

Eventually the assembly moved to the dinner table in an exquisitely appointed hall paneled in an exotic wood with flamboyant grain patterns Wyl never before observed. A minor etiquette catastrophe occurred upon the discovery that MaraDara did not eat meat but the kitchen staff of the king performed admirably under pressure and improvised a spectacular glazed, spiced and herbed bread substitute for the prepared meat portion. The balance of the guests ate duck with orange and cherry sauce accompanied by green beans sautéed with mushrooms and mixed nuts. Wyl never moved his eyes up from his plate even gazing upon it long after completing his meal as if in solemn remembrance while drinking more glasses of lime liqueurs as he ate, he marveled at not only the indulgence of such extravagantly prepared delicacies, but the craftwork involved. Considering the arrangement and presentation of the food on the plate no less than great art, Wyl experienced bitter remorse over his willful destruction of such a masterpiece with as crude an instrument as a fork.

Upon conclusion of the meal, Wyl rolled smokes for MaraDara reinforcing his portrayal of the dutiful subordinate while three of the other guests produced tins from their pockets, withdrew and ignited pipes or machine-crafted smokes of perfect proportion and geometry rolled in brilliant white paper.

After a polite pause for relaxation, King Nelles announced to his council, “Mara expresses to me some concerns regarding our policies,” then addressing Mara directly, he informed her, “and I have taken the liberty of asking those present to conduct research into potential relevant archival agreements of record, and as it-”

Politely holding up a hand to interrupt Nelles, Mara stated graciously, “Very hospitable is he and pleasant evenings they enjoy as his guests. She wishes not to provoke disputes with him or his state and would prefer, at least for present evenings, casual conversations of no consequence, if these he finds satisfactory.”

Two or three men at the table raised their eyebrows, leaned back slightly or otherwise exposed reactions demonstrative of mild surprise or even relief and King Nelles smiled evidently surprised himself to some extent and then responded, “By all means.” with an encouraging wave of his hand.

“Good.” Mara acknowledged then proceeding delicately, she stated, “Eh... no fields of crops, orchards or herds do they observe in proximity of city. They observe no places people of city make foods, yet inside city walls, they discover people of city eat foods. Many men outside city gate they encounter, men in rags, hungry, angry and desperate. Why for she wonders hungry men in rags outside city gate do not make foods, yes?”

Minister of Agriculture Praeleau appeared prepared to respond but paused to offer his counterparts opportunity for counsel and satisfied they sufficiently indicated approval, he explained, “Some local consortiums in fact conduct food production operations in the immediate area-”

“-Of these she is aware.” Mara conceded then advised, “Deliberately she exaggerates to contextualize her inquiries, yes?”

Acknowledging the position with a polite nod, Praeleau furthermore advised, “Most of our food products come in from remote or foreign markets.”

Mara raised her eyebrows expectantly and with obvious disappointment for the brevity of the explanation, she commented, “Yes. These she easily guesses, as she observes no fields of crops, orchards or herds in proximity of city. The focus of her question she specifically directs at desperate hungry men in rags that do not produce foods, yes?”

Evidently interpreting the situation an opportunity to exercise a measure of persuasion and with obvious pleasure over the apparent circumstance, Praeleau responded patiently as if explaining to a child, “To ask why these men do not produce food is no different from asking why they do not produce furniture, clothing or pottery. You mention contextualizing your inquiry - The focus on the production of food is an argumentative contextualization and there is no inherent significance to that context. The reality of the situation is not that these men do not produce food but that they have not negotiated positions of occupation or identified their potential market opportunities.”

Biting her bottom lip with a subtle smile, Mara asked, “Men in rags are hungry, yes?”

Inhaling slowly with apparent reluctance to concede any point to Mara in any context of food or hunger, Praeleau ultimately recognized only one possible answer for such a direct and simple question and though he affirmed, he equivocated, “Presumably. Yes.”

“Hungry men in rags also possess no furniture, yes?” Mara asked.

“Yes.” Praeleau conceded with an aggravated sigh.

“Hungry men in rags also possess no clothing but for rags, yes?” Mara asked.

“Yes.” Praeleau conceded with growing irritation.

“Hungry men in rags also possess no pottery but for presumably those things they might scavenge, yes?” Mara asked.

“- Yes -” Praeleau acknowledged with exaggerated pronunciation.

Mara leaned sideways onto her elbow, paused for dramatic emphasis, inhaled deeply then asked, “Why for hungry men in rags without furniture, clothing or pottery do not make foods, furniture, clothing and pottery, yes?” Praeleau contorted his lips in disapproval of a tactic he clearly considered manipulative then with stubborn patience, opened his mouth to respond but Mara interrupted, asserting, “She will assist him with less argumentatively contextualized questions, yes? Why for men deprived of basic necessities do not do obvious things to provide for selves basic necessities, yes?”

Praeleau shook his head and sighed with exasperation then glanced around the table at his counterparts and they all stirred and adjusted in their chairs but ultimately, the present chairmanship of Praeleau survived the rhetorical assault of the foreign agitator. Shaking his head almost imperceptibly, Praeleau breathed heavily as if in preparation for a feat of physical contest then countered, “We are a - **free - society.**” emphasizing the words with dramatic pauses as if with reverent adoration for something sacred then he elaborated, “We are not tyrant taskmasters orchestrating the every move of every man. The state does not determine the occupation or the personal conduct of the individual. If we were tyrant taskmasters, we would obviously assign those men tasks and you would never observe hungry men in rags outside the city but we are all free men and as free men, we encounter fortune or misfortune as the consequence of our individual choices and actions without the interference or intervention of the state. The condition of those men in rags, while admittedly unattractive, is not proof of our tyranny but proof of their freedom.”

In all likelihood as the result of suppressed laughter, Mara shuddered slightly but she clenched her lips into a frown and asked, “Why with these answer he does not respond when him initially she asks why hungry men do not produce foods? Why his responses change with contexts, yes? She asks why hungry men do not produce foods - He tells her foods come from abroad. She asks why men deprived of basic necessities do not produce basic necessities - He tells her men are free. These are different answers to same questions, yes? Why more than one answers has he for same questions, yes?”

Lacing her fingers together, Mara patiently awaited his response as Praeleau exhibited the kind of reaction the dishonest exhibit when caught in dishonesty. Somewhat surprisingly, his mood turned detectably angry as Praeleau contended, “These are cynical ploys. Your cleverly crafted manipulative questions do not alter reality. You manipulated me into responses you call different - That is my mistake for presuming we are speaking on honest terms. It is an intellectually dishonest argument. My responses you call different are the same response - My answer to these questions in all cases is liberty. Food products, as well as many other products for that matter, come from abroad because we respect liberty and personal initiative. Someone exercises the personal initiative and ambition to create those enterprises. It is not the role of the state to coerce the individual, interfere with personal liberties and tamper with the enterprises of free men-”

“-Some men somewhere construct shelter, grow foods, craft furniture, clothing and pottery, yes?” Mara interrupted to inquire in tangible contrast without emotional quality to her demeanor or tone.

Evidently rattled by what he termed ‘cynical ploys’, Praeleau exhibited obvious reluctance to concede anything more no matter how trivial but withdrawing from the engagement would constitute the most humiliating concession of all so he had no choice but to persevere and he finally replied, “Of course.”

Mara subsequently asked, “Do men that construct shelter, grow foods, craft furniture, clothing and pottery exercise liberties, personal initiatives and enterprises of free men?”

Praeleau cautiously answered, “Of course.”

“-and hungry men in rags outside city walls are free men, yes?” Mara asked, “These but only moments ago he unequivocally insists, yes?” she reminded.

With the quick succession of questions, Mara restricted Praeleau to predictable responses she obviously easily anticipated and his only possible alternative answers occurred in the form of direct contradiction of his own prior assertions. Obviously aware of his vulnerability, Praeleau noticeably squirmed then resentfully conceding yet another answer Mara obviously easily anticipated, he finally replied, “Yes.”

Mara nodded slightly then leaned on her elbows and asked, “What differences occur between men that construct shelter, grow foods, craft furniture, clothing and pottery, and hungry men in rags outside city walls, yes?”

Apparently relieved by a question without a predetermined answer, Praeleau exhaled and attempted to respond, “I do not personally know the character of every man-”

“-What differences in **conditions** occurs?” Mara countered.

Praeleau contended, “Every man is responsible for his own-”

“-This is not answer to her question.” Mara admonished again interrupting then with greater specificity, she asked, “Why hungry men in rags outside city walls do not grow foods in fields outside city walls, yes?”

Praeleau attempted yet another evasive answer, replying, “Again, I do not personally know the reasons every man-”

“-Again, this is not answers to her questions.” Mara interrupted to counter, “She does not ask him to account for character of every man nor does she ask him to explain personal reasons for actions or inactions of every man. She asks him not question about men outside city walls. She asks him question about **fields** outside city walls.” then pausing to rephrase, Mara asked, “What prohibits hungry men in rags outside city walls from growing foods **specifically** in fields outside city walls, yes?”

After the brief respite of three relatively innocuous questions, Mara again asked a question to which she not only obviously knew the answer but Praeléau just as obviously attempted to evade. Finally relenting, Praeléau delicately stated, “Those fields are not the property of those men.”

Mara tilted her head with palpable curiosity then asked in a childishly innocent tone, “Does he not tell her, free men encounter fortune or misfortune as consequence of individual choices and actions without interference or intervention of state? Does he not tell her, state is not tyrant? What tyranny prohibits hungry men from growing foods upon earth beneath their feet, yes?”

From the moment the three foreigners arrived, the king and his council exhibited obvious condescension for their guests as potential intellectual adversaries and evidently prepared only to defend their actions and policies to an extent sufficient to appease the meddlesome expectations of ‘Mazan’. Even in argument, Praeléau exhibited a casual and dismissive attitude as if humoring an ill-mannered adolescent, but in response to the last question, he froze and fell silent deep in thought. Clearly, Mara asked him a question for which he had no prepared response and just as clearly, Praeléau recognized the question as fraught with philosophical hazard. The last remnants of his casual dismissive attitude evaporated and as if with newfound respect for a formidable opponent, Praeléau inhaled deeply, leaned forward slightly then cautiously attempted to craft an answer that both conceded the inescapable truth yet still disputed the indisputable, “Private property is the most essential liberty, and the denial of private property is the greatest tyranny of all-”

“-then he says deprivation of property is tyranny, yes?” Mara asked and even as Praeléau appeared intent on a response, she asked in quick succession, “Are hungry men in rags not deprived of most essential liberty, private property? Do hungry men in rags not encounter greatest tyranny of all, denial of private property? Yes?”

“If you would allow me to complete a sentence, I might actually answer one of your questions before you ask it.” Praeléau protested then without much apparent thought, he immediately contended, “Property is the reward of a man’s personal initiative and productive action, and without the prospect of property, a man has no incentive to contribute productive action. The state that takes from the productive and redistributes benefit to the unproductive encourages the most unproductive attributes of a man and punishes his most creative productive inclinations-”

“-Man denied property encounters tyranny, yes?” Mara interrupted yet again to inquire as Praeléau sighed in exasperation, “Conditions of hungry men in rags outside city walls are conditions of tyranny - This he says in his own words three different times, three different ways, yes?”

“Well,” Praeléau huffed, “if that’s the way you choose to interpret-”

“-No!” Mara barked raising her voice for the first time then continuing, she calmly asserted, “Nothing does she interpret. She observes and to his words, she listens. These things she considers for direct demonstrable qualities and values deliberately **without** interpretation. He tells her man without property encounters tyranny. Hungry men in rags outside city walls are men without property, men without incentive, men discouraged from creative productive inclination, men **tyrannized**. Only but one issue determines the validity of all his words and arguments so he answers her single question.” Mara leaned forward somewhat ominously and with carefully controlled tempo and exaggerated pronunciation, she asked, “Are hungry men in rags outside city walls tyrannized?”

Adjusting slightly, Praeléau paused then conducted a series of adjustments in his chair, pausing between each as if to speak then in reconsideration, transitioning to another adjustment as if ultimately, the correct adjustment in his chair would surely produce at last, the correct response. He may or may not have understood why but at the very least, Praeléau intuitively realized he did not want ever to concede to Mara that anybody in his state ever encountered any form of tyranny.

“This is simple yes or no question, yes? No?” Mara taunted.

With painfully obvious trepidation, Praeléau attempted to craft yet another strategic response and he delicately proposed, “The state does not tyrannize those men-”

“-This does not answers her questions.” Mara again insisted then qualified her question, inquiring, “Without regard for source or blame... without identifying cause or culprit... yes or no... men outside walls are tyrannized?”

Nearly as if chanting a prayer, Praeléau stubbornly insisted, “The individual creates wealth and property through creative productive action-”

“-Tyranny!” Mara shouted.

“Yes!” Praeléau finally admitted, “Those men encounter the tyranny of their own inability, their own weakness, their own failure! That is liberty! Punishing the productive to compensate for the failures of others is tyranny-”

“-Tyranny of their own failures or tyranny of the successes of others?” Mara demanded with a pointed finger.

In his own words, from the very first he spoke and consistently thereafter belaboring the dire consequences of state interference with individual liberty, productivity and property, Praeléau incidentally described the very conditions outside the city walls and not only qualified those conditions as tyrannical but moreover he unwittingly admitted those conditions occurred as the direct exclusive product of state interference. Without so much as a word in argument, Mara merely asked Praeléau a series of questions to which his own responses exposed the arbitrary selectivity of his principles. Inhaling with a sharp breath, Praeléau opened his mouth to speak and in reaction, Mara leaned back in her chair folding her arms with a smile as if fascinated and for the first time, clearly demonstrated no intent to interrupt as she patiently awaited his response. Praeléau calculated his options and with detectable mounting apprehension, he apparently estimated the more complicated his argument, the greater the degree of difficulty in opposition to it, and so he contended, “The individual creates property through personal initiative and enterprise. It is not the role of the state to determine the distribution of private property-... Any attempt by the state to provide productive benefit to the unproductive involves the artificial redistribution of property, and that simply amounts to seizing property from those that create the most and then giving it away to those that create the least... and- and- and that... uh... punishes success and rewards failure. The state does not determine the distribution of property or the abilities of the individual... The- the state only... uh... **protects** property and- and... the... creative... product... of... productive...-”

“-productivity?” Mara graciously offered, assisting in the completion of the sentence.

The repetition of the response exposed the desperation of Praeléau in substantially unflattering terms and the uncharacteristic silence of Mara painfully exaggerated his precipitous predicament. Praeléau adjusted again while silently moving his lips as if speaking an entire sentence then he impulsively stammered, “With...- Without... private property, the individual cannot benefit from creative productive action...-”

Mara remained silent obviously inviting Praeleau to amend, alter or modify his answer and with an apparently involuntary grimace, he argued, “Individual liberty is the measure of a free society... Interference with the... productive ability and created property of the individual is tyranny...” Praeleau tapered off evidently nearing exhaustion as the repetition of his rhetoric bordered on embarrassment.

Leaning her elbows onto the table, with a gentle tone yet assertive delivery, Mara inquired, “Why hungry men do not produce foods? This he remembers, yes? This is her initial questions, this is her concluding questions and this is her every questions in between. Why hungry men do not produce foods? Like her single questions in several forms, he responds in several forms but in all cases, he yet responds with but single answers. Liberty and property is his answers. His every argument is his confessions.

He tells her state does not artificially determine distribution of property or abilities of individual, state protects property and abilities of individual, structure of property is reward of creative productive action. His own words he fails to recognize, identify hungry men in rags as tyrannized, artificially prohibited from property, abilities artificially restricted, artificially punished for hunger and natural human condition. These universalities he fails to recognize because words he speaks are not universal principles. Words he speaks are childish arbitrary sentiments he selectively applies as they sentimentally appeal to his opportunistic conveniences.”

Praeleau attempted to counter but Mara held up her hand sharply in a gesture both respectfully insistent and somewhat threatening, and Praeleau clenched his lips perhaps a bit intimidated as Mara continued undeterred, asserting, “His free state prohibits property, punishes productivity, restricts ability, and artificially redistributes property as exclusive reward for only the most tyrannical actions of only the most tyrannical free men. His ‘free men’ and their precious ‘liberty’ are but tyrants practicing tyranny... and he exercises audacity to tell her his state is not tyrannical? Of course, his state is not tyrannical! This she easily observes, first of all things she observes, in but the blink of an eye from a mile away. His state is passive impotent superficial pretense that exercises only just barely enough authority through threat of armed guard to terrorize hungry men in rags sufficiently enough to prevent them from defending themselves from tyrannical ‘free men’. No. His free state is not tyrannical. His free state is state of tyrannical free men with property that tyrannize free men without property.

Why hungry men do not produce foods? Hungry men in rags produce no foods not because they are unproductive or unable, hungry men in rags produce no foods because tyrant free men prohibit productivity and restrict ability. No, his state is not tyrannical. His property is tyrannical, his liberty is tyrannical, his free men are tyrannical. His private property is earth stolen from under feet of men now hungry in rags.”

Mara stretched to lean onto the table and raising her voice slightly, she forcefully concluded, “Without protection of his army, their weapons and threat of violence, if he tells men they cannot produce foods, they must stand idle, do nothing and go hungry because earth is **his** property, those men tell him **BULLSHIT!** -- and this much only if not they kill him first. His creative productivity, individualism, property and liberty are not lofty principles but privileges of men protected by armed force that outnumbers or otherwise overpowers other men.”

“That is true of any state!” Praeleau impulsively countered, “The foundation of a state is the enforcement of law and order.”

Mara slumped as if relaxing at the conclusion of an exhausting chore then leaned back and stared for a moment with an expression of contentment. “Is that so?” she finally inquired then remarked, “-and now the true meaning we know of all his eloquent words spoken with such conviction - He dictates terms enforced by weapon and violence.”

Praeleau glared angrily and opened his mouth to object but Mara silenced him with a stern rebuke, announcing, “He exhausts with her his esoteric contrivances and trite clichés. With him her argument concludes.” Suddenly slapping her palm on the table with a thunderous clap that caused everyone in the room but Dara to jolt in shock, Mara then nearly shrieked, “**He loses!**” with an accusative finger pointed toward the face of Praeleau. Subsequently turning her attention to King Nelles, Mara courteously inquired, “Whom next his gracious King Nelles presents for her to contest, yes?”

All five ministers and advisors simmered with indignation while King Nelles alone exhibited no anger and in fact smiled even if just barely. Praeleau tensed in apparent preparation to object once again but Nelles silenced him with a subtle flinch of his finger. Perhaps Praeleau indeed lost the contest or perhaps he prevailed, or perhaps such judgments simply account as subjective opinion at best but Mara at least confounded Praeleau enough that Nelles dismissed him and withdrew him as a contestant.

Consequently, Nelles nodded almost imperceptibly toward his council then with a deep breath, Minister of Defense Heigaan leaned forward and commenced his attempt to contest the Red Witch, proposing, “It is not so simple or arbitrary as the state literally picking and choosing forms of reward and punishment at its own convenience. The state does not simply give property away to those it pleases then establish arbitrary rules that conveniently favor property ownership. Property is something created by the individual, not the state-”

“-How this is relevant?” Mara interrupted with obvious impatience for the tactic.

“Neither individuals nor the state tyrannize those that own no property.” Heigaan asserted, “You may choose to define the absence of property as a form of virtual tyranny or the protection of property from those that have none as a form of coercion, and maybe they are, but this is not deliberate or controlled - It is just one of the natural consequences of self-determination. The consequences are perhaps unattractive but natural nonetheless. Yes, men wear rags and go hungry outside the walls. No one chose that or caused it and no one is particularly pleased with it. It is the result of economic circumstances but we do not resolve it by forcibly seizing the property of some and giving it away to others. We resolve it by encouraging those men to exercise personal initiative... and by doing what we can to make conditions favorable for economic growth. Those men will prosper not by coercive artificial redistribution of wealth but by genuine economic opportunity. Yes, the state enforces the structure but the structure is individual self-determination, mutually consensual trade and economics, not coercion, weapons, threat and violence.”

“She does not understand what means ‘economics’.” Mara stated somewhat irritably.

Heigaan sighed then with admirable patience, he attempted to explain, “Economics means the production and distribution of goods. It means trade-”

“-She understands what he thinks means economics.” Mara stated so authoritatively as to overpower Heigaan then she quoted him, demanding, “State does not give property then favor property ownership?” Shaking her head vigorously, Mara squinted as if confounded by an incomprehensible riddle then implored, “What he thinks means to ‘protect’ property, yes?”

Obviously failing to recognize the question as rhetorical, Heigaan opened his mouth to speak but just as obviously, it accounted as a question he never anticipated or for which he ever prepared a response and he only expelled a hollow croak from his throat as he awkwardly groped for words. Mara circumvented the process and with detectable aggravation, she forcefully stated, “To ‘protect’ property is to favor one to exclusion of all others and enforce arrangement by threat of violence. ‘Protection’ **is act of coercion!** In acknowledgment of necessity for protection, they concede private property does not occur by any natural means and only coercive actions of state artificially preserve it.” Holding her breath with a smile for a long pause, Mara concluded, “Too cleverly he crafts his words yet only does he rearranges and repeats contrivances of his associate. They say to her ‘protection’, ‘property’, ‘liberty’ and ‘coercion’ one times too many for her to overlook as incidental. He says ‘mutually consensual trade’ but she asks how ‘consensual’ is trade with party under threat of starvation or threat of violence? He says ‘economics’ - She says weapons. Yes. She understands precisely what means economics. What she does not understand is how he convinces himself his words alter the meaning of his actions. He insults his own intelligence more so than he insults her intelligence.”

Addressing King Nelles, Mara smiled a completely unexpected and charming smile, stating, “She thanks good King Nelles for lovely evenings of fine liqueurs, delicious foods and pleasant stimulating conversations.” then returning her attention to Heigaan, she advised, “His associate concludes with trite hollow cliché in panic after his own argument condemns him, but he **commences** in panic with trite hollow cliché and so also... **He loses!** Before he commences, he loses!” then once again returning her attention to King Nelles, Mara suggested, “More contestants with him he brings next times. When all contestants he wishes exhausts all arguments he wishes **then** they will address his *‘potential relevant archival agreements of record’* of which he initially speaks, yes?” Mara bowed then informed her companions as she rose from her chair, “They go now.”

King Nelles rose and escorted Mara and her party back to the circular chamber then initiated a formality in which his entourage in succession, bid Mara and Dara farewell and exchanged courtesies. Wyl discreetly drifted close to the cabinetry to inspect the voluminous collection of leather bound books, immediately fascinated by the variety of language, theory, history and lore within only the segment in his immediate reach.

“Looking for something in particular?” a voice inquired softly over his shoulder.

Startling slightly, Wyl turned to find King Nelles next to him. “My apologies, my Lord.” Wyl stated, “I didn’t intend to intrude.”

“No. Not at all.” Nelles insisted, “It pleases me to observe interest in my collection. I consider it a compliment.” The interaction surprised Wyl a bit, expecting a man such as Nelles would never stoop to converse with such a lowly peasant as him, let alone one in the company of the presumably reviled Mazan. Nelles smirked as if sensing the thought and remarked sarcastically, “I suppose it would prove to no avail to offer you a print of basic economic theory. I suspect your Mistress would seize it from you and burn it, if you in fact did not do so yourself under her influence.”

“My Lord, I am but a humble manservant.” Wyl replied, more than anything in the hope excessive submissiveness somehow made the silliness of his hood dressed over his head indoors appear as some kind of credible form of fanaticism, and he added as reinforcement, “I am hardly qualified by any stretch to argue such advanced disciplines as economics.”

Nelles grunted and remarked, “There is no such thing as an unqualified opinion. ‘Unqualified’ is an excuse to avoid the discomfort of disagreement.” With a sly smile, Nelles leaned slightly closer and repeated somewhat under his breath, “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to take a look at that print of economic theory?”

Wyl stiffened and mentioned as if it only just occurred to him, “Someone told me about the Ome’ and I remember thinking it sounded fascinating. Are you familiar with it?” Nelles motioned with his head and Wyl followed then Nelles opened a glass door and removed a relatively short and compact book by comparison to most others, bound in a leather cover finished in dark violet then pushed the book at Wyl. Somewhat amazed by the gesture, Wyl wrapped his hands onto the object but stated, “I don’t know if I can—”

“-Do not argue with me, please.” Nelles insisted, “You did not ask me for it. I offered it to you. Do not insult me with the refusal of a token gesture.”

Wyl conceded the argument with a nod and simply said, “Thank you, my Lord.”

Nelles immediately remarked, “I will attach a condition so you can consider it a fair value exchange if you are uncomfortable with the acceptance of something you regard as gratuitous. Read all of it or some portion of it and sometime soon, you owe me an opinion about it -- any opinion at all -- or I will ask you to return it.”

Wyl nodded and agreed, “Absolutely. Thank you again.” Glancing over his shoulder into the chamber, to his surprise, Wyl observed the entourage long since departed. Only Nelles remained and MaraDara stood close by ready to depart. Mara nodded at Nelles and the three exited the chamber then turned toward the stairwell.

Reposed in front of the fireplace in the room long after Saccia and Dara retired, Wyl asked Mara, “Did you notice the recurring words?”

Digging his journal out of his clothing, Wyl flipped it open to a marked page as Mara flexed her forehead and inquired, “He takes notes?”

“Yeah.” Wyl admitted a bit ashamed of the indiscretion then in an attempt to rehabilitate himself, he argued, “-but nobody noticed! You didn’t notice, right?” Mara shook her head somewhat reluctantly and Wyl immediately continued, advising, “-so... recurring words. I call them recurring words as opposed to recurring themes because the words **are** themes.” Referring to his list, Wyl explained, “You have the positive sentiment themes, ‘freedom’, ‘liberty’, ‘property’, ‘incentive’ and a host of others -- I think those words are all closely related but ‘liberty’ means something distinctly different from ‘freedom’ -- then there’s the negative sentiment themes, ‘tyranny’, ‘coercion’, ‘interference’, ‘artificial’...”

Mara smiled slightly, stretched out wrapping herself in blankets and stated with a yawn, “Yes, she notices word themes.”

“Oh yeah, I noticed you noticed.” Wyl remarked while cinching up against Mara then lowering his voice to a near whisper, he confided, “It’s spooky. The definitions for their thematic words aren’t a customary sort of definition. They’re more complicated, like the definition of each word might take up a whole page of text as opposed to a single concise sentence and I sense what’s far more important to them than what the words mean is what the words **don’t** mean, you know what I mean? I imagine that whole page of definition I’m talking about probably describes mostly what the word **doesn’t** mean, and the only thing that distinguishes the positive theme word from the negative theme word is the sentiment... most conspicuous of all, in the contexts of the arguments, with everything they said, they described ‘liberty’ and ‘tyranny’ as precisely the same thing.”

Wyl held his breath as if straining to lift a heavy object then speculated, “Positive sentiment words and their negative sentiment counterparts mean exactly the same things, and the only criterion that distinguishes them as something different one from the other is the sentiment... ‘Liberty’ means desirable tyranny and ‘tyranny’ means undesirable liberty. These men don’t bandy the terms to define multiple principles as oppositional but merely to divide a single principle into portions for which they feel positive and negative sentiments. The reason they can’t persuade you is that you apply a single principle universally and would never consider dividing it into contrary sentiments but they **think** they can persuade you because with the thematic jargon, they have persuaded themselves to believe that their sentiments are the product of incontrovertible logic and reason.”

Wyl paused and then impulsively advanced to his next subject of curiosity, inquiring, “What about the titles? Nelles introduced two of his council as his policy and economic advisors but neither one ever spoke. You asked questions about policy and economics and the only two that spoke to you were the ministers of agriculture and defense. You know what I think of that? I think ‘agriculture’ means beating peasants and robbing them of their crops, and ‘defense’ means pretty much the same thing as ‘agriculture’. You introduced the subjects of policy and economics, and the Ministers of Beating Peasants and Robbing Them of Their Crops responded to you because evidently, they’re the two most qualified experts present to speak on the subjects of policy and economics.”

“Mm, yes. She appreciates ironies.” Mara whispered and before Wyl spoke further, she suggested, “His book gift from kings perhaps to him explains many things about his titles and word themes, yes?”

Wyl twisted his head and inquired, “What? You mean the Ome?”

“Is not ‘the’ Ome’.” Mara gently corrected, “Is Ome’... like proper names, yes? He does not refer to girl as ‘the’ Saccia, yes? To disciples, book is like, eh... individual personalities, yes?”

“Nelles didn’t correct me when I said ‘the’ Ome’.” Wyl impulsively argued.

“Mm, Nelles.” Mara repeated with a hint of mockery, “His friend Nelles accommodates him. He thinks perhaps in him he finds convert, yes? He thinks perhaps he converts humble peasant manservant of Mazan and causes discord in Mazan world.”

“Really?” Wyl asked somewhat intrigued, “Should I pretend to convert?”

“Mm, no.” Mara answered with little consideration, “His conversions very unlikely and these king appreciates. Negative consequences of pretending and failing are more unconstructive than honest disagreement. He reads gift book from king if these pleases him. If king asks, he confides with king his honest impressions, yes?”

“Okay.” Wyl affirmed then after a contemplative pause, he inquired suspiciously, “You know about this? ... the- I mean... Ome’?”

“Mm.” Mara grunted.

“You never mentioned it.” Wyl asserted almost as if an accusation, “The old man longbeard mentioned it and by your reaction, or lack thereof, I never would have guessed you even heard of it. Why would you never say anything?”

“She considers... eh...-” Mara sighed evidently too tired or disinterested to settle on an appropriate word.

“Inconsequential?” Wyl suggested.

“Yes, inconsequential. Very good.” Mara congratulated.

“-but... the longbeard said it would answer my questions.” Wyl argued.