OFFICE OF IMPROBABLE JURISDICTION

Department of Delegated Powers, Incarnate Emissary Welfare, Cosmic Administration, and the Protection of Free Peoples

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THE PALANTÍR QUESTION

On the Acquisition of Information, the Manufacture of Certainty, and the Risks of Adversarial Communication

A Continuing Inquiry into the Distinction Between Observation and Understanding, the Manipulation of Truth Through Selective Disclosure, and the Responsibilities of Those Who Possess the Means to See Beyond Their Immediate Circumstances

Office of Improbable Jurisdiction
November 14, 2026

NOTICE OF CONTINUING INVESTIGATION

The Office of Improbable Jurisdiction hereby continues its inquiry into the conduct and responsibilities of the Maiar, with particular attention to the use of the palantíri during the later history of Middle-earth.

The preceding proceedings established concerns regarding the corruption of delegated authority, the misuse of extraordinary knowledge, and the tendency of powerful individuals to mistake their understanding of a danger for an unrestricted right to determine the response.

The present investigation concerns the means by which such understanding is obtained.

The palantíri, commonly called the seeing-stones, were instruments of extraordinary perception and communication.

Through their use, individuals could perceive distant places and, under appropriate circumstances, communicate across distances that ordinary travel could not readily overcome.

Their capabilities were substantial.

Their operation required knowledge, strength of will, and judgment.

Their possession carried considerable strategic importance.

Nevertheless, the Office observes that the ability to see a distant event does not necessarily establish an understanding of that event.

Nor does the possession of information establish that the information has been interpreted correctly.

A person may witness a genuine occurrence and misunderstand its significance.

A person may receive accurate information that has been selected to encourage an inaccurate conclusion.

A person may correctly identify a danger while remaining mistaken about its inevitability.

And a person may acquire such confidence in the superiority of his own information that he ceases to recognize the possibility of error.

The Office considers these distinctions especially important where the instrument of observation is connected, directly or indirectly, to an adversary possessing both the motive and the ability to influence what the observer perceives.

The question is not simply whether the information is true.

It is whether the truth has been presented in a manner that permits understanding.

The Office therefore enters the following preliminary principle:

Access to information does not constitute possession of certainty.

The inquiry proceeds.

I. On the Nature of the Seeing-Stones

The palantíri were made in Aman and were associated with the extraordinary craftsmanship of the Eldar.

Seven were brought to Middle-earth by Elendil and his sons following the downfall of Númenor.

They were subsequently placed in locations associated with the northern and southern kingdoms of the Dúnedain.

Their purposes included observation and communication.

The Office recognizes that these capabilities were of substantial value.

The ability to communicate across great distances may strengthen cooperation.

The ability to observe developments beyond one's immediate surroundings may permit earlier recognition of danger.

The ability to receive information from distant places may reduce the isolation of communities and institutions.

These are legitimate purposes.

The Office therefore rejects any interpretation under which the eventual misuse of the palantíri establishes that their creation was inherently improper.

A communication instrument does not become malicious merely because a malicious person learns to use it.

Nor does the fact that an instrument may be misused establish that every person who relies upon it has exercised poor judgment.

The relevant questions concern access, purpose, interpretation, and the circumstances under which information is obtained.

The Office further observes that the palantíri were not ordinary windows.

Their operation required attention to the relationship between the stone, its user, and the object of observation.

The capacities of different stones were not necessarily identical.

Nor were all users equally capable of employing them.

The surviving accounts indicate that skill, will, knowledge, and rightful authority affected their use.

The Office therefore cautions against treating the palantíri as simple devices whose outputs could be interpreted without reference to the conditions of their operation.

It also cautions against the opposite error.

The unusual nature of an instrument does not eliminate the need to examine its effects.

A device need not resemble a familiar machine to create recognizable problems of trust, access, and responsibility.

The Office considers these problems central to the present inquiry.

II. On the Difference Between Seeing and Knowing

The Office now considers the epistemological limitations of observation.

To see an event is to acquire information concerning that event.

It is not necessarily to acquire information concerning every cause, consequence, intention, or circumstance associated with it.

A person may observe an army moving.

The observation does not establish the army's ultimate destination.

A person may observe ships approaching a harbor.

The observation does not, by itself, establish the intentions of those aboard.

A person may observe an enemy preparing for war.

The observation may provide evidence of danger.

It does not necessarily establish the outcome of the war.

The Office recognizes that such distinctions may appear obvious when considered abstractly.

They become more difficult to preserve when the observer possesses an instrument capable of showing events far beyond ordinary sight.

The extraordinary character of the instrument may encourage the observer to assign extraordinary authority to the information received.

The observer may begin to confuse the instrument's capabilities with the completeness of the understanding those capabilities provide.

The ability to see farther does not necessarily mean that one sees more clearly.

The Office further observes that the experience of direct perception may be especially persuasive.

Information obtained through an intermediary may be questioned.

A report may be examined for omissions.

A messenger may be asked how the information was acquired.

A rumor may be compared with other accounts.

But an individual who believes he has witnessed an event personally may be less inclined to question his interpretation.

He has seen it.

What further evidence could be required?

The Office considers this reasoning inadequate.

An image may be accurate and incomplete.

A perception may be genuine and misleading.

And the confidence produced by direct observation may exceed the understanding that observation reasonably supports.

The Office therefore recommends a distinction among three separate propositions:

What has been observed.

What the observer believes the observation means.

What the observer concludes must therefore be done.

These propositions may be related.

They are not interchangeable.

The Office finds that substantial harm may result when an individual moves from the first to the third without adequately examining the second.

III. On the Integrity of Information and the Manipulation of Truth

The Office recognizes an important limitation upon the manner in which the palantíri could be used to deceive.

The stones were not ordinarily instruments through which their users could simply manufacture arbitrary false images.

Their danger lay, in substantial part, in the possibility that genuine sights could be selected, directed, or interpreted in ways that created misleading impressions.

This distinction deserves particular attention.

An individual who wishes to deceive another need not always invent false information.

It may be sufficient to select true information carefully.

To show the strength of an enemy while concealing the weakness.

To show a danger while withholding evidence of a possible remedy.

To show a failure while omitting the successes that occurred alongside it.

To show an approaching catastrophe while excluding the actions already underway to prevent it.

Each selected observation may be accurate.

The conclusion encouraged by their arrangement may nevertheless be false.

The Office refers to this practice as **the manufacture of certainty through selective truth**.

The phrase does not suggest that the underlying observations have necessarily been fabricated.

Rather, it describes the construction of an apparently complete account through the deliberate selection of incomplete evidence.

The distinction is significant.

A person confronted with an obvious falsehood may seek correction.

A person confronted with accurate but selectively presented information may find the deception more difficult to recognize.

The information appears reliable because it is reliable within the narrow boundaries of what has been shown.

The error lies in the assumption that those boundaries encompass everything relevant.

A true image may be used to support a false conclusion.

The Office considers this principle essential to understanding the danger presented by adversarial communication through the palantíri.

It further observes that the person controlling the selection of information may exercise substantial influence without issuing a direct command.

The observer may believe himself to be reaching an independent conclusion.

Yet the materials from which that conclusion is drawn have been arranged by another.

The resulting judgment may therefore be influenced at a stage preceding conscious deliberation.

The Office does not suggest that every act of selecting information constitutes manipulation.

No account can contain every possible fact.

Selection is often necessary for communication.

The ethical question concerns whether the selection is undertaken to improve understanding or to produce a predetermined misunderstanding.

The Office regards this distinction as fundamental.

IV. On the Capture of the Ithil-Stone

The Office next considers the palantír formerly held at Minas Ithil.

Following the capture of the city by the forces of Sauron, the stone came into his possession.

This circumstance substantially altered the risks associated with communication through the remaining stones.

An instrument originally placed within a network associated with the kingdoms of the Dúnedain was now controlled by an adversary whose purposes were hostile to those kingdoms.

The Office recognizes that the possession of a stone conferred a significant practical advantage.

It does not follow that possession established legitimate custodianship.

Nor does control of a communication instrument establish a right to manipulate other users of that instrument.

The distinction between possession and authority, previously examined in the Istari Mandate, remains applicable.

Sauron's acquisition of the Ithil-stone allowed him to exert influence through a means of communication that other persons might still regard as a source of extraordinary knowledge.

The Office identifies a substantial institutional vulnerability.

A communication system may continue to function after one of its important instruments has fallen into hostile hands.

The apparent continuity of its operation may conceal a fundamental change in the conditions of trust.

A user may recognize the instrument.

The user may know its history.

The user may have relied upon its capabilities previously.

Yet the circumstances governing the information received may have changed.

The continuity of a communication channel does not establish the continuity of its trustworthiness.

The Office therefore finds that the capture of the Ithil-stone should be understood not merely as the loss of a valuable object, but as an alteration in the informational environment confronting the users of the surviving stones.

The Office makes no finding that every subsequent use of a palantír was necessarily compromised.

It does find that the possibility of adversarial contact became a material consideration.

The preservation of an instrument's usefulness required recognition of the danger that now accompanied its operation.

V. On Curumo and the Palantír of Orthanc

The Office now returns to Saruman.

As custodian and user of the Orthanc-stone, Saruman possessed a means of observation and communication exceeding the capabilities available to most inhabitants of Middle-earth.

The Office recognizes that such access could have served legitimate purposes.

Information concerning Sauron's movements might have assisted resistance.

Communication across distance might have strengthened cooperation.

Observation of developments beyond Isengard might have informed the White Council's deliberations.

These possibilities were consistent with the broader purposes of the Istari Mandate.

The respondent's actual conduct raises substantial concerns.

Through the Orthanc-stone, Saruman came into communication with Sauron.

The surviving accounts indicate that this contact contributed to his entanglement with the very power he had been commissioned to oppose.

The Office cautions against explaining the respondent's subsequent conduct as the simple consequence of irresistible external control.

Saruman possessed ambitions of his own.

He sought the One Ring for purposes that were not identical to Sauron's.

He attempted to advance his own position even while operating under the influence and pressure of a more powerful adversary.

The Office therefore distinguishes between manipulation and the complete elimination of agency.

An individual may be manipulated without becoming incapable of making choices.

An individual may be pressured without becoming innocent of every subsequent decision.

An individual may also recognize the possibility of deception while remaining susceptible to it.

The Office considers the last circumstance especially important.

Saruman's expertise did not render him immune to manipulation.

Indeed, his confidence in his own knowledge and strength may have contributed to his vulnerability.

The person who believes himself too perceptive to be deceived may cease to examine the conditions under which deception becomes possible.

Knowledge of manipulation is not immunity from manipulation.

The Office further notes that Saruman's access to the palantír created an opportunity for private communication beyond the scrutiny of those whose interests his commission was intended to protect.

The existence of private communication is not inherently improper.

Confidentiality may serve legitimate purposes.

But private communication with an adversary, undertaken while exercising authority derived from a mission to oppose that adversary, raises questions concerning divided loyalties and undisclosed influence.

The Office considers those questions substantial.

Its earlier findings concerning the corruption of Saruman's commission remain in effect.

VI. On the Problem of Superior Knowledge

The Office considers it necessary to examine an assumption common to the conduct of powerful advisers.

The assumption is that superior access to information establishes superior entitlement to decide.

Saruman possessed knowledge beyond that of most mortals.

He understood ancient history.

He possessed technical skill.

He studied the Rings of Power.

He had access to instruments through which he could observe matters concealed from ordinary sight.

These advantages were real.

But they did not eliminate the possibility of error.

Nor did they establish that his interests were identical to those of the people affected by his decisions.

The Office therefore rejects the proposition that greater knowledge automatically confers greater political legitimacy.

An adviser may correctly identify a danger.

The adviser may correctly understand the likely consequences of inaction.

The adviser may possess information unavailable to those being advised.

Nevertheless, the persons affected by the proposed response retain interests, relationships, and responsibilities that the adviser may not fully understand.

Their judgment may be imperfect.

So may his.

The possession of unusual knowledge does not alter this fundamental condition.

An expert may know more about a problem without knowing everything about the people who must live with the proposed solution.

The Office acknowledges that knowledge may justify confidence in particular conclusions.

It does not advocate indiscriminate skepticism.

Nor does it suggest that all interpretations possess equal evidentiary support.

The purpose of examining uncertainty is not to deny the possibility of knowledge.

It is to prevent knowledge from being mistaken for unlimited authority.

The Office considers this distinction especially important in circumstances where the consequences of a decision will be borne principally by persons other than the decision-maker.

The more distant the decision-maker becomes from those consequences, the greater the need to examine whether the information upon which the decision rests is sufficiently complete.

Saruman's history illustrates what may occur when the distinction is abandoned.

The Office's findings concerning his use of information are therefore incorporated into the present proceeding.

VII. On Denethor and the Stone of Anor

The Office now considers the conduct of Denethor II, Steward of Gondor.

The palantír held at Minas Tirith, formerly Minas Anor, remained available to the ruling authority of Gondor.

Denethor employed the stone during a period of extraordinary danger.

The Office recognizes that he possessed substantial responsibilities.

Gondor faced military threats from a powerful adversary.

Its people depended upon the judgment of those charged with their defense.

Information concerning enemy movements was therefore of immediate strategic importance.

The Office does not presume that Denethor's decision to employ the stone was inherently irresponsible.

Nor does it accept the interpretation that his use of the palantír established that he was simply deceived by fabricated visions.

The surviving accounts present a more difficult situation.

Denethor possessed considerable strength of will.

He was not reduced to an obedient instrument of Sauron.

He perceived genuine dangers.

Yet his contact with an adversary of greater power exposed him to a selective understanding of circumstances that contributed to his despair.

The Office considers this distinction essential.

Denethor did not need to be shown an imaginary army.

The armies of Mordor were real.

He did not need to be shown an imaginary threat to Gondor.

The threat was real.

He did not need to be persuaded that destruction was possible.

Destruction was possible.

The error arose when the reality of danger came to be treated as sufficient evidence of the inevitability of defeat.

The Office therefore distinguishes between the recognition of danger and the surrender of judgment to that danger.

A catastrophe may be possible without being certain.

A danger may be overwhelming without being final.

And the inability to perceive a path toward survival does not establish that no such path exists.

The Office recognizes the severity of the circumstances confronting Denethor.

It does not propose to reduce his despair to a simple failure of character.

He bore responsibility under conditions of war, grief, exhaustion, and profound uncertainty.

His actions must be examined within those circumstances.

Nevertheless, the Office cannot disregard the consequences of his conclusions for others.

Denethor's despair became especially dangerous when he attempted to impose upon his son Faramir the finality he had come to believe unavoidable.

The Office considers this a grave distinction.

A person may lose hope.

The loss may be understandable.

It does not automatically establish an entitlement to determine that another person's life must end with his own.

The conviction that no future remains is not sufficient authority to extinguish another person's future.

The Office therefore finds that Denethor's history illustrates both the vulnerability of an observer exposed to adversarially selected truth and the danger of converting private certainty into decisions imposed upon others.

His tragedy should not be simplified into foolishness.

Nor should its seriousness prevent examination of the harm associated with his final decisions.

VIII. On the Manufacture of Despair

The Office now examines a particular consequence of selective information.

The manufacture of despair does not necessarily require the invention of suffering.

It may proceed through the deliberate concentration of attention upon suffering that is real.

An adversary may show losses.

May show preparations for further violence.

May show the apparent strength of hostile forces.

May show the destruction of familiar places.

May show the failure of expected assistance.

Each observation may be genuine.

Yet a record consisting exclusively of such observations may produce the impression that nothing else exists.

The observer may begin to confuse the limits of the available account with the limits of possibility itself.

The Office finds this mechanism especially dangerous because despair may appear to be a conclusion supported by evidence.

The observer is not necessarily imagining the danger.

The observer has seen it.

The armies are real.

The losses are real.

The suffering is real.

What remains unproven is the conclusion that the future has therefore been settled.

Despair may arise not from seeing what is false, but from being prevented from seeing what remains possible.

The Office acknowledges that not every situation possesses a favorable outcome.

A person may confront circumstances in which survival is unlikely.

Institutions may fail.

Cities may fall.

Lives may be lost despite every reasonable effort to preserve them.

Recognition of these possibilities is not itself an error.

The error lies in treating an incomplete account as though it had established the impossibility of every alternative.

The Office therefore cautions against the assumption that a person possessing unusually extensive information necessarily possesses a more balanced understanding than someone whose information is limited.

The breadth of the information matters.

So does its selection.

So does the interpretive framework through which it is received.

And so does the possibility that the person receiving it has become unwilling or unable to consider evidence inconsistent with an emerging conclusion.

The Office enters the following principle:

An institution that controls what may be seen may influence what its observers believe can be done.

Such influence may operate even where no individual observation is false.

The Office considers this a substantial concern.

IX. On Peregrin Took and Unanticipated Access

The Office next considers the experience of Peregrin Took.

Following the events at Orthanc, the palantír came into the possession of the company accompanying Gandalf.

Peregrin subsequently examined the stone.

His use of the instrument brought him into contact with Sauron.

The Office acknowledges that Peregrin acted without fully understanding the dangers associated with the object.

His curiosity contributed to the incident.

Nevertheless, the Office does not consider curiosity alone sufficient grounds for assigning responsibility for every foreseeable consequence of access to an extraordinarily dangerous instrument.

The palantír was not an ordinary object.

Its capacities were not readily apparent from its appearance.

Its risks were not necessarily intelligible to a person unfamiliar with its operation.

The Office therefore distinguishes between unauthorized access and informed assumption of risk.

A person may deliberately handle an object without understanding the dangers the object presents.

That circumstance does not make the decision wise.

It does, however, affect the allocation of responsibility.

The existence of a warning that was never effectively communicated does not establish that the person exposed to danger understood the warning.

The Office further recognizes that the palantír was a powerful instrument whose safe handling required expertise unavailable to an ordinary Hobbit.

Its possession by a company containing inexperienced persons therefore created foreseeable custodial risks.

The Office does not suggest that every such risk could have been eliminated.

It does recommend that future custodians of comparable objects consider whether their security arrangements depend excessively upon the assumption that no one will touch them.

The Office acknowledges that Peregrin survived the encounter.

It further acknowledges that the information Sauron drew from the incident did not necessarily produce the strategic advantage the adversary anticipated.

These outcomes do not retroactively establish that the exposure was harmless.

A dangerous incident may produce an unexpected benefit.

The benefit does not eliminate the danger.

Nor does it establish that the incident should be deliberately reproduced.

The Office therefore enters no recommendation that inexperienced persons be encouraged to examine hostile communication instruments for the purpose of confusing their operators.

The Office considers this limitation self-evident.

It has nevertheless been advised that the limitation should be recorded.

X. On the Difference Between Contact and Consent

The experience of Peregrin Took raises a broader question concerning communication.

The Office distinguishes between the establishment of contact and the voluntary acceptance of the conditions under which communication occurs.

A person may encounter an instrument without intending to communicate with a particular individual.

A person may begin an exchange without understanding the identity or intentions of the other participant.

A person may be exposed to demands or pressures that were not reasonably foreseeable at the moment contact began.

The Office therefore rejects the assumption that contact itself constitutes consent to every consequence of communication.

This distinction is especially important where the person encountered possesses extraordinary power.

Sauron's capacity to exert pressure upon those who came into contact with him through a palantír was not equivalent to an ordinary exchange between equally situated correspondents.

The Office recognizes that the surviving accounts describe spiritual and mental capacities that do not correspond precisely to modern categories of communication.

Nevertheless, the ethical question remains intelligible.

An individual may be exposed to another person's influence without having meaningfully chosen that exposure.

And an individual who initiates contact may not have understood the nature of what he was initiating.

The Office therefore proposes that responsibility for harmful communication be evaluated with attention to the capacities, knowledge, and intentions of the participants.

A channel may be open without every person reached through it having agreed to the encounter.

The Office considers this principle especially relevant where an instrument's operation permits the stronger participant to exert pressure upon the weaker.

The mere fact that the weaker participant touched the instrument does not establish that every subsequent act of domination was authorized.

XI. On Aragorn and the Deliberate Use of the Orthanc-Stone

The Office now examines a materially different use of the palantír.

Aragorn, heir of Isildur, deliberately employed the Orthanc-stone to confront Sauron.

Unlike Peregrin, Aragorn understood the nature of the instrument and the danger associated with its use.

Unlike Saruman, his purpose was not to establish a private understanding with Sauron for the advancement of competing ambitions.

Unlike Denethor, his use of the stone was not principally directed toward acquiring a more complete picture of an enemy whose strength had already threatened to overwhelm his judgment.

Aragorn sought to influence Sauron's understanding of events.

He asserted his identity and authority.

He revealed himself to the adversary.

And he accepted the danger that such a confrontation entailed.

The Office recognizes that this act involved considerable risk.

It does not treat the outcome as proof that the decision was necessarily safe.

Nor does it presume that every person possessing a legitimate claim of authority would have been equally capable of undertaking such a confrontation.

The circumstances were exceptional.

The Office further observes that Aragorn's use of the stone illustrates a distinction between the manipulation of information and the strategic disclosure of truth.

An individual may choose to reveal accurate information for the purpose of influencing an adversary's judgment.

Such disclosure is not inherently illegitimate.

Its ethical character depends upon the purpose, context, authority, and consequences of the act.

Aragorn's confrontation contributed to Sauron's premature action by encouraging him to interpret events through the assumptions already governing his judgment.

The Office considers this significant.

Sauron was not merely capable of manipulating the conclusions of others.

He was also vulnerable to mistaken conclusions of his own.

His expectations concerning the Ring and the ambitions of those opposing him shaped his interpretation of the information received.

The power to influence another's perception does not establish freedom from error in one's own.

The Office therefore finds that the palantíri did not create a simple division between knowledgeable manipulators and ignorant victims.

They exposed the judgments of their users to the consequences of their own assumptions.

Those assumptions could be exploited.

The instrument did not eliminate the need for humility.

If anything, its capabilities made humility more necessary.

XII. On the Adversary Who Misunderstood

The Office considers it appropriate to examine Sauron's interpretation of the information available to him.

Sauron possessed extraordinary knowledge and power.

He understood the Rings.

He understood domination.

He understood the strategic significance of the One Ring.

He understood that its possession might enable another powerful being to challenge him.

These considerations shaped his conduct.

Yet his understanding was incomplete.

He did not sufficiently anticipate that his enemies would seek to destroy the Ring rather than employ it.

The Office recognizes that this failure was consequential.

Sauron's interpretation of available information was influenced by his assumptions concerning power.

He understood the desire to possess it.

He understood the desire to wield it.

He understood the fear of losing it.

He did not adequately account for the possibility that another person might knowingly reject its use.

The Office therefore identifies a form of interpretive error particularly dangerous to powerful institutions.

An institution may become incapable of recognizing motives that differ fundamentally from its own.

A ruler who regards every political relationship as a contest for domination may interpret every opponent as another aspiring ruler.

A person who understands power principally through possession may assume that anyone capable of possessing power will seek to acquire it.

An institution that relies upon coercion may underestimate cooperation freely undertaken.

An adversary accustomed to the pursuit of advantage may fail to recognize sacrifice.

The Office does not suggest that such motives are inherently incomprehensible to powerful beings.

It observes that their recognition requires a willingness to consider possibilities inconsistent with one's own habits of judgment.

Sauron possessed information.

He possessed extraordinary means of obtaining more.

Nevertheless, the limitations of his assumptions contributed to his failure.

The Office therefore enters the following principle:

The acquisition of more information cannot correct an error that the interpreter refuses to recognize as possible.

This finding is of particular relevance to the present inquiry.

The problem of adversarial communication is not confined to the deliberate deception practiced by an opponent.

It includes the distortions introduced by the observer's own desires, fears, and expectations.

The palantír may show what is real.

The observer must still decide what it means.

XIII. On the Burden of Continuous Observation

The Office now considers whether the availability of extraordinary information creates a corresponding expectation that such information must continually be sought.

A ruler responsible for the defense of a city may possess legitimate reasons to monitor approaching danger.

An adviser confronting a powerful adversary may reasonably seek knowledge of hostile movements.

An institution may benefit from maintaining awareness of circumstances beyond its immediate surroundings.

Nevertheless, the Office rejects the assumption that the ability to observe continuously establishes an obligation to do so.

The availability of information does not eliminate the limitations of those required to interpret it.

Attention is finite.

Judgment may become impaired through exhaustion.

Repeated exposure to danger may alter the observer's understanding of its probability and significance.

The constant search for additional information may eventually cease to improve understanding.

It may instead become an attempt to eliminate uncertainty through observation alone.

The Office considers this attempt fundamentally limited.

No amount of observation guarantees knowledge of every future event.

Nor does the continuous acquisition of information necessarily establish which decisions ought to follow.

There may be circumstances in which the responsible use of an instrument includes the decision to stop looking through it.

The Office does not advocate ignorance.

It advocates recognition of the relationship between information and judgment.

A person entrusted with a dangerous instrument must consider not only what the instrument may reveal, but what its use requires of the person receiving the revelation.

The ability to see distant suffering does not create an unlimited capacity to respond to that suffering.

The ability to observe every approaching threat does not create the power to prevent every threat.

And the knowledge that dangers exist does not necessarily establish that one must remain in uninterrupted contact with them.

The Office therefore recommends that future custodians of comparable instruments consider the conditions under which observation remains useful.

Such consideration should include the purposes of observation, the reliability of the information received, the circumstances of the user, and the availability of independent judgment.

The Office recognizes that the palantíri do not possess ordinary operating schedules.

It does not propose that a stone be permitted to function only during established office hours.

It does, however, observe that constant availability is not synonymous with responsible use.

XIV. On Independent Verification

The Office now addresses the need to compare information obtained through powerful instruments with evidence acquired through other means.

An observation may be genuine.

It may nevertheless require context.

That context may be provided by witnesses, historical records, physical evidence, or other forms of inquiry.

The Office recognizes that no method of verification is infallible.

Witnesses may be mistaken.

Documents may be incomplete.

Messengers may arrive too late.

Physical evidence may be difficult to interpret.

Nevertheless, the limitations of ordinary evidence do not establish that extraordinary evidence should be exempt from examination.

The Office therefore rejects the assumption that the prestige of an instrument establishes the completeness of its output.

A palantír may show an army.

It does not necessarily reveal the army's intentions.

A palantír may show a ship.

It does not necessarily reveal who will ultimately command it.

A palantír may show the strength of an adversary.

It does not necessarily establish that the adversary's plans will succeed.

The Office recommends that information obtained through an instrument of extraordinary perception be evaluated according to the same fundamental distinctions applicable to other forms of evidence.

What has been observed?

Under what conditions was it observed?

What remains outside the observation?

What interpretations are reasonably supported?

What interpretations remain possible?

And what decisions, if any, are justified by the available record?

These questions are not evidence of disrespect toward the instrument.

They are evidence of respect for the consequences of relying upon it.

The greater the authority assigned to a source of information, the more important it becomes to understand the limits of that source.

The Office considers this principle essential to responsible information governance.

XV. On the Duty to Preserve Uncertainty

The Office recognizes that institutions frequently operate under pressure to produce definite conclusions.

A ruler may require an assessment of danger.

A commander may require a decision concerning deployment.

An adviser may be asked whether a proposed course will succeed.

A council may demand clarity before committing resources.

These needs are legitimate.

Nevertheless, the demand for a decision does not transform uncertain evidence into certain evidence.

The Office therefore distinguishes between the obligation to act and the obligation to claim certainty.

An institution may be required to make a decision before all relevant information is available.

It may be necessary to choose among imperfect alternatives.

It may be impossible to delay without creating additional danger.

But none of these circumstances requires the institution to pretend that its information is complete.

Uncertainty may remain genuine even when a decision cannot be postponed.

The Office considers the preservation of this distinction especially important where institutions rely upon experts or instruments whose perceived authority may discourage questions.

The statement that a conclusion is the best supported by the available evidence differs from the assertion that no other conclusion is possible.

The statement that an outcome is probable differs from the assertion that it is inevitable.

And the statement that a danger is grave differs from the assertion that resistance is futile.

The Office identifies the conversion of such distinctions into unwarranted certainty as a recurring hazard of power.

Saruman used his knowledge to justify increasingly coercive conduct.

Denethor allowed genuine danger to become, in his judgment, evidence of unavoidable defeat.

Sauron interpreted the actions of his adversaries through assumptions that ultimately proved inadequate.

Their circumstances differed.

Their responsibilities differed.

Their conduct differed.

Nevertheless, each illustrates the danger of allowing interpretation to harden into certainty without sufficient recognition of its limits.

The Office therefore enters the following preliminary principle:

Responsible judgment does not require the elimination of uncertainty. It requires the recognition of uncertainty where uncertainty remains.

The inquiry proceeds.

XVI. On Communication Without Understanding

The Office now considers the broader relationship between communication and mutual understanding.

The existence of a channel between two persons does not establish that they share intentions, interests, or interpretive assumptions.

Nor does an exchange of information necessarily produce trust.

Two persons may observe the same event and understand it differently.

They may use the same words while assigning those words different significance.

They may accurately describe their circumstances while misunderstanding the circumstances of the other.

The Office therefore cautions against treating communication as an automatic remedy for disagreement.

Communication can clarify.

It can also manipulate.

It can disclose.

It can conceal.

It can strengthen cooperation.

It can deepen hostility.

Its ethical value cannot be determined solely by the fact that information has been exchanged.

The Office considers this distinction especially important where one participant possesses substantial influence over the other.

A powerful adversary may use communication to intimidate.

May disclose selected information to induce despair.

May invite cooperation under misleading conditions.

May interpret another's response as evidence of intentions the respondent does not possess.

And may believe that the establishment of contact has created a relationship of authority where none exists.

The Office therefore enters the following observation:

The ability to reach another person does not establish an entitlement to command that person.

Nor does the ability to observe another's circumstances establish a right to determine what those circumstances should become.

The distinction returns the inquiry to the purpose of the Istari Mandate.

The preservation of freedom requires more than the defeat of overt coercion.

It requires recognition that another person's judgment is not merely an obstacle to be overcome.

The palantíri made communication possible across extraordinary distances.

They did not eliminate the ethical distance between understanding another person and possessing authority over that person.

The Office considers this limitation significant.

XVII. Preliminary Findings

Following review of the surviving accounts, the Office enters the following provisional findings.

First. The palantíri were instruments of extraordinary observation and communication whose legitimate purposes included coordination, information gathering, and the maintenance of contact across great distances.

Second. The subsequent misuse of these instruments does not establish that their creation or every instance of their use was inherently improper.

Third. The accuracy of an observation does not establish the completeness of the information available to the observer.

Fourth. Genuine information may be selected or presented in ways that encourage inaccurate conclusions.

Fifth. The capture of a communication instrument by an adversary may substantially alter the conditions of trust governing its continued use.

Sixth. Saruman's contact with Sauron through the Orthanc-stone contributed to circumstances in which his independent ambitions and adversarial influence became dangerously entangled.

Seventh. Superior knowledge does not establish unlimited authority to determine the actions of those who possess less information.

Eighth. Denethor's use of the Anor-stone illustrates the distinction between exposure to genuine danger and the conclusion that defeat has become inevitable.

Ninth. The personal despair of an individual exercising authority does not establish a right to impose that despair's consequences upon the lives of others.

Tenth. Peregrin Took's exposure to the Orthanc-stone raises questions concerning custodial responsibility, informed access, and the protection of inexperienced persons from extraordinary hazards.

Eleventh. The establishment of contact does not necessarily constitute consent to every consequence of communication.

Twelfth. Aragorn's deliberate use of the Orthanc-stone demonstrates that extraordinary instruments may be employed for purposes materially different from those pursued by earlier users.

Thirteenth. Sauron's misinterpretation of his adversaries illustrates the limitations imposed upon judgment by assumptions concerning the motives and conduct of others.

Fourteenth. The continuous availability of information does not establish that continuous observation is necessary or beneficial.

Fifteenth. Information obtained through extraordinary means remains subject to the need for context, interpretation, and independent verification.

Sixteenth. The obligation to make decisions under uncertainty does not require the pretense that uncertainty has been eliminated.

Seventeenth. Communication does not necessarily produce understanding, and understanding does not automatically confer authority.

Eighteenth. The responsible use of extraordinary information requires restraint concerning both the conclusions drawn from that information and the actions undertaken in its name.

These findings are preliminary.

They do not constitute a comprehensive technical account of the operation of the palantíri.

Nor do they establish that the ethical standards employed by the Office were formally recognized by the original makers or custodians of the stones.

The Office's conclusions are interpretive.

The surviving accounts remain the basis for its historical observations.

XVIII. On the Eye That Could See and the Mind That Could Not Know

The Office considers it appropriate to conclude by returning to the distinction between seeing and understanding.

A person may possess an instrument capable of revealing distant places.

He may observe movements concealed from others.

He may acquire information that would otherwise require months of travel.

He may witness the preparations of enemies, the actions of allies, and the unfolding of events far beyond his immediate surroundings.

These capacities may be extraordinary.

They do not eliminate the limitations of judgment.

For the world does not surrender its meaning merely because someone has learned how to look upon it.

An army may be seen.

Its victory is not thereby established.

A city may be threatened.

Its destruction is not thereby certain.

A person may possess an object of great power.

The possession does not reveal what that person intends to do with it.

A path may appear closed.

Another may remain beyond the observer's sight.

The Office therefore rejects the proposition that the expansion of perception necessarily produces the expansion of understanding.

Knowledge requires more than access.

It requires interpretation.

It requires the willingness to examine assumptions.

It requires recognition of what remains unknown.

And, where the lives of others are concerned, it requires sufficient humility to distinguish the confidence of the observer from the completeness of the truth.

Saruman possessed knowledge.

He came to regard that knowledge as justification for domination.

Denethor possessed knowledge.

He came to regard the dangers revealed to him as evidence that hope had become unreasonable.

Sauron possessed knowledge.

He failed to recognize that his enemies might reject the very power whose possession he considered decisive.

The three did not make identical errors.

Their motives and responsibilities differed.

Their circumstances were not interchangeable.

Yet their histories illuminate a common difficulty.

A mind may be furnished with extraordinary information and remain imprisoned within its own assumptions.

The prison need not consist of ignorance.

It may consist of certainty.

Certainty that others cannot be trusted.

Certainty that disaster cannot be prevented.

Certainty that power will always be sought.

Certainty that one's own understanding is sufficiently complete to render further examination unnecessary.

In such circumstances, additional information may cease to expand judgment.

It may instead be arranged around the conclusions already believed.

The observer sees more.

But understands less.

The Office recognizes that the desire for certainty is not inherently unreasonable.

Human beings must act.

They must make decisions under imperfect conditions.

They must respond to danger without knowing every consequence.

The inability to predict the future does not eliminate responsibility for the present.

Nevertheless, the need to act does not justify the invention of certainty where none exists.

It does not require the denial of possibilities that have not been disproven.

Nor does it establish that the person with the greatest access to information must possess the greatest right to decide.

The Office therefore distinguishes between judgment and the claim of infallibility.

Judgment acts upon evidence while recognizing that evidence may be incomplete.

The claim of infallibility treats the possibility of error as an insult to authority.

Judgment may change.

Infallibility must defend itself.

Judgment may invite questions.

Infallibility increasingly treats questions as threats.

And when the person claiming certainty possesses extraordinary power, the consequences of that certainty may extend far beyond the person who holds it.

The Office considers this danger especially evident in the history of Saruman.

His knowledge became inseparable from his claim to authority.

The possibility that others might understand something he had failed to consider became increasingly difficult for him to tolerate.

The world was to be organized according to his judgment.

And resistance to that organization became evidence that the world required still greater control.

Denethor's tragedy followed another path.

He did not simply seek to command the world.

He came to believe that the world he was responsible for defending could no longer be saved.

The evidence of danger was real.

But the future remained unfinished.

Beyond what he had seen, decisions were still being made.

People were still acting.

Help was still moving.

And possibilities remained that his observations had not adequately disclosed.

The Office does not suggest that hope is a substitute for evidence.

Nor does it propose that optimism possesses greater truth merely because it is more comforting.

It recognizes that hope may be mistaken.

But so may despair.

The absence of evidence that a future can be saved is not always evidence that the future has already been lost.

This distinction matters because the future is not simply an object waiting to be observed.

It is also shaped by the actions of those who have not yet surrendered their capacity to act.

A person may see the strength of an approaching army.

He cannot necessarily see every act of courage that will arise in response.

He may see a city surrounded.

He cannot necessarily see every decision that will be made within its walls.

He may see the preparations of a powerful enemy.

He cannot necessarily see the small and unexpected act upon which the enemy's defeat will depend.

And a being who has spent ages studying the desire for power may still fail to understand someone who chooses to relinquish it.

The Office considers this final possibility especially significant.

Sauron understood domination.

He understood fear.

He understood ambition.

He understood the desire to possess the Ring.

But the destruction of the Ring depended upon intentions and acts that his understanding of power had not adequately anticipated.

This was not merely a failure of observation.

It was a failure to recognize the limits of his own interpretation.

The palantíri did not correct that failure.

Nor could they have done so without a corresponding willingness to consider what their user did not already believe.

The Office therefore returns to a distinction that has governed the present inquiry.

To see is not necessarily to know.

To know is not necessarily to understand.

And to understand is not necessarily to possess the right to command.

These are separate matters.

The confusion of them has consequences.

An adviser may become a tyrant.

A guardian may become an oppressor.

A ruler may mistake despair for final judgment.

A powerful being may believe the future has been settled because every future he can imagine conforms to his understanding of power.

Yet the world continues beyond the limits of any single observer.

It contains persons whose intentions have not been disclosed.

Actions whose consequences remain uncertain.

Choices that have not yet been made.

And possibilities that no instrument, however extraordinary, has rendered fully visible.

The Office does not regard this uncertainty as a defect requiring elimination.

It regards uncertainty as part of the condition under which free beings exercise judgment.

No person possesses the whole world merely by seeing a portion of it.

No institution possesses the future merely by predicting one possible course.

And no instrument, however ancient or powerful, can relieve its user of the responsibility to distinguish what has been observed from what has merely been assumed.

Perhaps this is the final lesson of the seeing-stones.

They offered the ability to perceive beyond the ordinary limits of the body.

They did not offer freedom from the ordinary limitations of judgment.

And the persons who relied upon them remained responsible for what they chose to believe.

The Office therefore enters its concluding determination:

The danger of the palantíri was not that they made truth impossible to see.

It was that they made it possible to see truth without understanding how much remained unseen.

The Office considers this distinction sufficient grounds for continuing review.

XIX. Notice of Continuing Proceedings

The Office directs that the present findings be entered into the Maiar Accountability Record.

The proceedings concerning the misuse of the palantíri are concluded for purposes of preliminary review.

Questions concerning the interpretation of extraordinary information, the responsibilities of custodians, and the consequences of adversarial influence remain open.

The Office further directs that the records concerning Saruman, Denethor, Peregrin Took, Aragorn, and Sauron be maintained as distinct matters.

Their circumstances differed.

Their intentions differed.

Their degrees of authority and knowledge differed.

And the consequences of their actions should not be presumed interchangeable merely because they employed instruments of a similar kind.

The next scheduled inquiry shall concern:

THE DENETHOR QUESTION

On Despair, the Burden of Stewardship, and the Difference Between Recognizing Danger and Surrendering the Future

Particular attention will be directed toward the responsibilities of leaders confronting overwhelming threats, the psychological and institutional consequences of prolonged exposure to danger, and the distinction between an individual's loss of hope and the authority to determine the fate of those entrusted to that individual's care.

The Office recognizes the sensitivity of these matters.

It further recognizes that the events under review involve grief, war, and the deaths of persons whose experiences should not be reduced to procedural abstractions.

Appropriate care will be taken.

SUPPLEMENTAL ADMINISTRATIVE NOTICE

Concerning the Custody and Authorized Use of Seeing-Stones

The Office has received an inquiry concerning whether the palantíri should be classified as communications equipment, historical artifacts, intelligence instruments, or property held under extraordinary custodial arrangements.

The matter remains under review.

The Office recognizes that certain stones possess capabilities exceeding those ordinarily associated with the equipment categories available to its Records Division.

It further recognizes that the instruments were manufactured before the establishment of the present accounting system.

The absence of an original purchase invoice is therefore understandable.

Nevertheless, the Office considers it appropriate to establish a preliminary inventory.

The Office requests clarification concerning the location and present condition of the surviving stones.

It further requests that any custodian intending to establish communication with an adversarial power notify the appropriate supervisory authority where circumstances permit.

The Office acknowledges that certain users may possess legitimate reasons to undertake such contact.

It does not prohibit all such communication.

It does, however, recommend that users refrain from assuming that an adversary's willingness to answer establishes the adversary's willingness to cooperate.

The Office further recommends that persons unfamiliar with the operation of the stones not be permitted unsupervised access.

This recommendation is entered without adverse finding against Peregrin Took.

The Office considers him to have endured sufficient difficulty in connection with the incident.

INTERNAL INFORMATION SECURITY MEMORANDUM

TO: Director, Office of Improbable Jurisdiction
FROM: Department of Records, Communications, and Information Security
RE: Adversarial Access to the Palantír Network

The Department has completed a preliminary review of the communication arrangement through which Sauron exercised influence over users of the surviving seeing-stones.

The Department identifies several unresolved concerns.

First: The capture of the Ithil-stone appears to have permitted an unauthorized hostile party to participate in communications involving instruments still held by other custodians.

Second: The surviving record does not establish that affected users received a standardized security notification following the capture.

Third: Certain users appear to have continued employing the stones despite knowledge of the risks.

Fourth: No comprehensive access-control policy has been produced.

Fifth: The Department has been unable to establish whether the stones possess a mechanism for restricting contact from specific hostile users.

The Department therefore recommends a review of authentication procedures, custodial responsibilities, and the possibility of revoking compromised access.

The Director has requested clarification concerning whether Sauron's participation may be regarded as an intrusion into a protected communications network.

The Department considers this classification broadly appropriate as an administrative analogy.

It cautions, however, that the instruments do not appear to employ conventional network protocols.

The Department further observes that Sauron possessed extraordinary knowledge concerning the operation of the stones.

The possibility of unauthorized access must therefore be regarded as substantial.

The Director has asked whether the system can be secured through a change of credentials.

The Department has not identified a password-reset function.

The Director has asked whether the compromised stone can be disconnected.

The Department has not identified a conventional disconnection procedure.

The Director has asked whether the remaining users can be instructed not to answer communications originating from Mordor.

The Department considers this recommendation immediately practicable.

It further recommends that no employee attempt to verify the identity of Sauron by initiating direct contact.

The Department recognizes that such contact might produce information of considerable interest.

It nevertheless considers the associated risks unacceptable.

The Office does not require confirmation of an adversary's identity through personal exposure to the adversary.

INTERNAL FINANCE MEMORANDUM

TO: Director, Office of Improbable Jurisdiction
FROM: Office of Finance and Appropriations
RE: Classification and Maintenance of Palantíri

The Finance Division has reviewed the preliminary inventory of seeing-stones.

The Division acknowledges that the instruments possess extraordinary historical significance.

It further acknowledges that their operational capabilities may be relevant to the Office's continuing investigations.

Nevertheless, no satisfactory documentation has been submitted establishing their original acquisition cost.

The Finance Division has therefore declined to assign a depreciable value pending further review.

The Division additionally notes that the instruments appear to have remained operational for several millennia without conventional maintenance.

This raises questions concerning their expected useful life.

The Director has suggested that the useful life may be indefinite.

The Division rejects this characterization pending supporting documentation.

The Division further requests clarification concerning the appropriate allocation of costs arising from the capture of the Ithil-stone.

The Department of Information Security has advised that the event constituted a serious compromise of the communication arrangement.

The Division acknowledges the finding.

It nevertheless requires a determination concerning whether the resulting loss should be classified as theft, military seizure, unauthorized transfer, or extraordinary asset impairment.

The Director has indicated that Sauron took possession of the instrument during the fall of Minas Ithil.

The Division considers this explanation historically relevant.

It does not constitute a completed asset-disposal form.

No further reimbursement will be authorized until the matter has been resolved.

END OF CONTINUING INVESTIGATION III

Issued under the authority claimed by the Office of Improbable Jurisdiction, the existence and limits of which remain subject to examination.

The Office finds that extraordinary access to information does not eliminate the duties of judgment, restraint, and independent verification.

No general prohibition upon the use of seeing-stones is entered.

The inquiry continues.

Literary and Interpretive Note

This fictional investigation draws principally upon J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, including the events concerning the Orthanc-stone, Denethor's use of the Anor-stone, Aragorn's confrontation with Sauron, and the histories of the palantíri described in the appendices and related writings.

The inquiry also draws upon the broader accounts of the seeing-stones in *Unfinished Tales*.

The Office's administrative terminology, proposed procedures, and findings are fictional interpretive devices. They are not presented as legal or institutional arrangements established by Tolkien.

In particular, the investigation distinguishes the palantíri's capacity to reveal genuine images from the possibility that selected images and incomplete context could produce misleading interpretations.

The experiences of Saruman, Denethor, Peregrin Took, Aragorn, and Sauron are considered separately to preserve differences in authority, intention, knowledge, and responsibility.

The discussion of information security employs modern administrative concepts as analogies rather than as literal descriptions of the stones' operation.

The central question concerns not whether the acquisition of information is inherently dangerous, but whether those who possess extraordinary means of obtaining information remain willing to recognize the limits of their understanding.

The Office finds that the distinction deserves continued examination.