The day war was declared, a rain of telephones fell clattering to the cobblestones from the skies above Novy Petrograd. Some of them had half melted in the heat of re-entry; others pinged and ticked, cooling rapidly in the postdawn chill. An inquisitive pigeon hopped close, head cocked to one side; it pecked at the shiny case of one such device, then fluttered away in alarm when it beeped. A tinny voice spoke: “Hello? Will you entertain us?”

The Festival had come to Rochard’s World.

A skinny street urchin was one of the first victims of the assault on the economic integrity of the New Republic’s youngest colony world. Rudi—nobody knew his patronymic, or indeed his father—spotted one of the phones lying in the gutter of a filthy alleyway as he went about his daily work, a malodorous sack wrapped around his skinny shoulders like a soldier’s bedroll. The telephone lay on the chipped stones, gleaming like polished gunmetal: he glanced around furtively before picking it up, in case the gentleman who must have dropped it was still nearby. When it chirped he nearly dropped it out of fear: a machine! Machines were upper-class and forbidden, guarded by the grim faces and gray uniforms of authority. Nevertheless, if he brought it home to Uncle Schmuel, there might be good eating: better than he could buy with the proceeds of the day’s sackful of dog turds for the tannery. He turned it over in his hands, wondering how to shut it up, and a tinny voice spoke: “Hello? Will you entertain us?”

Rudi nearly dropped the phone and ran, but curiosity held him back for a moment: “Why?”

“Entertain us and we will give you anything you want.”

Rudi’s eyes widened. The metal wafer gleamed with promise between his cupped hands. He remembered the fairy stories his eldest sister used to tell before the coughing sickness took her, tales of magic lamps and magicians and djinn that he was sure Father Borozovski would condemn as infidel nonsense; and his need for escape from the dull brutality of everyday life did battle with his natural pessimism—the pessimism of barely more than a decade of backbreaking labor. Realism won. What he said was not, I want a magic flying carpet and a purse full of gold roubles or I want to be Prince Mikhail in his royal palace, but, “Can you feed my family?”

“Yes. Entertain us, and we will feed your family.”

Rudi racked his brains, having no idea how to go about this exotic task; then he blinked. It was obvious! He held the phone to his mouth, and whispered, “Do you want me to tell you a story?”

By the end of that day, when the manna had begun to fall from orbit and men’s dreams were coming to life like strange vines blooming after rain in the desert, Rudi and his family—sick mother, drunken uncle, and seven siblings—were no longer part of the political economy of the New Republic.

War had been declared.
Deep in the outer reaches of the star system, the Festival’s constructor fleet created structure out of dead mass. The Festival fleet traveled light, packed down into migratory starwisps that disdained the scurrying FTL of merely human clades. When it arrived, fusion pods burned bright as insectile A-life spawned furiously in the frigid depths of the outer system. Once the habitats were complete and moved into orbit around the destination planet, the Festival travelers would emerge from aestivation, ready to trade and listen.

Rochard’s World was a backwater colony of the New Republic, itself not exactly the most forward-looking of post-Diaspora human civilizations. With a limited industrial base to attract trade—limited by statute, as well as by ability—few eyes scanned the heavens for the telltale signatures of visiting ships. Only the spaceport, balanced in ground-synchronous orbit, kept a watch, and that was focused on the inner-system ecliptic. The Festival fleet had dismantled a gas giant moon and three comets, begun work on a second moon, and was preparing to rain telephones from orbit before the Imperial Traffic Control Bureau noticed that anything was amiss.

Moreover, there was considerable confusion at first. The New Republic was, if not part of the core worlds, not far out of it; whereas the Festival’s origin lay far outside the light cone of the New Republic’s origin, more than a thousand light-years from old anarchist Earth. Although they shared a common ancestry, the New Republic and the Festival had diverged for so many centuries that everything—from their communications protocols to their political economies, by way of their genome—was different. So it was that the Festival orbiters noticed (and ignored) the slow, monochromatic witterings of Imperial Traffic Control. More inexplicably, it did not occur to anybody in the Ducal palace to actually pick up one of the half-melted telephones littering their countryside, and ask, “Who are you and what do you want?” But perhaps this was not so surprising; because by midafternoon Novy Petrograd was in a state of barely controlled civil insurrection.

Burya Rubenstein, the radical journalist, democratic agitator, and sometime political prisoner (living in internal exile on the outskirts of the city, forbidden to return to the father planet—to say nothing of his mistress and sons—for at least another decade) prodded at the silvery artifact on his desk with a finger stained black from the leaky barrel of his pen. “You say these have been falling everywhere?” he stated, ominously quietly.

Marcus Wolff nodded. “All over town. Misha wired me from the back country to say it’s happening there, too. The Duke’s men are out in force with brooms and sacks, picking them up, but there are too many for them. Other things, too."

“Other things.” It wasn’t phrased as a question, but Burya’s raised eyebrow made his meaning clear.

“Things falling from the skies—and not the usual rain of frogs!” Oleg Timoshevski bounced up and down excitedly, nearly upsetting one of the typecases that sat on the kitchen table beside him, part of the unlicensed printing press that Rubenstein has established on peril of another decade’s internal exile.
“The things—like a telephone, I think, at least they talk back when you ask them something—all say the
same thing; entertain us, educate us, we will give you anything you want in return! And they do! I saw a
bicycle fall from the skies with my own eyes! And all because Georgi Pavlovich said he wanted one, and
told the machine the story of Roland while he waited.”

“I find this hard to believe. Perhaps we should put it to the test?” Burya grinned wolfishly, in a way that
reminded Marcus of the old days, when Burya had a fire in his belly, a revolver in his hand, and the ear
of ten thousand workers of the Rail-yard Engineering Union during the abortive October Uprising
twelve years earlier. “Certainly if our mysterious benefactors are happy to trade bicycles for old stories,
I wonder what they might be willing to exchange for a general theory of postindustrial political
economy?”

“Better dine with the devil with a long, long spoon,” warned Marcus.

“Oh, never fear; all I want to do is ask some questions.” Rubenstein picked up the telephone and turned

“Yes.” The voice was faint, oddly accentless, and slightly musical.

“Good. Who are you, where are you from, and what do you want?”

“We are Festival.” The three dissidents leaned closer, almost bumping heads over the telephone. “We
have traveled many two-hundred-and-fifty-sixes of light-years, visiting many sixteens of inhabited
planets. We are seekers of information. We trade.”

“You trade?” Burya glanced up, a trifle disappointed; interstellar capitalist entrepreneurs were not what
he had been hoping for.

“We give you anything. You give us something. Anything we don’t already know: art, mathematics,
comedy, literature, biography, religion, genes, designs. What do you want to give us?”

“When you say you give us anything, what do you mean? Immortal youth? Freedom?” A faint note of
sarcasm hovered on his words, but Festival showed no sign of noticing.

“Abstracts are difficult. Information exchange difficult, too—low bandwidth here, no access. But we can
make any structures you want, drop them from orbit. You want new house? Horseless carriage that flies
and swims as well? Clothing? We make.”

Timoshevski gaped. “You have a *Cornucopia* machine?” he demanded breathlessly. Burya bit his
tongue; an interruption it might be, but a perfectly understandable one.

“Yes.”
“Will you give us one? Along with instructions for using it and a colony design library?” asked Burya, his pulse pounding.

“Maybe. What will you give us?”

“Mmm. How about a post-Marxist theory of post-technological political economy, and a proof that the dictatorship of the hereditary peerage can only be maintained by the systematic oppression and exploitation of the workers and engineers, and cannot survive once the people acquire the self-replicating means of production?”

There was a pause, and Timoshevski exhaled furiously. Just as he was about to speak, the telephone made an odd bell-like noise: “That will be sufficient. You will deliver the theory to this node. Arrangements to clone a replicator and library are now under way. Query: ability to deliver postulated proof of validity of theory?”

Burya grinned. “Does your replicator contain schemata for replicating itself? And does it contain schemata for producing direct fusion weapons, military aircraft, and guns?”

“Yes and yes to all subqueries. Query: ability to deliver postulated proof of validity of theory?”

Timoshevski was punching the air and bouncing around the office. Even the normally phlegmatic Wolff was grinning like a maniac. “Just give the workers the means of production, and we’ll prove the theory,” said Rubenstein. “We need to talk in private. Back in an hour, with the texts you requested.” He pressed the OFF switch on the telephone. “Yes!”

After a minute, Timoshevski calmed down a bit. Rubenstein waited indulgently; truth be told, he felt the same way himself. But it was his duty as leader of the movement—or at least the nearest thing they had to a statesman, serving his involuntary internal exile out on this flea-pit of a backwater—to think ahead. And a lot of thinking needed to be done, because shortly heads would be brought into contact with paving stones in large numbers: the Festival, whoever and whatever it was, seemed unaware that they had offered to trade for a parcel of paper the key to the jail in which tens of millions of serfs had been confined for centuries by their aristocratic owners. All in the name of stability and tradition.

“Friends,” he said, voice shaking with emotion, “let us hope that this is not just a cruel hoax. For if it is not, we can at last lay to rest the cruel specter that has haunted the New Republic since its inception. I’d been hoping for assistance along these lines from a—source, but this is far better if it is true. Marcus, fetch as many members of the committee as you can find. Oleg, I’m going to draft a poster; we need to run off five thousand copies immediately and get them distributed tonight before Politovsky thinks to pull his finger out and declare a state of emergency. Today, Rochard’s World stands on the brink of liberation. Tomorrow, the New Republic!”
The next morning, at dawn, troops from the Ducal palace guard and the garrison on Skull Hill, overlooking the old town, hanged six peasants and technicians in the market square. The execution was a warning, to accompany the Ducal decree: Treat with the Festival and you die. Someone, probably in the Curator’s Office, had realized the lethal danger the Festival posed to the regime and decided an example must be made. They were too late to stop the Democratic Revolutionary Party from plastering posters explaining just what the telephones were all over town, and pointing out that, in the words of the old proverb, “Give a man a fish, feed him for a day—teach him to fish, feed him for life.” More radical posters exhorting the workers to demand the means of constructing self-replicating tools rang a powerful chord in the collective psyche, for whatever the regime might have wished, folk memories lived on.

At lunchtime, four bank robbers held up the main post office in Plotsk, eighty kilometers to the north of the capital. The bank robbers carried exotic weapons, and when a police Zeppelin arrived over the scene it was shot to pieces. This was not an isolated incident. All over the planet, the police and state security apparat reported incidents of outrageous defiance, in many cases backed up with advanced weapons that had appeared as if from thin air. Meanwhile, strange, dome-like dwellings mushroomed on a thousand peasant farms in the outback, as palatially equipped and comfortable as any Ducal residence.

Pinpricks of light blossomed overhead, and radios gave forth nothing but hissing static for hours afterward. Sometime later, the glowing trails of emergency re-entry capsules skidded across the sky a thousand kilometers south of Novy Petrograd. The Navy announced that evening, with deep regrets, the loss of the destroyer Sakhalin in a heroic attack on the enemy battle fleet besieging the colony. It had inflicted serious damage on the aggressors; nevertheless, reinforcements had been requested from the Imperial capital via Causal Channel, and the matter was being treated with the utmost gravity by His Imperial Majesty.

Spontaneous demonstrations by workers and soldiers marred the night, while armored cars were deployed to secure the bridges across the Hava River that separated the Ducal palace and the garrison from the city proper.

And most sinister of all, an impromptu fair began to grow in the open space of the Northern Parade Field—a fair where nobody worked, everything was free, and anything that anybody could possibly want (and a few things that nobody in their right mind would desire) could be obtained free for the asking.

On the third day of the incursion, His Excellency Duke Felix Politovsky, Governor of Rochard’s World, entered the Star Chamber to meet with his staff and, by way of an eye-wateringly expensive teleconference, to appeal for help from his Emperor.

Politovsky was a thick-set, white-haired man of some sixty-four years, unpreserved by contraband anti-aging medical treatments. It was said by some that he was lacking in imagination, and he had certainly not been appointed governor of a raw backwater dumping ground for troublemakers and second sons because of his overwhelming political acumen. However, despite his bull-headed disposition and lack of
insight, Felix Politovsky was deeply worried.

Men in uniform and the formal dress of his diplomatic staff stood to attention as he entered the richly paneled room and marched to the head of the conference table. “Gentlemen. Please be seated,” he grunted, dropping into the armchair that two servants unobtrusively held out for him. “Beck, have there been any developments overnight?”

Gerhard Von Beck, Citizen, head of the local office of the Curator’s Office, shook his head gloomily. “More riots on the south bank; they didn’t stay to fight when I sent a guard detachment. So far, morale in the barracks seems to be holding up. Molinsk is cut off; there have been no reports from that town for the past day, and a helicopter that was sent to look in on them never reported back. The DR’s are raising seven shades of merry hell around town, and so are the Radicals. I tried to have the usual suspects taken into custody, but they’ve declared an Extropian Soviet and refuse to cooperate. The worst elements are holed up in the Corn Exchange, two miles south of here, holding continuous committee meetings, and issuing proclamations and revolutionary communique on the hour, every hour. Encouraging people to traffic with the enemy.”

“Why haven’t you used troops?” rumbled Politovsky.

“They say they’ve got atomic weapons. If we move in—” He shrugged.

“Oh.” The Governor rubbed his walrus moustache lugubriously and sighed. “Commander Janaczeck. What news of the Navy?”

Janaczeck stood. A tall, worried-looking man in a naval officer’s dress uniform, he looked even more nervous than the otherwise controlled Von Beck. “There were two survival capsules from the wreck of the Sakhalin; both have now been recovered, and the survivors debriefed. It would appear that the Sakhalin approached one of the larger enemy intruders and demanded that they withdraw from low orbit immediately and yield to customs inspection. The intruder made no response, so Sakhalin fired across her path. What happened next is confused—none of the survivors were bridge officers, and their reports are contradictory—but it appears that there was an impact with some sort of foreign body, which then ate the destroyer.”

“Ate it?”

“Yes, sir.” Janaczeck gulped. “Forbidden technology.”

Politovsky turned pale. “Borman?”

“Yes, sir?” His adjutant sat up attentively.

“Obviously, this situation exceeds our ability to deal with it without extra resources. How much acausal
bandwidth does the Post Office have in hand for a televisor conference with the capital?”

“Um, ah, fifty minutes’ worth, sir. The next consignment of entangled qubits between here and New Prague is due to arrive by ramscoop in, ah, eighteen months. If I may make so bold, sir—”

“Speak.”

“Could we retain a minute of bandwidth in stock, for text-only messages? I realize that this is an emergency, but if we drain the current channel we will be out of touch with the capital until the next shipment is available. And, with all due respect to Commander Janaczeck, I’m not sure the Navy will be able to reliably run dispatch boats past the enemy.”

“Do it.” Politovsky sat up, stretching his shoulders. “One minute, mind. The rest available for a televisor conference with His Majesty, at his earliest convenience. You will set up the conference and notify me when it is ready. Oh, and while you’re about it, here.” He leaned forward and scribbled a hasty signature on a letter from his portfolio. “I enact this state of emergency and by the authority vested in me by God and His Imperial Majesty I decree that this constitutes a state of war with—who the devil are we at war with?”

Von Beck cleared his throat. “They seem to call themselves the Festival, sir. Unfortunately, we don’t appear to have any more information about them on file, and requests to the Curator’s Archives drew a blank.”

“Very well.” Borman passed Politovsky a note, and the Governor stood. “Gentlemen, please stand for His Imperial Majesty!”

They stood and, as one man, turned expectantly to face the screen on the far wall of the conference room.

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The Gathering Storm

“May I ask what I’m charged with?” asked Martin.

The sunshine filtering through the skylight high overhead skewered the stuffy office air with bars of silver: Martin watched dust motes dance like stars behind the Citizen’s bullet-shaped head. The only noises in the room were the scratching of his pen on heavy official vellum and the repetitive grinding of gears as his assistant rewound the clockwork drive mechanism on his desktop analytical engine. The room smelled of machine oil and stale fear.

“Am I being charged with anything?” Martin persisted.