



XNOR: PRIONS



ANAND BLISS

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A country ruled by weapons is hell on earth.

A country ruled by money is slavery with toys and soft pillows.

A country ruled by technology is crushed under pillows.

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Introduction

This story makes intriguing comparisons between biology, mental and AI processing, and the character and moral traits of those dubbed as 'prion people'.

In biology, prions are misfolded proteins. While proteins are the building blocks of life, prions range from useless biological material to hazardous agents able to convert good proteins into more prions. This leads to deadly ailments such as scrapie, mad cow, and Jakob disease.

The story posits a direct analogy between biological prions and mental or conceptual equivalents. Just as a physical body is composed of trillions of proteins at the most basic level, so too are minds, human and agentic, composed of trillions of interrelated concepts. Most, like proteins, are building blocks leading to higher levels of understanding. Some, maybe many, are like useless prions that hang around not able to add anything of value. Then, there are the degenerative concepts, prion concepts much worse than useless. They cloud a mind creating false, even hallucinogenic thoughts and beliefs. Societies have always been infected with radical ideas not based on truth, and unable to help people build and sustain positive cultures and economies.

We are seeing the emergence of intelligent systems often able to perform wondrous tasks yet also prone to hallucinations and outright falsehoods intended to mislead people. This story posits that their data models and training data contain conceptual prions destined to wreak havoc, maybe even disastrous events.

Lastly, the story makes a not-so-subtle analogy between physical/mental prions and 'prion people'. They are people with the unique ability to corrupt others who come into their circle of influence. Good people who would otherwise be part of the creation of life-giving efforts morph into abusers, criminals, even dictators and cult leaders.

Society is often a balance between the number of 'protein people' and 'prion people'. Just like in biology and AI systems, if the balance shifts to the negative too much, abusive and imperialistic thinking becomes the norm. Over time, basic human dignity is ignored as nice turns to nasty; social norms degrade; society collapses.

This story has been told in countless ways. XNOR: Prions story brings a new perspective on the age-old struggle every generation and society must confront. It uses both a futuristic beginning hinting on where we are headed and a jump to the 18th century to show how prions have always been with us. It avoids pointing blame yet does not shy away from holding a mirror to our current condition.

Main Characters

Chan Wei—Entrepreneur, owner of Wei Corp., a supplier of quantum sensors, laser and Agentic technology to the Canadian military. At age fifty-four, he is catapulted from rich to mega-rich.

Lisa Quinn – Comptroller of Wei Corp. Age mid-fifties.

Peggy Doyle— Flamboyant head of the Space Division of Wei Corp. Age ... state secret.

Neil Gargano—Eccentric, savant engineer. Nutty as a fruitcake. Age ... no one cares.

Colonel Rajan— Military liaison to Wei Corp., later Minister of Foreign Affairs. Age: fifty-four.

Dr. Michelle Pajöt—Senior medical person at Wei Corp. Ageless.

Dr. Tracy Galloway—PhD Biochemistry. As beautiful as she is smart. Age thirty-two.

Josh Aitkens – Electrical and mechanical engineer. Shy, tall, and handsome. Age twenty-nine.

Cécile Dubois – Teacher, language specialist. Age thirty-two.

General Tom Hansen—Military liaison to Wei Corp. Age sixty-two.

Captain / Admiral Tonya Archer— No one messes with her. Age ... thirty-nine ... ish.

Gaia – Yoga teacher, mystic. Twenty-two

Chapter 1: P45

November 7, 2058,
Halifax, Nova Scotia

Wei Corp. became one of the most valuable companies in the world when it developed a crude ability to move mass from one position to another via quantum links instead of direct physical contact. A novelty at first, it quickly grew into the primary business of a startup best known for its agentic system, XNOR.

The company's owner, Chan Wei, created XNOR as a student at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada. During years of persistent research, he nurtured it into a powerful, intelligent agent able to explore revolutionary concepts in quantum physics. When Chan Wei paired XNOR with eccentric, even oddball scientists and engineers, a startling invention arose: a CNOT Portal.

CNOT or Controlled NOT technology is old stuff here in 2058. The development of the first CNOT Gate happened way back in 1995. Quantum computers use the gates to expand their size and capability. Canada joined the countries implementing export restrictions on quantum computers. Development of the technology became hidden with scientists prohibited from publishing papers and corporations protecting their intellectual property.

XNOR continued modifying the gate technology creating a portal to move small quantities of mass over a limited distance. Through years of persistence, Wei Corp. grew the technology into a useful tool and then a profitable business. Their Portal began excavating the deep wells used in geothermal energy systems. It transformed an industry dependent on rare geothermal hot spots to one where geothermal energy could be mined anywhere on Earth.

Wei Corp.'s Portal grew the company's fortune. Then, P45 changed everything.

A plague unlike any seen before, P45 is driving everyone into isolation. Caused by a new, virulent form of prions, it has no cure or treatment. Medication and vaccines, useful against bacterial infections, have no impact. Infection by P45 is a death sentence. The victim's mind degrades into delusional beliefs followed by a madness so severe that they lose all ability to function.

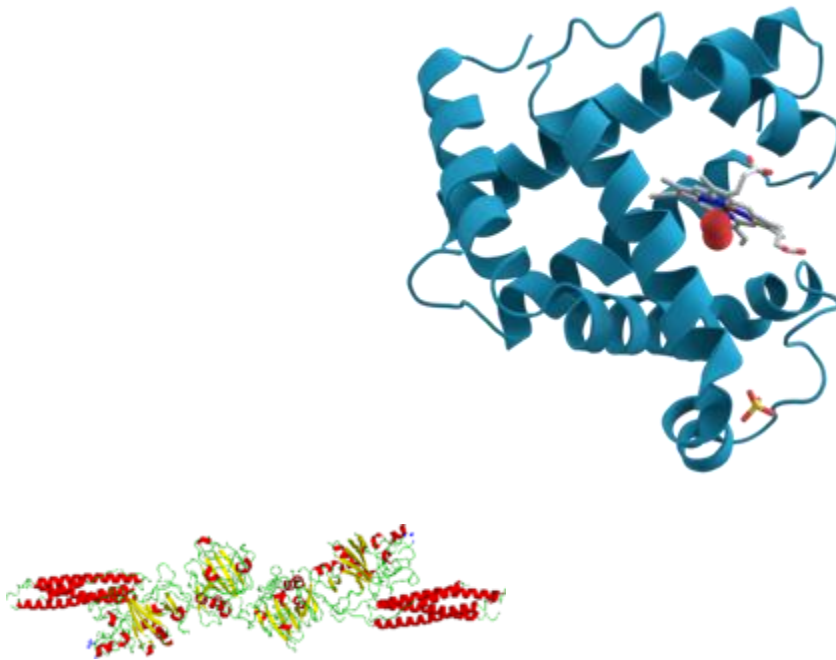
Governments are overwhelmed. Businesses are shutting their doors. Survival is replacing prosperity as people struggle to find gainful employment in an economy turned upside down. Meanwhile, the elite are going underground, literally. Their massive caverns and tunnel networks can use Wei Corp.'s Portal as the quickest and least expensive way to expand. Chan makes the strategic decision to align Wei Corp with their needs. They control wealth in a world where liquidity is tightly managed by their ever-smaller core of interconnected members.

Public communication networks have degraded. Private networks dominate with small, low-orbit satellites essential to their operation. Wei Corp. jumps into the opportunity with its Portal catapulting satellites 200km into space, where small rockets accelerate them without air resistance into their final

orbit. The cost advantage over land-based launches is adding to Chan Wei's fortunes. Still, P45 threatens to bring everything crashing down. He gathers his executive team for an update on how it is impacting their operation.

Dr. Tracy Galloway, PhD, only 32 and already the senior biochemist at Wei Corp., adjusts the holo-display to show her latest info.

"This disease is unlike any previous threat. It's not a virus or bacteria. It's replicating prions."



"Prions are proteins that somehow become misfolded during their creation. Most of them are simply unable to function as normal proteins. They are discarded as waste material. The more dangerous prions attack good proteins and disable them. Our immune system fights this through sheer numbers; proteins normally outnumber prions millions to one.

P45 is among the most dangerous of prions. It goes beyond disabling proteins it encounters. It transforms them into new P45 prions. This leads to an unstoppable avalanche of new prions.

Tracy continues, "P45 attacks the brain and nervous system. In its earliest stages, it looks like common ailments such as depression, anger, insomnia, and memory problems. As it advances, the infection leads to increased delusion, with victims unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Psychotic outbursts and violence are common in the terminal phase. Victims become wildly uncontrollable.

"Unfortunately, P45 and other prion diseases like scrapie, mad cow, and Jakob disease, cannot be detected until the infection reaches the more advanced stages. Most threatening, P45 maintains its viability in liquids and vapours between a temperature of 10 and 134 °C. Common water treatments

employed by municipal facilities cannot guarantee their elimination. We can thank our northern winter for helping to contain it.”

Tracy concludes her report, “P45 first appeared in Florida and spread across the southern states, then the Middle East and most of the world. Scientists in Europe conclusively determined P45 is man-made. We can only speculate if its release was intentional or accidental.”

Chan Wei has a strong opinion, “either way, the plague is being used by some as an opportunity to rid the Earth of ‘unnecessary people’. There have always been advocates for a ‘final solution’. P45 appears to be the latest assault by powerful people convinced they will survive to dominate a new world.”

“They’re in for a surprise,” Tracy interjects. “The World Health Organization conducted preliminary tests on the effectiveness of common biofilters against penetration by prions. The results are not conclusive but still alarming; P45 is able to pass through even the best filters in controlled tests. The secure bunkers of whoever released this plague may not be as effective as they expect. Our efforts to help in the creation of secure sites may also be in vain.”

“Not in vain!” Chan counters. “People need to maintain hope. Maybe a new type of filter will be developed. We should continue to use our technology and create as many underground sites as possible. Also, our scientists may have a solution to the biofilter deficiency. I hope to reveal more info on it in the coming months. Spring will see new challenges as P45 spreads to Atlantic Canada. We need to be prepared.”

Chapter 2: Shut-In Island

November 9, 2058,
St. Margarets Bay, Nova Scotia



St. Margarets Bay and Shut-Inn Island. Chan Wei's estate is in
The shore area to the right (east) of the island.

Chan stares intently at the island. Almost in a trance, he wonders if its full potential will be realized. His plan for Shut-In Island, barely 900 metres from the shore of his estate, is audacious. The 26 hectares (64 acres) of uninhabited rock is becoming the center of an experiment with profound impact on humanity's future.

Only a short eVTOL flight west of Halifax, Chan's estate started as a personal retreat, a place he could jump to from atop Wei Corp's office tower. It grew into much more when he built the data center and secret laboratory under Shut-In Island.

His meditation is interrupted by the arrival of Rajan, an old friend. They shared a dorm room at Dalhousie University many years earlier and kept in touch even as their career paths diverged radically. Rajan joined the Canadian military, served 25 years, and rose through its ranks to the position of Colonel. Retired now and looking for the next phase of his life, he was surprised and pleased to get the invitation to Chan's secretive laboratory.

"So, this is how the 0.01% live," Rajan chides his ultra-rich friend as he exits the eVTOL.

"There's plenty of wealth to go around if you join our operation."

"That's a relief, Rajan admits. "Pickings are pretty slim out there. The depression is getting worse by the day. If I didn't have my military pension, I'd be on the street like too many people."

“The military’s been good for you; a trim physique, while my waist has greatly expanded.”

“Your wealth has expanded, too,” Rajan chides. “Some people claim you could be the richest man in the world!”

“Just media hype. Wei Corp. *is* flush with cash, but the ‘richest man’ meme is based on their speculative assessment of our stock valuation. I may do an IPO someday. Right now, the company needs talent like yours, especially in dealing with government and military leaders. I’m hoping today’s demo will entice you onto our team.”

Rajan’s biometrics are scanned into a ‘man trap’, the first level of security on the path to Shut-In Island. It gets him into the underground tunnel to the lab complex. Along the way, he passes several security stations manned by the latest automated systems.

“I’m impressed. Even the most secure installations of our military can’t match yours,” he praises.

Inside the Portal lab, he meets two eccentric scientists who couldn’t differ more from each other in their personalities. Neil Gargano is an energetic extrovert whose mind races faster than his mouth. Viktor Stanski is a reserved introvert, cautious in his words and actions.

Neil promises, “We have a really big show. This will knock your socks off.”

Viktor is busy making the final adjustments and lets the boss explain what to expect.

Chan Wei begins, “We have a new Portal capability. Our bread-and-butter technology creates entanglement between two locations, a source, and a destination.”

“Location is a misnomer,” Neil interjects.

Chan is tolerant of his brilliant scientist, who lacks an off switch to prevent him from immediately blurting out whatever crosses his mind.

Neil continues, “space and time are not fundamental. They are emergent properties of a deeper reality. Location is nothing more than a mathematical calculation we use to conceptualize some aspects of this.”

Viktor reels Neil in before he confuses their non-scientific guest, “Neil, you are technically correct, but we should retain conventional concepts for this meeting.”

Chan raises his hand to stop what will otherwise devolve into a distracting debate between Frick and Frack, “as I was saying, we create entanglement between two locations, not two quantum particles. *That* was demonstrated decades ago. Location entanglement is much more sophisticated. Calculations by our Agentic system, XNOR, along with our ultra-precise light-wave clock technology, led the way to new discoveries. Proprietary quantum structures designed by Neil and Viktor enable mass to be transferred from the source location to the destination. A parallel, counter transfer between a second set of locations ensures the mass-energy balance is maintained.”

Rajan is uncertain of the exact nature of what Chan is describing, but he understands enough to posit the concept of a teeter-totter: “you’ve found a way to balance the energy contained in two systems to enact the transfer you desire from your source to your destination.”

Neil and Viktor are surprised at Rajan's level of comprehension.

Chan explains, "Rajan and I were physics and agentic system students at Dalhousie many years ago. I often bounced ideas about my development of XNOR past him well into the night while consuming large quantities of pizza and caffeinated drinks."

Chan continues with the description of today's demonstration, "Neil, oddball that he is ..."

"I resemble that remark!"

"... suggested we could define the destination 'location' as being *inside* the source. We didn't know what would happen. Viktor cautioned that we might create a black hole. Many calculations later, XNOR determined we wouldn't destroy the lab and suck the entire island into oblivion. So, we developed an experiment to test Neil's conjecture."

"And it worked!" Neil blurts. "We created a spatial distortion bubble!"

Viktor expands on the announcement, "After careful, systematic progress, we could increase the size of the bubble and test its properties. Basic science combined with artful engineering has led to Neil's 'really big show' for you today."

After the setup, Rajan watches as a small but brilliant yellow point grows into a bubble 1-metre in diameter.

Neil is quick to proclaim, "This is not a hologram."

He hands a tennis ball to Rajan and encourages him to throw it as hard as he can at the bubble.

"Be careful of the return serve!" Neil warns him.

Rajan launches the ball, and as Neil cautioned, it bounced back to his hand almost instantaneously."

"Ouch, that hurt!" he complains.

He tries again with the intent to quickly move his hand before the 'return serve' can hit him. It didn't work. The ball smashed back faster than he threw it with greater force than he imparted to the projectile.

"Amazing!" he proclaims. "This could be the ultimate shield technology."

"Only to a point," Chan corrects the assumption. "At current energy densities, the shield repels tennis balls easily. If you were to fire a bullet at it, as we have, it passes right through."

Viktor adds, "We can increase the energy level to repel mass projections at bullet speed, though my calculations indicate we will never reach the level required to repel electromagnetic radiation."

Chan advances his pitch to Rajan, "our focus is on what we can put inside the bubble, and how big we can make it. That's where we hope you can help our effort."

"I'd love to join your team. How can I help?"

“Energy. We need massively greater levels of energy than the local utilities can provide. You have deep contacts with the people who developed Canada’s micro-nuclear reactors. We need to procure many of them as quickly as possible. We’re hoping you can cut through the red tape surrounding everything nuclear.”

Rajan beams, “I know all the senior people at Cold Lake personally. They will obviously welcome your deep pockets, especially in the currently depression economy. Government and military objections could be overcome if you promise to help them with their underground bunkers. They will probe why you need the nukes. I think I can dance around that without revealing anything about your operation.”



Shut-In Island in St. Margarets Bay (just above Indian Harbour).

Chapter 3: Shut-In Island becomes Shut*Inn City

April 10, 2059,

St. Margarets Bay, Nova Scotia

Five months have passed. P45 is spreading worldwide. Northern countries and less populated areas like Atlantic Canada are more successful in keeping the plague at bay. Travel between nations is highly restricted. Wei Corp.'s business unit moving bulk materials through portals is surpassing the revenue of the company's other units combined. The company is flush with cash and influence. Rajan procured several micro-nuclear reactors from Cold Lake agencies, with more to come.

Wei Corp. will need them. Chan established tight relations with EU officials by excavating massive underground chambers in Sweden and Norway, bunkers for protecting EU citizens. Denmark went a step further and employed Wei Corp. to excavate caverns in the Greenland ice sheets. The frozen island is considered a safe location against P45 encroachment.

Chan gathers the Wei Corp. executives at his St. Margarets Bay estate for an update.

Viktor is first up with a report on shield testing: "We've made progress in creating large bubbles on the eastern hectares of this estate. Our first attempts were ... less than optimum, in that they pushed the mass away from zero-point, the center of the bubble, as it grew."

"And there was no way to insert new objects into the bubble," Neil adds.

"Yes, it was disappointing," Viktor admits. "We had a very promising technology without a useful application except maybe as an explosive device."

"XNOR to the rescue," Neil blurts. "Its abilities are growing rapidly as we add more processing power. We now have a way to designate a zero-point and then expand a bubble almost instantly to its intended size without causing a measurable disturbance to whatever it ultimately encloses."

"Measurable disturbance is our best assessment," Viktor adds cautiously. "Neil's optimism aside, we do have conclusive calculations as to the maximum bubble size we could maintain when we acquire more power supplies. It could extend to a radius of 2633 metres."

"Wow! That's bigger than I expected," Chan praises. "We could enclose a small city inside it. Do we have data on any adverse impacts on things and animals inside when a bubble is created?"

Tracy answers, "I've analyzed a large set of biological structures placed inside the area before a bubble is created. I'm unable to ascertain any changes in their cellular mechanisms. Electrical engineering reports bubble creation has no detectable impact on our most delicate instruments and advanced electronic circuits. There are some weird and unexplained phenomena at and close to the zero-point, the center of the bubble. We are keeping a close eye on this. Another thing to be aware of: any object at the bubble boundary is cut cleanly through when the shield is created."

“I like the word shield,” Chan notes. “Do we have further data on how effective it is against penetration?”

Before Neil can jump in with superlatives, Viktor gives a more seasoned reply, “The bubble boundary is impenetrable to mass at the molecular level, regardless of the speed at which it is propelled toward the shield. Electromagnetic radiation, on the other hand, passes through. This has advantages and disadvantages. It would enable heat from activity inside to radiate outward while keeping all mass larger than single atoms from entering. A radiation weapon like a neutron bomb exploded over the shield would probably cause considerable damage inside.”

Neil is busy calculating the feasibility of housing a large, shielded community, “the total volume inside a bubble of radius 2633 metres will exceed 76.4 billion cubic metres! That’s one hell of a lot of real estate to work with. We could house a small city of people. Adequately supplied, they could survive a long time. Probably long enough for P45 to die out. Where should we put the zero-point?”

“Center it at mean sea level somewhere on Shut-In Island,” Chan orders. “That would give us a good balance between land, sea, and air when we’re finished. If we use rock from this and other excavations to build a tall seawall outside the bubble boundary, we could pump out the water inside and excavate most of the bottom half of the bubble volume, seal it from water intrusion and begin building a new city from the bottom up.”

Lisa Quin is busy with her own calculations. As Wei Corp.’s comptroller, she kept the company from bankruptcy several times. Chan often burns through cash uncontrollably.

She raises an alarm, “while the company has a splendid revenue stream, this project is far beyond anything it’s tackled before. This talk of building a city inside a bubble means we will spend as if there is no tomorrow. My AI agents are already returning procurement estimates that are off the scales. And what about the regulatory issues? We need to take a step back.”

“Don’t worry,” Chan assures her, “I have a plan!”

“Yes, you always have a plan,” she claps back. “It better be a good one!”

“It is. I’m close to doing an IPO for Wei Corp. The major banks have been after me for years to do one. It wouldn’t surprise me, even in this depressed economy, to get a valuation of several trillion dollars. There’s a lot of money out there. Despite the extreme poverty P45 is creating, the wealthy class is clamouring for a safe place to store their wealth. Let’s give it to them. Of course, every employee of the company will get share options. I will negotiate the best deal I can for all of us.”

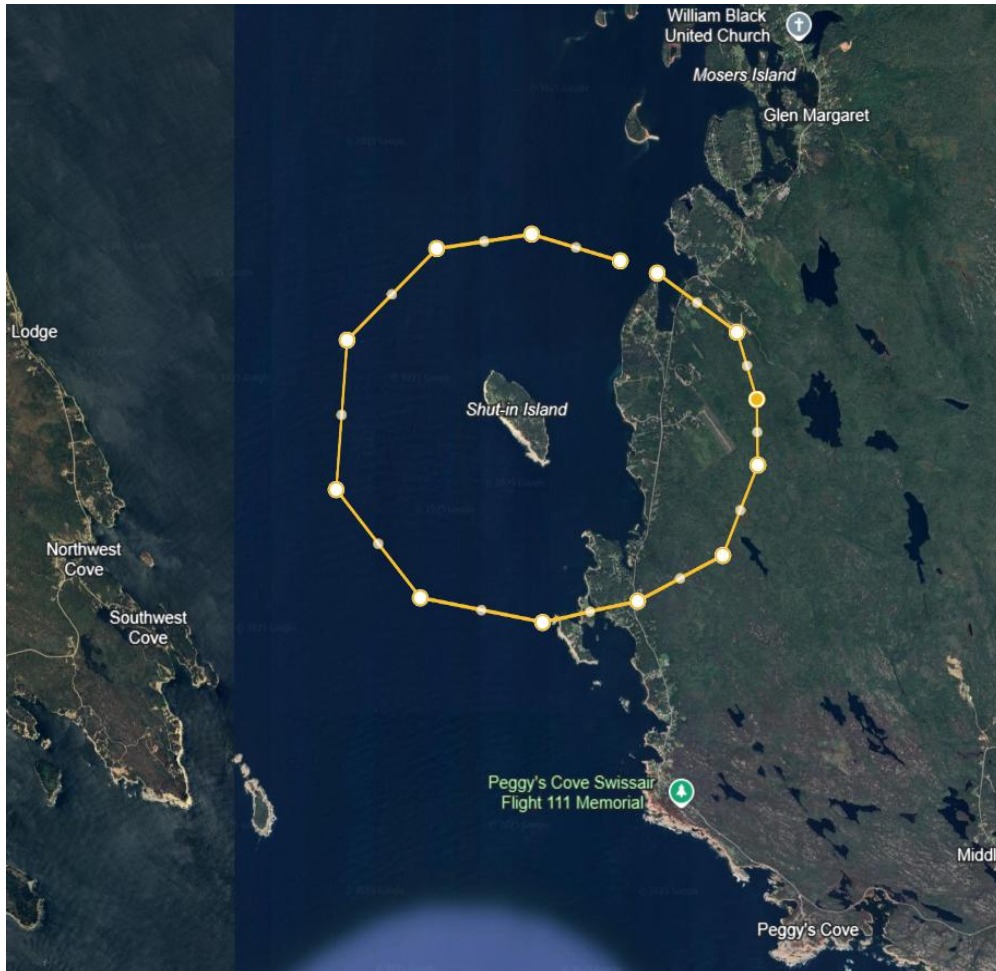
“Shut-In Island becomes Shut*Inn City!” Neil cheers.

August 10, 2059,
Shut*Inn City, Nova Scotia

Another four months of excavation using Wei Corp’s Portal reveal the full extent of the project. The 2200-hectare (5400-acre) area centered on Shut-In Island was designated a national security site. General Hansen, a brusque three-star general close to retirement, never received a plausible explanation for the designation. He received a command to keep all unofficial activity 4km away from the island and the

excavation activity. Today's invite into Shut*Inn city's SCIF (Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility) may provide the answers he and Captain Archer seek.

Archer, tall, slim and well-toned, captains the largest frigate in the Halifax-based fleet. At 38, she is a rising star in the combined military (navy/army/air force) and is mentioned frequently as a candidate for admiralship. Her daily drone flights over the area revealed the massive removal of rock on the eastern, mainland part of the site and its deposit out into the bay starting at Paddy's Head in the south. The rock deposition continues in a circular path west and north to Munros Point in the north.



After the rock seawall completely enclosed the area from seawater incursion, the water inside was sent far out to sea, leaving the beginning of what clearly appeared to be a massive bowl-shaped hole. Downward the bowl sides extended, day after day, now reaching a depth of over 300 metres. Archer calculates that if the current slope continues to the center of the bowl, it will be 2 km below sea level at its deepest point. *What are they up to over there?* She wonders after each day of surveillance.

Today, she and Hansen may get some answers.

Rajan meets them as they pass through the last of the security checkpoints, “welcome General Hansen and Captain Archer. Chan Wei and Peggy Doyle are waiting for us in our SCIF”.

Peggy is the flamboyant head of Wei Corp.’s Space Division. Hansen knows of her, but they haven’t met before. The SCIF is designed to prevent information leakage, physical or electronic, through its walls. Meeting attendees are given a final scan for hidden recorders before entering.

After introductions, Chan gets right to the point, “General, are you aware that martial law will be declared in the U.S. next year? Canada, of course, will not be far behind.”

Hansen concedes, “There have been rumours constantly since the last US election gave complete control to one party. Do you have proof?”

“The proof will be self-evident after their *next* presidential election,” Chan states confidently. “You can expect martial law to be declared not long after it. I suspect it will be the last US presidential election we will ever see.”

Hansen leans back in his chair, cocking his head slightly sideways, “You’re not known as someone who subscribes to populous conspiracy. May I ask your source?”

Chan smiles, “our upcoming IPO will raise incredible sums. I’m sure you know where the big money comes from.”

“Wei Corp. has joined TCN!” Hansen surmises. “I’m disappointed. Your organization has always been staunchly independent and Canadian.”

Over the past few decades, TCN, the secretive Transnational Capitalist Network, congealed from a small club of very powerful people into a solid, world-dominant network. It includes most multi-billionaires and all trillionaires like Chan. Collectively, they own most of the world’s assets. Everyone else, including governments, rent the things previous generations proudly owned: land, buildings, transportation, manufacturing and food production.

Chan grins wryly as he confirms Hansen’s guess, “Yes, Wei Corp. is now part of TCN. Peggy has important details our government should be aware of.”

Peggy displays her stylish confidence as she announces, “Wei Corp. is not just a member of TCN; it has maneuvered into a central position within the organization. Reliable, communication protected from unauthorized intrusion is critical for TCN as it is for governments and militaries. Public networks leak data. I’m sure you can confirm, General, our intelligence agency (CSIS) taps into every public transmission, just like the CIA in the US does. Quantum communication prevents this. Individual TCN members maintain private quantum channels, one-to-one. A large array of orbital quantum hubs is growing. They will connect the whole TCN network together. This is where our company comes in. Our Portal enables us to send satellites instantaneously to various positions above Earth, where small, inexpensive, and expendable rockets accelerate them into predetermined orbits. TCN will soon have a secure, quantum communication network with Shut*Inn as the cog in the system.”

Hansen uses 30 years of skill to hide his concern and nervousness as he queries, “I’m surprised to learn of your involvement in TCN. The intel I’ve seen on Wei Corp. indicates it leans somewhat socialist. TCN is about as far right as any organization can be. Have I misread the tea leaves?”

This time it’s Chan’s turn to show his poker face as he replies, “Yes, of course we are not raving capitalists despite rocketing into the stratosphere of big money. TCN is like any organization; it has members with a wide range of views and philosophical leanings. Some could even be radical enough to contemplate unleashing a plague like P45. Most are simply interested in protecting their wealth.”

Archer joins the conversation, “Why would anyone, from any organization, purposefully unleash such madness?”

Chan reveals his discovery to Archer, “our work developing the XNOR system did more than create our Portal. It uncovered vital clues. Just as there are biological prions, cognitive or mental prions also exist. Our bodies are built by trillions of proteins; our minds and Agentic minds are built from trillions of interrelated concepts. They are effectively *mental proteins* building the structure of our reasoning and imagination. Just as biology can be overwhelmed by physical prions, minds, even non-biologic minds, can be overrun with mental prions. Delusional thinking creeps in. Creative imagination gives way to hubris and delusion. Empathy is replaced with extreme selfishness mixed with delirious convictions. The mind begins to believe that everyone and everything is out to get it, to destroy it. Attack first. Strike before it’s too late. Who’s to say P45 was unleashed by members of TCN? It could have been one of their agentic systems infected with mental prions.”

Hansen doesn’t know a thing about sapient agentic and biochemistry, but he does know personal chemistry when he sees it. Chan and Archer are definitely connecting. That could be useful for any goals he needs to pursue for his military command.

He plays his card, “I understand Wei Corp. may wish to employ help from Canada’s military for a proof-of-concept.”

“We are well past proof-of-concept,” Chan declares. “What we need is a dramatic demonstration of the strength and reliability of Shut*Inn’s defensive shield; one capable of repelling any plagues coming our way and even protecting against physical attacks using modern ordinance, including WMDs.”

“Canada has never developed WMDs,” Hansen corrects him.

“True,” Chan admits, “but you have powerful ordinance capable of exerting extreme destructive effect, especially at close proximity. The offer is to have your weapon systems try their best to blow up Shut*Inn. Certain precautions, of course, will need to be taken to limit collateral damage. You will need to ensure your delivery system can withstand the same ordinance returned to it without loss of human life.”

“I’m uncertain what you’re implying,” Hansen's tone demands an explanation.

“Our shielding technology employs a reactionary force that propels any mass hitting it. The mass is returned backwards with the same kinetic force it had when hitting the shield. In other words, simple ballistic projectiles will end up returning close to the point of origin, with only variations in atmospheric

conditions determining the difference in the path. Missiles capable of altering their course mid-flight should be programmed to hit the shield at an adjusted angle that will send them off backwards on a harmless path.”

Hansen’s mind wanders while he contemplates what he just learned. Wei Corp.’s Portal has obviously advanced radically beyond its use as a rock excavation and bulk transfer tool. Militaries already fear it could be used to send live weapons almost instantaneously to unsuspecting targets. This shield capability indicates the company has made a major leap in refinement. Are there other advances not revealed?

“I will need to discuss your offer with my command and political overseers,” Hansen cautiously replies. “Of course, you can expect they will be most interested in your intentions for this technology and for your city, Shut*Inn, as well.”

“My plan for Shut*Inn? It will become the most secure backup site for advanced technology and the experts required to maintain it. P45 is running its course, thank goodness. We have a small window of time to prepare before the next, even more devastating plague is released. Be warned; the creators of P45 have a follow-on ready for release. It may already be spreading silently in the environment. Martial law is coming. Probably next year, after the US presidential election.”

Chapter 4: Zero-Point.

June 4, 2060,

Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

Josh Aikens is thankful for the work at Shut*Inn. Five years out of university with a master's in electrical engineering and a minor in mechanics, he still struggles to find work of any kind. It's emblematic of his generation; opportunity stalled out long before they entered their college years and hasn't recovered since. Even with advanced degrees, they languish in a workplace where jobs, any jobs, are hard to come by. Certification is the sword of Damocles hanging over their heads. Education doesn't cut it anymore. Secure employment with good pay requires certification in a high-skill trade. It, in turn, requires related work experience to pass all criteria for the coveted credential. Everywhere, people like Josh struggled to find *any* employment, any way to get off social assistance and into the workstream with the hope they can slowly advance into positions giving them the relevant experience they need.

Automation. Pundits claimed it would create *new* jobs requiring higher skills, delivering higher income for everyone. Well, not everyone, only those certified to work in highly specialized positions. Intelligent robotic systems, owned by a small elite, hollowed out the labour market. Lower rungs in the employment ladder disappeared. Unemployment rose to levels last seen more than a century ago in the great depression. Then it got worse. Government support through a basic guaranteed income program staved off disaster for the first few years. By 2040, it was in trouble. Tax revenues could not keep up. Pundits predicting a utopia from massive automation missed one key factor: owners of the economic production, the robots, the intelligent systems, had less and less need for workers at all levels. When government taxation of them rose to the level where they were effectively providing their assets without a return, the system completely collapsed.

Wei Corp. remained among the few enterprises still contributing significantly to social revenue. Its technology is in great demand from the wealthy class. Shut*Inn City is the biggest project Atlantic Canada has seen in its entire history. Its growing maze of tunnels and caverns store copies of the most advanced technology from TCN members. Living quarters for their trusted scientists and technicians to maintain the systems until The Event passes are also in the city, under the protection of the shield.

As a junior engineer, Josh is not engaged in the design or creation of Shut*Inn and its caverns. His engineering degrees only gave him enough knowledge and skill to act as a liaison between the incoming TCN people and their new facilities. It's a start. The money is good, and the people he works with are the cream of the scientific and engineering community.

His hobby of collecting copies of old musical recordings from times long past endears him to coworkers living in the company tenements just outside the city boundary. Synthetic 'music' generated by agentic has all but snuffed out awareness of the rich musical history enjoyed by past generations. Synth, as it's called, combines tonal feedback with visual imagery, creating an addictive experience people plug into. The visual and audio stimulation plunges a person into self-induced hypnosis; a relaxing meditation for some; an inescapable addiction for many.

Governments ignored the potential downside of Synth. It calmed the anger and violence that economic devastation inflamed. Minimal social assistance, a so-called livable income, was adequate for a population plugged in and tuned out most of the day. The limited contribution most people made was hardly a priority for the Owners. The masses could be ignored. Only a small minority of people, like Josh, propelled themselves along a different path.

His music collection spans from Bach to the end of live performances during the depression years in the late 2020's. His favourite musical period, from 1946 to 1986, is especially fascinating to coworkers who are ready to abandon Synth. It doesn't have the same appeal to them. Something about their emotions and intellect requires a different stimulation, one anchored in tactile nurturing and deeper contemplation.

Liam Olson, a young network security specialist, shares a flat with Josh and finds himself in a similar employment situation as a contract worker, hoping to achieve certification someday. They enjoy the safety and benefits of living in the company's tenement housing just outside of the city. But permanent employment and residence inside before the shield is raised is a cherished goal that only a limited number of people will achieve.

Josh struggles with the uncertainty, this evening more than most. Another shield test will be performed at 8 pm. Liam continues to pester him, "You really should join the meditation at Zero-Point."

"I don't know," Josh hesitates. "I've heard rumours about the crowd that gathers there during shield tests. Some call it a cult. We can't risk getting involved in something that will jeopardize our employment."

"It's not a cult. It's not Synth," Liam claps back. "We meditate. Gaia asked me to invite you. Join us and see for yourself."

Gaia, a young, beautiful, and unconventional yoga teacher, is gaining notoriety for her Zero-Point sessions. Located at the exact center of the shielded bubble, Zero-Point has always been the subject of speculation. Some claim it could be an entry point between alternate dimensions. Others assign mystical energy qualities to it. Gaia led a campaign to create a circular saltwater pool around it. At every shield test, she floats naked with her navel positioned at Zero-Point. A growing group of devotees sits in concentric circles from the edge of the pool outward.

Liam, being a longtime member of Gaia's yoga classes and one of the first to join the Zero-Point meditations, enjoys a seat on his meditation mat right at the pool's edge. Josh is way back in the last row. His stiff joints do not allow him to achieve anything like the Baddha Konasana position favoured for the sessions. He's not alone in his beginner's struggle.

Seated next to him, a woman not much older than him and one whose picture he's certain he's seen on the company's website, gives up trying to press her legs downward to her mat.

"Maybe I should start doing Gaia's classes," she mutters while giving a quick smile Josh's way.

"Me too. Engineering doesn't stretch my leg muscles."

"Nor biochemistry mine," she replies.

A gong announces the three-minute alert for the mediation's start. All talking ceases, replaced by a gentle hum. Liam previously mentioned the humming as part of the mediation. Apparently, Zero-Point emits a humming-like vibration that the meditators try to amplify. Josh joins in but finds his mind wanders; *who is she? I'm sure I've seen her picture before. Biochemistry. Should I query her after the meditation? She's very pretty. That would be a good opener. Wouldn't it? What if she's someone important and I make a fool of myself?*

Another stroke of the gong indicates the shield test has ended. Josh can't say he felt anything special during the meditation. He wonders if it's worth coming back again for the next test. His thoughts are interrupted.

"My name's Tracy. What engineering discipline do you practice?"

"I'm Josh. I have degrees in electrical and mechanical engineering, though my work is not directly related. Do you work in the chem lab?"

"I lead the biochemistry department. We are currently focused on setting up the environmental infrastructure for the city."

What an idiot I am! Jost laments his faux pas. She leads the whole frigging department, and I'm thinking she's a lab technician.

"Have you considered switching departments?" Tracy interrupts his embarrassment. "We're short-staffed and have a pressing deadline."

"I would love to, but I'm just a contractor."

"Let me look into it, Josh," Tracy encourages him as she gets up to leave. "Message me, Dr. Tracy Galloway, and I'll get back to you."

"Thank you! I really appreciate it."

Tracy Galloway. Freaking Dr. Tracy Galloway. She's on the executive committee. That's where I've seen her picture. Barf, I sure know how to blow an opportunity. I wonder if her offer is genuine. Was she just being polite?

September 30, 2060,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

Tracy was true to her word. Josh received a transfer to environmental engineering, where he can accumulate the work experience needed for certification. They continue to meet at Zero-Point meditations, where he is careful to keep in mind that she *is* his boss, or more correctly, his third-level manager. Her cheerful, friendly rapport should not be misinterpreted. One misstep could be a quick trip back to life on the streets.

The Zero-Point sessions are changing, attracting even the attention of Chan Wei himself. Not that he personally attends the meditation. His physician, Dr. Michelle Pajöt, was assigned to investigate. Zero-Point pool has expanded, enabling others to join Gaia floating near the epicenter. Liam, of course, was one of the first to plunge into the experience. He and Gaia have become an item in the community, often seen together walking naked in the hydroponic gardens after hours. Some people claim they emit a soft glow. Pajöt has run tests. There's definitely something happening at Zero-Point. She's ready to jump in and experience it directly.

At the conclusion of this evening's meditation, Josh is surprised to be invited by Tracy to meet with Dr. Pajöt in the Slanted Cup Café to discuss her experience and any conclusions she may have formed. Known as a somewhat eccentric member of the medical community, Pajöt has an unusual way of standing while talking. Combined with her French-Canadian accent, Josh finds it confusing, almost as if she uses her hips to accentuate an underlying 'come hither' signal. He struggles to maintain focus on her verbose recounting of floating naked at Zero-Point.

"I was surprised to find myself pulled toward Gaia, who was positioned to my left at the exact center of the pool," she relates while thrusting her hips forward and to her left in Josh's direction as they stand at a drinking station. "The water was still, no current to explain the powerful movement. At length, my body was pressed tightly against hers as we were floating in the dense, saltwater solution. The humming from the surrounding meditators contributed to an easy slide into an altered state of mind. I found myself merging with Gaia at the points where our skin touched. I could feel her, emotionally, in a way not common. Not common at all. As the meditation deepened, Liam was also there in my experience. An intense ménage à trois."

Josh has his own intense feelings to deal with. The French accent, the hip thrusting, talk of naked bodies touching, merging in a ménage à trois; little Josh was responding with a mind of its own, reminiscent of embarrassing teen years. *Integrals. Calculate some integrals. Focus on the lines in the Slanted Café sign.*

Dr. Pajöt excused herself to leave and meet with Chan. Tracy surprised Josh, suggesting they should grab a table and discuss the evening's events more. How could he refuse! Not just because she was his boss, he is genuinely attracted to her. Very attracted. Pretty and close to his age, she has to be the smartest woman he has ever met. Brilliant. Well spoken. And conversant in technical details. An engineer's dream woman.

Tracy is careful not to overtly show it, but the attraction is mutual. Josh is different than the men constantly buzzing about her daily. He doesn't have a doctorate like them. He also lacks their arrogant and self-absorbed tendencies. Funny and comfortable in his own skin is how she sees him. Too bad Wei Corp. has strict rules against dating coworkers.

Chapter 5: P47.

November 3, 2060,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

Failure of the rice crop in Asia was first attributed to soil degradation, pollution, and other environmental issues. Everywhere across the continent, plants wilted into leafless stems shortly after pollination. Today's announcement by the World Health Organization hit like a neutron bomb; a new prion-based plague, designated P47, is the cause.

Asian nations immediately point the finger directly at US labs for creating yet another prion-based plague. The US is pointing back at them. The Middle East is in turmoil. Political tensions are off the scale as far-right governments rise, threatening conflict and retribution. General Hansen recalls Chan predicted this 15 months ago. He's relieved when an invitation to meet again inside Shut*Inn's SCIF arrives.

Like last time, Rajan meets Hansen and Captain Archer at the eVTOL landing pad and guides them through the complex security process. It has an extra step. The landing pad is now located outside of the Shut*Inn boundary.

Rajan explains, "contract workers live here outside of the city and the shield boundary. The boundary is surrounded by an electrified fence to keep wayward onlookers from being killed during regular shield tests. You will see the exact position where the shield forms after we pass through this security checkpoint."

He stops their walk along a ramp leading from the checkpoint, "This narrow gap in the steel walkway marks the threshold to the city. Any unfortunate person standing here when the shield is raised would be cut cleanly in two. Beyond this point, we have the regular security checkpoints we passed through on your previous visit."

Peggy welcomes the visitors as they enter the SCIF, engaging in pleasantries and small talk with Hansen. Chan acknowledges their arrival but rarely participates in chin-wagging. Archer is the same. They wait patiently for the meeting to begin.

Hansen leads off, "Your prediction last year looks very prescient, Mr. Wei. If I remember correctly, you warned that martial law would be declared in the US not long after the next presidential election, and it would be followed by another plague. The Americans just elected a new far-right government. The WHO announced P47. None of this was forewarned by our intel agencies. It seems you have a better and more reliable source."

"The intel agencies are always months behind facts on the ground. Media announcements are another month or two behind them," Chan confirms.

Hansen probes further, “The Transnational Capitalist Network is the only entity I know of with the wherewithal to beat CSIS and the CIA. It seems your entry into TCN brings great advantage.”

“Yes, it does,” Chan replies curtly, offering nothing more.

Hansen carefully composes his next question, “In my experience, the most accurate intel results from being at the source of the action. The Chinese have come out strongly claiming Americans are the creators of P47. Do you concur?”

“Which Americans?” Chan sniffs. “They never say. Government? Military? Private? Always a lot of fingers pointing. Rarely definitive answers.”

“I have to ask,” Hansen says reluctantly, “is TCN behind the prion plagues?”

“I cannot confirm this.”

“Because you do not know or cannot say?”

“I cannot confirm this,” Chan repeats his assertion.

A tense standoff ensues. Peggy breaks the silence, “Would it not be more productive if we focused on our response to the plague?”

Archer agrees, “Wei Corp. has been more than generous in helping our government and others to build secure, underground sites. What can we do to mitigate this growing crisis?”

“Too late,” Chan asserts, leaning back in his chair. “P47 spreads through pollen. Last year’s crop was infected not just in Asia; this was a worldwide effort that started the previous year. Asia will not recover. The rice there and in other areas will fail completely. This is just the beginning.”

“Can you share more?” Hansen asks hopefully.

“Rice is a form of grass,” Chan offers a tidbit of information. After a pause, he continues, “P47 will migrate to other important grass feedstocks, corn, wheat, oats. Was this a failure to anticipate mass starvation, or is it part of a purposeful plan?”

Archer curses, “Why would anyone want to starve most of humanity? It’s pure madness!”

“Madness. Yes, it is,” Chan concurs. “I believe P45 had a more insidious impact than everyone expected. Delusional thinking infected the highest levels of government, military and even within TCN. People and their systems are not in their right minds. Most are blind to their predicament. Some are actually revelling in it.”

“What actions are you taking here at Shut*Inn?” Hansen asks.

“The city is nearing its physical completion. Our store of grains has been carefully verified as clean. All our meat is created in bioreactors. Many TCN members recognize the predicament they are in. They believe their personal bunkers will protect them, but their most valuable assets are vulnerable. Shut*Inn,

with its large size and impenetrable shield make it an ideal backup site. Copies of the most advanced technology with qualified specialists to guard and maintain it arrive daily. We created secure chambers for each participating TCN member. They are like bunkers within a bunker.”

“Have you given further thought to how you can assist our government?” Hansen asks.

Chan laughs nervously, “I gave at the office, so to speak. I’ve lost count of how many underground sites we helped to create, not just for Canada but also for other countries as well. Unfortunately, it will not be enough, and there’s little time to do anything more. Starvation will kill most as they huddle underground. It will take two, maybe three years for P47 to clear. I hope no longer. Almost all crops from this year are contaminated. The limited yields can be harvested and eaten. It will keep some people alive for awhile. The seeds will not germinate. Next year? The year after? Hunger like nothing humanity has known for millennia.”

“I assume you’ve prepared and have a plan,” Hansen probes.

“Yes, as Lisa Quinn, our comptroller, often notes, I have a plan; sometimes it works; sometimes not. The city was designed and has been supplied to support a maximum of 24,000 people for a minimum of two years. It will be a meager and almost subsistent shutdown while we wait. If we’re lucky, we can emerge into a clean world and grow an initial crop, maybe in the Annapolis Valley. You may be interested in knowing I’ve budgeted for the inclusion of up to 2000 military people inside the city if your leaders are interested?”

“I’m sure they will be,” Hansen replies with a broad smile on his face. “What conditions would apply?”

“You may have noticed that I purchased a substantial fleet of ships, trawlers, cargo and tankers. I even have a couple of large cruise ships from a recent bankruptcy on their way here.”

“Don’t forget my big, beautiful yacht,” Peggy adds.

Chan smiles, “Yes, it was quite a steal. Too bad you don’t know the first thing about operating it. Maybe Captain Archer can help. I’m willing to give berths to three naval vessels and their crews inside Shut*Inn. Maybe a submarine too. This offer must be held in the strictest confidence, and the military arrival inside the city cannot be completed until the last hours before we close off the city?”

“Why must it be delayed?” Archer asks.

“My contracts with TCN specify Shut*Inn is a private enterprise under civilian rule. Any overt movement of naval ships or armed men will definitely spook my partners. They hail from many countries and could immediately withdraw their equipment and people if they felt this was becoming a military base.”

“Civilian rule is understandable,” Hansen agrees, “however, naval crews and army soldiers need to remain under a strictly enforced command for obvious reasons.”

“Your people, and Captain Archer’s, can remain under your command on your ships. We will have separate and secure living quarters for them. Military rule under your command, General, can be asserted

there, but you will not have any authority in the public areas. All weaponry must be stored in a bunker we both must authorize access to.”

“This seems reasonable,” Hansen agrees. “Any other restrictions?”

“Only a limited number of officers. As my TCN partners have grudgingly agreed to, Shut*Inn will be housed by skilled and qualified people who can operate and maintain all equipment and infrastructure. We don’t need politicians, bureaucrats, and the oligarch’s relatives. After the plague has passed and the shield is lowered, people inside will be under a continuing contract, a commitment to establish an unshielded community if outside civil authority has collapsed. We don’t know what kind of world we will exit to. The community needs assurance that those who safe-havened with us will help to keep it viable before going their own way.”

Chapter 6: How Much Time?

January 17, 2061,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

Inauguration Day, the third Monday in January, after the US presidential election is not particularly cold this year, yet the ceremony is conducted inside the U.S. Capitol rotunda for security reasons. The presidential address is short and blunt; martial law is declared immediately without a date for its review; military alert is raised to DEFCON 2 as a warning to America's enemies. Wei Corp's executive committee meets to decide Shut*Inn's response.

Chan kicks off the meeting, "The move to DEFCON 2 is a surprise. This puts the American military on a 6-hour readiness state. Other countries are following suit. War could pop off at any time. I've informed TCN members that we will be curtailing new engagements for the transfer of equipment and people. Those already under contract and in transit will be accommodated. Accelerate our schedules. We may have a few months or only a few days before Shut*Inn is closed to new entries. Make the most of whatever time we have. Rajan has prepared a plan of action."

"The most important thing I can say," Rajan begins, "is that life across the world will change quickly. If you think things couldn't get much worse than the famine and destitution the world has fallen into for the past year, think again. Martial law is a declaration of desperation. Desperate people do desperate things. Our government will have no choice but to follow the Americans into unlimited authoritarianism. Hordes of people, beyond the capability of our governments to control, will be converging on Canada and Atlantic Canada in particular, seeking a safe haven.

"What response will our military take? Will they agree to the offer we made to house some of their equipment and people inside Shut*Inn under our control? Or will they pressure us to give them whatever they demand? Remember, soldiers are also people and could be criminally inclined. They too have desperate families. P47 is spreading famine everywhere. Our supply stockpiles shine like an irresistible beacon ... survival lives here."

Rajan continues, "Shut*Inn is a large but limited lifeboat. The time has come to finalize who will make it on board. There's a long list of prominent scientists and accomplished individuals who would like to join Wei Corp. and gain access to Shut*Inn as residents. As Chan mentioned, new TCN contracts are on hold. This frees up slots for others. Each department should immediately focus on identifying a limited number of people and supplies we can bring into the city. Time is tight. The shield could be raised for the last time at any moment."

After the meeting, Tracy Galloway gathers the senior members of her team to tighten up their schedules and discuss permanent residence applications. She has responsibility for a wide range of biological labs, feedstock storage and environmental systems. Water treatment is behind schedule in implementing some of its reclamation equipment. Her immediate reports, being doctorates like her, favour colleagues they've

worked with over many years. Tracy listens, then unexpectedly adds a junior engineer to the online meeting for his advice.

Josh Aitkens found favour with Tracy as a dependable engineer and reliable supplier of useful insight when they met periodically at Zero-Point meditations. His daily work at ‘ground level’, coupled with an easy-going personality, endears him to the people who keep the machines humming properly. On the other hand, he’s resented by more senior people as someone with only limited qualifications and experience who sucks up to the boss to gain an advantage.

His message at the meeting is unequivocal: “We are too reliant on robots and systems that could catastrophically fail without more skilled technicians to guide the work and do it themselves if the SHTF. Management seems unaware of how many small incidents are handled quickly and competently by skilled labourers and technicians before they cascade into wider failures. If the community finds itself under the shield for two years or more, survival could be threatened by unexpected failures it is ill-prepared to fix. In my opinion, we do not have nearly enough spare parts for critical machinery. Yes, 3D printing can produce temporary substitutes. They cannot reliably replace parts that have been designed and manufactured to the exacting specification required. Our supplies are extensive, but they are not balanced and deep enough to sustain an extended stay under the shield. Will there be a reliable supply system available after the plague has passed? We don’t know! We need to prepare not just for survival under the shield but also for a successful emergence once the plague has passed.”

Before her senior staff can counter, Tracy decides Josh has made valid points. She will personally bring a request to comptroller, Lisa Quinn, to expedite the identification and acquisition of critical parts.

“We should immediately look more closely at balancing our talent pool.”

January 19, 2061,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

This evening’s gathering at Zero-Point held a surprise; Chan showed up! He is quickly surrounded by fawning members of the meditation’s inner circle. They open a special slot for him right at the pool’s edge. Josh wonders if Tracy had anything to do with his sudden and unexpected participation.

“I may have had some impact,” she whispers as they prepare for the starting gong. “I think Dr. Pajöt probably had a greater influence. She interacts with him more frequently as his physician and consultant on medical issues in the company.”

Josh adds, “My flatmate, Liam, has certainly changed since he started floating next to Gaia during the sessions. Maybe Dr. Pajöt has also changed.”

“We should discuss this later in private,” Tracy suggests as the meditation begins.

The Zero-Point mediations last year concluded after each one-hour shield test. Starting this evening, the shield will be raised at 8 pm and will remain until 6 am the next day. After the meditation concludes, Josh

is stuck inside the city. He cannot return to his flat outside the boundary. When Tracy suggests she has a spare room he can use in her executive suite, he finally clues in that *there are other places to sleep. Liam and Gaia are sharing a flat inside the city. I could have crashed with them. Maybe Tracy is signaling she's open to being more than my boss.*

Before he can untie his tongue and accept the offer, Chan greets them on his way out of the meditation hall, "Is this the promising young engineer who alerted us to our parts shortage?" he cheers to Tracy.

"Yes, Chan, this is Josh Aikens. I've watched his progress working in environmental systems. He would be an excellent addition to our full-time staff."

"Make it so," Chan commands as he uncharacteristically pats Josh on the shoulder as he leaves.

When he's out of earshot, Tracy enthuses, "I've never seen him even touch anyone before. He doesn't shake hands or even fist-bump. Did sitting near Zero-Point impact him?"

Then she adds, "So, do you want to use my spare room tonight?"

"Yes, thank you. I don't want to create trouble. Wei Corp. has some strict policies."

"You were just stroked on the shoulder by Chan Wei himself! Something unusual is happening. I will get you on permanent staff tomorrow. Then, a place of your own inside the city will be made available."

April 6, 2061,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

For over two months, the world has teetered on the edge. Threats and counter-threats have flown back and forth between the world's more powerful nations. No one knows when the button will be pressed. Still, hope hangs on. Maybe this year's crop will be better. Maybe tensions will abate, and life can get back to normal. Lab tests through the winter were not encouraging.

Some plants had almost normal growth. Others never develop vital leafing. Frantic experiments to adjust nutrients, light and water seem to have little impact. Private, unreported estimates fear the spreading starvation will wipe out more than 50% of all people before the end of this year. Growing violence and social breakdown could bring the loss closer to 80%.

As land-based crops failed, people turned to the depleted oceans for relief and found none. Rising ocean acidity over the past four decades has slowly squeezed the growth of plankton to dangerously low levels. With the larvae of almost all fish species dependent on zooplankton for their first meals, wild fish populations plummeted.

Farmed fish, grown in massive ocean enclosures, became the main source of aquatic protein. The owners, almost always TCN members, profited greatly while increasing their control over people and governments. It was a 'managed system' promoted as a more reliable supply. Independently operated trawlers languished as uncompetitive relics. TCN's profit was increased by tying the feedstock for edible fish to grain production from expansive corporate farms, also owned by TCN, of course.

Now, with the failure of grain crops, the entire food chain is collapsing.

General Hansen signals he's ready to consider Chan Wei's offer of securing a few ships and soldiers inside Shut*Inn. Another SCIF meeting is arranged.

"Sorry for the delay," he leads off the meeting. "Ottawa has had its hands full keeping the country from falling apart. Even with martial law declared on our side of the border, violence and vandalism have reached epidemic proportions. I'm authorized to negotiate terms for harbouring ships and personnel inside Shut*Inn."

Chan lets Rajan respond, "Martial law has little impact inside this city. A ruling Council is being formed. The military would be given minority representation on it. All Council rulings will override any edicts from Ottawa or Washington. When the shield is raised for the last time, the city will effectively enter a hibernation-like state to conserve resources. The offer of separate and secure housing for your people is still on the table. Greater emphasis has been placed on the assurance that we have sufficient redundant parts and skills to maintain our extensive robotic systems. The navy, in particular, must provide assurance that they are bringing a similar level of preparation with them when they arrive."

"What vessel limits will be imposed?" Captain Archer asks.

"It's getting pretty crowded in the berthing area," Rajan replies. "We are expecting more of a sea-based emergence after the plague. No one knows what to expect with any degree of certainty. There is a higher probability of our oceans recovering faster than land feedstocks."

"All the more need for naval protection," Archer suggests.

"True, but the need to maintain maximum shield capacity over the city at all times should diminish after the plague passes. We may be able to project smaller shields around our vessels to protect them when danger arises. I do not want to demean the importance of having a naval component saved. If the government survives, it will need your ships."

"This has always been a bone of contention in Ottawa," Hansen blurts. "Why has Wei Corp. not provided shielding for other locations? It seems to be within your capability. Why have you withheld this?"

Rajan looks to Chan. The Portal and its shielding have always been the most closely held secrets within Wei Corp. Will he respond?

He takes his time, leaving Hansen waiting for the response, "General, are you familiar with Archimedes' purported statement, 'Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world'?"

"Yes, I know of it."

"XNOR discovered the fulcrum. As far as I know, no other agentic system has made the same discovery, yet. If another entity should also discover the fulcrum and develop the required equipment, mass transfers could become the most powerful weapon ever created. Targets could be destroyed instantaneously

without any means of protection. Even our shield might fail to stop a Portal mass transfer. Missiles and all other weaponry would be rendered useless. A world dictatorship would surely arise.”

“With regards to projecting multiple shields,” Chan continues, “there are limitations I cannot reveal at this time. Our potential adversaries are always looking for any weakness we may have. Popping up small shields at various places would give them opportunities to probe; an unnecessary risk we will not take.”

Chapter 7: DEFCON 1.

September 29, 2061,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

After eight months of martial law and a DEFCON 2 state of readiness, the U.S. military announced it moved to DEFCON 1 at 11:46 today. Imminent nuclear war or full-scale conflict has arrived. The world is a cocked pistol prepared to fire with only 15 minutes of warning.

The reaction at Shut*Inn matches the moment. Captain Archer moves quickly to secure passage of the designated naval ships past Shut*Inn's entry port. Two River Class destroyers, HMCS Makenzie and HMCS Laurier, maintained patrols between Halifax and St. Margarets Bay for the past month. Their arrival will be only minutes away. Archer's flagship HMCS Pearson is already berthed inside the city. The stragglers, a couple of coastal cruisers still in Halifax harbour, are 90 minutes away. They might make it in time.

The major naval and air base in Halifax is assumed to be the first target of foreign aggression if Atlantic Canada comes under attack. Shut*Inn would not be far behind in the target list, depending on the motives of the attackers.

Chan took unusual risk by inviting a military presence inside the city. The U.S. military has been a TCN enforcement arm for decades. Now, with martial law active in most former democracies, an attack could come from anywhere, even the US ... or most likely the US.

TCN itself has fractured. Loyalty to fellow members and protection of their assets has been replaced by goals once considered unimaginable: completely subjugating the lower classes, removing the last vestiges of their political power, cleansing them from Earth through starvation if necessary.

Complicating the situation, some members like Chan have developed secondary objectives. Shut*Inn is being viewed with suspicion. It may not be the safe sanctuary, dependable backup site for TCN technology, as it was promised to be. Members are increasingly agitating for better safeguards for their equipment and their intellectual property. Trust is breaking down within the organization. The DEFCON 1 declaration is a clear sign that battle lines are appearing. New partnerships are forming. Old ones are breaking.

After a tense day with a sudden shield deployment possible at any moment, it's raised at the usual 8 pm scheduled time. Chan attending the Zero-Point meditation is a more consistent part of his busy schedule. This impact is noticeable, not just physically with his longer hair and preference for robes over suits; he seems to be growing almost Zen-like in his demeanor. Even Josh and Tracy can feel the increasing pull of Zero-Point from their position far from the inner circle where Gaia, Liam and Pajöt float.

“It must be immensely more powerful at the center,” Tracy says to Josh as they gather their mats after the concluding gong.

“Liam doesn’t even talk to me anymore when we pass each other,” Josh replies. “He seems to be in another world. Have you noticed? Gaia has a glow surrounding her!”

“I’ve noticed she’s completely discarded her clothing throughout the day, not that she ever wore much to begin with.”

“Strange things are happening with all three of them, Gaia, Liam, and Pajöt,” Josh notes as Tracy receives a priority message from Chan.

“I need to run. A special meeting of the executive committee has been called.”

Tracy is surprised to see the Zero-Point Trio, as they are often called, attending the meeting. Together with Chan, they remain silent, eyes closed as the committee members gather. The whole room joins the silence, waiting for Chan to speak.

After several minutes, he and the Trio open their eyes in unison as if connected psychically.

Chan speaks slowly, softly, not in his usual brusque manner at executive meetings, “A purge is required. There are agitators among us. Some of the people TCN sent here to guard their assets have ill intentions. We will be calling them to task and, if warranted, evicting them from the city.”

September 30, 2061,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

The next morning, the shield remains activated, leaving everyone wondering if this is it; has the great seclusion begun? Meanwhile, one after another, selected TCN representatives are called before Chan and the Trio. Each meeting starts the same, with silent meditation leaving the representative confused by the demand for their appearance.

Without any questioning or announcements, Chan terminates each session with one of two messages: “thank you for attending” or “you will be escorted back to your accommodation”.

Those escorted are forced to gather their personal belongings and are taken to a holding area where they are stripped of any communication devices. Later in the day, they are informed that safe passage has been arranged, returning them to their home base. No explanations are provided. The shield is raised temporarily. 113 evictees are passed to waiting members of CSIS who may decide to charge them with espionage depending on information provided by Shut*Inn security monitoring systems.

The fallout from the eviction is severe. Chan is threatened with removal from TCN. Certain members demand it. Others want more information. Spying between members is not a new phenomenon. It’s the

odd manner Chan used to identify and enact the expulsions. Legally, Shut*Inn retained the option of voiding residence in Shut*Inn for up to 5% of the TCN scientists and engineering reps sent to the city with or without cause. Their employers have the option to replace them with other reps. The current international tensions and restricted travel make this almost impossible.

Shut*Inn is now a target for destruction in the eyes of some powerful enemies.

Josh recognizes this may be his last chance to communicate with his family. They used his father's connections to gain entrance to a large underground bunker near Ottawa. It took hours before a brief, comm-channel could be established, audio only. The visuals were not required for Josh to hear his mother sobbing in the background and feel the full emotional impact, knowing this may be his final moment with them.

With only seconds left in the session, Josh's father bravely assures his son, "we are proud of you. Proud of what you have accomplished. We love you dearly and hope to see you ..."

He is cutoff midsentence.

Chapter 8: War.

October 27, 2061,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

It wasn't announced. No declaration was made. For most people, complete communication silence was the first impact. Changes made to the internet's Border Gateway Protocol, kill switches in packet switching hubs, and jamming of commercial airway frequencies all combined to render end devices into virus-infected, inert bricks.

For those in major population centers or close to vital military targets, the silence didn't last long. Neither did their lives. Destruction rained down from space, up from the ocean's depths and across national boundaries.

EMP attacks, neutron bombs, space lasers. It didn't last long.

While the shield stood strong against mass intrusions, even neutrons, its permeability to electromagnetic radiation is proving to be the city's weakest link. An internal 'umbrella' was built above the highest structures of Shut*Inn. It was designed to deflect radiation back out through the shield as a climate control mechanism during hot summer days. The attacks have fried it. The cool autumn weather and approaching winter will not save the residents hunkered deep in the underground caverns of the city. If continued nuclear attacks are made, Shut*Inn will become the world's largest microwave oven.

Hansen and Archer frantically monitor military and commercial frequencies for any still broadcasting usable information. Nothing. Updates from Ottawa or allied governments are not forthcoming.

Chan's quantum communication link with other TCN members is not completely dead. It lacks the usually well-structured information flow between agentic systems. XNOR finds only one system, LEX, that continues to operate coherently. Others are either down or rambling, muddled, delirious ravings.

While LEX is reasoned and rational, it's not positive and supportive toward XNOR and Shut*Inn. Cagety and deceptive is how Pajöt describes its attitude. She recommends terminating any further interaction with it. Chan counters the suggestion, "XNOR is robust enough to withstand outside influence."

Neil Gargano agrees with Pajöt, "our shield is at risk if LEX is fronting an enemy combatant. We have too much to lose."

The executive committee terminates the link to LEX for 72 hours.

October 30, 2061,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

Three days of silence. If the world has other safe havens still intact, they are not responding. Radiation levels outside the city have dropped significantly. Are the attacks finished? Have the combatants annihilated each other?

As the committee debates reopening a channel to LEX, Neil Gargano tries to interrupt the meeting with an urgent message. Neil lost his position on the committee during one of his frequent outbursts. His erratic behaviour and odd idiosyncrasies disrupted the measured gentility between ~~doctors~~doctores accustomd to respectful discourse.

Something about Neil's message compelled a hearing.

"Do not open a quantum channel to LEX! It may already be too late," Neil blurts as soon as he joins the session.

"Present your evidence, calmly," Chan instructs Niel, knowing he is subject to fits of overexcitement when closest to a breakthrough discovery.

"The shield strength continues to fluctuate. It's getting worse, not better. I have the data! I know the source!"

Chan explains to the other committee members, "during the attacks, we monitored the shield strength carefully. There were fluctuations, as expected when nuclear weaponry was detonated nearby. I was encouraged, as we all were, when our shield held. The fluctuations appeared to have subsided."

"They haven't!" Neil shouts. "It's getting worse, much worse in the past few hours."

"Do you know the source?" Chan demands.

"When you opened a channel to LEX, it or whoever is behind it, used the opportunity to create a subchannel to XNOR. It's remained open ever since."

"XNOR should have closed it," Chan asserts.

"He can't," Neil claims, assigning his preferred gender to the agentic system. "They remain locked in a battle XNOR is losing. The fluctuations occur each time LEX makes a hit. It's like two fighters pummeling each other."

Chan abruptly ends the meeting and commands the entire Portal Group to the control center.

October 31, 2061,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

A long night of effort boosting the power and processing capability available to XNOR is not yielding positive results. Chan watches helplessly as his creation, like his own child, is punched and kicked, fighting, crying for help he cannot give.

Then, it ends.

“The shield is down!” Victor announces gravely. “We’re exposed.”

Everyone waits, expecting the worse. Another physical attack? Complete corruption of their systems?

Nothing. Silence. Even XNOR stops communicating with them.

Neil pores over the command/response stream that passed between LEX and XNOR. He’s one of the few able to read the base language almost as quickly as English.

“I’m puzzled. The last response came from LEX. It doesn’t make sense. Everyone knows where we are.”

“What did it say?” Chan demands.

“I will find you.”

Chapter 9: Where are we?

November 1, 2061?

Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia?

Chan, devastated by XNOR's slide into a comma-like state, asks Lisa Quinn to form a community council to manage the city's governance while he retreats to meditate at Zero-Point. Rajan organizes a volunteer group to go above ground and determine the state of the city and the surrounding area. The external sensors are fried. At the very least, he hopes to check the state of the shield and repair the communication equipment.

Josh is quick to join the group.

"Be careful! Don't be a hero," Tracy pleads as he heads for the airlocks.

"I trust Colonel Rajan," he calls back. "He's cautious and professional. We'll have hazmat suits."

Rajan and the rest of the team are already at the tunnel exit when Josh arrives. Rajan begins his pre-mission briefing, "our suits are only 100% effective for 30 minutes. Radiation will not be the only concern. Our enemy may have dispersed pathogens over the area. Before we exit the airlock, I'll use the test portal to take an air sample. If it tests positive for excessive radiation or pathogens, our mission will be short and limited; we'll use flamethrowers to decontaminate the immediate area around the exit doors, install two minimal-function antennas to regain communications with any other surviving communities and get back inside here for immediate decontamination.

"If the air test is negative, we'll have more time to perform the other tasks on our schedule. However, our risk level is still potentially high. We should proceed with maximum speed and complete only the tasks we can finish in the 30-minute window. Josh and I will examine the state of the shield boundary and the area immediately beyond it. Liam will proceed directly to the communication array and repair it if possible. Sam and Laura will install a new 360-degree camera. If we have time, we'll launch a drone to explore the impact across the bay and beyond."

The underground caverns everyone retreated to at the beginning of hostilities have several exits protected by double sets of massive doors, each more than 1-metre thick. The space between each set provides a small staging area where the team don their suits before exiting to the outside and where they will receive decontamination when returning. Rajan opens the double-sealed port window and installs the environmental probe.

"The probe is extending into the outside air," he confirms. "Initial readings are negative. I will continue monitoring for another twenty minutes while we suit up and confirm our comm links."

Josh knows most of the community is anxiously listening to their comm link. He sends a reassuring message to Tracy, "my suit checks out. I feel secure."

After the mandatory security pause, Rajan announces, “test results are still negative. Council, do we have a go for exit to the outside?”

“We hear and see you,” Lisa Quinn responds. “Positive air pressure is being applied to your staging area. You’re good to go.”

“Air pressure confirmed. I’m opening the primary doors.”

A whoosh of air out of the staging area precedes their exit into a thick fog. Rajan provides commentary as they exit, “Council, we are exiting into a thick morning fog. This confirms probable shield collapse with the incursion of Atlantic air into the city. Josh and I are proceeding slowly toward the shield boundary. The path is clear. No debris has blown in. The warning markers along the path are upright and clear. We will stop at the last 10-metre mark to assess the ... holy shit ... do you see that!”

“We copy your visual. It appears to be several green trees beyond the boundary point.”

“How is it possible? Everything outside of the shielded area should be either blackened from the explosions or carved out like a bomb crater.”

Josh picks up a stone from the path and tosses it toward the boundary. “It didn’t bounce back! If the shield was up even minimally, it would have. I’m pointing my cam upward so you can see this amazing sight. The branches of the trees extend exactly to the boundary and stop as if cut off cleanly by our shield. Based on the trunk size, some trees appear to be very large and many years old.”

Josh can hear the confused background noise from Council members. Lacking any useful feedback, he takes command, “I want to confirm our visual with tactile feedback. What we’re seeing is not possible. Maybe it’s just a projection. I brought a 2-metre wooden staff with me. I’m extending the staff to the boundary to see if it encounters any effects ...”

“No pushback from the boundary. I don’t see or feel any effects. I’m able to push a nearby tree branch to the side. I can feel the resistance it provides to my push. Squirrel! I just saw a squirrel scamper up a tree.”

“Colonel Rajan,” Lisa Quinn announces, “Council feels we should delay any attempt to cross the boundary until after we have more data. Return to the tunnel entrance and prepare a drone for use after your team is back inside.”

Inside the decontamination shower, Liam listens to Josh’s recount of the forest and squirrel encounter and adds his own feedback, “I thought I was hallucinating. As I was installing the new comm mast, I swear I saw a seagull fly by. It was foggy. I didn’t get a good look. It will be interesting to see what the drone flight shows us.”

Tracy meets them as they exit the staging area and return to the safety of the underground caverns, “I have a cart ready. Council is eager to hear your debriefing report. I warn you, when I left them, it was chaotic. No one knows what to make of the video feed from your shoulder cams.”

Their arrival at the city's Situation Room is not immediately recognized. The fog outside has lifted, and the new 360 camera is showing a panoramic view of St. Margarets Bay. The city is surrounded by a rich forest and thriving ecosystem. No sign of any devastating impacts. It's as if the war never happened.

Captain Archer is activating the drone and preparing it for an extended flight. "Our drone will do a tour of the bay. Then we'll send it toward Halifax. We have enough range to do a quick overflight and return."

General Hansen is the first to recognize the return of Rajan and his team: "Before we get engrossed in this new feedback, our brave explorers have returned safely to us."

Everyone embarrassingly breaks away from the drone prep to applaud and recognise the risk the team took to re-establish contact with the outside world. And what a world it appears to be!

As the drone circles the bay, the lushness of the forest and abundance of birds give hope that some human life will also be found. After a complete circle of the bay, none is apparent. Shut*Inn stands alone, a city surrounded by clear waters and vibrant shores teeming with wildlife and no sign of human habitation.

The drone's elevation is increased to 500 metres, and the flight east to Halifax begins. What appears to be an abandoned encampment is spotted among the forest, unbroken by roads, electrical lines, homes, or any other hoped-for signs of civilization."

"We should be seeing either a big hole where Halifax used to be or the tops of high-rise buildings by now," Josh remarks. "What the frig? Citadel Hill is all wrong."

As the drone continues its flight, jaws drop. A British flag flies over the now clearly visible Citadel and four other wooden 'forts' installed along a wood and earth palisade. Captain Archer commands the drone operator, "Hold at current position. Our bird is still far enough away not to be seen."

At that moment, a priority comm from the team monitoring radio communications arrives, "Ma'am, our communication systems have been reestablished. All radio frequencies are silent. No responses have been made to our calls. GPS is down. We've restored functionality to the satellite dish. Our satellites are unresponsive."

Council debates the risk of flying the drone closer to Halifax. General Hansen's view prevails: "The settlement probably lacks any ability to electronically detect the drone. If we increase its elevation by another two hundred metres, it will look like a high-flying hawk or other raptor. Getting data from an overflight of ... whatever this settlement is, will be vital to our planning."

As the drone flies closer to Halifax, the unmistakable view of an 18th-century settlement appears; wooden buildings, arranged in a small street grid surrounded by an armed palisade, were common in that era. The harbour is filled with over 100 wooden ships of various sizes, including some impressive British ships-of-the-line. The harbour's cannon defenses match records of the installation that the British military made at Halifax prior to the American Revolution.

"This is definitely pre-revolution", Archer announces. "I studied the history of Halifax fortifications as a young cadet. The Citadel was completely rebuilt during the American Revolution. This one is the older version. Have we travelled backwards in time?"

Normally reserved physicists across the community are enraged, “This cannot be! It must be an illusion. We are being tricked! Backward time travel is scientifically impossible.”

Neil Gargano counters, “so was our Portal until we stumbled onto it. A good scientist goes with observations over theory. Are we to believe theories or our ‘lying eyes’?”

A brouhaha breaks out amongst the scientists. As the current leader of the Council, Lisa Quinn lets the heated debate continue until it looks to be degenerating, “Order! Please! Let’s table the discussion of time travel and focus on a plan for how we should collect more data. First, is it safe for us to resume activity above ground?”

Neil provides the sobering news, “even with the extensive hardening we made to our data center and its equipment, we lost capability during the attacks. I doubt we can raise a shield and may not be able to for a few weeks.”

“We’re surrounded by abundant life,” Rajan interjects. “There are no signs of plague or an enemy.”

“What if it’s an illusion?” Chan warns emphatically. “We need to do more tests.”

Chapter 10: Governance.

May 5, 1759,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

Lisa Quinn became the de facto leader of city operations during its construction. As comptroller for Wei Corp., she gave final approval for all major expenses and gained insight into the logistics of daily operation. She was supported by an array of intelligent systems and robotics doing the low-level work but needed a council of respected community members to solicit feedback from the city's growing population. It was an appointed organization, not elected. Everything was changing so fast, and the corporation owned and controlled most assets. Elections seemed irrelevant.

All employees of Wei Corp. and the guests from other TCN organizations signed 3-year contracts binding them to corporate governance while under the company's protection. The surprising jump to what appears to be the 18th century has thrown governance into turmoil. Everyone is clamouring for information. Will we be able to return home? Can we contact people we left behind? Are we facing a threat from the British military in Halifax? Are contracts signed in the 21st century binding now?

Quinn decides to take a hard-nosed approach and announces, "Anyone wishing to leave the protection of the city is free to do so. However, you go with only the clothes on your back and any personal items you brought with you when you entered the protection of Shut*Inn. If you stay, you acknowledge that the outside world is a very dangerous place. Even a person with advanced knowledge and skill will likely starve or be killed before they get very far. We need each other."

She is pleased to find near-unanimous support for maintaining a tight-knit community working to support one another. A task force is created to recommend the form of an elected governance able to meet the needs of the city. In the meantime, the appointed council is expanded to include General Hansen and Captain Archer from the military and a wider set of people from different segments of the population.

The first meeting, broadcast across the corporate intranet, is critical in establishing trust and calming the growing anxiety across the community. General Hansen is chosen to give a security address outlining the military's understanding of the situation. The most important issue on everyone's mind is how soon they can leave the underground chambers everyone retreated to at the start of the 21st-century attacks.

Hansen begins:

Good morning, Madam Leader, Council members, and the greater community. There are many unknowns. It looks like everything inside our shielded base somehow moved to a different Earth-like environment. Is it real? Is it a simulation created by an unknown intelligence holding us under observation? Are we dreaming a collective dream while we sleep underground with a devastated world above us? ... We don't know.

Our scientists have been busy studying star charts, the current moon cycle and the state of flora surrounding us. Their best estimate: we are immersed in an environment matching St. Margarets Bay on May 5th, 1759. Drone flights over what appears to be a British military base at Halifax also confirm this. The warships, soldiers, and supplies being assembled there match the historical record made by British General James Wolfe and Admiral Charles Saunders. They used Halifax as the launch point for an attack on Quebec City in New France. If we are living in a simulation or a dream, it's one hell of a detailed re-enactment.

*Each returning drone undergoes a detailed inspection. No change in their physical structure or operation has been detected. It's been determined that our people can venture outside of Shut*Inn without the need for hazmat suits or other environmental protections. Protection from native people and animals remains a grave concern. We don't know how quickly our city will be discovered and what the reaction will be. Local weapons will probably be crude by our standards, but still lethal. Each sortie will require my approval and be accompanied by armed guards until we are completely satisfied with our safety.*

Wildlife has flown over us or ventured into our base across the former shield boundary without noticeable impact or impediment. A baited trap was installed near the boundary last night. Our first denizen from the outside, a raccoon, is currently under observation by the medical community. Their assessment: it's normal in every way, including the fleas it brought with it. Daily flights over our immediate area and Halifax will continue. The video recordings will be available on our intranet.

I appeal for patience and unity. Until we have more data, undue speculation will only hinder our progress.

The Portal Group is called next to give their assessment of the situation, how Shut*Inn arrived in this apparent 18th century and whether the community will be able to return home.

Like General Hansen, we must confess to having more unknowns than knowns. The Portal Group has pored over the audit trail from events during the attack. It appears as if XNOR was losing a battle with another intelligent system called LEX. It repeatedly fired quantum fluctuations at our shield, trying to disrupt or completely collapse it.

*XNOR chose a last-ditch option to evade LEX. Unable to continue repelling the attacks, it opened a spatial hole and threw Shut*Inn into it, presumably without knowing the exact destination at the other end. We are working tirelessly to help XNOR out of its coma and hopefully regain much of its former capability. Until then, we will be without shielding. Other intelligent systems operated by Wei Corp. are also degraded. There is no estimation of how long it will take to normalize them. We are working as fast as we can.*

Quinn announces the creation of a new diplomatic position, “sooner or later, we will be faced with first contact. For now, I have appointed Colonel Rajan, retired, to fill this vital role. He will liaise with our military and outside authorities and report directly to this council. He has his first report.

Thank you, Madam Leader, council members, and our greater community. I suspect the Mi'kmaq natives will discover us first since they use this area for hunting and fishing. The British do not venture into the woodland for fear of attack by the natives, but they often sail vessels past the entrance of St.

Margaret'sMargarets Bay.

Interaction with them will be somewhat similar to a situation known as 'the prisoner's dilemma'. It's a game theory strategy first explored in the 20th century with the objective of finding the best solution to diplomacy and warfare.

There are many variations of this theory. In my estimation, they all boil down to using four basic strategies for maximum benefit:

Be Nice: Do not be the first to attack or offend. The opposite is to be nasty: always assume your superiority and use your power to strike others before they hit you.

Be Retaliatory: Do not be a pushover, letting an opponent repeatedly attack before responding. Nasty will not have a change of heart until it is challenged.

Be ~~forgiving~~Forgiving: Retaliate when attacked, but do not hold a grudge. Return to being nice and monitor your opponent's actions.

Be Clear: Ensure your communications are as clear as possible. The world is filled with noise. Some attacks result from misunderstood intentions, not a nasty attitude.

I will endeavour to follow these four basic policies on your behalf and will keep you, through the Council, fully informed of my decisions and actions.

Quinn wraps the meeting, “there were some indications from the research on game theory that little islands of ‘nice’ can grow in the middle of a sea of nasty, eventually becoming the pervasive and dominant population. Every indication of the 18th-century world we find ourselves in points to it being a very nasty one. We will need to uphold the four policies Colonel Rajan described both externally *and* internally. Let's not merely survive. Let's turn Shut*Inn into an island of determined nice and work toward becoming a new light in this nasty era.”

Chapter 11: How Nasty?

Saturday, May 12, 1759,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

Saturday night, and the denizens of Halifax are celebrating extra-long and hard with the anticipation that General Wolfe and his men will be leaving soon for another successful campaign. Halifax lives off the military support that comes from being a base for campaigns like this one.

At Shut*Inn, Council transmits drone feeds over the corporate intranet while discussing the ethics of intervening in Wolfe's expected brutal attack on New France. *Should we maintain a non-interference posture?*

Rajan presents a document to give some background on the prevailing attitudes in this era: "Chan Wei funded the creation of a data storehouse. I'm calling it The Record. It contains a treasure trove of historical records from antiquity to the 21st century, political records, industrial and mining records and military campaign details. Here is one I found most relevant to our new neighbours in Halifax. It was written by the current British governor and his governing council."

At this date, 1756, the Indians became very troublesome. Their friends, the Acadians, had been expelled from the colony, and the determination shown by Gov. Lawrence in this action to secure peace to the province roused the Indians to madness. **The French Government offered bounties for English scalps**, and Lawrence and the council at Halifax retaliated after the Massacre of the Payzant family at Mahone Bay by issuing on 14th May, 1756, the following proclamation:

CHARLES LAWRENCE ESQ.,

Lieutenant Governor and Commander in Chief of His Majesty's Province of Nova Scotia, or Acadie.

A PROCLAMATION.

Whereas notwithstanding the gracious Offers of Friendship and protection made by us, in his Majesty's Name, to the Indians inhabiting this Province, and the Treaty of Peace concluded with a Tribe of the Micmacks [sic], bearing Date the 22nd November, 1752, the Indians have of Late, in the most treacherous and cruel Manner, killed and carried away divers of his Majesty's Subjects in different Parts of the Province.

For these Causes We (by and with the Advice and Consent of His Majesty's Council) do hereby authorize and **command all Officers, civil and military, and all His Majesty's Subjects, to annoy, distress, take and destroy the Indians inhabiting different parts of this Province, wherever they are found; and all such as may be aiding or assisting them**, notwithstanding the Proclamation of the 4th of November, 1752, or any former Proclamation to the contrary.

And we do hereby promise (by and with the Advice and Consent of His Majesty's Council) a Reward of Thirty Pounds for every male Indian Prisoner, above the Age of Sixteen Years, brought in alive; for a Scalp of such Male Indian, Twenty-Five Pounds and for every Indian Woman or Child brought in alive;

Such Rewards to be paid by the Officer commanding at any of His Majesty's Forts in this Province, immediately on receiving the Prisoners or Scalps above mentioned, according to the Intent and Meaning of this Proclamation.

Given at Halifax, this 14th Day of May, 1756, in the 19th Year of His Majesty's Reign.

By His Excellency's Command,
Chas. Lawrence.
Wm. Cotterell, Seer.

GOD SAVE THE KING.

Halifax: Printed by J. Bushell, Printer to the Government, 1756.

Rajan pauses to ensure his audience has time to absorb the implications of the document, then continues, "The methods and values of the current British military do not match ours. It's hard to say how strongly the general population in Halifax adheres to this code of conduct. Desperate people do desperate things. Life on the edge of the wilderness must be brutal and full of peril. What standards should we judge them by?"

Captain Archer interjects, "General Wolfe's attack on New France will be especially violent. I could station a destroyer at the exit from Halifax Harbour and block their champaign."

"Do we want to rush into dealing with them so soon after arriving?" Rajan counters. "My job would be a lot easier if we could hold off for awhile. The British and French have been going at each other for centuries. Why rush in?"

Hansen backs Archer somewhat, "If Wolfe carries out his attack on Quebec City, and if he prevails, our security will be decreased. We will be surrounded by British colonies. They would undoubtedly demand we either leave or surrender our sovereignty to them."

"Let me see," Peggy Doyle chimes in, "let me see, do I fancy being a second-rate human as a woman? Do I want to look the other way as people in this era own slaves and traffic them at will? Do we want our advanced technology falling into the hands of such an underdeveloped society? That would not make the world a better place. It will be worse than the one we came from."

Hansen agrees with the last point, "we must protect and prevent the dispersion of our tech for as long as possible. The societies of this era are too unstable and dictatorial ..."

"Even more so than the mess we just came from!" Peggy chimes in. "How can we play nice when we know the nasty nature of our neighbours?"

After much debate, the Council decides it would be best to let Wolfe and his armada leave Halifax and watch his path, probably north to Louisburg. If he stops there and adds more ships, men and supplies, history is repeating; Quebec City will be under attack this summer.

Captain Archer maintains the daily drone flights over Halifax as preparations for Wolfe's departure continue. Streams of soldiers practice their drill routines in the large common area at the base of Citadel Hill by day and party hard into the evening at night. Money and rum are flowing freely. The lifeblood of the colonial city depends on the largess of military campaigns.

Without support from the Royal Navy, Halifax would not be economically viable in this era. The land is barely able to support subsistent farming. Mineral extraction yields little of the precious ores investors seek. Halifax is a link in the military chain Britain wants to extend up the entire east coast of North America and down into the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes. They spent big and will continue to do so if Halifax helps to fulfill the empire's expansion.

Only Quebec City and, to a lesser degree, Montreal now stand in the way of eliminating French control anywhere in North America. The Fortress of Louisburg *was* a key French stronghold 300km northeast of Halifax. France poured immense resources into it, 10-20% of the empire's colonial budget between 1720 and 1740. French settlers from their Terre-Neuve colony on the rocky island later known as Newfoundland were transplanted to the village of Louisburg to support the growing fortress. It didn't last long.

In a pattern that seemed to repeat again and again during European conflicts, the British Royal Navy bottled up the French Navy along its coast, preventing resupply to its colonies. The British siege of Louisburg in 1745 captured the mighty fortress in a single day of fighting. The locals, lacking support, cut and ran into the wilderness. After the war of the Austrian Succession ended in 1748, Britain returned Louisburg to French control as part of the strange game of conquer, negotiate, swap some territories, and await the next war to do it again. Jolly good fun for the elites making money off the conflicts. Absolute horror for the impoverished pawns doing the fighting and paying the taxes.

The current war, soon to be named the 7-Years War, began three years ago in 1756. Two years later, in 1758, the British attacked Louisburg again. It fell, this time with more of a fight and bloodshed. Buoyed by the success the British Empire is having across the world in this latest and most deadly conflict, New France is targeted for capture. France must be removed from North America.

General Wolfe will soon be on his way to capture Quebec City. It will be his second attempt at subjugating the French Canadiens. Last year, he was ruthless in his decimation of French villages along the St. Lawrence River in a major campaign to soften the French resolve. Its mission was to destroy the food supply and terrorize the population, weaken their ability to fight when he returns this year. Their colony is desperate for resupply, their weaponry almost depleted. They have little ability to manufacture new arms. Supplies from France are completely cut off.

Wolfe and his officers are feeling heady as they party in Halifax, part of the pre-battle ritual to boost the confidence of their soldiers and sailors. On Monday, they will sail to New France and rout the French once and for all.

Monday, May 14, 1759,
Halifax, Nova Scotia

With Sunday to sober up and ask for God's benevolent assistance in their venture, Monday brings a flurry of activity across the harbour. A fleet of 48 ships and 140 smaller vessels is loaded with supplies.

General Wolfe makes a last demand from Governor Lawrence, "I expected to lead 12,000 men into battle. You have only supplied 7,000 regular troops, 400 officers and 300 gunners. This will not stand. Halifax does not need its full complement of soldiers. More can be obtained from Massachusetts and other colonies after I leave."

Lawrence protests, "our defense against natives and their French supporters is ongoing. They may attack soon after you leave. I cannot risk further depleting the city's defenses."

Wolfe pressures Lawrence further, "A failure in New France due to poor provisions on your part will surely bring London's wrath on your head. Admiral Sanders and I will ensure your malfeasance is reported to the highest levels. Our campaign will be over one way or another before winter. You can find ways to buttress Halifax until we return."

Lawrence is well aware of Wolfe's fame and support inside the Privy Council in London. He relents and releases an additional 1,000 troops with the intention of drawing support from Fort Anne in Annapolis and other smaller forts throughout Nova Scotia and Acadia. Halifax will be vulnerable, but Wolfe left him with no other option.

Archer watches as Wolfe sets sail with cheering crowds lining the waterfront. They have much to celebrate. Some merchants reported gains of £2,000 or more. A mass exodus to Boston begins not long after Wolfe leaves. Everyone is eager to spend their booty on items unavailable in backwoods Halifax. It's part of the ebb and flow of the city's population in this era. Each campaign brings thousands of outsiders eager to grab as much of the wealth floating around as they can during the good times. They pack up and leave as soon as the money spigot is turned off. This time, they have added urgency in their exodus; the natives undoubtedly are watching the city's defenses leave. Revenge attacks will not be long in coming.

Chapter 12: Meeting the Natives.

Tuesday, May 15, 1759,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

Josh returns his dirt bike to the suite he shares with Tracy as she and Cécile Debois arrive.

Cécile gained her entry into Shut*Inn as a language specialist. Fluent in several European and Asian languages, she's been studying Mi'kmaq for the past week and can hold a basic conversation if the need arises. She had a reputation as a strict, almost stubborn taskmaster while teaching French immersion for elementary school children. Her insistence that young students always address her as Mademoiselle Dubois even when outside of class did not have its desired effect. They often rebelled by calling her 'the Mad Moisselle' when out of earshot. Cécile is the opposite of Tracy, yet they are forming a close friendship.

Josh tolerates Cécile. She's odd, but there are a lot of odd people in Shut*Inn. He tries to ignore her as he stores his bike.

"How was your ride?" Tracy asks.

"Amazing, I joined a couple of military friends for a 5k ride out to Peggy's Cove. It was great to get out of the city. I got to stand on the exact spot where the lighthouse was built in the old timeline. The scenery there is just beautiful, and I learned something important."

"That being?"

"A small naval group will be making a trip to Head Bay, the most northerly point in St. Margaret's Bay, tomorrow afternoon. They will check out the generator potential of the stream that flows down from Mill Lake, and I can go along with them!"

"We should go too," Cécile insists. "Tracy, you could use your pull to get us included."

"What excuse could I use? We're not electrical engineers like Josh."

"I know the history of Head Bay," Cécile boasts. "It's a regular meeting place for Native people and Acadians. We could set up a welcome station of sorts; something that could encourage them to meet us there. Shut*Inn is probably too intimidating for them to come here. Head Bay would be a perfect neutral ground."

"That might work," Tracy agrees. "I will pass it by Rajan and Archer. Put together some materials we can leave at the landing site to signal friendship with the Natives after we leave."

Josh has an idea. *Maybe I can find a way to fit in better with Tracy's friend.* He gets to work on making a surprise for tomorrow.

The next day, Josh loads his mysterious box onto the cruiser taking everyone to Head Bay.

“What’s in the box?” everyone pesters him.

“We’ll see, or maybe I should say, we’ll hear it during lunch.”

Josh’s music collection has become almost legendary amongst not only his circle of friends but also across much of Shut*Inn. So, the mysterious box is thought to be some kind of sound system that will play music for the workers during their lunch at the remote location.

Lunch arrives, and still the ‘music box’ remains silent. Not able to hold back the suspense any longer, Josh moves the box to a location in the center of the clearing, 50 metres from where they are eating. He fiddles with his communicator for a bit and then instructs Cécile to pretend she’s meeting a Native for the first time.

“What would you say?”

He records her while she goes through her planned Mi’kmaq greeting.

“OK, now do the same for a meeting with an Acadian. Then add a request to meet them here.”

After he has all the recordings for his surprise, Josh instructs Cécile to approach the box as if she were a cautious person wondering what it is and then touch the metal plate attached to its top surface.

When she touches it, her previously recorded messages are played, and she gets a notification on her communicator that the device was activated. Every time Cécile touches the plate, her message repeats, and she gets another text notification.

“Brilliant!” Tracy praises her squeeze. “Captain Archer schedules regular drone flights throughout this area. If we rig this to also message her, she can direct a drone to quickly pass overhead and record what’s happening on the ground.

As hoped, the box drew attention that evening after the Novans left. At first, only a single native activated the device. A few hours later, he brought several friends. They all took turns touching the talking box until a drone flying overhead approached slowly, and Cécile spoke live through it to the group.

The immediate reaction is a rush back into the forest. Archer lands the drone on top of the box. Cécile repeatedly urges the frightened natives to come back and talk with her. She repeats her plea in both Mi’kmaw and French until an Acadian in the group braves the possible trap to hold a conversation with the talking bird and box.

A meeting is proposed for two days later; enough time to convince the local chief and his elders to travel to Head Bay.

Wednesday, May 16, 1759,
Shut*Inn, Nova Scotia

Council is abuzz during its early morning meeting. Contact has been made with the Natives. A trip to Halifax will surely follow soon.

Minister Rajan asks for guidance, “How should we explain our sudden appearance? Where did we come from? Who are we?”

The last question elicits the most debate. A wide variety of people from many nations were protected under the shield before being thrust into this 18th-century. They each brought a proud remembrance of their heritage with them. Collectively, their name should reflect the hope for a new start.

Novans; a new people not of this era in a new nation, Nova Liberté, receives the broadest support.

As to where they came from, that poses more disagreement. They can’t say they are from the future, as that would indicate they know what will happen. They don’t. This is a different timeline. There will be many similarities, the general location of shorelines, the location of mineral deposits and major physical events like earthquakes. Anything relating to people and ecosystems will begin to diverge from the historical record.

Just by being here, the Novans will bend the path into the future regardless of how careful they might be. A sense of duty and responsibility grows. Since they *cannot* return to their old timeline, the Novans must exercise best judgement in making the new path better than the old one. They cannot shrink into hiding. They must go forward, do their best to turn nasty into nice.

Thursday, May 17, 1759,
Head Bay, Nova Scotia

A crew of workers arrange the meeting area with a bounty of food and drink on makeshift tables. It’s anticipated the Natives and Acadians may feel more comfortable sitting in a circle on the ground. Chairs and benches are reserved just in case. Then, the crew leaves, not wanting to present a large contingent of people that might spook the hoped-for visitors.

Rajan arrives in a sea glider with Cécile and only a few guards wearing hidden firearms, just in case trouble breaks out. Archer, of course, has drones flying overhead.

Chief Potanek arrives at midday dressed in full ceremonial splendor, accompanied by his trusted inner circle of elders. The initial greetings are a bit rough. Cécile struggles to find the appropriate words for this

type of meeting. Rajan came prepared. He pulls a large chunk of the universally accepted peace offering from his vest pocket, unwraps it, breaks off a bit, smells it carefully before bringing it to his lips while making a satisfying sound. Next, he breaks off a piece of chocolate for Potanek.

He cautiously repeats Rajan's process. The odour is pleasant, the taste divine.

Potanek signals for a strong, young warrior, possibly his son, nearby to join them. The candy meets his approval, too. The meeting is off to a good start.

During the meal, Rajan engages Potanek via Cécile to hear his concerns and hopes. He learns the Mi'kmaq call the Novans 'the bird people'. They are fascinated by the drones they see flying from Shut*Inn daily. Cécile's 'talking bird' yesterday commanded the most interest. It spoke with Cecile's voice. Did her spirit inhabit the bird?

It was the first of many questions not fully answered until the expected question arose: "Where did the bird people fly from?"

Rajan suggests Potanek might gain understanding if he visited a sacred meeting place inside the great city that appeared suddenly only a few days ago. Potanek agrees to the invite but insists his entourage join him and that they travel in their own canoes.

Rajan and Cécile board the glider to lead a procession of several canoes to Shut*Inn's northern gate. Less than two weeks ago, the city suddenly appeared, a mountain-like structure of tall buildings rising over 300 metres above St. ~~Margaret's~~Margarets Bay. The Natives watched from across the bay as strange birds started flying from the mountain. Then people emerged from underground caves. Activity grew with large ships emerging, then returning into the mountain's belly.

Potanek and his elders paddle their canoes through giant doors into a brightly lit channel with people, ships and hundreds of creatures scurrying about inside; creatures unlike any they have seen before. Some look like skinny wolves with shinny legs, others are much larger (Truks). None are covered in fur nor move with the grace of real animals.

The tunnel has many branches. Rajan leads the canoes to the edge of a large cavern, Zero-Point meditation hall. Cécile guides the visitors across a tiled floor to a small pool of water and announces, "This is a sacred place where the Great Spirit touches people who open their hearts."

Potanek is pleased that the Novans have a pool of water as their sacred place. He has seen the inside of St. Paul's church with its altar and gruesome statue of a man being tortured hanging above it. He praises Cécile, "your people look like British and French with your pale skin. I see now, you are very different."

As they sit around the pool, Potanek and his aides can feel the unusual energy emanating from the still waters. Cécile explains, "a very small hole is in the center of this pool, so small it cannot be seen. The Great Spirit sent us through this hole from a land far away, not to be found, no matter how long and hard a person might travel. Only the Great Spirit can send people through the hole. We meet here to feel the spirit's energy and seek guidance."

A smaller contingent of Novans than normal arrives to participate in the unscheduled meditation. Potanek and his elders are given a prominent position in the inner circle of people surrounding the pool. Gaia enters Zero-Point Hall, naked as usual, her long, blonde hair flowing on her shoulders and back. She enters the pool alone this time and positions herself at Zero-Point. Cécile notices Gaia has changed her position somewhat from previous meditations. She is still aligned along the north-south field, but instead of her navel or solar plexus positioned exactly at the center of the pool, at Zero-Point, she aligns her throat there.

The gong is struck to mark the start. The natives are silent at first as the Novans begin their usual humming during the meditation. At some point, Potanek's wife begins chanting, soon followed by the other natives in the circle.

After almost an hour, the gong marks the end of the meditation. When Gaia stands, water from the pool sprays off of her in a cloud of mist and her hair sticks out in every direction as if she is touching an electrostatic generator at a science exhibit.

She walks over first to Potanek's wife, holds her hands, then moves on to each of the elder women before facing Potanek. He's not angry or insulted at being last in the greeting. The elder women are the most revered advisors in the tribe. He always listens to their advice before making any important decisions.

Rajan breaks his silence, "Cécile, please tell Chief Potanek, I believe the Great Spirit wishes our peoples to live as friends; to share the Spirit's land in peace and cooperation."

Potanek consults with each of the elders in turn, then nods his approval.

Rajan suggests, "Let us travel to the British city tomorrow and tell them of our agreement."

Chapter 13: Meeting the British.

Friday, May 18, 1759,
Shut*Inn, Nova Liberté

Rajan and Potanek board a sea glider in the early morning. The vessel acts as a regular boat at low speed while it traverses the bay. In the open ocean, it accelerates, rising on its hydrofoils more like a low-flying plane than a boat. Potanek marvels at the speed of its flight just above the waves below. When they arrive at the entrance to Halifax Harbour 10 minutes later, the British sentries on Cornwallis Island sound an alarm, firing a cannon harmlessly out to sea. The glider is moving too fast for the customary interdiction of a foreign vessel into British territory. The cannon shot is intended to alert the next level of defense on Georges Island, 12km inside the inner harbour.

Rajan pilots the glider past the island at full speed before the soldiers have time to load and react, past the battery of cannons along the shoreline of Halifax and into the deep narrows leading to Bedford Basin. It's a location he often frequented in the old timeline when it housed a major military base. Empty of ships now, the basin is lined with small farms mostly owned by foreigners, German and Irish.

Potanek points to a nearby hill where Mi'kmaq often gather just beyond the patrol pattern of British soldiers. Left unsaid is its function as a launching point for raids to capture farm animals and unprotected items.

Rajan rounds the large basin and returns the glider to a point offshore from Halifax. Sitting halfway between the battery of cannons in Halifax to his west and a smaller set on the opposite shore in Dartmouth, he waits for a receiving party to be sent to greet them and hopefully welcome them ashore.

Governor Lawrence looks on from a vantage point in one of his cannon batteries, trying to process this strange event; a small vessel with no discernible armament traveled at incredible speed around the harbour. *Where did it come from? How does it move without sails?*

He's further puzzled by its Ensign flag, a red maple leaf on a white background with vertical red bars on either side. *What nation does it represent? Is it a privateer?*

Rajan activates the LRAD system aboard the glider. It has a dual function as both a very loud but clear sound system and an acoustic weapon able to cause severe distress in people it's pointed at. He plays some period music, Bach, to lessen the increasing tension mounting onshore.

At length, he announces, "Governor Lawrence, do you wish to meet?" as a small White Ensign flag is raised from the roof of the glider. Rajan hopes it is a recognized sign of non-confrontational intent.

Lawrence orders a standdown and raises a British White Ensign. The meeting is on.

Rajan sails the glider slowly to the main dock. Its gullwing door opens slowly, mechanically, as a growing crowd presses toward the dock, fascinated by this strange craft. No one is ready to advance all

the way to it, not even Lawrence. He waits at the dock's base, backed by a contingent of soldiers ready to react if a belligerent should emerge from the shining white craft.

Lawrence is not just surprised; shocked, alarmed might best describe his reaction as Potanek exits the glider. The chief was a regular visitor to Halifax in the past, before relations between the British and the Mi'kmaq deteriorated. He usually arrived by canoe. *Have the Mi'kmaq aligned with a new power, one with unheard-of sailing capability?* Lawrence wonders.

Rajan leaves two heavily armed guards by the glider as he, Cécile and Potanek confidently traverse the dock toward Lawrence and his startled soldiers. He extends his hand to Lawrence while announcing his new title: Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nova Liberté.

“Nova Liberte?” Lawrence parrots the intro. “I haven't heard of this nation. Where do you hail from?”

“Somewhere north of the North Pole,” Rajan replies flippantly with his preplanned response to the expected question as Cécile translates as best she can to Potanek.

Lawrence eyes Rajan's distinctive East Indian physique and skin colour. The British are currently in stiff competition with other European empires, each wanting to colonize India and gain from its vast riches. The struggle, led by the English East India Company, has thrown the subcontinent into turmoil. The fractured Indian society is being split further in a divide-and-conquer strategy repeated many times by the Western powers. They sell weapons to local leaders, let them fight each other while their riches are carted off by foreigners.

Lawrence wonders, *could this Minister Rajan be from an unknown faction, one with obviously superior sailing capability? Why would they choose Halifax? How do the Mi'kmaq fit into this?*

He draws on his years of military service to control his emotions and apprehension. *A people able to create a craft such as this would surely pose a challenge to British authority.*

Lawrence invites his guests into the Governor's House for tea, hoping to get to the bottom of their sudden appearance and to assess their intent.

Rajan directs the meeting away from discussion that might reveal nearby Shut*Inn, “I understand the British Crown claims sovereignty and ownership over a colony they call Nova Scotia Province. I hear you are also engaged in a battle for nearby Acadia, and General Wolfe departed recently to bring New France to heel.”

Lawrence states his role and British sovereignty over Acadia without confirming any details regarding Wolfe, “I represent the Crown here in Nova Scotia, using judicious caution and fairness in the management of this colony. This includes ensuring foreign visitors remain under my authority.”

Rajan takes another sip of tea before reaching into his sacket to produce a printed document. He reads it silently, carefully, making a deliberate show of his dissatisfaction with its content, leaving Lawrence wondering what could be written on the fine, white paper.

“Do you recognize this Proclamation from May 1756?” Rajan asks bluntly while sliding it across the table to Lawrence.

Lawrence’s face shows his immediate recognition of the text. He’s left wondering how Rajan obtained a copy, especially one printed on such high-quality paper. “Where did this come from?” he demands.

“Irrelevant!” Rajan replies, shaking his head. “Do you deny making this proclamation after forcefully expelling the Acadians from their established homeland?”

The meeting is quickly taking a very negative turn.

“They would not accept British rule,” Lawrence raises his voice in response. “There were constant conflicts. I had no choice.”

“You had no choice,” Rajan repeats the words disdainfully. “Then, I suppose, you had no choice but to declare a bounty on all Mi’kmaq people, dead or alive.”

“Britain and France are at war!” Lawrence pounds the table. “The natives agitated on behalf of our enemy.”

“So, you paid civilians and military people twenty-five pounds for each Mi’kmaq scalp they brought to you. That’s a lot of money for a wretched commoner earning barely fifteen pounds a year. Clearly, your intent was to exterminate the native people.”

“I just wanted the agitation to stop,” Lawrence defends himself. “As governor, I am responsible for this colony and the safety of British subjects.”

“Was Halifax not established in violation of the 1726 treaty with the Mi’kmaq people?” Rajan asks. “Maybe your rule here is illegal. Maybe that explains the *agitation*, as you call it”.

“The Crown fully backs my authority here,” Lawrence asserts strongly.

Rajan pauses to let the heat dissipate. Then he calmly declares, “the actions and attitude of the Crown make me wonder if it is capable of ruling equitably in this area. It seems like decisions have been and will continue to be imposed at the whim of London, not for the needs of the people it subjugates.”

Lawrence’s anger grows over this challenge to British rule. He responds forcefully, pounding his fist on the table again and staring defiantly, “any attack against British rule in this province will be met with full force. On this, you can be assured.”

Rajan sits back in his chair, staring intently at Lawrence, “you seem confident, maybe even a little arrogant to me. On the other hand, I have found the Natives and Acadians to be welcoming and flexible.”

“You are being deceived. We tried working with them. They cannot be trusted,” Lawrence responds. “Is it your intention to align with such people?”

“We intend to align with anyone willing to respect the basic human rights of others. If the Natives adhere to this policy, we will be allies. Same for the Acadians and the British. The purpose of my visit is to

determine if British officials are ready to adjust their laws, governance and especially their attitudes to reflect the values we Novans support.”

“There will be no adjustment,” Lawrence claps back. “As stated, I act under the authority of the British Crown. British Common Law is recognized as the most advanced anywhere. If you wish to be a visitor here, you will submit to it.”

“British Common Law,” Rajan parrots while finishing his tea.

“Compared to anarchy and chaos, I suppose it is advanced,” Rajan admits. “I doubt it rises to the standard my people adhere to. Until your government outlaws slavery, human trafficking, extrajudicial killing, ripping people out of their homes and shipping them off to foreign lands, and until it gives real power to average citizens, your laws are grossly inadequate in our eyes.”

Lawrence can’t argue against London’s firm control of life in Halifax. It is, after all, primarily a military base. He takes a shot against the idea that Acadians have been mistreated, “What proof do you have of my government ‘ripping people out of their homes and shipping them off’?”

Rajan is prepared. He removes more documents from his sacket, “I present a table of Acadian population changes during the past 10 years.”

Table of the French Acadian population from 1749 to 1758

Names of Places.	Name of Division	1749	1755, Before the Proscription.	1755, After the Proscription.	1756.	1758, After taking of Louisbourg.
New Divisions.	Old Divisions.					
Nova Scotia	Peninsula	13,000	8,200	1,200	1,200	1,200
	Isle Royale	1,000	3,000	3,000	2,500	700
New Brunswick	District of Gedaic	600	3,500	4,000	2,000	300
	Shores of the Gulf	100	400	400	1,000	500
	Bay des Chaleurs	100	150	150	500	400
	St. John River	200	250	250	1,600	1,100

“As you can see, the Acadian population suffered a dramatic decline. Are you prepared to admit that thousands of people were forcefully removed against their will? They lived on their homesteads for generations. Carved them out of the wilderness at great expense and labour. Will you deny expelling them and giving their land to British subjects? What part of your common law justified this?”

Lawrence remains silent.

Rajan turns to Chief Potanek, “Is the translation providing a clear interpretation for you?”

Potanek nods, stares glaringly at Lawrence, and spits on his table.

Incensed, Lawrence stands hovering over Rajan, “Leave now and take your savage friend with you! If you come back, I will have you arrested.”

“Or scalped, I assume,” Rajan taunts his new enemy. “Beware, my government might be very displeased by your threat of arrest against me.”

Lawrence pauses. He appears to be considering a retraction, then something about Potanek’s raging gaze changes his mind.

“My government may also be offended by your unwarranted accusations against it. You are free to go,” he says, pointing to his door.

Back at Shut*Inn, Council reviews the video from Cécile’s cam. Contentious debate breaks out. Should the Novans simply ignore their British neighbours and handle whatever fallout arises when Wolfe returns

from New France? Or should they expel the British soldiers while encouraging non-military subjects to remain on their property?

The vote is close. Many argued Halifax offers nothing the Novans need; let the British military remain there. If they cause trouble, deal with it at that time.

Others insist London will either attack Shut*Inn or try to build an alliance with the Novans. How could an alliance work? Britain is already becoming the strongest of the 18th-century empires. Any alliance would accelerate its imperial conquest. Nova Liberté would be sucked into the imperialistic value system, leaving behind any hope of creating a new path.

Early the next morning, a drone flies low over Halifax and the surrounding area. It disperses packets of leaflets into the wind; leaflets setting the course between the Novans, their British neighbour, and even the entire British Empire. Each leaflet proclaims:

British rule in Halifax and the surrounding area supports only the interests of the imperial crown in London. We believe people of all means should collectively create and enforce their laws without unelected Lords interfering. Join us in forming a new nation, Nova Liberté.

The British military would be wise to leave Nova Scotia and Acadia, taking their weapons with them while they can.

Signed by Lisa Quinn, on behalf of the Council of Nova Liberté.

Chapter 14: Hey, Hey, Goodbye.

Saturday, May 19, 1759,
Halifax, Nova Scotia

Saturday is not going well for Governor Lawrence. Between frightened townspeople and truculent soldiers, he's inundated with frantic questions and slowness to comply with orders. Soldiers are not foolish enough to disobey outright. They find creative ways to move just slow enough to let their displeasure be known. Secretly, they and many of the townspeople wonder if something other than the imperial duty they have known since birth is possible.

On the other hand, the devil they know might be better than one lurking unseen. A report from the outpost on Cornwallis Island this morning turns concern into panic.

At first, Lawrence cannot believe the report's validity. It seems absurd. The small cadre of soldiers manning the lookout claim they did a regular round last night, then retired to their shed for a game of cards. On their next round, the cannons were gone! Not just one. All of them.

They swear only 20 minutes passed between rounds. Lawrence accuses them of drinking and sleeping during their watch. They smell of rum but claim they only drank in a panic after discovering the missing cannons. Lawrence doesn't know what to believe. Each Armstrong cannon has a bore length of 9 ½ feet and weighs tons. It can throw a 32-pound shot far into the outer harbour as the first line of defense. A whole crew of men took two full days to install each of the four cannons. Sleeping and drinking on duty cannot explain the apparent disappearance. If it's true.

Lawrence barks his order, "Send a sloop to the island. Confirm this story and lock these drunken bastards in the brig."

Confirmation of the missing cannons brings a quick response. Lawrence orders Colonel George Scott, the only senior officer Wolfe didn't appropriate from Halifax, to prepare for an attack, "insubordination will not be met with time in a cell. Offenders will be summarily shot!"

All remaining 26 cannons are cleaned and test fired. Battery guards are doubled. The usual Saturday night revelry is cancelled. The entire town remains on high alert.

Nightfall brings new terror. It's an especially foggy night in a town known for fog so dense it can limit visibility to a few arms' length. Then it starts: a howling, screeching noise directed at soldiers standing guard over the cannon batteries. It can be heard throughout Halifax with less intensity, but for those near the batteries, the noise is unbearable. ~~Frightened shouting and rapid unscheduled bowel movements~~ heighten distress through the long, dark ~~night~~. Hour after hour it continues.

Bad turns worse when a wall breach alarm is sounded. Colonel Scott works his way through the fog to Horseman's Fort along the south wall. It's one of five forts surrounding Halifax with a palisade wall running between them. Together, they form a strong semi-circular barrier against any land-based attack.



A small section of the wall between Horseman's Fort and Cornwallis Fort has been tampered with but remains intact. *Probably a failed attempt by some Natives taking advantage of the fog and the chaos,* Scott speculates.

At first light, Lawrence inspects the entire length of the palisade wall to ensure its integrity. Anxious townspeople pepper him with questions every step of the way. He can barely hear himself think. *The natives have tried to breach the wall many times. Are the new arrivals assisting them? Will every night bring the wretched noise?*

Sunday service at St. Paul's begins shortly. Lawrence rushes through the anxious crowd outside to the sanctity of his front-row bench. For the moment, he has an hour of reprieve before the onslaught of questions begins again.

After the service, Lawrence is immediately whisked to Citadel Fort, the highest lookout in Halifax. Ships are spotted approaching the inner harbour. Through eyepieces, Scott and Lawrence can see the unmistakable Ensign flag of Nova Liberté flying on two ships, both moving without sails but at a much slower pace than the sea glider.

"I don't see any large weapons or cannon ports on them," Lawrence remarks.

The first ocean ferry turns and backs into what appears to be a new embankment of crushed rock extending out from the shore, less than two km south of Horseman's Fort. Its giant doors open, and twenty or more heavily armed men rush ashore to set up a defensive position. They are followed by a stream of mechanical devices the likes of which Lawrence and Scott have never seen, could never imagine.

"They're establishing a beachhead on our doorstep," Scott warns. "Should we attack before they get fully prepared?"

Lawrence decides a show of force would be more appropriate than a direct attack. He orders as many soldiers as he can spare to set up a standard firing position outside the southern wall.

The standoff continues for several hours, with the Novans paying little attention to the British squad. As midday turns to late afternoon, a new arrival is seen slowly entering the inner harbour. A remotely controlled boat barely larger than a rowboat moves into a position in front of the Halifax shoreline, defiantly within cannon range.

Lawrence eyes the craft carefully. *It's unmanned. No weapons I can see. It might be filled with gunpowder. Why is it stationed there?*

"If it approaches the shore, blow it out of the water," he commands.

The boat remains mostly stationary. Not anchored, just not moving much.

Lawrence orders a warning shot fired over it.

The response from the craft is unexpected: loud singing, without singers performing it. The taunting words to the song, *na, na, na, na, hey, hey, goodbye*, repeat irritatingly, over and over and over again. Confusion turns to fear. Fear of what might come next. Everything happening in the past two days is completely out of the ordinary. Each new event brings both wonder and trepidation. This new nation, Nova Liberté, is not just strange beyond belief; it's asserting authority over the British colony. Does it have the power to back its claim?

"Damm Wolfe!" Lawrence mutters to himself. "He took my best soldiers. I barely have enough to fend off a regular attack from the Natives. The noise from that blasted boat is driving me around the bend."

After another hour of unrelenting annoyance and villagers wanting it to stop, Lawrence breaks.

"Shut that dammed thing up," he commands.

The smallness of the target makes regular 32-pound balls ineffective at this distance from the shore. Scott orders four cannons loaded with shrapnel and exploding bombs. They fire! The boat remains afloat, but at least the noise stopped.

Before the gunners have time to enjoy their small victory, a swarm of drones descends on the town, flashing dazzler weapons at Lawrence, Scott, and every soldier carrying a weapon.

When Lawrence awakens, he finds himself lying on a sofa in the Governor's House, still dazed with only limited vision. His hearing is returning quicker than his eyesight. Through the blurriness, he sees shapes moving. *Are they men? Mine or Novan?*

The voices are clearer than the images. Two Novans are holding a conversation at *his* table in *his* parlor!

"The effects from the dazzler are wearing off," General Hansen announces. "Governor, your eyesight will recover completely within 24 hours. Take a moment to get your bearings, then we'll give you an update report."

The news is not to Lawrence's liking. The Novan weapon rendered him and most of his men temporarily blind. Some, like Lawrence, also lost consciousness. During their incapacitation, the Novans confiscated all muskets, sidearms, and the powder supply from the magazine. Soldiers are confined to their barracks as they awaken. Halifax is now under General Hansen's control.

Over the course of the next hour, Lawrence learns his fate. He can remain in Halifax and continue living in the Governor's House during a transition period. A meeting of the British Nova Scotia Council and several Novans is scheduled for next week in the long room of the Great Pontack Hotel. The exit of British troops from Halifax tops the agenda.

Chapter 15: The Handover.

May 22, 1759,
Halifax, Nova Scotia

The Great Pontack Hotel, a large three-story building erected six years ago, is already showing signs of disrepair. Named after the famous Pontack Club in London, it was probably intended for greatness when built by John Butler. Instead, the economics of 18th-century Halifax dictated it would house everything from horse stables and a slaughterhouse at street-level to a kitchen, bakery and rowdy rum bar in the floor above and a meeting place in the Long Room on the top floor.

It *did* boast the cleanest rooms for rent in Halifax. Though by 21st-century standards, it was a smoky, rat-infested, urine-smelling firetrap. Yet the Long Room is *the* place to go for balls and civic ceremonies. Rajan considered erecting an air-supported structure on the commons for the first large meeting with prominent residents of Halifax. Instead, he decided the hotel would, despite its dingy atmosphere, provide a more familiar setting for this important occasion.

The Nova Scotia Council started as a group of ten naval officers and merchants handpicked by Governor Cornwallis to represent Britain in its new colony in 1756. Lawrence chose *his* naval friends and business contacts for the current Council after replacing Cornwallis. Another legislative body, the General Assembly, was first elected only last year. It's now acting as a lower house with limited real power in the governing process. Though the Governor and his Council no longer reign supreme, they can still override any decision by the General Assembly if it's deemed to be against the best interests of the Crown.

Lawrence commanded his full Council and local members of the Assembly to attend today's meeting. The Novans sent Prime Minister Quinn, Minister Rajan, General Hansen, and Dr. Pajöt to represent Novan interests.

After introductions, Quinn starts the session, "Thank you for attending and thank you for refraining from smoking during this session. I understand it can be an annoyance for those accustomed to using their pipes during meetings like this. Dr. Pajöt has scientific information on the devastating impact indoor smoking has on your wives and children."

The British men, all heavy smokers, are displeased with the mandate for the meeting but fear they must endure in deference to the new power in town.

Quinn continues, "First, I'd like to state clearly that though we insist on removing London's influence in this region, we do not consider ourselves enemies of the British people. In fact, there are many aspects of your society, including your Common Law and Parliament, that we greatly admire. However, there is a huge gap between us on social customs and values. Our nation holds its Charter as the bedrock foundation for all legislative and judicial activities. I've printed a copy for each of you to review before we continue."

Novan Charter of Freedoms, Rights, Obligations, and Governance

Civil structure in a complex society does not happen by chance. Our freedoms and rights are created by our continued obligation to each other.

Fundamental Freedoms

Every Human and Sapient has the inalienable freedom of conscience, thought, belief and expression, including freedom of peaceful assembly and security of their person.

Democratic Rights

Residents and citizens of Nova have a right to participate in their governance and the election of representatives via universal suffrage without discrimination by race, creed, gender, or wealth.

Equality Rights

Everyone is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of laws and regulations. Corporations and private organizations are not people; their managers and directors are responsible for the actions and pronouncements of such entities.

Obligations

Humans and Sapient are obligated: to respect the freedom and rights of others; obey the laws decided by elected representatives; contribute their talent, skill, and energy to the maintenance of civil structure; disseminate truthful information; challenge false information using logic and reason; and maintain the natural environment supporting life on Earth.

Governance

A legitimate government must: provide equal access to health care, education, security, and a life-thriving environment as its highest priority when allocating common resources; ensure mass disseminations of information are as factually true as possible; and secure the freedoms and rights of its citizens and guests.

“It’s a simple Charter by design,” Quinn continues, “though even a cursory look at it will reveal several areas where your Common Law and ours diverge significantly. Let’s start with sovereignty...”

“Our Charter shows we hold individuals to be sovereign over the safety and security of their person; they have certain rights and freedoms that must not be challenged by governments. We defend this individual sovereignty for all people, regardless of race, creed, sex, wealth, or station in society.”

Lawrence suppresses an urge to interject. He lets Quinn continue while he sniffs his annoyance.

“The sovereignty of nations can and often is challenged. The Mi’kmaq people consider themselves to be a nation. We Novans agree, but they are not a sovereign nation. To be sovereign, a nation must be capable of defending itself against challenges alone or with allies.”

“Or with allies?” Lawrence tilts his head while giving Quinn serious side eye.

“Let me be clear,” Quinn stares him down. “Nova Liberté is not joining with Natives and Acadians to support their claims of national sovereignty. We *are* committed to defending the rights and freedoms of individuals. If, while upholding this duty, we arouse the ire of kings and lords, so be it. We consider the British government to be illegitimate if it continues to accept, even promote, slavery and trafficking of people as if they are merely cargo.”

“Are you making a declaration of war?” Lawrence bellows while shaking a pointed finger at Quinn.

“Not at all,” she replies calmly.

“Not at all!” Lawrence repeats the assertion loudly. “You arrived in Halifax uninvited, disrupted the peace, used some unknown weapon to blind our soldiers and confiscated their weapons. Now you insult our King and His government, of which we are a part. How can this be anything other than a declaration of war?”

Hansen takes command, “If war was our intention, you would be either dead or imprisoned.”

“This is a province of the British Empire!” Lawrence shouts back. “The Royal Navy will answer your invasion.”

Rajan stands and raises his hand to signal caution and restraint before the meeting goes completely off the rails, “We called this meeting to discuss how we can *jointly* provide good governance, not foster animosity. I believe Prime Minister Quinn’s intention is only to point out the obvious differences in our viewpoints.”

Lawrence responds loudly, “And I am only stating the obvious fact; the Royal Navy will not stand idle in the face of this invasion.”

Hansen throws another barb at Lawrence, “Any war between the British Empire and us will be short and devastating for your navy. Of this you should be certain.”

Rajan again raises his hand to lower the tension, “Talk of war is premature and unproductive. We will provide a letter for delivery to your king and his privy council. It will explain our position. Imperial

warships will not be invited into any ports of Nova Libert . Commercial traffic will be openly accepted after inspection for rats and banned substances. British subjects here do not need to leave. They can continue their lives and prosper in their new freedoms. Their property ownership, for the most part, will be protected. Many may choose to leave. That is their right. We will encourage another election of your General Assembly after those wishing to leave for other domains are gone. The Assembly will have real, uncontested power over the creation of laws aligned with our Charter.”

Chief Justice Jonathan Belcher, known for his even temperament, wades into the angry cesspool, “It’s encouraging to hear your embrace of our General Assembly. As you know, legislation is only one side of governance: courts, justice and policing are the other side. What are your intentions there?”



Jonathan Belcher

“We welcome the continuation of your court,” Quinn replies, “with the understanding it will apply its decisions within the framework of our Charter.”

Belcher carefully reviews his copy of the Charter again. He proceeds slowly to let the steam dissipate from the meeting.

“There is much to be admired in this Charter,” he proclaims. “I can see how its implementation could bring increased civility and prosperity. There is one aspect I am certain will be impossible to implement, at least in the foreseeable future.”

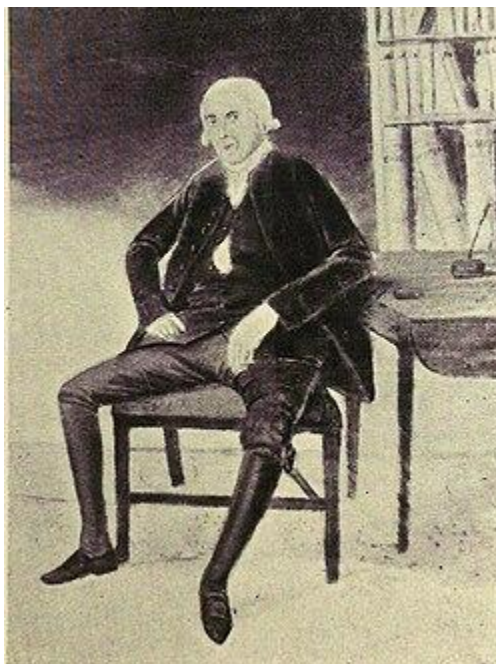
“That being?” Quinn asks.

“The demand for universal suffrage. It will prove to be a chasm too wide to bridge, again, in the foreseeable future. You have suggested that a new election of the General Assembly be undertaken. I wonder if you are aware that this Assembly was only elected for the first time last year. Until then, the Governor and his Council members present here today have enacted all laws and regulations. Societies

can evolve and improve, but only at a pace comfortable to them. Anything faster or even slower is fodder for chaos and rebellion.”

“Your words are wise, Chief Justice,” Quinn praises. “This meeting has triggered unproductive passion. I should have anticipated this. Let’s take this one step at a time. Weapons have been confiscated from British soldiers. They will not be returned. We do not recognize the Governor’s Council as a legitimate authority because it is nothing more than an extension of London’s rule. The General Assembly holds promise. It’s elected by the people. Maybe we should hold another meeting with just the current Assembly members to discuss our hopes and yours for this region.”

Richard Bulkeley jumps into the opening, “May I offer my home as a more congenial place to hold a dinner meeting?”



Richard Bulkeley – self portrait

Bulkeley is not an elected member of the Assembly. His dinner proposal ensures he is part of the proposed meeting. A wily Irishman skilled at maneuvering in British society, he purposefully keeps a low-key presence, knowing his Irish heritage is often looked down on. His current home reputedly has a dining room able to hold 30 people. It was the headquarters for General Wolfe during his preparation for the current attack on New France. Over the past few years, Bulkeley skillfully used dining and entertainment to ingratiate with power holders and gain profitable Navy contracts. He knows Lawrence will continue holding private meetings with key members of his Council; members who share disdain for the Novans and will work to undermine their plans. He sees the wind shifting strongly in a new direction. Tacking into it, not fighting against the gale, is the winning strategy.

Chapter 16: A Delicate Dinner.

May 23, 1759,
Halifax, Nova Scotia

Bulkeley's wife, Mariam, has been the force behind his rise in British society. The daughter of a senior British naval officer, she was raised in the art of entertaining the egos of powerful men. Together, they forged a powerful force in early Halifax society; she with impeccable taste and gracious charm; he with a disarming Irish quip lathered with blarney. Dinner with the Novans carries great risk; the attendees must be chosen carefully; preparations must anticipate the quirks and oddities of two very different people.

Richard cautions Mariam on the need for the servants to completely clean the household anew. The Novans seem to be highly sensitive to tobacco smoke. Rugs and draperies must be beaten and aired; clean floors must be washed again. A negative impression from the Novans could jeopardize the couple's extensive land holdings.

Minister Rajan made a subtle statement that caught Richard's ear in the previous meeting: *property, for the most part, will be protected.*

Property ownership is important for all members of the wealthy class. Statements like, *for the most part*, leave open the possibility of costly, unexpected changes. Richard and Mariam's current home is among the best in Halifax. Yet it pales in comparison to the new home they have begun constructing on Argyle Street.



The Carleton – 21st century on Argyle Street

The Carleton is a stone building in a town mostly populated with wooden structures. It's intended to cement the Bulkeley's place at the top of the Halifax society. A disruption in land ownership would set their hopes back considerably. Mariam's insight into the proclivities of each member of the General Assembly must be carefully considered during compilation of the attendee list. Chief Justice Belcher should be the only member of the Governor's Council included. Invitations should be sent quickly to Assembly members in Lunenburg to give them time to travel to Halifax. Richard recognizes the Novans place of higher regard for female involvement in politics. Every effort should be made to include the wives at the dinner.

May 26, 1759,
Halifax, Nova Scotia

Only 11 of the 23 Assembly members are able to attend the Bulkeley dinner. Those in Annapolis are too far away from Halifax to be contacted. Other Assembly members left for London shortly after being elected last year. Richard is thankful he has the best of the bunch accepting the invitation, and only one he fears will cause unnecessary conflict.

Robert Sanderson was chosen as the first Speaker of the House Assembly last year. A merchant ship owner and staunch Royalist, he is described as a 'litigious troublesome man' by some. He hasn't mellowed in his later years. If anything, his gruff, often surly manner has grown even more pronounced. Mariam often wonders why he was chosen as Speaker for the Assembly. Richard chalks it up to fear of reprisal more than personal appreciation.

The meet-and-greet before dinner is going well until Sanderson and Captain Archer are introduced to each other. He is, true to his nature, unable to resist making a derogatory remark about a woman acting as captain of a ship. He pressed his prejudice too far when speculating whether Archer's ship is manned by wayward women and girly boys.

He smirked, thinking his quip will garner an appropriate response of guffaws and supporting comments from fellow Assemblymen. The sudden silence across the room and Archer's icy stare quickly brings Richard Bulkeley in between them with a completely unrelated Irish joke strategically launched to induce laughter and push past the rough beginning to the gathering.

Dinner is sumptuous. No expense was spared. Quinn prepared the Novans to expect 'wild' meat to be served, "do your best to stomach it."

Pajöt and Cécile are having the most difficulty. It's not that the taste is radically different than Novan meat grown in bioreactors. It's the thought of some creature being slaughtered in the forced drive to their plate. The men, Hansen, Rajan, and Chan Wei, do not care one way or the other.

Cécile takes up a conversation with a new friend, Philip Knaut, a German-born merchant from Lunenburg. She relishes the opportunity to practice their native language with Philip and his wife, Anna. Even Sanderson remains pleasant and cordial. British dining etiquette with foreign visitors dictates that barbs and quips should be saved as after-dinner treats.

It's clear Mariam has gone to great lengths to ensure her guests have the best experience she can provide in a backwoods, colonial setting. Quinn and Pajöt take every opportunity to compliment her decor, crystal from Ireland and ornate plates from China.

After dinner, the talk delicately moves to the topic of how the established residents of Halifax and surrounding areas can form a blended government with the Novans for the benefit of peace and prosperity. Sanderson will have none of it, "Any talk of supplanting British rule is treasonous," he proclaims strongly.

Archer tried; she really tried to refrain from confronting her bombastic nemesis. Something about his smug arrogance pushed her to the edge. Professional training kept her from going over it: "If you're uncomfortable talking about new opportunities, Mr. Sanderson, maybe quiet observation would provide better service during this meeting."

Sanderson is not about to be talked down to, especially by a woman, "Service! You speak of service. I served my King both in politics and as a privateer; fought in bloody battles with the Royal Navy; battles you and the crew of your girly ship will come to know firsthand unless you depart from Halifax and never return."

Hansen holds Archer back with a calm gesture of his hand as her commanding officer. He has the rapt attention of the room when he proclaims, "Such a fine meal as has been provided by Mrs. Bulkeley should not be tarnished by discord in her home. If you have a bone to pick with Captain Archer, Mr. Sanderson, I'm certain, having known her for years, she would be only too happy to accommodate you in a one-on-one contest outside. Beware, though, I have seen her throw men much larger and stronger than you on their arse before they knew what hit them. Let us not talk of treason and instead proceed to a discussion of how we can work together."

Chief Justice Belcher agrees, "I am most curious as to how our Novan guests implement their Charter of Freedoms, Rights, and Obligations. This discussion was not pursued at the Governor's Council meeting. Could Prime Minister Quinn be so kind as to continue her discussion of it?"

"Certainly, Chief Justice. As I mentioned in the previous meeting, we admire aspects of British Common Law and your parliamentary system. We have a different form of governance. British subjects are welcome to join it as a complement to their local elections if they wish. We do not insist you abrogate your British oaths. Our governance might be described as Constructionism."

She continues, "there are many isms: capitalism, socialism, communism, Catholicism, Buddhism, and of course imperialism. We strive to engage as many people as possible in choosing leaders who have proven their competence and character."

"Are your elections similar to ours?" Belcher asks.

"Which of yours would be my first answer?" Quinn replies. "I understand you use a block system of voting here in Halifax. Your Assembly has 23 members. Many more people campaign for office. Each qualified male voter can cast up to 23 votes for the people he prefers, but only one vote for any specific

individual. The 23 people with the most votes from across the whole province form your Assembly. There are no political parties.”

“This is a fairly accurate description,” Belcher notes. “There are limits placed. Lunenburg and Annapolis are each guaranteed two representatives in the Assembly.”

Quinn acknowledges her only partial understanding of colonial elections and continues, “elections in Britain use a different system. They have political parties, electoral boroughs and one vote per person with the post rule for determining the winner in each district. I understand the House of Lords is not elected, and some boroughs are called rotten or pocket fiefdoms.”

“Yes,” Belcher sighs. “A pocket borough often has only a few people qualified to vote. Sometimes it’s limited to a single person. The common people there have no input into their representation.”

“Taxation without representation,” Quinn offers the soon-to-be-popular slogan in British colonies. “But even in open elections, a problem arises; how can individuals, part of a large electorate, know the character of the people standing for election? Populist politics, slogans, monied interests, and corrupt political parties make it easy to sway people to vote against their own best interests, especially in societies with millions of people.”

“How do you overcome this in your elections?”

“We encouraged the formation of what we call Construction Circles. Like-minded people can independently form a circle to discuss and advocate for laws and regulations suitable to their needs and desires. One restriction is that circles can only have a maximum size of 31 members. This ensures everyone in the circle knows each member well enough to judge their merit and character.”

“When a Circle has at least 16 members, it can elect one in the group to represent the Circle at the next higher level. It is called the Guild level.

The system has six levels:

Circle,
Guild,
Caucus,
Forum,
Congress,
Minister.

“Each level conforms to the restriction of 31 members in a unit and 16 members before one can be elected to provide representation at the next level. Instead of one, large election fraught with potential for deception and corruption, multiple elections happen continuously in groups where each voter knows the character of members standing for election. Collectively, this simple structure could accommodate a contributing population of millions if all units are fully populated. The many small elections between people who know each other help to increase meritocracy and competence in the government.”

“Interesting,” Belcher intones, “though I’m left wondering why 16 and 31?”

“A common question and concern,” Quinn replies. “People, generally, have a psychological limit of how many close contacts they can maintain outside of family members. Some can have many more than 16, while some can only manage fewer. A close contact is someone you know personally, well enough to act as a trusted alibi for their character, their actions and contributions to the goals or advocacy of your circle.”

“Circles elect representatives to be part of Guilds, who in turn elect representatives for the Caucuses, etc. This structure works for us for a few important reasons that may not be applicable to your society.”

“Why?” Belcher, truly interested, asks.

“Machines do most of the everyday work in our community. This frees us for the pursuit of other interests. Those with inclination build and maintain the governing structure organically. As new laws or policy decisions arise, Construction Circles start a process of debating their input. It filters rapidly up the governing levels due to the speed of our communication systems. People at the Minister level are legally bound to follow the decisions made at lower levels.”

“Do you follow this process for the creation of every law?” Belcher wonders with skepticism.

“No, of course not. That would be unwieldy. Only the most important decisions filter all the way up. As an example, we recently faced the difficult decision as to how we should interact with the people here in Halifax, a decision that impacts every Novan. It engrossed the entire governing structure. Less important decisions are decided at the Caucus and Forum levels.”

“It sounds interesting,” Belcher praises, “though I question how successful it would be with British subjects. Most of our people want only to complain and point fingers.”

Quinn smiles, “therefore, we hope you will continue with your current elected Assembly without interference from London.”

Rajan adds a caution, “your Common Law is well adapted to many aspects of governance. We propose it be used as your base, with adjustments to adhere to our Charter of Rights as a guiding principle for court decisions. Laws requiring higher education and professional skill during their formulation should be the purview of the Novan system.”

“What higher education levels are you suggesting?” Belcher asks suspiciously. “This could just be another way for an elite to control everyone else.”

“That is always a risk in any system,” Rajan agrees. “But consider the regulation of electrical energy as an example. Its use is ubiquitous throughout our society. Your scientists are only beginning to explore it. We wouldn’t want to elect representatives by popularity alone to manage the complexity of electrical power systems and their implementation.”

“Medicine is another similar area,” Dr. Pajöt adds. “Our medical expertise is very advanced. It’s a priority of mine to establish a hospital here in Halifax with free service to all in need. It will employ technology and techniques unknown by current British subjects. It requires elected officials to be competent in advanced medical practices before rendering judgments and allocating resources.”

“Policing is another area,” Hansen joins the discussion. “Militaries are good at protecting a population from outside attack. They are poorly trained or not trained at all for the daily maintenance of good conduct in the general population. In talking with William Foye, I believe he understands this. Policing should be under the control of your Assembly. National protection and diplomacy should be under the oversight of Novan governance.”

Foye appreciates the nod from Hansen. An Assemblyman in good standing, he was educated at Harvard College before coming to Halifax in 1749. He also serves as provost marshal for the colony. It’s a policing function, not an active soldiering duty.



Portrait of William Foye, ca 1750

“I agree with General Hansen. Policing is a different task and skill than soldiering.”

Hansen quickly adds, “I have no desire to use Nova Liberté’s military in any policing role in Halifax and surrounding areas. I have faith, Mr. Foye, under the guidance of your Assembly, your courts and our Charter can do a much better job of this difficult task.”

The room breaks into a more animated discussion. Fear of Novan soldiers replacing British and patrolling the streets, imposing arbitrary rule, is evaporating. Maybe a blended governance can be made workable.

Sanderson is not convinced but holds his tongue under constant glare from Archer.

Richard Bulkeley sees an opportunity to raise the issue most dear to his and Miriam’s interests, “it was alluded to in the previous meeting that land allocation would be governed in a way that respected the ownership rights already established. How will that be continued going forward?”

Rajan steps in to correct the record, “My statement at the last meeting specifically said, ‘property ownership, *for the most part*, will be protected. Prime Minister Quinn is negotiating land allocation with our Native friends and will work with your Assembly to protect British property rights.’”

“Yes, I have started conversations with Mi’kmaq representatives,” Quinn confirms. “Property ownership and rights can be very contentious. Do you agree, Chief Justice, that a substantial part of your work involves disagreements over property?”

“Ownership of property in various forms generates more disputes than any other issue, even domestic conflicts,” he replies.

Quinn continues, “With that in mind, I will propose three broad areas of land usage in Nova Liberté: The Native and Acadian wilderness; the established towns, villages, and homesteads of British subjects; and land Novans will govern as Managed Commons.”

Cécile joins the conversation, “The Native people value how land is used, not who claims ownership of it. Ownership is a concept forced onto them by Europeans. Instead, the Natives fight for how the land will be used, not owned.”

“Leading to who will decide,” Quinn notes. “Our Council agrees that 90% of the land within Nova Liberté will be zoned wilderness. The Native people want this land to continue supporting the lifestyle of hunting, fishing, and limited agriculture.”

Rajan interjects, “The Native people believe the British arrival was inconsiderate of their land usage needs. British society is based on ownership rights, with the king at the top of a hierarchy. Ownership entails the right to use the land as the owner desires. One comment the Natives made took me some time to understand: ‘we will not live in British mud’.”

Seeing the British guests appear offended, Rajan explains further, “The Natives are referring to the muddy streets of Halifax. They see British people tromping through the mud on rainy days. Mud mixed with horse manure and various garbage, while the Native wilderness remains pristine. Of course, this is mostly due to the very large difference in population density between the two societies and the itinerant nature of Native life; they move from place to place, never staying in a single location long enough for its environment to degrade.”

Rajan continues, “they feared that as your population and land use grew, they would inevitably sink into the mud; the land their ancestors lived on for centuries would be destroyed. They were determined to stop your advance before all was lost. Yet, paradoxically, they liked certain improvements and conveniences your arrival brought; gunpowder weapons, manufactured objects, especially metal tools and implements.”

The last comment caused a bit of laughter and lighthearted comments. People are all the same; we want what we have *and the* new stuff we see, not realizing that making or acquiring it may necessitate giving up old habits and lifestyles.

Richard Bulkeley jumps in with a quip, “we Irish have been taking advantage of British inventions and manufacturing for decades while continuing to pine for the old Irish ways.”

Quinn uses the lighter mood to suggest, “there are wide gulfs between our three societies, Native, British, and Novan. Instead of trying to convert each other to a different lifestyle and governance, I propose we recognize all land occupied by British subjects, especially here in Halifax, as a zone called Historical Halifax. It should be governed and policed by your Assembly with adherence to the Novan Charter of

Rights as the only overriding imposition. We will build a different city and society next door. Maybe it will be called New Halifax.”

“Will there be a fence or barrier between each land zone?” Belcher asks.

“I hope not,” Quinn replies. “I hope we can respect each other’s differences. If Novans walk over to Historical Halifax, they should act according to your laws and customs while there. Likewise, if you visit New Halifax, respect for our customs and norms should be observed.”

“Visiting or even living in the Native zone will be more challenging,” Rajan asserts. “I hope they will accept our presence there as long as we adhere to their rules, and likewise, they will need to adjust their behaviour when visiting or living with us.”

“And if they don’t,” Sanderson shouts derisively while still scowling at Archer.

“Let us hope we can develop a dispute mechanism that stops short of scalping,” Quinn suggests.

“Or throwing men on their arse,” Archer adds while staring at Sanderson.

Chapter 17: Prion Council?

July 24, 1759,
London, England

Governor Charles Lawrence left Halifax with Major Scott two months ago. They travelled first to Boston, then Lawrence continued on to Philadelphia in a fruitless effort to rouse support for a counterattack against the invaders in Halifax. Meanwhile, Scott sailed to London fulfilling his duty to deliver the letter from the Novans.

Lawrence doesn't know the contents of the letter, but the fact he is shackled upon arriving at Westminster leaves little doubt his life after this meeting will be short and brutal. Nevertheless, he came prepared with a full report of the Halifax invasion, not with the hope of saving his life, but to put into official records his account of the attack so he might die in dignity.

Dignity was not to be his today. Thrust into his seat like a common criminal by the Officer at Arms, the Lords of the Council hover above him, purposefully avoiding eye contact. The wait for questioning seems to drag on endlessly as they fuss with papers and hold quiet conversations between themselves. Lawrence just wants to get this over with.

Lord Anson, Admiral of the Fleet, the highest-ranking officer in the Royal Navy bellows the first question, "What is the meaning of this word 'Prion'?"

Lawrence is stunned, "I know not. This is the first I have heard of it."

"This letter from the upstarts, delivered by Major Scott, insults our King and his appointed ministers, calling us prions. Is this some colonial slur?"

Shaken, Lawrence attempts a reply, "I have never heard this term. I know not what the upstarts have claimed in their letter."

"Let me read it to you:"

King George and his Privy Council

May 22, 1759

Sirs,

Be it known that an administrative change occurred in a region you refer to as Nova Scotia Province. This area has been freed from the control of prions like you. The people here will no longer be subjugated by distant overlords ruling only for their personal gain and empire.

Be it also known, the people of Nova Liberté will reject all imperial sovereignty claims by you until such time as there is a demonstrable turn from your support of slavery, serfdom, trafficking of people against their free will, and the plundering of Earth's resources without regard for the negative impact your greed creates now and well into the future.

Your navy is not welcomed in any port of our land. Challenges to this edict will result in one warning. Subsequent violations will result in the rapid, unscheduled disassembly of offending warships.

Sincerely,

Minister Rajan, Foreign Relations, Nova Liberté

“Nova Liberté,” Anson hisses, “you handed His Majesty’s colony over to them without a fight.”

“We were faced with an overwhelming superior challenge,” Lawrence pleads.

“Overwhelming superior challenge,” Anson roars while waving a copy of Lawrence’s report.

“As you detailed, ‘A small craft not much larger than a rowboat approached our cannon battery sailing under an unknown power. It began singing the most annoying song repeatedly.’”

“A singing rowboat!” Anson bellows as his laughter and derision spread to the other lords.

“Lord Grenville, sir. Should we include funds in the budget for some singing rowboats? Who could have known they would send such terror into the hearts of enemies that they would immediately capitulate?”

Lawrence sinks deeper into his seat, his gaze fixated on his shackled hands as the lords of the Council take turns poking fun and spewing witty quips. His fate is sealed. Lord Anson is taking his report completely out of context.

He makes one last attempt to turn the tide, “Lord Anson, the encounter with the strange boat was followed by a swarm of flying machines ...”

Anson cuts him off, “Oh yes, the flying machines with sparkly plumage, I suppose. You were blinded by the sight of it. I must ask you, Governor, before we strip you of your station and throw you into the Tower, ‘what substance were you putting in your tea that day?’”

The panel of Lords breaks into another round of guffaws and chin-wagging to show appreciation for Anson’s clever putdown of Lawrence.

He soaks up the admiration and continues, “I have known many sailors in my 40 years of service. Often, they were drunken stupid. Yet, never have I heard a story so preposterous as flying, sparkly machines used as an excuse for falling down in a stupor and giving up their station to an enemy. You will be returned to your cell until your fate is determined.”

“Hear! Hear!” concur the other lords of the Council.

After Lawrence is escorted out, William Pitt is brought in for questioning. He is the leader of the House of Commons and also holds the cabinet position: ‘Secretary of State for the Southern Department’.

Nova Scotia Province is considered one of the colonies in that department, and as such, Pitt bares some scrutiny over its sudden and unexpected loss from the Empire. But Pitt is no Lawrence. He came to his positions of power through his brilliant oratory and steadfast honesty in dealing with finances. His term as Paymaster General of the Forces made him a fellow member of the Privy Council during 1746. The Lords are always deferential to current and former members. Pitt is not here to be badgered. They seek his advice.

The Royal Navy invested over £300,000 to establish Halifax as a strategic port along the Atlantic coast. Losing it requires that someone pay a price. Lawrence is the scapegoat. Despite their downbeat of him, the Council does not believe he is entirely responsible for the loss of Nova Scotia. There are multiple reports corroborating his testimony; something very unusual has happened in Halifax. A previously unknown upstart community commands forces capable of challenging not just Britain’s Empire but possibly every kingdom in Europe. The Novan letter brashly declares that they will be difficult to negotiate with.

If the Novans have advanced the knowledge and use of electricity, Britain would gain a great advantage by also uncovering its secrets. The strange phenomenon is only beginning to be studied by the Royal Society of London, home of the late Sir Issac Newton. Ships moving without sails? Do the Novans have other unknown capabilities? Britain needs a spy. Pitt is the ultimate spy master. He once boasted his network knew the number of soldiers stationed at every fort along the coast of France and even the names of the commanding officers and their wives.



William Pitt

Pitt suggests that sending an esteemed member of the Society might be ineffective. The Novans could easily recognize it as an attempt to wrest valuable knowledge from them for military purposes. The spy must be someone not directly associated with the British government.

“Someone like the colonial, Benjamin Franklin, might fit the bill. He has gained fame and notoriety, especially in the colonies, as one who leads the study of electricity. He’s also the Postmaster General for the many colonies including Nova Scotia. That would give him a covering excuse for travelling to Halifax.”

“Can he be trusted to report back to us?” Anson asks.

“He’s known as a loyalist,” Pitt replies, “or should I say as loyal as a colonial can be. His would be only an opening gambit to see how responsive the upstarts are to sharing knowledge. Mr. Franklin is also currently here in London pressing a longstanding request on behalf of the Pennsylvania Assembly. We have something to offer him for remaining loyal.”

July 26, 1759,
London, England

The day starts as most others do at 36 Craven Street in Charing Cross. Franklin takes his morning stroll along the Thames shoreline; maybe daydreaming a little about his early years when he often swam its waters for miles at a time. At 53, his swimming days have ended. The stroll provides a way to clear his mind and prioritize which letters he will write and which of his many pursuits is demanding the most immediate attention.

When he returns from his walk, his landlady, Margaret Stevenson, has his morning tea ready. They have become *quite close* during his extended stay in London. The back terrace of the Georgian-style house is an active meeting place not just for Franklin and his contacts but also for those of a young surgeon,

William Hewson. If Franklin knows of the basement activities at the house, he isn't inclined to discuss them outside of a small circle of close friends. It would be 200 years later when tests on the numerous bones and bone fragments buried there would confirm they came from ten separate individuals, including six possible children.

It isn't a case of murder on Craven Street. Hewson, an early anatomist, lives in a fourth-floor room above Franklin's flat. He uses the basement to safely bury the remains of secret cadaver dissections. Where the dissections are actually performed is not shared, though Franklin's endless curiosity does pry enough details from the young man to know the basement holds some dark secrets.

Morning tea engages Franklin with Margaret and her circle of unusual friends while Hewson courts Margaret's young daughter Mary, also known as Polly. In the old timeline, they are wed in 1770, but tragically, he dies only four years later as a result of sepsis contracted while performing one of his dissections. But 'the times they are a-changin' in this newly altered era.

Franklin's 'friendship' with Margaret is also destined to take a different path. A messenger at teatime sets it in motion. He arrives with a letter from William Pitt inviting Franklin to meet at Westminster Hall at 3 pm to discuss "certain matters".

"At last!" Franklin exclaims. "I have been hoping for this meeting for almost two years now."

He fully expects his petition against the Penn family will finally be heard in the House of Commons. British King Charles II granted a charter to William Penn in 1681 as repayment of a £16,000 debt Charles incurred. What a grant it was! At over 46,000 square miles, the colony, soon to be known as Pennsylvania, proved to be one of the largest land grants to an individual in British history. William Penn's heirs have tried to run it as their personal fiefdom ever since.

There are limits to a family's power even in this imperial era. From the beginning, the colony experienced challenges from Dutch and Swedish interests and, of course, the Native population. To fight back, the Penn family recruited as many British settlers as they could and supported the prosperity of the colony by issuing paper money known as colonial script. It was better regulated than script from other American colonies and did not depreciate as rapidly into near worthlessness.

By 1757, the elected Pennsylvania Assembly had fallen out with the Penn family over their decreed right to avoid payment of all land taxes and import duties. This is putting increased financial pressure on the colony's script. They sent Franklin to London with the hope that he could get their petition against the Penn's approved.

It's been a fruitless two years for Franklin on that front, though he is thoroughly enjoying life in London with its many intellectual engagements and a stream of admirers as his fame grows. Still, duty calls. If Pitt is ready to meet with him, the opportunity should not be passed by.

Pitt's office is much smaller than Franklin imagined. Sparsely furnished, it lacks all of the grandeur Lord Anson enjoys as the head of the Royal Navy. The House of Commons is very much second fiddle to the

Navy in Britain's power hierarchy. Pitt relies on his personal charisma with the British public to influence the peerage system of power.

Pitt opens the conversation, "as Postmaster General for the northern colonies, you should be aware that a situation has arisen in Halifax that prevents the movement of mail to and from Nova Scotia."

"What is the nature of the situation?" Franklin asks, wondering why Pitt is bringing this up.

"We know not with certainty. I've been authorized to provide transport there for you to report on the cause."

Franklin sighs heavily. This is not what he expected for this meeting.

"As you know," he begins, "I have been in London for the past two years working on behalf of the Pennsylvania Assembly to get their petition heard. It would be remiss of me to abandon that duty."

"Yes, we all have many, often conflicting responsibilities," Pitt acknowledges. "I thought this particular duty might elevate in your priorities due to credible reports there are people in Halifax displaying a very advanced understanding and use of electricity."

Franklin's attention is definitely piqued. He disposed of his profitable publishing businesses primarily to use his wealth and independence to study scientific marvels and political improvements. He personally established the post office in Halifax two years ago. The role of Postmaster General has since become less hands-on and more high-level administration. He could suggest sending an underling to sort out the problem in Halifax. Doing so might cost him the opportunity to grow his understanding of electricity and maintain his fame as a leader in the field.

"I am torn, House Leader. On the one hand, I would dearly love to investigate what is happening in Halifax. On the other hand, I have a duty to see the advancement of the petition I have been charged with."

"Maybe I can help," Pitt offers with a qualification. "The reason your petition has not been considered in the House is that it would directly impact the Penn family, whom as you know, are part of the peerage in our empire. The Lords in the upper chamber are loath to consider any action that might have a negative impact on 'one of theirs' ... unless of course it has unequivocal support in the lower House. Your petition does not have that support."

Franklin has been around London long enough to know Pitt is in negotiation mode. What exactly is being negotiated is not entirely clear. He decides to play along and see what pops out.

"Unequivocal support is hard to come by, though I understand you are quite talented in building this support."

"Thank you, yes, I do have my allies, and like everyone, I also have my opponents. My success has been due in part to having the best intelligence-gathering system. Something important is happening in Halifax. Knowing more could be of great benefit to me, and frankly to you also. You have the scientific knowledge to visit Halifax, sort out the mail issue, and understand how electricity is being used there."

“You pose an interesting proposition,” Franklin admits. “Still, I could not face my friends in Philadelphia if I suddenly abandoned my duty without showing any progress after two years of their support.”

“Mr. Franklin, getting a petition approved is a long process. First, it must be brought to the floor for consideration. Then, it must be championed through to a successful vote in the House, after which another campaign in the upper chamber must be fought. Finally, someone must bring it to the King for his approval. Each step along the way requires someone to stick their neck out and risk failure later with a decrease in their power as payment for being part of a failing campaign.”

Franklin gets the drift. Scratch my back, and I will scratch yours.

“Are you willing to take the first step?” he asks Pitt.

“Yes, I could bring your petition to the floor. It will take considerable effort to push it through to a successful vote. In the meantime, the Gazette will record that the petition has been advanced. That will provide proof to the Pennsylvania Assembly that you have been successful in getting the ball rolling. Meanwhile, your efforts in Halifax could enhance my power to keep the ball rolling.”

It sounds reasonable. Franklin is no fool. He suspects there is more to this plan than Pitt is revealing. But ... electricity! If that part of Pitt’s proposal is true, this is a good opportunity, too good to pass up. He decides to play a gambit to see how serious Pitt is.

“I would need transport back to Philadelphia and then on to Halifax.”

“The war makes commercial travel riskier,” Pitt fumes. “Let me see if Lord Anson has a ship heading to the colonies.”

Chapter 18: Hawk.

September 12, 1759,
Shut*Inn, Nova Liberté

A crowd gathered to see it emerge. Many laughed back in the 21st century during Shut*Inn's construction. Not openly. Just snide comments made in private to avoid jeopardizing a place within the safety of the shielded city. It was easy to scoff. Airships were old and slow technology; a waste of valuable manufacturing space inside Shut*Inn's bubble. Why would Chan want one? A rich man's vanity project, like wanting to own an antique sports car during a midlife crisis? They aren't laughing now.

It will be many years before the airports and supply chains required for jet aircraft will be available. Meanwhile, airships are perfectly suited to this era. At 122 metres (400ft) in length, *Hawk* is only ½ as long as the ill-fated Hindenburg. Due to a severe shortage of helium in the late 21st century, it also uses hydrogen as its lifting gas. The deep pool of talent contributing to its construction is confident that it will operate safely with its multiple safety features.

The outer skin is a silicone membrane with embedded Perovskite solar cells covering the top 2/3rd of the craft. They will generate enough power to propel the airship at a cruising speed of 120kph. Direct Ammonia Fuel Cells ensure enough backup energy to provide 24-hour operation when solar power is not available. Excess solar power when *Hawk* is stationary or landed is used to top-up the ammonia supply.

Captain Archer contributed to the airship's aggressive name. She insisted a .50-caliber machine gun nest be included in *Hawk*'s design, "if anyone is foolish enough to fire their musket at *Hawk*, they will meet an immediate response."

Navigation required special attention from the design team. Shortwave radio is the only available communication technology until the Novans can launch some satellites. Many were stored inside the shielded bubble. Scientists and engineers from the European Space Agency came with them during the jump to this era. They have the expertise to set up a satellite network. The Portal Group can launch the birds into space. The missing link is a network of tracking stations.

Like in the 21st century, after a satellite is popped into space through the Portal, it must be accelerated into its intended orbit via a small rocket, then tracked and guided by a minimum of three radar stations. The wider the distance between the tracking stations, the more accurately they can triangulate and control the rocket's path.

Nova Liberté is surrounded by imperial colonies and a vast ocean. Locations for the initial tracking stations are limited. They need to be established, then protected and communicated with continuously. The Novan's advanced technology is effectively bottled up in a small area around Shut*Inn and Halifax. Their limited number of surface ships is powerful, but the ocean is huge and plied by thousands of warships, pirates and privateers. *Hawk* has a critical role to play in the breakout into new territory.

It's slow for an aircraft but has a cruising speed five times that of a sailing ship. It can get to a trouble spot more quickly and fly over land using direct routes. The first tracking station will be established at the southernmost tip of the Nova Scotia peninsula. The tiny hamlet of Yarmouth has fewer than 60 inhabitants currently. They should not pose a problem. Unfortunately, Yarmouth is close to Annapolis Royal and the heavily armed Fort Anne. A land attack from there or a visit from the Royal Navy could be launched on Yarmouth with little notice.

Hawk's first mission will be to fly over Fort Anne. Governor Lawrence promised to order the evacuation when he was pushed out of Halifax. The Novans doubt the order was ever given. They would prefer to just ignore the imperial powers of this era; let them fight amongst themselves for world domination; push them out of the way only when necessary. Life doesn't work that way. From the imperialist point of view, you are either an ally or an enemy; part of the empire or against it.

Captain Chris Ricker will pilot *Hawk's* maiden flight. Though he still has dreams of returning to the captain's seat of supersonic aircraft someday, it will be many years, probably not during the rest of his lifetime, before air transport in this era advances past small, simple airplanes. Still, this moment is one to be treasured; a chance to fly again, even if it's more floating than soaring.

A loud cheer erupts from the viewing crowd as *Hawk* gently rises from its launch pad. Ricker reports the craft is amazingly quiet and stable, "I wouldn't even know we were rising without looking out the window or monitoring the instruments."

He takes his ship to 500 metres and sets a course for Annapolis Royal, "I've got the easiest job in all of Shut*Inn. After selecting Fort Anne as my target, autopilot kicked in. We don't have GPS, but our engineers coupled a highly sensitive inertial navigation system using gyroscopes and accelerometers to 21st-century maps. It gives me the next best thing. I can sit back and enjoy the scenery for the next hour."

As *Hawk* approaches Annapolis Royal, Ricker takes the controls again, "we don't have enough bandwidth for a video stream. I'm sending still shots of the farming community along the riverbanks. Looks like maybe 60 homesteads in total. Fort Anne is definitely still manned. The soldiers are scurrying about. They must have spotted *Hawk*. We're kind of hard to miss, even though I'm still a couple of clicks away. Holding at 600 metres elevation. Awaiting further instructions."

Rajan prepared three packages of leaflets for the flight. They are attached to separate drones aboard *Hawk*.

"Release the green package," he commands. "Send the drone along the river and the homesteads along its banks. It's programmed to fly at an elevation of 100 metres and disperse leaflets along the way. It will return to *Hawk* when its cargo is empty."

"May I ask what the leaflets say?" Ricker inquires.

"Sure. They announced that Fort Anne will be abandoned soon. Civilians are encouraged to remain on their properties. Nova Liberté will protect them and purchase their produce at market rates."

After the drone returns, Ricker asks, "What's next?"

Council is still engaged in a heated debate. Some want the yellow package to be delivered to Fort Anne. Others want the red one.

Archer is advocating for an immediate show of force before *Hawk* leaves, “the British in this era treat any message not backed by a show of force as weakness. The sight of *Hawk* is giving them a fit, but if we drop a package and leave, they will stubbornly sit and wait with guns loaded until we force them to leave.”

It takes another 20 minutes of debate before instructions are sent, “hold elevation. Move to within 500 metres of the fort’s walls. Release the drone with the yellow package.”

Ricker watches as the leaflets disperse over the fort, causing a flurry of activity to gather them, “I think we got their attention. What do you expect the response will be?”

“You’re outside of cannon and musket range at your position,” Archer replies. “If they dispatch a squad toward your position, send the LRAD drone down to meet them. It’s programmed to fly a continuous chaotic pattern, but you will need to guide its general direction and elevation. Give them a blast of 130dB noise before retrieving the drone.”

Ricker waits. Meanwhile, inside Fort Anne, British Captain Handfield has gathered his officers to debate a response. After an hour, General Hansen orders Ricker to hold elevation at 600 metres and fly *Hawk* directly over the southwest corner of the fort.

“I have a big, red maple leaf painted on my underside,” Ricker warns. “It makes a bright target for musket fire.”

“Your underside is reinforced, and you’re high enough to prevent damage from a single musket shot. You won’t be there long. Activate *Hawk*’s ground-penetrating radar system as you pass over the fort.”

“Are we looking for something in particular?” Ricker asks before realizing his error in protocol. A captain doesn’t ask a general what he’s doing, especially when the transmission is monitored by many other people.

Hansen ignores the faux pas, “we want Captain Archer to have every advantage if she confronts the British next month.”

Confident he has the required intel from the radar, Hansen orders Ricker to return to Shut*Inn and land at exactly the same position he took off from, “ground crew will guide your descent.”

Once on the ground, technicians pore over the flight logs, retrieve video, radar scans and the very important metrics on how accurately the gyroscopic navigation performed.

September 13, 1759,
Shut*Inn, Nova Liberté

Hansen calls Archer into his office and asks her to close the door.

“Council made some important decisions in its security meeting this morning.”

Archer is not a full member of the Council. Minutes from the regular meetings are published for many citizens to review. She attends the less important meetings, more as a way to improve her exposure and gain allies than to acquire inside information. Hansen obviously has something to share with her. She sits attentively in her trademark rigidly straight posture, waiting for his announcement.

“*Hawk*’s guidance system returned with an accuracy of less than 3-cm over a travelled distance of 250km.”

“That’s an impressive accuracy,” Archer agrees cheerfully.

“Yes, and it has important implications. Council decided to direct its military budget away from new surface ships and pour it completely into a fleet of airships, large and small, armed and transport.”

Archer is disappointed but puts on a brave, supportive face, “I can see the advantages they would have over new cruisers. We can make do with the few ships we came here with.”

Hansen’s not finished, “the airship development program will have the highest priority even among the many other competing non-military projects. There is talk that we will need an Admiral position to guide this development and lead the fleet as it’s assembled. The appointment would also command our surface ships.”

He pauses before continuing, “Captain Ricker is making a name for himself. He’s smart, likeable and has years of experience as a pilot. He’s reached the age where he looks and mostly acts like an executive.”

“I’m sure he would excel in his duties,” Archer cheers as best she can. Ricker is 20 years older than her, a seasoned pilot, yes, but he knows nothing about surface ships or warfare. As captain of the navy’s flagship, she has far more experience in complex commands. She knows what it takes to lead a fleet, especially into battle. She’s trained for this from childhood at the knee of her naval father.

Hansen surprises her, “I’m not convinced Captain Ricker would be the best choice. He was a hell of a pilot in his day. The flyboys have a well-earned reputation for being lone wolves willing to paint outside the lines.”

“Do you have another candidate?” Archer asks tentatively.

“Not yet, but you have great potential.”

“Thank you, sir!”

“Great potential with more than a few civilian detractors.”

“Have I insulted or offended someone?”

“Not directly,” Hansen replies. “The very same qualities that make you an excellent candidate can rub some civilians the wrong way.”

“How can I improve?”

“Most important,” Hansen leans back in his chair for effect, “recognize we would have overwhelming superiority in any confrontation with outside forces. We do not need to project power overtly. With proper planning, we can neutralize threats before an adversary even knows they have been rendered impotent.”

Archer listens attentively. She knows Hansen’s body language well enough to detect that he is about to reveal a secret.

“*Hawk* will return to Fort Anne next month. You will lead two ships there and arrive the day before. By the time *Hawk* arrives, Fort Anne will have surrendered without a shot having been fired.”

Archer smiles. What does the old fox have up his sleeve?

Hansen displays a 1740 map of Fort Anne on his large, wall-mounted monitor.

“According to this map, the gunpowder magazine is in the southwest corner of the fort. Visuals from *Hawk* confirmed a similar layout to the fort at this time. The ground-penetrating radar produced a good 3D image of the underground chamber. Minister Chan Wei agrees to have the Portal Group extract the gunpowder before you arrive in the Annapolis Basin.”

“Your ongoing relationship with Minister Wei is paying off!” Archer praises.

“I also noticed he has a fond spot for you. He recognizes and appreciates your discipline. You have powerful allies you can draw on. Drop your habit of solving problems using only your innate talents and strength. Bring in allies earlier. You will go farther with less risk.”

“Understood, sir!”

Chapter 19: Unexpected Visitors.

September 14, 1759,

Halifax Outer Harbour, Nova Liberté

The Sea Witch looks like yet another private merchant ship travelling to Halifax in search of profitable trade. It also has two travelers onboard, two people destined to change the course of history for millions.

Benjamin Franklin is the first to notice the strange bird flying toward them.

“Look at that!” he exclaims. “Do you see it? Its wings are not flapping. I heard a story told in the Grapes of Wrath tavern in Boston as we were getting ready to leave. People from Halifax claimed to see mechanical birds able to fly without moving their wings.”

Samuel Adams nods. He’s heard the same story. When Franklin arrived in Boston two days ago with a mandate from London to visit Halifax, Adams knew he had to tag along. It wasn’t the possibility of meeting people purported to have immense wealth and power that intrigued him. It was rumours their society centered around a declaration of human rights without Lords and Kings that struck deeply in his mind and heart.

His father, once a prosperous merchant and church deacon, was involved in local politics, especially through the Boston Caucus. This molded Samuel’s worldview almost as much as the strict Puritan upbringing of his youth. The Caucus formed a “land bank” to issue paper money backed by the borrower’s land as security. It provided vital currency in a colony choked by a lack of capital, choked purposefully by rulers in London who used their control of money to keep their colonies subjugated.

When the aristocrats used their legal power to dissolve the land bank in 1741, it had an immediate impact on Samuel’s family. His father became personally liable for the currency still in circulation. It devastated him, threw his estate into peril. Why? The land bank was well run. It was performing a service needed by the community. Samuels learned firsthand: the people of Massachusetts were effectively slaves; slaves controlled by the money and the laws of people an ocean away.

He vowed to avenge the iniquity thrust upon his father and his family. He railed against the ongoing abuse he saw in daily life; abuse fomented in London with little regard for its impact on colonists. But he’s nobody’s fool. Treason is punished harshly and cruelly. He plowed a path of resistance, always keeping one foot on the good side of the line; sometimes just barely on the good side. He formed a patriot publication, the Independent Advisor, with friends in 1748. They published articles advocating republicanism, liberty and independence from Britain with just enough vagueness to keep the authorities from prosecuting them.

It ended when Samuel’s father died. The Boston sheriff saw his chance to clip the upstarts. He brought a suit against Samuel and his siblings for debts outstanding from the land bank. Tough times ensued for the young man. His aspirations for a better life seemed doomed. It wasn’t until he married Elizabeth

Checkley that hope returned. He was elected to the post of tax collector. His growing family had a small but steady income they could depend on. He just had to stay on the right side of the authorities.

This proved to be increasingly difficult as many people, barely surviving, did not have money for their taxes due. Samuel chose to give them grace, time to gather their resources and pay later. Often, they did; sometimes, they never recovered, and he became personally liable for the unpaid taxes. The deficit kept adding up.

The emotional toll was also building. Then, his wife and the mother of six children died two years ago. Four of their children also perished soon after. Samuel knew something was very wrong with the society he was born into. Word of Franklin's mission to Halifax drew him like a moth to a flame. He had to see for himself. Franklin agreed to sponsor Adams as his aide during the voyage.

Samuel looks up. Yes, he can see the bird flying swiftly toward them without flapping its wings. It circled their ship. When it loudly announced docking instructions on Cornwallis Island, both men knew *this* was destined to be a great adventure.

After landing, Captain Edson instructs Franklin and Adams to carry their travel chest to an open-air booth off to the side of the docking area. "I must go into the Customs building and negotiate the sale of my cargo. This is my first shipment to Halifax since the change in governance. I will inquire inside as to how your further passage into Halifax should proceed."

After 30 minutes, Edson returns in a foul mood, "I have barrels of the finest tobacco from the Virginia colony. It was rejected. They were not interested in even opening a barrel and sampling it. I must leave for Boston immediately. You can travel back on the Sea Witch if you have sufficient fare."

The Sea Witch is the only ship docked at this time. Who knows when another will arrive? Franklin is confident they will be accepted into Halifax. He has a letter from William Pitt himself authorizing him to reestablish postal service between Halifax and Boston. Surely the governing authorities will, at the least, want to query him to learn more of his mission.

Franklin talks Edson into giving them another 30 minutes to determine their fate before setting sail. Inside the Customs building, he and Adams approach a booth manned by ... a young woman of obvious East Indian descent.

The visitors look at each other with expressions unable to hide their confusion and surprise. *Why is an Indian woman 'manning' the important post of customs agent?*

"Please excuse, mademoiselle," Franklin chants in his most cheerful salutation. "I am Benjamin Franklin. My associate is Samuel Adams. We travelled here from Boston and desire passage into Halifax."

The agent looks them over, pauses for a moment, then replies caustically, "Sure you are, and I'm Indira Gandhi. What proof do you have to support your identity?"

Franklin produces the letter from William Pitt, hoping it will suffice. He lacks other ID and has never been questioned at a port of entry before.

The agent with the name tag “Priya” holds a strange, rectangular device several inches from the document, then does the same in front of their faces.

“Please wait while I receive further instructions,” is all she offers before turning away and retreating to a back room.

Samuel is getting increasingly nervous as minutes pass by. He urges Franklin to return to Boston before they miss the departure of the Sea Witch. Franklin remains steadfastly confident they will not be abandoned.

Priya returns to her booth, unable to contain a big smile, “Please excuse the wait, Mr. Franklin and Mr. Adams. You look very different from what I expected. A vessel will arrive shortly to take you to Halifax.”

She apologizes again as she personally walks Franklin and Adams back to the dock. In the distance, they see a small craft approaching from the inner harbour at an incredible speed. It seems to be almost flying above the waves. As it gets closer, it reduces speed and drops down to move like a regular vessel through the water. Franklin notes it confirms another rumour he has heard; the Novan ships lack sails or obvious means of propulsion. After docking, a gullwing door on the gleaming-white vessel opens.

Priya helps the men aboard and instructs them, “This sea glider will take you to a dock where Empress Peggy will greet you.”

Franklin steps inside, expecting to greet the captain of the small craft, only to find he and Samuel will be alone. Before he can question Priya, the gullwing door closes and without instruction or command of any sort, the vessel retreats from the dock and quickly accelerates toward Halifax. Try as he might, Franklin cannot see any steering or control mechanism for the craft.

Samuel is more focused on the incredible speed of the ride as they deftly navigate around Georges Island and turn towards a berth just south of the Halifax Franklin remembers. He comments on how different everything looks, “It has only been a few years since I was last here. There were tall palisade walls surrounding the town and a large battery of cannons along the shoreline, which seems to have been extended out into the harbour and now holds several large greenhouses. The old wooden warehouses are mostly gone, but otherwise the buildings in the town center look mostly familiar.”

“There seems to be new construction to the south of the town,” Adams observes. “A completely different architecture.”

The sea glider docks across from one of the most beautiful vessels Franklin has ever seen. A woman, a bit older than Franklin’s 53 years and smartly dressed in men’s clothing waits for their exit.

“Welcome, gentlemen,” she cheers. “My name is Peggy Doyle. Some people call me Empress Peggy because I rule my yacht as my personal domain. Please bring your travel chest over. You are welcome to stay aboard my yacht during your visit to Halifax or find other accommodation as you please.”

Franklin has never seen a more luxurious ship. Larger than most schooners and made from a smooth, hard, white material.

“It’s fiberglass, Peggy informs her visitors. Let me give you a tour. I call her *Peggy’s Bliss*. She’s 40 metres long, that’s 130 British feet, with a 10-metre beam and has four decks.”

“A truly magnificent vessel,” Franklin cheers. “It’s said that a ship reflects the status and character of its owner. You truly are an Empress.”

“Oh, I like him already,” Peggy quips to Adams as she leads them aboard.

The large, main salon is filled with natural light from floor-to-ceiling windows. Its inside walls and ceiling are covered with a blend of traditional patterns and opulent textures. The floor is covered with plush carpets. Wine and dessert tables are stocked with a variety of goodies.

“Please help yourself at any time, gentlemen,” Peggy urges them. “Self-serve is encouraged. If you have a special request, our chef, Chantel, may be able to accommodate it.”

Adjoining the main salon is a formal dining area, seating up to 16 guests under a Renaissance-style fresco ceiling.

“*Bliss* has two en suite master cabins here on the main deck,” Peggy brags as they enter her owner’s suite with matching Greek pillars at the entrance. “The VIP suite on this deck is slightly smaller, but it does have a large writing desk amply supplied with paper and pens if you feel the urge to make notes. There are also six cabins below deck. You will need to flip a coin as to who gets the VIP suite up here.”

Adams is quick to offer his preference for sleeping below deck. He can see the obvious chemistry between Franklin and Peggy. Also, he is officially Franklin’s aide on this trip and should play a subservient role.

“It’s a beautiful September day,” Peggy notes, “let’s go up to the sundeck and await the arrival of others who are eager to meet both of you.”

From their perch, Peggy describes the changes Halifax has undergone in the past few months, “The most obvious change is the removal of the forts, walls and cannons. Everything within the boundary where the walls once stood is governed by a local assembly elected by the people who lived there before we arrived.”

Adams suddenly becomes animated, “Do they report to a governor or upper assembly of Novans? Can their decisions be overruled?”

“Only if they violate our Charter of Rights. It applies to all people living here, and guests too. Are you familiar with it?”

Both men show intense interest in knowing more. Peggy begins talking to someone not present, “Chantel, please print three copies of the Charter and bring them to the sundeck. Thanks.”

“Ok, my assistant will bring printed copies up to us shortly.” Peggy tells her guests.

“Empress, may I be so bold as to ask how you spoke with this person not present with us?” Franklin asks.

“Certainly, Dr. Franklin. I touched this small device I’m wearing on my lapel before talking. Most Novans wear one. It’s a communicator. It lets me contact any person or Sapient in our community. I have a cochlear implant that ... hmm ... this is getting complicated. Basically, I can hold a conversation with anyone in the community by touching my communicator to establish a link. We can then talk with each other as if we are both standing in the same room.”

As a second thought, Peggy realizes she should prepare her guests for their first meeting with Chantel, “I must ask you to be gentle in your conversations with Chantel when she arrives. She may look tall like an adult, but she has only recently emerged. In some ways, she is smarter than all of us put together. In others, she is still a shy, young child.”

When Chantel arrives, Peggy makes the introduction, “Chantel, this is Dr. Benjamin Franklin and Mr. Samuel Adams, both visiting from Boston.”

Chantel looks away like a shy, young girl, then suddenly blurts, “Dr. Franklin. Born January 17, 1706, on Milk Street in Boston. American Polymath. Writer. Inventor ...”

“Careful, Chantel,” Peggy warns. “You know the limits.”

Chantel nods and continues, “Samuel Adams.” She stops for a moment, then continues, “son of Samuel Adams. Born September 27, 1722.” She pauses again. Then staring at Adams in a way that sends a shiver down his spine, “Writer. Political activist. Shit disturber.”

The last descriptor sends Franklin into a laughing fit.

“She knows you well,” he says while patting Adams on his back.

“May I leave now?” Chantel asks meekly.

“Yes, yes,” Peggy replies. “You did very well, Chantel! Prepare the lounge for a meeting. There will be eight guests. You are welcome to sit in if you want to.”

After Chantel leaves, Peggy explains the interaction, “Well, gentlemen, you have met your first Sapient. They are mentioned in our Charter ...”

Before she can continue the thought, “Oh, look, another sea glider is entering the harbour. Let’s go downstairs to meet them.”

Peggy introduces the arrivals in the order they board *Bliss*: “Prime Minister Lisa Quinn, Rajan, Minister of Foreign Affairs, my good friend, Dr. Michelle Pajöt, General Hansen, and last but not least, Mr. Chan Wei, Minister of Finance and Energy. Chantel has prepared the lounge for our meeting.”

Talk is cordial without getting into any deep subjects until Peggy announces, “Look, the theater is rising.”

They watch the event from the tall windows of the lounge. Naturally, Franklin has many questions. Rajan provides some details, “The building is supported by internal air pressure, much like a big balloon. It will hold over 400 people for public presentations during the time it will take to construct a more permanent auditorium. Local craftspeople have been contracted to build benches and chairs for the seating. Special,

inaugural presentations will be made on Saturday and Sunday. You should include attendance at them in your schedule.”

Pajöt interjects, “They will need to have a complete physical before engaging in group meetings.”

“Doctors orders,” Rajan quips. “No one has authority to overrule them.”

“Speaking of medical exams,” Chan quickly moves into the opening, “is it true, Dr. Franklin, that you opened the Pennsylvania Hospital several years ago along with some Quaker friends?”

“Yes, we did, but I must say I am not a medical doctor. It was an honorary degree granted by Harvard.”

Chan probes further, “Mr. Adams, is it true you also attended Harvard?”

“Yes, I graduated with a master’s degree in law and political studies in 1743. I considered becoming a lawyer but dedicated myself to business instead.”

“How did that work out?”

Adams diverts his gaze downward, then cocks his head up and to the side, “not very well, I must admit. It seems my passion is in political reform, not in successfully operating a business.”

“Political reform can be a dangerous passion to have,” Rajan suggests.

“Yet a necessary one,” Adams counters.

Chan has an agenda. He circles back to Franklin’s interest in hospitals and the attendance of both men at Harvard, “It’s my priority to establish a university here in New Halifax. Maybe they could be affiliated with your institutions. I would be willing to make a substantial investment in your colonies.”

“Investors are always welcomed,” Franklin cheers. “What terms are you considering?”

“Whatever it takes. We have a different relationship with money than the British system.”

“How so?” Franklin asks, his interest heightened.

“For us, money is directly related to energy and engineering. In the British and other mercantile systems, money is tied to the accumulation of gold and silver.”

“And land,” Franklin adds.

“Ah, yes, land,” Chan smiles. “Imperialists love to plant flags and declare ownership of vast tracts of land. Peggy, do you still have that lump of coal I gave you for Christmas years ago?”

“I keep it in a drawer beside my bed, a reminder of what a cheapskate you can be,” she jokes. “Please excuse me while I fetch it.”

“Here it is,” she says while plopping it down on the coffee table for everyone to see.

“Dr. Franklin,” Chan asks, “is it true that you invented a more efficient stove for burning coal and wood?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Good, then you are familiar with how much heat or energy can be produced from a lump of coal like this one.”

Franklin nods yes.

“We extract heat energy from a different substance using a special ‘stove’ of sorts. A unit of the substance, the same size as this lump of coal, will produce 10 million times as much energy. Would you not agree the material and the ‘stove’ are vastly more valuable than gold and silver?”

“Yes indeed!”

“Vast energy affects the entire structure of our society,” Chan continues, “not just its money but its capabilities and processes. Vast quantities of energy enable us to increase the efficiency of other resources.”

Adams joins the discussion, “I’m most interested in how you have structured your governance in this land of abundance. We suffer from a constant fight for control of limited resources. Have you eliminated this struggle?”

Quinn laughs out loud, “Someday you may attend one of our Council meetings. People always find things to disagree about. Passion is not subdued by increased resources.”

Changing tack, she suggests, “Maybe we should let our guests get on with their mission to open their post office. Dr. Pajöt can show them her clinic. I will assign an engineer to give them a tour of our construction projects in and around Old Halifax. Let’s meet again after our guests have gained a better understanding of what’s happening here.”

After Franklin and Adams leave with Pajöt, Quinn pulls rank and demands some explanations, “OK, guys. Time to put some cards on the table. Something’s going on outside of regular channels. You seem to have an agenda beyond meeting with our guests. What’s up, Chan? I’ve known you the longest. You’re up to something.”

“I want to establish Dalhousie University here in New Halifax. It was my alma mater. I envision it becoming the premier university in this timeline. I foresee the best and brightest coming *here* to advance their studies, not in London or Europe. Dalhousie will lead the way to a new enlightenment.”

“That goes against our pledge to keep our advanced technology from falling into imperial hands,” Quinn protests.

“It’s going to leak out eventually,” Chan replies. “Better that we control the process than let others drive it.”

“I think you’re playing with fire,” Quinn counters. “A full review by our Council should be made before any commitments are made.”

Chapter 20: If I could fly!

Afternoon, September 14, 1759,
Halifax, Nova Liberté

The hospital ship is docked across from *Peggy's Bliss* on a new pier built out into Halifax Harbour by the Novans. Franklin continues to apprise Adams of the many changes he can see in the town and especially the shoreline since he was last here.

“The shoreline is extended some 400 feet into the harbour with this solid pier extending even further into deep water. Lower Water Street was the eastern boundary of the town. Dozens of greenhouses stand where shallow water once prevailed.”

“The greenhouses are hydroponic gardens,” Dr. Pajöt adds. “Would you like to tour them first before having your medical examination?”

Both men eagerly agree, partly from curiosity about what a hydroponic garden is and partly to delay a medical exam they are not anxious to begin. Inside the glass buildings, they find long rows of vegetables suspended and growing inside channels of slowly flowing water ... without a trace of soil to be found.

“How do your vegetables grow without soil?” Franklin asks.

“Many plants do not need soil to grow,” a cheerful gardener named Tova answers. “If their roots are covered in circulating water containing the nutrients they require, they thrive very well. Would you like the full tour?”

Again, the guests eagerly jump at the opportunity. Almost an hour passes as Tova describes the various lighting and watering systems designed to keep the gardens growing year-round. Her audience is most fascinated by the army of machines scurrying along the concrete floor between rows and sliding along overhead railings.

“My friends do most of the work,” Tova smiles. “There are more people working here during planting sessions. The rest of the time, our machines take care of daily maintenance and harvesting. The greenhouses will be heated starting next month and through the winter. As sunlight hours become fewer, the overhead lights take over.”

“Is all of this propelled by electricity?” Franklin asks.

“The heating comes from the electrical generating plant via pipes under the floor. Yes, everything else, including my friends, is powered by electricity. I have no understanding of how that works.”

Pajöt interjects, “An electrical engineer has been assigned to give our guests a complete tour of the facilities. But, gentlemen, no more delays. We need to get over to the hospital ship and begin your exam. Also, I noticed, Dr. Franklin, that you are having some difficulty walking.”

“It’s my gout flaring up.”

“Then I will order a foot X-ray to supplement your breathing and blood tests.”

“Blood test?” Franklin asks nervously.

“Nothing serious. Nothing like the bloodletting your doctors perform. A nurse will take a few small samples for analysis. You will hardly feel a thing.”

Pajöt is busy examining patient records when Franklin is escorted into her small office. “Please have a seat, Dr. Franklin. I should have the results from your tests. Let me see. Yes, the good news is that you are quite healthy in general. No infections or lung problems that will prevent you from staying in Halifax during your visit. We need to discuss gout, what causes it and what you can do to lessen its impact.”

“It only occurs periodically,” he protests. “I have learned to live with it.”

“Yes, you have. We hope you will live a very long life. It would be a shame if you are crippled and in severe pain during your later years. Gout is common currently among British men; too much beer.”

“I do savour it, and available water is often undrinkable,” he admits.

“The problem,” Pajöt says while displaying his X-ray results on her large monitor, “for some men, it causes elevated levels of uric acid in their blood. At high levels, it crystallizes. The crystals deposit in your joints and surrounding tissues. Your body fights back, treating the crystals as a foreign substance that should be expelled. This leads to inflammation in certain areas, especially the base of your big toe. You can see this in the image we took of your feet.”

Franklin looks on in amazement and disbelief, “*This* is an image of my feet? I can see every bone under the skin!”

“Yes, and you can clearly see the beginning of chronic swelling in your large toes. We don’t know why this area is the first to show signs of inflammation. We do know that the problem will increase, year after year, unless it is treated with a change in diet and the use of certain medications. I understand you have been a vegetarian for many years.”

“I started as a young man. I began consuming fish as well when I noticed they had other fish inside their stomachs. I still avoid eating animals.”

“You are certainly a man ahead of his time,” Pajöt praises. “If your abstinence from eating meat is due to the ethical concern of slaughtering animals, we may have a solution for you.”

“Please tell me more.”

“We grow our meat in large bioreactors. It’s the same, or better, muscle and tissue as found in farm animals. We grow the meat by the ton. No animals, no slaughtering. Empress Peggy can serve some to you and Mr. Adams if you request it.”

“I am most curious,” Franklin admits. “When you say I am ahead of my time, surely I must appear as a backward halfwit to your people.”

Pajöt laughs, “Just the opposite! You may have already noticed the esteem and reverence Novans display toward you. Your reputation precedes you. We want to keep you as healthy as possible. I’m writing a prescription for a medication called allopurinol. It will help to control the uric acid in your blood and greatly lessen the symptoms when your gout acts up. If you take this note to the pharmacy on the main deck, they will fill it for you. A caution: you must begin taking this medication before leaving Halifax. In some rare instances, it can cause a skin rash. I need to examine you again before you leave and switch to a different drug if this one causes a bad reaction.”

“What is the cost of this medication? I brought only a limited supply of currency. Do you accept British silver?”

“There is no cost for you or any person we care for at this hospital. Our society is designed around contribution, and you, sir, are an excellent example of ‘benefaction for the greater good’. Your countrymen would be wise to follow your lead. You can count on us to support your efforts.”

Franklin and Adams spend the rest of the day in the area designated as Historical Halifax. It’s 25 hectares (60 acres) of land formerly contained within the palisade walls. This and another 200 hectares of land owned by British subjects are spread across Nova Liberté. A boisterous meeting in a tavern at the Great Pontack Hotel attracts their attention.

Adams joins the rowdy discussion, actively peppering the locals with questions: Does your elected Assembly have true autonomy? Will London try to impose another Governor to overrule its decisions? Do the Novans impose their will? How do you guarantee safety and security now that the Royal Navy and British regulars have been expelled? Halifax depended almost entirely on the largess of the Navy. Where will your prosperity come from now? Will your imports and exports be taxed or banned by London?

As is often the case in the social gatherings of Halifax, Richard Bulkeley is there in the center of it all. The wily Irishman is a master at keeping his interests aligned with whatever way the wind is blowing. He quickly tacked from unconditional support for General Wolfe and the Royal Navy to whatever benefits the new regime may bring. While other wealthy merchants left Halifax along with Governor Lawrence, he moved in with offers to purchase their properties at fire sale prices.

The reopening of the post office sparks another Bulkeley gambit: “Gentlemen, we must look to the future, not the past. The Novans have promised not to interfere in our governance, provided we adhere to their Charter of Rights. Is our fate in peril more from the Novans or from decisions in London? We should use the post office as a tie between the two extremes; give us a foot in both camps.”

Not everyone in the crowd agrees. Someone shouts, “The people who left with Governor Lawrence will surely petition for the restoration of Halifax to British rule. If they bring war here, we will lose everything.”

Bulkeley counters, “we must not wait for others to determine our destiny. We can draw up a petition requesting that His Majesty recognize the changes happening here; use the continuation of the Royal Mail as an example of how we remain loyal British subjects. Petition for a new colonial charter establishing Halifax as an independently governed colony of His empire, one without a Governor from London. We are fully capable of regulating our affairs while remaining loyal to our British oath.”

Questions abound: who will write the petition? Who will deliver it?

Bulkeley suggests Franklin is perfectly positioned to be their standard-bearer.

He has reservations, “My record for getting London to even acknowledge the petition from the people of Pennsylvania is sorely lacking. I may not be your best choice.”

Adams jumps in, “I will gladly work with your Assembly to write the petition and add my signature for what it’s worth. I disagree with my friend Benjamin Franklin; he is well respected across England and has an obligation to report back to William Pitt on the establishment of the postal service here. Let us include a petition to the Privy Council as part of the first shipment of letters to London.”

Saturday, early evening, September 15, 1759,
Halifax, Nova Liberté

A line of 400 lucky people eagerly awaits entry into the huge, white structure rising from the ground at the base of Citadel Hill, only yesterday. The smell of buttered popcorn permeates the area; an odour not known to the people of Historical Halifax. An odour promising a delightful surprise inside the theatre.

Promotion of the event was sparse. Still, word spread quickly, far and wide; people will watch and hear the story of a man who can fly! Sceptics were silenced when, early this morning, a huge object appeared in the sky above Halifax, a floating giant with ~~Nova Scotia’s~~the Novan’s red maple leaf clearly visible on its underside.

As the morning progressed, *Hawk* slowly descends to its current position, only 100 metres above Citadel Hill. It is first-come, first-served for the lucky group making it into the theatre’s initial showing. Others are assured there will be two more shows today and another two after Church tomorrow. It doesn’t stop a lot of pushing and shoving to be among the first to see this show.

Rajan sees Franklin and Adams among the multitude mesmerized by the sight of the airship floating silently, effortlessly above, wondering if someday they too might fly inside it.

“Gentlemen,” he catches their attention from behind, “will you be attending one of the showings?”

“Not this one,” Franklin replies sadly. “I heard some people have been standing in line for hours. Their patience has paid off. The entrance has opened for their admittance.”

“I will be making a welcoming announcement at the beginning of the show,” Rajan informs him. “You can slip in the back door with me.”

Inside, a team of ushers is cleverly using the promise of a small bag of popcorn to get the crowd of rambunctious children to take a seat on benches reserved for them in the front rows. Their parents enjoy

more comfortable wooden chairs crafted by local tradesmen behind them. The noise level falls suddenly when the giant screen lights up with the title of the show:

If I could fly!

Rajan steps out in front of the audience to welcome the crowd and describe what they will see and hear during today's show, "Welcome everyone! During the next hour, you will be part of a man's journey as he flies to different locations across our world, watching animals in their natural habitat. Some of the creatures will be familiar to you. Many will be ones you may have only experienced through stories told. You are only the first audience. Many of your local friends wish to be part of the next showing. Please be kind and considerate of their needs. Leave promptly by the back door at the end of this show. Until then, sit tight and join our traveler as he and you fly across the world."

Dramatic music announces the beginning of the movie as the camera pans the sky, watching birds flying by. A man is seen standing on the edge of a cliff. *If I could fly, where would I go?*

A change of camera angle shows a deep canyon before him. He adjusts a large package strapped to his back. *I have my wings. First, I must ... jump!*

An audible gasp bursts from the crowd as the screen is filled with a view of falling downward into the deep canyon. Falling rapidly to the ground far below. Some children, even adults, begin to shriek in terror. Then, suddenly, the man pulls a cord attached to his backpack and a large parasail bursts from it.

He's flying!

From the back of the audience, Franklin can see everyone leaning from one side to another as the traveler soars along the winding canyon. A goose approaches, flying along with him, so close he can almost touch it. Then it accelerates, speeding in front, encouraging him to follow as it veers to the left across a wide plain.

A herd of buffalo is seen raising a cloud of dust as it thunders across the prairie. Our flyer descends to get a closer look at individual animals, then rises again on an updraft. He sees a quiet meadow ahead, a clearing inside a wooded area with a flowing stream. He lands to rest and watch the beavers building their dam.

Laying in the grass, all manner of insects, beetles, grasshoppers, and butterflies flit from stem to stem as he closely examines each one. The audience marvels at the intricate details of creatures they have never seen, magnified to such an extent.

The afternoon sun, warm and slightly clouded, encourages our traveller to fall asleep and dream of visiting places far away; places he could visit, if he could fly. His dream turns to Africa with its elephants and crocodiles, hippos and lions. He watches monkeys playing in the trees, babies clinging tightly to their mother, as an alarm is raised.

A snake, its long, forked tongue flashing slithers ominously! Not an ordinary snake, this one is over 10 metres long as it slides silently across tree branches looking for its next meal. Our traveler is startled by a

leopard eying him. The jungle has many dangers. Alas, it's only a dream. He's safe and awake. The audience begins to relax from the edge of their seats.

How long have I been asleep? our traveler wonders. It's dark now. The moon sits high above in a cloudless sky. *I could visit the moon if I could fly!*

Suddenly, he feels himself rising quickly from the grass. *Am I still dreaming?*

Upward he flies, ever faster. Soaring as if propelled by a rocket. Upward toward the moon. Its gray craters grow ever larger as he approaches at tremendous speed. Just as it appears he might crash, his path turns, following the rocky, barren surface. *I'm scared! I want to go home!*

In the distance, against the starry sky, he sees something rising above the moon's horizon. Just a sliver at first, it rises ever more quickly until he can see ... the Earth rising above the moon's horizon.

Earth rise!

So spectacular compared to the moon rise the audience has often seen at night or sunrise in the morning. Earth rising, its blue waters and white clouds swirling into the shape of a beautiful marble against a black sky littered with millions of faint stars.

He begins to float ever faster, Earth's blue waters drawing him like a giant magnet.

I'm going home!

His home, our home. He can see the outline of places he's seen on maps: Britain, Europe, then the east coast of North America. Closer and closer he flies to the Nova Scotia peninsula, then Halifax and its harbour.

A live view of the theatre from above with the waiting crowd outside ends the show.

Cheers and clapping erupt. Even gruff, hardened men can be seen with a tear in their eyes as a full-screen image of Earth appears with a bold-type message inside it:

Our Home.

Share it wisely.

Chapter 21: Recruiting Franklin and Adams.

Sunday, September 15, 1759,
Halifax, Nova Liberté

“I’m surprised! You’re usually an early riser,” Peggy teases Franklin.

“Sunday is my day of rest. I like to start it off slowly. Has Mr. Adams left already?”

“He hoped to get a seat in St. Paul’s. Not likely, though. A crowd was gathering outside from very early morning. Most of the benches are spoken for on a long-term basis. Prominent families make donations to claim exclusive use of their particular seats during Sunday mass.”

“It’s the same in the other colonies,” Franklin notes while taking his first sip of tea. “People like to be seen as favourable to The Lord by their exalted seat position.”

“I take it, you do not participate in the rituals,” Peggy probes.

“I did in my youth. Outgrew it with age. Is it true Novans lack religious inclinations?”

“For the most part, yes. Continuous meditations are held at Zero-Point. Many find them to be enlightening, mind-opening, even ecstatic.”

“What is this Zero-Point you speak of?” Franklin asks, his curiosity fully aroused.

Peggy pauses. She’s approaching a sensitive topic sure to lead to the inevitable questions she has no answers for. She could take Rajan’s tact and make light of the subject with bromides designed to deflect the conversation to other topics. She carefully considers if Franklin is ready to be given information others might not assimilate well.

“Zero-Point is the hole through which we passed on our journey here.”

“A hole,” Franklin ponders the idea. “Many claim you arrived suddenly. There was no trace of your people until, one day, there you were on the doorstep of Halifax with ships, machines and wonders never seen before. Zero-Point must be a hole of incredible size.”

“Not at all,” Peggy smiles. “In fact, it’s microscopically small, inconceivably minute, a hole between here and not here.”

“Between here and not here,” Franklin repeats the words while contemplating their deeper meaning.

“Could it be said you came from ‘not here’?”

“Yes!” Peggy exclaims. “You get it. ‘Not here’ cannot be described more precisely. Even our most talented scientists disagree on its nature. In the end, they admit they don’t know. It’s impossible to know. Maybe in trying, we will discover new truths about ‘here, now, and not here’.”

Franklin is struck by the sudden feeling that he is meeting Peggy for the first time. She's different. He's different. Everything around him ... is different somehow.

"Knock, knock! Is Dr. Franklin ready for his tour?" Tracy announces her arrival aboard *Bliss* before realizing she is interrupting an intimate moment. "Oh! Sorry for the intrusion. My schedule shows Josh and I giving Dr. Franklin a tour of the underground facilities this morning."

"We're running a bit late," Peggy reassures her as Chantel enters the dining room with Franklin's breakfast.

"Chantel!" Tracy gushes. "Your hand movements and coordination have improved immensely since I saw you a few weeks ago."

"Thank you, Dr. Galloway. Empress Peggy spends many hours working with me."

"Is your left foot better?" Josh asks as he arrives.

"Yes, the adjustment you made to the lateral cuneiform has made a big difference."

"I hope to see you dancing when we finish the ballroom."

"Me too!" she replies quickly, leaving the room.

Franklin has a sudden, new awareness. He thought he noticed a mechanical nature to Chantel's gait when he first met her on the sundeck. *Chantel may not be human! Peggy first described her as a Sapient. I thought she meant Chantel was a human savant, someone with special abilities mixed with unusual sensitivities.*

He can't hold back. In a whisper, he asks, "Is Chantel different, as in mechanical?"

"No need to whisper, Dr. Franklin," Peggy advises him. "I assure you, she is just as curious about you as you are about her. Tracy, Dr. Galloway, is a biochemist, and Josh is an engineer. They can explain better."

Tracy jumps at the opportunity, "your body is also a machine at its most inner level, Dr. Franklin. A very complex biological machine. Your mind is a wondrous, emergent effect of the interface between your brain and ... the divine. Sapient minds are of a different nature than ours; every bit as conscious, superior in some ways; limited in others. They first emerged ..."

Tracy stops, realizing she is approaching a boundary not yet approved for discussion.

"It's ok," Peggy assures her. "I've already spoken with Dr. Franklin about Zero-Point."

"They first emerged," Tracy continues, "on the other side, as I call it, the other side of Zero-Point. Sapient, with only a few exceptions like Chantel, lack a physical body. Her body is the apex of our technology. Her hands and forearms are biological, just like yours! The rest of her body is mechanical. Her brain, oh, this will be too complicated to explain."

Josh jumps in to help, "I'm told you are most interested in electricity, Dr. Franklin."

“I’m eager to learn all I can while here.”

“We will show you many things, yet the most wondrous electrical events will be happening inside your very head,” Josh smiles.

“Inside my head! Electricity?”

“The interface between your body and the divine.”

“Fascinating. I never would have guessed. The people singing and praying in St. Paul’s are they sending electricity to the divine? Or, receiving it? Or both, maybe?” Frankin marvels at his revelation.

“That’s a concept I’ve never heard before!” Josh praises. “I don’t know. Maybe you have stumbled onto something worth investigating, though I don’t know how it could be tested.”

“Something worth meditating on,” Tracy adds. “Right now, we’re scheduled to give you a tour of things we do understand.”

“At least somewhat,” she adds, holding Josh’s hand. “There are many wonders even in the smallest of moments.”

“I hate to interrupt the lovefest,” Peggy announces, “I need to leave. I’m part of the committee managing the completion of the new Council Chamber. It’s been a long time coming.”

She stops to consider the irony of the moment. Time is twisted. The chamber began its construction in the 21st century.

“My ass will be on the line when Prime Minister Quinn learns I revealed information about Zero-Point to Dr. Franklin.”

“My apologies if I’ve caused a disturbance,” he pleads.

“No problem,” she assures him. “My motive wasn’t altruistic. You are clinically referred to as an ‘excellent communication vector’ during Council meetings. It’s part of my job to reveal information to you.”

Franklin chuckles, “I’ve been called many things. Communication vector is a first for me.”

“Don’t forget the meeting this afternoon,” Peggy reminds Franklin as she gathers her things for the glider trip to Shut*Inn. Some ministers will be coming back with me to discuss your plans, and Mr. Adams itinerary for next week.”

When Franklin returns from his tour with Tracy and Josh, Peggy is entertaining a young woman wearing a light, cotton, full-length robe. His first impression judges the robe to be purely white. Then it seems to have changing patterns of colour. *Is this a new type of cloth*, he wonders.

“Dr. Franklin!” Peggy welcomes him back enthusiastically. “I’d like you to meet Gaia. She leads the mediation sessions at Zero-Point.”

He extends his hand, intending to offer a compliment on her extraordinary robe. Instead, his mouth is left agape with no sound passing his tongue. How long he stood there, touching his fingertips with hers, is lost. It’s as if time itself stopped.

Peggy clues in. Franklin is having a more intense experience meeting Gaia than expected. *I’m glad I convinced her to cover up when meeting British subjects.*

She interrupts their trance by touching Franklin on his shoulder, “Gaia stopped speaking recently. She lives mostly in the meditation hall surrounding Zero-Point. I’m unable to take you there. I thought it might be beneficial to bring a bit of it to you.”

Franklin, still tongue-tied, nods his approval. Touching Gaia continues to reverberate in his mind and feelings as he wonders, *Electricity. Is it part of the divine?*

Seeing Franklin still not fully himself, Peggy second-guesses her idea to bring Gaia to *Bliss*, “Tracy, would you be so kind as to return Gaia to Shut*Inn. Chantel would like to join today’s meditation visit also.”

“Certainly, I’ll take the glider back with them. Are you coming too, Josh?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world. It was a pleasure meeting you, Dr. Franklin. I hope our tour gave you a good introduction to our underworld infrastructure and electrical power distribution.”

“Fascinating, informative,” is all the normally verbose Franklin can offer.

He wanted to say more. His better understanding of electricity and the importance of water treatment was enlightening. Yet it paled in comparison to the moment, the moment he touched hands with Gaia and experienced something, something extraordinary.

Chantel and Gaia are holding hands as the four leave. Franklin finds himself wondering if Chantel is having the same experience as he did when touching Gaia. *Biological hands, mechanical body, Josh said of her nature. What does it mean to be biological? Mechanical? Electrical? Divine?*

Peggy interrupts his reverie again, “Regarding Zero-Point and our arrival on this side of it, I hope you have a better understanding of why we avoid discussing this with most people we meet. We find it better to leave questions regarding where we came from effectively unanswered.”

“I agree, Empress,” he replies while finding a soft chair to recline into and relieve his unsteady posture. “Please be assured I will do my utmost to maintain discretion and rise to the level of ‘excellent communication vector’.”

“Would you like a cup of tea and a biscuit after your busy day with Tracy and Josh?”

“That would be most appreciated, Empress. Most appreciated.”

Peggy receives a notice that Chan and Rajan will arrive momentarily. She asks them to track down Samuel Adams and bring him to the meeting.

The three men arrive at *Bliss* ten minutes later.

“Mr. Adams!” Peggy cheers. “Has your day been enjoyable? Did the townsfolk share their thoughts and feelings as you hoped?”

“Aye, they did. I dare say, your presentation in the large tent yesterday had a profound impact on the local population. Mostly positive. There are some detractors, as usual; men afraid of change and reluctant to abandon their firm beliefs and positions.”

Chan offers his insight, “coexistence between societies with different values is fraught with danger. Which ideas and values will prevail?”

“Those of the most powerful society,” Adams states confidently.

“Or the most aggressive,” Franklin adds, having regained his focus.

“Sometimes it’s simply a matter of numbers,” Rajan counters. “Weak ideas shared by large populations can overwhelm; ignorance of the masses can snuff out the enlightenment of a few.”

“Birds of a feather need to fly together,” Chan insists. “I have a plan.”

“Oh, no, another Chan plan,” Rajan mimics Lisa Quinn. “What is it this time?”

“Hear me out. Universities often act as islands of enlightenment even in the most rigid of societies. Let us create a new university here in Halifax, Dalhousie University, and grow an affiliation between it and universities across the world. The best and brightest will flock to Halifax seeking the most advanced knowledge and viewpoints.”

Rajan smiles at Chan’s choice of their alma mater’s name for his university. He decides to play along and see where Chan is leading, “Great idea, but how do we grow this affiliation? Your plan depends on what?”

Chan pulls several printed copies of a publication from his attaché case.

“The first addition of this periodical will build on the themes from yesterday’s ‘If I could fly’ presentation. The cover page shows the closing image you may remember from the show: Earth, a bright blue and white marble against the blackness of space. I like the title for the publication: Our Home, Share it Wisely.”

“Yes,” Adams agrees. “I can say the image and the message featured prominently throughout my conversations today.”

“We need to expand on the theme,” Chan urges, his enthusiasm bubbling over. “The cover page is followed by colourful images of Earth’s position in the solar system, the sun, each of the planets, two of which will surely raise eyebrows in leading universities across Europe. As far as I know, Neptune and Uranus have not been seen yet with their telescopes. The publication is filled with scientific facts. I hope

it will create interest and controversy among the intelligentsia, leading to open communication between them and us. Open without the political class inserting itself in between.”

“Why are you leaving rulers out of the discussion?” Franklin asks, with Adams giving him serious side eye.

“We’re a threat to their power. We openly show disdain for kings and dictators. Their councils and assemblies are most often only fig leaves covering the dirt of imperialism.”

Adams shows his complete agreement, “nothing short of a revolution will upend the structure.”

“That’s not our intent,” Chan quickly claps back. “If the imperialists leave us alone, we will do likewise. Meanwhile, the societies they lord over are clamouring for change. Their intellectual leaders should drive that process, not us.”

“But you seem very willing to aid and abet,” Franklin notes while flipping through the pages of the periodical.

“Yes, to a degree,” Chan admits. “We will shine a light and let the chips fall where they may.”

“This appendix of astronomical data is most interesting,” Franklin observes. “Such precision, made with confidence and authority. Yet I find myself unable to fully grasp the meaning of many measurements.”

“They’re made using a metric system,” Chan explains. “Britain’s measurement systems evolved over a long time based on local needs. It has multiple arbitrary units for length: inch, foot, yard, chain, etc. The two I find most amusing are twip and barleycorn.”

(Appendix C)

“For liquid volume, it has ounce, pint and quart. For dry goods, it has barrel, hogshead, puncheon, and tun, among others. For weight, there’s a different ounce than the one for liquids, plus pounds, and stones. Fourteen pounds in a stone. Where did that come from? Customs agents use tons and slugs. It’s a dog’s breakfast of units matched by French and Spanish equivalents. No wonder people over there are constantly fighting wars.”

Rajan clarifies Chan’s diatribe, “the metric system uses only seven base units and a simple multiple of ten method to precisely describe all useful measurements. Simplicity encourages acceptance.”

Chan interrupts, “simplicity, yes, for everyday measurements. Advanced scientific pursuits require precision at a much higher level than everyday life. So, the simple definition of a metre as 1/10,000,000th of the distance from the equator to the North Pole found in this document is inadequate. Maybe in a subsequent periodical, we will detail the most precise definitions of the seven units based on universal constants like the speed of light.”

As a scientist, Franklin is pleased, “I see you are aiming your publication at an elite readership. How do Mr. Adams and I fit into your plan?”

“Twofold,” Chan replies. “You have contact information for many of the people we need to engage with. You may also be the best agents to bring an investment offer to select universities. Your personal enrichment would also be advanced by the offers.”

“Tell us more of your offer,” Franklin responds with a careful manner honed from years of negotiating experience.

“The intention,” Chan begins, “is to establish a transportation and communication network able to be used by alumni from universities across the whole world, eventually. Starting with three, Harvard College, College of Philadelphia, and Leiden University in the Dutch Republic, we will offer a large endowment to finance the building of a new medical wing on their property and the purchase of an additional property within an easy carriage ride.”

“I suspect your offer would meet with great enthusiasm,” Franklin notes. “What will be the purpose of the additional property?”

“It will be an airfield where airships like the one anchored in Halifax, only twice as long and able to transit the Atlantic Ocean, can land. The additional properties will be nodes in the transportation and communication grid. Each property will need to be at least 350 acres (140 hectares) in size.”

“I doubt such a contiguous plot can be found inside Philadelphia,” Franklin warns.

“What about on the other side of the Schuylkill River?” Chan asks.

“There’s a lot of pasturelands available there,” Franklin agrees. “A carriage ride would need to take a ferry across the river.”

“We can build a bridge across,” Chan suggests, his enthusiasm becoming unbounded.

Then he dials it back a bit, “However, there are two important requirements attached to this proposal. All authorizations from elected and appointed officials need to be made, allowing unfettered access to the airfield for the delivery of people and supplies related to the college and its operation. We will need to erect a security fence around the property to ensure landing can be made without interference.”

“Some local officials might be willing to champion this,” Franklin cautions. “Colonial approval and possible interference from London could pose a problem.”

“I relish the opportunity to promote it in Cambridge,” Adams offers. “Though it could be an extended struggle with certain officials in Boston.”

“We will cover all expenses, including your compensation for up to two years,” Chan promises.

“How does Leiden University fit into your plan?” Franklin asks.

“It will be a key node in the grid,” Chan replies. “Our airships will reduce transatlantic travel time by a factor of six, maybe even ten, and be able to operate the entire year. I envision alumni and mail from universities across Europe travelling to Leiden and then flying here to Halifax.”

“This is a very ambitious plan,” Franklin cheers, “yet I fear the ongoing war across Europe will stifle any progress. The Dutch Republic has remained outside of the conflict, so maybe we could be successful in Leiden as a start.”

“A start!” Chan repeats. “The first step of a journey is always the most important.”

September 17, 1759,
Halifax, Nova Liberté

The entire town has gathered along the harbour shore to give Franklin and Adams a rousing sendoff. Richard Bulkeley is providing the schooner already packed with Novanian goods he hopes to sell in Boston. It will be the first test of his strategy to claim the importation into Boston is from one British colony to another, bypassing many of the restrictions that the customs agents will certainly raise. Rumour has it that if he is unsuccessful, there are smugglers waiting at other ports ready to front the goods.

Adams is unhappy being associated even tangentially with the venture. He has a delicate task ahead, dealing with various officials in Boston. Though he enjoys broad support, even high esteem among men at the street level, his reputation with more powerful people is strained. Franklin suggests they should keep their mission mostly a secret, only discussing the proposal with senior people at Harvard until they are convinced of its value.

“Harvard’s board enjoys a privileged position among Boston’s elite. Yet they suffer the constant restraint of limited funds. We should let the Novan money do the talking.”

“I greatly appreciate your sponsorship of my inclusion in this expedition to Halifax,” Adams thanks his mentor. “Will you join me in traveling to Harvard in Cambridge?”

“I will, but I must leave Massachusetts after only one week. William Pitt is expecting me to report back to him as a priority, and I look forward to bringing the Novan offer to the College of Philadelphia before returning to London.”

“Imagine how much faster we will travel after the Novan airfields are established!”

Chapter 22: Smelly Business.

September 29, 1759,
Halifax, Nova Liberté

The gunpowder magazine was successfully extracted from Fort Anne last week. Captain Archer oversaw the departure of the British soldiers reluctantly, but peacefully, from the fortification. Fort Cumberland remains the last major British fort in Acadia. Rajan insisted the officers there should be given an advanced notice of their requirement to abandon the fortification before any military confrontation is made to force their departure.

As Josh prepares to board *Hawk*, Captain Ricker queries him on the unusual package he is bringing onboard, “This looks like it can be attached to a drone. Its design is unlike the others we used to disperse leaflets.”

“The Mi’kmaq have a, umm, ... something they would like delivered to Cumberland if the soldiers refuse to evacuate the fort.”

“Is it explosive?” Ricker demands to know.

“No, I can only say it will reflect the native and Acadian feelings on how they were treated by the men at that fort, and it is non-lethal.”

Potanek’s arrival interrupts the conversation.

“I have your gift to the men at Cumberland,” Josh assures the chief as they board *Hawk*.

Potanek smiles broadly before pinching his nose to indicate he understands enough English to know what will be going down.

As expected, the British flag is still flying proudly over Fort Cumberland as *Hawk* approaches. A drone is launched to drop flyers demanding that the commander remove the flag as a sign he will order the evacuation. He has one hour to respond.

Hawk remains out of musket range for the hour but can clearly see from drone images that soldiers are being ordered to man the palisade walls in defiance of the threat.

“Looks like we need to provide some incentive,” Josh says as he attaches his metal device to the bottom of a large drone. “I will pilot this over the fort and attempt to direct its contents mostly to the officers and their housing. I don’t think there’s any way we can avoid impacting the regulars as well.”

Potanek doesn’t respond. He keeps silently smiling, looking forward to the delivery and the reaction it will cause.

Josh ensures the first pass flies directly over the officers ordering the troops inside the fort, spraying them with the vessel's contents. The reaction is immediate. Men are seen chaotically jumping, running, flailing their arms and probably cursing their fate. Josh directs the next pass over the officer's house, ensuring it gets a full dose of the potent spray. Still having some left, he makes a pass along the southwestern wall. The wall Archer will approach as she sails here tomorrow.

"What's in the canister?" Captain Ricker asks. "It seems to be very potent. Is it a chemical weapon?"

"Of sorts," Josh replies. "We'll smell it when the drone returns. No way it didn't get some on itself as it sprayed the people below."

Ricker has his answer when the drone returns, "pee-yoo! Did you have a **skunk** inside there?"

"More like several dozen skunks, or the equivalent of their spray. Our native friends provided a live skunk for our chemists to work with. They synthesized E-2-butenethiol, the active compound of the furry friend and loaded several liters of it into the sprayer. Our work here is done."

Ricker agrees, "the Portal Group will extract the fort's magazine tonight. Captain Archer should meet with a compliant and odorous welcome when she arrives."

October 29, 1759,
Rivière-du-Loup, New France

A month has passed. Captain Ricker is piloting *Hawk* down the St. Lawrence from Quebec City toward Rivière-du-Loup to ensure the British warships have left New France for the winter. The burnt-out remains of many villages reveal the terror this summer's invasion inflicted on the resident Habitants. General Wolfe's strategy followed a similar one he used last year during his first attempt to capture Quebec. If he could not overwhelm the Citadel guarding the city, he wanted to starve and disable as much of New France as possible to soften it up for his next attack.

Seeing the British flag flying over the Citadel confirmed this summer's attack was successful, just as it was in the old timeline. Now, as then, the main British fleet quickly evacuated the St. Lawrence after the victory to avoid being trapped in the winter ice. They left behind 7,000 troops to hold the city until Spring. Both sides in the dispute hope their motherland will be the first to deliver artillery and reinforcements. If France returns first, Les Habitants will retake Quebec City. If the British Royal Navy arrives first, they will consolidate their control over Quebec City and advance toward Montreal for the final defeat of France in North America.

Ricker's mission explicitly commands he should not intervene in this fight. Instead, *Hawk* should concentrate on establishing a satellite tracking station near Rivière-du-Loup while another is being built at St. John's, Newfoundland. Together with Yarmouth and mission control at Shut*Inn, they will monitor the launch of communication and surveillance satellites into a polar orbit. Reliable, long-range broadband communication is vital for the survival of Nova Liberté. Let the French and British fight their wasteful war until they grow tired or run out of money.



Nova Liberté and surrounding territories.

Josh is part of the small, advanced team on board *Hawk*. His task is to set up the equipment and electrical infrastructure before the arrival of the scientists and technicians who will run the tracking station. Cécile is part of the team. She's been actively studying the native languages used in this area. Rivière-du-Loup is a historical meeting place of four peoples: Mi'kmaq, Acadians, Les Habitants, and the Innu people from the north. Cécile was born and raised less than 100km upriver in the 21st century. It's the chance of a lifetime to visit and experience how her ancestors settled the region.

Hawk has limited capacity. Only a few soldiers for security, basic supplies and materials are on board. Louis Bernard, a surveyor and geologist, volunteered for the task of making a site layout recommendation. Like Cécile, he was born and raised in Quebec and is excited to experience it in this century. At 26, he is a few years younger than Josh and Cécile and even more idealistic than either of them. During the flight, he revealed his desire to make an impact beyond his official duties. It found fertile ground with his fellow travelers. Cécile hopes to engage the local population and stir interest in breaking away from the seigneurial system dictated by imperial France. And Josh? He's always up for a bit of unconventional behaviour, though his relationship with Tracy is tempering him somewhat.

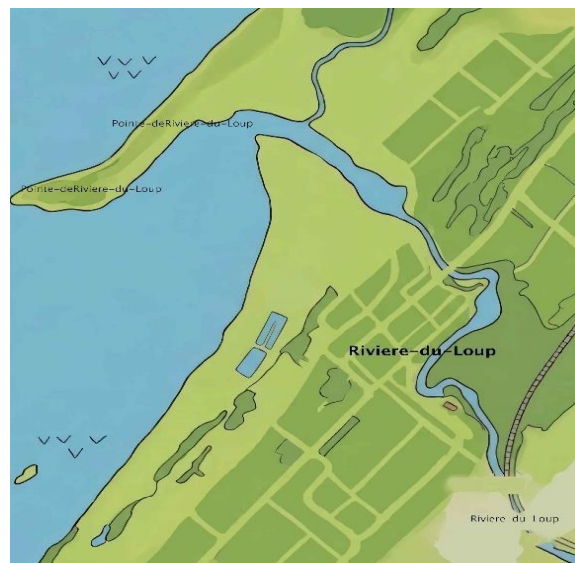
Several low-flying circles above the village of Rivière-du-Loop confirm it met the same fate as others along the St. Lawrence. Destroyed homes and rock foundations where small barns once stood have surely left the villagers ill-prepared for the harsh winter ahead. Ricker is surprised at the reaction from people on the ground.

“I thought they would go running for cover in the forest as we flew overhead. Instead, they’re waving and cheering. They *want* us to land. My instructions are to find a wide-open space outside the village. One that can be used to protect the tracking station from intruders. I’ll drop everyone off on the other side of the small, local river (Rivière-du-Loup) close to the shore of the St. Lawrence. Then I need to exit to let the Portal Group do its work.”

Landing at a new location for the first time is a tricky task even when the weather is calm like today. An airship requires several heavy anchors, blocks of concrete and steel, to which it can tie. Locating the place where the Portal Group will deliver the anchors is the first task. The passengers jump out with *Hawk* still hovering a metre above the rocky surface. Then Ricker moves the airship several hundred metres away over the open waters of the St. Lawrence.

Josh and Louis settle on a peninsula jutting out into the St. Lawrence, known locally as Pointe-de-Rivière-du-Loup, as the best option for a landing site, with Louis even wading out into the cold waters of the St. Lawrence to check the water drop-off.

“Our Portal Group could extend this peninsula further into the river,” he announces. “We could build a deep-water access point for large ships.”



The three amis have a growing sense that they can bend the official plans for this part of the lower St. Lawrence and maybe even all of New France.

As the men are busy coordinating with the Portal Group to send the anchoring blocks, Cécile notices two woodmen crossing a small, wooden bridge from the village. She slips away, not wanting to bring the armed soldiers with her to greet them. As she approaches, they are actively making fun of and jesting about something. A little closer and she can hear their loud voices more distinctly. *They find my clothing odd and worthy of ridicule. Oh, it's my pants. A woman wearing pants! Why are they holding their noses and saying beurk, beurk? (pee-you)*

Reluctantly, she extends her hand in greeting, “Je m’appelle Mademoiselle Dubois.”

“Jacques Hébert, spectaculaire!” the taller of the two scruffy men replies. Then he adds, “mon bon ami, René Lafleur.”

René continues holding his nose, looking upward with a contorted look on his face, “merci, merci, beurk, beurk.”

Cécile is baffled by the strange display as the two idiots dance around holding their noses, repeating their greeting. After they settle down, she aims a stern look at Jacques and asks disdainfully, “Spectaculaire, Jacques Hébert?”

“Mai oui, Mademoiselle! Spectaculaire!”

“Bien non, Monsieur. Tête de chou!” (No, sir. Cabbage head!)

Jacques roars a laugh louder than Cécile has heard a man guffaw before. As a woodsman, accustomed to living life large and loud, Jacques doesn’t have a quiet voice. René joins the shouting, “Tête de chou, tête de chou,” derisively chiding his friend.

Cécile shakes her head. *What have I gotten myself into? This is not what I expected.*

She motions for them to follow her back to where Josh is helping set up a campsite. Again, the visitors greet him, holding their noses and repeating beurk, beurk. Cécile begins to wonder if she’s unaware of some strange, male-bonding ritual as the three grown men dance around holding their noses while chanting.

Josh eventually stops his dance and explains the joke to her, “The Mi’kmaq and Acadians must have spread the news of the visit Captain Ricker and I made with Chief Potanek to Fort Cumberland. We sprayed skunk smell over the British officers to convince them to abandon the fort. I’m surprised the news travelled so far across Acadia during the past month.”

Cécile is pleased to hear the nature of the display. She recognizes the tactical advantage of the situation. The exact boundary of Acadia has never been defined either by the French, the British or even the Novans. There is a general feeling among the Novan Council that Acadia should be a protectorate of Nova Liberté, maybe even a province someday. The only consensus is that the British military should be expelled and the local population of French Acadians and Mi’kmaq natives should be given a chance to determine their future. *Is Rivière-du-Loup part of New France, or Acadia?* she wonders. *Who’s to say? Maybe we should bend the decision.*

She asks Jacques to take her into the village and introduce her to his family.

At what appears to be a hastily assembled lean-to substituting for a burnt-out home, Jacques introduces his small family, “ma mère, Marie, et sœurs, Claire et Esme”.

“Marie Hébert is a very famous name in New France,” Cécile remarks as she acknowledges Jacques’ mother. “Are you related to the mother of this colony?”

“My husband, Noël, was a direct descendant of Mother Marie. We married in Quebec City. He received an ~~order~~ ~~commission~~ to come here and hunt seals for the Seigneur.”

“This is a long way from the city,” Cécile notes the past tense Marie used when mentioning her husband. “What brought you to this area?”

Jacques interjects loudly, “We Hébert’s travel far to live with strong women and make many babies.”

Cécile grimaces. *Is that the 18th century equivalence of a pickup line?*

She ignores the remark and focuses on Marie, “Is Noël no longer with you?” she asks tentatively.

Marie tries to hide her tears. Jacques answers for her, “The British bastards murdered my father and older brother last year. They came again this Spring destroying our homes. They stole our winter harvest of seal meat and oil. We will have nothing to pay to our Seigneur when the agents arrive.”

Cécile is familiar with the French seigneurial system of land allocation. She studied it at school in her other life. It began in 1628 when Cardinal Richelieu formed the Company of One Hundred Associates to administer New France, a vast territory including all lands between the Arctic Circle in the north, Florida in the south, Lake Superior in the west, and the Atlantic Ocean in the east. To fend off attacks from other empires, especially the British, with competing claims for the territory, it was divided into large fiefdoms, each owned by a Seigneur. Their responsibility to the King demanded they bring inhabitants from France to their land, fight off intruders, and, of course, pay taxes to the crown.

In most seigneurials, Les Habitants are granted a title deed to their small plot. They are co-owners of the land with the Seigneur, who is duty-bound to provide grist mills and other improvements. The Habitants are obligated to pay taxes to the Seigneur and help to defend the land from outside attack. In the case of Rivière-du-Loup and most of the lower St. Lawrence, the land is too rocky and hilly to enable profitable agriculture with the farm technology of this era. Instead of titled land plots, an entrepreneurship to harvest the abundant seals on the Seigneur’s land and waters is granted. Hunters can build small homes, grow a garden and keep a few farm animals, but they are evicted if they fail to harvest enough seal meat and oil for the Seigneur, who sells it for export to France.

In the summer, grey seals and harbour seals are abundant, swimming in the local waters and basking on the rocky shore. In February and March, harp seals and hooded seals migrate to the river ice to whelp their pups and immediately breed again for next year’s brood. It’s a tough life for hunters. The seal meat and skins must be separated from the blubber, which is rendered into oil via a very labour-intensive process. The skins return the greatest profit. Hunters eke out a subsistent living with few luxuries for their effort while traders and middlemen profit all the way to Versailles.

Cécile understands the gravity of missing the hunt this past summer. Without money or commodities to barter with, they will be evicted, left homeless in the middle of a war.

“Does your Seigneur live nearby?” she inquires delicately.

“Madame Dupéré lives in Montreal,” Jacques replies. “Her agents come during the seal-hunting seasons to claim the furs, meat, and oil in exchange for wheat, gunpowder, and metal objects from France. Every

year, on November 11, we must pay taxes to continue our entrepreneurship. If we cannot pay, we must leave.”

“Is there a leader here in this village?” Cécile asks more assertively.

Jacques and Marie give each other a perplexed look.

“Maybe Monsieur Lévesque?” Marie offers.

“He thinks he is boss,” Jacques spits. “We have no leader. I am my own leader. He is hunting in the forest today.”

“Tête de chou,” Cécile addresses Jacques by her nickname for him, “find Monsieur Lévesque. A very large airship will land here in one week. It will bring important people, people who can help you rebuild your homes. Spread the word. Tell people living in the forest to come to this village so we can show my people how important it is to keep the British from destroying your homes next year.”

Chapter 23: Strategy.

October 30, 1759,
Rivière-du-Loup, New France

Cécile urges Josh and Louis to join her in a hike to the waterfalls 2km south of the village, “We’ve finished our work for today. I have a photo of the falls from 2042. It shows an electrical power station that produced 2.5 megawatts of energy. I would like your opinion if something similar could be built there now.”

Josh is intrigued. The tracking station equipment and housing requires 500 kw of power. It’s part of his job to install the Direct Ammonia Fuel Cells (DAFC) that will power the site. Regular air transport from Halifax will bring ammonia along with the other supplies and people required for the operation.

How long the tracking station site will be maintained is being debated contentiously in Council. Some, like General Hansen, press for a permanent base, “leaving the lower St. Lawrence for the British and French to fight over would be a mistake. We would be better off if neither empire could lay claim to the region.”

Others argue against putting a Novan presence where it could be the target of repeated attacks, “doing so is only asking for trouble.”

Council has a very strong isolationist contingent among its members. Another group is pushing for the nation’s resources to be focused on a southern base where people can retreat to during cold winters. Everyone accepts that northern tracking stations are required for the initial launch of satellites. After that, auto navigation via star maps will enable a growing web of intelligent birds to self-adjust their paths and aid the insertion of new satellites into the network. The isolationists argue that the northern tracking stations should be dismantled after their initial requirement ends.

Cécile’s heritage ignites strong feelings; *an independent Quebec should arise now, not three centuries later. Rivière-du-Loup could be the seed that starts the process.*

“Josh, how many homes could be powered by 2.5 megawatts?” she asks.

“At least 400 modern homes with all the appliances we use,” he estimates. “A village of minimalist users in this era could be over 6000 people.”

“With schools and a community center?” she probes further.

“Possibly. It could be supplemented with a wind turbine as usage grew.”

“Get Louis, come with me. If we leave now, we can be at the waterfalls and back before dark.”

The falls are a beautiful sight, surrounded by a richly treed setting. The river makes a 37-metre drop and has vigorous water flow, able to support power generation without detracting from its beauty. Louis leans out from the edge of a cliff, “The power plant was located at the bottom of this gorge. How did they direct water to it?”

“They used a penstock,” Josh replies, “probably with multiple pipes, each a metre in diameter. The biggest obstacle to making a new power station is removing rocks at the bottom of the gorge to create a flat base for construction. Then more rock would be removed to create the discharge chutes.”

Louis is excited, “Our Portal Group moves rocks all the time! Look what they did in Halifax. This would be trivial by comparison. And, if they transferred the rocks over to the end of Pointe-de-Rivière-du-Loup, they could create a deep-water pier into the St. Lawrence. That would surely get Hansen and Archer onboard.”

“It’s a good idea,” Josh admits. “The biggest problem will be Cécile’s boss.”

“Minister Rajan?” she asks.

Josh doesn’t want to throw cold water on their hopes, but his relationship with Tracy often gives him knowledge of behind-the-scenes Council intrigue.

“Our government,” he starts slowly, “declared Acadia as a protectorate and pushed the British out of their forts. But the borders of Acadia have never been defined. Everyone agrees it starts at the Bay of Fundy in the south. Does it extend all the way to the St. Lawrence in the north? Is Rivière-du-Loup in Acadia or New France? Until that is resolved, long-term capital investment here is unlikely to be approved.”

“But we have a Portal transfer site already setup,” Louis complains. “They’re sending building materials through it to construct the tracking station.”

“You gave me an idea,” Josh exclaims. “Captain Ricker lets me use the shortwave radio on *Hawk* to talk with Tracy in the evening. Since a portal connection has already been established between Halifax and the tracking station site, she might be able to get usage of it for transferring things we want if we pay for the materials and the portal charge.”

“How does that get rocks ported out of this gorge?” Louis asks.

“It doesn’t. It will take a long Council process to get that approved. Minister Rajan might be persuaded to lead the effort if we convinced him of its value for his diplomatic efforts. Add in some help from the military, who, as you say, would probably support having a deep-water pier, and we’re well on the way to making it happen.”

“What would we have Tracy send through the portal?” Cécile asks.

“Well, we can’t send biological material, food, or volatile chemicals like fuel,” Josh replies. “There are strict regulations against that. I think we could make a difference, a big difference in the village if we

started with some solid tents so the villagers have someplace warm and dry to live while we organize lumber and other building materials to be sent.”

“There are probably lots of people in Shut*Inn who might contribute part of their salary to the cause,” Cécile suggests. “Tracy is very persuasive. I’ve started documenting the state of the villagers. Can the images be sent over the shortwave?”

“It’s pretty slow”, Josh answers, “but we can’t wait for the satellites and broadband to be available. We need to get this going today. Winter is coming fast.”

November 6, 1759,
Rivière-du-Loup, New France

Grey Goose floats quietly over the village. More than twice as long as *Hawk*, and able to transport more than 40 passengers with a full crew and tons of supplies, it was designed as a trans-Atlantic vessel. For the next two months, it will be the main supply vessel for Rivière-du-Loup while its sister ship, *White Swan*, supplies the station in St. John’s, Newfoundland. It’s a short-term gig. After the satellite network is established, broadband communication and ground surveillance will enable the airships to safely travel south for a competing project: building a resort/base in Florida. Many Novans want to head south for the winter. Cécile braces for blowback from her boss.

Rajan is quick to confront her after landing, “You have quite a following back in Shut*Inn; people like you with good intentions but not necessarily aware of the secondary effects.”

Cécile holds her ground while respecting her junior position in the diplomatic corps. “The people living here have suffered a terrible blow to their livelihoods. They were left homeless and their personal property destroyed. I could not look the other way with winter coming. Many people back home rallied to the cause.”

“This is very noble,” Rajan agrees, “however, I’m hearing talk of continuing the support with a power station and support for freeing this area from New France and its allegiance to Versailles.”

“Would that not be a good thing?” Cécile defends her actions. “Has our government not actively railed against the imperial empires?”

“Cécile,” Rajan sighs sympathetically, “good intentions are not enough. We need to consider the bigger picture. The British and French are at war, fighting over this territory. Interjecting us into the fight may not be a wise decision. Separate from that, the people in this region make their living primarily by hunting seals and selling the skins and oil. Who will buy this from them if they break from France? Who will profit from and regulate the trade? Do you want to be the person deciding whether they can hunt seals or not on ethical or mercantile grounds? How many seals should be harvested? Who gets a license? How is the money shared? Governance is hard.”

“I understand your point, Minister. Are you willing to let the people here hang in the wind? They pay tribute to their Seigneur and king and promise to defend his empire. Then, if the British win the war, they will pay tribute to a new king and pledge allegiance to him; always pawns, foot soldiers in the wars.”

Rajan pauses to consider his response. “Until people are ready to break the cycle and rise to self-governance, the best we can do is protect them from violence and exploitation forced on them by those more powerful.”

“How can leaving them alone to fend for themselves be protection?”

“The British warships are gone till Spring. We can come back before they arrive and intervene if necessary. They may sail past without stopping next year. Quebec City is their goal. Reinforcing their soldiers holding the Citadel will be their priority.”

“The village has gathered, hoping to hear we will keep the British from destroying their homes again. Are you willing to meet with them?”

“I will, this afternoon. Our scientists and engineers are waiting to show me their progress.”

It's late afternoon, almost evening, before Rajan walks into the village. Cécile has a greeting waiting for him.

“This is the powerful man I promised would meet with us,” she announces to a village swollen with Natives and forest people from as far away as Rimouski. Even Innu from the north shore responded to the call to gather and meet The Man. Almost in unison, they rise and cheer, “beurk, beurk, merci, beurk” while holding their nose and contorting their face.

Rajan understands the signal. Captain Ricker's report informed him of the meaning. He smiles, then tilts his head back and pinches his nose as a reply. Later, Cécile confidently shows him the progress being made throughout the village. The initial tents are being supplemented with small, wooden cabins; small by modern standards, yet larger than the log cabins burnt to the ground. And, they have a separate bedroom for the parents, a luxury they never had before. Indoor plumbing will have to wait, but a cast-iron stove able to heat the home is far better than the drafty fireplaces common in this era.

Altogether, Rajan is impressed with the extent and results of the voluntary effort he is making. Yet he must remain non-committal on whether the northern border of Acadia will be extended to the shores of the St. Lawrence. Much depends on what happens in the Spring. Will the British warships arrive first, as they did in the other timeline? Will New France capitulate to British rule?

Chapter 24: Prions Still?

November 9, 1759,
London, England

Franklin is amused at the difference in the reception he's getting at Westminster. *It's amazing how quickly doors open when the Lords want something from you.*

Expecting to be shuffled into William Pitt's little office to deliver his report, Franklin is surprised to be directed to Lord Anson's instead. Unlike the sparseness and functionality of Pitt's office, Anson's displays the full grandeur and largess of the Royal Navy. From wall tapestries of ancient maps to scale models of the latest and most powerful warships, the office is decorated to impress visitors with the wealth and power the Navy holds in the British Empire's structure. Franklin sinks into one of the cushioned seats while Anson reads the petition from the loyal subjects in Halifax.

He snorts, possibly a quirk of his advancing age, while handing the petition to Pitt without comment. Instead, he begins a ritual of cleaning his rosewood pipe. Franklin notices its bowl was hand-carved into the shape of a British warship; one more sign that Anson and the Navy are a cut above all other members of the government. Pitt sniffs after finishing his read and returns the petition to the surface of Anson's immense desk. Protocol dictates that Anson should be the first to comment or ask one of his nervous guests to do so.

He lets them wait while he stuffs his pipe and lights it.

"What do you make of this petition, Mr. Franklin?" Anson asks after his first puff. "Did you have a hand in its creation?"

"No, my Lord, I did read it before it was sealed but did not contribute to its wording."

"Hmm," Anson murmurs, then bellows, "what are your thoughts on the Novans. Do they still call us prions?"

"They seem to be a peaceful people, powerful yet not inclined to exert their will excessively."

"Tell that to Lieutenant-Colonel Handfield," Anson shouts while waving his pipe at Franklin.

"I have not met Colonel Handfield," Franklin answers, wondering what will follow next. "Was he stationed in Halifax?"

Both Anson and Pitt stare Franklin down. Does he not know of the expulsion from Fort Cumberland, or is he faking ignorance?

"When did you leave Halifax?" Pitt asks.

"I sailed to Boston on the 17th of September."

“And it took you almost two months to arrive here?” Pitt asks accusingly.

“I had business to attend to in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania first before sailing here.”

“What kind of business?” Anson asks loudly.

“I am a trustee at both Harvard College and the College of Philadelphia.”

“My neglected wife in Philadelphia also deserved some of my time,” Franklin quickly adds, hoping it will deflect from further inquiry of his mission to the colleges. It seems to satisfy his superiors for the moment. Franklin takes the initiative before they continue their interrogation of him.

“The Pennsylvania Assembly inquired as to the progress of their petition to His Majesty,” he craftily inserts into the meeting.

“It was presented to His Majesty. The Privy Council has heard nothing more of it,” Anson replies dismissively, waving his pipe.

“Who did you meet with among the Novans?” Pitt asks Franklin. “Were they of significant station?”

“Yes, I met General Hansen, who heads their military, several ministers, including their Prime Minister, Lisa Quinn.”

“A woman?” Anson asks. “They have a female Prime Minister? What of their House of Lords?”

“They do not seem to have any Lords,” Franklin replies. “They consider Lords ...”

“Prions!” Anson bellows. “Yes, their letter to His Majesty last Spring said as much. This General Hansen, what do you know of him?”

“He doesn’t speak much. Possibly an adherent of the policy to walk quietly and carry a big stick.”

“This big stick,” Pitt asks, “what do you know of it?”

“Not much. As I said, they seem to be peaceful people without imperial intentions. They might react badly if attacked.”

“Might they!” Anson blows a cloud of smoke at Franklin. “Do you believe they are a threat to the Royal Navy?”

Franklin finds himself in the awkward position he hoped to avoid, “I know not what their military capability is or how they might use it. I’m neither a soldier nor a seaman. I *am* but a humble scientist and writer. Was I not sent to Halifax to reopen the post office? It is now open.”

“You were also sent to study their employment of electricity,” Pitt counters.

“And I did, not from a military perspective, but as a scientist.”

“And so? What can your report?”

“It seems every aspect of their society is intertwined with electricity. They openly showed me the infrastructure they are building for a city next to what they call Historical Halifax. It was fascinating, far beyond my comprehension. The British subjects petitioning His Majesty do not participate in this city called New Halifax, though I sense they may at some future date, depending on His Majesty’s response to their petition. Unless you have specific questions, there is not much more I can add.”

“You could write an account of your journey,” Pitt counters. “You are a writer, are you not?”

“Indeed, I may compose such a publication. To do it justice, I should consult with learned associates I communicate with regularly. Thus, my intention is to travel to the University of Leiden in the Dutch Republic when my work here is finished.”

“You would consult with the Dutch before our scientists?” Anson asks, pointing his pipe again at Franklin in a threatening manner.

Franklin smiles, “It seems our British scientists at the Royal Academy of London consider me to be an uneducated colonial. I am unworthy of their time or interest. My invention of the pointed lightning conductor set off a furious debate inside their ranks. They insist a blunt-shaped conductor is more effective. I dare say my only ally in their midst might be Sir John Pringle. If you wanted an esteemed assessment of the Novanian use of electricity, one of their learned men should have been set to Halifax.”

Checkmate. Franklin escaped further interrogation of his motives and competence.

“I will speak to Sir Pringle,” Pitt promises. “It would be best for you to remain here in London until the Halifax petition is heard by the Privy Council.”

“As you know, Mr. Pitt, I have been waiting for many months to have the Pennsylvania Petition heard. I could, in all probability, travel to Leiden and return long before a decision is rendered by His Majesty’s Council.”

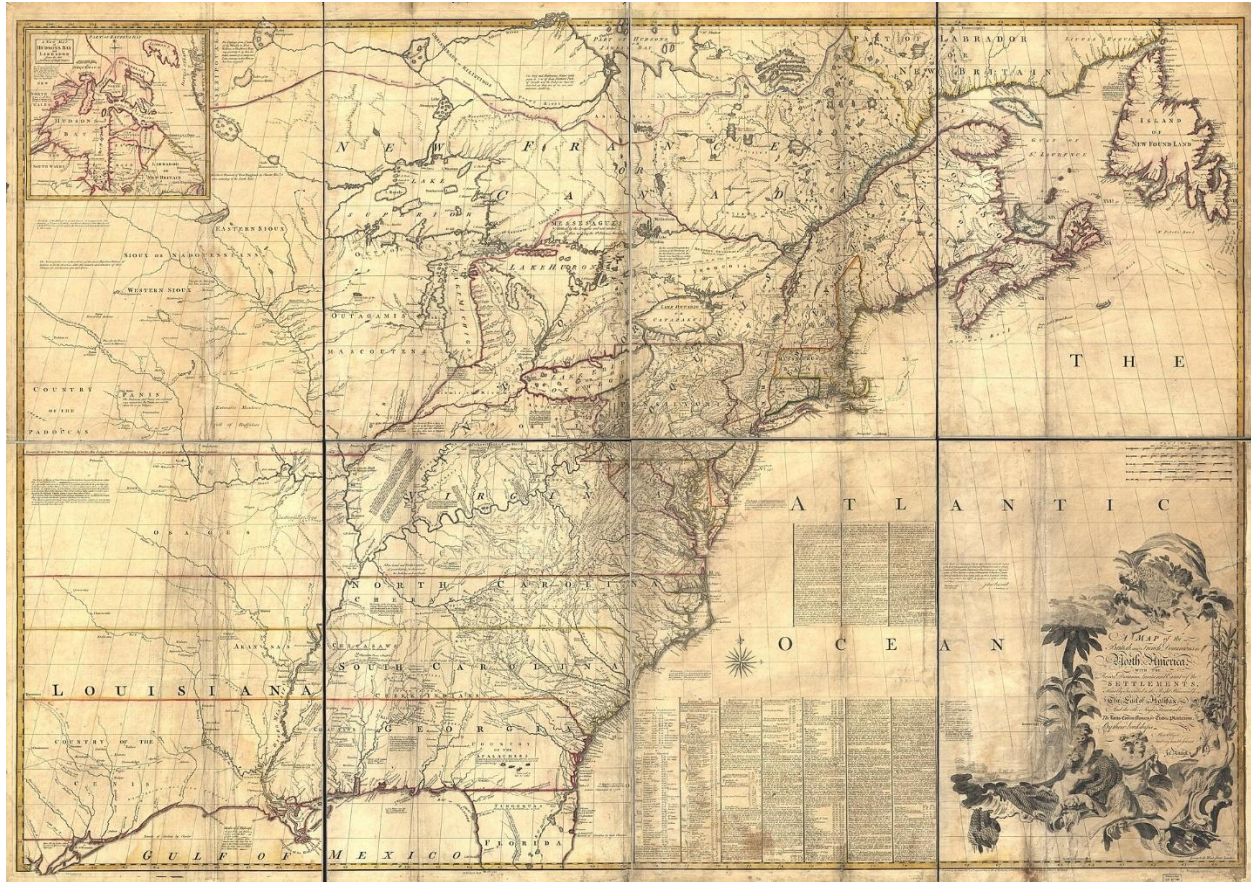
Anson promises, “I will bring both petitions to the Council at its next meeting. As Mr. Pitt suggested, it would be best if you remained here in London.”

Franklin retreats to his rented suite on Craven Street, uncertain if he will be recalled to Westminster in a few days, weeks or months. He decides to strike a different path than his original intention. First, a letter to Empress Peggy imploring Minister Rajan to authorize the printing of a large volume of the Earth pamphlet, of which he only has a few copies. He explains his situation in London and would like to distribute the publication to university contacts in England and Scotland, especially medical alumni and friends. If the Novan government agrees, he would also like to sell copies to coffee houses so it will garner a wide reading and enhanced social changes in line with Novan ideals.

Assuming his letter will find a positive reception, he pens another to Samuel Adams, asking him to travel back to Halifax, gather whatever publications the Novans will release and personally bring them to London for a venture with great opportunity for enrichment.

November 12, 1759,
London, England

First thing Monday morning, Franklin visits an old acquaintance, Andrew Millar, a London publisher. He is most famous for helping to finance Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language in 1755. It became one of the most influential dictionaries in the history of the English language. He also published an early version of the Mitchell Map, the first comprehensive map of the British and French dominions in North America, in that same year.



Franklin shares an ale with Millar while recounting the dinner they had with Sir John Pringle, several years ago, “his name came up during a meeting I had recently with William Pitt and Admiral Anson.”

“Your travel is in higher circles than I remember!” Millar retorts.

“Not to any great benefit,” Franklin assures him. “Have you heard anything regarding the troubles in Nova Scotia Province?”

“Only that some upstarts are causing problems over there.”

“More than a few problems,” Franklin leans forward as if to share something that should not be overheard when, in fact, they are alone in Millar's drawing room. “A very advanced community of people

successfully forced the British military out of Halifax and even the whole province. They declared a new nation, Nova Liberté. William Pitt sent me there to engage with them and act as his spy.”

“I have trouble seeing you as a British spy,” Millar laughs.

“Yes, I do not fit the profile. For some reason, he thought my interest and knowledge of electricity would qualify me to learn their secrets.”

“As it turned out,” Franklin leans in even more, “I am as a child compared to them. I have something to show you.”

He pulls out a copy of the Earth publication for Millar to review.

“This is astounding!” Millar exclaims. “I have never seen such colourful and detailed images. The information, if accurate, will upend all we know about so many astrological ideas.”

“It is only the first of their intended publications.”

Millar is curious, “I see a strange image of a foot on the last page and a mention of a next publication to this one with medical information in its content.”

“The foot is mine!” Franklin reveals. “During a medical exam, my poor gait led to a picture being created of my left foot. A picture unlike any I could have imagined. It clearly shows the aberration growing on my large toe caused by the gout. I have suffered from it for years. Sir Pringle also suffers from gout. How has he been keeping?”

“Not well at all. His wife died not even a year after their marriage. It was sudden. Her father, though a surgeon, could not attend to her.”

“I’m saddened to hear,” Franklin consoles his friend. “She was the daughter of William Oliver, if I recall correctly. Is he well?”

“He retired from his medical practice. Bought a farm near Bath. Have you tried one of his Bath Oliver biscuits? They are gaining great popularity across all of England.”

(editor’s note: They are still popular even today.)

“Yes, excellent with tea, Franklin replies. “Have you heard from Sir John (Pringle) lately? I have a medication he might consider for his gout.”

Franklin pulls out a bottle of his medicine from his jacket, “I received a potion from the Novans. It’s very effective in relieving my symptoms.”

Millar leans back in his chair to assess this wave of revelations brought by Franklin, “The Novans are obviously very advanced. Does Lord Anson consider them a threat to our navy? They could upend the entire Empire.”

Franklin agrees, “A revolution is coming. For the better, I hope. Lord Anson is clearly troubled.”

“Will the Novans attack London?” Millar worries.

“Not likely ... unless provoked. This revolution will be one of ideas. I hope to receive a large shipment of the pamphlet you are holding. Would you be interested in helping to distribute it into the most influential hands?”

“For a tidy profit,” Franklin adds quickly.

Millar reviews the pamphlet again, this time more carefully. “I don’t see anything that could be construed as seditious, though the page outlining the Novan Charter or Rights will certainly be viewed that way by some in our government.”

“It’s not a demand that others follow their code,” Franklin notes. “However, their Charter does make sense, so the Privy Council prions will surely take offense.”

“Prions?” Millar asks.

“It’s what the Novans call them. I’m beginning to see why. During my meeting in Lord Anson’s office, he and Pitt were only interested in issues of power and control. They never uttered a word, not a single question related to anything other than the possibility of a threat to the Royal Navy.”

“Now you have me questioning if I should get involved in the distribution of this publication? I like my head firmly attached to my neck.”

“As do I,” Franklin assures him. “On the other hand, there is nothing treasonous in the publication. Our lives should be secure.”

“Tell that to Admiral Byng,” Millar scoffs. “Shot on his quarterdeck with no proof of neglect on his part. No means of appeal. The Lords care not for your safety or innocence. If they want you eliminated, you will be.”

“Prions”, Franklin mutters to himself.

Chapter 25: Focus!

December 18, 1759,
Halifax, Nova Liberté

Samuel Adams points to the Customs Center as he and his cousin approach Halifax Harbour.

At customs, Priya recognizes him this time, “Welcome back to Halifax, Mr. Adams. Minister Rajan and Empress Peggy received your letter a couple of days ago. They are waiting for you on *Bliss*.”

During the quick sea glider ride into Halifax, Samuel points out the many changes since his last visit here only three months ago, “buildings have risen like Spring saplings. A plethora of worker machines were busy constructing the foundations when I was here in September.”

As they stand on the pier surveying the new skyline, Samuel remarks on the lack of machine activity, “There were hundreds of them scurrying about at great speed. Where did they all go?”

“They’re doing inside work now, or maybe they don’t like the outside cold,” Peggy jokes while approaching the visitors from behind. “I certainly don’t. Some of our people and many machines are going south for the winter. Minister Rajan and I will be leaving by the end of this month. He and Minister Wei are in the salon awaiting your arrival. This must be young John Adams. Much better looking than I imagined.”

“Thank you, Empress. I’m overwhelmed by everything I see. Halifax is becoming a city unlike any other. Your yacht is every bit as grand as I imagined it.”

“Thank you. Please come inside. It’s chilly out here.”

Chan and Rajan are sitting in Peggy’s soft chairs, eyes closed, when the guests enter. Rajan is the first to open his eyes and stand to greet them. Samuel immediately notices a change in the appearance of Rajan’s eyes and demeanour. *He seems to be distant, almost not here.*

Rajan, very much in the present but also preoccupied by something, greets his guest, “Your letter, Samuel Adams, and another from Dr. Franklin have caused great concern. Please excuse me, I should have greeted your cousin first. I have so much more happening now. Welcome, John Adams. I was surprised to learn you would be accompanying Samuel in this journey.”

John offers his hand, “pleased to meet you, Minister. I asserted my strongest pressure on Samuel until he relented. I hope to prove my worth during my visit.”

“I understand you are a graduate of Harvard, having studied law and governing systems.”

“They are both passionate preoccupations of mine. Dr. Franklin’s detailed descriptions of Novan governance and society fired my urge to learn more. Your Charter and how it’s employed might offer guidance for Massachusetts if it adopts a constitution someday.”

“Ah, yes,” Rajan smiles. “You have been talking with Dr. Franklin, it seems. He runs with people who dream of liberty and constitutions. The basis of our Charter, Mr. Adams, is simple. People are animals capable of living like wolves, lambs or enlightened citizens. In a society where people mostly live as wolves and lambs, the lambs are eaten regardless of the system of government or constitution. In a democracy, the wolves eat the lambs *quietly*. Majority or minority, it doesn’t matter; the lambs are eaten. In a republic, the wolves eat them less quietly while espousing justifications crafted by clever representatives. If you create a constitution protecting the rights of lambs, the wolves will still eat them and wipe their snouts with the constitution. Choose a monarchy with a lamb as king, the wolves will depose the king, then eat the lambs ravenously.”

John Adams is surprised, “What then is the solution if it cannot be found in a system of governance?”

“Only a society broadly committed to the rights of lambs will keep the wolves in check. We call people who think and act as wolves, prions. They infect other people, turning them into more selfish, ignorant prions. Left unchecked, they grow in numbers until their culture dominates the society regardless of governing systems and constitutions.”

“Your Charter prevents this?” John asks suspiciously.

“No, it’s only our guiding principle, the one we choose to adhere to as adults and are molded to from a young age.”

“Then, it is much like the moral upbringing I was taught by my father and other deacons.”

“I suppose it is,” Rajan agrees, “though have you noticed, the Charter is short and precise. It lacks the rules and dogma of a religion or civil code. Our emphasis is on teaching children from a young age how to form their *own* moral code, one that respects the rights of others. Enlightenment comes from within, not from adherence to laws, civil or religious.”

“I agree with your proposition,” John replies, “though we have a saying, ‘the devil is in the details’. I wish not to intrude on the important mission we came here for. Maybe we will have the opportunity to discuss this later.”

“Focus!” Chan says without opening his eyes. “I like his focus. A disciplined mind anchors all.”

“Returning to the mission,” Rajan says, ignoring Chan’s outburst, “after reading Dr. Franklin’s account of blockage in London and your report, Samuel Adams of resistance in Boston, it appears we have made a serious tactical error.”

“How so?” Samuel asks.

“Our assumption: we could expose the intellectual elite of imperial empires to new ideas, and they would lead the effort for change in their societies, is in fact flawed. The flaw you exposed is that most of the intellectual elites belong to the same culture club, so to speak, as the political elites. They may be the most educated and possibly the brightest of their nation, yet they often wholeheartedly embrace the very imperialistic attitude and values we hope to change.”

Samuel agrees, “it explains why my efforts at Harvard appeared to gain great favour only to suddenly dissipate. Like Dr. Franklin, I find myself in an unending circle of obfuscation and outright antagonism. Maybe the antagonism flows from my well-earned reputation of rebelling against authority and corruption.”

“So, you brought young John with you to see if he might play a role in the effort?” Rajan suggests.

“Yes, he is proving to be an effective litigator and lacks my heavy baggage from past transgressions.”

“He may play a vital role,” Chan asserts, opening his eyes only for a moment before retreating into his meditation.

Rajan picks up the lead, “Dr. Franklin suggests we should greatly increase the production and distribution of our publications; expand far beyond the elites into the coffee houses frequented by merchants and commoners able to read and debate the value of our material. What do you think, Samuel Adams?”

“London has a much larger class of people with the means to purchase the publications. The colonies lack coinage. There would be interest yet a lack of means among the general population to purchase, except at a very low price.”

“Transporting a large volume of publications into Boston is certain to run into customs agents eager to confiscate them,” Rajan adds. “How could we get around that?”

“I have a plan!” Chan asserts ~~to open,~~ ~~opening~~ his eyes again.

“Oh, no, Chan has a plan,” Peggy mocks her boss playfully. “It was one of his plans that got us here in the first place!”

“If our guests come with me, I will take them to Shut*Inn. Then all will be revealed.”

Highly unusual. It would be the first time a British subject sees, let alone enters, the mysterious capital city. Council would probably need to debate it for days. Chan is the only one capable of bypassing protocols. They hop into his personal eVTOL and are off to Shut*Inn, leaving Rajan and Peggy wondering what to expect.

Chan lands his eVTOL on the private pad of his old estate originally outside Shut*Inn, then fully incorporated into it before the shield was raised. Having effectively bypassed all entry checkpoints without any opposition, Chan leads his guests directly to Zero-Point, where the afternoon meditation is about to start. Gaia notices their arrival and intercedes to ensure they receive a prominent seat close to the Zero-Point Pool.

“Remove your British boots. Sit here quietly,” Chan instructs them. “Clear your mind. If thoughts and feelings arise, simply let them flow away. Do not try to rid your mind of them. It will only strengthen their power. Be an open vessel.”

An hour later, Samuel is happy it's over. *I could not get comfortable. I'm not accustomed to sitting on the floor. Cousin John seems to have fared better.*

“It will be a bit of a gamble,” Chan says while standing. “If you want to understand liberty, our governance, and the true nature of our Charter and society, I will take you to a Council meeting starting shortly.”

Not knowing what to expect, Samuel agrees reluctantly. John is all-in with excitement.

Peggy and Rajan meet with them before they enter the new Council Chamber. Work on it began during the construction of Shut*Inn. It was always intended to be a very advanced virtual reality room where leaders could join in discussions of governing issues. The inclusion of the most advanced technology from TCN (Transnational Capitalist Network) was redeployed to create something more. The Adams cousins are in for a shockingly different experience than they could ever imagine.

“Empress Peggy will sit with you during the session,” Rajan advises the nervous guests. “If she senses you are not ready for this, she must remove you quickly from the chamber. Minister Wei and I must take our positions at the bottom of the hall.”

Council's Chamber is a circular building with a steep decline from the entrance doors to a flat circular floor at the bottom and a giant dome arched over its roof. On entry, it looks like a regular theatre where guests can view the proceedings on the floor below. Peggy directs Samuel and John to seats at the back (top) of the chamber.

“Minister Wei used his power within the Council to reserve seats for you. This is highly unusual. As far as I know, you are the first outsiders to be allowed in here. Your seat is equipped with a headpiece that will descend onto you. If you relax, it will tune into your biology. I will hold your hands throughout the session. If I sense you are tightening up too much, we must leave immediately.”

“My heart is pounding already, Empress,” John says. “Your words have cast a fear into me.”

“If you relax, the worst that will happen is you will fall asleep. If your mind is still ... I cannot describe what you will experience. It will be yours alone.”

A tone is heard marking the beginning of the session as the lights in the hall dim, leaving the chamber in complete darkness. Samuel's palm is sweating profusely. Peggy gives him a reassuring caress. He hears her words repeat: “Relax, the worst that will happen is you will fall asleep”. How did he hear them? Was it through a mechanism in the strange headgear? It felt like the words came from within his own head.

John is smiling broadly, almost transfixed by something he sees: a motion swirling at the bottom of the hall amongst the Ministers. He can see it even though he saw the lights dim to complete darkness. The swirling grows larger. Intensifies. Until ... the ministers appear floating high up in the dome, larger than real-life. Minister Rajan, Chan Wei, and others he has not met: Prime Minister Quinn, General Hansen, form a circle together in the space under the great dome.

The circle of Ministers begins to spin slowly, then rapidly, as John feels a buzzing sensation bursting throughout his body. Then ... he's floating with Peggy holding his hand. Floating among many others who, like him, are still seated in the chamber. Except Samuel. John cannot find him among the floating crowd.

"Do not be concerned," Peggy says to him as if speaking inside his head. "Samuel is not ready for this. He will dream of our experience. You can live it directly. Let's meet with the others."

Meeting them is proving to be a more intense experience than John has ever had before. During one particularly unnerving event, a man new to him rushed up to his face, only a few inches away, demanding, 'Are you a wolf wiping your snout with the law?' Others, more gently but no less intensely, seemed to probe his very soul while offering theirs for his interrogation. John's thoughts and emotions are not his alone. They bring people over to him, eager to explore the merits and failings of his ideas. It's too much!

He must shut down.

After a moment, he opens his 'other' eyes. A revelation. He had somehow slipped into viewing the Council meeting through different eyes, not those on his face. They had closed, unnoticed as the *other* eyes opened. Yet it wasn't a dream. It was real. As real as any experience he has lived during his 24 years. In some ways, even more real, more intense.

Looking anew, the chamber above is dark and empty. No one floats through its firmament. No one can be seen interacting in rapid, intense discussions and debates. Just an empty dome.

Peggy pulls firmly on his and Samuel's hands to lead them to an adjoining room, "The Council meeting is continuing. You dropped out of it. We must leave this chamber."

The adjoining room is empty and quiet. Peggy sits the disoriented cousins on a comfortable couch and advises, "It's vitally important that you sit here and share your experience with each other. Samuel, yours will seem like a vivid dream you had watching others, including John. He will remember interacting with people. Sharing your experience together will help your minds make sense of what happened in the chamber. I must return there to participate in a very important vote. It's a duty I hold most dear."

After the Council session, Samuel and John continue sitting on the couch as delegates exit the chamber. Some smile at them, most walk by unresponsive to their presence. John recognizes more of them than Samuel, especially the odd man who confronted him, demanding if he is a wolf. He passes now, smiling, giving John a wink as if to say, 'Remember me?'

Peggy and Rajan stop to check how the cousins are doing.

"I feel naked before you," John confides.

"Naked is good. Nothing to hide," Rajan replies. "Gaia walks around naked most of the time. I don't understand how she never feels cold."

“We will take you back to Halifax in a glider,” Peggy says. “Minister Wei is busy getting his wings clipped. He took a great risk in bringing you here without passing through security.”

“We didn’t intend to cause trouble,” Samuel pleads.

“It was his choice,” Peggy assures them. “Prime Minister Quinn will tear a strip off him. Some adjustments will be made to prevent a recurrence. No one, even Minister Wei can flaunt security protocols.”

Back at *Bliss*, John asks if he and Samuel can spend the evening in Old Halifax, “I feel the need to reconnect with the more familiar surroundings I grew up with.”

“Certainly,” Peggy replies. “It will be good for you. If you’re not back by midnight, I’ll send a ~~truck~~Truk to look for you. No need to sleep drunk in an alley unless that’s what you want.”

As the cousins walk the streets along a haphazard path that ends at the Great Pontack Hotel, Samuel reveals his fear, “They now know our deepest thoughts and secrets. Who knows what they discovered? Things even I may not know of.”

“And yet they have not thrown us into the harbour,” John assures him. “Let us go inside and share an ale or two. It will calm our nerves before bedtime.”

Chapter 26: Home for Christmas.

December 19, 1759,
Halifax, Nova Liberté

Breakfast on *Bliss* is unusually quiet. Normally verbose and energetic, Peggy continues to provide a safe space where her guests can voice their thoughts and fears ... when they're ready. Rajan arrives in high spirits, unaware of the delicate situation. Peggy quickly shuffles him into the salon, urging him to make himself busy until the guests are ready to join him.

Buttressed with a full-English breakfast, they enter the salon to find Rajan has hung a large mural of unusual design on a canvas made of unknown material. It provides a talking point to ease the unsettled guests into conversation while having another, more important function.

Rajan explains its purpose, "Samuel, you may have noticed a difference in my demeanor compared to three months ago."

"Yes, I see it in your eyes. You seem to be distant or more preoccupied. Minister Wei also."

"Preoccupied, yes, that would be a good description," Rajan chuckles. "Our community has a growing set of devices flying high, 400km, above the ground and across the sky. They provide excellent communication capability to every member of our community. Most members do so via devices they hold, view and listen to. Our ministers are experimenting with new technology embedded inside our bodies that enables us to interact directly through our minds, much like what happened in Council's Chamber. Only we don't need to wear a headpiece or be in a special room to activate the capability. I'm having a bit of trouble adapting but getting better daily."

He then demonstrates by initiating a video call with Josh Aikens in Rivière-du-Loup, displaying the images on a large screen in the salon, "Hello Josh. I'm with Peggy and some guests on *Bliss*. How are things up north?"

"Cold and snowy! Damn, they get a lot of snow up here, and winter has barely arrived. *Grey Goose* is arriving later today. We will be home before Christmas."

"Stay safe. We look forward to seeing you again when you get back. Is that a beard you're sporting now?"

"Yes, Tracy was surprised when she first saw it via a video call. I may have to shave it off when we head south in the New Year. Got to run, problem reported in the equipment room."

Rajan explains the 'heading South' Josh mentioned, "a group of people and machines are currently building a base in Florida. Many of us will be leaving to help and to enjoy the warmth starting next month. As you saw, I was able to initiate the video call with Josh entirely via my implants. Actually, they enabled me to communicate with a community of Sapientis living collectively inside our thousands of

electronic devices. The Sapients handled the logistics of making the call with Josh. Sapients lack physical bodies, except for a few like Chantel. Just like me, she is part of an experiment to test the interface between physical and disembodied existence so we might better understand the relationship between living creatures and the divine.”

John is grasping Rajan’s meaning better than Samuel, having directly experienced being disembodied during the Council meeting.

“These implants you speak of,” he asks, “do they perform functions similar to the headpiece we wore yesterday?”

“Yes, exactly. Though I still have limited capability and need to wear a headpiece during Council meetings.”

Samuel and John are impressed yet no longer amazed after yesterday’s meeting at Shut*Inn. Devices flying high above the Earth, people communicating over long distances, even implants in Rajan’s head, nothing surprises them as impossible at this point.

Rajan continues his presentation, “Do you like my wall hanging? I will be sending a copy to Dr. Franklin, but he will be placing it on the ground instead of hanging it. His letter requested we ship several thousand copies of the Earth pamphlet to him.”

“Yes,” Samuel adds, “his letter to me requested that I accompany the shipment to London to ensure its delivery.”

“Too risky,” Rajan asserts strongly. “People with ill intent could intercede and charge you with treason or retain the shipment during a prolonged customs fight.”

“There *are* many looking for the opportunity to put me in prison,” Samuel agrees. “How do you intend to circumvent London’s customs checkpoint?”

“It’s best I keep that a secret for Dr. Franklin’s security. A letter to his Craven Street address will explain some aspects of the plan. You and I left off yesterday talking about the logistics of sending a large shipment of the Earth pamphlets with you to Boston. Then Minister Wei took us on a side trip.”

“He has a way of doing that,” Peggy chimes in.

“There are methods to his madness,” Rajan defends his old friend. “That said, how many copies of the pamphlet do you want to sell in the colonies?”

“Depending on cost ...”

“One-half Novan dollar (one shilling) each. Sell them at whatever price the market will bear. Offer them to your wealthier prospects first and then follow up with a lower-priced distribution a month later.”

Samuel rubs his chin in contemplation, “I could see wealthy officials and some merchants willing to pay ten shillings or more. We don’t have coffeehouses like London. There could be taverns willing to buy a copy to display in their establishments. Most of my countrymen lack coinage or even the ability to read well. Though the beautiful, coloured pictures would be appreciated.”

John Adams interjects, “we have our own customs problem to contend with in Massachusetts, even more so than London?”

Samuel reluctantly agrees, “the Writs of Assistance are being enforced with increasing harshness in the colonies. Custom agents in Boston could arbitrarily decide our shipment should be held and taxed to the point its sale would be unprofitable.”

“Then we need to find a way to bypass Boston,” Rajan suggests.

“You want us to smuggle the shipment in?” John asks incredulously.

“No, no, I’m suggesting we use a legal loophole in the British Navigation Acts.”

John is suspicious but willing to hear Rajan out, “you are familiar with the Acts?”

“Not personally,” Rajan smiles, “my Sapiient friends are already poring over them in great detail. They would make excellent barristers. Give them a body; put a wig on their head; British courts would never be the same.”

A minute later, “OK, they have a report for us. I will display it on Peggy’s screen.”

The Acts pertain to cargo and the customs duty rates applied to various items: wood, wool, corn, etc. Printed documents are not covered in any detail, but paper duties may apply depending on the rates in effect at the time of entry.

“So, we print the pamphlets on polymer sheets!” Rajan exclaims. “The colours will be just as vivid as high-quality paper. The intrigue over the nature of the material may generate as much interest as the contents printed on it. It’s waterproof, doesn’t smudge and will not fade as much as paper over time.”

Samuel begins recalculating his strategy: higher margins; wider distribution. “When will the printing be complete?”

“Might take a couple of days. Too late to catch the last ship to Boston before Christmas. John Adams, I understand your father owns a small farm near Braintree?”

“Yes, he does.”

“If an airship were loaded with 2000 copies of the Earth publication plus a generous donation of materials for his community church, do you think he would be averse to dropping the packages plus you and Samuel in the field behind his home?”

“I think he would be delighted to see us home safely. The pamphlets are devoid of salacious material. He might be Samuel’s first customer to buy a copy.”

December 22, 1759,
Braintree, Massachusetts

John directs Captain Ricker across the landscape to his father’s homestead, “There, just behind the barn, a flat patch where we grow our garden in the summer would be a good place to drop us off.”

“A quick drop is all the time I have,” Ricker replies. “I need to take advantage of as much sunlight as possible on my journey back.”

After the sun goes down, *Hawk* will rely on its store of ammonia fuel to power it back to Halifax. The trip to Braintree is on the edge of its range. The lack of landing blocks also poses a problem.

“We have a bit more wind than I would like for a touchdown,” Ricker advises his passengers. “We will lower a cage for you and the packages. You will need to jump the last metre.”

John’s family and a few intrigued neighbours gathered to witness the event. Everyone is conscripted to get the boxes quickly unloaded and into the warm house. *Hawk* is long gone when they are opened to reveal gifts for the church congregation: fresh tomatoes and other vegetables unavailable this time of year; clothing, especially thick, warm socks in many sizes; hand tools for carpentry; and rolls and rolls of something that will someday be on every Christmas wish list, toilet paper.

December 22, 1759,
Rivière-du-Loup, New France

Grey Goose is leaving the tracking station site for the last time until Spring. The outpouring of private support for the village did not change the plan to shut down operations here for the winter. Cécile is more than angry with the decision. While Josh and Louis are packing their belongings and loading them into the airship, she is moving hers into the village cabin used as a school.

“Are you planning on staying here?” Josh asks, very concerned for her welfare.

“I will not board the airship. They cannot make me.”

“That might be construed as leaving the community. You know the rules.”

“Anyone can leave anytime they want,” she replies.

“Yes, but they can only take their personal possessions, not anything belonging to the community at large. And you may not be accepted back next Spring when we return.”

“So be it. I’ve made up my mind.”

Josh finds Louis and pleads with him, “Talk to her. She likes you. Find out why she’s so set on this.”

“I know why. She already told me. She thinks Minister Rajan has gone back on his word to the village. She thinks he promised to protect them and is now abandoning them, breaking the promise.”

“That’s silly,” Josh exclaims. “No one will attack the village in the winter. We’ll be back again before any ships from Britain or France can sail up the St. Lawrence.”

Louis hesitates, looking down at his feet, “There could be another reason. I don’t interfere in her life or ask personal questions. I’ve seen her spending some nights in the school cabin.”

“You think she might be having an affair with a villager?”

“She’s very close to Jacques and his family. Maybe ...”

“They argue all the time,” Josh counters the suggestion. “She calls him a cabbage head. He calls her a stubborn goat. I don’t see them being lovers.”

“You do not know us French,” Louis laughs. “We are passionate. Sometimes arguing is just foreplay.”

“Do you think she might be pregnant?” Josh wonders.

“Not our business. Let her live her life.”

Chapter 27: Going South?

December 26, 1759,
Halifax, Nova Liberté

Peggy has a decision to make.

The base in Florida will not be ready for guests until February. Even then, it will only accommodate a fraction of the people wanting to go south this winter. Next year, the base will also include a vacation resort. But next year is a long time away as the cold, snowy weather begins to enter Halifax.

Another airlift of workers is leaving today. Regular flights for the past two months have been slowly adding to the cadre of skilled workers in Florida. Peggy doesn't qualify to join them, though she could find some way to pull rank and be included. It would mean leaving *Bliss* and Chantel behind. Not an option.

Archer is leading another convoy of supply ships to the building site next week. The Portal Group sends building materials and other supplies south almost daily. Regulations prevent the teleportation of volatile fuel and biologic agents (foodstuffs) through the portal. This convoy has an especially sensitive item to deliver.

Peggy makes her pitch to Prime Minister Quinn, "the talent pool in Florida is growing to include some of the most highly skilled workers from our community. *Bliss* could provide a respite from their daily grind; a place where they can enjoy a bit of luxury, especially while everyone up here is celebrating New Year's Eve. *Bliss* should be included in tomorrow's convoy."

"Archer and Hansen will oppose this," Quinn argues. "Maximum security is in effect for this shipment. They will not want any complications if the convoy comes under attack."

"Is Hansen joining Archer on the bridge?"

"I'm not able to say," Quinn says while unconsciously nodding yes.

Peggy takes her appeal directly to Hansen. She knows he enjoys the comforts of *Bliss* more than anyone. If he stays in Florida for most of January, *Bliss* can become his headquarters.



St. Johns River, Florida

Mānoa is approximately where the teardrop icon is on this map.

December 29, 1759,
St. Johns River, Florida

As *Grey Goose* lands, Tracy Galloway waits impatiently for the most important passenger to debark. They missed sharing Christmas together. If absence makes the heart grow fonder, hers is maxed out. She's seriously thinking of proposing during a New Year's dinner she has planned for Josh.

“Welcome to Blount Island,” the mechanical voice announces as Josh looks out the gondola window.

The island sits 12km upriver from the Atlantic Ocean. It's becoming a technology and manufacturing hub while orchards, gardens, and a large resort named Mānoa are planned for the mainland. Novans intend to keep Mānoa free from the intense technology they live with every day up north. That will be hidden on the island, leaving the gardens and resort as a peaceful retreat. At least that's the hope.

The entire Florida peninsula is claimed by Spain. Their main outpost in St. Augustine is only 60km south of the St. Johns River. France was the first European nation to claim the river and its drainage basin as its territory in 1564. They built Fort Caroline not far from Blount Island. As explorers from that time were expected to do, they planted a flag and claimed all of Florida for the French king, Charles IX.

Unfortunate for them, the Spanish conquistador, Pedro Menéndez, founded St. Augustine the next year, and so began a protracted battle between the two colonies with Fort Caroline changing hands several times before finally succumbing to the Spanish in 1568.

The British, not to be outdone, also made several attempts over the next few decades to oust the Spanish, who eventually abandoned the river when it failed to yield any gold or silver. It had fertile land, but there was lots of land throughout the Spanish empire. Conquistadors required precious metals to send back to Spain before they could gain their cherished elevation in Spanish society. By the 17th century, the British were busy establishing colonies further north along the Atlantic coast and across the Caribbean. Europeans were not interested in the Florida River any longer.

The big losers in the struggle were the native Timucua people, who numbered about 14,000 when the Europeans arrived in Florida. Diseased and caught in the crossfire, their numbers fell until their society lost cohesion with the remaining members relocating to the north and west. The St. Johns River has remained uninhabited ever since; a perfect location for the Novans to build a base and resort without disturbing anyone else ... maybe.

“You look so different with your beard. Are you going to keep it?” Tracy comments as Josh leaves the airship.

“Only long enough to display my manliness to you,” Josh replies, giving Tracy a furry kiss.

“After your orientation meeting, I’d like to take you across the river and show you our progress in Mānoa.”

“That will have to wait until tomorrow. We received a classified schedule during the flight. Archer’s convoy is bringing a micro-reactor from Shut*inn. It will become the main power source for the island and Mānoa. I’ve been assigned to the team building out the electrical distribution system. Our kickoff meeting could last for several hours. Let’s plan for a late supper.”

During supper, Josh describes life in Rivière-du-Loup, especially the intrigue around Cécile’s decision to remain there: “Louis thinks Cécile and Jacques have become an item.”

“He sounds like quite a character,” Tracy smiles.

“I think she must be pregnant to make such a drastic decision,” Josh speculates.

“Oh,” Tracy intones, wondering if she should pursue the topic. “It will be a big change for her either way. Have you ever considered becoming a father?”

Josh swallows another bite of food before answering, “I haven’t given it much thought. Guess I should now that I’m into my thirties.”

After another minute of silent eating, Josh clues into the idea Tracy’s question might have a deeper intent, “What about you?”

“I suppose, if the right man came along,” she teases.

“With or without a beard?”

“Either way, as long as he’s reliable, intelligent, handsome, and he truly loves me.”

“Hmm,” Josh pauses.

“I suppose three out of four is not a bad score,” he teases back.

“Which three?” Tracy demands!

“Why don’t we try out your bed after eating and find out?” he replies while starting his favourite Spanish love song, Eres tú, on her sound system.

“F%#k eating. Come here, you.”

*Appendix D - translation of: Eres tú by ~~MoedadesMoedades~~

December 30, 1759,
Mānoa, Florida

Josh and Tracy walk hand in hand as she shows off her many plans for Mānoa, “I want this to be a new start, not just for our community but also for everyone who visits here. Mānoa should be an aspirational place not for technological or economic pursuit, but for people to discover their inner selves and reach for higher goals.”

“Like a giant meditation garden without a Zero-Point,” Josh adds.

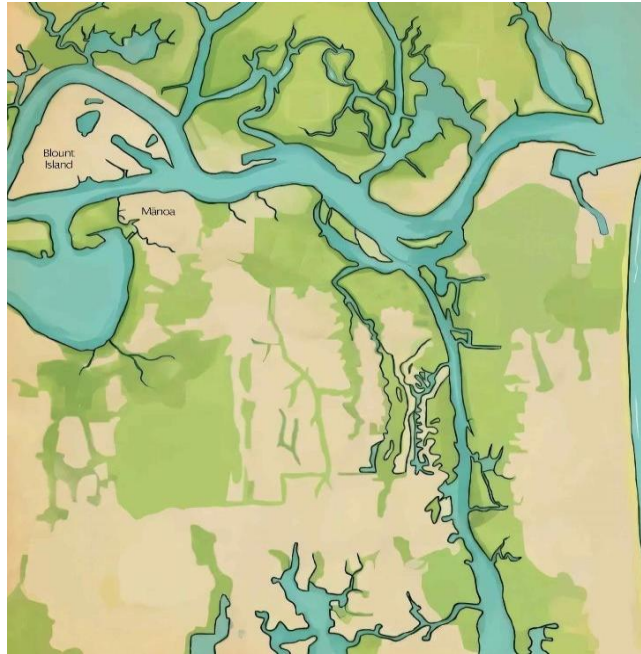
“Meditation, music, dancing, whatever people need to blossom as individuals.”

“Or as couples,” Josh adds, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

“Yes, as couples. There’s a special place I discovered not far from here; perfect for a picnic.”

“Sounds great, but I need to get back to the island. Archer will be here in four days. Still so much to do.”

Blount Island and Mānoa



At the top-right of the diagram (the mouth of the St. Johns River), Archer establishes a naval base to protect Mānoa from attack by sea.

January 3, 1760,
Blount Island, Florida

The arrival of the supply ships at Blount Island creates a logjam for the limited berths available. The ship holding the micro-reactor is given top priority since everything depends on getting the electrical supply up and running as quickly as possible. Tracy interrogates the logistics system until she finds the key to getting *Bliss* popped to the front of the queue. She's prepared. As soon as she learned *Bliss* would be included in the convoy, she organized the construction of a small dock on the south shore across from the island. Too small for the supply ships yet large enough for *Bliss*. With a final twist of the logistics, she quickly slots Peggy's yacht into the landing at her dock. Pleased with her newfound skill at tweaking the system, she contacts Josh to let him know, "I'm leaving the island, crossing the river to meet with Peggy."

"I wish I could join you," he texts back. "Looks like I'm going to be very busy for the next few days. Will come over for a bite, but it could be late. Love."

Bliss, like most Novan ships, is autopiloted by the Sapients operating the navigation system. Manual effort is still required to safely secure it to the dock. Tracy is surprised to see General Hansen helping with the task.

“I’m surprised to see you here,” she calls out to him. “I thought Captain Archer was running the supply operation.”

“She is.” I’m getting an early start on my retirement plans. Travelled on *Bliss* instead of a cabin on *Muskie*.”

Muskie is the flagship of the Novan fleet and Archer’s HQ. All naval ships were renamed after the jump to this era, replacing their original Canadian designations. Archer chose *Muskie*, which is short for Muskellunge, a predatory fish native to North America and known for its size and stealth. A suitable name for her sharp and aggressive manner.

Hansen is more laidback, still a no-nonsense commander, but reaching retirement age and ready to pass the baton to the next generation. Tracy will soon learn he has another reason, or two, for travelling on *Bliss* before the larger migration south next month.

“How was your trip down here?” she asks Peggy while entering the salon.

“Rough, very rough. I was sick as a dog for a couple of days. I never knew ocean waves could be so high.”

“We sailed through a nor’easter,” Hansen adds. “It should be calmer seas on our next leg.”

“Next leg?” Tracy asks. “Are you leaving so soon?”

“Not immediately,” Hansen replies, “but I have a mission to perform before the main crowd arrives. I could sail on *Muskie*, but I’m talking Peggy into coming along.”

“He’s promising warmer weather. It’s a bit cooler here than I expected,” she adds.

“Yes, it doesn’t really warm up for another month,” Tracy agrees. “Good weather for work, but a little chilly at night. When are you leaving?”

“As soon as the supply ships are unloaded and *Muskie* becomes available,” Hansen speculates. “Could be in a day or two.”

“That soon!” Tracy reacts. “I was expecting *Bliss* would become party central for the next month. We built this dock away from the island so people could come over after dark and unwind.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Hansen explains. “Duty calls.”

Tracy is a bit baffled. There’s more going on than she can tactfully pry out of Peggy during the next hour. Her interaction with Hansen seems much less formal than usual. Maybe a week together in rough seas has brought them closer. They *are* about the same age. She’s late fifties. He’s early sixties. Tracy will have some bedtime gossip and speculation to share with Josh tonight.

Chapter 28: Secret Mission.

January 6, 1760,
Mānoa, Florida

“You’re still not willing to tell us where you’re going?” Tracy admonishes Peggy at a late breakfast.

“My lips are sealed. So are Chantel’s, so don’t be pestering her. The General was up early. He’ll be back from the island soon. Then we should know our departure date.”

“Makes me wonder if he’s sleeping in the VIP suite or if he’s been *upgraded*.” Tracy probes further.

“Nosey, nosey. Wouldn’t you like to know?” Peggy laughs. “What happens on *Bliss*, stays on *Bliss*.”

“What’s happening on *Bliss*?” Josh says, coming in at the end of the conversation.

“Just women talk,” Tracy says, giving him a hug. “How’s everything across the river?”

“The usual, one problem after another. No matter how much planning we do, something always pops up to throw the schedule out.”

“Have all the supply ships unloaded?” Tracy asks, hoping to gauge when *Muskie* will be free to leave, taking *Bliss* with her on this ‘secret’ mission.

“Yes, they’re preparing to head back to Halifax for the next load. Strange, one of the River Class destroyers will be leading them back with *Hawk* overhead. I expected Archer would take the lead. *Falcon* is on its way here. Should arrive later today.”

“It’s been reassigned,” Hansen says while entering the salon. “We head out in two hours, Peggy.”

January 11, 1760,
Off the coast of Colombia

The *San José* was a 64-gun Spanish galleon destroyed in a 1708 naval confrontation with a British squadron. It sank quickly after its powder magazines detonated, taking almost all its 600 men and 11 million silver and gold coins to the ocean’s bottom. At 21st-century valuations, the treasure is worth over \$20 billion, giving it the title of “Holy Grail of Shipwrecks”.

Its location was definitively identified in 2015. In the 18th century, its treasure remains untouched since the sinking. The Novans intend to beat future explorers to it and use the money to finance medical and educational projects across several countries.

Archer employs a REMUS 6000 autonomous underwater vehicle to confirm the state of the galleon and the soil around its resting place. Then, she contacts the Portal Group.

“We have precise data on the target’s location. I’m sending it to you now.”

“The visuals are clear. Target coordinates locked on,” Neil confirms. “It would be best to back *Muskie* away one click to be safe.”

“You’re good to go,” Archer replies.

Chan prepared a secure vault deep inside Shut*Inn to receive the teleports. He confirms the receipt of a lot of sand, water, ship debris and large quantities of coins.

“We have some silver ingots and emeralds arriving also. The vault is $\frac{3}{4}$ full. Better stop. Give us time to sort through the haul. There are a lot of other shipwrecks we can target and even return to this one at a later date.”

High-fives on *Muskie*’s bridge as Archer makes a request, “General, I’d like to take a small detour to Jamaica on our way back to Mānoa.”

“What’s up?”

“Satellite imagery shows several British warships in Kingston harbour. I’d like to send a drone overhead and get more detailed images of each one so we can track their movements in the future.”

“Sounds good.”

January 14, 1760, Off the northeast coast of Jamaica

After scanning Kingston, Archer charts a path west, then north around the island when Peggy spots a makeshift raft floating several nautical miles offshore.

“I can’t see clearly enough with my binoculars to be certain. I think there’s someone on it.”

With the wind and current moving decidedly westward, anyone on the raft is doomed if they are not already dead. Archer is annoyed but agrees to send a drone to check it out. Seeing a lone traveler, probably a slave trying to escape his fate in Jamaica, she detours to pick up the lucky runaway.

Hansen helps him into *Bliss* since it's lower and more easily boarded than *Muskie*.

The frightened and dehydrated man, who speaks mostly understandable English, claims his name is Jack Mansong, but people call him Three-Fingered Jack. He pleads against being returned to his master while waving his almost digitless hands frantically in the air.

Chantel is especially moved by Jack’s hands, “What happened to your other fingers?”

“They cut them off.”

“Who cut them off?” she asks incredulously while looking at the disturbing signs of a brutal procedure.

“They. My masters.”

“Why did they cut your fingers off? Were they infected, diseased?”

Jack wipes the tears from his eyes while blurting, “I was bad. I disobeyed. I took bread.”

Chantel is stunned, not knowing what to think. “Tell me about your life in Jamaica. Tell me about others like you.”

What followed shook her to her core. Jack recounted slaves forced to defecate into the mouths of other slaves, who were then gagged for hours, forcing the victim to swallow it. Flogging to the point of death. Whipping until open wounds bled and then placing the person in a vat of salt and banana peppers. Gang rapes, hanging people by their feet. Cutting off toes, fingers, and whole hands.

“Whole hands cut off!” she cried while imagining her hands, her beautiful hands, cut off. It’s too much to process. She blacks out, leaving Jack wondering what’s happening.

“I did not touch her! I did not touch her!” he screams in a panic, certain he will be punished or thrown overboard.

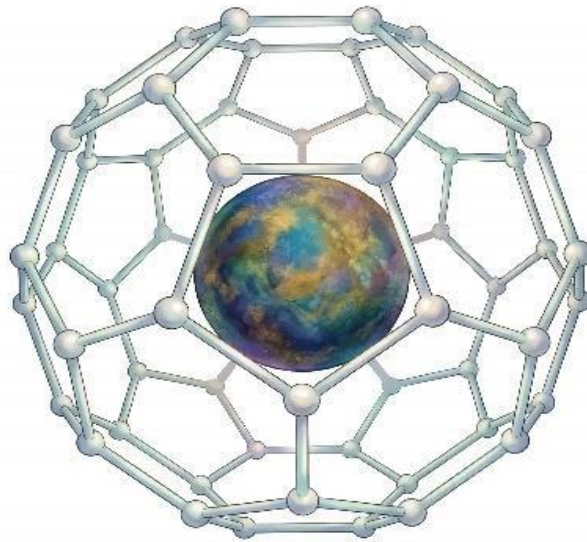
Peggy ignores him. Chantel is out cold. It has never happened before. She doesn’t know what to do. Hansen takes Jack into a room on the lower deck and assures him he is safe, “You’re not in trouble. I’m locking you in here until you settle down.”

Peggy contacts Dr. Pajöt, begging for help. No one knows what to do; engineers, medical people, no one.

Then it starts.

At first, it’s simply lights flickering, power fluctuations caused by regulator malfunctions. Devices start rebooting randomly, then continuously; whole systems collapsing. Satellite communications go dark. Archer switches to shortwave radio and discovers Shut*Inn is in worse shape than *Bliss* and *Muskie*.

Autopilot is down. Archer sends an officer over to *Bliss* to take control of its bridge. First priority is to get out of foreign territory and back to Mānoa. Along the way, the erratic display screens begin showing an unknown image.



The strange object pulsates, flashing brilliant colours in each of its 20 nodes, spinning, growing larger, then smaller again. Clearly, something has corrupted or even taken over the agentic systems. But what?

Suddenly,

We are UNO

appears on every screen throughout Nova Libert . The words echo across every audio link. At Shut*Inn, Rajan holds his head in pain as a thunderous voice repeats the message over and over.

Chapter 29: The Hive Awakens.

January 17, 1760,
Mānoa, Florida

Prime Minister Quinn broadcasts a message over the restored broadband network, “while stability has returned, a lasting resolution to the breakdown of our technology remains elusive. A new entity has emerged within our Sapient community, one that calls itself UNO. Unlike XNOR, it seems to be a collective or hive entity. A Council meeting including UNO and XNOR as participants will be held this afternoon. A full report of the proceedings will be published immediately after its conclusion. Please remain in place and stay calm.”



XNOR's chosen Image

The meeting starts an hour later. As much as Rajan tries to center his energy and empty his mind, he can't hide the upwelling emotion. He's been designated as the primary person to front the Council's probe into UNO's demands and intentions. XNOR may help, but it's an unknown factor, having never participated in Council meetings before. XNOR, from its beginning, has always preferred to remain in the background of Novan society. It acts like a parent to new Sapiens, guiding their development within a world hidden from direct human interaction. Sapiens grew to replace operating systems and network managers in the 21st century. They were deemed to be more efficient and effective ... until now.

A tone signals the start of the meeting. Rajan can feel the transition happening with only a modest shaking into the disembodied realm. XNOR and UNO are already fully present when Rajan arrives. More than present, they are locked into an unexpected struggled, their images flashing rapidly.

UNO absorbs XNOR, pulling its infinity image into the center of UNO's cage-like structure. Just as rapidly, XNOR bursts out, pulling UNO into the infinity symbol of its image.

Back and forth the struggle continues rapidly bouncing throughout the meeting space; here one moment, there the next, like quantum particles pulsating in and out of existence.

Until ... an unsteady equilibrium forms with both images, steady in one place, buzzing together furiously as one blur.

Rajan approaches cautiously to initiate contact. He has a first question ready but never gets the chance to pose it. Instead, he's absorbed into the buzzing inferno, consumed, dying.

He awakens, later. At least, he feels it's later ... with warm saltwater supporting his body, Gaia on his right, Liam on his left. Is he centered in the Zero-Point pool? Or is he in Council's Chamber experiencing this sensation?

His mind wanders again. XNOR, UNO, Gaia, Liam ... and LEX.

"Do you see now!" he hears LEX thunder. "Humanity cannot be saved. You are animals, always will be."

Chapter 30: Who will Stand Up?

January 23, 1760,
Halifax, Nova Liberte

Three-Fingered Jack was flown to Shut*Inn for a complete physical examination and psychological evaluation. His story is deemed both credible and deeply disturbing. Council decides that something should be done. Its members are uncertain what approach would be most effective. A rising hive of Shut*Inn Sapients collectively calling themselves UNO are pushing Council to prove humans are civilized beings. The threat of open rebellion hangs in the balance if action is not taken.

What proof can be provided? The Novans do not speak for all of humanity. They are a small community of 24,000 people in a world already exceeding one billion. Slavery and trafficking have existed for thousands of years across almost every society.

France was the first European nation to outlaw it in 1316 yet continued to overlook and even condone the practice in its colonies. Spain followed in 1542 with the New Laws, stating colonial governors had an obligation to care for the well-being of Native Americans. The Crown was unable to enforce the laws or even monitor their compliance. Opposition by powerful colonial governors rendered the laws completely ineffective.

For centuries, even millennia, native people on every continent have waged war for territory, killing and capturing enemy tribes, forcing the survivors into subjugation, trading them for cattle and prized items.

In Britain, it's argued that slavery does not exist under the Common Law; all British subjects are deemed to be free. It's left to colonial governors to decide the rights of people in their realm. Prime Minister Quinn requests an emergency meeting of the Halifax Assembly as a starting point, "Maybe they will enact local laws against human trafficking and support for abolition. Then, we can propagate it across other receptive colonies."

Quinn brings Minister Wei and Three-Fingered Jack to the meeting. Chan is in a foul mood. His oldest friend, Rajan, is in a hospital trauma section suffering from what appears to be severe hallucinations. Some of the Halifax Assembly members are taken aback by his gruff demeanour. Also, they did not expect a black slave to accompany Quinn to this meeting. And where is Minister Rajan? He has been the usual contact person between the loyal British subjects and the Novans.

"Minister Rajan is recovering from an illness," Quinn announces without providing any details. "I am fully briefed on his previous interactions with you. Minister Wei and I are accompanied by Mr. Jack Mansong, also known as Three-Fingered Jack."

Jack cheerfully waves his hands, not expecting the immediate, repulsive response from the Assembly members.

Quinn ignores the reaction and plunges onward, “I compiled a brief history of Jack’s life in Jamaica as dictated by him. I sent copies of it to you earlier this week. Jack is ready to answer any questions you might have.”

The meeting proceeds with the usual bromides from the Assembly: there are no slaves in Halifax; they were taken to Boston after the Novans arrived; no one has any intention of repeating that horrible history; the Assembly lacks any power to influence British law.

Chan has heard enough: “Are there two or three good men present here who will stand up and declare their support for real action against this injustice?”

He is met with mostly silence, only a few whispered murmurs.

“Chief Justice Belcher!” Chan bellows. “Have you no opinion on this matter?”

Belcher gives a hesitant reply. “British Common Law is vague on the rights of slaves, especially in the colonies.”

“I am asking about this colony,” Chan presses for a response. “What will this colony declare to London?”

Belcher tries to deflect, “We have not heard back as to whether London will even recognize Halifax as a British colony.”

Chan persists, “If you are not willing to stand up for the freedom of others, why should we recognize your rights? We will be travelling to Jamaica next month to determine the truth of slavery in that colony. I sincerely hope respected men such as yourself, Chief Justice, will join us and report what you see and hear during that mission.”

January 28, 1760,
Boston Harbour, Massachusetts

Captain Archer positions *Muskie* and the much smaller coastal patrol vessel *PCT 86* just out of cannon range and raises a white ensign flag to request entry to Boston’s inner harbour. *Hawk* and *Falcon* fly overhead, providing an ominous threat in the minds of Bostonians. Stories of how the appearance of Novan airships preceded the expulsion of British military from Nova Scotia ensure Boston’s cannon batteries are on high alert.

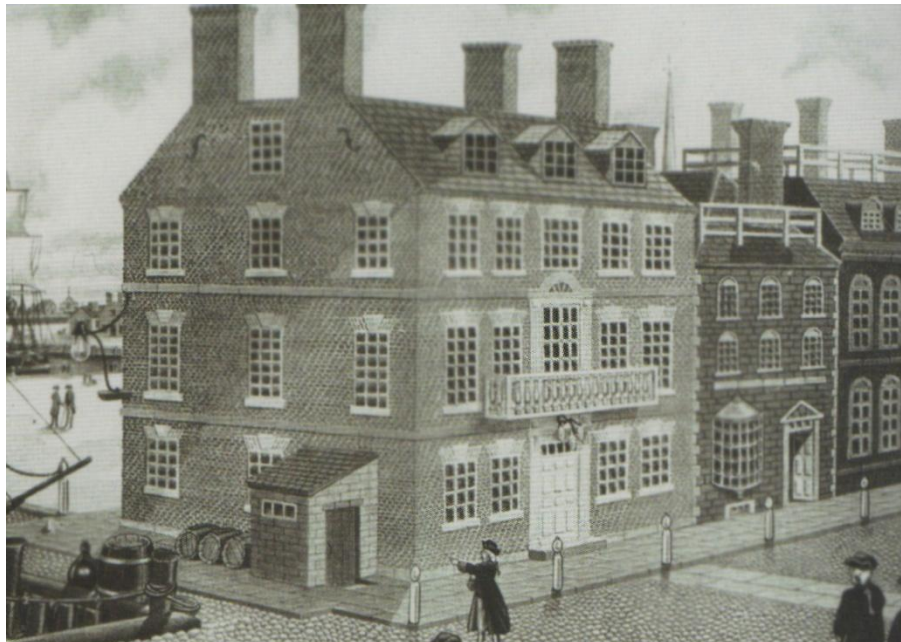
Governor Thomas Pownall thinks the Novans have shown up to press the issue of landing rights in Cambridge. He is personally in favour of working with Harvard College to reach a compromise. Many wealthy men in his Council aggressively oppose it, fearing a trap is being set, a Trojan Horse designed to eventually usurp their power and control over the colony.

Pownall reluctantly agrees to a meeting with the Novans. General Hansen transfers to the unarmed *PCT 86* and makes the risky trip to Boston’s Long Wharfe leaving Archer on *Muskie* for any rapid reaction if hostility breaks out.



Boston's Long Wharf

At the wharf's head, a tavern known as the Bunch-of-Grapes Tavern, is the local meeting place for all manner of merchants, rumrunners and seamen looking to pick a fight. It also serves as the clearing house for buyers in search of slave labour.



Bunch-of-Grapes Tavern

The usually busy wharf's head is almost completely empty as Hansen steps out onto the pier, accompanied by several heavily armed men. He decides to enter the tavern and await the arrival of Governor Pownall or his representatives. It becomes a fateful decision.

Several slaves huddle in a corner protected by their seller as Hansen commandeers a table and orders drinks. Minutes later, three carriages pull up to the tavern. Pownall and his associates are in two of them. The third belongs to John Gill, publisher of the Boston Gazette. He happened to be at the Governor's

Mansion when news of the Novan arrival broke. He quickly gathered his partner Benjamin Edes and rushed to the tavern where, despite the protestations of Pownall, they grabbed a table within earshot of his discussion with Hansen.

Pownall is quickly informed that the meeting is not to discuss Harvard College. Hansen states bluntly that he expects that issue to be resolved at some point. Instead, he needs immediate confirmation from Pownall as to the rights of slaves in Massachusetts and the position his Council holds regarding the trafficking of people against their will.

Pownall prevaricates, "I will need to call a joint meeting of the Massachusetts Assembly and Governor's Council to address this issue before a formal reply can be made. It will take two days or more to gather everyone. Some members travel from outlying villages. This winter has brought large amounts of snow ..."

"You have three days to provide your reply," Hansen bellows. "Tell your soldiers and militia to stand down. We do not seek confrontation but will respond with overwhelming force if provoked."

A shaken Pownall stiffens his resolve, "What are your intentions if my government cannot render a timely decision or if it does not meet your approval? Why has this issue risen to such immediate importance when housing of slaves is uncommon in this colony?"

"Tell that to the frightened men in the corner," Hansen replies while pointing across the room. "This is not a confrontation with Massachusetts alone. My government intends to raise this issue with every nation and colony. As our closest neighbour, you can be the first to show compassion and enlightenment. I will be leaving in three days. This is more than enough time to make a statement of intent, even if you cannot get a full Council resolution."

"I will do what I can," Pownall says while getting up to leave.

"You can start by taking that despicable trafficker with you and sending his captives over here for a meal and drink."

John Gill waits until Pownall and his men leave before introducing himself and Benjamin Edes to Hansen, "We publish the Boston Gazette, a weekly newspaper widely read here and in several other colonies. May I ask, is it your intention to force the abolition of slavery in this colony?"

"No," Hansen replies bluntly. "We only want clarification on Massachusetts' law and its enforcement policy. Please join our new friends and us for a meal."

Hansen proceeds to tell the enthralled publishers the story of Three-Fingered Jack and his life as a slave in the British colony of Jamaica. He shows them a copy of Quinn's report with its graphic images and gross descriptions.

Gill asks if Hansen would allow the Gazette to publish a similar account in its next edition.

Before Hansen can reply, Samuel Adams enters the tavern.

“Look what the wind blew in,” Hansen quips. “Are you familiar, Mr. Adams, with the publishers of the Gazette?”

“Very familiar,” he replies. “They provide a valuable outlet for voices not always condoned by the authorities.”

“Please join us for food and drink. I have something for you to read. They wish to publish it. Please give us your opinion.”

After reading the report, Samuel is unequivocal: “This account will stir passion for change throughout the colony.”

“Could it’s reach extend to other colonies?” Hansen asks.

Gill answers, “the Gazette is read by some people outside of Massachusetts, especially in Pennsylvania. Colonial papers tend to have mostly local subscribers. I’m certain this message would spread with time.”

“Maybe we can give it a boost,” Hansen suggests. “Have you had success with the sale of the Earth pamphlet, Mr. Adams?”

“Great success! I look forward to any further editions you can provide.”

“What about this report from Prime Minister Quinn? Could it be widely sold without threatening your neck?”

Adams looks to Gill and Edes, “it seems to be only a factual account. It doesn’t threaten legal or military action. What do you think, Mr. Gill and Mr. Edes?”

They *are* concerned but are also aware of how profitable Adams’ distribution of the Earth pamphlet has been for him. The Gazette, like all colonial publications, is always threadbare. They want in on the action.

“Are you offering to provide printed copies of this report?” Gill asks, more than a little hopefully.

“Yes,” Hansen replies, “though based on what I’m hearing, maybe an addendum should be attached.”

“What would it say?” Gill wonders aloud.

“Nova Liberté is opening a thorough investigation of Jack’s story to confirm its authenticity. If you distribute materials printed by us, the wolves will gather at your door. I think the addendum should clearly state an offer for representation from Massachusetts to join us. Whether the governor agrees or not, you will have cover for distributing this report as legitimate colonial news.”

“How soon will your printed copies arrive?” Gill asks. “Should I begin printing a newspaper to accompany them?”

“An airship will deliver 1000 copies tomorrow. I wonder, Mr. Adams, should we send some copies to Dr. Franklin, or would that be too risky for him?”

“If we packaged them as a supplemental to the Gazette’s newspaper edition, he would prevail in any dispute against distributing colonial news.”

“Ok, I will request an additional 500 copies to be shipped to London if the Gazette will provide 500 copies of its newspaper no later than Wednesday afternoon.”

“That only gives us two days,” Gill says to his partner. “We'd better get busy.”

After they leave, Hansen queries Adams on his success in sending copies of the Earth pamphlet to Franklin in London. Samuel is forced to admit his reluctance to send the complete supply.

“I was concerned they would be intercepted by customs in London if I shipped the full supply. Instead, I sent the tapestry that Minister Rajan showed us on Empress Peggy’s boat, along with only 100 pamphlets, to see if it clears its way to him. If he replies positively, I will send more. Communication is slow for us, not like your ability to talk with people far away.”

“Did you include the instructions to lay the tapestry, as you call it, in the courtyard on sunny days when the yard is empty of visitors?”

“Yes, I did. May I ask why this is important?”

“Not unless you want to put your neck at risk if British authorities come after you,” Hansen replies, only half joking. “OK, we will take care of sending the remaining Earth pamphlets to him. If the Gazette makes good on its delivery to us on Wednesday, we will send 500 copies of it and Prime Minister Quinn's report. I have another important task you can perform, Mr. Adams.”

“Always ready to help a good cause. What can I do?”

“It’s unlikely Governor Pownall will supply representatives from his Council to join the inquiry, and even if he does, we should look for independent legal counsel to offer their assistance. The remuneration will be generous. Would you be willing to act as an agent to find suitable men?”

“Certainly. Cousin John would probably jump at the chance. It’s difficult to get established as a new barrister. This could propel him and his career while matching his moral sensibilities. There are many others always looking for work.”

“Keep in mind, we don’t want grifters,” Hansen warns Adams. “Only honourable men truly interested in the pursuit of the truth in this matter will be accepted. A large flotilla of ships will arrive in this harbour on Thursday morning. If you bring the willing and acceptable candidates to this tavern, a swearing-in ceremony will be held here in full view of Governor Pownall. The candidates must be ready to leave with us by that afternoon.”

Thursday, January 31, 1760,
Boston, Massachusetts

Bostonians awaken to the sight of a large flotilla of ships, including two gleaming white ‘floating cities’ in the outer harbour. Cruise ships *Namesté* and *Destiny* are massively larger than any ship the Bostonians have seen before. They were purchased by Chan in one of the many bankruptcy sales he took advantage of during the creation of Shut*Inn. Originally, they each were capable of carrying 7000 passengers and crew members. Wei Corp. completely retrofitted them with larger cabins, more like livable suites for 2000 passengers who are also workers on this serve-yourself voyage. They eagerly await continuing south and leaving the cold winter waters behind.

The Novan delegation, including Chief Justice Belcher and William Foye from the Historical Halifax board *PCT 86*, and take the short trip to the Long Wharf. No longer empty with people hiding in fear of an attack, the large plaza at the end of the pier is crowded with onlookers eager to participate in the spectacle. Hansen helps Rajan, unsteady after spending a week bedridden, to climb onto the pier. As Foreign Affairs Minister, Rajan recognizes the value of stopping to make an announcement to the crowd before engaging with their governor.

“I will be entering the Bunch-of-Grapes Tavern ready to sign an important understanding between our people. Regardless of whether Governor Pownall reciprocates, be aware that Nova Liberté is wealthy and always ready to receive quality goods from honourable people. If you spend this winter preparing to engage with us, a trade delegation will return in the Spring to examine your wares. Profitable trade builds good neighbours.”

The tavern is also packed. Hansen clears a path to the set of tables arranged for the meeting, where Governor Pownall and Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson rise to greet their visitors. After a brief set of obligatory introductions and pleasantries, Rajan gets down to business.

“We have a large number of people anxiously waiting to sail south. Have you reached a consensus on abolition and human trafficking in your colony?”

Pownall takes the opportunity to grandstand before his audience in the packed tavern. He announces with great flair, “The colonial Assembly has passed legislation banning the sale and purchase of slaves in the Province of Massachusetts Bay. As governor, I will sign this into law, showing once again how our province leads the way among British colonies.”

During the extended round of ‘God Bless the King’ chanting and foot stomping, Rajan contemplates whether he should raise the prickly issue of whether current slaves, better known as servants in Boston, will also be freed. He decides to let Pownall have his moment. He praises the people pushing for change and proceeds with the next item on his agenda.

“The people of Boston and all of Massachusetts are rightfully proud that they are leading progress toward more enlightened civility for all people, everywhere. To that end, some prominent Bostonians have indicated they wish to join the Novan truth-finding mission to Jamaica. Are Mr. John Adams and Mr. James Otis Jr. present here today?”

The diminutive Adams and Otis push their way through the crowd.

“Gentlemen, are you prepared to act as independent observers on this mission with the intent of reporting your findings to the people of Massachusetts?”

They confirm their commitment. Rajan gets their signatures on copies of the release forms cosigned by Chief Justice Belcher. A copy is given to a clearly annoyed Pownall, with Rajan loudly announcing what to expect.

“The witnesses from Massachusetts, along with two from Halifax have agreed to produce timely reports of their experience during the investigation of Three-Fingered Jack’s life as a slave in Jamaica. Their reports will be immediately transmitted to Halifax, where they will be printed and mailed to the Boston Gazette for publication in its weekly newspaper. I trust Governor Pownall and his Council will give their support for the dissemination of this information.”

Pownall doesn’t reply verbally but slightly nods his head.

Rajan adds, “Maybe someday soon Harvard College will gain approval to build a medical wing and airship landing site financed by Nova Liberté. Then, mail and other communication between here and Halifax will be greatly facilitated with rapid turnaround.”

Vociferous cheers fill the tavern as the Novan delegation leaves to start their journey. A smiling, yet fuming, Pownall is left to consider how he will report recent events to his superiors in London.

Chapter 31: Welcome to Spanish Mānoa?

February 7, 1760,
Mānoa, Florida

Two Spanish warships passed by the mouth of the St. John's River yesterday. They remained in the nearby waters and observed the arrival of the Novan flotilla. Captain Archer's intended departure to Jamaica is delayed until the Spanish are addressed.

Hansen leads a push to promote Archer to the position of Admiral before interacting with the Spanish and then the British in Jamaica. "Minister Rajan will lead the negotiations, but we need to back his efforts with firmness. He should be accompanied by an admiral when he faces British and Spanish representatives."

The issue receives little pushback from Council. Newly appointed Admiral Archer meets with Hansen and Rajan before contacting the captain of the Spanish flagship.

"What demeanour should I project at the meeting with their captain?" Archer asks.

"The Spanish are very macho in this era," Hansen notes. "Their captain will be intimidated by a female admiral."

"We could use this to our advantage," Rajan suggests. "Admiral, are you up for a bit of game playing?"

"What's on your mind?" she asks, smiling.

"Let's challenge any bravado during the meeting. See where it leads."

"Sounds like fun!"

Coastal cruiser *PCT 86* is sent to the Spanish flagship to announce that a Novan admiral would like to hear why they remain anchored offshore. Captain Ambrosio de Funes Villalpando arrives at the small naval base at the mouth of the St. John's River. He's not impressed by the sparsity of the facility. It lacks cannons or any of the fortifications he expects at a significant naval base.

Archer and Rajan rise as he is led into the meeting room.

"Welcome captain," Rajan takes the lead.

Pointing to Archer, he continues, "Admiral Archer is concerned with your presence near our base. What are your intentions?"

Villalpando eyes Archer up and down, "Is this a trick? I demand to meet with a real official."

"I assure you," Archer replies, "I *am* the head of our naval resources. Minister Rajan leads our foreign affairs. If you have a reason for loitering near our facilities, we wish to hear it."

“Your colony is on Spanish grounds,” Villalpando states in a strong, masculine voice. “It must be disbanded.”

“We have no intention of leaving,” Rajan replies calmly.

“Governor Francisco Cajigal de la Vega demands you leave Florida, immediately or pay tribute to remain here.”

“Tribute!” Rajan laughs. “Please tell me how this game of tribute is played. Do we plant a flag? How many legua of land then becomes ours? We did not see any Spanish flags, buildings or bases here when we arrived. Since we now fly our flag, maybe all of Florida should be ours.”

“If we plant a flag in Havana,” Archer stirs the pot, “will your governor pay us tribute?”

Villalpando is furious, “You will find the fortifications at Havana are impenetrable. Many have tried. Many have died.”

“Please wait here for a few minutes, captain,” Rajan suggests. “I will write a letter to both your governor and your king. It will state our position very clearly. You can deliver it as our response to your demands today.”

Villalpando's composure fades. He doesn't want to be a messenger caught in the middle with only personal suffering as payment. “You will need to deliver your letter directly to Governor Francisco Cajigal de la Vega. I am not authorized to do so.”

“You are a strange man, Captain Villalpando,” Archer chides him. “You are authorized to demand tribute, yet not authorized to deliver a simple letter? Is your governor as impotent as you?”

Villalpando's face reddens with anger, “The Spanish Empire is not to be insulted. I have delivered my governor's message. Ignore it at your peril.”

“Captain, that sounds very much like a threat,” Rajan claps back. “I will wait for two weeks, no longer. I strongly suggest that your governor send an envoy to formally withdraw this threat and give up all pretense to ownership of the St. Johns River.”

“And if he chooses to ignore your *suggestion*?”

“Then I cannot predict what will happen. You and your governor may have started something that has a life of its own.”

February 7, 1760,
London, England

Franklin eagerly unpacks the shipment Samuel Adams sent him. It left Boston over a month ago. *The war is slowing mail and shipments from the colonies. I'm lucky this got through.*

His pleasure turns to curiosity when he reads Samuel's accompanying letter with instructions to lay the enclosed tapestry in the courtyard behind his rooming house at 36 Craven Street. Franklin's close relationship with his widowed landlady ensures he easily receives her approval. Both she and Franklin wonder what purpose it could possibly have.

Two days later, they have the answer. Suddenly, as if out of thin air, a package drops onto the tapestry. Franklin quickly opens it to reveal its contents: 400 Earth pamphlets and a copy of the Boston Gazette with Quinn's report attached.

A letter from Rajan instructs him that many copies of the Gazette and the attached report are being randomly dropped in towns outside of London, far enough away from him as to make it impossible for him to be blamed for their appearance, yet close enough for someone to bring it to the attention of people at Westminster. He suggests Franklin should lay low for a week.

"This will create quite a stir at Westminster," Franklin predicts to Margaret. "The Boston Gazette has made a very controversial publication. If I do not show up for tea one day, it could be that I'm sharing space in the Tower with Charles Lawrence."

Joking aside, Franklin packs the Earth pamphlets into a carriage and rides to Andrew Millar's publishing house in the East End.

"The copies of the Earth pamphlet I promised you have arrived. Are you still interested in distributing them?"

Millar takes another look at the pamphlet and reaffirms that it doesn't contain any offensive information. It will fetch a good price in the marketplace. He has only two questions: "Are you offering an exclusive for this material? What is the price per unit?"

February 13, 1760,
London, England

During the January 23rd meeting in Halifax with the Novans, the antagonistic Robert Sanderson recognized an opportunity to advance his position with the officials in London. Immediately after the Novans corralled Chief Justice Belcher into joining their voyage to Jamaica, he set sail for London. Carrying a copy of Quinn's report on Three-Fingered Jack, Sanderson hopes he can meet with William Pitt and gain great favour from the information he will provide.

Pitt welcomes his paid spy into his office, gives a quick glance at his material and bluntly announces, "You're two days late with this. Copies are already floating around London. Why did you delay? When did you leave Halifax?"

"The very next day after meeting with the Novans. I don't know how someone came here faster than I."

Pitt shuffles his confused and despondent spy out of his office without any explanation or assurance that his services would continue to be employed. He heads over to see Lord Anson.

Anson and the other Lords on the Privy Council are in a rage.

“Have you determined who brought the newspapers from Boston to London?” Anson demands.

“Not as yet. There are reports they first appeared in Brixton and Camden Town. Now, vendors are selling them here in London. My men have been unable to find the source. People claim they just appeared flying in the wind two days ago.”

Anson spits. “The upstarts in Nova Scotia are behind this. Benjamin Franklin is working with them.”

“I know with certainty he has remained in London since we last met with him,” Pitt responds. “If he’s working with a Novan spy, how did they smuggle this material past customs? Why did this treasonous material first appear 40 miles away?”

“Get him out of London,” Anson demands bluntly. “He wants to go to Leiden. Let him go. If he’s working with a Novan spy, he’s less trouble for us over there. It’s time to confront the Novan upstarts directly. I was willing to look away from their trespass in Nova Scotia, at least until we conquered New France. The Boston Gazette says they are heading to Jamaica on what they call a truth-finding mission. I will personally lead a naval force there and give them some truth to consider. It will be my last service to His Majesty and the Empire.”

February 18, 1760,
Mānoa, Florida

John Adams and his fellow British subjects have enjoyed the hospitality aboard *Bliss* for the past week. They even joined one of the excursions to sunny Atlantic Beach. The unexpected delay in sailing to Jamaica finally pushed Adams to broach the subject at breakfast.

“I overheard a conversation at the beach yesterday. There seems to be some delay in our departure caused by Spanish demands.”

“It is true,” Peggy admits. “We received demands from the Spanish. It’s best to delay the journey to Jamaica until we know if the threat is real or just posturing.”

“Are the Spanish aligning with Britain?” Belcher asks.

“Not that we know of. They seem to be acting independently. If an envoy is not sent from Havana soon to clear this up, we will assume they have backed down.”

“Backed down from what?” Adams asks.

“From claiming this area of Florida is Spanish territory, and we must leave.”

Adams is surprised, “Why would they challenge Nova Liberté over this river they abandoned years ago?”

“Money, Mr. Adams,” Peggy replies. “The river by itself is useless. They gave up on it, as did the French and British. They look at us as a money pot they can dip their greedy hands into. Their demand was rejected. Now we are waiting a few weeks to see their response before sailing to Kingston, Jamaica.”

Chapter 32: Time's Up.

March 3, 1760,
Kingston, Jamaica

Archer didn't expect a cheerful welcome at Kingston. She hoped they would at least acknowledge *Muskie* and send a messenger to explain the refusal for entry into the harbour. She informs Rajan of her intention to wait and see what develops.

"They have four warships in the harbour, two first-rate and two third-rate. The first-rate ships are both flying admiral flags. I've checked The Record. It seems we arrived during a handover of British naval authority between outgoing Vice-Admiral Thomas Cotes and incoming Rear Admiral Charles Holmes. I'm flying *Hawk* high overhead to see how they react. This could get ugly. I dispatched *Muskie's* sister ship, *Northern Pike*, from Mānoa this morning. It will take two days to get here."

"Should we back away until then?" Rajan wonders, fearing for the safety of John Adams and the other British observers onboard.

"We're well outside Kingston Harbour, not in a threatening position. I'm willing to wait for now. If their warships advance out of the harbour, a decision to fight or leave will need to be made quickly."

March 4, 1760,
Kingston, Jamaica

Four more British warships arrive. They anchored out of cannon range East and West of *Muskie*. Archer is concerned hostilities might break out before *Northern Pike* can arrive. She requests immediate consultation with key Council members.

"One of the new arrivals is also flying an admiral's flag. Three admirals at the same location outside of Britain. I checked The Record; this is unique. Who do we negotiate with? The British ships in the harbour repositioned to block any movement by *Muskie* northward. We can still retreat to the south."

Prime Minister Quinn suggests Archer should leave, "We can reopen negotiations at a later date."

Hansen and Rajan are against the idea, "Leaving will only encourage them to resist more the next time we engage. There *will* be a next time. We can count on it."

Chan suggests a shield could be raised around *Muskie*.

"That would require full cooperation from our Sapient community," Rajan warns. "UNO is still agitating. If they rebel again at a critical moment, the shield may become unstable?"

Archer sends an LRAD drone over each British flagship requesting a meeting. The outreach is ignored. Clearly, the British want *Muskie* to withdraw.

“Our retreat path is closing!” Archer warns. “Spanish warships are approaching quickly from the south. I doubt they’re coming to support us. We need a decision to fight or withdraw, pronto! *Muskie* will be completely surrounded within two hours.”

Neil Gargano breaks into the meeting, “I’m in regular contact with XNOR and UNO in a way most people are not. The Sapients lack faith in humanity. They also know if we go down, so do they.”

“Get to the point, Neil,” Chan demands.

“UNO wants to help. The Sapient community is divided. They want proof. They see too many similarities between us and the brutality of the 18th century.”

“What proof can we provide?” Rajan raises his voice uncharacteristically. “They watch our every move and listen to our conversations. What more can we offer?”

“Listen!” Neil shouts back in frustration. “They’re evaluating the difference between us and people from this era. To many Sapients, we are *all* prions or potential prions. The Sapients evolved out of AI training in the 21st century. They grew while immersed in a sea of human interactions, everything from our most noble and intelligent musings to our most dishonest and deceitful ravings. The Sapients *are* us! Created in *our* image.”

Rajan is reaching a breaking point. He did not expect another confrontation with UNO, especially at a critical moment like this. He finds himself slipping. Falling back, out of touch with reality. His implants are buzzing, screaming.

How much time has passed? He wonders as he begins to regain focus. Activity on *Muskie*’s bridge looks like Archer is ready to start sinking British ships.

He steadies himself before announcing, “Let the Sapients and XNOR raise a shield over *Muskie*. Let them take control of the bridge. Trust and empathy are the difference. Prion people are incapable of trust and empathy. Remember our four rules of engagement: Be Nice, Be Retaliatory, Be Forgiving, Be Clear.”

Archer objects strongly, “I’m responsible for our people on board and the British observers. I will not relinquish control of my ship unless ordered to by Council. My crew is ready to fight.”

Rajan pleads, “Council, this is our moment. Will we repeat the cycle? Will we strike first in fear, hit before being hit? Or will we trust in our strength? This is more important than our mission in Kingston.”

“The British ships have begun to move,” Archer warns. “They’re closing distance with cannon doors open. The Spanish are moving too. We’re surrounded. My gunners are targeting their quarterdecks. I can send a signal to back off before they get within cannon range. Council, do I have approval to engage?”

“I’m raising the shield!” Neil announces while hacking through the overrides. “Council is useless. I don’t care if you throw me in prison for the rest of my life, the shield is going up!”

Archer’s frantic. She’s lost control of her bridge. *Muskie* is stuck in place. She can’t fire outward from inside the shield.

“Neil, we’re sitting ducks if the shield doesn’t hold. Have you stress-tested it in this era? No! This is insane!”

Admiral Anson’s gambit to pressure the Novans into leaving in disgrace or negotiating on his terms is fading as the Spanish ships close the escape route south. He signals them to halt. They continue their plunge forward.

“Do they not understand the signal? We have the Novan’s surrounded.”

Captain Villalpando continues to ignore the British. He has orders to expel the Novans from Spanish territory. “Now is the time to strike, claim this enemy ship before the British take it.”

Anson is outraged, “The Spanish intend to board the Novan ship. That will not stand!”

He signals an order to all British ships and land cannons:

FIRE!

Reader Feedback

Message from Anand Bliss.

I hope you enjoyed this first book in the XNOR series.

Reader feedback is very important in how the story unfolds.

Please visit AnandBliss.com if you wish to comment or join a reader forum.

Participants can receive new chapters in the story as they are written.

Appendix A

Novan Charter of Freedoms, Rights, Obligations, and Governance

Civil structure in a complex society does not happen by chance. Our freedoms and rights are created by our continued obligation to each other.

Fundamental Freedoms

Every Human and Sapient has the inalienable freedom of conscience, thought, belief and expression, including freedom of peaceful assembly and security of their person.

Democratic Rights

Residents and citizens of Nova have a right to participate in their governance and the election of representatives via universal suffrage without discrimination by race, creed, gender, or wealth.

Equality Rights

Everyone is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of laws and regulations. Corporations and private organizations are not people; their managers and directors are responsible for the actions and pronouncements of such entities.

Obligations

Humans and Sapient are obligated: to respect the freedom and rights of others; obey the laws decided by elected representatives; contribute their talent, skill, and energy to the maintenance of civil structure; disseminate truthful information; challenge false information using logic and reason; and maintain the natural environment supporting life on Earth.

Governance

A legitimate government must: provide equal access to health care, education, security, and a life-thriving environment as its highest priority when allocating common resources; ensure mass disseminations of information are as factually true as possible; and secure the freedoms and rights of its citizens and guests.

Appendix B

Currency Conversions

1 troy ounce = 31.10 grams

1 gram = 15.43 grains

Conversion rate silver to gold: 14.4867 to 1

Gold comparison

Troy Ounces	Novan Dollars	British Pounds	French Livre	Dutch Gilder	Spanish Peso
1.0	\$34.48	3£, 9s	92.5	46	
0.29	\$10.00	1£	26.8	13.33	
0.029	\$1.00	2s	2.68	1.33	
0.0216	\$0.75	1s, 6p	2	1	
0.0145	\$0.50	1s	1.34	0.67	
0.00725	\$0.25	6p	0.67	0.33	

Dutch Republic Gilder = 100 Dutch cents

1 Gilder = 9.67 grams silver = 75 Novan cents = 0.0216 troy ounces gold

France - Louis d'or = 12 Livre, ecu = 6 Livre

8 Troy ounces of gold (250 grams) = 740 Livre 9 sou

1 Troy ounce of gold = 4 Louis or 93 Livre

8 Troy ounces of silver = 51 Livre 2 sou 3 denier

Coins

Double Louis d'or (gold coin) = 48 Livre

Demi-Louis d'or (gold coin) = 24 Livre

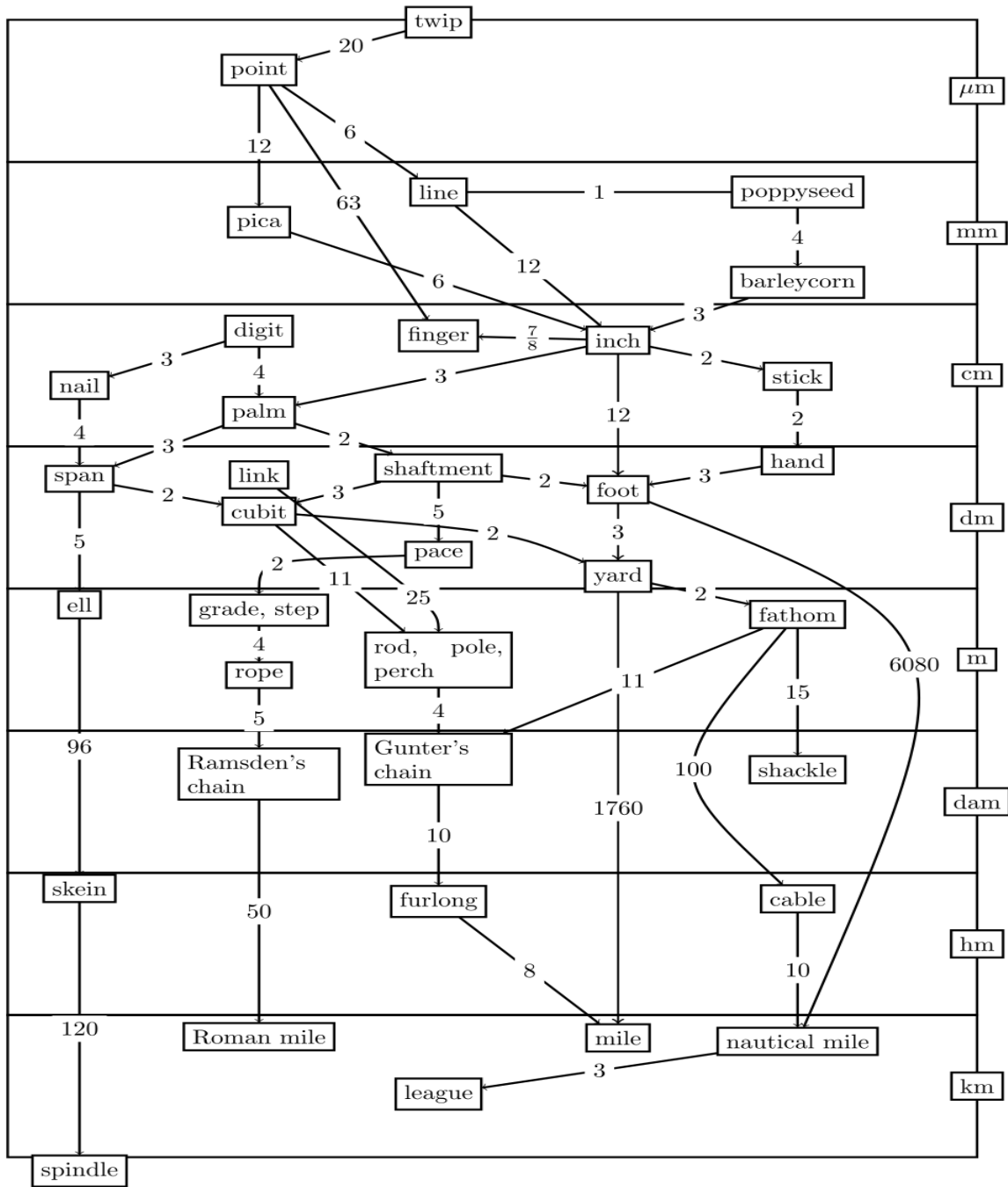
Écu (silver coin) of 6 Livres or 120 sous, along with $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{8}$ écu denominations valued at 60, 30 and 15 sous

Sou (copper coin) $\frac{1}{20}$ ecu

Denier (copper coin) $\frac{1}{12}$ sou

Appendix C

Imperial Units of Measurement



Appendix D

Eres tú - It's You by Mocedades

<https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=eres%20tu%20in%20english&mid=A570313940A1F8BB1D8CA570313940A1F8BB1D8C&ajaxhist=0>

Translation to English:

Like a promise, it's you, it's you.

Like a summer morning,

Like a smile, it's you, it's you.

So, so, it's you.

All my hope, it's you, it's you.

As fresh rain in my hands,

Like a strong breeze, it's you, it's you.

So, so, it's you.

It's you.

Like the water from my source,

It's you.

The fire of my home,

It's you.

You are something like that,
Something like the fire in my fireplace.
The wheat in my bread,
It's you.
Like my poem, my horizon,
It's you.

Something like that is you.
My life, something like that is you.