



THE GOLDEN AGE

"Wright may be this
Redging century's most important
new SF talent. ... a hard and
mind-blowing read."

—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

JOHN C. WRIGHT

THE GOLDEN AGE

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

grouped by nervous system formation (neuroform)

Biochemical Self-Aware Entities

Base neuroform

PHAETHON PRIME of RHADAMANTH, Silver-Gray

Manorial School HELION RELIC of RHADAMANTH, Phaethon's sire,

founder of the Silver-Gray Manorial School, and a

peer DAPHNE TERCIUS SEMI-RHADAMANTH, Phaethon's

wife GANNIS HUNDRED-MIND GANNIS, Synergistic—

Synnoint School, a peer ATKINS VINGT-ET-UN GENERAL-ISSUE, a soldier

Nonstandard neuroforms

VAFNIR of MERCURY EQUILATERAL STATION, a peer

XENOPHON of FARAWAY, Tritonic Neuroform Composure School, called the Neptunians

XINGIS of NEREID, also called DIOMEDES, Silver-Gray School

Alternate Organization neuroform, commonly called

Warlocks

AO AOEN, the Master-Dreamer, a peer

NEO-ORPHEUS the Apostate, protonothary and chair

of the College of Hortators ORPHEUS MYRIAD AVERNUS, founder of the Second

Immortality, a Peer

Cortial-Thalamically Integrated neuroform, commonly called Invariants

KES SENNEC the Logician, a peer

Cerebelline neuroform

WHEEL-OF-LIFE, an Ecological Mathematician, a peer GREEN-MOTHER, the artiste who

organizes the ecological performance at Destiny Lake

Mass-Mind Compositions

The ELEMOSYNARY COMPOSITION, a Peer

The HARMONIOUS COMPOSITION, of the College of

Hortators The BELLIPOTENT COMPOSITION (disbanded)

Electrophotonic Self-Aware Entities

Sophotechs

RHADAMANTHUS, a manor-house of the Silver-Gray School, million-cycle capacity

EVENINGSTAR, a manor-house of the Red school, million-cycle capacity

NEBUCHEDNEZZAR, advisor to the College of Hortators, ten-million-cycle capacity

HARRIER, consulting detective, one-hundred-thousand-cycle capacity

MONOMARCHOS, a barrister, one-hundred-thousand-cycle capacity

AURELIAN, host of the Celebration, fifty-thousand-million-cycle loose capacity

The ENNEAD consists of nine Sophotech groups, each of over a billion-cycle capacity, including

Warmind, Westmind, Orient, Austral, Boreal, Northwest, Southwest, and others.

EARTHMIND, the unified consciousness in which all terrestrial machines, and machines in Near

Earth-Orbit, from time to time participate: trillion-cycle capacity

PROLOGUE

CELEBRATIONS OF THE IMMORTALS

It was a time of masquerade. It was the eve of the High Transcendence, an event so solemn and significant that it could be held but once each thousand years, and folk of every name and iteration—phenotype, composition, consciousness and neuroform, from every school and era, had come to celebrate its coming, to welcome the transfiguration, and to prepare.

Splendor, feast, and ceremony filled the many months before the great event itself. Energy shapes from living in the north polar magnetosphere of the sun, and Cold Dukes from the Kuiper belts beyond Neptune, had gathered to Old Earth, or sent their representations through the mentality; and celebrants had come from every world and moon in the solar system, from every station, sail, habitat and crystalline magnetic latticework.

No human or posthuman race of the Golden Oecumene was absent from these festivities. Fictional personalities as well as actual personalities were invited. Composition-assisted reconstructions of dead or deleted paladins and sages, magnates and philosophers, walked by night the boulevards of the Aurelian palace-city, arm-in-arm with extrapolated demigoddesses from imagined superhuman futures, languid-eyed lamia from morbid unrealized alternatives, and strolled or danced among the monuments and energy sculptures, fountains, dream fixtures, and phantasms, all beneath a silver, city—

covered moon, larger than the moon past ages knew.

And here and there, shining like stars on the active channels of the mentality, were recidivists who had returned from high transhuman states of mind, bringing back with them thought-shapes and mathematical constructions inexpressible in human words, haunted by memories of what the late Transcendence had accomplished, feverish with dreams of what the next might hold.

It was a time of cheer.

And yet, even in such golden days, there were those who would not be satisfied.

THE OLD MAN

On the hundred-and-first night of the Millennial Celebration, Phaethon walked away from the lights and music, movement and gaiety of the golden palace-city, and out into the solitude of the groves and gardens beyond. In this time of joy, he was not at ease himself; and he did not know why.

His full name was Phaethon Prime Rhadamanth Humodified (augment) Uncompose Indeconsciousness, Base Neuroformed, Silver-Gray Manorial Schola, Era 7043 (the "Reawakening")

This particular evening, the west wing of the Aurelian Palace-city had been set aside for Presentation of Visions by the elite of Rhadamanthus Mansion. Phaethon had been extended an invitation to sit on the panel of dream-judges, and, eager to experience the future histories involved, he had happily accepted. Phaethon had been imagining the evening, perhaps, would be in miniature, for Rhadamanthus House, what the High Transcendence in December would be for all mankind.

But he was disappointed. The review of one drab and uninspired extrapolation after another had drained his patience.

Here was a future where all men were recorded as brain-information in a diamond logic crystal occupying the core of the earth; there was one where all humanity existed in the

threads of a plantlike array of sails and panels forming a Dyson Sphere around the sun; a thing promised, larger than worlds, housings for trillions of minds and superminds, existing in the absolute cold of trans-Neptunian spacecold was required for any truly precise subatomic engineering but with rails or elevators of unthinkably dense material running across hundreds of AU, across the whole width of the solar system, and down into the mantle of the sun, both to mine the hydrogen ash for building matter, and to tap the vast energy of Sol, should ever matter or energy in any amount be needed by the immobile deep-space mainframes housing the minds of mankind.

Any one of them should have been a breathtaking vision. The engineering was worked out in loving detail. Phaethon could not name what it was he wanted, but he knew he wanted none of the futures being offered him.

Daphne, his wife, who was only a collateral member of the House, had not been invited; and Helion, his sire, was present only as a partial-version, the primary having been called away to the conclave of the Peers.

And so it was that in the center of a loud, happy throng of brightly costumed telepresence mannequins, and real-folk, and with a hundred high windows in the Presence Hall busy and bright with monotonous futures, and with a thousand channels clamoring with messages, requests, and invitations for him, Phaethon realized that he was entirely alone.

Fortunately, it was masquerade, and he was able to assign his face and his role to a backup copy of himself. He donned the disguise of a Harlequin clown, with lace at his throat and mask on his face, and then slipped out of a side entrance before any of Helion's lieutenants or squires-of-honor thought to stop him.

Without a word or signal to anyone, Phaethon departed, and he walked across silent lawns and gardens by moonlight, accompanied only by his thoughts.

He wandered far, to a place he had not seen before. Beyond the gardens, in an isolated dell, he entered a grove of silver-crowned trees. He paced slowly through the grove, hands clasped behind his back, sniffing the air and gazing up at the stars between the leaves above. In the gloom, the dark and fine-grained bark was like black silk, and the leaves had mirror tissues, so that when the night breeze blew, the reflections of moonlight overhead rippled like silver lake water.

It took him a moment to notice what was odd about the scene. The flowers were open, even though it was night, and their faces were turned toward one bright planet above the horizon.

Puzzled, Phaethon paused and pointed two fingers at the nearest trunk, making the identification

gesture. Evidently the protocols of the masquerade extended to the trees as well, and no explanation of the trees, no background was forthcoming.

“We live in a golden age, the age of Saturn,” said a voice from behind him. “Small wonder that our humor should be saturnine as well.”

One who appeared as a wrinkle-faced man, wearing a robe as white as his hair and beard, stood not far away, leaning on a walking stick. During masquerade, Phaethon had no recognition file available in mind, and thus could not tell what dream-level, composition, or neuroform this old man was. Phaethon was not sure how to act. There were things one could say or do to a computer fiction that to a real person, a telepresence, or even a partial, would find shockingly rude.

He decided on a polite reply, just in case. “Good evening to you, sir. Then there is a hidden meaning to this display?” His gesture encompassed the grove.

“Aha! You are not a child of this present age, then, since you seek to look below the surface beauty of things.”

Phaethon was not certain how to take this comment. It was either a slight against the society in which he lived, or else against himself. “You suspect me to be a simulacrum? I assure you, I am real.”

“So simulacra must seem to themselves, I suppose, should anyone ask them,” said the white-bearded man with a wide-armed shrug.

Then he seated himself on a mossy rock with a grunt. “But let us leave the question of your identity; this is a masquerade, after all, and not the right time to inquire, eh? and study instead the instruction of the trees here. I do not know if you detect the energy web grown throughout the bark layers; but a routine calculates the amount of light which would shine, and the angle of its fall, were the planet Saturn to ignite like some third sun. Then, true to these calculations, the energy web triggers photosynthesis in the leaves and flowers, and, naturally, favors the side and angles from which the light would come, you see?”

“Thus they bloom at night,” Phaethon said softly, impressed by the intricacy of the work.

“Day or night,” the white-bearded man said, “provided only that Saturn is above the horizon.”

Phaethon thought it ironic that the white-haired man had picked Saturn as the position for his fictitious new sun. Phaethon knew Saturn would never be improved, the huge atmosphere never mined for volatiles. He himself had twice headed projects to reengineer Saturn and render that barren wasteland more useful to human needs, or to clear out the cluttered navigational hazards for which near-Saturn space was notorious. In both cases public outcry had halted his efforts and driven away his financial support. Too many people were in love with the majestic (but utterly useless) ring-system.

The white-haired man was still speaking: “Yes, they follow the rise and fall of Saturn. And listen here is the curious part: over the generations, the flowers have evolved complex reactions so that their heads can turn to follow that wandering planet through cycle and epicycle, opposition, triune and conjunction. Thus they thrive. They are not one whit disaccommodated by the fact the sun they follow with such effort is a false one.”

Phaethon looked back and forth across the grove. It was extensive. The cool night breeze tingled with the scents of eerie mirrored blossoms.

Perhaps because the man looked so odd, white bearded, wrinkled, and leaning on a stick, just the way a character from an old novel or reproduction might look, Phaethon spoke without reflection. “Well, the artist here did not use flint-napped knives for his gene-splicing, and he didn’t run his calculations in Roman numerals on an abacus, eh? Rather a lot of effort for a pointless jest.”

“Pointless?” The white-haired man scowled.

Phaethon realized his blunder. Perhaps the man was real after all. Probably he was the very artist who had made this place. “Ah... Pardon me! ‘Pointless,’ I admit, may be too strong a word for it!”

“Oh? And what is the right word, then, eh?” asked the man testily.

“Well, ah ... But this grove is meant to criticize the artificiality of our society, is it not?”

“Criticize?! It is meant to draw blood! It is Art! Art!”

Phaethon made an easy gesture. “No doubt the point here is too subtle for me to grasp. I fear I do not understand what it means to criticize civilization for being artificial. Civilization, by definition must be artificial, since it is manmade. Isn't ‘civilization’ the very name we give to the sum total of manmade things?”

“You are being obtuse, sir!” shouted the odd man, drumming his cane sharply into the mosaic underfoot. “The point is! The point is that our civilization should be simpler.”

Phaethon realized then that this man must be a member of one of those primitivist schools, whose members everyone seemed to revere but no one wanted to follow. They refused to have any brain modifications whatsoever, even memory aids or emotion-balancing programs. They refused to use telephones, television, or motor transport.

And some, it was said, programmed the nanomachines

floating in their cell nuclei to produce, as years passed, the wrinkled skin, hair defects, osteoarthritis, and general physical decay that figured so prominently in ancient literature, poems, and interactive games. Phaethon wondered in horror what could prompt a man to indulge in such slow and deliberate self-mutilation.

The man was speaking: “You are blind to what is plain before your eyes! Behold the mirrored layer of tissue growing over all these leaves. It is to block the true sun from the knowledge of the plants. Tracking a sun, which merely rises and sets, is easier than anticipating retrograde motion, I assure you. Complex habits, painfully learned through generations, would be instantly thrown aside by one blast of true sunlight. And therefore these little flowers have a mechanism to keep the truth at bay. Strange that I've made the blocking tissue look mirrored; you can see your own face in it... if you look.”

This comment verged on insult. Phaethon replied hotly: “Or perhaps the tissue merely protects them from irritants, good sir!”

“Hah! So the puppy has teeth after all, eh? Have I irked you, then? This is Art also!”

“If Art is an irritant, like grit, good sir, then spend your genius praising the society cosmopolitan enough to tolerate it! How do you think simple societies maintain their simplicity? By intolerance. Men hunt; women gather; virgins guard the sacred flame. Anyone who steps outside their stereotypical social roles is crushed.”

“Well, well, young manor-born you are a manorial, are you not? Your words sound like someone taught by machines what you don't know, young manor-born, is that cosmopolitan societies are sometimes just as ruthless about crushing those who don't conform. Look at how unhappy they made that reckless boy, what's-his-name, that Phaethon. There are worse things in store for him, I tell you!”

“I beg your pardon?” Strange. The sensation was not unlike stepping for a nonexistent stair, or having apparently solid ground give way underfoot. Phaethon wondered if he had

somehow wandered into a simulation or a pseudomnesia-play without noticing it “But... I am Phaethon. I am he. What in the world do you mean?” And he took off the mask he wore.

“No, no. I mean the real Phaethon. Though you are quite bold to show up at a masquerade like this dressed in his face. Bold. Or tasteless!”

“But I am he!” A bewildered note began to creep into his voice.

“So you are Phaethon, eh? No, no, I think not. He is not welcome at parties.”

Not welcome? Him? Rhadmanthus House was the oldest mansion of the Silver-Gray, and the Silver-Gray was, in turn, the third oldest scholium in the entire manorial movement. Rhadmanthus boasted over 7,600 members just of the elite communion, and not to mention tens of thousands

collaterals, partials and secondaries. Not welcome? Phaethon's sire and gene-template was Helio founder of the Silver-Gray and archon of Rhadamanthus. Phaethon was welcome everywhere!—

The strange old man was still speaking: "You could not be him: Phaethon wears grim and brooding black and proud gold, not frills like those."

(For a moment, oddly enough, Phaethon could not quite recall how he usually dressed. But surely he had no reason to dress in grim colors. Had he? He was not a grim man. Was he?)

He tried to speak calmly: "What do you say I have done to make me unwelcome at celebration, sir?"

"What has he done? Hah!" The white-haired man leaned back as if to avoid an unpleasant smile. "Your joke is not appreciated, sir. As you may have guessed, I am an Antia-maranthine Purist, and I do not carry a computer in my ear telling me every nuance of your manor-born protocols, or which foot to use, or when to hold my tongue. Maybe I speak out of turn to say that the real Phaethon would be ashamed to show his face at a festival like this! Ashamed! This is a celebration of those who love the civilization, or who, like

me, are urged to try to improve it by constructive criticism. But you!"

"Ashamed? ... I have done nothing!"

"No, no more! Do not speak again! Perhaps I should get a brain filter like you machine-pets, so I could merely blot out stains like you from my sight and memory. That would be ironic, wouldn't it? Me, shrouded in a little silvery tissue of my own. But irony is perhaps more fit to an age of iron than to an age of gold."

"Sir, I really must insist you tell me what"

"What?! Still here, you interloper! If you want to look like Phaethon, maybe I should treat you like him, and have you thrown out of my grove on your ear!"

"Tell me the truth!" Phaethon stepped toward the man.

"Fortunately, this grove, and even the surrounding dreamspace, are my own, not part of the park grounds proper, and so I can throw you out, can't I?"

He cackled, and waved his walking stick.

The man, and the grove, disappeared. Phaethon found himself standing on a green hilltop in the sunlight, overlooking the palaces and gardens of the celebration shining in the distance. An overture music came faintly from the distant towers.

This was a scene from the first day of the celebration, one of the entrance scenarios. The old man had deleted his grove scene from Phaethon's sensorium, throwing him back into his default setting. An unthinkable rudeness! But, perhaps, allowed under the relaxed protocols and standards of the festival time.

A moment of cold anger ran through Phaethon. He was surprised at the vehemence of his own emotion. He was not normally an angry man, was he?

Perhaps it would be wise to let the matter drop. There were entertainments and delights enough to engage his attention at the Celebrations without pursuing this.

But... unlike everything he had seen, this was real. Phaethon's curiosity was piqued, and perhaps his pride was stung. He would discover the answers.

He raised his fingers to his eyes and made the restart gesture. He was back in the scene, at night, in the silvery grove, but alone. The man was either gone or he was hiding behind Phaethon's sense-filter.

With another gesture, Phaethon lowered his sense-filter and opened his brain to all the sensations in the area, so he could look upon "reality" without any interpretation-buffer.

The shock of the noise and music, the screams of the Advertisements, startled him.

Panels and banners of lightweight film hung or floated grandly in the air. Each one flashed with colors brighter and more gaudy than its neighbor; every image was twice as dizzying, alluring, and

hypnotic as the one before. Some of the Advertisements had projectors capable of directing stimulation into any brain equipped to receive it.

When they noticed Phaethon staring (perhaps they had registers to note his eye movements and pupil dilations such information was, after all, in the public domain) they folded and swooped clamoring, pressing around him, squawking, urging him to try, just once, free trial offer, the proffered stimulants and additions, false memories, compositions, and thought schemes. They swarmed like angry sea gulls or hungry children from some historical drama.

The music was, if anything, worse. A group from the Red Manorial School on one hillside in the distance were having a combination scream-feast, Bacchanalia, and composition-symphony analogous to the Emancipated partials of the Psycho-asymmetric Insulae-Composition were on the other hillside having a noise duel. Their experimental 36- and 108-tone scale music, subsonic and hypersonic, trembled in Phaethon's teeth. They made no effort to muffle the sound for the sake of those who do not share their extensive ear/auditory lobe modifications, their peculiar subjective time-scale alterations, or their even more peculiar aesthetic theories. Why should they? Every civilized person was assumed to have access to some sort of sense-filter to allow them to block or to tolerate the noise.

And there was no sign of the white-haired man. Perhaps

he had been a projection after all, or some fiction, part of the art statement of the grove?

The flash and glamour of the transparent Advertisements did not block his view. The trees were widely spaced, nor was there brush. And, unless the man had hidden behind the walking iceberg thing looming above the grape trellises nearby, there was simply no place to hide.

Phaethon threw his hands before his face and gestured for his sense-filter to resume.

Peace and silence crashed into place around him. It was not, perhaps, the perfect truth he saw. But the groves were quiet now, and starlight and moonlight slanted through the strange silver-mirrored leaves, and falling blossoms. A routine calculated how the scene would look (and sound and feel and smell) were the disturbing objects not present. The representation was close to real, "Surface Dreaming" as it was called. The machine intelligences creating the illusion, able to think a million times faster than a man, or a billion, could cleverly and symmetrically account for all inconsistencies and cover up any unwanted errors.

His ears still rang with echoes; his eyes were still dazzled by floating half shapes, colors reversed. He could have waited for his ears to stop ringing naturally, or blinked his eyes clear. But he was impatient; the man he sought was no doubt getting away. He merely signaled for his eyes to reset to perfect night adaptation, for his ears to restore.

Phaethon started to jog toward the grape trellises where ...

The iceberg thing was gone. Phaethon saw nothing.

Iceberg? Phaethon's augmented memory could re-create an exact image of what he had seen. It had loomed, gigantic, over the area, moving on myriad legs of semiliquid, which solidified into elephantine, then liquefied again as the creature drifted forward. Likewise, it had had a dozen arms and tentacles of ice flowing and freezing around objects in the area, careful not to disturb the trees, but holding objects (eyes? remote sensors?) near the garden plants, as if to study them from every angle.

It was, of course, a member of the Tritonic Neuroform

Composition School, the so-called Neptunians. The technology of their nerve-cell surface allowed them thought-speeds approaching that of some of the slower Sophotechs; but the crystals of the cell surface exhibited their peculiar electro-superconductive and micropolymeric characteristics only under the near-absolute-zero temperatures and near-metallic-hydrogen-forming pressures of the Neptunian atmosphere. The icy body Phaethon had seen was armor-living, shape-changing armor, but armor nonetheless, and a triumph of molecular and submolecular technology. That armor allowed the Neptunian brain substances inside to withstand the unbearable heat and (relative to Neptune) near

vacuum conditions of the earthly atmosphere.

~~That he had programmed his sense-filter to block images of Advertisements or raucous music~~ Phaethon could understand. But he did not remember (and his memory was photographically perfect) ordering the filter to block views of Neptunians. Merely that one of that strange, remote school, the most distant members of the Golden Oecumene, should come physically to Earth was cause for wonder and comment.

Why in the world would Phaethon have ordered himself not to see, or to avoid remembering seeing, such a being? It was true that Neptunians were thought of as reckless, innovative, untrustworthy, and yet...

Phaethon took a moment to examine his sense-filter's censor. Only three of the command lines struck him as odd. Very odd. One was meant to prevent him seeing the Cerebelline Green-Mother ecoperformance being held on Channels 12-20 at Destiny Lake. The second was to edit out sights and references to the visiting Neptunian legates. A third was meant to distract him from studying astronomical reports or information concerning a recent disaster in Mercurial space, brought on by solar prominences and irregularities of unusual violence.

Why? What was the connection?

And why had he done this to himself? And then ordered himself to forget that he had done it?

Phaethon adjusted his sense-filter to allow himself to see

the Neptunian (without hearing the music or seeing those dreadful Advertisements) and was surprised to behold the gigantic creature picking its way up the grassy slope toward him, moving like a pale cloud bank.

As it came closer, Phaethon saw, within the ice, several concentric shells or spheres of crystalline armor. Deep in the smoky depths was a web of nerve tissue connecting four major brains, and at least a hundred lesser subbrains, nerve knobs, ganglia, synthetic cells, relays, and augmentation clusters.

The nerve tissue within the ice was in motion, some tendrils of brain matter expanding, forming new nodes and knobs; and others contracting, creating an impression of furious mental activity.

Closer it came.

Elsewhere, Helion was also discontented.

In Aurelian mansion, seven entities of very different schools, life principles, neuroforms, and appearance were meeting privately. They had three things in common: wealth, age, and ambition.

The Seven Peers were actually sitting in a tall, many-windowed library, with thought-icons on the oak-paneled walls. Each Peer saw the chamber differently.

The most recently admitted Peer was named Helion Relic (undetermined) Rhadaman Humodified (augment, with multiple synnoetic sensory channels) Self-composed, Radial Hierarchy Multipartial (multiple parallel and partial, with subroutines), Base Neuroformed, Silver-Gray Manorial School, Era 50 (The Time of the Second Immortality).

He was the only manor-born present, and was more than a little pleased that his school, the Silver Gray, was singled out from among the other schools of the manorials for this dignity.

Helion's self-image wore the costume of a Byzantine emperor—

perator from the time of the Second Mental Structure, with a many-rayed diadem of pearly white and robe of Tyrian purple.

"My Peers, it is with great pride and honor I take my place among you. I trust that the legal issues surrounding the question of my continuity of identity are acceptable to everyone here?"

There was a signal of concurrence from the Peers, which Helion's sensorium interpreted as nods and murmurs of assent.

"Gentlemen, we are the Peers and Paramounts of this civilization. The Golden Oecumene has given us every benefit she can give. Now we must protect her. We must make certain that the event

that so recently shook our society to her rootsevents that only we Seven now recallnever recur.

~~“We Seven represent the wealthiest nonmachine fortunes ever to exist in time or space. If we do not actthen who?”~~

“I submit that we have reached a golden age, a time of perfection and Utopia: to maintain it, sustain it, no further changes can be allowed. Adventures, risks, rashness, must receive no further applause from any voice in our Oecumene. Only then will we all be able to keep our wayward sons home, safe from harm.

“At your leisure, you may examine my detailed findings; how many people we can influence, what the possible results are of various forms of art and persuasion we can bring forth during the celebration. I draw your attention, for example, to the ecoperformance at Destiny Lake, formulated by the sister-mates of our Peer, Wheel-of-Life. Even those who do not apprehend the direct analog involved there will be subliminally made uneasy by the type of erratic and selfish heroism which the work of art condemns.

“This is merely one example of thousands. The computer time available to my Manor house can generate specific anticipations running to many orders of magnitude. Merely human minds will not be able to outwit the kind of persuasive campaign I envision. If enough people are persuaded of the truth of a proposition before the Transcendence, surely that

will be remembered during the Transfiguration, surely that will shape the outcome after.

“The Age of Tranquility, dreamed of for so many aeons of so much turmoil and pain, has come. My Peers, history must be called to an end!

“Examine my proposal, my Peers. Look at the future I have drafted. It is one where the College Hortators is backed by the full power of the Seven Peers.”

THE NEPTUNIAN

Phaethon addressed the giant being: "Pardon me, sir, if I am intruding, but could you tell me please, if you saw a man come by here just now? He looked like this...." and he opened up channel 100, the common-use channel, and downloaded a few hundred frames of images and sensor-mediated data from his recent memory into a public temporary file. He had an artistic subroutine add background music, narrative comments, and some dramatic editing for theme and unity, and then he transmitted the images.

Phaethon felt the tingle of his nape hairs as his name was read (he still had not put his mask back on), and then a signal came in on a high-compression channel, saying: "This is the translator. My client is attempting to convey a complex of memory files and associational paths which you either do not have the ability to receive or which I do not have authority to transmit. The amount of information involved may be more than one brain can apprehend. Do you have stored noumenal personalities, backups, or augments?"

Phaethon signaled for identity, but the Neptunian was masked. "You have me at a disadvantage, sir. I am not accustomed to revealing the locations of my mindspace to strangers, and certainly not my resurrection copies." Phaethon wanted an answer to his question, and would have preferred

to remain polite, but the request that he open his private thoughts was extraordinary, almost absurd. Not to mention that the Neptunian reputation for eccentric pranks was too well known.

"Very well. I will attempt to convey my client's communication in a linear format, by means of words, but only on the understanding that much substantial content, and all secondary meanings, nuances, and connotations will be lost."

"I will be tolerant. Proceed."

"My initial data burst consists of four hundred entries, including multidimensional image arrays, memory respondents and correlations, poetry, and instructions on nerve alterations for creating novel emotional receiving structures in your brain. These structures may be of use later for appreciating the emotions (which have no names as yet in your language) which other parts of the communication will then attempt to arouse. The initial burst contains other preliminary minutia.

"Then follows a contextual batch of six thousand entries, including volumes of art and experienced memories and reconstructed memories, real and fictional, intended to give you and him a common background of experience, a context in which certain allusions and specifics will be best understood. Other greetings and salutations follow.

"The first entry of the core message contains rote formalities of time-sense and identity continuity, establishing that you are, in fact, the same Phaethon of my client's acquaintance, or, in case you are a copy, reconstruction, or simulation, to ascertain the relative degree of emotional and mental correspondence with which my client must regard you. The core message itself"

"Pardon me," said Phaethon. "Did I know your client before he joined your Composition?" He amplified his vision (opening additional wavelengths) to look curiously at the several brains and brain groups floating in the icy substance.

"The Neptunian legate produces an emotion-statement of three orders of complexity, with associated memory trees to show correspondence, but otherwise does not respond to your question which he regards as fantastic, disorienting, and not

at all funny. Pause: Should I explain further about the emotional reaction, or shall I continue with the central message of the first datagroup? The process could be considerably sped if you will impart your command codes and locks to give me direct access to your neurological and mnemonic systems; this will enable me to add files directly into your mind, and alter your temperament, outlook, and philosophy to understand my client in the way he himself would like to be understood."

“Certainly not!”

“I was required to ask.”

“Can you make your summary more brief? The man I’m asking about is someone whose name perhaps he offended me, or this man said some confusing things, and he well, I’m trying to find him. Phaethon finished lamely.

“Very well. My client says: I (he forwards, as an appendix, a treatise on the meaning of the word ‘I,’ the concept of selfhood, and a bibliographical compendium of his life experiences and changes in his self-notions in order to define this term to you) greet (he also has side comments on the history and nature of greetings, the implications in this context of what is meant, including the legal implications of violating the ban placed on his initiating any contact with you) you (and he postulates a subjunctive inquiry that, should you not be the individual that he deems you to be, that all this be placed in a secondary memory-chain, and be regarded as a less-than-real operation, similar to pseudomnesia). He also requests sealed and notarized confirmation on his recorded memorandum documenting that you initiated the contact without his prompting).”

“Stop! You are only three words into the first message, and already everything is obscure. Where has the prohibition been placed on him? By whom? The human race is finally mature, wise enough to reject coercion as a means to deal with each other. Where is there any institution, any curia, that is not voluntary, not based on subscription? Our militia was supported by donations from historical trusts. Who has any right to prevent your client from speaking with me? Who is your client? Tell him to remove his mask.”

“My client responds with an emotion-action statement of four orders of complexity, all in the hypothetical-subjunctive mode, which states, in brief, that were he forbidden to speak with you, the consequences may be (granting for the sake of argument) monitors or directives eavesdropping, which, were there to be such a thing, would not interfere as long as this discourse is kept within the general boundaries of polite and innocuous discourse. Of the seventy-four thousand million possible outcomes of this conversation which my client has examined in predictive scenarios, over fourteen of them conclude with some sort of interruption or reaction from the Aurelian Sophotech. Would you care to examine the full text of my client’s reply, examine the extrapolation scenarios which he has calculated, or should I continue with my disquisition of the core message?”

This was the most fantastic yet. Phaethon put his mask back on, which acted as a signal to restore a zone of privacy around him, even hiding such information as was normally public, such as his name and appearance.

“Surely no one would be so rude as to intrude on our private conversation, not without some good reason!”

“My client wishes to download a philosophical question-and-debate routine to attempt to convince you that, even in the most enlightened and civilized of societies, reasonable men can differ as to what constitutes the good. For example (and here he once again indicates that he speaks only hypothetically) those who place a higher value on freedom than on the alleged security and meaningfulness which adherence to tradition provides, might be willing to tolerate, or even encourage, a certain small amount of crime and riot, danger and uncertainty.”

Phaethon knew Greek and Latin, English and French, and half a dozen other dead languages, and so he knew what the word “crime” meant; but he had never heard it used except as a metaphor for unacceptable rudeness, or for poorly executed works of art. A paleolinguistic routine from the Rhadamanthus Mansion-mind had confirmed the original meaning

of the word and had inserted it into Phaethon’s short-term memory.

He had his memory replay the last message over more than once to reassure himself that there had been no error. Was this creature actually advocating that the use of violence or fraud against innocents

beings was, in some measure, justified?

The translator persisted: “Will you open, at least, a holding space where he can put some of the conversation trees he has constructed on this topic for you?”

“Sir, forgive me if I seem abrupt. But my main question, about the man who accosted me, lingered unanswered. Could you return to your core message, and, if you please, summarize the summary?”

“Here is a severely reduced summation of the core message:

“Phaethon, I greet you once again, though you have passed into the shadow of our enemy, have been wounded in your soul and mind, and have forgotten me. One day, I pray, we shall be whole again. Crippled now in your mind, you have perhaps no strength to sustain the belief in that great dream which once shook the worlds and empires of the Golden Oecumene to its rotten base; nor would you believe in what high esteem I and my comrades still hold you, despite your treasonous weakness of will. But believe this: You are trapped in a labyrinth of illusion; and yet the scruples, or the folly, of our foes allows you one hope of escape, one weak chink, a loophole, in an otherwise all-embracing prison wall.

“You must come with me now to the outer world, to cold and distant Neptune, in the dark, where the power of the sunlight, and of the Golden Oecumene’s machines, fall short. After long struggles and contests of will, we have forced Golden Oecumene law to grant to the distant exiles there a measure of mental privacy and freedom undreamed here; our thoughts are not monitored by the benevolent tyranny of machines. Once there, you can become one of us. Your soul and memory can be cured of their great wound. Your body will be changed, and become like unto ours, and your mind will be embraced into our all-encompassing communion.

“But you must come at once, with no delay. Leave your wife, your life, your dreams of wealth, your mansion-home. Leave all. Say farewell to warmth and sun, but come!” “

Phaethon’s mind was blank. It was all too bizarre. He knew what the word “enemy” was; the term referred to something like a competitor, but a vicious and uncivil one. The idea that the Golden Oecumene structure, however, could be such a thing was patently absurd, like thinking the sky was made of iron. Phaethon knew what insanity was, from his historical simulations, the same way he knew what a flint hand ax or a disease was; he was able to understand the idea that the Neptunian might be insane. He just was not able, not really, to believe it.

In his mental blankness, all he could think to say was: “If I wake my real body, to travel outside the range of the Noumenal Mentality, my brain information could not, in the case of a physical accident, be recorded and stored. Important segments of my life experience might be lost; I could even lose continuity and die the true and final death.”

“But I tell you that you shall not die, but shall mingle with the Tritonic Composition and achieve a finer and higher life!”

The other six Peers, each with different thinking-speed and thinking processes, absorbed, poring over, or examined over 9,200 projections of the effect of the next Transcendence on the upcoming Millennium, either directly, or (for those without permanent mental augmentations on staff), through auxiliary minds.

A gap in Helion’s memory edited out this wait, and brought his time and time sense current to the next point in the conversation. To him, there was no pause. It may have been hours, or merely seconds later.

The undisputed informal leader of the Peers, Orpheus Myriad Avernus, was not physically present there or anywhere. He was the eldest and wealthiest of the Seven. He presented

himself to Helion’s senses as a dark-haired, pale-skinned youth, whose face had a haunting lack of expression, but with eyes unblinking, inward looking, deeply self-absorbed. He wore a long black Plutonian thermal cape of a style so quaint and so far out of fashion that only during a masquerade

would it pass without comment. The wide neckpiece rose almost to his ears, and the pauldrons extended past his shoulders, making his head seem small and childlike.

Orpheus spoke in a very soft voice: "We applaud the sentiment expressed by our newest Peer. When conditions are optimal, any change, by definition, is decay. And Helion knows all too well how chaos, disloyalty, and recklessness can be found within our own households and holdings, and even within the hearts of those nearest to us."

For a moment, no one spoke. All eyes were fixed on Helion. An embarrassed silence hung over the room.

Gannis (or one of him) was physically present in the library chamber in Aurelian House where the meeting was "actually" taking place. Gannis was disguised as a character from First Mental Structure mythology, in robes of sky blue and white, crowned in rays, and with a lightning bolt for a scepter. He held the copyright on a rather striking face: black bearded, with deep-set eyes spaced far apart beneath a wide and kingly brow. An eagle and a she-eagle were perched on his chair back, one over either shoulder. Gannis's eyes were as bright and fierce as those of his pets, but his voice was an agreeable, cheerful boom.

He now spoke to break the tension: "Elder Orpheus! Here you are opening old wounds. Helion has held Phaethon well under control; why bring up an episode we all agreed to forget? I thought we were not going to speak any further it."

Orpheus spoke softly, as if he were talking only to himself, without moving his eyes: "We did not speak on that subject. Except we note that Helion has good reason, now, to display uncompromising zeal in the defense of tradition and orthodoxy."

Orpheus was a member of the small, ancient, peculiar school called the Aeonites. Their practice was to record an

unchanging idealized version of themselves into permanent computer space. This template, at regular intervals, created an emanation or eidolon of itself, which came to life. New eidolons absorbed the information any prior active or living eidolons had acquired since the time the template was absorbed, but rejected any changes of personality, philosophy, or basic values. Members of this school were frozen and unalterable.

It was only by the narrowest margins that the Curia determined Aeonite legal status to be that of self-aware entities rather than ghosts or recordings. Public opinion did not necessarily agree.

(Helion, watching with part of his multiple mind on another channel, saw that Orpheus had no sensorium in operation. Orpheus saw no room at all; the dialogue was merely text; face expressions and nonverbal signs appeared in frames nearby, like the faces on playing cards. There was no other extension or background in Orpheus's scene. Everything else was black. Helion, disturbed, lowered the attention-value of that view, and paid attention to his own version of the scene.)

For a moment, Phaethon was silent, caught in a spell of wonder. He should have been repelled, but he was not. It all sounded as splendid and strange as anything one of his wife's deep-dreamscape dramas might portray.

The Neptunian was speaking: "Even now, I have called my surface-to-orbit pinnace down from Cernous Roc, my vessel. A partial-vacuum generator is among the capabilities in my base layer which grants me flight, and my subsurface fluids can sustain your life cycles in suspension till the midday rendezvous is accomplished. Retrieve your true body from its crypt. I assume it is nearby, for the material housings of Rhadamanth Mansion are not far away. Wake, come here, then step within the circle of my arms; put your face into the surface substance of my body; it will part before you and flow around you, bonding cell with cell, to encase you in a protective vacuole."

Phaethon spoke softly: "But... but... I would need several years, at least, to set my affairs in order and to create and educate a partial-duplicate of me to see to my duties in my absence. In any case

could not leave the festival before the Final Transcendence in December.”

“No. You must come without any delay whatsoever. If you send a message, or even a signal, the labyrinth may close again, and, this time, any loose stones be bricked over!”

Leave immediately? Phaethon imagined his wife, giddy on imagination amplifiers, emerging from her pseudomnesia womb, eagerly seeking him out to talk about her dream-victories, all her newly made computer-generated friends and wonders.

But he would not be there. Impatient, then angry, then frantic, she would seek among the images on the promenade, or in the feast-cities, ballrooms, or game halls, seeing a thousand costumes, all masks. The location channel was disabled during masquerade. It would be eight months or more before her fears could be confirmed. Till then, she would not know if he was no longer in this world rather than merely hiding or ignoring her.

The thought sobered him. He laughed. “I’m quite sorry, my dear sir, but you must realize what a ridiculous offer you are extending”

And he stopped. Because it was beyond ridiculous. Go to Neptune?

Neptune was the farthest outpost of civilization, and, with two notable exceptions, the farthest any colony of humanity had ever reached: The actual last outpost of the Golden Oecumene was at 50 AUs, at the focal point of the gravity lens created by Sol. Here, elements of the Porphyrogenic Composition mass-mind had created an artificial ice planet for themselves, and for the other visitors and staff of the Cosmic Observatory Effort. Beyond that, the nearer stars were barren of life. But Cygnus XI, a small colony founded to study the effects of the singularity there had discovered a source of

infinite energy, and, with that wealth, had expanded to a mighty civilization. Yet the distance was so far, the costs of travel so very great, that all communication with that society was lost; for that reason, it was known as the Silent Oecumene.

Neptune was unthinkable closer even than the nearest star, and yet was still unthinkable remote. Even ships with fairly high fuel-mass-to-payload ratios required very long times to make the journey—months, sometimes years.

Ridiculous? The thought was impossible.

In the palace:

“Come!” said Gannis heartily, slapping the tabletop with his palm. “Helion has spent more computer time than any of us millions of seconds for one study alone to extrapolate which visions the Aurelian-mind may present during the December Transcendence. His devotion is beyond question.

“His dream is a grand one, I admit! Cease the motions of society, and freeze it into its present state! (Fortunate for us, when the waves freeze, those of us now at the crest will be at the tip of the iceberg forever after.) And yet your pardon, friend Helion allow me to introduce a note of caution. The Hortator College is a group of populist moralizers; their pinch-nostriled, squint-eyed overzealousness—ah? Is that what we need more of? Or less of? Augmenting their power will increase their power over us, even over us Seven Peers. What then, eh? What egalitarian nonsense will we be forced to stomach then? And I speak not just for myself but for all of me when I say that!”

Gannis’s view of the room was the same as Helion’s, but his sense of humor required him to introduce a slight difference. In Gannis’s view, every object had two shadows, a dark black and a faint gray, for he had placed a second, smaller sun, a mere pinpoint of dazzling brightness, rising in the East.

Orpheus said in his cold, soft whisper of a voice: “Peer

Gannis perhaps has cause to fear any close inquiry into the recent events. It is a fine coincidence that he earned so much advantage by the Hortator’s most recent deliberations.”

Gannis should have looked angry at the accusation, but instead he threw wide his arms and

laughed. “I am complimented that you think me cunning enough to have arranged these recent debacles! Not so. I fear that mere dumb luck has saved the Jovian Engineering Effort once again. Do you recall when bad investments by my overself brought me to such penury that I was asked to leave my peerage behind? Why, yes, you surely must, for it was you yourself who ask me to depart.”

Gannis turned to the others, and continued: “And you wanted to have no more to do with funny, dumb, lovable, affable old Gannis, did you, my Peers? But then my other selves made back our fortune with the establishment of the Jupiter Equatorial Grand Collider. We did not predict the existence of the continent of stabile transadamantine elements beyond atomic number nine hundred; in fact, the standard model predicted against it.

“Chrysdmantium! What could not be done with this wonder metal? It elevated me back to my dominant position others were enticed to dreams more wild, perhaps.

“I am better for my days of loss. More generous. Generous to the point of folly! I am as free with my advice as I am with my bounty. Is it my fault my advice was ignored? Is it my fault the wealth spent so freely returned to me? This is the reward of fate, who cherishes the magnanimous. Clever lawyers merely help the process....

“But for all my generosity, good Helion, I cannot see what more I can do for the College of Hortators. The contracts and covenants we make with all of our clients provide that anyone shunned by the College of Hortators we also must shun. For my clients, this means they can enter no structures, ships, or space elevators made from my supermetal; for the customers of Vafnir, this means no power of the Eleemosynary Composition, no understanding; of Ao Aoen, no dreams; of Orpheus, no life. What more is wanted?”

Helion answered: “Nebuchednezzar Sophotech, who had been advising the College, has sequestered himself. The College presently has little or no sophotechnology at its command; that can be remedied. If they had sufficient computer-time resources, the Hortators could be omnipresent and omniscient: We, my Peers, who are the wealthiest entities ever to live, have no lack of resources to donate.”

Gannis made an expansive gesture. “But why spend so much? Dangerous matters have been resolved”

Helion said darkly, “There are still those who would overthrow all we have built and done. Do you gentlemen have the word ‘enemy’ in your archives?”

In the garden:

“What is your true motive here?” asked Phaethon. “What is the meaning of this?”

“That same restriction which prevented me from first approaching you prevents me from bringing up the interdicted topic. Though my legal counsel parapersonality suggests that, if you and you alone bring up the topic, I may be able to answer questions about it without overstepping the letter of the law.”

“Very well. Does this have anything to do with the man I saw?”

“The tree artist? He is nothing. He escaped you by yanking down a low-hanging Advertisement and wrapping himself in it, cloaklike, and your sense-filter blinded you to him till he was gone.”

Phaethon thought such things happened only in comedies. Wryly, he realized that the tree artist, being a Puritan, had worn no sense-filter. He would have been exposed naked to all the clamor and commotion of the Advertisements, the roar of the music. Small wonder, then, that he had been in a testy mood.

“He implied I had done something shameful or dreadful, something showing hatred or contempt for the Golden Oecumene. Is this related to your forbidden topic?”

“Directly related.”

“Hm. It is well-known that the Neptunians love to test the boundaries of reason and good taste, and forever chafe and complain at the protocols and polite customs one can hardly call them ‘laws’ which we voluntarily bind ourselves. And before you used the obscure word ‘crime.’ Were we partners, you and I, in some criminal attempt?”

“Not criminal. Neptunians experiment with unusual mind forms, but we are not insane. And you and I were partners in an attempt which was not well loved by your small-souled people here, nor well loved at all.”

“Some Neptunian prank or trick or fraud, was it, then?”

“You repeat the slanders of our detractors. The Tritonic Composition explores the boundaries of mental effort, unhindered by the ponderous moral posturing of your leaden machine-minds! Allow me to transmit my stored compendia into your brain space. Time is short, and the Neptunian philosophy complex, and is based on value judgments which only experience, not logic, can convey.”

“Load them onto a semipublic channel, and I will peruse them at leisure, without danger of mind-to-mind contamination or manipulation.”

“I am not permitted to undertake the insecurity or expense of placing valuable and private thought templates from my life experience into a public box.”

“Expense?” This was ridiculous. Why, the expense of shipping Phaethon to Neptuneor, saving the mass, of shipping Phaethon’s brain in a lightweight life support was astronomical. Phaethon consulted an almanac in the Rhadamanthus Mansion-Mind. Neptune and Earth were not in favorable positions for any fuel-efficient flight paths. Phaethon calculated how the increased payload of his weight would affect the mass-energy costs of even a low-boost orbit. The cost in energy-currency was roughly equivalent to a several thousand seconds of time-currency. In other words, a small fortune.

“The expense is nothing compared to what you’ve already offered in transportation costs.”

At first, it looked as if the iceberg shape were melting. But no, it was flattening, the high crown dropping, and the wide base growing wider and wider. Fluid flowed from the base, thickening and freezing into leg pillars. Under the ice at each foot of these pillars, Phaethon could see, dimly, complex machines being quickly made out of neurocomposite crystal and ceramic. The bulbs and globes and insulated tubes seemed to be energy batteries and field manipulators.

“You have acted against my advice and signaled to your mansion. I must flee before I am discovered.”

Signaled? Phaethon had retrieved one almanac file and run a calculation routine, almost automatic functions. Phaethon had thought the Neptunian had only not wanted him to talk to his mansion. “Don’t be absurd! No one would dare to listen in on my private communications.”

“Even your vaunted Sophotechs will bend their precious laws to serve a purpose they call higher. But I shall use their own laws against them. They allow you some privacy during the distractions and masquerades meant to appease you. Behold. I shall construct a masquerader for you; he shall hold the files you will not receive from me; when you are strong enough to face truth, strong enough to deconstruct this world of illusions, my messenger shall come for you.”

Phaethon saw, in the depth of the armored crystal, a shape like a naked body floating to the surface. It was complete with bones, muscles, nerves, veins. Only the skin of the face and neck had not been wholly grafted on; and the skull was opened like a flower of bone, and strands and lines of nerve fiber were still being packed into place, with umbilicuslike channels still leading back to the main Neptunian brain-group. The lower body had a costume being woven around it, bulky and ill-fitting, but it was recognizable as the costume of Scaramouche, a character from the same period and operetta cycle as Phaethon’s Harlequin.

“Phaethon, come now. This is the final second.”

“Forgive me, sir, but I am not satisfied with your various

mystifications and hints. I suspect a deception, for which your kind are notorious. You have not even yet told me your name.”

“How should I tell you my name when you do not even recall the meaning of your own!”

“Phaethon? The name dates from the Time of the Second Mental Structure. The myth is of the sun god’s bastard child who dared to drive his father’s chariot....” Phaethon’s voice trailed off.

There was a final surge and broil in the depth of the Neptunian body substance, as structural elements were formed and grown into place. A gush of wind announced the creature was activating its lift generators, joined by whistling screams from compression-jets.

The Neptunian’s voice, channeled into Phaethon’s sensorium, did not need to get any louder to speak over the rush and rumble of the liftoff. “You named yourself for a demigod whose ambition burned a world. Not the name a man content with his lot in life would choose. But you don’t recall why you chose it, do you? Can you begin to guess now how much of your memory is missing? The accident did not even let you keep the meaning of your name.”

Phaethon backed up as pressure exploded from the feet of the Neptunian. Its low, flat shape was now in an aerodynamic configuration. With ponderous grace, it raised its nose to the sky, and moved upward.

Phaethon adjusted his sense-filter so that, instead of the roar of jets and the whine of magnetics, he still only heard the chirruping of night insects in the Saturn-grove. Amplifying his vision to the highest extent he could, he saw the body of the masquerader, wrapped in some sort of cocoon of buoyancy chute ejected from the Neptunian as it rose. He attempted to encompass the satellite and ground-based location routines within his vision, and to open more sense-channels. But apparently the same protocol that disabled the location routines during masquerade extended to escaping aircraft as well. Phaethon was not able to track the body as it fell.

As for the Neptunian, it flashed like distant ice, gained altitude. Then the light twinkled and receded, one star lost among many.

In the palace:

Wheel-of-Life was a Cerebelline ecoperformer of the Decentral Spirit School, as well as trustee for all copyrighted biotechnology based on the Five Golden Rings mathematics. She appeared as a matron of serene beauty and grave demeanor, seated on a throne of living flowers, grass, and hedge, in which a dozen species of birds and insects nested. She was also physically present (insofar as the word had meaning for Decentral Spiritualists), but her great cloak of interwoven living fibers ran from her shoulders out the window to where the other plants and animals that formed her corporate body and mind components reposed.

Cerebellines were a neuroform whose hindbrain and cortex were interconnected in the pattern called “global,” from their ability to resolve multiple simultaneous interrelationships. They could think in a timeless meditation, and from many points of view at once. This avoided set-theoretical paradoxes, and linear-thought limitations. It was one of the least popular neuroforms in the Golden Oecumene, however, since it fell prey too easily to mystical conundrums and nonverbalisms.

(Helion was not able to maintain a translation from her point of view for any length of time. The plantlike parts of her were aware of the room only as motion, pressure, sunlight, moisture, but also of computer movements, information flows. The birds and rodents gave so many small, scattered pictures and sounds of the Conclave that Helion was perplexed; and the thoughts were so tangled with sharp, bright shards of instinct, lust, hunger, fear, that Helion’s brain-structure could not assimilate or index the perceptions.)

Wheel-of-Life indicated an objection. She expressed herself by holding up her hands and creating a miniature ecosystem in its globe. Microbes, plankton, brightly colored fish-shaped

darts swam in the globe; triangular shark things fought many-tentacled cephalopods in relentless

subsea wars.

~~She shattered the globe on the table surface into many globes. In each of the lesser globes, one species and only one rose to dominance, destroyed all competition, overgrazed, died back, and lost its throne. In every case the single dominant life form subdivided into new avenues as evolution continued.~~

Ao Aoen, the Master Dreamer, owner of a vast entertainment empire, spoke up: "I agree with Peer Wheel-of-Life. Helion's vision will create a future of monochromatic conformity; events will narrow toward simplicity. Yet our society is diverse. Solutions are diverse. Within the mind are webs of interconnections, laws of thought; between minds are webs of social relation, laws of institution. Turn one inside out and you have the other. Yet which of us is simple enough to be understood by, or complex enough to understand, ourselves?!"

Helion responded by inventing a mathematical game of geometric solids and spaces within a three-dimensional grid. The rules of the game allowed the solids, if surrounded by spaces, to reproduce; but the solids evolved their shapes due to pressure from the other solids.

He held it up like a glass box in his hand, and ran it, in compressed time, a dozen or a thousand times. In all but one case, the shapes bowed to the pressure of the surrounding solids, eventually forming cubes, and consumed all the available empty spaces.

The one nonstandard case was a beautiful snowflake-shaped system, with octahedrons and tetrahedrons radiating out from the single central dodecahedron. Ao Aoen thoughtfully reached across the table with his extremely long fingers, picked up that system, saved it, and handed it to Peer Wheel-of-Life, who sent several birds and insects to gaze at it with joy.

"I'd like to disagree with Peer Wheel-of-Life," said Helion. "The diversity in nature is sustained because the beasts and plants must solve their disputes in inefficient life-or-death competition. Rational creatures can create treaties, laws, and

social mechanisms to channel aggression into peaceful competition. Competition encourages efficiency. Efficiency encourages uniformity. Even a society as diverse as ours has certain rules and mores which we must enforce against those who deviate."

Gannis murmured: "And here I had thought we were agreed not to speak about Phaethon again..."

Helion hid a frown in a backup file, were no one could see it. Yet he frowned.

Vafnir, the energy magnate, said, "The same argument implies, Peer Helion, that those societies that employ to enforce its rules against deviations are justified in their use of force. Is this consistent with the arcadian ease and Utopian peace we all have known?"

Helion said, "There are warriors even in paradise. And even in Arcadia, death comes."

THE SOLDIER

In the garden: As Phaethon stood and stared at the receding glimmer of the Neptunian, something came floating in on the night breeze.

Phaethon looked. A gaggle of little black bubbles swirled, windblown, across the grass under the trees and stars. Phaethon did not see from whence these machine organisms came. The bubbles swirled and swooped, circling the spot where the Neptunian just had been.

“Now what?” muttered Phaethon.

Some spheres dropped to roll across the grass, uphill and downhill. The main group of them slowly went back and forth along the path toward the grape trellises where Phaethon had first seen the Neptunian. The black spheres paused frequently to insert a slender probe or proboscis into the ground. Nearer to Phaethon, at the spot from which the Neptunian had launched, the spheres gathered in several rounded tetrahedrons and drove more probes into the ground.

It did not look very beautiful; the sphere movements were at once too slow and methodical, and too quick and efficient, to be an animation dance, nor was there music. Unless it was meant for an audience with senses not like his? Setting his hearing to a search routine, Phaethon found only high-frequency encrypted signals coining from the spheres, all squawks and stuttering whines, with no trace of rhythm or grace.

Phaethon pointed a finger and made the identification gesture, knowing it would be blocked by the masquerade. To his surprise, it was not. To his eyes, it looked as if a window had opened in midair, and a scroll unfurled, and in the frame was a dragon glyph radiating four ideograms in an archaic style: Honor, Courage, Fortitude, Obedience.

“Preliminary array, hostile organism detection and counteraction system identifies itself. Copyright information (Security Clearance required). Public Ownership. This unit is assigned to Marshal-General Atkins Vingtetun, General-Issue Humaniform (multiple battle augmentation), Military Hierarchy, Semicompilation (ghosthaunted, and combat-reflexes), Warmind, Star Command, Base Neuroform, Unschooled, Era Zero (the Creation).”

Phaethon was truly amused that someone would come to a masquerade disguised as Atkins. Atkins was the soldier. The last soldier. Phaethon was under the vague impression that Atkins had long ago, centuries upon centuries ago, killed himself or gone to stand-by or been stored in a museum, something.

The impersonation was in questionable taste, however. A soldier? No one liked to be reminded of their barbaric past. And, unless Phaethon had misunderstood the masquerade guidelines, identity and location information could be masked but not actually falsified. But it seemed as if someone were nonetheless impersonating Atkins. Wouldn't the Hortators consider this a breach of propriety?

On the other hand, falsifications of fictional people, or people whose identities were retired, whose memory copyrights had expired, must be permissible. Such identities were in the public domain, were they not? After all, no one was going to object to Phaethon, for example, impersonating Harlequin.

But Phaethon was still curious. For what were the spheres so diligently searching? Had the Neptunian (assuming it had

been real) left behind some clue or trace of its origins or goals?

Well, if the false Atkins was going to be so gauche as to imitate a long-retired war hero, Phaethon could overstep politeness also. (This was a party, after all, and the standards of behavior were relaxed.)

After all, it was also in very bad taste to intrude icon-objects (like this midair window and dragon glyph) into Phaethon's field of view without any attempt whatever to blend the objects into the re-

environment, so as not to disturb Phaethon's previously established visual-continuity aesthetic. So perhaps it was in equally bad taste to tap into another person's private communication link, decode it, and find out what information all the spheres were sending back to their base point. But Phaethon did it anyway.

He caught only a fragment of the many messages: "... an information-deception-and-avoidance routine more complex-magnitude eight than a nonmechanical intelligence can produce. Sophotechnology of origin unknown ..."

"... artificial viral bodies introduced into grass DNA where subject stepped. Excessive information-strand-coding unknown data-compression techniques grass will spore microorganisms of high complex systematology intelligence level 100 seeking out raw materials and creating large organizations ..."

And also: "... deduces (from the enemy success against civilian countermeasures) electron and quantum-state manipulation technologies comparable to those produced by Oecumenical civilization based on the same history-development up through to late-period Fifth Mental Structure, but deviating thereafter in a fashion no member schola, or group embraced within the Golden Oecumene, could theoretically produce. Conclusion: .. ."

Then, an interruption: "Who the hell is on this line? Sir hey, you! Excuse me, sir! But what do you think you are doing?"

The window in midair changed, and the dragon sign was replaced by an image of a man-shaped streamlined black

power-armor of a style dating from the Sixth Mental Structure. The helmet turned toward Phaethon (who had his mask back on by then) and, somehow, Phaethon nonetheless felt that nape-hair prickling sensation which was his cue from Rhadamanthus that his name file was being read.

Phaethon was shocked beyond words. Then: "Who, if I may ask, are you, sir, that you just tramped on the protocols of the masquerade without a word?"

"Sorry, sir," the man in the floating window replied. "Atkins. I'm acting on orders from the partial-Parliament extrapolation of the Warmind. You're tapping into a secured channel. May I ask what you're doing in this area?"

In the palace:

Ao Aoen was a Warlock neuroform. His brain had interconnections between the temporal lobe, nonverbal left-brain lobes, and the thalamus and hypothalamus, seats of emotion and passion. Consequently, the relationships between his conscious and subconscious were nonstandard, and allowed him to perform accurately what base neuroforms could do only infrequently: acts of insight, intuition, inspiration, pattern recognition, lateral thinking. He could script his dreams. And dreams were merely one of several overlaps between conscious and unconscious realms that he had mastered or to which he had surrendered.

He was physically present in a hideously beautiful body, patterned with scales like a colored cobra. Extra skull extensions gave his head the shape of a manta ray, shadowing his shoulders and reaching down his back. He had a half a dozen hands and arms, with fingers a yard or more in length. Between his fingers and his arms, like butterfly wings, tissues carrying a dozen delicate sensory-membranes stretched. This gave him scores of sensual sensations beyond the normal ranges.

(Ao Aoen saw the standardized version of the library scene, but overlaid with several dreams and half-dreams, so that every object seemed charged with mysterious and profound symbolism. Ao Aoen had superimposed a webwork of lines, glyphs, astrological notations, indicating loyalties and emotional, or, perhaps, magical-symbolic, sympathies or affiliations. Each Peer was represented by the self-image they projected, so that Orpheus, for example, who projected none, looked to Ao Aoen like an empty black cube.)

Ao Aoen said in a voice like a hollow woodwind, “I see patterns within patterns here. Let our society step outside itself and let us watch ourselves with awe and curious fear, as if we were strangers. The first thing we see is that most of our population (population measured only by information use) are Sophotech machine-minds. The whole rest of our society, our empires and our efforts, are like the Amish who refused Fourth Era assimilation, like an animal preserve to be sustained while the Sophotechs spend their efforts contemplating abstract mathematics.”

Orpheus said softly: “Distraction. Ao Aoen strays from the topic.”

Ao Aoen made an eye-dazzling wave with his meter-long finger-fans. “All parts reflect the whole. Peer Orpheus. And yet, bluntness is art also, therefore I will be blunt. Attempts to herd human destiny oft times produce stampedes, which trample would-be shepherds.

“My Peers, the Hortators are a private organization, whose sole power comes from the popular esteem and respect they have earned. They cannot dare to be seen arm-in-arm with us, the ill-famed plutocrats, not as long as we Peers are wealthy enough to defy tradition, to ignore popular sentiment and, yes, wealthy enough to suborn the Hortators.”

Helion said coldly: “Recent events have proven that even the wealthiest and bravest of the manor born are not beyond their reach. The best of us must bow to public opinion; no one can afford to offend the Hortators, not anymore.”

In the garden, Phaethon felt offended.

A soldier? It was preposterous. There still were some crimes these days; computer frauds, tin can thefts. Usually by very young rogues, not yet octogenarians. They were always eventually caught, and public outrage was always severe. Such matters were handled by the Hortators, or, in rare occasions when no one answered the call to give themselves up, by the Subscription Constabulary.

But Constables were always unfailingly polite and deferential. Phaethon had not been aware that it was even possible for someone to read one of Phaethon’s masked files (and the name file had, in fact, been masked) without permission. Perhaps a Constable had that right, but only after due notice and in service of a warrant. This man was certainly not a Constable!

Phaethon said as much. “You may ask, Mister Whatever-you-are, but I need not answer. You have no right. And, dammit! Could you at least have the decency to manifest your image properly, without jarring my scene to bits!”

The floating window blinked out, and the armored shape appeared next to Phaethon. The great blades did seem to bend under the black metal boots, and a moon shadow did fall, in proper perspective, across the lawn; but that was about the only concession to manorial notions of propriety this man gave. The highlights and reflections within the armored breastplate were all wrong, and the vision tracking and correction was crude, since the image wavered if Phaethon turned his head too quickly.

The helmet disassembled into a cloud of fingernail-sized scales, which spread and opened, and hovered motionless around the man’s head like a black halo. The face underneath was unremarkable except in its uncomeliness. Phaethon couldn’t remember in face symbology what lines around the lips, or crow’s-feet at the corners of the eyes were supposed to represent. Wisdom? Grimness? Determination? But he had

a crew cut, and an even, unblinking gaze that spoke of ten millennia of military tradition. The face looked much like old archive pictures of Atkins.

One of the black spheres not far from Phaethon sent a signal: “Subject Phaethon shows no presence of contamination. Examination of communication logs and thought-buffers fails to show any data packages received, except for low-level, speech-linear communication. Insufficient to hide an organism construction or self-aware memory data systems.”

“What?!!” exclaimed Phaethon. “Have you been going through my files and logs without

warrant? Without a word? You didn't even ask!"

The man in black armor spoke to Phaethon. His tone was serious and brisk: "Sir, we didn't know whether you had been compromised or not. But you're clean. I'd like you to keep this quiet. The opposition may have constructions, by now, in all our public channels, and I don't want to give them many hints about where the investigation is. But don't worry. This is probably just another false alarm, or a drill. That's all I ever do nowadays anyway. So there's really no need for concern. You are free to go." And he turned to look toward where the black spheres were congregating.

Phaethon stared at him blankly. Were these lines from a play or something? "I think this really has gone on far enough. Tell me what's going on."

The man spoke without turning around. "Sir, that's no concern of yours right now. If I need more cooperation from you, or if we need to do some follow-up examination, you'll be contacted. Thank you for your cooperation."

"What is all this?! You can't talk to me that way! Do you know who I am?!"

The man turned. There was a slight twitch in the tense lines around the soldier's mouth. It looked as if he were trying not to smile. "Ahsir, the Service doesn't allow me to play tricks with my memory. I just don't have that luxury, I guess, sir. I'm, ah, sure at least one of us remembers who you are, then, sir. Ahem. But for now ..." And the trace of humor vanished

as if it had never been. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave. I'm required to secure the area."

"I beg your pardon!" Phaethon spoke in an outraged tone.

They were interrupted by a fanfare of silver-voiced trumpets.

In the palace:

Vafnir, the energy magnate, like Gannis, was also physically present, but, in order to demonstrate the vast wealth of his holdings, he had had his mind recorded into a high-speed energy matrix, which hung above the table and burned like a pillar of fire. The amount of computer time spent recalculating his nerve paths and magnetic envelope shape every time the slightest energy change occurred in the room was tremendous. The pillar of flame was burning hundreds of seconds a second.

(An aspect of Helion's mind watched Vafnir's view of the scene. Vafnir held to an utterly nonstandard aesthetic. Words and thoughts seemed to him like notes or crescendos of light; sound was force, puncturing, trembling; emotions or innuendoes appeared as smells or vibrations in sixteens radiant hues. To him the Peers were like seven balls of music hanging in space, issuing voices of fire. Helion an eager yellow-white, Gannis a pinching and sarcastic green, Orpheus a cold, drear fugue.)

Vafnir spoke: "My Peers, Helion does not propose an alliance to support the Hortators. He proposes that we appease them. He is telling us we have been forced to this extreme."

Helion said, "What is your objection? We represent the eldest generation. The invention of safe and repeatable personal immortality ensures that no generation after us will necessarily supplant us. We have given mankind endless life- is it not our due to ask, in return, that our lives be allowed to continue in the forms to which we are accustomed, surrounded by the institutions and society we prefer?"

Vafnir replied, "I do not object. I merely wish things stated clearly, without dazzle or smoke. I'm one of the richest men in the Oecumene, well-respected, influential. A million, a billion, and a trillion years from now, barring mishaps, I should still be here. And, long after Earth is gone, when the universal night has extinguished all the stars, and all the cosmos dies of final entropy, the entities with the most wealth and stored-up energy shall be the very last to go. I hope to be among them. If the cost of that is that we must tame society, make it predictable, break its spirit, and kills its dreams, aha! So be it! I only spoke to let us all be aware that we are doing this for self-centered and ignoble reasons."

Orpheus spoke softly, "Pointless to debate the matter of morality, my Peers. There is no right, no wrong, in this world, not any longer. The machine-minds watch us, and they take care that we do not

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