They don't bother us much. Not since the Ghadramiel Conflict, at least." Vida replied. "We wiped out their entire fleet in that struggle. A few of them got away in escorts and those little C-class transports they have. But, for the most part, we haven't seen them until now—that's been, oh, forty

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years!” Viktor explained realizing the connection toward the end of his dialogue.

“Yeah, every forty years or so; that’s interesting. Our scientists think that it might have something to do with the way they reproduce.” Lad said.

“You mean, their hatcheries—in some tidal pool somewhere?” Viktor asked.

“Well, yes; I guess that has something to do with it. Of course, we only know of *that* aspect of their reproductive cycle from the Toulledan and Zonin who are citizens here on Argo Navis. I don’t believe *our* two governments have had much more than cultural exchanges.” Lad replied.

“Well, I can tell you that *our* knowledge of the Bolin is limited to the experience our people had on this planet centuries ago. We don’t know where the Bolin home world is any more than do your people. And, I suppose, we’re not really interested in finding it either.” Viktor said with a quiet chuckle sneaking through the cadence of his speech.

Lad smiled and sipped some more coffee. “Why did your people move off to Katavvi? I mean, I know some your people still live here but you seem to have preferred Katavvi to expand your civilization.” Lad asked.

“It has to do with Alfred Bull. His resting place is here. We view this place as a shrine to him and the memory of him. The stories that have been passed on to you are the heroic tales of his fight against the Bolin on our behalf but his most valued contribution was teaching us how to enjoy life.” Viktor explained. “He gave us our civilization and, when Gannemead sent its first envoys here, he made sure that we were given the gifts of science and technology. He negotiated with the Republic to build the university. Our lives were changed for the better because of him. We have never thought a need to challenge your government for possession because of the way your people live here. Your people treat the planet with a great deal of respect and act as stewards of its natural resources. Our government feels that leaving the planet to you is an appropriate way of acknowledging Alfred’s sacrifice on our behalf. He never went home, you know, he never left us. Still, when the Bolin showed their ugly faces in the Carinas—well, you had your hands full. We felt a need to intervene. The sanctity of this place cannot be violated. Do you understand?”

Lad slowly nodded affirmatively. “I’m glad our people get along so well, Viktor.”

“I’m pleased with that as well. My mission is one of great honor. My men and I are to be the honor guard here on Delf...Argo Navis as you call it.

And, the Ambassador informed me this morning that we're to remain here until the danger of a new Bolin swarm has passed." Vida explained.

"How long do you think that mission will last—could it become a permanent arrangement?" Lad asked.

"Well, no, as soon as the Bolin are suppressed again we'll probably return to Katavvi. Ah, these conflicts usually take a year or two; probably because the Bolin are not great in number. Right now they're probing the colonial defenses. We haven't seen any of them out our way. At any rate, our government feels that a permanent military presence isn't exactly a diplomatic coup—if you get my drift. We want to be friends with the Gannemead Republic. I'm sure that you can understand. You know, one would think that a space-faring, intelligent species would eventually discover that peace brings greater prosperity. I think they're "wired" wrong." Viktor concluded.

Lad sat forward at that remark. He had finished his breakfast and waited patiently until his friend could finish his. "Mmmm...that's an interesting remark."

"What—that peace brings greater prosperity? It's as plain as the nose on your face, Lad." Viktor replied sipping his coffee.

"No, the one about the Nistasi—Bolin—being wired wrong;" Lad said with a casual flip of his wrist to emphasize the point, "I've always wondered why they were hell-bent on such awful barbarism. I mean they make off with some technology now and then but, for the most part, they just like to savage civilized people."

"My great-grandfather told me that it is their custom to take Kume." Viktor explained as he ate.

"What's Kume?" Lad asked.

"Heads! Lives!" Viktor replied for lack of a better translation. "They eat their victims not because they need the nourishment but because they think that they can add to their own individual life force by doing so. Great-Grandfather said that he saw them eat their young! The warrior class of the Bolin has a short lifespan—compared to their Sakkalim; you know...the caste that governs the bureaucracy."

Lad returned a look of confusion. Viktor surmised that he didn't know of the Sakkalim.

"The egg-heads," Viktor put down his fork and made a gesture with his hands about his head to mimic the size of their skulls. "I gather you've never learned of this caste?" He asked as he picked up his fork and began eating again.

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The comment clearly shocked Lad. A look of remorse swept over his face. “Good god, Viktor!” He exclaimed. “They eat their young?”

“Yes, Lad, it’s true. There is a caste of Bolin who reproduce to provide protein for the rest. Ah, you’re aware that they have a caste system, aren’t you?” Viktor inquired.

“A Caste system! Why, no, I’m not aware!” Lad replied. “What is its composition? Are these Sakkalim part of that institution?”

“Well, let me explain: there is this warrior class; they make up the ruling elite. Then there are those poor unfortunates who provide the food. And there is this super-intelligent caste of Bolin who do all the thinking and building and what not.” Viktor replied before biting into another slice of buttered toast. “Of the three casts, the Sakkalim are known by our people to live a long, long time. The warrior-ruling elite have a life-span of, oh, about thirty or forty years. And, the commoners—Kut—I believe Great-Grandfather used to call them—they live for about twenty years or so.”

“Why can’t the super-intelligent caste see where this insanity is taking their race and put a stop to it?” Lad asked.

Viktor was chewing on his toast. He swallowed and sipped some coffee to wash it down. “Wired wrong, Lad, they’re wired wrong!” Viktor said matter-of-factly. “When the majority of the population has grown to a point where it can no longer sustain itself, they swarm. That’s when the killing starts. They may even be using armed conflict as some sort of population control. I don’t know! Some of our scientists suspect as much. Great-Grandfather told me that their aristocracy will not breed until their numbers are sufficiently low. He never told me how low the population had to get though.” Viktor explained looking past Lad’s shoulder at the view outside the dining room’s huge window. “That may be some kind of a factor in their survival protocol but, like I said before: I think they’re wired wrong.”

Lad put down his cup and nodded slowly. “Yes, I see your point. Maybe I’m somewhat shocked by the sheer alien aspect of it all.”

“I’m an alien, Lad.” Viktor said through a chuckle.

“Well, yes, to me—as I suppose I am to you but our survival protocol—as you refer to it—is similar and so our strangeness to one another is mitigated. Once we’re past that aspect of our relationship, we may *still* look different to one another but we gradually become normal to each other. But the Nistasi—their behavior doesn’t even seem...well, natural.” Lad replied.

“Do you mean natural as evolution goes or natural as we see it and understand it?” Viktor asked enjoying the dialogue.

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“I mean natural as evolution goes. It’s as though someone has interfered with Mother Nature—you know what I mean?” Lad replied.

“Perhaps, someone *has*.” Viktor mused, as he brought his coffee cup to his lips in a casual sign of pensiveness.

Later that morning, the diplomatic corps set up tables and chairs out on the Hotel’s veranda. It had become a beautiful sunny summer day and the breeze coming in from off the sea was pleasant and very calm as it soothed the palms in a gentle swaying motion. Bathers could be seen all along the beaches either swimming or sunning themselves. Lad and Viktor sat on the old sea wall telling each other stories of their exploits out among the stars. Then, realizing that both Ambassadors had come out to sit beneath the shade of a wide old palm tree to talk, Viktor excused himself and took up his station standing behind his Ambassador. The two diplomats were engaged in a discussion the aim of which was to know each other better. The diplomatic luncheon was set for noon. After that the two Ambassadors would iron out any details in the arrangements being drawn up between the two governments. Mendoza had explained to the Katavvi Ambassador that the Republic of Gannemead was looking for the formation of an alliance between the two governments.

“Not to worry, Mr. Ambassador,” the old Ambassador began, “Our government will certainly seek such close relations with yours in time. You and I can lead the way and then turn everything over to our assistants to haggle over later. Rest assured a treaty is in the making.”

“I am most grateful for Your Honor’s consideration in this matter.” Mendoza replied. “Perhaps the Nistasi threat is only temporary as before but if it should become more of a problem, your government’s help would be invaluable.”

The old Toulle looked around and then eyed the sky above smiling comfortably. He seemed to be reminiscing. Then he focused his attention on Mendoza again. “Forgive me if I...wander at times, Mr. Ambassador but I have not been back to this planet for a very long time. I was born here, you know.”

“Yes, so I am told.” Mendoza acknowledged.

“Here on Delf the days can drift endlessly by. Somber days; days forgotten; time forgotten. You spend your waking hours trying to control the forgetfulness of it all; trying *not* to lose your memories. No one wants to become lost.” The Ambassador said as he reached for his tumbler of iced tea. He winked at Mendoza. “Alfred Bull was someone none of us knew anything about. The *Cantors* worshipped him, you know. There was this

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ceremony they had where they would slip quietly past his cabin. They didn't want to disturb his peace nor did they wish to crowd in upon his sensibilities. He was a tough, rugged old soul who wouldn't stand for anything short of complete respect from the people. He also loved them all a great deal and they *knew* it.

After the Menzenian wars—after the freaks were finished nuking the planet to couch some mute point to the general population—there wasn't any law. The Cantors wandered the devastated landscape aimlessly. Crowds of Bolins, your people call them Nistasi, picked them off the burning piles of rubble; robbed them; savaged them; murdered their children—ate them!”

Mendoza's eyes widened a bit; he hadn't expected the Ambassador to divulge *that* bit of history at the end. Having taken up a recliner next to him on the beach in front of the Consulate, he felt relaxed and comfortable around this ancient old fellow. “*Ate* them, Excellency?” He quietly asked.

“Oh, Bolins are a crude lot, Mister Ambassador. They are freaks of Nature don't you know? Half-baked madmen! Marauders! Stinking bunch of blister faced butt-heads is what they are! Forgive me but I hate them. Most of us band together in hard times; bond to one another; help each other. Not these guys. Goddamn Jerks! It took a human to teach us the meaning of kindness!” Ambassador Zonin replied.

“Uh, *I* am the younger here, Ambassador Zonin, you may call me by my first name: Francisco.” Mendoza said to Zonin out of diplomatic courtesy.

“Why, *thank* you Francisco.” The ambassador replied. He continued: “Bull had come through space along a beam of light to find us. I guess he just wanted to visit—hey? As he told the story, he traveled out among the stars one hundred times as fast as sunrise. I found that impressive! We *all* believed him too! I mean, we never saw anything like him until his ship slipped out of orbit. It was low on fuel and splattered its cargo pods along a fifty mile tract of Toulledan real estate.” Zonin waited for a few moments, his facial expression seemed locked in a reverie. “You call this planet Argo Navis; we call it *Delf*.” He added almost absent-mindedly. “I was a much younger fellow then.” He said taking another sip of his iced tea. Then he leaned forward just a bit to emphasize his story.

Zonin smiled at Mendoza and began: “Get this...we're all looking up at the sky watching the light show and along comes Bull's shuttle—just wafting through the clouds. It landed right in front of us about one-hundred yards off. He steps out with his crew. Big guys they were—over six feet tall most of them; strong, muscle-bound fellows with long hair down to their shoulders. Very quiet types too. Welcome, says I. And, who the hell are you? Ha!”

Zonin said through a smiling expression as he slapped his knee; then he leaned back in his recliner again. “He smiled a lot; shook my hand and rambled on in a tongue *I* had never heard before. We spent the rest of the fall and on into winter teaching each other our respective languages so we could communicate.” The Ambassador began to laugh in a quiet mild way at the memory. “Sometimes winter can be a serious thing in the Northern Hemisphere. It lasts thirteen standard phases—three or four storms in a season sometimes. Of course, spring, summer, and fall account for the other thirty-six. Still, it's one hell of a hurdle to get over!”

Mendoza smiled at the serenity the Ambassador displayed, finding his story fascinating as well.

“Once he and his men could leave off talking that ridiculous sounding tongue of theirs—English they called it, why then I realized that they had this—this disposition. They didn't *hate* anybody! They went through the whole damn winter cooped up with us in our subterranean village and never once made a disparaging remark about our bald heads! I mean, everybody on Delf pokes fun at our bald heads!” Zonin said in a matter-of-fact way. “When spring came, they helped us move to the top; out up on the surface.” The Ambassador explained pointing to the escarpment that rose above and behind them. Then they took off toward the Crystals. That big mountain range—*there*—to the west—over there on the mainland. See it?” He asked Mendoza pointing to the much larger island on the horizon. “We didn't see their surly faces for sixteen standard cycles. And, believe me, on Delf, that's a hell of a long time!”

Zonin continued: “It wasn't a government thing. On Delf, there really wasn't any Government...I mean...the way there is on Gannemead. That's where Bull and his buddies came from, you know. Naah! On Delf we had, what Bull called: War Lords. Butt-heads is what I called 'em! It was like a tradition, you know?”

The old Toulle looked up at the sky briefly as though he was trying to find just the right words. “Well, let me explain.” He said returning his focus to Mendoza. “For the cycle of Farradah, we would all go beat up on the Zonin. During the cycle of Soud-Karrafin we'd kick some Cantors around. Then, in the Bakkah, we quiet, mind-our-own-business Toulles would get the pointy end of the stick—so-to-speak. No body ever did anything to the Bolin. They were the God damned ruling class on this chunk of rock! And, *there were so many of them!* They dished it out—they never took it! They would eat ya'—make no mistake!”

Mendoza let loose a short quiver and shook his head in disgust.

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“Yeah, I know, it’s revolting isn’t it?” The Ambassador said in response.

“This was the primary perspective of our culture—such as it might be described to out-worlders like yourselves. It had continued for thousands of cycles—that is, until Alfred Bull arrived. He didn’t like any of it. He tried to stay out of local affairs too—parked his ass up on the Toulledan Plateau for cycles! But, he just could *not* stand to witness all the killing.”

The Ambassador sat up and swung his old legs across the front of his recliner to rest his feet in the warm sand. “The Zonin are a warrior race.” He continued, flipping his thumb at Vida. “They didn’t take too much shit before they came barrelin’ out of their holes to fight. Black holes in space! Your people were scary sometimes!” The Ambassador exclaimed turning his head toward Vida. Captain Vida let out low slow laughter at the colorful dialogue. “The Toulles, that’s us, well, we didn’t fare very well against the Bolin. But, then *we* live up there in the temperate regions of the North Plate. The Bolin, like most butt-heads in the Galaxy, hated the cooler weather and they *never* came down into our douffos lookin’ for us anyway.” Old Zonin noticed a quizzical look on Mendoza’s face. “Douffos...that’s like a house underground; only, they’re all connected together by tunnels.” He explained. Ambassador Mendoza nodded his head in understanding and smiled. “Nahh, the people that suffered the most were always the Cantors—poor bastards.” Ambassador Zonin continued. “They’re really a nice race of people—always wantin’ to help you and all—very generous with food. You ever been to a Cantor Feast Day? I tell you, if you’re ever down on the Southern Plate, you won’t want to miss out on Sirilius! Let’s see . . . that would be like—well, sort of like that holiday you guys got back on Gannemead—New Years...yeah, that’s it...New Years!”

The Ambassador went on: “Well, me and Bonifah here,” he made a gentle motion with his right hand towards his aide, “we’re wanderin’ around down on the Southern Plate near Destooney township when the Family Menzenias declared war on everybody—but themselves, of course. We’re standin’ there tradin’ with this Cantor; it was our winter production of cloaks for some braddeberry wine—great stuff—when all hell breaks loose!” The Ambassador alternately pointed first his left then his right index fingers at the sky: “Boom! Boom! Boom! The whole sky lights up! Buildings on fire! Our clothes on fire! Bodies flyin’ everywhere! Well, I says to Bonifah as I hit the dirt, they musta’ found a new toy to play with—hey? Nukes. What you guys call: photon munitions.”

There was a distinct pause in the old Toulle’s delivery. He sat with his elbows resting on his knees; there was a reminiscent look on his face: “I

remember the day Bull killed those guys. We were hidin' in the trees and the Bolin were rippin' and tearin' and slashin' and killin' everything in sight! Space! Those poor Cantors were gettin' pasted! Well, Gardutha, the Bolin leader—a real ass hole—used to brag about how he butchered a thousand Cantor kids every Soud-Karrafín...that would be..." And he looked up at his aide.

"It's their seventh month, tet Navi." The aide quietly offered.

"Right," the Ambassador replied. "Well, anyway, he's on this kid's mother—freaking animal! And, he's hacking away; blood all over the place; the kid is screaming his lungs out! All of a sudden Bull walks out from behind this huge boulder right into the fray and just calmly saunters up to Gardutha and blows a hole in his fat ugly head with an air sling! I mean, you wanna' see quiet? Everybody just stops!"

The Ambassador's eyes widened to emphasize the moment. "Bull looks around at everybody then tells the big blond guy...what's-his-name...Johannan—right! That's it, Johannan. Bull says: Kill them...kill them all and let their bodies rot in the sun!" The old Toulle bellowed the words out to dramatize his historic account. "I mean, you guys woulda' had to have *been* there! The Bolin had this who-the-hell-is-this-guy look on their faces. I'm tellin' you they pissed their pants! It had to be the first time in a thousand cycles that the Bolin had ever been challenged. And, hell, from that day forward the bums knew fear—they were literally scared shitless—hey?" Zonin smiled at Mendoza and then looked up at Bonifah for approval. The aide smiled warmly and nodded his head approvingly.

Then the Ambassador reached for his iced tea again and took a sip. "Later that night we're all sittin' around the fire tryin' to keep warm—you know? Bull and his men had come back from huntin' Kouffa. They had three of 'em on poles and began cookin' em over the over a pit fire. Buddy, you could hear a moot fly fart I tell ya'. Everybody is standin' around trying to look calm—you know? Then Bulls says: I have rules that I live by and if the rest of you want to live by me, you'd all better learn the rules. First, we all pull together. I don't like people who don't like other people. Because, after they kill all the Zonin they'll come for the Toulles. And, after they kill all the Toulles, they'll come for the Cantor. When there aren't any Cantor left, they'll come for me and I like to be left alone. I don't trust anyone who hates anyone! He looks around—we're all starvin'—and he asks: Are you all hungry? No one says a word. Then he says: Bring me the children first. So the mothers bring up their kids and he looks at his men and says: Feed them first because these young ones are our future. Then he asks: Who among

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you are pregnant females? And all the little mommies come waddlin' up to him real quiet and respectful and all. He says: Feed these next for they are the hope of their people. After these people had been given a share of the food Bull says: Bring me your elders. So everyone brings up Grandma and Grandpa and the aunties and uncles and Bull says: These are to be fed next for they possess the wisdom of their people. Then Bull says: Lastly, we who are young and strong will eat for we are the care-givers. So we all look at each other and kind of agree with him only without sayin' anything. We're all lookin' at each other as if to say: I ain't got a problem with that. Do you have a problem with that? You know what I mean?" Zonin smiled and saluted Mendoza with his glass briefly then took another sip of his tea.

"It's a really nice day, isn't it?" The Ambassador asked Mendoza.

"Why, yes...yes it is!" Mendoza replied.

"Katavvi is a planet not unlike this one. The seasons aren't as long though." The Ambassador explained.

Mendoza smiled at him. Something in his diplomatic training told him the old man needed a few seconds to organize his thoughts.

Then the Ambassador continued: "After the war, Bull and his men went back up into the mountains. They took Cantor females as mates but they couldn't have any offspring on account of the species not being genetically compatible. So Bull and his men took in Cantor orphans as their own kids. I tell ya' this guy glowed in the dark as far as the rest of us were concerned. The people wanted to make him King or somethin' but he said: No, you people have to learn to run your own lives. I mean, where in the hell did Awah-Pall get this guy? Come to think of it, over the years, I've often asked myself: If Awah-Pall can make so complex a Universe and create so beautiful a creature as Alfred Bull; why in the hell did He waste time making Galaxy-class shit-heads like the Bolin? Ah! All that religious stuff is for the Zonin intellectuals anyway!" tet Navi eyed Vida who returned the glance with a wink and a smile. "I'm not as ignorant as I look, you know. Bull and the boys taught me how to read and write the Common Tongue. Yes...that's a Gannemead lingual form is it not? Yeah...I've read some of your literature. That ancient book: the Bible...the story about Adam 'n Eve. Is that how your people thought it all began? Our people worship Awah-Pall. The name is roughly translated: The Center. It's like your concept of God only...well...only bigger—I guess. I mean it might be the same big guy, you know, only Awah-Pall ordains destiny for everybody. And then, well, there aren't any chosen people—hey? Like...well, everybody is involved—if you know what I mean."

Mendoza nodded affirmatively. He understood the concept from his intellectual exchanges with the Zonin.

“Say, did I explain my surname? It’s Zonin. Like the lizard folk here.” And, he pointed to the Zonin Commander, Captain Vida. “Obviously, no connection though.” The Ambassador jokingly gave Mendoza a high-browed smile. “It was the name of my whole clan. The Zonin had once rescued my forebears from the Bolin and we took up the name tet Zonin—which means: bind to the Zonin. Tet Navi Zonin means: bind to the Zonin who migrated...the word tet means ‘to bind.’ The word Navi means ‘to travel.’ You see, we’ve accepted your naming convention for the planet. My clan is all gone now. I’m the only one left.” The Ambassador said sadly. “Many of them died in the struggle against the Bolin.”

“Alfred Bull accepted all of us and, of our religion, he thought we had the right to our own personal perspective on reality. Humans, on the other hand, are always trying to find their way back to an Adamic virtue lost to your race eons ago—beneath that fabled fruit tree. You guys are always trying to simplify things down to their most basic components. It’s not a problem, I guess, but it must drive some of you crazy!”

“That it does!” Mendoza replied in a gentle tone of laughter.

“Don’t get me wrong now! Uh, how do you put it? You’re Okay. But look, once you start building an artificial world around yourself and call it Civilization, life just ain’t simple anymore—know what I mean? These concepts, by their very nature, force sentient life forms to establish a hierarchy of values. You colonists are cause-and-effect guys so this argument should appeal to you—hey?” The Ambassador added.

“Alfred Bull’s intervention in *our* world shattered our perspective on being! He gave us time to smell the taffudonias. You know what they are? They’re a flowering plant that smells good in the spring. They fill the air with a sweet scent that is *so* pleasant. Yeah...we built ourselves a civilization after that. We’d become a popular people in just eighty-five standard cycles. Before Bull came on the scene, nobody even knew we existed. I even think that Awah-Pall forgot us!” tet Navi stopped his dialogue for a moment and looked down at the ground, his elbows on his knees again, his hands folded in front of him. When he looked up at Mendoza again, his eyes were beginning to tear. Mendoza felt a momentary alarm but his emotions quickly subsided when he saw that the old Toulle had been swept away by some sad memory.

“When Bull died the whole god damned planet cried!” The Ambassador started up again. “I mean, not just the people, us guys—you know? I mean

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everything—the people, the plants, the animals, the rocks, the water—*everything!*” The old Toulle recounted pointing to those objects in the surrounding scenery for emphasis. “We had become Eden and had lost *our* Adam. Ahhh...I'm gettin' sentimental in my old age, I guess. But it's true. He's buried up there on that escarpment...see...yeah—over there...right—that's it.” Zonin pointed to a rather ordinary cleft of rock in the side of the mountain that rose behind them.

“You know what he said to me when he was on his death bed? Oh yes Francisco, I was there at the end 'cause I was there at the beginning! Yeah...well, he says: Hold my hand Looney, I'm dying. So I took his hand for the last time and then he says: Looney I want you to remember this: it's the people—the living, breathing people—that are the stuff of a civilization; not just the things that they build. Without the people there are no ideas, no achievements, no emotions, no science or art or technology or anything for that matter! Without the people there exists nothing to defend, no reference—no point of view—no tradition. Our business should be the business of defending the people from the ravages of reality, from all the pain that comes with being born. In this way they might be able to live out their lives fulfilling the purpose for which they were created—to contribute to the maintenance of life within this Universe. Looney, don't ever go back to the old ways! And then...he just died.” A tear fell off the cheek of the old Toulle as he finished the story. He wiped his cheek with his tunic sleeve.

“We're here to protect that burial chamber.” Ambassador Zonin said, his voice warbling with a touch of remorse, and he briefly pointed to the mountain. “He's going to rest peacefully. The Bolin will never be allowed to set foot on the soil of this planet again!” The Ambassador said with some conviction as he looked into Mendoza's eyes. Leave this to us...please don't interfere.”

“I assure you, Mr. Ambassador, our Government has no intention of interfering and we welcome your assistance as well. Your involvement has freed up an entire star fleet to attend to other territories within our Republic and we are grateful.” Mendoza replied.

“Thank you.” Zonin Replied. “I...I will inform my fleet commander that he has the right to set up his blockade within the planetary system. Of course, the ships of your Republic will not be challenged. Captain Vida, here, will give your Military Representative the protocol for receiving the authorization codes each time they are changed.” The Ambassador pointed to the huge Zonin Warrior in uniform who had stood silently beside them

during their meeting. The creature bowed to Mendoza who returned the courtesy with a smile and a nod of his head.

“Would we be able to enlist the assistance of your people for the task of moving our small contingent of troops to the mountain?” Captain Vida asked. “I don’t think that spit of land connecting this island to the mainland would provide the means to transport supplies and, of course, we feel that we would be somewhat of an intrusion. There is that seaside resort across the isthmus and, well, we wouldn’t want to frighten the tourists. I’m sure that you would agree.”

“Oh, why yes, I *certainly* agree!” Mendoza replied. Captain Chrzenowski’s people will provide you with the assistance you need. His ship has been assigned the duty of transporting your people and supplies from the space port at New Athens to the small harbor here on the other side of the island. From there, ground transport will be provided. Sorry about insisting your shuttles not land anywhere other than the Space Port. It’s an environmental issue, Captain.”

“We are quite comfortable with your Government’s planetary regulations, Mr. Ambassador.” Captain Vida explained. “These regulations confirm our high opinions of your people.”

“Excellent, then!” Mendoza replied. “Eh, we’ll let you decide when the emergency is over, Captain.”

Captain Vida bowed ceremoniously to Mendoza to signify that his business had been concluded. He returned to his former Military bearing and eyed Chrzenowski standing far off behind the two Ambassadors. The submariner had taken up a relaxed position leaning against the foundation of the old stone sea wall. Chrzenowski seemed to realize that the big Zonin Warrior was staring at him and he casually saluted him by bringing his right hand to his temple and snapping off a salute to acknowledge the attention he was being paid. Captain Vida smiled and returned the salute in a manner every bit as casual. The two diplomats had been engaged in conversation and didn’t notice.

“Will that be all Your Excellency?” Captain Vida asked the old Ambassador.

“Ahhh?” The Ambassador replied somewhat confused at first. “Oh! Yes, yes, Viktor, carry on, my boy, carry on.”

“Good Day, Gentlemen.” Captain Vida said acknowledging the diplomats before him. They all returned the courtesy. Vida took up a stride and headed directly for Chrzenowski.

The Creature Crafters

* * *

[COMFLEETTWO: DIPLOMATIC] 9557.186
TO: **First Consul Casius Vespasi**
Gannemead Federal Republic
State Department
Gannemead
FROM: **Francisco Pablo Mendoza**
Federal Consulate
Argo Navis
CC: [CLEARANCE DIPLOMATIC CHANNEL 1]
Professor Estaphan Polinka
Federal Consulate
Marina Bay, Erta
RE: **Update**

By every account, it was Alfred Bull who stopped the suffering. The Cantor Bards tell of the day that he and his men came upon the Bolin carnage. The Bolin were savaging the local population as was their custom. Bull shot the Bolin leader, Gardutha, dead with an air sling as Gardutha consumed the entrails of a Cantor female whom he had just recently butchered. With dispatch he ordered his men to slay the remaining Bolin in full view of those present on the battle field. The colonial warriors closed in upon the ruthless Bolin and killed them, one and all, with their rapiers never once fearing the Bolin weapons leveled against them. The Bolin heat rays were harmlessly deflected by the circular shields held by each of the colonial warriors as the courageous out-worlders hacked their way through crude Bolin defenses.

Clearly angry, Bull ordered the people to "...let their bodies rot in the sun!" Thus for the first time in the known history of the planet Delf (or Argo Navis as it is now called) were the Bolin challenged. All the people rallied to the leadership of Alfred Bull—Touilles, Zonin, and Cantor alike his rule being just and his deportment very generous. Within four complete seasons of the planet, the Bolin had been utterly exterminated. A few had commandeered a captured colonial freighter and its crew and had taken flight out among the stars, to where no one really knows. However, with the Bolin annihilation complete, the inhabitants of Argo Navis began the great era of peace and prosperity it now enjoys.

Eight hundred years after the last photon projectile had been detonated; our recorders entered the mountain stronghold of the Family Menzenias to find their Hall of records intact. We examined what we had found as

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thoroughly as any group of scholars could and learned that the Bolin were not of a species indigenous to the planet Argo Navis. Surprisingly, their ancestry was traced back to the distant planet of Ledi Prime in the Parnassian Sector of the “Kalloopus.” Their vid blocks reveal the conquest of an ancient people similar to the Cantor some ten-thousand years past. From where the other races came remains a mystery to this day.

I have every reason to believe that the long orbital cycles of Delf, roughly equivalent to four standard years, have something to do with extending organic life upon the planet. Our people have been living there for some sixty-five years and haven't aged, by any criterion that we can determine, more than sixteen of our standard years!

Yes, it is true that the people had made Commander Bull their King, so to speak. They moved him into a palatial home above the Nouvo Sea. They built it there to get him and his men to come down out of the mountains of the Northern Plate. He was the person who set up the government we now see institutionalized today. They have become proficient at running the government by themselves and all traces of the old bigotries have vanished. I suppose that it was the evil influence of the Bolin, now long gone, that had perpetuated it.

The Cantor woman, Sohanni, was Alfred Bull's companion although he considered her his wife. She is buried in the crypt with him. I often regret the genetic differences between our two species. Regardless of this fact, he and Sohanni raised seven orphans and this accounts for the Clan that bears his namesake. They are *not* his genetic offspring. Steven Goodwin, his navigator, helped the people of Delf put technology to good use. He was a scientist as well as an astronaut. He learned that the Bolin had developed a type of combustion technology which I will describe as photomic for lack of a better word. This explains why the planet remains a pristine wilderness in spite of all the wars of their violent past. However, while they *did* have the ability to travel within their interplanetary space, they had not become a space-faring people at the time that Alfred Bull found Argo Navis.

Eventually, Goodwin reverse-engineered their photomic technology and it was this technology that was later integrated into our fighter, shuttle, and other landing craft designs. These craft can appropriate hyperspace although *not* at the velocity that our capital ships achieve. Even though Bull and his men had launched eighteen deep space beacons with their original shuttle outfitted with a new photomic engine, we only discovered their whereabouts within the last century—about eight hundred years *after* the death of Commander Bull. But, with the rise of the Toulledan Civilization, diplomatic missions and exploration of the neighboring star systems had begun. A relationship with these modern people has only been established

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recently. I read on the Web only yesterday that the Star Fleet Academy has offered to train their professional Military for extended deep-space exploration. But, to this day, they continue to keep their diplomatic distance.

In the cycle of Bakkah in *the Time 37242 since the downfall of Sute*, a Vikan Battle Star, the *Anappolees*, docked at Canopus Deep Space Station Number Four. A man by the name of Linus Cook asked to see the King. Apparently, Commander Cook was the son of one Nobel Cook, an old friend of the Alfred Bull. Commander Cook had come to bid the King health, long life, and prosperity on behalf of his family. It was his father's dying request. Our Station Commander thanked him but informed him that Commander Bull was thought to have died on Argo Navis hundreds of years earlier and that a democratic republic had been established not long after. Captain Cook wept bitterly for the loss of his father's old friend. He left for destinations unknown and the Government of Katavvi could not supply us with information that would explain the whereabouts of Captain Cook's ship or even from what planet he might have come.

We now have a diplomatic protocol in place that codifies the understanding between us and the people of Katavvi. Oddly enough, they make no claims upon this planet despite the fact that it is their original home world. They prefer to leave the governance of it to the Republic while, at the same time, fiercely protecting the entire planetary system from any Nistasi incursion. Their Proconsul has often remarked to me that: "Humans are emotional and fragile creatures and must be looked after constantly."

I was somewhat curious about the monument and felt compelled to ask the aging Toulle the meaning of it. The old bird led me up the slope to a path, the beginning of which was marked by a single obelisk of fine demorolite. It bore an inscription in the *Delf* tongue: "*Upon this path have the people keep the memory of their first and only Sovereign Lord, Alfred the Great, King of all the Delf people, Defender of the Innocent.*"

We walked the path for some distance in silence. It is a ritual of great importance to them. Atop the escarpment a tomb, carved into the solid demorolite hillside, bore this inscription above the entrance: "*The Hope is that the people of Delf should live forever.*" Looney (Ambassador tet Navi Zonin) translated this inscription also, tapping each word with his knurled cane to drive home the point that eternal life is a reward for continued vigilance.

It became evident to me that Commander Bull had left an indelible impression upon these people through the judicious exercise of human kindness. It would be most advantageous to Fleet Command if we continue our policy of permitting these people to remain non-aligned. But, to the extent that the Delf People revere our race and home world, we must never

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shrink from a continuing friendship. As the old Ambassador remarked: "A trusted friend is worth dying for. . .is this not the truth?"

The *Palladays* blow down from the North Plate now as I record the events to which I am witness. It has been some eight hundred standard years since the death of their beloved Alfred. The Katavvi no longer visit us as often but now there is a small contingent of Zonin Soldiers guarding the Crypt and their fleet remains on station.

Francisco Mendoza

END TRANSMISSION

[KATAVVI STARFLEET SEVEN] 37225.137

TO: **GRAND CONSUL**
Federal Republic of the Katavvi
Katavvi Home World

FROM: **Kaloopus tet Navi Zonin**
Ambassador to the People of Alfred
Argo Navis

RE: **Assurances**

We had not seen a human for the last forty cycles or more. The centuries before our ships journeyed to Earth several times but found only the ruins of a great civilization on a wild and beautiful planet. At the time, the planet seemed to be coming out of an ice age. We have not been back there since that time but I understand that an enterprising young fellow named John E. Cutter has filed a claim upon the place inviting others like him to immigrate and take up residence there. Shall I tell them, Grand Consul? Or, should we leave "well enough" alone?

We have no idea of the whereabouts of the son of Commander Cook as his visit to their Space Station was reported to us. The Vikan Imperial Staff say that he had completed his military service decades ago and was dismissed. They also made a mention of the fact that his retirement fund had never been accessed nor are any of his descendants aware of his whereabouts. As you know, Vikan is one of their "lost colonies." However, Proconsul Mitranus specifically instructed us not to publish their location to the Gannemead Federal Republic and we are compelled to honor their request.

All the humans that once lived on Delf had either left or died off themselves within a few hundred cycles of the King's death. Those who live

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there today are the children of the first colonial settlers from the planet Gannemead and they have been there for less than a century. We have not explained too much to the humans preferring to tell a little of the truth instead of manipulating them with a lie. Communications traffic from The Crafters began to diminish until, finally, it came to nothing—nothing at all. We continued to send out deep space beacons until just a few cycles ago but we have never received any additional instructions from either Lord Emile or Lord Tofla. Neither have any of the others of their kind attempted to communicate with us in any way. However, I am aware of an incident that occurred not but a few months ago in which Commander Chrzenowski of the Oceanographic Research Vessel, Princeton, had reported sighting those mysterious rose-colored orbs again. So, my Lord, I must assume that the Crafters are still busy.

I wonder if we are, again, alone—forgotten even by Awah-Pall. Perhaps our assistance is no longer needed and we are to be left to ourselves. I cannot complain; our people thrive. We are now a billion strong and continue to live in harmony with the memories of our King—a jewel of the human race.

This communication is intended to make official the arrangement to which we had agreed during the previous negotiations. Please find a detailed security treaty included as an addendum to this document. I like this Mendoza fellow though; he is very kind and seems to have a lot of integrity as does their Governor, De Salva. What remains of our people seem comfortable enough living among the Humans. They are given every liberty and constitutional right that the new government can afford them. I spoke with several of our people when I had the occasion to give them an audience. Every one of them reassured us that they are held in high regard and treated as citizens of the Old Republic. The Humans recognize that our claim upon these territories is very old and they wonder why we have chosen *not* to dispute it. I have trouble with their penchant for inquiry but, alas, they are human are they not?

Concerning the planet Delf which these new-comers have named Argo Navis 223, we have decided to permit the colonists to remain inasmuch as they are, predominantly, farmers and pose no threat to our cultural and religious artifacts. Their government is certainly insistent upon enforcing regulations designed to protect the environment and now, I am told, their government has legislated new laws intended to protect our antiquities. We also believe that it would be better for them to remain under their own political jurisdiction. The planet is our shrine. What better way to honor the King than to let his people care for it. The thought had occurred to us that such a compromise may pay fitting tribute to the memory of our Alfred. We, therefore, beg your continued indulgence. Our traditions and personal beliefs

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may, at some time in the future, once again engage their cooperation. I have read both the documents presented to me by my envoy and the letter of understanding delivered to me by their representative. Their people have a history that is somewhat mythical in its representation.

As the political head of our people, I understand your feelings and can find no fault with your particular request. But, then again, *they* have taken up no issue with it either. We have a memory that forms the foundations of our culture and binds its diverse races together with affection and understanding; pity that the humans have never achieved a similar success elsewhere. Therefore I have ordered, by general decree, that as you have written the terms and conditions of this agreement so shall it be enforced throughout the Kingdom of the Pleiades...*Alfred's* Kingdom.

Farewell for the time being, Grand Consul, and if some day we *do* meet again may it be with as much of a sense of brotherhood as you have kept in your heart toward me all these many ages.

Kalloopus tet Navi Zonin

END TRANSMISSION

[KATAVVI STARFLEET SEVEN] 37225.149

TO: **Kalloopus tet Navi Zonin**
Ambassador to the People of Alfred
Argo Navis
FROM: **GRAND CONSUL**
Federal Republic of the Katavvi
Katavvi Home World
RE: **Assurances**

You old goat! Give yourself a long rest why don't you! You've been working far too hard these past months and I'm worried about your health. Do as I instruct or I will be forced to give Vida a direct order to tie you to your lounge chair and *force* you to take a vacation! Honestly tet Navi Zonin, you sometimes cause me such concern for your well being. Here are your answers. I shall be brief because I really must insist on you turning everything over to Bonifah. He is your apprentice and quite capable.

- 1) I would prefer you to hold your tongue where it concerns the whereabouts of their legendary Earth. The Crafters have explained to us on several occasions that, while part of the plan, they should not know of its location for the present time.

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- 2) We really shouldn't get in between the Vikan Imperial Council and the Gannemead Federal Republic. Such matters are for the humans to iron out (as Alfred used to say). I have been informed that they intend to break their diplomatic silence next year and notify the GFR that they intend to normalize relations.
- 3) The issues raised by Ambassador Mendoza are fine with me *and* the Grand Council here on Katavvi. We judge the humans by their actions and, so far as we can tell, their actions have always been honorable.
- 4) The next time a human asks why we do not dispute the governance of our home world with them tell them that friends are *supposed* to share!

Now get some rest and may Awah-Pall be the light that guides you through life!

Affectionately,
Corbus Botshavanni, Grand Consul

END TRANSMISSION

* * *

“Ahhh, Mendoza!” The Governor said. “How can the bulwark of an entire civilization simply collapse? Do you mean to say that the simple and straightforward act of such a conflict can bring on a precipitous collapse of organizational society—a society that had previously existed for thousands of years—and a space-faring society at that?”

Mendoza finished his glass of Madera and seemed pensive, then answered: “In any culture where the people intentionally rely on their governing body to attend to the business of civilization, that body politic can be derailed by any combination of catastrophic phenomenon. As you are aware, it happened to the ancients. Within a decade of a destructive event—the invasions of barbaric peoples—the government of these great civilizations became incapable of coordinating the power and authority required to maintain their dominance. This resulted in the breakup of their culture and the reestablishment of the “rule of the Clan” as I like to call it. Such social organization lasted for centuries because it is a very simple

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form of government for a human organizational society to maintain: You live by the law of the Clan and its chieftain or you are eliminated as a challenge; all wealth and property belong to the Clan. A casual examination of our history shows that there were no democratic ideals fostered on Gannemead for nearly twelve hundred years. Democracy, as we know it today, isn't even 800 years old."

"Then civilization, as we now know it, is an abstract construct? That's preposterous! What about all of these buildings? What about our Universities, our technology, our Warships? Come now, old friend, be reasonable! Those things are real enough aren't they?" De Salva inquired.

"Mere edifices of our existence, dear friend," Mendoza broke in. "It is the rule of the Clan that seems more natural to our species and that is because of our biological origins. We are great apes who are *used* to living beneath the rule of a dominant male or female as do the wild gorannitans that live in the forests of Argo Navis in clans dominated by Alpha males and females. Democracy, for example, is an ideal or *ideology* that requires a lot of hard work and the continual participation of the masses. A dictatorship of the ruling elite is another artificial construct that requires a lot of pomp and circumstance for its maintenance. Dictatorship of the ruling elite can be democratic or dictatorial but it *still* requires that the body politic be subjugated to the ideals of the ruling body. In the Gannemead Republic, we have become subjugated via propaganda—which I readily admit is reasonable and constructive—and other social mechanisms of enforcement such as our educational institutions, to believe in the *authority* of our government. To codify the class I speak of: it is a Government by fiat. This is an artificial construct, my friend, and it can only exist in the minds of its constituents—the general population."

"We are an organizational society then." De Salva replied. "In an organizational society the people can only benefit or suffer from its existence if they continue to *think* about its structure as an abstract metaphor. In other words, the people view the Republic, let's say, as a part of their reality whose boundaries are defined by a string of habitable planets we refer to as the Home Worlds. But, in reality, no such thing exists outside of our intellectual predilection. The only thing that exists in reality is the planets themselves, the boundless emptiness of deep space between them, and the people living on them—that is the reality." De Salva said as he poured himself another glass of Madera. "As long as the *people* living on those planets think of themselves as citizens of the Gannemead Republic, then there will exist a Gannemead Republic.

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Remove that notion from their heads and there will exist nothing more than the chaos that comes with the collapse of any civilization. Uh, have I got it right?” The Governor asked deftly stopping to salute his companion with his glass of wine before taking it in.

“If these theories of social integration are correct—and based on the work of Professor Polinka they seem to be—then it would not take decades of gradual deterioration to remove the abstract notion of civilization from the *minds* of the people; it would only take a catastrophe of sufficient proportions to remove any concept of loyalty to the central government from the minds of the people as they struggle to regain their equilibrium and continue to survive. I suspect that, within a few short years, the worst of our kind would arise as regional warlords in command of the major population centers. Once this took place, it would only be, perhaps, a decade before the people lost sight of their social heritage and resorted to giving their loyalties to local chieftains who could guarantee their survival in a universe of ever-increasing chaos. Look at what happened on Erta, Cutter’s Claim, Argo Navis, and, I suppose, the Earth of our prehistory. Why, look at what went on in Chronopoles during prohibition! Who was running the government then—the Mayor or Jesus Malaguerra?”

De Salva stood there with a pensive look holding his glass. “Good God! Mendoza, I *do* believe that you are right!”

“It’s not the *rightness* or *wrongness* that I attempt to prove, Marco, *Civilization* is an artificial construct that exists *only* in the minds of its constituents and it requires a lot of heavy machinery to be propped up and maintained. Civilization is an expensive and tedious human endeavor. It requires the thoughtful and willing participation of its organizational constituency. *That’s* what is threatened by the general lawlessness and bad behavior of our reprobate ruling elite. They truly believe they have no accountability. When they promote the kind of science that is *not* constructive—that does not conform to the principles upon which all life is sustained—all humanity suffers. The planned distribution of wealth to a chosen few, for example, is an act of suicidal mania. Everyone knows that wealth is a concept but its physical manifestation is generated by the labor of other creatures and that physical labor can only be performed by a working class of being as the organization and management of that labor is usually performed by its ruling elite.

An inequitable redistribution of wealth actually means that the laboring classes will be condemned to a life wherein they will work for nothing more than subsistence. As is evidenced by the revolutions of our

more formative years before the establishment of the Republic, it doesn't take very long for people to become fed up with exploitation. What do *you* think would happen if a network of mass communications telegraphed the major event I am suggesting might have happened? The people, in general, realize that they no longer need to contend with the arrangement and, subsequently, no longer recognize their organizational society as the preferred intellectual abstraction for governance." Mendoza explained adding a gesture with his hand that signified a matter-of-fact.

He continued: "Remember, this arrangement is something that exists as a concept *only* in the minds of the participating constituents. Once they collectively decide to let go of the concept, the law and order we recognize as government would come crashing down around our ears. It would be best for the survivors to understand the more traditional skills at that time: gardening, farming, pottery, healing and medicine, metalworking, woodworking, masonry, reading and writing, music, poetry, and the like. In such a time as that time which I suspect befell our forefathers, civilization or the concept of it could only have survived in the communes spread out along the wilderness territories—away from the population centers—mmmm...like those at Arcadia, Monrovia, and the old city of Hebron. You see?"

De Salva stood near the fireplace, his arm resting on the mantle, his glass still half full and in his right hand. He took another drink of Madera. "Then we must *always* be prepared for such dangerous times. The Nistasi are moving upon the colonial territories and even though their numbers are not very great they wreck so much destruction and terror! They are want to bring Chaos upon us and to destroy our way of life! Should such catastrophe envelop us, there would be those who would seize control of the remaining population centers and build power bases which, I know, can only come from the people living under such arrangements but, Mendoza, such a rearrangement of the political landscape would necessarily be according to the deranged social, religious, or political principles of the fanatics among us! Those minority viewpoints are *always* bizarre and lack the currency of reason."

"They would only have the chance because they're being *funded* and *supported* by the morons among our ruling elite who actually use these maniacs to distract our attention away from the fact that there is no longer any development or growth in the common equity of the people and there has not been any such development or growth for quite some time out in the settlements—along the periphery of the Home Worlds. Their folly, as

proven by History, is that they will never be able to maintain such a colossal distraction of the masses for any great length of time—the War of the Brent-Sophia, the Fifty Year War...which, by the way, didn't really last for fifty years, wars of cessation—oh the moronic attempts at mind-control levied by a retinue of imbeciles goes on and on.” Mendoza replied.

“I predict that there will be a group of leaders much like the leadership that seized power during The Great Migration. They will attempt to define *boundaries* of the Republic as did those first explorers when they forced the colonists to stop exploring this string of habitable planets.” He made a sweeping motion with his right hand. “Those efforts of antiquity said: Here we end our expansion and now make stronger what lies within. They are doing the same thing today; and you will notice they are displaying a penchant for letting sleeping dogs lie. The Legionari have already given up the idea of expanding their colony any farther than the settlements around Onega, *their* home world. The people on Argo Navis wish to be left alone to trade with their fellows. Tavali and New Iberia had the snot beat out of them during the wars of attrition; they’re not interested in spending one credit on exploration and expansion. And, after the wealth of the great trading colony on Barcelona had been totally sacked defending the Marssanaen Mineral Fields, they too constructed a defensive perimeter along their regional borders and built up a homeland defense force to “hunker down.” It’s already happening. The Parliament has quietly appropriated billions of dollars to begin building a defensive barrier across the Gannemead Outer Rim, similar to the one the Tavali have built across their outward lying boundaries—to keep the invaders out, they assert. This is *exactly* the mentality the archives show existed in the population on Erta shortly before their fall into Barbarism.” Mendoza continued. “*What* invaders?” He asked rhetorically. “The Nistasi? They’re a degenerate race of parasites whose numbers are small and they are gradually dying off. How could they represent a threat to humanity? No, Marco, the politicians are hard at work building cloistered kingdoms for themselves once again. They’ve learned *nothing* from the lessons of History. You watch; in time, we’ll be negotiating with our own kind for permission to cross the vacuum of deep space. It’s ridiculous, I tell you! We’re all one single species!”

“We should have used all of our wealth and labor to discover an alternative government and associated social technology—it would have been a lot cheaper and we would have been able to focus on exploration which always builds up civilization. But our ruling elite didn’t want to do

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that.” De Salva offered. “They want to “play” read: Hedonists.” He threw up his left hand in disgust and set his wine glass down. “You’re right Francisco, they’ve become complacent and contemptuous of the rest of us just like the Patricians of Onega became contemptuous of their Plebeians not realizing from where all the wealth was coming. At least *they* had the good sense to marginalize the influence of their strategic rulers by creating a democratic monarchy.”

“We are living in times that are a hop, skip, and a jump away from the end of Civilization as we know it. When the ruling elite acts and behaves as does our own, it is a sign that they have lost their grip on the articles of their reality. They have become stupid and no longer use the generous amount of time their parasitic life styles have afforded them to *think things through!*” Mendoza added. “They are no longer holding those great intellectual discussions to theorize and make practical the human effort required to sustain the body politic. There will be rough justice for all from here on out. Only the very clever will elude the consequences of the really stupid mistakes our government is now making on behalf of all of us.”

De Salva paced across the room a bit. “You know, Francisco, labor is the *only* thing that the common man has to negotiate, in his own behalf, with anything, really: Nature, Government, your wife, your employer. With that instinctive knowledge in the mind of every citizen, one had better use one’s limited political capital wisely. I think we’ve stumbled on to something; I think *that’s* what eventually brings on the collapse of any civilization—when civil management, so to speak, loses its connection with those who actually produce the wealth of an organizational society.” He had clasped his hands behind his back now and turned to face Mendoza. “Mmmm? What do you think?”

“I think you’re absolutely right.” Mendoza replied and saluted his friend with his wine glass before consuming the remainder of the delicious liquid within.

* * *

“Will you respond to their inquiry, Emile?” Toftla asked.

“No. I don’t want them poking around our project with their natural curiosity. They’re good people—the Katavvi—and, Creation, we know they’ve contributed much to the success of our project but to allow them

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the opportunity to introduce such a distraction at this time...” Emile’s voice trailed off.

“And, what of Earth?” Tofla asked “It has been many millennia since a civilized population inhabited the place. The ruins are almost indistinguishable from the natural formations around them and the environment is quite pristine once again. It might be an appropriate time to repopulate the planet with this next generation. After all, it’s this generation that will have all of the genetic improvements bred into them.”

“Mmmm...we’ll see.” Emile responded. “We’ve found several candidates, true. But, we can’t let them all travel to one place knowing that they’re some kind of experiment can we? That would foster intellectual insurrection now wouldn’t it?”

“I suppose you’re right, Emile.” Tofla responded. “We’ve learned time and time again that the notion of sanctuary gives the control group the necessary intellectual disposition required to survive.”

“Exactly,” Emile replied, “it improves their chances for survival because it makes them more cautious about the choices they make in their daily routine. The circumstances need to be similar to those placed on the control group—what, nearly a million years ago? You remember—what did their descendants call that place, Tofla?”

“South Africa?” Tofla responded.

“Yes! Yes, that was the place. As I remember, you didn’t give the poor creatures much chance to survive the cataclysm now did you?” Emile inquired.

“No, you’re right; I didn’t display a great deal of faith in the implementation plan. You and I were on a learning curve back then. But they were a remarkable improvement in the evolution of the species though; I’ll admit that.” Tofla replied as wry laughter began to chuckle up from his throat.

“You were so sarcastic about my calculations for success.” Emile continued. “But, as we now know, the idea of sanctuary is a powerful intellectual abstraction and it helped them find their place in their world. Just as we had planned, I might add.”

“Mmmm...yes...risk management. You’re right again, Emile.” Tofla said. “You would think that I’d get used to the way you think after all these many millennia together working on this one project...” Tofla crossed the room shaking his head in mild exasperation. “Now we’re to use the same protocol on the Bolin that we used upon those poor unfortunate Neanderthals and...let’s not forget Homo erectus too.”

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“Yes, Homo erectus. It was the most compassionate approach to the problem of what to do with a species that had served its purpose and whose usefulness could no longer be justified.” Emile replied.

Tofla threw up his hands and gently tapped his temples with the index fingers of each hand. “Simply neuter them—Creation! ...And, they eventually die out without much suffering; I commend you for your originality. You are, first and foremost, a scientist of incomparable stature and ethical courage. But, you have a heart of hearts, Emile. How I do love working with you old friend.”

Emile smiled at his comrade. “And I with you.” He replied affectionately. “Oh, Tofla, by the way, what are those imbeciles doing with their time now? Could you bring me up to date?”

“Well, they’ve reached another population apogee and are preparing to wreck havoc on their small part of the Universe once again. Do you think that we’ve learned enough from their development now, Emile?” Tofla asked.

“Well...Mmmm...perhaps. Let me make sure that they’ve served their purpose before I order extinction.” Emile replied.

“Extinction,” Tofla responded. “Dear, dear, it sounds so cruel. But, I suppose we will have to dispose of them. They’re beginning to affect the outcome in the development of the control group.”

“Well, it isn’t as though we’re going to savage them into extinction. We’ll do it in the same manner as we have always done it.” Emile said. “Do you have the virus prepared?”

“Yes, my staff announced its efficacy this morning.” Tofla replied.

“We’ve some time to observe and I don’t want to complicate the process just yet; we’re making so much progress.” Emile said.

“Indeed we are.” Tofla responded affirmatively. “Indeed we are.”

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