

## **The Emperor of Gondwanaland** by Paul Di Filippo

\* \* \* \*

“Hey, Mutt! It’s playtime, let’s go!”

Mutt Spindler raised his gaze above the flatscreen monitor that dominated his desk. The screen displayed Pagemaker layouts for next month’s issue of *PharmaNotes*, a trade publication for the drug industry. Mutt had the cankerous misfortune to be assistant editor of *PharmaNotes*, a job he had held for the last three quietly miserable years.

In the entrance to his cubicle stood Gifford, Cody and Melba, three of Matt’s co-workers. Gifford sported a giant foam finger avowing his allegiance to whatever sports team was currently high in the standings of whatever season it chanced to be. Cody had a silver hip flask raised to her lips, imbibing a liquid that Mutt could be fairly certain did not issue from the Poland Springs cooler. Melba had already undone her formerly decorous shirt several buttons upward from the hem and knotted it, exposing a belly that reminded Mutt of a slab of Godiva chocolate.

Mutt pictured with facile vividness the events of the evening that would ensue, should he choose to accept Gifford’s invitation. His projections were based on numerous past such experiences. Heavy alcohol consumption and possible ingestion of illicit stimulants, followed by slurred, senseless conversation conducted at eardrum-piercing volume to overcome whatever jagged ambient noise was passing itself off as music these days. Some hypnagogic, sensory-impaired dancing with one strange woman or another, leading in all likelihood to a meaningless hookup, the details of which would be impossible to recall in the morning, resulting in hypochondriacal worries and vacillating commitments to get one kind of STD test or another. And of course the leftover brain damage and fraying of neurological wiring would insure that the demands of the office would be transformed from their usual simple hellishness to torture of an excruciating variety undreamed of by even, say, a team of Catholic school nuns and the unlamented Uday Hussein.

Gifford could sense his cautious friend wavering toward abstinence. “C’mon, Mutt! We’re gonna hit Slam dunk’s first, then Black Rainbow. And we’ll finish up at Captains Curvaceous.”

Mention of the last-named club, a strip joint where Mutt had once managed to drop over five hundred dollars of his tiny Christmas bonus while simultaneously acquiring a black eye and a chipped tooth, caused a shiver to surf his spine.

“Uh, thanks, guys, for thinking of me. But I just can’t swing it. If I don’t get this special ad section squared away by tonight, we’ll miss the printer’s deadlines.”

Cody pocketed her flask and grabbed Gifford’s arm. “Oh, leave the little

drudge alone, Giff. It's obvious he's so in love with his job. Haven't you seen his lip-prints on the screen?"

Mutt was hurt and insulted. Was it his fault that he had been promoted to assistant editor over Cody? He wanted to say something in his defense, but couldn't think of a comeback that wouldn't sound whiny. And then the window closed on any possible repartee.

Gifford unselfconsciously scratched his butt with his foam finger. "Okay, pal, maybe next time. Let's shake a tail, ladies."

Melba winked at Mutt as she walked away. "Gonna miss you, loverboy."

Then the trio was gone.

Mutt hung his head in his hands. Why had he ever slept with Melba? Sleeping with co-workers was insane. Yet he had done it. The affair was over now, but the awkward repercussions lingered. Another black mark on his karma.

Refocusing on the screen, Mutt tried hard to proof the text floating before him. "Epigenetix-brand sequencers guarantee faster throughput..." The words and pictures blurred into a jittery multicolored fog like a mosh pit full of amoebas. Was he crying? For Christ's sake, why the hell was he crying? Just because he had to hold down a suck-ass job he hated just to pay his grad-school loans, had no steady woman, hadn't been snow-boarding in two years, had put on five pounds since the summer, and experienced an undeniable yet shameful thrill when contemplating the purchase of a new *necktie*?

Mutt knuckled the moisture from his eyes and mentally kicked his own ass for being a big baby. This wasn't a bad life, and plenty of people had it worse. Time to pull up his socks and buckle down and all that other self-improvement shit.

But not right now. Right now, Mutt needed a break. He hadn't lied to Gifford and the others, he had to finish this job tonight. But he could take fifteen minutes to websurf his way to some amusing site that would lift his spirits.

And that was how Mutt discovered Gondwanaland.

In retrospect, after the passage of time had erased his computer's logs, the exact chain of links leading to Gondwanaland was hard to reconfigure. He had started looking for new recordings by his favorite group, Dead End Universe. That had led somehow to a history of pirate radio stations. And from there it was a short jump to micronations.

Fascinated, Mutt lost all track of time as he read about this concept that was totally new to him.

Micronations—also known as cybernations, fantasy countries or ephemeral states—were odd blends of real-world rebellious politics, virtual artsy-fartsy projects and elaborate spoofs. Essentially, a micronation was any assemblage of persons regarding themselves as a sovereign country, yet not recognized by international entities such as the United Nations. Sometimes micronations were associated with real physical territory. The Cocos Islands had once been ruled as a fiefdom by the Clunies-Ross family. Sarawak was once the province of the White Rajas, as the Brooke clan had styled themselves.

With the advent of the internet, the number of micronations had exploded. There were now dozens of imaginary online countries predicated on different philosophies, exemplifying scores of different governmental systems, each of them more or less seriously arguing that they were totally within their rights to issue passports, currency and stamps, and to designate ministers, nobility and bureaucratic minions.

Mutt had always enjoyed fantasy sports in college. Imaginary leagues, imaginary rosters, imaginary games—Something about being totally in charge of a small universe had appealed to him, as an antidote to his lack of control over the important factors and forces that batted his own life around. He had spent a lot of time playing Sims too. The concept of cybernations seemed like a logical extension of those pursuits, an appealing refuge from the harsh realities of career and relationships.

The site Mutt had ended up on was a gateway to a whole host of online countries. The Aerican Empire, the Kingdom of Talossa, the Global State of Waveland, the Kingdom of Redonda, Lizbekistan—

And Gondwanaland.

Memories of an introductory geoscience course came back to Mutt. Gondwanaland was the super-continent that had existed hundreds of millions of years ago, before splitting and drifting apart into the configuration of separate continental landforms familiar today.

Mutt clicked on the Gondwanaland button.

The page built itself rapidly on his screen. The animated image of a spinning globe dominated. Sure enough, the globe featured only a single huge continent, marked with interior divisions into states and featuring the weird names of cities.

Mutt was about to scan some of the text on the page when his eye fell on the blinking time readout in the corner of the screen.

Holy shit! Nine-thirty! He'd be here till midnight unless he busted his ass.

Reluctantly abandoning the Gondwanaland page and its impossible globe, Mutt returned to his work.

Which still sucked.

Maybe worse.

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The next day Mutt was almost as tired as if he had gone out with Gifford and the gang. But at least his head wasn't throbbing and his mouth didn't taste as if he had french-kissed a hyena. Proofing the advertorial section had taken until eleven-forty-five, and by the time he had ridden the subway home, eaten some leftover General Gao's chicken, watched Letterman's Top Ten and fallen asleep, it had been well into the small hours of the morning. When his alarm went off at seven-thirty, he had thrashed about in confusion like a drowning man, dragged from some engrossing dream that instantly evaporated out of memory.

Once in the office, Mutt booted up his machine. He had been doing something interesting last evening, hadn't he? Oh, yeah, that Gondwanaland thing—

Before his butt hit the chair, someone was IMing him. Oh, shit, Kicklighter wanted to see him in his office. Mutt got up to visit his boss.

He ran into Gifford in the hall. Unrepentant yet visibly hurting, Gifford managed a sickly grin. "Missed a swinging time last night, my friend. After her fifth jello shot, Cody got up on stage at Captains. Took two bouncers to get her down, but not before she managed to earn over a hundred bucks."

Mutt winced. This was more information than he needed about the extracurricular activities of his jealous co-worker. How would it be possible now to work on projects side-by-side with her, without conjuring up visions of her drunkenly shedding her clothing?

Suddenly this hip young urban wastrel shtick, the whole life-is-fucked-so-let's-get-fucked-up playacting that Mutt and his friends had been indulging in for so long looked incredibly boring and tedious and counterproductive, possibly even the greased chute delivering one's ass to eternal damnation. Mutt knew with absurd certainty that he could no longer indulge in such a wasteful lifestyle. Something inside him had shifted irrevocably, some emotional tipping point had been reached.

But what was he going to do with his life instead?

Making a half-hearted neutral comment to Gifford—no point in turning into some kind of zealous lecturing missionary asshole Gifford would tune out

anyway—Mutt continued through the cube-farm.

Dan Kicklighter, the middle-aged editor of *PharmaNotes*, resembled the captain of a lobster trawler, bearded, burly and generally disheveled, as if continually battling some invisible Perfect Storm. He had worked at a dozen magazines in his career, everything from *Atlantic Monthly* to *Screw*. A gambling habit that oscillated from moderate—a dozen scratch-ticket purchases a day—to severe—funding an Atlantic City spree with money the bank rightly regarded as a year’s worth of mortgage payments—had determined the jagged progression of his resume. Right now, after some serious rehab, he occupied one of the higher posts of his career.

“Matthew, come in. I just want you to know that I’m going to be away for the next four days. Big industry conference in Boston. With a little detour to Foxwoods Casino on either side. But that’s just between you and me.”

Kicklighter was upfront about his addiction, at least with his subordinates, and claimed that he was now cured to the point where he could indulge himself recreationally, like any casual bettor.

“I’m putting you in charge while I’m gone. I know it’s a lot of responsibility, but I think you’re up to it. This is a crucial week, and I’m counting on you to produce an issue we can all be proud of.”

There were three assistant editors at *PharmaNotes*, so this advancement was not insignificant. But Mutt cringed at the temporary promotion. He just wanted to stay in his little miserable niche and not have anybody notice him. Yet what could he do? Deny the assignment? Wasn’t such an honor the kind of thing he was supposed to be shooting for, next step up the ladder and all that shit? Cody would’ve killed for such a nomination.

“Uh, fine, Dan. Thank you. I’ll do my best.”

“That’s what I’m counting on. Here, take this list of targets you need to hit before Monday. It’s broken down into ten-minute activity blocks. Say, have you heard the odds on the Knicks game this weekend?”

Back in his cube, Mutt threw down the heavy sheaf of paper with disgust. He just knew he’d have to work through the weekend.

Before he had gotten through the tasks associated with the first ten-minute block, Cody appeared.

“So, all your ass-kissing finally paid off. Well, I want you to know that you haven’t fooled everyone here. Not by a long shot.”

Before Mutt could protest his lack of ambition, Cody was gone. Her angry

strut conjured up images of pole-dancing in Mutt's traitorous imagination.

A short time later, Melba sauntered in and poised one haunch on the corner of Mutt's desk.

"Hey, big guy, got any plans for Friday night?"

"Yeah. Thanks to Kicklighter, I'll be ruining my eyesight right here at my desk."

Melba did not seem put off by Mutt's sour brusqueness. "Well, that's too bad. But I'm sure there'll be some other night we can, ah, hook up."

Once Melba left, Mutt tried to resume work. But he just couldn't focus.

So he brought up the Gondwanaland page.

Who was going to tell him he couldn't? Kicklighter was probably already out the office and halfway to the roulette wheels.

Below the spinning foreign globe was a block of text followed by some hot-button links: IMPERIAL LINEAGE, CUSTOMS, NATURAL HISTORY, POLITICAL HISTORY, ART, FORUMS, and so forth. Mutt began to read the main text.

\* \* \* \*

For the past ten thousand years of recorded history, Gondwanaland's imperial plurocracy has insured the material well-being as well as the physical, spiritual and intellectual freedom of its citizens. Since the immemorial era of Fergasse I, when the walled communities of the Only Land—prominently, Lyskander, Port Shallow, Vybergum and Turnbuckle—emerged from the state of siege imposed by the roving packs of scalewargs and amphidonts, banding together into a network of trade and discourse, right up until the current reign of Golusty IV, the ascent of the united peoples of Gondwanaland has been unimpeded by war or dissent, despite a profusion of beliefs, creeds, philosophical paradigms and social arrangements. A steady accumulation of scientific knowledge from the perspicacious and diligent researchers at our many technotopia, combined with the practical entrepreneurship of the ingeniator class, has led to a mastery of the forces of nature, resulting in such now-essential inventions as the strato-carriage, storm-dispeller, object-box and meta-palp.

The grateful citizens of Gondwanaland can assume—with a surety they feel when they contemplate the regular rising of the Innermost Moon—that the future will only continue this happy progression ... ?

\* \* \* \*

Fascinated, Mutt continued to scan the introductory text on the main page, before beginning to bop around the site. What he discovered on these dependent pages were numerous intriguing photos of exotic scenes—cities, people, buildings, landscapes, artworks—and many more descriptive and explanatory passages that amounted to a self-consistent and utterly convincing portrait of an alien world.

The Defeat of the Last ‘Warg; a recipe for bluebunny with groundnut sauce; *The Adventures of Calinok Cannikin*, by Ahleucha Mamarosa; Jibril III’s tornado-struck coronation; the deadly glacier apes; the first landing on the Outermost Moon; the Immaculate Epidemic; the Street of Lanternmoths in Scordatura; the voices of children singing the songs of Mourners Day; the Teetering Needle in the Broken Desert; sunlight on the slate roofs of Saurelle; the latest fashion photographs of Yardley Legg—

Mutt’s head was spinning and the clock icon on his screen read noon. Man, people thought Tolkien was an obsessive perfectionist dreamer! Whoever had put this site together was a goddamn fantasy genius! The backstory to Gondwanaland possessed the kind of organic cohesiveness that admitted of the random and contradictory. Why hadn’t the citizens of Balamuth ever realized that they were sitting on a vein of pure allurium until a shepherd named Thunn Pumpelly fell into that sinkhole? They just hadn’t! A hundred other circumstantial incidents and anecdotes contributed to the warp and woof of Gondwanaland, until in Mutt’s mind the whole invention assumed the heft and sheen of a length of richly embroidered silk.

Mutt wondered momentarily if the whole elaborate hoax was the work of a single creator, or a group effort. Perhaps the name or names of the perps was hidden in some kind of Easter Egg—

The one link Mutt hadn’t yet explored led to the FORUMS. Now he went there.

He faced a choice of dozens of boards on different topics, all listing thousands of archived posts. He arbitrarily chose one—IMPERIAL NEWS—and read a few recent posts in chronological order.

\* \* \* \*

Anybody heard any reports since Restday from the Liminal Palace on G4’s health?

—IceApe113

\* \* \* \*

The last update from the Remediator General said G4 was still in serious condition. Something about not responding to the infusion of nurse-hemomites.

—LenaFromBamford

\* \* \* \*

Looks like we could be having an Imperial Search soon then. I hope the Cabal of Assessors has their equipment in good working order. When was the last IS? 9950, right?

—Gillyflower87

\* \* \* \*

Aren't we all being a little premature? Golusty IV isn't dead yet!

—IlonaG

\* \* \* \*

Mutt was baffled, even somehow a little pissed off, by the intensity of the roleplaying on display here. These people—assuming the posts indeed originated from disparate individuals—were really into this micronation game, more like Renaissance Faire headcases and Civil War reenactors than the art-student goofballs Mutt had envisioned as the people responsible for the Gondwanaland site. Still, their fervent loyalty to their fantasy world offered Mutt a wistful, appealing alternative to his own anomie.

Impulsively, Mutt launched his own post.

\* \* \* \*

From everything I've seen, Golusty IV seems like a very fine Emperor and a good person. I hope he gets better.

—MuttsterPrime

\* \* \* \*

He quit his browser and brought up his word-processor.

Then he resumed trying to fit his life into ten-minute boxes.

\* \* \* \*

Kicklighter returned from the Boston trip looking as if he had spent the entire time wrestling rabid tigers. Evidently, his cure had not been totally effective. His vaunted invulnerability to the seductions of Native-American-sponsored games of chance plainly featured chinks. An office pool was immediately begun centered on his probable date of firing by the publisher, Henry Huntsman. Ironically, Kicklighter himself placed a wager.

But all these waves of office scandal washed over Mutt without leaving any impression at all. Likewise, his dealings with his former friends and rivals had no



impact on his abstracted equilibrium. Gifford's unceasing invitations to get wasted, Cody's sneers and jibes, Melba's purring attempts at seduction—None of these registered. Oh, Mutt continued to perform his job in a semi-competent, off-handed way. But most of the time his head was in Gondwanaland.

With his new best IM buddy, Ilona Grobes.

Ilona Grobes—IlonaG—had posted the well-mannered, respectful comment about not hastening Golusty IV into his grave. Upon reading Mutt's similarly themed post, she had contacted him directly.

\* \* \* \*

MuttsterPrime, that was a sensitive and compassionate sentiment. I'm glad you're not so thrilled by the prospect of an IS like most of these vark-heads that you forget the human dimension of this drama. I don't recognize your name from any of the boards. What clade do you belong to?

—Ilona G

\* \* \* \*

That question left Mutt scratching his head. He debated telling Ilona to cut the fantasy crap and just talk straight to him. But in the end he decided to go along with the play-acting.

\* \* \* \*

Ilona, is my clade really so important? I'd like to think that we can relate to each other on an interpersonal level without such official designations coming between us.

—MuttsterPrime

\* \* \* \*

When Ilona's reply came, Mutt was relieved to see that his strategy of conforming to her game-playing had paid off.

\* \* \* \*

How true! I never thought to hear from another Sloatist on this board! I only asked because I didn't want to give offense if you were an ultra-Yersinian. But it's so refreshing to dispense with such outdated formalities. Tell me some more about yourself.

—IlonaG

\* \* \* \*

Not much to tell really. I'm an assistant editor at a magazine, and it sucks.

—MuttsterPrime

\* \* \* \*

I'm afraid you've lost me there, Muttster. Why would a repository for excess grain need even one professional scurrilator, much less an assistant? And how can a condition or inanimate object "suck?" Where do you live? It must be someplace rather isolated, with its own dialect. Perhaps the Ludovici Flats?

—IlonaG

\* \* \* \*

Mutt stood up a moment and looked toward the distant window in the far-off wall of the cube-farm, seeing a slice of the towers of Manhattan and thereby confirming the reality of his surroundings. This woman was playing some serious games with his head. He sat back down.

\* \* \* \*

Oh, my home town is no place you've ever heard of. Just a dreary backwater. But enough about my boring life. Tell me about yours!

—MuttsterPrime

\* \* \* \*

Ilona was happy to comply. Over the next several weeks, she spilled her life story, along with a freight of fascinating details about life in Gondwanaland.

Ilona had been born on a farm in the Ragovoy Swales district. Her parents raised moas. She grew up loving the books of Idanell Swonk and the antic-tableaus (were these movies?) featuring Roseway Partridge. She broke her arm when she was eleven, competing in the annual running of the aurochs. After finishing her schooling, earning an advanced instrumentality in cognitive combinatorics, she had moved to the big city of Tlun, where she had gotten a job with the Cabal of Higher Heuristics. (Best as Mutt could figure, her job had something to do with writing the software for artificial mineral-harvesting deep-sea fish.) Every Breathday Ilona and a bunch of girlfriends—fellow geeks, Mutt conjectured—would participate in *zymurgy*, a kind of public chess match where the pieces were represented by living people and the action took place in a three-dimensional labyrinth. She liked to relax with a glass of cloudberry wine and the music of Clay Zelta. (She sent Mutt a sample when he said he wasn't familiar with that artist. It sounded like punk polkas with a dash of tango.)

The more Mutt learned about Ilona, the more he liked her. She might be crazy, living in this fantasy world of hers, but it was an attractive neurosis. The world she and her fellow hoaxers had built was so much saner and exotic than the one Mutt inhabited. Why wouldn't anyone want to pretend they lived in such a place?

As for the larger outlines of Gondwanalandian society and its finer details,

Mutt learned much that appealed to him. For instance, the role of Emperor or Empress was not an inherited one, or restricted to any particular class of citizen. Upon the death of the reigning monarch—whose powers were limited yet essential in the day-to-day functioning of the plurocracy—the Cabal of Assessors began a continent-wide search for a psychic heir. At death, the holy spirit of the ruler—not exactly that individual's unique soul, but something like free-floating semi-divine mojo—was believed to detach and descend on a destined individual, whose altered status could be confirmed by subtle detection apparatus. And then there was that eminently sensible business about every citizen receiving a lifetime stipend that rendered work not a necessity but a dedicated choice. Not to mention such attractions as the regular state-sanctioned orgies in such cities as Swannack, Harsh Deep and Camp Collard that apparently made Mardi Gras look like the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

As for the crisis of Golusty IV's impending death, the boards remained full of speculation and chatter. The remediators were trying all sorts of new treatments, and the Emperor's health chart resembled Earth's stock market's gyrations, one minute up and the next way down.

*Earth's stock market?* Mutt was shocked to find himself so convinced of Gondwanaland's reality that he needed to distinguish between the two worlds.

With some judicious self-censorship and liberal use of generalities, Mutt was able to convey something of his life and character to Ilona as well, without baffling her further. He made up a lot of stuff too, incidents and anecdotes that dovetailed with Gondwanalandian parameters. Her messages began to assume an intimate tone. As did Mutt's.

By the time Ilona sent him her picture, Mutt realized he was in love. The photograph clinched it. (It was too painful for Mutt even to dare to think the image might be a fake, the Photoshop ruse of some thirteen-year-old male dweeb.) Ilona Grobes was a dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty with a charming mole above quirked lips. If all cognitive combinatorics experts looked like this, Gondwanaland had proved itself superior in the geek department as well. With the photo was a message:

\* \* \* \*

Dear Mutt, don't you think it's time we met in the flesh? The Emperor can't live much longer, and of course all non-essential work and other activities will be suspended during the moratorium of the Imperial Search, for however long that may take. We could use those leisurely days to really get to know each other better.

—IlonaG

\* \* \* \*

Finally, here was the moment when all charades would collapse, for good or ill. After some deliberation, Mutt attached his own photo and wrote back:

\* \* \* \*

Getting together would be really great, Ilona. Just tell me where you live, and I'll be right there!

—MuttsterPrime

\* \* \* \*

You're such a joker, Mutt! You know perfectly well that I live at Number 39 Badgerway in the Funes district of Tlun! When can you get here? The aerial tramway service to Tlun is extensive, no matter where you live. Here's a pointer to the online schedules. Try not to keep me waiting too long! And I think your auroch-lick hairstyle is charming!

—IlonaG

\* \* \* \*

Mutt felt his spirits slump. He was in love with a clinically insane person, one so mired in her delusions that she could not break out even when offered genuine human contact. Should he cut things off right here and now? No, he couldn't bring himself to.

\* \* \* \*

Let me check those schedules and tidy up some loose ends here, Ilona. Then I'll get right back to you.

—MuttsterPrime

\* \* \* \*

Mutt was still sitting in a motionless, uninspired funk half an hour later when Kicklighter called him into his office.

All the editor's photos were off the walls and in cardboard boxes, along with his other personal possessions. The hairy, rumpled man looked relieved.

"I'm outta here as of this minute, kid. Security's coming to escort me to the front door. But I wanted to let you know that I put in a good word for you to take over my job. Huntsman might not like my extracurricular activities too much, but he's a good publisher and realizes I know my stuff when it comes to getting a magazine out. He trusts me on matters of personnel. So you've got a lock on the job, if you want it. And who wouldn't? But you've got to get your head out of your ass. I don't know where you've been the past few weeks, but it hasn't been here."

All Mutt could do was stare at Kicklighter without responding. Scurrilator, he thought. Why would I want to be head scurrilator?

After another awkward minute, Mutt managed to mumble some thanks and good-luck wishes, then left.

He dropped in to Gifford's cubicle. Maybe his friend could offer some advice.

Gifford looked like shit. His tie was askew, his face pale and bedewed with sweat. There was a white crust around his nostrils like the rim of Old Faithful. He smiled wanly when he saw Mutt.

"Hey, pal, I'd love to talk to you right now, but I don't feel so good. Little touch of stomach trouble. In fact, I gotta hit the john pronto."

Gifford bulled past Mutt. He smelled like spoiled yogurt.

Mutt wandered purposelessly through the cube-farm. He found himself at Cody's box. She glared at him and said, "If you're here like the rest of them to gloat, you can just get in line."

"Gloat? About what?"

"Oh, come on, don't pretend you haven't heard about the layoffs."

"No—no, I haven't, really. I'm—I'm sorry, Cody."

Cody just snorted and turned away.

Melba wasn't in her cube. Mutt learned why from an official notice on the bulletin board near the coffee-maker.

\* \* \* \*

If any employee is contacted by any member of the media regarding the sexual discrimination suit lodged by Ms. Melba Keefe, who is on extended leave until litigation is settled, he or she will refrain from commenting upon penalty of dismissal....

\* \* \* \*

Back in his cubicle, Mutt brought up the Gondwanaland web page. The coastline of Gondwanaland bore unmistakable resemblances to the geography Mutt knew, the way an assembled jigsaw puzzle recalled the individual lonely pieces. As far as he could make out, Tlun was located where Buenos Aires was on Earth.

\* \* \* \*

Ilona, I'm going to try to reach you somehow. I'm setting out today. Wish me luck.

\* \* \* \*

Mutt left his cheap hotel—roaches the size of bite-sized Snickers bars, obese hookers smoking unfiltered cigarettes and trolling the corridors 24/7—for the fifth time that day. He carried a twofold map. Before he had left the US, he had printed off a detailed street map of Tlun. He had found a similar map for Buenos Aires and transferred it to a transparent sheet. Using certain duplicate, unvarying physical features such as rivers and the shape of the bay, he had aligned the two. This cartographic construction was what he was using to search for Number 39 Badgerway.

Of course, Buenos Aires featured no such street in its official atlas. And the neighborhood that Ilona supposedly lived in was of such a rough nature as to preclude much questioning of the shifty-eyed residents—even if Mutt’s Spanish had been better than the “Que pasa, amigo?” variety. Watched suspiciously by glue-huffing, gutter-crawling juveniles and their felonious elders hanging out at nameless bars, Mutt could only risk a cursory inspection of the Badgerway environs.

After checking out the most relevant district, Mutt was reduced to wandering the city’s boulevards and alleys, parks and promenades, looking for any other traces of a hidden, subterranean, alternative city that plainly didn’t exist anywhere outside the fevered imagination of a handful of online losers, praying for a glimpse of an unforgotten female face graced by a small mole. Maybe Ilona was some Argentinian hacker-girl who had been subliminally trying to overcome her own reluctance to divulge her real whereabouts by giving him all these clues.

But even if that were the case, Mutt met with no success.

He had now been in Argentina for ten days. All costs, from expensively impromptu airline tickets to meals and lodging, had been put on plastic. He had turned his last paycheck into local currency for small purchases, but Mutt’s loan payments had left him no nest egg. And the upper limits on his lone credit card weren’t infinite. Pretty soon he’d have to admit defeat, return the New York, and try to pick up the shambles of his life.

But for the next few days anyhow, he would continue to look for Tlun and Ilona.

Returning today to the neighborhood labeled Funes on the Tlun map, Mutt entered a small cafe he had come to patronize only because it was marginally less filthy than any other. He ordered a coffee and a pastry. Spreading his map on the scarred countertop he scratched his stubble and pondered the arrangement of streets. Had he explored every possible niche—?

A finger tapped Mutt’s shoulder. He turned to confront a weasly individual

whose insincere yet broad smile revealed more gaps than teeth. The fellow wore a ratty Von Dutch t-shirt that proclaimed I KISS BETTER THAN YOU.

“*Senor*, what is it you look for? Perhaps I can help. I know this district like the breast of my own mother.”

Mutt realized that this guy must be some kind of con-artist. But even so, he represented the best local informant Mutt had yet encountered, the only person who had deigned to speak with him.

Pointing to the map, Mutt said, “I’m looking for this street. Do you know it?”

“*Si, seguro!* I will take you there without delay!”

Experiencing a spark of hope, Mutt followed the guide outside.

They came to a dank *calle* Mutt was half-sure he had visited once before. The guide gestured to a shadowy cross-street that was more of a channel between buildings, only large enough for pedestrian traffic. A few yards along, the street transformed into a steep flight of greasy twilit stairs.

“Right down here, *senor*, you will find *exactamente* what you are looking for.”

Mutt tried to banish all fear from his heart and head. He summoned up into his mind’s eye Ilona’s smiling face. He advanced tentatively into the claustrophobic cattle-chute.

He heard the blow coming before he felt it. Determined not to lose his focus on Ilona, he still could not help flinching. The blow sent him reeling, blackness seeping over Ilona’s face like spilled tar, until only her smile, Cheshire-cat-like, remained, then faded.

\* \* \* \*

Sunlight poured through lacy curtains, illuminating a small cheerful room. On the wall hung a painting which Mutt recognized as one of Sigalit’s studies for his *Skydancer* series. Mutt saw a vase filled with strange flowers on a nearby small table. Next to the flowers sat a box labeled LIBERTO’S ECLECTIC PASTILLES and a book whose spine bore the legend:

\* \* \* \*

*Ancient Caprices*, by Idanell Swonk

\* \* \* \*

Mutt lay in what was obviously a hospital bed, judging by the peripheral gadgetry around him, including an object-box and a pair of meta-palps. The blanket

covering him diffused an odd yet not unpleasant odor, as if woven from the hairs of an unknown beast. He saw what looked like a call button and he buzzed it.

A nurse hurried into the room, all starched calm business in her traditional tricornered hat and life-saving medals.

Behind her strode Ilona Grobes.

Ilona hung back smiling only until the nurse assured herself that Mutt was doing fine and left. Then Ilona flung herself on Mutt. They hugged wordlessly for minutes before she stood up and found a seat for herself.

“Oh, Mutt, what *happened* to you? A Junior Effectuator found you unconscious a few feet from my door and brought you here. I was at work. The first thing I knew about your troubles was when I saw your picture on the evening propaedeutic. ‘Unknown citizen hospitalized.’ I rushed right here, but the remediators told me not to wake you. You slept for over thirty hours, right from Fishday to Satyrday!”

Mutt grabbed Ilona’s hand. “Let’s just say I had kind of a hard time getting to Tlun.”

Ilona giggled. “What a funny accent you have! That’s one thing that doesn’t come across online.”

“And you—you’re more beautiful than any photo. And you smell like—like vanilla icecream.”

Ilona looked shyly away, then back. “I’m sure that’s a compliment, whatever vanilla icecream may be. But look—I brought you some candy, and one of my favorite books.”

“Thank you. Thank you very much for being here.”

No icecream, Mutt thought. He’d be a millionaire by this time next year.

They talked for several hours more, until the sounds of some kind of commotion out in the hall made them pause.

The door to Mutt’s room opened and three men walked in. They were clad in elaborately stitched ceremonial robes and miters, and carried among them several pieces of equipment.

Seeing Mutt’s puzzlement, Ilona explained. “It’s just a team of Assessors. Golusty died yesterday, shortly after your arrival. The Imperial Search has begun.”



One Assessor addressed Ilona. “Citizen Grobes, your testing will take place at your residence. But we need to assess this stranger now.”

“Of course,” Ilona said.

The Assessors approached Mutt’s bedside. “With your permission, citizen—”

Mutt nodded, and they placed a cage of wires studded with glowing lights and delicate sensors on his head like a crown.